

Geology of the InSight Landing Site, Mars: Initial Observations

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The InSight spacecraft landed successfully on Mars on November 26, 2018 at 4.50°N, 135.62°E. A large number of color images from an arm-mounted camera, including stereo coverage at two resolutions of the instrument deployment workspace and a 290° panorama (320° to 250° azimuth), provide information on the geology of the landing site. The lander is located within a degraded impact crater, dubbed Homestead hollow, with a smooth surface adjacent to a slightly rougher terrain with rocky ejecta craters nearby. The near surface is characterized by 1-10 m diameter impact craters in various stages of degradation, partly associated with eolian bedforms. Some like Homestead hollow have very little relief and are filled with fine-grained material. Farther afield, bright circular patches suggest soil-filled craters are common. No bedrock has been observed.

The surface of Homestead hollow is made of smooth plains with low rock abundance (~2%), and the re-solvable particle size distribution is dominated by pebbles with slightly buried cobbles. Cobble and pebble shape and form are equant to sub-equant and angular to sub-angular, respectively, consistent with an origin via fragmentation. Some of the clasts closest to the lander have a dark grey color and appear aphanitic, consistent with fine-grained, dark mafic rocks (basalts). Other clasts appear lighter in albedo as if covered by dust and/or weathering rinds. At least one rock appears fluted, suggesting eolian abrasion (ventifact).

Post-landing HiRISE images show a dark spot centered on the lander. In the workspace nearest the lander, the surface appears scoured, with multi-millimeter-relief ridges and troughs that extend radially from the lander. Some pebbles and protrusions have what appear to be wind tails that extend radially away from the lander. At least one rounded rock rolled across the surface creating divots and elongated depressions. These observations are consistent with the pulsed-descent motor exhaust removing surficial dust and granules to create the dark spot, as well as sculpting loose sand to create the scours and moving some pebbles.

Three 10-20 cm-deep pits excavated by the retrorockets beneath the lander provide clues to the near surface structure. In one pit, the subsurface material is poorly sorted with pebbles and cobbles. Another pit has a steep slope (greater than the angle of repose) composed of small clasts and pebbles cemented in a finer-grained matrix (duricrust). Two footpads show evidence for slight sliding into place, creating a depression on one side and bulge in the direction of travel. These observations suggest a near surface stratigraphy of surficial dust over thin cohesionless sand, lying over a variable thickness (centimeters) duricrust, underlain by poorly sorted, cohesionless sand and clasts. Orbital thermal inertia measurements are consistent with a surface dominated by sand-sized particles, consistent with the cohesionless fines and the low rock abundance.

In summary, the observations are consistent with a surface formed dominantly by impact, mass wasting, and eolian processes that created an impact-generated regolith composed dominantly of sand-sized particles with decreasing abundance of pebbles, cobbles and boulders, consistent with expectations established from remote sensing data prior to landing.