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# Journal Pre-proof



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**Ice Giant Systems:****The Scientific Potential of Orbital Missions to Uranus and Neptune**

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26

27

28 **Abstract:**

29 Uranus and Neptune, and their diverse satellite and ring systems, represent the least explored  
30 environments of our Solar System, and yet may provide the archetype for the most common outcome of  
31 planetary formation throughout our galaxy. Ice Giants will be the last remaining class of Solar System  
32 planet to have a dedicated orbital explorer, and international efforts are under way to realise such an  
33 ambitious mission in the coming decades. In 2019, the European Space Agency released a call for scientific  
34 themes for its strategic science planning process for the 2030s and 2040s, known as *Voyage 2050*. We used  
35 this opportunity to review our present-day knowledge of the Uranus and Neptune systems, producing a  
36 revised and updated set of scientific questions and motivations for their exploration. This review article  
37 describes how such a mission could explore their origins, ice-rich interiors, dynamic atmospheres, unique  
38 magnetospheres, and myriad icy satellites, to address questions at the heart of modern planetary science.  
39 These two worlds are superb examples of how planets with shared origins can exhibit remarkably different  
40 evolutionary paths: Neptune as the archetype for Ice Giants, whereas Uranus may be atypical. Exploring  
41 Uranus' natural satellites and Neptune's captured moon Triton could reveal how Ocean Worlds form and  
42 remain active, redefining the extent of the habitable zone in our Solar System. For these reasons and  
43 more, we advocate that an Ice Giant System explorer should become a strategic cornerstone mission within  
44 ESA's *Voyage 2050* programme, in partnership with international collaborators, and targeting launch  
45 opportunities in the early 2030s.

46

47 **Keywords:** Giant Planets; Ice Giants; Robotic Missions; Orbiters; Probes

48

## 49 1. Introduction: Why Explore Ice Giant Systems?

## 50 1.1 Motivations

51



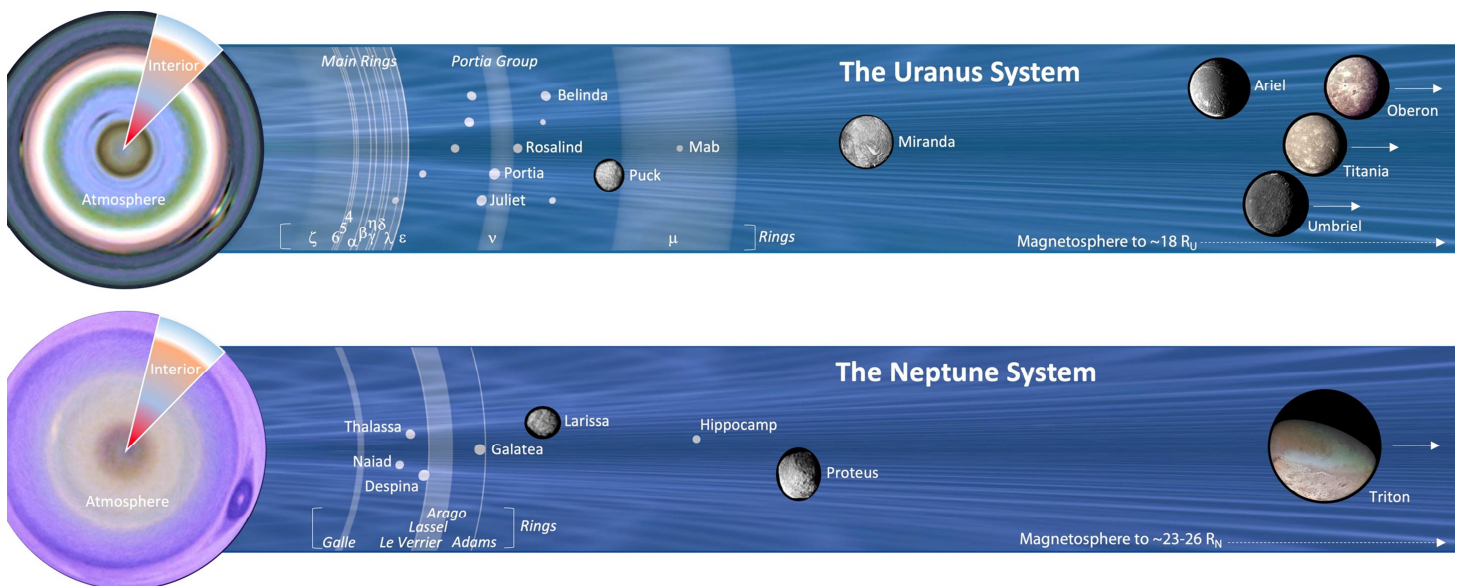


Figure 1 Each Ice Giant exhibits a rich system of planetary environments to explore, from their mysterious interiors, atmospheres and magnetospheres, to the diverse satellites and rings. The inner systems are to scale, with arrows next to major moons indicating that they orbit at larger planetocentric distances. The magnetosphere and radiation belts would encompass the full area of the figure. Credit: L.N. Fletcher/M. Hedman/E. Karkoschka/Voyager-2.

52 The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has provided unprecedented leaps in our exploration of the Gas Giant systems, via  
 53 the completion of the Galileo and Cassini orbital missions at Jupiter and Saturn; NASA/Juno's ongoing  
 54 exploration of Jupiter's deep interior, atmosphere, and magnetic field; ESA's development of the JUICE  
 55 mission (Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer) and NASA's Europa Clipper to explore the Galilean satellites. The past  
 56 decade has also provided our first glimpses of the diversity of planetary environments in the outer solar  
 57 system, via the New Horizons mission to Pluto. Conversely, the realm of the Ice Giants, from Uranus (20  
 58 AU) to Neptune (30 AU), remains largely unexplored, each system having been visited only once by a flyby  
 59 spacecraft – Voyager 2 – in 1986 and 1989 respectively. More than three decades have passed since our  
 60 first close-up glimpses of these worlds, with cameras, spectrometers and sensors based on 1960s and 70s  
 61 technologies. Voyager's systems were not optimised for the Ice Giants, which were considered to be  
 62 extended mission targets. Uranus and Neptune have therefore never had a dedicated mission, despite the  
 63 rich and diverse systems displayed in Figure 1. A return to the Ice Giants with an orbiter is the next logical  
 64 step in humankind's exploration of our Solar System.

65

66 The Ice Giants may be our closest and best representatives of a whole class of astrophysical objects, as  
 67 Neptune-sized worlds have emerged as the dominant category in our expanding census of exoplanets  
 68 (Fulton et al., 2018), intermediate between the smaller terrestrial worlds and the larger hydrogen-rich gas

69 giants (Section 3.3). Our own Ice Giants offer an opportunity to explore physical and chemical processes  
70 within these planetary systems as the archetype for these distant exoplanets (Rymer et al., 2019).  
71 Furthermore, the formation and evolution of Uranus and Neptune (Section 2.1) pose a critical test of our  
72 understanding of planet formation, and of the architecture of our Solar System. Their small size, compared  
73 to Jupiter, places strong constraints on the timing of planet formation. Their bulk internal composition (i.e.,  
74 the fraction of rock, ices, and gases) and the differentiation with depth (i.e., molecular weight gradients,  
75 phase transitions to form global water oceans and icy mantles) are poorly known, but help determine the  
76 conditions and dynamics in the outer planetary nebula at the time of planet formation.

77  
78 Uranus and Neptune also provide two intriguing endmembers for the Ice Giant class. Neptune may be  
79 considered the archetype for a seasonal Ice Giant, whereas the cataclysmic collision responsible for Uranus'  
80 extreme tilt renders it unique in our Solar System. Contrasting the conditions on these two worlds provides  
81 insights into differential evolution from shared origins. The atmospheres of Uranus and Neptune (Section  
82 2.2) exemplify the contrasts between these worlds. Uranus' negligible internal heat renders its atmosphere  
83 extremely sluggish, with consequences for storms, meteorology, and atmospheric chemistry. Conversely,  
84 Neptune's powerful winds and rapidly-evolving storms demonstrates how internal energy can drive  
85 powerful weather, despite weak sunlight at 30 AU. Both of these worlds exhibit planetary banding,  
86 although the atmospheric circulation responsible for these bands (and their associated winds,  
87 temperatures, composition and clouds) remain unclear, and the connection to atmospheric flows below  
88 the topmost clouds remains a mystery.

89  
90 Conditions within the Ice Giant magnetospheres (Section 2.3) are unlike those found anywhere else, with  
91 substantial offsets between their magnetic dipole axes and the planets' rotational axes implying a system  
92 with an extremely unusual interaction with the solar wind and internal plasma processes, varying on both  
93 rotational cycles as the planet spins, and on orbital cycles.

94

95 The diverse Ice Giant satellites (Section 2.4) and narrow, incomplete ring systems (Section 2.5) provide an  
96 intriguing counterpoint to the better-studied Jovian and Saturnian systems. Uranus may feature a natural,  
97 primordial satellite system with evidence of extreme and violent events (e.g., Miranda). Neptune hosts a  
98 captured Kuiper Belt Object, Triton, which may itself harbour a sub-surface ocean giving rise to active  
99 surface geology (e.g., south polar plumes and cryovolcanism).

100

101 Advancing our knowledge of the Ice Giants and their diverse satellite systems requires humankind's first  
102 dedicated explorer for this distant realm. Such a spacecraft should combine interior science via gravity and  
103 magnetic measurements, *in situ* measurements of their plasma and magnetic field environments, *in situ*  
104 sampling of their chemical composition, and close-proximity multi-wavelength remote sensing of the  
105 planets, their rings, and moons. This review article will summarise our present understanding of these  
106 worlds, and propose a revised set of scientific questions to guide our preparation for such a mission. This  
107 article is motivated by ESA's recent call for scientific themes as part of its strategic space mission planning  
108 in the period from 2035 to 2050,<sup>1</sup> and is therefore biased to European perspectives on an Ice Giant mission,  
109 as explored in the next section.

110

## 111 1.2 Ice Giants in ESA's Cosmic Vision

112

113 The exploration of the Ice Giants addresses themes at the heart of ESA's existing Cosmic Vision<sup>2</sup>  
114 programme, namely (1) exploring the conditions for planet formation and the emergence of life; (2)  
115 understanding how our solar system works; and (3) exploring the fundamental physical laws of the  
116 universe. European-led concepts for Ice Giant exploration have been submitted to several ESA Cosmic  
117 Vision competitions. The Uranus Pathfinder mission, an orbiting spacecraft based on heritage from Mars  
118 Express and Rosetta, was proposed as a medium-class (~€0.5bn) mission in both the M3 (2010) and M4

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cosmos.esa.int/web/voyage-2050>

<sup>2</sup> <http://sci.esa.int/cosmic-vision/38542-esa-br-247-cosmic-vision-space-science-for-europe-2015-2025/>

119 (2014) competitions (Arridge et al., 2012). However, the long duration of the mission, limited power  
120 available, and the programmatic implications of having NASA provide the launch vehicle and radioisotope  
121 thermoelectric generators (RTGs), meant that the Pathfinder concept did not proceed to the much-needed  
122 Phase A study.

123

124 The importance of Ice Giant science was reinforced by multiple submissions to ESA's call for large-class  
125 mission themes in 2013: a Uranus orbiter with atmospheric probe (Arridge et al., 2014), an orbiter to  
126 explore Neptune and Triton (Masters et al., 2014); and a concept for dual orbiters of both worlds (Turrini et  
127 al., 2014). Once again, an ice giant mission failed to proceed to the formal study phase, but ESA's Senior  
128 Survey Committee (SSC<sup>3</sup>) commented that *“the exploration of the icy giants appears to be a timely  
129 milestone, fully appropriate for an L class mission. The whole planetology community would be involved in  
130 the various aspects of this mission... the SSC recommends that every effort is made to pursue this theme  
131 through other means, such as cooperation on missions led by partner agencies.”*

132

133 This prioritisation led to collaboration between ESA and NASA in the formation of a science definition team  
134 (2016-17), which looked more closely at a number of different mission architectures for a future mission to  
135 the Ice Giants (Hofstadter et al., 2019). In addition, ESA's own efforts to develop nuclear power sources for  
136 space applications have been progressing, with prototypes now developed to utilise the heat from the  
137 decay of <sup>241</sup>Am as their power source (see Section 4.3), provided that the challenge of their low energy  
138 density can be overcome. Such an advance might make smaller, European-led missions to the Ice Giants  
139 more realistic, and addresses many of the challenges faced by the original Uranus Pathfinder concepts.

140

141 At the start of the 2020s, NASA and ESA are continuing to explore the potential for an international mission  
142 to the Ice Giants. A palette of potential contributions (M-class in scale) to a US-led mission have been

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://sci.esa.int/cosmic-vision/53261-report-on-science-themes-for-the-l2-and-l3-missions/>

143 identified by ESA<sup>4</sup>, and US scientists are currently undertaking detailed design and costing exercises for  
144 missions to be assessed in the upcoming US Planetary Decadal Survey (~2022). Each of these emphasise  
145 launch opportunities in the early 2030s (Section 4.2), with arrival in the early 2040s (timelines for Ice Giant  
146 missions will be described in Section 4.3). This review article summarises those studies, whilst taking the  
147 opportunity to update and thoroughly revise the scientific rationale for Ice Giant missions compared to  
148 Arridge et al. (2012, 2014), Masters et al. (2014), Turrini et al. (2014) and Hofstadter et al. (2019). We focus  
149 on the science achievable from orbit, as the science potential of in situ entry probes has been discussed  
150 elsewhere (Mousis et al., 2018). Section 2 reviews our present-day knowledge of Ice Giant Systems;  
151 Section 3 places the Ice Giants into their wider exoplanetary context; Section 4 briefly reviews the recent  
152 mission concept studies and outstanding technological challenges; and Section 5 summarises our scientific  
153 goals at the Ice Giants at the start of the 2020s.

154

## 155 2. Science Themes for Ice Giant Exploration

156

157 In this section we explore the five multi-disciplinary scientific themes that could be accomplished via  
158 orbital exploration of the Ice Giants, and show how in-depth studies of fundamental processes at Uranus  
159 and Neptune would have far-reaching implications in our Solar System and beyond. Each sub-section is  
160 organised via a series of high-level questions that could form the basis of a mission traceability matrix.

161

### 162 2.1 Ice Giant Origins and Interiors

163

164 What does the origin, structure, and composition of the two Ice Giants reveal about the formation of  
165 planetary systems? Understanding the origins and internal structures of Uranus and Neptune will  
166 substantially enhance our understanding of our own Solar System and intermediate-mass exoplanets. Their

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://sci.esa.int/future-missions-department/61307-cdf-study-report-ice-giants/>

167 bulk composition provides crucial constraints on the conditions in the solar nebula during planetary  
168 formation and evolution.

169

170 ***How did the Ice Giants first form, and what constraints can be placed on the mechanisms for planetary***

171 ***accretion?*** The formation of Uranus and Neptune has been a long-standing problem for planet formation

172 theory (e.g., Pollack et al., 1996, Dodson-Robinson & Bodenheimer, 2010, Helled & Bodenheimer, 2014).

173 Yet, the large number of detected exoplanets with sizes comparable (or smaller) to that of Uranus and

174 Neptune suggests that such planetary objects are very common (e.g., Batalha et al. 2013), a fact that is in

175 conflict with theoretical calculations.

176

177 The challenge for formation models is to prevent Uranus and Neptune from accreting large amounts of

178 hydrogen-helium (H-He) gas, like the Gas Giants Jupiter and Saturn, to provide the correct final mass and

179 gas-to-solids ratios as inferred by structure **models**. In the standard planet formation model, core accretion

180 (see Helled et al., 2014 for review and the references therein), a slow planetary growth is expected to occur

181 at large radial distances where the solid surface density is lower, and the accretion rate (of planetesimals) is

182 significantly smaller. For the current locations of Uranus and Neptune, the formation timescale can be

183 comparable to the lifetimes of protoplanetary disks. Due to long accretion times at large radial distances,

184 the formation process is too slow to reach the phase of runaway gas accretion, before the gas disk

185 disappears, leaving behind an intermediate-mass planet (a failed giant planet), which consists mostly of

186 heavy elements and a small fraction of H-He gas.

187

188 However, since the total mass of H-He in both Uranus and Neptune is estimated to be 2-3 Earth masses

189 ( $M_{\oplus}$ ), it implies that gas accretion had already begun, and this requires that the gas disk disappears at a

190 very specific time, to prevent further gas accretion onto the planets. This is known as the ***fine-tuning***

191 problem in Uranus/Neptune formation (e.g., Venturini & Helled, 2017). Another possibility is that Uranus

192 and Neptune formed *in situ* within a few Mys by pebble accretion. In this formation scenario, the core's

193 growth is more efficient than in the planetesimal accretion case, and the pebble isolation mass is above 20  
 194  $M_{\oplus}$ . As a result, the forming planets could be heavy-element dominated with H-He envelopes that are  
 195 metal-rich due to sublimation of icy pebbles (e.g., Lambrechts et al., 2014).

196

197 Measuring the elemental abundances in the atmospheres of Uranus and Neptune can provide information  
 198 on their formation history by setting limits on their formation locations and/or the type of solids  
 199 (pebbles/planetesimals) that were accreted. Measurements of the elemental abundances of well-mixed  
 200 noble gases, which are only accessible via *in situ* entry probes, would be particularly informative (e.g.  
 201 Mousis et al., 2018). In addition, determining the atmospheric metallicity provides valuable constraints for  
 202 structure models, as discussed below.

203

204 ***What is the role of giant impacts in explaining the differences between Uranus and Neptune?*** Uranus and  
 205 Neptune are somewhat similar in terms of mass and radius, but they also have significant differences such  
 206 as their tilt, internal heat flux, and satellite system. It is possible that these observed differences are a result  
 207 of giant impacts that occurred after the formation of the planets (e.g., Safronov 1966, Stevenson 1986). An

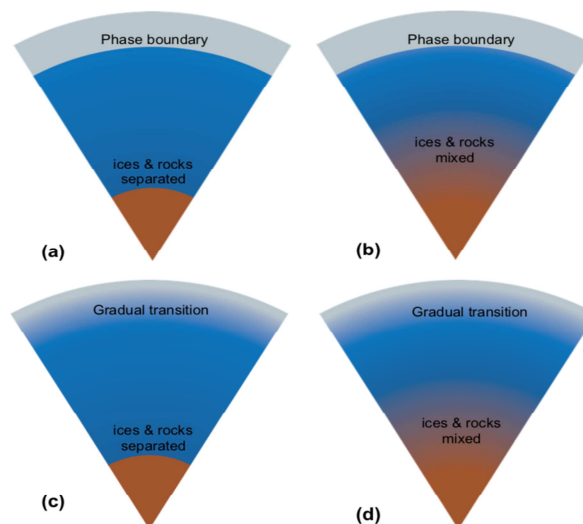


Figure 2 Sketches of the possible internal structures of the ice giants. It is unclear whether the planets are differentiated and whether the transitions between the different layers are distinct or gradual: (a) separation between the ices and rocks and the ice and H-He atmosphere (b) separation (phase boundary) between the H-He atmosphere and ices and a gradual transition between ice and rock, (c) gradual transition between the H-He atmosphere and ice layer, and a distinct separation between the ice and rock layers, and (d) gradual transition both between the H-He atmosphere and ice and the ice and rocks suggesting a global composition gradient with the planets (see text for



208 oblique impact of a massive impactor can explain Uranus' spin and lead to the formation of a disk where  
209 the regular satellites form. Neptune could have also suffered a head-on impact that could have reached the  
210 deep interior, providing sufficient energy (and mass) to explain the higher heat flux, and possibly the higher  
211 mass and moment of inertia value (e.g., Stevenson 1986, Podolak & Helled, 2012). Giant impact simulations  
212 by various groups confirmed that Uranus' tilt and rotation could be explained by a giant impact (Slattery et  
213 al., 1992, Kegerreis et al., 2019). Nevertheless, alternative explanations have been proposed: Boue and  
214 Laskar (2010) showed that under special circumstances, the high obliquity could potentially arise from  
215 orbital migration without the need for a collision. Understanding the cause of Uranus' tilt and the  
216 mechanisms that led to the observed differences between the planets are key questions in planetary  
217 science.

218

219 ***What is the bulk composition and internal structure of Uranus and Neptune?*** There are still substantial  
220 uncertainties regarding the bulk compositions and internal structures of Uranus and Neptune (e.g., Podolak  
221 et al., 1995, Podolak & Helled, 2012, Nettelmann et al., 2013). The available measurements of their physical  
222 properties such as mass, radius, rotation rate, atmospheric temperature, and gravitational and magnetic  
223 fields are used to constrain models of their interiors. For the Ice Giants, only the gravitational harmonic  
224 coefficients  $J_2$  and  $J_4$  are known and their error bars are relatively large (Jacobson, 2009; 2014),  
225 nevertheless, various studies have aimed to constrain the planets' internal structures.

226

227 Standard structure models of the planets consist of three layers: a rocky core, an 'icy' shell (water,  
228 ammonia, methane, etc.), and a gaseous envelope composed of H-He and heavier elements. The middle  
229 layer is not made of "ice" in regard to the physical state of the material (i.e., solid), but is referred to as an  
230 icy layer since it is composed of volatile materials such as water, ammonia and methane. The masses and  
231 compositions of the layers are modified until the model fits the observed parameters using a physical  
232 equation of state (EOS) to represent the materials. Three-layer models predict very high ice-to-rock ratios,  
233 where the ice fraction is found to be higher than the rock fraction by 19-35 times for Uranus, and 4-15



234 times for Neptune, with the total H-He mass typically being 2 and 3  $M_{\oplus}$  for Uranus and Neptune,  
235 respectively. The exact estimates are highly model-dependent, and are sensitive to the assumed  
236 composition, thermal structure and rotation rate of the planets (Helled et al., 2011, Nettelmann et al.,  
237 2013).

238

239 The interiors of Uranus and Neptune could also be more complex with the different elements being mixed,  
240 and could also include thermal boundary layers and composition gradients. Indeed, alternative structure  
241 models of the planets suggested that Uranus and Neptune could have a density profile without  
242 discontinuities (e.g., Helled et al., 2011), and that the planets do not need to contain large fractions of  
243 water to fit their observed properties. This alternative model implies that Uranus and Neptune may not be  
244 as water-rich as typically thought, but instead are rock-dominated like Pluto (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2017)  
245 and could be dominated by composition gradients. It is therefore possible that the “ice giants” are in fact  
246 not ice-dominated (see Helled et al., 2011 for details). The very large ice-to-rock ratios found from  
247 structure models also suggest a more complex interior structure. At the moment, we have no way to  
248 discriminate among the different ice-to-rock ratios inferred from structure models. As a result, further  
249 constraints on the gravity and magnetic data (Section 2.3), as well as atmospheric composition and isotopic  
250 ratios (e.g., D/H, Atreya et al., 2020) are required.

251

252 ***How can Ice Giant observations be used to explore the states of matter (e.g., water) and mixtures (e.g.,***  
253 ***rocks, water, H-He) under the extreme conditions of planetary interiors?*** In order to predict the mixing  
254 within the planets, knowledge from equation-of-state (EOS) calculations is required. Internal structure  
255 models must be consistent with the phase diagram of the assumed materials and their mixtures. This is a  
256 challenging task and progress in that direction is ongoing. EOS calculations can be used to guide model  
257 assumptions. For example, it is possible that Uranus and Neptune have deep water oceans that begin  
258 where  $H_2$  and  $H_2O$  become insoluble (e.g., Bailey & Stevenson, 2015, Bali et al., 2013). Figure 2 presents

259 sketches of four possible internal structures of the ice giants where the transitions between layers are  
260 distinct (via phase/thermal boundaries) and/or gradual.

261

262 Current observational constraints, foremost  $J_2$  and  $J_4$ , clearly indicate that the deep interior is more  
263 enriched in heavy elements than the outer part. Understanding the nature and origin of the compositional  
264 gradient zone would yield important information on the formation process and subsequent evolution  
265 including possible processes such as outgassing, immiscibility, and sedimentation of ices; processes that  
266 play a major role on terrestrial planets and their habitability.

267

268 ***What physical and chemical processes during the planetary formation and evolution shape the magnetic***  
269 ***field, thermal profile, and other observable quantities?*** Structure models must be consistent with the  
270 observed multi-polar magnetic fields (see Section 2.3), implying that the outermost ~20% of the planets is  
271 convective and consists of conducting materials (e.g., Stanley & Bloxham, 2004, 2006). Currently, the best  
272 candidate for the generation of the dynamo is the existence of partially dissociated fluid water in the  
273 outermost layers (e.g., Redmer et al., 2011), located above solid and non-convecting superionic water ice  
274 ‘mantle’ (Millot et al., 2019). Dynamo models that fit the Voyager magnetic field data suggest the deep  
275 interior is stably stratified (Stanley & Bloxham 2004, 2006) or, alternatively, in a state of thermal-buoyancy  
276 driven turbulent convection (Soderlund et al., 2013). Improved measurements of the magnetic fields of  
277 Uranus and Neptune will also help to constrain the planetary rotation rate. Since Voyager’s measurements  
278 of the periodicities in the radio emissions and magnetic fields have not been confirmed by another  
279 spacecraft, it is unclear whether the Voyager rotation rate reflects the rotation of the deep interior (Helled  
280 et al., 2010), with major consequences for the inferred planetary structure and the question of similar or  
281 dissimilar interiors (Nettelmann et al., 2013).

282

283 Finally, the different intrinsic heat fluxes of Uranus and Neptune imply that they followed different  
284 evolutionary histories. This could be a result of a different growth history or a result of giant impacts

285 during their early evolution (e.g., Reinhardt et al., 2020). Moreover, thermal evolution models that rely on  
286 Voyager's measurements of the albedo, brightness temperatures, and atmospheric pressure-temperature  
287 profiles that are used to model the evolution of the two planets cannot explain both planets with the same  
288 set of assumptions.

289

290 **Summary: A better understanding of the origin, evolution and structure of Ice Giant planets requires**  
291 **new and precise observational constraints on the planets' gravity field, rotation rate, magnetic field,**  
292 **atmospheric composition, and atmospheric thermal structure, both from orbital observations and in situ**  
293 **sampling from an atmospheric probe. The insights into origins, structures, dynamo operation and bulk**  
294 **composition provided by an Ice Giant mission would not only shed light on the planet-forming processes**  
295 **at work in our Solar System, but could also help to explain the most common planetary class throughout**  
296 **our observable universe.**

297

## 298 2.2 Ice Giant Atmospheres

299

300 Why do atmospheric processes differ between Uranus, Neptune, and the Gas Giants, and what are the  
301 implications for Neptune-mass worlds throughout our universe? Ice Giant atmospheres occupy a wholly  
302 different region of parameter space compared to their Gas Giant cousins. Their dynamics and chemistry  
303 are driven by extremes of internal energy (negligible on Uranus, but powerful on Neptune) and extremes of  
304 solar insolation (most severe on Uranus due to its  $98^\circ$  axial tilt) that are not seen anywhere else in the Solar  
305 System (Figure 3). Their smaller planetary radii, compared to Jupiter and Saturn, affects the width of zonal  
306 bands and the drift behaviour of storms and vortices. Their zonal winds are dominated by broad  
307 retrograde equatorial jets and do not exhibit the fine-scale banding found on Jupiter, which means that  
308 features like bright storms and dark vortices are able to drift with latitude during their lifetimes. Their  
309 hydrogen-helium atmospheres are highly enriched in volatiles like  $\text{CH}_4$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  that show strong equator-  
310 to-pole gradients, changing the atmospheric density and hence the vertical shear on the winds (Sun et al.,

311 1991). Their temperatures are so low that the energy released from interconversion between different  
312 states of hydrogen (ortho and para spin isomers) can play a role in shaping atmospheric dynamics (Smith &  
313 Gierasch, 1995). Their middle and upper atmospheres are both much hotter than can be explained by  
314 weak solar heating alone, implying a decisive role for additional energy from internal (e.g., waves) or  
315 external sources (e.g., currents induced by complex coupling to the magnetic field). As the **atmospheres**  
316 **are the windows through which we interpret the bulk properties of planets**, these defining properties of  
317 Ice Giants can provide insights into atmospheric processes on intermediate-sized giant planets beyond our  
318 Solar System.

319

320 A combination of global multi-wavelength remote sensing from an orbiter and *in situ* measurements from  
321 an entry probe would provide a transformative understanding of these unique atmospheres, focussing on  
322 the following key questions (summarised in Figure 3):

323

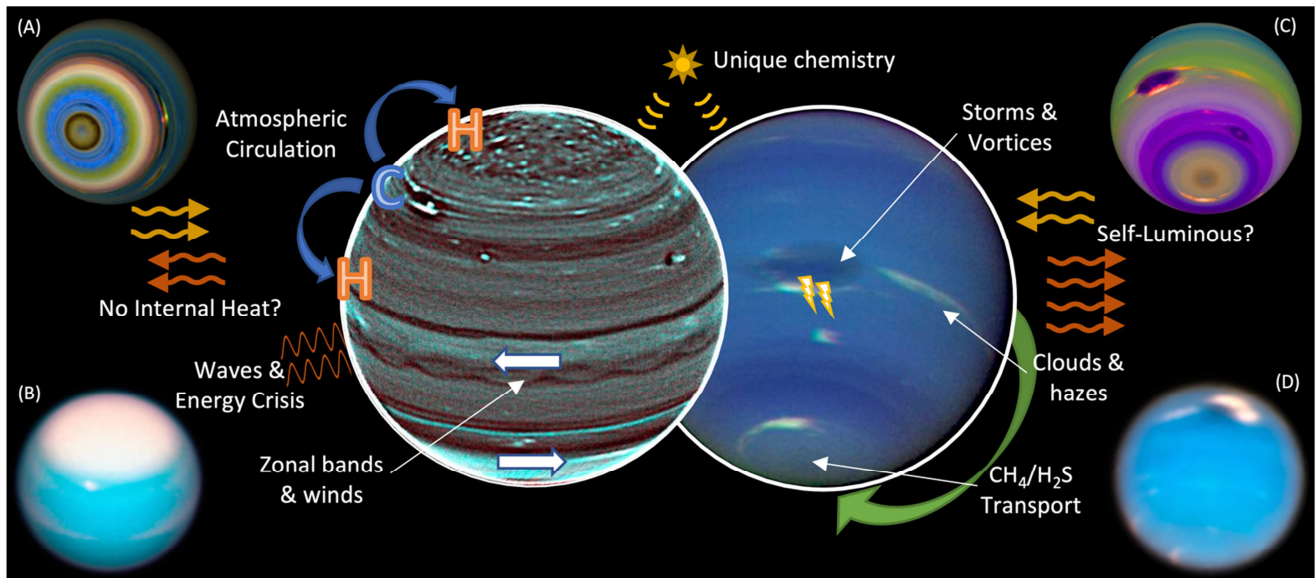


Figure 3 Ice Giant atmospheres are shaped by dynamical, chemical and radiative processes that are not found elsewhere in our Solar System. Images A & C are false-colour representations of Voyager 2 observations of Uranus and Neptune, respectively. Images B and D were acquired by the Hubble Space Telescope in 2018.

### 324 **What are the dynamical, meteorological, and chemical impacts of the extremes of planetary luminosity?**

325 Despite the substantial differences in self-luminosity (Pearl et al., 1990, 1991), seasonal influences,  
 326 atmospheric activity (Hueso and Sanchez-Lavega et al., 2019), and the strength of vertical mixing (resulting  
 327 in differences in atmospheric chemistry, Moses et al., 2018), there are many similarities between these two  
 328 worlds. In their upper tropospheres, tracking of discrete cloud features has revealed that both planets  
 329 exhibit broad retrograde jets at their equators and prograde jets nearer the poles (Sanchez-Lavega et al.,  
 330 2018), but unlike Jupiter, these are seemingly disconnected from the fine-scale banding revealed in the  
 331 visible and near-infrared (Sromovsky et al., 2015). Is this simply an observational bias, or are winds on the  
 332 ice giants truly different from those on Jupiter and Saturn? What sets the scales of the bands? On the Gas  
 333 Giants, small-scale eddies (from atmospheric instabilities and convective storms) appear to feed energy  
 334 into the large-scale winds, but we have never been able to investigate similar processes on Uranus and  
 335 Neptune. Indeed, convective processes themselves could be substantially different – moist convection  
 336 driven by the condensation of water will likely play a very limited role in the observable atmosphere, as  
 337 water is restricted to pressures that exceed tens or hundreds of bars. Instead, convection in the observable  
 338 tropospheres may be driven by methane condensation in the 0.1-1.5 bar range (Stoker & Toon, 1989), or by  
 339 heat release by ortho-para- $H_2$  conversion (Smith & Gierasch, 1995). These sources of energy operate in a

340 very different way compared to those available on Jupiter and Saturn. Firstly, the high enrichment in  
341 methane in the Ice Giants could inhibit vertical motions due to a vertical gradient of the atmospheric  
342 molecular weight (Guillot et al., 1995; Leconte et al., 2017). This phenomenon may also be at work in the  
343 deep and inaccessible water clouds of both the Gas and Ice giants, but the observable methane clouds of  
344 Uranus and Neptune provide an excellent opportunity to study it (Guillot et al., 2019). Secondly, heat  
345 release by ortho-para H<sub>2</sub> conversion is much more efficient in providing energy within the cold  
346 atmospheres of Uranus and Neptune. Thus, convection may occur in vertically-thin layers (Gierasch et al.,  
347 1987), rather than extending vertically over tremendous heights, or in a complex and inhomogeneous  
348 weather layer (Hueso et al., 2020). Multi-wavelength remote sensing of the temperatures, clouds, winds,  
349 and gaseous composition is required to investigate how these meteorological processes differ from the Gas  
350 Giants, how they derive their energy from the internal heating or weak sunlight, and their relation to the  
351 large-scale banded patterns and winds (Fletcher et al., 2020). Spatially-resolved reflectivity and thermal-  
352 emission mapping will allow precise constraints on the Ice Giant energy balance to constrain their self-  
353 luminosities. And mapping the distribution and depth of Ice Giant lightning, previously detected via radio  
354 emissions on both worlds (Zarka et al., 1986; Gurnett et al., 1990), could determine the frequency and  
355 intensity of water-powered convection on the Ice Giants, elucidating its impact on their atmospheric  
356 dynamics.

357

358 ***What is the large-scale circulation of Ice Giant atmospheres, and how deep does it go?*** Atmospheric  
359 circulation, driven by both internal energy and solar heating, controls the thermal structure, radiative  
360 energy balance, condensate cloud and photochemical haze characteristics, and meteorology. Unlike  
361 Jupiter and Saturn, observations from Voyager, space telescopes, and ground-based observatories have  
362 revealed mid-latitude upwelling (where most of the vigorous storms and coolest temperatures are found)  
363 and sinking motions at the equator and poles (e.g., Conrath et al., 1998, Fletcher et al., 2020). This is  
364 superimposed onto polar depletions in several key cloud-forming volatiles: methane (from reflection  
365 spectroscopy, Sromovsky et al., 2014; Karkoschka et al., 2011); hydrogen sulphide (from near-IR and

366 microwave spectroscopy, de Pater et al., 1991; Hofstadter & Butler, 2003; Irwin et al., 2018); and  
367 potentially ammonia (from microwave imaging). Do these contrasts imply circulation patterns extending to  
368 great depths (de Pater et al., 2014), or are they restricted in vertically-thin layers (Gierasch et al., 1987)?  
369 Recent re-analysis of the gravity fields measured by Voyager (Kaspi et al., 2013) suggests that zonal flows  
370 are restricted to the outermost ~1000 km of their radii, indicating relatively shallow weather layers  
371 overlying the deep and mysterious water-rich interiors. The circulation of the stratosphere is almost  
372 entirely unknown on both worlds, due to the challenge of observing weak emissions from hydrocarbons in  
373 the mid-infrared (e.g., Orton et al., 2014; Roman et al., 2020). Either way, observations of Uranus and  
374 Neptune will have stark implications for atmospheric circulation on intermediate-sized planets with strong  
375 chemical enrichments and latitudinal gradients.

376

377 ***How does atmospheric chemistry and haze formation respond to extreme variations in sunlight and***  
378 ***vertical mixing, and the influence of external material?*** Methane can be transported into the  
379 stratosphere, where photolysis initiates rich chemical pathways to produce a plethora of hydrocarbons  
380 (Moses et al., 2018). The sluggish mixing of Uranus indicates that its photochemistry occurs in a different  
381 physical regime (higher pressures) than on any other world. Furthermore, oxygen compounds from  
382 external sources (from cometary impacts, infalling dust, satellite and ring material, Feuchtgruber et al.,  
383 1997) will play different photochemical roles on Uranus, where the methane homopause is lower, than on  
384 Neptune (Moses & Poppe, 2017). This exogenic influence can further complicate inferences of planetary  
385 formation mechanisms from measurements of bulk abundances (particularly for CO). This rich atmospheric  
386 chemistry will be substantially different from that on the Gas Giants, due to the weaker sunlight, the colder  
387 temperatures (changing reaction rates and condensation processes, Moses et al., 2018), and the unusual  
388 ion-neutral chemistry resulting from the complex magnetic field tilt and auroral processes (Dobrijevic et al.  
389 2020). Condensation of these chemical products (and water ice) can form thin haze layers observed in  
390 high-phase imaging (Rages et al., 1991), which may add to the radiative warming of the stratosphere, be  
391 modulated by vertically-propagating waves, and could sediment downwards to serve as condensation

392 nuclei or aerosol coatings in the troposphere. Furthermore, Uranus' axial tilt presents an extreme test of  
393 coupled chemical and transport models, given that each pole can spend decades in the shroud of winter  
394 darkness. The strength of vertical mixing may vary with location, and disequilibrium tracers can be used to  
395 assess where mixing is strongest (Fletcher et al., 2020; Cavalie et al., 2020). Such tracers include CO  
396 (Cavalie et al., 2017), para-H<sub>2</sub> (Conrath et al., 1998) and yet-to-be-detected phosphine (Moreno et al.,  
397 2009), arsine, germane, silane, or even tropospheric hydrocarbons (ethane, acetylene). Fluorescence  
398 spectroscopy, infrared emissions and sub-mm sounding will reveal the vertical, horizontal, and temporal  
399 variability of the chemical networks in the unique low-temperature regimes of Uranus and Neptune.

400

401 ***What are the sources of energy responsible for heating the middle- and upper-atmospheres?*** Weak  
402 sunlight alone cannot explain the high temperatures of the stratosphere (Li et al., 2018) and thermosphere  
403 (Herbert et al., 1987), and this severe deficit is known as the energy crisis. Exploration of Uranus and  
404 Neptune may provide a solution to this problem, potentially revealing how waves transport energy  
405 vertically from the convective troposphere into the middle atmosphere, and how the currents induced by  
406 the asymmetric and time-variable magnetic fields provide energy to the upper atmosphere via Joule  
407 heating. For example, the long-term cooling of Uranus' thermosphere, observed via emission from H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> in  
408 the ionosphere (Melin et al., 2019), appears to follow Uranus' magnetic season, which may hint at the  
409 importance of particle precipitation modulated by the magnetosphere in resolving the energy crisis.  
410 Solving this issue at Uranus or Neptune, via wave observations and exploring magnetosphere-ionosphere-  
411 atmosphere coupling processes (e.g., via aurora detected in the UV and infrared), will provide insights into  
412 the energetics of all planetary atmospheres.

413

414 ***How do planetary ionospheres enable the energy transfer that couples the atmosphere and***  
415 ***magnetosphere?*** In-situ radio occultations remain the only source for the vertical distribution of electron  
416 density in the ionosphere (Majeed et al., 2004), a critical parameter for determining the strength of the  
417 coupling between the atmosphere and the magnetosphere. The Voyager 2 occultations of both Uranus and



418 Neptune (Lindal et al, 1986, 1992) provided only two profiles for each planet, providing very poor  
419 constraints on what drives the complex shape of the electron density profiles in the ionosphere, including  
420 the influx of meteoritic material (Moses et al., 2017).

421

422 ***How do Ice Giant atmospheres change with time?*** In the decades since the Voyager encounters, Uranus  
423 has displayed seasonal polar caps of reflective aerosols with changing winds (Sromovsky et al., 2015) and  
424 long-term upper atmospheric changes (Melin et al., 2019); Neptune's large dark anticyclones – and their  
425 associated orographic clouds – have grown, drifted, and dissipated (Lebeau et al., 1998, Stratman et al.,  
426 2001, Wong et al., 2018, Simon et al., 2019); and a warm south polar vortex developed and strengthened  
427 during the Neptunian summer (Fletcher et al., 2014). What are the drivers for these atmospheric changes,  
428 and how do they compare to the other planets? There have been suggestions that storm activity has  
429 occurred episodically, potentially with a seasonal connection (de Pater et al., 2015; Sromovsky et al., 2015),  
430 but is this simply driven by observational bias to their sunlit hemispheres? Mission scenarios for the early  
431 2040s would result in observations separated from those obtained by the Voyager 2 by 0.5 Uranian years  
432 and 0.25 Neptunian years. Orbital remote sensing over long time periods, sampling both summer and  
433 winter hemispheres, could reveal the causes of atmospheric changes in a regime of extremely weak solar  
434 forcing, in contrast to Jupiter and Saturn.

435

436 **Summary:** Investigations of dynamics, chemistry, cloud formation, atmospheric circulation, and energy  
437 transport on Uranus and Neptune would sample a sizeable gap in our understanding of planetary  
438 atmospheres, in an underexplored regime of weak seasonal sunlight, low temperatures, and extremes of  
439 internal energy and vertical mixing.

440

441 2.3 Ice Giant Magnetospheres

442

443 What can we learn about astrophysical plasma processes by studying the highly-asymmetric, fast-rotating  
444 Ice Giant magnetospheres? The off-centered, oblique and fast rotating planetary magnetic fields of Uranus  
445 and Neptune give rise to magnetospheres that are governed by large scale asymmetries and rapidly  
446 evolving configurations (e.g. Griton et al. 2018), with no other parallels in our Solar System. The solar wind  
447 that impinges upon these two magnetospheres attains Mach numbers significantly larger than those found  
448 at Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn, adding further to their uniqueness (Masters et al. 2018). Magnetospheric  
449 observations should thus be a high priority in the exploration of the Ice Giants because they extend the  
450 sampling of the vast parameter space that controls the structure and evolution of magnetospheres, thus  
451 allowing us to achieve a more universal understanding of how these systems work. Insights would also be  
452 provided to astrophysical plasma processes on similar systems that are remote to us both in space and  
453 time. Such may be the magnetospheres of exoplanets or even that of the Earth at times of geomagnetic  
454 field reversals, when the higher order moments of the terrestrial magnetic field become significant, as  
455 currently seen at the Ice Giants' (Merrill and Mcfadden, 1999). Evidence for  $H_3^+$  ionospheric temperature  
456 modulations at Uranus due to charged particle precipitation (Melin et al. 2011; 2013) is one of many  
457 indications reminding us how strong a coupling between a planet and its magnetosphere can be, and why  
458 the study of the latter would be essential also for achieving a system-level understanding of the Ice Giants.

459  
460 A synergy between close proximity, remote sensing, and in-situ magnetospheric measurements at the Ice  
461 Giants would redefine the state-of-the-art, currently determined by the single Voyager-2 flyby  
462 measurements, and limited Earth-based auroral observations. Key questions that would guide such  
463 observations are listed below:

464  
465 ***Is there an equilibrium state of the Ice Giant magnetospheres?*** Voyager-2 spent only a few planetary  
466 rotations within Uranus' and Neptune's magnetopauses, such that it was challenging to establish a nominal  
467 configuration of their magnetospheres, their constituent particle populations, supporting current systems.  
468 Furthermore, it is unclear whether the observations of this dynamic system represent any kind of steady

469 state, as ongoing magnetospheric reconfigurations were observed throughout each flyby, owing to the  
470 large dipole tilts at the Ice Giants and their ~16 and ~17-hour rotation periods. The extent to which the two  
471 magnetospheres are modified by internal plasma sources is also poorly constrained; Uranus'  
472 magnetosphere for instance was observed to be devoid of any appreciable cold plasma populations  
473 (McNutt et al., 1987). The presence of strong electron radiation belts (Mauk et al. 2010), seems  
474 contradictory to the absence of a dense, seed population at plasma energies, or could hint an efficient local  
475 acceleration process by intense wave-fields (Scarf et al. 1987). A strong proton radiation belt driven by  
476 Galactic Cosmic Ray (GCR)-planet collisions may reside closer to Uranus or Neptune than Voyager-2  
477 reached (e.g. Stone et al. 1986), given that Earth and Saturn, which are known to sustain such belts, are  
478 exposed to a considerably lower GCR influx than the Ice Giants (Buchvarova and Belinov, 2009). Ion  
479 composition and UV aurora measurements hint that Triton could be a major source of plasma in Neptune's  
480 magnetosphere (Broadfoot et al., 1989, Richardson & McNutt, 1990), although questions remain as to the  
481 effects of coupling between the magnetosphere and the moon's atmosphere and ionosphere in  
482 establishing the plasma source (Hoogeveen & Cloutier, 1996). The magnetotails of both planets are  
483 expected to have very different structures to those seen at other magnetized planets (Figure 4), with strong  
484 helical magnetic field components (Cowley, 2013; Griton and Pantellini 2020), that may lead to a similarly  
485 helical topology of reconnection sites across the magnetospheric current sheet (Griton et al. 2018).  
486 Whether the overall magnetospheric configuration is controlled more by current sheet reconnection or a  
487 viscous interaction along the magnetopause (Masters et al. 2018) is also unknown. Finally, measuring  
488 average escape rates of ionospheric plasma would offer further insights on whether planetary magnetic  
489 fields protect planetary atmospheres from solar wind erosion (Wei et al. 2014, Gunell et al., 2018). For such  
490 dynamic systems, long-term observations that average out rotational effects and transients (e.g. Selesnick,  
491 1988) are essential for achieving closure to all the aforementioned questions.

492

493 ***How do the Ice Giant magnetospheres evolve dynamically?*** The large tilts of the Ice Giant magnetic fields  
494 relative to their planetary spin-axes hint that large-scale reconfigurations at diurnal time scales are

495 dominating short-term dynamics, a view supported by MHD simulations (Griton and Pantellini 2020; Griton  
496 et al. 2018; Cao and Paty 2017; Mejnertsen et al. 2016). The rate of magnetic reconnection, for instance, is  
497 predicted to vary strongly with rotation, and so is the rate of matter and energy transfer into the  
498 magnetosphere and eventually upper atmosphere (Masters et al., 2014). Simulations do not capture how  
499 such variations impact regions as the radiation belts, which would typically require a stable environment to  
500 accumulate the observed, high fluxes of energetic particles (Mauk et al. 2010). A strong diurnal variability  
501 may also affect the space weather conditions at the orbits of the Ice Giant moons, regulating the  
502 interactions between the charged particle populations, their surfaces and exospheres (Plainaki et al., 2016;  
503 Arridge et al., 2014) through processes like surface sputtering, ion pick up, and charge exchange, which  
504 may also feed the magnetosphere with neutrals and low energy, heavy ion plasma (Lammer 1995). In the  
505 time-frame considered here, the exploration of Neptune could provide an opportunity to study a “pole-on”  
506 magnetosphere at certain rotational phases.

507

508 Additional sources of variability can be solar wind driven, such as Corotating Interaction Regions (CIRs) and  
509 Interplanetary Coronal Mass Ejections (ICMEs) (Lamy et al. 2017). By the time they reach Uranus and  
510 Neptune, ICMEs expand and coalesce and attain a quasi-steady radial width of  $\sim 2\text{-}3$  AU (Wang and  
511 Richardson, 2004) that could result in active magnetospheric episodes with week-long durations. With  
512 Triton being a potential active source, Neptune’s magnetosphere may show variations at the moon’s orbital  
513 period (Decker and Cheng 1994).

514

515 On longer time scales, seasonal changes of the planetary field’s orientation are most important, especially  
516 at Uranus, because of its spin axis which almost lies on the ecliptic. There may be additional implications for  
517 the long-term variability of the magnetosphere if magnetic field measurements reveal a secular drift of the  
518 planetary field at any of the Ice Giants, in addition to providing constraints on the magnetic fields’ origin  
519 and the planets’ interiors (Section 2.1).

520

521 ***How can we probe the Ice Giant magnetospheres through their aurorae?*** Aurorae form a unique  
522 diagnostic of magnetospheric processes by probing the spatial distribution of active magnetospheric  
523 regions and their dynamics at various timescales. Auroral emissions of Uranus and Neptune were detected  
524 by Voyager 2 at ultraviolet and radio wavelengths. The Uranian UV aurora has been occasionally re-  
525 detected by the Hubble Space Telescope since then. At NIR wavelengths auroral signatures remain elusive  
526 (e.g. Melin et al., 2019).

527

528 UV aurora are collisionally-excited H Ly- $\alpha$  and H<sub>2</sub> band emissions from the upper atmosphere, driven by  
529 precipitating energetic particles. The radical differences of the Uranian UV aurora observed across different  
530 seasons were assigned to seasonal variations of the magnetosphere/solar wind interaction (Broadfoot et  
531 al., 1986; Lamy et al., 2012, 2017; Cowley, 2013; Barthél my et al., 2014). The tentative detection of  
532 Neptunian UV aurora did not reveal any clear planet-satellite interaction (e.g. with Triton) (Broadfoot et al.,  
533 1989). Repeated UV spectro-imaging observations are essential to probe the diversity of Ice Giant aurora,  
534 assess their underlying driver and constrain magnetic field models (e.g. Herbert, 2009).

535

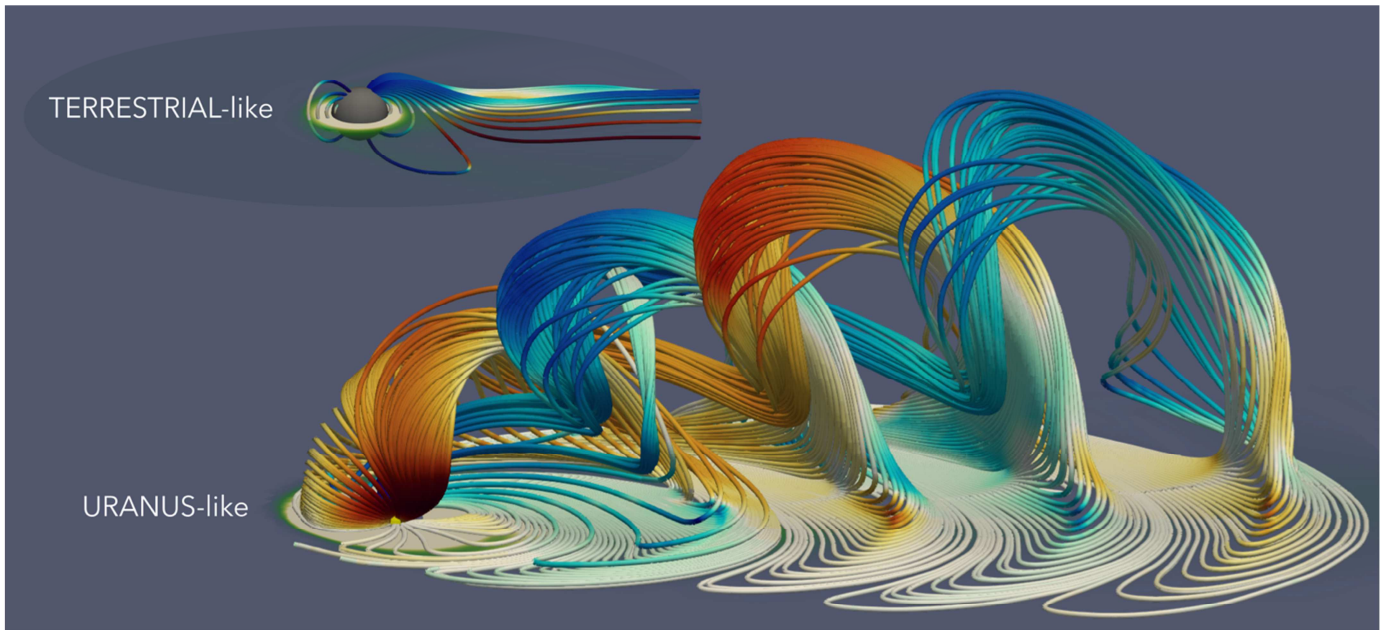


Figure 4 Typical magnetic field configuration in a terrestrial-like, solar wind driven magnetosphere (top) where the magnetic and spin axis are almost aligned, compared to a Uranus-like magnetospheric configuration (bottom), when the magnetic axis is  $90^\circ$  away from the spin axis, during equinox. The helicoidal magnetotail structure develops due to the planet's fast rotation.

536 Uranus and Neptune produce powerful auroral radio emissions above the ionosphere most likely driven by  
 537 the Cyclotron Maser Instability as at Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn. The Uranian and Neptunian Kilometric  
 538 Radiation are very similar (Desch et al., 1991, Zarka et al., 1995). They include (i) bursty emissions (lasting  
 539 for <10min) reminiscent of those from other planetary magnetospheres. A yet-to-be-identified time-  
 540 stationary source of free energy, able to operate in strongly variable magnetospheres, is thought to drive  
 541 (ii) smoother emissions (lasting for hours) that are unique in our solar system (Farrell, 1992). Long-term  
 542 remote and in-situ radio measurements are crucial to understand the generation of all types of Ice Giant  
 543 radio emissions, to complete the baseline for the search of exoplanetary radio emissions. Long-term  
 544 monitoring of auroral emissions will also be essential to precisely determine the rotation periods of these  
 545 worlds.

546  
 547 Summary: The Ice Giant magnetospheres comprise unique plasma physics laboratories, the study of which  
 548 would allow us to observe and put to test a variety of astrophysical plasma processes that cannot be  
 549 resolved under the conditions that prevail at the terrestrial planets and at the Gas Giants. The strong  
 550 planet-magnetosphere links that exist further attest to the exploration of the magnetospheres as a key  
 551 ingredient of the Ice Giant systems.

552

553 2.4 Ice Giant Satellites – Natural &amp; Captured

554

555 What can a comparison of Uranus' natural satellites, the captured "Ocean World" Triton, and the myriad  
556 ice-rich bodies in the Solar System, reveal about the drivers of active geology and potential habitability on  
557 icy satellites? The satellite systems of Uranus and Neptune offer very different insights into moon  
558 formation and evolution; they are microcosms of the larger formation and evolution of planetary systems.  
559 The Neptunian system is dominated by the 'cuckoo-like' arrival of Triton (i.e., severely disrupting any  
560 primordial Neptunian satellite system), which would be the largest known dwarf planet in the Kuiper belt if  
561 it were still only orbiting the Sun. Neptune's remaining satellites may not be primordial, given the degree of  
562 system disruption generated by Triton's arrival. In contrast, Uranus's satellite system appears to be  
563 relatively undisturbed since its formation — a highly surprising situation given that Uranus has the most  
564 severe axial tilt of any planet, implying a dramatic collisional event in its past. Thus, these two satellite  
565 systems offer laboratories for understanding the key planetary processes of formation, capture and  
566 collision.

567

568 ***What can the geological diversity of the large icy satellites of Uranus reveal about the formation and***  
569 ***continued evolution of primordial satellite systems?*** The five largest moons of Uranus (Miranda, Ariel,  
570 Umbriel, Titania, Oberon) are comparable in sizes and orbital configurations to the medium-sized moons of  
571 Saturn. However, they have higher mean densities, about  $1.5 \text{ g/cm}^3$  on average, and have different  
572 insolation patterns: their poles are directed towards the Sun for decades at a time, due to the large axial tilt  
573 of Uranus. The surfaces of Uranus's five mid-sized moons exhibit extreme geologic diversity, demonstrating  
574 a complex and varied history (Figure 1). On Ariel and Miranda, signs of endogenic resurfacing associated  
575 with tectonic stress, and possible cryovolcanic processes, are apparent: these moons appear to have the  
576 youngest surfaces. Geological interpretation has suffered greatly from the incomplete Voyager 2 image  
577 coverage of only the southern hemisphere, and extremely limited coverage by Uranus-shine in part of the

578 north (Stryk and Stooke, 2008). Apart from a very limited set of images with good resolution at Miranda,  
579 revealing fascinatingly complex tectonic history and possible re-formation of the moon (Figure 5), most  
580 images were acquired at low to medium resolution, only allowing characterisation of the main geological  
581 units (e.g., Croft and Soderblom, 1991) and strongly limiting any surface dating from the crater-size  
582 frequency distribution (e.g. Plescia, 1987a, Plescia, 1987b). High-resolution images of these moons,  
583 combined with spectral data, will reveal essential information on the tectonic and cryovolcanic processes  
584 and the relative ages of the different geological units, via crater statistics and sputtering processes.  
585 Comparison with Saturn's inner moons system will allow us to identify key drivers in the formation and  
586 evolution of compact multiplanetary systems.

587

588 ***What was the influence of tidal interaction and internal melting on shaping the Uranian worlds, and***  
589 ***could internal water oceans still exist?*** As in the Jovian and Saturnian systems, tidal interaction is likely to  
590 have played a key role in the evolution of the Uranian satellite system. Intense tidal heating during sporadic  
591 passages through resonances is expected to have induced internal melting in some of the icy moons  
592 (Titemore and Wisdom 1990). Such tidally-induced melting events, comparable to those expected on  
593 Enceladus (e.g. Běhouňková et al. 2012), may have triggered the geological activity that led to the late  
594 resurfacing of Ariel and possibly transient hydrothermal activity. The two largest (>1500 km diameter)  
595 moons, Titania and Oberon, may still harbour liquid water oceans between their outer ice shells and inner  
596 rocky cores – remnants of past melting events. Comparative study of the static and time-variable gravity  
597 field of the Uranian and Saturnian moons, once well-characterized, will constrain the likelihood and  
598 duration of internal melting events, essential to characterize their astrobiological potential. Complete  
599 spacecraft mapping of their surfaces could reveal recent endogenic activity.

600

601 Accurate radio tracking and astrometric measurements can also be used to quantify the influence of tidal  
602 interactions in the system at present, providing fundamental constraints on the dissipation factor of Uranus  
603 itself (Lainey, 2008). Gravity and magnetic measurements, combined with global shape data, will greatly



604 improve the models of the satellites' interiors, providing fundamental constraints on their bulk composition  
605 (density) and evolution (mean moment of inertia). Understanding their ice-to-rock ratio and internal  
606 structure will enable us to understand if Uranus' natural satellite system are the original population of  
607 bodies that formed around the planet, or if they were disrupted.

608

609 ***What is the chemical composition of the surfaces of the Uranian moons?*** The albedos of the major  
610 Uranian moons, considerably lower than those of Saturn's moons (except Phoebe and Iapetus's dark  
611 hemisphere), reveal that their surfaces are characterized by a mixture of H<sub>2</sub>O ice and a visually dark and  
612 spectrally bland material that is possibly carbonaceous in origin (Brown and Cruikshank, 1983). Pure CO<sub>2</sub> ice  
613 is concentrated on the trailing hemispheres of Ariel, Umbriel and Titania (Grundy et al., 2006), and it  
614 decreases in abundance with increasing semimajor axis (Grundy et al., 2006; Cartwright et al., 2015), as  
615 opposed to what is observed in the Saturnian system. At Uranus' distance from the Sun, CO<sub>2</sub> ice should be  
616 removed on timescales shorter than the age of the Solar System, so the detected CO<sub>2</sub> ice may be actively  
617 produced (Cartwright et al., 2015).

618

619 The pattern of spectrally red material on the major moons will reveal their interaction with dust from the  
620 decaying orbits of the irregular satellites. Spectrally red material has been detected primarily on the leading  
621 hemispheres of Titania and Oberon. H<sub>2</sub>O ice bands are stronger on the leading hemispheres of the classical  
622 satellites, and the leading/trailing asymmetry in H<sub>2</sub>O ice band strengths decreases with distance from  
623 Uranus. Spectral mapping of the distribution of red material and trends in H<sub>2</sub>O ice band strengths across  
624 the satellites and rings can map out infalling dust from Uranus's inward-migrating irregular satellites  
625 (Cartwright et al., 2018), similar to what is observed in the Saturnian system on Phoebe/Iapetus (e.g., Tosi  
626 et al., 2010), and could reveal how coupling with the Uranus plasma and dust environment influence their  
627 surface evolution.

628

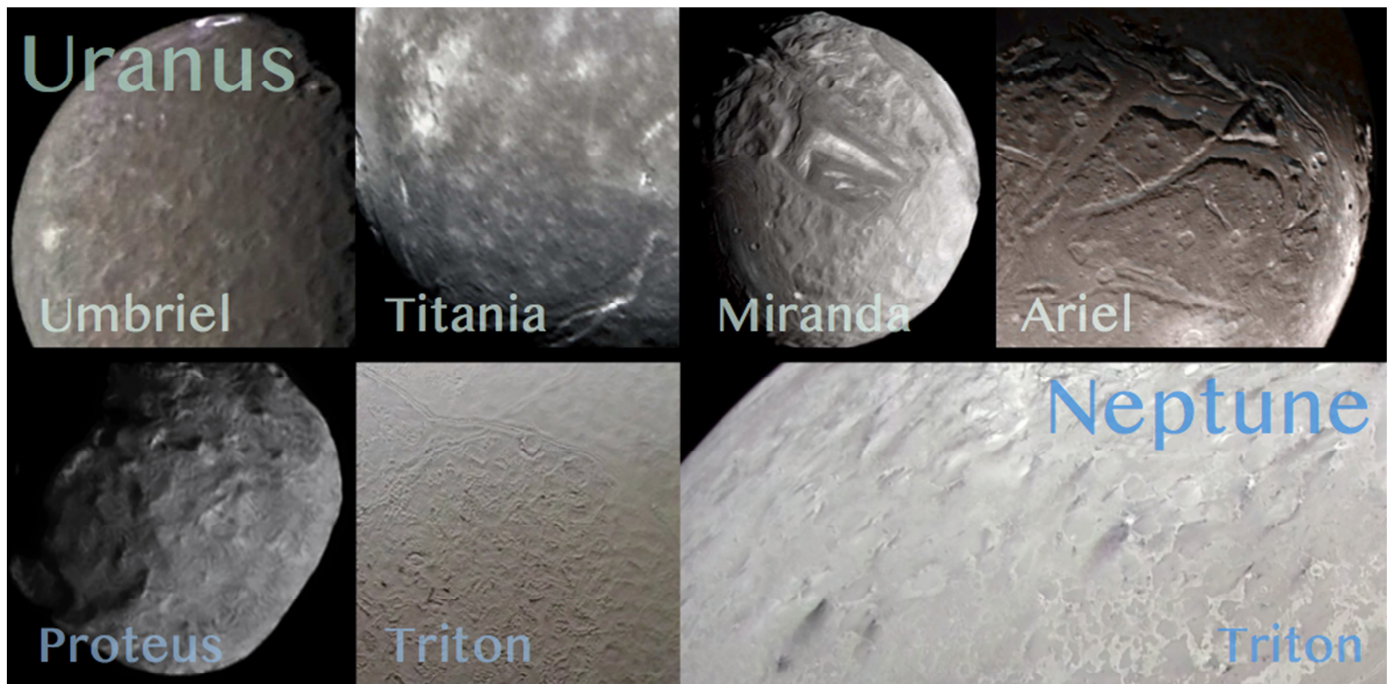


Figure 5 Best-resolution (roughly  $\sim 1$  km/px) imagery of terrains seen in the moons of Uranus (top row) and Neptune (lower row) by Voyager 2. At Uranus, Umbriel and Titania are highly cratered with some major faults; Miranda displays spectacular and massive tectonic features; Ariel's filled-fissured surface is suggestive of late cryovolcanic activity. At Neptune, Proteus has a surface suggestive of Saturn's dust-rich moon Helene. The dwarf-planet-sized Triton has both the sublimation-related "cantaloupe terrain" (left) and active nitrogen gas geysers in the south polar terrains (right), with deposited dust visible as dark streaks. Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Ted Stryk/collage M. Bannister.

629 **Does Triton currently harbour a subsurface ocean and is there evidence for recent, or ongoing, active**  
 630 **exchange with its surface?** Neptune's large moon Triton, one of a rare class of Solar System bodies with a  
 631 substantial atmosphere and active geology, offers a unique opportunity to study a body comparable to the  
 632 dwarf planets of the rest of the trans-Neptunian region, but much closer. Triton shares many similarities in  
 633 surface and atmosphere with Pluto (Grundy et al. 2016), and both may harbour current oceans. Triton's  
 634 retrograde orbit indicates it was captured, causing substantial early heating. Triton, in comparison with  
 635 Enceladus and Europa, will let us understand the role of tidally-induced activity on the habitability of ice-  
 636 covered oceans. The major discovery of plumes emanating from the southern polar cap of Triton  
 637 (Soderblom et al. 1990; see Figure 5) by Voyager 2, the most distant activity in the Solar System, is yet to be  
 638 fully understood (Smith et al. 1989).

639  
 640 Like Europa, Triton has a relatively young surface age of  $\sim 100$  Ma (Stern and McKinnon 2000), inferred from  
 641 its few visible impact craters. Triton also displays a variety of distinctive curvilinear ridges and associated  
 642 troughs, comparable to those on Europa (Prockter et al. 2005) and especially apparent in the "cantaloupe

643 terrain". This suggests that tidal stresses and dissipation have played an essential role in Triton's geological  
644 activity, and may be ongoing (Nimmo and Spencer 2015). Intense tidal heating following its capture could  
645 have easily melted its icy interior (McKinnon et al. 1995). Its young surface suggests that Triton experienced  
646 an ocean crystallization stage relatively recently (Hussmann et al. 2006), associated with enhanced surface  
647 heat flux (Martin-Herrero et al. 2018). Combined magnetic, gravimetric and shape measurements from  
648 multiple flybys or in orbit will allow us to detect if Triton possesses an ocean and to constrain the present-  
649 day thickness of the ice shell. Correlating the derived shell structure and geological units will show if there  
650 is exchange with the ocean. It is entirely unclear if the source(s) for Triton's plumes reaches the ocean, as at  
651 Enceladus.

652

653 ***Are seasonal changes in Triton's tenuous atmosphere linked to specific sources and sinks on the surface,***  
654 ***including its remarkable plume activity?*** Triton's surface has a range of volatile ices seen in Earth-based  
655 near-infrared spectra, including N<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>O, CO<sub>2</sub>, and CH<sub>4</sub> (Quirico et al., 1999; Cruikshank et al., 2000; Tegler  
656 et al, 2012). A 2.239 μm absorption feature suggests that CO and N<sub>2</sub> molecules are intimately mixed in the  
657 ice rather than existing as separate regions of pure CO and pure N<sub>2</sub> deposits (Tegler et al., 2019). Mapping  
658 the spatial variation of this absorption feature will constrain how the surface-atmosphere interaction  
659 affects the surface composition, and more generally its climate and geologic evolution. Triton's surface may  
660 also contain complex organics from atmospheric photochemistry, like those of Pluto or Saturn's moon Titan  
661 (e.g. Krasnopolsky and Cruikshank 1995), as suggested by its yellowish areas (Thompson and Sagan 1990).  
662 Identifying the organic compounds, and mapping out their correlation with recently active terrains and  
663 geysers, will strongly raise the astrobiological potential of this exotic icy world.

664

665 Triton's tenuous atmosphere is mainly molecular nitrogen, with a trace of methane and CO near the  
666 surface (Broadfoot et al. 1989, Lellouch et al. 2010). Despite Triton's distance from the Sun and its cold  
667 temperatures, the weak sunlight is enough to drive strong seasonal changes on its surface and atmosphere.  
668 Because CO and N<sub>2</sub> are the most volatile species on Triton, they are expected to dominate seasonal volatile

669 transport across its surface. Observation of increased CH<sub>4</sub> partial pressure between 1989 and 2010  
670 (Lellouch et al. 2010) confirmed that Triton's atmosphere is seasonably variable. The plumes of nitrogen  
671 gas and dust could be a seasonal solar-driven process like the CO<sub>2</sub> 'spiders' of the south polar regions of  
672 Mars, although an endogenic origin is possible.

673

674 ***Are the smaller satellites of Neptune primordial?*** Voyager 2's flyby led to the discovery of six small moons  
675 inside Triton's orbit: Naiad, Thalassa, Despina, Galatea, Larissa and Proteus. A seventh inner moon,  
676 Hippocamp, has been recently discovered by HST observations orbiting between the two largest, Larissa  
677 and Proteus. Almost nothing is known about these faint moons, which may post-date Triton's capture  
678 rather than being primordial. Only a new space mission could unveil basic features such as shape and  
679 surface composition, shedding light on their origin.

680

681 ***How does an Ice Giant satellite system interact with the planets' magnetospheres?*** Most of the major  
682 moons of Uranus and Neptune orbit within the planets' extensive magnetospheres (Figure 1). The tilt and  
683 offset of both planets' magnetic dipoles compared to their rotation axes mean that, unlike at Saturn, the  
684 major moons at both Ice Giants experience continually-changing external magnetic fields. The potential  
685 subsurface oceans of Titania, Oberon and Triton would be detectable by a spacecraft that can monitor for  
686 an induced magnetic field. The moons in both systems orbit in relatively benign radiation environments,  
687 but radiation belt particles could still drive sputtering processes at the inner moons' surfaces and Triton's  
688 atmosphere. Triton could be a significant potential source of a neutral gas torus and magnetospheric  
689 plasma at Neptune. Triton's ionosphere's transonic, sub-Alfvénic regime (Neubauer 1990; Strobel et al.  
690 1990) may generate an auroral spot in Neptune's upper atmosphere. No such interaction is anticipated at  
691 Uranus. Red aurorae may also be present on Triton from N<sub>2</sub> emission, providing valuable insights into  
692 Triton's interaction with its space environment.

693

694 Summary: Exploring Uranus' and Neptune's natural satellites, as well as Neptune's captured moon Triton,  
695 will reveal how ocean worlds may form and remain active, defining the extent of the habitable zone in the  
696 Solar System. Both satellite systems are equally compelling for future orbital exploration.

697

## 698 2.5 Ice Giant Ring Systems

699

700 What processes shape the rings of Ice Giants, and why do they differ from the extensive rings of Saturn?  
701 Uranus and Neptune both possess a complex system of rings and satellites (Figure 6, see also de Pater et  
702 al., 2018, Nicholson et al., 2018). The rings exhibit narrow and dense ringlets, as well as fainter but broader  
703 dust components. The moons can confine the rings gravitationally, and may also serve as sources and sinks  
704 for ring material. Observations indicate rapid variability in the Uranian and Neptunian rings within decades.  
705 A mission to the Ice Giants, with a dedicated suite of instruments, can answer fundamental questions on  
706 the formation and evolution of the ring systems and the planets themselves:

707

708 ***What is the origin of the solar system ring systems, and why are they so different?*** The origin of the giant  
709 planets' rings is one of the unsolved mysteries in planetary science. Whereas all four giant planets do have  
710 rings, their diversity of structure and composition argues for different formation scenarios (Charnoz et al.,  
711 2018). It was hypothesized that the very massive Saturnian rings formed more than 3 Gyrs ago through  
712 tidal destruction of a moon, or of a body on a path traversing the system. However, recent Cassini  
713 measurements (Zhang et al., 2017, Kempf et al., 2018, Waite et al., 2018, less et al., 2019) argue for a  
714 younger ring age. In contrast, Uranus' and Neptune's rings are far less massive and they have a different  
715 structure. Compared to Saturn, their rings' albedo is much lower, favouring a parent body that was a  
716 mixture of ice and dark material (silicates and possibly organics). For instance, it was suggested (Colwell  
717 and Esposito, 1992, 1993) that these two ring systems could result from the periodic destruction of  
718 moonlets through meteoroid bombardment, in which case most of the ringlets would be only transient  
719 structures, currently in the process of re-accretion to satellites. Among the Uranian dust rings the  $\mu$  ring has

720 a distinct blue spectral slope (de Pater et al. 2006). In that regard it is similar to Saturn's E ring, for which  
721 the blue slope results from the narrow size distribution of its grains, formed in the cryo-volcanic activity of  
722 the moon Enceladus. Although the moon Mab is embedded in the  $\mu$  ring (Showalter et al, 2006) it appears  
723 much too small (12km radius) to be volcanically active and create in this way the dust that forms the ring.  
724 Other dust rings of Uranus exhibit a red spectral slope (de Pater et al. 2006), suggestive of dusty material  
725 released in micrometeoroid impacts on atmosphere-less moons and the origin for different appearance of  
726 the  $\mu$  ring is unknown. Recent ground-based observations of thermal emission from the Uranian ring  
727 system (Molter et al., 2019) are consistent with the idea that the rings are made up of larger particles,  
728 without micron-sized dust, and that their temperatures result from low thermal inertia and/or slow  
729 rotation of the particles. Clearly, more data is needed to ultimately settle the question of the origin and  
730 nature of Uranus' and Neptune's rings.

731

732 ***How do the ring-moon systems evolve?*** A variety of processes govern the evolution of planetary rings,  
733 many of which are also fundamental to other cosmic disks. Important for the rings are viscous transport,  
734 ring-satellite interactions, the self-gravity, as well as meteoroid bombardment and cometary impacts.  
735 These processes may induce rapid evolution on timescales much shorter than the rings' age. For instance,  
736 the Neptune ring arcs were initially interpreted to be confined by resonances with the moon Galatea.  
737 However, it was found that the arcs actually move away from the corresponding corotation sites (Dumas et  
738 al., 1999, Namouni & Porco 2002) and that they evolve rapidly (de Pater et al., 2005). Also, for the Uranian  
739 rings significant changes since the Voyager epoch are observed (de Pater et al., 2006, 2007). In the Uranus  
740 and Neptune systems the role the moons play in sculpting the rings is even stronger than for Saturn's rings.  
741 Moreover, depending on their composition, the Uranus and Neptune ring systems may even extend  
742 beyond the planet's Roche Limit (Tiscareno et al., 2013). This implies that their path of evolution is different  
743 from the Saturnian rings, inducing changes on more rapid timescales. Some of the edges of the Uranian  
744 rings are clearly confined by known satellites and others might be confined by yet undetected moons.



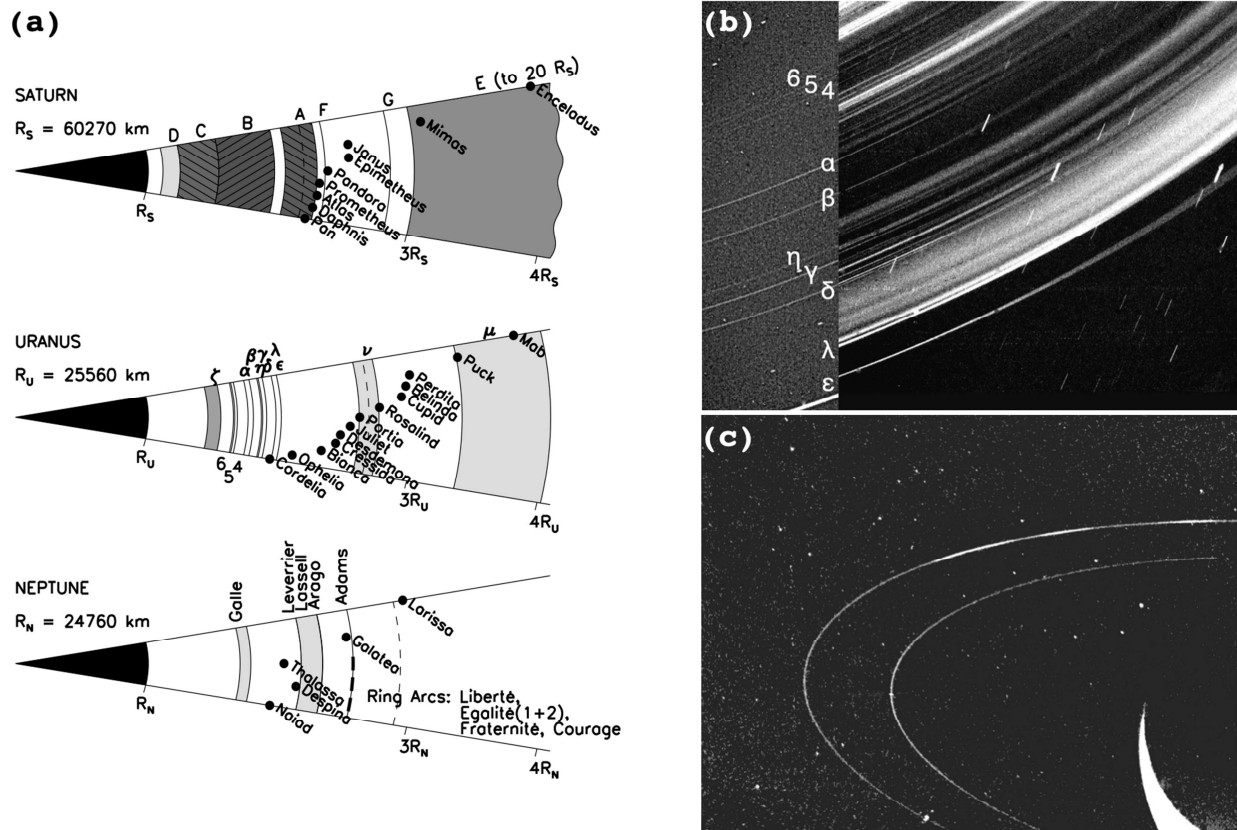


Figure 6 Panel (a): Schematic diagram of the ring moon systems of Uranus, Neptune, and Saturn for comparison. The Roche radius (for icy ring particles) is marked as a dashed line. Panel (b) shows a combination of two Voyager images of the Uranus rings, taken at low (upper part) and high (lower part) phase angle (figure from Nicholson et al., 2018). At high phase angle the dusty components of the ring system stand out. Panel (c) shows a Voyager image of the rings of Neptune (Credit: NASA/JPL).

745 Alternatively, there might be different processes of confinement at work, in a similar manner as for narrow  
 746 rings of Saturn, for which shepherding moons are absent. Some of the dense rings of Uranus show sub-  
 747 structure the origin of which is unclear. Spacecraft investigation will answer the question if the structure is  
 748 induced by resonant interaction with moons, or if it represents intrinsic modes arising from instability and  
 749 self-gravity of the rings.

750

751 **What is the ring composition?** The rings (as the moons) very likely consist of material that was present at  
 752 the location in the solar system where the planets themselves have formed. Therefore, the investigation of  
 753 the composition of the rings, while being interesting in its own right, may also shed light on models of  
 754 planet formation and migration in the solar system.

755



756 Imaging at high and intermediate phase angles will constrain the shapes and properties of known dust rings  
757 and has the potential to discover new rings. Multicolour imaging at a range of phase angles will determine  
758 the size distribution of the grains that form these rings. Imaging at low phase angles will probe the dense  
759 rings and allow for a comprehensive search and discovery of yet unseen satellites that serve as sources for  
760 ring material and that interact dynamically with the rings. Stellar occultations performed with a high-speed  
761 photometer, or radio occultations, will determine the precise optical depths of the denser rings and resolve  
762 their fine sub-structure (French et al., 1991). An IR spectrometer will determine the composition of the  
763 dense rings. In a complementary manner a dust detector will directly determine the composition of the  
764 grains forming the low optical depth dust rings (Postberg et al., 2009) and of particles lifted from the dense  
765 rings (Hsu et al., 2018). A dust detector will also measure the flux and composition of interplanetary  
766 particles in the outer solar system, which is a poorly known quantity of high importance for the origin and  
767 evolution of the rings.

768

769 Summary: Ice Giant rings appear to be fundamentally different to those of Saturn, such that their origin,  
770 evolution, composition and gravitational relationships with the icy satellites should provide key new  
771 insights into the forces shaping ring systems surrounding planetary bodies.

### 772 3. Ice Giant Science in Context

773

774 The scientific themes highlighted in Section 2 span multiple disciplines within planetary science, and  
775 address questions that touch on issues across astronomy. In this section we review how an Ice Giant  
776 mission must be considered in the context of other fields and technologies that will be developing in the  
777 coming decades.

778

#### 779 3.1 Astronomical Observatories

780

781 An Ice Giant System mission would be operating in the context of world-leading new facilities on or near  
782 Earth. The 2020s will see the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope, able to provide spectral maps of  
783 both Ice Giants from 1-30  $\mu\text{m}$  but at a moderate spatial resolution and with limited temporal coverage.  
784 Earth-based observatories in the 8-10 m class provide better spatial resolution at the expense of telluric  
785 obscuration. A successor to the Hubble Space Telescope, which has been the key provider of visible and UV  
786 observations of the Ice Giants, has yet to become a reality, but could be operating in the 2030s. And  
787 although the next generation of Earth-based observatories in the 30+m class (the ELT, TMT, GMT) will  
788 provide exquisite spatial resolution, this will remain limited to atmospheric and ionospheric investigations  
789 of the Earth-facing hemisphere (with some disc-averaged spectroscopy of the satellites), leaving a  
790 multitude of fundamental questions unanswered.

791

792 Additionally, distant remote sensing can only study phenomena that alter the emergent spectrum –  
793 meteorology, seasonal variations, and ionospheric emissions (auroral and non-auroral). This limits our  
794 understanding of the underlying mechanisms and means that ground- and space-based telescopes only  
795 serve a narrow subset of the Ice Giant community, and cannot address the wide-ranging goals described in  
796 Section 2. Thus, there is no substitute for orbital exploration of one or both of these Ice Giant systems  
797 (alongside in situ sampling of their atmospheres), but we envisage that these space missions will work in  
798 synergy with the ground-based astronomy community, following successful examples of Galileo, Cassini,  
799 Juno and, ultimately, JUICE and Europa Clipper. Support from Earth-based observatories, either on the  
800 ground or in space, will be used to establish a temporal baseline for atmospheric changes (e.g., tracking  
801 storms), provide global context for close-in observations from the orbiters, and plug any gaps in spectral  
802 coverage or spectral resolution in the orbiter payload.

803

804 3.2 Heliophysics Connection

805

806 Missions to explore the Ice Giant Systems also resonate with the heliophysics community, as detailed  
807 exploration of an oblique rotator can inform a universal model of magnetospheres. The panel on solar-  
808 wind magnetosphere interactions of the 2013 heliophysics decadal survey<sup>5</sup> identified how the  
809 magnetospheres of Uranus and Neptune are fundamentally different from others in our Solar System, and  
810 sought to ensure that magnetic field instruments would be guaranteed a place on outer planet missions,  
811 with a strong recommendation being that NASA's heliophysics and planetary divisions partner on a Uranus  
812 orbital mission. They describe how Uranus offers an example of solar wind/magnetosphere interactions  
813 under strongly changing orientations over diurnal timescales. Depending on the season, the effects of solar  
814 wind-magnetosphere interaction vary dramatically over the course of each day.

815

816 There is also a need to understand how the solar wind evolves beyond 10 AU (Saturn orbit), as the states of  
817 solar structures travelling within the solar wind (solar wind pressure pulses) are largely unknown due to the  
818 lack of observations at such large heliocentric distances (Witasse et al., 2017). The long cruise duration of a  
819 mission to Uranus or Neptune provides an excellent opportunity for both heliophysics and Ice Giant  
820 communities if a space weather-monitoring package that includes a magnetometer, a solar wind analyser,  
821 and a radiation monitor operates continuously during the cruise phase, to understand how conditions vary  
822 out to 20-30 AU over a prolonged lifetime. Moreover, the complexity of the interactions of Uranus's  
823 magnetosphere with the solar wind provides an ideal testbed for the theoretical understanding of  
824 planetary interactions with the solar wind, significantly expanding the parameter range over which  
825 scientists can study magnetospheric structure and dynamics. The potential discoveries from its dynamo  
826 generation and its variability stand to open new chapters in comparative planetary magnetospheres and  
827 interiors.

828

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/13060/solar-and-space-physics-a-science-for-a-technological-society>

829 3.3 Exoplanet & Brown Dwarf Connection

830

831 The Ice Giant System mission will occur during an explosion in our understanding of planets beyond our  
832 Solar System, through ESA's Cosmic Vision missions Plato, Euclid, and ARIEL; through missions with  
833 international partners like JWST and TESS; and through next-generation observatories like WFIRST, LUVOIR,  
834 Origins, and HabEx. The physical and chemical processes at work within our own Solar System serve as the  
835 key foundation for our understanding of those distant and unresolved worlds. Our Solar System provides  
836 the only laboratory in which we can perform in-situ experiments to understand exoplanet formation,  
837 composition, structure, dynamos, systems and magnetospheres. After the several highly-successful  
838 missions to the Gas Giants (and the upcoming ESA/JUICE mission), dedicated exploration of the Ice Giants  
839 would place those discoveries into a broader, solar-system context.

840

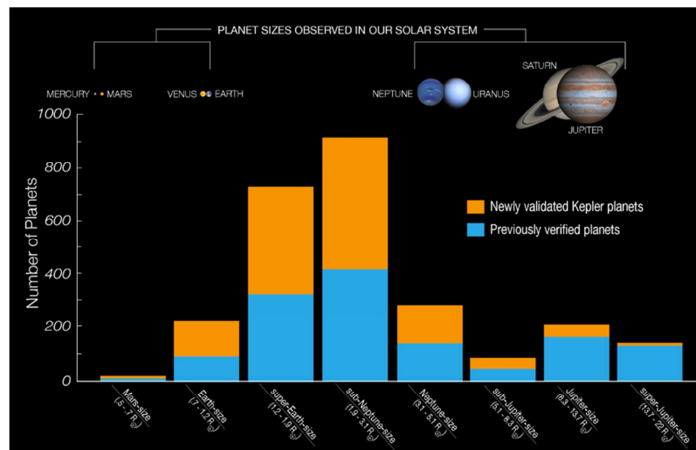


Figure 7 Known transiting exoplanets in 2016, from the Kepler mission, showing sub-Neptunes as the most common planetary radius in the current census. Credit: NASA/Ames

841 **Planet Statistics:** Uranus and Neptune represent our closest and best examples of a class of planets  
 842 intermediate in mass and size between the larger, hydrogen-helium-enriched gas giants, and the rocky  
 843 terrestrial worlds. Indeed, Neptune- and sub-Neptune-size worlds have emerged as commonplace in our  
 844 ever-expanding census of exoplanets (Figure 7). Neptune-size planets are among the most common classes  
 845 of exoplanet in our galaxy (Fulton et al., 2018). Fressin et al. (2013) suggest that this category of planets  
 846 can be found around 3-31% of sun-like stars, and Petigura et al (2017) suggests that sub-Neptunes remains  
 847 the most common category within Kepler’s survey. Based on statistics from the Kepler mission it is  
 848 predicted that TESS will detect over 1500 sub-Neptunes (2-4  $R_E$ ) over the mission (Barclay et al. 2018).  
 849 Microlensing surveys (e.g., WFIRST, Penny et al., 2019) will also be more sensitive to lower-mass planets on  
 850 wide orbits, and could reveal new insights into extrasolar Ice Giants ahead of a mission to Uranus or  
 851 Neptune. Given these planetary occurrence rates, the exploration of bulk composition and interiors of our  
 852 Ice Giants would provide strong constraints on the most common outcome for planetary formation.  
 853 However, we emphasise that being Neptune-sized does not necessarily imply being Neptune-like, as a  
 854 plethora of additional parameters come into play to shape the environmental conditions on these worlds.

855  
 856 **Atmospheric Insights:** Although we are currently unable to resolve spatial contrasts on exoplanets and  
 857 brown dwarfs, comparisons of dayside (eclipse) and nightside (transit) spectra suggest the presence of  
 858 powerful winds on some targets that are responsible for redistribution of energy. Brightness variations as  
 859 Brown Dwarfs rotate suggest patchy cloud structures, but their rapid evolution was only understood when

860 compared with long-cadence Neptune observations (Apai et al., 2013, Stauffer et al. 2016, Simon et al.  
861 2016). Changes in exoplanet transit spectra with temperature indicate complex cloud condensation  
862 processes (Morley et al., 2012; Wakeford et al., 2017). Atmospheric dynamics, chemistry, and cloud  
863 formation all vary as a function of planetary age, distance from the host star, and the bulk enrichments of  
864 chemical species. The smaller radii of Uranus and Neptune, compared to the larger gas giants, implies  
865 atmospheric processes (zonal banding, storms, vortices) at work in a different region of dynamical  
866 parameter space, and one which is unavailable elsewhere in our Solar System. Detailed exploration of our  
867 Ice Giants, in comparison to the existing studies of the Gas Giants, would allow us to unravel these  
868 competing and complex phenomena shaping the atmospheres of exoplanets and brown dwarfs.  
869 Importantly, measurements of Ice Giant composition and dynamics can be directly compared to exoplanet  
870 and brown dwarf observations, placing their formation location, age, and evolution into context, and vice  
871 versa. However, this cannot be done without a detailed comparative dataset from our Solar System Ice  
872 Giants.

873  
874 ***Magnetospheric Insights:*** Rymer et al. (2018) explore the importance of Ice Giant interactions with the  
875 wider magnetic environment as a testbed for understanding exoplanets. Eccentric and complex orbital  
876 characteristics appear commonplace beyond our Solar System, and Uranus is one of the only places where  
877 radio emission, magnetospheric transport and diffusion resulting from a complex magnetospheric  
878 orientation can be explored. The stability and strength of the Uranian radiation belts could also guide the  
879 search for exoplanets with radiation belts. Finally, understanding the dynamos of Uranus and Neptune  
880 would drastically improve our predictions of magnetic field strengths and exoplanet dynamo morphologies.  
881 Each of these insights will be vital as exoplanetary science moves into an era of characterisation of  
882 atmospheric composition, dynamics, clouds, and auroral/radio emissions.

## 883 4. Ice Giant Missions

### 884 4.1 Architectures: The Case for Orbiters

885

886 The scientific themes of Ice Giant System missions (summarised in Figure 9) are broad and challenging to  
887 capture within a single mission architecture, but recent efforts by both ESA (e.g., the 2018-19 studies with  
888 the Concurrent Design Facility for an M\*-class mission<sup>6</sup>) and NASA (e.g., the 2017 Science Study Team  
889 report, Hofstadter et al., 2019)<sup>7</sup> have explored strategies to achieve many of the goals in Section 2. The  
890 joint NASA-ESA science study team provided a detailed investigation of various combinations of flyby  
891 missions, orbiters, multiple sub-satellites from a core spacecraft, satellite landers, and atmospheric probes.  
892 Strategies to explore both Ice Giants with dual spacecraft have also been proposed (Turrini et al., 2014;  
893 Simon et al., 2018). It was widely recognised that a flyby mission like Voyager, without any additional  
894 components like an entry probe, was deemed to provide the lowest science return for the Ice Giants  
895 themselves, despite their lower cost point. Without *in situ* measurements, and by providing only brief  
896 snapshots of the evolving atmospheres and magnetospheres, and limited coverage of the satellites and  
897 rings, a flyby could not deliver on the highest-priority science goals for an Ice Giant mission. Targeting  
898 Triton as a flyby, or the inclusion of an entry probe, would increase the scientific reach, but would still  
899 prove inadequate for whole-system science. The study found that an Ice Giant orbiter for either the  
900 Uranus or Neptune systems, alongside an *in situ* atmospheric probe, would provide an unprecedented leap  
901 in our understanding of these enigmatic worlds. An orbiter would maximise the time spent in the system  
902 to conduct science of interest to the entire planetary community.

903

904 In our 2019 submission to ESA's call for ideas to shape the planning of space science missions in the coming  
905 decades (known as Voyage 2050), we therefore proposed that an orbital mission to an Ice Giant should be  
906 considered as a cornerstone of ESA's Voyage 2050 programme, if not already initiated with our  
907 international partners in the coming decade. An ESA orbital mission, powered by radioisotope  
908 thermoelectric generators, should be studied as an L-class mission to capitalise on the wealth of European  
909 experience of the Cassini and JUICE missions. Alternatively, an M-class Ice Giant budget would allow a

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://sci.esa.int/future-missions-department/61307-cdf-study-report-ice-giants/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.lpi.usra.edu/icegiants/>



910 crucial contribution to an orbital mission led by our international partners. The mass and mission  
911 requirements associated with additional components, such as satellite landers, *in situ* probes, or secondary  
912 small satellites, must be tensioned against the capabilities of the core payload, and the capability of the  
913 launch vehicle and propulsion. In all of these cases, a formal study of the requirements and capabilities is  
914 necessary to mature the concept.

915

916 **Payload Considerations:** The 2017 NASA study found that payload masses of 90-150 kg could deliver  
917 significant scientific return for a flagship-class mission, whilst the 2018 ESA CDF study identified 100 kg as a  
918 realistic payload mass for a European orbiter. Different studies have resulted in different prioritisations for  
919 instrumentation, but produced suites of orbiter experiments in common categories. Multi-spectral remote  
920 sensing is required, using both imaging and spectroscopy, spanning the UV, visible, near-IR (e.g.,  
921 atmosphere/surface reflectivity, dynamics; auroral observations), mid-IR, sub-mm, to centimetre  
922 wavelengths (e.g., thermal emission and energy balance, atmospheric circulation). Such remote sensing is  
923 also a requirement for characterising any atmospheric probe entry sites, or satellite lander sites. Direct  
924 sensing of the magnetospheric and plasma environment would be accomplished via magnetometers, dust  
925 detectors, plasma instruments, radio wave detectors, and potentially mass spectrometers. Radio science  
926 would provide opportunities for interior sounding and neutral/ionospheric occultation studies. The  
927 provision of such instruments would capitalise on European heritage on Cassini, JUICE, Rosetta,  
928 Venus/Mars Express, and BepiColombo, but at the same time recognising the need to develop smaller,  
929 lighter, and less power/data-intensive instruments, raising and maturing their technological readiness.

930

931 **Orbit Considerations:** Orbital missions to both Uranus and Neptune depend crucially on the chemical fuel  
932 required for orbit insertion, which determines the deliverable mass. The potential use of aerocapture,  
933 using atmospheric drag to slow down the spacecraft, permits larger payloads and faster trip times at the  
934 expense of increased risk, which needs significant further study. Mission requirements and orbital  
935 geometries will determine the inclination of orbital insertion – high geographical latitudes would benefit

936 some atmospheric, rings, and magnetospheric science, but satellite gravity assists and subsequent  
937 trajectory corrections would be needed for exploration of the satellites, rings and atmosphere from a low-  
938 inclination orbit. High inclinations are easier to achieve at Uranus, although Triton can be used to drive a  
939 satellite tour at Neptune. The delivery and telemetry for an atmospheric entry probe must also be  
940 considered in an orbital tour design (e.g., Simon et al., 2020). We also propose that distinct phases of an  
941 orbital tour be considered, balancing moderate orbital distances (for remote sensing, outer magnetosphere  
942 science, and a satellite tour) with close-in final orbits (for gravity science and inner magnetosphere),  
943 following the example of Cassini and Juno. Multiple close flybys of major satellites are desirable to map  
944 their interiors, surfaces, and atmospheres via a variety of techniques. Finally, multi-year orbital tours (at  
945 least  $\sim 3$  years) would maximise our time in the system, permitting the study of atmospheric and  
946 magnetospheric changes over longer time periods. The 2018 ESA CDF study confirmed the feasibility of  
947 orbital tours satisfying these scientific requirements.

948

949 **Ring Hazards:** The 2017 NASA-ESA report highlighted potentially unknown ring-plane hazards as a topic for  
950 future study. Orbit insertion should be as close to the planet as possible to reduce the required fuel, but  
951 the properties of Ice Giant rings remain poorly constrained. Potential options to mitigate this risk include:  
952 having the insertion be further out (requiring more fuel); fly through the ring plane at an altitude where  
953 atmospheric drag is high enough to reduce the number of particles, but not enough to adversely affect the  
954 spacecraft; use a pathfinder spacecraft to measure the particle density ahead of time; or use Earth-based  
955 observations to constrain the upper atmosphere/ring hazard. Detailed calculations on the location of this  
956 safe zone are required.

957

#### 958 4.2 Timeliness and Launch Opportunities

959

960 Trajectories to reach the Ice Giants depend on a number of factors: the use of chemical and/or solar-  
961 electric propulsion (SEP) technologies; the lift capacity of the launch vehicle; the use of

962 aerocapture/aerobraking; and the need for gravity assists. The availability of Jupiter, as the largest planet,  
963 is key to optimal launch trajectories, and the early 2030s offer the best opportunities. The synodic periods  
964 of Uranus and Neptune with respect to Jupiter are  $\sim 13.8$  and  $\sim 12.8$  years, respectively, meaning that  
965 optimal Jupiter gravity-assist (GA) windows occur every 13-14 years. The NASA-ESA joint study team  
966 identified chemical-propulsion opportunities with a Jupiter GA in 2029-30 for Neptune, and a wider window  
967 of 2030-34 for Uranus. Such windows would repeat in the 2040s, and a wider trade space (including the  
968 potential to use Saturn GA or direct trajectories using the next generation of launch vehicles) should be  
969 explored. We stress that a mission to an Ice Giant is feasible using conventional chemical propulsion.

970  
971 Furthermore, a mission launched to Uranus or Neptune could offer significant opportunities for flybys of  
972 Solar System objects en route, especially Centaurs, which are small bodies that orbit in the giant planet  
973 region. This population has yet to be explored by spacecraft, but represents an important evolutionary step  
974 between Kuiper Belt objects and comets. Around 300 are currently known, with 10% of these observed to  
975 show cometary activity. In addition, we can expect to discover at least an order of magnitude more  
976 Centaurs by the 2030s, following discoveries by the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, increasing the  
977 probability that a suitable flyby target can be found near to the trajectory to Uranus/Neptune. Some of the  
978 largest of the Centaurs ( $\sim 100$  km scale objects) have their own ring systems, the origin of which has yet to  
979 be explained, while smaller ones (1-10 km scale) could add an important 'pre-activity' view to better  
980 interpret data from Rosetta's exploration of a comet. The payload options described in Section 4 would be  
981 well suited to characterise a Centaur during a flyby.

982  
983 The launch time necessarily influences the arrival time, as depicted in Figure 8. Uranus will reach northern  
984 summer solstice in 2030, and northern autumnal equinox in 2050. Voyager 2 observed near northern  
985 winter solstice, meaning that the north poles of the planet and satellites were shrouded in darkness. These  
986 completely unexplored northern terrains will begin to disappear into darkness again in 2050, where they  
987 will remain hidden for the following 42 years (half a Uranian year).

988

989 Neptune passed northern winter solstice in 2005, and will reach northern spring equinox in 2046. After this  
 990 time, the southern hemispheres of the planet and satellites (most notably the plumes of Triton at high  
 991 southern latitudes) will sink into winter darkness, meaning that the Triton plumes – if they are indeed  
 992 restricted to the south – would no longer be in sunlight after ~2046, and would remain hidden for the next  
 993 ~82 years (half a Neptunian year).

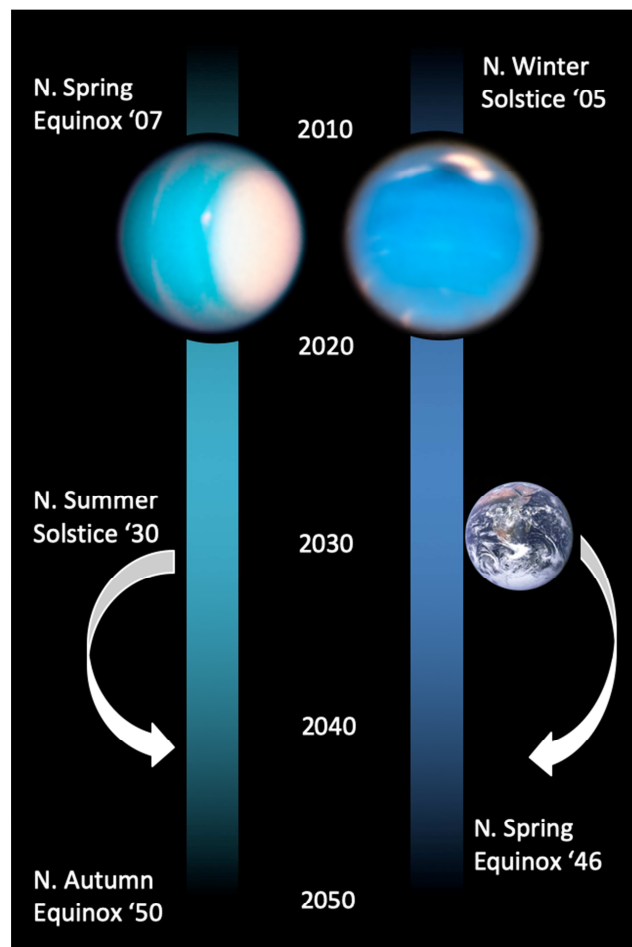


Figure 8 Potential timeline of missions to Uranus (left) and Neptune (right), compared to the seasons on each Ice Giant. The white arrows show the approximate timescales for launch opportunities in the early 2030s, with arrival in the 2040s.

994

995 The 2028-34 launch opportunities were assessed by the joint ESA-NASA study team. Saturn GA was  
 996 considered but did not appear optimal for this launch window. Interplanetary flight times are 6 to 12 years  
 997 to Uranus, 8 to 13 years to Neptune, depending on launch year, mission architecture, and launch vehicle.  
 998 The greater challenge of reaching the Neptune system was reflected in their choice of detailed architecture

999 studies: five missions to Uranus (orbiters with/without probes; with/without SEP; and with different  
1000 payload masses), and a single orbiter and probe for Neptune. Both Uranus and Neptune were deemed  
1001 equally valuable as targets – Uranus standing out for its uniqueness; Neptune for the prospects of exploring  
1002 Triton. The choice between these two enticing destinations will ultimately be driven by launch  
1003 opportunities and deliverable mass to the systems.

1004

1005 We must capitalise on the current momentum within Europe, alongside our international partners, to make  
1006 use of the launch opportunities in the ~2030s. Such a mission would arrive at Uranus while we can still see  
1007 the totally-unexplored northern terrains, or at Neptune while we can still see the active geology of Triton.  
1008 Operations in the 2040s would also allow ESA to maintain Outer Solar System expertise from current and  
1009 future missions like JUICE. An Ice Giant explorer would therefore be active as a cornerstone of ESA's  
1010 Voyage 2050 strategic planning for space missions.

1011

#### 1012 4.3 Mature and Developing Technologies

1013

1014 An ambitious mission to an Ice Giant System would largely build on existing mature technologies (e.g., see  
1015 the discussion of payload development in Section 4.1), but several challenges have been identified that, if  
1016 overcome, would optimise and enhance our first dedicated orbital mission to these worlds. Note that we  
1017 omit the need for ablative materials on atmospheric entry probes, which will be required for *in situ* science  
1018 (Mousis et al., 2018, Simon et al., 2020). Key areas where technology maturations are required include:

1019

1020 **Space nuclear power:** With the prospect of flying solar-powered spacecraft to 20 AU being non-viable, an  
1021 Ice Giant System mission must rely on radioisotope power sources, both for electricity and for spacecraft  
1022 heating. In the US, existing MMRTGs (multi-mission radioisotope thermal generators), based on the decay  
1023 of  $^{238}\text{Pu}$ , will be re-designed to create eMMRTGs (“enhanced”) to increase the available specific power at  
1024 the end of life, 4-5 of which were considered for the mission architectures studied in the 2017 NASA-ESA

1025 report. Previous M-class Uranus mission proposals have relied on US provision of these power sources for  
1026 an ESA-led mission. However, ESA continues to pursue the development of independent power sources  
1027 based on  $^{241}\text{Am}$  (Ambrosi et al., 2019). Whilst the power density is lower than that of  $^{238}\text{Pu}$ , the half-life is  
1028 much longer, and much of the material is available from the reprocessing of spent fuel from European  
1029 nuclear reactors, extracted chemically from plutonium to a ceramic oxide form. Prototypes for both  
1030 radioisotope heater units (warming the spacecraft) and thermoelectric generators (providing spacecraft  
1031 power) have now been demonstrated, and development is continuing for operational use late in the next  
1032 decade (Ambrosi et al., 2019). An Ice Giant System mission could benefit tremendously from this  
1033 independent European power source.

1034

1035 **Hardware longevity:** Given the 6- to 13-year interplanetary transfer, coupled with the desire for a long  
1036 orbital tour, Ice Giant orbiters must be designed to last for a long duration under a variable thermal load  
1037 imposed by gravity assists from the inner to the outer solar system. This poses constraints on the reliability  
1038 of parts and power sources, as well as the need to develop optimised operational plans for the long cruise  
1039 phases, such as the use of hibernation modes following the example of New Horizons.

1040

1041 **Telemetry/Communications:** All missions to the giant planets are somewhat constrained by competition  
1042 between advanced instrumentation and the reduced data rates at large distances from Earth, but the case  
1043 at Uranus and Neptune is most severe. The use of Ka-band in the downlink, currently supported by both  
1044 the US Deep Space Network and two out of three ESA Deep Space Antennas, allows for mitigating this issue  
1045 by increasing the achievable daily data volumes, but a careful optimization of the science tour remains  
1046 critical. The available power, length of the downlink window, and the need to balance science data,  
1047 engineering and housekeeping telemetry, all contribute to determining the overall data rate. For example,  
1048 the NASA/JPL mission study<sup>8</sup> in 2017 suggested that use of a 35-W traveling wave tube amplifier (the  
1049 current power limit for space-qualified TWTAs) and a 34-m ground-station could provide 15 kbps at Uranus,

---

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.lpi.usra.edu/icegiants/mission\\_study/Full-Report.pdf](https://www.lpi.usra.edu/icegiants/mission_study/Full-Report.pdf)

1050 whereas this could increase to 30 kbps with a 70-W TWTA. The 2018 ESA CDF study<sup>9</sup> suggested that the  
1051 data rate of a future M-class orbital mission to Uranus could use a 100-W TWTA to deliver 94 kbps Ka-band  
1052 downlink from Uranus, or 42 kbps from Neptune. Assuming 3.2 hours/day for communications, this  
1053 equates to daily data volumes for science of 1.09 and 0.48 Gb, respectively. Using current 35-W TWTAs, the  
1054 ESA CDF study also suggested that lower data rates of 31 and 14 kbps could be achievable at Uranus and  
1055 Neptune respectively, requiring the use of longer downlink windows. Even under the most optimistic  
1056 assumptions discussed above, it is clear that some data optimization strategy would still be required. We  
1057 would welcome detailed studies of new communications technologies, such as optical communications, as  
1058 a general enabling technology for solar system exploration. However, we recognise that achieving the  
1059 required directionality of a downlink laser from beyond 5AU will be challenging.

1060

1061 **Launch Vehicles:** The market for launch vehicles is changing dramatically both in Europe and in the US. Ice  
1062 Giant mission concepts have traditionally considered Jupiter gravity assists to provide realistic flight times  
1063 and sufficient payload delivered to each system. However, we also advocate investigation of the direct-  
1064 transfer trajectories enabled by the heavy-lift capacity of the next generation of launch vehicles. This may  
1065 (i) obviate the need for Jupiter/Saturn GA, so allow more flexibility in launch dates; and (ii) open up the  
1066 possibilities for launching multiple spacecraft that share the same faring.

1067

## 1068 5. Summary and Perspectives

1069

1070 This article reviews and updates the scientific rationale for a mission to an Ice Giant system, advocating  
1071 that an orbital mission (alongside an atmospheric entry probe, Mousis et al., 2018) be considered as a  
1072 cornerstone of ESA's Voyage 2050 programme, working in collaboration with international partners to  
1073 launch the *first dedicated mission* to either Uranus or Neptune. Using technologies both mature and in

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://sci.esa.int/web/future-missions-department/-/61307-cdf-study-report-ice-giants>



1074 development, the Ice Giants community hopes to capitalise on launch opportunities in the 2030s to reach  
1075 the Ice Giants. As shown in Figure 9, an Ice Giant System mission would engage a wide community,  
1076 drawing expertise from a vast range of disciplines *within* planetary science, from surface geology to  
1077 planetary interiors; from meteorology to ionospheric physics; from plasma scientists to heliophysicists. But  
1078 this challenge is also interdisciplinary in nature, engaging those studying potentially similar Neptune-size  
1079 objects beyond our Solar System, by revealing the properties of this underexplored class of planetary  
1080 objects. As Neptune's orbit shapes the dynamical properties of objects in the distant solar system, an Ice  
1081 Giant System mission also draws in the small-bodies community investigating objects throughout the Outer  
1082 Solar System, from Centaurs, to TNOs, to Kuiper Belt Objects, and contrasting these with the natural  
1083 satellites of Uranus.

1084

1085 To launch a mission to Uranus and/or Neptune in the early 2030s, the international Ice Giant community  
1086 needs to significantly raise the maturity of the mission concepts and instrument technological readiness. At  
1087 the time of writing (late 2019), we await the outcomes of both ESA's Voyage 2050 process, and the next US  
1088 planetary decadal survey. Nevertheless, this should not delay the start of a formal science definition and  
1089 study process (pre-phase A conceptual studies), so that we are ready to capitalise on any opportunities that  
1090 these strategic planning surveys provide. Fully costed and technologically robust mission concepts need to  
1091 be developed, studied, and ready for implementation by 2023-25 to have the potential to meet the  
1092 upcoming window for Jupiter gravity assists between 2029-2034. We hope that the scientific themes and  
1093 rationale identified in this review will help to guide that conceptual study process, to develop a paradigm-  
1094 shifting mission that will help redefine planetary science for a generation of scientists and engineers.

1095

1096 Most importantly, the Ice Giant System mission will continue the breath-taking legacy of discovery of the  
1097 Voyager, Galileo, Cassini, and Juno missions to the giant planets (in addition to the forthcoming JUICE and  
1098 Europa Clipper missions). A dedicated orbiter of an Ice Giant is the next logical step in our exploration of  
1099 the Solar System, completing humankind's first reconnaissance of the eight planets. It will be those

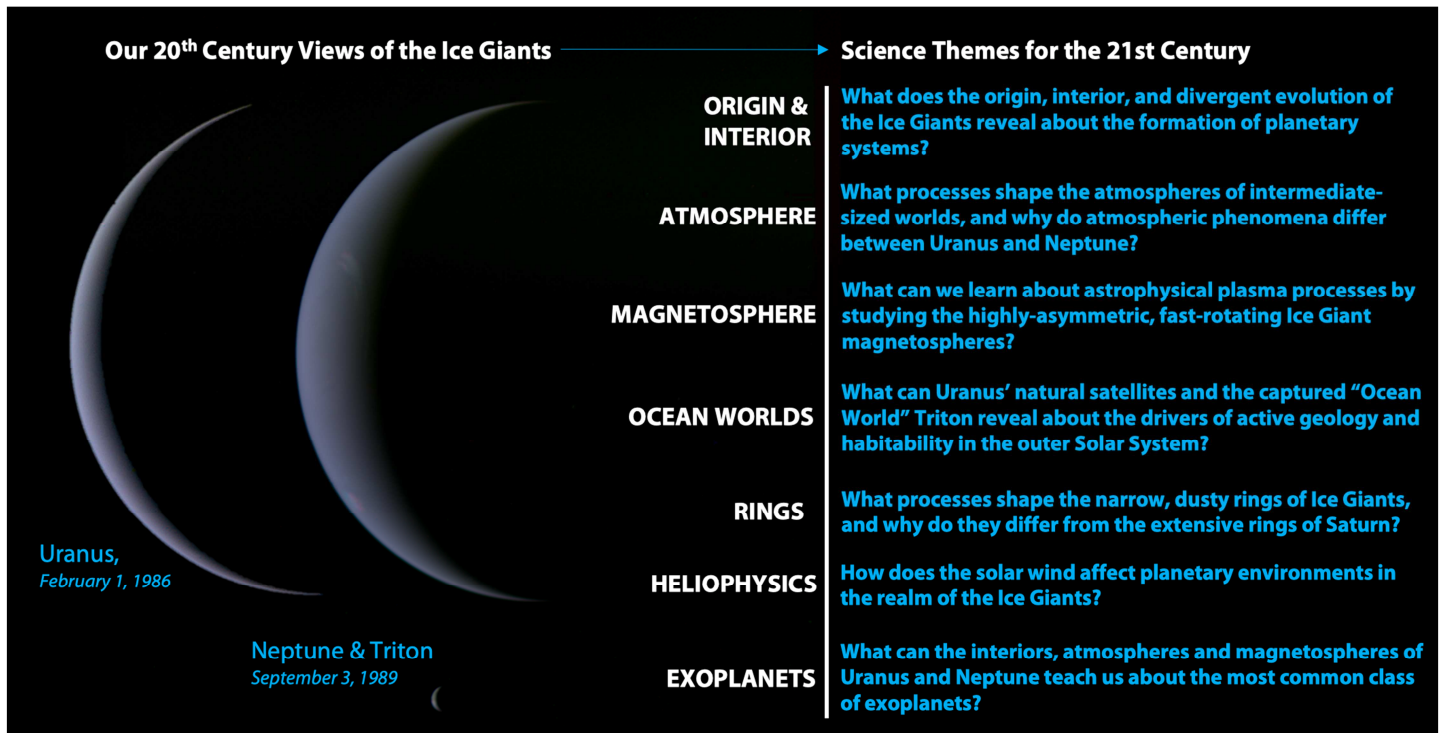


Figure 9 Left: Our last views of Uranus and Neptune from a robotic spacecraft, taken by Voyager 2 three decades ago (Credit: NASA/JPL/E. Lakdawalla). Will we see these views again before a half-century has elapsed? Right: Seven science themes for Voyage 2050 that could be addressed by an Ice Giant System mission.

1100 discoveries that no one expected, those mysteries that we did not anticipate, and those views that no  
 1101 human has previously witnessed, which will enthuse the general public, and inspire the next generation of  
 1102 explorers to look to the worlds of our Solar System. We urge both ESA and NASA to take up this challenge.

1103

1104

1105

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1107

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1117 2019 (see <https://www.cosmos.esa.int/web/voyage-2050/workshop-programme>).

1118

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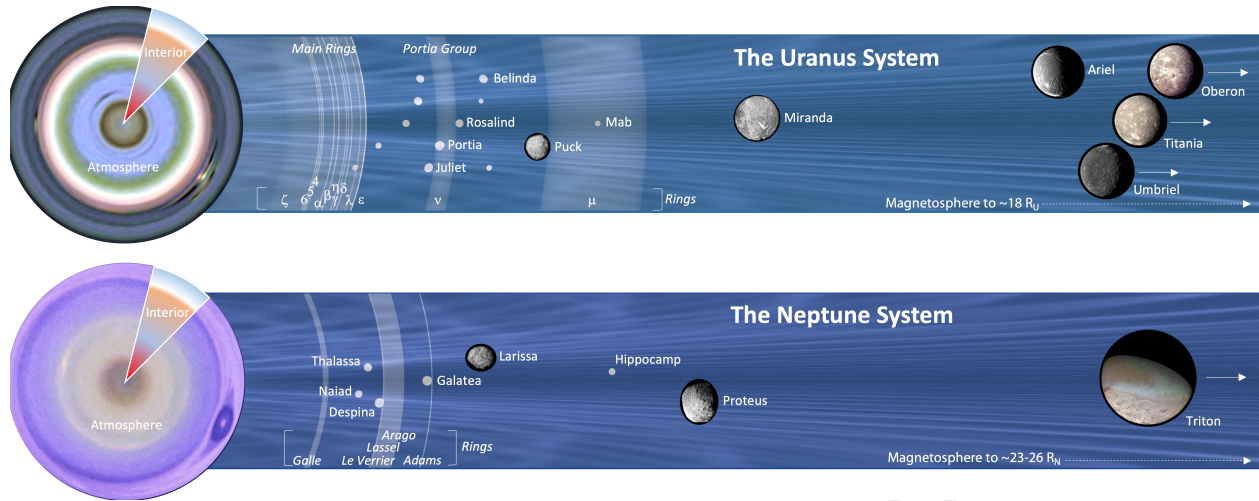
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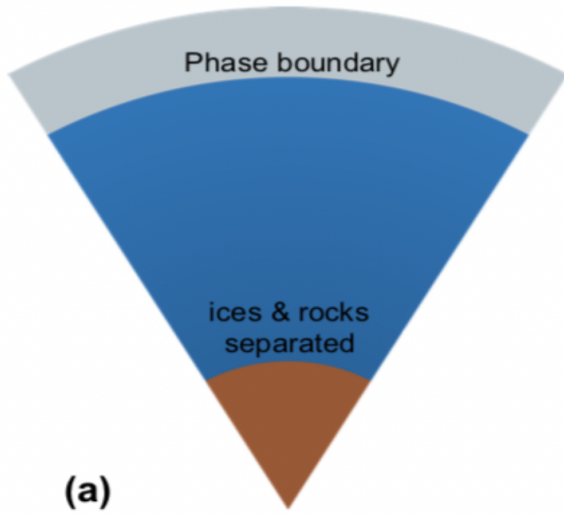
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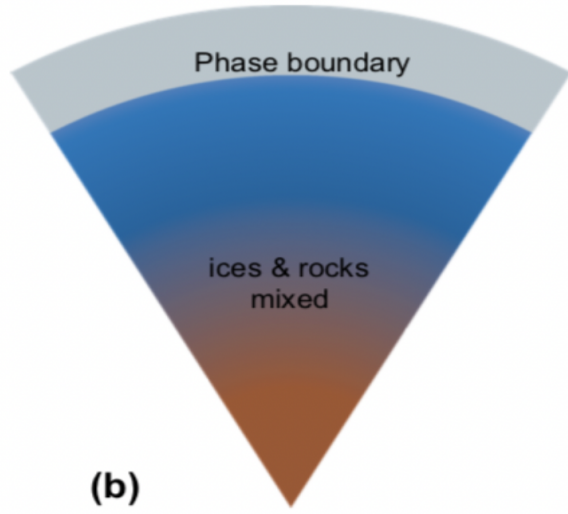
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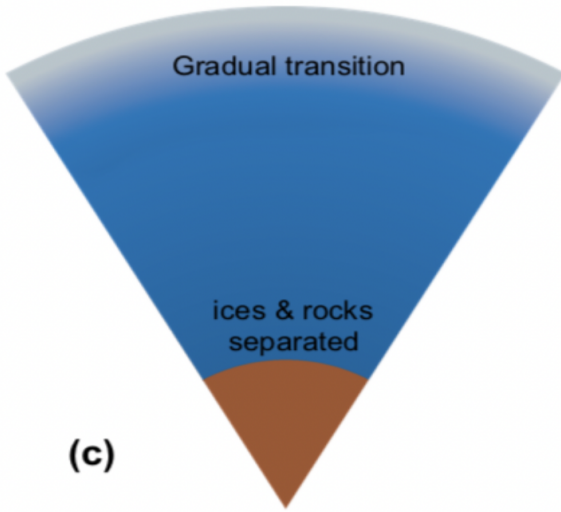
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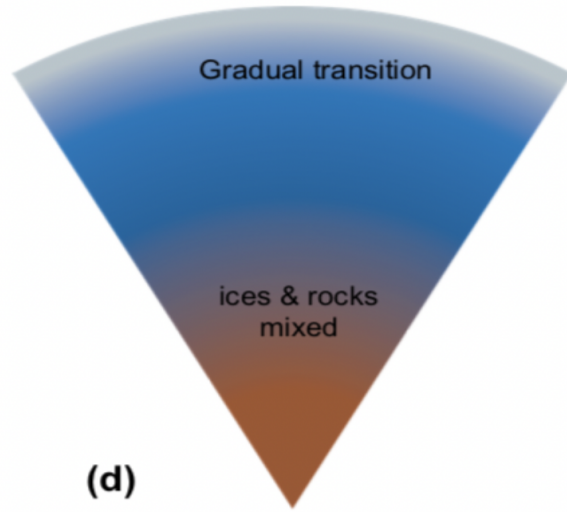
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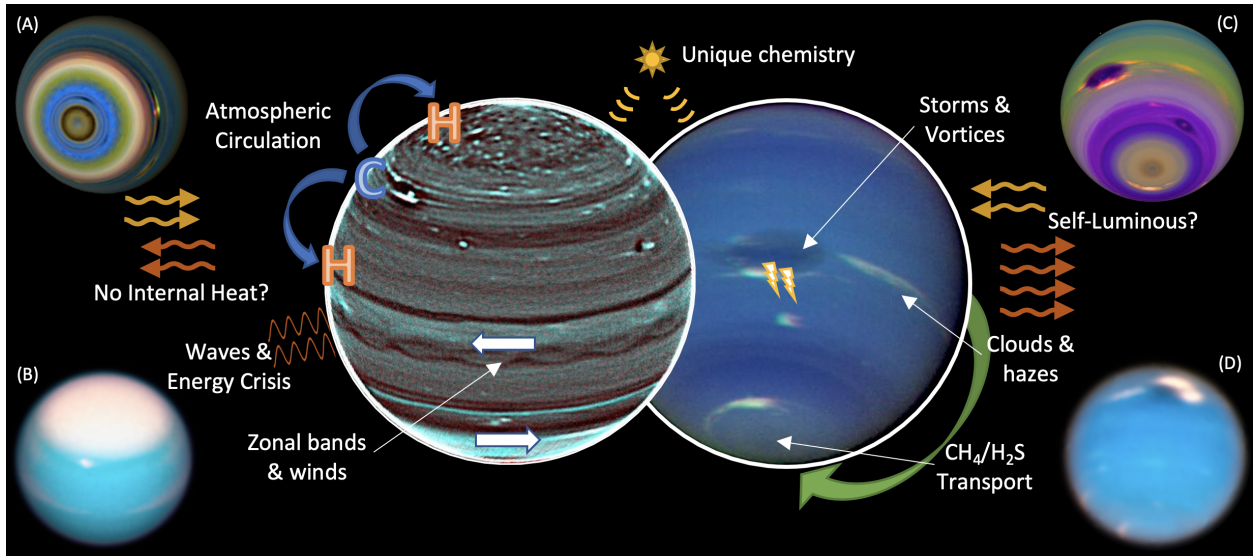


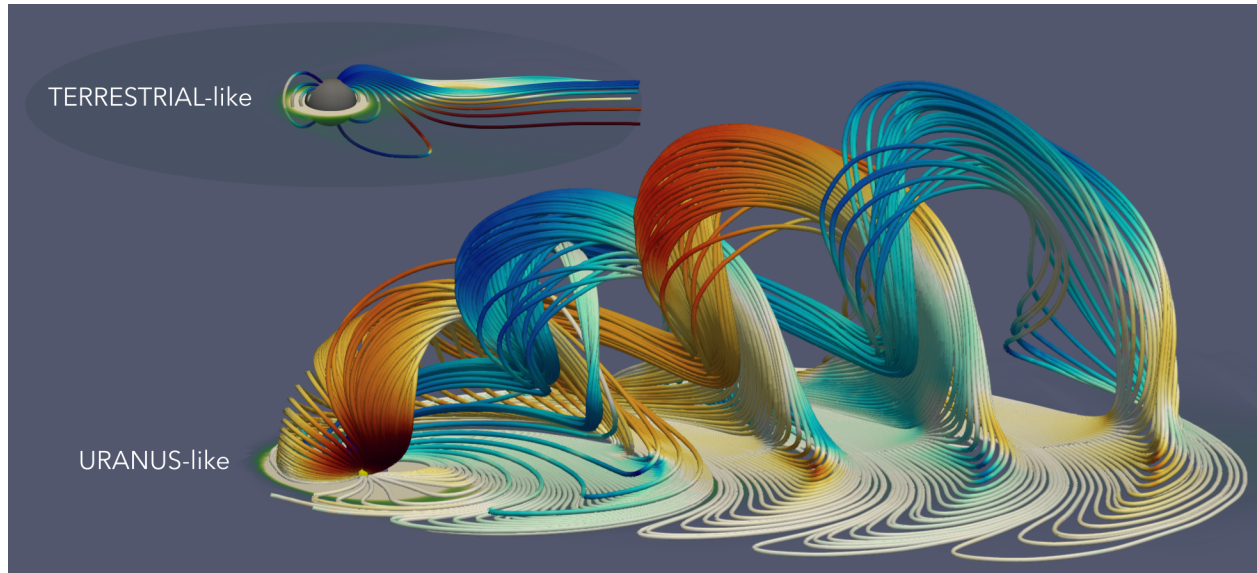
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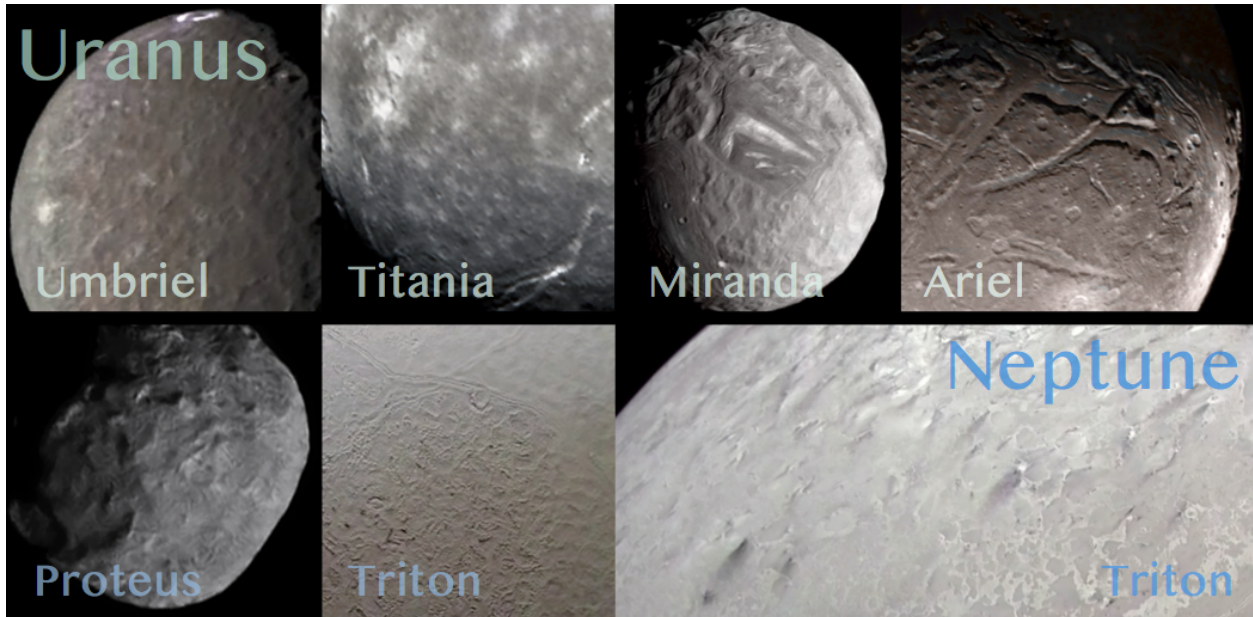
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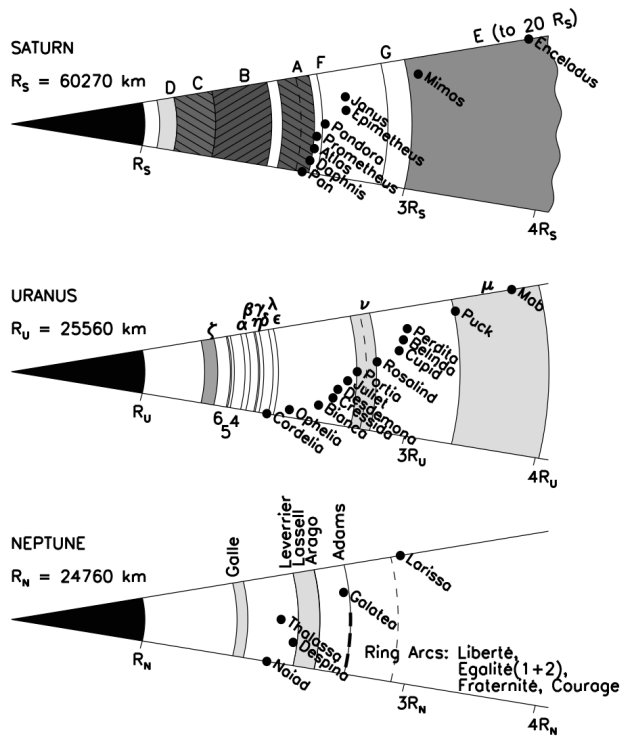




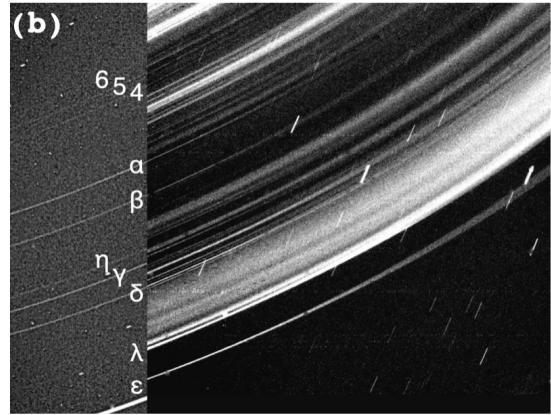
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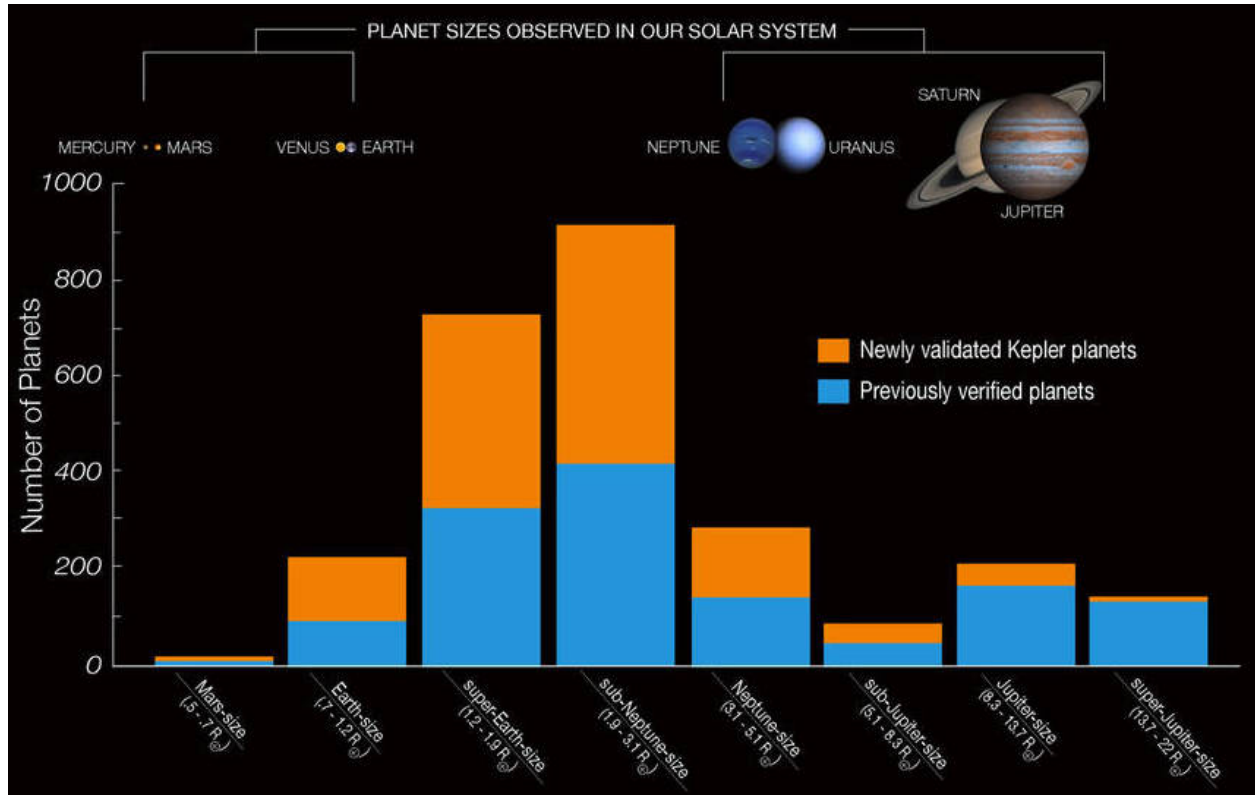
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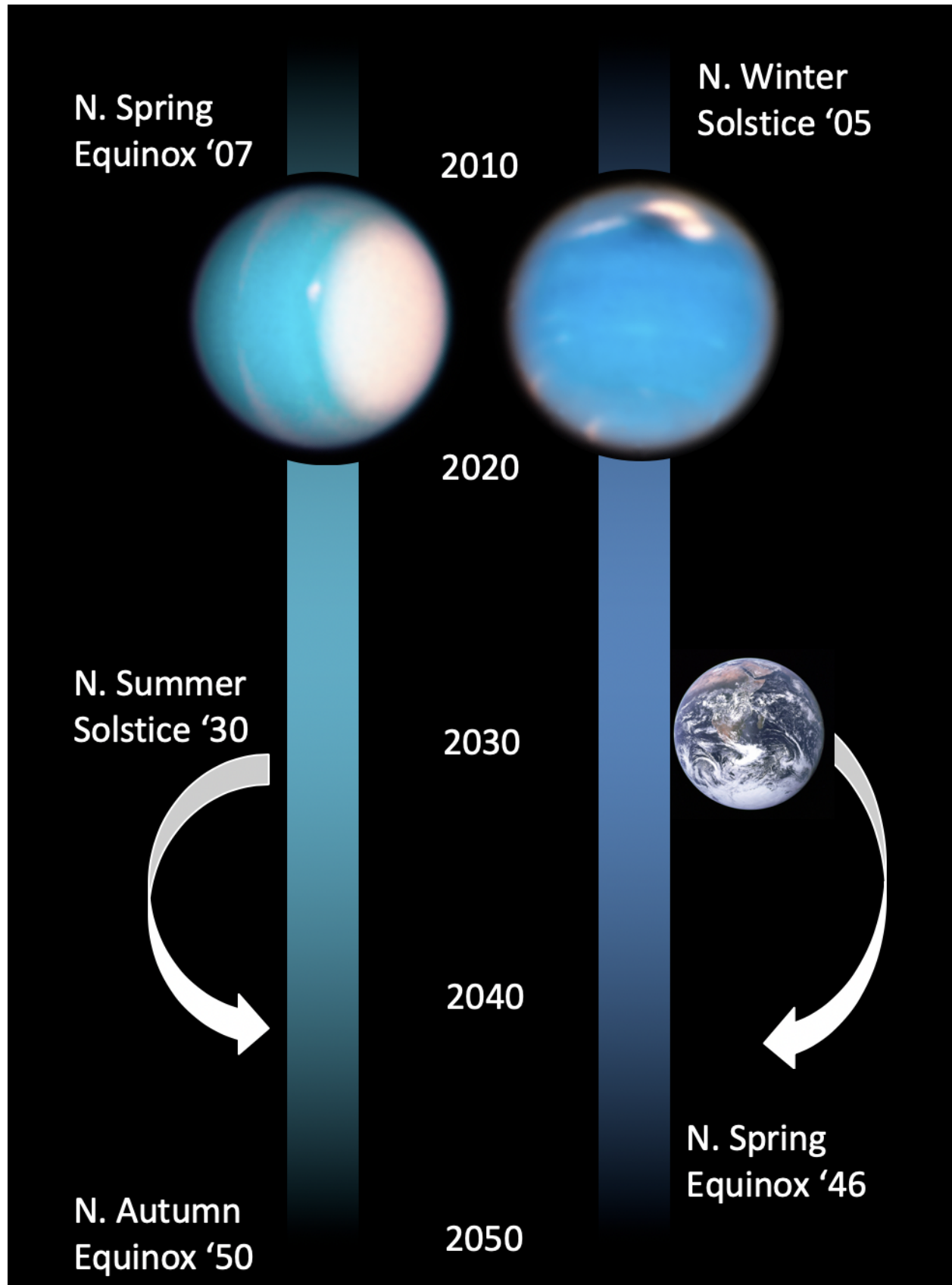
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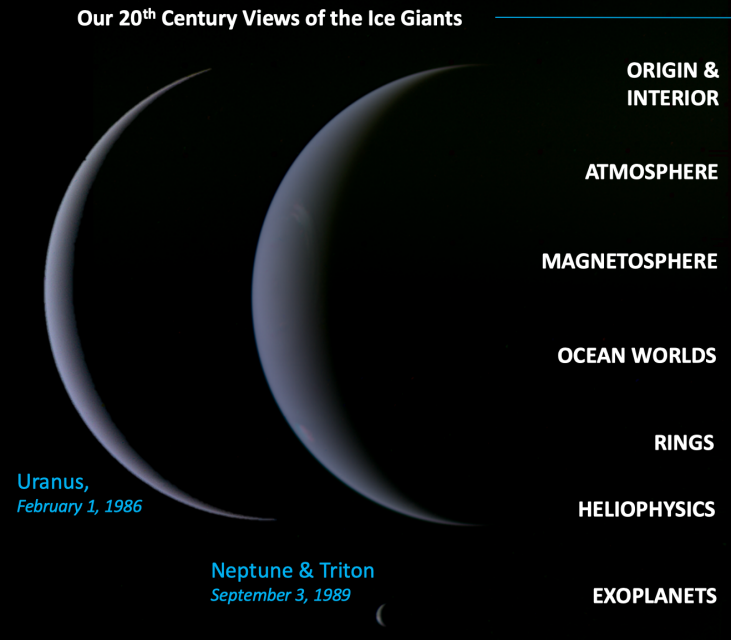
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**Our 20<sup>th</sup> Century Views of the Ice Giants** → **Science Themes for the 21st Century**



<b>ORIGIN &amp; INTERIOR</b>	What does the origin, interior, and divergent evolution of the Ice Giants reveal about the formation of planetary systems?
<b>ATMOSPHERE</b>	What processes shape the atmospheres of intermediate-sized worlds, and why do atmospheric phenomena differ between Uranus and Neptune?
<b>MAGNETOSPHERE</b>	What can we learn about astrophysical plasma processes by studying the highly-asymmetric, fast-rotating Ice Giant magnetospheres?
<b>OCEAN WORLDS</b>	What can Uranus' natural satellites and the captured "Ocean World" Triton reveal about the drivers of active geology and habitability in the outer Solar System?
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Uranus,  
February 1, 1986

Neptune & Triton  
September 3, 1989

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**Declaration of interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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