

## **<sup>14</sup>C DATING WITH THE ICELS LIQUID SCINTILLATION COUNTING SYSTEM USING FIXED-ENERGY BALANCE COUNTING WINDOW METHOD**

Konrad Tudyka<sup>1</sup> • Anna Pazdur

Centre of Excellence-Gliwice Absolute Dating Methods Centre, Institute of Physics, Silesian University of Technology, Krzywoustego 2, 44-100 Gliwice, Poland.

**ABSTRACT.** This article presents an application of a fixed-energy balance counting window in radiocarbon dating of geological peat samples. We determine a fixed-energy balance counting window with an inexpensive liquid scintillation counting ICELS system. We show long-term modern biosphere standard records that show stability sufficient for dating samples up to approximately 30,000 <sup>14</sup>C yr BP. We then compare our results to ones obtained previously using a Quantulus 1220™.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This work is aimed to apply the semitheoretical work presented by Theodórsson (2011) into practice. Theodórsson (2011) proposed the fixed-energy balance counting window for the liquid scintillation counting (LSC) ICELS system. However, no radiocarbon dating has been reported using this method so far. Therefore, we applied the proposed system with minor modifications for <sup>14</sup>C dating of peat cores. The measurements obtained with the ICELS system are compared with previous results obtained on another LSC spectrometer, the Quantulus 1220™.

### **EXPERIMENTAL**

#### **LSC ICELS Systems**

ICELS was designed by P Theodórsson, University of Iceland, and has been described thoroughly elsewhere (e.g. Theodórsson 2005, 2011). Therefore, just a brief description will be given here. ICELS is based on a single horizontally placed photomultiplier tube (PMT). On top of the PMT, a 7-mL low-potassium Pico™ glass vial containing LSC cocktail is placed. The LSC cocktail is composed of 2 mL of benzene and 0.026 g of butyl-PBD. The vial is wrapped with polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) tape and a drop of glycerol is placed between the vial and the PMT for better light collection efficiency. The counter is shielded with ~20 kg of lead. In this work, 2 ICELS systems are equipped with Tukan 8K (Guzik et al. 2006) multichannel analyzers (MCA). Despite its simple construction and low cost, ICELS provides very attractive parameters for <sup>14</sup>C dating. In the ICELS system, the quenching effect is quantified by the attenuation (*A*) value, defined as

$$A = \frac{C_{59.5\text{keV}}}{C_{ref}}$$

where  $C_{59.5\text{keV}}$  is a channel number that corresponds to the 59.5-keV peak from the <sup>241</sup>Am X line of each sample, and  $C_{ref}$  is a reference channel number. The reference channel number is adjusted so that for the least-quenched samples,  $A = 1.00$ . Typical attenuation measured in samples varies from  $A = 0.85$  up to  $A = 1.00$ .

#### **Determining Fixed-Energy Balance Window**

The balance counting window was first used in <sup>14</sup>C dating by Pearson (1979). Later, this same concept was used in the ICELS system (Theodórsson et al. 2003; Tudyka et al. 2010) where a balance point was set via the high-voltage adjustment. In this work, we use the multichannel analyzer

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. Email: konrad.tudyka@polsl.pl.

(MCA) to set the fixed-energy balance counting window. This improves precision as it allows to include variation in the background count rate easily, and sample changing is much less time consuming because the high voltage does not need to be adjusted for each sample. Therefore, this work uses the idea presented by Theodórsson (2011) with minor modifications.

Figure 1 presents  $^{14}\text{C}$  spectra quenched and unquenched in: a) channel and b) energy scales. On the energy scale, those spectra are almost identical, excluding low (<25 keV) and high (>156.5 keV) energy ranges. As the  $^{14}\text{C}$  spectra in the 25 to 156.5 keV energy range (Figure 1b) are almost identical, we can determine the fixed-energy balance counting window assuming linearity of the net  $^{14}\text{C}$  spectrum. The position of the balance counting window is adjusted so that for small fluctuations (of e.g. attenuation), the count rate does not change. This balance counting window increases the overall system stability, which can be affected by e.g. high-voltage, high-temperature fluctuations (Theodórsson et al. 2003). We use the window spanning from 39.5 to 101 keV, which was chosen as a compromise between background stability, activity standard stability, and efficiency.

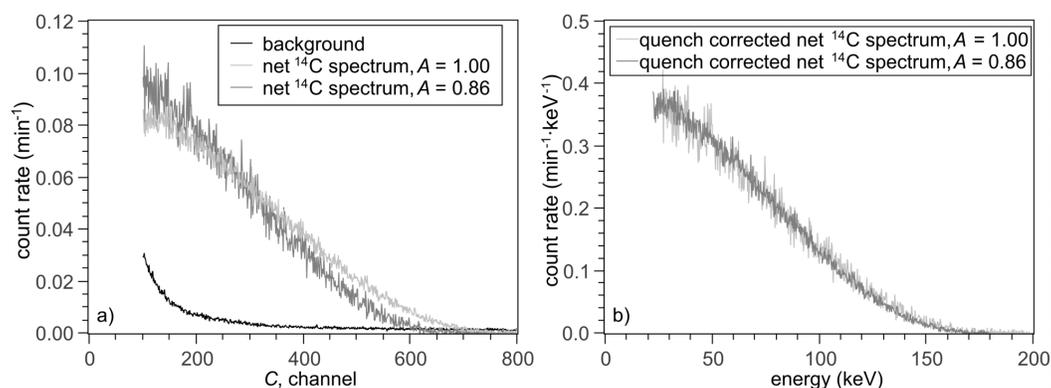


Figure 1 Background and  $^{14}\text{C}$  ANU sucrose (quenched, unquenched) spectra in a) channel and b) energy scale measured using ICELS no. 1.

### Background Count Rate Stability

The ICELS system was designed with an emphasis on simplicity. Therefore, some expensive technical solutions like active shielding were not used. This made the system sensitive to the fluctuation of cosmic radiation. Theodórsson and Gudjónsson (2009) demonstrated that the ICELS background count rate is in correlation with atmospheric pressure and therefore with cosmic radiation. This variation is especially important when old samples with count rates close to background are measured, approximately >30,000  $^{14}\text{C}$  yr BP. To include uncertainty larger than would be expected from Poisson statistics, we use an uncertainty multiplier. Figure 2 shows 11 measurements of background count rate as a function of attenuation. Each measurement took from 40 to 150 hr. Measurements were conducted over 10 months and lasted for 28 days in total.

### Modern Biosphere Count Rate Stability

Figure 3 shows 9 measurements of modern biosphere standard count rate. Each measurement took from 40 up to 220 hr. The modern biosphere standard count rate was determined using IAEA C-6, also known as ANU sucrose. The IAEA C-6 secondary standard has 150.61% of modern biosphere activity (Róžański et al. 1992). Measurements were conducted over 10 months and lasted for 41 days in total and were fully stable. The net count rate was calculated after subtracting the quench-

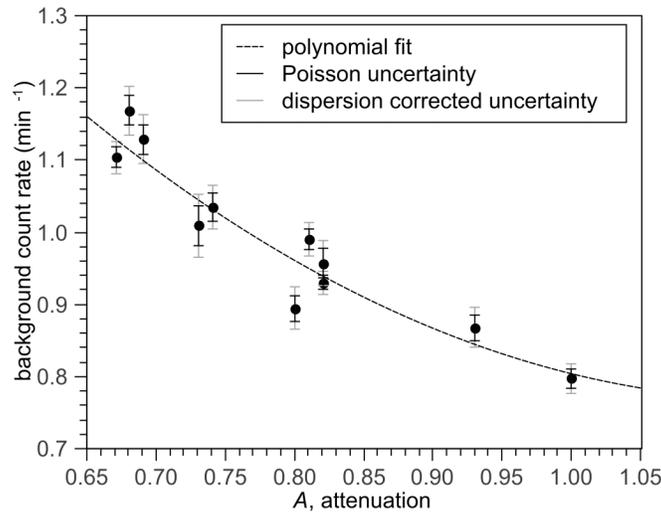


Figure 2 Background count rate as a function of attenuation. Error bars correspond to Poisson and dispersion-corrected uncertainty. Measurements were performed using the ICELS no. 1 system.

corrected background (Figure 2) for each individual fixed-energy balance window position. The net count rate was normalized to the modern biosphere activity and to  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  according to Stuiver and Polach (1977) and Polach (1979). Some of the ANU sucrose samples were artificially quenched by the addition of a small amount of acetone. The calculated modern biosphere count rate in Figure 3 is  $9.452(12) \text{ min}^{-1}$ . A rough estimation gives  $10^{14}\text{C yr}$  of uncertainty originating from the radioactivity standard. For  $^{14}\text{C}$  dating, this uncertainty needs to be combined with the statistical count rate uncertainty of the measured sample.

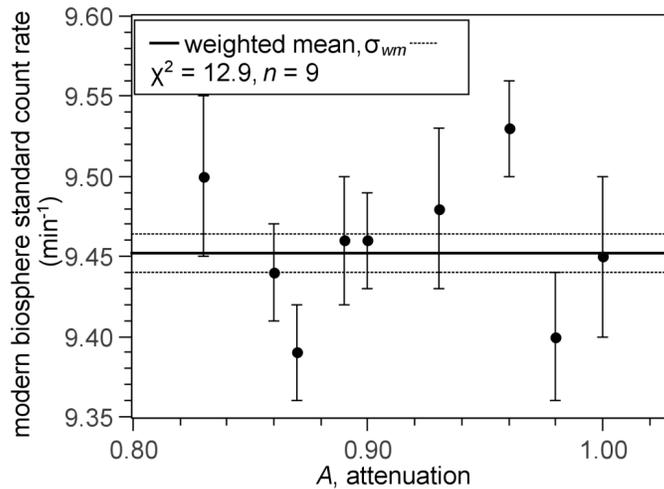


Figure 3 Modern biosphere standard count rate determined using IAEA C-6 secondary  $^{14}\text{C}$  standard as a function of attenuation. Measurements were performed using the ICELS no. 1 system.

**<sup>14</sup>C DATING****Sample Description and Preparation**

The sampled peat core was collected near Żyglin (southern Poland). A detailed site description was given by Tudyka and Pazdur (2010). The peat spans a 2-ha area and is situated near the drainage of the Brynica River. Due to the 20-cm sand layer covering the surface, the peat was well preserved to the present day. The peat contains large amounts of charcoal, copper, lead, silver, and zinc. It is highly suspected that their presence is related to early metallurgical smelting in this region.

Samples were treated with the standard acid-alkali-acid procedure to remove humic acids, chitin, fungal products, etc. Benzene for the LSC cocktail was produced using standard methods in the GADAM Centre (Pawlyta et al. 1998). Before measurement, samples were stored for over 1 month to allow all <sup>222</sup>Rn and daughter isotopes to decay.

**Results Comparison**

Table 1 presents the results obtained with the 2 ICELS systems and the Quantulus 1220. The <sup>14</sup>C age was calculated according to Stuiver and Polach (1977) and Polach (1979). To compare the results obtained on 3 LSC spectrometers, we use the difference between the weighted mean (Figure 4) calculated for 16 samples <sup>14</sup>C dated with 3 spectrometers.

Table 1 <sup>14</sup>C dates of a peat profile from the Żyglin site using 3 different spectrometers.

| Depth (cm) | Spectrometer         | Lab nr  | Age ( <sup>14</sup> C yr BP) |
|------------|----------------------|---------|------------------------------|
| 20–21      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-759 | 1410 ± 55                    |
| 22–23      | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-244 | 1270 ± 130                   |
| 28–29      | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-565 | 1560 ± 40                    |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-564 | 1565 ± 50                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-848 | 1660 ± 50                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-563 | 2045 ± 70                    |
| 29–30      | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-566 | 2030 ± 50                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-849 | 1990 ± 65                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-419 | 1755 ± 70                    |
| 31–32      | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-418 | 1795 ± 75                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-850 | 1830 ± 55                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-557 | 2310 ± 160                   |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-556 | 2230 ± 200                   |
| 34–35      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-859 | 2210 ± 150                   |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-561 | 2715 ± 50                    |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-560 | 2720 ± 40                    |
| 40–41      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-858 | 2915 ± 55                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-569 | 2770 ± 70                    |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-572 | 2870 ± 55                    |
| 42–43      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-834 | 2910 ± 50                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-851 | 3315 ± 50                    |
| 44–45      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-830 | 3695 ± 50                    |
| 50–51      | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-417 | 3960 ± 70                    |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-420 | 3780 ± 50                    |
| 57–58      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-835 | 3865 ± 50                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-409 | 4400 ± 100                   |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-412 | 4500 ± 55                    |
| 63–64      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-763 | 4445 ± 90                    |

Table 1 <sup>14</sup>C dates of a peat profile from the Żyglin site using 3 different spectrometers. (Continued)

| Depth (cm) | Spectrometer         | Lab nr   | Age ( <sup>14</sup> C yr BP) |
|------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------|
| 64–65      | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-411  | 4550 ± 110                   |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-410  | 4590 ± 50                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-763  | 4435 ± 65                    |
| 73–74      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-873  | 6945 ± 70                    |
| 79–80      | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-237  | 8300 ± 130                   |
|            | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-570  | 8130 ± 70                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-874  | 8340 ± 75                    |
| 82–83      | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-884  | 9265 ± 70                    |
| 85–86      | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-243  | 9120 ± 80                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-875  | 9320 ± 80                    |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-559  | 9570 ± 110                   |
| 89–90      | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-562  | 9460 ± 100                   |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-876  | 9740 ± 110                   |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-431  | 9950 ± 100                   |
| 92.5–95    | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-430  | 9600 ± 200                   |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-1054 | 10,090 ± 140                 |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-429  | 9890 ± 120                   |
| 100–102.5  | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-432  | 9740 ± 65                    |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-1055 | 9785 ± 110                   |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-478  | 10,100 ± 100                 |
| 110–112.5  | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-479  | 10,110 ± 95                  |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-1057 | 9950 ± 120                   |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-555  | 10,710 ± 190                 |
| 115–117.5  | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-558  | 10,525 ± 55                  |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-1057 | 10,210 ± 110                 |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-477  | 10,620 ± 100                 |
| 120–122.5  | ICELS no. 2          | GdC-580  | 10,640 ± 65                  |
|            | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-1058 | 10,660 ± 110                 |
|            | ICELS no. 1          | GdC-477  | 10,620 ± 100                 |
| 125–117.5  | Quantulus 1220 no. 2 | GdS-896  | 10,880 ± 110 <sup>a</sup>    |

<sup>a</sup>Sample age is 1160 <sup>14</sup>C yr younger than the result published earlier by Tudyka and Pazdur (2010). This error was eliminated after noticing a systematic decrease of the standard count rate caused by a sample elevator breakdown in the Quantulus 1220.

Independently, we performed a  $\chi^2$  test to verify the agreement of the results. The  $\chi^2$  values for ICELS no. 1, ICELS no. 2, and Quantulus no. 2 versus the weighted mean are 9.6, 8.2, and 20.0, respectively. It is likely that small values of  $\chi^2$  for ICELS systems are the consequence of including background variation. The samples on ICELS were measured in pairs; hence, the background count rate was slightly systematically shifted. This factor may be responsible for the small systematical difference.

### Age-Depth Models

<sup>14</sup>C dates were calibrated to calendar ages using the IntCal09 calibration curve (Reimer et al. 2009). Age-depth models were made with the OxCal v 4.1.7 program (Bronk Ramsey 2008) using the P\_Sequence (Bronk Ramsey 2009) function. The *k* parameter of the P\_Sequence, which describes increments per unit length of core, was set to 1 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Figure 5 presents 2 age-depth models obtained for a) the Quantulus 1220 no. 2 and b) the weighted mean of ICELS no. 1 and no. 2. The 2 age-depth models are very similar, although there are differences caused mostly by the fact that not every sample was dated using all 3 LSC systems.

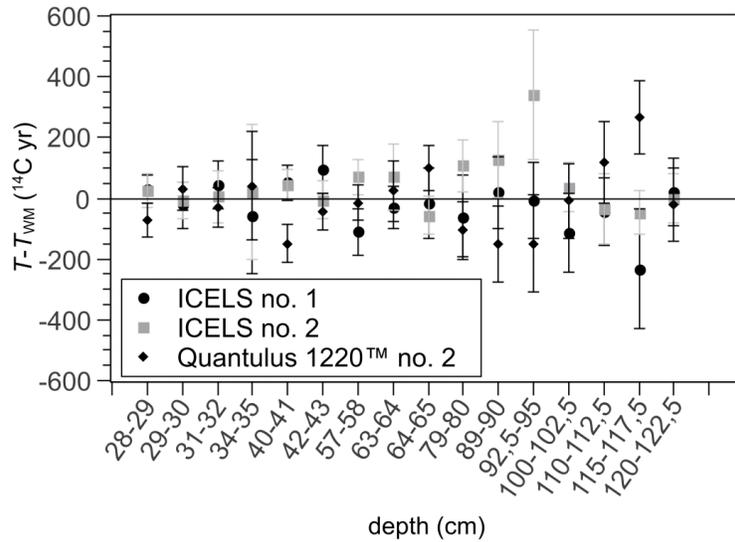


Figure 4 Difference of  $^{14}\text{C}$  age ( $T$ ) and weighted mean ( $T_{\text{WM}}$ ) for ICELS no. 1, ICELS no. 2, and Quantulus 1220 no. 2 versus sample depth.

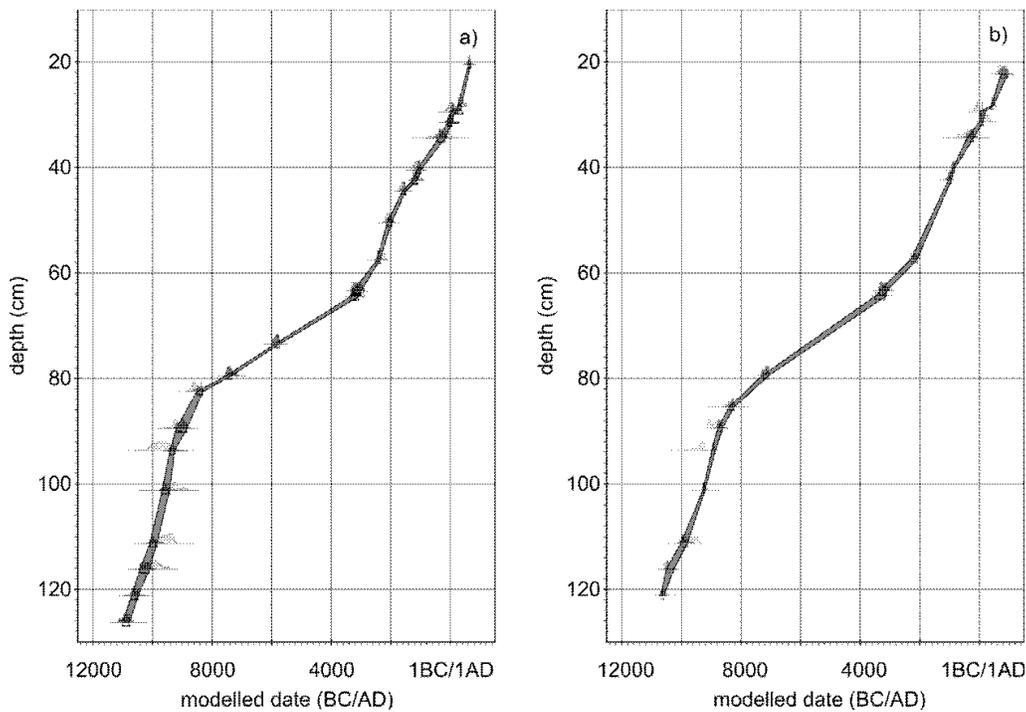


Figure 5 Age-depth models obtained with a) the Quantulus 1220 no. 2 and b) the weighted mean of ICELS no. 1 and 2. The gray curve represents the 68% highest probability density range. Distributions for the single calibrated dates are marked with light gray. Posterior distributions are marked with dark gray and take into account the depth model.

## CONCLUSIONS

Background and the modern biosphere secondary standard count rate are sufficiently stable for accurate <sup>14</sup>C dating using ICELS. The overall system stability is very good, proving that ICELS can be used for accurate and precise <sup>14</sup>C dating of samples up to ~30,000 <sup>14</sup>C yr old. The results obtained on 2 ICELS systems and the Quantulus 1220 are in agreement, although a negligible systematical difference is noted between the ICELS and Quantulus 1220.

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