
Account of Some Observations Tending to Investigate the Construction of the Heavens. By William Herschel, Esq. F. R. S.
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XXXIII. *Account of some Observations tending to investigate the Construction of the Heavens.* By William Herschel, Esq. F. R. S.

Read June 17, 1784.

IN a former paper I mentioned, that a more powerful instrument was preparing for continuing my reviews of the heavens. The telescope I have lately completed, though far inferior in size to the one I had undertaken to construct when that paper was written, is of the Newtonian form, the object speculum being of 20 feet focal length, and its aperture $18\frac{7}{8}$ inches. The apparatus on which it is mounted is contrived so as at present to confine the instrument to a meridional situation, and by its motions to give the right-ascension and declination of a celestial object in a coarse way; which, however, is sufficiently accurate to point out the place of the object, so that it may be found again. It will not be necessary to enter into a more particular description of the apparatus, since the account I have now the honour of communicating to the Royal Society regards rather the performance of the telescope than its construction.

It would, perhaps, have been more eligible to have waited longer, in order to complete the discoveries that seem to lie within the reach of this instrument, and are already, in some respects, pointed out to me by it. By taking more time I should undoubtedly be enabled to speak more confidently of the

interior construction of the heavens, and its various *nebulous and sidereal strata* (to borrow a term from the natural historian) of which this paper can as yet only give a few outlines, or rather hints. As an apology, however, for this prematurity, it may be said, that the end of all discoveries being communication, we can never be too ready in giving facts and observations, whatever we may be in reasoning upon them.

Hitherto the sidereal heavens have, not inadequately for the purpose designed, been represented by the concave surface of a sphere, in the center of which the eye of an observer might be supposed to be placed. It is true, the various magnitudes of the fixed stars even then plainly suggested to us, and would have better suited the idea of an expanded firmament of three dimensions; but the observations upon which I am now going to enter still farther illustrate and enforce the necessity of considering the heavens in this point of view. In future, therefore, we shall look upon those regions into which we may now penetrate by means of such large telescopes, as a naturalist regards a rich extent of ground or chain of mountains, containing strata variously inclined and directed, as well as consisting of very different materials. A surface of a globe or map, therefore, will but ill delineate the interior parts of the heavens.

It may well be expected, that the great advantage of a large aperture would be most sensibly perceived with all those objects that require much light, such as the very small and immensely distant fixed stars, the very faint nebulae, the close and compressed clusters of stars, and the remote planets.

On applying the telescope to a part of the *via lactea*, I found that it completely resolved the whole whitish appearance into small stars, which my former telescopes had not light enough

to effect. The portion of this extensive tract, which it has hitherto been convenient for me to observe, is that immediately about the hand and club of Orion. The glorious multitude of stars of all possible sizes that presented themselves here to my view was truly astonishing; but, as the dazzling brightness of glittering stars may easily mislead us so far as to estimate their number greater than it really is, I endeavoured to ascertain this point by counting many fields, and computing, from a mean of them, what a certain given portion of the milky way might contain. Among many trials of this sort I found, last January the 18th, that six fields, promiscuously taken, contained 110, 60, 70, 90, 70, and 74 stars each. I then tried to pick out the most vacant place that was to be found in that neighbourhood, and counted 63 stars. A mean of the first six gives 79 stars for each field. Hence, by allowing 15 minutes of a great circle for the diameter of my field of view, we gather, that a belt of 15 degrees long and two broad, or the quantity which I have often seen pass through the field of my telescope in one hour's time, could not well contain less than fifty thousand stars, that were large enough to be distinctly numbered. But, besides these, I suspected at least twice as many more, which, for want of light, I could only see now and then by faint glittering and interrupted glimpses.

The excellent collection of nebulae and clusters of stars which has lately been given in the *Connoissance des Temps* for 1783 and 1784, leads me next to a subject which, indeed, must open a new view of the heavens. As soon as the first of these volumes came to my hands, I applied my former 20-foot reflector of 12 inches aperture to them; and saw, with the greatest pleasure, that most of the nebulae, which I had an opportunity of examining in proper situations, yielded to the

force of my light and power, and were resolved into stars. For instance, the 2d, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 22, 24, 28, 30, 31, 37, 51, 52, 53, 55, 56, 62, 65, 66, 67, 71, 72, 74, 92, all which are said to be nebulae without stars, have either plainly appeared to be nothing but stars, or at least to contain stars, and to shew every other indication of consisting of them entirely. I have examined them with a careful scrutiny of various powers and light, and generally in the meridian. I should mention, that five of the above, *viz.* the 16th, 24, 37, 52, 67, are called clusters of stars containing nebulosity; but my instrument resolving also that portion of them which is called nebulous into stars of a much smaller size, I have placed them into the above number. To these may be added the 1st, 3d, 27, 33, 57, 79, 81, 82, 101, which in my 7, 10, and 20-foot reflectors shewed a mottled kind of nebulosity, which I shall call resolvable; so that I expect my present telescope will, perhaps, render the stars visible of which I suppose them to be composed. Here I might point out many precautions necessary to be taken with the very best instruments, in order to succeed in the resolution of the most difficult of them; but reserving this at present too extensive subject for a future opportunity, I proceed to speak of the effects of my last instrument with regard to nebulae.

My present pursuits, as I observed before, requiring this telescope to act as a fixed instrument, I found it not convenient to apply it to any other of the nebulae in the *Connoissance des Temps* but such as came in turn; nor, indeed, was it necessary to take any particular pains to look for them, it being utterly impossible that any one of them should escape my observation when it passed the field of view of my telescope. The few which I have already had an opportunity of examining, shew plainly that
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those most excellent French astronomers, Mess. MESSIER and MECHAIN, saw only the more luminous part of their nebulae; the feeble shape of the remainder, for want of light, escaping their notice. The difference will appear when we compare my observation of the 98th nebula with that in the *Connoissance des Temps* for 1784, which runs thus: “Nébuleuse sans étoile, “d’une lumière extrêmement foible, au dessus de l’aile boréale “de la Vierge, sur le parallèle et près de l’étoile N° 6. cinquième grandeur, de la chevelure de Bérénice, suivant “FLAMSTEED. M. MECHAIN la vit le 15 Mars, 1781.” My observation of the 30th of December, 1783, is thus: A large, extended, fine nebula. Its situation shews it to be M. MESSIER’s 98th; but from the description it appears, that that gentleman has not seen the whole of it, for its feeble branches extend above a quarter of a degree, of which no notice is taken. Near the middle of it are a few stars visible, and more suspected. My field of view will not quite take in the whole nebula. See fig. 1. tab. XVII. Again, N° 53. “Nébuleuse sans étoiles, “découverte au-dessous et près de la chevelure de Bérénice, à “peu de distance de l’étoile quarante-deuxième de cette constellation, suivant FLAMSTEED. Cette nébuleuse est ronde et “apparente, &c.” My observation of the 170th Sweep runs thus: A cluster of very close stars; one of the most beautiful objects I remember to have seen in the heavens. The cluster appears under the form of a solid ball, consisting of small stars, quite compressed into one blaze of light, with a great number of loose ones surrounding it, and distinctly visible in the general mass. See fig. 2.

When I began my present series of observations, I surmised, that several nebulae might yet remain undiscovered, for want of sufficient light to detect them; and was, therefore, in hopes
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of making a valuable addition to the clusters of stars and nebulae already collected and given us in the work before referred to, which amount to 103. The event has plainly proved that my expectations were well founded: for I have already found 466 new nebulae and clusters of stars, none of which, to my present knowledge, have been seen before by any person; most of them, indeed, are not within the reach of the best common telescopes now in use. In all probability many more are still in reserve; and as I am pursuing this track, I shall make them up into separate catalogues, of about two or three hundred at a time, and have the honour of presenting them in that form to the Royal Society.

A very remarkable circumstance attending the nebulae and clusters of stars is, that they are arranged into strata, which seem to run on to a great length; and some of them I have already been able to pursue, so as to guess pretty well at their form and direction. It is probable enough, that they may surround the whole apparent sphere of the heavens, not unlike the milky way, which undoubtedly is nothing but a stratum of fixed stars. And as this latter immense starry bed is not of equal breadth or lustre in every part, nor runs on in one straight direction, but is curved and even divided into two streams along a very considerable portion of it; we may likewise expect the greatest variety in the strata of the clusters of stars and nebulae. One of these nebulous beds is so rich, that, in passing through a section of it, in the time of only 36 minutes, I detected no less than 31 nebulae, all distinctly visible upon a fine blue sky. Their situation and shape, as well as condition, seems to denote the greatest variety imaginable. In another stratum, or perhaps a different branch of the former, I have seen double and treble nebulae, variously arranged; large ones
with

with small, seeming attendants; narrow but much extended, lucid nebulae or bright dashes; some of the shape of a fan, resembling an electric brush, issuing from a lucid point; others of the cometic shape, with a seeming nucleus in the center; or like cloudy stars, surrounded with a nebulous atmosphere; a different sort again contain a nebulosity of the milky kind, like that wonderful, inexplicable phenomenon about θ Orionis; while others shine with a fainter, mottled kind of light, which denotes their being resolvable into stars. See fig. 3. &c. But it would be too extensive at present to enter more minutely into such circumstances, therefore I proceed with the subject of nebulous and sidereal strata.

It is very probable, that the great stratum, called the milky way, is that in which the sun is placed, though perhaps not in the very center of its thickness. We gather this from the appearance of the Galaxy, which seems to encompass the whole heavens, as it certainly must do if the sun is within the same. For, suppose a number of stars arranged between two parallel planes, indefinitely extended every way, but at a given considerable distance from each other; and, calling this a sidereal stratum, an eye placed somewhere within it will see all the stars in the direction of the planes of the stratum projected into a great circle, which will appear lucid on account of the accumulation of the stars; while the rest of the heavens, at the sides, will only seem to be scattered over with constellations, more or less crowded, according to the distance of the planes or number of stars contained in the thickness or sides of the stratum.

Thus, in fig. 16. (tab. XVIII.) an eye at S within the stratum ab , will see the stars in the direction of its length ab , or height cd , with all those in the intermediate situations, projected into the

lucid circle ACBD; while those in the sides *mv*, *nw*, will be seen scattered over the remaining part of the heavens at MVNW.

If the eye were placed somewhere without the stratum, at no very great distance, the appearance of the stars within it would assume the form of one of the less circles of the sphere, which would be more or less contracted to the distance of the eye; and if this distance were exceedingly increased, the whole stratum might at last be drawn together into a lucid spot of any shape, according to the position, length, and height of the stratum.

Let us now suppose, that a branch, or smaller stratum, should run out from the former, in a certain direction, and let it also be contained between two parallel planes extended indefinitely onwards, but so that the eye may be placed in the great stratum somewhere before the separation, and not far from the place where the strata are still united. Then will this second stratum not be projected into a bright circle like the former, but will be seen as a lucid branch proceeding from the first, and returning to it again at a certain distance less than a semi-circle.

Thus, in the same figure, the stars in the small stratum *pq* will be projected into a bright arch at PRRP, which, after its separation from the circle CBD, unites with it again at P.

What has been instanced in parallel planes may easily be applied to strata irregularly bounded, and running in various directions; for their projections will of consequence vary according to the quantities of the variations in the strata and the distance of the eye from the same. And thus any kind of curvatures, as well as various different degrees of brightness, may be produced in the projections.

From appearances then, as I observed before, we may infer, that the sun is most likely placed in one of the great strata of the fixed stars, and very probably not far from the place where some smaller stratum branches out from it. Such a supposition will satisfactorily, and with great simplicity, account for all the phænomena of the milky way, which, according to this hypothesis, is no other than the appearance of the projection of the stars contained in this stratum and its secondary branch. As a farther inducement to look on the Galaxy in this point of view, let it be considered, that we can no longer doubt of its whitish appearance arising from the mixed lustre of the numberless stars that compose it. Now, should we imagine it to be an irregular ring of stars, in the center nearly of which we must then suppose the sun to be placed, it will appear not a little extraordinary, that the sun, being a fixed star like those which compose this imagined ring, should just be in the center of such a multitude of celestial bodies, without any apparent reason for this singular distinction; whereas, on our supposition, every star in this stratum, not very near the termination of its length or height, will be so placed as also to have its own Galaxy, with only such variations in the form and lustre of it, as may arise from the particular situation of each star.

Various methods may be pursued to come to a full knowledge of the sun's place in the sidereal stratum, of which I shall only mention one as the most general and most proper for determining this important point, and which I have already begun to put in practice. I call it *Gaging the Heavens*, or the *Star-Gage*. It consists in repeatedly taking the number of stars in ten fields of view of my reflector very near each other, and by adding their sums, and cutting off one decimal on the right, a mean of the contents of the heavens, in all the parts which

are thus gaged, is obtained. By way of example, I have joined a short table, extracted from the gages contained in my journal, by which it appears, that the number of stars increases very fast as we approach the Via Lactea.

N. P. D. 92 to 94°.		N. P. D. 78 to 80°.	
R. A.	Gage.	R. A.	Gage.
15 10	9.4	11 16	3.1
15 22	10.6	12 31	3.4
15 47	10.6	12 44	4.6
16 8	12.1	12 49	3.9
16 25	13.6	13 5	3.8
16 37	18.6	14 30	3.6

Thus, in the parallel from 92 to 94 degrees north polar distance, and R. A. 15 h. 10', the star-gage runs up from 9.4 stars in the field to 18.6 in about an hour and a half; whereas in the parallel from 78° to 80° north polar distance, and R. A. 11, 12, 13, and 14 hours, it very seldom rises above 4. We are, however, to remember, that with different instruments the account of the gages will be very different, especially on our supposition of the situation of the sun in a stratum of stars. For, let ab , fig. 17. be the stratum, and suppose the small circle gb/k to represent the space into which, by the light and power of a given telescope, we may penetrate; and let $GHLK$ be the extent of another portion, which we are enabled to visit by means of a larger aperture and power; it is evident, that the gages with the latter instrument will differ very much in their account of stars contained at MN , and at KG or LH ; when with the former they will hardly be affected by the change from mn to kg or lb . And this accounts for what a celebrated author says concerning the effects of telescopes,

scopes, by which we must understand the best of those that are in common use *.

It would not be safe to enter into an application of these, and such other gages as I have already taken, till they are sufficiently continued and carried all over the heavens. I shall, therefore, content myself with just mentioning that the situation of the sun will be obtained, from considering in what manner the star-gage agrees with the length of a ray revolving in several directions about an assumed point, and cut off by the bounds of the stratum. Thus, in fig. 18. let S be the place of an observer; $Srrr$, $Srrr$, lines in the planes rSr , rSr , drawn from S within the stratum to one of the boundaries, here represented by the plane AB. Then, since neither the situation of S, nor the form of the limiting surface AB, is given, we are to assume a point, and apply to it lines proportional to the several gages that have been obtained, and at such angles from each other as they may point out; then will the termination of these lines delineate the boundary of the stratum, and consequently manifest the situation of the sun within the same. But to proceed.

If the sun should be placed in the great sidereal stratum of the milky way, and, as we have surmised above, not far from

* On voit avec les télescopes des étoiles dans toutes les parties du ciel, à peu près comme dans la voie lactée, ou dans les nébuleuses. On ne sauroit douter qu'une partie de l'éclat et de la blancheur de la voie lactée, ne provienne de la lumière des petites étoiles qui s'y trouvent en effet par millions; cependant, avec les plus grands télescopes, on n'en distingue pas assez, et elles n'y sont pas assez rapprochées les unes des autres pour qu'on puisse attribuer à celles qu'on distingue la blancheur de la voie lactée, si sensible à la vue simple. L'on ne sauroit donc prononcer que les étoiles soient la seule cause de cette blancheur, quoique nous ne connoissions aucune manière satisfaisante de l'expliquer. *Ast. M. DE LA LANDE*, § 833.

the branching out of a secondary stratum, it will very naturally lead us to guess at the cause of the probable motion of the solar system: for the very bright, great node of the Via Lactis, or union of the two strata about Cepheus and Cassiopeia, and the Scorpion and Sagittarius, points out a conflux of stars manifestly quite sufficient to occasion a tendency towards that node in any star situated at no very great distance; and the secondary branch of the Galaxy not being much less than a semi-circle seems to indicate such a situation of our solar system in the great undivided stratum as the most probable.

What has been said in a former paper on the subject of the solar motion seems also to support this supposed situation of the sun; for the apex there assigned lies nearly in the direction of a motion of the sun towards the node of the strata. Besides, the joining stratum making a pretty large angle at the junction with the primary one, it may easily be admitted, that the motion of a star in the great stratum, especially if situated considerably towards the side farthest from the small stratum, will be turned sufficiently out of the straight direction of the great stratum towards the secondary one. But I find myself insensibly led to say more on this subject than I am as yet authorised to do; I will, therefore, return to those observations which have suggested the idea of celestial strata.

In my late observations on nebulae I soon found, that I generally detected them in certain directions rather than in others; that the spaces preceding them were generally quite deprived of their stars, so as often to afford many fields without a single star in it; that the nebulae generally appeared some time after among stars of a certain considerable size, and but seldom among very small stars; that when I came to one nebula, I generally found several more in the neighbourhood; that after-

wards

wards a considerable time passed before I came to another parcel; and these events being often repeated in different altitudes of my instrument, and some of them at a considerable distance from each other, it occurred to me, that the intermediate spaces between the sweeps might also contain nebulae; and finding this to hold good more than once, I ventured to give notice to my assistant at the clock, "to prepare, since I expected in a few minutes to come at a stratum of the nebulae, finding myself already" (as I then figuratively expressed it) "on nebulous ground." In this I succeeded immediately; so that I now can venture to point out several not far distant places, where I shall soon carry my telescope, in expectation of meeting with many nebulae. But how far these circumstances of vacant places preceding and following the nebulous strata, and their being as it were contained in a bed of stars, sparingly scattered between them, may hold good in more distant portions of the heavens, and which I have not yet been able to visit in any regular manner, I ought by no means to hazard a conjecture. The subject is new, and we must attend to observations, and be guided by them, before we form general opinions.

Before I conclude, I may, however, venture to add a few particulars about the direction of some of the capital strata or their branches. The well known nebula of Cancer, visible to the naked eye, is probably one belonging to a certain stratum, in which I suppose it to be so placed as to lie nearest to us. This stratum I shall call that of Cancer. It runs from ϵ Cancr. towards the south over the 67 nebula of the *Connoissance des Temps*, which is a very beautiful and pretty much compressed cluster of stars, easily to be seen by any good telescope, and in which I have observed above 200 stars at once in the field of

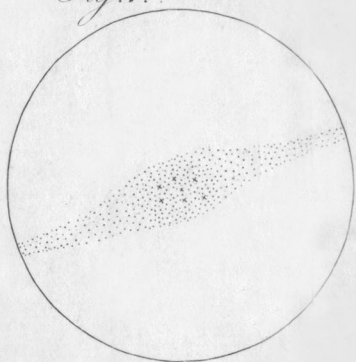
view of my great reflector, with a power of 157. This cluster appearing so plainly with any good, common telescope, and being so near to the one which may be seen by the naked eye, denotes it to be probably the next in distance to that within the quartile formed by γ , δ , η , θ ; from the 67th nebula the stratum of Cancer proceeds towards the head of Hydra; but I have not yet had time to trace it farther than the equator.

Another stratum, which perhaps approaches nearer to the solar system than any of the rest, and whose situation is nearly at rectangles to the great sidereal stratum in which the sun is placed, is that of Coma Berenices, as I shall call it. I suppose the Coma itself to be one of the clusters in it, and that, on account of its nearness, it appears to be so scattered. It has many capital nebulae very near it; and in all probability this stratum runs on a very considerable way. It may, perhaps, even make the circuit of the heavens, though very likely not in one of the great circles of the sphere: for, unless it should chance to intersect the great sidereal stratum of the milky way before-mentioned, in the very place in which the sun is stationed, such an appearance could hardly be produced. However, if the stratum of Coma Berenices should extend so far as (by taking in the assistance of M. MESSIER's and M. MECHAIN's excellent observations of scattered nebulae, and some detached former observations of my own) I apprehend it may, the direction of it towards the north lies probably, with some windings, through the great Bear onwards to Cassiopeia; thence through the girdle of Andromeda and the northern Fish, proceeding towards Cetus; while towards the south it passes through the Virgin, probably on to the tail of Hydra and the head of Centaurus. But, notwithstanding I have already fully ascertained the existence and direction of this stratum for more

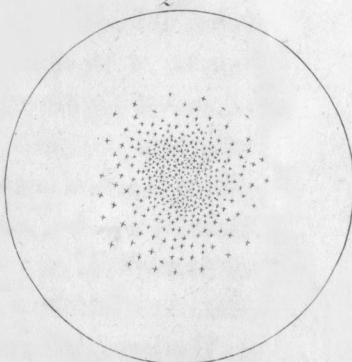
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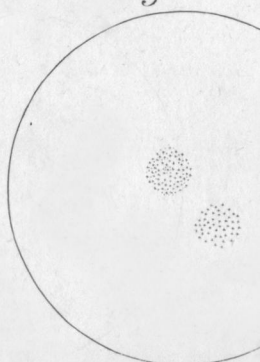
Fig. 1.



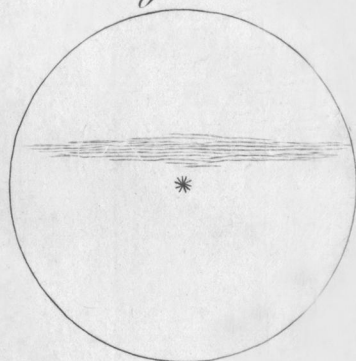
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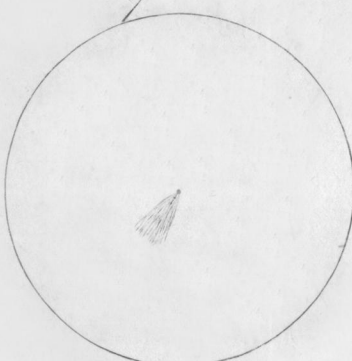
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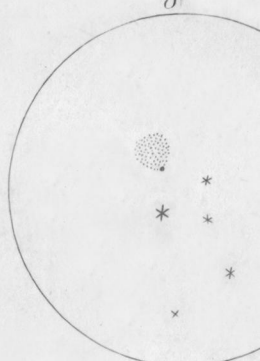
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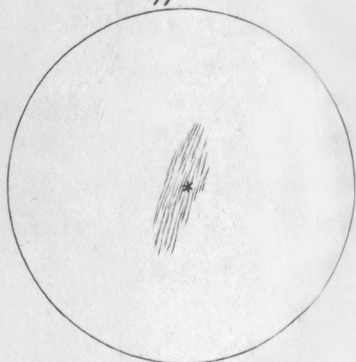
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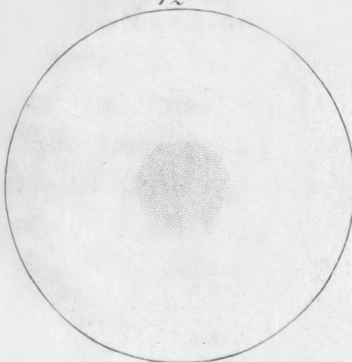
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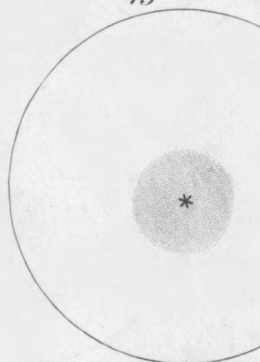
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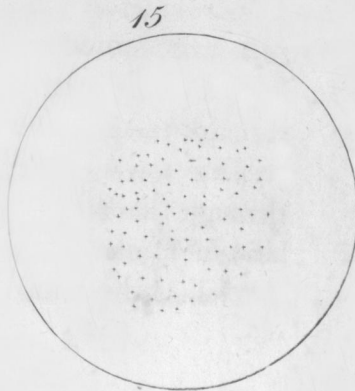
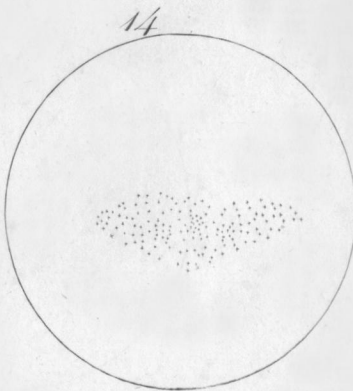
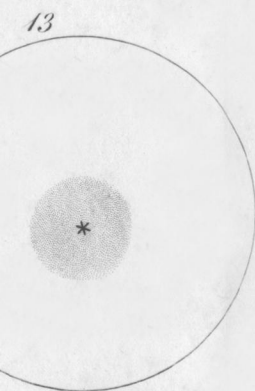
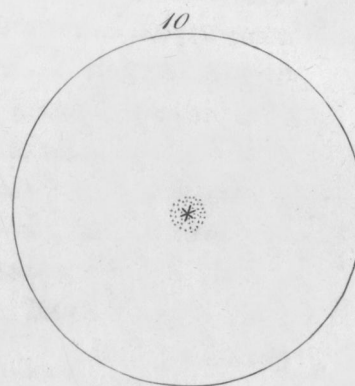
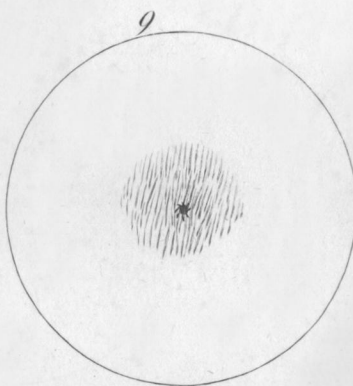
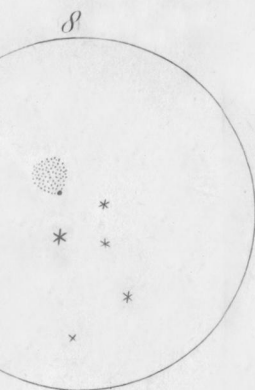
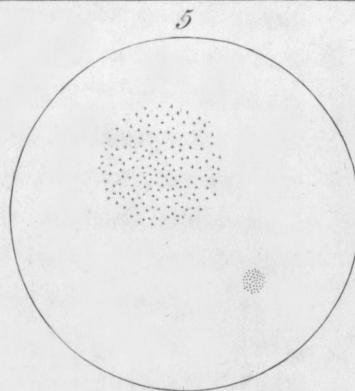
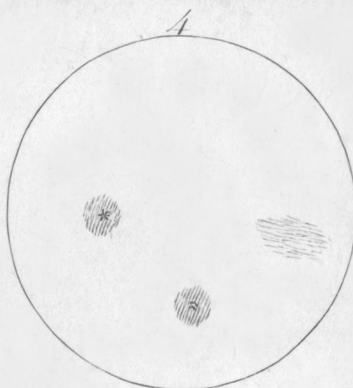
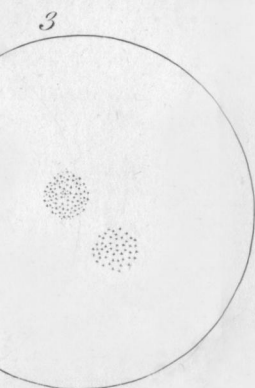


Fig. 16.

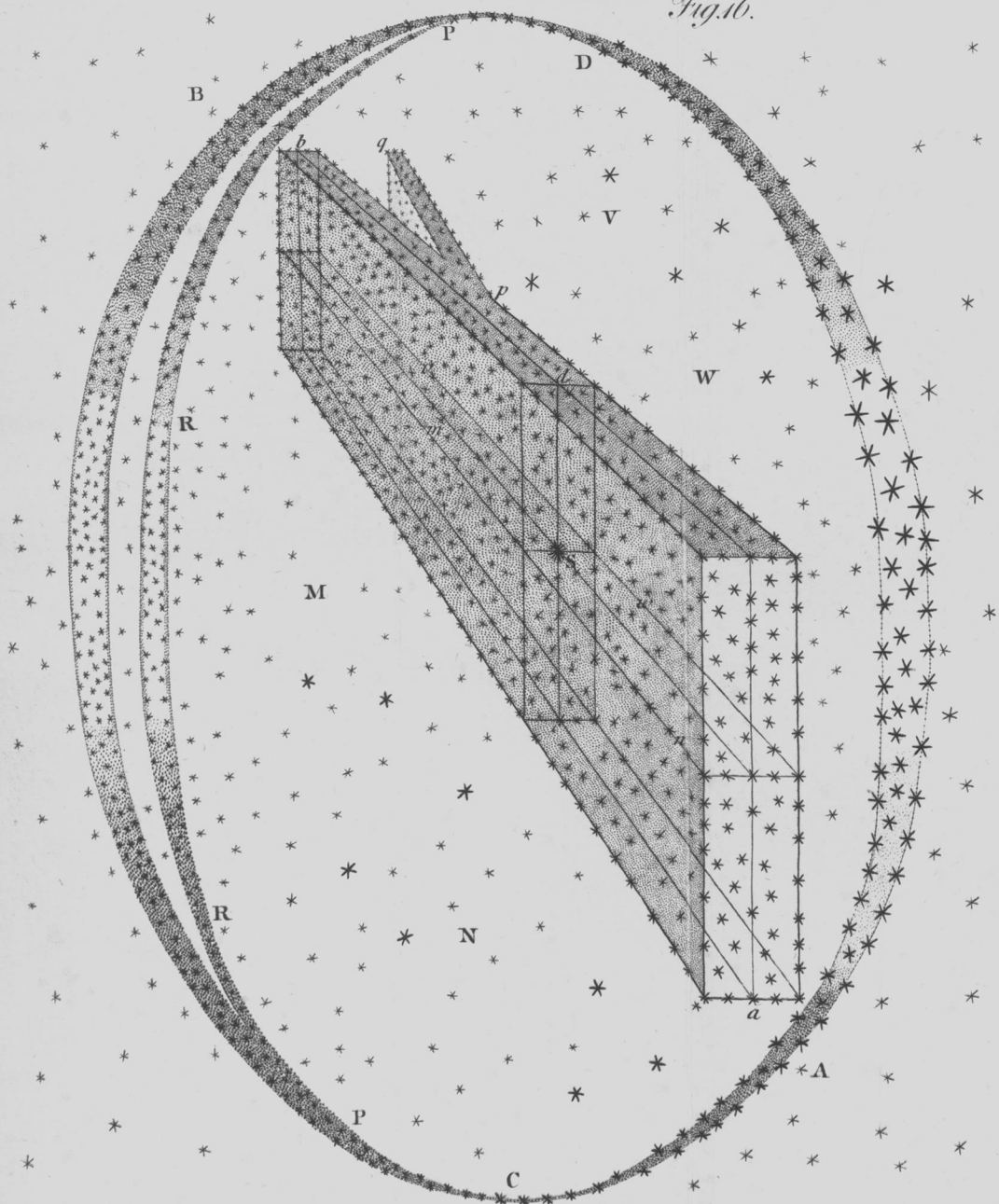


Fig. 17.

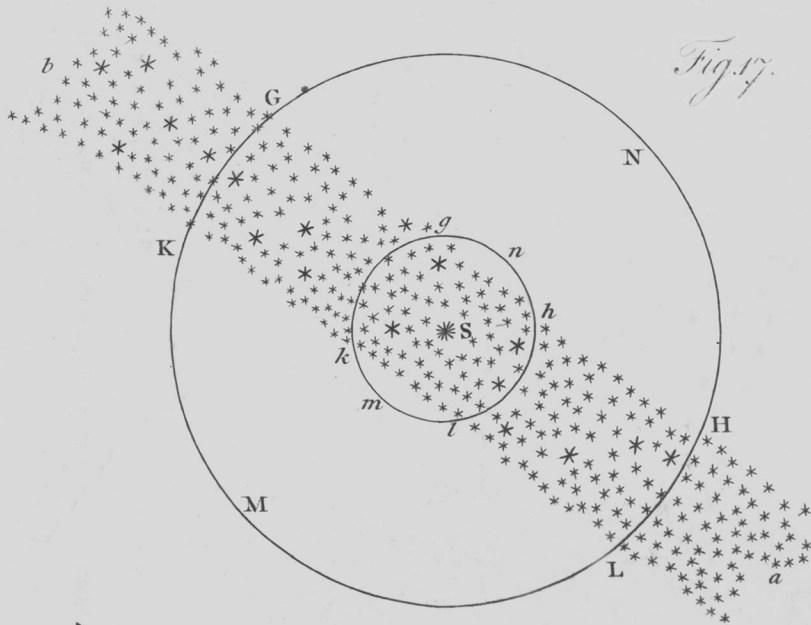
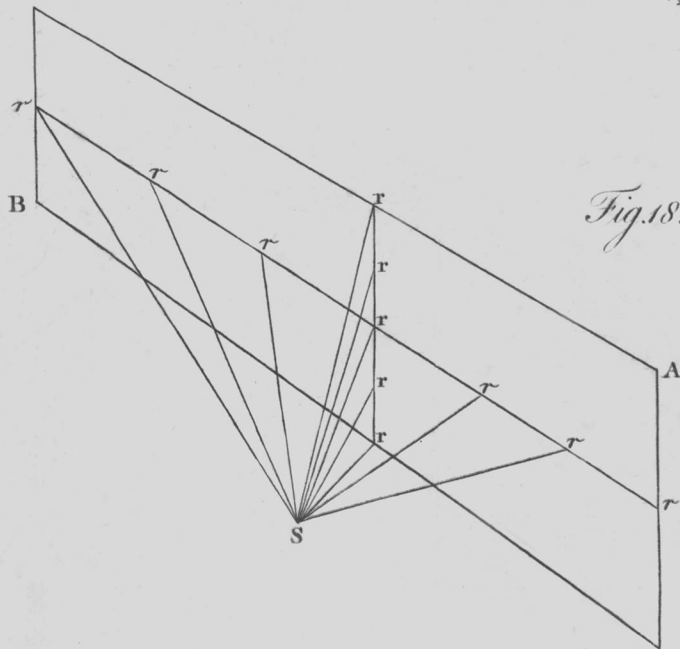


Fig. 18.



than 30 degrees of a great circle, and found it almost every where equally rich in fine nebulæ, it still might be dangerous to proceed in more extensive conjectures, that have as yet no more than a precarious foundation. I shall therefore wait till the observations in which I am at present engaged shall furnish me with proper materials for the disquisition of so new a subject. And though my single endeavours should not succeed in a work that seems to require the joint effort of every astronomer, yet so much we may venture to hope, that, by applying ourselves with all our powers to the improvement of telescopes, which I look upon as yet in their infant state, and turning them with assiduity to the study of the heavens, we shall in time obtain some faint knowledge of, and perhaps be able partly to delineate, *the Interior Construction of the Universe.*

Datchet near Windsor,
April, 1784.

WILLIAM HERSCHEL.

