TIME-RESOLVED PHOTOMETRY OF KUIPER BELT OBJECTS: ROTATIONS, SHAPES, AND PHASE FUNCTIONS

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Received 2002 April 8; accepted 2002 May 22

ABSTRACT

We present a systematic investigation of the rotational light curves of trans-Neptunian objects based on extensive optical data from Mauna Kea. Four of 13 objects (corresponding to 31%) in our sample [(33128) 1998 BU₄₈, 2000 GN₁₇₁, (20000) Varuna, and (40314) 1999 KR₁₆] were found to exhibit light curves with peak-to-peak range ≥0.15 mag. In a larger sample obtained by combining our data with reliably determined light curves from the literature, seven of 22 objects (32%) display significant (≥0.15 mag range) light curves. About 23% of the sampled objects have light-curve ranges ≥0.4 mag. Curiously, the objects are very large (≥250 km diameter, assuming an albedo of 0.04) and, in the absence of rotation, should be nearly spheroidal as a result of self-compression. We propose that the large-amplitude, short-period objects are rotationally distorted, low-density rubble piles. Statistically, the trans-Neptunian objects are less spherical than their main-belt asteroid counterparts, indicating a higher specific angular momentum, perhaps resulting from the formation epoch. In addition to the rotational light curves, we measured phase darkening for seven Kuiper belt objects in the 0° to 2° phase-angle range. Unlike Pluto, the measured values show steep slopes and moderate opposition surge, indicating backscatter from low-albedo porous surface materials.

Key words: Kuiper belt | minor planets, asteroids | Oort cloud | solar system: general

On-line material: machine-readable table

1. INTRODUCTION

More than 500 trans-Neptunian objects (TNOs) have been discovered in the decade since the discovery of 1992 QB₁ (Jewitt & Luu 1993). These objects make up the Kuiper belt (also known as the Edgeworth-Kuiper belt), which is thought to contain about 70,000 objects with radii greater than 50 km (Jewitt, Luu, & Chen 1996). The Kuiper belt is thought to be a relic from the original protoplanetary disk, albeit one that has been dynamically disturbed and collisionally processed in ways that are not yet fully understood.

The Kuiper belt is the most likely source of the Jupiter-family comets (Fernández 1980; Duncan, Quinn, & Tremaine 1988). It is by far the largest long-lived reservoir of small bodies in the planetary region, outnumbering the main-belt asteroids and Jovian Trojans by a factor of ~300. The Kuiper belt objects (KBOs) are further thought to be chemically primitive, containing trapped volatiles and having experienced relatively little thermal evolution since formation. Thus, we may be able to probe some aspects of the early history of the local solar nebula by studying the Kuiper belt and related objects.

The determination of the physical characteristics of the KBOs has proceeded very slowly. This is because even the brightest known KBOs (other than Pluto and Charon) only reach apparent red magnitude mₗ₉ ~ 19.5 and thus are challenging targets with current spectroscopic technology. The surfaces of KBOs may have been altered over their lifetimes by collisions, cometary activity, and irradiation. The largest KBOs might even be partially differentiated as a result of radiogenic heating. This could lead to the spinning up of objects to conserve angular momentum. Colors of the KBOs have been found to be diverse, ranging from neutral to very red (V–R ~ 0.3 to V–R ~ 0.8; Luu & Jewitt 1996; Green et al. 1997; Tegler & Romanishin 2000; Jewitt & Luu 2001). While spectra of KBOs are mostly featureless, some show weak 2 μm water ice absorptions (Brown, Cruikshank, & Pendleton 1999; Jewitt & Luu 2001). Most KBOs are too distant (≥30 AU) and small to resolve with current technology. They are also very cold objects (~50 K) that emit most of their thermal radiation in the inaccessible far-infrared wavelengths, requiring observations from above Earth’s atmosphere. Thus, the most feasible way to determine KBOs shapes and surface features is through their photometric light variations.

The rotations and shapes of the KBOs may be a function of their size. Small KBOs (diameters D < 100 km) are thought to be collisionally produced (Farinella & Davis 1996). These objects retain no memory of the primordial angular momentum of their parent bodies. Instead, their spins are presumably set by the partitioning of kinetic energy delivered by the projectile responsible for breakup. Larger objects may be structurally damaged bodies held together by gravity (rubble piles; Jewitt & Sheppard 2002). The spins of these objects should be much less influenced by recent impacts. A similar situation prevails in the main asteroid belt, where collisional modification of the rotations and shapes of the smaller objects is observationally well established (Catullo et al. 1984). The large objects in both the main belt and the Kuiper belt may provide a record of the primordial distribution of angular momenta imbibed by the growth process. A key attribute of the Kuiper belt is that the population is very large compared with the main asteroid belt, allowing access to a substantial sample of objects that are too large to have been influenced by recent collisions.

We here use voluminous time-resolved photometric observations to determine the rotational light curves, colors, and phase functions of KBOs. As our sample, we select the intrinsically brightest (presumably largest) KBOs.
Specifically, we observed KBOs having absolute magnitude $H_R \leq 7.5$, corresponding to $D \geq 200$ km if a red geometric albedo of $p_R = 0.04$ is assumed. We use most of the known KBOs with $H_R \leq 6.0$, which corresponds to $D \geq 375$ km in our analysis. The objects observed were all bright, in order to guarantee high signal-to-noise ratios in short exposures to adequately sample the KBO light curves.

2. OBSERVATIONS

The University of Hawaii 2.2 m diameter telescope atop Mauna Kea, in Hawaii, was used with a 2048 × 2048 pixel Tektronix CCD (24 μm pixels) and a 0′.219 pixel⁻¹ scale at the f/10 Cassegrain focus. An antireflection coating provides very high average quantum efficiency (0.90) in the $R$ band. The field of view was 7′5 × 7′5. Exposures were taken using $BVRI$ filters based on the Johnson-Kron-Cousins system, while the telescope was autoguided on bright nearby stars. The seeing ranged from 0′.6 to 1′5 during the many nights of observation throughout 1999, 2000, and 2001. Objects moved relative to the fixed stars at a maximum of 4″ hr⁻¹, corresponding to travel lengths ≤0′.45 in the longest (400 s) exposures. Even for the fastest-moving objects in the longest exposures, the trailing motion is small compared with the seeing and so can be neglected as a source of error in the photometry.

The images were bias-subtracted and then flat-fielded using the median of a set of dithered images of the twilight sky. Landolt (1992) standard stars were used for the absolute photometric calibration. Photometry of faint objects, such as the KBOs, must be done very carefully to achieve accurate results. To optimize the signal-to-noise ratio, we performed aperture correction photometry by using a small aperture on the KBOs (0′.65–0′.88 in radius) and both the same small aperture and a large aperture (2′40–3′29 in radius) on (four or more) nearby bright field stars. We corrected the magnitude within the small aperture used for the KBOs by determining the correction from the small to the large aperture using the field stars (cf. Tegler & Romanishin 2000; Jewitt & Luu 2001). Since the KBOs moved slowly, we were able to use the same field stars from night to night within each observing run. Relative photometric calibration from night to night was very constant. The few observations that were taken in mildly nonphotometric conditions were calibrated to observations of the same field stars on the photometric nights. The observational circumstances, geometry, and orbital characteristics of the 13 observed KBOs are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

3. LIGHT-CURVE RESULTS

The photometric results for the 13 KBOs are listed in Table 3, where the columns include the start time of each integration, the corresponding Julian Date, and the magnitude. No correction for light-travel time has been made. Results of the light-curve analysis for all the KBOs observed are summarized in Table 4, while the mean colors can be found in Table 5. We first discuss the light curves of (20000) Varuna, 2000 GN171, (33128) 1998 BU48, and (40314) 1999 KR16 and give some details about the null results below.

We employed the phase dispersion minimization (PDM) method (Stellingwerf 1978) to search for periodicity in the data. In PDM, the metric is the so-called $\delta$-parameter, which is essentially the variance of the data when phased by
a given period divided by the variance of the unphased data. The best-fit period should have a very small dispersion compared with the unphased data, and thus \( \theta < 1 \) indicates that a good fit has been found.

3.1. (20000) Varuna

Varuna shows a large, periodic photometric variation (Farnham 2001). We measured a range \( \Delta m_R = 0.42 \pm 0.02 \) mag and best-fit, two-peaked light-curve period \( P = 6.3436 \pm 0.0002 \) hr (about twice the period reported by Farnham), with no evidence for a rotational modulation in the \( B-V, V-R, \) or \( R-I \) color index. These results, and their interpretation in terms of a rotating, elongated rubble pile of low bulk density, are described in detail in Jewitt & Sheppard (2002).

3.2. 2000 GN\(_{171}\)

PDM analysis shows that 2000 GN\(_{171}\) has strong PDM minima near periods \( P = 4.17 \) hr and \( P = 8.33 \) hr, with weaker 24 hr alias periods flanking each of these (Fig. 1).

We phased the data to all the peaks with \( \Theta < 0.4 \) and found only the 4.17 and 8.33 hr periods to be consistent with all the data. The \( P = 4.17 \) hr period gives a light curve with a single maximum per period, while the \( P = 8.33 \) hr light curve has two maxima per period, as expected for rotational modulation caused by an aspherical shape. Through visual inspection of the phased light curves, we find that the phase plot for \( P = 4.17 \) hr (Fig. 2) is more scattered than that for the longer period of \( P = 8.33 \) hr (Fig. 3). This is because the double-peaked phase plot shows a significant asymmetry of \( \Delta m_R = 0.08 \) mag between the two upper and lower peaks. A closer view of the PDM plot in Figure 4 around the double-peaked period allows us to obtain a rotation period of \( P_{\text{rot}} = 8.329 \pm 0.005 \) hr with a peak-to-peak variation of \( \Delta m_R = 0.61 \pm 0.03 \) mag. We believe that the photometric variations in 2000 GN\(_{171}\) are due to its elongated shape rather than to albedo variations on its surface.

Broadband \( BVRI \) colors of 2000 GN\(_{171}\) show no variation throughout its rotation within the photometric uncertainties of a few percent (Figs. 5 and 6 and Table 6). This again suggests that the light curve is mostly caused by an elongated object with a nearly uniform surface. The colors

### Table 2

| Object       | Class\(^a\) | \( H \) (mag) | \( i \) (deg) | \( e \) | \( a \) (AU) |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------|-------------|
| (38628) 2000 EB\(_{173}\)       | R           | 4.7           | 15.5         | 0.273 | 39.3        |
| (20000) Varuna 2000 WR\(_{106}\)       | C           | 3.7           | 17.1         | 0.055 | 43.2        |
| (26375) 1999 DE\(_{2}\)           | S           | 4.7           | 7.6          | 0.423 | 55.9        |
| (26181) 1996 GQ\(_{21}\)         | S           | 5.2           | 13.4         | 0.588 | 92.8        |
| 2000 GN\(_{171}\)      | R           | 5.8           | 10.8         | 0.279 | 39.3        |
| (19521) Chaos 1998 WH\(_{24}\)    | C           | 4.9           | 12.0         | 0.110 | 46.1        |
| (33340) 1998 VG\(_{44}\)         | R           | 6.5           | 3.0          | 0.260 | 39.6        |
| 2001 FZ\(_{273}\)              | S           | 6.2           | 12.2         | 0.622 | 88.0        |
| (33128) 1998 BU\(_{28}\)         | S           | 7.2           | 14.2         | 0.387 | 33.5        |
| (40314) 1999 KR\(_{16}\)         | C           | 5.8           | 24.9         | 0.298 | 48.5        |
| 2001 CZ\(_{31}\)               | C           | 5.2           | 2.2          | 0.015 | 44.2        |
| 1998 HK\(_{151}\)              | R           | 7.6           | 6.0          | 0.224 | 39.1        |

Note.—Parameters are from the Minor Planet Center. \( H \) is the absolute magnitude, which is the object’s brightness if it were at 1 AU from the Sun and Earth and the phase angle were zero, \( i \) is the inclination, \( e \) is the eccentricity, and \( a \) is the semi major axis.

\(^{a}\) (S) Scattered-type object; (C) classical-type object; (R) resonance-type object.

### Table 3

| Object       | Image\(^a\) | UT Date\(^b\) | Julian Date\(^c\) | Exp.\(^d\) (s) | Mag.\(^c\) (\( m_R \)) |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------|
| (38628) 2000 EB\(_{173}\)       | 6066       | 2001 Feb 21.4853 | 2,451,961.9853 | 200        | 19.318           |
|               | 6067       | 2001 Feb 21.4889 | 2,451,961.9889 | 200        | 19.323           |
|               | 6072       | 2001 Feb 21.5195 | 2,451,962.0195 | 200        | 19.360           |
|               | 6073       | 2001 Feb 21.5231 | 2,451,962.0231 | 200        | 19.363           |
|               | 6081       | 2001 Feb 21.5658 | 2,451,962.0658 | 200        | 19.364           |

Note.—Table 3 is presented in its entirety in the electronic edition of the Astronomical Journal. A portion is shown here for guidance regarding its form and content.

\(^{a}\) Image number.

\(^{b}\) Decimal Universal Date at the start of the integration.

\(^{c}\) Julian Date at the start of the integration.

\(^{d}\) Exposure time for the image.

\(^{c}\) Apparent red magnitude; uncertainties are \( \pm 0.02–0.03 \) for the brighter objects (\( < 21.0 \) mag) and \( \pm 0.04–0.05 \) for fainter objects.
$B-V = 0.92 \pm 0.04$, $V-R = 0.63 \pm 0.04$, and $R-I = 0.56 \pm 0.03$ (Tables 5 and 6) show that 2000 GN$_{171}$ is red but unremarkably so as a KBO (Jewitt & Luu 2001).

### 3.3. (33128) 1998 BU$_{48}$

The KBO 1998 BU$_{48}$ showed substantial variability (>0.4 mag with period greater than 4.0 hr) in $R$-band observations from two nights in 2001 February and April. However, a convincing light curve could not be found from just these two nights separated by 2 months. Additional observations were obtained in the period 2001 November 14–19. One minimum and one maximum in brightness within a single night were observed and put the full single-peaked light curve between about 4 and 6 hr. Through PDM analysis, 1998 BU$_{48}$ was found to have a peak-to-peak variation of $\Delta m = 0.68 \pm 0.04$ mag with possible single-peaked periods near 4.1, 4.9, and 6.3 hr, which are 24 hr aliases of each other (Fig. 7). By examining the phased data using these three possible periods, we find that the single-peaked periods of 4.9 ± 0.1 and 6.3 ± 0.1 hr are both plausible (Fig. 8). The colors, $B-V = 0.77 \pm 0.05$, $V-R = 0.68 \pm 0.04$, and $R-I = 0.50 \pm 0.04$ (Table 5), show no sign of variation throughout the light curve, within the measurement uncertainties (Table 7 and Fig. 8).

### 3.4. (40314) 1999 KR$_{16}$

This object was observed on four different observing runs during the course of 2000 and 2001. The data from 2001 are

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**Table 4**

**Properties of Observed KBOs**

| Object      | $m_R$ (mag) | Nights$^b$ | $\Delta m_R$ (mag) | Single$^c$ (hr) | Double$^c$ (hr) |
|-------------|-------------|------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| (38628)     | 2000 EB$_{173}$ | 19.18 ± 0.03 | 3 | <0.06 | ... |
| (20000)     | Varuna 2000 WR$_{106}$ | 19.70 ± 0.25 | 8 | 0.42 ± 0.03 | ... | 6.34 ± 0.01 |
| (33128)     | 2000 GN$_{171}$ | 20.35 ± 0.04 | 6 | <0.10 | ... |
| (19521)     | Chaos 1998 WH$_{34}$ | 20.66 ± 0.10 | 2 | <0.10 | ?
| (33340)     | 1998 VG$_{48}$ | 21.05 ± 0.05 | 2 | <0.06 | ... |
| (33128)     | 1998 BU$_{48}$ | 21.25 ± 0.35 | 7 | 0.68 ± 0.04 | 4.9 ± 0.1 | 9.8 ± 0.1 |
| (40314)     | 1999 KR$_{16}$ | 21.15 ± 0.15 | 10 | 0.18 ± 0.04 | 5.929 ± 0.001 | 11.858 ± 0.002 |
| 1997 CS$_{29}$ | 21.36 ± 0.04 | 1 | <0.08 | ... |
| 2001 CZ$_{31}$ | 21.70 ± 0.10 | 5 | <0.20 | ?
| 1998 HK$_{151}$ | 21.75 ± 0.05 | 2 | <0.15 | ... |

$^a$ Mean red magnitude on the date having the majority of observations.

$^b$ Number of nights used to determine the light curve.

$^c$ Peak-to-peak range of the light curve.

$^d$ The light-curve period if there is one maximum per period.

$^e$ The light-curve period if there are two maxima per period.

$^f$ See Jewitt & Sheppard 2002 for details.

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**Table 5**

**Colors of Observed Kuiper Belt Objects**

| Object      | $B-V$          | $V-R$          | $R-I$          |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| (38628)     | 0.93 ± 0.04    | 0.65 ± 0.03    | 0.59 ± 0.03    |
| (20000)     | 0.85 ± 0.01    | 0.64 ± 0.01    | 0.62 ± 0.01    |
| (26137)     | 0.94 ± 0.03    | 0.57 ± 0.03    | 0.56 ± 0.03    |
| (26181)     | 0.92 ± 0.04    | 0.69 ± 0.03    | ...            |
| (19521)     | 0.94 ± 0.03    | 0.63 ± 0.03    | 0.56 ± 0.03    |
| (33340)     | 0.93 ± 0.05    | 0.61 ± 0.04    | 0.77 ± 0.04    |
| (33128)     | 0.77 ± 0.05    | 0.68 ± 0.04    | 0.50 ± 0.04    |
| (40314)     | 0.99 ± 0.03    | 0.75 ± 0.04    | 0.70 ± 0.04    |
| (1997)      | 1.16 ± 0.06    | 0.61 ± 0.05    | 0.66 ± 0.03    |
| 2001 CZ$_{31}$ | 0.60 ± 0.15    | 0.5 ± 0.1     | 0.3 ± 0.1     |
| 1998 HK$_{151}$ | 0.45 ± 0.04    | 0.42 ± 0.04    |

$^a$ From Jewitt & Luu 2001.

$^b$ See Jewitt & Sheppard 2002.

$^c$ From Tegler & Romanishin 2000.

$^d$ From Boehnhardt et al. 2001.

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**Fig. 2.**—Phased $R$-band data from the UT 2001 April 20–25 and May 11–13 observations of 2000 GN$_{171}$. The period has been phased to 4.17 hr, which is the best-fit single-peaked period. The May data have been corrected for geometry and phase-angle differences relative to the April data (see Table 1). The points are much more scattered here than for the better fit double-peaked period (Fig. 3).
more numerous and of better quality than the data from 2000. We observed one brightness minimum and one maximum within a single night of data and from this estimated that the full single-peaked light curve should be near 6 hr. In a PDM plot constructed using only the inferior data from 2000, we found single-peaked minima at 4.66 and 5.82 hr. Phased light curves at these periods are acceptable for the year 2000 data, but the 4.66 hr period is inconsistent with the 2001 CZ31 data, which shows the 15 and 60 day aliasing much better and gives two best-fit periods, one at 5.840 hr and the other at 5.929 hr (Fig. 9). Closer examination of the PDM fit near 5.9 hr flanking peaks from 24 hr and 15 and 60 day sampling aliases (Fig. 10). We phased the 2001 data to both single peaks and found neither to be significantly better than the other. The true single-peaked period for 1999 KR16 is at one of these two values. The data phased to the 5.840 hr single-peaked period are shown in Figure 11. Neither of the possible double-peaked periods of 11.680 and 11.858 hr shows differences between the peaks. The peak-to-peak amplitude of 1999 KR16 is 0.18 ± 0.04 in the 2001 data, consistent with that found in the 2000 data. Colors of 1999 KR16, B - V = 0.99 ± 0.05, V - R = 0.75 ± 0.04, and R - I = 0.70 ± 0.04, are on the red end of the KBO distribution (Table 5). The colors show no signs of variation through the rotation of the object to the accuracy of our measurements (Table 8 and Fig. 11).

3.5. Null Light Curves

Nine of the TNOs [2001 FZ173, 2001 CZ31, (38628) 2000 EB173, (26375) 1999 DE9, 1998 HK151, (33340) 1998 VG44, (19521) Chaos 1998 WH24, 1997 CS29, and (26181) 1996 GQ31] show no measurable photometric variations. Practically, this means that their light curves have range ≤0.15 mag, period ≥24 hr, or both (Fig. 12 and Table 4). A few objects show hints of variability that might, with better data, emerge as rotationally modulated light curves. Inspection of the 2001 CZ31 data hints at a single-peaked light curve of period ~3 hr and amplitude ~0.15 mag, but since the photometry has large error bars, we cannot be sure of this result. The TNO 1999 DE9 may have a long-period light curve of about 0.1 mag range, since the brightness on 2001 April 24 slowly increases toward the end of the night and the February data appear to have base magnitudes different by about 0.1 mag. The data from 2000 on 1999 DE9 show the object to have a flat light curve. The object (33340) 1998 VG44 may also have a long-period light curve, since its base magnitudes on 1999 November 11 and 12 are different by about 0.05 mag. The bright TNO (19521) 1998 WH24 may have a possible light curve of about 4 hours single-peaked period and peak-to-range of 0.07 mag. Confirmation of these subtle light curves will require more accurate data, probably from larger telescopes than that employed here.

4. INTERPRETATION

The KBOs should be in principal-axis rotation, since the expected damping time of any other wobbles is much less than the age of the solar system (Burns & Safronov 1973; Harris 1994). Orbital periods of KBOs are long (>200 yr), and thus the pole orientation to our line of sight should not change significantly between epochs. The apparent magnitude of a KBO depends on its physical characteristics and geometric circumstances and can be represented as

\[ m_R = m_\odot - 2.5 \log [p_R^2 \phi(\alpha)/(2.25 \times 10^{16} R^2 \Delta^2)] \quad (1) \]

in which \( r \) (km) is the radius of the KBO, \( R \) (AU) is the heliocentric distance, \( \Delta \) (AU) is the geocentric distance, \( m_\odot \) is the apparent red magnitude of the Sun (−27.1), \( m_R \) is the apparent red magnitude, \( p_R \) is the red geometric albedo, and \( \phi(\alpha) \) is the phase function, in which the phase angle \( \alpha = 0^\circ \) at opposition and \( \phi(0) = 1 \). The apparent brightness of an inert body viewed in reflected light may vary because of \( (\alpha) \) changes in the observing geometry, including the effects of phase darkening as in equation (1), and \( (\theta) \) rotational modulation of the scattered light. These different effects are discussed below.
4.1. Nonuniform Surface Markings

Surface albedo markings or topographical shadowing can potentially influence the light curves. Judging by other planetary bodies, the resulting light variations are typically smaller than those caused by elongated shape, with fluctuations due to albedo being mostly less than about 10%–20% (Degewij, Tedesco, & Zellner 1979). A color variation at the maximum and minimum of a light curve may be seen if albedo is the primary cause for the light curve, since materials with markedly different albedos often also have markedly different colors. For example, many pure ices and frosts have a very high albedo and are neutral to bluish in color. A light curve caused by an ice or frost patch should show a

Fig. 5.—Same as Fig. 3, but for the BVRI data. The BVRI data have been shifted by the amount indicated on the graph in order to correspond to the $R$ data. No color variation is seen within our uncertainties. A Fourier fit shows the two pronounced maxima and minima.

Fig. 6.—Colors of 2000 GN$_{171}$ plotted against rotational phase for 8.329 hr.

Fig. 7.—PDM plot for (33128) 1998 BU$_{48}$ from the 2001 November data. Best fits from this plot are the 4.9 and 6.3 hr single-peaked fits and the 9.8 and 12.6 hr double-peaked fits.
The large albedo contrast on Iapetus is a special consequence of its synchronous rotation and the impact of material trapped in orbit about Saturn. This process is without analog in the Kuiper belt. Pluto is also not representative of the other KBOs. It is so large that it can sustain an atmosphere, which may contribute to amplifying its light-curve amplitude by allowing surface frosts to condense on brighter (cooler) spots. Thus, brighter spots grow brighter while darker (hotter) spots grow darker through the sublimation of ices. This positive feedback mechanism requires an atmosphere and is unlikely to be relevant on the smaller KBOs studied here.

### 4.2. Aspherical Shape

The critical rotation period ($T_{cr}$) at which centripetal acceleration equals gravitational acceleration toward the
center of a rotating spherical object is

\[ T_{\text{crit}} = \left( \frac{3\pi}{G\rho} \right)^{1/2}, \]  

where \( G \) is the gravitational constant and \( \rho \) is the density of the object. With \( \rho = 10^3 \text{ kg m}^{-3} \), the critical period is about 3.3 hr. Even at longer periods, real bodies will suffer centripetal deformation into aspherical shapes. For a given density and specific angular momentum \( (H) \), the nature of the deformation depends on the strength of the object. In the limiting case of a strengthless (fluid) body, the equilibrium shapes have been well studied (Chandrasekhar 1987). For \( H \leq 0.304 \) [in units of \( (GM^2a^3)^{1/2} \), where \( M \) (kg) is the mass of the object and \( a \) (m) is the radius of an equal-volume sphere], the equilibrium shapes are the oblate “Maclaurin”

**Table 7**

Color Measurements of (33128) 1998 BU

| Image | UT Date | JD | Phase | \( R \) | \( B-R \) | \( V-R \) | \( R-I \) |
|-------|---------|----|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|
| 4098  | 2001 Nov 17.5907 | 2,452,231.0907 | 0.3418 | 21.138 | ... | 0.613 | ... |
| 4107  | 2001 Nov 17.6458 | 2,452,231.1458 | 0.5519 | 20.934 | ... | 0.656 | ... |
| 4099  | 2001 Nov 17.5968 | 2,452,231.0967 | 0.3647 | 21.091 | ... | ... | 0.542 |
| 5088  | 2001 Nov 18.5635 | 2,452,231.9666 | 0.1916 | 21.490 | 1.497 | ... | ... |
| 5091  | 2001 Nov 18.5819 | 2,452,231.9850 | 0.3042 | 21.227 | 1.408 | ... | ... |
| 5095  | 2001 Nov 18.6056 | 2,452,232.0087 | 0.0533 | 21.529 | ... | 0.777 | ... |
| 5087  | 2001 Nov 18.5558 | 2,452,231.9589 | 0.1237 | 21.564 | ... | 0.698 | ... |
| 5090  | 2001 Nov 18.5760 | 2,452,231.9791 | 0.2141 | 21.446 | ... | 0.645 | ... |
| 5098  | 2001 Nov 18.6233 | 2,452,232.0264 | 0.0242 | 21.483 | ... | ... | 0.519 |
| 5094  | 2001 Nov 18.5997 | 2,452,232.0028 | 0.1011 | 21.566 | ... | 0.380 | ... |
| 5099  | 2001 Nov 18.6292 | 2,452,232.0323 | 0.2817 | 21.283 | ... | ... | 0.574 |
| Mean  | 1.45 ± 0.05 | 0.68 ± 0.04 | 0.50 ± 0.04 |

* \( a \) Julian day at start of exposure.
* \( b \) Phase of (33128) 1998 BU corresponding to color measurement of the single-peaked 6.29 hr light curve. The phase of 0.6 corresponds to maximum brightness (\( \approx 20.9 \)), and 0.1 corresponds to minimum brightness (\( \approx 21.6 \)).
* \( c \) \( R \) magnitude interpolated to the time of the corresponding \( BVI \) data.

**Fig. 8—** \( BVI \) phased data from the UT 2001 November 14–19 observations of (33128) 1998 BU. The period has been phased to 6.29 hr, which is one of the best-fit single-peaked periods for (33128) 1998 BU, the other being around 4.9 hr.
spheroids. Oblate spheroids in rotation about their minor axis exhibit no rotational modulation of the cross section and therefore are not candidate shapes for explaining the light curves of the KBOs. However, for $0.304 \leq H \leq 0.390$ the equilibrium figures are triaxial “Jacobi” ellipsoids, which generate light curves of substantial amplitude when viewed equatorially. Strengthless objects with $H > 0.390$ are rotationally unstable to fission.

The KBOs, being composed of solid matter, clearly cannot be strengthless. However, it is likely that the interior structures of these bodies have been repeatedly fractured by impact, and that their mechanical response to applied rotational stress is approximately fluid-like. Such “rubble pile” structure has long been suspected in the main asteroid belt (Farinella et al. 1981) and has been specifically proposed to explain the short period and large amplitude of (20000) Varuna (Jewitt & Sheppard 2002). The rotational deformation of a rubble pile is uniquely related to its bulk density and specific angular momentum. Therefore, given that the shape and specific angular momentum can be estimated from the amplitude and period of the light curve, it is possible to use photometric data to estimate the density.

Elongated objects exhibit rotational photometric variations caused by changes in the projected cross section. The rotation period of an elongated object should be twice the single-peaked light-curve variation because of its projection of both long axes (two maxima) and short axes (two minima) during one full rotation. From the ratio of maximum to minimum brightness, we can determine the projection of the body shape into the plane of the sky. The rotational brightness range of a triaxial object with semiaxes $a \geq b \geq c$ in rotation about the $c$-axis is given by

$$\Delta m = 2.5 \log \left( \frac{a}{b} \right) - 1.25 \log \left( \frac{a^2 \cos^2 \theta + c^2 \sin^2 \theta}{b^2 \cos^2 \theta + c^2 \sin^2 \theta} \right)$$

(Binzel et al. 1989), where $\Delta m$ is expressed in magnitudes and $\theta$ is the angle at which the rotation ($c$) axis is inclined to the line of sight (an object with $\theta = 90^\circ$ is viewed equatorially).

It is to be expected that, through collisions, fragments would have random pole-vector orientations. For example, the collisionally highly evolved asteroid belt shows a complete randomization of pole-vector orientations, $\theta$. Only the largest asteroids may show a preference for rotation vectors aligned perpendicular to the ecliptic ($\theta = 90^\circ$), though this is debatable (Binzel et al. 1989; Drummond et al. 1991; De Angelis 1995). In the absence of any pole orientation data for the KBOs, we will assume they have a random distribution of spin vectors. Given a random distribution, the probability of viewing an object within the angle range $\theta$ to $\theta + d\theta$ is proportional to $\sin \theta d\theta$. In such a distribution, the average viewing angle is $\theta = 60^\circ$. Therefore, on average, the sky-plane ratio of the axes of an elongated body is smaller than the actual ratio by a factor $\sin 60^\circ \approx 0.87$.

In addition to rotational deformation, it is possible that some asteroids and KBOs consist of contact binaries (Jewitt & Sheppard 2002). For a contact binary consisting of equal spheres, the axis ratio of 2 : 1 corresponds to a peak-to-peak light-curve range $\Delta m = 0.75$ mag, as seen from the rotational equator. For such an object at the average viewing angle $\theta = 60^\circ$, we expect $\Delta m = 0.45$ mag.

Collisonally produced fragments on average have axis ratios 2 : $\sqrt{2}$ : 1 (Fujiiwara, Kamimoto, & Tsukamoto 1978; Capaccioni et al. 1984). When viewed equatorially, such fragments will have $\Delta m = 0.38$ mag. At the mean viewing angle $\theta = 60^\circ$, we obtain $\Delta m = 0.20$ mag.

4.3. Light-Curve Model Results

The KBOs in our sample are very large ($D > 250$ km, assuming a low albedo) and should, in the absence of rotational deformation, be spherical in shape from gravitational self-compression. The large amplitudes and fast rotations of (20000) Varuna, 2000 GN$_{171}$, and (33128) 1998 BU$_{48}$ suggest that the light curves are caused by elongation and not surface albedo features. In support of this is the finding that (33128) 1998 BU$_{48}$ and (20000) Varuna have no color variations throughout their light curves and 2000 GN$_{171}$ has only a slight, if any, variation in color. Independently, 2000 GN$_{171}$ shows two distinct light-curve maxima and minima,
Fig. 11.—Phased $BVRI$ data from the UT 2001 April 24–25 and May 11–13 observations of (40341) 1999 KR$_{16}$. The period has been phased to 5.840 hr, which is one of the best-fit single-peaked periods for (40341) 1999 KR$_{16}$, the other being at 5.929 hr.

### TABLE 8

**Color Measurements of (40341) 1999 KR$_{16}$**

| Image | UT Date | JD$^a$ | Phase$^b$ | $R^c$ | $B-R$ | $V-R$ | $R-I$ |
|-------|---------|--------|-----------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2031  | 2001 May 12.2634 | 2,452,041.7634 | 0.135 | 21.107 | ... | 0.705 | ... |
| 2035  | 2001 May 12.2899 | 2,452,041.7899 | 0.244 | 21.173 | ... | 0.753 | ... |
| 2051  | 2001 May 12.3479 | 2,452,041.8479 | 0.482 | 21.183 | ... | 0.748 | ... |
| 2055  | 2001 May 12.3743 | 2,452,041.8743 | 0.590 | 21.161 | ... | 0.770 | ... |
| 2069  | 2001 May 12.4314 | 2,452,041.9314 | 0.825 | 21.048 | ... | 0.798 | ... |
| 2073  | 2001 May 12.4538 | 2,452,041.9538 | 0.917 | 21.016 | ... | 0.778 | ... |
| 2033  | 2001 May 12.2754 | 2,452,041.7754 | 0.184 | 21.141 | ... | 0.713 | ... |
| 2037  | 2001 May 12.3020 | 2,452,041.8019 | 0.293 | 21.189 | ... | 0.734 | ... |
| 2053  | 2001 May 12.3599 | 2,452,041.8599 | 0.531 | 21.174 | ... | 0.699 | ... |
| 2057  | 2001 May 12.3862 | 2,452,041.8662 | 0.640 | 21.145 | ... | 0.660 | ... |
| 2034  | 2001 May 12.2815 | 2,452,041.7814 | 0.209 | 21.156 | 1.743 | ... | ... |
| 2054  | 2001 May 12.3659 | 2,452,041.8659 | 0.556 | 21.169 | 1.738 | ... | ... |
| 3035  | 2001 May 13.3145 | 2,452,042.8144 | 0.454 | 21.187 | ... | 0.698 | ... |
| 3038  | 2001 May 13.3325 | 2,452,042.8325 | 0.528 | 21.175 | ... | 0.808 | ... |
| 3057  | 2001 May 13.4042 | 2,452,042.9042 | 0.823 | 21.050 | ... | 0.787 | ... |
| 3059  | 2001 May 13.4162 | 2,452,042.9161 | 0.872 | 21.027 | ... | 0.721 | ... |
| 3062  | 2001 May 13.4342 | 2,452,042.9342 | 0.947 | 21.014 | ... | 0.736 | ... |
| 3037  | 2001 May 13.3265 | 2,452,042.8265 | 0.504 | 21.179 | ... | ... | 0.706 |
| 3040  | 2001 May 13.3444 | 2,452,042.8444 | 0.577 | 21.164 | ... | 0.727 | ... |
| 3061  | 2001 May 13.4282 | 2,452,042.9282 | 0.922 | 21.015 | ... | 0.692 | ... |
| 3064  | 2001 May 13.4463 | 2,452,042.9463 | 0.996 | 21.023 | ... | ... | 0.652 |

**Mean**

1.74 ± 0.04    0.75 ± 0.03    0.70 ± 0.03

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$^a$ Julian day at start of exposure.

$^b$ Phase of (40341) 1999 KR$_{16}$ corresponding to color measurement of the single-peaked 5.84 hr light curve. The phase of 0.9 corresponds to maximum brightness (∼21.0), and 0.4 corresponds to minimum brightness (∼21.2).

$^c$ $R$ magnitude interpolated to the time of the corresponding $BV1$ data. $R$ magnitudes are corrected for phase and distance difference from April data so they can be compared with the plots directly.
which is a strong reason to believe the object is elongated. The other light curve we found was for (40314) 1999 KR 16. Since its amplitude is much smaller and its period longer, the light curve of (40314) 1999 KR 16 may be dominated by nonuniform-albedo features on its surface, though we found no measurable color variation over the rotation.

Table 10 lists the parameters of albedo, Jacobi ellipsoid, and binary models that fit the axis ratios estimated from the light-curve data (Table 4). For each object and model, we list the minimum bulk density $\rho$ required to maintain a stable configuration, as described in Jewitt & Sheppard (2002). We briefly describe the procedure below for 2000 GN 171.

Results for the rest of the objects in our sample with significant light variation [(20000) Varuna, (33128) 1998 BU48, and (40314) 1999 KR 16] can be seen in Table 10, using the data from Table 4.

![Fig. 12a](image1.png)

![Fig. 12b](image2.png)

![Fig. 12c](image3.png)

![Fig. 12d](image4.png)

![Fig. 12e](image5.png)

![Fig. 12f](image6.png)

Fig. 12.—Null light curves of KBOs found to have no significant variation: (a) 2001 FZ173, (b) 2001 CZ31, (c) (38628) 2000 EB173, (d-f) (26375) 1999 DE9, (g) 1998 HK151, (h) (33340) 1998 VG44, (i) (19521) Chaos 1998 WH24, (j) 1997 CS29, (k–l) (26181) 1996 GQ21.
We use equation (3) to estimate the axis ratio $a/b$. If we assume that the rotation axis is perpendicular to our line of sight ($\theta = 90^\circ$), we obtain

$$a/b = 10^{0.4\Delta m_R}.$$  

Using $\Delta m_R = 0.61$ mag, we obtain from equation (4) $a/b = 1.75 : 1$ for 2000 GN$_{171}$. This is a lower limit to the intrinsic axis ratio because of the effects of projection into the plane of the sky. If 2000 GN$_{171}$ is a Jacobi triaxial ellipsoid with $P = 8.329$ hr, then its $a:b:c$ axis ratio would be $1.75 : 1 : 0.735$ and the lower limit on the density would be $\rho = 635$ kg m$^{-3}$ (Chandrasekhar 1987; see Jewitt & Sheppard 2002 for a KBO-context discussion of Jacobi ellipsoids). If 2000 GN$_{171}$ were a contact binary, the ratio of the two radii, $a_1:a_2$, would be $1.15 : 1$ with a lower limit to the density of $\rho = 585$ kg m$^{-3}$ (see Jewitt & Sheppard 2002 for a discussion of contact binaries in the KBO context). Finally, though it is unlikely, if 2000 GN$_{171}$ is spherical and the light curve is due to a $1.75 : 1$ contrast in albedo, then the lower limit to the density of the KBO is $\rho = 157$ kg m$^{-3}$ from equation (2) and using $P = 8.329$ hr.

5. DISCUSSION

In Table 9, we show objects in the solar system that have one axis of at least 200 km and show large-amplitude light curves. Interestingly, there is a group of asteroids that are large ($D = 200–300$ km) and which have substantial light-curve amplitudes. They also possess fast rotations. These objects are probably rotationally deformed “rubble piles,” which may be similar to a Jacobi ellipsoid-type object.
(Farinella et al. 1981). Such rubble-pile structures may form in the main asteroid belt because all objects have been affected by the high-velocity (∼5 km s⁻¹) collisions that occur there (Farinella, Paolicchi, & Zappala 1982). The effect of collisions is highly dependent on the object size. Objects with $D > 300$ km are large enough not to be completely turned into rubble piles or have their angular momentum greatly altered. Objects with diameters 200–300 km are large enough to be gravitationally bound, but impacts over the age of the solar system will transform them into rubble piles and may significantly change their angular momentum. Most asteroids with $D < 200$ km are thought to be fragments from catastrophic collisions and are not massive enough to be gravitationally spherical.

How does the collisional outcome scale with velocity and density differences in the asteroid belt versus the Kuiper belt? We assume the target body experiences catastrophic breakup when the projectile kinetic energy equals the gravitational binding energy of the target,

$$\frac{1}{2} M_p v^2 = \frac{3GM_p^2}{5r_p},$$

where $\Delta v$ is the mean collision speed, $M$ is mass, $r$ is radius, and subscripts $p$ and $t$ refer to projectile and target, respectively. For collisions with a target of given radius, the ratio of the sizes of the projectiles needed to cause disruption in the main belt and in the Kuiper belt is

$$\frac{r_{p,KB}}{r_{p,MB}} = \left[ \left( \frac{\rho_{KB}}{\rho_{MB}} \frac{\Delta v_{KB}}{\Delta v_{MB}} \right)^{2/3} \right]^{1/3},$$

where we have assumed that all KBOs have density $\rho_{KB}$ and all main-belt asteroids have density $\rho_{MB}$. Here $r_{p,MB}$ and $r_{p,KB}$ are the radii of the projectile in the main belt and in the Kuiper belt that are needed to fracture the target in the respective belt, $\rho_{MB}$ and $\rho_{KB}$ are the densities of the target body in the main belt and Kuiper belt, respectively, and $\Delta v_{MB}$ and $\Delta v_{KB}$ are the respective collision velocities. If we put in nominal values of $\rho_{MB} = 3000$ kg m⁻³, $v_{MB} = 5$ km s⁻¹ and $\rho_{KB} = 1000$ kg m⁻³, $v_{KB} = 1.5$ km s⁻¹ for the main-belt asteroids and Kuiper belt, respectively, we find

$$r_{p,KB} \approx 1.5r_{p,MB}.$$  

Thus, for targets of equal size a projectile has to be about 50% larger in the Kuiper belt than in the main belt to be able to cause catastrophic breakup of the target body. This difference is not large, and since the current collisional timescales for the asteroids and KBOs are similar (Davis & Farinella 1997; Durda & Stern 2000), other factors such as material strength and the number density of objects during early formation of each belt will be most important in determining collisional differences.

**TABLE 9**

| Name       | Type    | $a \times b \times c$ (km) | $\rho$ (kg m⁻³) | $\Delta$ mag | Period (hr) | Comment |
|------------|---------|---------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|---------|
| Pluto      | Planet  | 2300                      | 2061           | 0.33         | 6.4 days    | Albedo  |
| Iapetus    | Satellite | 1430                   | 1025           | 2            | 79.3 days   | Albedo  |
| Hyperion   | Satellite | $350 \times 240 \times 200$ | $\sim 1250$   | 0.5          | Chaos       | Fragment?|
| 624 Hektor | Trojan   | 300 $\times 150$         | $\sim 2500$   | 1.2          | 6.9         | Contact binary? |
| Amalthea   | Satellite | $270 \times 166 \times 150$ | $\sim 3000$   | ...          | ...         | Fragment (?)/albedo |
| 15 Eunomia | Asteroid | $\sim 270 \times 160 \times 115$ | 1160          | 0.56         | 6.1         | Jacobi? |
| 87 Sylvia  | Asteroid | $\sim 270 \times 150 \times 115$ | 1640          | 0.62         | 5.2         | Jacobi? |
| 16 Psyche  | Asteroid | $\sim 260 \times 175 \times 120$ | 2340          | 0.42         | 4.2         | Jacobi? |
| 107 Camilla| Asteroid | $\sim 240 \times 150 \times 105$ | 1850          | 0.52         | 4.8         | Jacobi? |
| Janus      | Satellite | 220 $\times 190$ $\times 160$ | 656           | ...          | ...         | Fragment? |
| 45 Eugenia | Asteroid | $\sim 210 \times 145 \times 100$ | 1270         | 0.41         | 5.7         | Jacobi? |

*Note.*—Listed are objects that have diameters over 200 km and light curves with peak-to-peak amplitudes above 0.40 mag. Pluto is the only exception, since its light curve is slightly less than 0.40 mag. The Jacobi-type main-belt asteroids had their axis ratios and densities calculated from their amplitudes and periods as described for the KBOs in the text. Data for the other objects were culled from the best measurements in the literature.

**TABLE 10**

| Name       | $H$ (mag) | $D$ (km) | $a:b:c$ | $\rho$ (kg m⁻³) | $\Delta v$ (km s⁻¹) | $\rho$ (kg m⁻³) | $a_1:a_2$ | $\rho$ (kg m⁻³) |
|------------|-----------|----------|---------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Varuna     | 3.7       | 900      | 1:1     | $\geq 1090$     | $\geq 1.5:1:0.7$     | $\geq 1050$     | $\geq 1.4:1$ | $\geq 996$     |
| 2000 GN₁₁ | 5.8       | 400      | 1:1     | $\geq 157$      | $\geq 1.75:1:0.74$   | $\geq 635$      | $\geq 1.15:1$ | $\geq 585$     |
| 1998 BU₄₈ | 7.2       | 240      | 1:1     | $\geq 109$      | $\geq 1.87:1:0.75$   | $\geq 456$      | $\geq 1.07:1$ | $\geq 435$     |
| 1999 KR₁₆ | 5.8       | 400      | 1:1     | $\geq 77$       | $\geq 1.18:1:0.63$   | $\geq 280$      | $\geq 2.35:1$ | $\geq 210$     |

* Diameter computed assuming that the albedo is 0.04.
* See Jewitt & Sheppard 2002.
The current Kuiper belt has been found to be erosive for KBOs with $D < 100$ km, while many of the larger objects are probably rubble piles (Davis & Farinella 1997). Laboratory and computer simulations show that self-gravitating targets are more easily fractured than dispersed (Asphaug et al. 1998). Once formed, rubble-pile structures can insulate the rest of the body from the energy of impact, further inhibiting disruption. Collision experiments by Ryan, Davis, & Giblin (1999) also show that porous ices dissipate energy efficiently. The outcome of impact into a rubble pile depends heavily on the angle of impact. We note that glancing low-velocity collisions substantially alter the spin of the target body and can create elongated objects and contact binaries (Leinhardt, Richardson, & Quinn 2000). These simulations all hint that rubble-pile structures are able to remain gravitationally bound after an impact but that their angular momentum may be altered in the process, which could produce elongated shapes.

To date, eight binary Kuiper belt objects have been reported. It seems that there may be a large fraction of binary KBOs. It also appears that about 32% of KBOs are highly elongated. Both the binaries and the highly elongated shapes indicate large specific angular momentum, most likely delivered by glancing collisions. The current rate of collisions is too small, however, for any substantial modifications of the spins or shapes of KBOs (Jewitt & Sheppard 2002). Instead, we prefer the hypothesis that the binaries and elongated shapes are products of an early, denser phase in the Kuiper belt, perhaps associated with its formation.

5.1. Other Light-Curve Observations

We now consider light-curve observations of KBOs published by others in order to make a larger sample. Unfortunately, few KBOs to date have been shown through independent observations to have repeatable light curves. Hainaut et al. (2000) reported that (19308) 1996 TO$_{66}$ has a light curve that varies in amplitude over the course of 1 year, and they interpreted this as a result of possible ongoing cometary activity. Object 1996 TO$_{66}$ may show a color difference throughout its rotation (Sekiguchi et al. 2002). In contrast, 1996 TO$_{66}$ was reported to have a flat light curve by Romanishin & Tegler (1999) during the same year in which Hainaut et al. detected variation. Our own observations show that 1996 TO$_{66}$ does have a significant light curve, basically confirming the variation originally observed by Hainaut et al. and contradicting the null detection by Romanishin & Tegler (Sheppard 2002). Conversely, an object reported to have a light curve by Romanishin & Tegler (1999), (15820) 1994 TB, was found by us to display no significant variation (Sheppard 2002). Because of these conflicts of unrepeatability, and since many of the Romanishin & Tegler targets were very sparsely sampled with raw data that remain unpublished, we use their work with caution in the following analysis.

Our combined sample of 22 KBOs comprises only well-observed objects with numerous observations that could constrain any significant photometric variation from this (Table 4) and other (Table 11) works. Among the objects newly observed in this survey (Table 4), the fraction with significant light-curve variation is $f(\Delta m_R > 0.15) = 4/13$ (31%) and $f(\Delta m_R > 0.40) = 3/13$ (23%). Including the objects reliably observed by others (Table 11) yields $f(\Delta m_R > 0.15) = 7/22$ (32%) and $f(\Delta m_R > 0.40) = 5/22$ (23%). Although we have evidence that some of their light curves are unrepeatabe, we note that Romanishin & Tegler (1999) found a comparable $f(\Delta m_R > 0.10) = 3/11$ (27%). We consider these results all to point to a similar fraction $f(\Delta m_R > 0.15) \sim 32\%$ and $f(\Delta m_R > 0.40) \sim 23\%$.

The samples of objects with significant light curves and flat light curves were tested for correlations with orbital parameters and colors. No significant correlations were found. From the sample of 22 objects, two of the nine (22%) resonant objects, four of the eight (50%) classical objects, and one of the five (20%) scattered objects had measurable light curves ($\Delta m_R \geq 0.15$). Many of the objects shown in Table 11 are detailed elsewhere by us (Sheppard 2002) because they were objects particularly targeted by us to confirm their reported light curves and determine amplitudes and periods if a light curve was seen. Conversely, the 13 objects reported in this paper (Table 4) were selected because of their size and brightness, and not because of previous reports of their variability.

In comparison with the percentages of KBOs with large-amplitude light curves (>0.40 mag, or about 1.5 difference in brightness), the four main-belt asteroids with $D > 400$ km have $f(\Delta m_R \geq 0.40) = 0/4$ (0%), the largest being only about 0.15 mag (Lagerkvist, Harris, & Zappala 1989; Tedesco 1989). For main-belt asteroids with $D > 200$ km,

### TABLE 11

| Name            | Classa | $H$ (mag) | $\Delta$ mag | $P$ (hr) | $i$ (deg) | $e$   | $a$ (AU) | Refs. |
|-----------------|--------|-----------|--------------|---------|----------|-------|---------|-------|
| (28978) Ixion   | R      | 3.2       | ...          | ...     | 19.7     | 0.246 | 39.3    | 1, 2  |
| (19308) 1996 TO$_{66}$ | C      | 4.5       | 0.25         | 7.9     | 27.4     | 0.115 | 43.4    | 1, 3  |
| (24835) 1995 SM$_{55}$ | C      | 4.8       | ...          | ...     | 27.0     | 0.110 | 42.1    | 1     |
| (13874) 1996 TL$_{56}$ | S      | 5.4       | ...          | ...     | 23.9     | 0.587 | 84.9    | 4, 5  |
| (26308) 1998 SM$_{165}$ | C      | 5.8       | 0.45         | 7.1     | 13.5     | 0.371 | 47.8    | 1, 6  |
| (15875) 1996 TF$_{56}$ | R      | 6.8       | ...          | ...     | 5.7      | 0.336 | 39.7    | 4, 7  |
| (15789) 1993 SC   | R      | 6.9       | ...          | ...     | 5.2      | 0.185 | 39.6    | 4, 8  |
| (15820) 1994 TB  | R      | 7.1       | ...          | ...     | 12.1     | 0.321 | 39.7    | 1     |
| (32929) 1995 QY$_{9}$ | R      | 7.5       | 0.60         | 7.3     | 4.8      | 0.266 | 39.8    | 1, 4  |

* (S) Scattered-type object; (C) classical-type object; (R) resonance-type object.

References.—(1) Sheppard 2002; (2) Ortiz et al. 2001; (3) Hainaut et al. 2000; (4) Romanishin & Tegler 1999; (5) Luu & Jewitt 1998; (6) Romanishin et al. 2001.; (7) Collander-Brown et al. 1999; (8) Davies, McBride, & Green 1997
...that the period distributions of the asteroids are significantly shorter than for the KBOs. The mean periods are 5.56 ± 0.89 and 7.80 ± 1.20 hr for the asteroids and KBOs, respectively, giving a $t$-statistic of $-3.84$ (12 degrees of freedom), which is significant at the 99.7% confidence level. This difference is formally significant at the 3σ level by Student’s $t$-test, but it would be highly desirable to obtain more data from another large unbiased survey in order to be sure of the effect. The KBOs have a larger mean amplitude, but the effect. The KBOs have a larger mean amplitude, but the...
where $q$ is a constant and $\Psi(x)dx$ is again the number of KBOs with axis ratios in the range $x$ to $x + dx$. We assumed $0.5 \leq x \leq 1.0$. The results can be seen in Figure 16. The $q = -5$ distribution is very similar to an exponential distribution, with its peak at an axis ratio of $x = 1$. Again we see that the models fit the data better with a broader distribution of axis ratios.

Fourth, we ask whether the data are consistent with selection from an intrinsic distribution of shapes caused by collisional fragmentation. The fragment shape distribution is taken from Catullo et al. (1984). Figure 17 shows that the KBO $\Delta m$ distribution is inconsistent with the collisional fragment distribution in the sense that more highly elongated KBOs are found than would be expected from the impact fragments. This finding is consistent with collisional models (Farinella & Davis 1996; Kenyon & Luu 1999) in the sense that only KBOs smaller than a critical diameter of ~100 km are likely to be impact fragments, while the observed KBOs are all larger than this.

Finally, we ask whether the data are consistent with selection from an intrinsic distribution of shapes like that measured in the large ($D > 200$ km) main-belt asteroid population. We take this distribution from the published light-curve database of Lagerkvist et al. (1989), which has been updated by A. Harris on the World Wide Web.1 The results are shown in Figure 17, where we see that the KBOs contain a larger fraction of highly elongated objects than is found among the main-belt asteroids. A plausible explanation for such a large fraction of the highly elongated KBOs is that the objects are very large yet structurally weak and of low density. This would allow many of the KBOs to be gravitationally bound rubble piles easily distorted by centripetal forces due to their rotation.

5.3. KBO Density Comparisons in the Solar System

The Kuiper belt objects are thought to consist of water ice with some rocky material mixed in, similar to the comets. How do the densities of the icy outer satellites compare with what we have found for our sample of KBOs? In Figure 18, we plot all the outer icy bodies in the solar system that have well-known densities and are less than 3000 km in diameter. There is a clear trend, with larger objects being denser. The KBOs seem to follow this trend. We also note there appears to be a trend with object size versus light-curve amplitude and size versus period for the KBOs in our data. Objects that have densities less than that of water ice (1000 kg m$^{-3}$) must have significant internal porosity or be composed of ices less dense than water (see Jewitt & Sheppard 2002).

To date, only about 10 main-belt asteroids have reliably measured bulk densities. Most of these are from perturbation calculations between asteroids, though two have been measured by passing spacecraft and a few others found from the orbital motions of known companions. Most asteroid densities are consistent with that of rock, 2000 kg m$^{-3}$, although some of the asteroid densities have

1 At http://cfa-www.harvard.edu/iau/lists/LightcurveDat.html.
been found to be lower than expected and attributed to internal porosity, possibly from rubble-pile structure (Yeomans et al. 1997).

In Table 9, we present new densities for five main-belt asteroids calculated under the assumption that they are equilibrium rotational (Jacobi ellipsoid) figures. We used their light curves as seen at maximum amplitude, to eliminate the effects of projection. The densities are higher than those of the KBOs obtained using the same method (Fig. 19) but lower than expected for solid-rock objects. This provides another hint that these objects may be internally porous. The densities of 15 Eunomia (790 ± 210 kg m$^{-3}$) and 16 Psyche (1800 ± 600 kg m$^{-3}$) were reported separately from measurements of gravitational perturbations (Hilton 1997; Viateau 2000). The higher density for 16 Psyche is particularly interesting because this object is an M-type asteroid and thus expected to have a high density.

The main-belt asteroid 45 Eugenia was found to have a companion, which was used by Merline et al. (1999) to find a density of 1200$^{+600}_{-200}$ kg m$^{-3}$. Asteroid densities found by others are probably underestimated, since they assumed that the objects were spheres. A sphere has the highest volume-to-projected area ratio, and thus any deviation from a sphere will cause the object to appear to have a lower density. We calculated the density for these objects using the assumption they are Jacobi ellipsoids, and thus the parameters used are the well-known period and amplitude from the light curves. Interestingly, the five best examples of main-belt rotationally deformed asteroids (Table 9) are found in all the main classes, two C-type, and one each of S, P, and M types.

6. PHASE FUNCTIONS OF KBOs

At large phase angles, the phase function in equation (1) may be approximated as

$$\phi(\alpha) = 10^{-\beta \alpha},$$

where $\alpha$ is the phase angle in degrees and $\beta$ is the "linear" phase coefficient. Empirically, the magnitude of $\beta$ is inversely correlated with the surface albedo (Gehrels 1970; Bowell et al. 1989; Belskaya & Shevchenko 2000), suggesting that we might be able to indirectly assess the albedos of KBOs from their phase functions. Unfortunately, this is not possible. The maximum phase angle attained by an object at distance $R$ (AU) is roughly $\alpha_{\text{max}} = 180/((\pi R)$. At $R = 30$ AU, for instance, $\alpha_{\text{max}} = 1.9$. This is exactly the phase-angle range in which the opposition surge is potentially important (Scaltriti & Zappalà 1980; Belskaya & Shevchenko 2000). The opposition surge is a complex, multiple-scattering phenomenon that occurs in the grains of a porous regolith. The magnitude of the opposition surge, which causes an increase in scattered intensity over and above that predicted by equation (10) at small $\alpha$, is determined by coherent backscattering and is a complex function of regolith physical and optical properties. It is not simply related to the albedo, and equation (10) must be modified to take account of this surge. Nevertheless, the phase functions provide a new basis for comparison of the KBOs and should be measured if we are to accurately assess the sizes of KBOs from their optical data.

Seven of the KBOs were observed over a range of phase angles sufficient for us to measure the phase darkening. We plot the quantity $m_{R}(1, 1, \alpha) = m_{R} - 5 \log RA$ against $\alpha$ for these seven KBOs in Figures 20 and 21. When observations from consecutive nights were available, we averaged the phase angle and apparent magnitude over those nights to create a single point with small uncertainty. If an object showed a light curve, its time-averaged mean apparent magnitude was used. The linear least-squares fits to the KBO data are listed in Table 12 and shown in Figure 20. Within the uncertainties, we find that photometry of the seven KBOs is compatible with $\beta(\alpha < 2^\circ) = 0.15 \pm 0.01$ mag deg$^{-1}$. In contrast, the phase function for Pluto was found to be linear throughout the $0^\circ$ to $2^\circ$ phase-angle range with $\beta(\alpha < 2^\circ) = 0.0372 \pm 0.0016$ mag deg$^{-1}$, indicating a very shallow, if any, opposition surge and consistent with a high-albedo surface (Tholen & Tedesco 1994).

Since the observations at small phase angle are affected by the opposition surge, caused by multiple scattering...

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**Fig. 18.—Sizes and densities of icy bodies. A trend is observed in which the larger the object, the higher the density. The solid line is overplotted to show the expected bulk density of a pure water ice sphere with size (Lupo & Lewis 1979). Other lines indicate how the density would behave with added porosity and rock. Data points for satellite densities are from the JPL Solar System Dynamics Web page.**

**Fig. 19.—Sizes and densities of possible rotationally deformed KBOs and main-belt asteroids. The asteroids have lower densities than expected for solid rock but are still denser than the KBOs.**
within the porous regolith, we also fitted the data using the Bowell et al. (1989) $H$-$G$ scattering parameterization. This technique yields a curved relation at small phase angles that becomes asymptotically like the linear $H/C_1^2$-relation at large phase angles and thus attempts to account for the opposition surge. In the Bowell et al. formalism, $H$ is the absolute magnitude of the object, analogous to $m_R(1, 1, 0)$. The parameter $G$ provides a measure of the slope of the phase function at large angles, analogous to $H/C_1^2$. It is scaled so that $G = 0$ corresponds to the darkest surfaces found on the asteroids, while $G = 1$ corresponds to the brightest (Bowell et al. 1989). The results of the $H$-$G$ fits are presented in Table 12 and Figures 21 and 22. The KBOs show steep slopes with a possible moderate opposition surge. The best-fit values of the $G$-parameter are very low, with an average of $G = 0.21$. This small $G$-value more closely resembles that of dark, C-type asteroids ($G = 0.15$) than the brighter S-types ($G = 0.25$) in the main belt. This is consistent with, though does not prove, the assumption that the majority of KBOs are of very low albedo. The similarity of the slopes of the phase functions of all KBOs in our sample suggests comparative uniformity of the surface compositions, physical states, and albedos. As a comparison, Pluto was found to have a best-fit $G = 0.88 \pm 0.02$ using data from Tholen & Tedesco (1994). The dramatic difference between the back-scattering phase functions of Pluto and the smaller KBOs studied here is shown in Figure 22. This difference is again consistent with the smaller KBOs having low-albedo (0.04?) surfaces qualitatively different from the high-albedo (0.6), ice-covered surface of Pluto.

7. SUMMARY

We have conducted a systematic program to assess the rotations and sky-plane shapes of Kuiper belt objects from their optical light curves.

1. Four of 13 (31%) bright KBOs in our sample [(33128) 1998 BU$_{49}$, 2000 GN$_{171}$, (20000) Varuna, and (40314) 1999 KR$_{16}$] show light curves with range $\Delta m \geq 0.15$ mag. In an

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**TABLE 12**

| Name       | $H$       | $G$       | $\beta(\alpha < 2^\circ)^a$ |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| 2000 EB$_{173}$..... | $4.44 \pm 0.02$ | $-0.15 \pm 0.05$ | $0.14 \pm 0.02$ |
| Varuna...... | $3.21 \pm 0.05$ | $-0.58 \pm 0.10$ | $0.19 \pm 0.06$ |
| 1999 DE$_{17}$..... | $4.53 \pm 0.03$ | $-0.44 \pm 0.07$ | $0.18 \pm 0.06$ |
| 1996 GQ$_{21}$...... | $4.47 \pm 0.02$ | $-0.04 \pm 0.05$ | $0.14 \pm 0.03$ |
| 2000 GN$_{171}$..... | $5.98 \pm 0.02$ | $-0.12 \pm 0.05$ | $0.14 \pm 0.03$ |
| 1999 KR$_{16}$...... | $4.37 \pm 0.02$ | $-0.08 \pm 0.05$ | $0.14 \pm 0.02$ |
| 2001 CZ$_{31}$...... | $5.53 \pm 0.03$ | $-0.05 \pm 0.07$ | $0.13 \pm 0.04$ |
| Mean...... | $-0.21 \pm 0.04$ | $0.15 \pm 0.01$ |
| Pluto....... | $-1.00 \pm 0.01$ | $0.88 \pm 0.02$ | $0.0372 \pm 0.0016$ |

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*a The phase coefficient at phase angles less than $2^\circ$.

*b Data for Pluto are from Tholen & Tedesco 1994, while the $G$-value was calculated by us.
enlarged sample combining objects from the present work with objects from the literature, seven of 22 (32%) objects have $\Delta m \geq 0.15$ mag.

2. The fraction of KBOs with $\Delta m \geq 0.4$ mag (23%) exceeds the corresponding fraction in the main-belt asteroids (11%) by a factor of 2. The KBO $\Delta m$ distribution is inconsistent with the distribution of impact fragment shapes reported by Catullo et al. (1984).

3. The large KBOs (33128) 1998 BU$_{48}$, 2000 GN$_{171}$, and (20000) Varuna show large periodic variability with photometric ranges $0.68 \pm 0.04$, $0.61 \pm 0.03$, and $0.45 \pm 0.03$ mag, respectively, and short double-peaked periods of 9.8 $\pm$ 0.1, 8.329 $\pm$ 0.005, and 6.3565 $\pm$ 0.0002 hr, respectively. Their $BVRi$ colors are invariant with respect to rotational phase at the few-percent level of accuracy.

4. If these objects are equilibrium rubble piles distorted by centripetal forces due to their own rotation, the implied densities must be comparable to or less than that of water. Such low densities may be naturally explained if the KBOs are internally porous.

5. In the phase-angle range $0^\circ \leq \alpha \leq 2^\circ$, the average slope of the phase function of seven KBOs is $\beta(\alpha < 2^\circ) = 0.15 \pm 0.01$ mag deg$^{-1}$ (equivalently, $G = -0.2$). The corresponding slope for ice-covered Pluto is $\beta(\alpha < 2^\circ) \approx 0.04$ mag deg$^{-1}$ (equivalently, $G = 0.88$). The large difference is caused by pronounced opposition brightening of the KBOs, strongly suggesting that they possess porous, low-albedo surfaces unlike that of ice-covered Pluto.

We thank John Dvorak, Paul deGrood, Ian Renaud-Kim, and Susan Parker for their operation of the UH telescope, and Alan Harris for a quick and thoughtful review. This work was supported by a grant to D. C. J. from NASA.

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