Gas-water partition and gas channelling along $Rn-He-CO_2$ bearing faults (*)(**)

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Summary. — The amount and distribution of radon (²²²Rn) and helium (⁴He) at the Earth's surface are controlled not only by type and depth of the source, permeability of geological formations and hydrogeological setting, but also by disequilibria processes occurring during upward gas migration. In order to evaluate the latter processes, in this work we discuss Rn and He data collected during surveys performed simultaneously in different types of natural occurrence (*i.e.* soil-air, groundwater, gas vent and soil-atmosphere exhalation flux) located along faults bearing pressurised CO_2 (Siena basin, Central Italy). The obtained results emphasize the effects of gas-water partition and gas channelling processes induced by faults on Rn and He distribution in near-surface environment; accordingly they suggest that the analysis of a single "sub-system" of the geologic environment (*e.g.*, groundwater analysis only) may provide data not representative of gas occurrence or abundance in the investigated site.

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1. – Introduction

Gas-geochemical analyses in ground and groundwater are increasingly recognised as a fundamental task for geological and environmental characterisation. The amount and distribution of surface discharges of rare gases such as radon (²²²Rn) and helium (⁴He) may be controlled not only by type and depth of the source, permeability of geological formations and hydrogeological setting, but also by disequilibria processes occurring during upward gas migration (*e.g.*, gas exolution due to pressure decrease). Therefore, field gas data can be prone to misinterpretation if the boundary conditions of the observed system and the possible interactions among phases (gas, water, rock) are not properly considered. In this work we discuss an integrated approach encompassing the study of radon, helium and CO₂ concentrations in different types of

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369

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Fig. 1. – Block diagram showing the different types of gas occurrence (subsystems) that have been considered in this work: a) soil gas, b) groundwater, c) gas vents and d) exhalation flux to the atmosphere. Whereas possible, at any sampled point the concentration of Rn, He, and CO_2 in the different subsystems was measured (within few square meters) to study gas-water partition processes.

natural occurrence, *i.e.* soil gas, groundwater, gas vents and exhalation flux to the atmosphere (fig. 1). This communication outlines the main results of gas surveys undertaken from 1993 to 1995 within the framework of PEGASUS (Project on the Effects of GAS in Underground Storage facilities for radioactive wastes) European project [1]. The surveys were performed in the northern sector of the Siena basin (Tuscany, Central Italy), in correspondence with two important tectonic faults, Linea d'Arbia (LA) and Rapolano fault (RF), along which many discharges of CO_2 -rich waters from a low-enthalpy geothermal reservoir occur.

2. – Methodology

Soil-gas was sampled at 0.7 m below the ground by portable hollow steel probes [1]. Exhalation flux was measured by closed chamber method [2]. Free gas from vents and bubbling pools was collected through an inverted funnel and driven into gas-tight vessels. In all gas samples ²²²Rn was determined in the field by an α scintillation counter (EDA RDA 200). Dissolved Rn was previously extracted by air stripping. Samples for dissolved helium and CO₂ analyses were collected by admitting water into a gas-tight 500 cm³ glass vessel equipped with vacuum stopcocks. The determination of He and CO₂ was performed in laboratory within 10 days after sampling by quadrupole mass spectrometry. Test sites were selected along faults bearing pressurised gas (CO₂) from low-enthalpy geothermal reservoirs in the Siena basin.

3. - Results and discussion

Data show that, in the same site, low concentrations of radon or helium in water co-exist with high concentrations in the ground, and low Rn in soil-air can occur in correspondence with Rn-rich gas vents. As an example, fig. 2 shows the scatterplot of CO_2 exhalation vs. Rn concentration in soil gas collected in correspondence with gas vents. A logarithmic inverse dependence highlights the depletion of Rn in soil pores within the CO_2 vent area. Figure 3 shows a direct dependence of helium concentration in gaseous phase, discharged at vents, with CO_2 flux, consistently with the channelling effect. The enrichment of trace gas in the channel/vent is more effective as much as the flux of the carrier (CO_2) increases, in spite of the large amount of discharged CO_2 that should dilute and minimise the rare-gas signal. Figure 4 shows the inverse relationship between He in groundwater and He concentration in the free phase of vents, as evidence of the channel-induced partitioning effects. The stripping effect that causes the enrichment of rare gas in the ascending gas column and the "draining" of the surrounding volume of rock and soil acts also below the water level.

Gas stripping is clearly related to the strength of carrier flux; however, geometric, thermodynamic and hydrologic conditions of the system (*e.g.*, partial pressure gradient



Fig. 2. – Scatterplot of CO_2 exhalation vs. Rn concentration in soil gas collected in correspondence with gas vent. A logarithmic inverse dependence highlights the depletion of Rn in soil pores within the CO_2 vent area.



Fig. 3. – Helium concentration in gaseous phase discharged at vents. A direct dependence with CO_2 flux is consistent with the channelling effect.



Fig. 4. – The inverse relationship between He in groundwater and He concentration in the free phase of vents gives evidence of the channel-induced partitioning effects.

between dissolved gas, gas in vent and in the surrounding environment; the ratio between water volume and stripping-gas volume; groundwater flow rate) could also control underground stripping processes; probing studies should quantify the relative effects.

4. - Conclusion

The observed results suggest that the analysis of a single "subsystem" of the geologic environment (*e.g.*, groundwater analysis only) may provide data not representative of gas occurrence and abundance in the investigated site. Integrated data, including all possible types of subsystems in the studied areas, are indeed recommended for a reliable use of gas geochemistry in any application, *i.e.* natural resource exploration, earthquake precursor studies or radiation protection zoning.

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