Ion irradiation of N2O ices and NO2:N2O4 ice mixtures: first steps to understand the evolution of molecules with the NO bond in space

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Ion irradiation of N$_2$O ices and NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures: first steps to understand the evolution of molecules with the N–O bond in space


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Accepted XXX. Received YYY; in original form ZZZ

ABSTRACT
Astronomical observations towards star forming regions have revealed the presence of molecules with the N–O bond such as NO, N$_2$O, and HNO. These species are considered potential precursors of prebiotic molecules. Thus understanding nitrogen and oxygen chemistry may help us to better understand the origin and evolution of prebiotic molecules in space. However, species with the N–O bond are poorly studied and laboratory works on the effects induced on them by solar wind and galactic cosmic rays are still scarce. For this, we wanted to study the effects of ion bombardment on molecules with the N–O bond. We focus here on N$_2$O ices and NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ = 1:1 ice mixtures (at 16 and 50/60 K) irradiated with 200 keV protons. Infrared transmission spectroscopy (8000–500 cm$^{-1}$; 1.25–20 µm) was used to analyze the samples. Irradiation of N$_2$O ices and NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures produces comparable effects independent of the irradiation temperature, NO being the main product. Moreover, we show that the maximum amount of N$_2$O and N$_2$O$_4$ destroyed by irradiation, at the highest dose reached in our experiments, is equal to about 98 and 70%, respectively. The dose range covered in the experiments has been compared with the astrophysical timescale of surface processing in space, showing that irradiation of N$_2$O and NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ mixtures can produce, within $10^5$–$10^8$ years, amounts of solid NO ice detectable towards star forming regions by the James Webb Space Telescope.

Key words: Astrochemistry – Methods: laboratory: molecular – Techniques: spectroscopic – Kuiper belt: general – ISM: molecules – ISM: cosmic rays

1 INTRODUCTION
In dense clouds of the interstellar medium (ISM), dust grains covered by ices experience a plethora of chemico-physical processes, among which are: accretion and subsequent reaction of gas–phase species, reactions induced by photon and ion irradiation, thermal processing, and desorption of ices from the dust grain surface (see for instance Palumbo & Strazzulla 1993; Gerakines et al. 1996; Kaiser & Roessler 1998; Charnley et al. 2001; Cottin et al. 2008; Raut et al. 2008, 2012; Öberg et al. 2011; Fulvio et al. 2012, 2017; Garrod & Weaver 2013; Qi et al. 2013; Boogert et al. 2015).

Molecules containing nitrogen and oxygen with the N–O bond (hereinafter N–O species) are considered potential precursors of prebiotic molecules therefore understanding their chemical evolution in space is matter of great interest. However, to date, few N–O species have been identified in the ISM and then only in gas–phase - NO, N$_2$O, and HNO found in star forming regions (see for instance Liszt et al. 1978; Ziurys et al. 1991, 1994a,b; Halfen et al. 2001; Quintana-Lacaci et al. 2013; Codella et al. 2018) - suggesting that these molecules could be present on dust
grains, where they would be exposed to radiation processing.

Astronomical observations have shown that CO, O$_2$, N$_2$, CH$_4$, and H$_2$O molecules can be found on the surface of outer Solar System objects (e.g., Roush 2001; Bieler et al. 2015), where they are irradiated by solar wind and cosmic rays (e.g., Strazzulla et al. 1991; Palumbo et al. 2008). Thus, even if not yet detected, N−O species can be present on them (e.g., Boduch et al. 2012).

Laboratory experiments have shown (Boduch et al. 2012; Sicilia et al. 2012) that the ion irradiation of a number of different icy mixtures with one component being N$_2$ ice and the other O$_2$, CO or H$_2$O always leads to the appearance of N−O species, such as NO, N$_2$O, and NO$_2$. Furthermore, non–energetic surface reaction studies at low temperature showed that NO$_2$ may form when NO reacts with O, O$_2$, O$_3$, or N while NO + H produces hydrogenated species such as HNO and NH$_2$OH. Similarly, the reaction of NO$_2$ with H, O, or N may form nitrogen oxides (NO, N$_2$O, ...) as well as hydrogenated species (see for instance Congiu et al. 2012; Minissale et al. 2014; Ioppolo et al. 2014).

Despite the number of experimental works in recent years has increased, the chemistry of N−O species is far from being understood. For instance, studies on the effects induced by ion irradiation on solid N$_2$O, NO$_2$ and N$_2$O$_4$ in space are still scarce. In de Barros et al. (2017) the ion processing of N$_2$O ices at 11 and 75 K by 90 MeV Xe$^{2+}$ has been reported. Various daughter molecules (NO$_2$, NO$_2$, ...) were detected and their cross–sections (formation and destruction) were estimated. Similar results were also found and discussed in the recent work by Almeida et al. (2017). Besides these works, there is a lack of dedicated experiments that needs to be filled in. Accordingly, here we present the results of irradiation experiments performed by using 200 keV protons on (i) N$_2$O ices at 16 K and 50 K and (ii) NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures at 16 K and 60 K. The experiments were performed at the indicated temperatures to apply the results to a range of case–studies, from the ices covering interstellar dust grains to the frozen surface of outer Solar System objects.

### 2 EXPERIMENTAL APPARATUS

The experiments were executed at the Laboratory for Experimental Astrophysics in Catania (Italy). A vacuum chamber was operated at a pressure $P < 10^{-7}$ mbar and was interfaced to a FTIR spectrometer (Bruker Vertex 70). The spectrometer worked in the range 8000–500 cm$^{-1}$, 1 cm$^{-1}$ resolution and 0.25 cm$^{-1}$ sampling. Inside the vacuum chamber, species of interest were inserted (with a gas inlet) and condensed onto a KBr substrate which temperature can be set as low as 16 K. The substrate formed an angle of 45° with the IR beam. In this study icy samples were condensed at 16 K and 50 K (N$_2$O) and at 16 K and 60 K (NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ mixtures). The thickness of the ice accreted onto the substrate was monitored and estimated by using the interference pattern of a laser system (Fulvio et al. 2009). In each experiment, spectra acquired after sample growth (or after irradiation, see below) were divided by the related background spectrum, acquired after the substrate had reached the chosen temperature. In the following, spectra are shown on an optical depth ($\tau$) scale.

For the N$_2$O frozen films at 16 and 50 K we used N$_2$O gas provided by the SIO company. For the frozen mixtures of NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ at 16 and 60 K we used NO$_2$ gas (purity $\geq$ 99.5%) provided by the Aldrich company. Taking into account the equilibrium between the NO$_2$ monomer and its own N$_2$O$_3$ dimer, we determined their relative concentration as described in Fulvio et al. (2009). As a first order approximation, we obtained a mixture of about NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ = 1:1. More details will be given in Section 3.2.

The samples discussed in the current work have been irradiated with 200 keV protons obtained by an ion implanter (Danysik). By using the SRIM software (Ziegler et al. 2008) we estimated stopping powers for both N$_2$O and NO$_2$ ices equals to $2.16 \times 10^{-14}$ eV cm$^2$ per 16u molecule. Irradiation doses have been determined for each experiment, on a scale of eV per 16u molecule, by multiplying the ion fluence (ions / cm$^2$) and the stopping power (eV cm$^2$ / 16u molecule). By using the SRIM software we also checked that for all experiments the ice thickness (usually of about 1 $\mu$m) was lower than the ion penetration depth, to guarantee that the sample is irradiated throughout its total thickness. We have checked that the contribution of secondary electrons emitted by the substrate (KB), in our experimental conditions, is negligible.


### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 N$_2$O Ices

IR spectra of N$_2$O ices (i) as deposited on a KBr substrate at 16 K and (ii) as deposited at 16 K and warmed up to 50 K are presented in Fig. 1. During warm up, we observe a decrease of the width accompanied by an increase of the intensity of the N$_2$O bands that is due to the amorphous to crystalline transition occurring at 20–30 K (Hudson et al. 2017). Similar modifications of the band’s profile have been observed for other solid phase species (such as CO$_2$, CH$_3$CN, HCOOCH$_3$) at the relevant temperature (e.g. Modica & Palumbo 2010; Abdulagall et al. 2013; Baratta & Palumbo 2017). All the main N$_2$O bands are identified in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wavenumber (cm$^{-1}$)</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>589</td>
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<tr>
<td>1165</td>
<td>$2\nu_2$</td>
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<tr>
<td>2238</td>
<td>$\nu_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2469</td>
<td>$\nu_1 + 2\nu_2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2581</td>
<td>$2\nu_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2814</td>
<td>$\nu_2 + \nu_1$</td>
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<tr>
<td>3380</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3509</td>
<td>$\nu_1 + \nu_3$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. IR spectra of N$_2$O ices grown at 16 K and grown at 16 K and warmed up to 50 K.

Table 2. N-O species produced under ion irradiation of N$_2$O ice at 16 K and 50 K, main IR peak positions, assignments, and band strength (A−value) (in bold) to calculate the column density of the produced molecules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Wavenumber (cm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>A−value ($\times 10^{-17}$ cm mol$^{-1}$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>1869$^{a,b}$</td>
<td>$v_1$</td>
<td>0.68$^{f}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(NO)$_2$</td>
<td>1764$^{a,b}$</td>
<td>$v_3$</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO$_2$</td>
<td>753$^{a,c}$</td>
<td>$v_2$</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>NO$_3$</td>
<td>950$^{d}$</td>
<td>$v_1$</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>785$^{a-d}$</td>
<td>$v_4$</td>
<td>6.0$^{e}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$O$_4$</td>
<td>753$^{a,d}$</td>
<td>$v_{12}$</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$O$_5$</td>
<td>730$^{a,d}$</td>
<td>$v_{11}$</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Fig. 2 the IR spectra of N$_2$O ice grown at 16 K after three irradiations (200 keV protons) are shown, in four spectral regions. Similarly, Fig. 3 shows the spectra after three irradiation steps for N$_2$O ice grown at 16 K and warmed up to 50 K before irradiation. We point out that the actual number of ion irradiation steps performed for this work is way higher than the number of spectra shown in Figs. 2 and 3. In fact, these figures want to show just an example of the ion irradiation effects on N$_2$O ices therefore, for the sake of clarity, we show there only a limited number of spectra. The new molecules appearing after ion irradiation are: NO/(NO)$_2$, NO$_2$, NO$_3$, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$, N$_2$O$_5$, O$_3$. Table 2 lists all new N–O species appearing after ion irradiation, as well as their band positions, assignments, and the band strengths (A−value; cm molecules$^{-1}$) used to calculate the column density $N$ (molecules cm$^{-2}$) of each product (as described, for instance, in Garozzo et al. (2010) – equation (1)).

The column density evolution for N$_2$O ices vs. the irradiation dose is presented in Fig. 4. To estimate the integrated optical depth values, the band at 2581 cm$^{-1}$ has been used. For N$_2$O ice irradiated at 16 K, the A−value = 1.5 × 10$^{-18}$ cm mol$^{-1}$ has been used (Fulvio et al. 2009) while for N$_2$O ice deposited at 16 K and irradiated at 50 K, the A−value = 1.4 × 10$^{-18}$ cm mol$^{-1}$ (Hudson et al. 2017). Column density evolution is also shown for the following daughter species produced by the ion irradiation: NO, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$.
N$_2$O$_4$, and N$_2$O$_5$. For the other daughter species appearing in Figs. 2 and 3, there are no well resolved bands to be used or the $A$-values are unknown.

### 3.2 NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures

IR spectra of the icy mixture NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ = 1:1 grown on a KBr substrate at 16 K and at 60 K are shown in Fig. 5, in three different spectral regions. Taking into account (i) the equilibrium between the NO$_2$ monomer and its own N$_2$O$_4$ dimer, and (ii) the fact that N$_2$O$_4$ simultaneously shows stable and metastable molecular configurations (which IR features depends on deposition rate and substrate temperature, Fateley et al. (1959)), the NO$_2$ monomer band profile depends on these factors as well. Moreover, additional bands are seen in the deposited ice mixtures, attributed to NO/(NO)$_2$, NO$_3$, N$_2$O, N$_2$ (only at 16 K, as expected with the low desorption temperature of this species, around 30 K), N$_2$O$_3$, and CO$_2$. These are contaminant species inside the lecture bottle, and not in our vacuum system. Indeed they were not present when considering other samples, like for instance N$_2$O (see Fig. 1). Alternatively, some of them could be formed during the association–dissociation reaction 2NO$_2$ ↔ N$_2$O$_4$. In Fig. 5, bands that have not been identified are labelled with a question mark. The identification of the main IR bands of Fig. 5 is reported in Table 3.

In Fig. 6 we show the spectra of the NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixture deposited at 16 K after three ion irradiations, in three spectral regions. Similarly, Fig. 7 shows the spectra after three irradiation steps for the NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixture deposited and irradiated at 60 K. As in the case of N$_2$O ices, we point out that the actual number of ion irradiation steps considered in the following of this work is way higher than the number of spectra shown in Figs. 6 and 7. Again, these figures should be seen just as examples of the ion irradiation effects on NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ at 16 and 60 K, respectively, therefore, for the sake of clarity, we show only a limited number of spectra. The molecules produced by ion irradiation are: NO/(NO)$_2$, N$_2$O, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_5$ and O$_3$, while for other molecules already present in the ice before the irradiation we mainly observed a strong change in the band shape and/or peak position (such as for NO$_3$). In Figs. 6 and 7, bands that have not been identified are labelled with a question mark. Table 4 lists all identified N–O species produced by ion irradiation, their band positions, assignments, and band strengths ($A$-value; cm molecule$^{-1}$) used to calculate the column density of each product.
In Fig. 8 we report the column density vs. irradiation dose for the N−O species formed under ion irradiation of the NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures at 16 K (left−hand) and at 60 K (right−hand). The following daughter molecules are shown: NO, N$_2$O, N$_2$O$_3$, and N$_2$O$_5$. As discussed in Section 3.1 for the irradiation of N$_2$O ices, for the other daughter species appearing in Figs. 6 and 7 there are unresolved bands or bands for which the A−value is unknown. We point out that, unfortunately, this is also true for the two parent molecules present in the starting mixture: NO$_2$ and N$_2$O$_4$. Indeed, despite Fulvio et al. (2009) having estimated the A−values for these two molecules at 16 K: (a) for N$_2$O$_4$ at 60 K, we already explained there that it is not possible to measure the band area for the feature at 1740 cm$^{-1}$ since the significant and not quantifiable contribution from the contiguous bands should be considered, especially the one at 1765 cm$^{-1}$; (b) for NO$_2$, the A−values reported in Fulvio et al. (2009) are overestimated since the authors did not consider the contribution due to N$_2$O$_3$ to the area of the band at 1613 cm$^{-1}$. The data analysis performed for the current study gave us the opportunity to understand this.

Therefore we could not estimate the column density evolution vs. irradiation dose for either NO$_2$ or N$_2$O$_4$. Nevertheless, in Fig. 9 (right−hand) we show the normalized band area evolution for N$_2$O$_4$ vs. irradiation dose. This is the N$_2$O$_4$ decreasing as irradiation proceeds, at two irradiation temperatures, 16 K and 60 K. Similarly, in Fig. 9 (left−hand) we report the normalized band area evolution for N$_2$O$_5$ at the two irradiation temperatures considered in this study (Section 3.1): 16 K and 50 K. Experimental data shown in Fig. 9 were fitted by using the following equation:

$$y = y_\infty + (1 - y_\infty)e^{-\sigma \text{Dose}}$$

where $y_\infty$ is the asymptotic normalized band area, $\sigma$ is the cross section in 16u / eV, and Dose is in eV / 16u. Best fit parameters are reported in Table 5. Often in the literature cross sections are given in units of cm$^2$. If we indicate with $\sigma$ the cross sections in 16u / eV units given in Table 5 and with SP the stopping power in eV cm$^2$ / 16u molecule, the cross sections $\sigma_{cm^2}$ in standard units of cm$^2$ can be obtained for 200 keV protons through the relation: $\sigma_{cm^2} = \sigma \times SP = \sigma \times 2.16 \times 10^{-14}$. We have verified with several experiments that fast ions of different mass and energy give similar chemical effects in ices, provided that the exposure dose is the same. Hence, unlike the cross sections given in cm$^2$ units, which

![Figure 3](https://academic.oup.com/mnras/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/mnras/sty3081/5185102/10.1093/mnras/sty3081)
Figure 4. Column density evolution of N$_2$O ice and daughter molecules (NO, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$, and N$_2$O$_5$) vs. irradiation dose (lower axis) and astrophysical timescale (upper axis) needed at 40 au, 85 au, and in the Local Interstellar Medium (LISM) to reach those doses, for icy targets 1 µm thick. Irradiations performed at 16 K (left-hand) and at 50 K (right-hand) are shown. Band area values have been estimated by using the IR features indicated in each figure. The A-value used for each species is listed in Table 2. Points are connected for clarity.

Table 3. Feature assignment for the N-O species seen on the spectra of the NO$_2$N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixture deposited at 16 K or at 60 K, before ion irradiation (Fig. 5). Only identified bands are here reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wavenumber (cm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Species</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at 16 K - at 60 K</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>755 - 742</td>
<td>v$_{12}$ + v$_3$</td>
<td>N$_2$O$_3$; NO$_2$</td>
<td>(a), (d); (a), (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>v$_3$</td>
<td>N$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>(a), (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>805</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>NO$_3$</td>
<td>(d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>v$_1$</td>
<td>NO$_1$</td>
<td>(d)</td>
</tr>
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<td>1263 - 1251</td>
<td>v$_{11}$</td>
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<td>(a), (d)</td>
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<td>NO$_2$; N$_2$O$_2$</td>
<td>(a) ; (g) ; (a), (d)</td>
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<td>(d)</td>
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<td>(a), (d)</td>
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<td>v$_9$</td>
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<td>(a), (d), (e)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>v$<em>6$ + v$</em>{11}$; v$_5$</td>
<td>N$_2$O$_4$; (NO)$_2$</td>
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<td>NO$_5$; (NO)$_2$</td>
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<td>N$_2$O</td>
<td>(g)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2601 - 2592</td>
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<td>(h) ; (g)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2640 - 2627</td>
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<td>N$_2$O$_4$</td>
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<td>(h)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(h)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3442</td>
<td>v$_5$ + v$_9$ / v$_5$ + v$_9$ + R</td>
<td>N$_2$O$_4$</td>
<td>(h)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Fateley et al. (1959); *b* Legoy & Legay-Sommaire (1995); *c* Shimanouci (1977); *d* Jacob (1998); *e* Andrews & Anderson (1981); *f* Jamieson et al. (2005); *g* Fulvio et al. (2009); *h* Wiener & Nixon (1957); R = Torsional lattice vibrations.
Figure 5. IR spectra of the icy mixture NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ = 1:1 at 16 and 60 K. Unidentified bands are indicated with a question mark.

Figure 6. IR spectra of the icy mixture NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ deposited at 16 K and after three irradiations (see label). For the sake of clarity three different spectral regions are shown, with optimized y-scale. Unidentified bands are indicated with a question mark.
Figure 7. IR spectra of the icy mixture NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ deposited at 60 K and after three ion irradiations (see label). For the sake of clarity three different spectral regions are shown, with optimized y-scale. Unidentified bands are indicated with a question mark.

Table 4. N-O species formed under ion irradiation of the NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixture at 16 and 60 K, main IR peak positions, assignments, and band strength (A-value) used (in bold) to calculate the column density of the produced molecules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Wavenumber (cm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>A-value (x10$^{-17}$ cm mol$^{-1}$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>1869$^a$,b</td>
<td>$\nu_1$</td>
<td>0.68$^c$</td>
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<tr>
<td>(NO)$_2$</td>
<td>1764$^a$,b,1869$^a$,b</td>
<td>$\nu_3$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$O</td>
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<td>$\nu_1$</td>
<td>at 16 K = 5.7$^f$; at 60 K = 5.1$^f$</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>$\nu_4$</td>
<td>6.0$^g$</td>
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<td>1598$^a$,d,1833$^a$,d</td>
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<td>-</td>
</tr>
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<td>1243$^a$,d,1340$^a$,d</td>
<td>$\nu_{10}$</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Fateley et al. (1959); $^b$Legay & Legay-Sommaire (1995); $^c$Fulvio et al. (2009); $^d$Jacox (1998); $^e$Jamieson et al. (2005); $^f$Hudson et al. (2017); $^g$de Barros et al. (2017).

depend on the stopping power, the cross sections given in 16u / eV units are, in first approximation, independent of the particular ion considered. Thus a comparison with other experimental studies and the extrapolation to astrophysical environments is straightforward.

From Fig. 9 and Table 5 we can see that the destruction of N$_2$O$_4$ by ion irradiation (right-hand) is almost independent of the temperature, with small differences only at the beginning of the irradiation where N$_2$O$_4$ at 16 K is destroyed faster than at 60 K. Once irradiation reaches higher doses it looks like the maximum amount of N$_2$O$_4$ destroyed by ion irradiation is equal to about 70%, independently of temperature. This means that equilibrium is reached among the N$_2$O$_4$ destruction and re-formation rates, where its re-formation is due to the ion processing of the daughter species that meanwhile have increased their concentration within the irradiated ice. Even more interesting is the case of ion irradiation of N$_2$O (left-hand side of Fig. 9). We point out that when irradiating the N$_2$O ice at 50 K we had to stop the irradiation experiment at a lower dose than in the experiment at 16 K. As a consequence, at 50 K we only have data for the beginning of the irradiation and we did not consider fitting the data in this case. Nevertheless, it looks like, where available, the two set of data are superimposed (within the uncertainties of the measurements) and the fitting of the experimental data at 16 K works quite well also for the data at 50 K. In other words, the destruction of N$_2$O by ion irradiation seems independent of the ice temperature in the range investigated. Another interesting aspect is that the amount of N$_2$O destroyed by ion irradiation at the maximum dose reached in our experiments is about 98%, i.e. the N$_2$O ice is almost entirely destroyed.
Ion irradiation of N$_2$O and NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ mixtures

It is well known that fast ions (keV–MeV) colliding with frozen samples release their energy along the ion track causing the formation of molecular fragments and radicals which recombine quickly (one picosecond or less) giving rise to molecular species not present in the original sample. As a consequence original species are destroyed and the chemical composition of the samples may be significantly modified.

The destruction of frozen N$_2$O, NO$_2$, and N$_2$O$_4$ induced by ion irradiation in space is still scarcely understood and with the current work we want to contribute to fill in this void. For this, we have presented the results of ion irradia-
tion experiments of (i) N$_2$O ices at 16 K and 50 K and (ii) NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixtures at 16 K and 60 K. The experiments were performed at the indicated temperatures to comprehend a large range of case–studies, from the ices covering interstellar grains to the frozen surface of the outer Solar System objects.

The results presented in the current study show that irradiation of N$_2$O at 16 K or at 50 K produces similar effects. The most abundant molecules appearing after ion irrad-
iation are: NO/(NO)$_2$, N$_2$O, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$, N$_2$O$_5$, O$_3$ (Figs. 2 and 3). Among the daughter species, NO and N$_2$O$_4$ are the main products, independently of the irradiation temperature, while N$_2$O$_3$ and N$_2$O$_5$ are seen only in small amounts (Fig. 4). Similarly, ion irradiation of NO$_2$:N$_2$O$_4$ ice mixture at 16 K or at 60 K produces comparable effects as well. The most abundant molecules produced by ion irradiation are: NO/(NO)$_2$, N$_2$O, N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$ and O$_3$ (Figs. 6 and 7). Among the daughter species, NO is again the main product, independently of the irradiation temperature, while N$_2$O$_3$, N$_2$O$_4$, and N$_2$O$_5$ are detected only in small amounts (Fig. 8). In addition, the experiments suggest that in neither N$_2$O$_4$ nor N$_2$O does the temperature of the ice play a crucial role when analyzing the destruction rate of the parent species. The amount of N$_2$O$_4$ and N$_2$O destroyed by ion irradiation within the maximum dose reached in our experiments is equal to about 70 and 98%, respectively (Fig. 9). For a detailed discussion on the reaction network which drives the destruction of N–O species and the formation of daughter molecules the reader is referred to dedicated works such as Almeida et al. (2017) and de Barros et al. (2017).

To understand the astrophysical implications of the experiments here presented, we compared the dose range covered in the performed experiments with the irradiation dose suffered by surfaces in the outer Solar System and the ISM and, eventually, with the astrophysical timescale of sur-
Combining the results presented here with those reported in Sicilia et al. (2012), it is possible to conclude that the solid NO feature at about 1870 cm$^{-1}$ (5.35 μm) is potentially detectable in young stellar objects (YSOs). In fact the expected abundance of NO produced after ion processing of icy grain mantles is of the order of 10$^{-2}$ with respect to carbon monoxide (e.g., Sicilia et al. 2012). Assuming that the fractional abundance of CO is 10$^{-4}$ (Ferriking et al. 1982; Wilson & Rood 1994), then the fractional abundance of solid NO would be 10$^{-6}$. Being the column density of hydrogen towards YSOs of the order of 10$^{22}$-10$^{23}$ molecules/cm$^2$ (Tiels et al. 1991), then it is expected a column density for solid NO of the order of 10$^{16}$-10$^{17}$ molecules/cm$^2$. Using the A-value reported in Table 2 this corresponds to a band area, in optical depth scale, ranging from 0.068 to 0.68 cm$^{-1}$. The Full Width at Half Maximum (FWHM) of the NO band will depend on the mixture the molecule is embedded in. For CO-rich or N$_2$-rich mixtures the FWHM of the NO band is about 2 cm$^{-1}$. As a consequence the optical depth at peak position would range from 0.3 to 0.03. These values are above the detection limit of the MIRI instrument aboard the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST; Wells et al. 2015). Furthermore the NO feature at about 1870 cm$^{-1}$ is not expected to be superposed to other bands due to more abundant species.

As concerns the other N–O species studied in this work, the most intense NO$_2$ band which falls around 1615 cm$^{-1}$ is superposed to the strong H$_2$O band at 1660 cm$^{-1}$ and would be very hardly detectable. The main N$_2$O band occurs around 2240 cm$^{-1}$. It is superposed to the broad HNCO band at about 2260 cm$^{-1}$ which is also expected.
to be present in the spectra taken towards YSOs (e.g., Fedoseev et al. 2018). A quantitative estimation of the expected column density of N$_2$O in icy grain mantles is not straightforward. In fact it has been shown that N$_2$O is also formed in variable amount after energetic processing of other ice mixtures, like for instance CO:CH$_4$:N$_2$, H$_2$O:CH$_4$:N$_2$, CH$_3$OH:N$_2$ (e.g., Baratta et al. 2015; Fedoseev et al. 2018). If detected by the JWST, the intensity of the N$_2$O band with respect to the NO and HNCO features could give insights about the starting composition of icy grain mantles.

To the best of our knowledge, the bands due to N–O species cannot be detected with current IR telescopes. In fact, the wavelength value of 5.35 m is outside the range (1–5 m) of the VLT-ISAAC and Gemini-NIRI spectrographs. The Spitzer Space Telescope IRS spectrograph covered the spectral region at about 5.35 m with low resolution (R=1/Δλ ~ 100) and low signal to noise ratio S/N=50–100 (e.g., Houck et al. 2004; Boogert et al. 2008; Öberg et al. 2011). These values are significantly lower than the values which will be reached with the JWST (R=1500–3000 and S/N=100–300). As a consequence, presently, no conclusions can be drawn on the presence of NO in icy grain mantles. Moreover, the N$_2$O band at 2240 cm$^{-1}$ (4.46 m) is not accessible by ground based telescopes because of telluric absorption and it is outside the range observable with Spitzer.

To date, only NO, HNO and N$_2$O have been identified in the ISM and then only in gas–phase (see for instance Quintana-Lacaci et al. 2013; Codella et al. 2018). Despite NO$_2$ has been extensively searched, it has not been detected so far (Hallen et al. 2001). NO is expected to be formed in the gas phase at an abundance comparable to the observed temperature (R=1/Δλ ~ 100) and low signal to noise ratio S/N=50–100 (e.g., Houck et al. 2004; Boogert et al. 2008; Öberg et al. 2011). These values are significantly lower than the values which will be reached with the JWST (R=1500–3000 and S/N=100–300). As a consequence, presently, no conclusions can be drawn on the presence of NO in icy grain mantles. Moreover, the N$_2$O band at 2240 cm$^{-1}$ (4.46 m) is not accessible by ground based telescopes because of telluric absorption and it is outside the range observable with Spitzer.

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