

Greek scholar invented the term asteroid, researcher reveals

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Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech

It was hardly the greatest mystery in the cosmos, and solving it won't change the course of science. But a Fort Lauderdale astronomer has cracked a 200-year-old puzzle: Who coined the word "asteroid"?

Publishers might want to take notice.

"It will actually cause books to be rewritten and dictionaries to be revised," said Clifford Cunningham, whose research revealed the true

creator of the word used to describe the rocky space travelers.

It wasn't William Herschel, the famed court astronomer for King George III, who is credited with inventing the term in 1802, Cunningham found. Rather it was the son of a poet friend of Herschel's, Greek scholar Charles Burney Jr., who originated the term asteroid, which means "star-like" in Greek.

"It's been a long-standing mystery," said Rick Fienberg, press officer for the American Astronomical Society.

"Herschel was certainly one of the greatest astronomers of all time, but this is not a credit we can give him," said Cunningham, who presented his findings Monday in Denver at the 45th annual convention of the astronomical society's Division of Planetary Sciences.

"Asteroid was Herschel's choice, but it was not his creation."

Erik Gregersen, senior editor for astronomy and space exploration at Encyclopaedia Britannica, said he will review Cunningham's work and make any necessary changes.

"We do have a big revision of our asteroid article in the works at the moment, so I'll have to see how it fits in there," he said. "To be accurate, the etymology of the word might have to credit this other fellow."

Gregersen noted that revisions can be easily made, since most dictionaries are online. His own encyclopedia, for example, has been exclusively online since 2010.

Cunningham is a world authority on asteroids and one, 4276, was named Clifford after him in honor of a 1988 book, "Introduction to Asteroids." He pored through volumes of source material at Yale University before

uncovering two letters indisputably proving who first came up with the asteroid term. He is preparing to publish a formal paper on his discovery and submit it for peer review.

According to Cunningham, who is currently affiliated with the National Astronomical Research Institute of Thailand, stargazers in 1802 were baffled by the discovery of what they thought were two new planets. Herschel argued they were in fact completely different celestial entities and deserved their own identity.

But Herschel couldn't conjure up an appropriate term, and his paper on the new objects was due to be delivered to the Royal Society in a week's time. "He had to get a name immediately for his paper," Cunningham said. "He didn't have a word, and he was desperate."

So the Sunday before the Royal Society meeting, Herschel appealed to Charles Burney Sr., a poet with whom he was collaborating on an educational poem about the cosmos. Burney considered the question and that night, by candlelight, penned a letter to his son, Greek expert Charles Burney Jr. The elder Burney suggested the words "asteriskos" or "stellula" to describe the new celestial objects.

Charles Burney Jr. came back with the term "asteroid."

It was unveiled in Herschel's subsequent paper - and instantly dismissed.

"Every astronomer in Europe rejected it, everyone was against the creation of this word," Cunningham said.

But within a few decades the concept of asteroids, and their name, gained legitimacy.

"It wasn't actually accepted in the scientific field until the 1850s,"

Cunningham said. "They determined they weren't planets, but really asteroids."

Cunningham based his conclusion on two letters from the Yale archives: the one the senior Burney wrote to his son, and another confirming that his son furnished the [asteroid](#) word to Herschel.

Fienberg attended Cunningham's lecture and said attendees were "quite tickled" at his findings. The researcher is "well-respected" in astronomical circles, he added, and his discovery is likely to be "officially and widely recognized" once published.

The discovery's significance, Fienberg said, is more historical than scientific. "It's a little microcosm of how science works," he said.

"Naming of things isn't a trivial matter. Whenever something new arises, you have to give it the right name," Gregersen said. "I think we got the right name."

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