MERIDIANIITE (MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O): A NEW MINERAL SPECIES OBSERVED ON EARTH AND PREDICTED TO EXIST ON MARS.

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Magnesium sulfate minerals are thought to exist in the soils at Gusev crater and elsewhere on the Martian surface. These minerals are thought to have formed through evaporation of a brine solution at or below the surface of soil or the sulfate material may have formed elsewhere and transported by wind.

The phase diagram for the MgSO$_4$-H$_2$O system shows that at temperatures below 275K, MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O is the stable phase in equilibrium with a saturated brine or with ice.

![Figure 1. MgSO$_4$-H$_2$O phase diagram](image1)

The atomic structure of synthetic MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O has been solved by single crystal X-ray diffraction but the material had not been observed in nature. MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O was recently discovered on the surface of a frozen pond in central British Columbia Canada. The ponds were created when magnesium sulfate was mined from evaporite deposits between 1920 and 1972. This new mineral formed as solution containing magnesium sulfate was wicked up the bark on the lower side of an inclined post. As the solution evaporated at temperatures below 2°C, MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O crystallized. The name, meridianite, was chosen for naturally occurring MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $11H$_2$O to reflect the locality on Mars where the MER rover Opportunity observed crystal molds in sedimentary rock that are thought to be caused by minerals that have since dehydrated or dissolved.

![Figure 2. Meridianiite crystallized as white granular material mixed with bark. The bark acted as a wick drawing magnesium rich solution from below the ice up the post where it evaporated. The meter is 7cm wide](image2)

Meridianiite is stable below 2°C. Above 2°C it melts incongruently to a slurry of epsomite (MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $7H$_2$O) and water. This evolution of four moles of water is not a dehydration reaction but generates a sulfate-rich solution which could flow from a melting sulfate deposit.

Meridianiite, instead of epsomite, is the expected magnesium sulfate phase in equilibrium with brine or ice on or below the Martian surface. Meridianiite, under the current low humidity conditions in equatorial regions on Mars, would ultimately dehydrate to a fine dust of kieserite (MgSO$_4$$ \cdot $H$_2$O) that could be dispersed by wind across the Martian surface.

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