The Short Rotation Period of Nereid

Tommy Grav

Institute of Theoretical Astrophysics, University in Oslo,
Postbox 1029 Blindern, 0359 Oslo, Norway (tommy.grav@astro.uio.no)

&

Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics,
MS51, 60 Garden Street, Cambridge MA 02138

Matthew J. Holman

Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics,
MS51, 60 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

JJ Kavelaars

National Research Council Canada
5071 West Saanich Rd.
Victoria, BC V9E 2E7

ABSTRACT

We determine the period, \( p = 11.52 \pm 0.14 \) h, and a light curve peak-to-peak amplitude, \( a = 0.029 \pm 0.003 \) magnitudes, of the Neptunian irregular satellite Nereid. If the light curve variation is due to albedo variations across the surface, rather than solely to the shape of Nereid variations, the rotation period would be a factor of two shorter. In either case, such a rotation period and light curve amplitude, together with Nereid’s orbital period, \( p = 360.14 \) days, imply that Nereid is almost certainly in a regular rotation state, rather than the chaotic rotation state suggested by ???.

Assuming that Nereid is perfectly spherical, the albedo variation is 3% across the observed surface. Assuming a uniform geometric albedo, the observed cross sectional area varies by 3%. We caution that the lightcurve found in this paper only sets limits on the combination of albedo and physical irregularity and that we cannot determine the orientation of Nereid’s spin axis from our data.

Subject headings: planets and satellites: individual (Nereid)

\(^{1}\)Visiting Astronomer, Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory. CTIO is operated by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA) Inc., under contract with the National Science Foundation.
1. Introduction

**N II Nereid**, one of the irregular satellites of Neptune, was discovered in 1949 by G. Kuiper from McDonald Observatory (?). Nereid is physically large ($\sim 175 \pm 25\text{ km radius}$) for an irregular moon (?), and has an extremely eccentric orbit ($e \sim 0.75$).

The photometric and rotational properties of Nereid are still undetermined, despite numerous ground-based and space-based observations. Reported light curves give amplitudes from an upper limit of 0.05 magnitudes reported by ? to a 1.5 magnitude amplitude reported by ?. Reported rotation periods range from hours to as much as a year. It should be noted that a recent study by ? suggests that a large opposition effect might explain much of the controversy. The large intra-night variations reported by ? and ?), however, still remain unexplained.

The uncertainties in Nereid’s rotation state would be of relatively little concern were it not for the theories of Nereid’s origin and possible chaotic rotation state. It is suggested that Nereid formed as a regular satellite around Neptune but was ejected to its present orbit by Triton after Triton was captured from heliocentric orbit and its orbit was tidally circularized (??). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the reported large amplitude photometric variations are the result of chaotic tumbling due to the overlap of resonances between the spin and orbit periods of Nereid, similar to that predicted (?) and observed (???) for the Saturnian moon Hyperion. ? has studied the effect of spin-orbit resonances and tidal evolution on Nereid in detail. He suggests that tides slowed Nereid’s rotation period to a few days or weeks while Nereid was in orbit close to Neptune. After Nereid was scattered by Triton the satellite has been further despun to a period of the order a month as it reached its current 360-day orbit. ? also points out that, for rotation periods of Nereid longer than about two weeks, Nereid is it is likely to be in spin-orbit resonance if Nereid is nearly spherical (less than 1%). Otherwise, Nereid’s rotation is likely chaotic, with its period and obliquity changing from year to year. However, for rotation periods shorter than two weeks, Nereid is unlikely to be in spin-orbit resonance or to be tumbling chaotically.

In this paper we report new, accurate relative photometry of Nereid. In the next section, we review previous observational results on the photometry of Nereid. In section 3, we discuss our observations and data reduction procedures. In section 4, we report the characteristics of Nereid’s light curve. In the final section, we summarize our conclusions.
2. Previous Observations

Kuiper’s original magnitude estimate of 19.5 was the only available photometry until reported large amplitude photometric variations (1.5 magnitudes) and a possible rotational period of 8 to 24 hours in observations of Nereid over the period of 18-26 June of 1987.

A number of subsequent studies found similar results. and reported photometric variations, with a peak-to-peak amplitude of approximately 0.5 magnitudes, in observations covering 14 nights in June and July 1988 and in June 1989. reported 1.3 magnitude amplitude variations over 6 consecutive nights in July 1990 and argued for a 13.6 hr period. reported their entire collection of 224 photometric observations of Nereid from 1987 to 1997, in which they confirmed large brightness variations with a total amplitude of 1.83 magnitudes on time scales ranging from hours to approximately a year. They also reported a shift in the brightness variations, from large amplitude rapid variations with intranight changes before ~ 1991 to slower, smaller amplitude variations, with no detectable intranight changes.

On the other hand, Voyager II, in 1989 found no brightness variations greater than 10% and no evidence that Nereid is significantly aspherical, although the resolution (43.3km/pixel and later 61km/pixel) could not constrain this beyond the general radius determination of 175 ± 25km.

observed Nereid on three nights in July 1995 with the Palomar 5 m telescope and found no large brightness variations, although they did report a 0.14 magnitude decrease between their two first nights (their first night only allowed a few images due to a forest fire). They addressed the discrepancy between their data set (and that of Voyager) and the data sets reported by, and, suggesting that the large brightness variations observed were due to significantly understated errors of the earlier observations.

observed Nereid in the R-band on two consecutive nights and found no variation beyond a 0.09 ± 0.05 magnitude increase between the two nights (a 3σ result that did not include any systematic errors). They concluded that their data is consistent with a light curve with $\Delta m < 0.1$ magnitude, although a long-periodic, large amplitude light curve could not be ruled out.

Most recently, used 57 V-magnitudes collected over 52 nights in the period from June 20 to October 26 in 1998 to determine the opposition surge of Nereid. They found a surprisingly large phase coefficient of 0.38 magnitudes per degree for phase angles less than 1° and 0.03 magnitudes per degree for phase angles greater than 1°. noted that, although the large brightness variations found in many of the runs (11 of 16) from 1987 to 1998 could be explained by such an opposition surge, not all of the apparent variation could be accounted
for by phase effects alone. A closer examination of the available data, reveal that 4 of the 5 runs that can not be explained by the phase effects are from 1987-1990 when Nereid was only $13 - 17^\circ$ away from the galactic center. The star density in these areas makes accurate photometry very difficult with even state of the art methods. All of these runs also have intranight variations, which further makes the accuracy of these observations questionable.

3. Observations and Data Reduction

We observed N II Nereid during a pencil beam search for faint Neptunian satellites using the 8k MOSAIC camera and a VR-filter (?) on the CTIO 4 m Blanco telescope on 2001 August 9-13 and 2002 August 12-16. Nereid was only observed on one night in 2001, but in 2002 our search fields were placed such that they slightly overlapped, ensuring that Nereid was observed on all four nights. The exposure times used were 480 seconds with a temporal resolution of 10-15 minutes in 2001, and 20 to 40 minutes in 2002 (see Table 1). The 2001 search strategy consisted of staying on one single field throughout the night, while in 2002 alternating exposures between two fields was used. The pointing of the CTIO 4m Blanco Telescope is accurate to about $10 - 20$ pixels, insuring that even with Nereid’s motion of $\sim 15$ pixels/hour, the moon stayed within $\sim 100$ pixels throughout the night. It is known that the CTIO 8k MOSAIC camera causes a variation in the zeropoint across the field-of-view (FOV). Depending on the night, Nereid moved either radially or tangentially acrossed the FOV. This, together with the small change in radial distance from the FOV center during the night, the maximum change in zeropoint is $\sim 0.002$ magnitudes, within the statistical errors of our data.

The images were bias-subtracted, flat-fielded, and relative aperture photometry was performed (?). The full-width-half-maximum (FWHM) of each image was measured (1 to 1.5 arcseconds). An aperture with radius $1.2 - 1.5$ times the FWHM (1.2 to 2.3 arcseconds) was used to ensure the maximum signal-to-noise ratio (?) and at the same time minimizing the chance of contamination from faint background sources. The same aperture was used on a set of 10 to 12 reference stars common to all fields throughout a night (all the reference stars were closer than $\sim 5$ arcminutes and taken from the same CCD chip that contained Nereid). Comparing the instrumental magnitude of Nereid to the instrumental magnitude of the reference stars on the image and comparing this difference with that of other images reveals any brightening or fading throughout the night. This method does not require photometric conditions and efficiently removes effects due to airmass and transparency. To test this method we applied it to several stars with similar brightness as Nereid in the field. The resulting “light curves” were flat with a root-mean-square scatter of 0.003 magnitudes.
We take this to be our systematic error and add this to the formal photometric errors in quadrature. To avoid contamination from faint background stars and galaxies we stacked all the images from each night and found no faint sources down to VR ∼ 25.0 magnitude.

The magnitude differences between the individual nights were determined by using the procedure described above on one of the fields from each night, but using 10 to 15 reference stars that were common between the two nights compared. Thus we were able to put our nightly relative photometry on the same relative scale for all the nights in 2002. Only a few observations of standard stars (?) were performed, since the main focus of our run a search for Neptunian satellites. The fact that the observations were done using a VR-filter (centered on 6000Å with a width of 2000Å) further complicates the situation. The standard stars used have $V - R$ colors between 0.49 – 0.54, which is slightly higher than the color of Nereid at $V - R = 0.44 ± 0.03$ (?), so we used the $R$-magnitude given by (?) to derive a zeropoint for our observations. Due to the similarity in colors, the wider filter lets through approximately the same relative amount of flux for both the standard stars and Nereid. Using the newly derived zeropoint on our object we get an approximate $R$-magnitude of $\sim 18.8$. This is consistent with the magnitudes reported by (?) after accounting for the phase effects.

Due to the size of the telescope aperture and the generally excellent observing conditions at the Cerro Tololo site, we obtained relative photometry of Nereid with 0.003 – 0.006 accuracy (the S/N ratio of the object was 600-700). This accuracy is significantly better than any photometry of Nereid reported to date.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows our results, clearly indicating a periodicity on the order of hours. Using a Levenberg-Marquardt fitting method (?), we fit the data with the simple model

$$\Delta m = a \cos \left[ \frac{2\pi}{P} (t - t_0) \right] - k(\alpha - \alpha_0)$$

where $t$ and $\alpha$ are the time and phase angle of the observations, and $a$, $P$, and $k$, are the amplitude, period, phase coefficient, respectively. We fix the phase angle reference point, $\alpha_0 = 0.4^\circ$. In addition to these parameters, we allow the sinusodial curve to move along the time axis (through letting $t_0$ be a free parameter). We also allow the single night from 2001 to move freely along the magnitude axis, resulting in 6 free parameters in total.

The fit gives a rotational period of $11.52 ± 0.14$ hours (apparent single harmonic period of 5.76 hours) with a peak-to-peak amplitude of $a = 0.029 ± 0.003$ magnitudes and a phase
coefficient of $k = 0.14 \pm 0.08$ magnitudes per degree. To evaluate the fit we determined the chi-squared. With 68 degrees of freedom (74 observations minus 6 parameters) we get a chi-squared of 80.1. We further estimate the goodness of fit with the incomplete gamma function, $Q(0.5N, 0.5\chi^2)$, where $N$ is the numbers of degrees of freedom (?). The result, $Q = 0.17$, gives the probability that this variation can occur by chance with the given model. We have also fit the data with higher order harmonics to attempt to distinguish shape-induced variations from those resulting from surface variegations, but we see no significant improvement over the simple sinusoid with the available data.

It should be noted that the period can be well fit by values that differ by integer multiples of $1.60 \times 10^{-4}$ days or $\sim 14$ seconds, the change in period that results from one-half additional revolution between the 2001 and 2002 observations. Obviously, we cannot determine the period that well with the data at hand. Furthermore, there is a correlation between the amplitude, $a$ and phase coefficient, $k$. As the period is decreased, the phase effect coefficient increases and the amplitude decreases. As the period is increased, the phase coefficient decreases and the amplitude increases. In both cases, the chi-squared increases and $Q(0.5N, 0.5\chi^2)$ decreases. We estimate the uncertainty in the rotation period by the limits at which $Q(0.5N, 0.5\chi^2) = 0.001$. This yields a rotation period and phase coefficients between $11.40 - 11.68$ hours and $0.19$ to $0.05$ mag/deg, respectively. Interestingly, ?) report a decrease of $0.05 - 0.025$ magnitudes over a 5.5 hour period in their second and third nights, although they state that this decrease was not statistically significant.

The peak-to-peak amplitude of $0.029 \pm 0.003$ magnitudes does not constrain the shape or albedo variegations of Nereid independently. Assuming that Nereid is perfectly spherical, the albedo variation is $< 3\%$ across the observed surface. Recall that Voyager II constrained the brightness variations of Nereid over a large range of phase angles to $\leq 10\%$, its radius to $r = 175 \pm 25$ km, and geometric albedo to $0.180 \pm 0.005$ (?). Our own observations show that, assuming a uniform geometric albedo, the observed cross sectional area varies by 3%. However, we caution that we cannot determine the orientation of Nereid’s spin axis from our data and that if the observations are pole-on the equatorial irregularity could well be more than 3%.

5. Conclusions

From observations on one night in August 2001 and four consecutive nights in August 2002 we have established the rotational period, $p = 11.52 \pm 0.14$ hours, and a light curve peak-to-peak amplitude, $a = 0.029 \pm 0.003$ magnitudes, of the Neptunian irregular satellite Nereid. The peak-to-peak amplitude constrains the shape and/or albedo variations of Nereid.
Assuming that Nereid is perfectly spherical, the albedo variation is 3% across the observed surface. Likewise, assuming a uniform geometric albedo, the observed cross sectional area varies by 3%. Viewed from a random angle, this implies a nearly spherical body with a limit of $\sim 3\text{km}$ out-of-round, based on the radius estimate from Voyager II (??). Again, we caution that we cannot determine the orientation of Nereid’s spin axis from our data.

Nereid’s short rotation period and long orbital period Nereid place it near the 750:1 spin-orbit resonance. The phase space is essentially free of chaos for high rotation rates, those beyond the 40:1 spin-orbit resonance, regardless of the shape of Nereid (??). Thus, little or no dynamical chaos is expected in the rotation of Nereid. Without such a chaotic region it seems highly unlikely that Nereid could have changed it’s rotational state in recent years. Since the rotation state of Nereid is perfectly normal for a distant irregular satellite (cf., Jupiter VI), no implications for an unusual formation history of Nereid can be drawn.

6. Acknowledgments

We dedicate this paper to the memory of James J. Klavetter, who gave MH his first instruction in CCD photometry and who started this project in 1988. Dr. Klavetter, shortly thereafter, wisely concluded that it would be better to wait a decade until Neptune had cleared the plane the Milky Way than to proceed with the data in hand.

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Table 1: The calendar and Julian dates of the observations of Nereid taken with the CTIO 4-m Blanco telescope are given with the number of images, the solar phase angle, and the mean anomaly of Nereid at the time of observation.
Fig. 1.— The observations from August 2001 and 2002 are shown in the lower left and upper panels, respectively. The dotted line in these two panels shows the best-fit model, which consists of a simple sinusoid with a linear decrease in magnitude with solar phase angle (a function of time). The lower right panel shows the data from both years folded with the best-fit apparent period. The solid line shows the model fit.