Large isotopic shift in volcanic plume CO_2 prior to a basaltic paroxysmal explosion

Fiona D'Arcy[1], Alessandro Aiuppa[2], Fausto Grassa[3], Andrea Luca Rizzo[4,5], John Stix[1]

[1] Department of Earth & Planetary Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, Canada
[2] Dipartimento DiSTeM, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Palermo, Italy
[3] Istitutio Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia, Palermo, Palermo, Italy
[4] Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Milano-Bicocca, Piazza della Scienza 4, 20126, Milan, Italy
[5] Istitutio Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia, Sezione di Milano, Via Alfonso Corti 12, Milan, Italy

Corresponding author: Fiona D'Arcy (fiona.darcy@mail.mcgill.ca)

Key Points:

- Rapid collection of volcanic plume CO_2 enabled by Unoccupied Aerial Systems
- A carbon isotopic anomaly was present 2 weeks prior to the Stromboli 2019 paroxysm
- High CO_2 concentrations, elevated CO_2/S_t, and negative $\delta^{13}C$ may precede paroxysms on timescales of months to weeks

Abstract

Carbon dioxide is a key gas to monitor at volcanoes because its fluctuation relative to other gases can be detected prior to eruptions, yet carbon isotopic fluctuations at volcanic summits are not well constrained. Here, we present carbon isotopes measured from plume samples collected at Stromboli volcano, Italy, by Uncrewed Aerial System (UAS). We found contrasting volcanic source $\delta^{13}C$ in 2018 during quiescence (-0.36 ± 0.59 ‰) versus 10 days before the July 3rd 2019 paroxysm (-5.01 ± 0.56 ‰). During the buildup to the eruption, an influx of CO_2-rich magma began degassing at deep levels (~100 MPa) in an open system fashion, causing strong isotopic fractionation and maintaining high CO_2/S_t ratios in the gas. This influx occurred between 10 days prior to the event and up to several months beforehand, meaning that isotopic changes in the gas could be detected weeks to months before unrest.

Plain Language Summary

Volcanoes produce gases which change composition depending on how active the volcano is. One of these gases, carbon dioxide, is known to change relative to other gases before an eruption occurs, but little is known about how the isotopes of carbon change leading up to an eruption.

Using drones to reach the gaseous plume of Stromboli volcano, Italy, we have captured carbon dioxide both during an inactive phase in 2018 and during the lead-up to a highly explosive eruption called a paroxysm. There is a stark difference in the carbon isotopes measured 10 days before the July 3rd 2019 paroxysm as opposed to those measured in 2018. This is caused by the arrival of CO_2-rich magma which progressively degassed, leading to more negative carbon isotopes in the residual magma over time. This process could have started anywhere from 10 days to several months before the paroxysm. This provides a warning signal which can be picked up weeks to months before an active period begins.

1 Introduction

Volcanoes play a significant role in the global cycle of carbon (Burton et al., 2013; Mather, 2015; Werner et al., 2019). This is because carbon is the second major species dissolved in a magma, it is transferred from the lithosphere to the atmosphere during eruption, and more significantly, during quiescence between eruptions at open-vent volcanoes (Edmonds et al., 2022). At the surface, this transfer of carbon takes the form of carbon dioxide emissions which can seep out through the ground as soil gas, dissolve into groundwater in a hydrothermal system, or be expelled from a volcanic vent. The concentration relative to other gas species (gas ratios) and flux of these CO_2 emissions can provide valuable information to understand and forecast eruptions (Aiuppa et al., 2007; Moor et al., 2016; Rizzo et al., 2009). Carbon isotopes provide information complementary to gas ratios and fluxes, as the isotopes can be used to constrain degassing models (Barry et al., 2014; Boudoire et al., 2018; Gerlach & Taylor, 1990), fingerprint the source of a magma (Fischer et al., 2015; Paonita et al., 2012; Troll et al., 2012), and monitor hydrothermal systems (D'Arcy et al., 2022; Federico et al., 2008a).

Sampling of volcanic plumes provides a safe and fast alternative to direct sampling which bypasses the need to access the crater. Depending on the topography and wind conditions, the plume can be sampled several metres to hundreds of metres away from the source vent. Methods for sampling volcanic plumes for $\delta^{13}CO_2$ analysis have undergone several advances in the last two decades. Samples were first obtained by physically entering the plume and manually collecting samples (Chiodini et al., 2011) before evolving to plume traverses in ground vehicles (Rizzo et al., 2015), helicopters (Fischer & Lopez, 2016), and use of proximal satellite laboratories (Malowany et al., 2017; Schipper et al., 2017). This field of study has entered a new era with the

onset of compact sensor arrays combined with lightweight pumps for targeted sampling of volcanic plumes by Unoccupied Aerial Systems (UAS) (D'Arcy et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Shingubara et al., 2021; Tsunogai et al., 2022). These studies have demonstrated the utility of UAS in volcanic carbon isotope geochemistry, highlighting the need to continue exploring this technique.

Stromboli volcano is part of the Aeolian arc of volcanoes in Italy, which results from the subduction of the African plate below that of European (e.g. Gasparini et al., 1982). It has a well-studied volatile output, with up to ~35 mol% CO_2 during passive degassing and up to 54 mol% CO_2 during syn-explosive degassing (Aiuppa et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2007; Pering et al., 2020). Carbon isotopes at the summit of Stromboli varies from -1.0 to -2.5 ‰ $\delta^{13}CO_2$ (Capasso et al., 2005; Federico et al., 2008; Finizola et al., 2003; Di Martino et al., 2021; Rizzo et al., 2009) however gas emissions during and immediately prior to paroxysms are not so well constrained (Aiuppa et al., 2010, 2021).

In this work, we have refined a series of bespoke UAS gas sampling assemblies to collect CO_2 from a volcanic plume at Stromboli volcano, Italy, for isotopic analysis. We demonstrate that there are distinct differences between the stable carbon isotopic signature of volcanic CO_2 collected from passive degassing (quiescent periods, ground samples) compared to the CO_2 signature collected from active vents immediately prior to a devastating explosive paroxysm. This study demonstrates the potential utility of carbon isotopes to better understand open and closed degassing processes, which has implications for eruption forecasting at open-vent volcanoes.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Sampling and isotopic analysis

We conducted 25 sampling flights in May 2018 and June 2019 at the summit of Stromboli. We used a series of UAS (Figure 1a and 1b) and Compact Aerial Receiver-initiated Gas-sampling Operations (CARGOs) which we developed over the course of this study and which are described in detail in the Supporting Information (Text S1). Each sampling flight collected two to ten 600ml bags of volcanic gas. Bags were closed with clamps upon landing the aircraft and immediately taken from the summit to the field lab at the end of the day for same-day $\delta^{13}C$ analysis (Supporting Information Text S2-S6).

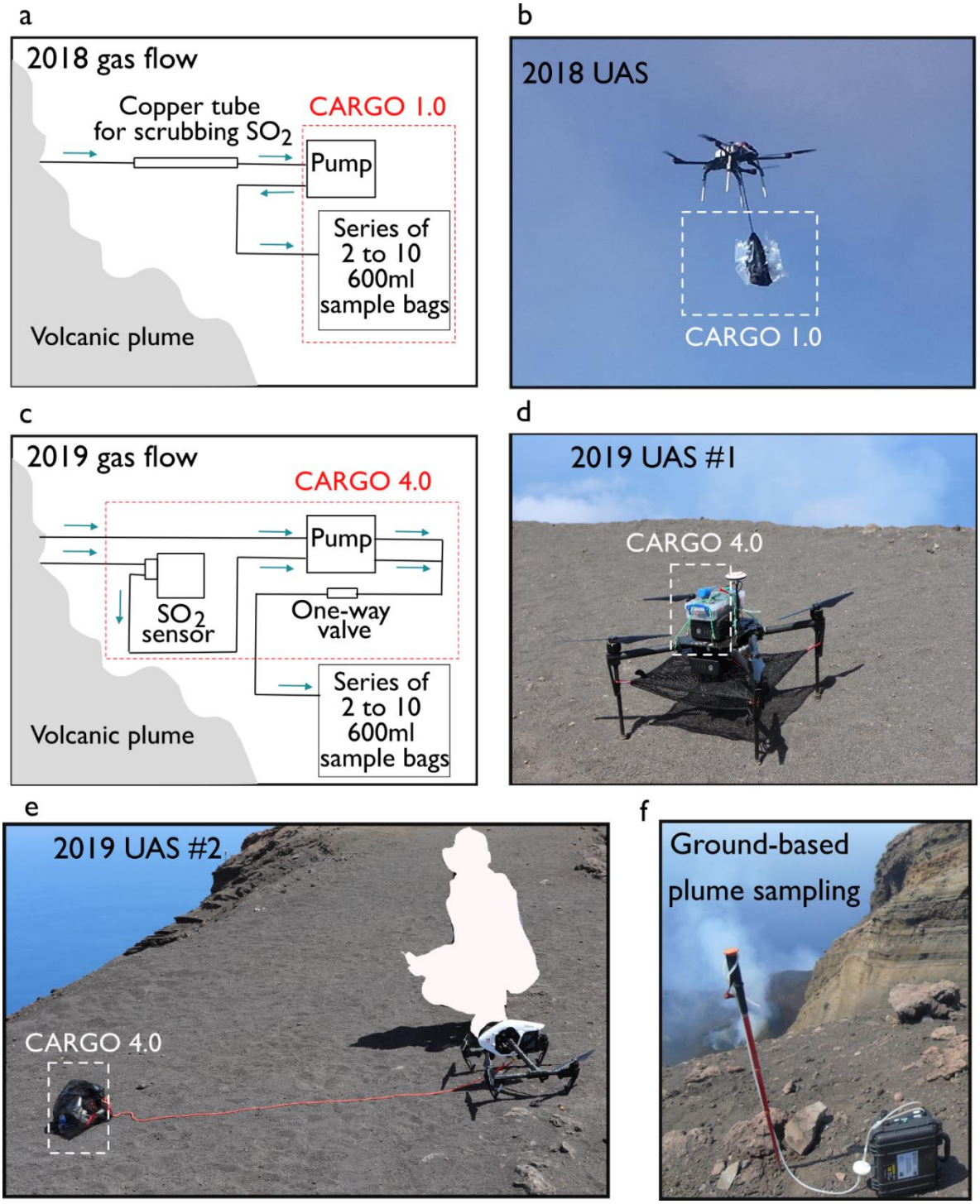

Figure 1: Sampling set-up for 2019 and 2018 samples. Gas flow schematics of the 2018 (a) and 2019 (c) Compact Aerial Receiver-initiated Gas-sampling Operations (CARGOs) along with the Uncrewed Aerial System (UAS) used to fly them in 2018 (b) and in 2019 (d, e). In (f), the general method used for ground-based sampling is pictured.

99 2.2 Estimates of the isotopic signature of magmatic carbon

100 Volcanic plumes are a mixture of atmosphere and volcanic gas, such that:

101 $$[\mathrm{CO_2}]_p = \mathrm{f}[\mathrm{CO_2}]_v + (1 - \mathrm{f})[\mathrm{CO_2}]_b \quad [1]$$

102 Where f is the relative contribution from the volcanic source (Chiodini et al., 2011), and
103 subscripts p, b, and v denote plume, background, and volcanic, respectively. To estimate the
104 isotopic composition of the volcanic source of gas, isotopic results of plume samples must
105 account for the presence of background air. A number of authors (Rizzo et al., 2014, 2015;
106 Fischer and Lopez, 2016; Malowany et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Shingubara et al., 2021;
107 Tsunogai et al., 2022) have adopted the Keeling method (Keeling, 1958) to calculate the carbon
108 signature of volcanic plumes. This method uses a linear regression analysis to fit the
109 observations to a line of best fit, wherein one endmember is background air and the other is the
110 volcanic source. The intercept of this line represents the theoretical composition of the volcanic
111 source, $\delta^{13}CO_{2,v}$, when considering the variation in plume $\delta^{13}C$ against 1/ CO_2:

112 $$\delta^{13}\mathrm{C}_p = \frac{1}{[\mathrm{CO_2}]_p}\,[\mathrm{CO_2}]_b\,[\delta^{13}\mathrm{C_b} - \delta^{13}\mathrm{C_v}] + \delta^{13}\mathrm{C_v} \quad [2]$$

113 $$\delta^{13}\mathrm{C_p} = \mathrm{m}\frac{1}{[CO_2]_p} + b \quad [3]$$

114 There is another simplified method adapted from equation [1] which uses each discrete point
115 sampled in a plume to estimate the $\delta^{13}CO_{2,v}$ which takes the weighted mean of the combined
116 estimates (Schipper et al., 2017):

117 $$[CO_2]_v \cdot \delta^{13}\mathrm{C_v} = [CO_2]_p \cdot \delta^{13}\mathrm{C_p} - CO_{2_b} \cdot \delta^{13}\mathrm{C_b} \quad [4]$$

118 We applied both methods to calculate the volcanic source $\delta^{13}CO_2$.

119 **3 Results and Discussion**

120 3.1 Aerial samples of volcanic CO_2 capture a unique data set

121 The concentration of CO_2 collected during 14 flights from 12 - 17 May 2018 ranged from 405 to
122 490 ppmv and $\delta^{13}C$ between -7.5 and -9.2 ‰ (Supporting Information Dataset S1). The first two
123 days of measurements were discarded due to inclement weather, which inhibited targeted flights
124 into the plume. We also collected 16 dilute plume samples on the crater rim with a pump and
125 portable Multi-GAS to monitor for SO_2 (indicating the volcanic plume was reaching the rim).

These ground samples varied from 410 to 463 ppm CO_2 with $\delta^{13}C$ of -7.6 to -9.0 ‰. One sample was discarded due to soil gas contamination as indicated by high CO_2 and low SO_2. Average background from 9 samples taken at the summit was 401 ppm and -8.9 ‰.

During 11 flights from 17 - 21 June 2019, we measured CO_2 concentrations ranging from 403 to 555 ppm and $\delta^{13}C$ between -8.3 and -9.8 ‰ (Dataset S1). Two samples were discarded due to leaks during a failed landing. We also collected 12 samples on the rim ranging from 408 to 501 ppm CO_2 with $\delta^{13}C$ -7.8 to -9.7 ‰. Two ground samples were discarded due to soil gas contamination. Average background from 4 samples taken at the summit was 401 ppm and -9.9 ‰.

Our sampling concentrations are comparable to those collected by UAS at other volcanoes. Shingubara et al. (2021) achieved 531 ppm (maximum volcanic CO_2 of 61 ppm), while Tsunogai et al. (2022) reached 514 ppm (maximum volcanic CO_2 of 98 ppm) at Aso volcano in Japan. At Manam volcano in Papua New Guinea, plume samples from Liu et al. (2021) ranged from 421 to 494 ppm (maximum volcanic CO_2 of 85 ppm). At Poás volcano, D'Arcy et al. (2022) reached up to 528 ppm or 120 ppm volcanic CO_2. The variation in average background at Stromboli between 2018 and 2019 samples has also been seen by workers elsewhere (Tsunogai et al., 2022) due to interferences from various sources and sinks of CO_2 around the crater.

First, the $\delta^{13}CO_{2\ volcanic}$ estimated from the Keeling method for May 2018 and June 2019 are -0.36 ± 0.59 ‰ (R^2 = 0.67, p= 0.05, n=50) and -5.01 ± 0.56 ‰ (R^2 = 0.73, p= 0.05, n=51), respectively. Errors are reported as the standard error of the regression multiplied by 1.96 to give ±2σ (Figure 2). The estimates for the weighted mean method for 2018 and 2019 using samples with volcanic CO_2 concentration greater than 50 ppm are -0.78 ± 1.34 ‰ and -4.12 ± 1.71 ‰, respectively (Dataset S2).

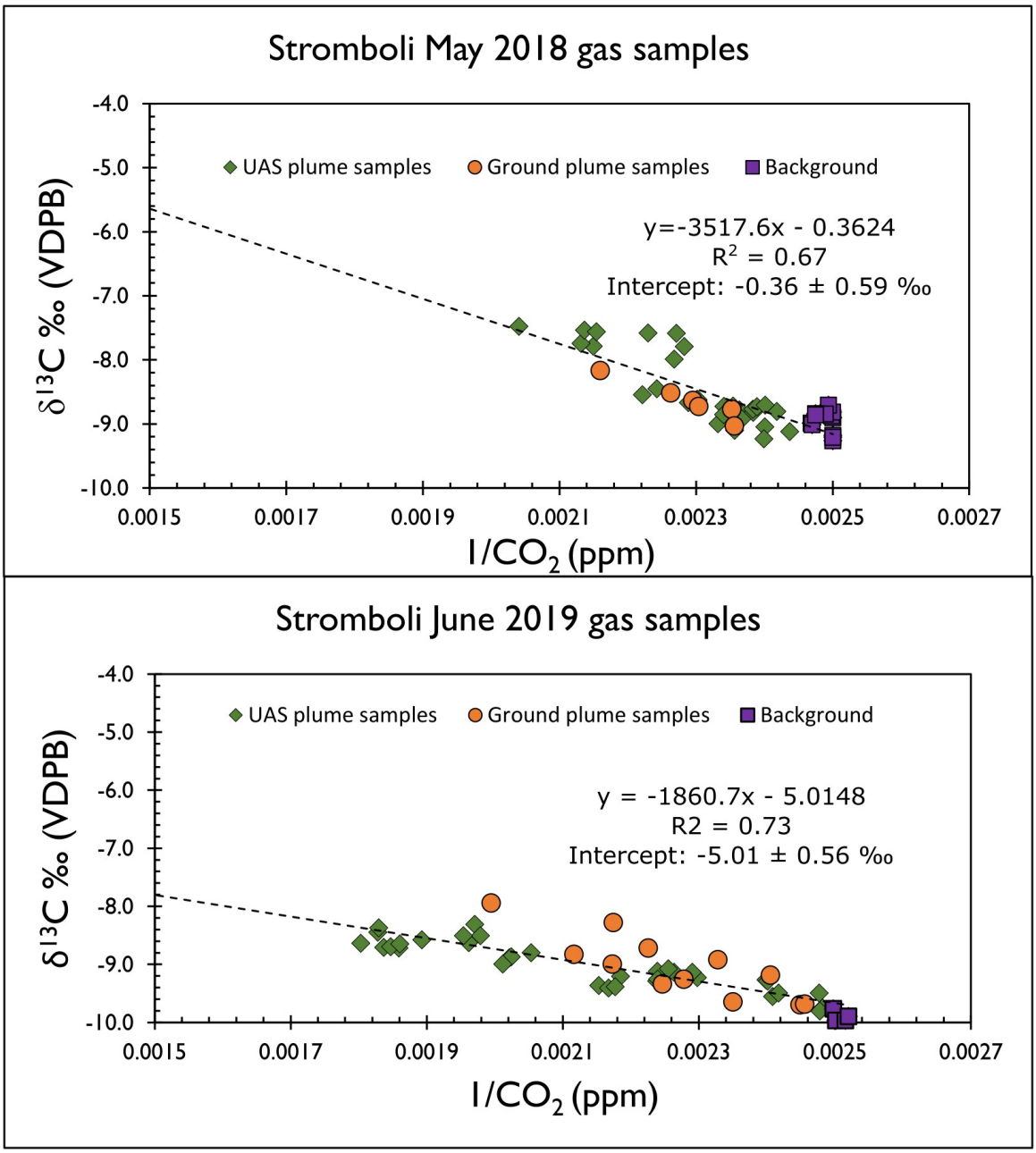

Figure 2: Stable carbon values against inverse CO_2 concentrations of all plume samples during this study. UAS (green diamonds), ground (orange circles), and background (purple squares) samples are plotted and included in a linear regression analysis whose line of best fit (dashed line) is shown for 2018 (a) and 2019 (b). This line represents a mixing line between the volcanic source and background air which is extrapolated to the y-intercept in order to estimate the $\delta^{13}CO_2$ of the high concentration volcanic source.

The volcanic source we estimate for 2018 (-0.36 ± 0.59 ‰) falls slightly outside of the range of $\delta^{13}CO_2$ measured in summit fumaroles (-1.0 to -2.5 ‰) in previous years (Figure 3). The difference in 2018 may be due to uncertainties in estimating $\delta^{13}C$, vent-specific differences, or daily variations. Significantly, the volcanic source in 2019 (-5.01 ± 0.56 ‰) is more than 2‰ more negative than the lowest $\delta^{13}C$ values usually measured at Stromboli in fumaroles (Figure 3). The large difference between the 2018 and 2019 isotopic signatures in the carbon dioxide sampled at Stromboli is a key finding, as the 2019 samples were collected two weeks prior to the July 3rd paroxysm, which was an unusually intense and fatal volcanic explosion (Andronico et al., 2021; Giordano & De Astis, 2021; Ripepe et al., 2021).

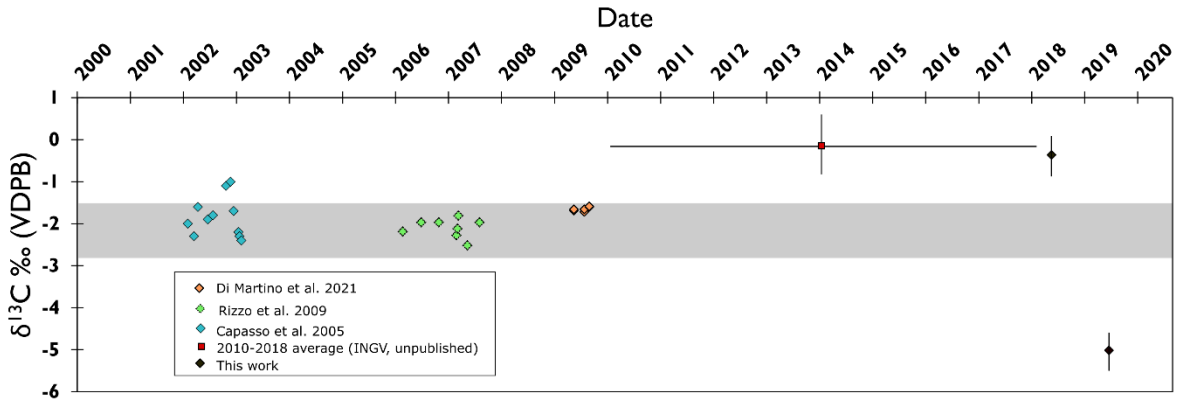

Figure 3: carbon isotopes plotted against time on the x-axis, showing where 2018 and 2019 results compare with previous studies. The grey band represents the first gas exsolved from a melt having -2.5 per mil (e=+3 and f=1). The 2010-2018 average was calculated using a regression on passive gas samples taken at the summit (n=49) with 4 blanks as background.

3.2 Carbon isotopes reveal changes prior to paroxysmal activity

The significant difference in the $\delta^{13}CO_2$ of the volcanic plume between 2018 (-0.36 ‰) and 2019 (-5.01‰) is the first of its kind measured at Stromboli. Not only has the bulk plume itself not been sampled before, but such a variation in $\delta^{13}C$ has never been observed in any fumarolic or hydrothermal sample. We posit that this is due to the unique conditions which allowed us to sample the plume close to the vent (a) during a quiescent period and (b) just two weeks before a highly energetic paroxysmal eruption which the system had been primed for. Our analytical procedures using two different instruments and employing two different statistical methods demonstrate that these results represent true volcanic variations.

The most intuitive explanation for the nearly 5 ‰ difference is a new magmatic source supplying the 2019 eruption. There are two main reasons why this appears not to be the case. Firstly, the major and trace element geochemistry of the 2019 eruptive products (Andronico et al., 2021; Métrich et al., 2021; Petrone et al., 2022) is indistinguishable from that of pyroclastic materials erupted during other recent paroxysms on Stromboli in 2003 and 2007 (Métrich et al., 2005, 2009), in which occasions fumarole direct sampling has found a stable, isotopically heavy carbon isotopic signature (Figure 3). This indicates that all these events (2003, 2007 and 2019) were charged by similar magma sourced by the same metasomatically altered mantle source (Peccerillo & Frezzotti, 2015). Secondly, there is no evidence for a magma source in the region with a $\delta^{13}CO_2$ as light as our 2019 data (-5.01 ‰). Studies from fumarolic emissions of volcanoes in the Aeolian arc range from -2.5 to -1.0 ‰ at Stromboli (G. Capasso et al., 2005; Federico et al., 2008b; A. Rizzo et al., 2009) and -3.2 to +0.7 ‰ at Vulcano (Giorgio Capasso et al., 1997; Venturi et al., 2017). Thus, while the mantle source of Stromboli volcanism is admittedly heterogeneous in terms of radiogenic isotopes and trace elements (Peccerillo et al., 2013), there is no evidence for the existence of a light carbon component in the mantle, both at a local scale (Gennaro et al., 2017) and regionally.

The next plausible mechanism for this unique carbon isotopic signature is that of isotopic fractionation during degassing. Studies have shown that, during magmatic degassing, heavier ^{13}C preferentially partitions (relative to ^{12}C) into the gas phase exsolved from a degassing silicate melt, with the extent of such an enrichment being defined by an enrichment factor $\varepsilon_{vap\text{-}melt}$ (Aubaud, 2022; Javoy et al., 1978; Mattey, 1991). As a consequence, in a batch of magma ascending and decompressing through the crust, the residual carbon remaining in the melt is expected to become progressively lighter (^{13}C-depleted) upon increasing extents of degassing, and so will the gas phase exsolved at later and shallower degassing stages (Aubaud, 2022). Importantly, the extent of this progressive ^{13}C depletion of both dissolved and exsolved carbon will depend upon whether fractionation occurs in equilibrium (closed-system) or disequilibrium (open-system) conditions between melt and the exsolved gas phase (Aubaud, 2022). Hence, magma degassing in open-system (disequilibrium) conditions can lower the $\delta^{13}C$ of the resulting gas (Aubaud, 2022) to levels that could explain our 2019 gas data.

3.3 Dynamic carbon isotopes at arc volcanoes

On Stromboli, as in other open-vent volcanoes (Edmonds et al., 2022), both closed- and open-system degassing conditions can occur, and even coexist. For example, during ordinary Strombolian activity (Harris & Ripepe, 2007; Rosi et al., 2013), both quiescent and explosive degassing coexist, in which the former is interpreted as caused by shallow gas release from convectively circulating magma in the upper conduits (Allard et al., 2008) while the latter is thought to reflect rapid, separate ascent (and explosive bursting at the surface) of deeply sourced gas bubbles (Burton et al., 2007). Important in this context is that high CO_2/SO_2 ratios have typically been observed in the bulk plume (passive + explosive) before paroxysms (Aiuppa et al., 2010) and major explosions (A. Aiuppa et al., 2011). This indicates that open-system conditions prevail in such conditions, resulting in the release of deeply sourced gas that is not in equilibrium with resident shallow conduit magma.

Geochemical and geophysical evidence supports a deeply derived gas was being emitted in the months prior to the paroxysm. First, increased CO_2 concentrations and high CO_2/SO_2 ratios were noted in the plume beginning 8 months prior to the July 2019 eruption (Aiuppa et al. 2021), indicative of a deeply sourced magma. Second, elevated CO_2 flux from summit soil began in October 2018, accelerating to July 2019 as higher volatile input was supplied (Inguaggiato et al., 2020). Third, a seismic precursor to the 3 July paroxysm was noted in very long period waveforms, starting at least 1 month before the eruption, thought to be caused by vigorous (deep-sourced?) gas jetting activity sustaining the Strombolian activity (Giudicepietro et al., 2020). Modelling the Stromboli degassing behaviour as a combination of open and closed system conditions has been invoked to account for the bimodal CO_2/SO_2 gas ratios observed prior to the July 3rd paroxysm (Aiuppa et al. 2021).

We now test if a switch from closed-system to open-system degassing conditions can explain the distinct $\delta^{13}CO_2$ plume composition in 2018 and 2019 (Fig. 4). Carbon isotopic modelling of both closed and open degassing has been used in the past to relate fluid inclusions (Barry et al., 2014; Boudoire et al., 2018) and fumaroles (Gerlach and Taylor, 1990) to their magmatic sources. Here, we use the model of Gerlach and Taylor (1990) to simulate carbon isotope fractionation during degassing in both closed-system and open-system conditions (Supplmental Information). In order to estimate f, the fraction of residual carbon in the melt at each step of the degassing

path (see eq. 5-7 in the Methods), we use the Chosetto model (Moretti et al., 2003; Moretti & Papale, 2004) to simulate degassing upon decompression of a Stromboli-like parental melt (same initial conditions as in Aiuppa et al., 2010; see Supporting Information Text S7). The model also outputs, at each degassing step (e.g., at each pressure of the modelled decompression path), the CO_2/SO_2 ratios in the gas coexisting with the melt. These are plotted, along with the gas carbon isotope signature, in Figure 4.

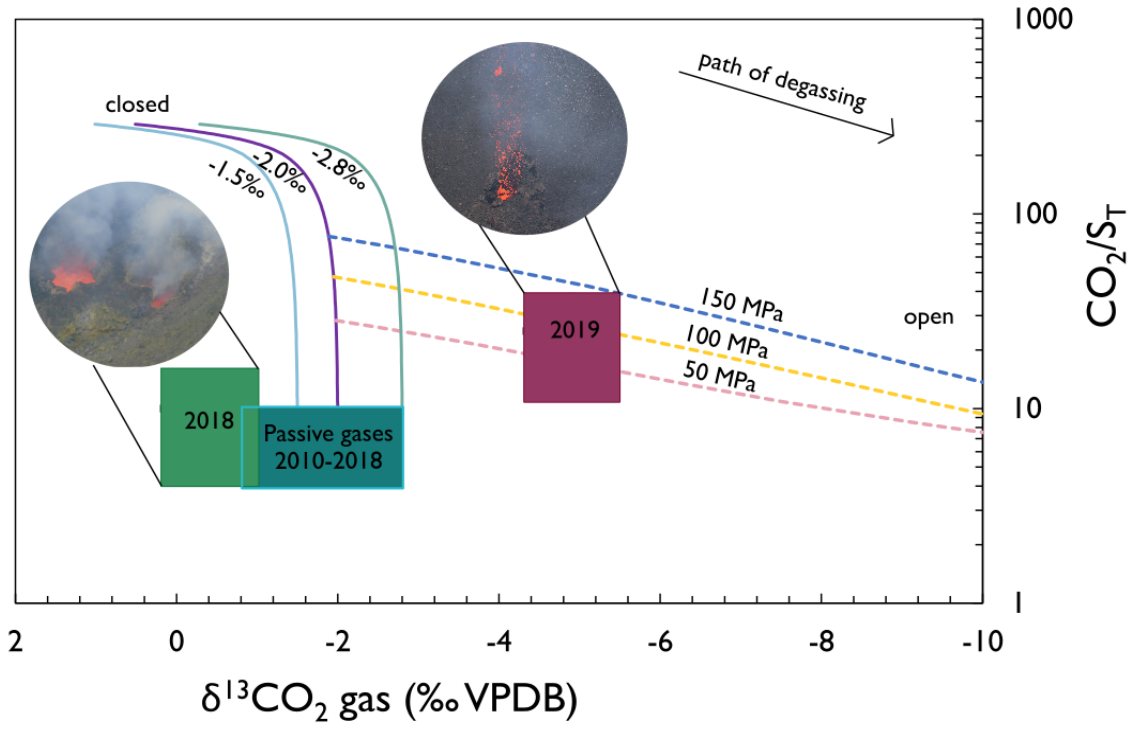

Figure 4: a) open and closed degassing paths of magma at Stromboli, showing carbon isotopic and gas ratios.

Our results indicate that the plume 2018 results, as well as the 2010-2018 fumarole data, can be explained by degassing under closed-system conditions down to 0.1 MPa (initial pressure, 1000 MPa), of a parental magma with initial $\delta^{13}CO_2$ of -0.5 to -2.8 ‰ (Figure 4). This confirms that degassing of shallow convecting magma dominates the degassing budget during ordinary Strombolian activity (Allard et al., 2008; Aiuppa et al., 2010). In contrast, we see that the 2019 plume data diverge from the closed-system degassing lines, due to their light (^{13}C-poor) carbon

signature. Our June 2019 carbon isotopic results can be reproduced from a degassing path that switches from closed to open (Figure 4). We propose a scenario in which closed-system degassing takes place as magma decompresses from 1000 MPa (~40 km) to ~50-150 MPa (2-6 km depth). At this point, magma reaches a ponding zone (a geological or rheological discontinuity), at which point accumulating gas bubbles separate from melt (Aiuppa et al., 2021), and the system switches to open degassing. Previous work has identified this transition from closed to open-system degassing based on either gas (A. Aiuppa et al., 2010; Métrich et al., 2009) evidence. This "switchover depth" from closed to open system degassing may be variable rather than constant, resulting in variable yet high CO_2/SO_2 observed before the paroxysm (~20-35). Vent-specific and short-term changes in CO_2/SO_2 were noted at Stromboli in the lead-up to the 2019 event (Pering et al., 2020). A variable switchover depth could indicate multiple levels of magma storage and/or multiple foam layers accumulating at different depths within the magma plumbing system prior to a paroxysm (Aiuppa et al., 2021). In any case, we postulate that the gas separated from the deeply accumulated magma in this open-system environment then rapidly ascends toward the surface, preserving its deeply inherited high CO_2/SO_2 ratio signature (Aiuppa et al., 2021) and also a ^{13}C-depleted isotopic signature caused by disequilibrium fractionation during open-system degassing. These are exactly the features we observe in the June 2019 plume (Figure 4).

Modern applications of carbon isotopes as monitoring tools at Stromboli assume that small increases in $\delta^{13}C$ would indicate unrest due to injection of a fresh, CO_2-rich magma (Federico et al. 2008); However, as we gain more data, it is becoming increasingly evident that this assumption may not always be true. In the same way that gas geochemists are documenting patterns of precursory CO_2/SO_2 increases prior to basaltic eruptions across many arcs (Werner et al. 2019), now is the time to build a similar repository for precursory $\delta^{13}C$ changes for Stromboli and other volcanic systems as well.

At Stromboli in 2018, the observed low CO_2/SO_2 and heavy $\delta^{13}C$ resulted from CO_2 remaining in equilibrium with the magma until shallow levels, thereby efficiently lowering the gas ratios. In 2019, high CO_2/SO_2 and light $\delta^{13}C$ were the result of the gas decoupling and separating from the deep magma at pressures of ~100 MPa. By Rayleigh fractionation, the CO_2 was depleted in ^{13}C, while CO_2/SO_2 remained relatively high. The early onset of deep gas supply many months before

the July 3rd event led to higher gas content in the deep magma reservoir which primed the magma for an energetic eruption.

4 Conclusions

What is the "recipe" for forecasting large eruptive events at Stromboli? Based on previous work (Aiuppa et al., 2021) and ours, we propose that a combination of high CO_2 concentrations (maximum volcanic CO_2 > 50 ppm) and elevated CO_2/S_t (values > 20) as measured by Multi-GAS at the summit, combined with anomalously negative $\delta^{13}C$ (e.g., less than -2 to -3 ‰), may indicate a heightened probability of a paroxysm. The longer the timescale of anomalous CO_2 characteristics, the greater the thickness of the foam layer(s) developing at depth (Aiuppa et al., 2021), hence the more powerful the eruption will be. Geophysical data may enhance this geochemical forecasting recipe. For example, (Giudicepietro et al., 2020) used seismic data to show increasing VLP size for a period of 2-4 weeks prior to the July 3rd event. In the very short-term, we can use minutes-long ground inflation detectable with tiltmeters (Ripepe et al., 2021). An integrated geochemical-geophysical approach incorporating the above parameters will improve our understanding of Stromboli and our ability to successfully forecast large eruptive events.

Our 2019 sampling was conducted two weeks prior to the July 3rd paroxysm, the largest such event for at least two decades (Bevilacqua et al., 2020). The buildup to this eruption clearly began 6-12 months beforehand (Aiuppa et al., 2021). Thus, we may have sampled at an ideal time, with maximum carbon isotopic fractionation from open system degassing. If we had sampled six months earlier, the isotopic fractionation may have been less pronounced. Likewise, other paroxysms with shorter precursory times, or major explosions which are substantially smaller than paroxysms, may produce smaller isotopic fractionations which could be more difficult to measure. We stress that the timing to forecast large paroxysmal events, whether short term (days to weeks) or longer term (weeks to months) remains unknown. Nevertheless, we hypothesize that future work may reveal systematic carbon isotopic fractionations with time if the volcano is sampled on a frequent basis, e.g., every two or three weeks. This could improve our ability to forecast both paroxysms and major explosions at Stromboli.

Acknowledgements

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Open Research

The data used in the study are available for download in the Earthchem repository (D'Arcy at al. 2024). The Chosetto code used for the CO_2 modelling was downloaded from https://github.com/charlesll/chosetto and is freely available from Github.(R. Moretti et al., 2003; Roberto Moretti & Papale, 2004).

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