

- Timo Tamminen & Jorma Kuparinen: On the measurement of heterotrophic activity in the aquatic environment using labelled substrates**  
Tiivistelmä: Vesistöjen bakteeriplanktonin aktiivisuuden mittauksesta radioaktiivisten merkkiaineiden avulla 4
- Timo Tamminen: Linear transformations of the Michaelis-Menten kinetic equation in natural microbial communities research**  
Tiivistelmä: Michaelis-Menten -kinetiikan lineaarimuunnokset luonnon mikrobiyhteisöjen tutkimuksessa 11
- Timo Tamminen, Seppo Kaitala & Ludmila V. Iliash: The heterotrophic glucose uptake potential of three marine dinoflagellates**  
Tiivistelmä: Kolmen merellisen dinoflagellaatin glukoosinottopotentialiaali 21
- Jorma Kuparinen, Kirsti Lahti, Tuija Talsi, Timo Tamminen & Anneli Virtanen: Determination of the Michaelis-Menten kinetic parameters with single concentration assays**  
Tiivistelmä: Bakteeriplanktonin glukoosinottoa kuvaavien kineettisten parametrien määrittäminen yhden substraattipitoisuuden menetelmällä 26
- Jorma Kuparinen, Kirsti Lahti, Ari Mäkelä, Seppo Rekolainen, Tuija Talsi, Timo Tamminen, Anneli Virtanen & Antti Uusi-Rauva: A practical approach to the measurement of microbial heterotrophic activity by the single concentration method**  
Tiivistelmä: Vesistöjen bakteeriplanktonin aktiivisuuden määrittäminen yhden substraattipitoisuuden menetelmällä: käytännön suoritus 35
- Tuija Talsi, Timo Tamminen & Jorma Kuparinen: Variability in planktonic heterotrophic activity and primary productivity assays in relation to sampling strategies**  
Tiivistelmä: Perustuotannon ja bakteeriplanktonin aktiivisuuden mittauksen tilastollinen luotettavuus näytteenoton suunnittelun perustana 42

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## FOREWORD

This series of methodological articles on the measurement of aquatic heterotrophic activity originates from several independent studies of Finnish lakes and coastal areas, carried out during 1978—1982. Most of these studies were financed by the National Board of Waters with water protection funds, and they were carried out in Water Districts of Vaasa, Tampere, Helsinki, Kokkola and Kainuu. The authors wish to thank the Water Research Institute and all the Water

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## ON THE MEASUREMENT OF HETEROTROPHIC ACTIVITY IN THE AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT USING LABELLED SUBSTRATES

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The development of heterotrophic activity assay methodology in hydrobiological research is briefly reviewed. Different methodological approaches to the utilization of radioactive substrates in heterotrophic activity measurements are described. Emphasis is placed on the application of these methods in the study of the structure and function of the aquatic ecosystem as well as on applications in ecotoxicological research. A summary of related Finnish research is also presented.

Index words: Heterotrophic activity, Bacterioplankton, labelled substrates, monitoring, ecotoxicology, pelagic ecosystem.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The re-evaluation of the trophic role of microbial heterotrophic organisms in the food web of the aquatic ecosystem has been a major development in hydroecological research during the past decade. The traditional view underestimated or totally ignored the role of microheterotrophic organisms in the marine pelagic ecosystem (Steele 1974), although evidence from limnological studies has emphasized their significance in the cycles of matter in the aquatic environment since the early works of e.g. Kuznetsov (1959), Kuznetsov et al. (1966), Romanenko (1966), Sorokin (1965) and Sorokin and Paveljeva (1972). Sorokin (1971a, 1971b) has also presented similar results from the marine environment.

Perhaps the best review of the state of the art has been presented by Williams (1981a). Methods that are capable of adequately measuring the dynamics of microheterotrophic processes are urgently needed and are presently under rapid development. Heterotrophic bacteria represent only one component of the "microbial complex" (Williams 1981a), along with colourless nanoflagellates etc., but their metabolism is undoubtedly of great importance for the fluxes of matter in the pelagic ecosystem as a whole.

Traditional microbiological methods — state variable measurements such as plate counts, MPN etc. — are inadequate to provide the required information on heterotrophic processes. Bacterial numbers and biomass can be determined by epifluorescence microscopy directly from water

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samples (Hobbie et al. 1977). This state variable gives valuable information, but it gains full significance only in combination with relevant activity parameters.

One approach to the study of the role of microheterotrophs in the aquatic carbon cycle is to measure community metabolism by oxygen analysis (Bryan et al. 1976). Respiration can be divided into different size fractions in order to estimate the contribution of micro-organisms to the total respiration (Williams 1981b) and to relate respiration to microbial state parameters such as direct counts.

Another approach is to measure the activity of microheterotrophs as the assimilation of radioactively labelled substrates. Since Parsons and Strickland (1962) launched the utilization of radioactive organic substrates in hydrobiology, a vast amount of data has accumulated concerning diverse heterotrophic processes. This article attempts briefly to summarize the main trends in this field of research and to discuss the value of this approach to ecological and ecotoxicological studies of the aquatic environment.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE UTILIZATION OF RADIOACTIVE SUBSTRATES IN THE STUDY OF HETEROTROPHY

The method of Parsons and Strickland (1962) was based on the measurement of heterotrophic assimilation of radioactively labelled organic substrate ( $^{14}\text{C}$ -glucose). The introduction of radioactive substrates was an essential improvement in the precision of measurement of heterotrophic processes. This offers the possibility to study heterotrophic processes *in situ* or in relatively undisturbed laboratory conditions. Wright and Hobbie (1965, 1966) were the first to analyze kinetically substrate uptake results, and this analysis resulted in wide applications of the methodology in hydrobiological research.

The original method of Parsons and Strickland (1962) and Wright and Hobbie (1965) measured only net assimilation of the substrate (incorporation into microbial cells), and therefore represented an underestimate of the total assimilation. Hobbie and Crawford (1969) improved the method by taking into account the respired fraction of assimilated substrate and therefore measuring total heterotrophic uptake of the substrate.

The kinetic analysis of uptake measurements provides three parameters describing the efficiency of heterotrophic utilization of the substrate: maximal uptake velocity ( $V$ ); concentration sum ( $K + S$ ) of the half-saturation constant ( $K$ ) and ambient substrate concentration ( $S$ ); and turnover time ( $T$ ). The application of the kinetic method is laborious, since it requires replicate incubations of each sample at several substrate addition levels. Therefore, the so-called single concentration method of measuring either the turnover time (or turnover rate,  $1/T$ ) (Williams and Askew 1968, Azam and Holm-Hansen 1973) or maximal uptake velocity (Wright 1978) has been developed to evaluate heterotrophic activity with a more reasonable amount of effort (Kuparinen et al. 1984a). Azam and Holm-Hansen (1973) introduced the use of high specific activity  $^3\text{H}$ -labelled substrates. These enable tracer level additions of the substrate and the natural turnover rate ( $1/T$ ) of the substrate can thus be measured even in oligotrophic conditions.

The assimilation measurement of a single organic compound offers only one indicator of the total heterotrophic activity. By definition, total heterotrophy cannot be measured as assimilation of any single substrate. Some attempts have been made to overcome this restriction. Sorokin (1955) and Romanenko (1964) proposed that dark  $\text{CO}_2$  assimilation would represent about 6% of the total carbon assimilation of aerobic heterotrophic bacteria. Therefore, this constant has been used to calculate approximate total heterotrophy from dark  $^{14}\text{CO}_2$  assimilation measurements (see Romanenko 1979). Another alternative has been proposed by Monheimer (1974). This method is based on the measurement of  $^{35}\text{SO}_4$  assimilation and the assumption of a constant S/C ratio in heterotrophic assimilation. Both approaches have met with serious criticism (Overbeck 1979, Monheimer 1978), but they are still actively studied and no final agreement concerning their limits of applicability has been reached.

Perhaps the most actively developing field of research at the moment is the combination of state variable and activity measurements. These approaches can be divided into three categories. An early strategy was the application of the autoradiographical technique, which produces the number of cells actively metabolizing the assayed substrate (Brock 1967, Brock and Brock 1968, Hoppe 1976). This approach has also been combined with the determination of total bacterial counts to yield the fraction of active cells in the community (Meyer-Reil 1978, Tabor and Neihof 1982).

Secondly, some heterotrophic activity measurement (e.g. turnover rate of glucose) can be combined with total counts to obtain an activity index of the bacterioplankton community (activity per cell; Wright 1978).

Thirdly, perhaps the most promising alternative is to measure the incorporation of a radioactively labelled RNA or DNA precursor (thymidine, adenine, uridine) and combine this with experimentally determined ratios of RNA or DNA to cell carbon (Brock 1967, Tobin and Anthony 1978, Karl 1979, Fuhrman and Azam 1980, 1982). This approach yields bacterial production, or in connection with bacterial counts, generation times of bacteria. Although the approach is widely debated at the moment (e.g. Karl 1982), it offers a promising possibility for the quantification of microheterotrophic activity in the aquatic environment.

It is rather obvious that quite different aspects of the metabolic activity of aquatic microheterotrophic organisms are described by each of the approaches referred to above. The term "heterotrophic activity" or "microheterotrophic activity" (when confusion with higher trophic levels is possible) should be used in a broad sense, referring to each parameter describing relevant aspects of the total metabolism of aquatic microbial heterotrophs. The method must be chosen in each case according to the problem under study. Both indicator level parameters as well as parameters attempting to estimate the total quantity of microheterotrophy — production of microheterotrophs — certainly have wide potential applications in hydrobiological research.

### 3. APPLICATIONS TO ECOLOGICAL AND ECOTOXICOLOGICAL STUDIES

**Monitoring.** Labelled compounds of small molecular weight have been in extensive use in monitoring and describing variations of heterotrophic activity with respect to time and space. Variations over three orders of magnitude with respect to geographic location, trophic status of the water body, temperature and depth of the study site have been reported (Sepers 1977, Hoppe 1978). As a monitoring parameter, heterotrophic activity measurements have revealed trends in the heterotrophy of a water body and changes in heterotrophy-autotrophy relations (Kuparinen et

al. 1981). Measurements of turnover rate with a single substrate (e.g. glucose) offer a simple method valid for monitoring purposes.

**Ecosystem research.** Knowledge of microbial heterotrophic activity in the aquatic environment is of limited interest *per se*. Heterotrophic activity measurements are needed particularly in order to understand the role of microheterotrophs in the structure and function of the aquatic ecosystem. This aim can be reached in two principal ways: through the quantitative energy flow approach, or through multivariate analysis of indicator level parameters. Both approaches can ultimately lead to modelling of the ecosystem, usually with energy flow models (based on differential equations) or with structural equation models (based on covariance between parameters).

In statistical multivariate analyses of ecological data, heterotrophic activity parameters have been used to describe the functional role of microheterotrophy in the ecosystem, especially the relationships of heterotrophy to autotrophy, nutrient cycling or water quality parameters (Bölter 1982, Tamminen 1982c).

When quantifying the flows of energy and carbon through the pelagic food web, the flow from autotrophs to the dissolved organic carbon (DOC) pool (exudation) has received increasing attention (Williams 1981a, Wolter 1982, Larsson and Hagström 1982, Riemann et al. 1982). This pathway leads back to higher trophic levels via bacterial secondary production and has gone unnoticed in earlier studies of the aquatic food web (e.g. Steele 1974). Although the total DOC pool remains rather constant in aquatic systems, a small fraction of it is subject to rapid cycling (e.g. Derenbach and Williams 1974, Smith et al. 1977, Wiebe and Smith 1977, Larsson and Hagström 1979). Turnover rate measurements of compounds of this fraction, coupled with quantitative analyses of their pool sizes, have emphasized the significance of these compounds as a carbon source for bacterial production (Bölter 1981). Also, these results have lent support to the use of a single model substrate (e.g. glucose) as an indicator of this rapidly cycling fraction of DOC (Bölter 1981).

**Ecotoxicology.** In ecotoxicological studies, heterotrophic activity measurements can be applied to screening tests. These tests allow a rapid and precise measurement of the effect of a pollutant on natural bacterioplankton communities, and the single concentration method is especially appropriate (Azam and Holm-Hansen 1973). Tests have been applied to screening the effects of a variety of single pollutants or combined effluents (Albright et al. 1972, Kuparinen 1980, Kuparinen 1984b,

Kaitala et al. 1983, Tamminen 1983a). The drawback of using microheterotrophs in toxicological tests is their ability to adapt rather quickly to the test situation through physiological or genetic adaptation if the exposure time exceeds several generation times of the organisms (Menzel 1977). Therefore, ecologically relevant results can be obtained only by testing acute reactions, preferably coupled with field data on the pollutant and activity parameters.

#### 4. HETEROTROPHIC ACTIVITY MEASUREMENTS IN FINLAND

Heterotrophic activity measurements were adopted in fresh water studies in Finland in the late nineteen-sixties. In the pioneering works of Leppänen (1970), Seppänen and Ojanen (1973), Lehmusluoto and Leppänen (1974) and Leppänen (1982), a kinetic approach was used to monitor glucose uptake in different water bodies. Leppänen (1982) also discussed glucose uptake kinetics in the context of dark CO<sub>2</sub> assimilation measurements. Salonen (1981) has estimated bacterioplankton production in the oligotrophic lake Pääjärvi with the dark CO<sub>2</sub> assimilation measurement.

Glucose assimilation has also been used as an indicator of heterotrophic activity in all later investigations, except for the study of Mäkelä (1981), in which pyruvate and an amino acid mixture were used to monitor heterotrophic activity in a pelagic brackish water ecosystem.

The second period of heterotrophic activity measurements started in late nineteen-seventies with the adoption of the single concentration method in the study of heterotrophic activity near the sediment surface (Kuparinen 1978). During this period, the main interest was in the study of single concentration methodology (Kuparinen and Uusi-Rauva 1980, Tamminen 1980, Kuparinen and Tamminen 1982, Kuparinen et al. 1984b, Talsi et al. 1984) and its application to pollution monitoring, ecotoxicological and ecosystem studies. The more laborious kinetic approach has been used mainly to determine which substrate concentrations should be used in the single concentration assays (Kuparinen et al. 1984b).

**Monitoring.** Because of the negligible amount of data on heterotrophic processes in Finnish lakes and coastal brackish waters, monitoring studies have been continuously emphasized. Particular attention has been paid to monitoring the effects

of pulp and paper mill effluents on different water bodies (Kuparinen 1980, 1981, 1984b, Kuparinen et al. 1981, Talsi 1981, 1982a, 1982b, Lahti 1982, Talsi and Rekolainen 1982, Rekolainen and Talsi 1982, Tamminen 1983b). Monitoring of heterotrophic activity in the Gulf of Finland (Virtanen 1981, Tamminen 1983c) and in eutrophic lake (Tamminen 1982a) has also been conducted.

**Ecotoxicology.** The utilization of the single concentration assay has enabled screening-type toxicity testing. Within a few recent years, a number of studies have been carried out on the effects of waste waters from pulp and paper mills (Talsi 1981, 1982a, 1982c, Lahti 1980, Kuparinen 1981, 1982, 1983b, Kuparinen and Niemi 1981) and other industrial effluents (Tamminen 1982b, 1983a). Some studies concerning the toxicity of single pollutants have also been performed (Kuparinen 1981, Kaitala et al. 1983, Talsi 1983).

**Ecosystem research.** Some attention has been paid to the study of the role of heterotrophic micro-organisms in the structure and function of the ecosystem. Tamminen (1983d) discussed the connection between phyto- and bacterioplankton through the exudate pathway. Talsi and Rekolainen (1982) and Tamminen (1982c, 1983a, 1983c) have utilized statistical multivariate techniques to study the connections between heterotrophic and autotrophic processes and the relations of these processes with standard water quality parameters. Kuparinen et al. (1984c) and Kuparinen (1983a) attempted to quantify the role of bacterial production and glucose mineralization in relation to the total carbon mineralization (measured by oxygen consumption) in a pelagic brackish water ecosystem.

#### LOPPUTIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä työssä käsitellään radioaktiivisten merkkiainneiden käyttöön perustuvien vesistön heterotrofiamittausten kehitystä viime vuosikymmeninä. Hiili-dioksidin pimeäsitoutumisen sekä sulfaatin, yksinkertaisten orgaanisten yhdisteiden ja RNA- tai DNA-prekursorien oton mittausten tuottamaa tietoa esitellään lyhyesti. Lisäksi käsitellään radioaktiivisten merkkiainneiden avulla tehtyjen aktiivisuusmittausten yhdistelemistä perinteiseen bakteerimikroskoopointiin tai muihin tilaparametreihin, joko autoradiografian avulla tai erilaisten bakteeriyhteisöä kuvaavien indeksien, yhteisön generaatio-aikojen tai tuotannon määrittämiseksi.

Heterotrofisen aktiivisuuden mittauksen soveltamista seuranta- ja tutkimuksiin, ekologiin tai ekotoksikologiin tutkimuksiin käsitellään, ja erityisesti korostetaan heterotrofisen aktiivisuuden mittausten tarpeellisuutta vesiekosysteemin rakenteen ja toiminnan selvittelyssä. Lopuksi esitellään menetelmien sovellutuksia suomalaisessa tutkimuksessa.

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