

CURRENT PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH

Organic Compound Synthesis on the Primitive Earth

Several questions about the origin of life have been answered, but much remains to be studied.

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Since the demonstration by Pasteur that life does not arise spontaneously at the present time, the problem of the origin of life has been one of determining how the first forms of life arose, from which all the present species have evolved. This problem has received considerable attention in recent years, but there is disagreement on many points. We shall discuss the present status of the problem, mainly with respect to the early chemical history of, and the synthesis of organic compounds on, the primitive earth.

Many of our modern ideas on the origin of life stem from Oparin (1), who argued that the spontaneous generation of the first living organism might reasonably have taken place if large quantities of organic compounds had been present in the oceans of the primitive earth. Oparin further proposed that the atmosphere was reducing in character and that organic compounds might be synthesized under these conditions. This hypothesis implied that the first organisms were heterotrophic—that is, that they obtained their basic constituents from the environment instead of synthesizing them from carbon dioxide and water. Horowitz (2) discussed this point further and outlined how a simple heterotrophic organism could develop the ability to synthesize various cell constituents and thereby evolve into autotrophic organisms.

In spite of the argument by Oparin,

numerous attempts were made to synthesize organic compounds under the oxidizing conditions now present on the earth (3). Various sources of energy acting on carbon dioxide and water failed to give reduced carbon compounds except when contaminating reducing agents were present. The one exception to this was the synthesis of formic acid and formaldehyde in very small yield (10^{-7} H_2CO molecules per ion pair) by the use of 40-million-electron-volt helium ions from a 60-inch cyclotron (4). While the simplest organic compounds were indeed synthesized, the yields were so small that this experiment can best be interpreted to mean that it would not have been possible to synthesize organic compounds nonbiologically as long as oxidizing conditions were present on the earth. This experiment is important in that it induced a reexamination of Oparin's hypothesis of the reducing atmosphere (5).

The Primitive Atmosphere

Our discussion is based on the assumption that conditions on the primitive earth were favorable for the production of the organic compounds which make up life as we know it. There are many sets of conditions under which organic compounds could have been produced. All these conditions are more or less reducing. However, before accepting a set

of conditions for the primitive earth, one must show that reactions known to take place will not rapidly change the atmosphere to another type. The proposed set of conditions must also be consistent with the known laws for the escape of hydrogen.

Cosmic dust clouds, from which the earth is believed to have been formed, contain a great excess of hydrogen. The planets Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune are known to have atmospheres of methane and ammonia. There has not been sufficient time for hydrogen to escape from these planets, because of their lower temperatures and higher gravitational fields. It is reasonable to expect that the earth and the other minor planets also started out with reducing atmospheres and that these atmospheres became oxidizing, due to the escape of hydrogen.

The meteorites are the closest approximation we have to the solid material from which the earth was formed. They are observed to be highly reduced—the iron mostly as metallic iron with some ferrous sulfide, the carbon as elemental carbon or iron carbide, and the phosphorus as phosphides.

The atmosphere under these reducing conditions would contain some hydrogen, methane, nitrogen, and ammonia; smaller amounts of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide; and possibly small amounts of other substances such as higher hydrocarbons, hydrogen sulfide, and phosphine. These substances were probably not present in equilibrium concentrations, but compounds which are thermodynamically very unstable in this highly reducing atmosphere—such as oxygen, oxides of nitrogen, and oxides of sulfur—could not have been present in more than a few parts per million. This is true of compounds which are unstable in the present oxidizing atmosphere of the earth, such as hydrogen, ozone, methane, and nitrous oxide.

The over-all chemical change has been the oxidation of the reducing atmosphere to the present oxidizing atmosphere. This

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is caused by the loss of hydrogen, which results in the production of nitrogen, nitrate, sulfate, free oxygen, and ferric iron. As is discussed below, many complex organic compounds would have been formed during the course of this over-all change, thereby presenting a favorable environment for the formation of life. Whether the surface carbon of the present earth was all part of the initial atmosphere or whether it has been escaping from the earth's interior in a somewhat reduced condition is not important to the over-all picture.

Escape of Hydrogen

We have learned in recent years that the temperature of the high atmosphere is 2000°K or more, and there is no reason to suppose that the same temperature was not present in the past. One might expect that a reducing atmosphere would be cooler than an oxidizing atmosphere because methane and ammonia can emit infrared radiation while the diatomic molecules, nitrogen and oxygen, cannot. Curtis and Goody (6) have shown that carbon dioxide is ineffective in emitting infrared radiation in the high atmosphere. This is due to the low efficiency of energy transfer from the translational and rotational to the vibrational degrees of freedom, and it seems likely that this would apply to methane as well.

The loss of hydrogen from the earth is now believed to be limited by the diffusion of H₂ to the high atmosphere, since almost all the water is frozen out before it reaches the high atmosphere. Urey (7) has discussed this problem and finds that the loss is entirely due to these effects and not to the Jeans escape formula.

The present rate of escape is 10⁷ atoms of hydrogen per square centimeter per second, and it is proportional to the concentration of molecular hydrogen in the atmosphere, which is now 10⁻⁶ atm at the earth's surface. This rate would result in escape of hydrogen equivalent to 20 g of water per square centimeter in the last 4.5 × 10⁹ years. This rate is not sufficient to account for the oxygen in the atmosphere (230 g/cm²).

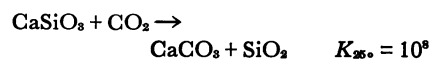
In addition, we must account for the oxidation of the carbon, ammonia, and ferrous iron to their present states of oxidation. The oxidation of the 3000 g of surface carbon per square centimeter present on the earth from the 0 to the +4 valence state (that is, from C or

H₂CO to CO₂) would require the loss of 1000 g of hydrogen per square centimeter. At the present rate of escape this would require 2.5 × 10¹² years. In order for this escape to be accomplished in 2.5 × 10⁹ years (that is, between 4.5 × 10⁹ and 2.0 × 10⁹ years ago), a pressure of hydrogen at the surface of the earth of 0.7 × 10⁻³ atm would have been required. In order for the nitrogen, sulfur, and iron also to be oxidized, even larger losses and a higher pressure of hydrogen would have been needed. We use a figure of 1.5 × 10⁻³ atm for the hydrogen pressure in the primitive atmosphere.

These calculations are greatly oversimplified, since methane and other volatile hydrogen compounds would be decomposed in the high atmosphere and therefore a higher concentration of hydrogen might exist in the high atmosphere than is indicated by surface partial pressures. However, the results of the calculation would be qualitatively the same for hydrogen pressures different from the chosen value by an order of magnitude.

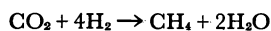
Equilibria of Carbon Compounds

The partial pressure of CO₂ in the atmosphere is kept low by two buffer systems. The first system, which is rapid, is the absorption in the sea to form HCO₃⁻ and H₂CO₃. The second, which is slow, is the reaction of carbon dioxide with silicates; for example



The partial pressure of CO₂ at sea level (3.3 × 10⁻⁴ atm) is somewhat higher than the equilibrium pressure (10⁻⁸ atm), but very much lower than would be the case without the formation of limestones (CaCO₃).

The equilibrium constant at 25°C in the presence of liquid water for the reaction



is 8 × 10²². Assuming that equilibrium was attained, and using partial pressures P_{CO₂} = 10⁻⁸ atm and P_{H₂} = 1.5 × 10⁻³ atm, we find that the pressure of CH₄ would be 4 × 10³ atm. In order to have a reasonable pressure of CH₄, the partial pressure of CO₂ would have to be less than 10⁻⁸ atm, and limestones would not form.

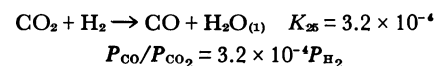
Complete thermodynamic equilibrium could not exist in a reducing atmosphere

because of the dependence of the equilibrium proportions of compounds on pressure and hence on altitude. It is more likely that the steady-state concentrations of CO₂ and CH₄ would be determined not by the equilibrium at sea level but rather by the equilibrium at higher altitude, where the ultraviolet light would provide the activation energy to bring about rapid equilibrium. Under these conditions water would be a gas, and the equilibrium constant would be 10²⁰, so

$$K_{\text{ss}} = 10^{20} = P_{\text{CH}_4} P_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^2 / P_{\text{CO}_2} P_{\text{H}_2}^4 \\ = X_{\text{CH}_4} X_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}^2 / X_{\text{CO}_2} X_{\text{H}_2}^4 P^{-1}$$

where the X's are the mole fractions and P is the total pressure. If the surface partial pressures were P_{CH₄} = 1, P_{CO₂} = 3.3 × 10⁻⁴ (the present value), and P_{H₂} = 1.5 × 10⁻³, the X's would be equal to these partial pressures. We use X_{H₂O} = 10⁻⁶, which is the present value for H₂O above the tropopause. Equilibrium will be established under these conditions where P = 2.5 × 10⁻⁹ atm—the present atmospheric pressure at about 180 km. It is reasonable to assume that equilibrium was established at some high altitude; therefore, carbon dioxide and hydrogen could both have been present at small partial pressures and methane could have been present at a moderate partial pressure in a reducing atmosphere where the pressure of hydrogen was 1.5 × 10⁻³ atm.

Carbon monoxide should not have been an important constituent of the atmosphere, as can be seen from the following reaction



Using P_{H₂} = 1.5 × 10⁻³, we have the ratio P_{CO}/P_{CO₂} = 5 × 10⁻⁷, which is independent of pressure. Furthermore, carbon monoxide is a relatively reactive compound, and should any significant quantities appear in the atmosphere, it would react rather rapidly to give organic compounds, carbon dioxide and hydrogen, and formate.

Rubey (8) and Abelson (9) have argued that the surface carbon and nitrogen have come from the outgassing of the interior of the earth instead of from the remaining gases of the cosmic dust cloud from which the earth was formed. The carbon from the outgassing of the earth is a mixture of CO₂, CO, and CH₄, and hydrogen may be present. While outgassing may have been a significant process on the primitive earth, this does not

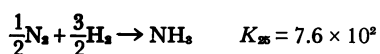
mean that the atmosphere was necessarily composed of CO₂ and CO. The thermodynamic considerations discussed above would still apply. The carbon dioxide would dissolve in the ocean to form bicarbonate, and CaCO₃ would be deposited, and the CO would be unstable, as is demonstrated above.

Many writers quote "authorities" in regard to these questions without understanding what is fact and what is opinion. The thermodynamic properties of C, CO, CO₂, CH₄, N₂, NH₃, O₂, H₂O, and other similar substances are all well known, and the equilibrium mixtures can be calculated for any given composition without question. The only point open to argument is whether equilibrium was approximated or whether a nonequilibrium mixture was present. A mixture of hydrogen and carbon monoxide or hydrogen and carbon dioxide is very unstable at 25°C, but does not explode or react detectably in years. But would such mixtures remain in an atmosphere for millions of years subject to energetic radiation in the high atmosphere? We believe the answer is "No." These mixtures would react even without such radiation in geologic times. Hydrogen and oxygen will remain together at low temperatures for long times without detectable reaction by ordinary methods. The use of radioactive tracers shows that a reaction is proceeding at ordinary temperatures nonetheless.

The buffer systems of the ocean and the calcium silicate-calcium carbonate equilibrium were of sufficient capacity to keep the partial pressure of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at a low value; hence, the principal species of carbon in the atmosphere would have been methane, even though the fraction of surface carbon in the oxidation state of carbon dioxide was continuously increasing. This would have been true until the pressure of H₂ fell below about 10⁻⁶ atm. It is likely that shortly after this, significant quantities of molecular oxygen would have appeared in the atmosphere.

Equilibria of Nitrogen Compounds

The equilibrium concentrations of ammonia can be discussed by considering the reaction



Using $P_{\text{H}_2} = 1.5 \times 10^{-3}$, we have $P_{\text{NH}_3}/P_{\text{N}_2}^{1/2} = 0.04$.

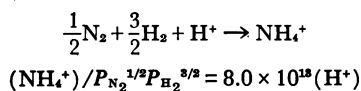
Ammonia is very soluble in water and

Table 1. Present sources of energy averaged over the earth.

Source	Energy (cal cm ⁻² yr ⁻¹)
Total radiation from sun	260,000
Ultraviolet light	
λ < 2500 Å	570
λ < 2000 Å	85
λ < 1500 Å	3.5*
Electric discharges	4 †
Cosmic rays	0.0015
Radioactivity (to 1.0 km depth)	0.8 ‡
Volcanoes	0.13 §

* Includes the 1.9 cal cm⁻² yr⁻¹ from the Lyman α at 1216 Å (39). † Includes 0.9 cal cm⁻² yr⁻¹ from lightning and about 3 cal cm⁻² yr⁻¹ due to corona discharges from pointed objects (40). ‡ The value, 4 × 10⁹ years ago, was 2.8 cal cm⁻² yr⁻¹ (41). § Calculated on the assumption of an emission of lava of 1 km³ (C_p = 0.25 cal/g, P = 3.0 g/cm³) per year at 1000°C.

therefore would displace the above reaction toward the right, giving



which is valid for pH's less than 9. At pH = 8 and $P_{\text{H}_2} = 1.5 \times 10^{-3}$, we have

$$(\text{NH}_4^+)/P_{\text{N}_2}^{1/2} = 47$$

which shows that most of the ammonia would have been in the ocean instead of in the atmosphere. The ammonia in the ocean would have been largely decomposed when the pressure of hydrogen fell below 10⁻⁵ atm, assuming that the pH of the ocean was 8, its present value. A higher pH would have made the ammonia less stable; the converse is true for a lower pH.

All the oxides of nitrogen would have been unstable and therefore rare. Hydrogen sulfide would have been present in the atmosphere only as a trace constituent because it would have precipitated as ferrous and other sulfides. Sulfur would have been reduced to hydrogen sulfide by the reaction



It is evident that the calculations do not have a quantitative validity because of many uncertainties with respect to temperature, the processes by which equilibrium could be approached, the atmospheric level at which such processes would be effective, and the partial pressure of hydrogen required to provide the necessary rate of escape. In view of these uncertainties, further calculations are unprofitable at the present time. However, we can conclude from this dis-

cussion that a reducing atmosphere containing low partial pressures of hydrogen and ammonia and a moderate pressure of methane and nitrogen constitutes a reasonable atmosphere for the primitive earth. That this was the case is not proved by our arguments, but we maintain that atmospheres containing large quantities of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are not stable and cannot account for the loss of hydrogen from the earth.

Synthesis of Organic Compounds

At the present time the direct or indirect source of free energy for all living organisms is the sunlight utilized by photosynthetic organisms. But before the evolution of photosynthesis other sources of free energy must have been used. It is of interest to consider the sources of such free energy as well as the origin of the appropriate chemical compounds containing excess free energy which supplied the energy for chemical evolution prior to the existence of what should be called living organisms, and before the evolution of photosynthesis.

Table 1 gives a summary of the sources of energy in the terrestrial surface regions. It is evident that sunlight is the principal source of energy, but only a small fraction of this is in the wavelengths below 2000 Å which can be absorbed by CH₄, H₂O, NH₃, CO₂, and so on. If more complex molecules are formed, the absorption can move to the 2500-Å region or to longer wavelengths where a substantial amount of energy is available. With the appearance of porphyrins and other pigments, absorption in the visible spectrum becomes possible.

Although it is probable, it is not certain that the large amount of energy from ultraviolet light would have made the principal contribution to the synthesis of organic compounds. Most of the photochemical reactions at these low wavelengths would have taken place in the upper atmosphere. The compounds so formed would have absorbed at longer wavelengths and therefore might have been decomposed by this ultraviolet light before reaching the oceans. The question is whether the rate of decomposition in the atmosphere was greater or less than the rate of transport to the oceans.

Next in importance as a source of energy are electric discharges, such as lightning and corona discharges from pointed objects, which occur closer to

the earth's surface and hence would have effected more efficient transfer to the oceans.

Cosmic-ray energy is negligible at present, and there is no reason to assume it was greater in the past. The radioactive disintegration of uranium, thorium, and potassium was more important 4.5×10^9 years ago than it is now, but still the energy was largely expended on the interior of solid materials such as the rocks, and only a very small fraction of the total energy was available in the oceans and atmosphere. Volcanic energy is not only small but its availability is very limited. A continuous source of energy is needed. It contributes little to the evolutionary process to have a lava flow in one part of the earth at one time and to have another flow on the opposite side of the earth years later. For a brief time heat is available at the surface of the lava, but the surface cools and heat flows slowly from the interior for years, making the surface slightly warm. Only a very small contribution to the evolutionary process could be contributed by these energy sources.

Electric Discharges

While ultraviolet light is a greater source of energy than electric discharges, the greatest progress in the synthesis of organic compounds under primitive conditions has been made with electric discharges. The apparatus used by Miller in these experiments was a closed system of glass, except for tungsten electrodes. The water is boiled in a 500-ml flask which mixes the water vapor and gases in a 5-lit. flask where the spark is located. The products of the discharge are condensed and flow through a U-tube back into the 500-ml flask. The first report (10) showed that when methane, ammonia, water, and hydrogen were subjected to a high-frequency spark for a week, milligram quantities of glycine, alanine, and α -amino-*n*-butyric acid were produced.

A more complete analysis (11, 12) of the products gave the results shown in Table 2. The compounds in the table account for 15 percent of the carbon added as methane, with the yield of glycine alone being 2.1 percent. Indirect evidence indicated that polyhydroxyl compounds (possibly sugars) were synthesized. These compounds were probably formed from condensations of the formaldehyde that was produced by the

electric discharge. The alanine was demonstrated to be racemic, as would be expected in a system which contained no asymmetric reagents. It was shown that the syntheses were not due to bacterial contamination. The addition of ferrous ammonium sulfate did not change the results, and the substitution of N_2 for the NH_3 changed only the relative yields of the compounds produced.

This experiment has been repeated and confirmed by Abelson (13), by Pavlovskaya and Passynsky (14), and by Heyns, Walter, and Meyer (15). Abelson worked with various mixtures of H_2 , CH_4 , CO , CO_2 , NH_3 , N_2 , H_2O , and O_2 . As long as the conditions were reducing conditions—that is, as long as either H_2 , CH_4 , CO , or NH_3 was present in excess—amino acids were synthesized. The products were the same and the yields as large in many of these mixtures as they were with methane, ammonia, and water. If the conditions were oxidizing, no amino acids were synthesized. These experiments have confirmed the hypothesis that reducing atmospheres are required for the formation of organic compounds in appreciable quantities. However, several of these mixtures of gases are highly unstable. Hence the synthesis of amino acids in these mixtures does not imply that such atmospheres were present on the primitive earth.

Heyns, Walter, and Meyer also performed experiments with different mixtures of gases, with results similar to Abelson's. These workers also used CH_4 , NH_3 , H_2O , and H_2S . They obtained ammonium thiocyanate, thiourea, and thioacetamide as well as compounds formed when H_2S was absent.

The mechanism of synthesis of the amino acids is of interest if we are to extrapolate the results in these simple systems to the primitive earth. Two alternative proposals were made for the synthesis of the amino and hydroxy acids in the spark discharge system. (i) Aldehydes and hydrogen cyanide are synthesized in the gas phase by the spark. These aldehydes and the hydrogen cyanide react in the aqueous phase of the system to give amino and hydroxy nitriles, which are hydrolyzed to amino and hydroxy acids. This mechanism is essentially a Strecker synthesis. (ii) The amino and hydroxy acids are synthesized in the gas phase from the ions and radicals that are produced in the electric discharge.

It was shown that most, if not all, of the amino acids were synthesized accord-

ing to the first hypothesis, since the rate of production of aldehydes and hydrogen cyanide by the spark and the rate of hydrolysis of the amino nitriles were sufficient to account for the total yield of amino acids (12).

This mechanism accounts for the fact that most of the amino acids were α -amino acids, the ones which occur in proteins. The β -alanine was formed not by this mechanism but probably by the addition of ammonia to acrylonitrile (or acrylamide or acrylic acid), followed by hydrolysis to β -alanine.

The experiments on the mechanism of the electric discharge synthesis of amino acids indicate that a special set of conditions or type of electric discharge is not required to obtain amino acids. Any process or combination of processes that yielded both aldehydes and hydrogen cyanide would have contributed to the amount of α -amino acids in the oceans of the primitive earth. Therefore, whether the aldehydes and hydrogen cyanide came from ultraviolet light or from electric discharges is not a fundamental question, since both processes would have contributed to the α -amino acid content. It may be that electric discharges were the principal source of hydrogen cyanide and that ultraviolet light was the principal source of aldehydes, and that the two processes complemented each other.

Ultraviolet Light

It is clear from Table 1 that the greatest source of energy would be ultraviolet light. The effective wavelengths would be $CH_4 < 1450 \text{ A}$, $H_2O < 1850 \text{ A}$, $NH_3 < 2250 \text{ A}$, $CO < 1545 \text{ A}$, $CO_2 < 1690 \text{ A}$, $N_2 < 1100 \text{ A}$, and $H_2 < 900 \text{ A}$. It is more difficult to work with ultraviolet light than with electric discharges because of the small wavelengths involved.

The action of the 1849-A Hg line on a mixture of methane, ammonia, water, and hydrogen produced only a very small yield of amino acids (16). Only NH_3 and H_2O absorb at this wavelength, but apparently the radical reactions formed active carbon intermediates. The limiting factor seemed to be the synthesis of hydrogen cyanide. Groth (17) found that no amino acids were produced by the 1849-A line of mercury with a mixture of methane, ammonia, and water, but that amines and amino acids were formed when the 1470-A and

1295-A lines of xenon were used. The 1849-A line produced amines and amino acids with a mixture of ethane, ammonia, and water. The mechanism of this synthesis was not determined. Terenin (18) has also obtained amino acids by the action of the xenon lines on methane, ammonia, and water.

We can expect that a considerable amount of ultraviolet light of wavelengths greater than 2000 Å would be absorbed in the oceans, even though there would be considerable absorption of this radiation by the small quantities of organic compounds in the atmosphere. Only a few experiments have been performed which simulate these conditions.

In a most promising experiment, Ellenbogen (19) used a suspension of ferrous sulfide in aqueous ammonium chloride through which methane was bubbled. The action of ultraviolet light from a mercury lamp gave small quantities of a substance with peptide frequencies in the infrared. Paper chromatography of a hydrolyzate of this substance gave a number of spots with Ninhydrin, of which phenylalanine, methionine, and valine were tentatively identified.

Bahadur (20) has reported the synthesis of serine, aspartic acid, asparagine, and several other amino acids by the action of sunlight on paraformaldehyde solutions containing ferric chloride and nitrate or ammonia. Pavlovskaya and Passynsky (21) have also synthesized a number of amino acids by the action of ultraviolet light on a 2.5-percent solution of formaldehyde containing ammonium chloride or nitrate. These high concentrations of formaldehyde would not have occurred on the primitive earth. It would be interesting to see if similar results could be obtained with $10^{-4}M$ or $10^{-5}M$ formaldehyde. This type of experiment deserves further investigation.

Radioactivity and Cosmic Rays

Because of the small amount of energy available, it is highly unlikely that high-energy radiation could have been very important in the synthesis of organic compounds on the primitive earth. However, a good deal of work has been done in which this type of energy has been used, and some of it has been interpreted as bearing on the problem of the origin of life.

Dose and Rajewsky (22) produced

Table 2. Yields from sparking a mixture of CH_4 , NH_3 , H_2O , and H_2 ; 710 mg of carbon was added as CH_4 .

Compound	Yield [moles ($\times 10^6$)]
Glycine	63.
Glycolic acid	56.
Sarcosine	5.
Alanine	34.
Lactic acid	31.
N-Methylalanine	1.
α -Amino- <i>n</i> -butyric acid	5.
α -Aminoisobutyric acid	0.1
α -Hydroxybutyric acid	5.
β -Alanine	15.
Succinic acid	4.
Aspartic acid	0.4
Glutamic acid	0.6
Iminodiacetic acid	5.5
Iminoacetic-propionic acid	1.5
Formic acid	233.
Acetic acid	15.
Propionic acid	13.
Urea	2.0
N-Methyl urea	1.5

amines and amino acids through the action of x-rays on various mixtures of CH_4 , CO_2 , NH_3 , N_2 , H_2O , and H_2 . A small yield of amino acids was obtained through the action of 2 Mev electrons on a mixture of CH_4 , NH_3 , and H_2O (23).

The formation of formic acid and formaldehyde from carbon dioxide and water by 40 Mev helium ions was mentioned previously. These experiments were extended by using aqueous formic acid (24). The yield per ion pair was only 6×10^{-4} for formaldehyde and 0.03 for oxalic acid. Higher yields of oxalic acid were obtained from $Ca(HCO_3)_2$ and NH_4HCO_3 by Hasselstrom and Henry (25). The helium ion irradiation of aqueous acetic acid solutions gave succinic and tricarballic acid along with some malonic, malic, and citric acids (26).

The irradiation of 0.1- and 0.25-percent aqueous ammonium acetate by 2 Mev electrons gave glycine and aspartic acid (27). The yields were very small. Massive doses of gamma rays on solid ammonium carbonate yielded formic acid and very small quantities of glycine and possibly some alanine (28).

The concentrations of carbon compounds and the dose rates used in these experiments are, in all probability, very much larger than could be expected on the primitive earth, and the products and yields may depend markedly on

these factors, as well as on the effect of radical scavengers such as HS^- and Fe^{2+} . It is difficult to exclude high-energy radiations entirely, but if one is to make any interpretations from laboratory work, the experiments should be performed with much lower dose rates and concentrations of carbon sources.

Thermal Energy

The older theories of the formation of the earth involved a molten earth during its formation and early stages. These theories have been largely abandoned, since the available evidence indicates that the solar system was formed from a cold cloud of cosmic dust. The mechanisms for heating the earth are the gravitational energy released during the condensation of the dust to form the earth and the energy released from the decay of the radioactive elements. It is not known whether the earth was molten at any period during its formation, but it is clear that the crust of the earth would not have remained molten for any length of time.

Studies on the concentration of some elements in the crust of the earth indicate that the temperature was less than $150^\circ C$ during this lengthy fractionation, and that it was probably close to present terrestrial temperatures (29).

Fox (30) has maintained that organic compounds were synthesized on the earth by heat. When heated to $150^\circ C$, malic acid and urea were converted to aspartic acid and ureidosuccinic acid, and some of the aspartic acid was decarboxylated to α - and β -alanine. The difficulty with these experiments is the source of the malic acid and urea on the primitive earth—a question not discussed by Fox. Fox has also synthesized peptides by the well-known reaction (31) of heating amino acids at 150° to $180^\circ C$, and the yield of peptides has been increased by using an excess of aspartic or glutamic acid (32). There is a difficulty connected with heating amino acids and other organic compounds to high temperatures. Geological conditions can heat amino acids to temperatures above $100^\circ C$ over long periods of time, but it is not likely that this could occur over short periods. Abelson (33) has shown that alanine, one of the more stable amino acids, decarboxylates to methylamine and carbon dioxide. The mean life of alanine is 10^{11} years at $25^\circ C$ but only 30 years at $150^\circ C$. Therefore, any extensive heating

of amino acids will result in their destruction, and the same is true for most organic compounds. In the light of this, and since the surface of the primitive earth was probably cool, it is difficult to see how the processes advocated by Fox could have been important in the synthesis of organic compounds.

Surface Reactions, Organic Phosphates, and Porphyrins

It is likely that many reactions were catalyzed by adsorption on clay and mineral surfaces. An example is the polymerization of aminoacetonitrile to glycine peptides in the presence of acid clays, by Akabori and his co-workers (34). Formaldehyde and acetaldehyde were shown to react with polyglycine adsorbed on kaolinite to give serine and threonine peptides. This field offers many possibilities for research.

Gulick (35) has pointed out that the synthesis of organic phosphates presents a difficult problem because phosphate precipitates as calcium and other phosphates under present earth conditions, and that the scarcity of phosphate often limits the growth of plants, especially in the oceans. He proposes that the presence of hypophosphites, which are more soluble, would account for higher concentrations of phosphorus compounds when the atmosphere was reducing. Thermodynamic calculations show that *all* lower oxidation states of phosphorus are unstable under the pressures of hydrogen assumed in this article. It is possible that stronger reducing agents than hydrogen reduced the phosphate or that some process other than reduction solubilized the calcium phosphate. This problem deserves careful attention.

The synthesis of porphyrins is considered by many authors to be a necessary step for the origin of life. Porphyrins are not necessary for living processes if the organism obtains its energy requirements from fermentation of sugars or other energy-yielding organic reactions. According to the heterotrophic theory of the origin of life, the first organisms would derive their energy requirements from fermentations. The metabolism of sulfate, iron, N₂, hydrogen, and oxygen appears to require porphyrins as well as photosynthesis. Therefore, porphyrins probably would have to be synthesized before free energy could be derived from these compounds. While porphyrins may have been present in the environment

before life arose, this is apparently not a necessity, and porphyrins may have arisen during the evolution of primitive organisms.

Intermediate Stages in Chemical Evolution

The major problems remaining for an understanding of the origin of life are (i) the synthesis of peptides, (ii) the synthesis of purines and pyrimidines, (iii) a mechanism by which "high-energy" phosphate or other types of bonds could be synthesized continuously, (iv) the synthesis of nucleotides and polynucleotides, (v) the synthesis of polypeptides with catalytic activity (enzymes), and (vi) the development of polynucleotides and the associated enzymes which are capable of self-duplication.

This list of problems is based on the assumption that the first living organisms were similar in chemical composition and metabolism to the simplest living organisms still on the earth. That this may not be so is obvious, but the hypothesis of similarity allows us to perform experiments to test it. The surprisingly large yields of aliphatic, hydroxy, and amino acids— α -amino acids rather than the other isomers—in the electric-discharge experiments, plus the arguments that such syntheses would have been effective on the primitive earth, offer support for this hypothesis. Further support can be obtained by demonstrating mechanisms by which other types of biologically important compounds could be synthesized.

Oparin (1) does not view the first organism as a polynucleotide capable of self-duplication but, rather, as a coacervate colloid which accumulates proteins and other compounds from the environment, grows in size, and then splits into two or more fragments, which repeat the process. The coacervate would presumably develop the ability to split into fragments which are very similar in composition and structure, and eventually a genetic apparatus would be incorporated which would make very accurate duplications.

These two hypotheses for the steps in the formation of the first living organism differ mainly in whether the duplication first involved the relatively accurate duplication of nucleic acids, followed by the development of cytoplasm duplication, or whether the steps occurred in

the reverse order. Other sequences could be enumerated, but it is far too early to discuss profitably the exact nature of the first living organism.

It was probably necessary for the primitive organisms to concentrate organic and inorganic nutrients from their environment. This could be accomplished by means of a membrane or by absorption on rocks or clays (36). The development of optical activity in living organisms is another important problem. This has been discussed by many authors and is not taken up here.

Life on Other Planets

Life as we know it—and we know of no other variety of life than that existing on the earth—requires the presence of water for its chemical processes. We know enough about the chemistry of other systems, such as those of silicon, ammonia, and hydrogen fluoride, to realize that no highly complex system of chemical reactions similar to that which we call "living" would be possible in such media. Also, much living matter exists and grows actively on the earth in the absence of oxygen, so oxygen is *not* necessary for life, although the contrary is often stated. Moreover, the protecting layer of ozone in the earth's atmosphere is not necessary for life, since ultraviolet light does not penetrate deeply into natural waters and also because many carbon compounds capable of absorbing the ultraviolet light would be present in a reducing atmosphere.

It is possible for life to exist on the earth and to grow actively at temperatures ranging from 0°C, or perhaps a little lower, to about 70°C. It seems likely that if hot springs were not so temporary, many plants and possibly animals would evolve which could live in such temperatures. Plants are able to produce and accumulate substances which lower the freezing point of water, and hence they can live at temperatures below 0°C. At much lower temperatures the reactions would probably be too slow to proceed in reasonable periods of time. At temperatures much above 120°C, reaction velocities would probably be so great that the nicely balanced reactions characteristic of living things would be impossible. In addition, it is doubtful whether the organic polymers necessary for living organisms would be stable much above 120°C; this is prob-

ably true even when allowance is made for the amazing stability of the enzymes of thermophilic bacteria and algae.

Only Mars, Earth, and Venus conform to the general requirements so far as temperatures are concerned. Mars is known to be very cold and Venus may be too hot. Observations of the black-body emission of radio waves from Venus indicate surface temperatures of 290° to 350°C (37). The clouds of Venus have the polarization of water droplets. Clearing of the clouds occurs, and this indicates that the clouds are composed of some volatile substance, for nonvolatile dust could hardly settle out locally. However, no infrared bands of water have been observed. It is possible that this is due to a very dry, high atmosphere, such as is characteristic of the earth, and to a cloud level that rises to very near the tropopause, so that there is little water vapor above the reflecting layer.

Mars is known to be very cold, with surface temperatures of +30°C to -60°C during the day. The colors of Mars have been observed for many years by many people. The planet exhibits seasonal changes in color—green or bluish in the spring and brown and reddish in the autumn. Sinton (38) has observed an absorption at 3.5 μ in the reflected light of Mars. This corresponds to the C-H stretching frequency of most organic compounds, but many inorganic compounds have absorptions at this wavelength. The changing colors of Mars and the 3.5 μ absorption are the best evidence, however poor it may be, for the existence of life on the planet. One thing that can be stated with confidence is that if life exists there, then liquid water must have been present on the planet in the past, since it is difficult to

believe that life could have evolved in its absence. If this was so, water must have escaped from the planet, as very little water remains there now and no liquid water has been observed. Hence, oxygen atoms must escape from the planet. This is possible if the high atmosphere has a temperature of 2000°K, and this may well be the case in view of the high temperatures in the high atmosphere of the earth.

Surely one of the most marvelous feats of 20th-century science would be the firm proof that life exists on another planet. All the projected space flights and the high costs of such developments would be fully justified if they were able to establish the existence of life on either Mars or Venus. In that case, the thesis that life develops spontaneously when the conditions are favorable would be far more firmly established, and our whole view of the problem of the origin of life would be confirmed (42).

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