Udokan sulphide ore oxidativ leaching with acting oxygen compounds of nitrogen in the cryogenic conditions

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Sulfide mining wastes, as well as the natural geochemical anomalies, represent an uncontrolled sources of heavy metals into the environment. As a result of a complex multifactorial process of chemical and biochemical weathering of ore minerals in these landscapes there is a formation of aggressive sulfuric acid solution (upto pH <1) promoting the mobilization of Fe, Cu, Zn and other elements [Nordstrom, 1991]. During the last decade a large number of works cover the development of geotechnical methods of migratory flows management in the fields of waste storing on the basis of experimental studies of the interaction of sulfide minerals with the components of the environment [Alekhin, et al., 2006].

It is known that the processes of chemical weathering with atmospheric oxygen are limited by the activation phase \( O_2 (E^0 = + 1.23 \text{ B}) \) and noticeably accelerated in the presence of catalysts, whose role in the oxidative horizon of sulphide dumps along with ions, \( \text{Fe}^{3+}, \text{Cu}^{+} \) is acted by nitrogen oxycompounds coming from atmosphere in the form of acid deposition (dry and wet) [Ptitsyn, et al., 2009].

From the point of view of thermodynamics, nitric oxides and products of their interaction with water have higher oxidation potential \( (E^0 = + 0.85 \div + 1.77 \text{ B}) \) than univalent copper ions \( (E^0 = 0.15 \text{ B}) \) and ferric \( (E^0 = + 0.77 \text{ B}) \).

The mechanism of catalysis is extremely complex and currently do not have details. During oxidation in the system there is a number of nitrogen compounds \( (\text{NO, N}_2\text{O}_2, \text{NO}_2, \text{N}_2\text{O}_3, \text{HNO}_2, \text{NO}_2^-, \text{HNO}_3, \text{NO}_3^-, \text{NO}^+, \text{NO}_2^+ \ etc.) \) with different catalytic activity and varying concentrations. According to numerous experimental studies kinetically most chemically responsive form is the nitrous acid and its dissociation products. At low concentrations \( (< 0.1 \text{ M}) \) the activating effect of \( \text{HNO}_2 \) exceeds the catalytic activity of all other oxygen oxycoumpounds by several times.

The complete opening of sulfides does not require significant amounts of activator, because the escaping nitric oxides are easily oxidized in the presence of oxygen, and again form nitric acid.

\[
\begin{align*}
2\text{Cu}_2\text{S} + 2\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 + \text{O}_2 &= 2\text{CuSO}_4 + 2\text{CuS} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (1) \\
2\text{CuS} + \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 + \text{O}_2 &= 2\text{CuSO}_4 + 2\text{S} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (2) \\
\text{Cu}_2\text{S} + \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 + 2\text{HNO}_2 &= \text{CuSO}_4 + \text{CuS} + 2\text{NO} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (3) \\
\text{CuS} + \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 + 2\text{HNO}_2 &= \text{CuSO}_4 + \text{S} + 2\text{NO} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (4) \\
2\text{NO} + \text{O}_2 &= 2\text{NO}_2 \quad (5) \\
2\text{NO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} &= \text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2 \quad (6) \\
2\text{NO}_2 &= \text{N}_2\text{O}_4 \quad (7) \\
\text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O} &= \text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2 \quad (8) \\
\text{NO} + \text{NO}_2 &= \text{N}_2\text{O}_3 \quad (9) \\
\text{N}_2\text{O}_3 + \text{H}_2\text{O} &= 2\text{HNO}_2 \quad (10)
\end{align*}
\]

Activating effect of \( \text{HNO}_2 \) intensifies with its concentration increase and is limited by \( \text{HNO}_2 \) disproportionation in the range of positive temperatures and low pH values. Currently, it is experimentally determined that in cryogenic conditions nitrous acid stability increases many times, even in strongly acidic environment [Takenaka, et al., 1992].

Simulation of cryogenic weathering was realized on the patterns of Udokan sulphide ore (fraction - 0.2÷+0.063 mm) of the following chemical and mineralogical composition: \( (\text{Cu} – 20.50 \% \text{; Fe}_2\text{O}_3 – 12.96 \% \text{; FeO – 9.87 \%; S}_{\text{overall}} – 689 \%; S_{\text{sulphite}} – 0.14 \%; \text{Ag} – 199.33 \text{ g/t}, (\text{chalcosine – 13.87 \%; magnetite – 6.89 \%;}}\)
quartz + feldspar = 38.84 %; limonite = 0.43 %; brochantite, ilmenite and chalcopyrite < 0.1 %). Leaching of ore by the sulphuric solutions (0.5 M) was carried out in closed polyethylene containers (500 ml) at - 20 and + 20 °С. The initial ratio of solid and liquid phases (S: L) is 1:5 (5 g of ore: 25 ml of solution). Nitrous acid (0.1 M) was obtained directly in the reaction pulp according to the exchange reaction: 2NaNO₂ + H₂SO₄ = 2HNO₂ + Na₂SO₄ by adding a calculated amount of NaNO₂ solution (0.25ml 2 M) in the reaction vessel. The leaching periods were 2, 24 and 144 hours. Solutions after complete thawing and filtering were analyzed for copper content by atomic absorption (determination mistake with the account of dilution does not exceed 6%).

Preliminary investigations showed that the acid opening of Udokan ore in a wide range of pH values from 0.39 (0.5 M H₂SO₄) upto 3.01, (0.0005 M H₂SO₄) both in cryogenic conditions and at positive temperatures consisted of two stages: the initial oxidative leaching (according to eq. 1–4) and secondary mineralization (precipitation of soluble hydrosulfate).

The choice of sulfuric acid concentration (0.5 M) in these series of experiments has been determined by the following circumstances:
- opening of the ore by concentrated solutions of H₂SO₄ is limited by oxygen content in the closed system and does not go beyond the first stage, that allows us to investigate the activating effect of nitrous acid directly on the oxidation process without imposing the stage of brochantite loss.
- in cryogenic conditions environment acidity does not depend on the initial content of H₂SO₄ in the solution and it is determined by the preset temperature. According to the diagram of system of H₂SO₄–H₂O - T thermostating at – 20 °С of model solutions containing 0.5 M H₂SO₄ + 0.1M HNO₂ and 0.0005 M H₂SO₄ + 0.0001M HNO₂ – close to natural waters (pH 3, the content of NO₂⁻ in the mist 1–5 · 10⁻⁴ M, in the rain 0.02–2 · 10⁻⁵ M) leads to equalization of values upto 2.9 М H₂SO₄ + 0.58 М HNO₂.
- freezing of more acid solutions allows leaching at lower S:L values, that is, with a larger amount of unfrozen liquid phase. This circumstance can reduce the diffusion constraints and enhance the mass transfer processes.

The experimental results of the sulfuric acid leaching of Udokan sulfide ores (including the addition of NaNO₂) at different temperatures are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acid concentration, M</th>
<th>Concentration Cu²⁺, g/l</th>
<th>k = C_Cu(-20 °C)/C_Cu(+20 °C)</th>
<th>Experiment duration, hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H₂SO₄ 0.5</td>
<td>HNO₂ 0.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* – values were averaged over the three parallels;
in the numerator - the concentration of copper at T = - 20 C°
in the denominator - the concentration of copper at T = + 20 C°

According to the introduced results there is the positive dynamics in the process of copper extraction into the solution under all experimental conditions. Obviously even at subzero temperatures after complete freezing of the reaction mixture (20–50 minutes from the start of the experiment), the concentration of copper continues to rise.

Cooling of the system from 20 to 0 C° increases the solubility of oxygen from 6.94 to 10.19 ml per 1000 ml of water. According to the stochiometry of 1–2 equations with the full consumption of oxygen dissolved in the liquid phase at the beginning of the experiment, the copper content in the solution reaches approximately only 0.058 and 0.040 g/l (that is much lower than the values listed in the table). This fact indicates that O₂ molecules diffuse from the free volume of the reactor to the surface of sulfide not only at room temperature, but also in cryogenic conditions.

Probably, in this case the volume of unfrozen liquid phase located in the intergranular space of polycrystalline ice is of significant importance.

Oxidation of copper sulfides is much faster with nitrous acid and proceeds with almost equal intensity on the entire range of parameters. Activating action of HNO₂ is more pronounced during freezing. Extraction of copper from the solid phase increases by 2.7 times at room temperature and 4.7 times in cryogenic conditions.
References

