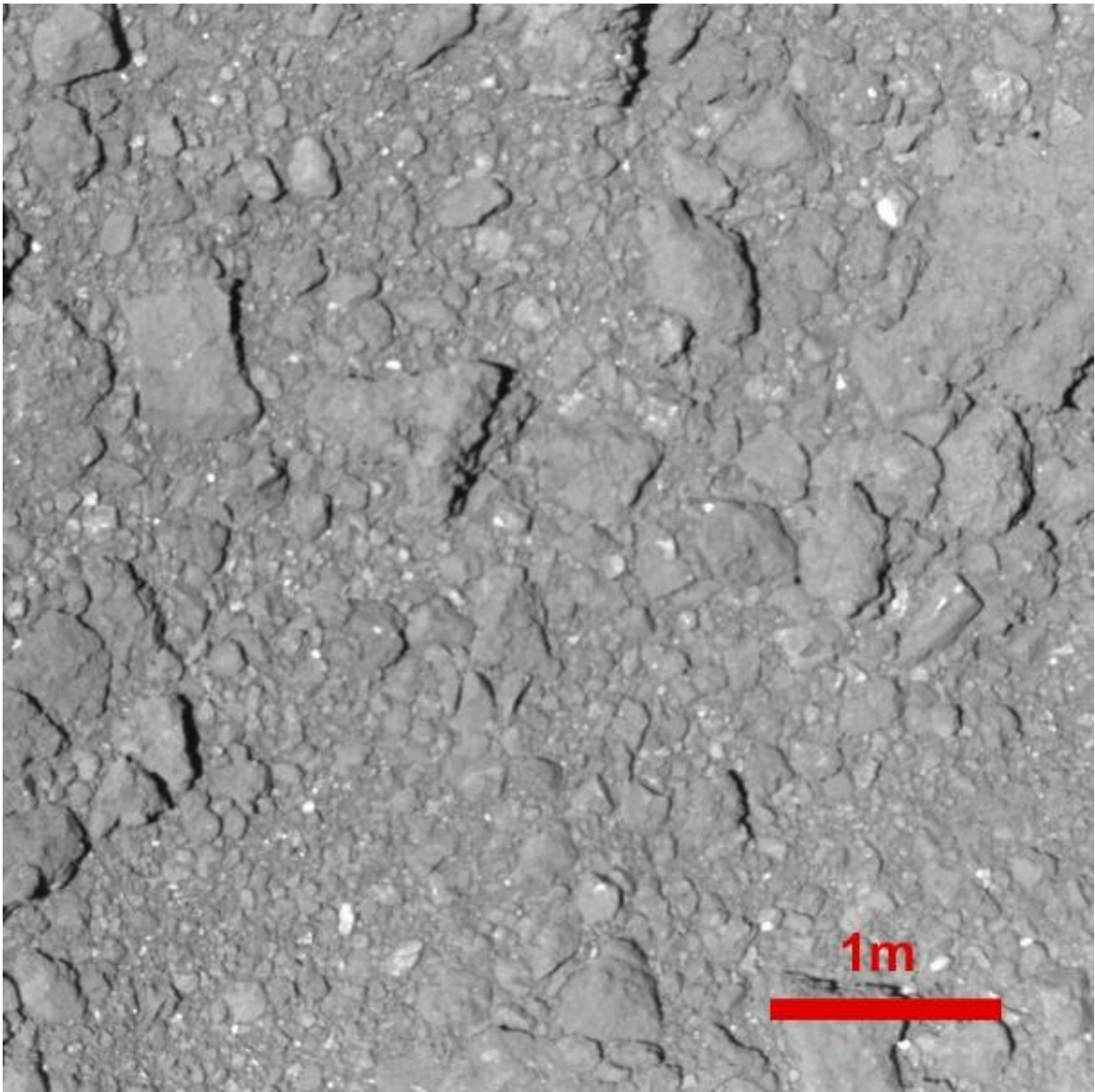


Japan spacecraft releases rover to asteroid in last mission

October 3 2019



This image of asteroid Ryugu was taken with Hayabusa2's ONC-T (Optical Navigation Camera-Telescopic) on October 15, 2018 from an altitude of 42 meters. The resolution is about 4.6 millimeters per pixel, and this is the highest resolution that Hayabusa2 spacecraft has taken. This is the highest resolution image that a spacecraft has taken of an asteroid. Credit: JAXA, Tokyo University, Kochi University, Rikkyo University, Nagoya University, Chiba Institute of Technology, Meiji University, Aizu University, and AIST

Japan's space agency says its Hayabusa2 spacecraft has released a small rover that will land on the surface of an asteroid as part its final mission before heading back to Earth.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, said the Minerva-II2 rover began its slow descent to the asteroid Ryugu early Thursday.

Hayabusa2 arrived in the area in June 2018. It has collected [soil samples](#) and other data from the asteroid 300 million kilometers (180 million miles) from Earth in a series of missions aimed at obtaining clues to the origin of the solar system.

The spacecraft will collect data and images of the rover's descent over the next few days to Ryugu to research the asteroid's gravity.

Hayabusa2 is to start its yearlong return trip later this year.

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