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Variability in Radiocarbon Ages of Individual Organic Compounds from Marine Sediments

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Organic carbon (OC) from multiple sources can be delivered contemporaneously to aquatic sediments. The influence of different OC inputs on carbon-14-based sediment chronologies is illustrated in the carbon-14 ages of purified, source-specific (biomarker) organic compounds from near-surface sediments underlying two contrasting marine systems, the Black Sea and the Arabian Sea. In the Black Sea, isotopic heterogeneity of *n*-alkanes indicated that OC was contributed from both fossil and contemporary sources. Compounds reflecting different source inputs to the Arabian Sea exhibit a 10,000-year range in conventional carbon-14 ages. Radiocarbon measurements of biomarkers of marine photoautotrophy enable sediment chronologies to be constructed independent of detrital OC influences.

Molecular-level studies of organic compounds in marine sediments can provide a wealth of information on the carbon cycle in past and present-day oceans as well as information on the depositional setting and origin of organic matter. Of greatest utility are lipid biomarkers that are specific to individual or a restricted range of organisms and that are sufficiently refractory to be preserved in sediments. Three characteristic features of individual organic compounds are currently exploited by biogeochemists: precise molecular structure, absolute or relative abundance, and stable carbon isotopic composition. A fourth feature, the radiocarbon content, has been added to the list (1). The ^{14}C content provides a means to evaluate the source and fate of natural and anthropogenic organic compounds in the biogeosphere.

Organic materials from various sources

and with different ages are deposited concurrently in marine sediments. This is particularly the case near continents where fresh vascular plant debris, soil organic matter, and OC eroded from sedimentary rocks may be deposited together with autochthonous biomass synthesized in the water column. The construction of carbon budgets and sediment chronologies based on ^{14}C measurements of total organic carbon (TOC) depends on being able to accurately quantify these inputs. The ages of specific OC inputs and their influence on TOC ^{14}C ages have remained elusive. Measurements of different compound classes in sediments have indicated that ^{14}C contents are heterogeneous (2), but it is only at the biomarker level that these variations are fully expressed and can be attributed to specific inputs.

Here we present an assessment of radiocarbon ages measured in individual biomarkers from two contrasting marine sedimentary systems. The Black Sea is a stratified anoxic marine basin, and the Arabian Sea is a highly productive system supported by intense seasonal upwelling. Organic carbon-rich sediments accumulating in both seas are strongly influenced by terrigenous inputs. Numerous large rivers drain into the western Black Sea and affect the hydrography and geochemistry of this system (3), whereas eolian dust

associated with seasonal monsoons is the primary mode of supply of continental OC to the Arabian Sea (4).

In the Black Sea, we studied laminated OC-rich (TOC, 5.5%) sediments at a depth of 4 to 7 cm recovered by a Mk-III box corer (BC4, station 2; 42°51'N, 31°57'E, at a water depth of 2129 m) during leg 134-9 of the 1988 R/V *Knorr* expedition. In the Arabian Sea, we studied a sediment sample (box core 6BC, depth of 2 to 4 cm; TOC, 6.7%) obtained from the Oman upwelling region in the Arabian Sea (17°48.7'N, 57°30.3'E, at a water depth of 747 m) during leg TN041 of the R/V *T.G. Thompson* expedition in 1994. We measured the natural ^{14}C content of specific biomarker compounds chosen to reflect both autochthonous and allochthonous inputs (5) in order to evaluate the magnitude and source of age variation in these components of sedimentary organic matter.

We selected a series of long chain (C_{37-39}) alkenes (compounds i in Table 1), the dominant unsaturated hydrocarbons in the Black Sea lipid extract, for radiocarbon dating as biomarkers of marine photoautotrophy. These compounds are derived from prymnesiophyte algae, such as the coccolithophorid *Emiliania huxleyi*, a major phytoplankton and important contributor to sinking particulate matter in the contemporary Black Sea (6). An autochthonous origin for these compounds is supported by their $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values (Table 1), which are consistent with values for lipids from marine phytoplankton (7). The similarity in both ^{13}C values and the conventional ^{14}C ages (8) (Table 1) between the alkenes [average $\delta^{13}\text{C} = -25.5$ per mil; 950 years before the present (B.P.), respectively] and TOC ($\delta^{13}\text{C} = -24.2$ per mil; 880 years B.P.) suggests that modern photoautotrophic biomass is a major component of the bulk OC in these sediments. The similarity in ^{14}C ages between prymnesiophyte alkenes and TOC also suggests that, contrary to previous assumptions (9), older detrital OC inputs have a minimal influence on the $^{14}\text{C}_{\text{TOC}}$ age of late Holocene Black Sea sediments. Conversion of conventional radiocarbon ages to reservoir-corrected ages for marine carbon re-

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quires that the reservoir age be accounted for before calibration against tree-ring records of atmospheric ¹⁴C abundance (10). The reservoir age describes the difference in ¹⁴C activity between atmospheric CO₂ and surface-dissolved inorganic carbon (DIC) in marine systems resulting from the mixing of older waters from depth into the surface layer of the ocean. For a reservoir correction of 400 years (9), the alkenes yield a revised ¹⁴C age for the depth interval of 4 to 7 cm of 550 years B.P. and a calibrated (calendar) age of ~1425 A.D., consistent with published ²¹⁰Pb and ¹⁴C profiles from abyssal Black Sea sediment cores. This age implies that sedimentation rates were 10 to 20 cm per thousand years during the late Holocene (9, 11).

We assessed directly the allochthonous OC inputs from ¹⁴C measurements of individual C₂₉ and C₃₁ *n*-alkanes (compounds v and vi, respectively) (Fig. 1A). The chain length distribution, odd over even carbon number predominance (OEP), and δ¹³C compositions (Table 1) of these hydrocarbons are highly characteristic of leaf wax inputs from C₃ vascular (land) plants (plants in which the first product of photosynthesis is a three-carbon acid) (12). The young conventional ¹⁴C ages for the C₂₉ and C₃₁ homologs relative to bulk OC (Fig. 2A) demonstrate that corrections for detrital contributions to Black Sea sediments should not necessarily invoke older OC inputs. Indeed, accounting for the reservoir age correction for the prymnesiophyte alkenes (vascular plants fix atmospheric CO₂ directly, so their ¹⁴C compositions are not subject to any reservoir correction), we find that the *n*-C₂₉ and *n*-C₃₁ alkanes are similar in calendar age to the marine phytoplanktonic biomarkers. Taken together, these data indicate that relatively fresh terrestrial (land plant) debris is deposited with autochthonous OC of similar age in Black Sea sediments.

In contrast, a suite of shorter chain (C₂₃ to C₂₇) *n*-alkanes (compounds ii through iv) as well as the total saturated hydrocarbon (HC) fraction exhibit significantly older ¹⁴C ages than either the vascular plant *n*-alkanes or TOC (Fig. 2A and Table 1). Given the similarity in δ¹³C values to those of the longer chain alkanes, an independent source for the shorter chain *n*-alkanes seems unlikely. Instead, we infer that fossil hydrocarbons partly contribute to the lower molecular weight homologs. Assuming that there was simple mixing of two end members, we can substitute Δ¹⁴C values (8) (Table 1) into an isotopic mass balance (1) to estimate the proportion of fossil hydrocar-

bon required to produce the observed radiocarbon values. For a ¹⁴C-free signature (Δ¹⁴C = -1000 per mil) for the fossil component and -66 per mil for a fresh higher plant component (*n*-C₃₁ alkane, Table 1), the measured Δ¹⁴C value for the C₂₃ *n*-alkane (-153 per mil) would correspond to 9% fossil *n*-alkane. Similarly, given the Δ¹⁴C value of the saturated HC fraction (-155 per mil), fossil hydrocarbons likely represent a small but significant component of this fraction. This minor contribution would have little influence on the carbon number distribution or δ¹³C values but is clearly revealed by ¹⁴C analysis. Thermogenic hydrocarbons have been detected (13) in suspended particles from the Black Sea on the basis of a low OEP *n*-alkane distribution dominated by lower carbon number homologs (C₂₃ to C₂₇). If a similar input was responsible for the fossil hydrocarbons we observed, the C₂₃ and C₂₅ *n*-alkanes would be most strongly influenced by the fossil sources.

Because abyssal Black Sea sediments are finely laminated (nonbioturbated) and the depth interval we studied is believed to predate significant human use of fossil fuels (pre-1880), we conclude that these hydrocarbons entered sediments by natural processes such as erosion of petroleum-bearing sediments (14) or seepage from depth (15).

We selected two sterenes (compounds e and f) as generic markers of marine primary productivity from the Arabian Sea sediment sample because sterols, their precursor natural products (16), are biosynthesized by a wide range of phytoplankton and some zooplankton. Conventional ¹⁴C ages of these compounds (mean = 680 years B.P.) are significantly younger than the TOC age (890 years B.P.). Consequently, in contrast to the Black Sea, the offset between sterene and TOC conventional ¹⁴C ages likely reflects contributions of older OC to the sediment. This age discrepancy is amplified further when

Table 1. Isotopic composition of bulk fractions and isolated compounds. The δ¹³C values were determined by irm-GC-MS (5), except when noted, and were calculated relative to PDB. The ¹⁴C age is the conventional radiocarbon age (8, 10). Prym., prymnesiophytes; Vas., vascular (higher) plant; Fos., fossil carbon; Diat., diatoms; Phyt., phytoplankton; Bac., bacteria; ID, compound identification; n.d., not determined (δ¹³C assumed as -25 per mil in these instances).

Compound or fraction	Inferred source	ID	δ ¹³ C (per mil)	Δ ¹⁴ C (per mil)	¹⁴ C age (years B.P.)
<i>Black Sea core BC4, 4 to 7 cm</i>					
TOC	-	-	-24.2*	-108 ± 3	880 ± 25
TLE†	-	-	n.d.	-113 ± 7	925 ± 65
Saturated HC	-	-	n.d.	-155 ± 15	1,310 ± 150
Autochthonous biomarkers					
C ₃₇₋₃₉ alkenes‡	Prym.	i	-25.5	-116 ± 10	950 ± 100
Allochthonous biomarkers					
<i>n</i> -C ₂₃ alkane	Vas./Fos.	ii	-30.7	-153 ± 13	1,290 ± 130
<i>n</i> -C ₂₅ alkane	Vas./Fos.	iii	-29.5	-158 ± 17	1,340 ± 170
<i>n</i> -C ₂₇ alkane§	Vas./Fos.	iv	-31.1	-136 ± 9	1,130 ± 90
<i>n</i> -C ₂₉ alkane	Vas.	v	-32.2	-78 ± 9	610 ± 90
<i>n</i> -C ₃₁ alkane	Vas.	vi	-30.2	-66 ± 11	500 ± 100
<i>Arabian Sea core 6BC, 2 to 4 cm</i>					
TOC	-	-	-21.7*	-109 ± 3	890 ± 30
TLE	-	-	n.d.	-100 ± 6	800 ± 60
Autochthonous biomarkers					
C _{25:4} HBI alkene	Diat.	a	-23.2	-40 ± 15	270 ± 130
C _{25:3} HBI alkene	Diat.	b	-20.2	-47 ± 6	350 ± 50
C _{25:2} HBI alkene	Diat.	c	-19.9	-33 ± 8	225 ± 70
C _{30:4} HBI alkene	Diat.	d	-37.1	-73 ± 8	570 ± 70
C ₃₀ sterene	Phyt.	e	-18.5	-81 ± 7	630 ± 70
Cholest-2-ene	Phyt.	f	-25.0	-92 ± 6	735 ± 55
22,29,30-trisnorhop-17(21)-ene	Bac.	g	-22.3	-139 ± 11	1,170 ± 100
Hop-21-ene	Bac.	h	-20.5	-125 ± 13	1,030 ± 110
30-norhop-17(21)-ene	Bac.	i	-22.3	-131 ± 9	1,080 ± 90
C ₃₀ hopene	Bac.	j	-24.1	-147 ± 9	1,240 ± 90
Hop-22(29)-ene	Bac.	k	-23.9	-120 ± 9	985 ± 85
22,29,30-trisnorhop-13(18)-ene¶	Bac.	l	-23.2	-597 ± 4	7,250 ± 70
Allochthonous biomarkers					
17α,21β-homohopane#	Bac./Fos.	m	-21.9	-608 ± 4	7,480 ± 80
<i>n</i> -C ₂₃ alkane	Vas./Fos.	n	-26.7	-724 ± 10	10,300 ± 300
<i>n</i> -C ₂₇ alkane	Vas./Fos.	o	-26.7	-677 ± 6	9,050 ± 160
<i>n</i> -C ₂₉ alkane	Vas./Fos.	p	-28.0	-594 ± 5	7,200 ± 90

*Determined by irMS. †Average of two values. ‡C₃₇₋₃₉ alkenes were analyzed as a composite sample to maximize yield and because they were insufficiently resolved to be isolated as pure compounds. §Contains an additional C₂₇ hydrocarbon. ¶Contains a small portion (~10%) of unresolved material. #Also contains fernene.

a series of highly branched isoprenoid (HBI) alkenes (compounds a through d), characteristic diatom biomarkers (17), are examined (Fig. 2B). The C₂₅ HBI alkenes exhibit substantially younger ¹⁴C ages (mean = 280 years B.P.) than both the sterenes and TOC. Their ¹⁴C compositions would yield present-day ¹⁴C ages after a 400-year reservoir correction is applied and are likely the result of downward mixing of surficial material containing bomb radiocarbon (from nuclear weapons testing). This mixing could result from sediment winnowing, a process that has

been suggested to be a dominant control on the composition of Arabian Sea sediments (18). An alternative explanation giving rise to ¹⁴C variations in different photoautotrophic biomarkers is heterogeneity in the reservoir age of the DIC pool. The strong seasonal variations in phytoplankton productivity, community structure, and vertical distribution in the Arabian Sea are related to wind-driven (monsoonal) upwelling and mixing of the water column (19). The balance between the upwelling of deep waters (low ¹⁴C activity) and the physical invasion or biological

driven draw-down of atmospheric CO₂ (high ¹⁴C activity) into the surface ocean may give rise to spatial and temporal variability in ¹⁴C_{DIC} (and, consequently, planktonic ¹⁴C). Consequently, differences in ¹⁴C and ¹³C composition, such as those between the C₂₅ and C₃₀ HBI alkenes, may be a function of the ecological characteristics (such as depth of growth) of their photoautotrophic source—the former having been identified in *Haslea* sp. and the latter in *Rhizosolenia* sp. (20). Such discrepancies between ¹⁴C ages of phytoplanktonic markers raise the possibility that information on past variations in water column structure may be carried by the isotopic signatures of different photoautotrophic biomarkers and preserved in the sedimentary record.

The hopanoid alkenes (compounds g through l), which were chosen as bacterial biomarkers (21), yielded with one exception (22) conventional ¹⁴C ages that are 300 to 400 years older than the sterenes. The structures of the individual compounds measured do not permit categorical assignment of precursor organisms; however, their relatively uniform δ¹³C compositions (Table 1) clearly point to a marine origin. Deep-dwelling cyanobacteria could yield older ¹⁴C ages as a result of uptake of respired DIC emanating from the O₂-depleted waters underlying the Oman upwelling zone (7), whereas benthic heterotrophic or chemoautotrophic bacteria may consume older carbon associated with bottom waters or sediments (23).

We determined the ¹⁴C compositions of selected saturated hopanoid (compound m) and normal (compounds n through p) hydrocarbons to investigate isotopic characteristics of allochthonous sources of OC. In marked contrast to the sterenes and HBI alkenes, these hydrocarbons display

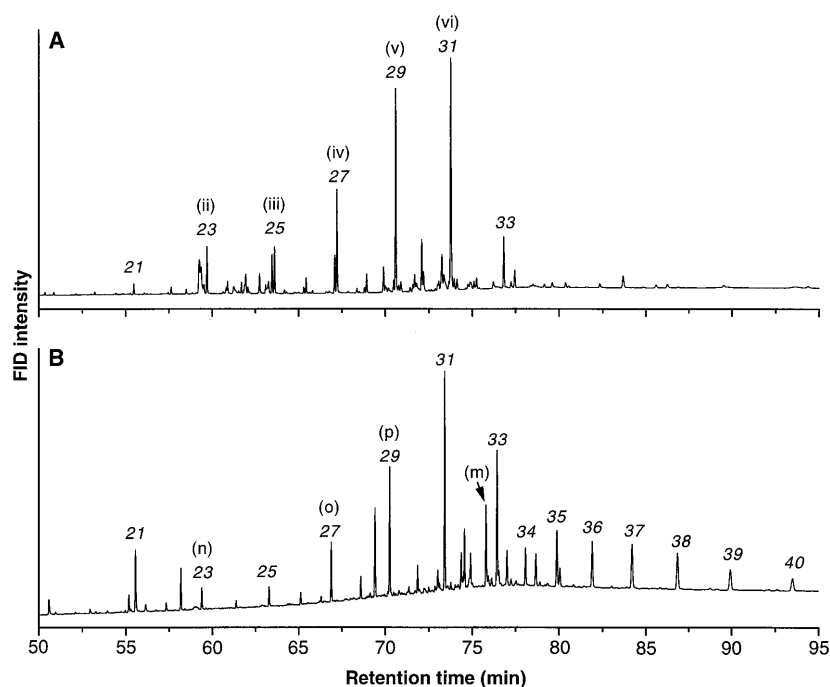


Fig. 1. Partial high-resolution gas chromatograms [with flame ionization detection (FID)] of total saturated hydrocarbon fractions from (A) Black Sea core BC4 (4 to 7 cm), and (B) Arabian Sea core AS-2 (2 to 4 cm). Numbers in italics indicate carbon chain lengths of *n*-alkanes. Numbers and letters in parentheses denote compounds isolated for ¹⁴C analysis from these fractions (see Table 1).

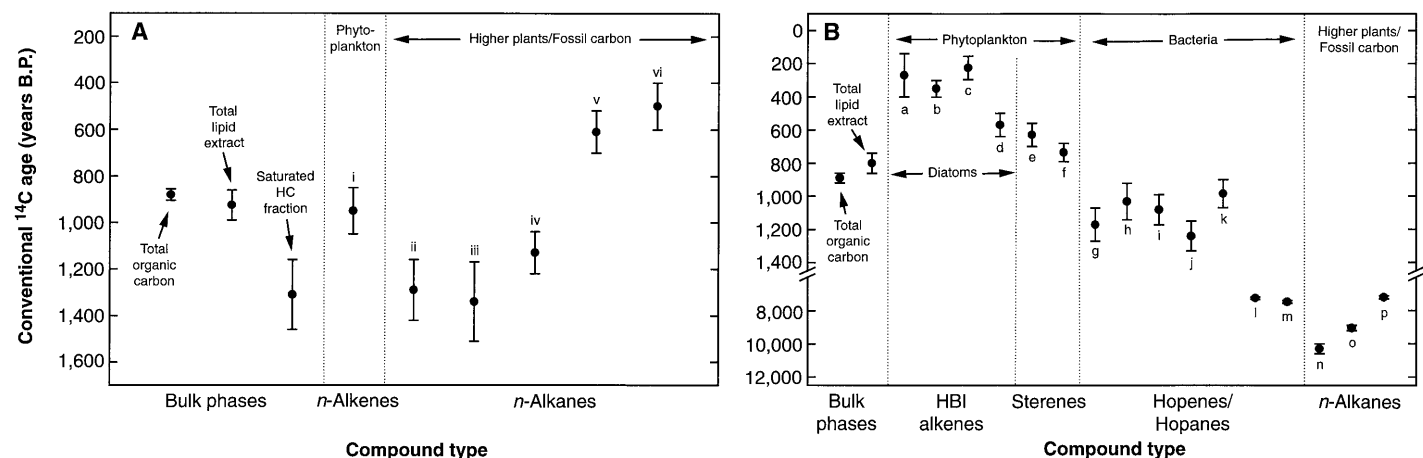


Fig. 2. Plot of conventional ¹⁴C ages (determined by AMS) for individual hydrocarbons and bulk fractions: (A) Black Sea core BC4, 4 to 7 cm, and (B) Arabian Sea core 6BC, 2 to 4 cm. See Table 1 for individual compound

identifications. Note break in y axis in (B). Error bars represent uncertainty associated with statistics of the AMS measurement. Overall error is believed to be better than 5% (in Δ¹⁴C) (1).

much older conventional ^{14}C ages ranging from 7200 to 10,000 years B.P. (Fig. 2B). As for the Black Sea sample, a pronounced OEP for the C_{25} to C_{31} *n*-alkanes indicates that OC from higher plants was supplied to the sediments (Fig. 1B). Plant detritus is likely delivered to this region by eolian processes, primarily the Somali Jet, which entrains dust from the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa (4). Older ages for the *n*-alkanes could be expected because the OC in dust plumes from this region are believed to arise from desiccated lacustrine sediments and paleosols formed at times when the climate in eastern Africa was less arid (before ~6000 years B.P.) (24). The hopanoid alkane (compound m) may derive from similar sources (soil or lacustrine bacteria); however, the similarity of its $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ value to the photoautotrophic biomarkers suggests that it has a marine origin. We suspect that the old ^{14}C ages of the *n*-alkanes and hopane are a result in part of the presence of fossil OC. Support for this interpretation is provided by the lack of OEP in a series of *n*-alkanes extending to C_{40} (Fig. 1B), indicating the presence of thermogenic hydrocarbons. The lack of an associated unresolved envelope suggests that these fossil hydrocarbons are protected from microbial degradation, possibly through association with mineral matrices (25). The overlap in the *n*-alkane envelopes from the higher plant and fossil inputs (Fig. 1B) provides an opportunity to estimate the ^{14}C age for the plant wax contribution. For infinite ^{14}C age petrogenic contributions of 30, 40, and 50% (26) to the C_{23} , C_{27} , and C_{29} *n*-alkane, respectively, application of a similar mass balance approach to that described above for the Black Sea *n*-alkanes yields a ^{14}C age of between 4000 and 5000 years B.P. for the land plant component, quite consistent with the timing for the onset of deterioration of climatic conditions in East Africa (24).

In both sediments, the maximal variation in radiocarbon ages observed between compounds exceeds the estimated <300-year age span (based on published sedimentation rates) for either of the intervals sampled. Our results reveal that compounds of the same class and belonging to the same homologous series (Black Sea *n*-alkanes) can exhibit distinctly different radiocarbon ages. Compounds having similar $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values may display significantly different ^{14}C ages (Black Sea *n*-alkanes) or, conversely, compounds of similar ^{14}C age may have various $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values (Arabian Sea HBI alkenes). These molecular isotopic measurements thus illustrate how different sources can affect sedimentary $^{14}\text{C}_{\text{TOC}}$ composition.

Differences in ^{14}C age can now be ex-

plained in the context of isotopic characteristics of specific source inputs and hence can be used to interpret the biogeochemical processes that govern their provenance in sediments. Two examples of long-standing issues in biogeochemistry that benefit from molecular ^{14}C measurements are the origin of non-zero $^{14}\text{C}_{\text{TOC}}$ ages commonly observed for marine surface sediments (27), and the development of refined chronostratigraphies free of interferences due to detrital OC inputs and selective degradation of different organic components. The latter also holds promise for other disciplines where accurate ^{14}C measurements are important (such as archaeology) but may be compromised by the presence of extraneous carbon-containing material.

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- The sediment samples, stored frozen (-20°C) from the time of collection until analysis, were thawed, and a portion was dried and acidified (2N HCl) for determination of bulk elemental and isotopic composition [$\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{TOC}}$ by isotope ratio mass spectrometry (IRMS), and $^{14}\text{C}_{\text{TOC}}$ by accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS)]; ~30 g (equivalent dry weight, Black Sea sample) or ~200 g (Arabian Sea sample) was extracted with a Soxhlet apparatus with CH_3OH and CH_2Cl_2 . An aliphatic hydrocarbon fraction was isolated from the resulting total lipid extract (TLE) by silica gel chromatography with $n\text{-C}_6\text{H}_{14}$ as the eluent. After removal of elemental sulfur (with an activated Cu column), saturated hydrocarbons ($n\text{-C}_6\text{H}_{14}$ eluent) were separated from unsaturated counterparts ($\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5$ eluent) by $\text{AgNO}_3\text{-SiO}_2$ column chromatography. Compound identifications were made by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ compositions were determined by isotope ratio monitoring GC-MS (irm-GC-MS). Individual compounds were isolated from the purified hydrocarbon fractions by preparative capillary gas chromatography (PCGC). Compounds were trapped during PCGC in cryogenically cooled glass u-tubes, and on completion of the sequence (typically about 100 repeated PCGC runs of each fraction yielded sufficient quantities of compound for AMS ^{14}C analysis), the products were recovered by dissolution in CH_2Cl_2 and transferred to quartz combustion tubes. After some of the sample was removed (for determination of yield and purity by GC), solvent was eliminated from the combustion tubes under a stream of nitrogen, CuO was added, and tubes were evacuated and flame-sealed. The samples were combusted (900°C , 5 hours), and the resulting CO_2 was purified, measured, and subsequently converted to graphite by reduction over Co catalyst in the presence of H_2 for radiocarbon analysis by AMS. AMS was performed at either Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution or Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.
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