Ewingite: Earth’s most complex mineral

Travis A. Olds1, Jakub Plášil2, Anthony R. Kampf3, Antonio Simonetti1, Luke R. Sadergaski1, Yu-Sheng Chen4, and Peter C. Burns1,5

1Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Earth Sciences, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, USA
2Institute of Physics, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 18221 Prague 8, Czech Republic
3Mineral Sciences Department, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, California 90007, USA
4Center for Advanced Radiation Sources, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60632, USA
5Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, USA

ABSTRACT

The newly discovered mineral ewingite is the most structurally complex mineral known. Ewingite is found in the abandoned Plavno mine in the Jáchymov ore district, western Bohemia (Czech Republic), and was studied by synchrotron X-ray diffraction. The structure of ewingite contains nanometer-scale anionic uranyl carbonate cages that contain 24 uranyl polyhedra, as well as Ca and Mg cations and H2O groups located in interstitial regions inside and between the cages. The discovery of ewingite suggests that nanoscale uranyl carbonate cages could be aqueous species in some systems, and these may affect the geochemical behavior of uranium.

INTRODUCTION

Earth by mass consists almost entirely of structurally simple minerals, with an explosion of diversity and complexity in the volumetrically insignificant crust, and especially in near-surface environments (Hazen, 2010). Mineral species diversity and the complexity of individual mineral species have increased through geologic time as geochemical processes fractionated elements and the atmosphere became oxidizing (Hazen, 2010). Anthropogenically modified systems including mines and their related tailings have produced many new mineral species. Our exploration of an abandoned uranium mine in the Czech Republic has yielded ewingite, which is now Earth’s most structurally complex known mineral. Ewingite, named in honor of Rodney C. Ewing (Stanford University, California, USA), formed on a damp wall of the old Plavno mine of the Jáchymov ore district, western Bohemia, in the same region where uranium ore was mined for the studies of Marie and Pierre Curie that resulted in the discovery of polonium and radium more than 100 yr ago. Here we describe ewingite, the structural reasons for its complexity, and its potential significance for modeling of geochemical processes containing uranium.

Most uranium in Earth’s crust occurs as the U(IV)-oxide mineral uraninite, UO2+x, and this is also the case in the Plavno mine. In the presence of water and oxidizing conditions, U(IV) is susceptible to hydrolysis (Sylva and Davidson, 1992; Plášil, 2014). Crystallization from uranyl-bearing solutions often results in fascinating assemblages of brightly colored uranyl minerals, including ewingite (Fig. 1). Uranyl minerals are important for understanding the geochemical history of uranium deposits, and have broader societal importance because they form due to the alteration of spent nuclear fuel in laboratory studies intended to simulate conditions in a geologic repository for nuclear waste (Wronkiewicz et al., 1992, 1996), on radioactive so-called lava (a nuclear reactor meltdown product) produced by the Chernobyl nuclear accident (Burakov et al., 1996), on uranium mine tailings including in Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States, and in subsurfaces contaminated due to inadequate containment of wastes created during production of nuclear weapons (Buck et al., 1996, 1995). Uranyl minerals affect transport of uranium in the environment, and record the history of natural and anthropogenic processes involving uranium.

METHODS

Chemical Analyses

High-resolution–inductively coupled plasma–mass spectrometry (HR-ICP-MS) was used to determine the empirical formula for ewingite. We hand-picked ~40 small crystals, weighing ~250 mg, with the aid of a microscope and placed them in two separate microcentrifuge tubes. The crystals were digested in 1 mL of high-purity, double-distilled 2% HNO3 acid and subsequently diluted 200-fold. Solution-mode ICP-MS analyses were done using the AttoM HR-ICP-MS (by Nu Instruments, http://nu-ins.com) in medium mass resolution (Δm/m ~3300). An external calibration method was used to determine the concentrations of U, Mg, Mn, and Ca by measuring ion signals for the isotopes 239U, 235U, 24Mg, 54Mg, 56Mn, and 44Ca.

Single Crystal X-Ray Diffraction

A yellow crystal of ewingite with dimensions 66 × 44 × 11 μm was mounted on the tip of a glass fiber with glue. The X-ray diffraction experiment was done with a Bruker D8 diffractometer and an APEX II detector using synchrotron radiation, 30 keV (0.41328 Å) Kα, at 100(2) K with an Oxford Cryojet. A total of 2160 frames (0.5°/θ scans) were collected at 20 angles of −8° and −15°. At each 20° angle, the θ angles are at values of −180°, −160°, and 140°. The distance between the detector and the crystal was 12 cm with an exposure time of 0.2 s.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ewingite forms aggregates of golden-yellow crystals as large as 0.2 mm in diameter on altered uraninite, and is associated with other uranyl carbonate minerals, including liebigite and metazel-literite (Fig. 1). Uranyl minerals, including ewingite, are typically various shades of yellow, green, and orange because they incorporate the (UO2)2+ uranyl ion, which is a strong coloring agent owing to its electronic transitions. Single-crystal synchrotron X-ray diffraction at the Advanced Photon Source (Argonne National Laboratory, Illinois, USA) allowed solution of the structure; this, in combination with HR-ICP-MS (see the GSA Data Repository†), established that ewingite is a uranyl carbonate with the composition Mg8Ca8(UO2)24(CO3)30O4(OH)12(H2O)138.

The structure analysis revealed that ewingite is tetragonal, space group I4/m, with unit cell dimensions a = 35.142(2) Å, b = 35.142(2) Å, c = 47.974(3) Å, and V = 59245(8) Å3. The

†GSA Data Repository item 2017341, complete details of all analytical procedures used during the characterization of ewingite, is available online at http://www.geosociety.org/datarepository/2017/ or on request from editing@geosociety.org.
Known from other uranyl compounds (Figs. 2A and 2B). In all of these, \((\text{UO}_2)^{2+}\) uranyl ions are approximately linear and have \(\text{U}-\text{O}\) bond lengths of \(\sim 1.8\ \text{Å}\). FBU-1 consists of three uranyl ions, each of which is coordinated by five oxygen atoms arranged about the equatorial regions of pentagonal bipyramids (Fig. 2C). A single oxygen atom in the equatorial planes of the bipyramids is bonded to all three uranyl ions, and the bipyramids each share two of their equatorial edges with two other bipyramids. In FBU-2, a uranyl ion is coordinated by three bidentate carbonate groups, resulting in a hexagonal bipyramid with carbonate groups in the equatorial region of the uranyl ion (Fig. 2D). In FBU-3, a uranyl ion is coordinated by two bidentate carbonate groups and two \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) groups in the equatorial region of a hexagonal bipyramid (Fig. 2E). One carbon site in the cage is 50% occupied, and the average makeup of the cage requires four FBU-1 and six each of FBU-2 and FBU-3. In Figures 2A and 2B, the partially occupied carbon site is included, and the cage corresponds to four each of FBU-1 and FBU-3, and eight of FBU-3. Linkages between the FBUs within the cage are through carbonate groups.

There are six calcium cations and two magnesium cations inside the uranyl carbonate cage, where they are coordinated by \(\text{O}\) atoms of the cage, as well as \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) groups. The uranyl carbonate cages are linked to other cages in the crystal structure by bonds to calcium and magnesium cations, as well as \(\text{H}\) bonds associated with \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) groups in the interstitial regions. The interstitial components typically exhibit partial occupancy and disorder.

Mineral structure complexity, or that of any inorganic compound, is quantifiable as the information content of the unit cell, with a higher information content indicating higher complexity (Krivovichev, 2013). Krivovichev (2013) established that the complexity of a crystal structure has implications for modeling assemblages of complex minerals, and how they evolve. Krivovichev’s approach quantifies the information content, \(I_i\), of a crystal structure in terms of bits of information per atom:

\[
I_i = \sum_{i=0}^{k} \log_2 \left( \frac{m_i}{v} \right) \left( \frac{\text{bits}}{\text{atom}} \right)
\]

Here \(k\) is the number of crystallographic orbits, where symmetrically equivalent atoms belong to the same orbit, and \(p_i = m_i/v\), where \(m_i\) is the multiplicity of the crystallographic orbit and \(v\) is the number of atoms in the reduced cell. The total information content of the unit cell, \(I_{\text{total}}\), is \(I_i\) multiplied by the number of atoms in the reduced cell. The average information content of 3949 minerals is 228.6 bits per unit cell (Krivovichev, 2013). Minerals with more than 1000 bits of information per unit cell are designated very complex, and this designation applies to \(\sim 2.5\%\) of known minerals (Krivovichev, 2013).

The TOPOS program (Blatov et al., 2000) was used to calculate that the information content (Krivovichev, 2013) of the structure of ewingite, as determined by the single-crystal X-ray diffraction analysis, is 12,684.86 bits per unit cell. The X-ray data did not provide locations of some of the disordered \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) groups or any of the \(\text{H}\) atoms in the structure, although they also contribute to its information content. The total information content is \(\sim 23,000\) bits/unit cell when all unit cell constituents are accounted for, more than three times higher than paulingite, a rare zeolite that was formerly the most complex mineral, with 6766.99 bits of information per unit cell (Krivovichev, 2013). The most complex inorganic structure currently is that of the synthetic compound \(\text{Al}_{30.4}\text{Cu}_{5.4}\text{Ta}_{39.1}\), with an information content of 48,538.63 bits per unit cell (Krivovichev, 2014). The large family of synthetic compounds that contain uranyl peroxide cages are the most complex inorganic uranium-based materials known (Qui and Burns, 2013); among the 2000 most complex inorganic structures, these are the seventh-most abundant group (Krivovichev, 2014).

The high information content of the structure of ewingite reflects the presence of the nanometer-scale uranyl carbonate cage (Figs. 2A and 2B). There are eight symmetrically equivalent
cages in the unit cell. The large unit cell contains 121 symmetrically unique atoms, all but 4 of which are on general sites in space group $I4_1/aced$ with a general site multiplicity of 32. Structurally, 5087.59 bits per unit cell is attributable to the nanometer-scale uranyl carbonate cages alone; the remainder of the information content is due to the interstitial species (Ca, Mg, H₂O) within and between the cages.

The structures of 11 uranyl carbonate minerals are known, and their corresponding information contents per unit cell are listed in Table 1. The structure with the lowest information content is that of rutherfordine, with 15.65 bits per unit cell. Bayleyite, linekite, and braunerite have information contents exceeding 1000 bits per unit cell, with braunerite being the second-most complex uranyl carbonate at 2305.36 bits per unit cell.

Uranyl carbonate aqueous species can be important constituents of groundwater under neutral to alkaline conditions (Gorman-Lewis et al., 2008), and efforts have focused on fully defining their speciation in solution (Guillaumont et al., 2003). The uranyl carbonate systems are complicated because multiple species coexist in equilibrium with one another (Clark et al., 1995), some of which constitute only a minor proportion of the total uranium in solution. Despite extensive studies of aqueous uranyl carbonate systems (Clark et al., 1995), including those with Ca uranyl carbonate species (Bernhard et al., 2001; Dong and Brooks, 2006), nanoscale uranyl carbonate cages have not been reported, nor have they been predicted to occur in minerals (Hazen et al., 2009). The uranyl carbonate cage in ewingite may have assembled in aqueous solution prior to crystallization, or it may have formed during the crystallization process. Uranyl peroxide cages with a similar size and the same number of uranyl polyhedra exist naturally, and in some cases these may affect the aqueous transport of uranium, which would require modification of existing geochemical models.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work was funded by the Chemical Sciences, Geosciences and Biosciences Division, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, Office of Science, U.S. Department of Energy, grant DE-FG02-07ER15880. The AttoM high-resolution–inductively coupled plasma–mass spectrometry instrument used for chemical analysis is housed at the Midwest Isotope and Trace Element Research Analytical Center (MTERAC) at Notre Dame University (Indiana, USA). A portion of this study was funded by the John Jago Trelawney Endowment to the Mineral Sciences Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (California, USA). Plášil is grateful for the support provided by project LO1609 and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports National Sustainability Program I of the Czech Republic.

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Mineral</th>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Unit cell volume</th>
<th>$I_{unit}$ (bits/unit cell)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>andersonite</td>
<td>$\text{Na}_2\text{Ca}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>6544.4</td>
<td>567.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bayleyite</td>
<td>$\text{Mg}_2[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>2624.4</td>
<td>1510.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>braunerite</td>
<td>$\text{K}_2\text{Ca}_2[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>5958</td>
<td>2385.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>čekajite</td>
<td>$\text{Na}_2[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>963.62</td>
<td>161.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>ewingite</td>
<td>$\text{Mg}_2\text{Ca}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>59245</td>
<td>12684.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leoszlíkite</td>
<td>$\text{Na}_2\text{Mg}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>1189.4</td>
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<td>liebigite</td>
<td>$\text{Ca}_2\text{Mg}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>4021.52</td>
<td>5765.73</td>
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<td>linekite</td>
<td>$\text{K}_2\text{Ca}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
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<td>rutherfordine</td>
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<td>6544.4</td>
<td>567.38</td>
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<td>schwertzite</td>
<td>$\text{Na}_2\text{Ca}[\text{UO}_2\text{(CO}_3)<em>3\text{]}</em>\text{H}_2\text{O}$</td>
<td>1029.94</td>
<td>527.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $I_{unit}$ is information content (see text). References: Coda et al. (1981); Mayer and Mereiter (1986); Plášil et al. (2012); Plášil et al. (2013); Fil. (2013); Plášil et al. (2013b);* FINCH et al. (1999); Mereiter (1986a); Mereiter (1986b).


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Manuscript received 22 June 2017
Revised manuscript received 3 August 2017
Manuscript accepted 4 August 2017
Printed in USA