

Japan asteroid probe enters 'target orbit' in space quest

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A Japanese space probe successfully entered "target orbit" and is on its way to rendezvousing with a far away asteroid, in a quest to study the origin of the solar system, authorities said Monday.

Earlier this month the unmanned explorer, Hayabusa 2, passed by Earth to harness the planet's [gravitational pull](#) in a bid to switch its orbital path to continue toward tiny Ryugu asteroid.

"The Hayabusa 2... entered the target orbit to travel to the asteroid," Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement.

Hayabusa 2 was launched a year ago aboard Japan's main H-IIA rocket from Tanegashima Space Center for its six-year mission to bring back mineral samples from the asteroid.

It is expected to reach Ryugu, named after a mythical castle in a Japanese folk tale, in mid-2018 and spend around 18 months in the area.

It will also drop rover robots and a "landing package" that includes equipment for surface observation.

If all goes well, soil samples will be returned to Earth in late 2020.

Analysing the extra-terrestrial materials could help shed light on the birth of the solar system 4.6 billion years ago and offer clues about what gave rise to life on Earth, scientists have said.

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