

Interplanetary dust particles in the Mediterranean: using helium isotopes to constrain sediment fluxes during sapropel events

Thien Khoi Nguyen¹, Adi Torfstein², Gisela Winckler²

(1)DEES, Columbia College, Columbia University, New York, New York

(2)Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University, Palisades, New York

Can helium isotopes be used as a flux proxy in marginal marine environments? To answer this question, we studied sapropel layers in the Eastern Mediterranean (core RC9-174). Sapropels are dark layers rich with organic material deposited in the Mediterranean during massive freshwater flooding events, associated with the strengthening of monsoonal activity in the sub-Saharan tropics. Helium isotopes (³He and ⁴He) in sedimentary environments reflect mixing between high-³He interplanetary dust particles (IDPs) that accrete to Earth at a constant rate and can thus be used as proxies of sediment fluxes, and a low-³He terrigenous component. In the case of sapropel events, an abrupt increase in the flux of terrigenous material provides us with the opportunity to study the patterns of helium isotope distribution before, during, and after these perturbations, which have a well-constrained chronology and thus a known sedimentation rate. We focused on two events, S1 and S4, dated 8 and 105 kyr, respectively. Samples were leached using acetic acid and the fractions of insoluble residue and carbonate were calculated. Helium isotope measurements were performed on the insoluble residue fraction. The results were compared to a quantitative calculation modeling several scenarios, and we further investigated the possible effects of diagenetic processes such as anoxia.

The total range the insoluble residue weight fraction in the samples is between 37.35% and 81.10%, with sapropel samples containing on average 14% more insoluble residue compared to the rest of the samples. Typical measurements of the carbonate content in sapropels, however, show an average difference of 30-40% between sapropels and non-sapropels. We also observed a range of ³He/⁴He ratios between 7.408×10^{-8} and 2.001×10^{-6} (duplicates reproduce themselves within 20% on average), with ³He and ⁴He concentrations in the range of 2.059×10^{-13} to 4.014×10^{-12} cc/g and 1.569×10^{-6} to 5.440×10^{-6} cc/g, respectively. The extraterrestrial ³He fraction in the samples ranges between 86.5% and 99.5%, as derived from a mixing scheme between the terrigenous and extraterrestrial end members. The ³He/⁴He ratios and ³He and ⁴He concentrations show relatively constant values before, during, and after each of the sapropel events. However, a surprisingly high content of ³He is observed above S1, at approximately 5 kyr of age. The lack of a shift in ³He/⁴He during S1 and S4 compared to the under and over lying sediments, despite the strong mixing with a “new” terrigenous component can be explained in several ways. Relatively small differences in the insoluble residue content beneath, within and above the sapropels might limit the possibility to observe trends in ³He/⁴He ratios. The onset of anoxic conditions associated with the sapropels might have caused mineral recrystallization and thus loss of helium.

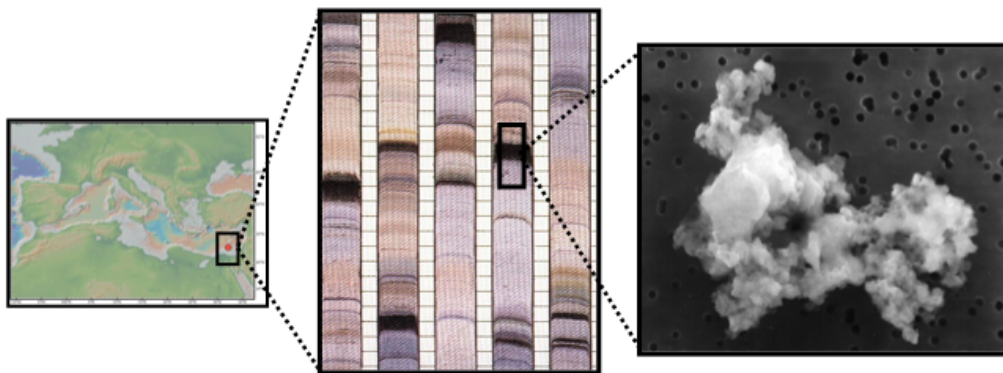
The use of helium isotopes for the reconstruction of sediment fluxes in marginal marine and continental environments is limited by the strong mixing with terrigenous material. A

major unknown is the mechanism of transportation of IDPs from the land to the sea and whether this process delivers material with relatively high or low IDP content. The results from this research will improve the understanding of the use of helium as a constant flux proxy and will contribute to other efforts attempting to constrain the global distribution patterns of the IDPs on Earth.

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Khoi Nguyen, Columbia College



- **Sapropels** - dark, organic, carbon-rich layers of sediments
- **Interplanetary dust particles (IDPs)** - cosmic dust that accretes onto Earth
- **Extraterrestrial ^3He** - tracer of sediment accumulation

PIs: Adi Torfstein & Gisela Winckler