

Roll call of worlds

Planetary appellations

Shakespeare dominates the northeast corner. Perhaps, situated in temperatures that would melt lead, he broods on his sins. Does he resent the nearness of Strindberg, a fellow poet, although of a different time and place? He also brushes shoulders with the Flemish master van Eyck, but not with the intimate embrace another painter, Degas, enjoys with one of the Brontë sisters not far away. To the southeast Boethius needs all the consolation philosophy can offer in the searing heat of the equator, and half a world away Michelangelo may well ask whether his patrons couldn't have found a larger crater to reflect the scope of his genius.

Dante Alighieri peopled his *Inferno* with figures from his own time and the past. In turn, today's astronomers are selecting the notables of history, subjects of the myths of nations and members of their own craft to bring identity to craters, crests and chasms on the worlds revealed by exploring spacecraft. Dr. Peter Millman of NRC's Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics explains how Mercury was chosen to celebrate the famous figures from the humanities. "Mercury was the last

planetary surface that could be mapped in detail," he says, "and many names were needed. There were several choices of subject: birds, for example, commemorating the winged messenger of the gods. The committee, which was under some pressure to meet printing deadlines for maps, accepted the suggestion of the Soviet delegates that Mercury offered the last chance to honor cultural figures. There was certainly no lack of possible choices, and the idea was adopted."

Millman is in his third three-year term as president of the Working Group for Planetary System Nomenclature established in 1973 by the International Astronomical Union. The group's task was to bring organization to the problem of identifying planetary features emerging from close scrutiny by Soviet and American spacecraft. Mariners, Veneras, Vikings and Voyagers, ships

of discovery rivalling the *Santa Maria* and the *Beagle*, were bringing to humanity the first detailed glimpses of our neighbors in space. Says Millman: "Space exploration projects successfully undertaken during the '60's and '70's indicated that nearly 40 worlds would be explored before the end of the century. Guidelines were necessary simply to avoid confusion in future scientific studies. Organized nomenclature was required to provide a clear, unambiguous tool to aid further research."

Is this the oldest extant surface in the solar system? Callisto's face exhibits a large impact basin almost 600 km across bearing the name Valhalla, Odin's hall where dead heroes dwell'd. (JPL-NASA)

S'agirait-il de la plus ancienne surface planétaire du système solaire? On peut voir sur Callisto un grand bassin d'impact atteignant près de 600 km et portant le nom de Walhalla, demeure éternelle des guerriers morts en héros dont Odin est le dieu. (Photo: JPL, NASA)

Dr. Peter Millman points out one of the Martian craters named for the Newfoundland community of Nain. (Photo: Stephen A. Haines)

Le Dr Peter Millman montre l'un des cratères martiens portant le nom de Nain, village de Terre-Neuve. (Photo: S.A. Haines, CNRC)

