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EXOBIOLOGY AND THE ORIGIN OF LIFE

October 1, 1977 - September 30, 1978

Principal Investigator: Professor Carl Sagan
CORNELL UNIVERSITY
Laboratory for Planetary Studies
NASA Grant N.R 33-010-101

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Prepared: September 1, 1978

Carl Sagan
Principal Investigator
Appendix I

The following is a list of papers published or in press or completed since the last annual report and supported wholly or in part by NASA Grant NGR 33-010-101.


In an earlier paper, Khare and Sagan reported the production of a brownish polymeric material from the near-ultraviolet irradiation of simulated jovian atmospheres with a low hydrogen abundance. Examination of this product indicates that hydrogen sulfide is the initial photon acceptor: the powder resulting after extraction with benzene is 84 percent sulfur, largely S₃. In results reported here, the remaining 16 percent was pyrolyzed and then examined by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry. Pyrolysis at 450°C yielded a series of alkanes, alkenes, C₃-alkylbenzenes, aromatics, thiophenes, alkylthiophenes, alkylmercaptans, alkyldisulfides, together with the nitrogenous compounds hydrogen cyanide, methyl cyanide, alkylisothiocyanates, acrylonitrile, and allylisothiocyanates. Some of these compounds might be sought on Jupiter and Saturn and their satellites by remote infrared and ultraviolet spectroscopy and directly by entry probes.

The complex brown polymer produced on passage of an electrical discharge through a mixture of methane, ammonia, and water, is analyzed by pyrolytic GC/MS. Pyrolyzates include a wide range of alkanes, alkenes, aromatic hydrocarbons, aliphatic and aromatic nitriles, pyrroles, and pyridine. Similar pyrolyzates are obtained from polypeptides and polymers with hydrocarbon moieties. This polymer is remarkably stable up to 950°C; its degradation products are candidate constituents of planetary aerosols in the outer solar system and the grains and gas in the interstellar medium.


A complex organic polymer produced by electrical discharge or ultraviolet irradiation in a mixture of cosmically abundant reducing gases exhibits an infrared spectrum, thermoirradiation stability, and other properties characteristic of interstellar grains. Sputtering products of this polymer bear a close resemblance to the molecules found by microwave spectroscopy in the interstellar medium.

Ultraviolet, visible and infrared transmission spectra are presented of a variety of organic solids produced by ultraviolet irradiation or electrical discharge of gas mixtures containing some or all of the following constituents: CH₄, C₂H₆, NH₃, H₂O, and H₂S. Scanning electron micrographs of these products are also presented, permitting an assessment of Mie theory scattering protocols for spherical particles used in the application of these spectra to planetary atmospheres. The general character of absorption features is remarkably independent of the energy source used to produce free radicals, and it is clear that substantial blue and ultraviolet absorption is provided by sulfur-free organic polymer.


Complex organic polymers produced from cosmically abundant molecules exhibit far infrared absorption features in the 45 to 90 µm range. Hexamethylenetetramine which forms stoichiometrically from formaldehyde and ammonia has such a feature at 36 µm. Orthorhombic sulfur absorbs at 52 µm. It is proposed that absorption and emission
features found in a variety of astrophysical sources at these
wavelengths, and often attributed to O III, be reconsidered in
the light of these findings.

(6) "Organic Dust Synthesized in Reducing Environments
by Ultraviolet Radiation or Electric Discharge," B.N. Khare and
Carl Sagan, Proc. Conf. on Thermodynamics of Dust in the Space Medium,
Lunar and Planetary Science Institute, in press.

A dark reddish-brown high molecular weight polymer is produced by
long wavelength ultraviolet irradiation of abundant gases present in re-
ducing atmospheres, CH₄, C₂H₆, NH₃, H₂O, and H₂S. The photodissociation
of H₂S yields a hydrogen atom which is superthermal by several electron
volts and which drives subsequent chain reactions. In a typical
experiment the inner walls of the reaction vessel are characteristically
coated, after a few hours of irradiation, with a brownish solid. This
solid material shows some spectrometric similarity to the brown clouds
observed on Jupiter, Saturn, and Titan. After a typical photolysis ex-
periment the brown solid after extraction with benzene is 84 percent sulfur,
largely S₃. The remaining 16 percent was pyrolyzed and then examined by
gas chromatography -- mass spectrometry. Pyrolysis at 450°C yields
the rich array of compounds shown in Table 1.
In another experiment, similar dark brown polymeric material is produced by electric discharge through a mixture of CH₄, NH₃, and H₂O (vapor) which on pyrolysis at 600°C yields a similar list of compounds.

The dust produced under conditions similar to those described in these two examples may be relevant to the observed ultraviolet, visible and infrared spectroscopic characteristics of planetary atmospheres and the interstellar medium.

The synthesized polymers exhibit an impressive thermal stability. Thermogravimetric analysis shows the electrical discharge polymer in particular to be half thermally dissociated at 1000°C. Another solid material that we consider important is hexamethylenetetramine (HMTA) that is obtained stoichiometrically from ammonia and formaldehyde. HMTA on heating produces largely HCN. From the infrared spectra of this polymer after heating to 923°C, we propose that the tradition of attributing the 9 to 13 μm interstellar features to silicate dust or pure graphite should be reexamined. Our infrared study of the polymers produced both by ultraviolet light and electric discharge, their stability at high temperatures, Douglas' proposal of explaining the diffuse interstellar line at 4420 Å and the continuum at 2200 Å by polyatomic molecules containing carbon as Cₙ (5 ≤ n ≤ 15), and other arguments, suggest organic polymers as major constituents of interstellar dust.
Table I. Polymer components from the ultraviolet synthesis experiments (the initial mixture consisted of CH₄, C₂H₆, NH₃, H₂S, and H₂O).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compounds identified</th>
<th>Relative abundance*</th>
<th>Molecular weight</th>
<th>Compounds identified</th>
<th>Relative abundance*</th>
<th>Molecular weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hydrogen sulfide</td>
<td>M 34</td>
<td>2-Methylthiophene</td>
<td>M 98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon dioxide</td>
<td>M 44</td>
<td>3-Methylthiophene</td>
<td>M 98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Carbonyl sulfide</td>
<td>M 60</td>
<td>Ethylthiophenes</td>
<td>M 112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hydrogen cyanide</td>
<td>M 27</td>
<td>Dimethylthiophenes</td>
<td>M 112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ammonia</td>
<td>M 17</td>
<td>C₆alkylthiophenes</td>
<td>m 126</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon disulfide</td>
<td>M 76</td>
<td>C₆alkylthiophenes</td>
<td>m 140</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethane</td>
<td>M 30</td>
<td>Methylmercaptan</td>
<td>M 48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propane</td>
<td>M 44</td>
<td>Ethylmercaptan</td>
<td>M 62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Butane</td>
<td>m 58</td>
<td>Propylmercaptan</td>
<td>m 76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethene</td>
<td>M 23</td>
<td>CH₃-S-S-CH₃</td>
<td>M 94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Propene</td>
<td>M 42</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-S-S-)t</td>
<td>M 108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Butene</td>
<td>M 56</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-S-S-)t</td>
<td>M 122</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pentene</td>
<td>M 70</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-S-S-)t</td>
<td>M 136</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hexene</td>
<td>m 84</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-S-S-)t</td>
<td>M 150</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Heptenes</td>
<td>m 98</td>
<td>CH₃-N=C=S(methyl)</td>
<td>M 73</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butadiene</td>
<td>M 54</td>
<td>Butadiene</td>
<td>M 87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methyl cyclopentene</td>
<td>t 82</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-N=C=S)</td>
<td>M 101</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hexadiene</td>
<td>t 82</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-N=C=S)</td>
<td>M 101</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hexyne</td>
<td>t 82</td>
<td>C₆alkyl(-N=C=S)</td>
<td>M 115</td>
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<td>Butadiyne</td>
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<td>C₆alkyl(-N=C=S)</td>
<td>m 129</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benzene</td>
<td>M 78</td>
<td>CH₃=CHCH=CH=CH-CN</td>
<td>M 99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toluene</td>
<td>M 92</td>
<td>CH₃-CN</td>
<td>M 41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Xylene</td>
<td>m 106</td>
<td>CH₂=CH-CN</td>
<td>M 53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyalkylbenzene</td>
<td>m 120</td>
<td>CH₂=CH=CH-CN</td>
<td>m 67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Styrene</td>
<td>m 104</td>
<td>Benzonitrile</td>
<td>m 103</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thiophene</td>
<td>M 84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* M: major component; m: minor component; t: tentative identification. *These compounds are alkyl disulfides (dithioalkanes): C₆alkyl(-S-S-), for example, is either CH₃CH₂CH₂CH₂-S-S-CH₃ or CH₃CH₂-S-S-CH₂CH₃. A lowercase t after a compound indicates that two or more isomers are present.


It has been proposed (Hart, 1975; Jones, 1976) that the apparent absence of extraterrestrials on or near the Earth shows that there are none, since a civilization moderately in advance of our own should be capable of relatively fast interstellar spaceflight, crossing the galaxy in a time much less than the age of the galaxy. Assuming that interstellar spaceflight is associated only with the wave of advance of an expanding civilization, these issues are re-examined by employing the
principles of population dynamics used in treating biological species (modified to accommodate "social" influences). The limiting velocity of an extraterrestrial colonization front is reassessed.

Population dispersal in biological problems is generally modelled after the Lotka-Volterra or semilinear diffusion equation. This equation describes in situ growth and saturation (characterized by a sigmoid curve) together with random diffusion. The solution for the population density in the Lotka-Volterra equation is characterized by a travelling wave. In this communication, the diffusion term in the equation is made population density dependent in order to reflect diffusion as a response to population pressure, a social influence generally not included in purely biological applications. Numerical studies of the modified equation reveal the existence of a travelling wave solution with a very sharp colonization front.

In terrestrial cultures, the population growth rate diminishes in response to increasing affluence, the demographic transition. Zero population growth is a concomitant of advanced technology and wealth in the terrestrial case and, it seems likely, for extraterrestrial ones. This situation may be modelled by population density dependent diffusion with no population growth mechanism. The solution for the population density in this case is asymptotically "self-similar" and has a sharp colonization front characterized by a velocity that rapidly diminishes with time.
The implications presented by these population dynamic models to the issue raised by the absence of extraterrestrials on Earth are discussed. Most significant among these is that a colonizing civilization that practices zero population growth would expand only over a small fraction of the galactic disc in the age of the galaxy.


The anthropogenic radio flux of the Earth is likely to be a delta function centered around the present implying that there is no civilization in the entire Milky Way Galaxy which should be preferentially detectable through radio eavesdropping.


Biological goals were among the important science objectives of the Viking lander camera. The camera performance characteristics relevant to these goals are discussed. They include the ability to observe (1) morphological detail, (2) color and reflectance spectra, and (3) motion and change. The scenes obtained by the cameras were scrutinized in many ways: monoscopically, stereoscopically, in color, and by computerized differencing of camera events. At the lander
sites and during the times that observations were carried out on the surface of Mars, no evidence, direct or indirect, has been obtained for macroscopic biology on Mars. No obvious examples of geometric distortion that might have been motion induced have been observed. Using the repeated line scanning mode of the camera has revealed no changes or motion suggesting life. These negative results may be due to limitations in sampling, in camera design, or in our understanding of Martian biology, but they are certainly consistent with the hypothesis that macroscopic life is absent on Mars.


The following paper was written in part when one of its co-authors, Professor Blackburn, was in residence at the Laboratory for Planetary Studies and partially supported by this Grant.


Ultraviolet irradiation of pyrolusite ($\beta$-MnO$_2$) and hematite ($\alpha$-Fe$_2$O$_3$) in a humid, oxygen-rich Mars atmosphere produced changes in
the oxygen (1s) and manganese (3p) binding energies as measured by x-ray photoelectron (ESCA) spectroscopy. The changes on MnO$_2$ are consistent with the formation of a surface layer of an oxide of Mn(V) or (VI) which, by reference to the properties of the bulk materials, would be highly oxidizing. The change in the O(1s) spectrum of αFe$_2$O$_3$ is not as easily interpreted; chemisorbed O may account for it. A gas exchange experiment on UV-irradiated MnO$_2$ powder results in oxygen evolution on exposure to water vapor. Thus transition metal surface chemistry may play an indicator role in the explication of extraterrestrial regolith chemistry.

In addition, following are a few additional publications which, while not supported by this grant, are nevertheless directly relevant to its objectives.

(12) "The Quest for Intelligent Life in Space is Just Beginning," Smithsonian Magazine, 9, pp. 38-47 (1978); reprinted in Cosmic Search, Volume 1, Number 1, January 1979, and in Reader's Digest (Canada), in press.
