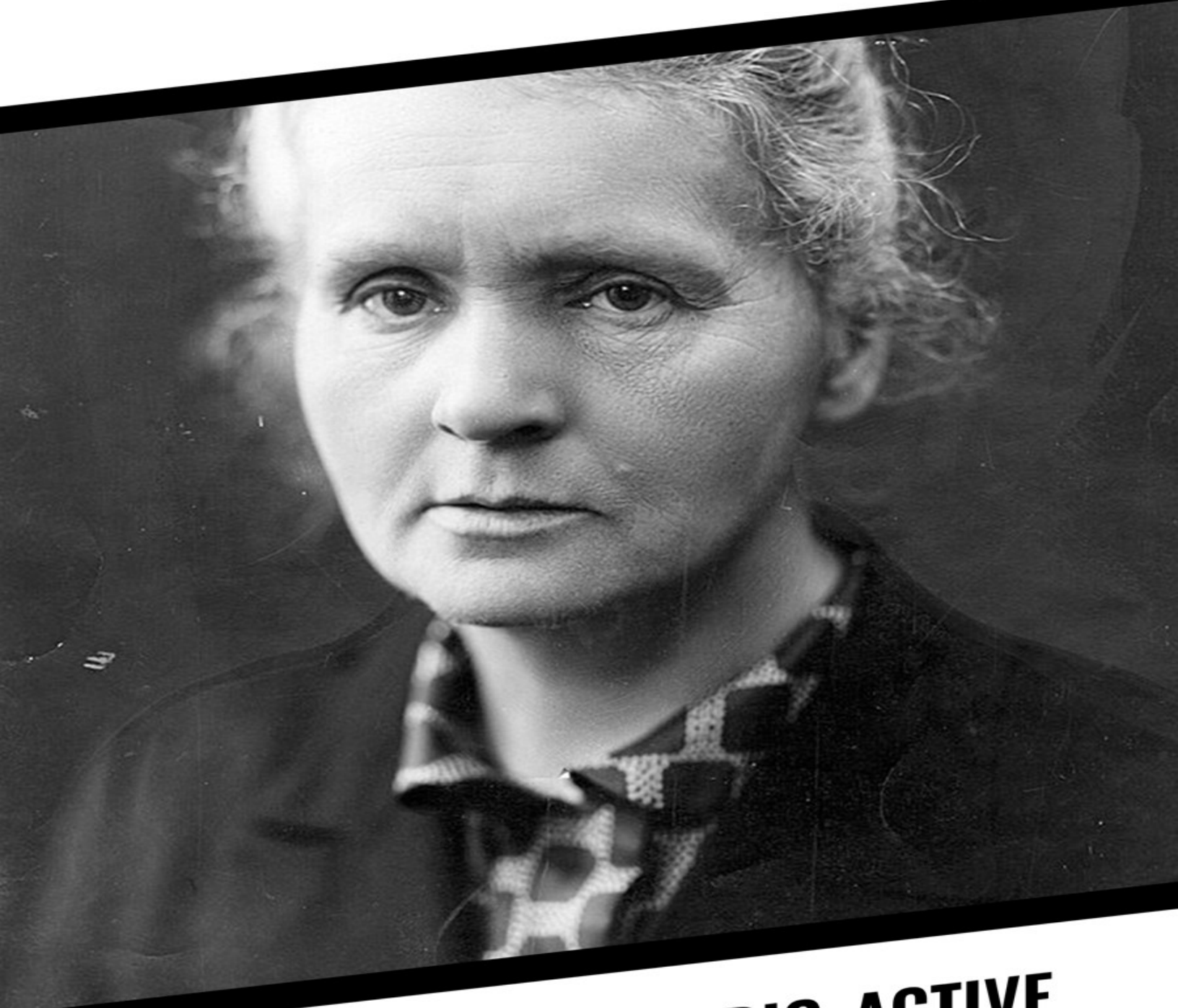




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MARIE CURIE



**RADIO-ACTIVE
SUBSTANCES**

Marie Curie

Radio-Active Substances

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Table of Contents

Introduction.

Historical.

Chapter I. Radio-activity of Uranium and Thorium. Radio-active Minerals.

Measurement of the Intensity of Radiation.

Radio-activity of the Compounds of Uranium and Thorium.

Is Atomic Radio-activity a general Phenomenon?
Radio-active Minerals.

Chapter II. Method of Research.

Polonium, Radium, Actinium.

Spectrum of Radium.

Extraction of the New Radio-active Substances.

Polonium.

Preparation of the Pure Chloride of Radium.

Determination of the Atomic Weight of Radium.

Characteristics of the Radium Salts.

Fractionation of Ordinary Barium Chloride.

Chapter III. Radiation of the New Radio-active Substances.

Methods of Investigation of the Radiation.

Energy of Radiation.

Complex Nature of the Radiation.

Action of the Magnetic Field.

Deflected β -Rays.

Charge of the Deflected Rays.

Action of the Electric Field upon the Deflected β -Rays of Radium.

Relation of the Charge to the Mass for a Particle Negatively Charged Emitted by Radium.

Action of the Magnetic Field upon the α -Rays.

Action of the Magnetic Field on the Rays of other Radio-active Substances.

Proportion of β -Rays in the Radiation of Radium.

Penetrating Power of the Radiation of Radio-active Bodies.

Ionising Action of Radium Rays on Insulating Liquids.

Various Effects and Applications of the Ionising Action of the Rays Emitted by Radio-active Substances.

Fluorescent and Luminous Effects.

Evolution of Heat by the Salts of Radium.

Chemical Effects produced by the New Radio-active Bodies.

Physiological Effects.

Influence of Temperature upon Radiation.

Chapter IV. Communication of Radio-activity to Substances Initially Inactive.

Activity Induced in an Enclosed Space.

Part played by Gases in the Phenomena of Induced Radio-activity.

Dissipation in Free Air of the Induced Activity of Solid Bodies.

Dissipation of Activity in a Confined Space. Velocity of Destruction of the Emanation.

Variation of Activity of Liquids rendered Active and of Radium Solutions.

Theory of Radio-activity.

Another Form of Induced Radio-activity.

Induced Radio-activity with Slow Dissipation.

Radio-activity Induced upon Substances in Solution with Radium.

Dissemination of Radio-active Particles and Induced Radio-activity of the Laboratory.

Activity Induced Outside the Influence of Radio-active Substances.

Variations of Activity of Radio-active Bodies. Effects of Solution.

Variations of the Activity of Radium Salts on Heating.

Theory of Interpretation of the Causes of Variations of Activity of Radium Salts after Solution and after Heating.

Nature and Cause of the Phenomena of Radio-activity.

Conclusions.

Introduction.

[Table of Contents](#)

The object of the present work is the publication of researches which I have been carrying on for more than four years on radio-active bodies. I began these researches by a study of the phosphorescence of uranium, discovered by M. Becquerel. The results to which I was led by this work promised to afford so interesting a field that M. Curie put aside the work on which he was engaged, and joined me, our object being the extraction of new radio-active substances and the further study of their properties.

Since the commencement of our research we thought it well to hand over specimens of the substances, discovered and prepared by ourselves, to certain physicists, in the first place to M. Becquerel, to whom is due the discovery of the uranium rays. In this way we ourselves facilitated the research by others besides ourselves on the new radio-active bodies. At the termination of our first publications, M. Giesel, in Germany, also began to prepare these substances, and passed on specimens of them to several German scientists. Finally, these substances were placed on sale in France and Germany, and the subject growing in importance gave rise to a scientific movement, such that numerous memoirs have appeared, and are constantly appearing on radio-active bodies, principally abroad. The results of the various French and foreign researches are necessarily confused, as is the case with all new subjects in

course of investigation, the aspect of the question becoming modified from day to day.

From the chemical point of view, however, one point is definitely established:—*i.e.*, the existence of a new element, strongly radio-active, viz., radium. The preparation of the pure chloride of radium and the determination of the atomic weight of radium form the chief part of my own work. Whilst this work adds to the elements actually known with certainty a new element with very curious properties, a new method of chemical research is at the same time established and justified. This method, based on the consideration of radio-activity as an atomic property of matter, is just that which enabled M. Curie and myself to discover the existence of radium.

If, from the chemical point of view, the question that we undertook primarily may be looked upon as solved, the study of the physical properties of the radio-active bodies is in full evolution. Certain important points have been established, but a large number of the conclusions are still of a provisional character. This is not surprising when we consider the complexity of the phenomena due to radio-activity, and the differences existing between the various radio-active substances. The researches of physicists on these substances constantly meet and overlap. Whilst endeavouring to keep strictly to the limits of this work and to publish my individual research only, I have been obliged at the same time to mention results of other researches, the knowledge of which is indispensable.

I desired, moreover, to make this work an inclusive survey of the actual position of the question.

I indicate at the end the particular questions with which I am specially concerned, and those which I investigated in conjunction with M. Curie.

I carried on the work in the laboratories of the School of Physics and Chemistry in Paris, with the permission of Schützenberger, late Director of the School, and M. Lauth, actual Director. I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude for the kind hospitality received in this school.

Historical.

[Table of Contents](#)

The discovery of the phenomena of radio-activity is connected with researches followed, since the discovery of the Röntgen rays, upon the photographic effects of phosphorescent and fluorescent substances.

The first tubes for producing Röntgen rays were without the metallic anticathode. The source of the Röntgen rays was the glass surface impinged upon by the cathode rays; this surface was at the same time actively fluorescent. The question then was whether the emission of Röntgen rays necessarily accompanied the production of fluorescence, whatever might be the cause of the latter. This idea was first enunciated by M. Henri Poincaré.

Shortly afterwards, M. Henry announced that he had obtained photographic impressions through black paper by means of phosphorescent zinc sulphide. M. Niewenglowski obtained the same phenomenon with calcium sulphide exposed to the light. Finally, M. Troost obtained strong photographic impressions with zinc sulphide artificially

phosphorescent acting across black paper and thick cardboard.

The experiences just cited have not been reproduced, in spite of numerous attempts to this end. It cannot therefore be considered as proved that zinc sulphide and calcium sulphide are capable of emitting, under the action of light, invisible rays which traverse black paper and act on photographic plates.

M. Becquerel has made similar experiments on the salts of uranium, some of which are fluorescent.

He obtained photographic impressions through black paper with the double sulphate of uranium and potassium.

M. Becquerel at first believed that this salt, which is fluorescent, behaved like the sulphides of zinc and calcium in the experiments of MM. Henry, Niewenglowski, and Troost. But the conclusion of his experiments showed that the phenomenon observed was in no way related to the fluorescence. It is not necessary that the salt should be fluorescent; further, uranium and all its compounds, fluorescent or not, act in the same manner, and metallic uranium is the most active. M. Becquerel finally found that by placing uranium compounds in complete darkness, they continue acting on photographic plates through black paper for years. M. Becquerel allows that uranium and its compounds emit peculiar rays—uranium rays. He proved that these rays can penetrate thin metallic screens, and that they discharge electrified bodies. He also made experiments from which he concluded that uranium rays undergo reflection, refraction, and polarisation.

The work of other physicists (Elster and Geitel, Lord Kelvin, Schmidt, Rutherford, Beattie, and Smoluchowski) confirms and extends the results of the researches of M. Becquerel, with the exception of those relating to the reflection, refraction, and polarisation of uranium rays, which in this respect behave like Röntgen rays, as has been recognised first by Mr. Rutherford and then by M. Becquerel himself.

Chapter I.

Radio-activity of Uranium and Thorium. Radio-active Minerals.

[Table of Contents](#)

Becquerel Rays.—The uranium rays discovered by M. Becquerel act upon photographic plates screened from the light; they can penetrate all solid, liquid, and gaseous substances, provided that the thickness is sufficiently reduced; in passing through a gas, they cause it to become a feeble conductor of electricity.

These properties of the uranium compounds are not due to any known cause. The radiation seems to be spontaneous; it loses nothing in intensity, even on keeping the compounds in complete darkness for several years; hence there is no question of the phosphorescence being specially produced by light.

The spontaneity and persistence of the uranium radiation appear as a quite unique physical phenomenon. M. Becquerel kept a piece of uranium for several years in the dark, and he has affirmed that at the end of this time the action upon a photographic plate had not sensibly altered. MM. Elster and Geitel made a similar experiment, and also found the action to remain constant.

I measured the intensity of radiation of uranium by the effect of this radiation on the conductivity of air. The method of measurement will be explained later. I also obtained figures which prove the persistence of radiation within the limits of accuracy of the experiments.

For these measurements a metallic plate was used covered with a layer of powdered uranium; this plate was not otherwise kept in the dark; this precaution, according to the experimenters already quoted, being of no importance. The number of measurements taken with this plate is very great, and they actually extend over a period of five years.

Some researches were conducted to discover whether other substances were capable of acting similarly to the uranium compounds. M. Schmidt was the first to publish that thorium and its compounds possess exactly the same property. A similar research, made contemporaneously, gave me the same result. I published this not knowing at the time of Schmidt's publication.

We shall say that uranium, thorium, and their compounds emit *Becquerel rays*. I have called *radio-active* those substances which generate emissions of this nature. This name has since been adopted generally.

In their photographic and electric effects, the Becquerel rays approximate to the Röntgen rays. They also, like the latter, possess the faculty of penetrating all matter. But their capacity for penetration is very different; the rays of uranium and of thorium are arrested by some millimetres of solid matter, and cannot traverse in air a distance greater than a few centimetres; this at least is the case for the greater part of the radiation.

The researches of different physicists, and primarily of Mr. Rutherford, have shown that the Becquerel rays undergo neither regular reflection, nor refraction, nor polarisation.

The feeble penetrating power of uranium and thorium rays would point to their similarity to the secondary rays

produced by the Röntgen rays, and which have been investigated by M. Sagnac, rather than to the Röntgen rays themselves.

For the rest, the Becquerel rays might be classified as cathode rays propagated in the air. It is now known that these different analogies are all legitimate.

Measurement of the Intensity of Radiation.

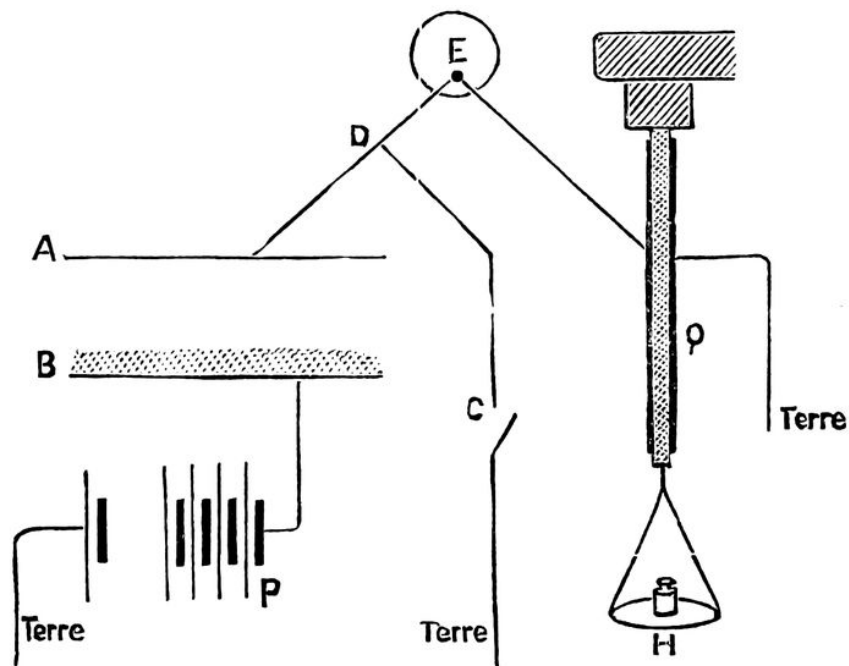


Fig. 1.

The method employed consists in measuring the conductivity acquired by air under the action of radio-active bodies; this method possesses the advantage of being rapid and of furnishing figures which are comparable. The apparatus employed by me for the purpose consists essentially of a plate condenser, A B (Fig. 1). The active body, finely powdered, is spread over the plate B, making the

air between the plates a conductor. In order to measure the conductivity, the plate B is raised to a high potential by connecting it with one pole of a battery of small accumulators, P, of which the other pole is connected to earth. The plate A being maintained at the potential of the earth by the connection C D, an electric current is set up between the two plates. The potential of plate A is recorded by an electrometer, E. If the earth connection be broken at C, the plate A becomes charged, and this charge causes a deflection of the electrometer. The velocity of the deflection is proportional to the intensity of the current, and serves to measure the latter.

But a preferable method of measurement is that of compensating the charge on plate A, so as to cause no deflection of the electrometer. The charges in question are extremely weak; they may be compensated by means of a quartz electric balance, Q, one sheath of which is connected to plate A and the other to earth. The quartz lamina is subjected to a known tension, produced by placing weights in a plate, π ; the tension is produced progressively, and has the effect of generating progressively a known quantity of electricity during the time observed. The operation can be so regulated that, at each instant, there is compensation between the quantity of electricity that traverses the condenser and that of the opposite kind furnished by the quartz. In this way, the quantity of electricity passing through the condenser for a given time, *i.e.*, the *intensity of the current*, can be measured *in absolute units*. The measurement is independent of the sensitiveness of the electrometer.

In carrying out a certain number of measurements of this kind, it is seen that radio-activity is a phenomenon capable of being measured with a certain accuracy. It varies little with temperature; it is scarcely affected by variations in the temperature of the surroundings; it is not influenced by incandescence of the active substance. The intensity of the current which traverses the condenser increases with the surface of the plates. For a given condenser and a given substance the current increases with the difference of potential between the plates, with the pressure of the gas which fills the condenser, and with the distance of the plates (provided this distance be not too great in comparison with the diameter). In every case, for great differences of potential the current attains a limiting value, which is practically constant. This is the *current of saturation*, or *limiting current*. Similarly, for a certain sufficiently great distance between the plates the current hardly varies any longer with the distance. It is the current obtained under these conditions that was taken as the measure of radio-activity in my researches, the condenser being placed in air at atmospheric pressure.

I append curves which represent the intensity of the current as a function of the field established between the plates for two different plate distances. Plate B was covered with a thin layer of powdered metallic uranium; plate A, connected with the electrometer, was provided with a guard-ring.