

Chapter 1

Organometallic compounds in the environment: An overview

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General points

In this chapter organometallic compounds are defined as those which have a carbon to metal single sigma bond polarized $M^{\delta+} - C^{\delta-}$ (some useful sources are listed in the References Craig 2003; Abel et al. 1995; Bennett et al. 1994, Crompton 2002; Ebdon et al: 2001; Elschenbroich and Salzer 1992; Sigel and Sigel 1993; Hock 2001; Ure and Davidson 1995). The metals of interest are usually main group metals in environmental matters (They are shown in Tables 1 and 2). For useful information to be derived, these substances need to be analysed. In most cases a full speciation analysis is not possible; the organometallic fragment is usually bound to a complex environmental moiety which may not be identifiable. Nevertheless much progress in speciation analysis has been made in recent years (see references above). For speciation analysis in the environment to be possible the organometallic fragment has to be separated from its environmental binding and then measured.

(i) *Methods of Separation*

- a. Gas chromatography
- b. Thermal desorption methods
- c. High performance liquid chromatography
- d. Flow injection methods
- e. Ion exchange chromatography
- f. Ion chromatography

(ii) *Methods of Detection*

- a. Atomic absorption spectroscopy
- b. Atomic fluorescence spectroscopy (sometimes with hydride generation)
- c. Atomic emission spectroscopy
- d. Voltammetry
- e. Mass spectrometry
- f. X-ray and neutron methods

Table 1. Stability of methylmetals to oxygen ^a

Stable	Unstable ^b
Me ₂ Hg	MePbX ₃
Me ₄ Si, [Me ₂ SiO] _n , (Me) _n Si ⁺⁽⁴⁻ⁿ⁾ , Me ₆ Si ₂	MeTl ⁺
Me ₄ Ge, Me ₄ Ge ⁽⁴⁻ⁿ⁾⁺ , Me ₆ Ge ₂	Me ₂ Zn, MeZn ⁺
Me ₄ Sn	Me ₂ Cd, MeCd ⁺
Me ₄ Pb§	Me ₃ B
MeHgX (Ph and Et also stable)	Me ₃ Al
Me _{4n} SnX _n	Me ₃ Ga
Me ₃ PbX	Me ₃ In
Me ₂ PbX ₂	Me ₃ Tl
Me(C ₅ H ₄)Mn(CO) ₃ ^c	Me ₃ As ^e
MeM _n (CO) ₄ L ^d	Me ₃ Sb ^e
Me ₂ AsO(OH)	Me ₃ Bi ^e
MeAsO(OH) ₂	Me ₂ AsH
Me ₂ S	MeAsX ₂
Me ₂ Se	MeSbX ₂
MeHgSeMe	Me _{4n} SnH _n ^e
MeCoB ₁₂ (solid state)	Me ₆ Sn ₂ (At RT gives [Me ₃ Sn] ₂ O)
Me ₃ SbO	Me ₆ Pb ₂ (to methyl lead products)
Me ₂ SbO(OH)	Me ₃ Sb
MeSbO(OH) ₂	Me ₃ AsO
Me ₂ Tl ⁺ , Me ₂ Ga ⁺	Me ₃ P
Me ₃ S ⁺	Me ₄ SiH _{4-n}
Me ₃ Se ⁺	Me ₄ GeH _{4-n}
Me ₃ PO	

- a At room temperature in bulk as against rapid (seconds, minutes) oxidation. Assume similar but lesser environmental stability for ethyls.
- b Variously unstable because of empty low lying orbitals on the metal, polar metal-carbon bonds and/or lone electron pairs on the metal.
- c Gasoline additive.
- d To exemplify ligand-complexed transition metal organometallics. Many of these synthetic compounds are oxygen-stable but none have been found in the natural environment.
- e But stable in dilute form and detected in the environment

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Table 2 Stability of organometallic species to water

Organometallic	Stability, comments
R_2Hg , R_4Sn , R_4Pb	Only slightly soluble, stable, diffuse to atmosphere. Higher alkyls less stable and less volatile. Species generally hydrophobic and variously volatile
$MeHgX$ $(Me)_nSn^{(4-n)+}$	Stable, slightly soluble depending on X Soluble, methyltin units stable but made hexa- and penta-coordinate by H_2O , OH^- . Species are solvated, partly hydrolysed to various hydroxo species. At high pH polynuclear bridged hydroxo species form for $(Me)_2Sn^{2+}$
Me_3Pb^+	Soluble, hydrolysis as methyltins above. Also dismutates to Me_4Pb and Me_2Pb^{2+} at 20 °C
Me_2Pb^{2+}	Soluble as for Me_3Pb^+ above. Disproportionates to Me_3Pb^+ and CH_3^+ slowly. These reactions cause eventual total loss of Me_3Pb^+ and Me_2Pb^{2+} from water.
Me_2As^+ $MeAs^{2+}$ $Me_2AsO(OH)$	Hydrolyses to Me_2AsOH then to slightly soluble $[Me_2As]_2O$ Hydrolyses to $MeAs(OH)_2$ then to soluble $(MeAsO)_n$ Stable and soluble (330 g dm^{-3}). Acidic $pK_a = 6.27$. i.e. cacodylic acid, dimethylarsinic acid. Detected in oceans
$MeAsO(OH)_2$	Stable and soluble. Strong acid $pK_1 = 3.6$, $pK_2 = 8.3$ – methylarsonic acid. Detected in oceans
Me_3S^+ , Me_3Se^+ Me_nSiCl_{4-n} $Me_nGe^{(4-n)+}$	Stable and slightly soluble Hydrolyse and condense, but methylsilicon groups retained Stable, soluble, has been discovered in oceans. Hydrolyses but Me_nGe moiety preserved
Me_2Tl^+	Very stable, soluble, but not been detected as a natural environment product
Me_3AsO , Me_3SbO	Stable and soluble
$MeAsH$, CH_3AsH_2	Insoluble, diffuses to atmosphere, air unstable
$MeSbO(OH)$	Stable and soluble. Detected in oceans
$CH_3SbO(OH)_2$	Stable and soluble. Detected in oceans

Solubility refers to air-free distilled water, no complexing ligands. Range of solubility is from mg dm^{-3} to g dm^{-3} .

Other species

Stable and insoluble – R_4Si , $(R_2SiO)_n$, $H_3HgSeCH$, most $PhHg$ derivatives, Me_2S , Me_2Se , Me_4Ge , Me_3B

Unstable – $MePb^+$ (has not been detected in the environment), R_2Zn , R_2Cd , R_3Al , R_3Ga , Me_6Sn_2 , Me_6Pb_2 , $MeTl^{2+}$, $MeCd^+$, Me_2Cd , Me_2Sb^+ , $MeSb^{2+}$.

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Separation and detection of organometallics in the environment presupposes that the species are stable. Stability is not discussed here but it is discussed in detail in a recent work (Craig 2003). Toxicology is also covered elsewhere in this work.

As many organometallic moieties are tightly bound in the environment, they may not be volatile and susceptible to separation as above. For such cases separation by derivatization is usually carried out.

This is generally achieved by (formal) SN_2 attack by hydride (from NaBH_4), ethyl (NaBEt) or other alkyl group (e.g. from a Gignard reagent), e.g. (Eqn. 1)



X = environmental counter ion

Organometallic compounds may be found in the natural environment because they are *formed* or because they are *introduced*. The chemistry of the latter group is better known, and their environmental impact has been widely discussed. Organometallic compounds introduced to the environment directly may enter *via* use as products whose properties relate to the environment (e.g. biocides) or they may enter additionally to a separate, main function (e.g. gasoline additives, polymer stabilizers). Compounds of arsenic, mercury, tin and lead have important environmental roles as organometallic compounds.

Where organometallics are formed in the environment it is usually as a result of a methylation process, “biomethylation”. This process is discussed below.

As mentioned above, stabilities will be little discussed here (but are shown in Tables 1 and 2), but it should be pointed out that the metal carbon bond is not necessarily weak (i.e. leading to decay for thermodynamic reasons), but there are often low energy routes for metal-carbon decomposition (i.e. kinetic decay). In the latter case the activation energy for decay is low.

In a similar way, all organometallic compounds are thermodynamically unstable to oxidation because of the lower free energies of the products of oxidation. However, some do not oxidise (or are not inflammable) for kinetic reasons. Compounds which in bulk may e.g. ignite are sometimes stable at high attenuation. Most organometallics are thermodynamically unstable to hydrolysis to the metal hydroxide and hydrocarbon. Again many are kinetically stable e.g. if nucleophilic attack by water on the metal cannot take place because lack of suitable orbitals on the metal or if the attack is physically blocked by ligands.

Stability to light for organometallics is most important for those volatile species which enter the atmosphere, and less relevant for those coordinated to biological or environmental ligands in organisms or water. Chemistry, decay and toxicity of organometallic species in biological systems is discussed elsewhere (see above) and in the present work.

Biomethylation

Biomethylation is the process whereby living organisms produce a direct linkage of a methyl group to a metal or metalloid, thus forming metal-carbon bonds. Methylation has been extensively studied and biomethylation activity has been found in soil, but mainly occurs in sediments in e.g. estuaries, harbours, rivers, lakes and oceans. The addition of a methyl group to a metall(oid) changes the chemical and physical properties of that element, and this then influences toxicity. The organisms responsible for metall(oid) biomethylation are nearly all microorganisms. Anaerobic bacteria are believed to be the main agents of biomethylation in sediments and other anoxic environments. Some aerobic and facultatively anaerobic bacteria, as well as certain fungi and lower algae, may also methylate metals. With the exception of vitamin B₁₂ higher organisms, containing a methyl-cobalt bond, do not seem to be able to methylate genuine metals. The situation is different for the metalloids arsenic, selenium and tellurium: many higher organisms have been shown to form methyl derivatives of these elements, e.g. methylarsenicals are formed in a wide range of organisms, including marine biota and mammals (and man).

Volatile methyl and hydride derivatives of metal(loids) can often be found in gases released from natural and anthropogenic environments (Feldmann and Hirner 1999; Feldmann et al. 1999; Hirner et al. 1998; Feldmann et al. 1994), e.g. geothermal gases, sewage treatment plants, marine sediments, landfill deposits), and biological production of volatile compounds is believed to be an important part of the biogeological cycles of metal(loids)s, such as arsenic, mercury, selenium and tin. With the exception of arsenic and selenium (and perhaps antimony), biomethylation increases toxicity, because methyl derivatives are more lipophilic and therefore more biologically active.

Biomethylation of organic molecules – e.g. such as proteins, nucleic acid bases, polysaccharides and fatty acids – occurs in all living cells and is an essential part of normal intracellular metabolism. The three main biological methylating agents for organic molecules – S-adenosylmethionine (SAM), methylcobalamine and N-methyltetrahydrofolate – have all been shown to be capable of involvement in the biomethylation of metall(oids). SAM is a ubiquitous methylating agent and is synthesised by the transfer of an adenosyl group from ATP to the sulphur atom of methionine.

A positive charge on the sulphur atom activates the methyl group of methionine, making SAM a methyl carbonium ion donor. The methyl group in biochemistry is transferred as a radical ($\text{CH}_3\bullet$) or as a carbonium ion (CH_3^+) and the atom receiving the methyl group must be nucleophilic, which requires a lone pair of electrons in the metal valency shell; i.e. oxidative addition, where there is alternation of M^{n+} and $\text{M}^{(n+2)+}$ oxidation states. The reaction (involving carbonium ions) is usually referred to as the Challenger mechanism, devised originally to account for the methylation of arsenic (Challenger et al. 1933; Brinckman and Bellama 1978) (Figure 1). SAM has subsequently been shown also to be the methylating agent for selenium, tellurium, phosphorus (Fatoki 1997) and antimony (Andrewes

et al. 1999a), all of which have lone pairs of electrons. N-Methyltetrahydrofolate like SAM, is thought to transfer methyl groups as carbonium ions or an intermediate radical, but its transfer potential is not as high as SAM. Conversely, for methylcobalamin in the environment – a derivative of vitamin B₁₂ – the methyl group is transferred as a carbanion (CH₃⁻) and the recipient atoms must be electrophilic e.g. mercury (II). Methylcobalamin is well established as a methylating agent for mercury and can also be involved in (in vitro) methylation for lead, tin, palladium, platinum, gold and thallium (Fatoki 1997). Although methylcobalamin appears to be the only carbanion methylating agent, in the natural environment, a carbanion may also be transferred to metals from other organometallic species which may be present, e.g. Me₃Pb⁺, Me₃Sn⁺. Regardless of the methylating agent, only one methyl group transfers to the metal(oids) in each step, although further groups may then be transferred to the same receiving atom. Methylation of some individual elements is now discussed.

Arsenic

Many microorganisms can methylate arsenic and methylarsenic compounds are produced, under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions (Cullen and Reimer 1989). Fungal methylation of arsenic was reported in the nineteenth century, when several poisoning incidents in England and Germany were associated with arsenic containing wall papers. Gosio in 1901, reported that a garlic-smelling, methylated arsenic compound was released from moulds growing in the presence of inorganic arsenic. Challenger et al. (1933) identified this as trimethylarsine (Me₃As). Several fungi have been shown to methylate arsenic under aerobic conditions, including *Scopulariopsis brevicaulis*, *Penicillium* sp., *Gliocladium roseum* and the yeast *Cryptococcus humicola* (Brinckman and Bellama 1978; Thayer 1984; Andreae 1986). The mechanism of arsenic methylation in fungi was established by Challenger et al 1933 and involves a series of reductions and oxidative methylations, using SAM (Figure 1.) as a methyl donor.

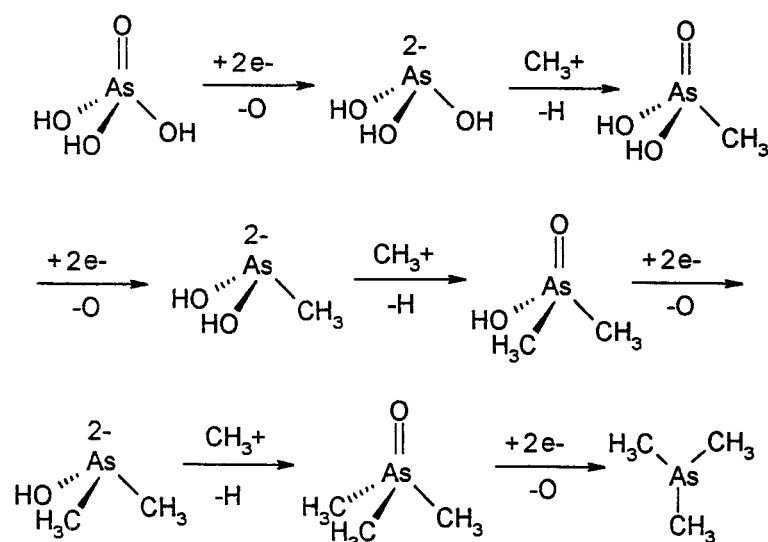


Fig. 1. Arsenic methylation according to the Challenger mechanism

Certain bacteria have also been shown to methylate arsenic under aerobic conditions, including *Flavobacterium* sp., *Escherichia coli* and *Aeromonas* sp. (Thayer 1984).

Arsenic biomethylation can also be catalysed by obligate anaerobic bacteria, e.g. *Methanobacterium* sp. can reduce AsO_3^- to AsO_2^- , with subsequent methylation to methylarsonic acid, dimethylarsonic acid and dimethylarsine (Takahashi et al. 1990). Methylcobalamin is the methyl donor for arsenic methylation by methanogenic archaea (McBride and Wolfe 1971). Michalke et al. (2000) have reported trimethylarsine in the gas phase above anaerobic cultures of *Methanobacterium formicicum*, *Clostridium collagenovorans* and two *Desulfovibrio* spp. For *C. collagenovorans* and *D. vulgaris*, trimethylarsine was the only volatile arsenic species detected. Conversely, *M. formicicum* volatilised arsenic as mono- di- and trimethylarsine and as arsine (AsH_3), while *Methanobacterium thermoautotrophicum* produced only arsine. This data serves to illustrate the key role of the organism for metal(loid) microbial transformations.

There is an extensive marine chemistry for arsenic with many methylarsonic riboside species identified and analogous compounds are now being found in terrestrial situations.

Antimony

Mono- and dimethylantimony species have been found to be formed in both marine and terrestrial natural waters (Andreae 1981; Andreae 1984). Freshwater plants from two lakes contaminated by mine effluent, and plant material from an abandoned antimony mine have also been shown to contain methylantimony species (Craig et al. 1999; Dodd et al. 1996).

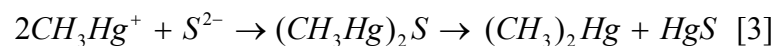
Biomethylation of inorganic antimony by the aerobic fungus *Scopulariopsis brevicaulis* is documented (Craig et al. 1998; Jenkins et al. 1998a; Jenkins et al. 1998b; Andrewes et al. 1998; Andrewes et al. 1999b; Andrewes et al. 2000) and is thought to involve methyl transfer *via* SAM (Andrewes et al. 1999a). Recently, the fungus *Phaeolus schweinitzii* has also been shown able to biomethylate antimony (Andrewes et al. 2001). Mixed cultures of bacteria growing under anaerobic conditions have been shown to generate volatile trimethylantimony as the sole volatilised antimony species (Gates et al. 1997, Gurleyuk et al 1997, Jenkins et al 1998c). Volatilisation of antimony from environmental sediments and municipal waste sites also suggests that certain anaerobic and/or facultatively anaerobic bacteria can biomethylate (Hirner et al. 1994; Feldmann et al. 1994) antimony. Michalke et al. (2000) reported biomethylation of inorganic antimony by pure cultures of anaerobic bacteria. *C. collagenovorans*, *D. vulgaris* and three species of methanogenic archaea, were shown to produce trimethylantimony in culture headspace gases. *M. formicium* was shown to produce SbH_3 together with $\text{Me}_{3-n}\text{SbH}_n$ ($n = 0, 72$) into culture headspace gases.

Mercury

Biomethylation of mercury has been studied extensively. Methylation of mercury increases lipid solubility and thus enhances bioaccumulation in living organisms. This can lead to mercury entering the food chain and to mercury poisoning incidents, e.g. in Japan and Iraq (Craig 2003). Many different bacteria in aerobic and anaerobic environments are known to cause mercury biomethylation, although anaerobic sediments are the main sites of environmental methylmercury formation (Fatoki 1997). Sulphur-reducing bacteria, such as *Desulfovibrio desulfuricans*, are thought to be the most important methylators of mercury (Compeau and Bartha 1985; Compeau and Bartha 1987; Kerry et al. 1991). Both low pH and high sulfate concentrations promote mercury biomethylation activity within environmental sediments (Winfrey and Rudd 1990; Craig and Moreton 1984). Methylcobalamin is the methyl donor, giving rise to monomethylmercury and (in a slower step) dimethylmercury (volatile) products in a transfer to electrophilic mercury (II) of a methyl carbonium ion (Eqn 2) viz.



Further reaction of methylmercury can occur *via* various biotic mechanisms (e.g. disproportionation reaction involving H_2S) also giving rise to dimethylmercury (Eqn 3) (Craig and Moreton 1984).



An important factor governing the concentration of mercury in biota is the concentration of methyl mercury in environmental waters, which is determined by the relative efficiencies of methylation and demethylation processes.

Several other metals and metalloids can undergo methylation and these systems have been discussed in detail in a recent work (Craig 2003). The elements involved include tin, bismuth, selenium and others. An example of a biogeochemical cycle for tin is shown in Figure 2.

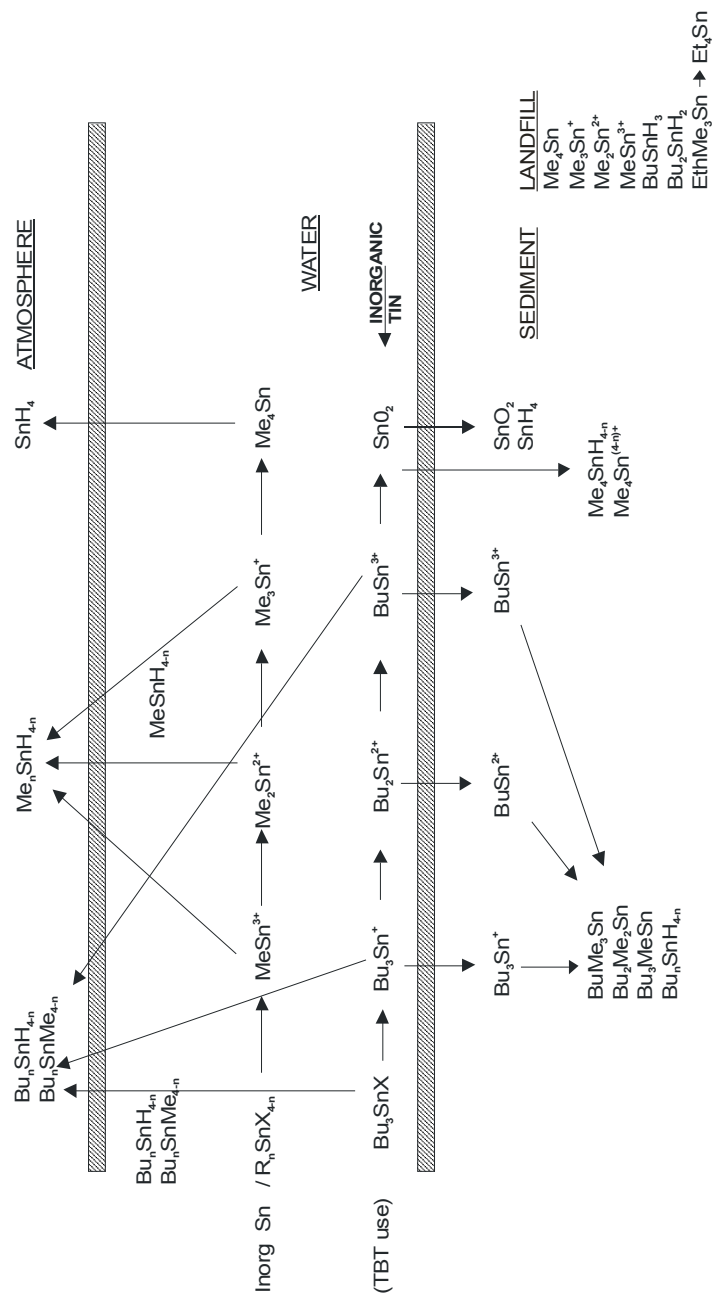
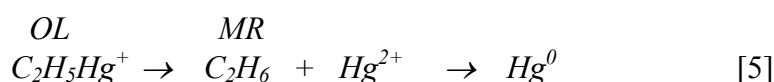
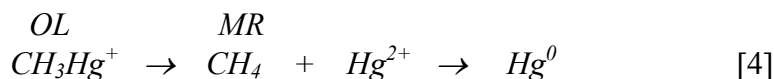


Fig. 2. The biogeochemical cycle of tin

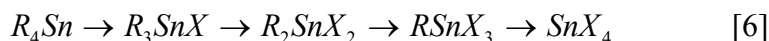
Microbial demethylation/dealkylation

For some metals, such as mercury and tin, microbial demethylation or dealkylation of organometallic forms are important in detoxication mechanisms. Bacterial mercury (II) resistance, for example, involves reduction of Hg(II) to Hg(O) *via* mercuric reductase (MR). The reduced form of the metal is less toxic, more volatile and is rapidly removed to the atmosphere. Detoxification of organomercurials proceeds *via* organomercurial lyase (OL), a product of the *Mer B* gene, that enzymatically cleaves the Hg-C bond to form Hg(II), which is then removed *via* mercuric reductase (Gadd 1993; Losi and Frankenberger 1997) (Eqns 4 and 5). For example



Oxidative demethylation of methylmercury, involving bacterial liberation of carbon dioxide, also occurs. The mechanism is thought to involve enzymes associated with bacterial metabolism of C-1 compounds (Oremland et al. 1991) and is believed to occur widely in freshwater and aqueous environments, under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions.

Degradation of organotin compounds has been shown for a wide range of microorganisms, including bacteria, fungi and algae (Gadd 2000). Organotin degradation (Eqn.6) is thought to involve sequential cleavage of tin-carbon bonds, resulting in removal of organic groups and a reduction in toxicity (Cooney and Wuerz 1989; Crompton 1998; Cooney 1988a; Cooney et al. 1988b). Cleavage is initiated by hydroxo attack (Eqn. 6).



Tributyltin oxide (TBTO) and tributyltin napthenate (TBTN) have been shown to be degraded by fungal action to di- and monobutyltins. Certain gram-negative bacteria and the green alga *Ankistrodesmus falcatus* can also dealkylate tributyltin, giving rise to dibutyl-, monobutyl- and inorganic tin products; the alga was able to metabolise around 50% of the accumulated tributyl over a four-week period (Maguire 1984). Similar end-products are formed by the action of soil microorganisms on triphenyltin acetate (Barnes et al. 1973). Tin-carbon bonds are also cleaved abiotically, for example by UV, and it has been difficult to establish the relative importance of abiotic and biotic mechanisms of degradation in the natural environment (Gadd 2000). In some circumstances, environmental conditions (e.g. pH or redox potential), established by microbial activity, strongly

pH or redox potential), established by microbial activity, strongly influence the extent of abiotic degradation of organotin (Gadd 2000). This discussion relating to abiotic and biotic organotin degradation also apply to other organometal(oids).

Bacterial demethylation of methylarsenicals is known to occur in aerobic aqueous and terrestrial environments, giving CO₂ and arsenate (Andreae et al. 1986). Several soil bacteria, such as *Achromobacter*, *Flavobacterium* and *Pseudomonas*, have been shown to possess organoarsenical demethylation ability. Bacterial demethylation of methylarsenic acids excreted by marine algae is an important part of the biogeochemical cycling of arsenic.

Dimethylselenide has been shown to be demethylated in anaerobic environments by methanogenic and sulphate reducing bacteria, producing CO₂ and CH₄ (Newman et al. 1997). Several bacterial isolates from aerobic soils, - including members of the genera *Pseudomonas*, *Xanthomonas* and *Corynebacterium* - have been shown to use methylselenides as sole source of carbon (Doran and Alexander 1977).

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Hirner, A.V.; Emons, H. (Eds.)

2004, XVIII, 328 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-540-20829-7