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Discovery

The first discovery of an asteroid, Ceres by Italian astronomer Giuseppe Piazzi in January 1, 1801

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Ceres was the first object considered to be an asteroid. The first asteroid discovered was 1 Ceres, or Ceres on January 1, 1801, by Giuseppe Piazzi a monk and astronomer in Sicily. It was classified as a planet for a long time and is considered a dwarf planet later. Asteroids are small, airless rocky worlds revolving around the sun that are too small to be called planets. They are also known as planetoids or minor planets. Ceres is the closest dwarf planet to the Sun and is located in the asteroid belt making it the only dwarf planet in the inner solar system. Ceres rotates on its axis every 9 hours and 4 minutes. In 2006, the International Astronomical Union voted to restore the planet designation to Ceres, decreeing that it qualifies as a dwarf planet. It does have some planet-like characteristics, including an interior that is separated into crust, mantle and core. Ceres has a diameter of 950 km and contains 32% of all of the mass in the main asteroid belt. This discovery has been published in the March 26 online edition of the journal Nature. NASA's Dawn mission, launched in 2007, began exploring Vesta in 2011. After a year, it left the asteroid for a trip to Ceres, with a planned arrival time of 2015. Dawn was the first spacecraft to visit Vesta, and will also be the first to explore Ceres.

Asteroids come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some are solid bodies, while others are smaller piles of rubble bound together by gravity. One, which orbits the sun between Neptune and Uranus, comes with its own set of rings. Another has not one but six tails. The average temperature of the surface of a typical asteroid is minus 100 degrees F (minus 73 degrees C). Asteroids have stayed mostly unchanged for billions of years. Asteroids can reach as large as Ceres, which is 940 km (about 583 miles) across. On the other hand, one of the smallest, discovered in 1991 and named 1991 BA, is only about 20 feet (6 meters) across. Nearly all asteroids are irregularly shaped, although a few are nearly spherical, such as Ceres. They are often pitted or cratered. The surfaces of most asteroids are thought to be covered with dust. Most asteroids lie in a vast ring between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Many asteroids lie outside the main belt. For instance, a number of asteroids called Trojans lie along Jupiter's orbital path. Three groups Atens, Amors, and Apollos are known as near-Earth asteroids orbit in the inner solar system and sometimes cross the path of Mars and Earth. Asteroids are leftovers from the formation of our solar system about 4.6 billion years ago. Early on, the birth of Jupiter prevented any planetary bodies from forming in the gap between Mars and Jupiter, causing the small objects that collide with each other and fragment into the asteroids seen today.