Sulfur and Hydrogen Isotope Anomalies in Meteorite Sulfonic Acids

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Intramolecular carbon, hydrogen, and sulfur isotope ratios were measured on a homologous series of organic sulfonic acids discovered in the Murchison meteorite. Mass-independent sulfur isotope fractionations were observed along with high deuterium/hydrogen ratios. The deuterium enrichments indicate formation of the hydrocarbon portion of these compounds in a low-temperature environment that is consistent with that of interstellar clouds. Sulfur-33 enrichments observed in methanesulfonic acid could have resulted from gas-phase ultraviolet irradiation of a precursor, carbon disulfide. The source of the sulfonic acid precursors may have been the reactive interstellar molecule carbon monosulfide.

Previous isotopic measurements of organic compounds from the Murchison meteorite, a carbonaceous chondrite, have shown that water-soluble polar organic compounds generally have high $^2\text{H}/\text{H}$ ($D/H$), $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$, and $^{15}\text{N}/^{14}\text{N}$ ratios relative to Earth and solar system ratios (1). The origins of such isotopic enrichments have been attributed to precursor molecules formed in low-temperature (−10 to 200 K) interstellar clouds by grain surface and gas-phase ion-molecule reactions (2). After incorporation into the proto-solar system and meteorite parent bodies at about 4.5 billion years ago, the interstellar precursors reacted during a period of aqueous alteration to form some of the observed meteoritic compounds (3).

The finding of homologous series of organic alkyl sulfonic acids (Scheme 1A) and phosphonic acids (Scheme 1B) (R = C$_n$H$_{2n+1}$) in Murchison is of interest because, in meteorites, the sulfonic acids are the first well-characterized series of organic S compounds, and the phosphonic acids are the only identified organic P compounds (4). In addition to D/H and $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$ measurements, our objective was to determine if the sulfonic acids had unusual S isotope ratios. Such anomalies in the sulfonic acids, along with unusual ratios of H and C isotopes in both classes of compounds, may demonstrate that at least some meteorite organic compounds containing S and P are traceable to origins in interstellar clouds or the proto-solar nebula.

In systems involving only two stable isotopes, such as C, H, and N, it is difficult to discriminate between ordinary mass-independent isotopic fractionation (for example, evaporation or other kinetic isotope effects) and mass-independent processes such as nucleosynthesis or symmetry-dependent chemical mechanisms. Studying an element with four stable isotopes, such as S, removes this limitation by allowing one to observe graphically the deviation of an isotope from mass-dependent behavior (5). Recently, some bulk ureilite meteorites have been shown to have small $^{33}\text{S}$ excesses ($\sim 0.1$ per mil) (7), and excess $^{33}\text{S}$ ($\sim 0.16$ per mil) was found in an oldhamite (CaS) separate from the Norton County enstatite meteorite (8).

We examined the methyl (MSA), ethyl (ESA), isopropyl (iPSA), and n-propyl (nPSA) sulfonic acids. The extraction from Murchison and the separation of sulfonic acids (sulfonics) and phosphonic acids (phosphonics) from other fractions of Murchison compounds were done as described in (9). We achieved baseline chromatographic separation of individual sulfonics (10). The phosphonics are present in very small amounts in Murchison (4); therefore, only bulk isotopic measurements were attempted (Table 1).

In Table 1, MSA, $^{33}\text{S}$, $^{34}\text{S}$, and $^{36}\text{S}$ (Table 1) are enriched relative to their abundances in various organic and inorganic phases from several meteorites (6–8, 11). The corresponding $^{33}\text{S}$ values of the other sulfonics fall within a range previously observed for organic phases in Murchison and other carbonaceous chondrites (11). The S isotopic distribution of MSA also shows an anomalous mass-independent enrichment ($\Delta$) in $^{33}\text{S}$ of $\Delta = 2.0$ per mil. The $\Delta$ value of iPSA is zero within measurement uncertainty; however, the $\Delta$ values of ESA and nPSA, although small, are anomalous (Table 1). Present measurements of $^{36}\text{S}$ have greater uncertainty than those of other S isotopes (Table 1) because of its low natural abundance (0.02%) coupled with the small (micromolar) sample sizes. Corresponding $\Delta$ values are of course also less certain. In MSA, the largest sample, $^{36}\text{S} = \text{28}^{36}\text{S}$ (5).

The $^{81}\text{C}$ values of the sulfonics decrease with increasing carbon number, as observed with homologous series of carboxylic acids and hydrocarbons from Murchison (12). In relation to the known $^{81}\text{C}$ values of Murchison organic compounds, the $^{81}\text{C}$ values of the sulfonic acids span the range from those of the amino acids to those of the carboxylic acids ($\sim 40$ to $\sim 5$).

As with the results obtained on Murchison amino acids (13), the D/H ratios of the sulfonics substantially exceed terrestrial ratios, indicating formation of the C–H bonds in a region that allows such D enrichment, that is, a low-temperature environment like that in interstellar clouds (2). In comparison with the D/H ratios of other Murchison organic compounds, the sulfonics fall in the range of the polar hydrocarbons and insoluble C (6D $\sim 500$ to 1000) (11). Because the phosphonics are present in small amounts, their isotope ratios are not corrected and are minimum values. Their D/H ratios are also above terrestrial ratios (Table 1).

Any proposed mechanism for sulfonic acid formation must account for the following observations: (i) the magnitudes of the $8\text{C}$, $8\text{S}$, and $\Delta$ values of MSA and the lower corresponding values of the other sulfonics; (ii) the similarity in structure coupled with a decline in abundance of the sulfonics with increasing carbon number (4), as with other homologous series of meteoritic organic compounds (1); and (iii) the similar D/H ratios among homologs. The second observation would seem to indicate formation of the sulfonics by the same or closely related processes. The relatively constant D/H ratios of the sulfonics could imply that unsaturated precursors ($\text{CS}_2$) to the sulfonics were formed first, followed by hydrogenation and D enrichment in a pool of nearly uniform H. The D/H values of the sulfonic as a group are nearly identical to those of Murchison polar hydrocarbons and insoluble carbonaceous material (1), which raises the possibility that C–H bonds of the precursors to the three groups were formed in the same pool of H.
The isotope effects may derive from molecules between MSA and the other sulfonics likely measured of a standard (NBS-22) with the same vacuum and combustion procedure indicated no D/H or $\Delta$ fractionation, and procedural standards consisting of different amounts of S showed close agreement, $\pm 4$ of 8D values (above). This value is obtained after correcting for exchangeable hydrogen. From a different sample of Murchison, the matching bulk sample was lost. Procedural standards, MSA: 1, 1, 4, and 7 µmol. |Procedural standards, MSA: 1 and 7 µmol. |$^{83}$S$^A_{\Delta}$ = $^{-29.7}, 8D = -118$.

The difference in S isotope composition between MSA and the other sulfonics likely arises from the differential fractionation factors associated with the formation of the individual molecules. A potential source of the $^{33}$S enrichment in MSA ($^{33}A = 2.0$ per mil) could be gas-phase ultraviolet (UV) irradiation of a precursor molecule such as CS$_2$. In the laboratory, mass-independent isotope effects have been produced by the gas-phase UV irradiation of symmetric molecules such as CS$_2$ (14), CO$_2$, and O$_2$ (15). The isotope effects may derive from molecular symmetry factors (16). In the irradiation (313-nm wavelength) of CS$_2$ (14), a $^{33}$S excess of 5.3 per mil was observed in the resulting solid phase, which was characterized as (CS$_2$)$_2$. In that experiment, a large $^{33}$S deficit was also observed, which is not the case for Murchison MSA. Recent experiments (17), however, have shown the process to be wavelength dependent, and the sign of the fractionations may be reversed. At present, it may only be concluded that a process capable of producing a $^{33}$S excess exists in an astrophysical environment.

At the low temperatures of interstellar space, chemical reactions of the molecule CS are capable of producing compounds that could serve as sulfonic acid precursors and have mass-independent isotope anomalies resulting from gas-phase UV irradiation. CS is reactive and relatively abundant in interstellar space (2). In the laboratory, CS forms several molecules and an insoluble solid phase on surfaces when it is condensed at low temperatures (18, 19). Molecular formation in the solid phase has been reported at temperatures as low as 33 K (20). The C/S ratio of the solid usually ranges from 1/1 to 5/1 (18). The requirements of a surface and low temperatures for CS polymerization are met by interstellar grains. In addition, CS will self-polymerize or is stable in the presence of some potentially interfering interstellar compounds. For example, CS is stable in the presence of solid methanol (21) and ammonia (22) and polymerizes in the presence of liquid methanol (21). In the photolysis of CS$_2$ (which produces CS), formation of a solid phase was not prevented by the addition of excess hydrogen and other molecules (23).

The reaction products or interstellar molecules of relevance to the present study are CS$_2$ (SCS), CS$_2$ (CCS), CS$_2$ (SCCS), CS$_2$ (CCCS), and CS$_2$ (SCCCS) (24). These compounds are potential precursors to the observed meteoritic sulfonic acids of the same carbon number. A high-resolution mass spectrometry study of organic matter in the Murray carbonaceous meteorite identified species of elemental compositions CS$_2$, CS$_2$, CS$_2$, CS$_2$, and CS$_2$, in addition to many others (25). CS$_2$ is common in carbonaceous meteorites (25, 26). In addition, in the present study, the unsaturated analog of ESA, vinyl sulfonic acid (H$_2$C=C(H)SO$_3^-$), was identified in an extract of a Murchison sample. These observations reinforce the possibility that the sulfonics and perhaps other interstellar carbon-chain compounds arose from unsaturated precursors, resulting from CS chemistry. Compounds of the type CS$_2$, if definitively identified in meteorites, comets, or interstellar clouds, may be more indicative of a reactive S-rich starting material like CS.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

5. Also see (6). The stable isotope compositions of S have masses of 32 (95.02%), 34 (0.75%), 34 (42.21%), and 36 (0.02%) atomic mass units (amu). The deviation of the ratio of S isotopes is compared to the standard (S in the Canyon Diablo iron meteorite) is given in parts per thousand or per mil, which is defined as $^{8S}$ = [($^{32}$S/$^{32}$S)$_{sample}$]$^{8S}_{(32S)}$ - 1) × 1000, where $^{32}$S, $^{33}$S, and $^{34}$S are the heavy and light isotopes, respectively, of each element.
10. The fraction containing the sulfonics and phosphonics (6) was then injected into a Dionex (Sunnyvale, CA) ion chromatograph (IC) equipped with two 9 mm by 250 mm AS4A-C columns eluted with a carbonate buffer, 1.8 mm Na$_2$CO$_3$, 1.7 mm NaHCO$_3$ (4 mmol/m), to collect sulfonics and phosphonics as separate groups. At this step, nPSA separates sufficiently from the other sulfonics for collection.
Discrete Intensity Jumps and Intramolecular Electronic Energy Transfer in the Spectroscopy of Single Conjugated Polymer Molecules

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Single-molecule fluorescence spectroscopy of a multichromophoric conjugated polymer (molecular weight \(\sim 20,000\)) revealed surprising single-step photobleaching kinetics and abrupt jumps in fluorescence intensity. These jumps were shown not to result from spectral diffusion and were attributed to fluctuations in the quantum yield of emission for the molecules. The data indicate efficient intramolecular electronic energy transfer along the polymer chain to a localized fluorescence-quenching polymer defect. The defects are created by reversible photochemistry of the polymer. These findings have implications for the use of conjugated polymers in light-emitting diode displays and sensors.

Recent developments in fluorescence microscopy have allowed for the detection, imaging, and spectroscopy of single molecules at room temperature (1-2). As a consequence, single-molecule spectroscopy (SMS) has moved from studies at cryogenic temperatures (3) to a broader range of environmental conditions. In many cases, direct information about the molecular distribution of physical quantities, rather than just the ensemble-averaged values obtained by bulk measurements, can now be obtained. Most room-temperature SMS studies have involved aromatic dye molecules that correspond to a single chromophore in a fluctuating environment and have revealed direct information on chemical and spectroscopic heterogeneity of single molecules (4, 14), as well as on the dynamics of these inhomogeneities (10, 15).

Here, we used SMS to study molecules that each comprise many similar chromophores, such as conjugated fluorescent polymers. Intramolecular migration of energy among these chromophores and the ultimate impact of the energy migration on photochemistry is of intense fundamental and practical interest. Conjugated polymers such as poly(p-phenylene vinylene) (PPV) and poly(p-phenylene vinylene) (PPyV) have shown great promise for light-emitting device applications (16, 17). We studied a derivatized PPV-PPyV copolymer compound with a molecular weight of \(\sim 20,000\) (Fig. 1A).

Spectroscopic studies on bulk polymer materials suggest that conjugated polymer emission is often dominated by energy migration to local minima in their optical band structure (18). For example, anthracene-derivatized poly(p-phenylene-ethynylene) in solution have been shown to selectively emit from states associated with the anthracene end groups (19). Although excitation diffusion along the chains in conjugated polymers is efficient, the actual optical excitation (exciton) may be localized and may have a coherence length of only a few monomer units (20). Thus, spectroscopic evidence of conjugated polymers suggests that their broad absorption spectra are the result of overlapping absorption bands from different segments along the polymer chain, and that their emission is strongly affected by energy migrations, often to sites remote from the absorption (18). This hypothesis can be