

USE OF NEGATIVE ION MASS SPECTROMETRY
FOR SIMULTANEOUS DETERMINATION OF SULFUR
ISOTOPE RATIOS $\Delta^{33}\text{S}$ AND $\Delta^{34}\text{S}$

Stanisław Hałas*, Tomasz Pieńkos, Andrzej Pelc, Artur Wójtowicz

Mass Spectrometry Laboratory, Institute of Physics, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 1, 20-031 Lublin, Poland
*e-mail: stanislaw.halas@umcs.pl

ABSTRACT

We describe a newly constructed dual inlet system and triple collector for precision study of sulfur isotope anomalies, $\Delta^{33}\text{S}$, using negative ion mass spectrometry. SO_2 gas is admitted to the ion source where it is ionized either to SO^- or S^- by low energy electrons (resonant ionization) and the ion beam is analyzed by a single focusing magnetic analyzer. Another gas which can be used for $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ and $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ analysis by negative ion mass spectrometry is SF_6 on mass spectrum of SF_5^- ions.

Keywords: isotope anomalies, terrestrial minerals, sulfates, sulfides

INTRODUCTION

The isotope anomalies received recently a great attention by a number of investigators (e.g. Thiemens 2006, Thiemens & Shaheen 2013, Eiler et al. 2014 and refs therein), therefore we propose here a novel approach in their study as described below. By isotope anomalies we understand the deviations of $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ from respective value of $0.52\delta^{34}\text{S}$ predicted by the mass-dependent theory (Urey 1947, Bigeleisen &

Mayer 1947). These anomalies, denoted as $\Delta^{33}\text{S}$, were first encountered in meteorites by Hulston & Thode (1965), but later on also in some billion years old Earth minerals (Farquhar et al. 2000). Large anomalies of $\Delta^{33}\text{S}$ recorded in Precambrian sulfides and sulfates result most likely due to ionization phenomena of SO_2 and H_2S in ancient Earth atmosphere. Due to severe analytical difficulties of isotope analysis of $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ by mass spectrometry, small anomalies were not well recognized at Earth surface level by far, except the oldest sulfur.

The goal of the present study is to overcome the most crucial difficulty by applying negative ion mass spectrometry. With the proposed idea we will attack the problem of the analysis of minor variations of $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ with negative ion spectrometry. Đông and Tiên (1989) reported that no interfering peaks occur in the mass spectrum of S^- using conventional gas SO_2 . They were able to determine $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ only with analytical precision 1.5‰ on a single collector mass spectrometer.

Inasmuch as the peak of mass-33 is about five times lower than peak 34, necessary precision of $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ determination should be enhanced several times in comparison to that attained for $\delta^{34}\text{S}$. We will try to enhance maximally the precision of isotope ratios determination by a single focusing ($R = 15 \text{ cm}$) and triple collector isotope ratio mass spectrometer (IRMS).

MASS SPECTROMETER

In our IRMS we have retained the alignment and electromagnet manufactured by Nuclide, Pennsylvania, in the 70's of the XX century, whereas the flight tube, ion source, collector assembly and gas inlet system have been designed for the measurements of isotope ratios. The overall view on the mass spectrometer is shown in Fig. 1. The vacuum system comprises two rotary pumps – one for the inlet system and one is used as backing pump for two turbo pumps of the differential ultra high vacuum (UHV) in the flight tube. The pumping speed of these turbo pumps is 250 L/s which guaranties a dynamic vacuum during analysis at the level 10^{-8} Torr in the flight tube. There is also one small ion sputtering pump (pumping speed 50 L/s) operated all the time, but it is open to the UHV only during breaks in analysis, i.e. when the turbo pumps are turned off. All the three pumps can be isolated from the UHV chamber by 2 manually operated all-metal valves or by a gate valve installed at the ion source.



Figure 1: Overall view on the 60° magnetic sector mass spectrometer. The inlet system is installed at the front of this picture. The ion source is on the right side and the collector assembly on the left. The mass spectra and isotope analyses are computer controlled.

In Fig. 2 is shown the triple collector assembly dedicated for simultaneous collection of the 3 isotopes in S^- spectrum. The same slit system can be used for positive ions of O_2^+ .

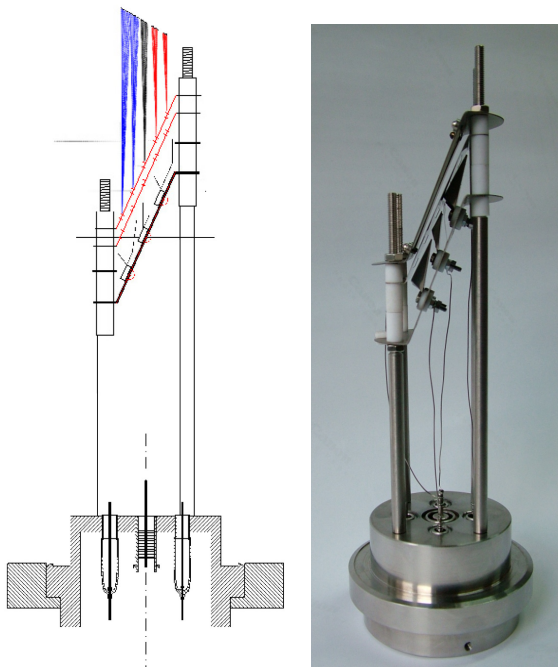


Figure 2: Triple collector assembly, the design is on the left and a photo on the right.

Negative ions SO^- and S^- are produced from being easily prepared SO_2 gas in the ion source with a hot cathode immersed in external magnetic field. The ions were produced by low energy electrons at so-called resonance (see e.g. Hałas 2002). The construction of this ion source will be described in detail elsewhere.

The inlet system is arranged as it is described in Halas (1979). The volume of the standard channel is large and constant, whereas that of the sample channel is small and variable. Such arrangement assures nearly constant pressure of the standard over an extended time of analysis. A bellows installed in the sample channel allows to equalize the pressure of sample gas to that of standard gas. Gas is admitted to the ion source through SS 1/8 inch capillaries whose ends are installed in the pneumatically operated changeover valve. A gas pressure ~ 20 Torr is kept in the inlet system during analysis to assure viscous flow condition from both channels (Halas 1980, 1982).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first results obtained on SO_2 gas with this new instrument look highly promising. The obtained mass spectra of negative ions produced from SO_2 gas are shown in Fig. 3. Note that peaks of SO^- are almost 3 times higher than those for S^- , hence they are more suitable for $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ analysis. However in this case the isotopic peak of ^{33}S at mass 49 is also contributed by ^{17}O . This is not the case in the isotopically clean spectrum of S^- . Therefore this spectrum will be used for simultaneous $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ and $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ analysis using triple collector assembly.

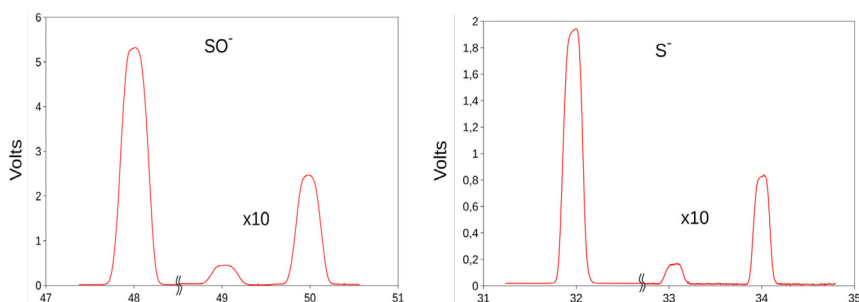


Figure 3: Obtained mass spectra of SO^- and S^- by scanning electric current in the electromagnet coils. The right part of each spectrum is 10-fold magnified. The ion current was recorded as the voltage drop on $10^{11} \Omega$ resistor.

Our preliminary test confirmed this conclusion. The obtained standard deviations of the average values from ten 60-second runs were 0.5 and 0.1 permil, respectively. Undoubtedly for too low precision of $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ excessive noise on high-ohm resistor available (10^{12} ohms) is responsible. This resistor will be replaced by a high quality one from OHMITE.

We have also tested mass spectra of two other gaseous sulfur compounds, namely hydrogen sulfide (H_2S) and sulfur hexafluoride (SF_6). The first of them has no isotopically clean mass spectrum. The peaks of S^- are accompanied with HS^- peaks, so $^{33}\text{S}^-$ is overlapped by H^{32}S^- . On the other hand, SF_6 is ideal gas for measurements of high ion currents of SF_5^- , which has isotopically pure mass spectrum (Fluor has only one stable isotope, ^{19}F). Moreover, this gas is practically non-adhesive. For the above reasons it may be recommended as excellent gas for negative IRMS (it is already used since the 60's of the XX century in positive ion IRMS). The preparation method of this gas by fluorination of solids sulfur compounds is, however, more difficult than SO_2 preparation from sulfides (Robinson and Kusakabe 1975) or sulfates (Halas and Szaran 1999).

CONCLUSION

We report here about a negative ion IRMS which is suitable for both $\delta^{33}\text{S}$ and $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ measurement on the S^- spectrum or respective SF_5^- spectrum. Initial tests of delta measurements indicate a high possible precision, which may lead to detect minor anomalies in sulfur isotope composition ($\Delta^{33}\text{S}$) which may exist in geologically young minerals, particularly those formed during big $\delta^{34}\text{S}$ sulfate excursions of ocean in the Phanerozoic (Holser 1977, Claypool et al. 1980).

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