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Reconstructing the formation history of top-shaped asteroids by the surface boulders distribution

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Finding the basic mechanism governing the surface history of asteroids of various shapes is essential for understanding their origin and evolution. In particular, the currently visited asteroids (162173) Ryugu¹ and (101955) Bennu² by Hayabusa2 and OSIRIS-REx appear to be top-shaped. This distinctive shape, characterized by a raised equatorial bulge, is shared

21 by other similarly sized asteroids, including Didymos A³, 2008 EV5⁴ and 1999 KW4 Alpha⁵.
22 However, the possibly common formation mechanism that causes the top-like shape is still
23 under debate. One clue may lie in the boulders on their surfaces. The distribution of these
24 boulders, that was precisely measured in unprecedented detail by the two spacecrafts^{1,2}, con-
25 stitutes a record of the geological evolution of the surface regolith since the origin of these
26 asteroids. Here, we show that during the regolith migration driven by YORP spin-up⁶⁻⁹, the
27 surface boulders coevolve with the underlying regolith and exhibit diverse dynamical behav-
28 iors: they can remain undisturbed, sink into the regolith layer and become tilted, or totally be
29 buried by the downslope deposition, depending on their latitudes. The predominant geolog-
30 ical features commonly observed on top-shaped asteroids, including the boulder-rich region
31 near the pole^{1,10}, the deficiency of large boulders at the equatorial area^{10,11} and partially
32 buried, oblique boulders exposed on the regolith surface^{12,13}, are commensurate with this
33 coevolution scenario. The surface regolith migration thus is the prevalent mechanism for the
34 formation history of the top-shaped asteroids with stiffer cores.

35 Our investigation of the quasi-static process of boulder-regolith evolution by YORP spin-
36 up was performed using numerical code based on the soft-sphere discrete element method¹⁴⁻¹⁶
37 (SSDEM). The considered structure and surface of a top-shaped asteroid consist of a “two-layer
38 structure” with a shallow mantle of loose granular regolith covering a stiffer interior^{7,8}. This model
39 is supported by multiple observations of the surface geologic features on Ryugu and Bennu, e.g.,
40 the longitudinal ridges and long linear grooves denoting internal stiffness and structural rigidity
41 with a weak strength of less than a few Pa¹⁷; the measured thermal inertia and substantial material

42 flows evidencing loose and unconsolidated surface regolith^{1,13}. The pit feature of the artificial
43 impact crater on Ryugu provides further evidence of a stronger substrate covered by cohesionless
44 regolith¹⁸. This heterogeneity could appear as a result of stronger interparticle cohesion, grains
45 of different materials, higher packing fraction, a big inner monolith, etc., or a combination of
46 those particular characteristics⁸. The “granular shell” model is shown in Fig. 1a, i.e., the asteroid
47 interior is modelled as a rigid spheroid (~ 400 m in radius), and a longitudinal slice of the regolith
48 layer (~ 30 m in thickness) is considered for the SSDEM simulation, consisting of 2,063,044
49 pebble-size particles. The boulders of various sizes, modelled as massive polyhedra, are located at
50 four latitudes $\{15^\circ, 45^\circ, 75^\circ, 87^\circ\}$ as representatives of low, mid-low, mid-high, and high latitudes,
51 respectively. We assumed these boulders are initially on top of the regolith layer, which could be
52 the direct result of the re-accumulation that formed the asteroids after the catastrophic disruption
53 of their parent bodies^{12,13}, or much later by ballistic sorting¹⁹ or Brazil-nut effect²⁰ during impact-
54 induced seismic events. Two different types of regolith grains were used: one with moderate
55 friction (internal friction angle of $\sim 25^\circ$) and one with gravel-like friction (internal friction angle
56 of $\sim 30^\circ$). We then used two types of regolith grains for each of the four latitudes, and each of the
57 three boulders, giving a total of 24 simulations (all simulation parameters are summarized in the
58 supplementary information).

59 The time evolution of this regolith migration during the spin-up process is shown in Fig. 1c.
60 The regolith remains stable at first. When the progenitor reaches the critical spin period $T_c = 4.35$ hr,
61 a localized landslide first occurs at mid-latitudes^{9,21}. Note that T_c here is for surface landslide
62 failure, which is different from the shedding limits and internal failure limits^{7,8}. The regolith mi-

63 gration forms a narrow zone with intense shear strain (Fig. 1c, first panel). Within the shear band,
64 particle contacts break and remake. Such rearrangement events soften the shear strength of the
65 granular material^{22,23}, i.e., the particles in this zone rotate and slip, transporting the regolith above
66 this weakened band downslope along the failure surface like a frozen ice block, with an average
67 creeping speed of less than 1 mm/s (Fig. 1b). Regolith above the slip region remains stable and
68 undisturbed due to the low surface slope near the pole⁹. With increasing spin rate Ω , the scarp
69 at the head of the slip zone retreats towards high latitudes, leading to the shrinking of the stable
70 region, as shown by the kinetic energy distribution change in Supplementary Fig. 3, in parallel
71 with the massive mass wasting towards low latitudes. The retreat of the headscarp to high latitudes
72 and the expansion of the depletion region at mid-latitudes are both evident from the growth of the
73 failure surface (Fig. 1c, second panel). In the later stage of the migration, due to the existence
74 of a stable region near the equator (low surface slope), the barely moved grains here increase the
75 resisting force along the failure surface in the landslide foot, blocking the material in the head from
76 moving towards the foot. Thus, the creeping debris moves uphill and then overlies the pre-existing
77 materials, forming a distinct deposit bulge near the equator. The original shear band propagates to
78 low latitudes and subsequently creates a rupture surface inside the deposition (Fig. 1c, third panel).
79 It is notable that the elevated geologic upheaval that marks the foot of the landslides is not at the
80 equator at first, i.e., the collapse is limited to the mid-latitudes due to the resistance force between
81 regolith grains. Then, as the accumulation of downslope materials from the depletion zone goes
82 on, this bulge swells upward, leading to a steeper local slope that eventually collapses towards
83 the equator. The raised, pronounced equatorial ridge denotes a fully sped-up progenitor for which

84 the top-shaped morphology emerges (Fig. 2a). The simulated topography, with low elevation at
85 mid-latitudes, mean elevation at the polar region and high elevation at the equator, resembles the
86 observed shapes of typical top-shaped asteroids (Fig. 2b), which is consistent with previous find-
87 ings that regolith migrations are a major force that has reshaped these asteroids if the interior is
88 stronger⁷⁻⁹. Simulations with higher friction give a similar picture, except that the stable region
89 near the pole is larger and that the equatorial ridge is steeper (Supplementary Video 6).

90 The motion of boulders across the surface shows three distinct dynamical behaviours (see
91 Supplementary Videos 2-5). The 15° and 45° boulders are located in the early migration zone,
92 thus they start to creep downslope in synchronization with the first landslide of granular regolith.
93 During the creeping-down process of the 45° boulder, the strength of its supporting force chain
94 network is weakened due to the grain agitations induced by the shear deformation²⁴. These weak
95 grain bonds generate a fluid-like behaviour; thus this boulder sinks into the regolith layer by a
96 few metres and becomes tilted, reminiscent of the abundant partially buried boulders on Ryugu
97 and Bennu^{12,13}. This flow-induced submergence phenomenon has also been observed in granular
98 experiments^{22,24}. At lower latitudes, the 15° boulder is first elevated by the extruded underlying
99 sediment, subsequently transferred downslope to the foot of the deposit upheaval, and eventually
100 buried entirely by the accumulated debris from the collapsed bulge hill. This mechanism, i.e.,
101 boulders initially located at low latitudes being totally buried by the downslope deposition, may
102 have caused the deficiency of large boulders at the equator as observed on Ryugu¹⁰ and Bennu²⁵.
103 At higher latitudes, the 75° boulder remains static until the regressive headscarp of the depletion
104 zone reaches 75° latitude. The growth of this scarp removes support from adjacent grains, forming

105 a fragile force-chain network downstream (Fig. 3). The weak support increases the equivalent local
106 slope and thus triggers a downslope migration of the boulder. Finally, this boulder sinks into the
107 granular mantle and leaves only a partially exposed body above the regolith layer, generating a
108 distinct outcrop-like landform (Fig. 4). The 87° boulder, however, is located in a stable region (see
109 Fig. 2a) and thus does not move throughout the reshaping process of the top-shaped asteroids. This
110 result is consistent with the geologic indication of a stable pole deduced from the disorganized
111 boulder structure near Bennu's pole and the non-slipping polar boulder Otohime on Ryugu^{1,12}.
112 We infer that Otohime could be a primordial relic of the original disruption/reaccumulation of
113 Ryugu's parent body. Future studies on the geologic age of Otohime from thermal or fracture
114 properties would provide significant constraints on when the catastrophic impact event that formed
115 Ryugu occurred. Note that we do not rule out the possibility that other exhumation processes
116 could contribute to the subsequent evolution of these boulders. Some of the buried boulders in the
117 equatorial region on Ryugu could be exhumed again by migrating grains from the ridge towards
118 the current geopotential lows at higher latitudes¹². Other mechanisms including Brazil nut effect²⁰
119 and ballistic sorting¹⁹ could also further modify these landforms.

120 Our results show that the top shapes of rubble pile asteroids can be evolved via regolith mi-
121 grations from mid-latitudes towards the equator driven by the YORP spin-up effect. If the interior
122 is stronger than the outer regolith, then miniature surface landslides could be frequent as the spin
123 rate approaches the critical spin limit^{9,21}. These landslides are to be distinguished from their coun-
124 terpart on large-gravity bodies like Mars, the Moon or Earth. On such planets the large boulders
125 usually bounce and deposit near the toe of the avalanche sediment²⁶. By contrast, regolith migra-

126 tion on low gravity rubble piles, driven by YORP, once near the spin limit, creeps imperceptibly
127 at glacial speeds. A detailed look into these creep-like landslides shows that the boulders are in a
128 “co-evolving” relationship with the underlying granular regolith, which may account for the unique
129 geological landforms observed on top-shaped asteroids, i.e., the stable boulders near the pole, the
130 abundant partially buried boulders and the deficiency of large boulders at the equator. We find
131 consistency of the derived shapes and boulder features between the observations and the numerical
132 results, which lends support to our model as a way to decipher the evolution history of top-shaped
133 asteroids. Further simulations show that the large craters that overlay the equator of Ryugu would
134 have been eroded by the migrating regolith if they were formed before the equatorial ridges (Sup-
135 plementary Fig. 7), implying an early-stage formation of the overall shapes¹. This would appear
136 to be in tension with the long timescales over which YORP effect could significantly modify the
137 spins²⁷. A plausible explanation is that the progenitor bodies that emerged from the catastrophic
138 disruptions are already oblate shapes with relatively high spin rates, which is a possible result of
139 the direct reaccumulation of fragments in the case of large starting angular momentum²⁷. These
140 early-formed “diamond-shaped” rubble piles with high spin rates could serve as a midway start-
141 ing point that facilitates the formation of top shapes, i.e., the YORP-induced migrations further
142 reshaped the bodies and remodeled their surface features like large boulders to the current geomor-
143 phology. Another possibility is these craters could be created by detachment of a small chunk from
144 the equatorial ridge at a more rapid rotation state²⁸. This mechanism seems to be plausible given
145 that the past spin period of Ryugu could be up to around 3 hours as deduced from its east-west
146 dichotomy²⁹. In such a scenario, the circum-equatorial ridge and overlying craters could both be

147 landscapes sculpted by YORP spin-up.

148 **Methods**

149 We performed discrete element simulations^{14–16} using an original soft-particle N -body code DEMBody³⁰,
150 which is capable of tracing the quasi-static behaviour of particle-particle and particle-polyhedron
151 interactions. In this code, the nonlinear contact forces between two contacting objects (sphere-
152 sphere, sphere-polyhedron, sphere-wall) are calculated based on Hertz-Mindlin contact theory³¹
153 according to the mutual overlap (typically $<1\%$ of their radii). A dimensionless coefficient μ is
154 used to control the stick-slip friction between colliding particles. A physically based rotational
155 resistance model incorporating rolling and twisting friction was implemented into this code, pa-
156 rameterized by a quantity β that represents a statistical measure of real particle nonsphericity^{30,32}.
157 To calculate the contact between non-spherical boulders and grains, the boulder is represented as
158 an assembly of movable walls with the same geometry and inertia tensor³⁰, which allows it to be-
159 have as a rigid body. A second-order leapfrog integrator is used for integration of the equations of
160 motion of both particles and boulders.

161 Our simulation scheme is as follows. First, we prepared a polydisperse granular medium con-
162 sisting of 2,063,044 cohesionless particles with properties chosen according to Ryugu’s regolith¹,
163 i.e., material density of 2.4 g/cc. A slight dispersion in the grain radius was considered, with a
164 random distribution ranging from 0.4 m to 0.6 m to avoid any crystallization of the packing. The
165 particles were dropped onto a rigid, frictional shell with a radius of 400 m and width of 100 m
166 confined by two vertical frictionless walls⁹, as shown in Fig. 1a, forming a longitudinal slice of

167 the asteroid surface with a thickness of ~ 30 m. A cuboid boulder, the size of which is similar to
168 that of typical boulders on Ryugu, was initially located above the interface of the granular media.
169 The whole system is under the two-component gravity⁹ exerted by the rocky interior (bulk den-
170 sity of 1.2 g/cc)¹ and the regolith shell. After a settling-down phase of the granular-polyhedron
171 system, we started to accelerate the asteroid linearly following the prescribed spin-up path shown
172 in Fig. 1b. The acceleration was performed until massive debris shedding occurred at the equator.
173 The angular acceleration used in this study is $2.5 \times 10^{-10} \text{ rad/s}^2$, which is much smaller than the
174 reference values used in previous works^{8,32}. By using this slow spin-up acceleration, we confirm
175 that the motion of the granular grains would immediately stop at any point in time when the spin-
176 up is stopped, which means that the regolith layer maintains quasi-static equilibrium during the
177 spin-up process (see Supplementary Information).

178 **Regolith bed geometry.** We investigated the dependency of the boulder evolution on the geometry
179 of the regolith bed. By using granular beds with depth of 45 m and of 20 m, which consists of
180 3,246,524 particles and 1,452,565 particles, respectively, we tested the influence of regolith bed
181 depth (Supplementary Figure 4-5). Simulations give results similar to those described above, in
182 which tilted boulders and buried boulders emerge with the surface migration driven by YORP
183 spin-up. By using a granular bed with width of 160 m, which consists of 3,332,716 particles, we
184 tested the influence of confining sidewalls (Supplementary Video 7). Simulations indicate the size
185 of surrounding walls is large enough to eliminate the boundary effect. By using a spherical wedge-
186 shaped bed with angular width of 20° , which consists of 2,063,045 particles, we tested the influence
187 of the boundary shape (Supplementary Figure 6). Simulations indicate the shrinkage effect from

188 surrounding walls has only a minor influence on the boulder dynamics for our simulation settings.
189 By using a granular bed of both hemispheres, which consists of 4,126,088 particles, we tested
190 the symmetry of the regolith migration. Simulations show the sliding debris meet and accumulate
191 symmetrically at the equator (Supplementary Video 9). The overall geomorphology is similar to
192 that in hemisphere cases.

193 **Equatorial crater.** We investigated the evolution of equatorial craters during the YORP spin-up.
194 A crater with radius of 80 m was generated at the equator before rotational acceleration (Sup-
195 plementary Fig. 7). Simulations show that the migrating debris would have filled the equatorial
196 craters if these craters formed before the equatorial ridges, which implies an early-stage formation
197 of the overall morphology.

198 **Boulders configuration.** We investigated the dependency of the boulder evolution on their con-
199 figurations. Simulations with boulders ten meters below the regolith surface show these initially
200 underground boulders keep buried throughout the creeping evolution (Supplementary Videos 10-
201 11). We also tested the interaction between multiple boulders. Given that the number density of
202 boulders¹⁰ larger than 15 m on Ryugu is $\sim 100 \text{ km}^{-2}$, we randomly placed eight boulders, either
203 on the surface or embedded in regolith, at middle and low latitudes of the simulated longitudinal
204 slice. Simulations give results similar to those described above, in which surface boulders sink into
205 or are buried by the creeping regolith, while underground boulders remain buried (Supplementary
206 Video 12).

207 **Data availability.** The data that support the plots within this paper and other findings of this study
208 are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

209 **Code availability.** The code used to generate the datasets is available from the corresponding
210 author on reasonable request.

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291 **Author contributions** B.C. performed the soft-sphere numerical simulations and analysed the numerical
292 results. B.H. and Y.Y. initiated the project, designed the simulations and led the research. E.A. and D.C.R.
293 contributed to the discussion of the two layer model and the creeping process. M.H. provides essential
294 comments on the interior structure and deformation. P.M. initiated the collaboration between the institutions
295 with Y.Y. and provided outstanding questions on scope of the research with M.Y. All authors contributed to
296 interpretation of the results and preparation of the manuscript.

297 **Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

299 **Figure 1 Asteroid morphological change during the YORP spin-up process. a,**
300 “Two-layer structure” with a shallow mantle of loose granular regolith covering a stiffer
301 interior. A large boulder lies on the regolith surface. **b,** Spin-up path and consequent
302 creep speed of global regolith migrations for a 75° boulder with moderate-friction regolith
303 case. **c,** Four selected frames of the regolith and boulder at different spin periods show-
304 ing the regolith migration under the YORP effect. The cuboid represents the boulder and
305 is located at 75° latitude initially. The regolith has moderate friction. When the progeni-
306 tor reaches the critical spin period $T_c = 4.35$ hr, the centrifugal tension induces a narrow
307 zone with intense shear strain (dashed line in first panel; see Supplementary Fig. 2 for
308 the shear heat of regolith particles). This shear band expands towards high latitudes,
309 and creeping debris moves to low latitudes along the rupture surface in the deposition
310 (dashed line in third panel). At the end of the simulation, deposit sediment accumulates
311 at low-latitudes, forming a pronounced ridge along the equator (fourth panel). The failure
312 surface acts as a dynamical divider separating the static zone from the depletion zone,
313 whose growth controls the landslides across the regolith bed. **Animation of this figure:**
314 **Supplementary Video 1.**

315 **Figure 2 The simulated geomorphology.** **a**, The topography changes during the
316 YORP spin-up process, showing the barely moved pole and migrating debris from mid-
317 latitudes overlying the pre-existing materials near the equator. Here the elevation is the
318 radial height of particles above the interior shell. Data are for a moderate-friction case.
319 **b**, Simulated morphological profile (black line) compared with Ryugu's (blue)¹, Bennu's
320 (red)²¹, 1999 KW4's (green)⁵ and 2008 EV5's (yellow)⁴ average shapes. All profiles are
321 normalized by the corresponding equivalent radius. Shaded areas stand for the 1σ error
322 bands.

323 **Figure 3 Visualization of the force networks excited by the creeping boulder.** Colour
324 indicates the elastic energy, E , stored in each particle relative to the average elastic en-
325 ergy, E_0 . Note that only those particles with $E > E_0$ are considered part of the force
326 chains³³. The white-curve indicates the free surface of the creeping regolith. Red arrows
327 show the sinking and tilting directions of the boulder. The chain structure downstream is
328 significantly fragmented and spatially sparse due to the removal of adjacent grains by the
329 retrogressive landslide, leading to subduction migration of the boulder. Data are for a 75°
330 boulder with moderate-friction regolith case.

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Figure 4 Typical landforms of boulders sculpted by YORP evolution. The 87° boulder remains stable, consistent with the non-slipping polar boulder Otohime on Ryugu¹². The boulders at mid-latitudes sink into the regolith layer by a few metres and become tilted. These landforms generated by regolith migrations are likely the geophysical origins of the partially buried/oblique boulders on Ryugu¹² and Bennu¹³. (panel d, hyb2_onc_20180831_101059_ panel e, hyb2_onc_20180801_160642_tnf_l2c and panel f, hyb2_onc_20180720_075208_tvf_l2b are from Hayabusa2 ONC dataset³⁴.)







