

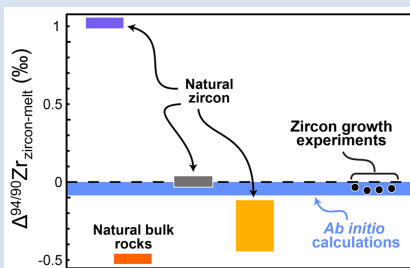
Zircon growth experiments reveal limited equilibrium Zr isotope fractionation in magmas

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Abstract



Recent studies of zirconium isotopes in igneous systems have revealed significant mass dependent variability, the origin of which remains intensely debated. While magmatic zircon crystallisation could potentially drive equilibrium isotope fractionation, given that Zr^{4+} undergoes a shift in coordination as zircon precipitates from a silicic melt, *ab initio* calculations predict only limited equilibrium fractionation between zircon and melt at magmatic temperatures. To resolve this debate, we determined the isotopic fractionation between co-existing zircon and silicic melt using controlled zircon growth experiments. Our experimental results indicate that zircon has a lower $\delta^{94/90}Zr$ relative to co-existing melt by $\sim 0.045\text{‰}$ at magmatic conditions, which is in excellent agreement with *ab initio* predictions. Our results imply that, for most natural systems studied to date, the observed variability is predominantly a result of non-equilibrium rather than equilibrium isotope fractionation during zircon crystallisation.

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Introduction

Zirconium (Zr) belongs to a group of transition metals known as the high field strength elements, which due to their distinctive geochemical properties are used to trace magmatic differentiation and the co-evolution of Earth's mantle and crust. While studies of Zr stable isotope variation (expressed as $\delta^{94/90}Zr = [(^{94}Zr/^{90}Zr)_{\text{Sample}} / (^{94}Zr/^{90}Zr)_{\text{Standard}} - 1] \cdot 1000$) have all linked Zr isotopic variability to zircon crystallisation during magmatic differentiation, they have also yielded conflicting observations regarding the direction and magnitude of Zr isotope fractionation in magmatic systems. Based on a $\delta^{94/90}Zr$ vs. SiO_2 trend in volcanic rocks from Hekla, Iceland, Inglis *et al.* (2019) suggested zircon is isotopically light compared to coexisting melt, and inferred a fractionation factor $\Delta^{94/90}Zr_{\text{zircon-melt}}$ (i.e. $\approx 1000 \cdot \ln(\alpha_{\text{zircon-melt}})$, where $\alpha_{\text{zircon-melt}} = [(^{94}Zr/^{90}Zr)_{\text{zircon}} / (^{94}Zr/^{90}Zr)_{\text{melt}}]$) of -0.5‰ . Conversely, through measurement of single zircon and baddeleyite crystals from a gabbroic cumulate, Ibañez-Mejía and Tissot (2019) found these phases to be isotopically heavy relative to the starting melt using the bulk rock $\delta^{94/90}Zr$ as a proxy, and inferred a $\Delta^{94/90}Zr_{\text{zircon-melt}} = 1.06\text{‰}$. A subsequent study by Guo *et al.* (2020) observed internally zoned zircon with isotopically light cores and progressively heavier rims, which they interpreted as equilibrium Rayleigh fractionation of isotopically light zircon from a melt with $\Delta^{94/90}Zr_{\text{zircon-melt}}$ between -0.12 and -0.45‰ . However, in all studies conducted to date on natural samples, no co-existing

zircon-glass pairs have been directly measured. Rather, zircon-melt fractionation factors have only been inferred by calculation (e.g., Rayleigh fitting or mass balance considerations).

Adding to this conundrum, no resolvable $\delta^{94/90}Zr$ variations (and therefore negligible fractionation) have been observed in several reference zircons (e.g., 91500, Mud Tank, and Plešovice; Tompkins *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2019), and recent *ab initio* calculations by Chen *et al.* (2020) and Méheut *et al.* (2021) predict that the magnitude of equilibrium Zr isotope fractionation at magmatic temperatures is too small ($\Delta^{94/90}Zr_{\text{zircon-melt}} \leq 0.08\text{‰}$) to explain the large fractionations observed in natural systems. Instead, both theoretical studies concluded that a combination of equilibrium and kinetic fractionation processes during crystallisation of zircon and rock forming minerals is necessary to produce the large variations observed in natural igneous systems.

Here, we address these conflicting observations from an experimental standpoint. Using zircon growth experiments performed under controlled laboratory conditions, we sought to determine the isotopic fractionation factor between zircon and melt ($\Delta^{94/90}Zr_{\text{zircon-melt}}$; hereafter $\Delta^{94/90}Zr$ for brevity) at various temperatures and melt compositions. To do so, experimental zircon and co-existing melts (quenched to a glass) were: 1) chemically separated using a novel sequential acid leaching procedure, and 2) their $\delta^{94/90}Zr$ were measured at high accuracy and precision using a ^{91}Zr - ^{96}Zr double spike method.

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Experimental Procedure and Samples

We utilised run products from zircon growth experiments performed by Wang and Trail (2019) and analysed: i) 11 experimental products published in Wang and Trail (2019), ii) three ‘low temperature’ (925 °C) experiments also performed by Wang and Trail (2019) but previously unpublished because they produced zircon crystals too small for that study, and iii) homogenised fractions of four starting base mixes that represent the starting composition (*i.e.* bulk system) for all experiments. Zircon growth experiments were performed in a piston cylinder apparatus at various temperatures and melt compositions (Table S-1). Various synthetic mixtures (dubbed ‘base mixes’) were prepared to simulate a range of hydrous felsic melts in the SiO₂-Al₂O₃-Na₂O-K₂O-CaO-ZrO₂-H₂O system with H₂O fixed at ~10 wt. % and doped with 500 ppm rubidium (Rb). Because Rb is highly incompatible in zircon, this trace element served as monitor for melt incorporation in the laser ablation study of Wang and Trail (2019), and was used as proxy for zircon-melt chemical separation in this study (see Supplementary Information). The base mixes covered a range of aluminum saturation indices (ASI = molar ratio of Al₂O₃/[CaO + Na₂O + K₂O]) alkalinity indices (A/NK = molar ratio of Al₂O₃/[Na₂O + K₂O]) and M factors (M = molar ratio of [K + Na + 2Ca]/[Si × Al]), as these are useful criteria for characterising felsic rocks and parameterising zircon saturation in silicate melts (*e.g.*, Boehnke *et al.*, 2013). Further details about the experiments and run products can be found in Wang and Trail (2019).

The experiments studied here cover a wide range of temperatures (1400 °C to 925 °C), ASI (0.9 to 1.3), A/NK (1.4 to 2.2) and M parameters (1.2 to 1.8) (Table S-1). In all cases, the experimental products consisted of a mixture of glass (quenched melt) and zircon. Since the zircon crystals in all experiments are too small (mostly ≤20 μm in diameter) to physically separate from the glass, we designed an extraction procedure using sequential acid leaching to attain full chemical separation of these phases. Our calibrated protocol resulted in complete separation of glass from zircon, enabling each fraction to be independently spiked and prepared for isotopic analysis. Once separation was achieved, all fractions were measured for their δ^{94/90}Zr relative to the NIST standard using the analytical methods described in Tompkins *et al.* (2020). Analytical methods are summarised in the Supplementary Information.

For each experimental product, we determined the total mass fraction of Zr removed from the liquid in the form of zircon relative to the bulk initial (*i.e.* *f* factor). Mean *f* values and their variability within the liquid at the time of quenching were determined *in situ* using Zr concentration measurements in glass fragments *via* secondary ion mass spectrometry (SIMS). The mean and variability in *f* values assigned in this manner were used to propagate uncertainties through all subsequent calculations. To ensure consistency, the mean *f* values determined using SIMS measurements of glass were verified using Zr/Rb measurements from solutions produced after acid leaching of glasses during preparation for isotopic analyses. Details about methods and calculations are included in the Supplementary Information.

Results

Results from all our measurements are reported in Tables S-2, S-3, and shown graphically in Figure 1. Experiments were found to yield mean *f* values between 0.12 ± 0.06 and 0.97 ± 0.01. The δ^{94/90}Zr of the four base mixes were undistinguishable within uncertainty, and their mean value (0.054 ± 0.005 ‰) is depicted in Figure 1a (horizontal grey band). Results for all 14 zircon-glass

pairs analysed are shown ranked by increasing mean *f*. All zircon fractions exhibit lower δ^{94/90}Zr with respect to the bulk system, ranging from -0.168 ± 0.011 ‰ to -0.068 ± 0.013 ‰. In contrast, glasses have a bimodal δ^{94/90}Zr distribution; six high temperature (1300 – 1400 °C) experiments yielded mean *f* ≤ 0.53 and glass δ^{94/90}Zr values indistinguishable from the bulk system within uncertainty (-0.057 ± 0.016 ‰ to -0.050 ± 0.013 ‰), while the eight experiments conducted at lower temperatures (925 – 1150 °C) yielded mean *f* ≥ 0.78 and positive glass δ^{94/90}Zr values (-0.004 ± 0.013 ‰ to +0.123 ± 0.013 ‰) compared to the bulk. Isotopic mixing calculations performed using the δ^{94/90}Zr and *f* determined for each glass-zircon pair show excellent agreement within uncertainty with respect to the δ^{94/90}Zr value of the starting base mix, thus confirming mass balance (Fig. 1b).

Discussion

The diffusivity of Zr⁴⁺ in zircon is expected to be extremely low even at magmatic temperatures (Cherniak *et al.*, 1997; Ibañez-Mejía and Tissot, 2019). Therefore, the growth of zircon from a magma removes Zr as a Rayleigh-type process even if chemical and isotopic equilibrium partitioning between the solid and melt are maintained, where only the outermost rim of the crystal is in equilibrium with the immediately surrounding melt while interior domains of the zircon become isolated from the rest of the system (Criss, 1999). In an equilibrium Rayleigh scenario, one could directly recover Δ^{94/90}Zr from experiments by measuring the isotopic composition of the outermost zircon rim and melt in direct equilibrium, but this is impossible to achieve using our experimental setup. Instead, our chemical separation method produces bulk glass and bulk (*i.e.* cumulative) zircon fractions, meaning that we can only capture the total integrated isotopic effects that a Rayleigh-type process imposes on δ^{94/90}Zr over the entire *f* interval of the experiment.

To approximate Δ^{94/90}Zr using the results of Figure 1a, we took an inverse approach that treats each zircon crystallisation experiment as an equilibrium Rayleigh fractionation. The recovered Δ^{94/90}Zr are summarised in Figure 1c, where they are compared with theoretically predicted values at 1300 – 700 °C from *ab initio* calculations. While all but one of our experiments conform to mass balance (Fig. 1b), for most high T experiments (low *f*) the δ^{94/90}Zr of the zircon, glass, and bulk system could not all be exactly fitted using an equilibrium Rayleigh fractionation inversion. For experiments where *f* ≤ 0.53, zircon fractions have δ^{94/90}Zr values that are ‘too low’ for their respective mean *f* if an equilibrium process is assumed. For these experiments, we used the absolute difference in δ^{94/90}Zr between the glass and bulk zircon measurements (a parameter we refer to as Δ^{94/90}Zr_{apparent}), as a maximum permissible limit for the Δ^{94/90}Zr governing that experiment (see Supplementary Information for a detailed rationale of this approach).

In general, all of the Δ^{94/90}Zr_{apparent} values determined from high T (low *f*) experiments, as well as the best fit Δ^{94/90}Zr values from Rayleigh inversion of low T (high *f*) experiments, indicate that: i) zircon is invariably isotopically light relative to the melt from which it precipitates, and ii) that the magnitude of the fractionation factor between zircon and melt (Δ^{94/90}Zr) is always smaller than -0.139 ‰ over the experimental temperature range. Details of the mathematical approach and parameters used to estimate Δ^{94/90}Zr and calculate uncertainties are included in the Supplementary Information.

To explore whether temperature and/or melt compositional differences are controlling the variable fractionations observed between experiments, Figure 2 shows the fractionation



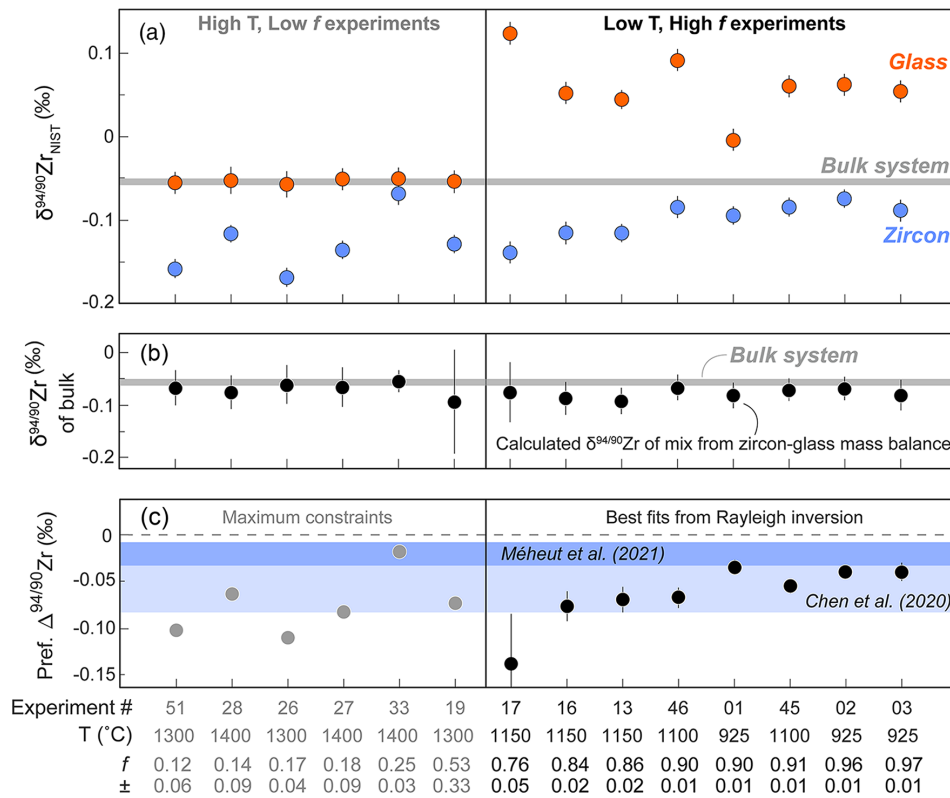


Figure 1 (a) $\delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ of the glass (orange) and bulk zircon (blue) for each experiment. ‘Bulk system’ is the mean value of all experimental base mixes. (b) Mass balance calculations for all glass-zircon pairs compared to the $\delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ of the bulk starting mix. (c) Apparent $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$, the fractionation factor between zircon and melt, determined for each experiment (see text for further details and discussion). Range of *ab initio* values between 1300 °C and 700 °C (Chen et al., 2020; Méheut et al., 2021) are shown as horizontal blue bands. Samples are shown rank ordered by increasing mean *f*. Uncertainties, visible only when larger than the symbols, are 2σ .

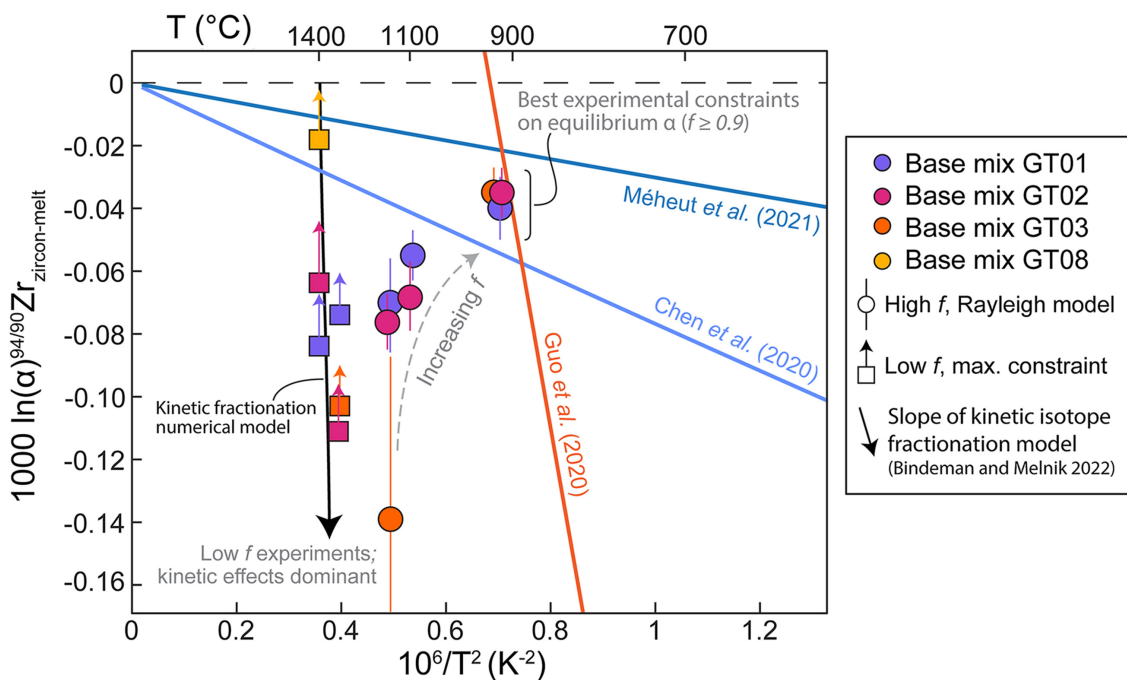


Figure 2 Temperature dependence of zircon-melt fractionation factors from *ab initio* studies (Chen et al., 2020; Méheut et al., 2021), natural samples (Guo et al., 2020), and our experiments. Circles are low T, high *f* experiments in Figure 1, from which $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ was retrieved using Rayleigh inversion. Squares denote high T, low *f* experiments, where only a *maximum* magnitude for fractionation ($\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}_{\text{apparent}}$) in that experiment could be constrained (see text). Black solid line is the slope of kinetic isotope fractionation during diffusion limited growth of a zircon nucleating at 1400 °C, calculated using the numerical code of Bindeman and Melnik (2022) (see Supplementary Information for details).



results of Figure 1c plotted as a function of their inverse squared temperature. The *ab initio* zircon fractionation models of Chen *et al.* (2020) (relative to Ca-catapleiite) and Méheut *et al.* (2021) (relative to gittinsite) are shown for comparison, as well as the model of Guo *et al.* (2020), obtained from Rayleigh inversion of $\delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ zoning in natural zircon. It is important to note, however, that because the Guo *et al.* (2020) model does not result in a $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr} = 0$ at infinite temperature (*i.e.* $1/T^2 = 0$), it has little physical meaning and, unlike as argued in that study, cannot represent an equilibrium fractionation process (Schauble *et al.*, 2009; Young *et al.*, 2015).

Close inspection of Figure 2 reveals that our data do not plot along a single slope in $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ vs. $1/T^2$ space, which clearly indicates that effects other than equilibrium isotope partitioning are influencing the $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ values calculated from our experiments. Because no arrays that are co-linear with the origin of this plot are defined among experiments sharing any given base mix, the scatter is unlikely to be caused by a melt chemistry dependence (*e.g.*, variable M, ASI or A/NK) of the fractionation factor. Our high T experiments exhibit the largest $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ scatter at any given T and define a steep array with a slope indicative of non-equilibrium fractionation.

Non-equilibrium trace element and isotope partitioning is expected to develop in solids growing from a magma when the distribution coefficient ($K_D = [i]_{\text{solid}}/[i]_{\text{liquid}}$) of a species of interest [i] diverges from unity, with the magnitude of the effects increasing proportionally to the ratio of phase boundary migration velocity over the diffusivity of the species in question (Albarede and Bottinga, 1972; Watson and Müller, 2009; Watkins *et al.*, 2017). Although analytical expressions to quantify this process in radial coordinates exist (*e.g.*, Eq. 11 of Watson and Müller, 2009), these are not applicable to the case of zircon growth as the conditions for this process are outside the bounds over which the Watson and Müller (2009) relationships are accurate (*i.e.* these apply for trace species where $K_D < \approx 0.5$). Thus, at present, the magnitude of Zr isotope fractionation during diffusion limited growth of magmatic zircon is better approached numerically.

To test for a possible kinetic control on isotope fractionation in our experiments, we used the numerical approach of Bindeman and Melnik (2022) to calculate an expected $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ vs. $1/T^2$ relation for zircon nucleating at 1400 °C and using model parameters close to those of our experimental conditions (see Supplementary Information). Because β factors (an empirical parameter

describing the efficiency of diffusive isotope fractionation; Richter *et al.*, 1999) for Zr in melt have not yet been determined, we do not attempt to reproduce our experiments quantitatively. However, it can be clearly seen from Figure 2 that the slope of kinetic isotope fractionation in $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ vs. $1/T^2$ space closely resembles the trend defined by our high T experiments, and is also similar to the slope of the Guo *et al.* (2020) model defined using natural zircon nucleated at lower temperatures. Thus, we interpret these steep arrays that do not intersect the origin of a $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ vs. $1/T^2$ plot as reflecting a combination of equilibrium and kinetic isotope fractionation effects, resulting in a compounded, larger fractionation than what can be imparted by vibrational equilibrium processes alone. Nevertheless, because β factors for Zr remain unknown, quantitative deconvolution of kinetic and equilibrium fractionation contributions to natural and experimental $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ data is not yet possible.

Given the above observations, we consider the experiments performed at high T (low *f*) inadequate for quantifying an equilibrium fractionation coefficient, and instead argue that the results from our highest *f* experiments ($n = 4$ where $f \geq 0.9$) yield the $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ that most closely approach the magnitude of the equilibrium fractionation factor. Indeed, isotope effects recorded by a solid growing in a kinetically dominated system where $K_D \gg 1$ are significant at low *f* (*e.g.*, Fig. 12 of Watson and Müller, 2009), whereas the impact of kinetic fractionation on the cumulative solid composition must, by mass balance, approach zero as *f* tends to unity. Results from experiments where $f \geq 0.9$ yield a mean $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ of -0.045 ‰. Although these experiments can potentially also be affected to some small degree by kinetic isotope effects, they all tightly cluster between the $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ models of Chen *et al.* (2020) and Méheut *et al.* (2021) (Fig. 2), supporting the accuracy of these first principles calculations. While our results cannot distinguish which of these two theoretical models is more accurate, we note that the absolute difference in $\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ at magmatic T between these studies is exceedingly small. As such, our results experimentally confirm their predictions, and reinforce the notion that large fractionations observed in natural zircon cannot be the result of equilibrium fractionation processes.

Overall, our results are in excellent agreement with the direction of isotopic fractionation estimated from *ab initio* studies and, for our lowest T experiments ($f \geq 0.9$), also its magnitude. Our results thus confirm that the expected effects of equilibrium isotope fractionation during magmatic zircon crystallisation are

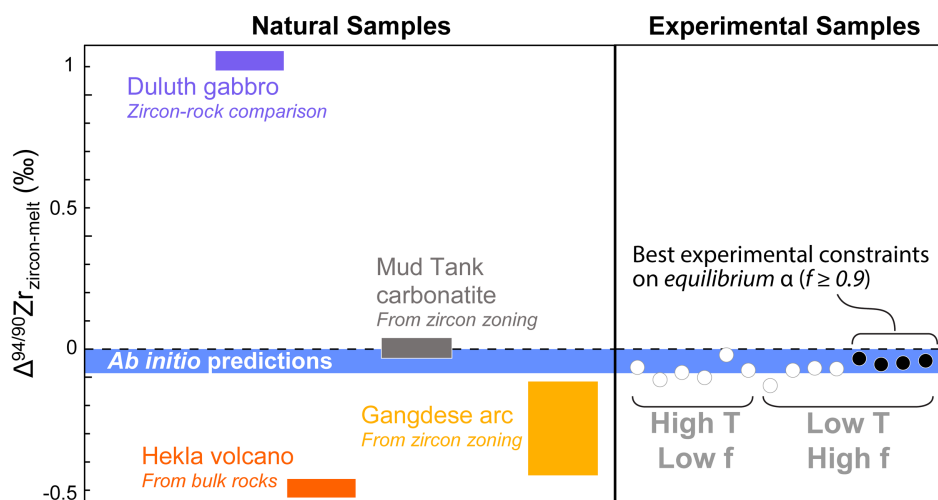


Figure 3 Summary of zircon-melt fractionation factors from *ab initio* calculations at ≥ 700 °C (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Méheut *et al.*, 2021), natural samples (Ibañez-Mejía and Tissot, 2019; Inglis *et al.*, 2019; Guo *et al.*, 2020; Tompkins *et al.*, 2020), and experimental samples (this study).

exceedingly small, demonstrating that the observed range of natural variability cannot be explained by this mechanism (Fig. 3). Instead, and as argued by Chen *et al.* (2020), Méheut *et al.* (2021), and Tissot and Ibañez-Mejía (2021), we conclude that non-equilibrium effects are needed to explain, and must be the dominant driver of, the large Zr isotope variations observed in natural systems.

Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates that: 1) at equilibrium, zircon is isotopically light compared to its co-existing silicic melt; 2) the magnitude of equilibrium Zr isotope fractionation between zircon and melt at magmatic temperatures is extremely small ($\Delta^{94/90}\text{Zr} \approx -0.045\%$), as predicted by *ab initio* calculations; and 3) the large $\delta^{94/90}\text{Zr}$ variations observed in natural igneous systems to date are not the result of equilibrium fractionation during zircon crystallisation. Our results reinforce the notion that kinetic isotope effects play a central, if not the dominant, role in fractionating Zr isotopes in high temperature environments. Thus, additional experimental constraints that quantify the magnitude of kinetic separation of Zr isotopes in solids and liquids (*e.g.*, Watkins *et al.*, 2017) are needed before the fractionations observed in natural systems can be fully understood and quantified.

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Additional Information

Supplementary Information accompanies this letter at <https://www.geochemicalperspectivesletters.org/article2310>.



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