
Introduction: Impact cratering is a ubiquitous process in the inner solar system, and continues to be the dominant geologic process shaping the surface of Mars. For some time, researchers have speculated about the types and volumes of amorphous material present on the surface of Mars [e.g., 1]. Probable “glassy” (referring to glasses and other amorphous phases) materials have been identified in the two major spectral windows used for remote observations of Mars, and some attempts have been made to describe their compositions via spectral techniques [2–4]. With the Mars Science Laboratory and its CheMin instrument on the surface of Mars we have our first opportunity to quantitatively assess the mineralogy and composition of amorphous phases.

Experimental Procedure: A series of glassy impactites from the Haughton, Ries, Lonar and Mistastin impact craters and glass/glass-rich exemplars from a number of other terrestrial sources have been prepared by hand crushing and dry sieving to produce <45 μm powders. These powders were analyzed via UV-Vis-NIR and IR reflectance and transmission spectrometers, XRF, XRD and NMR techniques. Focusing on the XRD, sample patterns were collected using a Rigaku DMax-2A powder diffractometer. Patterns were collected using a step-scan method, from 5 to 90° 2θ, with 0.05 degrees per step, and a 1.0 second dwell, using Co Kα radiation, or, 0.02 degrees per step, and a 2.0 second dwell using Cu Kα radiation.

Results: The results and a graphic depiction of methodology are presented in the following 3 figures. Figure 1 displays the cropped centroid of the amorphous halo of 14 individual XRD patterns (converted to d-spacing, offset and scaled for clarity). The central portion (approximately 20° 2θ, 10° either side of the maxima) of each halo is extracted from the full pattern and crystalline features, if present, are removed from the centroid and replaced with a section of randomly generated pattern bound by the standard deviation of the XRD pattern of the entire centroid. One can see the procedure in Figure 2, A through C. Using the sample from Mistastin (Figure 1: #12, top most purple), Figure 2:A is the full 5 to 90°, 2θ pattern, from which the centroid of the amorphous halo is extracted. In 2:B we can see the 20 to 40° 2θ centroid with crystalline features at ~24, 25.5 and 31° 2θ, respectively. Each of these crystalline features is then cut out, and appropriate sections are replaced with the bound random pattern. A 3rd order polynomial is then fit to this extracted section of the pattern (both illustrated in Figure 2:C) and the 20 and/or d-spacing maximum of the halo is computed. Full XRD patterns in Figure 3 are for reference so one can see the differences on a more familiar scale and displays patterns of Darwin Glass, 3 and Basaltic Glass, 14 (offset +250 counts for clarity).

Discussion and Conclusions: Figure 1, displays the 14 selected XRD patterns of glassy material. From bottom to top, 1 and 2 are both samples from Haughton that retain their macroscopic structures and shock features despite being nearly completely glass, i.e., they...
are mixed diaplectic and melt glasses. 3 is Darwin glass. 4 is also from Haughton, this time a melt derived from sandstone. 5, 6, 7 and 8, are Moldavite, Apache Tears, Trinitite, glass from the Trinity nuclear test site) and obsidian respectively. 9 is an impact melt glass from Haughton, and 10, a fulgurite. 11 and 12 are melt glasses from Ries and Mistastin respectively, both featuring devitrification via weathering, i.e., phyllosilicate formation. Finally, 13 and 14 are both basaltic glasses containing minor amounts of various crystalline pyroxenes and quartz, from the Lonar crater and Hawaii respectively.

The series of amorphous halos in Figure 1 are grouped by colour to denote their formation mechanism, compositions, (Note: the maxima of the centroid does not correlate with silica content) and to a lesser extent location. The reds from the Haughton impact event are either mixed diaplectic/melt glasses, as in 1 and 2, or melt glasses, 4 and 9. The greens from various locales, all rapidly cooled in air; either impact related, 3 and 5, pyroclastics, 6, explosion, 7, extrusive volcanism, 8 or via flash heating produced by lightning strike, 10. The purple and burgundy samples are basaltic melts, either from impacts, 11 and 12, each mid-devitrification, 13 which is a pristine impactite, or 14 which is extrusive.

The amorphous halo in question is a result of a series of linkages akin to polymerization within the glassy material or a series a nano-crystalline versions of the crystals that would make up the material should it have been afforded the time to recrystallize. Either scenario is equally plausible (We suggest the halo is a combination of the two). Via the procedure laid out in the results we can derive a metric from the XRD that we can then use to compare with other samples. The technique of [4] relies on this comparison. We prefer this method to the more complicated calculation based method of [5] which requires a glassy material of a known initial composition, from which bonds can be assigned and amorphous linkages/makeup established.

We further suggest that one could take glasses from known locales and compare them with those that either contain crystallites or do not, but have known progenitors, i.e., samples 13 and 14. These two, a glassy impactite from Lonar, and an extrusive basaltic glass have very similar compositions which result in very similar amorphous halos. One could then extrapolate to unknown samples, for example those recently, and to be analyzed by CheMin on Mars. Should those amorphous materials have halos similar to basaltic glass, one could safely conclude the amorphous material is likely to share a similar origin. Initial composition is not the only result one might look for, though. Comparing all samples, there are three stand outs, #s 1, 2 and 3 are without question different from all others, and could only have been produced by impact.


Acknowledgements: We thank Neil Banerjee and Horton Newsom, for providing selected samples. Funding for this research was provided by NSERC.