

Turbulent convection in liquid metal with and without rotation

Eric M. King^{a,b,1} and Jonathan M. Aurnou^c

^aDepartment of Physics and ^bDepartment of Earth and Planetary Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720; and ^cDepartment of Earth and Space Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095

Edited by Peter L. Olson, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, and approved March 8, 2013 (received for review October 8, 2012)

The magnetic fields of Earth and other planets are generated by turbulent, rotating convection in liquid metal. Liquid metals are peculiar in that they diffuse heat more readily than momentum, quantified by their small Prandtl numbers, $Pr \ll 1$. Most analog models of planetary dynamos, however, use moderate Pr fluids, and the systematic influence of reducing Pr is not well understood. We perform rotating Rayleigh–Bénard convection experiments in the liquid metal gallium ($Pr = 0.025$) over a range of nondimensional buoyancy forcing (Ra) and rotation periods (E). Our primary diagnostic is the efficiency of convective heat transfer (Nu). In general, we find that the convective behavior of liquid metal differs substantially from that of moderate Pr fluids, such as water. In particular, a transition between rotationally constrained and weakly rotating turbulent states is identified, and this transition differs substantially from that observed in moderate Pr fluids. This difference, we hypothesize, may explain the different classes of magnetic fields observed on the Gas and Ice Giant planets, whose dynamo regions consist of $Pr < 1$ and $Pr > 1$ fluids, respectively.

The interiors of Earth and other terrestrial bodies, as well as the Gas Giant planets, contain vast oceans of flowing metals. Mixed by turbulent convection as these planets cool, the flowing conductors produce electric currents that maintain planetary magnetic fields. These bodies also rotate, and it is expected that the resulting Coriolis forces strongly influence convective dynamo processes. Beyond linear theory (1), however, not much is known about the dynamics of rotating convection in liquid metal that underlie planetary magnetic field generation.

Theory and experiments often focus on a simplified analog of geophysical and astrophysical systems, Rayleigh–Bénard convection (RBC). The RBC system consists of a fluid layer contained between flat, horizontal plates separated by distance h , the bottom of which is warmer than the top by ΔT , and with downward pointing gravity, \mathbf{g} . Near the bottom boundary, the fluid warms and expands by a volumetric factor α (per degree kelvin) and similarly cools and contracts near the top boundary, such that the fluid is unstably stratified.

Rotating convection is explored by spinning the RBC system about a vertical axis at an angular rate Ω , which is adopted as the reference frame for the model. The fluid dynamics of the system are characterized by three dimensionless parameters. The Prandtl number, $Pr \equiv \nu/\kappa$, defines the diffusive transport properties of the fluid, where ν and κ are its viscous and thermal diffusivities. The Rayleigh number, $Ra \equiv \alpha g \Delta T h^3 / (\nu \kappa)$, prescribes the magnitude of the buoyancy force. Finally, the rotation period is specified by the Ekman number, $E \equiv \nu / (2\Omega h^2)$. The primary diagnostic used in many convection studies, including this one, is the Nusselt number, which characterizes the efficiency of heat transport by convection as $Nu \equiv qh / (k\Delta T)$, where q is total heat flux and k is the fluid's thermal conductivity. Heat flux q is total heat power \mathcal{P} divided by the horizontal surface area of the fluid layer, A .

Rotating convection studies have, to date, focused primarily on moderate Pr fluids. Of recent interest in these studies have been transitions between rotationally dominated and nonrotating turbulent states (2–10) and the enhancement of heat transport by rotation (6, 8, 11–15). Numerical simulations of planetary dynamo action by rotating convection also concentrate on fluids with

unit order Pr (16). Scaling analysis of heat transfer in such simulations agrees quantitatively with rotating convection experiments in water (17). Although it is often assumed that planetary cores can be modeled as $Pr = O(1)$ fluids (e.g., ref. 18), it remains to be seen whether such systematic behavior applies to liquid metal convection.

Liquid metals are special in that, due to electrical conduction, they transport heat more efficiently than momentum, $Pr \leq 0.1$. Similarly, the plasmas that constitute stellar convection zones, due to ionic transport, also have $Pr \leq 0.1$ (19). For comparable Ra , convection in low Prandtl number fluids is expected to be different from the more conventional $Pr \geq 1$ case in that inertia effects are enhanced for small Pr (e.g., refs. 20–22). All else being equal, nonrotating convection experiments and simulations find that low Pr fluids produce more vigorous convection, yet lower Nu values than moderate Pr fluids (23, 24). Just as varying Pr affects the dynamics of turbulent convection, so too does the influence of rotation. Coriolis forces tend to suppress and constrain convection (1). The stabilizing rotational constraint is overcome in low and moderate Pr fluids by different means. In low Pr fluids ($Pr < 0.67$), convective instability occurs as oscillatory convection, whereby the rotational constraint is overcome by the growth of inertial modes, whereas moderate Pr convection is manifest as stationary rolls in which the rotational constraint is overcome by viscous effects (1). Few studies, however, have ventured far beyond onset to investigate fully turbulent convection in rotating liquid metals.

The most comprehensive rotating liquid metal convection survey is that of Rossby (25), using mercury, whose accessed parameter range is shown in Fig. 1. Nakagawa (26) and Aurnou and Olson (27) also investigate rotating RBC in mercury and gallium, but their studies are limited to convection near onset. Several experiments have been performed using liquid metals in spinning spherical containers, in which convection occurs in response to centrifugal acceleration (28–30). These studies, although important for understanding global convection dynamics in planetary cores, may not be well controlled thermally (31).

Heat Transfer Regimes

We perform Rayleigh–Bénard convection experiments, using the liquid metal gallium with and without rotation. Nonrotating experiments provide a baseline for comparison with rotating experiments. Convection in liquid metal without rotation produces Nu – Ra scaling laws that differ from those of moderate Pr fluids. Convection in moderate Pr fluids often approximately follows the classical heat transfer scaling (32),

$$Nu \sim Ra^{1/3}, \quad [1]$$

which is attributed to the marginal stability of the thermal boundary layer (33). Low Pr fluids such as liquid metals are more

Author contributions: E.M.K. and J.M.A. designed research; E.M.K. and J.M.A. performed research; E.M.K. analyzed data; and E.M.K. and J.M.A. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: ericmking@gmail.com.

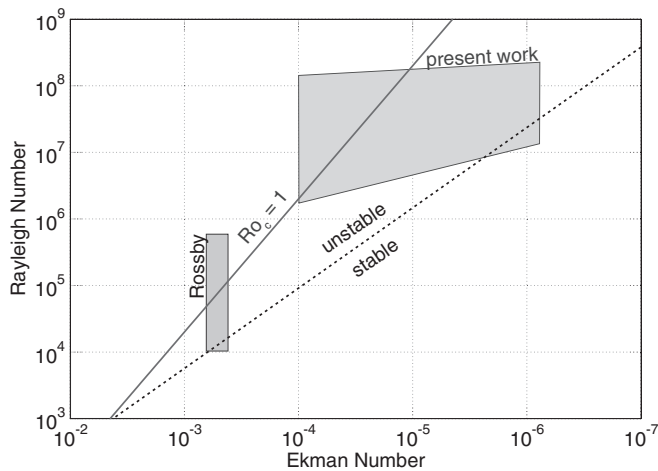


Fig. 1. Experimental parameter space for rotating RBC in liquid metal. Areas accessed by Rosby (25) (using mercury) and this work (gallium) are marked and labeled. The dotted line indicates the predicted onset of oscillatory convection for $Pr = 0.025$ (1). The solid line indicates where $Ro_c = 1$ for $Pr = 0.025$, above which convection is weakly influenced by rotation (Fig. 5).

susceptible to interior turbulence, and inertial effects in the fluid bulk have been shown to take precedence over boundary layer physics in heat transfer processes (34). An inertial heat transfer scaling can be derived (e.g., ref. 35) through two balances: a momentum balance between buoyancy and inertia and a thermal balance between advection in the bulk fluid and diffusion in the boundary layer,

$$U^2/h = \alpha \Delta T g \quad [2]$$

and

$$U \Delta T / h = \kappa \Delta T / \delta_T^2, \quad [3]$$

respectively. Here, U is a typical flow speed and δ_T is the thermal boundary layer thickness. The Nusselt number is usually taken to scale with the thermal boundary layer thickness as $Nu = h / (2\delta_T)$, such that Eqs. 2 and 3 predict

$$Nu = \frac{1}{2} (RaPr)^{1/4}. \quad [4]$$

Similar scaling laws have been observed in previous nonrotating liquid metal convection studies (e.g., refs. 23, 25, 36). Essentially, the difference between scaling laws [1] and [4] is that in the former the thermal boundary layer thickness is determined by its own marginal stability, whereas in the latter the thermal boundary layer thickness is set by the strength of interior turbulence.

Rotation suppresses convection, such that the onset of convection is delayed, $Ra_c \propto E^{-4/3}$, where Ra_c is the critical Rayleigh number, and, in many cases, less heat is transported by rotating convection than by nonrotating convection. King et al. argue that the heat transfer by rotating RBC with $Pr \geq 1$ is determined by the marginal stability of the boundary layer, which gives a heat transfer scaling law $Nu = (Ra/Ra_c)^3$ (37). Julien et al. analyze an asymptotically reduced system of equations for rapidly rotating RBC, finding the emergence of an “ultimate” regime where $Nu \propto (Ra/Ra_c)^{3/2}$ (38). In this ultimate regime, the primary bottleneck for heat transfer is the rotationally constrained interior turbulence, not thermal boundary layers. Experiments and direct numerical simulations with $Pr \geq 1$ support the marginal boundary layer stability law (7, 37), but simulations of the reduced equations for $Pr \geq 1$ produce scalings similar to the predicted ultimate regime (10, 38).

The propensity for strong interior turbulence in low Pr convection suggests that experiments in liquid metals may access this ultimate regime more easily than those using moderate Pr fluids.

Important in the understanding of rotating convection is the transition between rotationally dominated and weakly rotating turbulent states (2–9). For moderate Pr fluids, King et al. use the framework of a marginally stable thermal boundary layer to predict that the transition between the two states occurs at a transitional Rayleigh number (37),

$$Ra_t = E^{-3/2}. \quad [5]$$

When $Ra_c < Ra < Ra_t$, the boundary layer is stabilized predominantly by the influence of the Coriolis force, and its marginal stability leads to the $Nu = (Ra/Ra_c)^3$ heat transfer scaling law. When $Ra > Ra_t$, the boundary layer is instead stabilized predominantly by rotationally independent diffusive effects, leading to convective heat transfer that is not influenced by rotation ([1]). Analysis of rotating convection experiments in water supports the predicted transition scaling: When $Ra < Ra_t$, heat transfer is suppressed relative to nonrotating values; and when $Ra > Ra_t$, Nu values are observed to conform to the nonrotating behavior. This regime transition criterion does not depend on the mechanical boundary conditions, but, when Ekman boundary layers are present, it corresponds to the crossing of the Ekman and thermal boundary layers identified in ref. 3. And, although by different means, a similar regime transition scaling is produced by the analysis of Julien et al. (38).

In liquid metal convection we may expect that the interior turbulence takes precedence over boundary layer physics. In that case, it is generally expected that the transition between rotationally constrained and unconstrained states occurs when the free-fall scaling (2) is in balance with the Coriolis force, leading to a triple balance,

$$U^2/h = \alpha \Delta T g = 2\Omega U, \quad [6]$$

and, eliminating U , a transitional Rayleigh number,

$$Ra_t \sim E^{-2} Pr. \quad [7]$$

Thus, the regime transition for low Pr is predicted to occur when the convective Rossby number, $Ro_c \equiv Ra^{1/2} E Pr^{-1/2} = \mathcal{O}(1)$ (e.g., ref. 39).

Methods

A gallium-filled, 20-cm diameter, 20-cm tall right cylinder is heated from below by an electrical resistance element. The fluid is contained by a 0.3-cm thick stainless steel sidewall and by copper top and bottom endwalls with thicknesses 4 and 1.5 cm, respectively. The contact surfaces of the endwalls are coated with thin layers of tungsten to prevent corrosion by the liquid metal without appreciably inhibiting thermal coupling. Between 50 and 4,500 W of heat power \mathcal{P} is produced by the heating element, which is mechanically fixed underneath the bottom endwall, below which is a 10-cm-thick Marinite structural insulator. The convection tank sidewall is insulated by an inner layer of about 20 cm of Insulfrax fibrous, high-temperature thermal blanketing, outside of which is another 10 cm of closed-cell foam insulation. Heat passed through the fluid is removed by a thermostated recirculating bath above the top endwall. Temperature measurements are made near the top and bottom fluid surfaces by two arrays of six thermistors in each endwall, 2 mm from the fluid. Eight more thermistors penetrate the convection tank to characterize the temporal statistics of the flow. The convection tank and diagnostics systems are rotated up to 40 times per minute by a brushless servomotor. Further details on the experimental apparatus are given in refs. 9 and 40.

One hundred eight experiments are conducted with a range of fluid temperatures (at midlevel) between 38 °C and 110 °C and an ensemble median fluid temperature of 44 °C. The thermo-physical properties of liquid gallium are temperature dependent, and so this range must be accounted

for in the calculations of Pr , Ra , E , and Nu . Density is typically taken to vary linearly with temperature,

$$\rho = \rho_{mp} (1 - \alpha(T_{fluid} - T_{mp})), \quad [8]$$

where $\rho_{mp} = 6.090 \text{ kg/m}^3$ is the density of liquid gallium at its melting point, $T_{mp} = 29.8 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, and $\alpha = 9.85 \times 10^{-5} \text{ K}^{-1}$ (41). The temperature dependence of viscosity for liquid metals can be described by

$$\nu = \frac{\eta_0}{\rho} \exp(E/RT_{ab}), \quad [9]$$

where $\eta_0 = 4.36 \times 10^{-4} \text{ Pa}\cdot\text{s}$ and $E = 4,000 \text{ J/mol}$ are constants specific to liquid gallium, $R = 8.3144 \text{ J/(K}\cdot\text{mol)}$ is the gas constant, and T_{ab} is the absolute temperature of the fluid in kelvins (41). The temperature dependence of the thermal conductivity of liquid gallium is, unfortunately, not very well constrained (42, 43). For simplicity, we elect to use a single value of k such that $Nu = 1$ for our experiment with no convection (see Figs. 3 and 4A),

$$k = 32\text{W/mK}, \quad [10]$$

which is within the constraints of several experimental measurements made in our temperature range (e.g., ref. 44). Thermal diffusivity is then calculated as

$$\kappa = k/(\rho c_p), \quad [11]$$

where $c_p = 397.6 \text{ J/kgK}$ is the specific heat of liquid gallium (41).

Given these fluid properties and experimental temperature range, the Prandtl number of our liquid gallium spans the range $0.019 \leq Pr \leq 0.025$, with a median value of 0.025. Rayleigh numbers accessed in this study range from $2 \times 10^6 \leq Ra \leq 2 \times 10^8$, and rotating experiments have Ekman numbers $9 \times 10^{-7} \leq E \leq 10^{-4}$. This parameter range is shown in Fig. 1 and is compared against the most extensive previous study of rotating RBC in liquid metal (25).

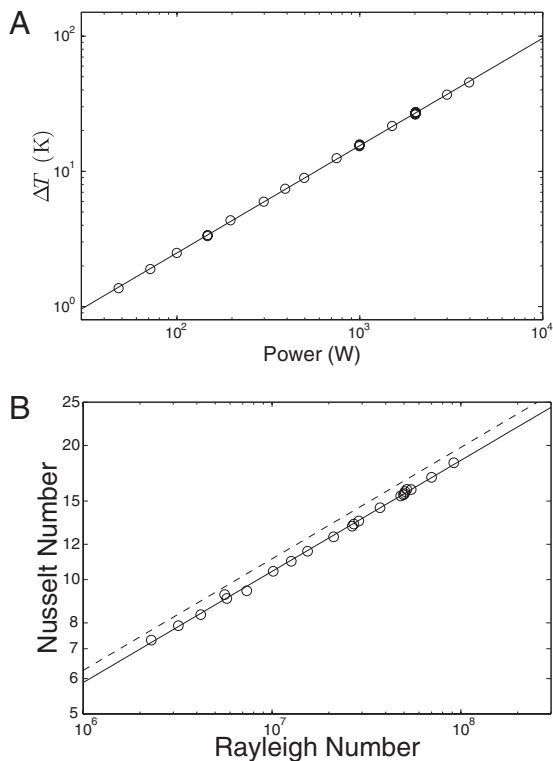


Fig. 2. Heat transfer by nonrotating convection. (A) Temperature drop across the layer, ΔT , is plotted vs. the input heat power, \mathcal{P} . The solid line shows the best-fitting power law $\Delta T = 0.0652 \mathcal{P}^{0.792}$. (B) Dimensionless heat transport, Nu , is plotted vs. the buoyancy forcing, Ra . The solid line shows the best-fit power law $Nu = 0.19 Ra^{0.249}$. The dashed line shows the inertial scaling [4], $Nu = \frac{1}{2} (Ra Pr)^{1/4}$, which overestimates measured convective heat flux by 7% on average.

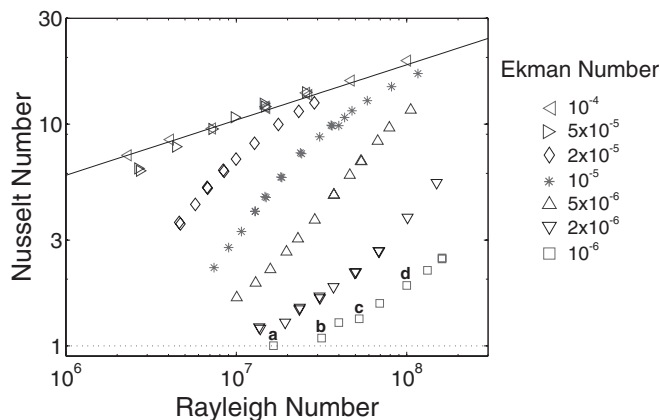


Fig. 3. The Nusselt number is plotted vs. the Rayleigh number for all rotating convection cases. Ekman numbers are indicated by symbol shape (color on line) and generally decrease from top left to bottom right. The lower, dotted line indicates $Nu = 1$. The solid line shows the best-fit nonrotating scaling law, $Nu = 0.19 Ra^{0.249}$. Temperature time series from the cases marked **a–d** are shown in Fig. 4.

The degree of turbulence is usually quantified by Reynolds numbers, $Re \equiv U h / \nu$, where U is rms flow speed, and flows with $Re > \mathcal{O}(10^3)$ are typically considered turbulent (45). Although we do not measure flow speeds directly, rough estimates of Re can be made using scaling laws. Several different scaling laws, both theoretical (23, 46) and empirical (47), provide similar estimates for maximum rms flow speeds in the present experiments, $Re \approx 2 \times 10^4$. Thus, we expect many of the experiments presented here to be fully developed turbulent convection.

Results

Fig. 2A shows measurements of ΔT plotted vs. input heat power, \mathcal{P} , for nonrotating convection experiments. A best-fit power law regression yields $\Delta T = 0.0652 \pm 0.002 \mathcal{P}^{0.792 \pm 0.004}$ (K/W), which is shown as the solid line in Fig. 2A. For three \mathcal{P} values, the mean temperature of the fluid was varied (by changing the top boundary temperature) to quantify heat losses, which should be roughly proportional to the temperature drop between the experiment and the room, $\Delta T_{amb} = T_{fluid} - T_{room}$. For $\mathcal{P} = 2,010 \text{ W}$, for example, T_{fluid} is varied in six separate experiments from $49 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ to $90 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. We find that the measured ΔT across the fluid decreases by less than 4% across this range, despite an increase in ΔT_{amb} of 86%. From this we conclude that our heat loss errors are small, and error bars, which would be smaller than the symbol size, are excluded.

Fig. 2B shows Nu plotted vs. Ra for nonrotating convection. A best-fit power law regression to the data yields $Nu = 0.19 \pm 0.01 Ra^{0.249 \pm 0.004}$ and is shown as the solid line in Fig. 2B. The dashed line in Fig. 2B shows the inertial scaling law [4] for the median experimental value of $Pr = 0.025$. Experimental heat transfer data trend with this scaling law, but are 7% less than predicted on average.

Fig. 3 shows Nusselt number measurements plotted vs. Ra for the rotating experiments. In general, heat transfer by rotating convection is suppressed relative to that for nonrotating convection, which is depicted by the solid line. One case, with $E = 10^{-6}$ and $Ra = 1.6 \times 10^7$, and demarked “**a**,” is convectively stable. A time series temperature measurement made within the fluid during that particular experiment is shown in Fig. 4A. The onset of convection for $E = 10^{-6}$ is observed to occur between $1.6 \times 10^7 < Ra < 3 \times 10^7$. Linear theory predicts (1) the onset of convective instability at $Ra = 2.4 \times 10^7$ for $E = 10^{-6}$ and $Pr = 0.025$. Our most weakly supercritical experiment, labeled case “**b**” in Fig. 3, convects heat by oscillatory motions in the outer half of the cylinder, $s > 0.5h$, where s is cylindrical radius (48). Fig. 4B shows a temperature time series from this case

Table 1. Summary of results from the present study, for which $Pr = 0.025$, in comparison with similar results for $Pr \geq 1$ (32, 37)

Result	$Pr = 0.025$	$Pr \geq 1$
Nonrotating heat transfer	$\gamma = 1/4$	$\gamma = 1/3$
Rotating heat transfer	$\gamma \leq 1.2$	$\gamma = 3$
Rotating regime transition	$Ra_t \simeq E^{-2}Pr$	$Ra_t \simeq 10E^{-3/2}$

Heat transfer scaling results are summarized as the exponent γ , for $Nu \propto Ra^\gamma$, for both nonrotating $E^{-1} = 0$ and rotationally constrained $Ra < Ra_t$ convection. The transitional Rayleigh number Ra_t defines the partition between rotationally constrained and weakly rotating convection regimes.

the other hand, the magnetic field is most likely generated by the convection of ionic water solution, with $Pr > 1$ (51).

The convective regimes of these planetary dynamos can be estimated using the regime transition criteria [5] and [7]. To compare the present transition scalings directly with planets, where Ra is poorly constrained, we use instead estimates of flux-Rayleigh numbers, $Rf \equiv Ra \cdot Nu = \alpha g q D^4 / (\rho c_p \nu \kappa)$, which depend on the better-constrained planetary heat flux q . Using heat flux measurements from ref. 52 and other estimates from ref. 53, we can estimate that

$$Rf = [4 \times 10^{37}; 6 \times 10^{34}; 2 \times 10^{32}; 2 \times 10^{33}] \quad [12]$$

for Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, respectively.

We can define a transitional flux-Rayleigh number as $Rf_t = Ra_t Nu_t$, where Nu_t is the Nusselt number at which the scaling transitions occur. For $Pr < 1$ (Gas Giants), we have Ra_t from Eq. 7 and, using Eq. 4, $Nu_t \sim E^{-1/2} Pr^{1/2}$, such that

$$Rf_t \sim E^{-5/2} Pr^{3/2}. \quad [13]$$

Jupiter and Saturn are estimated to have $E = [10^{-19}; 10^{-18}]$ and $Pr = [0.1; 0.1]$ (53), such that $Rf_t = [10^{46}; 3 \times 10^{43}]$, respectively.

Thus, the Gas Giants reside soundly within the rotationally constrained regime, with $Rf \ll Rf_t$.

For $Pr > 1$ (Ice Giants), we have Ra_t from Eq. 5 and, using Eq. 1, $Nu_t \sim E^{-1/2}$, and therefore

$$Rf_t \sim E^{-2}. \quad [14]$$

Uranus and Neptune are each estimated to have $E = 10^{-16}$ (53), and therefore $Rf_t = 10^{32}$. The Ice Giants, therefore, are close to the transition between turbulent states, with $Rf = \mathcal{O}(Rf_t)$. Thus, despite the fact that the flux-Rayleigh numbers for the dynamo regions of the Ice Giants are smaller than those of the Gas Giants, the influence of Pr on the nature of the regime transition indicates that convection in Ice Giants may be weakly affected by rotation.

Dynamo action within the Ice Giants produces off-axis, multipolar magnetic fields that differ dramatically from the axial dipoles of the Gas Giants (53). Because little is known of the interiors of these planets, the cause(s) of this division in field morphology is not well understood, and several hypotheses have been put forth, which usually rely on a geometric restriction of the Ice Giant dynamo region (16, 54). Alternatively, dynamo simulations show conclusively that rotationally constrained or weakly rotating convection, respectively, favors either dipolar or multipolar field generation (55). The Ice Giants, however, are colder than the Gas Giants and therefore are not typically thought to be convecting more vigorously. Because the present results suggest that the Gas and Ice Giants may lie in different convection regimes, we put forth the hypothesis here that the difference in field morphologies may be due to the influence of Pr on the transitions between turbulent convection regimes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. Support for laboratory experiment fabrication was provided by the US National Science Foundation (NSF) Instrumentation and Facilities Program. E.M.K. acknowledges the support of the Miller Institute for Basic Research in Science. J.M.A. acknowledges the support of the US NSF Geophysics Program.

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Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America

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Planets' magnetic fields come from more complex inner flows than thought

Posted on April 11, 2013 (<http://firstlook.pnas.org/planets-magnetic-fields-come-from-more-complex-inner-flows-than-thought/>) by Charles Q. Choi (<http://firstlook.pnas.org/author/charles/>)

The magnetic fields of Earth and other planets result from their dynamos—vast oceans of electrically conductive fluids such as liquid metals in their innards that roil turbulently due to convection of heat left over from the birth of those worlds. [Now scientists find](#) (<http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1217553110>) liquid metal may behave very differently in real life than in computer models developed so far, potentially explaining the variety of magnetic fields seen on gas and ice giant planets.

Earth's magnetic field was likely vital to the evolution of life, preventing hydrogen from leaking away, which helped keep its water. However, much remains uncertain about how Earth's magnetic field came to be and how, for instance, that of Mars vanished. Computer models exist to simulate dynamos, but physical experiments are needed to see how realistic those models really are.

Models of planetary dynamos generally assume fluids diffuse momentum faster than they do heat. As such, these fluids have what are called [Prandtl numbers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prandtl_number) that are greater than one. However, liquid metals actually often have Prandtl numbers that are less than one, meaning they diffuse heat more readily than they do momentum.

"In metals, electrons are free to roam, and these electrons carry both thermal energy and electrical charge, making metals good conductors of both heat and electricity," says researcher Eric King, a planetary scientist at the University of California at Berkeley. "This is why a room temperature metal often feels cold to the touch—it is very effective at pulling heat from your skin, which is warmer than room temperature, by a process known as thermal diffusion. Thermal diffusion is essentially the natural response of any material to smooth out temperature differences. Because of their free electrons, metals are better than most common materials at diffusing heat."

Now experiments with liquid metal gallium show the convective behavior of liquid metal differs substantially from that seen in conventional models.

"All else being equal, convection in liquid metal is more turbulent than convection in a moderate Prandtl number fluid such as water," King says.

To see how liquid metals actually behave, researchers experimented with a cylinder filled with liquid gallium, one 20 centimeters wide and 20 centimeters tall. The metal was heated up to 110°C, and the cylinder was spun at up to 40 times per minute to see what effects rotation had on convection, just as Earth's spin might have on its core. Sensors sticking into the tank measured the flow of the metal.

"The experimental apparatus took several years to design, build, and implement," King says. "Many of the challenges we faced centered around the use of the liquid metal gallium. Gallium freezes just above room temperature, at 85°F (29°C), and, like water, expands upon freezing. So similar to plumbing in a perpetually frozen environment, gallium storage and transfer systems had to be actively heated to avoid cracking pipes leading to potentially catastrophic spills."

"Gallium is also corrosive, and reacts with commonly used lab materials such as aluminum and copper," King adds. "The tank walls, which were constructed from copper for its favorable thermal properties, had to be coated with a thin layer of tungsten to prevent corrosion. Fortunately, our lab being in Los Angeles, I was able to take advantage of the local aerospace industry's expertise in such high performance material treatments."

The researchers discovered that convecting liquid metals interact with [Coriolis forces](http://www.animations.physics.unsw.edu.au/jw/coriolis.html) —the same forces that help drive major winds and ocean currents on Earth—differently than more conventional fluids do.

"Coriolis forces are felt by fluids flowing in rotating containers such as Earth's core, and we mimic this effect in the lab by rotating an experimental



convection tank,” King says. “Coriolis forces tend to organize turbulent flow, and this organization is thought to be responsible for the near-alignment of Earth’s geomagnetic and geographic poles.”

More turbulent flows required stronger Coriolis forces—faster rotation rates—to be well-organized, as expected. “What is surprising is that the liquid metal flows are more easily organized by Coriolis forces than are moderate Prandtl number fluids such as water,” King says. “Our research suggests that this difference is due to how heat and momentum are transferred from the [container] to the fluid, and so depends strongly on viscosity and thermal diffusion.”

“There are two basic implications for this work,” King says. “The first is that models of planetary systems where flowing liquid metals are important, such as Earth’s core, ought to pay attention to the special material properties of the fluid conductors. This may be important as well for astrophysics, where flowing plasmas are responsible for much of the dynamical behavior of stars like our sun, and these plasmas are thought to have very small Prandtl numbers.”

“The second implication that we offer is a possible explanation for the strange dichotomy between the observed magnetic fields of the gas giants, Jupiter and Saturn, whose magnetic fields are generated by flowing metallic hydrogen, and the ice giants, Uranus and Neptune, whose magnetic fields are believed to be generated by flowing mixtures of water, methane, and ammonia. By treating the former as a low Prandtl number fluid, and the latter as a moderate Prandtl number fluid, we predict that these planetary systems may be in different dynamical states—convection within Jupiter and Saturn being well organized by Coriolis forces and giving rise to well-organized magnetic fields, and Uranus and Neptune being relatively weakly affected by Coriolis forces, giving rise to disorganized magnetic fields.”

The researchers also investigated how liquid metal convects in the presence of strong magnetic fields.

“For this purpose, we designed a custom electromagnet that encapsulates the experimental convection tank,” King says. “The entire apparatus then had to be built entirely from non-magnetic materials. Experiments on rotating convection in liquid metals with strong magnetic fields show even more surprising results, and a publication of these results is currently in preparation.”

King and his colleague Jonathan Aurnou detailed their findings online April 8 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (<http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1217553110>) .

A movie showing the experimental apparatus rotating when filled with liquid gallium. Credit: Eric King.

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Online ISSN 1091-6490

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physics update

These items, with supplementary material, first appeared at <http://www.physicstoday.org>.

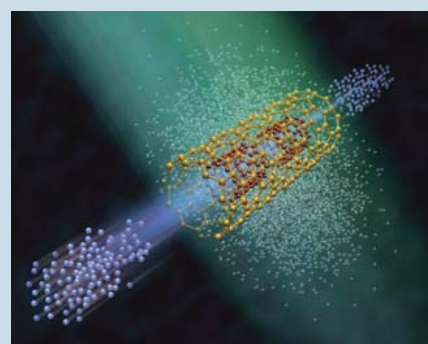
What kept the Moon's dynamo alive? The Moon's magnetic field used to have both the strength and the dipolar structure of a vigorous, dynamo-generated field like Earth's. Now, however, the lunar field is weak and patchy. Accounting for the field's enfeeblement might seem straightforward. As it aged, the Moon's molten core cooled and shrank to the point at which it could no longer sustain a dynamo.



The trouble is, whereas an analysis of Moon rocks published last year put that transformation at 3.7 billion years ago, models of thermal convection in the Moon's core put it at 4.1 billion years ago. What kept the dynamo alive for the intervening

400 million years? To find out, MIT's Clément Suavet and his collaborators recently subjected two Moon rocks, both 3.56 billion years old, to magnetic, thermal, and other tests. (The photo shows a 5-g sample of one of the rocks next to a 1-cm³ cube.) The researchers deduced that the rocks had been magnetized by a surface field of at least 13 μ T, which is consistent with a strong dynamo. Although the age difference is just 4% between the rocks in the 2012 study and the younger rocks in the new study, one explanation for the prolonged life of the dipolar field beyond its expected span can be ruled out: an off-center hit by an asteroid that set the Moon rocking back and forth in its tidally locked orbit. No impacts big enough occurred that late. Another proposed mechanism remains in play: The chemically stratified layers that formed when the mantle crystallized could have become dynamically unstable and triggered a second round of convection. (C. Suavet et al., *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, in press, doi:10.1073/pnas.1300341110.) —CD

Proton beams from a nanotube accelerator. Carbon nanotubes (CNTs) are hardy and versatile, with remarkable material and electronic properties. And they could be useful



in some extreme conditions as well. Two physicists in Japan, Masakatsu Murakami of Osaka University and Motohiko Tanaka of Chubu University, propose using a CNT as a shotgun barrel to shoot a beam of protons. Their scheme

nests two small hydrogen-rich fragments—which could be water ice, paraffin, or some other low-Z material but were modeled as hydrogen nanotubes—within a larger CNT that has gold atoms chemically adsorbed in its wall. The assem-

bled structure is then zapped from the side with an ultra-intense femtosecond laser pulse (green in the schematic). As shown in three-dimensional simulations, the laser partially ionizes the gold and fully ionizes the hydrogen and carbon in the assemblage; after a few swings of the laser's electric field, significant numbers of electrons (white) are blown off and form a cloud around the CNT. The now highly ionized coaxial structure generates a Coulomb potential in which the protons (blue) from the low-Z shotgun shells are squeezed toward the axis and accelerated out both ends of the CNT. The simulations indicate that even a non-optimized setup can produce highly collimated beams of nearly monoenergetic protons—1.5 MeV for the parameters used. Such beams are of great interest in fields as diverse as medicine, fusion energy, and materials engineering. (M. Murakami, M. Tanaka, *Appl. Phys. Lett.* **102**, 163101, 2013.) —SGB

Demystifying the ice giants' puzzling poles. Like our



Down planet, Jupiter and Saturn have magnetic and geographic poles that are closely, but not perfectly, aligned; each planet's magnetic dipole is angled just a few degrees off its rotational axis. But the magnetic fields of Uranus and Neptune, the so-called ice giants, are dramatically tilted—by 59° and 46°, respectively. New experiments by Eric King (University of California, Berkeley) and Jonathan Aurnou

(UCLA) may help to explain why. Planetary magnetic fields are thought to be generated by dynamos—turbulent, convective flows of electrically conducting fluid in the planet's interior (see the article by Daniel Lathrop and Cary Forest in *PHYSICS TODAY*, July 2011, page 40). Coriolis forces due to planetary rotation can influence those convective flows and thereby orient the dynamo's field. To probe that effect in the lab, King and Aurnou did what's known as a rotating Rayleigh-Bénard experiment: They heated a 20-cm-wide spinning drum of liquid gallium from below while simultaneously cooling it from above. Using conditions that, through appropriate scaling, mimic those of planetary interiors, the researchers found that the rotation-convection coupling is especially pronounced in fluids with high thermal conductivity. Therein may lie the secret of the ice giants' skewed poles: Based on trends seen in the experimental data, the researchers estimate that Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn, whose dynamos comprise high-conductivity molten metal, fall within the strongly coupled regime, whereas Uranus and Neptune, whose dynamos comprise moderate-conductivity aqueous solution, do not. (E. M. King, J. M. Aurnou, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **110**, 6688, 2013.) —AGS

Hot fire, cool soil. Wildfires around the planet burn an average of 3.7 million km² of vegetation annually and can leave landscapes scorched, barren, and vulnerable to erosion and flooding. According to the literature, the more vegetative fuel, the more intense the fire, the hotter the soil, and the more severe the damage to fragile roots, seeds, and microbes.