SAMPLE PREPARATION IN THE GLIWICE RADIOCARBON LABORATORY FOR AMS ¹⁴C DATING OF SEDIMENTS

TOMASZ GOSLAR and JUSTYNA CZERNIK

Department of Radioisotopes, Institute of Physics, Silesian University of Technology, Krzywoustego 2, PL-44-100 Gliwice (e-mail: goslar@zeus.polsl.gliwice.pl, justyna@zeus.polsl.gliwice.pl)

Abstract. The Accelerator Mass Spectrometry has been used in ¹⁴C dating for several years. The ¹⁴C concentration is measured in graphite target. In the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory a system to produce graphite targets has been built. This system will be used for ¹⁴C dating of terrestrial plant and zooplankton macrofossils in lake sediments, and later, in routine ¹⁴C dating of small samples.



1. INTRODUCTION

In radiocarbon dating 14C concentration is measured in samples containing carbon. Beta radiation of that isotope is routinely detected using gas counters and liquid scintillator spectrometers. Another possibility of ¹⁴C detection is Accelerator Mass Spectrometry. It has developed since the 80's. The idea of this technique is direct counting of ¹⁴C atoms. An advantage of this method is a small mass of samples (a few mg) and a possibility to measure much more samples per year than in other methods. Despite the high costs of building and later exploitation of the AMS facility, this technique is being used now for dating various types of samples (bones, sediments, macrofossils, foraminifera) in many laboratories. In Poland, the accelerator technique has been used for dating terrestrial plant macrofossils from Lake Gościąż and Lake Perespilno (Goslar, 1995, 1996 and 1999).

In the AMS technique the ¹⁴C concentration is measured in graphite prepared from gaseous CO₂ obtained by combustion of the sample. Graphite is pressed into a target of a few millimetres in diameter, which is placed in ion source of accelerator. Carbon ions (${}^{12}C^{3-}$, ${}^{13}C^{3-}$ and ${}^{14}C^{3-}$) are produced in source in process of sputtering the graphite target with caesium beam (Benett et al., 1977). In Europe, this technique is used in a few laboratories (Arnold et al., 1989; Bennett et al.; 1977; Nadeau et al., 1997; van der Plicht et al., 1995; Possnert et al., 1990; Rom et al., 1998). Graphite targets are produced in more laboratories. Also in the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory the system to produce graphite targets has been built. It contains lines for sample preparation, sample combustion, CO₂ purification, production of graphite from gaseous samples and pressing it into the target.

The line for graphitisation will be used in dating terrestrial and marine plant macrofossils and zooplankton. A purpose of this work is to study a problem of representativeness of macrofossils in absolute dating of lake sediments by the radiocarbon method. Results of radiocarbon dating of samples from Lake Perespilno suggest a possibility of redeposition of terrestrial macrofossils (Goslar, 1999) which limits reliability of such dates. A Line for graphitisation will be later used in routine dating.

Authors of this paper have taken advantage from their visits in the Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l'Environnement in Gif-sur-Yvette, France (Arnold, 1989) and in the Leibniz-Labor für Alterbestimmung in Kiel, Germany (Nadeau *et al.*, 1997, 1998). The graphite targets will be sent for AMS measurement in the Laboratory in Kiel.

2. SAMPLE PRETREATMENT

Terrestrial macrofossils are pretreated using the AAA method (Acid-Alkali-Acid, de Jong *et al.*, 1986). In this method during the first treatment of sample with HCl solution carbonate contamination is removed, and treatment with NaOH solution removes humid acids. Second treatment with HCl solution removes atmospheric carbon, which could be absorbed during treatment of the sample with NaOH.

In Table 1 are shown different methods of samples pretreatment used in the Laboratory in Gif-sur-Yvette and Laboratory in Kiel. Both laboratories have different methods of pretreatment. Probably the most important difference in pretreatment is temperature and duration of it. In Laboratory in Gif-sur-Yvette samples are treated in reagents at higher temperatures than in Kiel. In higher temperatures acid can easier react with carbonates and the time of treatment can be shorter. Preparation is performed in closed vials to avoid sample evaporation during heating and to minimise contact of the sample with atmospheric CO_2 . In Kiel Laboratory samples are treated with HCl and NaOH solutions in room temperatures in open vials. In this condition reaction proceeds slowly, the preparation time is longer, and risk of sample contamination with atmospheric CO_2 is bigger.

In Gif-sur-Yvette after each step of pretreatment the sample is washed to pH neutral by adding portions of distilled water and drawing away the solution with glass micropipette. During washing the sample with distilled water in Kiel the solution in each step is carefully poured out. In the Gif-sur-Yvette Laboratory, small samples are frozen in liquid nitrogen on the end of a steel stick and then carried into a quartz tube. In this tube the sample is dried. In Kiel Laboratory small samples are carried to a quartz tube with water using pipette, and then dried, while bigger samples are carried into the tubes with pincette.

The sample preparation used in Gif-sur-Yvette seems to be more effective and safe. That is why in the Gliwice Laboratory similar sample preparation will be used.

3. COMBUSTION

Dried sample is placed in a quartz tube baked earlier in 900 °C through 3h. To the sample copper oxide is added, which is the source of oxygen needed for combustion, and silver wool, which is needed to remove the gaseous sulphur and chlorine compounds. In Kiel Laboratory CuO is baked in atmospheric air before adding to the sample (**Table 2**). In the future, baking of CuO in a stream of pure oxygen to avoid contamination with CO_2 from the air (P. Grootes, personal information) is planned. During fast cooling of CuO, strong absorption of atmospheric CO_2 occurs.

 CO_2 absorption in CuO granules can happen during cooling of hot CuO in the air and during admitting the air after heating CuO in vacuum. In Gif-sur-Yvette Laboratory, CuO granules are preheated in oxygen and the danger of absorption during the cooling is avoided, but one can expect contamination of CuO during the admission of air after heating CuO and Ag in vacuum directly before adding them to the sample.

Mass of the sample needed to obtain adequate amount of graphite is measured in Kiel before combustion. In Gif-sur-Yvette, the whole sample is converted into graphite and if the amount of graphite is sufficient, two graphite targets are made.

In Kiel Laboratory, for sample combustion a 9 mm quartz tube (in diameter) is used, inside which a 6 mm tube is placed, which contains the sample with CuO and Ag. Afterwards all is connected to the vacuum line (**Fig. 1A**), pumped out and sealed under vacuum. Then the sample is combusted in muffle oven in temperature 900 °C for a few hours. In Gif-sur-Yvette one quartz tube (9 mm) is used for combustion.

In Kiel, the samples were primarily placed directly in tubes $\phi=9$ mm. But several accidents with cracking

Table 1. Comparison of sample preparation procedures for ¹⁴C dating with the AMS technique.

Gif-sur-Yvette	Kiel		
Preparation in small (ca. 20 cm ³) closed vials	Preparation in big (>100 cm ³) open vials		
Preparation steps:	Preparation steps:		
Treatment of sample with 0,5 M HCl in temp. 50 °C, in water bath, 2 h	Treatment of sample with 1% HCl in room temp., 24 h		
Washing to pH neutral	Washing to pH neutral, sample stored in neutral solution by 24 h		
Treatment of sample with 0,1 M NaOH in room temp., 2 h	Treatment of sample with 1% NaOH, in room temp., 24 h		
Washing to pH neutral	Washing to pH neutral, sample stored in neutral solution by 24 h		
Treatment of sample with 0,5 M HCl in temp. 50 °C in water bath, 2 h	Treatment sample with 1% HCl, in room temp., 24 h		
Solution pull off with pipette	Solution outpouring		
Drying of the sample	Drying of the sample		

Table 2. Comparison of sample combustion processes for AMS 14C dating.

Gif-sur-Yvette	Kiel	
CuO heating (portion for several tens samples) in oxide stream in quartz tube, temp. 800°C	CuO heating (portion for several tens samples) in the air in muffle oven, temp. 800-900°C	
	Ag heating in the air in muffle oven, temp. 800-900°C	
Amount of CuO and Ag:	Amount of CuO and Ag:	
0.2 g CuO for sample ca.	1 g CuO for sample	
0.1 g Ag for sample	150 mg Ag for sample	
CuO and Ag heating in vacuum in 800°C during 30 min	Swyl saist productions.	
Sample heating with CuO and Ag in 100°C during 10 min in vacuum, sealing the tube (the whole placed in single quartz tube $\phi 9$ mm)	Pumping the sample, CuO and Ag during ca. 12 h, sealing the tube (the whole placed in double quartz tube, $\phi 6$ mm and $\phi 9$ mm)	
Combustion: quartz tubes placed in muffle oven in 850°C during 6 h	Combustion: quartz tubes placed in muffle oven in 900°C during 2 h	

tubes in places of closer contact of CuO and sample with the tube walls occurred. There were not such accidents in Gif-sur-Yvette, probably because the amount of CuO is smaller, and the pressure during combustion inside the quartz tube is lower.



Fig. 1. (A) Line for sealing quartz tubes and (B) for cracking the tubes and purification of CO_x 1 – point of sealing the quartz tube; 2 – sample + CuO + Ag; 3 – point of cracking the quartz tube.

In the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory the experience from both laboratories (Laboratory in Gif-sur-Yvette and Laboratory in Kiel) is used. Initial heating of CuO and Ag is performed in oxygen stream. There is no heating of CuO and Ag in vacuum to avoid absorption of CO₂.

Sample is combusted in single quartz tube (9mm). When using the inner quartz tube, like in the Kiel Laboratory, it is necessary to keep clean both the inner and outer surfaces of the tube (6 mm). This condition is troublesome to fulfil. Samples are combusted in muffle oven in temperature 900 °C for 3 hours.

4. CO₂ PURIFICATION

Quartz tubes with gaseous sample, after cooling, are cracked under vacuum and CO_2 is purified. In Kiel Laboratory, for cracking the tubes ball joints are used (**Fig. 1B** and **Table 3**). Earlier incised tube is placed in one arm of the set for cracking tubes, which is cut off from the rest of the line with a cock. After pumping to high vacuum the tube is cracked. CO_2 is collected in glass vial with a cock, and in the arm with the ball joint water vapour is collected in a mixture of dry ice and alcohol. The advantage of this method is a possibility of simultaneous purification of CO_2 samples in several independent sets.



Fig. 2. Line for sealing quartz tubes, cracking the tubes and purification of CO_2 (Gif-sur-Yvette). A – top view of a part of the equipment.

Table 3. Comparison of procedures of CO, liberation and purification for ¹⁴C dating by the AMS method.

Gif-sur-Yvette	Kiel	
Cracking the tube inside a flexible tube	Cracking the tube inside ball joint	
No possibility of purification a few $\rm CO_2$ samples at one time (Fig. 2)	Possibility of simultaneous purification of CO ₂ samples in several independent sets (Fig. 1B)	
Measurement of CO ₂ amount in a specified volume (Fig. 2)	No measurement of the CO ₂ amount	

In Gif-sur-Yvette Laboratory the quartz tube is cracked inside flexible tube. After freezing of water vapour, CO_2 is collected in glass vial with a cock. In this system, CO_2 is passed through the whole line, what precludes purification of several samples at one time.

Scheme of a line for liberation and purification of CO_2 in the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory is shown in **Fig. 3**. In this design has been taken advantages of system construction in Kiel. In this line there is a small reservoir for measuring the CO_2 amount, and two cocks with a small volume in between, used for subtracting an excess of CO_2 . Measured amount of CO_2 is collected in a glass reservoir with a cock.

5. GRAPHITISATION

The aim of graphitisation is to produce graphite targets from samples of a few milligrams in weight. Graphite is formed during CO_2 reduction in hydrogen at high temperature. This reaction proceeds on iron powder (Fe) which is a catalyst of this reaction. Weighted portion of Fe is placed in quartz tube horizontally fixed in the reactor (**Fig. 4**). CO_2 is frozen in the reactor and hydrogen is introduced in an excess of 20%. After defreezing of CO_2 the reduction begins. During reaction H_2O_{gas} and graphite arises, which deposit on iron powder. To maintain this reaction the pressure of water vapour must be kept small. Water vapour is continuously removed by freezing in mixture of dry ice and alcohol. The progress of reaction is continuously monitored by measuring pressure in the reactor. Searching for the best temperature of reaction was made e.g. in Lunds University in Sweden (Stenström *et al.*, 1994), indicating the best temperature for this reaction of ca. 600°C (**Table 4**).

General scheme of line for graphitisation (Fig. 4) is similar to that in the Kiel and Gif-sur-Yvette laboratories. Different is the amount of Fe used in the reduction. In Kiel the mass of Fe is constant (2 mg), and CO₂ portion corresponding to 1 mg of carbon is separated before the reaction. If the amount of CO₂ corresponds to <1 mg C and >0,5 mg C, the Fe mass is proportionally lower. If the CO₂ amount is less than 0,5 mg the Fe mass is 1 mg. In Gif-sur-Yvette from one sample two targets are prepared. Because of that the whole sample is used, and the amount of Fe is assorted proportionally to the mass of the sample. Fe/C ratio is different than in Kiel. The Accelerator, which is used in Gif-sur-Yvette is

Table 4. Relationship between rapidity of CO₂ reduction on Fe powder and temperature (Stenström, 1994).

Temperature [°C]	Reaction rapidity [mb/min]	
515	1.4	
560	2.6	
600	3.0	
610	3.2	
665	2.2	
750	0.87	



of older construction and to obtain adequate precision of dating, ¹⁴C concentration is measured for two graphite targets prepared from one sample. In the Kiel Laboratory, the ¹⁴C measurement is made for only one target.

After graphitisation, the sample is kept in atmosphere of argon (for maximum a few hours) and pressed into tablet of a few millimetres in diameter. So prepared target is ready to be placed in the accelerator. Experience from the Laboratory in Kiel shows that the rate of reduction depends on the reactor size. If the tube diameter is bigger, the reaction is faster. In the German prototype the tube diameter of the reactor was 6 mm. Application of bigger diameter (9 mm) has shortened the reaction time to only 3 hours (**Table 5**). Oxidation and reduction of iron before introducing CO_2 speed up the reaction, too.

Table 5. Comparison of procedures of CO₂ reduction in several ¹⁴C laboratories. Reactor volumes are similar in all laboratories. The table presents current parameters, and those used in the prototype¹¹ and in the test runs²¹.

	Gif-sur-Yvette	Kiel	Gliwice
Reactor construction	Tube with Fe φ 6 mm, $H_{_2}\text{O}$ trap welded	Tubes ϕ 9 mm (ϕ 6 mm) ¹⁾ , H ₂ O trap connected with Cajon Ultra-Torr Fitting	Tube with Fe ϕ 6 mm, H ₂ O trap (ϕ 12 mm) connected with Cajon Ultra-Torr Fitting
Fe granulation	1 50 μm, 44 μm	44 μm	(150 μm, 10 μm) ²⁾ 44 μm
Fe amount	Measured individually for each sample	2 mg	(5 mg) ²⁾ 2 mg
Fe/C	5/1	2/1	(5/1) ²¹ 2/1
Fe measurement	Weighing with accuracy 0.1 mg	Measurement with pipette	Weighing with accuracy 0.1 mg
Fe introduction to the quartz tube	Stainless tube	Micropipette	Stainless tube
Arrangement of Fe in tube	Grains situated closely to each other	Grains situated closely to each other	Grains situated closely to each other
CO ₂ pressure	Dependent on the sample size	150-200 mbar	220-240 mbar
1 mg C	250 mbar	200 mbar	(230 mbar) ²⁾ 170 mbar
Reactor cleaning before the reduction	Heating the quartz tube with Fe in 650 °C and the reactor in 100 °C during 5 h under vacuum	Pumping the reactor with Fe overnight	Pumping the reactor with Fe overnight Heating the quartz tube with Fe in 650°C and reactor in 100 °C during 5 h under vacuum and pumping the reactor overnight
Fe oxidation	None	700 mbar 0 ₂ , T=400 °C, t=15 min	700 mbar 0 ₂ , T=400 °C, t=15 min
Fe reduction	1000 mbar H ₂ , T=300 °C, t=1 h	700 mbar H ₂ , T=400 °C, t=30 min	700 mbar H _z , T=400 °C, t=30 min
CO ₂ reduction	250 mbar CO ₂ /1 mg C, reduction time 5-7 h, reduction temp. 650 ℃	200 mbar CO_/1 mg C, reduction time 3 h, reduction temp. 600 °C	170 mbar CO $_2$ /1 mg C, reduction time 4-5 h, reduction temp. 600 °C
Defreezing and pumping out the H ₂ D _{eee} , Fe-C powder kept in reduction temp. Introducing Ar before disconnecting the tube with Fe-C powder	H_2^0 frozen, Fe-C powder kept in room temp.	H ₂ O _{gas} frozen, Fe-C powder kept in room temp.	
	Introducing Ar before disconnecting the tube with Fe-C powder	Introducing Ar before disconnecting the tube with Fe-C powder	





Construction of the Polish reactor (Fig. 5) resembles the scheme from French laboratory and the prototype from German Laboratory. That is why the tube diameter with Fe is small. Although tube diameters in Gliwice and Gif-sur-Yvette are the same, the time of reaction in Gliwice is shorter (Table 5) thanks to the oxidation of iron. In France, oxidation of iron is not used.

Primarily, in the reduction iron granulation coarser than now has been used (150 μ m). After consulting members of the staff in the Kiel Laboratory, finer Fe granulation (ca. 44 μ m) was applied. Sample is then more homogeneous. Originally the Fe/C ratio was 5/1, but because graphite targets will be sent to the Kiel Laboratory, the Fe/C ratio is adapted to the standards of that laboratory. For Fe introduction to the quartz tube, advantages of the French method with partly cut off one of ends of stainless tube has been taken (see figure in **Table 5**). Before reduction the reactor is cleaned. In Gliwice two different ways of cleaning were in use: pumping cool reactor with Fe overnight, or heating the quartz tube with Fe in 650°C and the Cajon Ultra-Torr Fitting in 100°C during 5 h, and pumping overnight. At present the quartz tube with Fe is pumped and heated in 90°C overnight. Reduction parameters are similar to that in Kiel (the same temperature, 600°C, and amount of hydrogen, an excess 20%). The reduction time for such conditions and for Fe granulation 44 μ m is ca. 4 hours (shorter than in Gif-sur-Yvette, longer than in Kiel).

6. TESTS OF GRAPHITISATION LINE

Tests were made for small portions of CO_2 obtained from several samples in the Radiocarbon Laboratory in Gliwice. The CO_2 amount corresponds to 1 mg carbon. First trials were made with Fc granulation 150 µm. A few trials were also made for Fe granulation 10 µm, but



Fig. 6. Changes of pressure in the reactor during reduction of CO₂, for different Fe grain sizes: 0 – Fe 44 µm, x – Fe 150 µm, 0 – Fe 10 µm.

the time of reduction was much longer than usually. Also the Fe weighing and introducing into the quartz tube was difficult for this granulation.

After consulting members of the staff in the Kiel Laboratory iron granulation 44 μ m was applied. Fig. 6 shows changes of pressure in the reactor for different Fe granulations. It is clear that the time of reduction is the shortest for Fe granulation 44 μ m.

Fig. 7 shows changes of pressure for different initial conditions. Different are the prereduction parameters

and the way in which the reactor was cleaned. It is visible that no significant differences in the rate of reduction occur. Probably the reaction is slightly slower when oxidation of Fe was made one day before reduction of CO_2 , but this difference is not too distinct.

7. PRESSING THE Fe-C POWDER

When the graphitisation is completed the Fe-C powder is pressed into a tablet in aluminium holder adapted to install it in the ion source of accelerator. In Fig. 8 a device is shown for pressing the Fe-C powder. Ready graphite targets are stored in atmosphere of argon and will be sent to measurement in accelerator in Kiel.



Fig. 7. Changes of pressure in the reactor during reduction of CO₂ for different initial conditions: \Diamond – cleaning the reactor for 24 hours, preoxidation and prereduction of the Fe; x – heating of the quartz tube (650 °C) and the union (90 °C) for 1,5 hours, pumping out for 24 hours (room temperature), heating of the quartz tube (90 °C), preoxidation and prereduction of Fe; Δ – preoxidation and prereduction of the Fe, reduction of the CO₂ in the next day.



Fig. 8. Scheme of the press for making graphite targets (Laboratory in Gliwice). The details of part A are shown at the right side of the figure.

8. SUMMARY

The Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) is one of the techniques used in ¹⁴C dating. The advantage of this method is a small mass of the sample (a few mg). ¹⁴C concentration is measured in graphite, which is prepared from gaseous CO_2 obtained from sample combustion. Graphite powder is pressed into target (a few millimetres in diameter), and then placed in the ion source of accelerator. In the source ¹²C³, ¹³C³ and ¹⁴C³ ions are sputtered from the graphite target by Cs beam.

In Europe, the accelerators are used in several laboratories. Graphite targets are produced in more laboratories. In the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory a line to produce graphite targets is under construction. It contains equipment for sample preparation, sample combustion, CO_2 purification and for production of graphite powder and graphite target.

The AAA method (Acid-Alkali-Acid) will be used for sample preparation. Samples will be treated with 0.5 M HCl in temperature 50 °C. NaOH will be then used in room temperature. After each stage the samples will be rinsed with distilled water and the solution will be removed with glass micropipette until pH=7 is achieved. Dry samples will be placed in quartz tube together with copper oxide (0.5 g CuO per sample) and silver wool (0.15 g Ag per sample), pumped out and sealed under vacuum. Before this step CuO and Ag are preheated in a stream of oxygen. CuO is the source of oxygen needed for combustion, and Ag removes gaseous contamination of CO2. Samples are combusted in muffle oven in temperature 900°C for a few hours. After combustion quartz tubes are cracked under vacuum, and the released CO₂ is purified. Next the CO₂ quantity corresponding to 1 mg C is separated for further processing.

Graphite powder arises during reduction of CO_2 by H_2 in high temperature. Fe powder is the catalyst of this reaction. In the reactor the necessary amount of CO_2 is collected and H_2 is introduced in an excess of 20%. The reaction yields water vapour and graphite powder, which is deposited on Fe grains. In order to maintain the reaction the H_2O_{gas} is continuously removed by freezing. The best temperature for this reaction is 600°C.

When the graphitisation is completed, Fe-C powder is kept in argon until it is pressed into graphite target. Such target is ready for AMS measurement. Ready graphite targets are kept in argon and will be sent to ¹⁴C Laboratorv in Kiel to measure the ¹⁴C concentration.

In the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory the lines for sealing and cracking quartz tubes, cleaning CO_2 and the line for graphitisation have been already assembled. The last one was tested using different sample material obtained in conventional ¹⁴C laboratory. Tests were made for different Fe grain size (10 µm, 44 µm, 150 µm) and for different conditions at the beginning of the graphitisation. It seems that the best reduction occurs on Fe 44 µm, and with the preoxidation and prereduction of Fe powder directly before the reduction of CO_2 .

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