

# Stable Isotope Forensics

An Introduction to the Forensic Application  
of Stable Isotope Analysis

**Wolfram Meier-Augenstein**

*Centre for Anatomy & Human Identification*

*University of Dundee, UK*

*SCRI, Invergowrie, Dundee, UK*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Contents

<b>Series Foreword: Developments in Forensic Science <i>Niamh Nic Daéid</i></b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Foreword: <i>Sean Doyle</i></b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>xix</b>
<b>Introduction: Stable Isotope ‘Fingerprinting’ or Chemical ‘DNA’: A New Dawn for Forensic Chemistry?</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>I How It Works</b>	<b>1</b>
I.1 What are Stable Isotopes?	3
I.2 Natural Abundance Variation of Stable Isotopes	5
I.3 Chemically Identical and Yet Not the Same	8
I.4 Isotope Effects, Mass Discrimination and Isotopic Fractionation	10
I.4.1 Physical Chemistry Background	10
I.4.2 Fractionation Factor $\alpha$ and Enrichment Factor $\epsilon$	11
I.4.3 Isotopic Fractionation in Rayleigh Processes	13
I.4.4 Isotopic Fractionation Summary	14
I.5 Stable Isotopic Distribution and Isotopic Fractionation of Light Elements in Nature	16
I.5.1 Hydrogen	16
I.5.2 Oxygen	19
I.5.2.1 $^{18}\text{O}$ in Bone Bio-apatite and Source Water	20
I.5.2.2 Bone Remodelling	23
I.5.2.3 Bone Diagenesis	24
I.5.2.3.1 Diagenetic Changes of Bio-apatite	24
I.5.3 Carbon	25
I.5.4 Nitrogen	27
I.5.4.1 Food Chain and Trophic Level Shift	29
I.5.4.2 Diagenetic Changes of Structural Proteins	32
I.5.5 Sulfur	33
I.6 Stable Isotope Forensics in Everyday Life	36
I.6.1 ‘Food Forensics’	37
I.6.1.1 Authenticity and Provenance of Single-Seed Vegetable Oils	38
I.6.1.2 Authenticity and Provenance of Beverages	39
I.6.1.3 Authenticity and Provenance of other Premium Foods	41

I.6.2 Counterfeit Pharmaceuticals	42
I.6.3 Environmental Forensics	43
I.6.4 Wildlife Forensics	46
I.6.5 Anti-Doping Control	47
I.7 Summary of Part I	49
I.8 Set problems	50
References	51
<b>II Instrumentation and Analytical Techniques</b>	<b>65</b>
II.1 Mass Spectrometry versus Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry	67
II.2 Instrumentation and $\delta$ Notation	72
II.2.1 Dual-Inlet Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry	74
II.2.2 Continuous Flow Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry	74
II.2.3 Bulk Material Stable Isotope Analysis	77
II.2.4 Compound-Specific Stable Isotope Analysis	78
II.2.4.1 CSIA and Compound Identification	79
II.2.4.2 Position-Specific Isotope Analysis	81
II.2.4.3 CSIA of Polar, Non-Volatile Organic Compounds	83
II.3 Isotopic Calibration and Quality Control in Continuous Flow Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry	85
II.3.1 Two-Point or End-member Scale Correction	86
II.3.1.1 Scale Correction of Measured $\delta^2\text{H}$ Values	87
II.3.1.2 Scale Correction of Measured $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ Values	88
II.4 Statistical Analysis of Stable Isotope Data within a Forensic Context	91
II.4.1 Chemometric Analysis	91
II.4.2 Bayesian Analysis	94
II.5 Forensic Stable Isotope Analytical Procedures	100
II.5.1 FIRMS Network	101
II.6 Generic Considerations for Stable Isotope Analysis	102
II.6.1 Generic Considerations for Sample Preparation	102
II.6.2 Generic Considerations for BSIA	104
II.6.2.1 Isobaric Interference	104
II.6.3 Particular Considerations for $^2\text{H}$ -BSIA	105
II.6.3.1 Keeping Your Powder Dry	105
II.6.3.2 Total $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus True $\delta^2\text{H}$ Values	106
II.6.3.2.1 $^2\text{H}$ Isotope Analysis of Human Hair	108
II.6.3.3 Ionization Quench Effect	113
II.6.4 Generic Considerations for CSIA	116
II.6.4.1 Isotopic Calibration during GC/C-IRMS	116
II.6.4.2 Isotope Effects in GC/C-IRMS during Sample Injection	117
II.6.4.3 Chromatographic Isotope Effect in GC/C-IRMS	118
II.7 Summary of Part II	121
II.8 Set Problems	122
II.A How to Set Up a Laboratory for Continuous Flow Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry	123
II.A.1 Pre-Installation Requirements	124
II.A.2 Laboratory Location	124
II.A.3 Temperature Control	125
II.A.4 Power Supply	125
II.A.5 Gas Supply	126

II.A.6 Forensic Laboratory Considerations	129
II.A.7 Finishing Touches	130
References	136

<b>III Stable Isotope Forensics: Case Studies and Current Research</b>	<b>143</b>
III.1 Forensic Context	145
III.2 Distinguishing Drugs	149
III.2.1 Natural and Semisynthetic Drugs	149
III.2.1.1 Marijuana	149
III.2.1.2 Morphine and Heroin	150
III.2.1.3 Cocaine	152
III.2.2 Synthetic Drugs	154
III.2.2.1 Amphetamines	154
III.2.2.2 MDMA: Synthesis and Isotopic Signature	157
III.2.2.2.1 Three Different Synthetic Routes – Controlled Conditions	157
III.2.2.2.2 One Synthetic Route – Variable Conditions	164
III.2.2.3 Methamphetamine: Synthesis and Isotopic Signature	164
III.2.3 Conclusions	167
III.3 Elucidating Explosives	169
III.3.1 Bulk Isotope Analysis of Explosives and Precursors	170
III.3.1.1 Ammonium Nitrate	171
III.3.1.2 Hexamine, RDX and Semtex	172
III.3.1.3 Hydrogen Peroxide and Peroxides	176
III.3.2 Isotopic Product/Precursor Relationship	179
III.3.3 Potential Pitfalls	182
III.3.4 Conclusions	183
III.4 Matching Matchsticks	184
III.4.1 <sup>13</sup> C-Bulk Isotope Analysis	185
III.4.2 <sup>18</sup> O-Bulk Isotope Analysis	186
III.4.3 <sup>2</sup> H-Bulk Isotope Analysis	187
III.4.4 Matching Matches from Fire Scenes	188
III.4.5 Conclusions	189
III.5 Provenancing People	190
III.5.1 Stable Isotope Abundance Variation in Human Tissue	191
III.5.2 The Skull from the Sea	194
III.5.3 A Human Life Recorded in Hair	197
III.5.4 Found in Newfoundland	201
III.5.5 The Case of ‘The Scissor Sisters’	207
III.5.6 Conclusions	211
III.6 Stable Isotope Forensics of other Physical Evidence	214
III.6.1 Microbial Isotope Forensics	214
III.6.2 Paper, Plastic (Bags) and Parcel Tape	215
III.6.2.1 Paper	215
III.6.2.2 Plastic and Plastic Bags	216
III.6.2.3 Parcel Tape	218
III.6.3 Conclusions	221
III.7 Summary	222

III.A 'Play True?': Stable Isotopes in Anti-doping Control or <i>Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?</i>	224
III.A.1 Testosterone Metabolism and $^{13}\text{C}$ Isotopic Composition	226
III.A.2 Analytical Methodology: Gas Chromatography and Peak Identification	230
III.B Sample Preparation Procedures	236
III.B.1 Preparing Silver Phosphate from Bio-apatite for $^{18}\text{O}$ Isotope Analysis	236
III.B.2 Acid Digest of Carbonate from Bio-apatite for $^{13}\text{C}$ and $^{18}\text{O}$ Isotope Analysis	238
III.B.3 Standard Protocol for Preparing Hair Samples for $^2\text{H}$ Isotope Analysis	240
References	242
<b>Government Agencies and Institutes with Dedicated Stable Isotope Laboratories</b>	<b>253</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>Recommended Reading</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>Author's Biography</b>	<b>261</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>263</b>

# Series Foreword

## Developments in Forensic Science

The world of forensic science is changing at a very fast pace. This is in terms of the provision of forensic science services, the development of technologies and knowledge, and the interpretation of analytical and other data as it is applied within forensic practice. Practicing forensic scientists are constantly striving to deliver the very best for the judicial process, and as such need a reliable and robust knowledge base within their diverse disciplines. It is hoped that this book series will be a valuable resource for forensic science practitioners in the pursuit of such knowledge.

The Forensic Science Society is the professional body for forensic practitioners in the United Kingdom. The Society was founded in 1959 and gained professional body status in 2006. The Society is committed to the development of the forensic sciences in all of its many facets, and in particular to the delivery of highly professional and worthwhile publications within these disciplines through ventures such as this book series.

**Dr Niamh Nic Daéid**  
*Series Editor*



# Foreword

I am delighted to be able to write the foreword for this, the first textbook of stable isotope forensics.

The breadth of material covered is wide, ranging from fundamentals to policy issues, and therefore this text will be of benefit to practitioners, researchers and investigators, indeed to anyone who has an interest in this new forensic discipline.

The year 2001 saw the formation of the Forensic Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry (FIRMS) Network. Since then much has been achieved in terms of advancing the forensic application of stable isotope analysis, this textbook being the latest significant step.

These advances have been made in the face of considerable challenges resulting from the novelty and complexity of the technique. Isotope forensics has already proved a powerful tool in the investigation and prosecution of high-profile crimes, including terrorism. Stable isotope analysis enables questions regarding the source and history of illicit and other forensic materials to be addressed – questions which might otherwise remain unanswered.

Isotope forensics is now being widely adopted for profiling illicit materials and human provenancing. Stable isotope analysis has already been used successfully in two major terrorist trials in the United Kingdom, and in a variety of investigations and trials in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

Dr Meier-Augenstein is to be commended for his vision in recognizing the forensic potential of stable isotopes, for his energy in developing and optimizing the methodology, and in promoting the technique to end-users. He is also well aware of the risk of contributing to a miscarriage of justice and recognizes that only an appropriate regulatory framework can significantly mitigate that risk.

The development of suitable databases of reference materials and appropriate tools for evaluation remain significant tasks; once complete the next decade should see isotope forensics taking a deserved place in mainstream forensic science and, to a greater extent, contributing to the efficient and effective delivery of justice.

**Sean Doyle**

Past Chair of the FIRMS Network

Principal Scientist, Forensic Explosives Laboratory, Defence Science  
and Technology Laboratory

September 2009



# List of Figures

## Part I

Figure I.1	$\delta^2\text{H}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values of whole wood and plant sugars (beet and cane sugar) in the framework of the global meteoric water line	18
Figure I.2	Correlation plot of source water $\delta^2\text{H}$ values versus $\delta^2\text{H}$ values of fresh soft fruit water	19
Figure I.3	Correlation graphs according to Daux <i>et al.</i> , Longinelli, and Luz and Kolodny for $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{phosphate}}$ versus $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{water}}$ and the resulting different solutions of $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{water}}$ for the same $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{phosphate}}$	23
Figure I.4	Bivariate graph plotting $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of scalp hair samples volunteered by residents in different countries reflecting their regionally different diet	26
Figure I.5	Schematic representation of typical $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values in relation to trophic level	28
Figure I.6	$^{13}\text{C}$ isotopic composition of various food and animal tissue	29
Figure I.7	Bivariate graph plotting $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values from scalp hair of a vegan and an omnivore who has a relatively strong meat component in their diet	31
Figure I.8	Approximate $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for $^{13}\text{C}$ isotopic composition of various body pools and tissue	32
Figure I.9	Natural variation in $^{13}\text{C}$ isotopic composition of single-seed vegetable oils and selected fatty acids isolated from these oils	39
Figure I.10	Bivariate plot of $\delta^2\text{H}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of ethanol from a selection of European white wines, including one suspect sample of wine labelled as vintage Austrian wine	41
Figure I.11	Isotopic bivariate plot of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of the API folic acid from three different manufacturers at three different locations	44

Figure I.12	Isotopic bivariate plot of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values of the API naproxen from six different manufacturers at four different locations	44
<b>Part II</b>		
Figure II.1	Schematic (top) and picture (bottom) of a modern IRMS magnetic sector instrument with a multicollector analyser	70
Figure II.2	Schematic (top) and picture (bottom) of a typical EA-IRMS system	75
Figure II.3	Schematic (top) and picture (bottom) of a TC/EA-IRMS system	78
Figure II.4	Schematic (top) and picture (bottom) of a GC/C-IRMS system	80
Figure II.5	Schematic (top) and picture (bottom) of a GC(-MS)/C-IRMS hybrid system	82
Figure II.6	Trivariate plots of measured $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ , $\delta^2\text{H}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of 10 Ecstasy tablets from eight different seizures in two different European countries	92
Figure II.7	HCA (furthest neighbour, Euclidean distance) using $\delta^2\text{H}$ , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ , $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values as well as MDMA content from 10 Ecstasy tablets from eight different seizures in two different European countries	93
Figure II.8	Plot of PCA score factors for the first two principal components of multivariate data from farmed and wild European sea bass	93
Figure II.9	Means of $\delta^2\text{H}$ , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ observations for each of 51 samples of white paints plotted over the smoothed bivariate density (darker equates to higher density) for each variate pair	97
Figure II.10	Costech Zero-Blank autosampler as used in our laboratory for BSIA by EA- or TC/EA-IRMS	107
Figure II.11	(Top) Untreated ammonium nitrate from six different sources. Note the already 'wet' appearance of the sample in the top right corner. (Bottom) The same samples after an 8-day exposure to ambient atmosphere	109
Figure II.12	Effect of argon concurrently present in the ion source on measured $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of same sized aliquots of $\text{CO}_2$ (accepted $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{VPDB}}: -32.56\text{‰}$ )	114
Figure II.13	Illustration of the potential interference on a $\text{H}_2$ peak caused by a partial overlap with a following $\text{N}_2$ peak	115
Figure II.14	Comparison of peak heights, peak shape and retention time of a $\text{H}_2$ peak in the absence (left) and presence (right) of $\text{N}_2$	115

Figure II.15	Illustration of the time displacement caused by the ‘inverse’ chromatographic isotope effect between the $^{13}\text{CO}_2$ and $^{12}\text{CO}_2$ aspects of a compound $\text{CO}_2$ peak and the resulting S-shaped 45/44 ratio signal	119
Figure II.A.1	Pressure triggered change-over unit for helium supply	128
Figure II.A.2	Laboratory gas delivery manifold fed from an external gas supply	129
<b>Part III</b>		
Figure III.1	Morphine and heroin	151
Figure III.2	Cocaine	154
Figure III.3	Six amphetamine powders from the 18 seizures isotopically profiled in Figure III.4	156
Figure III.4	Bivariate plot of $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for 18 amphetamine seizures	157
Figure III.5	Schematic synthetic route for PMK from safrole	158
Figure III.6	Schematic synthetic routes for MDMA from PMK	158
Figure III.7	Bivariate plot of $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of 18 MDMA batches from three different synthetic routes	159
Figure III.8	Bivariate plot of $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of 18 MDMA batches from three different synthetic routes	159
Figure III.9	Three-dimensional plot of $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of MDMA hydrochloride samples synthesized from aliquots of the same precursor PMK but by three different routes of reductive amination	162
Figure III.10	HCA of 18 batches of MDMA; three variables, Euclidean distance, single linkage	163
Figure III.11	Schematic synthetic routes ‘Emde’ and ‘Nagai’ for methamphetamine from ephedrine or pseudoephedrine	166
Figure III.12	Bivariate plot of $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values for ammonium nitrate prills from various sources (country of origin shown where known)	171
Figure III.13	Ammonium nitrate prills from various sources	172
Figure III.14	Detailed bivariate plot of $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for the explosive RDX from two different sources demonstrating homogeneity of the samples and reproducibility of isotope analysis	174

Figure III.15	Hexamine to RDX	174
Figure III.16	Three-dimensional plot of $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for the RDX precursor hexamine	175
Figure III.17	Dendrogram of a HCA (single linkage, Euclidean distance) for the trivariate stable isotope dataset of 14 hexamine samples	176
Figure III.18	Changing $\delta^2\text{H}$ values of a hydrogen peroxide solution with increasing dilution	178
Figure III.19	Changing $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values of a hydrogen peroxide solution with increasing dilution	178
Figure III.20	Bivariate plot of $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values from matchsticks recovered at the crime scene and seized from the suspect's house as well as from the controls	188
Figure III.21	Global map for $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values in precipitation	191
Figure III.22	You are what and where you eat and drink – a few stable isotopes in the human body	192
Figure III.23	Diagram of the area of skull submitted for isotope analysis	195
Figure III.24	Sample of scalp hair as submitted for sequential stable isotope analysis	198
Figure III.25	Time-resolved changes in $^{15}\text{N}$ isotopic composition of the victim's scalp hair	199
Figure III.26	Time-resolved changes in $^2\text{H}$ isotopic composition of the victim's scalp hair	200
Figure III.27	Geographic life history for the last 17 months prior to death as gleaned from $^2\text{H}$ isotope analysis of scalp hair segments from the body found at Minerals Road, Conception Bay South, Newfoundland	205
Figure III.28	Poster based on information derived from, amongst other sources, stable isotope analysis for a public appeal for information regarding the murder victim found at Minerals Road, Conception Bay South, Newfoundland	207
Figure III.29	Geographic life trajectory of the murder victim found in the Dublin Royal Canal based on $^{18}\text{O}$ isotope analysis of bone phosphate extracted from his femur	210
Figure III.30	(Top) Global map with highlighted areas with model predictions for $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values in precipitation ranging from $-10.1$ to $-7.6\text{‰}$ illustrating the constraining power of stable isotope profiling in aid of human provenancing. (Bottom)	

	Zoomed-in version of the global map focusing on Central Europe and the United Kingdom	213
Figure III.31	Bivariate plots of $\delta^2\text{H}$ versus $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of (top) intact (untreated) brown parcel tape samples and (bottom) treated brown parcel tape samples (i.e. backing material only)	220
Figure III.A.1	Schematic of the metabolic pathway of testosterone	227



# List of Tables

## Part I

Table I.1	Stable isotopes of light elements and their typical natural abundance	6
Table I.2	Representative but not concise list of international reference materials for stable isotope ratio mass spectrometry (IRMS) administered and distributed by the IAEA (Vienna, Austria)	7
Table I.3	Isotopic abundance of $^{13}\text{C}$ and $^2\text{H}$ in sugar from different sources and geographic origin	9

## Part II

Table II.1	Comparison of MS and IRMS system performance when applied to stable isotope analysis at near-natural abundance levels	68
Table II.2	Key dates in instrument research and development influencing design and evolution of commercially available CF-IRMS systems	76
Table II.3	Sample batch sequence composition in BSIA favouring high sample throughput under stable experimental conditions using $^2\text{H}$ isotope analysis of water as an example	86
Table II.4	Sample VSMOW – SLAP $\delta^2\text{H}$ scale correction	87
Table II.5	Organic $^{13}\text{C}$ reference materials available from the IAEA	89
Table II.6	Sample two-end-member VPDB $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ scale corrections showing the effect on appropriate and inappropriate choice of end-members	89
Table II.7	List of 51 white architectural paints from different sources	95
Table II.8	Percentage distributions for the likelihood ratios from each comparison	99
Table II.A.1	List of useful tools and equipment in an IRMS laboratory	130

Table II.A.2	List of secondary organic standards for stable isotope analysis (courtesy of Arndt Schimmelmann, University of Indiana)	132
<b>Part III</b>		
Table III.1	Observed ranges for $\delta^2\text{H}$ , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ , $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values of natural and hemisynthetic drugs	15
Table III.2	Summary $\delta^2\text{H}$ , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of MDMA hydrochloride samples synthesized from aliquots of the same precursor PMK, but by three different synthetic routes of reductive amination	161
Table III.3	Reported $\delta^2\text{H}$ , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values of ephedrine hydrochloride and pseudo-ephedrine from various sources	165
Table III.4	Summary of fraction factors $\alpha$ and enrichment factors $\epsilon$ for individual hexamine/RDX precursor/product pairs	181
Table III.5	Results of stable isotope analysis of the tissue samples studied in the case of the unidentified body found at Minerals Road, Conception Bay South, Newfoundland	204
Table III.A.1	Athlete's versus reported $\Delta\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values for pathway-linked testosterone metabolites	229

# Introduction

## Stable Isotope 'Fingerprinting' or Chemical 'DNA': A New Dawn for Forensic Chemistry?

Starting with the conclusion first, I would say neither of the above two terms is appropriate, although I am convinced information locked into the stable isotopic composition of physical evidence may well represent a new dawn for forensic chemistry.

The title for this general introduction is a deliberate analogy to the term 'DNA Fingerprinting' coined by Professor Sir Alec J. Jeffreys. I seek to draw the reader's attention to the remarkable analogy between the organic, life-defining material DNA and the more basic (and, on their own, lifeless) chemical elements in their various isotopic forms when examined in the context of forensic sciences, and human provenancing in particular. At the same time, it has also been my intention to alert readers from the start to the dangers of expecting miracles of stable isotope forensics. DNA evidence is at its most powerful when it can be matched against a comparative sample or a database entry and the same is true to a degree for the information locked into the isotopic composition of a given material. One could argue that the random match probability of 1 : 1 billion for a DNA match based on 10 loci and the theoretical match probability of an accidental false-positive match of a multi-isotope signature were also seemingly matched with multivariate or multifactor probabilistic equations being the common denominator for both. If we consider a material such as hair keratin and we make the simplifying assumption this material may exist naturally in as many different isotopic states per element as there are whole numbers in the natural abundance range for each isotope given in  $\delta$  units of per mil (‰) (Fry, 2006), we can calculate a hypothetical figure for the accidental match probability of such a multi-element isotope analysis that is comparable to that of a DNA fingerprint.

For example, the widest possible natural abundance range for carbon-13 ( $^{13}\text{C}$ ) is 110‰ (Fry, 2006), so for the purpose of this example we could say keratin can assume 110 different integer  $^{13}\text{C}$  values. Analysing hair keratin for its isotopic composition with regard to the light elements hydrogen (H), carbon (C), nitrogen (N), oxygen (O) and sulfur (S) could thus theoretically yield a combined specificity ranging from 1 : 638 million to 1 : 103.95 billion. In fact, one can calculate that the analysis of hair keratin for its isotopic composition with regard to hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and

sulfur would theoretically yield a combined specificity of 1 : 1 billion, thus suggesting a 'stable isotope fingerprint' based on these four letters of the chemical alphabet may have the same accidental match probability as a DNA fingerprint that ultimately is based on the four letters of the DNA alphabet, A (adenine), C (cytosine), G (guanine) and T (thymine) (see Box). However, it should be stressed that it has as yet not been fully explored if this hypothetical level of random match probability and, hence, level of discrimination is actually achievable given that actually assumed natural abundance ranges of organic materials are usually much narrower than the widest possible range. We will learn more about that in the course of this book. Thus, forensic scientists and statisticians such as Jurian Hoogewerff and Jim Curran suggest more conservative estimates, and put the potentially realized random match probability of stable isotope fingerprints at levels between 1 : 10 000 and 1 : 1 million, depending on the nature and history of the material under investigation. However, even at these lower levels, stable isotope profiling is a potentially powerful tool.

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#### Analogies between DNA and stable isotopes of light elements

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##### Biological DNA versus Chemical 'DNA'

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Alphabet of Biological DNA comprises the letters	Alphabet of Chemical 'DNA' comprises the letters
A	$^2\text{H}$
C	$^{13}\text{C}$
G	$^{15}\text{N}$
T	$^{18}\text{O}$
[U]	$[^{34}\text{S}]$

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Random match probability of Biological DNA is approximately 1 : 1 billion ( $1 \times 10^9$ ) for a DNA profile based on 10 loci.

Random match probability of a five-element stable isotope profile can theoretically range from 1 : 693 million ( $6.93 \times 10^8$ ) to as high as 1 :  $1.04 \times 10^{11}$ .

Note this is for illustrative purposes only and does not denote any equivalence between DNA bases and chemical elements.

While one can make a good case that isotopic abundances of  $^2\text{H}$ ,  $^{13}\text{C}$ ,  $^{15}\text{N}$  and  $^{34}\text{S}$  are independent variables, and figures representing their abundance range can hence be combined in a probabilistic equation, the same is not entirely the case for  $^2\text{H}$  and  $^{18}\text{O}$ , which when originating both from water behave like dependent variables. More relevant to this issue is the question if and to what degree isotopic abundance varies for any given material or compound. While across all materials and compounds known to man  $^{13}\text{C}$  isotopic abundance may indeed stretch across a range of 110 units, its range in a particular material such as coca leaves may only extend to 7 units (Ehleringer *et al.*, 2000).

Another reason why the analogy between DNA fingerprinting and stable isotope profiling should only be used in conjunction with qualifying statements is the fact that both a DNA fingerprint and a physical fingerprint are immutable – they do not change over time. Drawing on an example from environmental forensics, calling a gas chromatography or gas chromatography-mass spectrometry profile from a sample of crude oil spillage a fingerprint of that oil is a misnomer since ageing processes such as evaporation will lead to changes in the oil's composition with regard to the relative abundance of its individual constituents. Incidentally, due to isotopic fractionation during evaporation the isotopic composition of any residual compound will have changed as compared to its isotopic composition at the point of origin. A more apt analogy would therefore be the use of the term stable isotope signature. Just as a person's signature can change over time or under the burden of stress, so can the stable isotopic composition of the residual sample have changed by the time it ends up in our laboratories. Furthermore, in the same way a forensic expert relies on more than one physicochemical characteristic as well as drawing on experience and contextual information to arrive at an interpretation regarding similarity or dissimilarity, the stable isotope scientist combines measured data with experience, expertise and contextual information to come to a conclusion as to what the stable isotope signature does or does not reveal.

Despite these caveats it is easy to see why the prospect of potentially having such powerful a tool at one's disposal for combating crime and terrorism has caused a lot of excitement in both the end-user and scientific communities. However, if the history of applying DNA fingerprinting in a forensic context has taught us anything then it is this – great potential is no substitute for good forensic science and good forensic science cannot be rushed or packaged to meet externally driven agendas. At first there was no great interest in this new forensic technique; however, after a few spectacular successes demand for what seemed to be the silver bullet to connect suspect perpetrators to victims or crime scenes increased faster than research, still concerned with answering underlying fundamental questions, could keep up with – and history has all but repeated itself recently on the subject of low template DNA. Good forensic science cannot be rushed, but is the outcome of good forensic science research and, in turn, becomes the foundation of good forensic practice. While the former requires proper funding, the latter requires proper regulation, and both requirements must be addressed and met.

Not surprisingly, therefore, even at the time of writing this book we still have a mountain to climb if we are to turn stable isotope forensics into a properly validated forensic analytical tool or technique that is fit-for-purpose. Even though this technique has been successfully applied in a number of high-profile criminal cases where salient questions could be answered by comparative analysis, this should not blind us to the fact that a considerable amount of time, effort, money and careful consideration still has to be spent to develop and finely hone this technique into the sharp investigative tool it promises to be.

Similar to DNA, data have to be generated and databases have to be compiled for a statistically meaningful underpinning of this technique and the interpretation of its analytical results. Equally important, if not more so, all the steps from sample collection, storage and preparation through to the analytical measurement and final data reduction

have to be carefully examined either to avoid process artefacts or, if unavoidable, to quantify such artefacts and develop fit-for-purpose correction protocols to avoid stable isotope forensics suffering the same fate as low template DNA.

One way of ensuring appropriate and well-advised use of this technique in a forensic context is to advise and instruct upcoming generations of forensic scientists in this technique as early as possible. Fortunately, in spite of the aforementioned drawbacks, this is possible for two main reasons; (i) Thanks to end-user interest, there is a sufficient amount of actual case work and associated background research, and their results provide part of the foundations on which this book is built. (ii) Contrary to the misconception of many an analytical chemist, there is a huge body of knowledge and insight gained in scientific areas ranging from archaeology, biochemistry, environmental chemistry, geochemistry, palaeoecology to zoology, to name but a few, that is based on stable isotope chemistry and stable isotope analytical techniques.

In this book, the theory, instrumentation, potential and pitfalls of stable isotope analytical techniques are discussed in such a way as to provide an appreciation of this analytical technique. To this end some of the physical chemistry background relating to such aspects as mass discrimination, isotopic fractionation and mass balance is only touched upon, while some of the practical consequences of the aforementioned on the analytical process, the kind of information obtainable or the level of uncertainty associated with stable isotope data from a particular type of sample are discussed in finer detail. There are a number of excellent books and review articles dealing with the fundamental principles of stable isotope techniques, both from the instrumentation side and a physical chemistry point of view, which the interested reader is strongly encouraged to use for further study. These books and review articles are listed separately in the 'Recommended Reading' section at the back of this book.

In the main, what follows will focus on stable isotopes of light elements of which all organic material is comprised, and why and how stable isotope composition of an organic material can yield an added dimension of information with regard to 'Who, Where and When?'

## References

- Ehleringer, J.R., Casale, J.F., Lott, M.J. and Ford, V.L. (2000) Tracing the geographical origin of cocaine. *Nature*, **408**, 311–312.
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# **Part I**

## **How it Works**



# Chapter I.1

## What are Stable Isotopes?

Of the 92 natural chemical elements, almost all occur in more than one isotopic form – the vast majority of these being stable isotopes, which do not decay, unlike radioisotopes, which are not stable and, hence, undergo radioactive decay. In this context, ‘almost all’ means with the exception of 21 elements, including fluorine and phosphorous, which are mono-isotopic. The word isotope was coined by Professor Frederick Soddy at the University of Glasgow, and borrows its origin from the two Greek words *isos* (ἴσος) meaning ‘equal in quantity or quality’ and *topos* (τοπος) meaning ‘place or position’, with isotope thus meaning ‘in an equal position’ (of the periodic table of chemical elements). Frederick Soddy was later awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1921 for his work on the origin and nature of isotopes. By coining this term he referred to the fact that isotopes of a given chemical element occupy the same position in the periodic table of elements since they share the same number of protons and electrons, but have a different number of neutrons. Therefore, as is so often mistakenly thought, the word isotope does not denote radioactivity. As mentioned above, radioactive isotopes have their own name – radioisotopes. Non-radioactive or stable isotopes of a given chemical element share the same chemical character and only differ in atomic mass (or mass number  $A$ ), which is the sum of protons and neutrons in the nucleus.

Moving from the smallest entity upwards, atoms are comprised of positively charged protons and neutral neutrons, which make up an atom’s nucleus, and negatively charged electrons, which make up an atom’s shell (‘electron cloud’). Due to charge balance constraints, the number of protons is matched by the number of electrons. A chemical element and its position in the periodic table of elements is determined by the number of protons in its nucleus. The number of protons determines the number of electrons in the electron cloud, and the configuration of this electron cloud in turn determines chemical characteristics such as electronegativity and the number of covalent chemical bonds a given element can form. Owing to this link, the number of protons in the atomic nucleus of a given chemical element is always the same and is denoted by the atomic number  $Z$ , while the number of neutrons (in its nucleus) may vary. Since the number of neutrons ( $N$ ) has no effect on the number of electrons in the electron