Stable Magnesium Isotopes

**General aspects of magnesium**

Magnesium is the ninth most abundant element in the universe, the eighth most abundant element in the earth’s crust and the fourth most common element in the bulk composition of the earth. As an alkaline earth metal, it belongs to group 3 in the periodic table. In nature magnesium only occurs combined with other elements, where it always has an oxidation state of +2. Magnesium is incorporated during growth of biogenic CaCO$_3$ and plays an essential role during photosynthesis, which indicates that biological fractionation plays an important role for Mg isotopes (Hoefs 2018).

**Isotopes of magnesium**

$^{24}\text{Mg} \quad 78.99\%$

$^{25}\text{Mg} \quad 10.00\%$

$^{26}\text{Mg} \quad 11.01\%$

According to Rosman and Taylor (1998), magnesium is composed of three isotopes. Only the introduction of the multicollector-inductively coupled-plasma mass spectrometry (MC-ICP-MS) allowed proper research of the natural Mg isotope variations (Galy et al. 2002) The $\delta^{25}\text{Mg}$ and $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ values are reported relative to the DSM-3 standard (Teng et al 2015a). Young and Galy (2004) proposed that the relationship between $^{25}\text{Mg}/^{24}\text{Mg}$ and $^{26}\text{Mg}/^{24}\text{Mg}$ ratios is diagnostic of kinetic versus equilibrium fractionations. Equilibrium processes should therefore show a slope close to 0.521 on a three-isotope diagram, whereas kinetic processes result in a slope closer to 0.511. Figure 1 summarizes the natural $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ isotope variations relative to DSM-3.

![Figure 1: $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ values of important geological reservoirs (Hoefs 2018).](image-url)
**Fractionation Processes**

**High-Temperature Fractionations**
Fractionations are controlled by the coordination number of Mg in minerals, tetrahedral sites tend to have higher $^{26}\text{Mg}/^{24}\text{Mg}$ ratios than octahedral sites. In olivine, orthopyroxene, clinopyroxene, hornblende and biotite the coordination number of Mg is 6, resulting in limited isotope fractionations among these minerals. In spinel the coordination of Mg is 4 and in garnet it is 8. Therefore, pyrope is depleted in heavy Mg isotopes relative to pyroxenes and olivine, whereas spinel is enriched relative to the coordination of 6 (Hoefs 2018). Schauble (2011) calculated that $^{26}\text{Mg}$ isotope fractionations among silicates, carbonates and oxides result in enrichment in the order magnesite, dolomite, forsterite, orthoenstatite, diopside, periclase and spinel.

**Fractionations During Weathering**
Weathering has a rather complex effect on the fractionation of magnesium isotopes (Huang et al. 2012). Mg is soluble and mobile during weathering, potentially inducing small fractionations during dissolution and precipitation of minerals. Experiments on basalt resulted in an enriched residue due to light Mg isotopes being preferentially released during dissolution. Other experiments reported only little fractionation during dissolution of granite.

The isotopes show an even more complex behaviour during secondary formation of Mg minerals (Huang et al. 2012). Several studies showed that soil and clays are generally heavier than their parent rocks suggesting that heavier Mg isotopes are preferentially incorporated into the structure of clay minerals or absorbed in soils (Hoefs 2018).

The large variation of Mg isotopes in river waters depicted in Figure 1 results from this complex behaviour during weathering. Li et al. (2012) suggested that the range of $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ values is reflecting differences of catchment lithologies particularly in the proportions of carbonate to silicate rocks. Another study by Tipper et al. (2006) observed a smaller variation and concluded that the lithology in the drainage area is of limited significance and the major part of the variability has to be the result of fractionations in the weathering environment.

This leads to the conclusion that the different behaviour of Mg isotopes during weathering may be due to crystallographic differences of Mg-sites in minerals (Hoefs 2018).

**Mg Isotopes of Different Settings**

**Mantle Rocks**
Peridotites have a rather constant Mg isotope composition suggesting a homogeneous mantle with a $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ value of -0.25‰ (Hu et al. 2016) that is used as the average Mg isotope composition of the mantle and bulk earth. Different studies found that there is a lack of Mg isotope fractionation during crystal melt fractionation. Diffusion processes on the other hand play an important role in causing Mg isotope variations in mantle rocks. The interdiffusion exchange of Mg and Fe in olivine results in lighter Fe isotopes diffusing in and lighter Mg isotopes diffusing out of the crystal and thereby causes negatively coupled isotope variations from rim to core (Hoefs 2018).

Metasomatism produces Mg isotope variations in the lithospheric mantle. Wang et al. (2016) demonstrated that the continental lithosphere is heterogeneous in its Mg isotope composition, with xenoliths from the middle, lower crust and from the lithospheric mantle exhibiting values from -1.23 to 0.01‰. Low $\delta^{26}\text{Mg}$ values have been interpreted to indicate metasomatism by carbonate rich fluids.
**Continental Crust**

Shen et al. (2009) showed that the upper continental crust is heterogeneous in Mg isotope composition and on average slightly heavier than the mantle. The largest variations occur in sediments (more than 2.5‰), which are due to mixing of isotopically light carbonates with heavy silicates (Hoefs 2018). Clastic sediments are, overall, enriched in heavy Mg isotopes with δ²⁶Mg values up to 0.92‰ (Li et al. 2010). During subduction, clastic sediments generally retain their Mg isotope composition and thus will enrich the mantle in heavy Mg isotopes. Carbonates on the other hand are significantly depleted in heavy Mg isotopes. Light isotope values could therefore be interpreted as result of carbonate recycling.

**Ocean Water**

River input is the major source for Mg in the ocean. Major sinks are removal by hydrothermal fluids, dolomite formation and low-temperature clay formation during alteration of the oceanic crust. The riverine input has an average δ²⁶Mg value of -1.09‰ (Tipper et al. 2006). Due to its long mean residence time, ocean water has a constant isotope composition of -0.80‰ that is slightly higher than the average river water. This is the result of Mg uptake into silicate minerals during weathering. Other than hydrothermal interaction with the oceanic crust, dolomitisation affects the sea water and drives it to heavier values (Hoefs 2018).

**Carbonates**

Mg is present in CaCO₃ in the form of high Mg calcite, low Mg calcite and to a minor extent as aragonite. Marine organisms produce a wide range of δ²⁶Mg values from -5 to -1‰ that are species dependent. Since the extent of Mg substitution into CaCO₃ is temperature dependent, Mg/Ca ratios can be used as thermometer for oceanic temperatures. This temperature dependence, however, does not play a major role in determining Mg isotope ratios. The observed variability can instead be attributed to mineralogy (Hippler et al. 2009). The fractionation between water and carbonate follows the sequence aragonite < dolomite < magnesite < calcite. (Hoefs 2018). Most recent benthic and planktonic foraminifera show nearly identical δ²⁶Mg ratios, making them suitable for investigating past isotopic variations of ocean water. The change in the past 40 Ma in planktonic foraminifera concluded that seawater Mg has changed from δ²⁶Mg of -0.83‰ at present to 0‰ at 15 Ma (Pogge von Standmann et al. 2008). Dolomite is one of the major rock-forming Mg-bearing carbonates that forms under specific environmental conditions. As Figure 1 implies, the range of dolomite is rather large. Geske et al (2015) argued that Mg isotope ratios are affected by a variety of factors, making the application of Mg isotopes as a proxy for their depositional and diagenetic environment problematic. Other studies on the other hand observed, that early diagenetic dolomite inherits its isotope signature from precursor carbonates and diagenetic fluids. Later formed diagenetic dolomite phases may be slightly enriched in ²⁶Mg suggesting that temperature is not the decisive factor, but instead the Mg-isotope composition of the interacting fluid upon diagenesis.
References


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