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Contents

Chapter 1. Principles and theory of chromatography, by J. Novák	1
1.1 Basic terms	1
1.2 Classification of chromatographic systems and procedures	2
1.2.1 State of the aggregation of the coexisting phases	2
1.2.2 Physical arrangement of the system and the accomplishment of the chromatographic experiment	3
1.2.3 Development of the chromatogram	4
1.2.3.1 Frontal chromatography	4
1.2.3.2 Elution chromatography	4
1.2.3.3 Displacement chromatography	5
1.2.4 Mechanism of the distribution of the solute compound between the phases of the system	6
1.3 Development of chromatography — a review	6
1.4 Theoretical models of chromatography	8
1.5 Description of models of linear chromatography with an incompressible mobile phase	8
1.5.1 Linear non-ideal chromatography	8
1.5.2 Linear ideal chromatography	10
1.6 Simplified description of linear non-ideal chromatography	11
1.6.1 Retention equations	11
1.6.2 Spreading of the chromatographic zone	13
1.6.3 Concept of the theoretical plate	16
1.7 Mobile phase flow	17
1.8 Sorption equilibrium and the distribution constant	18
1.8.1 Problem of sorption equilibrium in a migrating chromatographic zone	18
1.8.2 Relations between the chromatographic distribution constant and the thermodynamic properties of chromatographic system	19
1.8.3 Dependence of the standard differential molar Gibbs function of sorption and the chromatographic distribution constant on temperature and pressure	22
1.9 Chromatographic resolution	25
1.10 Development of theories of chromatography	27
References	27
 Chapter 2. Principles and theory of electromigration processes, by J. Vacík	 29
2.1 Principles of electromigration methods	29
2.2 Transport processes and equilibria during electrophoretic separations	32

2.2.1	Migration velocity	33
2.2.2	Mobility	34
2.2.3	Diffusion velocity	37
2.2.4	Velocity of convection	37
2.2.5	Hydrodynamic flow	37
2.2.6	Electro-osmotic flow	38
2.2.7	The velocity of the thermal flow	38
2.2.8	The distribution of the potential gradient	39
References		39

Chapter 3. Gas chromatography, by M. Novotny and D. Wiesler 41

3.1	Introduction	41
3.2	Modern instrumentation of gas chromatography	45
3.2.1	General considerations	45
3.2.2	Operating conditions	47
3.2.3	Multiple-column systems	49
3.2.4	Sampling systems	53
3.3	Chromatographic columns	62
3.3.1	Phase systems	62
3.3.2	Capillary columns	68
3.4	Detection methods	72
3.4.1	General considerations	72
3.4.2	Selective detectors	75
3.5	Solute identification techniques	79
3.5.1	Retention studies	79
3.5.2	Ancillary techniques	80
3.6	Metabolic profiles	83
3.7	Steric resolution	87
3.8	Derivatization methods	89
3.8.1	General aspects	89
3.8.2	Derivatization of alcohols and phenols	90
3.8.2.1	Silylation agents	90
3.8.2.2	Other derivatization agents	93
3.8.3	Derivatization of carboxylic acids	95
3.8.4	Derivatization of aldehydes and ketones	99
3.8.5	Derivatization of amines and amino acids	100
3.8.6	Derivatization for the separation of enantiomers	103
3.9	Sample preparation	104
3.10	Selected applications	108
3.10.1	Steroids	108
3.10.1.1	General	108
3.10.1.2	Steroid hormones in blood and tissue	108
3.10.1.3	Urinary steroids	111
3.10.1.4	Sterols	114
3.10.1.5	Bile acids	115
3.10.2	Lipoid substances	116
3.10.2.1	General	116
3.10.2.2	Intact lipids	117
3.10.2.3	Fatty acids	118
3.10.3	Acid metabolites	121
3.10.4	Carbohydrates	124

3.10.5 Biological amines	125
3.10.6 Prostaglandins	128
3.10.7 Amino acids and peptides	129
References	135

Chapter 4. Liquid column chromatography (4.1–4.7) 149

Chapter 4.1. Types of liquid chromatography, by S.H. Hansen, P. Helboe and U. Lund 151

4.1.1 Introduction	151
4.1.2 Adsorption	151
4.1.3 Partition	151
4.1.4 Bonded phases	152
4.1.5 Ion exchange	152
4.1.6 Size exclusion	152
4.1.7 Affinity	153
References	153

Chapter 4.2. Instrumentation, by S.H. Hansen, P. Helboe and U. Lund 155

4.2.1 Introduction	155
4.2.2 The column	156
4.2.3 Injection devices	157
4.2.4 Solvent delivery systems	157
4.2.5 Detectors	158
4.2.6 Technical optimisation of the LC system	158
4.2.7 Conclusion	158
References	159

Chapter 4.3. Detection, by S.H. Hansen, P. Helboe and U. Lund 161

4.3.1 Introduction	161
4.3.2 Detectors	162
4.3.2.1 The ultraviolet detectors	162
4.3.2.2 The fluorescence detector	163
4.3.2.3 The electrochemical detector	163
4.3.2.4 The refractive index detector	164
4.3.2.5 The radioactivity detector	164
4.3.2.6 liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry	164
4.3.3 Detection enhancement	164
References	166

Chapter 4.4. Absorption and partition chromatography, by S.H. Hansen, P. Helboe and U. Lund 167

4.4.1 Phase systems	167
4.4.1.1 General aspects	167

4.4.1.2 Adsorption chromatography	168
4.4.1.3 Liquid-liquid partition chromatography	171
4.4.1.4 Bonded phase chromatography	174
4.4.1.5 Dynamically coated phases	183
4.4.2 Derivatization	185
4.4.3 Experimental techniques	185
4.4.3.1 General aspects	185
4.4.3.2 Sample pre-treatment	186
4.4.3.3 Choice of the chromatographic system	187
4.4.3.4 Quantitative analysis	187
4.4.3.5 Identification	188
4.4.3.6 Preparative liquid chromatography	189
4.4.4 Applications	201
References	201

Chapter 4.5. Ion exchange chromatography, by O. Mikeš 205

4.5.1 Ion exchange in biochemistry	205
4.5.1.1 Classic methods	205
4.5.1.2 Modern trends	206
4.5.2 Ion exchangers	208
4.5.2.1 Classification and fundamental properties of ion exchangers	208
4.5.2.2 Materials for batch processes and packings for low-pressure liquid column chromatography	211
4.5.2.3 Packings for medium- and high-pressure liquid chromatography	215
4.5.2.4 Packings for ampholyte displacement and chromatofocusing	219
4.5.3 Mobile phase systems	220
4.5.3.1 Aqueous solutions and organic solvents	220
4.5.3.2 Volatile and complex-forming buffers (special additives)	223
4.5.3.3 Amphoteric buffers for ampholyte displacement chromatography and chromatofocusing	225
4.5.4 Experimental techniques	226
4.5.4.1 Principles of chromatographic separation procedures	226
4.5.4.2 Choice of a suitable ion exchanger	229
4.5.4.3 Preliminary operations, equilibration (buffering) of ion exchangers, and filling or packing of chromatographic columns	230
4.5.4.4 Application of samples and methods of elution	232
4.5.4.5 Evaluation of fractions	234
4.5.4.6 Regeneration and storage of ion exchangers	237
4.5.5 Areas of application	238
4.5.5.1 Biochemically important bases and acids	238
4.5.5.2 Saccharides and their derivatives	238
4.5.5.3 Amino acids and lower peptides	243
4.5.5.4 Proteins and their high molecular weight fragments	243
4.5.5.5 Enzymes	248
4.5.5.6 Nucleic acids and their constituents	256
4.5.5.7 Other biochemically important substances	258
References	259

Chapter 4.6. Gel chromatography, by D. Berek and K. Macinka 271

4.6.1	Introduction	271
4.6.2	General concepts and principles of theory	272
4.6.2.1	Mechanism of ideal gel chromatography	272
4.6.2.2	Real gel chromatography	274
4.6.2.3	Resolution power and calibration in gel chromatography	275
4.6.2.4	Processing experimental data	277
4.6.3	Equipment and working procedures in gel chromatography	280
4.6.3.1	Scheme of a gel chromatograph	281
4.6.3.2	Transport of mobile phase	282
4.6.3.3	Sample preparation and application	283
4.6.3.4	Separation columns	284
4.6.3.5	Operational variables	286
4.6.3.6	Detection	287
4.6.3.7	Measurement of effluent volume	289
4.6.3.8	Auxiliary equipment	289
4.6.3.9	High speed separations	290
4.6.3.10	Preparative separations	290
4.6.3.11	Special working procedures	291
4.6.4	Materials for gel chromatography	294
4.6.4.1	Column filling materials — gels	294
4.6.4.2	Mobile phases — eluents	301
4.6.4.3	Reference materials — standards	303
4.6.5	Areas of applications	304
4.6.5.1	Proteins and peptides	306
4.6.5.2	Nucleic acids and nucleotides	310
4.6.5.3	Nucleoproteins	312
4.6.5.4	Saccharides	313
4.6.5.5	Other biological materials and biologically active substances	314
4.6.5.6	Applications in clinical biochemistry	314
	References	316

Chapter 4.7. Bioaffinity chromatography, by J. Turková 321

4.7.1	Introduction	321
4.7.2	General considerations on the preparation of bioaffinity adsorbents and their use in sorption and desorption	322
4.7.2.1	Required characteristics of solid matrix support	322
4.7.2.2	Choice of affinity ligands for attachment	324
4.7.2.3	Affinant-solid support bonding	326
4.7.2.4	Sorption and elution conditions	331
4.7.3	Solid matrix support and the most common methods of coupling	334
4.7.3.1	Survey of the most common solid supports	334
4.7.3.2	Survey of the most common coupling procedures	337
4.7.3.3	Blocking of unreacted groups	340
4.7.4	Experimental techniques	341
4.7.4.1	Classic bioaffinity chromatography	341
4.7.4.2	High-performance liquid bioaffinity chromatography (HPLAC) of proteins	343
4.7.4.3	Automatic time-based instrument for preparative application	345
4.7.4.4	Extracorporeal removal of substances in vivo	347

4.7.5 Areas of application	348
4.7.5.1 Enzymes, their subunits and inhibitors	353
4.7.5.2 Antibodies and antigens	353
4.7.5.3 Lectins, glycoproteins and saccharides	354
4.7.5.4 Receptors, binding and transfer proteins	354
4.7.5.5 Nucleic acids and nucleotides	354
4.7.5.6 Viruses, cells and their components	355
4.7.5.7 Specific peptides	355
4.7.5.8 Others	355
References	356

Chapter 5. Flat bed techniques, by J. Sherma and B. Fried 363

5.1 General introduction	363
5.2 Thin-layer chromatography	364
5.2.1 Introduction and history	364
5.2.1.1 Introduction	364
5.2.1.2 History	365
5.2.2 Sorbents, layer preparation and precoated plates	366
5.2.2.1 Sorbents	366
5.2.2.2 Layer preparation	369
5.2.2.3 Precoated layers	369
5.2.3 Sample preparation, derivatization and solvent systems	371
5.2.3.1 Sample preparation	371
5.2.3.2 Derivatization	373
5.2.3.3 Solvent systems	373
5.2.4 Development modes and chambers	374
5.2.4.1 Development modes	374
5.2.4.2 Chambers	375
5.2.5 Detection	378
5.2.5.1 General	378
5.2.5.2 Methods of detection	378
5.2.5.3 Detection reagents	379
5.2.6 Identification	380
5.2.7 In situ densitometry	382
5.2.8 Applications	388
References (Part A)	388
5.3 Paper chromatography	392
5.3.1 History and introduction	392
5.3.2 Chromatography papers	393
5.3.3 Sample preparation and application	395
5.3.4 Mobile phase (solvent) systems	396
5.3.5 Development methods	398
5.3.5.1 Descending development	398
5.3.5.2 Ascending development	400
5.3.5.3 Horizontal and radial development	401
5.3.5.4 Multiple development	402
5.3.5.5 Two-dimensional development	402
5.3.5.6 Miscellaneous techniques	402
5.3.6 Drying of the chromatogram	402
5.3.7 Detection of zones	403
5.3.8 Qualitative identification of zones	404

5.3.9 Quantitative PC	404
5.3.10 Applications	405
References (Part B)	410

Chapter 6. Electromigration techniques, by Z. Deyl and J. Hořejší 415

6.1 Introduction	415
6.2 Zone electrophoresis	415
6.2.1 Paper electrophoresis	415
6.2.1.1 Equipment for low and high voltage paper electrophoresis	416
6.2.1.2 Two-dimensional separations	418
6.2.1.3 Cellulose and cellulose acetate membranes	422
6.2.1.4 Ion exchange papers	422
6.2.1.5 Ultramicroelectrophoretic methods	423
6.2.1.6 Electrophoresis in non-aqueous buffers	424
6.2.2 Thin-layer electrophoresis	425
6.2.3 Electrophoresis in fused salts	425
6.3 Moving boundary electrophoresis	426
6.4 Electrophoresis in gel media	427
6.4.1 Starch gel electrophoresis	427
6.4.2 Polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis	428
6.4.2.1 Disc electrophoresis — general considerations and solutions	428
6.4.2.2 Rod shaped gel system	431
6.4.2.3 Slab gel system	433
6.4.2.4 Gradient gel electrophoresis	435
6.4.2.5 SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis	436
6.4.2.6 Two-dimensional polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and the Isodalt system	439
6.4.3 Agarose gel electrophoresis	443
6.4.4 Composite gel (acrylamide-agarose) electrophoresis	445
6.5 Immuno-electrophoretic procedures	446
6.5.1 Apparatus and equipment	446
6.5.2 Crossed immuno-electrophoresis	448
6.5.3 Fused rocket immuno-electrophoresis	451
6.5.4 Rocket electrophoresis	451
6.5.5 Crossed line immuno-electrophoresis	453
6.5.6 Tandem crossed immuno-electrophoresis	454
6.6 Isoelectric focusing	454
6.6.1 Carrier ampholytes	455
6.6.2 Isoelectric focusing in polyacrylamide gel	456
6.6.3 Thin-layer isoelectric focusing	457
6.6.4 Density gradient isoelectric focusing	457
6.6.5 Free solution isoelectric focusing	458
6.6.6 Two-dimensional procedures involving isoelectric focusing	458
6.6.7 Transient state isoelectric focusing	459
6.7 Isotachopheresis	460
6.7.1 Apparatus for isotachopheresis	461
6.7.2 Detection in isotachopheretic separations	462
6.7.3 Buffer systems for isotachopheretic separations of serum proteins	463
6.8 Affinity electrophoresis	464
6.9 General detection procedures	467
6.9.1 Detection by ultraviolet absorbance	468
6.9.2 Detection by fluorescence measurement	468

6.9.3	Detection by staining	469
6.9.3.1	Silver based staining of polypeptides	472
6.9.4	Scanning of electrophoretograms	473
6.9.5	Detection by radioactivity counting	473
6.9.5.1	Autoradiography and fluorography	473
6.9.5.2	Spark chamber detection	474
6.9.5.3	Direct counting	475
6.9.5.4	Elution or solubilization of radioactive material	475
6.9.5.5	Counting after combustion	475
6.9.5.6	Disruption of gel structure	475
6.10	Preparative procedures	476
6.10.1	Electrophoresis in columns	476
6.10.2	Preparative agar gel electrophoresis	477
6.10.3	Preparative electrophoresis in polyacrylamide gel	478
6.10.4	Preparative isoelectric focusing	481
6.10.4.1	Preparative isoelectric focusing in a density gradient	481
6.10.5	Preparative flat bed isoelectric focusing	483
6.10.5.1	Continuous flow isoelectric focusing	483
6.10.6	Preparative isotachopheresis	484
6.10.7	Continuous flow through electrophoresis	487
6.11	Drying of polyacrylamide gels	489
	References	489

Chapter 7. Field-flow fractionation, by J. Janča 497

7.1	Introduction	497
7.2	Principle of FFF	498
7.3	Theoretical backgrounds of FFF	500
7.3.1	Retention	500
7.3.2	Zone spreading	501
7.3.3	Relaxation	502
7.3.4	Optimization of FFF	502
7.4	FFF Subtechniques	505
7.4.1	Thermal FFF	506
7.4.2	Sedimentation FFF	508
7.4.3	Electrical FFF	510
7.4.4	Flow FFF	512
7.4.5	Steric FFF	513
7.4.6	Magnetic FFF	514
7.4.7	Concentration FFF	515
7.5	Prospects of FFF	516
	References	518

Subject index 521

CHAPTER 1

Principles and theory of chromatography

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1.1 Basic terms

It is useful to begin the chapter on the theory of chromatographic separation methods with a definition of chromatography. However, several such definitions can be formulated according to various classification aspects. For the sake of accuracy a phenomenological definition, a molecular kinetic definition and various working definitions can be introduced. According to the first definition chromatography is understood as a *phenomenon* of differential migration of solute compounds in a system of two phases, of which one is stationary and the other mobile. According to the molecular kinetic definition, chromatography is taken as a continuous *process* of convective upsetting and diffusional reestablishment of equilibrium between the concentrations of the solute compound in the stationary and in the mobile phase of the chromatographic system. This process results in a differential migration of the solute compounds. According to the working definitions chromatography is a certain method (specifically a separation and analytical method and various methods of physicochemical measurements). From the point of view of the theory of chromatography we are particularly interested in the chromatographic process.

Whereas the realization of a chromatographic experiment is often surprisingly simple — a number of important chromatographic processes proceed spontaneously — the mechanism of the chromatographic process is relatively complex. A prerequisite of the proper understanding of the mechanism of chromatography is the concept of dynamic equilibrium between the concentrations of a solute in a system of two coexisting phases; more accurately, equilibrium between the concentrations of the solute should be understood as a result of the identity of its chemical potentials in the individual phases of the system. Even when assuming that such a system is stationary and in equilibrium, molecules of the solute permanently pass from one phase to the other, remaining for a certain time in one or other phase after each transition. As the process is random at this level, the individual time intervals of the occurrence of the solute molecules in a given phase are also random and,

hence, very different. The mean time intervals of the occurrence of all solute molecules in each phase during a certain time are, however, constant under given conditions, and their ratio represents a basic factor of chromatographic retention. Thus, the ratio at which a given amount of the solute at equilibrium is distributed between the phases of the system is not determined by a static presence of the solute molecules in these phases but rather by the probability of their occurrence in the phases of the system. When, under these conditions, one phase moves with respect to the other, the solute molecules move together with the moving phase during their occurrence in that particular phase, but remain stagnant when in the stationary phase. Due to the statistical fluctuation some molecules of a given solute migrate a shorter or longer distance during a certain time interval than that corresponding to the mean time intervals of the occurrence of the molecules of this solute in the phases. This results, together with the longitudinal diffusion, in a spreading of the migrating zone of the solute. However, due to its statistical nature, this spreading increases only as the square root of the mean migration distance, so that, in the case of differential migration of zones of different solutes, the zones can be separated. This assumption of the mechanism of the chromatographic process will be formulated quantitatively in subsequent paragraphs of this chapter.

1.2 Classification of chromatographic systems and procedures

1.2.1 State of the aggregation of the coexisting phases

The traditional definition of the phases in a chromatographic system is often rather problematic. Whereas the term mobile phase is usually clear, specification of the chromatographic stationary phase is not always unambiguous. For instance, the whole content of the chromatographic column is sometimes considered as the stationary phase, but sometimes only those components of the packing that are functioning as sorbents of the solute compound are termed in this way. In the former case, the concept of chromatographic stationary phase apparently differs from the classical physical concept of the phase. Whereas in the physical conception the phase is a homogeneous part of the system, the chromatographic stationary phase may contain even more physical phases. In the latter case, the inert support of the sorbent is not considered to be the stationary phase, in spite of the fact that it represents a rather substantial physical phase of the system. However, when an active adsorbent plays the role of the sorbent support, it must then be considered as the chromatographic stationary phase. A problem then arises, viz. what part of the used adsorbent is really active with respect to the solute compound in the given system. Naturally, in a given chromatographic packing, chromatographic stationary phases cannot be unambiguously identified with physical phases. The above indeterminacies should be considered when classifying chromatographic systems according to the state of the aggregation of the phases; a summary of typical chromatographic systems according to this classification is presented in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1
Chromatographic systems

Stationary phase	Mobile phase	
	Liquid	Gas
Solid compound	LSC	GSC
Solid compound + liquid	LSLC	GSLC
Liquid	LLC	GLC

LSC, liquid-solid chromatography; GSC, gas-solid chromatography; LSLC, liquid-solid-liquid chromatography; GSLC, gas-solid-liquid chromatography; LLC, liquid-liquid chromatography; GLC, gas-liquid chromatography.

1.2.2 Physical arrangement of the system and the accomplishment of the chromatographic experiment

According to the physical arrangement chromatographic systems can be divided into planar and column ones. The planar arrangements are represented by systems of paper and thin layer chromatography. When further dividing the planar systems according to their physical arrangement we come to systems in the equilibration chamber and to the so-called sandwich systems. According to development procedures (flow of the mobile phase in the planar bed) the systems can be further classified as ascendent, horizontal, descendent and, occasionally, centrifugal; in orthogonal beds the development may proceed in one or more directions. When, during the development of the chromatogram, the composition of the mobile phase remains constant the development is termed isocratic, on the other hand, when the composition of the mobile phase varies, we speak of gradient development.

A more exact classification of column systems according to the physical arrangement leads to various types of packed and capillary columns. In column chromatography the use of several columns that can be suitably switched over, so that chromatographic fractions eluted from one column can be further chromatographed on other columns, is somewhat analogous to two-dimensional development in planar beds. In column chromatography the separation may proceed isocratically or with a programmed gradient of composition of the mobile phase, isothermally or with programmed changes of column temperature, and isobarically or with programmed changes of mobile phase pressure at the column inlet. The programming of the composition of the mobile phase is important practically only in liquid chromatography, whereas temperature and pressure programming is used primarily in gas chromatography.

In planar chromatographic systems the solute compounds are usually not eluted from the chromatographic bed but rather detected directly in it, whereas in modern column chromatography the solute compounds are gradually eluted with the mobile phase and detected in the effluent at the column outlet.

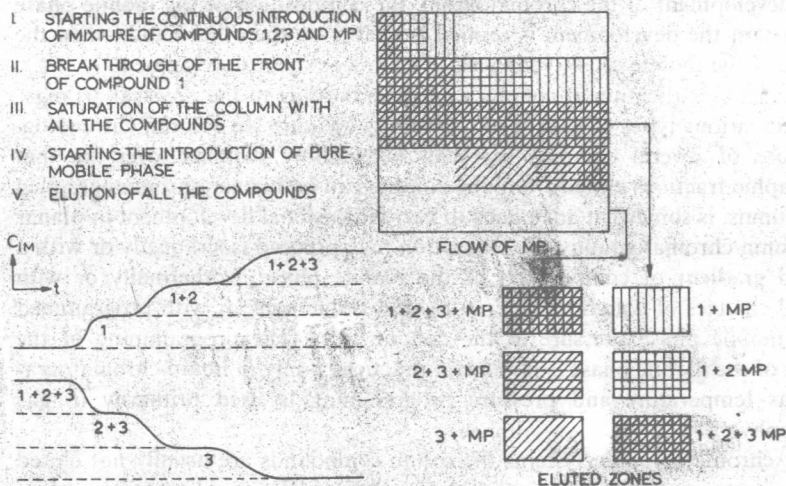
1.2.3 Development of the chromatogram

1.2.3.1 Frontal chromatography

A continuous supply of the analyzed material, or of its mixture with a non-sorbed mobile phase, into the column or into the planar bed results first in frontal chromatography and then in the saturation of the sorbent with all the components of the supplied material. After the development of the chromatogram, and during continuing supply of the mixture, the front of the least sorbed component is washed out first, followed by a mixture of the first component and the more strongly sorbed component etc., and, finally, after all the components of the mixture break through, a mixture identical in composition to that of the mixture supplied flows out of the column. By interrupting the supply of the analyzed mixture to the previously saturated column, and connecting the supply of the mobile phase alone, the opposite (desorption) frontal chromatogram arises. Initially, the mixture of all the components flows out of the column. After the least sorbed component has been eluted the mixture deprived of this component flows out of the column. After the further, more strongly sorbed component is eluted the mixture deprived of the first and second components flows out of the column. Finally, the most strongly sorbed component is washed out and only the supplied mobile phase leaves the column. Both versions of development of the frontal chromatogram are schematically and in an idealized form illustrated in Fig. 1.1.

1.2.3.2 Elution chromatography

Elution chromatography is simpler, and, with respect to the separation of an analyzed mixture, more effective. With this alternative a dose of the analyzed



GRAPHICAL RECORD OF THE SORPTION AND DE-SORPTION STAGES OF A FRONTAL CHROMATOGRAM

Fig. 1.1.

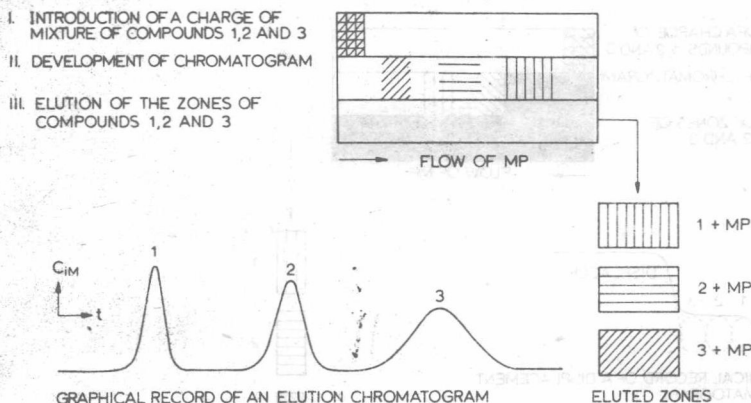


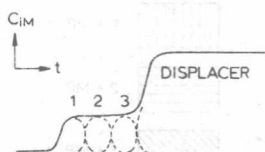
Fig. 1.2.

material is supplied to the column inlet or to the planar bed and is then washed with a non-sorbed mobile phase through the column. The development and differential migration of elution zones of individual components of the mixture thus take place. When the supply of the mobile phase continues the individual zones are gradually washed out of the column; the zone of the most weakly sorbed component is washed out first, followed by the zone of a more strongly sorbed component etc., and, finally, after the elution of the zone of the most strongly sorbed component, only the supplied mobile phase flows out of the column. A schematic illustration of the elution chromatography is presented in Fig. 1.2.

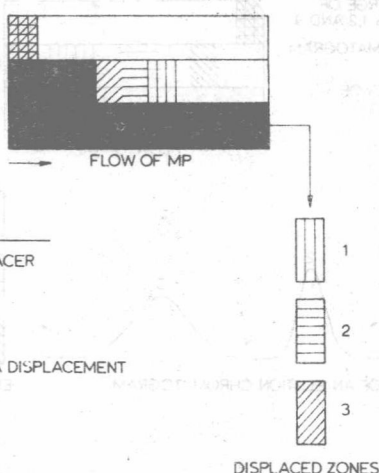
1.2.3.3 Displacement chromatography

When the stationary phase functions as an adsorbent and a compound that is adsorbed more strongly than any other component of the analyzed mixture serves as the mobile phase, the procedure otherwise similar to that used with elution chromatography is termed displacement chromatography. With this alternative the most weakly adsorbed component is displaced by the more strongly adsorbed component, this latter is then displaced by the more strongly adsorbed component, etc., resulting in a situation when the most strongly adsorbed component of the analyzed mixture is displaced by the supplied displacement agent. After the chromatogram has been developed, the zones of all the components migrate closely next to each other and, when the supply of the displacement agent continues, they leave the column in the order of increasing adsorption ability. In the case of elution chromatography (and in frontal chromatography when the mixture of the analyzed material is supplied together with the mobile phase) the eluted fractions are in fact mixtures of the solute compounds with the mobile phase, whereas in the case of displacement chromatography the individual zones are more or less the solute compounds alone. A scheme of displacement development is illustrated in Fig. 1.3.

- I. INTRODUCTION OF A CHARGE OF MIXTURE OF COMPOUNDS 1, 2 AND 3
- II. DEVELOPMENT OF CHROMATOGRAM
- III. DISPLACEMENT OF ZONES OF COMPOUNDS 1, 2 AND 3



GRAPHICAL RECORD OF A DISPLACEMENT CHROMATOGRAM



DISPLACED ZONES

Fig. 1.3.

1.2.4 Mechanism of the distribution of the solute compound between the phases of the system

The mechanisms of sorption and/or the interaction of the solute with the mobile phase can be summarized as follows: *a*, physical dissolution in the phase; *b*, physical adsorption on the surface of the phase; *c*, chemical reaction in the bulk phase or on its surface (acido-basic equilibrium, formation of coordination complexes or chelates, association of ionic pairs, exchange of ions, precipitation); *d*, steric exclusion (molecular sieving effect, gel permeation); *e*, bioaffinity association.

The cases presented in paragraphs 1.2.1–1.2.4 can be mutually combined. The number of all possible combinations naturally exceeds the number of the real combinations, however, the number of real chromatographic systems and procedures is still very large. From the practical point of view, the alternatives of elution chromatography are most important. Therefore, with the exception of general problems, only elution chromatography will be discussed in this chapter.

1.3 Development of chromatography — a review

The oldest intentional chromatographic experiments were performed as frontal chromatography in a liquid-solid system and date from the beginning of the 19th century [1]. Elution chromatography (liquid-solid) was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century [2], but developed rapidly only after the discovery and theoretical explanation of liquid-liquid elution chromatography [3] in the forties and particularly after the discovery of elution gas chromatography [4–6] in the fifties. The pioneers in chromatography are noted in Table 1.2. A detailed description of the development of chromatography can be found in reviews by Ettre [7,8] and Zechmeister [9].