

Muriel Gargaud  
*Editor-in-Chief*

Ricardo Amils  
José Cernicharo  
H. James Cleaves II  
William M. Irvine  
Daniele L. Pinti  
Michel Viso  
*Editors*

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# Encyclopedia of Astrobiology

 Springer

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Muriel Gargaud (Editor-in-Chief)

Ricardo Amils, José Cernicharo Quintanilla, Henderson James (Jim) Cleaves II,  
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# Encyclopedia of Astrobiology

With 547 Figures and 68 Tables

 Springer

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*Editor*  
Muriel Gargaud  
Astrophysicist  
Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Bordeaux  
BP 89  
33270 Floirac  
France

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# Foreword

Are we alone? Long an object of speculation or fiction, if not heresy, this question entered the field of science on November 1, 1961, at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, Virginia, where a number of scientists, including Melvin Calvin, who had just been awarded the Nobel prize in chemistry for his work on photosynthesis, and the charismatic Carl Sagan, gathered at the invitation of a young astronomer, Frank Drake, to launch the Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project. Since then, batteries of increasingly powerful radiotelescopes have been scanning space for messages sent out by some extraterrestrial civilization. So far in vain.

At the same time, in the wake of widening space exploration, a new discipline was born that has the distinctive peculiarity of having three names – exobiology, astrobiology, bioastronomy – and no as-yet-known object. The purpose of this new discipline is more modest than that of the SETI project: to detect signs of extraterrestrial life, not necessarily intelligent.

To guide this quest, we have available vast knowledge that has been gained in the last few decades concerning the basic mechanisms of life. This knowledge, in turn, has illuminated our concept of the origin of life. Even though we do not know how or under what conditions this phenomenon took place, we may safely affirm that if life arose naturally, which is the only scientifically acceptable assumption, its origin must have depended on “chemistry.” By its very nature, chemistry deals with highly deterministic, reproducible events that are bound to take place under prevailing physical-chemical conditions. If even a very slight element of chance affected chemical reactions, there would be no chemical laboratories, no chemical factories. We could not afford the risk.

A conclusion that emerges from this consideration is that life, as a product of environmentally enforced chemistry, was bound to arise under the physical-chemical conditions that prevailed at the site of its birth.

This statement, at least, holds true for the early steps in the origin of life, until the appearance of the first replicable substance, most likely RNA. Once this happened, “selection” became added to chemistry, introducing an element of chance in the development of life. Contrary to what has often been claimed in the past, this fact does not necessarily imply that the process was ruled by contingency. There are reasons to believe that, in many instances, chance provided enough opportunities for selection to be optimizing, and, therefore, likewise obligatory under prevailing conditions.

Thus, in so far as chemistry and optimizing selection played a dominant role in the process, the development of life appears as the obligatory outcome of prevailing conditions. Hence the assumption that the probability of the appearance elsewhere in the universe of forms of life resembling Earth life in their basic properties is approximately equal to the probability of the occurrence elsewhere in the universe of the physical conditions that obtained at the site where Earth life arose.

In the eyes of many astronomers, this probability is very high. It is estimated that some 30 billion sunlike stars exist in our galaxy alone and that the total number of galaxies in the universe is on the order of 100 billion. This means, to the extent that our galaxy may be taken as a representative sample of galaxies in general, there may be some 3,000 billion sunlike stars in the universe. Unless our solar system should be the product of extremely unlikely events, the probability of there being planets similar to Earth (or to whatever celestial object served as the cradle of Earth life) seems very strong.

Recent findings are most encouraging in this respect, by revealing that planet formation is not a rare event, with more than 400 planets already identified around a number of nearby stars. Although no habitable Earthlike extrasolar planet has yet been found, this may be partly due to technical limitations. The prospects that, with improved technologies, such a planet may be discovered some time in the future are far from negligible. Signs of life on such a planet, although more difficult to detect, may likewise yield to technological progress.

As by now, the enormous research effort expended within the framework of the new discipline of exobiology-cum-bioastronomy-cum-astrobiology has already produced a wealth of new findings, in fields ranging from physics and

cosmology to chemistry, biochemistry, and molecular biology. These findings have provided rich material for this Encyclopedia. Its editors and authors are to be commended for making this material widely available in easily accessible form.

Christian de Duve  
14 January 2011

## Reference

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# Preface

Where do we come from? Are we alone in the Universe? Where are we going? These are the questions addressed by astrobiology – the study of the origin, evolution, distribution, and the future of life in the Universe.

Encyclopedias are unusual works. A quote from the prologue of one of the more famous early encyclopedias is instructive:

- ▶ “. . . the purpose of an encyclopedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race in the future years to come”. Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie* (1751).<sup>1</sup>

Diderot and d’Alembert’s eighteenth century *Encyclopédie* was indeed ground-breaking, but perhaps more remarkable is the degree to which their description resembles the modern concept of genetic inheritance and natural selection: a civilization’s accumulated knowledge being analogous to the traits encoded in an organism’s time-tested DNA genome. In many ways, the *Encyclopédie* addressed the goals of astrobiology; between the lines, we find aspects of what makes biology *biology*.

Encyclopedias have now existed for approximately 2,000 years, the first being Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, which was a compendium of the knowledge available to a citizen of the Roman Empire as documented by the first century AD.<sup>2</sup> It contained ~ 20,000 facts from 2,000 sources written by 200 authors. The present volume contains an unknown number of “facts” (indeed, some of the content will likely be proven false, as science is a living, breathing accumulation of presently accepted knowledge, all subject to future revision), but it does include more than 1,700 contributions, references uncounted thousands of prior publications, and is written by 385 authors.

Modern encyclopedias are derived from the dictionaries of the eighteenth century. The two are similar in that both are arranged alphabetically and generally are the work of a team of expert contributors. They differ in that encyclopedias contain a deeper level of analysis of the included terms and attempt to cross-reference and place the assembled contents in a useful context.

The first encyclopedias attempted to cover all human knowledge. This is now impossible for a printed work because the body of human knowledge is presently growing exponentially, with no end in sight. Encyclopedias now exist for almost every definable field of study. A field requires a certain degree of maturity to have an encyclopedia, and conversely, the publication of an encyclopedia commonly records the birth of a definable field of study. Astrobiology is an interdisciplinary field, spanning geology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, biology, engineering, and computer science, to name only the core fields of study.

While some of these fields of research are fairly well mapped, many others are in rapid flux, and still others remain perennially enigmatic, awaiting future breakthroughs by the scientists of tomorrow. To this end, the *Encyclopedia of Astrobiology* is primarily aimed at younger scientists or scientists new to the field who wish to understand how their expertise coincides with current knowledge in other areas of study. It is hoped that the encyclopedia will serve to orient researchers to the current state of the art. A more in-depth discussion of many of the topic areas can be obtained by referring to college or graduate level texts or to the articles cited at the end of many of the entries.

Encyclopedias are snapshots of the state of knowledge at a particular time. In 1844, the book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* was published anonymously (it was later found to have been written by Scottish publisher William Chambers) and created a public sensation.<sup>3</sup> It offered a sweeping and very secular view of the development of the Solar System, stretching from the nebular hypothesis to the development of man. While primitive by modern standards (it was, after all, based on state-of-the-art early nineteenth century science), it was in many ways remarkably similar to modern cosmology. In broad brushstrokes, it is the precursor to the worldview developed in Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*<sup>4</sup> and the grand view of myriads of habitable planets implicit in the Drake equation. The implication of *Vestiges* was simply this: the

Universe operates everywhere and at all times according to physical principles, and the evolution of matter is largely predictable and often progressive, proceeding from the simple to the complex.

Science has advanced dramatically since Chambers' book was published. It is truly a long way from Sir William Herschel's 40-ft telescope to the Herschel Space Telescope,<sup>5</sup> and from a Universe with seven known planets orbiting the Sun to one with more than 500 planets orbiting other stars. It is also a long way from the work of Black, Priestly, and Lavoisier<sup>6</sup> to SELEX technology and high-throughput automated chemical screening and analysis, and from Lyell's *Principles of Geology*<sup>7</sup> to plate tectonics and isotope geochemistry. Nonetheless, certain questions permeate the sciences across time and discipline. Woese's three domains of life<sup>8</sup> are direct descendents of Linnaeus' early classification scheme, and both are attempts to unify and classify terrestrial organisms. Darwinism has offered an underlying mechanism for doing so that has allowed for unification of the assorted observations of the living world. However, the question of whether terrestrial life is unique in the universe has fascinated mankind for millennia.

It was not until 1959, when NASA began funding the search for life in the Universe in its Exobiology program, that we at last achieved the technological prowess to try to answer this question.<sup>9</sup> The paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson famously noted shortly thereafter that Exobiology was a science "that has yet to demonstrate that its subject matter exists."

NASA's first exobiology grant was awarded to Wolf Vishniac for the construction of the Wolf Trap, a device for detecting bacteria on Mars. Due to size limitations, the device never flew, but various descendants have made the trip to Mars and returned various negative or tantalizingly ambiguous results. These results are, amusingly, either disappointingly or encouragingly ambiguous, depending on one's point of view. Despite remarkable progress in the sciences, humanity still has no answer to the question, "Are we alone?," though the question is in principle answerable. The search continues enthusiastically.

Why should we think there might be life elsewhere in the Universe? In 1960, the radio-astronomer Frank Drake developed his now-famous equation for estimating the number of communicating civilizations in the Galaxy:

$$N = R * \times f_p \times n_e \times f_e \times f_i \times f_c \times L,$$

where  $N$  is the number of civilizations in our galaxy for which communication might be possible,  $R^*$  is the average rate of star formation per year,  $f_p$  is the fraction of stars that have planets,  $n_e$  is the average number of planets that can support life per star with planets,  $f_e$  is the fraction of the planets that can support life on which life actually develops,  $f_i$  is the fraction of those on which intelligent life develops,  $f_c$  is the fraction of those on which civilizations communicate using detectable signals, and  $L$  is the length of time these civilizations communicate.

When Drake unveiled his equation in 1960 and estimated that there were maybe ten communicating civilizations in the Galaxy, few of the parameters were known with any certainty; the rate of star formation was perhaps the only solid measurable value. Fifty years later, the flourishing search for exoplanets has placed the focus on the second value (notably, it now appears to be close to what Drake estimated,  $\sim 50\%$ ). Hundreds of exoplanets have been found around other stars, and current technology allows the observation of even small planets. Theory suggests that the fraction of stars with Earth-like planets is somewhere near 10% (again, surprisingly, and a tribute to back-of-the-envelope calculations, not far from Drake's initial estimate).

The least well-known value is the question of how difficult is it for life to begin (one of the "perennially enigmatic" facts mentioned above). Based on present knowledge, the fraction of planets on which life actually emerges ( $f_i$ ) could be anywhere from very, very close to 0 or far closer to 1. We simply do not know. On the ends of the spectrum, the scientific community is divided into two equally "hunch-"based camps: first, life is inevitable and is a cosmic imperative (where conditions are appropriate) and, second, the origin of life requires such a concatenation of improbable events that it is the scientific equivalent of a miracle.

On the one planet we know of with life, our own, putative evidence in the form of isotopically light carbon appears in the earliest known sedimentary rocks, suggesting life emerged relatively early in the history of the planet, although we do not know whether this took place 100 years or 700 million years after the planet formed. This implies that either something extraordinary happened on Earth, or that the origin of life is a mundane phenomenon on young planets, given appropriate chemistry, environmental conditions, and enough time. Radioastronomy has provided a glimpse of the chemical inventory of the cosmos which does appear to be universal. Spectral signatures of a veritable zoo of organic compounds suggest that the Universe is strewn with the potential precursors of life. Organic carbon (in the form of carbon monoxide) has now been observed as far back as 13 billion years ago, only some 700 million years after the birth of

the Universe in the Big Bang. The picture emerging, reminiscent of Chambers' universe, is that physics and chemistry are the same everywhere in the Universe, and that the Earth, although remarkable in many respects, may not be unique.

As in any factorial equation, the most important values are the ones with the largest uncertainty. Two approaches could shed light on the "f<sub>i</sub> problem": the duplication of the process in the laboratory or the discovery of life on another planet. It is difficult to say whether the first approach will ever succeed to anyone's complete satisfaction, given that the origin of life on Earth was a historical event that happened when no one was around to witness it. The second approach, while fraught with technological difficulties, is perhaps more promising. To that end, numerous instruments and space missions have been designed and launched to explore the Solar System and beyond. The spectral signatures of planets around nearby stars are being monitored for the characteristic signs of life such as the signature of disequilibrium chemistry in the form of the presence in their atmospheres of both oxidized and reduced gases.

While the answers to the vast questions that define astrobiology as a field of study are unclear, it is evident that answering them will require an interdisciplinary effort, stretching across international borders. One is hesitant to speculate what the answer to the question, "Are we alone?" will ultimately be. As good scientists, we should probably withhold judgment until the data are in. As better scientists, we must join hands and find the data. The editors of the *Encyclopedia of Astrobiology* hope that this volume will contribute to this effort.

The Editors

## Notes

1. A complete English and French version of the *Encyclopédie* can be found at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>
2. For a complete English translation of Pliny the Elder's *The Natural History* by John Bostock see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc&redirect=true>. A complete Latin version can be found at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0138:toc&redirect=true>
3. Chambers R (1994) *Vestiges of the natural history of creation and other evolutionary writings*. University of Chicago Press
4. *Cosmos* was a remarkable 13-part popular science series narrated by Carl Sagan which aired in 1980. Most if not all of the episodes can be viewed on line, and a book was spun off: Sagan C (1985) *Cosmos*. Ballantine Books
5. For a survey of the early developments in astronomy, see Lankford J (ed) (1996) *History of astronomy: an encyclopedia*, first edition. Routledge
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9. For an insightful recounting of the early history of NASA's early efforts in exo- and astrobiology (including discussion of the roles of Wolf Vishniac and Frank Drake) see Dick SJ, Strick JE (2005) *The living universe: NASA and the development of astrobiology*. Rutgers University Press



# Acknowledgments

A brief note is warranted about how we constructed the Encyclopedia. A glossary of terms was first compiled by a team of experts in each field. It was then cross-referenced between fields to check for conceptual overlap and was then both expanded and pared down to produce a consensus entry list.

Authors with peer-recognized contributions to their fields of study were then invited to contribute entries appropriate to their expertise. After a final draft was submitted, entries were proofread and vetted for scientific accuracy and readability by a team of field editors, then edited and modified to be accessible by a reader with general knowledge of college-level science. Finally, the entries were cross-referenced, and edited for stylistic consistency and ease of reading.

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The Editors



# Editor-in-Chief

**Muriel Gargaud**

Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Bordeaux

CNRS and Université Bordeaux 1

2 Rue de l'Observatoire

33270 Floirac

France

Muriel.Gargaud@obs.u-bordeaux1.fr

*Field: Astrophysics*



# Book Editors

**Ricardo Amils**

Laboratory of Extremophiles  
Department of Planetology and Habitability  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTA-CSIC)  
Ctra de Ajalvir km 4  
28850 Torrejón de Ardoz  
Madrid  
Spain  
ramils@cbm.uam.es  
*Field: Geomicrobiology*

**José Cernicharo Quintanilla**

Department of Astrophysics  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTA-CSIC)  
Ctra de Ajalvir km 4  
28850 Torrejón de Ardoz  
Madrid  
Spain  
jcernicharo@cab.inta-csic.es  
*Field: Astrochemistry and Astrophysics*

**Henderson James (Jim) Cleaves II**

Geophysical Laboratory  
Carnegie Institution of Washington  
Washington, DC 20015  
USA  
hjcleaves@ciw.edu  
*Field: Chemistry*

**William M. Irvine**

Goddard Center for Astrobiology and  
Astronomy Department  
University of Massachusetts  
619 Lederle Graduate Research Center  
Amherst, MA 01003  
USA  
irvine@astro.umass.edu  
*Field: Astrochemistry and Planetary Science*

**Daniele L. Pinti**

GEOTOP and Département des sciences de la Terre et  
de l'atmosphère  
Université du Québec à Montréal  
CP 8888, succ. Centre-Ville  
Montréal, Québec, H3C 3P8  
Canada  
pinti.daniele@uqam.ca  
*Field: Earth Sciences*

**Michel Viso**

Astrobiology  
CNES/DSP/EU  
Paris  
France  
michel.viso@cnes.fr  
*Field: Space Missions and Planetary Protection*

# Field Editors

**Francis Albarede**

Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon  
46, Allée d'Italie  
69364 Lyon Cedex 7  
France  
francis.albarede@ens-lyon.fr  
*Field: Early Earth Geochemistry*

**Nicholas Arndt**

Maison des Géosciences LGCA  
Université de Grenoble  
1381 rue de la Piscine  
38400 St Martin d'Hères  
France  
nicholas.arndt@ujf-grenoble.fr  
*Field: Archean Geology*

**Hugues Bersini**

IRIDIA  
Université Libre de Bruxelles  
Avenue Franklin Roosevelt 50  
B-1050 Brussels  
Belgium  
bersini@ulb.ac.be  
*Field: Artificial Life*

**Carlos Briones**

Laboratory of Molecular Evolution  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTA-CSIC)  
Instituto Nacional de Técnica Aeroespacial  
Carretera de Ajalvir, Km. 4  
28850 Torrejón de Ardoz  
Madrid  
Spain  
brioneslo@inta.es  
*Field: Genetics and Evolution*

**Steven Charnley**

Astrochemistry Laboratory  
Solar System Exploration Division, Code 691  
Science and Exploration Directorate  
NASA Goddard Space Flight Center  
Greenbelt, MD 20771  
USA  
steven.b.chnley@nasa.gov  
*Field: Interstellar Medium (gas phase)*

**Therese Encrenaz**

LESIA  
Observatoire de Paris  
92190 Meudon  
France  
therese.encrenaz@obspm.fr  
*Field: Outer Solar System and Comets*

**Felipe Gómez**

Laboratory of Extremophiles  
Department of Planetology and Habitability  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTA-CSIC)  
Ctra de Ajalvir km 4  
28850 Torrejón de Ardoz  
Madrid  
Spain  
gomezgf@cab.inta-csic.es  
*Field: General Biology*

**Gerda Horneck**

DLR German Aerospace Center  
Institute of Aerospace Medicine, Radiation Biology  
51170 Köln  
Germany  
gerda.horneck@dlr.de  
*Field: Microbiology in Space*

**Emmanuelle Javaux**

Geology Department  
University of Liège  
17 allée du 6 Août B18  
Sart-Tilman Liège 4000  
Belgium  
EJ.Javaux@ulg.ac.be  
*Field: Traces of Life*

**Lisa Kaltenegger**

Harvard University  
MS-20 60 Garden Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
USA  
lkaltenegger@cfa.harvard.edu  
*Field: Planetary Atmospheres*

**Kensei Kobayashi**

Grad. School of Engineering  
Yokohama National University  
79-5 Tokiwadai  
Hodogaya-ku, Yokohama 240-8501  
Japan  
kkensei@ynu.ac.jp  
*Field: Chemistry*

**David W. Latham**

Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics  
60 Garden Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
USA  
dlatham@cfa.harvard.edu  
*Field: Extra Solar Planets*

**Juli Pereto**

Institut Cavanilles de Biodiversitat i Biologia Evolutiva  
and Departament de Bioquímica i Biologia Molecular  
University of Valencia  
Evolutionary genetics group  
APDO. 22085  
46071 València  
Spain  
pereto@uv.es  
*Field: Biochemistry*

**Nikos Prantzos**

Institut d'Astrophysique de Paris  
98bis Bd Arago  
75014 Paris  
France  
prantzos@iap.fr  
*Field: Nucleosynthesis*

**Sean Raymond**

Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Bordeaux  
CNRS and Université Bordeaux1  
2 rue de l'Observatoire  
33270 Floirac  
France  
raymond@obs.u-bordeaux1.fr  
*Field: Planetary Formation and Dynamics*

**Daniel Rouan**

LESIA  
Observatoire de Paris, CNRS, UPMC, Université  
Paris-Diderot  
5 place Jules Janssen  
92195 Meudon  
France  
daniel.rouan@obspm.fr  
*Field: General Astrophysics*

**Tilman Spohn**

DLR - German Aerospace Center  
Institute of Planetary Research  
Rutherfordstraße 2  
12489 Berlin  
Germany  
tilman.spohn@dlr.de  
*Field: Inner Solar System and Asteroids*

**Steven Stahler**

Department of Astronomy  
University of California  
Berkeley, CA 94720  
USA  
stahler@astro.berkeley.edu  
*Field: Stars Formation*

**Stephane Tirard**

Centre François Viète d'Histoire des Sciences et des  
Techniques EA 1161  
Faculté des Sciences et des Techniques de Nantes  
2 rue de la Houssinière, BP 92 208  
44322 Nantes CEDEX 3  
France  
Stephane.Tirard@univ-nantes.fr  
*Field: History of Sciences*



# List of Contributors

**JOSÉ PASCUAL ABAD**  
Facultad de Ciencias  
Departamento de Biología Molecular  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid  
Cantoblanco, Madrid  
Spain  
jpabad@cbm.uam.es

**ANGELES AGUILERA**  
Laboratorio de Extremófilos  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTA-CSIC)  
Torrejón de Ardoz, Madrid  
Spain  
aguileraba@cab.inta-csic.es

**FRANCIS ALBARÈDE**  
Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon  
Lyon Cedex 7  
France  
albarede@ens-lyon.fr

**CONEL MICHAEL O'DONEL ALEXANDER**  
Department of Terrestrial Magnetism  
Carnegie Institution of Washington  
NW Washington, DC  
USA  
alexande@dtm.ciw.edu

**ABIGAIL ALLWOOD**  
Jet Propulsion Laboratory  
Pasadena, CA  
USA  
abigail.c.allwood@jpl.nasa.gov

**CONCEPCIÓN ALONSO**  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid  
Madrid  
Spain  
Concepcion.alonso@uam.es

**WLADYSLAW ALTERMANN**  
Department of Geology  
University of Pretoria  
Pretoria  
South Africa  
Wlady.altermann@up.ac.za

**LINDA AMARAL-ZETTLER**  
Marine Biological Laboratory  
Josephine Bay Paul Center for Comparative Molecular  
Biology and Evolution  
Woods Hole, MA  
USA  
amaral@mbl.edu

**RICARDO AMILS**  
Departamento de Planetología y Habitabilidad  
Centro de Astrobiología (CSIC-INTA)  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid Campus  
Cantoblanco  
Torrejón de Ardoz, Madrid  
Spain  
ramils@cbm.uam.es

**ARIEL D. ANBAR**  
School of Earth & Space Exploration and Department  
of Chemistry & Biochemistry  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, AZ  
USA  
anbar@asu.edu

**LUC ANDRÉ**  
Department of Earth Sciences  
Royal Museum of Central Africa  
Tervuren  
Belgium  
lucandre@africamuseum.be

**PHILIPPE ANDRÉ**  
Laboratoire AIM, IRFU/Service d'Astrophysique  
CEA Saclay  
Gif-sur-Yvette  
France  
pandre@cea.fr

**RALF H. ANKEN**

German Aerospace Center (DLR)  
Institute of Aerospace Medicine  
Cologne  
Germany  
ralf.anken@dlr.de

**JOSEFA ANTÓN**

Departamento de Fisiología, Genética y Microbiología  
Universidad de Alicante  
Alicante  
Spain  
anton@ua.es

**NICHOLAS ARNDT**

Maison des Géosciences LGCA  
Université Joseph Fourier, Grenoble  
St-Martin d'Hères  
France  
arndt@ujf-grenoble.fr

**ANDREW AUBREY**

NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory  
Pasadena, CA  
USA  
andrew.d.aubrey@jpl.nasa.gov

**JEFFREY BADA**

Scripps Institution of Oceanography  
La Jolla, CA  
USA  
jbada@ucsd.edu

**JUAN P. G. BALLESTA**

Genome Dynamics and Function  
Centro de Biología Molecular Severo Ochoa  
Cantoblanco, Madrid  
Spain  
jpgballesta@cbm.uam.es

**NADIA BALUCANI**

Dipartimento di Chimica  
Università degli Studi di Perugia  
Perugia  
Italy  
nadia.balucani@unipg.it

**RORY BARNES**

Astronomy Department  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA  
USA  
rory@astro.washington.edu

**MARIA ANTONIETTA BARUCCI**

LESIA  
Observatoire de Paris  
Meudon Principal Cedex  
France  
Antonella.barucci@obspm.fr

**GIBOR BASRI**

Astronomy Department, MC 3411  
University of California  
Berkeley, CA  
USA  
basri@berkeley.edu  
gbasri@astro.berkeley.edu

**UGO BASTOLLA**

Unidad de Bioinformática  
Centro de Biología Molecular "Severo Ochoa,"  
CSIC-UAM  
Cantoblanco, Madrid  
Spain  
ubastolla@cbm.uam.es

**CHRISTA BAUMSTARK-KHAN**

German Aerospace Center (DLR)  
Institute of Aerospace Medicine  
Cologne  
Germany  
christa.baumstark-khan@dlr.de

**ANDREY BEKKER**

Department of Geological Sciences  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, MB  
Canada  
bekker@cc.umanitoba.ca

**G. FRITZ BENEDICT**

McDonald Observatory  
The University of Texas  
Austin, TX  
USA  
fritz@astro.as.utexas.edu

**STEFAN BENGTSON**

Department of Palaeozoology  
The Swedish Museum of Natural History  
Stockholm  
Sweden  
stefan.bengtson@nrm.se

**KARIM BENZERARA**

Institut de Minéralogie et de Physique des Milieux  
Condensés, UMR 7590  
CNRS, Université Pierre et Marie Curie & Institut de  
Physique du Globe de Paris  
Paris  
France  
Karim.benzerara@imPMC.jussieu.fr

**JOSE BERENGUER**

Centro de Biología Molecular Severo Ochoa, UAM-CSIC  
Madrid  
Spain  
jberenguer@cbm.uam.es  
jose.berenguer@uam.es

**SYLVAIN BERNARD**

Section 4.3, Organic Geochemistry  
GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences  
Potsdam  
Germany  
Sylvain.Bernard@gfz-potsdam.de

**HUGUES BERSINI**

IRIDIA  
Université Libre de Bruxelles  
Brussels  
Belgium  
bersini@ulb.ac.be

**BRUNO BÉZARD**

LESIA  
Observatoire de Paris  
Meudon  
France  
Bruno.Bezard@obspm.fr

**JEAN-PIERRE BIBRING**

Institut d'Astrophysique Spatiale  
Université Paris-Sud  
Orsay Cedex  
France  
jean-pierre.bibring@ias.u-psud.fr

**JOHN H. BLACK**

Chalmers University of Technology  
Onsala Space Observatory  
Onsala  
Sweden  
John.Black@chalmers.se

**LAURENT BOITEAU**

Institut des Biomolécules Max Mousseron – UMR5247  
CNRS  
University Montpellier-2  
Montpellier Cedex  
France  
laurent.boiteau@univ-montp2.fr

**JESSICA C. BOWMAN**

School of Chemistry and Biochemistry  
Georgia Institute of Technology  
Atlanta, GA  
USA  
jessica.bowman@chemistry.gatech.edu

**SAMUEL A. BOWRING**

Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and  
Planetary Sciences  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, MA  
USA  
sbowring@mit.edu

**ANDRÉ BRACK**

Directeur de Recherche  
Centre de Biophysique Moléculaire CNRS  
Orléans cedex 2  
France  
brack@cnrs-orleans.fr

**DORIS BREUER**

German Aerospace Center (DLR)  
Institute of Planetary Research  
Berlin  
Germany  
doris.breuer@dlr.de

**CARLOS BRIONES**

Laboratory of Molecular Evolution  
Centro de Astrobiología (INTACSIC)  
Instituto Nacional de Técnica Aeroespacial  
Torrejón de Ardoz, Madrid  
Spain  
brioneslc@inta.es

**GILLES BRUYLANTS**

Laboratory of Molecular and Biomolecular Engineering  
Université Libre de Bruxelles C.P. 165/64  
Brussels  
Belgium  
gbruylan@ulb.ac.be

**SERGEY BULAT**

Russian Academy of Sciences  
Petersburg Nuclear Physics Institute  
Gatchina  
Russia  
sergey.bulat@ujf-grenoble.fr  
bulat@omrb.pnpi.spb.ru

**MICHEL CABANE**

LATMOS/IPSL B102/T45-46  
Université Pierre et Marie Curie UPMC-Paris 6  
Paris Cedex 05  
France  
michel.cabane@latmos.ipsl.fr

**JEAN CADET**

Institut Nanosciences et Cryogénie  
CEA/Grenoble  
Grenoble cedex 9  
France  
jean.cadet@cea.fr

**MICHAEL P. CALLAHAN**

NASA Goddard Space Flight Center  
Astrochemistry Laboratory, Code 691  
Greenbelt, MD  
USA  
Michael.P.Callahan@nasa.gov

**JAN CAMI**

Department of Physics and Astronomy  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, ON  
Canada  
and  
SETI Institute  
Mountain View, CA  
USA  
jcami@uwo.ca

**IAN CAMPBELL**

Research School of Earth Sciences  
The Australian National University  
Canberra, ACT  
Australia  
Ian.Campbell@anu.edu.au

**DONALD E. CANFIELD**

Institute of Biology  
University of Southern Denmark  
Odense  
Denmark  
dec@biology.sdu.dk

**MARÍA LUZ CÁRDENAS**

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique  
Unité de Bioénergétique et Ingénierie des Protéines  
Marseille Cedex 20  
France  
cardenas@ifr88.cnrs-mrs.fr

**DAMIEN CARDINAL**

Department of Earth Sciences  
Royal Museum of Central Africa  
Tervuren  
Belgium  
and  
LOCEAN  
Université Pierre & Marie Curie  
Paris cedex 5  
France  
damien.cardinal@africamuseum.be

**LETICIA CARIGI**

Instituto de Astronomía, Universidad Nacional  
Autónoma de México  
México, D.F.  
Mexico  
carigi@astroscu.unam.mx

**PIERGIORGIO CASAVECCHIA**

Dipartimento di Chimica  
Università degli Studi di Perugia  
Perugia  
Italy  
piero@dyn.unipg.it

**CLAUDE CATALA**

LESIA  
Observatoire de Paris  
Meudon Cedex  
France  
Claude.Catala@obspm.fr

**FRANCO CATALDO**

Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica – Osservatorio  
Astrofisico di Catania  
Catania  
Italy  
and  
Actinium Chemical Research  
Rome  
Italy  
franco.cataldo@fastwebnet.it

**DAVID C. CATLING**

Department of Earth and Space Sciences  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA  
USA  
dcatling@u.washington.edu

**CECILIA CECCARELLI**

Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Grenoble (LAOG/IPAG)  
Université J.Fourier de Grenoble, CNRS  
Grenoble cedex 9  
France  
Cecilia.Ceccarelli@obs.ujf-grenoble.fr

**JOSE CERNICHARO**

Observatorio Astronomico Nacional  
Centro Astronomico de Yebes  
Guadalajara  
Spain  
cerni@damir.iem.csic.es

**JOHN H. CHALMERS**

Scripps Institute of Oceanography Geosciences  
Research Division  
University of California, San Diego  
La Jolla, CA  
USA  
jhchalmers@ucsd.edu

**STEVEN B. CHARNLEY**

NASA Goddard Space Flight Center  
Solar System Exploration Division, Code 691  
Astrochemistry Laboratory  
Greenbelt, MD  
USA  
steven.b.charnley@nasa.gov

**MARC CHAUSSIDON**

CRPG-Nancy Université-CNRS  
Vandoeuvre les Nancy  
France  
chocho@crpg.cnrs-nancy.fr

**GLENN E. CIOLEK**

New York Center for Astrobiology, Rensselaer  
Polytechnic Institute  
Troy, NY  
USA  
cioleg@rpi.edu

**PHILIPPE CLAEYS**

Earth System Science  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Brussel  
Belgium  
phclaeys@vub.ac.be

**HENDERSON JAMES (JIM) CLEAVES II**

Geophysical Laboratory  
Carnegie Institution of Washington  
Washington, DC  
USA  
hjclevaes@ciw.edu

**ALAIN COC**

Centre de Spectrométrie Nucléaire et de Spectrométrie  
de Masse (CSNSM) CNRS/IN2P3  
Université Paris Sud 11, UMR 8609  
Orsay  
France  
Alain.Coc@csnsm.in2p3.fr

**CHARLES S. COCKELL**

Geomicrobiology Research Group, PSSRI  
Open University  
Milton Keynes  
UK  
c.s.cockell@open.ac.uk

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