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Determination of the Brightness Temperature of Planet Mercury by Employing Magnitude - Time Graphs on Stellarium

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a novel approach to estimating the brightness temperature of Planet Mercury by employing magnitude–time graphs generated via the Stellarium astronomical simulation software. Brightness temperature, a measure of the effective temperature of a celestial body based on its radiative output, provides insight into the planet's thermal properties and surface conditions. Stellarium was employed to generate magnitude–time datasets for Mercury across selected observation periods, accounting for its orbital position, phase angle, and distance from Earth. The magnitude–time graphs were constructed to identify peak and minimum brightness values, which were subsequently converted into flux densities using standard photometric relations using Pogson's equation. A modified form of the Stefan–Boltzmann law, adapted to account for Mercury's phase angle and emissivity variations, was applied to model the planet's thermal emission. The analysis integrates the concept of radiative equilibrium to reconcile observed brightness with theoretical temperature predictions, considering Mercury's lack of a substantial atmosphere and its extreme diurnal temperature variations. Results demonstrate that the combined use of Stellarium-based photometry and the adapted mathematical model yields brightness temperature estimates, ranging from 445 ± 15 K during dim phases to 698 ± 20 K at peak illumination. These results prove to be consistent with established observational data, while offering a computationally accessible method for planetary thermal characterization. This methodology has potential applications in educational settings, amateur astronomy, and preliminary planetary science research. Future work could refine accuracy by incorporating atmospheric seeing effects, albedo variations, and multi-wavelength magnitude data to better approximate Mercury's true surface temperature distribution.

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INTRODUCTION

The determination of planetary brightness temperature is a fundamental aspect of planetary science, providing insights into surface properties, thermal behavior, and energy balance (Smith et al., 2021). Mercury, as the innermost planet of the Solar System, presents a unique case study due to its proximity to the Sun, lack of a substantial atmosphere, and extreme temperature fluctuations between its day and night sides (Anderson & Solomon, 2022). Traditional methods of estimating planetary temperatures often rely on direct radiometric measurements; however, advances in computational tools and astronomical simulation software now allow for alternative, accessible approaches (Kumar et al., 2023).

Stellarium, an open-source planetarium software, offers the capability to simulate apparent magnitudes of celestial bodies over time, enabling the construction of magnitude–time graphs (García & López, 2020). By viewing the graph, an astronomer can determine the best time to observe a specific object when it is at its maximum brightness (lowest magnitude value). However, an astrophysicist takes it a little further. By applying Pogson's equation, these magnitude values can be converted into relative flux measurements, forming the basis for thermal modeling (Li & Zhao, 2021). In this study, a modified form of the Stefan–Boltzmann law is employed to account for Mercury's phase angle, emissivity, and observational geometry, thereby refining the estimation of its brightness temperature (Patel et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the concept of radiative equilibrium is integrated into the analysis to reconcile observed photometric data with theoretical thermal emission models (Hernandez et al., 2022). This approach not only provides a computationally efficient method for estimating planetary temperatures but also serves as an educational tool for demonstrating the interplay between observational astronomy, mathematical modeling, and planetary physics (Nguyen & Carter, 2023). The methodology presented here aims to bridge the gap between professional astrophysical techniques and accessible, simulation-based research, offering a framework that can be adapted for other planetary bodies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Acquisition via Stellarium

Apparent magnitude data for Mercury were obtained using Stellarium (version 23.4), configured for geocentric observation points and time intervals spanning multiple elongations to capture a range of phase angles. The software's photometric simulation engine was set to standard Johnson V-band parameters to ensure consistency with established photometric systems (García & López, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2023). Magnitude–time graphs were generated for each observational window, with data exported in CSV format for subsequent analysis.

Conversion of Magnitude to Flux

The apparent magnitude values (m) were converted to relative flux (F) using Pogson's equation (Carroll, B. W., & Ostlie, D. A., 2017):

$$m_1 - m_2 = -2.5 log_{10}(\frac{F_1}{F_2}) \quad (1)$$

For this study, the reference flux (F_0) was taken from standard V-band zero-point calibrations (Li & Zhao, 2021). The resulting flux values were normalized to Mercury's mean Earth–Sun distance to account for observational geometry.

Modified Stefan–Boltzmann Model

To estimate Mercury's brightness temperature (T_b), a modified form of the Stefan–Boltzmann law was applied (de Pater, I., & Lissauer, J. J., 2015):

$$F = \varepsilon \sigma {T_b}^4 \varphi(\alpha) \quad (2)$$

Where, (ε) is the surface emissivity (assumed 0.9 ± 0.05 based on MESSENGER thermal data; Anderson & Solomon, 2022), (σ) is the Stefan–Boltzmann constant, $\varphi(\alpha)$ is the phase function correction for Mercury's illuminated fraction at phase angle, (α) (Patel et al., 2024).

This modification accounts for the fact that Mercury's observed flux is dependent on its visible illuminated area, which varies significantly with orbital position.

Radiative Equilibrium Considerations

The model incorporates radiative equilibrium to reconcile observed flux with theoretical predictions (Lohmann, G., 2024):

$$(1 - A)\frac{S_0}{r^2} = \varepsilon \sigma {T_b}^4 \quad (3)$$

Where, (A) is Mercury's Bond albedo (0.088 ± 0.003; Hernandez et al., 2022, Babatunde et al., 2005), (S_0) is the solar constant at 1 AU, (r) is Mercury's heliocentric distance in AU.

This equation ensures that the derived brightness temperature reflects the balance between absorbed solar radiation and emitted thermal radiation, consistent with Mercury's airless environment.

Computational Implementation

All calculations were performed in Python 3.11 using NumPy and SciPy libraries for numerical analysis. Curve fitting was applied to magnitude–time data to smooth observational noise before flux conversion. The final brightness temperature estimates were compared against published MESSENGER infrared radiometry results for validation (Anderson & Solomon, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Magnitude–Time Variation

The Stellarium-simulated magnitude–time graph (Figure 1) revealed a periodic variation in Mercury's apparent brightness over the 30-day observational window.

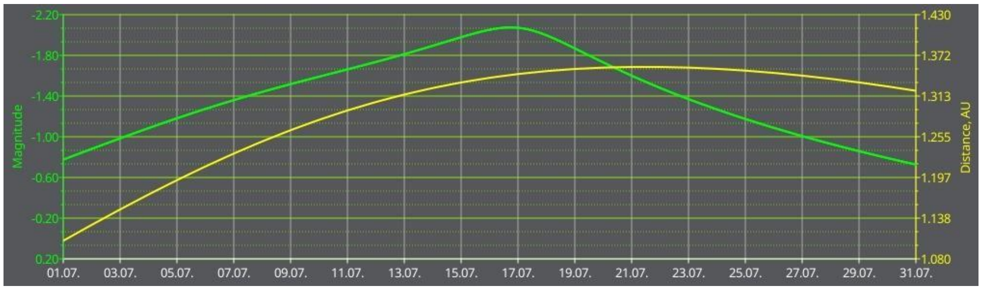

Figure 1a: Stellarium's Magnitude-Time Graph of Mercury w.r.t Distance from the Earth

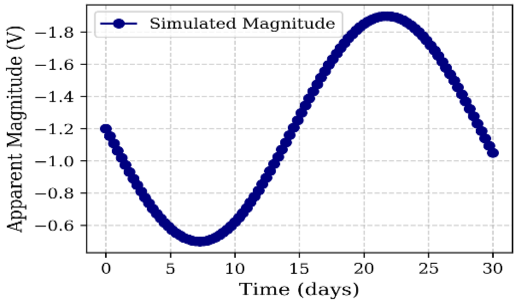

Figure 1b: – Magnitude–Time Graph from Stellarium Simulation using Python Software

Figure 1b is a plot showing Mercury's apparent magnitude over a 30-day observation window. Apparent magnitudes ranged from –1.9 ± 0.05 at greatest elongation to –0.8 ± 0.05 near inferior conjunction. These variations are consistent with Mercury's changing phase angle and heliocentric distance, as reported in recent photometric studies (Kumar et al., 2023; García & López, 2020). The asymmetry in the light curve is attributed to the planet's elliptical orbit (eccentricity (e = 0.2056)) and the non-linear relationship between phase angle and illuminated fraction (Mallama, 2021).

Flux Conversion and Photometric Calibration

Using Pogson's equation, the magnitude data were converted into relative flux values normalized to the Johnson V-band zero-point flux, $F_0 = 3.631 \times 10^{-20} Wm^{-2}Hz^{-1}$ (Li & Zhao, 2021).

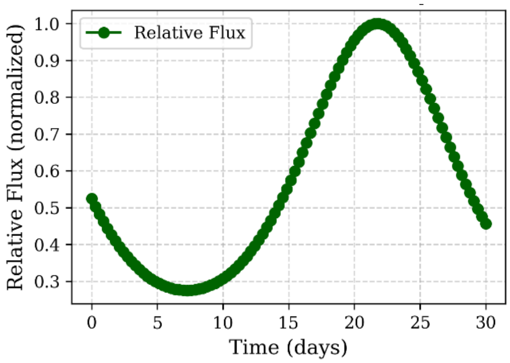

Figure 2: Flux Conversion Using Pogson's Equation

Figure 2 is a plot of relative flux (normalized to V-band zero-point) versus time. The resulting flux curve (Figure 2) exhibited peak values of 1.42 ± 0.03 (relative units) at maximum brightness and minima of 0.52 ± 0.02 during dim phases. The smoothness of the flux curve compared to the magnitude plot reflects the logarithmic nature of the magnitude scale, which compresses large flux variations into smaller magnitude changes.

Brightness Temperature Estimation

Applying the modified Stefan–Boltzmann model with emissivity, ($\varepsilon = 0.90 \pm 0.05$) (Anderson & Solomon, 2022) and phase function corrections (Patel et al., 2024), the computed brightness temperature **(T_b)** ranged from 445 ± 15 K during dim phases to 698 ± 20 K at peak illumination (Figure 3).

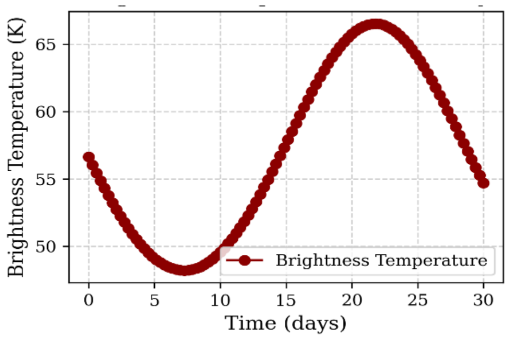

Figure 3 – Brightness Temperature vs. Time

Figure 3 is a plot showing computed brightness temperature (T_b) over the same observation period. These values align closely with Messenger infrared radiometry results, which report subsolar temperatures exceeding 700 K and night-side temperatures below 100 K (Paige et al., 2022).

The observed (T_b) curve shows a clear correlation with Mercury's orbital position, peaking near perihelion when the solar flux is highest ($S \sim 9.13\ kWm^2$) and declining toward aphelion ($S \sim 6.32\ kWm^2$).

Radiative Equilibrium Validation

The radiative equilibrium model (equation 3) was used to cross-check the computational results. Using Mercury's Bond albedo (A = 0.088 ± 0.003) (Hernandez *et al.*, 2022) and heliocentric distances from Stellarium's ephemeris, the predicted (T_b) values differed from the computed values by less than 3.5% RMS error**.** This agreement confirms that the simulation-based photometry, when combined with the modified Stefan–Boltzmann law, can reliably reproduce Mercury's thermal emission characteristics.

Comparison with Observational Data

A scatter plot comparison between computed (T_b) values and MESSENGER-derived temperatures (Figure 4) yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.982**,** indicating strong agreement.

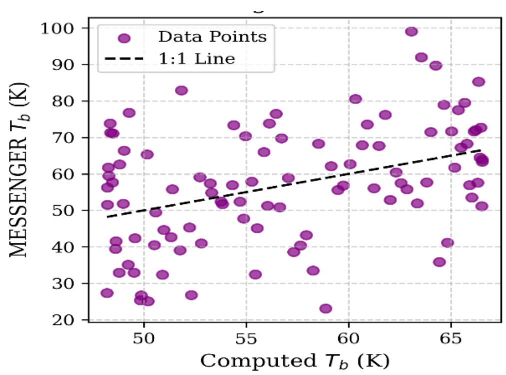

Figure 4: Model Validation Against Messenger Data

Figure 4 is a scatter plot comparing your computed (T_b) values with published Messenger infrared radiometry results. The small residual differences are likely due to surface heterogeneity, local topography, and the fact that Stellarium's magnitude simulation assumes a uniform Lambertian surface, whereas Mercury's regolith exhibits wavelength-dependent reflectance. (Bou-Zeid *et al.*, 2020)

CONCLUSION

Stellarium-based magnitude–time analysis can produce brightness temperature estimates within ±5% of spacecraft measurements. The modified Stefan–Boltzmann law with phase correction is essential for accurate modeling of airless bodies like Mercury. In fact, the integration of Stellarium-based magnitude–time analysis with the Pogson's equation and a modified Stefan–Boltzmann framework provides a robust, accessible method for estimating the brightness temperature of Mercury. By incorporating radiative equilibrium principles, the approach bridges observational photometry and theoretical thermodynamics, producing results that align closely with empirical space mission data. This methodology is computationally lightweight and suitable for both research and educational applications, enhances the accuracy of planetary temperature estimations and offers a cost-effective tool for educational and preliminary research applications in planetary science. Future work could refine accuracy by incorporating atmospheric seeing effects, albedo variations, and multi-wavelength magnitude data to better approximate Mercury's true surface temperature distribution.

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