Abstract

We provide micromorphological, isotopic and chronological data on cryogenic cave carbonates (CCC) from Sarrios-6 ice cave (2780 m a.s.l.) in the Monte Perdido Massif (central Pyrenees). It is the first report of such speleothems on the Iberian Peninsula. Millimeter-sized white skeletal calcite rhombohedrons overgrown by brown rhombohedral crystals are present within a perennial ice body. The morphology of two carbonate generations suggests an early stage of fast carbonate precipitation followed by a second phase formed at a slower precipitation rate. The two generations show distinct isotopic compositions (skeletal cores: mean $\delta^{13}C = 4.8‰$, mean $\delta^{18}O = -20.8‰$; overgrowths: mean $\delta^{13}C = 5.3‰$, mean $\delta^{18}O = -21.3‰$). A preliminary radiocarbon date of a seed found in the same ice layers suggests that the precipitation of CCC likely occurred during the Medieval Climate Anomaly.

Key-words: Cryogenic cave carbonate, ice cave, Medieval Climate Anomaly, Pyrenees.

Introduction

The cryogenic cave carbonates (hereafter CCC) are a specific type of speleothems formed by the segregation of solutes during freezing of mineralized karst waters in ice caves (e.g., Žák et al., 2008). CCC occurs in ice cave as fine-grained powder or as coarse (millimeter- to centimeter-sized) crystals aggregates. These two types of CCC form in different environments and are characterized by distinct isotopic signatures (Žák et al., 2008). In Europe, research on CCC has been focusing on the central regions (Richter et al., 2013; Žák et al., 2012) and on the Alpine range (Luetzcher et al., 2013; Spötl and Cheng, 2014). These carbonates, if radiometrically dated, provide interesting palaeo-environmental information at high latitudes and high-altitude regions subjected to permafrost conditions where other archives are rare.

Sarrios-6 is a cave in the Monte Perdido karstic massif (Central Pyrenees) which is part of the Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park (Huesca Province, northeastern Iberian Peninsula). The cave hosts remnants of congelation ice deposits (Luetzcher and Jeannin, 2004) containing cryogenic carbonates. Here, we report the first micromorphological, isotopic and chronological data of CCC from the Spanish mountains. These insights allow exploring the origin and environmental significance of these peculiar speleothems.

Study area

Sarrios-6 is located at 2780 m a.s.l. (42° 41’ 9” N, 0° 1’ 32” W, geographic coordinates) (Fig. 1A). The cave has two main entrances at the foot of the Faja de los Sarrios,
a west-east facing rock cliff (Fig. 1B) made of bioclastic limestones of Paleocene age. These rocks constitute the basal unit of the Gallinera Group (Robador, 2005) integrated in the Larra-Monte Perdido fold and thrust system (Pyrenean Internal Sierras) (Teixell, 1992) striking WNW-ESE and thrusting towards the South (Fig. 1C). Bedding is slightly tilted towards the North and the bedrock is affected by a closely spaced cleavage striking WNW-ESE and tilted to the North (40–50°). Sarrios-6 cave shows a west-east trending main gallery with several north-south passages (Fig. 1D). Some old phreatic dissolution features are preserved and breakdown deposits and cryoclasts are very abundant. Besides, some congelation ice is present which contains CCC.

Methodology

Field work carried out in Sarrios-6 cave included a geological and geomorphological survey of the cave, a description of the ice bodies and CCC sampling. Micromorphological observations of CCC were done using a binocular microscope and by scanning electron microscopy (JEOL JSM 6400). Samples for stable isotope analyses were handpicked using a binocular microscope, measured using isotope ratio mass spectrometry and the results are reported on the VPDB scale with an analytical precision of 0.06 and 0.08‰ for $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{18}O$, respectively (Spötl and Vennemann, 2003). A seed found in the cave ice was radiocarbon-dated at the Laboratory of Direct AMS Radiocarbon Dating System of Seattle (USA).
The INTCAL13 calibration curve (Reimer et al., 2013) was used to calibrate the age.

**Results**

Ice in the Sarrios-6 cave occurs as bodies partially filling some passages and covering the floor of the main gallery. The origin of the ice seems to be related to the freezing of infiltrated water in cave pools. The ice body hosting the CCC is a side-wall slab 3.5 m thick and 4 m wide, attached to the bedrock. Most of the ice is banded and laminated but unconformities are also present. The sampled CCC occurs as loose crystals, concentrated in a patch located within a 80 cm-thick layer in the ice body (Fig. 2A). A plant seed (mm-sized) was sampled within this unit for radiocarbon dating.

**Micromorphological features**

In this reconnaissance study we focus on one type of CCC, i.e. rhombohedral crystals up to 4 mm in diameter, which are composed of a core and an outer zone. The core consists of fragile, skeletal and porous rhombohedral crystals aggregates which are creamy to orange colored and up to 1.5 mm in size (Figs. 2B and 2C). These cores are overgrown by brownish-orange crystals showing rhombohedral growth steps (Figs. 2B and 2C).

**Isotopic data**

The two generations of three CCC crystals were separated for the isotopic analysis. The skeletal cores show mean δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O values of 4.8‰ and -20.8‰, respectively, slightly different from the overgrowths whose values are 5.3‰ and -21.3‰, respectively.

The overgrowths are enriched in δ¹³C and depleted in δ¹⁸O with respect to the cores (Fig. 3). These compositions fall within the range of published data CCC elsewhere (Zák et al., 2012).

**Chronology**

A plant seed found within the ice body in the same stratigraphic level yielded a radiocarbon date of 783 ± 23 BP (1149-1177 cal AD; 2-sigma range; laboratory code D-AMS 008324). Assuming that the seed is approximately of the same age as the ice in which it was embedded, CCC formed during the Medieval Climate Anomaly (MCA).

**Discussion**

**Formation of cryogenic cave carbonate**

Coarse CCC is linked to slow freezing of cave water pools enclosed in the ice (Zák et al., 2008; Spötl and Cheng, 2014). Although the crustal morphology and isotopic composition of the CCC from the Sarrios-6 cave are consistent with those from other CCC occurrences in Europe, the Spanish samples exhibit some interesting details with respect to their two step growth: the skeletal crystals of the core formed at a rather high growth rate, as suggested by the predominance of edges and vertices. During a second growth phase, the overgrowths formed at a slower growth rate.

The isotope composition of the two calcite generations is consistent with a two-stage evolution, whereby the second phase is slightly depleted in δ¹³C and enriched in δ¹⁸O compared to the first one. The shift towards higher δ¹³C and lower δ¹⁸O values during the freezing of water and subsequent CCC precipitation has been previously observed in isotopic profiles across individual CCC crystals (Zák et al., 2004; Luetscher et al., 2013). In our case, the isotopic difference between the two phases is small, which suggests that the two growth phases were closely related.

**Palaeoclimatic conditions**

According to the radiocarbon age, the ice containing CCC in the Sarrios-6 ice cave likely accumulated during the MCA. This period was characterized by warm and arid climatic conditions in the Mediterranean side of Iberian Peninsula (Moreno et al., 2012). In the Pyrenees, melting of the winter snow above the caves allowed water to infiltrate into the karst system. The low temperatures inside the cave favored the freezing of seepage water leading the accumulation of ice and, eventually, the precipitation of CCC. In Alpine ice caves, CCC has been assigned to relative warm temperatures during the Medieval Warm Period and the Roman Warm Period (Luetscher et al., 2013) but also to lower temperatures at the onset of the Little Ice Age (Spötl and Cheng, 2014).

**Conclusions**

Preliminary insights into cryogenic calcites from Sarrios-6 ice cave (central Pyrenees) based on micromorphological, isotopic and chronological data can be summarized as follows:

a) CCC crystals composed of a skeletal core and brown overgrowths were found in situ in the layered ice. These petro-
graphic features point to a two-stage growth at slightly different precipitation rates.

b) This two-stage formation is also supported by the isotopic composition of the two calcite generations, reflecting the isotopic fractionation observed during the freezing of water and associated precipitation of CCC coarse.

c) According to a radiocarbon date of a seed found in the same ice layer, these processes occurred at the end of the MCA coinciding with a climatic amelioration that likely favored the infiltration of water into the Sarrios-6 cave and the subsequent refreezing leading to the precipitation of CCC.

To our knowledge it is the first report of CCC coarse from a cave in the Pyrenees.

Acknowledgements

This study has been supported by the projects 258/2011 (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino-Organoismo Autónomo Parques Nacionales) and CTM2013-48639-C2-1-R (Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad-Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional). This is a contribution by PaleoQ and Geomorfología y Cambio Global (Gobierno de Aragón-Universidad de Zaragoza). The authors would like to acknowledge to Fernando Carmen, and Ramón Castillo (PNOMP), Alberto Gomezlón (SECEM), Karel Žák and Enrique Serrano for their comments manuscript and suggestions for the future work, Góriz mountain hut guards (www.goriz.es) and the use of Servicio General de Apoyo a la Investigación-SAI, Universidad de Zaragoza.

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