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Pierre-Yves Meslin, William Rapin, Olivier Forni, Agnès Cousin, Olivier Gasnault, Matteo Loche, Erwin Dehouck, Nicolas Mangold, Susanne Schröder, Gwénaél Caravaca, et al.

### ► To cite this version:

Pierre-Yves Meslin, William Rapin, Olivier Forni, Agnès Cousin, Olivier Gasnault, et al.. Overview of halite detections by chemcam in Gale Crater, Mars. Tenth International Conference on Mars 2024, Lunar and Planetary Institute, Jul 2024, Pasadena (California), United States. pp.3421. hal-04650462

**HAL Id: hal-04650462**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04650462>**

Submitted on 16 Jul 2024

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**OVERVIEW OF HALITE DETECTIONS BY CHEMCAM IN GALE CRATER, MARS.** P.-Y. Meslin<sup>1</sup>, W. Rapin<sup>1</sup>, O. Forni<sup>1</sup>, A. Cousin<sup>1</sup>, O. Gasnault<sup>1</sup>, M. Loche<sup>1</sup>, E. Dehouck<sup>2</sup>, N. Mangold<sup>3</sup>, S. Schröder<sup>4</sup>, G. Caravaca<sup>1</sup>, P. Gasda<sup>5</sup>, S. Le Mouélic<sup>3</sup>, J. Lasue<sup>1</sup>, S. Fabre<sup>1</sup>, J. Frydenvang<sup>6</sup>, B. Clark<sup>7</sup>, A.G. Fairen<sup>8</sup>, F.D. Dimitracopoulos<sup>9</sup>, S. Maurice<sup>1</sup>, R.C. Wiens<sup>5</sup>, N. Lanza<sup>5</sup>, <sup>1</sup>IRAP, Université Paul Sabatier, CNRS, CNES, Toulouse (pmeslin at irap.omp.eu). <sup>2</sup>Univ. Lyon 1, ENSL, LGL-TPE, Lyon. <sup>3</sup>LPG, Nantes. <sup>4</sup>DLR, Berlin. <sup>5</sup>LANL, Los Alamos. <sup>6</sup>Globe Institute, Univ. Copenhagen. <sup>7</sup>Space Science Inst., Colorado. <sup>8</sup>CAB, CSIC-INTA, Madrid. <sup>9</sup>Univ. New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM.

**Context:** Since 2012, the *Curiosity* rover has been exploring geological records of a paleo-lacustrine environment in Gale crater. It started with the fluvio-deltaic and lacustrine deposits in the Bradbury Group, followed by ~300 m of stratigraphy through the Murray formation (from the Pahrump Hills to the Jura member) dominated by mudstones and occasionally heterolithic mudstones, siltstones and sandstones. It also crossed the unconformity with the overlying Stimson formation, dominated by aeolian sandstones, and the Vera Rubin Ridge, an erosion-resistant section of the Murray fm., which has undergone extensive diagenesis [1]. From Sol 2300 to 3072, *Curiosity* has explored the Glen Torridon region, previously named “Clay-bearing unit”. Since Sol 3100 (Mont Mercou), the rover entered the basal Layered Sulfate unit with the objective of documenting a possible major change in Mars climate history. Evaporitic salts could represent a geochemical marker of this transition. Here, we provide an overview of previous halite detections by ChemCam [2, 3] and report on new detections made in the sulfate-bearing unit.

**Data and Method:** This study covers data acquired by the ChemCam instrument over the first 4160 sols and corresponding to ~31300 LIBS analysis points. The detection of halite is made possible by measuring the chlorine emission line at 837.8 nm. Comparing the chlorine peak area to the Na abundance reveals the presence of a significant group of points showing a strong linear correlation between the two elements (Fig. 1).

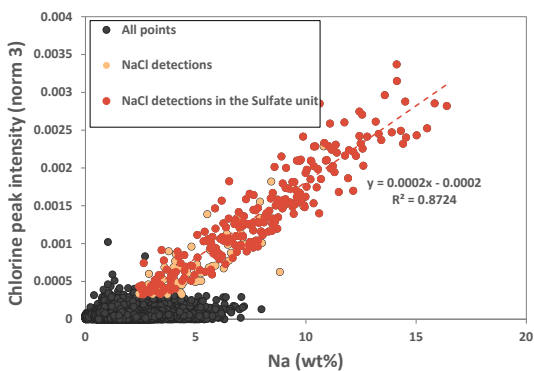


Fig. 1: Chlorine – Sodium correlation used to define halite detections. Pure halite contains 39.3 wt% Na.

These points reach the highest Cl and Na concentrations observed in the ChemCam dataset. The oxygen line intensity is used to discriminate between halite and Na-perchlorate [4]. It is found to decrease with increasing Cl intensity in this group of points, which confirms the presence of halite. We used this Na – Cl correlation in halite-rock mixtures to calibrate the Cl signal. Although the LOD for chlorine is close to ~1wt%, a detection

threshold of ~2.5 wt% Cl is applied for halite, which is the visual limit between the group of points described above and the remainder of the dataset shown in grey in Fig.1. Halite could be present in lower abundance in the latter (halite<4wt%). Other Cl-bearing phases identified in Gale crater so far are chlorates/perchlorates [5], akaganeite [6] and chlorapatites [7].

**Results/Observations:** A total of 296 halite detections was obtained, which represents only 0.9% of the whole dataset, but the distribution of halite is not homogeneous along the traverse (Fig.2).

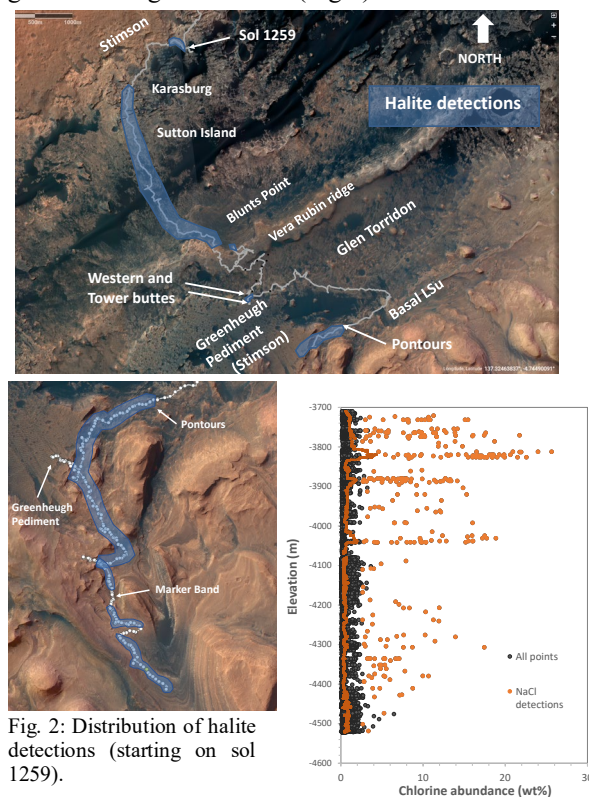


Fig. 2: Distribution of halite detections (starting on sol 1259).

Except in a few very rare targets in the Bradbury group [8], halite was not detected until sol 1259, when *Curiosity* was in the Murray formation, approaching the base of the Naukluft plateau (Stimson formation) [2], and then occasionally while crossing the Hartmann’s Valley (mostly sandstones), Karasburg (sandstones and mudstones), Sutton Island (heterolithic mudstones/sandstones) and Blunt Points (mudstones) members of the Murray fm. [3]. Two broad categories of geological settings were found. The first is associated with diagenetic features, along edges of vertical and subhorizontal fractures, along erosion-resistant vein ridges, ad-

adjacent to calcium sulfate fills or phosphate-rich dark inclusions. The second category consists of isolated detections in the bedrock. No detection was made in the sandstones of the Stimson unit.

It is noteworthy that only two detections were made in the Vera Rubin ridge and only one in the Glen Torridon region, despite the almost ubiquitous presence of cross-cutting calcium-sulfate veins. It is only near the base of the Greenheugh pediment capping unit that halite was detected again. This area is characterized by the presence of numerous diagenetic concretions [9], an increase in Ca-sulfate features [9] and is marked by an increase of Ca and Na in the bedrock [10]. A high number of fluorine detections, both in the bedrock and in diagenetic features, was also reported there and probably associated with the presence of fluorapatite [10,11]. In this area, halite is detected as isolated grains in nodular or knobby bedrock facies.

Finally, a sharp transition was observed from Sol 3171 on, starting around the Pontours drill site, after Curiosity entered the basal Layered-Sulfate bearing unit and after traversing lithologies marked by the presence of polygonal ridges enriched in Mg-sulfates [12]. Numerous halite detections were made there (6% of the points, or ~1wt% bulk), almost continuously, except at the Marker Band level and at another stratum (Fig.2). The halite concentration in individual points was also found to increase, reaching ~40wt% halite. The associated facies have also changed. For the first time, we observed contiguous detections of halite (as opposed to isolated grains) in planar and erosion-resistant grey laminae (Fig.3a). Halite was also detected in mm-sized spherules, which are possibly nodules eroded from the surrounding bedrock (Fig.3b), and, again, along fracture walls (Fig.3c).

**Discussion:** Multiple diagenetic features have been observed throughout the Bradbury group and Murray formation [9,13,14], but geochemical evidence indicative of an evolution of depositional environment (e.g., shallow lacustrine or evaporitic environment) has been scarce or ambiguous. For example, desiccation cracks enriched in Cl and Br were found in the Sutton Island member [15], followed by a series of subhorizontal dark laminae enriched in Fe and P, progressively giving way to mm-size dark nodules enriched in Mn, Mg and P [16] and to Mn-rich sandstones [17,18]. These laminae/nodules were interpreted as syndepositional or early diagenetic features having formed in a shallow lake or lake margin environment [16-18]. In the same area near the Sutton Island – Blunts Point boundary, evidence for Mg-sulfate brines concentration by evaporation was also found [19]. The laminated mudstones where halite was detected in this section contain many CaSO<sub>4</sub>-filled fractures/laminae (and halite is usually adjacent to these fractures). Because these subhorizontal fractures do not always follow the bedding planes, they were interpreted as diagenetic [20]. However, they could have been filled by a local remobilization of primary evaporites. In a closed evaporitic lake in steady-state, the absence of halite laminae could easily be explained by a sediment deposition rate exceeding the halite precipitation rate [21]. Thin halite evaporitic beds could also be eroded if exposed, or be dissolved by subsequent aqueous events. Halite could then be further diluted in the sedimentary

column, or transported to an evaporating front (e.g., at matrix/fracture interfaces).

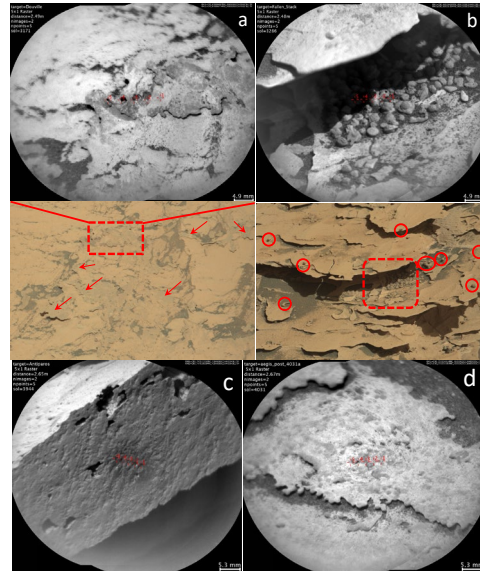


Fig. 3: Halite-rich features found in the Sulfate Unit.

In contrast to previous occurrences, halite past Pontours is often found along thin, dark-tone laminae, often forming an angle with the bedding planes. It constitutes an important fraction of the laminae and is not accompanied by Ca-sulfates. In fact, some of these laminae are crosscut by CaSO<sub>4</sub> veins, which indicates that they pre-date this diagenetic event and that they have not been totally dissolved by subsequent aqueous events. Together with the nearby mm-sized spherules and with halite-rich fracture walls, they may represent secondary evaporites formed by partial dissolution of adjacent evaporitic beds. Some of the halite-rich laminae found in the Sulfate-bearing unit, which are parallel to the bedding plane (Fig.3d), may be primary evaporitic layers.

The presence of these new halite-rich facies and the nearby presence of MgSO<sub>4</sub>-rich polygonal ridges reflect a change in depositional environment characterized by more arid conditions than previously encountered and wet-dry cycles [12]. The SAM instrument also recorded an increase in HCl released by samples during EGA analyses [22] and halite is a good candidate to explain this trend. The identification of a halite enrichment in the Sulfate unit is also relevant to understand the potential habitability of the early Gale lake, as salts would have allowed water to remain longer in the liquid phase during subsequent cooling [23].

**References:** [1] Fraeman et al., 2020, JGR. [2] Forni et al., 2017, LPSC. [3] Thomas et al., 2019, GRL. [4] Schröder et al., 2017, LPSC. [5] Clark et al., 2021, Minerals. [6] Rampe et al., 2020, JGR. [7] Meslin et al., 2016, LPSC. [8] Nachon et al., 2014, JGR. [9] Gasda et al., 2022, JGR. [10] Dehouck et al., 2022, JGR. [11] Forni et al., 2021, LPSC. [12] Rapin et al., Nature, 2023. [13] Nachon et al., 2017, Icarus. [14] Sun et al., 2015, Icarus. [15] Stein et al., 2018, Geology. [16] Meslin et al., 2018, LPSC. [17] Gasda et al., 2018, LPSC. [18] Lanza et al., 2018, LPSC. [19] Rapin et al., 2019, Nature Geo. [20] Fedo et al., 2018, LPSC. [21] Loche et al., 2022, LPSC. [22] Archer et al., LPSC, 2022. [23] Fairen et al., 2009, Nature.