

Japanese mission reaches unexplored asteroid Ryugu

Asteroid Ryugu is photographed by the ONC-T which is equipped on Hayabusa 2 probe after a journey of around 3.2 billion km since launch, in outer space 280 million km from the Earth, on June 24, 2018 at around 00:01 JST, in this handout photo released by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

A Japanese probe has reached an asteroid 300 million km away to collect information about the birth of the solar system and the origin of life after a more than three-year voyage through deep space.

The Hayabusa2 probe successfully settled into an observation position 20 km above the Ryugu asteroid, officials from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said on Wednesday.

Researchers broke out into cheers when the probe arrived in place, a feat JAXA described as “shooting from Japan at a six cm target in Brazil”.

Ahead of Asteroid Day

“Today, we are at the beginning of a space science exploration that is unprecedented for humankind,” project manager Yuichi Tsuda said. The successful mission came just days before the UN’s International Asteroid Day on June 30, a global event to raise awareness about the hazards of an asteroid impact and technological progress to counter such a threat.

Scientists hope to glean clues about what gave rise to life on the earth from samples taken from Ryugu, which is thought to contain relatively large amounts of organic matter and water.

Photos of Ryugu — which means “Dragon Palace” in Japanese, a castle at the bottom of the ocean in an ancient Japanese tale — show an asteroid shaped a bit like a spinning top with a rough surface.

The Hayabusa2 probe was in good shape and is now ready to start exploring the asteroid over the coming 18 months, JAXA said. The next stage is to identify suitable sites to take samples from once the probe touches down on the asteroid, scientist Seiichiro Watanabe said.

That probe returned from a smaller, potato-shaped, asteroid in 2010 with dust samples despite various setbacks during its epic seven-year odyssey and was hailed as a scientific triumph.

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