

When Did the Asteroids Become Minor Planets?

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Pluto is not the first object to be recognized as a planet for decades, only to be "demoted" largely as a result of subsequent discoveries of similar objects. When it was first discovered on 1 January 1801, Ceres was hailed as the "missing" planet. Even after the discoveries of Pallas, Juno, and Vesta, in 1802 through 1807, all were considered planets even though they did not fit in with the other known planets of the solar system because of their inclined, eccentric orbits and small sizes. Like the classical planets, they were assigned symbols as a notational short hand, and astronomy books of the day discussed them as planets. Decades went by without a new "planet" discovery; there seemed no need to alter the system in place. However, as dozens of additional asteroids were discovered between the mid 1840s and 1850s, the idea that the asteroids were planets broke down. At this time a new, simplified system of symbols was introduced; it gradually became apparent that the asteroids formed a new class of solar system bodies, and they were eventually relegated to the status of "minor planet".