

# CONCENTRATIONS OF NATURAL RADIONUCLIDES IN IMPORTED ZIRCONIUM MINERALS

by

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The natural radioactivity in imported zircon samples used as glaze for ceramic tiles in the ceramics industry has been presented in this paper. The measurements were made by gamma spectrometry with a high purity germanium detector. The average activity concentrations of  $^{238}\text{U}$  and  $^{232}\text{Th}$  determined in the measured samples (3250 Bq/kg, and 556 Bq/kg, respectively) are much higher than the concentrations found in the Earth's crust. The activity concentration of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$  is also high in all analyzed samples, while  $^{40}\text{K}$  was not detected. The gamma index,  $I$ , the external hazard index,  $H_{\text{ex}}$ , the internal hazard index,  $H_{\text{in}}$ , and the radium equivalent activity,  $\text{Ra}_{\text{eq}}$ , were calculated. Due to relatively high activity concentration level of uranium in imported zircon samples, specific regulations are necessary for zircon compound used in ceramic industry. It can be concluded that the investigated samples can be used as the component of ceramic glaze in the concentrations not above 3%.

*Key words: zircon, ceramics, radioactivity, gamma spectrometry*

## INTRODUCTION

Many materials that are usually found in the Earth's crust contain small but measurable amount of naturally occurring radioactivity (NORM). Some particular ores contain natural radionuclides at levels much higher than those usually present in the Earth's crust, and are also subject to radioisotope enrichment, during technological process, known as technologically enhanced natural radioactivity (TENORM). The term TENORM was proposed to distinguish the NORM from that enhanced by technological process [1, 2]. Typical concentrations of  $^{238}\text{U}$  and  $^{232}\text{Th}$  in the Earth's crust and in various natural materials are presented in tab. 1.

Zirconium is the 18<sup>th</sup> most abundant element on Earth – three times more abundant than copper. It occurs in nature as free oxide  $\text{ZrO}_2$  (baddeleyite), but most commonly as zircon, a compound oxide with silica having the chemical formula  $\text{ZrO}_2 \times \text{SiO}_2$  or  $\text{ZrSiO}_4$  (zirconium silicate). Zirconium in ores is associated with small amounts of the chemically similar element hafnium, with the relative hafnium content being 1% -3% [6]. The investigation of zirconium ores as sources of TENORM began in the late 1970s and early 1980s [7, 8]. These works highlighted the relatively

**Table 1. Activity of U and Th in the Earth's crust, ores, and mineral sands**

Material	Activity [ $\text{Bqkg}^{-1}$ ]		References
	$^{238}\text{U}$	$^{232}\text{Th}$	
Earth's crust	33	34	NCRP (1988) [3]
Bauxite ore	250	200	UNSCEAR (1988) [4]
Copper ore	30-80	23-100	UNSCEAR (1988) [4]
Phosphate rock	1300-2300		UNSCEAR (1982) [5]
Zircon sand	>500	>500	UNSCEAR (1988) [4]

high concentrations of natural radionuclides in zirconium ores. At present, the largest exporters of zirconium minerals are Australia, South Africa, Ukraine, India, China, Brazil, and Sri Lanka [8].

The relative consumption of zircon in ceramics industry in different regions of the world is shown in tab. 2 and the main uses of zircon are shown in tab. 3. The use of micronized zircon and zircon flour in ceramic products accounts for almost half of the worldwide use of zircon. It is a common opacifying constituent of glazes applied to ceramic tiles and sanitary ware and is also used as an opacifier in porcelain tiles by incorporation directly into the mixture used for forming the body of the tile [6].

The aim of this study was to measure the radioactivity in imported zircon samples used as raw mate-

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**Table 2. Relative zircon use by region [6]**

	Relative use [%]
Europe	36
China	20
North America	14
Asia-Pacific	14
Japan	7
Rest of the world	9

**Table 3. Commercial applications of zircon [6]**

	Proportion [%]
Ceramics	49
Foundry sands and mould washes	17
Refractories	16
Feedstock for production of zirconia and other zirconium compounds	9
Cathode ray tubes	8
Other	1

rial in ceramics industry for production of ceramic colors, glazes, tiles, and sanitary ware and to estimate the radiological hazards. This material is tested continuously in the Radiation and Environmental Protection Department of the Vinča Institute, Belgrade, as part of the regular inspection of imported goods from the customs.

## EXPERIMENTAL

The samples of zircon imported from Italy, Great Britain, Slovenia, Sweden, Spain, Slovakia, and Germany were investigated. Before measurements, the samples were crushed, sieved, and placed in the plastic 500 cm<sup>3</sup> Marinelli beakers. Considering that the zircon samples are part of the regular control of imported goods from the border crossing, they were measured immediately after preparation and were not left for four weeks to reach radioactive equilibrium. Counting time interval was 3000 seconds. The activity was determined by a high purity germanium detector (HPGe) with relative efficiency of 23% and energy resolution of 1.8 keV for the 1332 keV <sup>60</sup>Co energy [9]. Gamma energies for gamma spectrometry determination are presented in tab. 4.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The measured specific activities of <sup>226</sup>Ra, <sup>232</sup>Th, <sup>235</sup>U, and <sup>238</sup>U are presented in tab. 5. The combined uncertainty of the results was estimated to range from 10% to 20%. The average concentration of <sup>238</sup>U (3250 Bq/kg) was higher than the average concentration of <sup>232</sup>Th (556 Bq/kg), <sup>226</sup>Ra (3157 Bq/kg), and

**Table 4. Gamma energies for gamma spectrometry determination**

Radionuclide	Notes	Energy [keV]	Yield [%]
<sup>238</sup> U	via <sup>234</sup> Th	63	3.28
	via <sup>234</sup> Pa	1000	0.89
<sup>232</sup> Th	via <sup>228</sup> Ac	338.32	12.4
	via <sup>228</sup> Ac	911.07	29
<sup>226</sup> Ra	via <sup>214</sup> Bi	609.31	46.1
	via <sup>214</sup> Bi	1120.29	15
	via <sup>214</sup> Bi	1764.5	15.9
	via <sup>214</sup> Pb	295.21	19.2
	via <sup>214</sup> Pb	351.92	37.1
<sup>235</sup> U		143	10.5
		163	4.7
<sup>40</sup> K		1460.83	10.67

<sup>235</sup>U (175 Bq/kg). These values are in agreement with other recently published works (tab. 6). Considering that more than 80% of production comes from Australia, South Africa, and USA, it is evident from the data that most zircon currently produced contains <sup>238</sup>U series radionuclides at activity concentrations of about 1000-4400 Bq/kg, and <sup>232</sup>Th series radionuclides at activity concentrations of about 500-1000 Bq/kg. The worldwide average concentrations of natural radionuclides in the soil and in building materials are <sup>226</sup>Ra (32 Bq/kg), <sup>232</sup>Th (45 Bq/kg), and <sup>40</sup>K (420 Bq/kg), and in building materials: <sup>226</sup>Ra (50 Bq/kg), <sup>232</sup>Th (50 Bq/kg), and <sup>40</sup>K (500 Bq/kg) [15]. The obtained concentrations of <sup>226</sup>Ra and <sup>232</sup>Th in zirconium samples are significantly high, but these samples are used only as one component in the recipe for the production of ceramics for building materials. On the other hand, by comparison, the concentration of <sup>226</sup>Ra and <sup>232</sup>Th in zircon samples are higher than the concentrations of given radionuclides in soil samples [16, 17]. The specific activities of <sup>238</sup>U and <sup>232</sup>Th are up to two orders of magnitude and up to one order of magnitude higher, respectively, than the activity concentrations in the Earth's crust (tab. 1).

The high level of radioactivity can be explained on the basis of the following considerations: uranium and thorium atoms are easily incorporated in the crystalline structure of the zircon; furthermore, zircon ores undergo an enrichment during sand processing which produces almost pure zirconium silicate. For these reasons zircon minerals, used in ceramic industry, are usually included in the category of sources of technologically enhanced natural radioactivity [1].

Activity ratio <sup>238</sup>U/<sup>226</sup>Ra was approximately 1, and can be assumed that these two radionuclides are in the radioactive equilibrium.

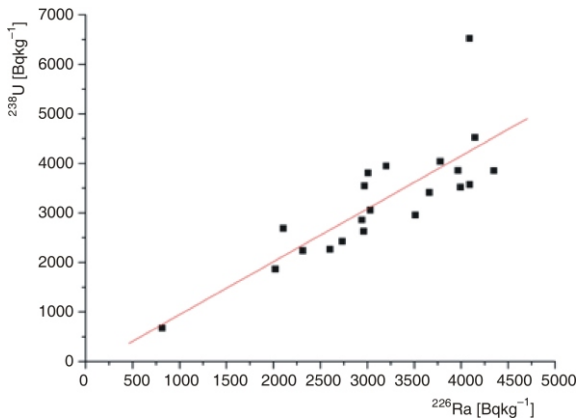
Good correlation ( $r = 0.81$ ) was observed between the concentrations of <sup>238</sup>U and <sup>226</sup>Ra as shown in fig. 1. The obtained value is statistically significantly different from zero and statistically insignificantly different from 0.90 [18].

**Table 5. Activity concentrations of radionuclides in zircon and appropriate gamma index**

No.	Imported	Activity concentrations of radionuclides [Bqkg <sup>-1</sup> ]				I				
		<sup>226</sup> Ra	<sup>232</sup> Th	<sup>235</sup> U	<sup>238</sup> U					
1	Italy	2312	347	367	73	194	58	2236	894	0.38
2		2969	297	816	106	78	33	3540	1133	0.53
3		4147	415	665	80	266	27	4522	588	0.69
4		3967	397	509	61	230	44	3855	694	0.65
5		4350	434	885	88	178	53	3853	462	0.75
6		3201	320	643	64	191	34	3948	592	0.54
7		2732	137	526	68	164	16	2425	1336	0.46
8		3031	303	630	94	198	20	3055	611	0.52
9		3993	399	555	72	203	32	3517	914	0.66
10		3661	366	658	79	279	28	3410	682	0.62
11		2961	296	570	74	214	21	2630	736	0.50
12	Great Britain	2021	202	396	59	55	26	1867	672	0.35
13		3511	351	454	54	162	41	2958	740	0.57
14		3778	378	584	64	215	54	4037	1009	0.63
15	Slovenia	2603	234	460	60	42	24	2266	748	0.44
16		2106	210	428	51	54	19	2687	564	0.36
17		814	163	187	47	71	14	672	138	0.14
18	Sweden	2941	294	565	85	225	56	2859	715	0.50
19	Spain	3008	301	596	89	206	21	3808	762	0.51
20	Slovakia	4090	1227	550	165	193	58	6524	1174	0.67
21	Germany	4092	409	624	69	258	52	3570	714	0.68

**Table 6. Specific activities of zircon minerals**

Origin	Activity concentrations of radionuclides [Bqkg <sup>-1</sup> ]				References	Remarks
	<sup>226</sup> Ra	<sup>232</sup> Th	<sup>238</sup> U	<sup>40</sup> K		
Australia		703	3533	49	Bruzzi <i>et al.</i> , [1]	Used in Italy
Australia	2250	500			Beretka <i>et al.</i> , [7]	
Belgium		570	3100	77	Fathivand <i>et al.</i> , [10]	Used in Iran
China	14387	7982		2226	Wen <i>et al.</i> , [11]	
Germany		590	2700	65	Fathivand <i>et al.</i> , [10]	Used in Iran
India		565	2510		Haridasan <i>et al.</i> , [12]	
Italy		550	3500	55	Fathivand <i>et al.</i> , [2]	Used in Iran
Malaysia	16000	43000			Hu <i>et al.</i> , [13]	
South Africa		610	4400	60	Fathivand <i>et al.</i> , [2]	Used in Iran
Ukraine		460	2100	50	Fathivand <i>et al.</i> , [2]	Used in Iran
USA		100-400	1900-4000		Armstrong <i>et al.</i> , [14]	



**Figure 1. Correlation between concentrations of <sup>238</sup>U and <sup>226</sup>Ra in zircon samples**

In order to estimate the radiological hazards, the gamma index, the external hazard index, the internal hazard index, and the radium equivalent activity,  $Ra_{eq}$  must be calculated. Due to the high activity of <sup>226</sup>Ra and <sup>232</sup>Th in the samples, the percentage of the sample that can be used in the recipe for the production of ceramics must be determined. Gamma index can be calculated using the following relation [19]

$$I = \frac{C_{Ra}}{200} + \frac{C_{Th}}{300} + \frac{C_K}{3000} \quad (1)$$

where  $C_{Ra}$ ,  $C_{Th}$ , and  $C_K$  are the activity concentrations of <sup>226</sup>Ra, <sup>232</sup>Th, and <sup>40</sup>K in Bq/kg in the building material, respectively. Gamma index must be less than 1 if the material is going to be used in high construction for interior. Gamma index for the investigated samples

will be less than 1 only if 3% of the sample is used. The obtained values for gamma index for interior are presented in tab. 5. For all investigated samples  $I < 1$  (in the account, 3% of the activity of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$  was used). Hence  $^{40}\text{K}$  was not detected in samples, 3% of the 16 Bq/kg (minimum detectable concentration) was used in all calculations. The external hazard index,  $H_{\text{ex}}$ , is defined as [7]

$$H_{\text{ex}} = \frac{C_{\text{Ra}}}{370} + \frac{C_{\text{Th}}}{259} + \frac{C_{\text{K}}}{4810} \quad (2)$$

where  $C_{\text{Ra}}$ ,  $C_{\text{Th}}$ , and  $C_{\text{K}}$  have the same meaning as in eq. (2). The value of this index must be less than unity in order to keep the radiation hazard insignificant. The obtained values of  $H_{\text{ex}}$  for the zircon samples ranged from 0.09 to 0.46, as shown in fig. 2, values which are indeed less than unity (results obtained with 3% of the activity of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$ ). In addition to the external hazard, radon and its short-lived products are also hazardous to the respiratory organs. The internal exposure to radon and its decay products is quantified by the internal hazard index,  $H_{\text{in}}$ , which is given by the equation [20]

$$H_{\text{in}} = \frac{C_{\text{Ra}}}{185} + \frac{C_{\text{Th}}}{259} + \frac{C_{\text{K}}}{4810} \quad (3)$$

where  $C_{\text{Ra}}$ ,  $C_{\text{Th}}$ , and  $C_{\text{K}}$  are the activity concentrations of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$  in Bq/kg in the building material, respectively. For the safe use of a material in the ceramics industry,  $H_{\text{in}}$  should be less than unity. The calculated values of  $H_{\text{in}}$  ranged from 0.15 to 0.81 as shown in fig. 2.

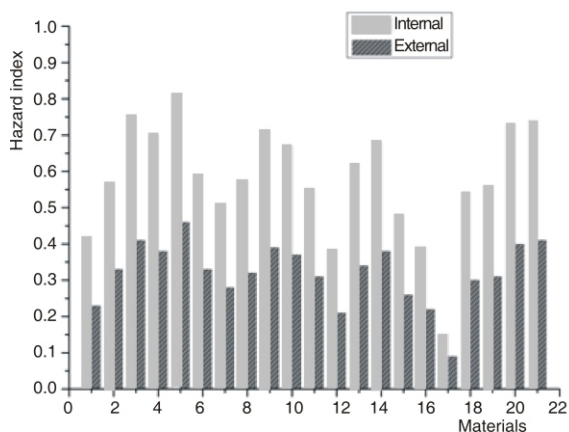


Figure 2. The calculated values of both the external and the internal hazard indices

The distribution of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$  in building materials is not uniform [7]. Uniformity in the respect of exposure to radiation has been defined in terms of radium equivalent activity ( $Ra_{\text{eq}}$ ) in Bq/kg in order to compare the specific activity of materials containing different amounts of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$ . It is calculated using the following relation [7]

$$Ra_{\text{eq}} = C_{\text{Ra}} + 1.43 C_{\text{Th}} + 0.077 C_{\text{K}} \quad (4)$$

where  $C_{\text{Ra}}$ ,  $C_{\text{Th}}$ , and  $C_{\text{K}}$  are the activity concentrations of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$  in Bq/kg, respectively. While defining,  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  activity according to eq. (4), it has been assumed that 370 Bq/kg of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$  or 259 Bq/kg of  $^{232}\text{Th}$  or 4810 Bq/kg of  $^{40}\text{K}$  produce the same gamma dose rate. A  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  of 370 Bq/kg in building materials will produce an exposure of about 1.5 mSv per year to the inhabitants [15].

Figure 3 shows the  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  values in all tested samples in increasing order of  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  magnitude (in the account, 3% of the activity of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ , and  $^{40}\text{K}$  was used). The lowest mean value of  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  is 71 Bq/kg for samples imported from Slovenia, while the highest calculated mean value is 150 Bq/kg for samples imported from Germany. All investigated samples have shown  $Ra_{\text{eq}}$  values lower than the limit of 370 Bq/kg set in the OECD report [21], but these materials would not present a significant radiological hazard only if maximum 3% of the sample used in the recipe for the production of ceramics.

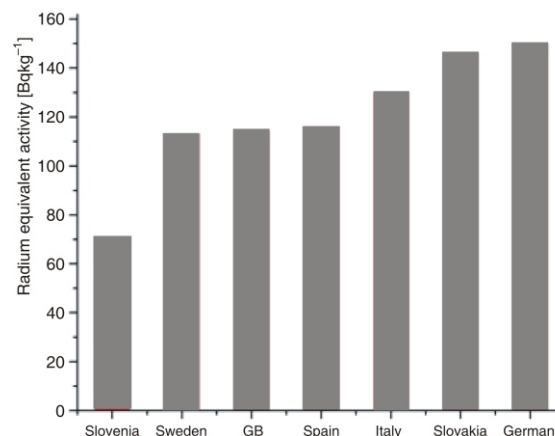


Figure 3. Radium equivalent activities calculated for zircon samples imported from different countries in ascending order of magnitude

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the radioactivity of imported zircon materials is lower than the limits regulated by our law [22]. As the investigated samples are used as one component in the recipe for the production of ceramics, we propose that they can be used in concentrations not above 3%.

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КОНЦЕНТРАЦИЈА ПРИРОДНИХ РАДИОНУКЛИДА У  
УВЕЗЕНИМ МИНЕРАЛИМА ЦИРКОНИЈУМА

У овом раду приказани су резултати мерења природне радиоактивности у увезеним узорцима циркона који се користи у керамичкој индустрији као глазура за керамичке плочице. Мерења су извршена гама спектрометријом на германијумском детектору (HPGe). Концентрације радионуклида <sup>238</sup>U и <sup>232</sup>Th детектоване у узорцима (3250 Bq/kg и 556 Bq/kg, респективно) много су веће од концентрација датих радионуклида који се налазе у Земљиној кори. Добијене концентрације <sup>226</sup>Ra су такође високе у свим анализираним узорцима. <sup>40</sup>K није детектован у испитиваним узорцима. У раду су израчунати гама индекси, индекси радијационог ризика услед спољашњег и унутрашњег излагања. Због релативно високе концентрације уранијума у узорцима циркона потребна су одређена правила по којима се циркон меша са осталим компонентама приликом производње керамике. Испитивани узорци могу да се користе у процесу производње керамике са учешћем од само 3%.

Кључне речи: циркон, керамика, радиоактивност, гама спектрометрија