The Prospects for Life Elsewhere in the Solar System

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In the later years of the 20th century, it became common in the scientific community to assume that life does not exist in the Solar System; therefore, the exploration of the Solar System by humans or unmanned devices must have other objectives than the discovery of life. This pessimism is largely the result of the initial discoveries of the US and Soviet space programs, which revealed hostile environments such as Venus and Mars.

**Mars**

Mars is currently a very cold place with an extremely thin atmosphere; at first glance, it would appear to be an inhospitable environment for life. It has been compared to Antarctica, though this is an interesting comparison, because Antarctica has many forms of microbial life within its ice and rocks, even in its most inhospitable regions. Liquid water could not exist on the surface for longer than a few minutes at a time, but there is likely to be liquid water in rock pores and cracks several kilometers underground; this may be a habitat for life.

**Viking biology experiments**

The Viking Mars landers were active on Mars from 1976-1980. They were equipped with biology experiments for analyzing Martian soil that, it was assumed, would definitively answer the question of life on Mars. An astonishing positive result was obtained with the Labeled Release (LR) experiment, but the GCMS experiment failed to detect any organic compounds in the Martian soil (Levin and Straat, 1988). A non-biological explanation was accepted for the positive result of the LR experiment; however, Levin notes that this was a change in attitudes among the scientists: “It was understood [before the Viking mission], then, that only one of the three experiments might return a positive response, were there truly life on Mars, and that such independent data would most probably be strong enough on its own merit to substantiate the detection of life” (Levin and Straat, 1988).

The LR experiment (Figure 1) used simple nutrients labeled with carbon-14 dissolved in water. To test the Martian soil, the nutrient broth was added to it, and then the radioactivity of any gas released would be measured―microbial life would presumably metabolize the nutrients and give off carbon dioxide containing carbon-14. To control for non-biological reactions that could cause this same effect, the same experiment was repeated after heating the samples to a temperature of 165⁰C, which would presumably sterilize the soil sample (Levin, 2010).

The results, which were very similar for both Viking 1 and 2 landers, indicated the presence of life: carbon-14 dioxide was produced from the soil upon addition of the nutrient broth, but with prior “sterilization,” no carbon-14 dioxide was given off. If a second addition of the nutrient broth was given to the non-sterilized soil after several days, no carbon-14 dioxide was given off. This last result was widely understood to be evidence *against* life, since microbes usually reproduce when given nutrients, so there would presumably be more microbes to produce carbon-14 dioxide when more of the nutrient broth is added. However, Antarctic soil samples containing microorganisms were found to exhibit the same behavior, because the microorganisms died before the second addition of nutrients (Levin, 2010).

The Viking Pyrolytic Release (PR) experiment was designed to measure synthesis of organic compounds using carbon dioxide from the air (this is essentially the reverse process of the LR experiment); in this experiment, a simulated Martian atmosphere containing carbon-14-labeled carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide were incubated with Martian soil for varying lengths of time and with or without simulated sunlight, then the labeled gas was purged and the soil was heated to 635⁰C to vaporize any carbon-containing compounds. This experiment gave positive results, since radioactive gases were detected (Plaxco and Gross, 2011:280). The PR experiment results cannot be interpreted as biological, however, since heating to 175⁰C does not entirely prevent the reaction, and heating to only 90⁰C does not inhibit the reaction at all; this is inconsistent with reactions mediated by biology (Klein 1978).

The GCMS experiment failed to detect any organic compounds, but it did detect dichloromethane, an organic solvent that was used to clean the soil compartments prior to launch of the Viking probes. A logical conclusion was that the dichloromethane detected was left over from this cleaning. The negative GCMS results initially seemed to rule out organic matter in the Martian soil; because it is almost inconceivable that living organisms could exist without organic compounds, this implied that there were not any microorganisms in the Martian soil. The conclusion that there were no organic materials was brought into question in 2008, when the Phoenix lander detected the presence of perchlorate ions (ClO4-); this would destroy any organic material in the heating step that begins GCMS analysis, converting it to dichloromethane (Levin, 2010). McKay has determined that “if *Phoenix*-like levels of perchlorates were present in the *Viking* samples, the organic content of the Martian soil could have been as high as 0.1% and still would have produced the (false) negative result that the GCMS experiment returned” (Plaxco and Gross, 2011:285). In light of this new information, the best interpretation of the detected presence of dichloromethane is that organic compounds *were* present in the analyzed Martian soil.

The discovery of perchlorates is significant for two other reasons: perchlorate is not stable on the surface due to light

###perchlorates###

**Martian meteorites**

The SNC class of meteorites have been identified as originating from Mars due to large impacts that caused Martian rock to escape the gravity of Mars and enter heliocentric orbit; to date, at least two of them have been reported to show evidence of biological exposure on Mars. One of these is ALH 84001 (Figure 2). In 1996, microscopic structures in the rock that appear to be fossils of microorganisms were identified (McKay et al, 1996). In addition, there are carbonate globules that must have formed in a wet environment at a temperature lower than 100⁰C, and are suggestive of biological activity (McKay et al, 1996). Magnetite crystals have been identified in the meteorite; a similar discovery in an ancient Earth rock would be taken as strong evidence for past magnetotactic bacteria (Plaxco and Gross, 2011:295). Unfortunately, it was later discovered by D.C. Golden et al. that similar magnetite crystals can be produced abiologically, by the heating of iron carbonates (Plaxco and Gross, 2011:295).

**Europa**

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**Titan**

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**Conclusion**

The evidence for life on Mars is still inconclusive, despite many attempts to determine this. The exploration of Mars has not been thorough enough to rule out life, however: there have been no sample return missions, no manned missions, and no drilling of the interior. The existing results, especially those from the Labeled Release experiment of the Viking landers, suggest that further exploration would be justified.

The consequences of discovering life, even in microbial form, can be predicted in advance, at least in outline: if the microbial life has biochemistry suggesting a common origin with Earth life, this would validate the panspermia hypothesis; this would raise the question of whether this common origin was on Earth or some other location in the Solar System, and the fossil record of the planet or moon on which this life is detected could be studied to determine at what point the transfer occurred, and even shed light on abiogenesis, the initial appearance of life from non-life (in the case that Earth was inoculated with microbes from this other body). If, on the other hand, the microbial life has biochemistry indicating a different origin from Earth life, this would show that abiogenesis is *not* an exceedingly unlikely occurrence, and greatly increase the likelihood that there are other living worlds to be discovered beyond the Solar System; with the data available at present, it cannot be ruled out that life appeared only once in the history of the universe.

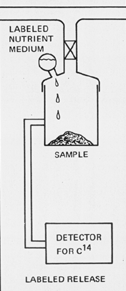
Figure 1: Labeled Release (LR) experiment of Viking landers (artemis 2012).

Figure 2: Electron micrograph of a section from the ALH84001 meteorite. The putative fossil is approximately 200nm in diameter (NASA).

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