

Report

Examination of *Portrait of a man*

Canvas on panel, 33.0 x 40.0 cm.
Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria
Felton Bequest, 1940



Fig 1. *Portrait of a man* (F 209 JH 1201)

Literature and dating

Portrait of a man was published in J.-B de la Faille's 1928 oeuvre catalogue.¹ The author believed it was painted in Van Gogh's Antwerp period, an opinion shared by Walther Vanbeselaere in 1937. He proposed the date of February of 1886, referring to a letter written in Antwerp in which Van Gogh mentioned a portrait of an old Frenchman.² De la Faille also gave a more specific date in the 1939 edition of his oeuvre catalogue – however, not February, but January 1886.³ He did not refer to a letter and gave no explanation.

The F-numbers in the text refer to J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh. His Paintings and Drawings*, Amsterdam 1970, the JH-numbers to Jan Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh. Paintings, Drawings, Sketches ...*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1996; and the FF-numbers to J.-B. de la Faille, *Les faux Van Gogh*, Paris & Brussels 1930. References to Van Gogh's letters consist of two numbers, referring respectively to *De brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, 4 vols., ed. H. van Crimpen, M. Berends-Albert, The Hague 1990; and *Verzamelde brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, 4 vols., ed. V.W. van Gogh, Amsterdam and Antwerp 1952-54.

¹ J.-B. de la Faille, *L'oeuvre de Vincent van Gogh. Catalogue Raisonné*, 4 vols., Paris & Brussels 1928, vol. 2, no. 209, p. 62.

² Walther Vanbeselaere, Appendix [to his *De Nederlandsche periode (1880/1885) in het werk van Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)*, Antwerp and Amsterdam 1937]: *Antwerpsche tijd*, manuscript 1937, p. 542 (Van Gogh Museum Library, no. T 135), and letter 568/457.

³ J.-B de la Faille, *Vincent van Gogh*, New York and Paris 1939, p. 177.

In 1948, the idea of an origin in Antwerp was questioned by Mark Tralbaut. He criticized Vanbeselaere's reference to the February letter, suggesting that in this letter Van Gogh was describing the portrait of a man who had already posed for him in December 1885 (fig. 2).⁴ He also had doubts about the Antwerp date. He believed that the virtuosity of the brushstrokes for the curls of the hair was perhaps more typical of Van Gogh's 'Parisian experiments in drawing and, more particularly, painting'.⁵ Tralbaut added, however, that De la Faille had told him personally that the Dutch painter A.H.C. Briët – who studied at the Antwerp Academy in the same period as Van Gogh – 'expressly stated that he had seen that model there'.⁶ Despite De la Faille's testimony, Tralbaut was not convinced. He declared that further research was necessary and did *not* include the work in his reconstruction of Van Gogh's Antwerp oeuvre.⁷



Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of an old man* (F 205 JH 971), 1885. Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum

Probably as a result of Tralbaut's criticism, De la Faille changed his opinion about the date. In the 1970 edition of his oeuvre catalogue the portrait was dated 'Paris summer 1886', and the editors provided the following arguments: 'Stylistically there is no reason to place F 209 in Antwerp; it is connected with the still lifes and flower pieces of summer 1886'.⁸ However, six years later Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov was

⁴ Mark Edo Tralbaut, *Vincent van Gogh's Antwerpsche periode*, Amsterdam 1948, p. 222; see also letter 550/439.

⁵ 'Parijzer teeken- en vooral schilder-experimenten', *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁶ '...uitdrukkelijk [zou] hebben verklaard aldaar dat model te hebben gezien', *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, and see also p. 284, no. 40.

⁸ J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh. His Paintings and Drawings*, Amsterdam 1970, p. 184, no. 209.

not persuaded by their arguments, and she moved the date of the portrait even further into the Paris period: 'possibly late 1886 or 1887'.⁹ She referred to a still life, *Cinerarias in a Flowerpot* (Rotterdam, Boijmans Van Beuningen),¹⁰ and to two letters: one to Livens in the autumn of 1886, and one written in mid 1888. In the first letter Van Gogh mentions 'two heads which I dare say are better in light and colour than those I did before', and Welsh-Ovcharov believed that the Melbourne portrait could be one of them.¹¹ In the 1888 letter Van Gogh wrote about an 'old Bohemian student fellow I knew last year', and this man (named 'Raoul'), Welsh-Ovcharov argued, could be the one depicted in the Melbourne portrait.¹² In 1992, however, she withdrew the first reference and instead referred to another letter – one written by Theo in February 1887, in which he mentions 'a couple of portraits [by Vincent] that have turned out well'.¹³

In 1977, swayed by Welsh-Ovcharov's opinion, Jan Hulsker placed the work in January-March 1887,¹⁴ later changing this to 'Winter 1886-87'.¹⁵ Although Ann Galbally wrote in 1987 that the Melbourne portrait was 'painted [by Van Gogh] in the last weeks before he left Holland', from then on it was generally believed that the work was made in his Paris period.¹⁶ 'Head of a man dates from Vincent's first year in Paris, somewhere between the second half of 1886 and early 1887', we are told in the 1993 exhibition catalogue *Shell presents Van Gogh. His Sources, Genius and Influence*.¹⁷ It was described as 'a transitional work; it is still Realist in style, but there are moves towards using more colour and to a greater freedom of technique'. A detailed description of the work was given to support this idea: 'The hair, the beard and moustache, which at first sight appear brown or black, on closer inspection

⁹ Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh. His Paris Period 1886-1888*, Utrecht & The Hague 1976, appendix IV, pp. 89, 224 (F 282 JH 1165). The two suggestions are contradictory. In one case the portrait supposedly dates from the autumn of 1886, and in the other from 1887.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224. The work is F 282 JH 1165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89, and letter 572/459a. For her dating of the letter to the autumn of 1886, see *ibid.*, p. 211.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 224, and letter 660/518.

¹³ 'He [Vincent] has painted a couple of portraits that have turned out well, but he always does it for nothing. It's a pity he has no desire to start earning something, because if he wanted to he could do it here; but you can't change a person' ('Hij heeft een paar portretten geschilderd die goed zijn uitgevallen, maar hij doet het altijd voor niets. Het is jammer dat hij geen lust krijgt om wat te gaan verdienen, want als hij het wilde zou hij het hier wel kunnen; maar men kan een mensch niet veranderen'). Letter of 28 February 1887 to his mother (Van Gogh Museum, inv. no. b 906). Welsh-Ovcharov refers to this in her letter to Sonia Dean, 20 February 1992 (Archive, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria).

¹⁴ Jan Hulsker, *Van Gogh en zijn weg. Het complete werk*, Amsterdam 1977, no. 1201 on p. 265, see also p. 266.

¹⁵ Jan Hulsker, *The New Complete Van Gogh. Paintings, Drawings, Sketches*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1996, p. 264.

¹⁶ Ann Galbally, *The Collections of the National Gallery of Victoria*, Oxford (Auckland) & New York 1987, p. 200.

¹⁷ James Mollison *et al.*, exh. cat. *Shell presents Van Gogh. His Sources, Genius and Influence*, Melbourne (National Gallery of Victoria) 1993-94, p. 76, cat. 34.

contain unexpected passages of pure ultramarine and crimson, sometimes the two applied in a single stroke, especially in the hair. Details of the eyes are painted in short vertical and horizontal strokes, of violet, cobalt and ultramarine, the pupils of the eyes in dark violet, while the underpainting of the moustache is in vertical strokes of delicate light blue and ochre. [...] The introduction of pure colour into a largely monochromatic palette seems to be in keeping with Vincent's aim of lightening and brightening his palette away from grey harmonies.'

This line of argumentation was followed in 2000 by George T.M. Shackelford, who wrote that the portrait showed 'evidence of some awareness of impressionism'.¹⁸ In 2006, Martin Bailey shared this opinion in his exhibition catalogue *Van Gogh and Britain. Pioneer Collectors*. He thought that the dating 'of the Melbourne portrait is difficult because it shares some characteristics of the artist's work in Nuenen and Antwerp, such as the more naturalistic use of colour, the dark palette and denser brushwork. But a closer examination of the colours suggests that it must have been done in Paris, after Van Gogh had encountered Impressionism'.¹⁹ He consequently placed it 'in the winter of 1886 or possibly very early in 1887', and suggested that the subject was 'a friend of Van Gogh, possibly a fellow artist'.

Provenance

The provenance of the work is incomplete. De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue of 1928 only mentions the owner of the portrait at the time, the Abels Art Gallery in Cologne, and this was repeated in the 1939 oeuvre catalogue. The 1970 edition came up with new facts, but only related to the history of the work after 1933. The work proved to have been sold at auction in Amsterdam in that year.²⁰

However, new information has been found. In the archive of the Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague there is a typed memorandum, probably written by De la Faille, giving additional information about the earliest history of the work, albeit without mentioning any dates.²¹ The memo is in French and must have been written after 1928 and before 1933.²² It is strange that these provenance data were not used for De la Faille's oeuvre catalogues of 1939 and 1971, but there is no reason to doubt their reliability.²³

¹⁸ George T.M. Shackelford, 'Van Gogh in Paris. Between the Past and the Future', in: Roland Dorn *et al.*, exh. cat. *Van Gogh Face to Face. The Portraits*, Detroit etc. (Detroit Institute of Arts etc.) 2000-2001, p. 99.

¹⁹ Martin Bailey, *Van Gogh and Britain. Pioneer Collectors*, Edinburgh 2006, p. 116, cat. 32

²⁰ Auction catalogue, *Tableaux modernes de l'école française des XIXe et XXe siècles*, Amsterdam (Mensing & Fils [Frederik Muller et Cie]), 13 June 1933, lot 17. Mentioned in De la Faille, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 619.

²¹ With thanks to Mayken Jonkman, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague.

²² The number of the work in De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue of 1928 is given, but the memo contains no reference to the sale of the portrait in 1933 (see note 20).

²³ The memo is not in the documentation files in accordance with De la Faille's numbering; it is in a separate file drawer, which is currently kept in the 'Vincent van Gogh/Martha Op de Coul'

According to the memorandum, the first owner of the portrait was a certain 'S. à Berlin'. The work passed from him via Galerie 'Goldschmidt & Co' in Berlin, 'Galerie Gurlitt' in Berlin and 'Galerie Abels' in Cologne into the hands of an anonymous collector, 'X à Cologne'. The portrait was then acquired through 'Galerie Goyert' in Cologne and Kunsthandel J.J. 'Biesing' in The Hague by one 'X. à la Haye'. This unknown collector sold it on to one 'De Groot' in the same city.

To the best of our knowledge, the files of the art dealers Goldschmidt & Co., Gurlitt, Abels and Goyert were lost in the Second World War.²⁴ Likewise there are no known records of the Dutch art dealer Biesing, and this makes it difficult to check the information in the memo. It does, however, tell us that the portrait fetched up in the *Netherlands* and this ties in satisfactorily with the information referred to above about the sale in *Amsterdam* in 1933.²⁵ Whether the portrait was sold at this auction, we do not know, but in 1937 the new owner was the G.A. Stein Art Gallery in Paris.²⁶ It was afterwards acquired by Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Alexander Cazalet, who owned the work in 1939; he sold it to the Museum in Melbourne in 1940.²⁷

Although we do not know the identity of the collector 'S' in Berlin, it is nonetheless possible to pin down the history of the work in the nineteen-twenties a little more precisely. The portrait was probably included in the *Impressionisten. Sonderausstellung* exhibition of February-March 1928, which was organized by M. Goldschmidt. According to the exhibition catalogue, one of the works at this large show was a 'Männerpörrat' by Van Gogh,²⁸ for which in theory only two work qualify: the portrait in Melbourne and Van Gogh's *Portrait of a Man* dating from early 1887 (location unknown).²⁹ The latter work, however, has a *French* provenance, and this would seem to indicate that the 'Männerpörrat' in the

archive. A copy of the memo can also be found on three photographs of the work in the documentation files in which the information about Van Gogh's work is kept in chronological order (for instance box: Antwerp & Paris, subject: portrait). The editors of De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue of 1970 were certainly aware of the memo. The portrait was described as 'Portrait du peintre Meier de Haan', and one of them, probably Anet Tellegen, noted on the memo: 'This is definitely not Meyer de Haan'. See further note 44.

²⁴ Stefan Koldehoff informed me that the archives of both M. Goldschmidt and Gurlitt were probably lost in the Second World War. Annelie Prinz gave me the same information about the records of the art gallery run by Wilhelm Goyert in Cologne. The Abels Galerie's files were also destroyed by fire at this time, as we learn from Mark Edo Tralbaut, 'Addenda et corrigenda bij de Antwerpse periode', in his *Van Goghiana I*, Antwerp 1963, p. 82. This was confirmed both by Walter Feilchenfeldt (Zurich) and Dr R. Horstmann (Hamburg). The latter also told me that there had been two art dealers by the name of Abels in Cologne.

²⁵ See note 20.

²⁶ Mentioned in De la Faille, op. cit. (note 8), p. 619.

²⁷ Bailey, op. cit. (note 19), p. 116.

²⁸ Exh. cat. *Impressionisten. Sonderausstellung*, Berlin (M. Goldschmidt & Co.), February-March 1928, p. 21, cat. 13.

²⁹ F 288 JH 1200. According to Stefan Koldehoff, 'When myth seems stronger than scholarship: Van Gogh and the problem of authenticity', *The Van Gogh Museum Journal* 2002, note 30 on p. 30, this 'Männerpörrat' was the Wacker fake FF 539a, but this is not so. See for this note 58.

exhibition is more likely to have been the work in Melbourne, particularly given that we know it had been bought and sold by Goldschmidt shortly before.³⁰

Doubts

The first known critical assessment of the work dates from 1933 when, as we have seen, the work was sold at auction in Amsterdam. According to the Dutch critic Kasper Niehaus, this sale contained many works whose authenticity seemed doubtful. However, in his view the Melbourne portrait seemed to belong to a different group; it was one of those many 'weak pieces ... from the weak moments that every artist has'. He wrote that the portrait was must have been painted in Van Gogh's 'Antwerp period, in a technique that is more reminiscent of his French period', and added: 'These works do little to clarify our image of their makers or confirm the impression that we get from others'.³¹

The second critical assessment was written by Tralbaut; who probably only knew the work from a photograph. In his 1948 book referred to above, he recommends that it should be thoroughly researched, and states categorically that 'in any event it stands entirely alone in the artist's oeuvre. The brushstroke here bears witness to a much more lavish looseness, so much so that we take the view that it would decidedly be worth while to examine it with the aid of the most modern scientific radiation and micro-chemical treatment. Until such time as this is done, we do not wish to include this painting definitely among the Antwerp works'.³² Although he did not say so in so many words, his first two observations (the portrait stands out in Van Gogh's oeuvre, and the brushstroke is looser than one would expect for a painting by him), taken in conjunction with the unusual proposal of a complete and thorough investigation, suggest perhaps that it was not just the Antwerp date he was unhappy about – he did not trust the authenticity of the painting either.

Tralbaut's suggestion was not followed up, but around 1992 James Mollison again proposed the need for an extensive investigation of the painting when the museum in Melbourne was organizing *Shell presents Van Gogh. His Sources, Genius and Influence*, the first exhibition on Van Gogh in Australia. He intended to send the

³⁰ At the time of the exhibition Goldschmidt had evidently already sold the work on to the Abels Galerie. At any rate De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue, which appeared in the spring of 1928, recorded the latter as the owner.

³¹ '... zwakke stukken [...] uit de zwakke oogenblikken, die elk kunstenaar heeft' ... '... Antwerpschen tijd, in een techniek, die eer aan z'n Franschen tijd doet denken.' ... 'Deze werken dragen er weinig toe bij onze voorstelling omtrent hun makers te verhelderen of de indrukken, die wij van andere kregen, te bevestigen'. Kasper Niehaus, 'Veiling eener middelmatige collectie. Doeken van vaag-omschreven herkomst bij Fred. Muller & Cie. Echt of onecht? Geringe zekerheden', *De Telegraaf*, 8 June 1933.

³² '... in het oeuvre van den kunstenaar in alle geval geheel op zich zelf [staat]. De penseeltoets getuigt hier van zulke veel royalere losheid, dat het ons dunkens beslist de moeite loonen zou hem, aan de hand van de meest moderne wetenschappelijke stralen- en mikro-chemische behandeling, te onderzoeken. In afwachting dat zulks gebeure, wenschen wij dit schilderij niet definitief op te nemen in de rij der Antwerpsche werken.' Tralbaut, op. cit. (note 4), p. 223.

work to the Van Gogh Museum for examination, but nothing came of it.³³ As we have seen, however, a new interpretation of the portrait was presented in the exhibition catalogue: it was now called a 'transitional work', and its date was changed from the winter of 1886-87 – Hulsker's suggestion – to 'somewhere between the second half of 1886 and early 1887'.

In 2006, the portrait was shown in Europe for the first time after its acquisition in 1940 by the Melbourne museum. The painting was included in the exhibition *Van Gogh and Britain. Pioneer Collectors* in Compton Verney and Edinburgh and, after studying it, Ronald Pickvance openly expressed his doubts as to its authenticity in his review in the *Burlington Magazine*. According to this author, the painting 'does not inspire confidence. It has been placed in the Antwerp period by some and in Paris by others, including Bailey who asserts that the colours reflect Van Gogh's encounter with Impressionism. It is surely more likely to be one of his competent fellow students from Antwerp'.³⁴

The identification of the portrait

The identity of the man in the portrait is unknown. He has blue eyes, dark brown curly hair, and seems to be in his forties – if one is allowed to make a guess at his age. There have been several attempts to link him to Van Gogh's world, but none of these has been persuasive.

He is not the old Frenchman from Van Gogh's letters, as was suggested by Vanbeselaere. This man had 'a type of head in the style of V. Hugo's', wrote Van Gogh.³⁵ He was familiar with Bonnat's portrait of Hugo (fig. 3), and this work

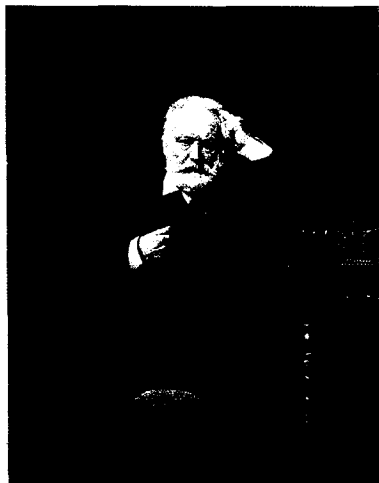


Fig. 3 Léon Bonnat, *Portrait of Victor Hugo*, 1879.
Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

³³ James Mollison to Ronald de Leeuw, letters 7 October 1992 and 7 June 1993, and Louis van Tilborgh to James Mollison, 16 June 1993 (Van Gogh Museum Archive).

³⁴ Ronald Pickvance, 'Van Gogh. Compton Verney and Edinburgh', *The Burlington Magazine*, July 2006, p. 501.

³⁵ ... 'een soort kop in het genre als die van V. Hugo'... Quote from letter 550/439 (see also note 4).

makes it clear that the French author has nothing in common with the subject of the painting in Melbourne.³⁶ There are, though, similarities to the old man in the work in Amsterdam (fig. 2), from which we may safely assume that it was this to which Van Gogh was referring in his letter, as Tralbaut already pointed out in 1948.

As we have seen, according to Tralbaut, Briët suggested to De la Faille that the man in the picture was a model at the Antwerp Academy in 1886.³⁷ Arthur Briët (1867-1939) studied at this academy in the years 1884-86, and his statement must have been based on memory, at least thirty years after the event, so he could be mistaken. In any case his story is difficult to check.³⁸ All we can say is that none of the male models in Van Gogh's Antwerp oeuvre bears any resemblance to the man in the Melbourne portrait.³⁹

De la Faille probably inferred from Briët's account that the portrait was the result of an exercise at the Antwerp Academy, since in the second edition of his oeuvre catalogue he dated the portrait to January 1886 – the month Van Gogh attended the last sessions of the painting class then running.⁴⁰ Painting from the clothed model was certainly part of the curriculum there. The students were given instruction in depicting full-length figures, dressed in typical (occupational) clothes – fishermen, farm labourers – but we do not know whether they prepared for this by making studies of heads.⁴¹ Van Gogh did paint a child's head at the Academy, so the possibility cannot be ruled out.⁴²

³⁶ Bonnat's portrait is mentioned in letter 290/248; Van Gogh had probably seen engravings of it.

³⁷ See note 6. As far as we know, Briët did not attend the same classes. In 1885-86 he was not enrolled for the 'figure' course, but for 'nature', which probably meant life drawing (Archief Koninklijke Academie, Antwerp, inv. no. 289, Register 1885-1891); see also Saskia de Bodt, *Halverwege Paris. Willem Roelofs en de Nederlandse schilderskolonie in Brussel 1840-1890*, Ghent 1995, p. 249. Briët lived at number 20 Korte Beeldekensstraat, just around the corner from Van Gogh. He is mentioned in letter 572/459a.

³⁸ We have been unable to trace any work by Briët dating from this time. K. Roodenburg, *Kunstenaars op de Noordwest Veeuwe 1880-1930*, Harderwijk 1992, p. 144, reports the existence of a 'sheet of studies of heads' supposedly depicting 'a number of Antwerp types from his time at the academy', but this drawing could not be located. The author died recently and the sheet is not with his heirs. With sincere thanks to Mrs A.H.C. Briët and Mayken Jonkman.

³⁹ For Van Gogh's Antwerp drawings, see Sjraar van Heugten and Marije Vellekoop, *Vincent van Gogh. Drawings. Volume 3. Antwerp & Paris 1885-1888. Van Gogh Museum*, Amsterdam, Blaricum & London 2001, pp. 41-82.

⁴⁰ Van Gogh attended the painting course at the Academy between 18 January 1886 and the end of the month; see Sjraar van Heugten, 'Van Gogh in Antwerp and Paris: modern art for modern times', in: Van Heugten and Vellekoop, op. cit. (note 39), p. 13.

⁴¹ This had been introduced for the genre painters, see Jeanne Sheehy, 'The flight from South Kensington: British Artists at the Antwerp Academy', *Art History*, 20 (March 1997), p. 131. Comparison with Van Gogh's paintings from the figure course is impossible: we know of no example of his exercises in this class.

⁴² In his correspondence he only mentions two paintings: 'the head of a child' and 'two wrestlers' (Letters 557/446 and 558/447).

The other possibility is that the model from the Academy posed for Van Gogh in his room in (Lange) Beeldekensstraat (or Rue des Images). However, one does not get the impression that Vincent was able to persuade men to pose for paintings while he was in Antwerp: the old Frenchman (fig. 2) is the only existing male portrait in his Antwerp oeuvre. He is also the only male model mentioned in his letters of this period – all Van Gogh's other actual and potential models were *women*.⁴³

In the memorandum of 1928-1933 the work is described as a 'Portrait du peintre Meier de Haan'.⁴⁴ This idea is repeated in Gerson's *Vóór en Na Van Gogh* of 1961, but was rightly dismissed by the editors of De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue of 1970.⁴⁵ His physiognomy is totally different (fig. 4) and, even more importantly, Van Gogh never met this Dutch painter.⁴⁶

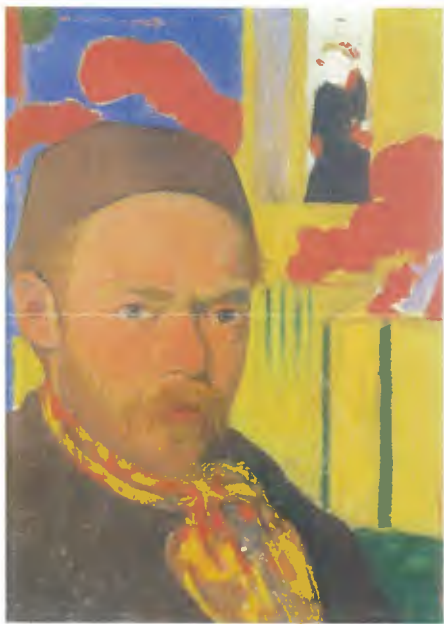


Fig. 4 Meyer de Haan, *Self-Portrait with Japanese background*, 1889. Triton Foundation, The Netherlands.

⁴³ Men from Antwerp are depicted in only two (or three) small drawings in his sketchbooks; see Johannes van der Wolk, *The seven sketchbooks of Vincent van Gogh. A facsimile edition*, New York 1986, p. 99, no. SB 2/21 [Nuenen or Antwerp], p. 129, no. SB 3/1 (Antwerp: 'the old Frenchman'), and p. 130, no. SB 3/2 (Antwerp: a man in an apron); for the last two sketches see Van Heugten & Vellekoop, op. cit. (note 39), pp. 41-45, cat. 210 (F 1359 JH 984) and cat. 211 (F 1358 JH 980).

⁴⁴ See note 6. De la Faille must have rejected the idea since he did not mention it in his oeuvre catalogue of 1939. This may well provide us with an explanation of his failure to include the provenance data on the same index card. They were probably overlooked since they are not referred to until later in the memo.

⁴⁵ H. Gerson, *Vóór en Na Van Gogh. De Nederlandse schilderkunst*, vol. 3, Amsterdam 1961, ill. 82; De la Faille, op. cit. (note 8), p. 184: 'The sitter has been called, erroneously, the painter Meyer de Haan'.

⁴⁶ De Haan came to Paris in October 1888 to move in with Theo, Vincent's brother; he stayed until around April 1889; see also letter 718/T3.



Fig. 5 François Aimé de Lemud, *Le café*.
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes.

Welsh-Ovcharov's suggestion in 1976 that the man in the Melbourne painting could be the bohemian student mentioned in an Arles letter seems unlikely. His curly hair does give the man in the Melbourne portrait something of a bohemian look, but he has little in common with the drinking man in the engraving by François Aimé Lemud to which Van Gogh links this 'Raoul'. The man in this engraving is well-groomed and so is difficult to compare with the man in the painting in Melbourne (fig. 5).⁴⁷

Finally, the validity of Welsh-Ovcharov's idea that the work could perhaps be what Van Gogh is referring to in the letter he wrote to Livens in the autumn of 1886 (later changed to a reference to Theo's letter of February 1887) can only be tested if it can be proved that the portrait in Melbourne is authentic. The descriptions of the portraits in the two letters are neutral, not specific, which means they cannot be put forward as direct *evidence* in a debate about the genuineness of the work in question.

⁴⁷ Letter 660/518: 'Je t'enverrai en même temps que les dessins que j'ai en train deux lithographies de de Lemud, "le vin" et "le café"; dans "le vin" il y a un espèce de Mefisto qui fait un peu penser à C.M. plus jeune, et dans le café – .. c'est absolument Raoul – tu sais cet espèce d'étudiant vieux bohème encore que j'ai connu l'année passée' ('At the same time as the drawings that I have in progress I'll send you two lithographs by De Lemud, 'Wine' and 'The café'; in 'Wine' there's a Mephisto character who makes you think a little of CM when younger, and in The café –.. it's absolutely Raoul – you know, that perpetual old bohemian student type whom I knew last year.')

Style and technique

As we have seen, the portrait is dated variously in the literature: in January-February 1886, in the summer and autumn of 1886 and in the winter of 1886-87. In only a few cases have stylistic comparisons with specific paintings by Van Gogh been made. In defending their dating of the work to the summer of 1886, the editors of De la Faille's oeuvre catalogue of 1970 pointed to the still lifes done in this period, but did not elaborate on this, which makes it difficult to discover where they saw similarities. Welsh-Ovcharov cited *Cinerarias in a Flowerpot* to demonstrate that the portrait must have been done in the period from late 1886 to early 1887 and expanded on this later with references to other still lifes and landscapes from roughly the same time.⁴⁸ She talks about the 'Realist style', 'colour' and 'brushwork', but she, too, was nowhere really specific, and this makes it hard to verify her assertions.

It is odd that it is always still lifes and landscapes that are mentioned as comparisons, not *portraits*, which would seem to be the far more obvious choice. After all, the crucial question is whether the characteristics of the painting can also be found in Van Gogh's portraits and self-portraits from this period – late 1885 to early 1886.⁴⁹ The chronological *lower limit* of this group is formed by his dark, earthy Nuenen heads, with which this work has little in common, while the *upper limit* is marked by his *Self-portrait with a glass* and *Portrait of Père Tanguy*.⁵⁰ In these last two paintings, done in January 1887, we can detect the first influences of Toulouse-Lautrec's *peinture à l'essence* and the Neo-Impressionist view of art, and these elements are likewise absent from the portrait.⁵¹ A comparison of the portrait in Melbourne with the portrait and self-portraits from the group thus defined revealed the following.

⁴⁸ In her letter of 1992 (see note 13) Welsh-Ovcharov also mentioned *Moulin de la Galette* (F 227 JH 1170), *The Hill of Montmartre* (F 230 JH 1177), *Vase of Gladioli* (F 237 JH 1131), *La Guinguette* (F 238 JH 1178), *Bowl with Sunflowers, Roses and Other Flowers* (F 250 JH 1166), *Mussels and Shrimps* (F 256 JH 1169), *The outskirts of Paris* (F 264 JH 1179), *Still Life with Red Herrings* (F 283 JH 1120), and *Basket of Sprouting Bulbs* (F 336 JH 1227). These works are different in style and technique, while *Basket of Sprouting Bulbs* falls outside the period described as central here: the work dates from January-February 1887. Furthermore, *Cinerarias in a Flowerpot* (F 282 JH 1165) seems more likely to have been painted in Nuenen than in Paris.

⁴⁹ These are the following paintings: *Antwerp, winter 1885-86* (F 205 JH 971, F 206 JH 972, F 207a JH 1204, F 174 JH 978, and F 207 JH 979); *Paris, spring 1886* (F 208 JH 1195, F 215c JH -, and F 215d JH -); *Paris, autumn-winter 1886-87* (F 208a JH 1089, F 181 JH 1090, F 180 JH 1194, F 263a JH 1199, and F 263 JH 1202). F 288 JH 1200 is only known to us as a reproduction, and the date of F 178v JH 1198 is not entirely clear to us. For the dating of these works, see Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilborgh, *New views on Van Gogh's Development in Antwerp and Paris An integrated Art Historical and Technical study of his Paintings in the Van Gogh Museum / Nieuwe visies op Van Goghs ontwikkeling in Antwerp en Paris. Een geïntegreerde technische en kunsthistorische studie van zijn schilderijen in het Van Gogh Museum*, 2 vols., PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam 2006, vol. 2.

⁵⁰ F 263a JH 1199 and F 263 JH 1202.

⁵¹ For Van Gogh's development at this time, see Hendriks and Van Tilborgh, op. cit. (note 49), vol. 1, pp. 75-81, 198-200.

Its composition is unusual for Van Gogh. In his studies of heads and bust-length portraits he always showed more of the clothes than just the top of the shoulders. On the other hand, the canvas was originally bigger. At some point the edges have been cut away with a sharp knife (see the Technical Examination Report, p. 7). It is not possible to tell how large it was. This means we do not know whether the original composition did in fact correspond to his customary portrait compositions at that time.

The man's head is shown against a fairly light background, the precise colour of which is difficult to determine because of the layer of discoloured varnish that presently covers it (see the Technical Examination Report, p. 10). Van Gogh occasionally used a light background in his studies of Nuenen peasants,⁵² but he did not do this in the key period we are looking at here.

A striking feature of the portrait is the combination of a fairly coarse and a detailed painting style. The former is most evident in the hair on the man's head, and the second in his face. Typical of the latter approach is the handling of the eyes, from which the portrait derives its charm. The artist in question took the trouble to paint the eyebrows and eyelashes individually; he has even rendered the wrinkles in the corners of the eyes, while the inside of the right eyelid is suggested by an infinitely fine red line. We also find this refined detailing in the lips and the beard, where quite thin paint has been used.

This sort of level of detail for the mouth, eyes and beard was foreign to Van Gogh and we find no comparable details in any portrait or self-portrait by him. The maker of the portrait in Melbourne moreover left gaps for the fine outlines of the lips and some tiny hairs in the beard immediately below in his initial blocking of the face (see the Technical Examination Report, p. 9), and we know of no parallels to this in Van Gogh's oeuvre either. Like the beard and the eyes, the skin is also suggested by means of a fairly detailed manner of painting and this, too, does not square with the – fairly coarse – way Van Gogh handled it in his portraits and self-portraits.⁵³

At upper left and lower right in the background we can see a cross-hatched stroke. Van Gogh used this brush stroke for filling in backgrounds from the time he studied with Cormon in the spring of 1886 onwards, but since this was a standard solution at the time (and one which was not executed with any great emphasis in the portrait), this is no more than a coincidental similarity. The jacket is suggested with a few fairly schematic touches, with some modelling by means of slightly curved, round strokes. Van Gogh also rendered clothes schematically in his portraits, but he used long, parallel lines (see fig. 2).

Anatomically the portrait has turned out rather odd. The artist accidentally created too much space between the eyes (assuming that the subject did not actually have such marked and unlikely physiognomic abnormalities). The right side of the nose and the right eye are consequently out of kilter and the upper part of

⁵² See for example F 133 JH 584, F 153 JH 587, F 153a JH 586, and F 168 JH 632.

⁵³ This does not include the portraits and self-portraits like F 208a JH 1089 and F 208 JH 1195, in which he worked with thin paint and only used impasto in the light passages.

the face also came out too wide, so that the maker felt compelled to make a number of corrections in the hair. However there are no parallels for this fault in Van Gogh's oeuvre. In fact, he had the unconscious habit in three-quarter profile faces of showing more of the side of the face that was turned away than was strictly realistic; in other words the opposite to what we see here.⁵⁴

To the best of our current knowledge, the painting materials used also have no direct parallel in Van Gogh's oeuvre. The composition of the primer used on the canvas does not correspond with any of Van Gogh's works from his Antwerp and Paris periods that have been analyzed so far (see the Report of the Sample Analysis, p. 5). The artist has used pure umber in the portrait, and current thinking is that this disappeared from Van Gogh's oeuvre around June-July 1886 (see the Report of the Sample Analysis, p. 5). In terms of individual pigments, there are consequently no differences between this and his palette from prior to this time, but when we look at the overall colour, the anomalies come to light. Traditional and modern colours have been used side by side in the portrait, and that does not point to Van Gogh. In his portraits and self-portraits in the period from December 1885 to the summer of 1886, he either used a conventional palette or modern colours.⁵⁵ In the portrait in Melbourne, however, the modern pigments do not provide the main tone: they are used solely as accents.

Conclusion

This examination reveals that there are more differences than similarities between the portrait in Melbourne and Van Gogh's Paris and Antwerp oeuvre, and the sum of the anomalies makes it plain that the work cannot be attributed to Van Gogh. Pickvance thought that the maker was probably 'one of his competent fellow students from Antwerp', but at present there are no indications that lead us to suspect that the artist belonged to Van Gogh's circle of acquaintances – unless one attaches great value to Briët's unverifiable remark that this is a picture of a model in Antwerp.⁵⁶ The provenance of the work is German, and at present that is all that can be said about it. If this work is in fact the 'Männerporträt' at the exhibition staged in 1928 by the art dealer M. Goldschmidt – and this is a reasonable assumption – the work equally has no provenance with it. According to Peter Kropmanns 'figurierten' at this exhibition 'unter dem Namen van Gogh offenbar ausschliesslich Fälschungen',⁵⁷ in other words there were evident Van Gogh

⁵⁴ Hendriks and Van Tilborgh, op. cit. (note 49), vol. 2, p. 38.

⁵⁵ For this see *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 162-163.

⁵⁶ Pickvance, op. cit. (note 34).

⁵⁷ Peter Kropmanns, 'Kunstmarkt Berlin 1928. "Beutekunst" and Fälschungen aus der Galerie M. Goldschmidt & Co.', *Museumsjournal*, 13 (1999), July, p. 9.

forgeries there, and while this may be open to debate and the portrait in Melbourne is certainly no forgery,⁵⁸ we do now know that the work surfaced at the precise moment the critical powers of the experts and dealers involved with Van Gogh had reached an all-time low.⁵⁹

Amsterdam, May 2007
Louis van Tilborgh

⁵⁸ For the exhibition see note 28. Stefan Koldehoff, op. cit. (note 29), note 30 on p. 30, suggested that the 'Männerporträt' (no. 13) might have been the Wacker fake FF 539a. However, this forgery after F 424 JH 1488 is of a Zouave, and it is unlikely that that would not have been mentioned in the title. Koldehoff's identification probably derives from his thesis that virtually all the works attributed to Van Gogh at Goldschmidt's exhibition were Wacker forgeries. This is certainly true of three of them, namely no. 16 (FF 577), no. 20 (FF 63) and no. 21 (FF 741a), as we can see from the illustrations in the exhibition catalogue (on pages 16, 18 and 20). On these grounds, and on the basis of the titles given, it seems reasonable to assume that they also included 'Sämann' (no. 14, FF 705), 'Retour des champs' (no. 15, FF 685) and 'Le champ de blé' (no. 19, FF 823). However, three works, 'Vorstadthaus' (no. 17), 'Auvers' (no. 18) and the 'Männerporträt' (no. 13) cannot be explained in this way.

⁵⁹ See for the critical powers at the time Henk Tromp, *De strijd om de Echte Vincent van Gogh. De kunstexpert als brenger van een onwelkome boodschap 1900-1970*, Amsterdam 2006.

Technical examination report

Painting: Head of a Man, F 209

Artist: Vincent van Gogh?

Date: The painting has variously been dated to the Antwerp or Paris periods of Van Gogh's production.

Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

Current examination and photography: January 2007, by Ella Hendriks, Head of Conservation at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Light microscopy and analysis of paint and thread samples was performed by Muriel Geldof at the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. See her report dated 23-03-2007.



Normal light



Raking light



UV light



Reverse, normal light



Detail of lips filled into reserve area on the white ground



Detail of hair in bright light, revealing pure red and blue colours poorly mixed into dark strokes



Detail of coarse impasto in man's collar, raking light



Detail showing use of 2cm wide bristle brush in the background



Raking light detail of forehead, broadened at left side



Raking light detail of left cheek



Detail of alternate, wet-on-wet working of background and hair

1. Original support (canvas)

The painting was made on a tightly woven, ready-primed artists' canvas. Polarised light microscopy of a sample (a loose fibre from the left bottom edge, sample 1) identified bast fibres, presumably linen, as the support material. Thread counts made from an x-ray of the painting, revealed an average of approximately 14 vertical and 16 horizontal threads per cm.¹

The finished painting has been cut down with a sharp knife at a later date, causing crushing and splintering of brittle (i.e. dry) paint around the edges. It now measures (H) 40.0 x (W) 33.0 cm. The original edges have been entirely lost, and there are no signs of cusping around the edges of the canvas caused by stretching. Hence there is no technical evidence for the original format of the portrait. Similarly, it is no longer apparent how the canvas was held- either stretched on a frame, or pinned onto a flat surface- during preparation and use.

2. Secondary support (triplex)

After it was cut down the painting was stuck onto a slightly larger triplex board measuring (H) 34.0 x (W) 40.8 cm. This leaves a c.5mm border of bare panel visible around the edges of the painting. The dimensions of the marouflaged painting approximate a standard Figure 6 format (c. 41 x 33 cm) used in landscape direction.

The triplex panel consists of a 2mm/3mm/2mm laminate, measuring 7mm thick in total. A meandering grain runs vertically on the front and back sides. The panel has developed a convex warp across its width, seen from the front.

3. Inscriptions and labels

Several inscriptions and labels are present on the back of the triplex, described in approximate sequence of application.

1. A hand-written pencil inscription lower centre reads: 33 Belgrave Sq.
2. Black (chalk?) sketches
 - a head and shoulder profile portrait of a man at the right edge, upside down
 - a schematic standing figure at the left
3. In white chalk: 2L6 (crossed through)
1M B
1B (crossed through)

¹ Comparative research has shown that Van Gogh employed a wide range of canvas weaves in Antwerp and Paris, so that thread count cannot provide specific evidence for the dating or attribution of this *Portrait of an old man*. See: Ella Hendriks and Muriel Geldof, *Van Gogh's Antwerp and Paris picture supports (1885-1888); reconstructing choices*, Art Matters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art, volume 2 (Waanders 2005), pp. 39-76. See too: Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilborgh, *New views on Van Gogh's development in Antwerp and Paris; an integrated art historical and technical study of his paintings in the Van Gogh Museum*, PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, defended 15 November 2006, pp. 116-117 and Table 3.

1. Residues of a circular brown paper sticker in the top left corner, no text
2. Printed brown paper label, top right:
JAMES BOURLET & SONS, Ltd.
Fine Art Packers, Frame Makers
B54968
17 & 18 NASSAU STREET
MORTIMER STREET, W.
Phones; MUSEUM 1871 & 7588
3. Printed label, top left (on top of second application of tape around edges)
OFFICIAL BRITISH AGENTS
JAMES BOURLET & SONS LTD.
17-18 Nassau Street, London, W.1.

4. Framing

The painting is currently fitted with mirror plates top and bottom, into a black shellac frame with a foam-core backboard.

Remains of brown paper margins around all four edges of the panel provide evidence that it was formerly taped into a frame. There are two applications of tape: the first is reddish-brown in colour with a linear grain, and the second, yellowish-brown with a plain surface. The second layer of tape may have been applied when the painting was reframed by the packers and frame making company, Bourlet & Sons, whose label is stuck on top.

There are residues of white gesso and gilding transferred from an old frame rebate that overlapped the painting c. 3mm around its edges. These indicate that the picture was formerly in a gilt frame, or a frame with a gilt liner. Pressure against the frame rebate has caused original paint to deform, notably along the lower left side of the painting where it was pushed up into a barbe (visible with stereo-microscope). This suggests that the paint was in a softened state when the frame was applied, presumably a consequence of the marouflage treatment that has caused significant flattening of original paint texture elsewhere.

5. Ground layers

The canvas is prepared with a white ground, visible in tiny patches when viewed with the stereo-microscope. Generally, the artist covered up the ground with paint, but occasionally exploited it as a figurative element in the finished portrait. Fine margins of ground were used to define the bottom contour of his lips and nostrils for example. Reserves of white ground were also used to depict some of the fine hairs in his beard (a simpler procedure would have been to scratch the lines through wet paint), whereas other hairs were detailed with strokes of light paint.

The ground seems evenly applied, suggesting a commercial application. The composition and build-up of the ground was confirmed by light microscopy and analysis of paint samples 2 & 3. The first ground layer measures up to 150 micron

thick, and contains chalk with some zinc white. The top ground layer is much thinner (10-15 micron) and contains lead white with fillers of chalk and barytes (natural barium sulphate pigment). So far a comprehensive technical study of the preparatory layers present in the Antwerp and Paris pictures by Van Gogh in the Van Gogh Museum collection, has not revealed the artist's use of this particular type of ground.¹

7. Underdrawing

Surface examination with the stereo-microscope did not provide evidence for any preliminary underdrawing in either a dry or wet medium.

8. Painting procedure

Surface examination suggests that the portrait was made in one go, executed wet-in-wet throughout. A paint sample taken from the light background colour at the bottom edge shows that this was built up in three layers, the first two of similar composition and definitely wet-on-wet, with a thin layer on top.

Though there is no evidence for a preliminary sketch, the fact that the main shapes of the portrait were filled into reserve areas suggests that, in fact, they were quite carefully planned (his lips provide the most obvious example of this technique). However, some overlaps did occur as a consequence of adjusting the shape of the sitter's head in the course of painting. Squatter proportions were achieved by slimming down the hair around the top and right sides of the portrait, and by widening the forehead on the left side. These changes remain apparent to the naked eye, since the light-coloured overpaint does not completely disguise the dark paint of his hair underneath. The painter worked alternately back-and-forth between background and portrait, finally adding some loose curls on top of wet background paint to enliven the junction between the two.

9. Colours

Though the general colours of the portrait are subdued, examination in strong light in fact reveals the use of pure bright red and blue colours too: evident as poorly mixed strands of colour within individual dark brushstrokes in the hair, as well as separate bright blue touches in the dark folds of his jacket and in the shadow of his beard.² The blue pigment used has been identified as synthetic ultramarine, present

¹ See Ella Hendriks and Muriel Geldof 2005, op cit., and Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilborgh 2006, pp. 107-128.

² The translucency of the red paint used in the hair suggests an organic red lake pigment, used pure or in mixture. Recent study has provided much information on the changing types of red lake paint that Van Gogh used in Antwerp, and in Paris. See Maarten van Bommel, Muriel Geldof and Ella Hendriks, *An investigation of organic red pigments used in paintings by Vincent van Gogh (November 1885-February 188)*, Art Matters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art, vol. 3, pp. 111-133, (Waanders 2005). In the case of F 209 we refrained from sampling the red lake paint used in the hair, since it was felt that this would prove too invasive. However, the fact that the red paint does not fluoresce in UV light would seem to rule out a madder lake, or Kopp's purpurin (derived from madder); two of the types of red lake that have been identified in Van Gogh's Antwerp and Paris works respectively.

in the mixed paint of the background (sample 2) and his jacket (sample 3). Paint sample analysis of the light background revealed different shades of ochre incorporated in underlayers, and used pure in the thin top layer (sample 2). Ochres, together with umber, were also used for the shadow of his jacket (sample 3). So far analysis performed on the Antwerp and Paris period paintings by Van Gogh in the Van Gogh Museum collection indicates that umber disappeared from his palette after June-July of 1886. Furthermore, though ochre pigments were regularly found as a minor ingredient of his ready-manufactured tube paints, Van Gogh did not use ochre as a pure colour in any of the Antwerp and Paris works examined.³

The colours of the portrait are strongly distorted by the discoloured varnish now present, especially in the light background that now looks a dull orange-grey. No cleaning tests were made during this examination, but based on surface examination it is anticipated that varnish removal would reveal a much cooler background that stands in contrast to the warm flesh tones of the portrait. In addition it would recover subtle contrasts of light blue (faintly visible through the varnish in brushstrokes bottom left) and pink in the background, echoing those present in the portrait itself.

The mid-flesh tones of the portrait were laid in first in a range of pink and orange tints, adding highlights and shadows on top. A reddish-brown colour was used for the shadows and for the fine contours. The darkest bluish-black accents were added at a late stage of painting, in the eyelashes, eyebrows, beard and hair. Possibly further darkening upon ageing has caused these accents to become over-prominent now. The irises of the eyes were painted in light blue that partly covered the pink underneath, subsequently adding the dark pupils and whitish to pink highlights.

Mismatched old retouches occur in the area of stippled paint application at the upper left edge of the background, and damage in this area seems to account for some dark patchiness in the x-ray. Also, a c. 15 cm diagonal line of matt retouching extending from the top left corner that shows dark in UV light examination. Visible light examination also suggests some retouching of the thin and abraded brown underpaint in the jacket. These same areas show a denser green fluorescence in UV light, which might indicate the presence of resinous glazed retouches, or extra varnish locally applied for adequate saturation.

10. Brushmarks and texture

A wide range of brushes and brushwork texture has been employed. A particularly broad, c. 20cm wide, flat-tipped bristle brush has been reserved for the background

³ See PhD thesis cited in note 1, p. 160.

area. In general the background was randomly filled in, skirting around the portrait, but some more succinct cross-hatched strokes occur top left and bottom right. A stiff bristle brush provided the scratchy, scrubbed impasto of his shirt collar. Similarly, touches with the end of a flat-tipped bristle brush were used to render the diagonal pink highlights on his left cheek. More fluid, tapering strokes that measure 7 and 12 mm at their widest part are distinguishable in the folds of his dark jacket. Brushstrokes in the face were oriented to describe form, following the undulations of his brow for example. Fine pointed brushes (pencils) have been used to detail the hairs in his beard. The viscous and stringy texture of the white paint employed for flesh highlights (notably on his forehead and on the tip of his nose) may indicate the use of lead white, rather than zinc white paint. However, UV examination of the portrait was not able to confirm this, since the greenish fluorescence of the aged varnish overrules the fluorescence characteristics of the pigments used underneath (zinc white is indicated by its green fluorescence).

Original brushwork texture has been significantly flattened by the heat and pressure applied during the later marouflage treatment.

11. Varnish

A varnish layer covers to the edges of the triplex panel, indicating that the picture was varnished in its current format and out of its frame. Paint samples taken from the bottom edge show two distinct varnish layers, which must have been applied at interval since they vary in their fluorescence characteristics and are separated by dirt accumulated in between. In visible light the varnish appears yellowed and grimy, and its green fluorescence in UV light is indicative of an aged natural resin. UV fluorescence reveals that the varnish is patchy, and that it was streakily applied with the brush.

Viewed in normal light, there are dark brown residues of unidentified material accumulated in the interstices of flattened impasto, which are especially disfiguring in the light background of the portrait.

There is a small white accretion stuck to the picture surface in the lower part of his beard.

Van Gogh (?), *Head of a man*, F209

TEKENS AAN DE WAND

Het Nederland van direct ná de oorlog wordt op dit moment in hoog tempo afgebroken. Daarmee verdwijnt een stenen document van Nederlands wederopbouw. Wat hierbij onderbelicht blijft, is dat er ook veel architectuurgebonden kunst ongezien verloren gaat.

Veel van deze gebouwen zijn voorzien van wandschilderingen en andere monumentale kunst. Het ICN en RACM inventariseren wat er aan kunstwerken in wederopbouw-panden aanwezig is en niet gesloopt mag worden. Via een culturele waardebeoordeling kunnen effectieve en praktische maatregelen genomen worden om deze kunst van de sloop te redden. Inmiddels is een aantal kunstwerken ook daadwerkelijk gered.

DOLF HENKES
'Van 't Hoff in zijn
Laboratorium',
1954-1955, detail.

In 2005 verplaatst van
de voormalige Caltex
raffinerij in Pernis
naar de Hogeschool
Rotterdam.





Van Gogh (?), *Head of a man*,
F209

Date

12-04-2007

Projectnummer

2007-017

By order of

Van Gogh Museum

Mw. E. Hendriks

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Introduction

Currently the portrait entitled "Head of a Man", de la Faille cat. 209, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, is at the Van Gogh Museum for attribution research in view of the fact that the painting has recently been doubted as by Van Gogh. Previous literature has dated the painting variously to Antwerp (December 1885 to February 1886) or Paris (summer or autumn 1886, or winter 1886-7). Besides documentary, provenance, stylistic and iconographic research, the painting has also been subject to technical examination in the conservation studios of the Van Gogh Museum. The picture was examined in normal, raking and UV light, studied with the stereo-microscope, and an x-radiograph of the painting was made.

In addition to the research performed at the Van Gogh Museum, also two paint samples have been taken for the identification of the structure and pigment composition of ground and paint layers. These samples were compared to those of undisputed works by Van Gogh. This provided additional information, presented in this report.

Next to the research on ground and paint layers also the nature of the canvas of the painting has been investigated.

1 Research

1.1 Methods

Optical microscopy

The samples were embedded in polyester resin and ground with SiC-paper. The resultant cross-sections were examined under a Zeiss Axioplan 2 microscope both with incident polarised light and incident UV-light (from a Xenon-lamp and a mercury short arc photo optic lamp, respectively). The filter set 'UV H365' used for examination in UV-light consist of the following filters: excitation BP365/12, beam splitter FT395 and emission LP 397. The layer thicknesses were measured with a measuring device in the eyepiece of the microscope and are approximate average values for the layers, unless stated otherwise.

Polarised Light Microscopy (PLM)

The fibres taken from the canvas were embedded in a 1:1 mixture of glycerol and water and examined in transmitted polarised light and in between crossed polarisers.

Scanning Electron Microscopy with Energy Dispersive X-ray Spectroscopy (SEM-EDS)

SEM-EDS analyses were carried out by Kees Mensch at the Shell Research and Technology Centre Amsterdam, using a JEOL JSM 6490 LV scanning electron microscope and a Thermo Noran System Six (NSS) EDS-system with pioneer Norvar detector. The primary electron beam energy was 25 KeV. The samples were coated with carbon and examined in the high vacuum mode.

1.2 Results

The threads of the canvas (F209/1) are composed of straight fibres which show joint-like cross markings and, when examined between crossed polarisers, strong double reflectance of the fibres can be observed. The appearance of the fibres indicates that they are bast fibres and no cotton. The method used does not allow for clear distinction between different types of bast fibres, but most likely the canvas consists of linen.

The ground of the painting is present in both samples (F209/2 and 3) and consists of two layers: a quite thick bottom layer, max. c. 150 μm , and a thin, c. 10-15 μm , top layer. The bottom layer contains chalk and some zinc white. The thin top layer contains lead white, some chalk and barytes. In one barite crystal a relative high amount of strontium was identified revealing the natural origin of the mineral.

In the sample taken from the background paint (F209/2) three paint layers are present on top of the ground layers. The first two layers, which have been applied wet-on-wet, have a similar composition of lead white, brownish-orange ochre, and some ultramarine, yellow and red ochre, but the top paint layer contains more lead white than the bottom layer. On top of these paint layers a thin layer (c. 6 μm) can be observed composed of orange ochre mixed with some fine red ochre.

In the sample taken from the jacket (F209/3) only one paint layer is present that is composed of lead white, ultramarine, orange and red ochre and some umber.

Two varnish layers, which show each a distinctive fluorescence, are visible in both cross-sections. The varnish layers are alternated by thin layers of dirt.

1.3 Discussion

The ground layer of the painting does not correspond to any of the grounds found on paintings by Van Gogh examined thus far^{i,ii}.

The pigments, lead white and ultramarine, identified in the paint layers have been used by Van Gogh throughout his careerⁱⁱⁱ. The earth pigments, different shades of ochre and umber, on the other hand, have frequently been found in Van Gogh's Dutch works only^{iv}. In Antwerp ochre's were found in three out of the six paintings investigated, in two as a minor ingredient to the paint and in one case, F212, 'Skeleton with burning cigarette' as the main ingredient, but used in a different pigment mixture as was found in 'Head of a man'^v. In paintings from the Paris period ochre's have been identified as well, but in those works they were present as minor ingredients in mixed paints^{vi}. Pure ochre-paint, as in the top layer in the sample taken from the background (F209/2), has not been found in any of the Antwerp or Paris works examined. UMBER was identified in only one Antwerp and two early Paris paintings by Van Gogh, latest date June-July 1886^{vii}.

1.4 Conclusion

The canvas of 'Head of a man' consists of bast fibres, presumably of the linen type.

The ground of 'Head of a man' is composed of two layers which have each a different composition. The structure and composition of the layers does not correspond to any of the grounds found on paintings by Van Gogh.

The pigments identified in the paint layers have all been used by Van Gogh in both his Antwerp and Paris period, but the prominent role of earth pigments in the paint is unlike what was found in paintings from Van Gogh's Antwerp and Paris periods.

Appendix

- Sample forms
- Microscope images of the cross-sections and embedded fibres
- Backscattered Electron Images
- SEM-EDX spectra and analysis spots

ⁱ Ella Hendriks and Muriel Geldof, *Van Gogh's Antwerp and Paris picture supports (1885-1888) reconstructing choices*, ArtMatters, Volume 2, 2005, p. 39-76.

Samples taken from sixteen Dutch works by Van Gogh have been analyzed by Dr. Elisabeth Jägers, micro-analytical laboratory, Bornheim, Germany. The information was taken from her report dated 18-12-98.

In the project '*Van Gogh's studio practice in context*' eleven Dutch paintings by Van Gogh, from the collection of the Van Gogh Museum and from the Kröller-Müller Museum, were subjected to technical and scientific examination. ICN-work nr. 2005-066.

In the 'De Wild' project samples taken from seventeen paintings from Van Gogh's late period (Arles, St. Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise) have been analyzed. ICN work nr. 2003-063.

IJ. Hummelen and C. Peres, '*The painting technique of The Potato Eaters*' in *The Potato Eaters* by Vincent van Gogh, Cahier Vincent 5, 1993, p.49.

D.W. Druick and P. Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the studio of the South*, Chicago, 2001, Table 2, p. 358-359.
E. Farrell and R. Newman, *Van Gogh's Painting Materials: An Analysis of the 'Self-portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin' and other Arles period paintings*, in Vincent van Gogh's 'Self portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin', Cambridge, 1984, p.28.

Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilburgh, *Van Gogh's 'Garden of the Asylum': genuine or fake?*, Burlington Magazine, March 2001.

See in addition also ICN-work nrs. 2003-063, 2000-035, 2002-146 and 2002-058.

ⁱⁱ A similar ground layer does have been encountered in the painting '*De Arenleester*' (F23) that has recently been examined at the ICN and that is not considered to be authentic.

The composition of the first ground is identical in both paintings, but the layer thickness is different: in '*De Arenleester*' the thickness of this layer is 60 to 80 µm (or somewhat thicker since the layer might be incomplete), while in '*Head of a man*' the first ground layer is roughly twice as thick, c. 150 µm. The thickness of the ground layer, as present in cross-section, depends on several parameters (e.g. sample spot and preparation), and interpreting these results is therefore difficult.

The composition of the second ground layer is not exactly identical in both paintings: in '*De Arenleester*' lead white is the only pigment identified, while in '*Head of a man*' also some chalk and barytes are present in the second ground layer (see 1.2 Results).

For the research into '*De Arenleester*' (F23) see ICN-work nr 2004-044, object nr. 3076.

Since 1958, after research of the Expertise Instituut, '*De Arenleester*' (F23) is no longer considered to be authentic. See the report of the research by the Expertise Instituut: RKD, Archief Expertise Instituut, dossier F23, report nr. 92, 30 July 1958. See also J. B. de la Faille and A.M.W.J. Hammacher, *The works of Vincent van Gogh; his paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam, 1970, p. 588 (rejected works).

ⁱⁱⁱ In the framework of the so called catalogue-project six Antwerp paintings and eighty-seven pictures made in Paris, now all in the Van Gogh Museum collection were subjected to technical and scientific examination. The results of the project will be presented in the second volume of a new catalogue of Van Gogh pictures that will be published in 2008. Part of the results has been published in the PhD-thesis '*New view on Van Gogh's development in Antwerp and Paris*' by Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilburgh. See ICN work nr. 2000-078.

See further the references mentioned in note 1.

^{iv} Samples taken from sixteen Dutch works by Van Gogh have been analyzed by Dr. Elisabeth Jägers, micro-analytical laboratory, Bornheim, Germany. The information was taken from her report dated 18-12-98.

In the project '*Van Gogh's studio practice in context*' eleven Dutch paintings by Van Gogh, from the collection of the Van Gogh Museum and from the Kröller-Müller Museum, were subjected to technical and scientific examination. ICN-work nr. 2005-066.

IJ. Hummelen and C. Peres, '*The painting technique of The Potato Eaters*' in *The Potato Eaters* by Vincent van Gogh, Cahier Vincent 5, 1993, p.49.

^v For the research into '*Skeleton with burning cigarette*' (F212) see ICN work nr 2000-078, object nr. 2632.

^{vi} Ella Hendriks and Louis van Tilburgh, '*New view on Van Gogh's development in Antwerp and Paris*', PhD-thesis, p.160. See also ICN work nr. 2000-078.

^{vii} See note VI.

<p>Object: Vincent van Gogh (?), Head of a man.</p> <p>F-no.: 209 S-no:</p> <p>Location: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.</p> <p>Temporarily in the VGM for expertise.</p> <p>Sample taken: 20-02-2007 by: E. Hendriks</p> <p>Sample spot: 0.9 cm in from the bottom left cut corner of the canvas.</p> <p>Slide/photo sample spot: no</p> <p>Sampling method: scalpel</p> <p>Purpose: identification of the fibres of the canvas</p>	<p>Werk no.: 2007-017</p> <p>Sample no.: 1</p> <p>Doc. Folder:</p> <p>Slide/photo cs:</p> <p>Sample material left:</p>
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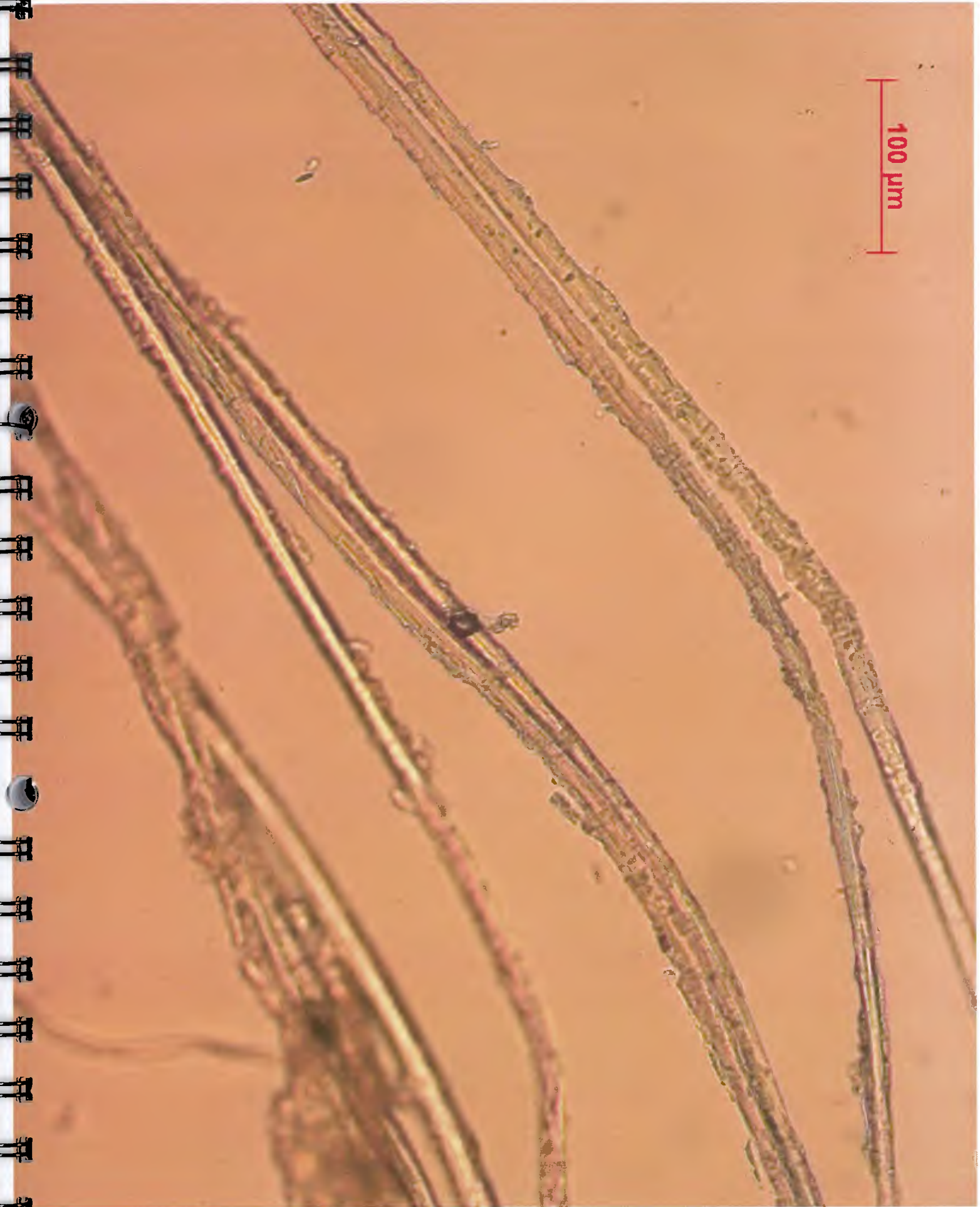
Description of the sample spot	Loose fibre at the bottom edge, at the left side of the painting.
Description of the sample	

PLM

The fibres were embedded in a mixture of glycerol and water and examined under the polarised light microscope in transmitted light. The fibres appear as straight fibres which show strong double reflectance with many interference colours when examined between crossed polars. Also the fibres show cross-links.

Conclusion: bark fibres, presumably linen.

Fibres 200x bright field

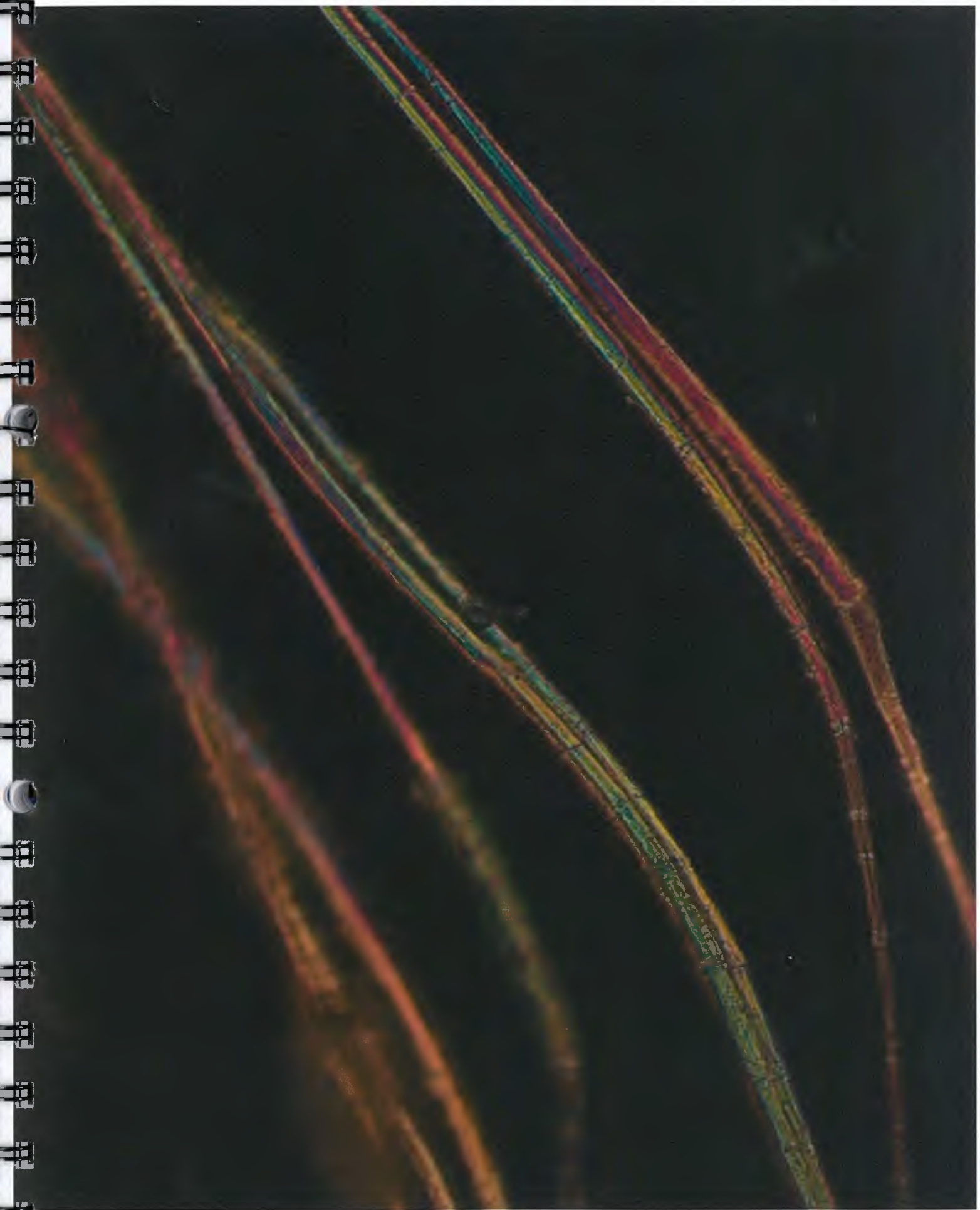


100 µm

Fibres 100x crossed polarisers



Fibres 200x crossed polarizers



Object: Vincent van Gogh (?), Head of a man. F-no.: 209 S-no: Location: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Temporarily in the VGM for expertise. Sample taken: 20-02-2007 by: E. Hendriks Sample spot: 1.15 cm in from the bottom left cut corner of the canvas. Slide/photo sample spot: no Sampling method: scalpel Purpose: layer structure and composition.	Werk no.: 2007-017 Sample no.: 2 Doc. Folder: Slide/photo cs: Sample material left: Nothing left
--	--

Description of the sample spot	On the loose fibre at the bottom left edge
Description of the sample	One piece. Remnants of fibres, ground and light paint from the background.

Description of the sample	Ground, light-brown layer, varnish
Embedding and polishing	Embedded in Polypol and ground with SiC-paper

Description of the cross-section			
Layer	µm c.	Microscopy	SEM-EDX
9	2	Thin dirt layer	
8	3	Varnish layer, greyish fluorescence	
7	2	Thin dirt layer	
6	8	Varnish layer, blue fluorescence	
5	6	Thin layer with brown-orange particles (ochre?) and some fine red particles.	Ochre

4	10	Layer with similar composition to layer 3, but contains more white pigment. The layer does not cover layer 3 completely.	
3	25	Layer with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White pigment (lead white) • Brown-orange pigment (ochre?) • Some fine blue particles (ultramarine?) • Some fine red particles • Some fine yellow particles 	Lead white Ochre Ultramarine Ochre Ochre
2	10	Thin second white ground layer (lead white?)	Lead white, some chalk and barytes (relative large amount of strontium present in one particle)
1	150 max	First ground layer which contains at least zinc white (characteristic fluorescence observed)	Chalk, some zinc white

F20g/2

200x bright field



200x UV-fluorescentie



500x bf



20 μm

500x UV-fluorescence



Figure 19
1000x



BEI



25kV

X190

100μm

F209/2

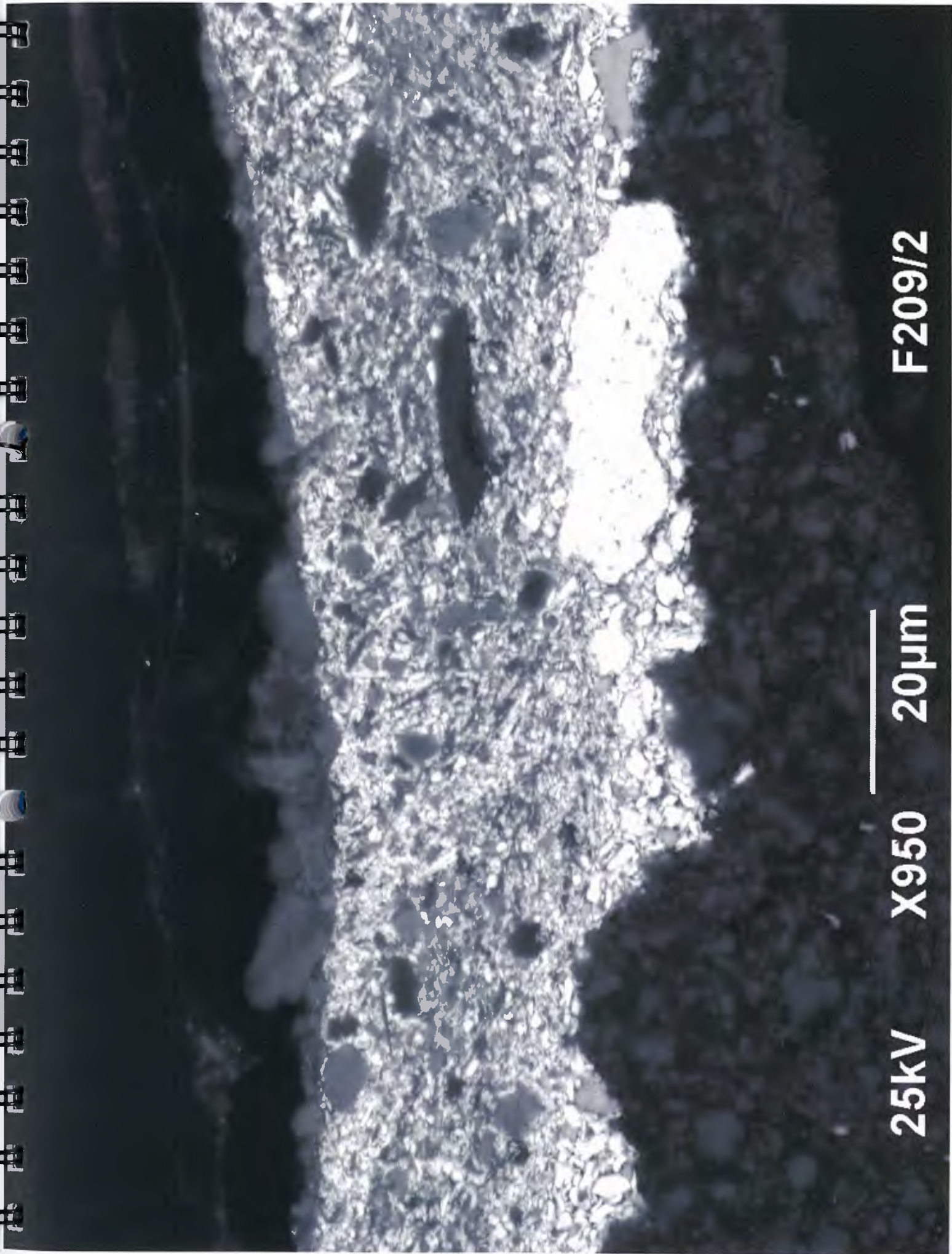
BEI

25kV

X950

20μm

F209/2



Object: Vincent van Gogh (?), Head of a man. F-no.: 209 S-no: Location: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Temporarily in the VGM for expertise. Sample taken: 20-02-2007 by: E. Hendriks Sample spot: 5.55 cm in from the bottom left cut corner of the canvas. Slide/photo sample spot: no Sampling method: scalpel Purpose: layer structure and composition.	Werk no.: 2007-017 Sample no.: 3 Doc. Folder: Slide/photo cs: Sample material left: Nothing left
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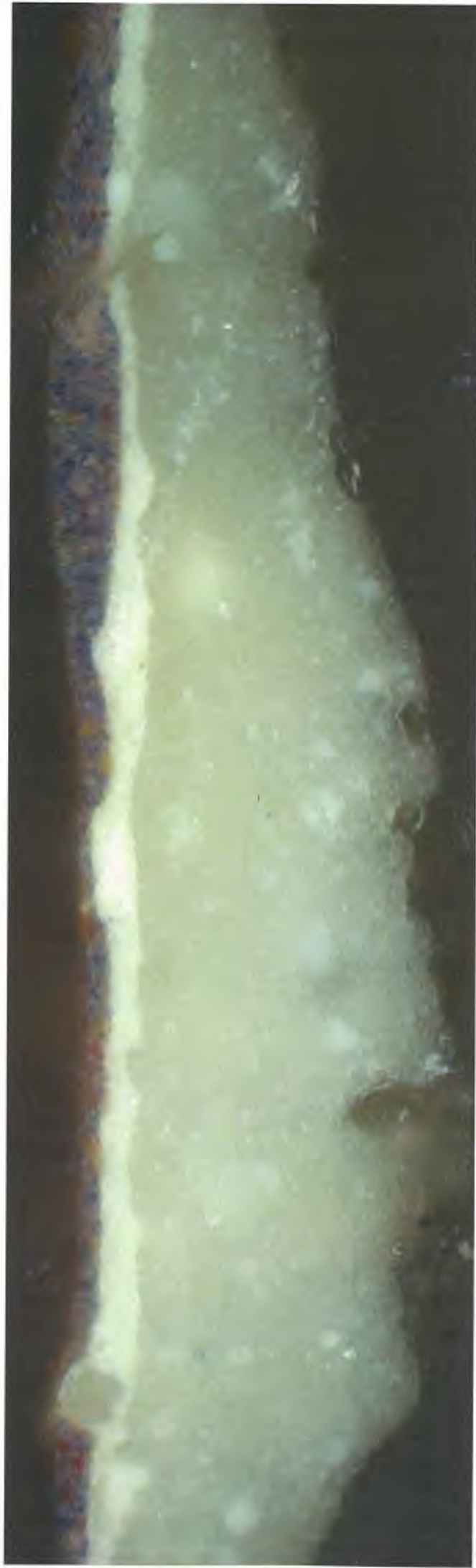
Description of the sample spot	At the bottom edge. Loose flake on top of a frayed thread. In painted shadow of jacket (looks greenish-grey with varnish)
Description of the sample	One piece. Remnants of fibres, ground and dark paint.

Description of the sample	Fibres, ground, brown paint layer, varnish
Embedding and polishing	Embedded in Polypol and ground with SiC-paper.

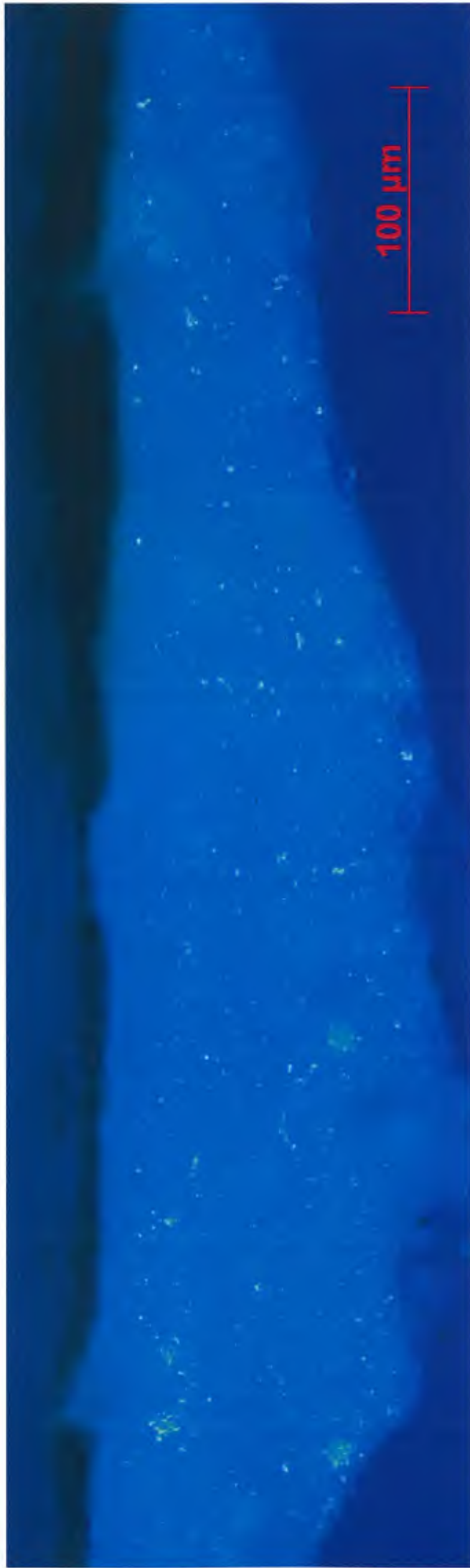
Description of the cross-section			
Layer	µm c.	Microscopy	SEM-EDX
8	1	Thin dirt layer	
7	3	Varnish layer, greyish fluorescence	
6	1	Thin dirt layer	
5	8	Varnish layer, blue fluorescence	
4	2	Thin dirt layer	

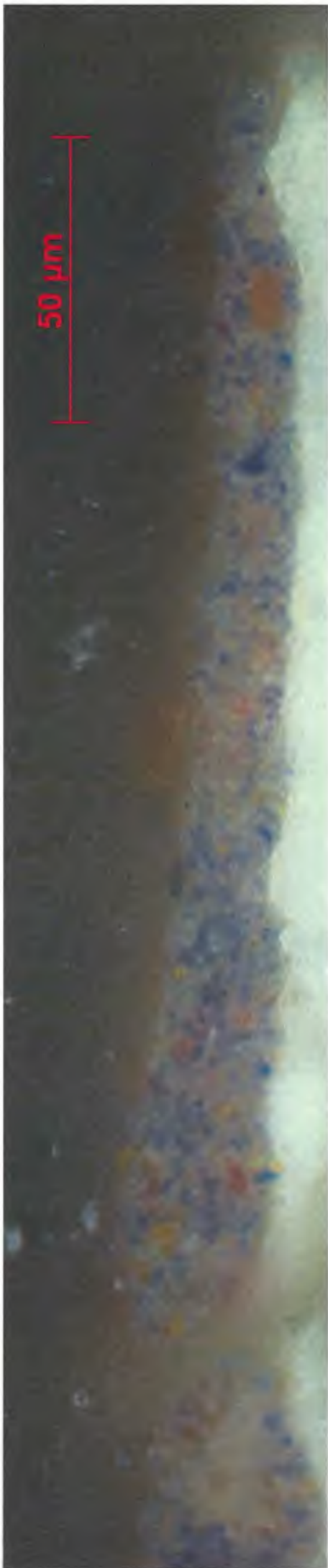
3	20	<p>Layer with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White pigment (lead white?) • Fine blue pigment (ultramarine?) • Orange particles (ochre?) • Red particles (ochre?) 	<p>Lead white</p> <p>Ultramarine</p> <p>Ochre</p> <p>Ochre</p> <p>Umber</p>
2	15	Thin second white ground layer (lead white?)	Lead white, some chalk and barytes
1	135, max	First ground layer which contains at least zinc white (characteristic fluorescence observed)	Chalk and some zinc white
		Remnant of fibres	

F209/3 200x bright field



200x UV-fluorescence



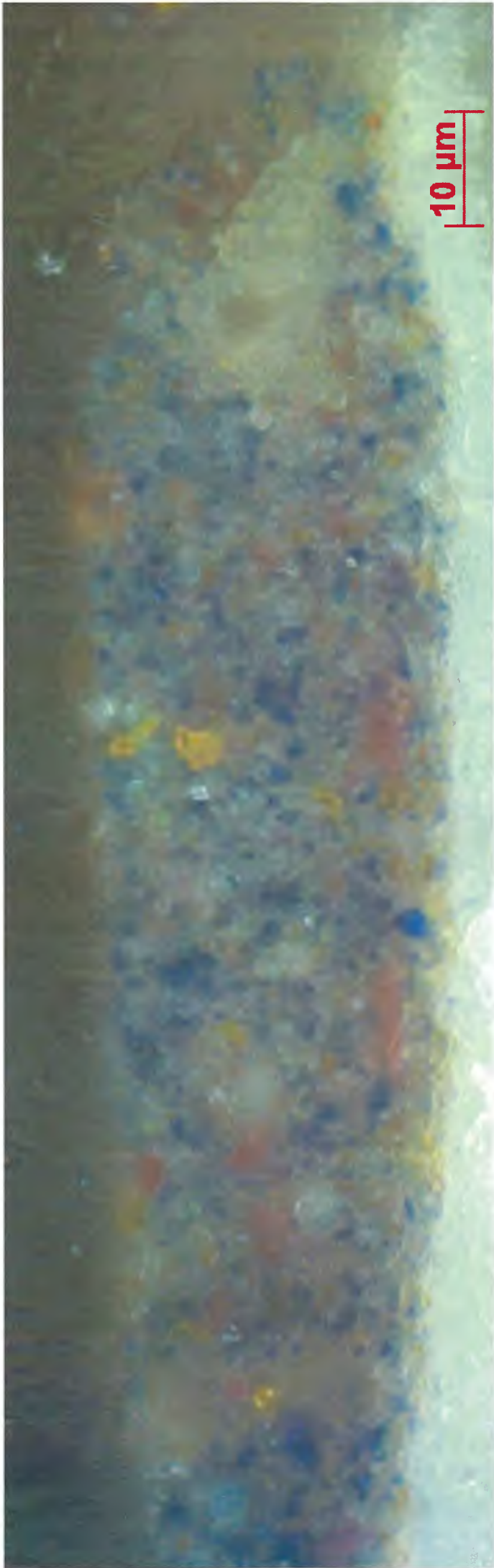


49
500x

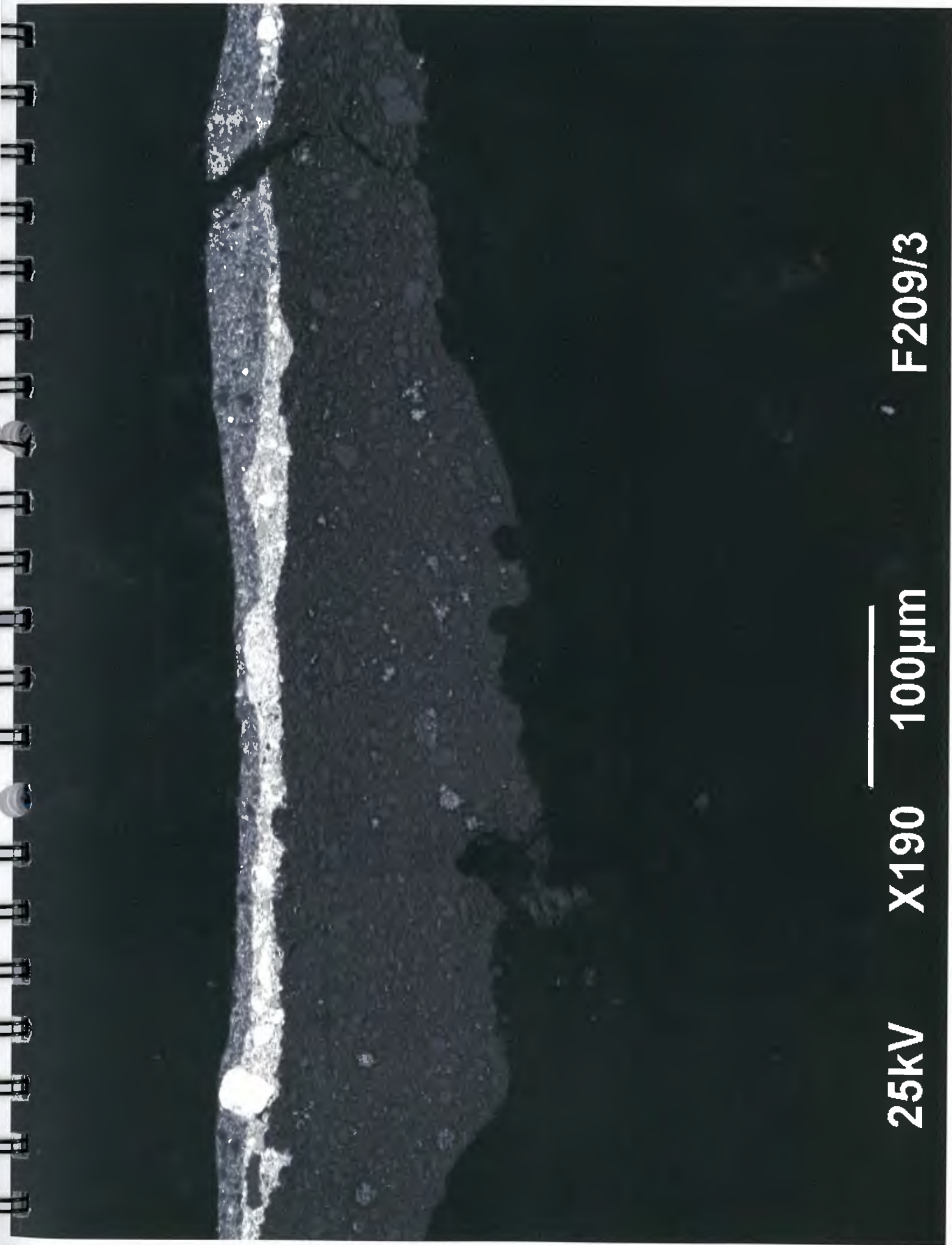
500x UV



Fig 1000 X



10 μm



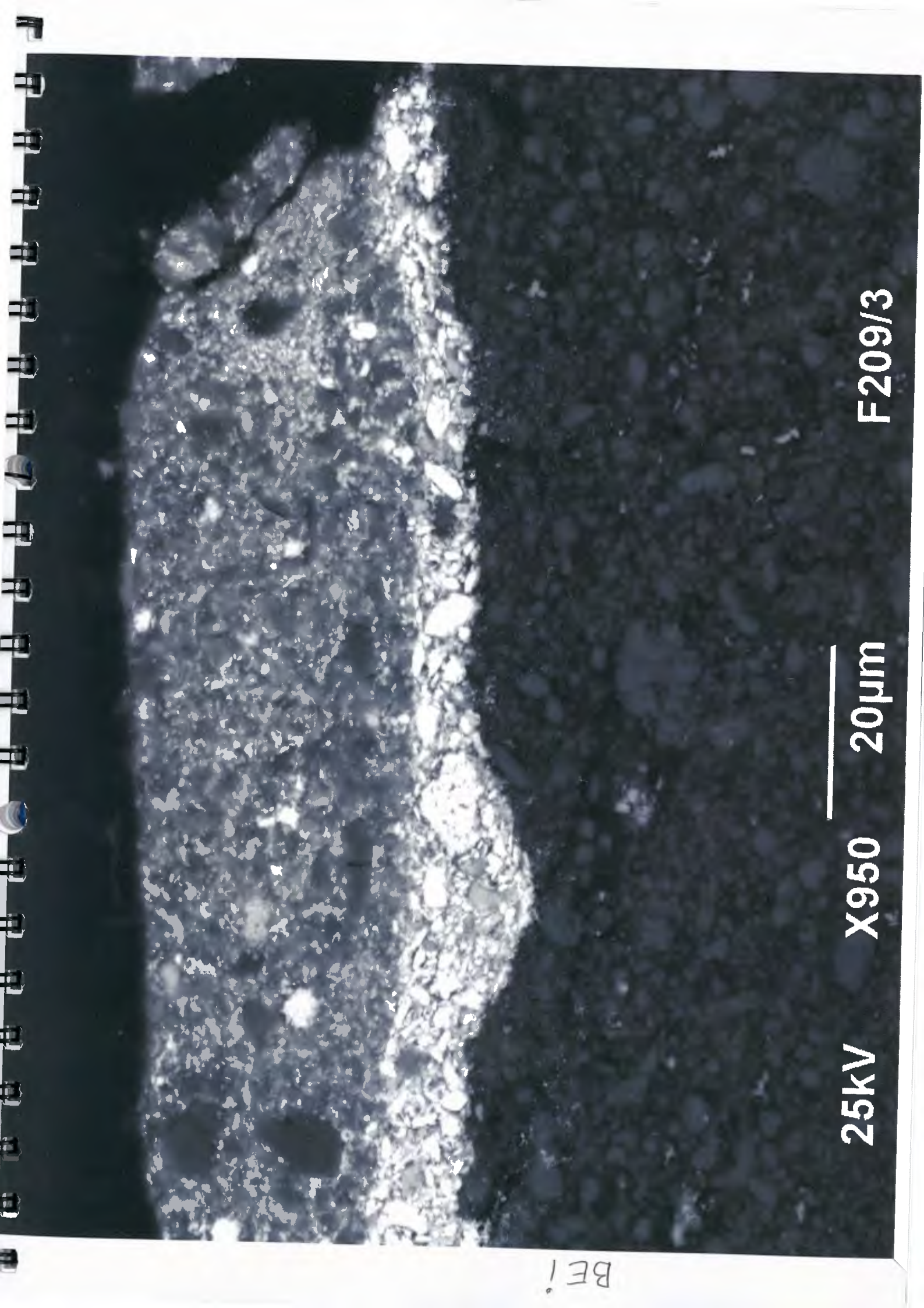
F209/3

100µm

X190

25kV

BEI



BEI

25kV

X950

20µm

F209/3

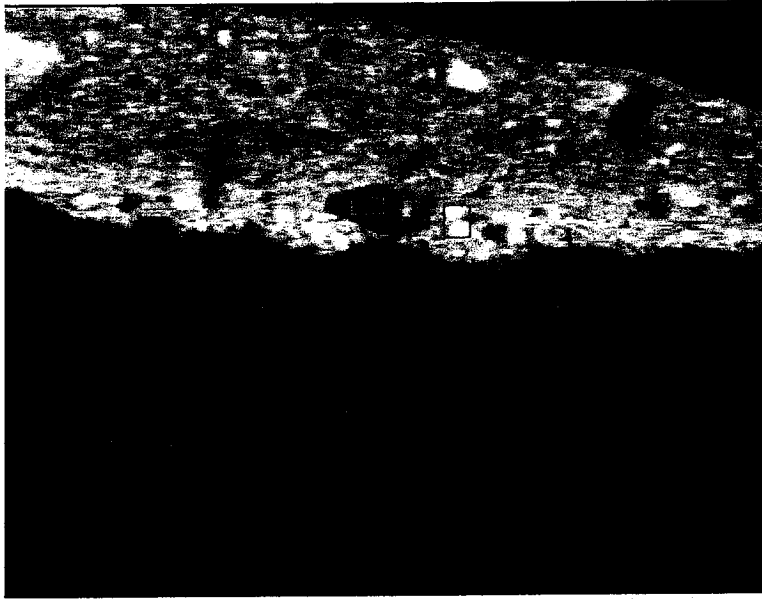
Analysis spots

F209-2_1

25 μ m

15495

64677

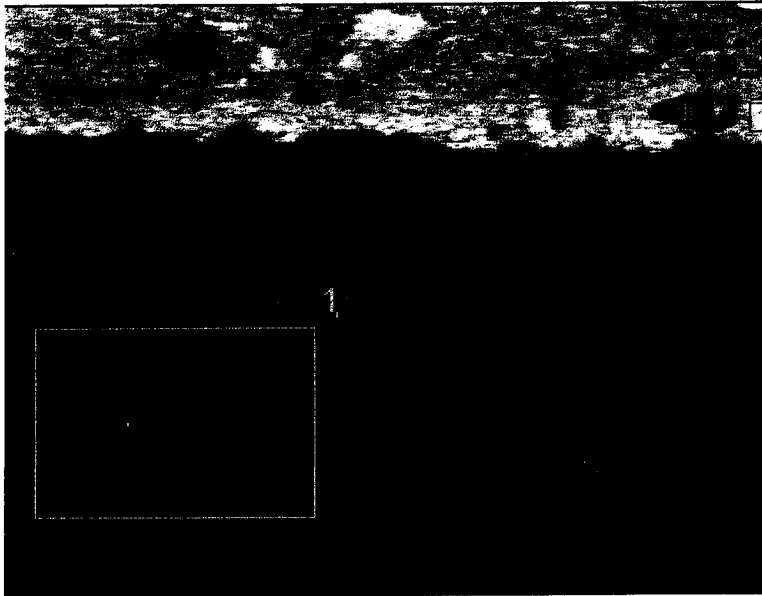


F209-2_2

50 μ m

15843

62946

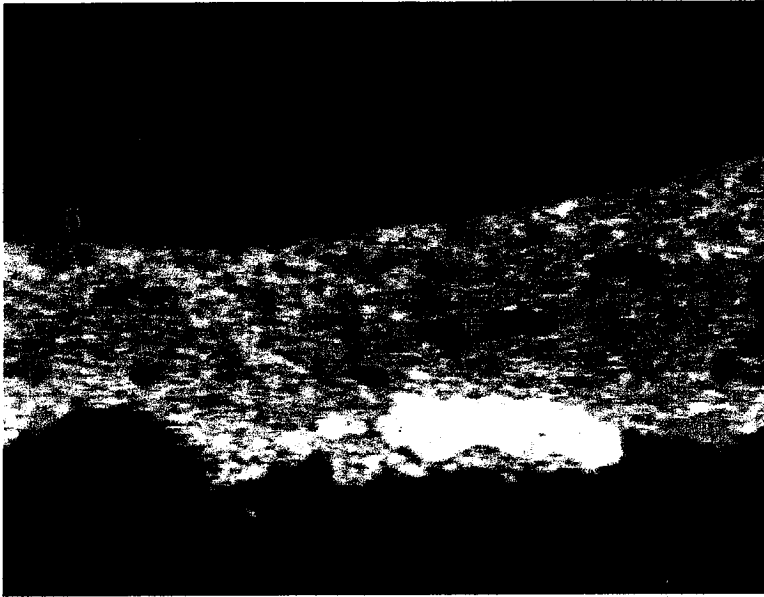


F209-2_3

25 μ m

14295

63423

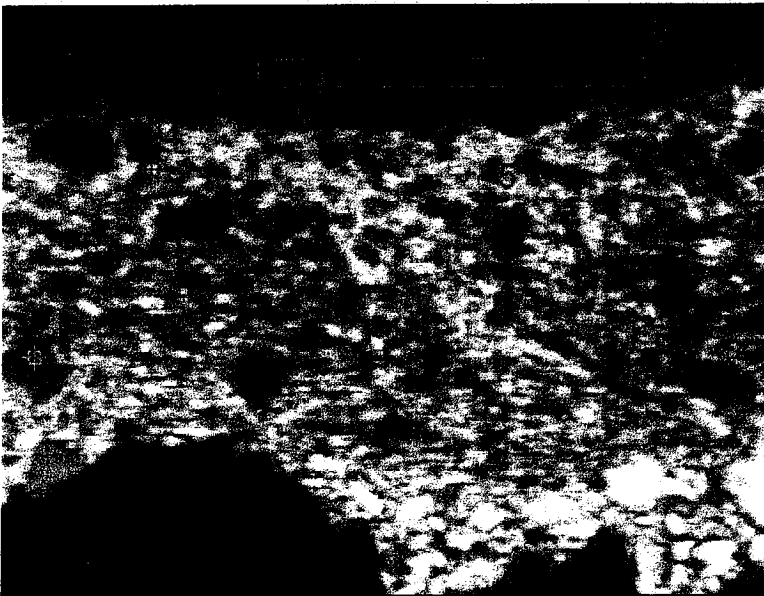


F209-2_4

10 μ m

13748

63201



F209-2_5

10 μ m

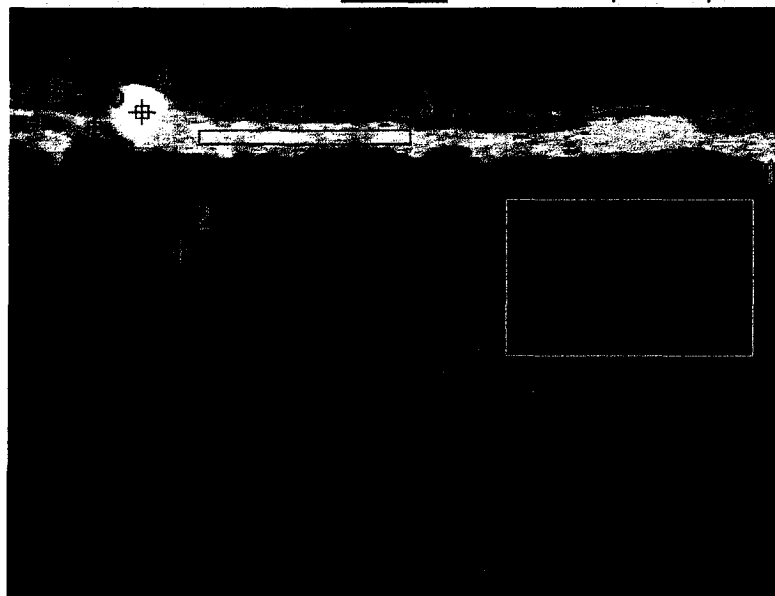
13519 63422



F209-3_1

50 μ m

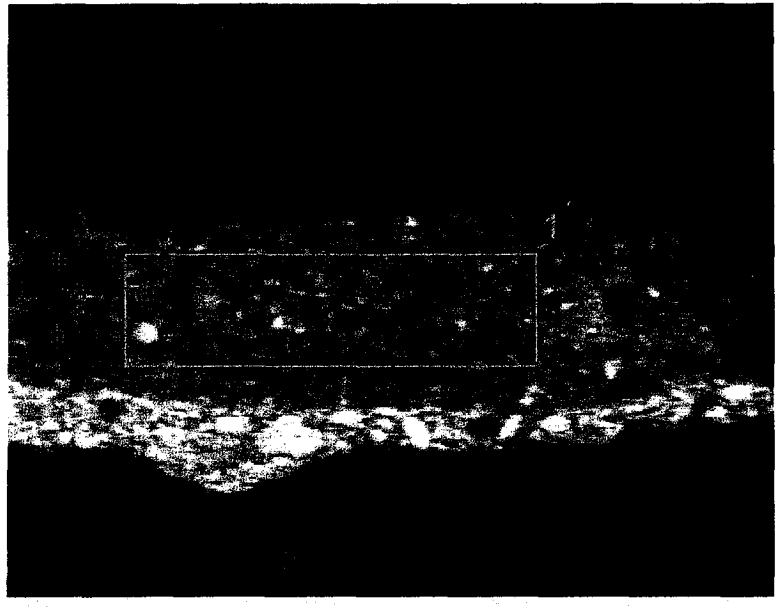
13705 62343



F209-3_2

25 μ m

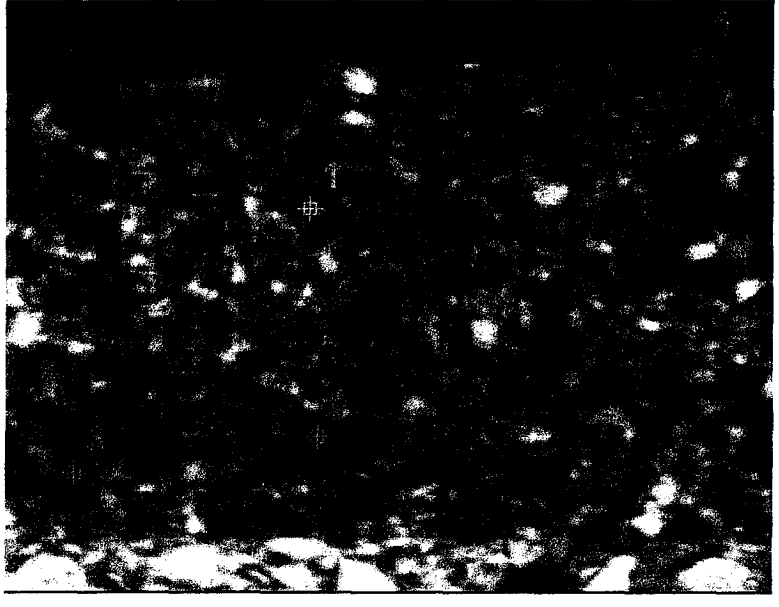
13573  62985



F209-3_3

10 μ m

13705  63772



F209-3_4

10 μ m

13641

83293



F209-3_5

10 μ m

14449

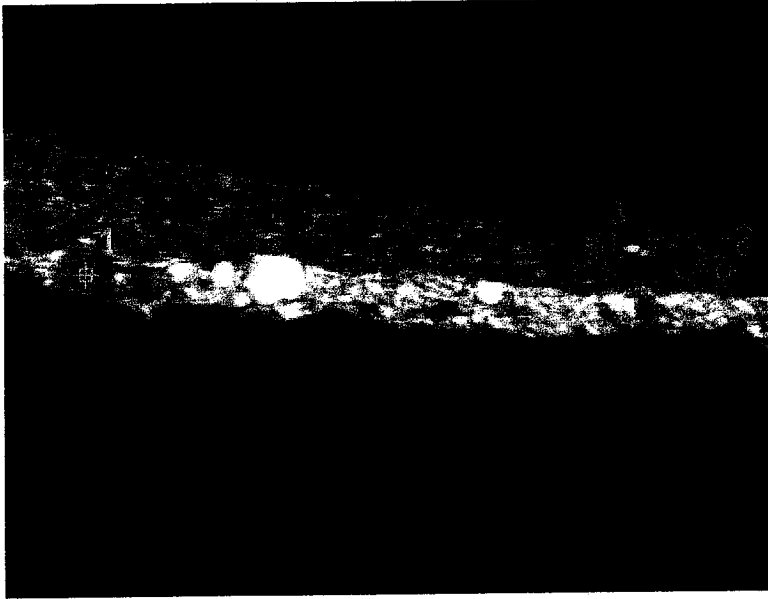
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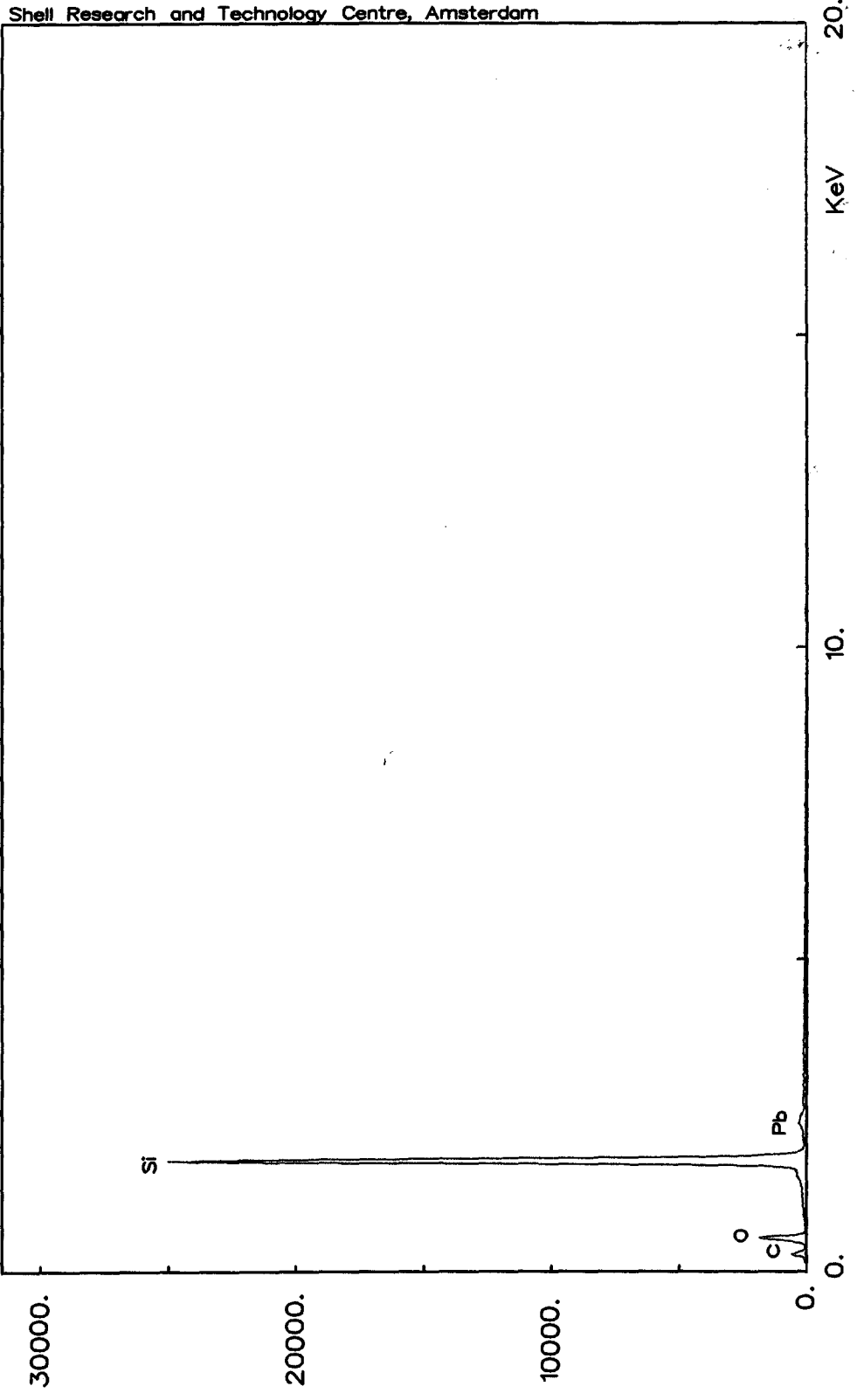
F209-3_6

25 μ m

13695 | 62130



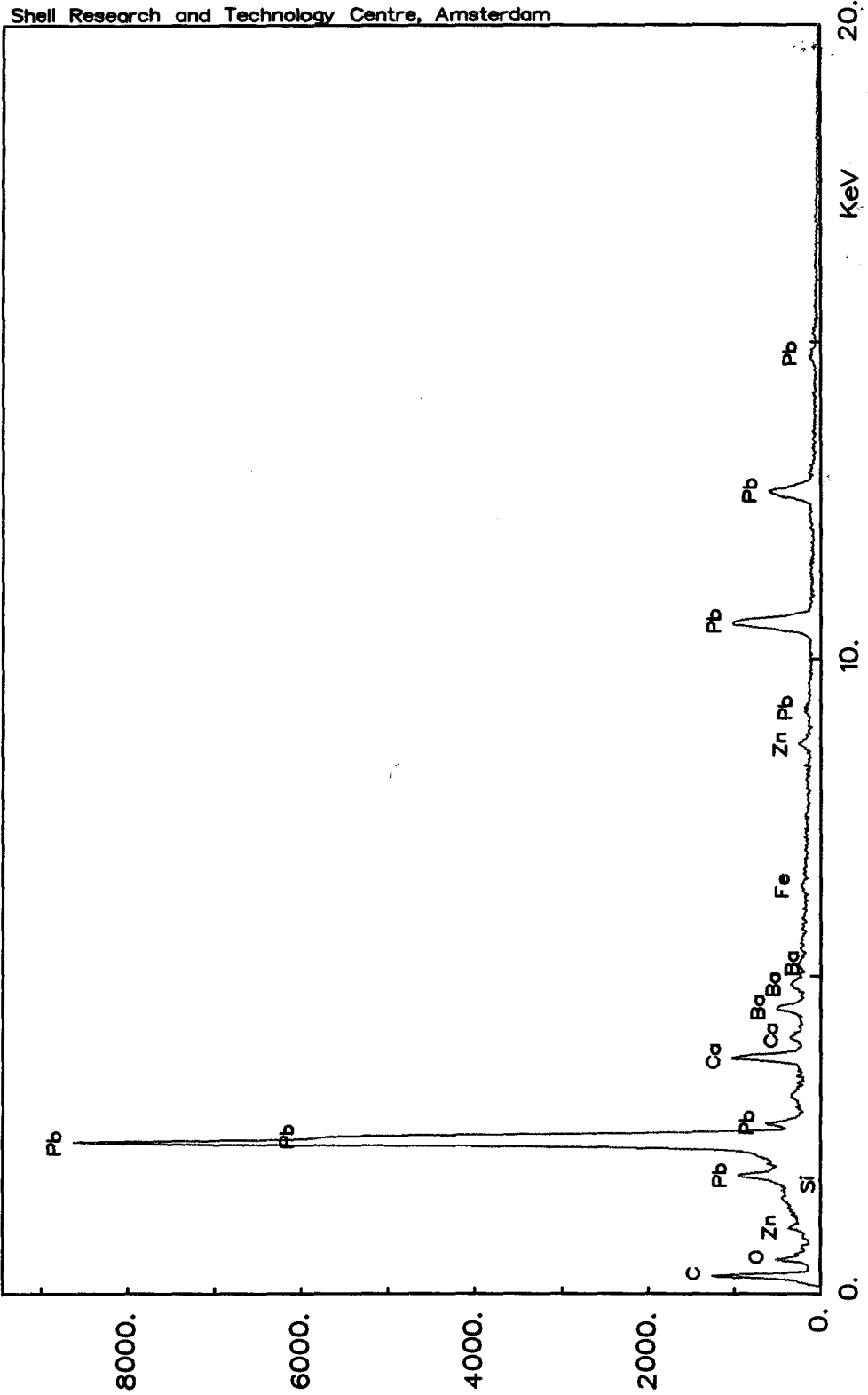
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acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



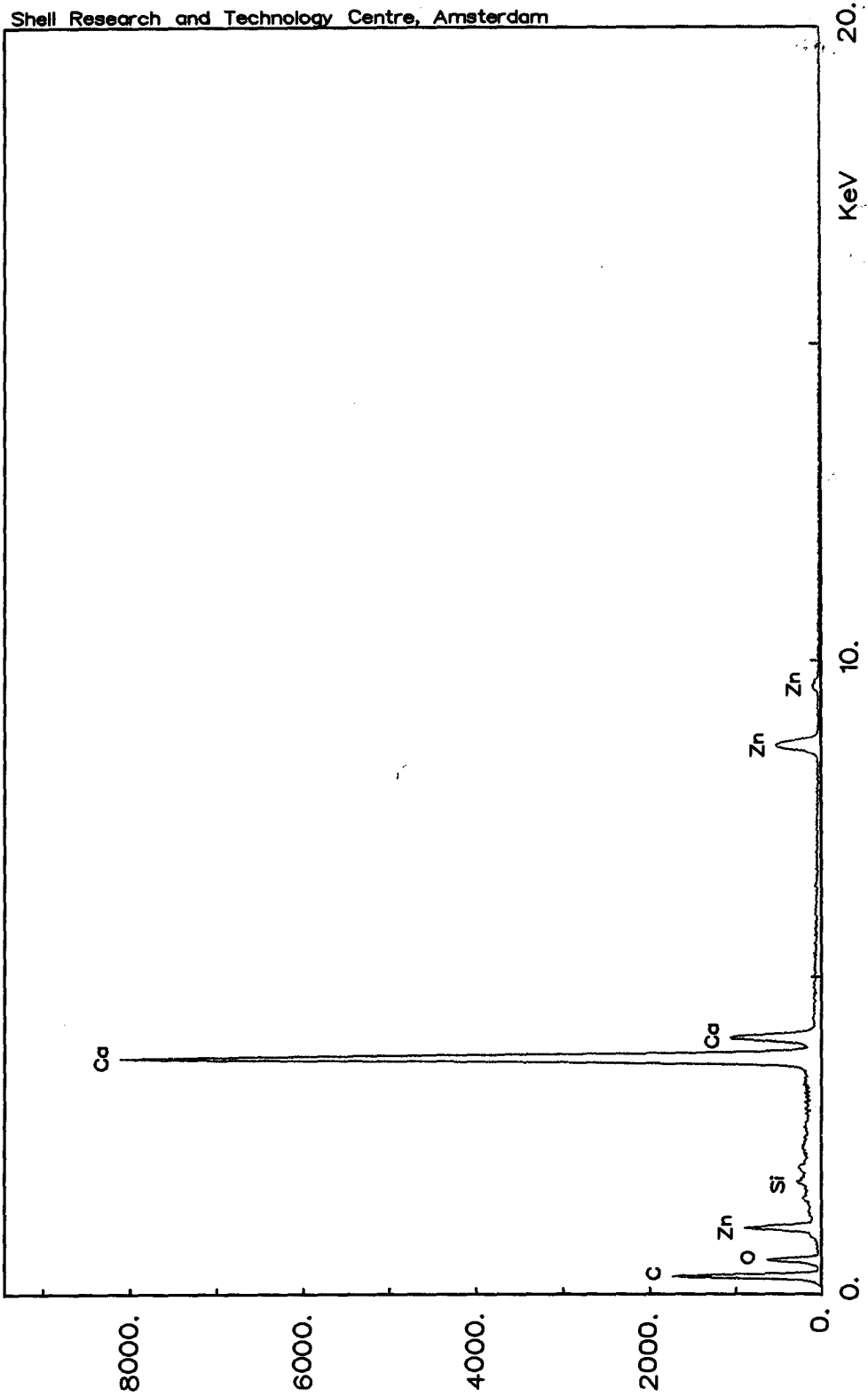
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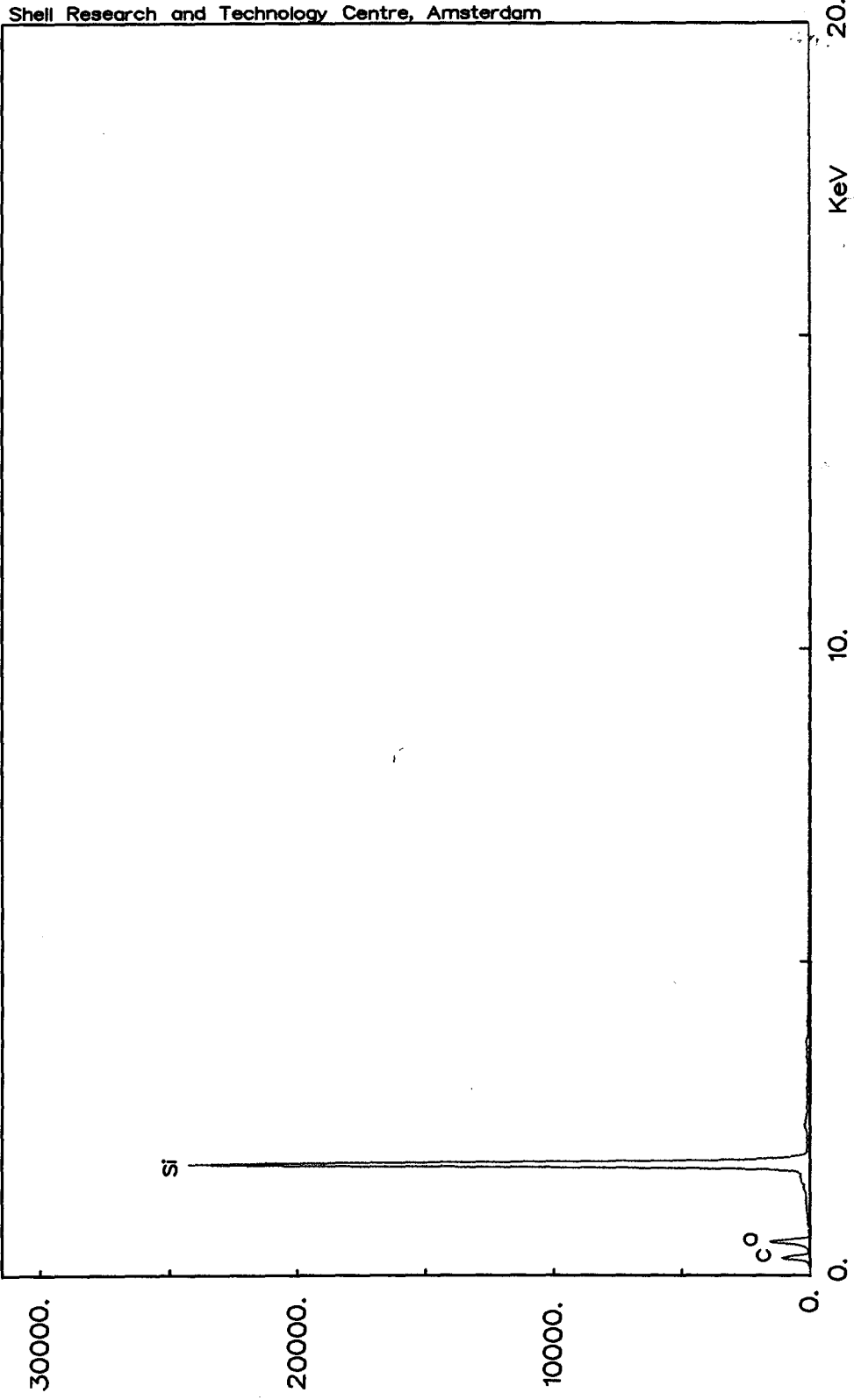
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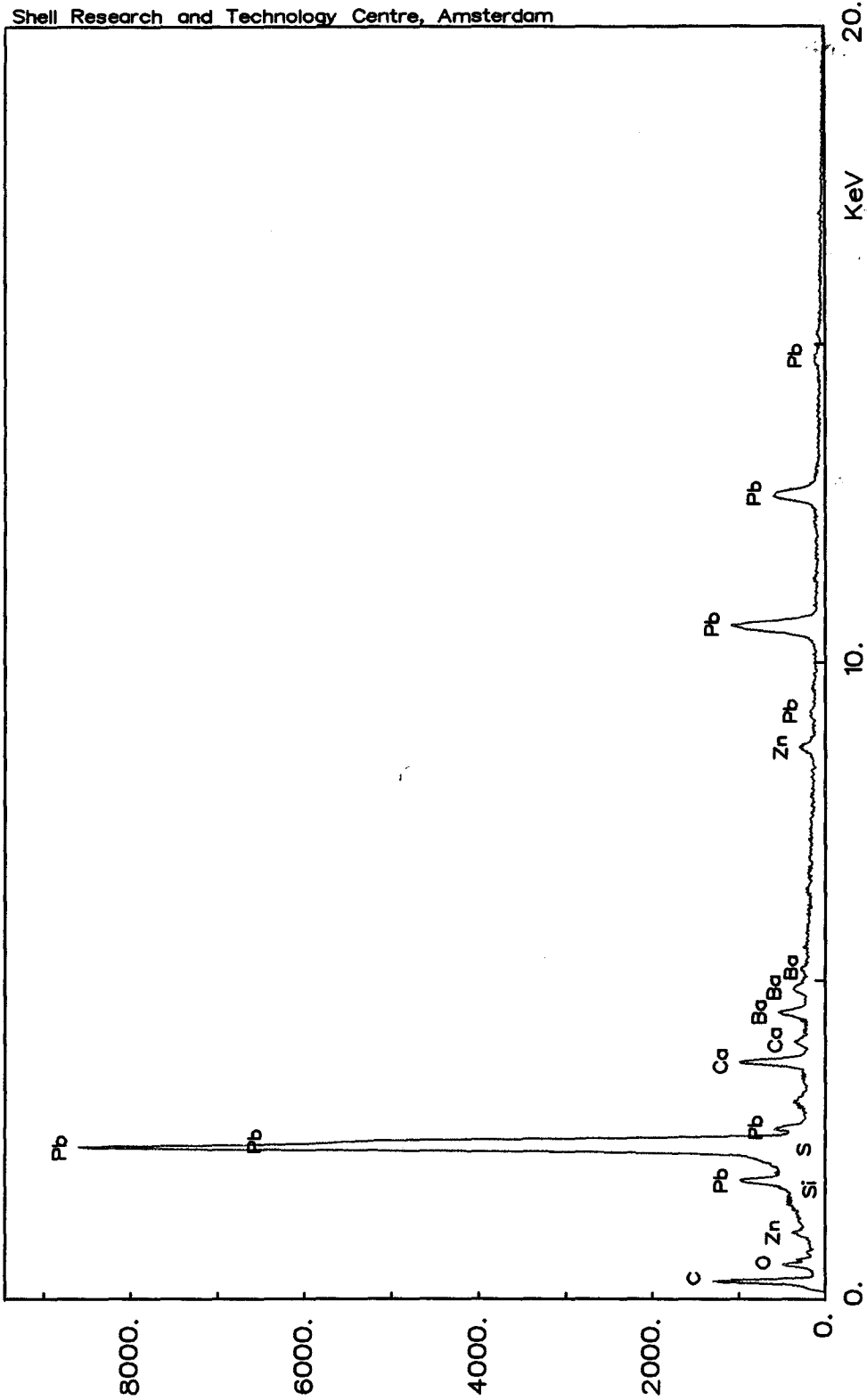
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EDX-spectrum for F209/2-2.pt3

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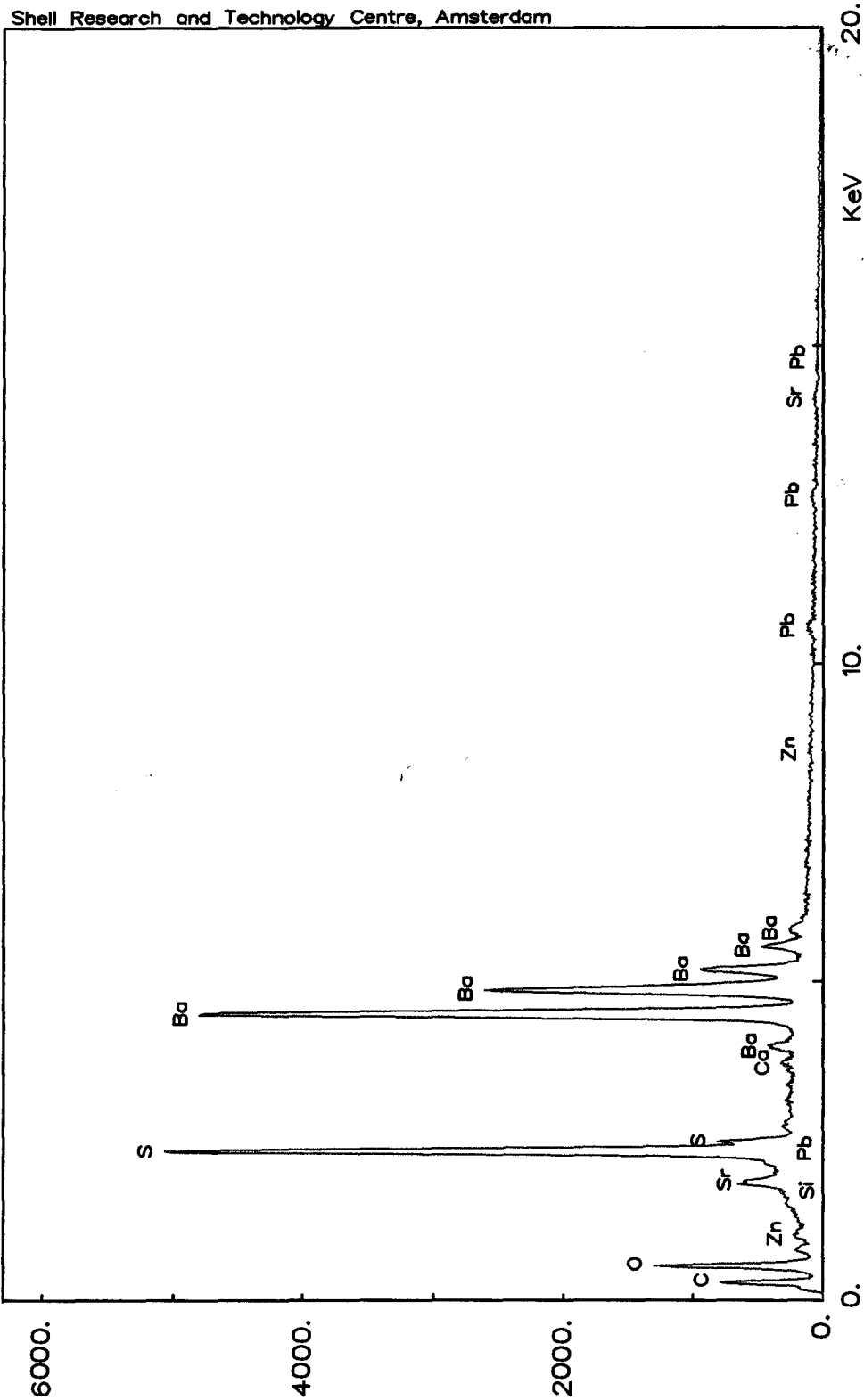
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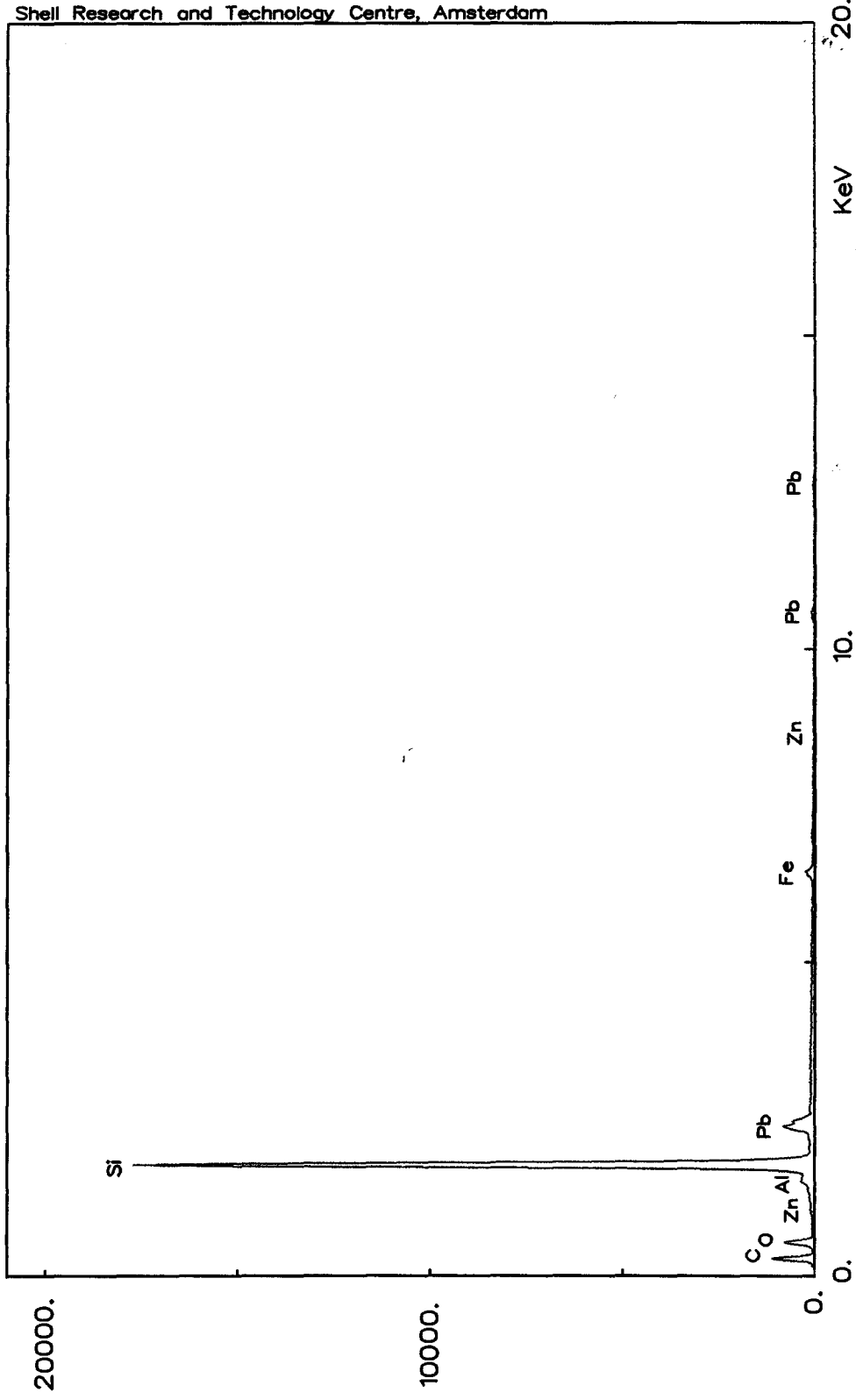
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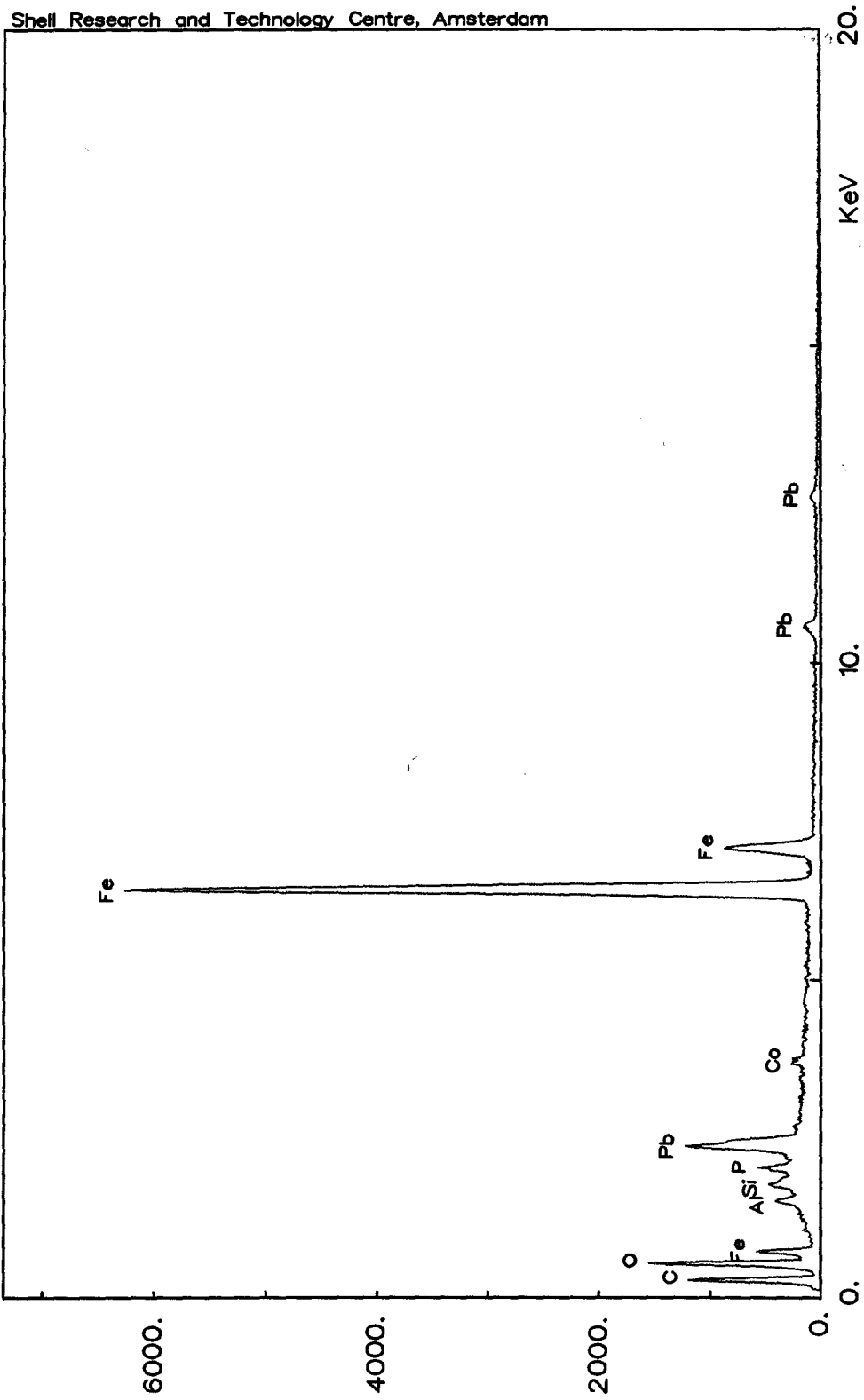
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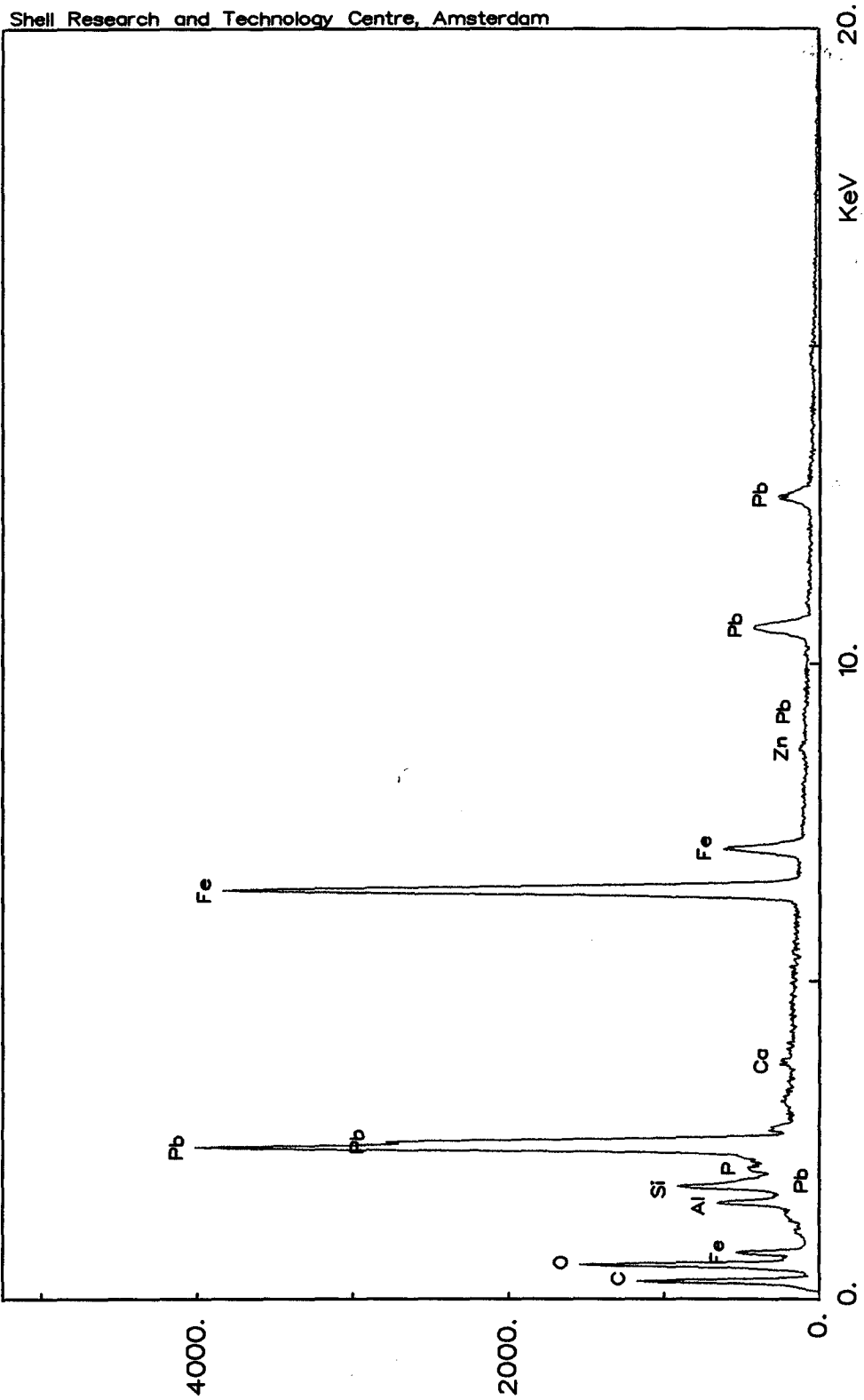
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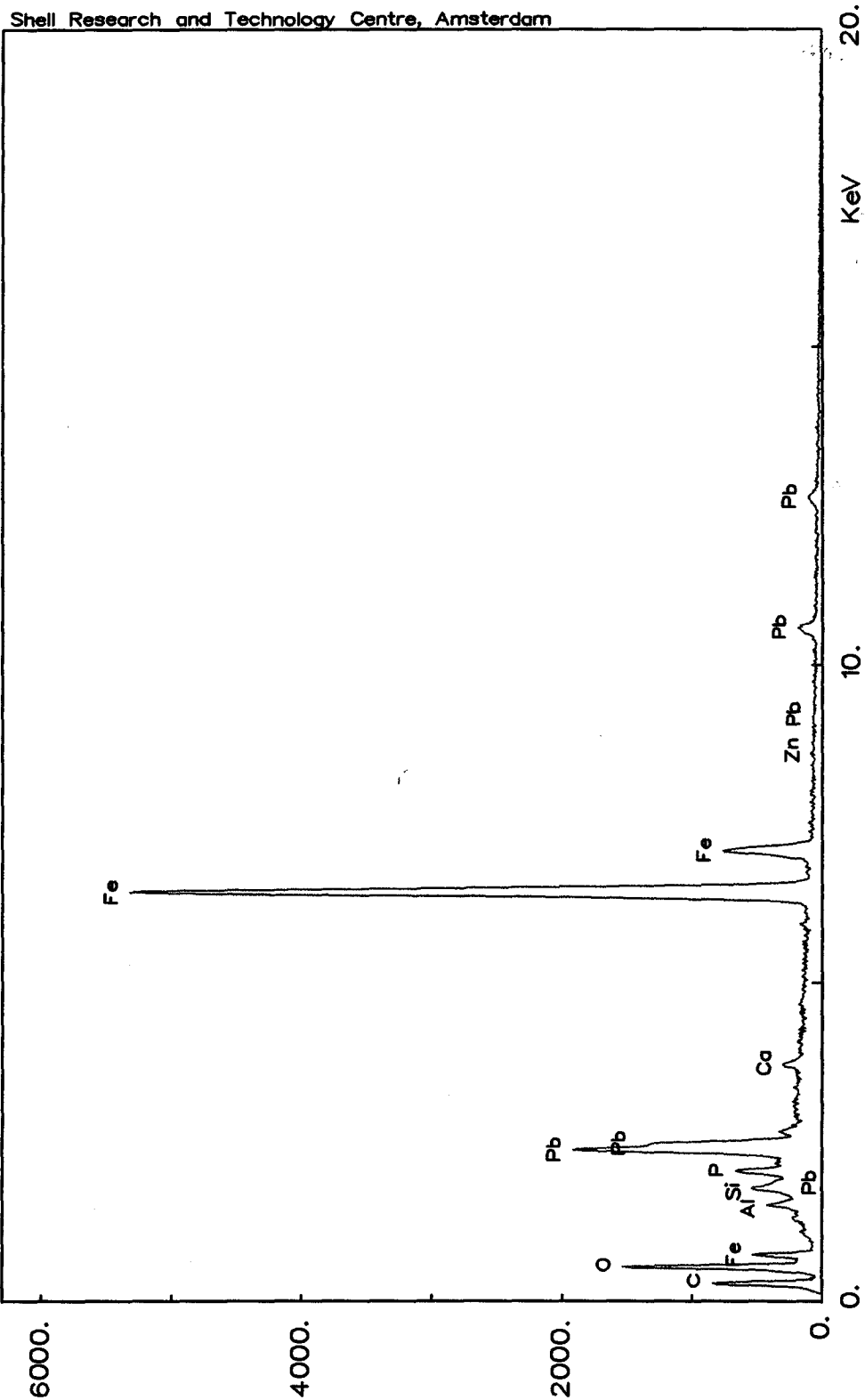
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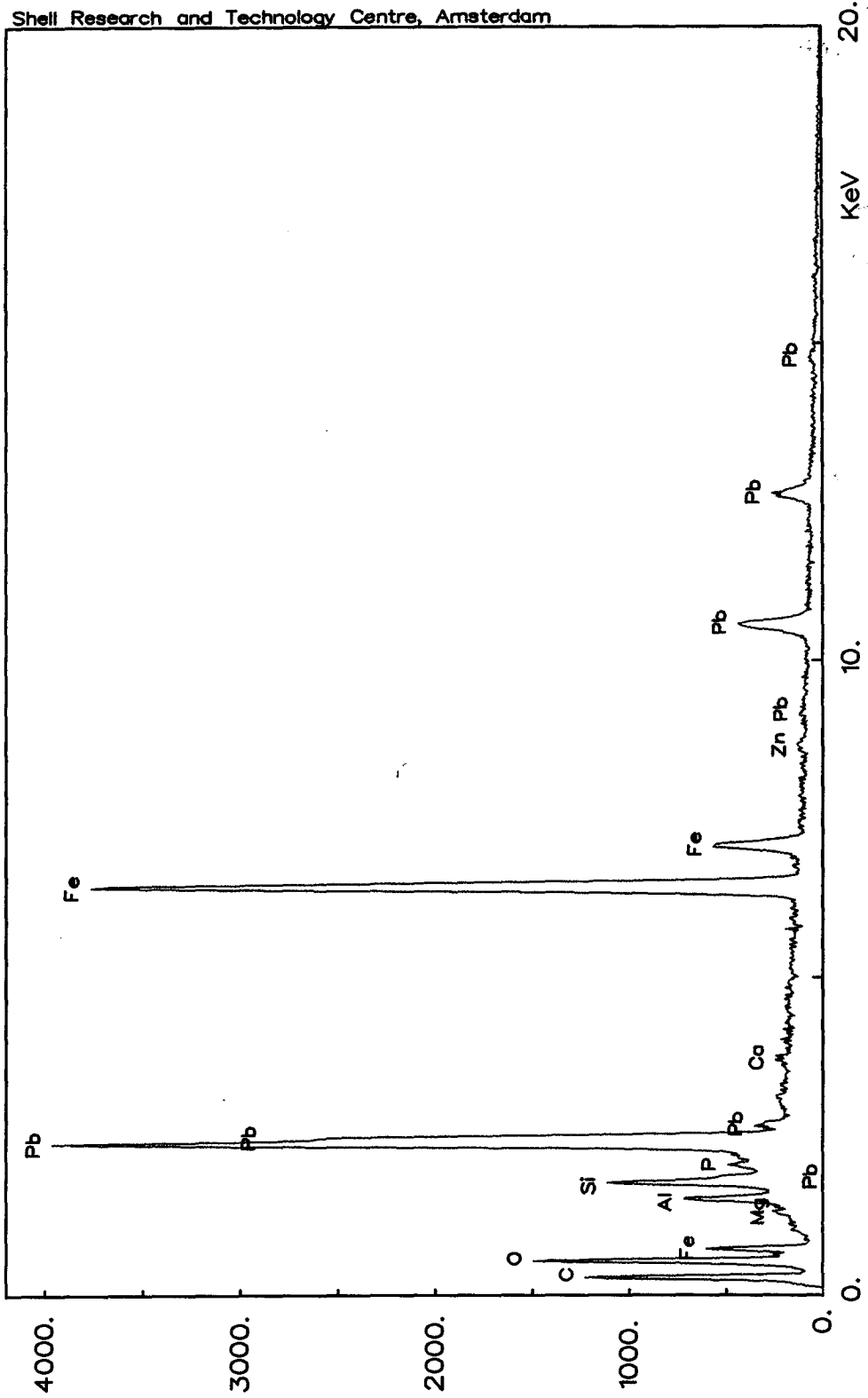
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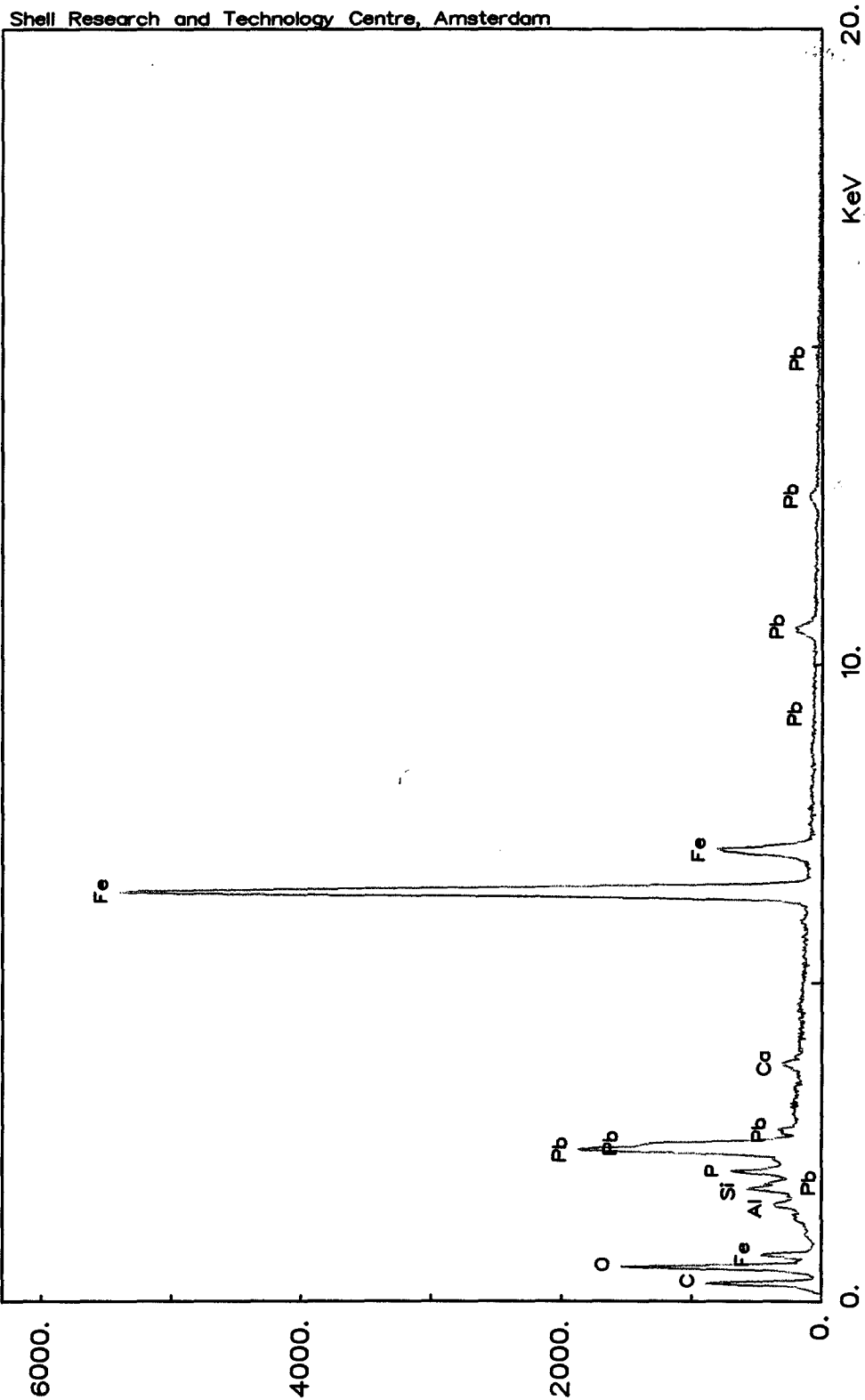
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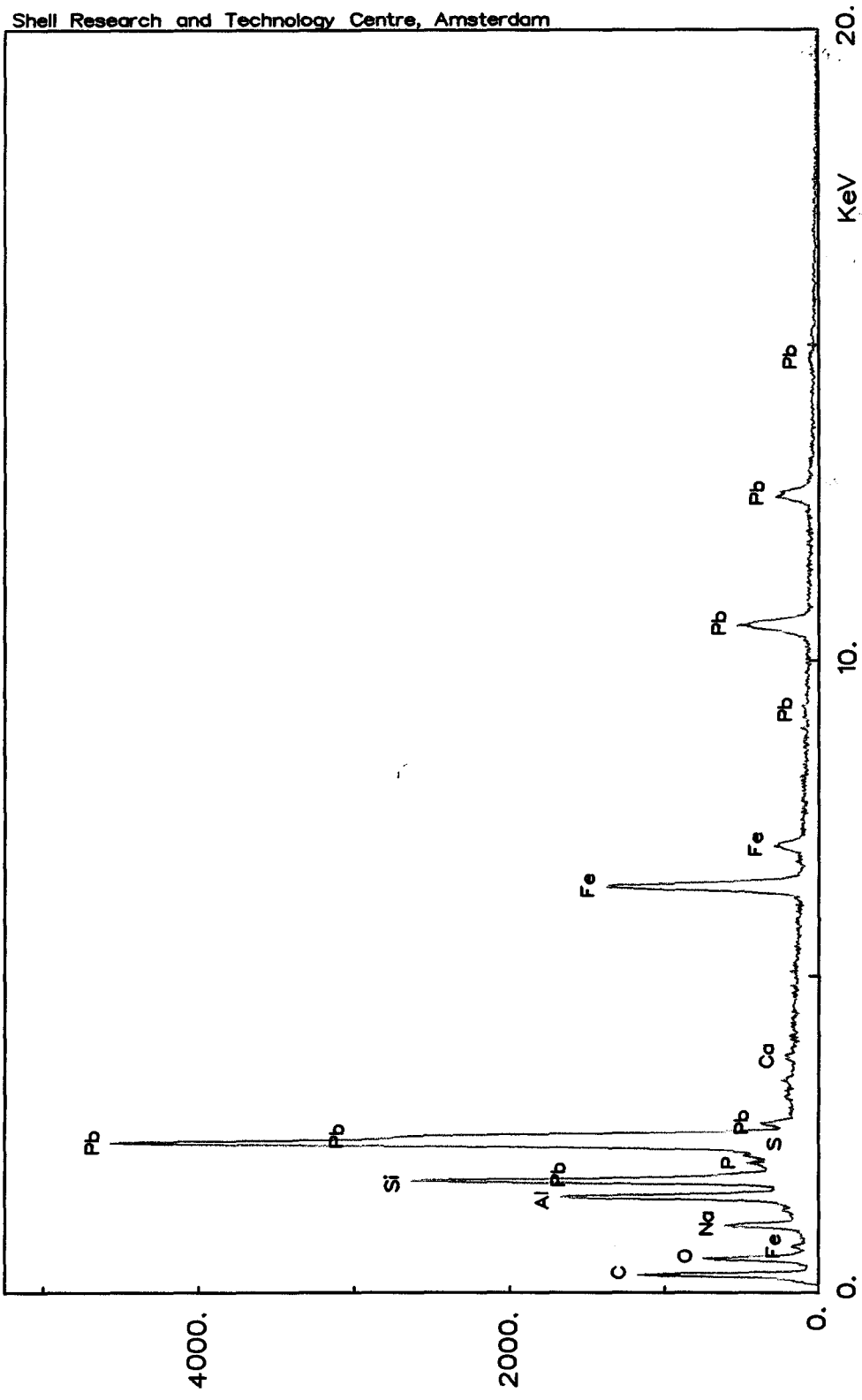
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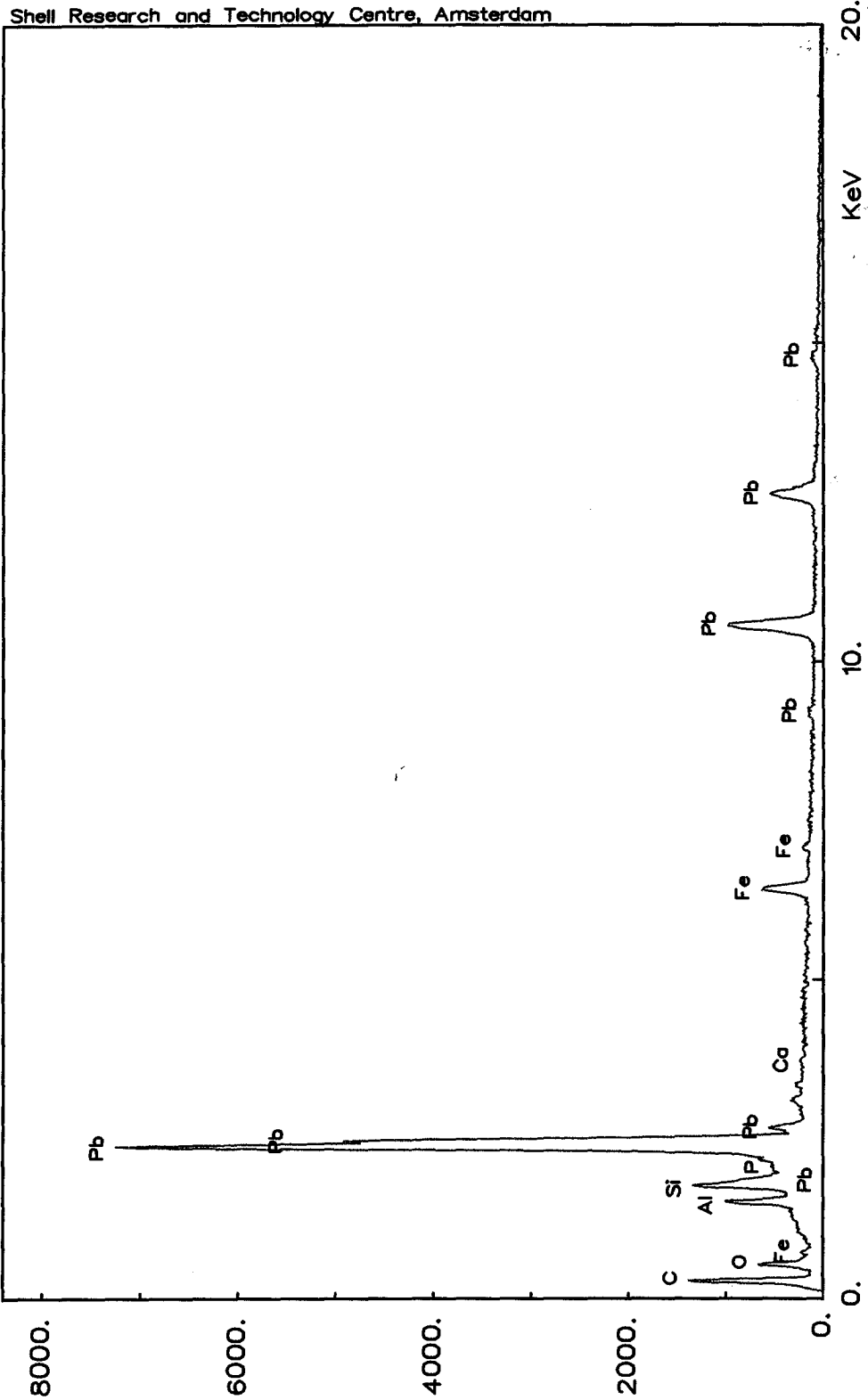
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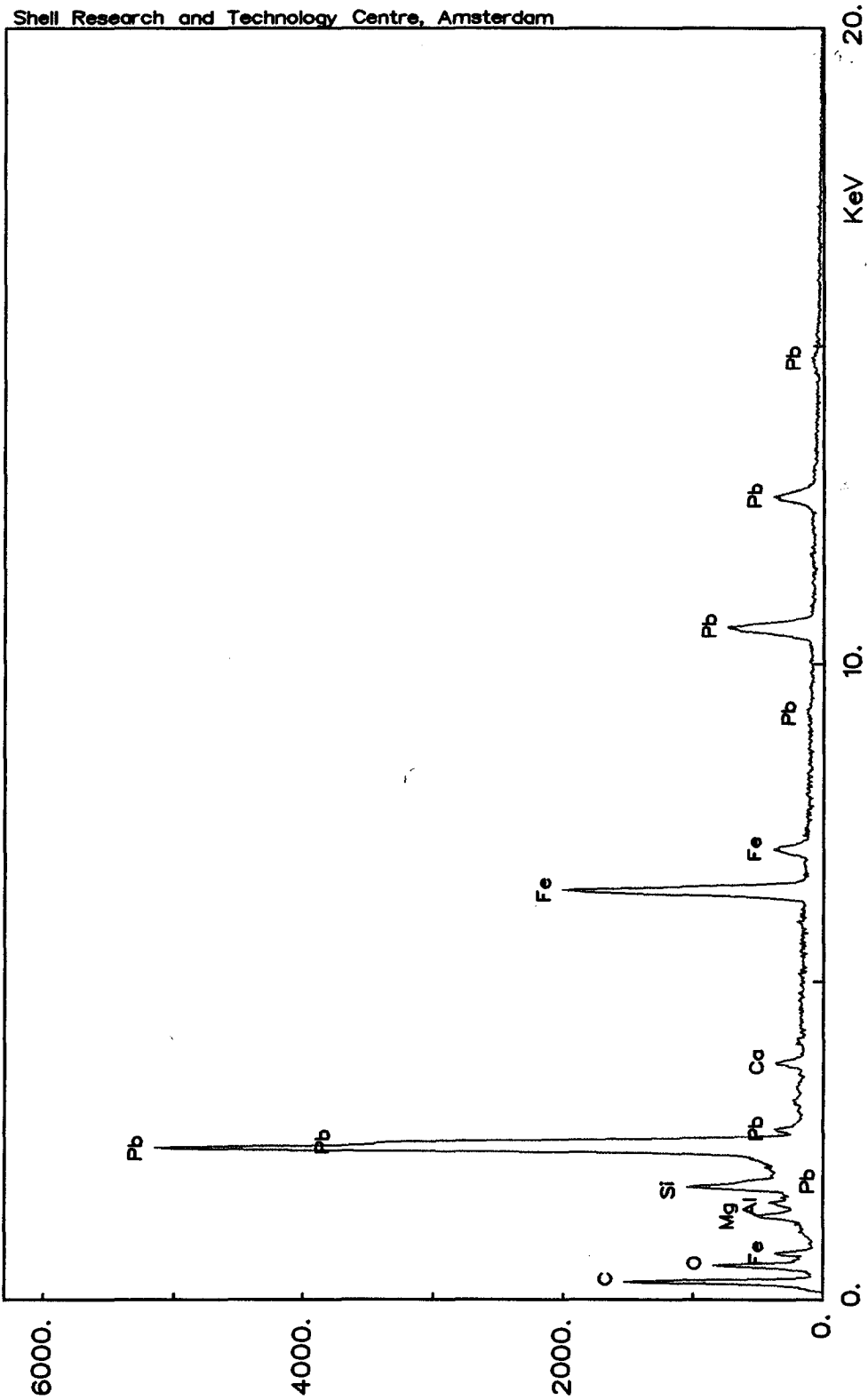
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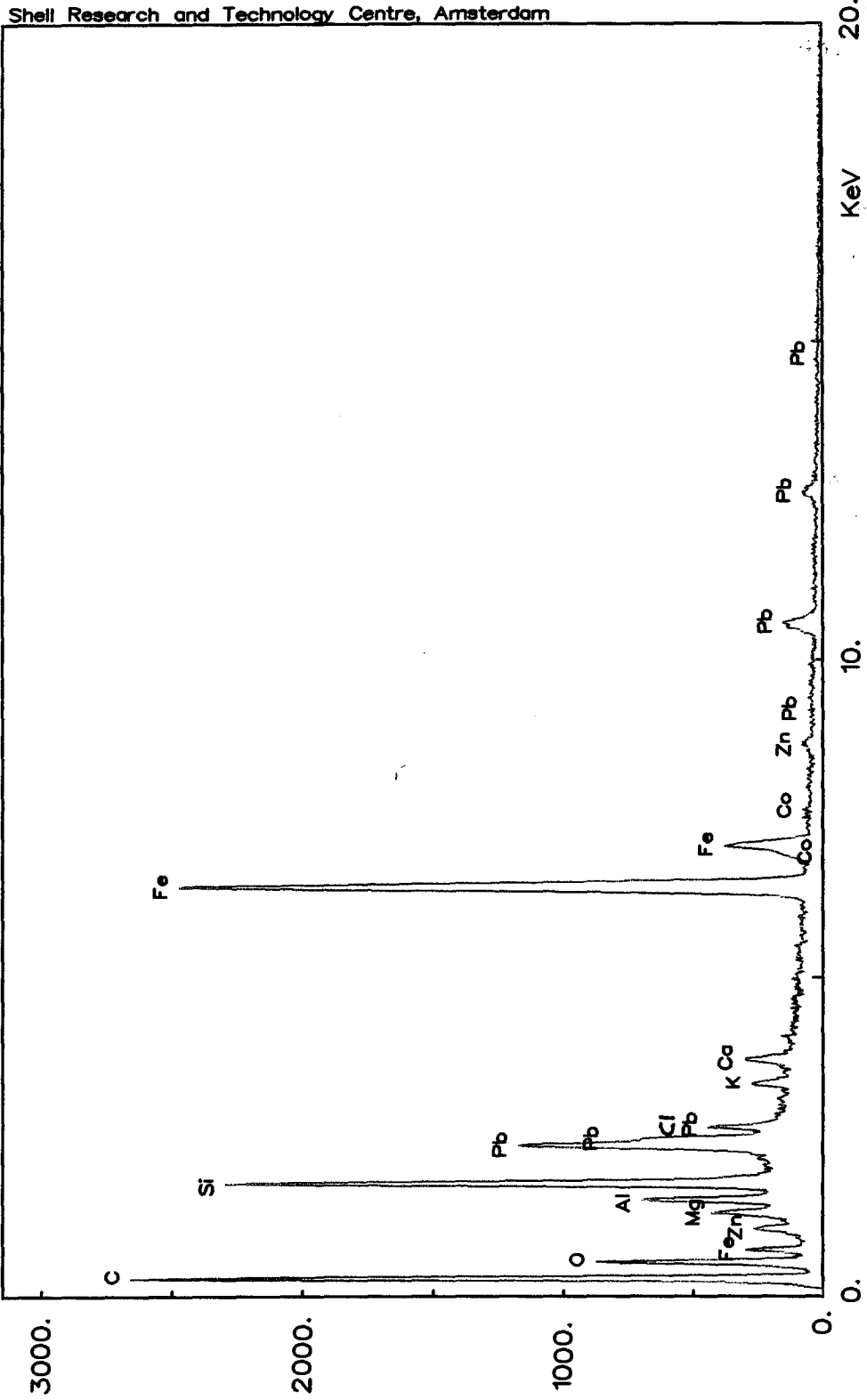
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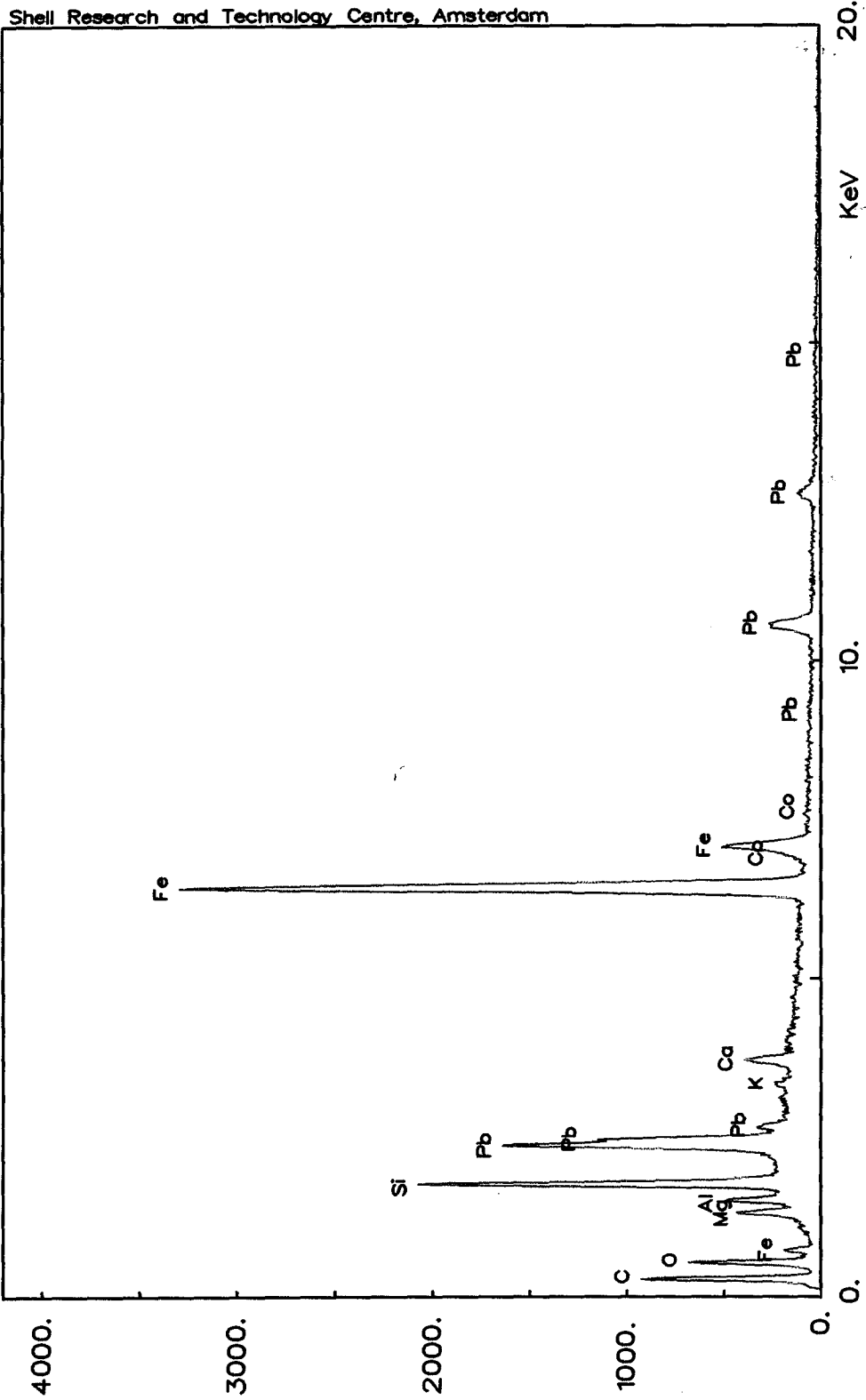
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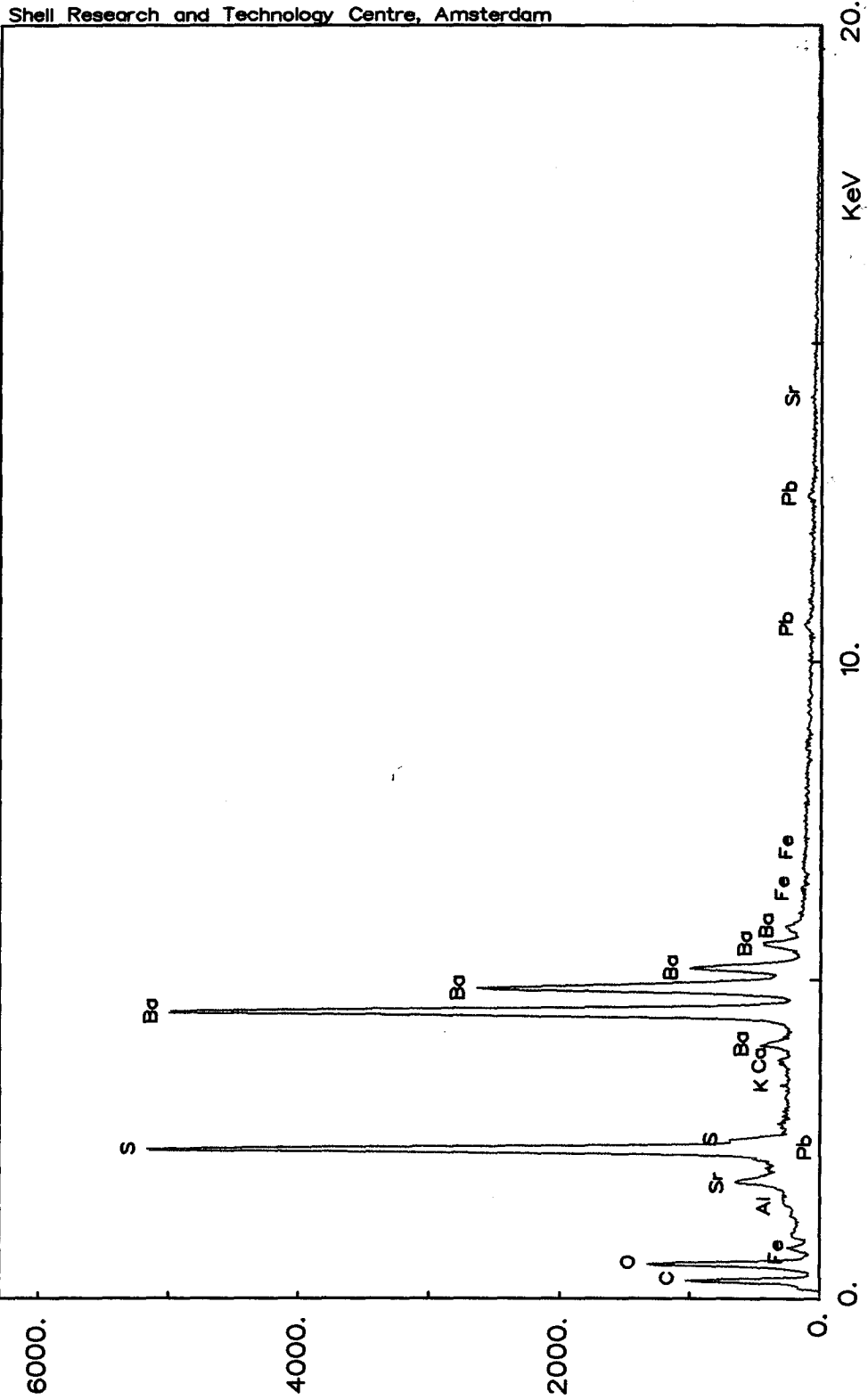
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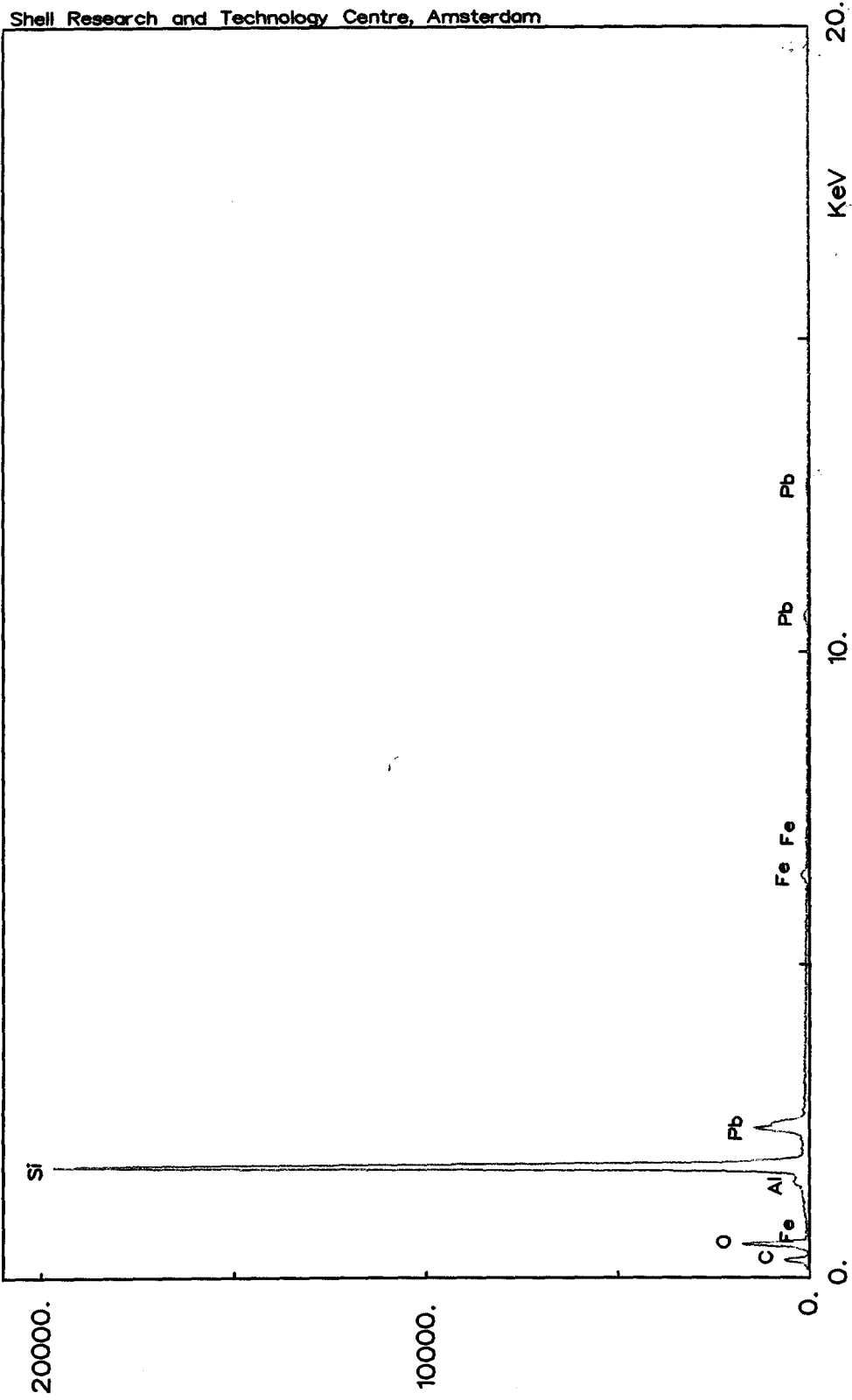
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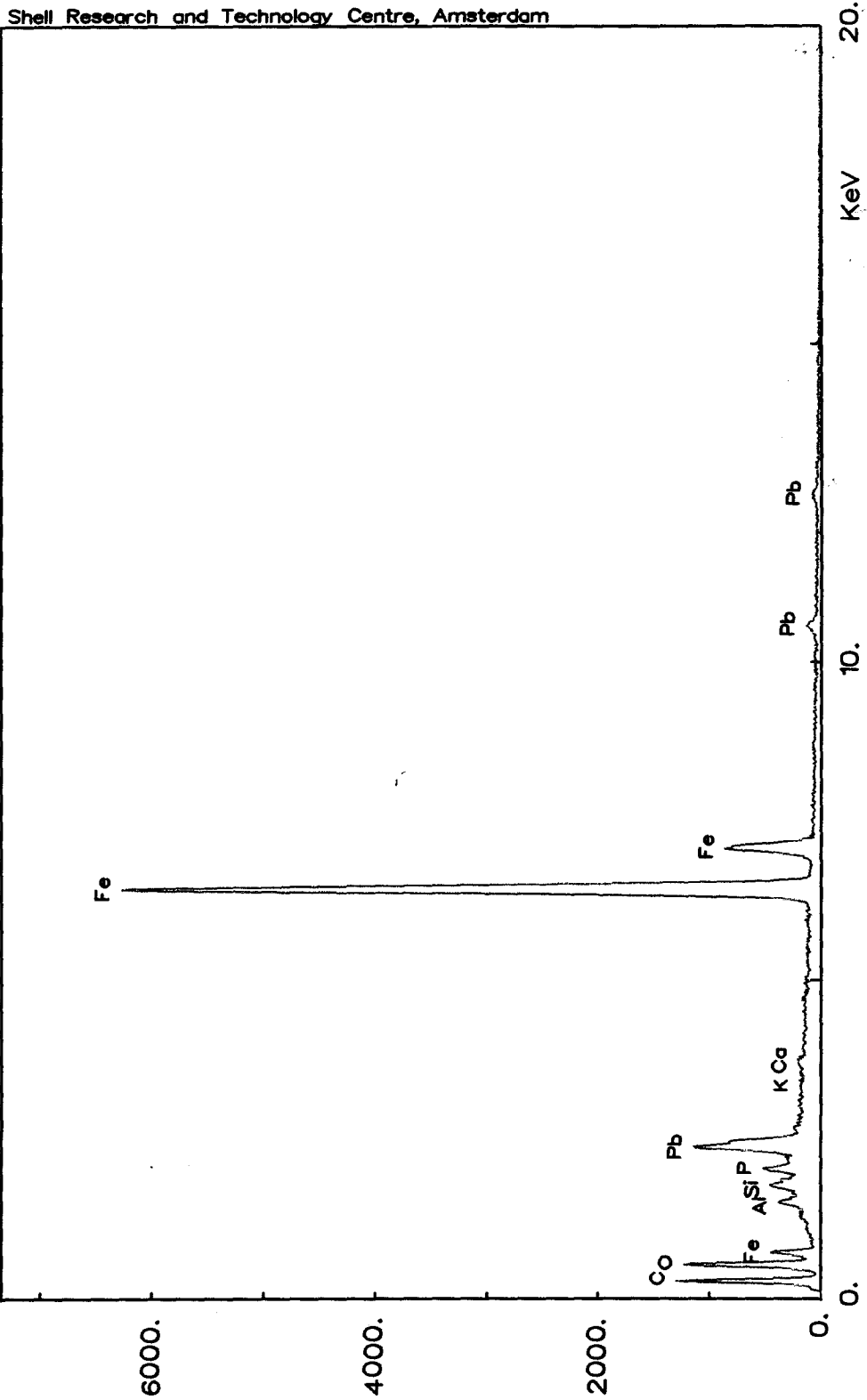
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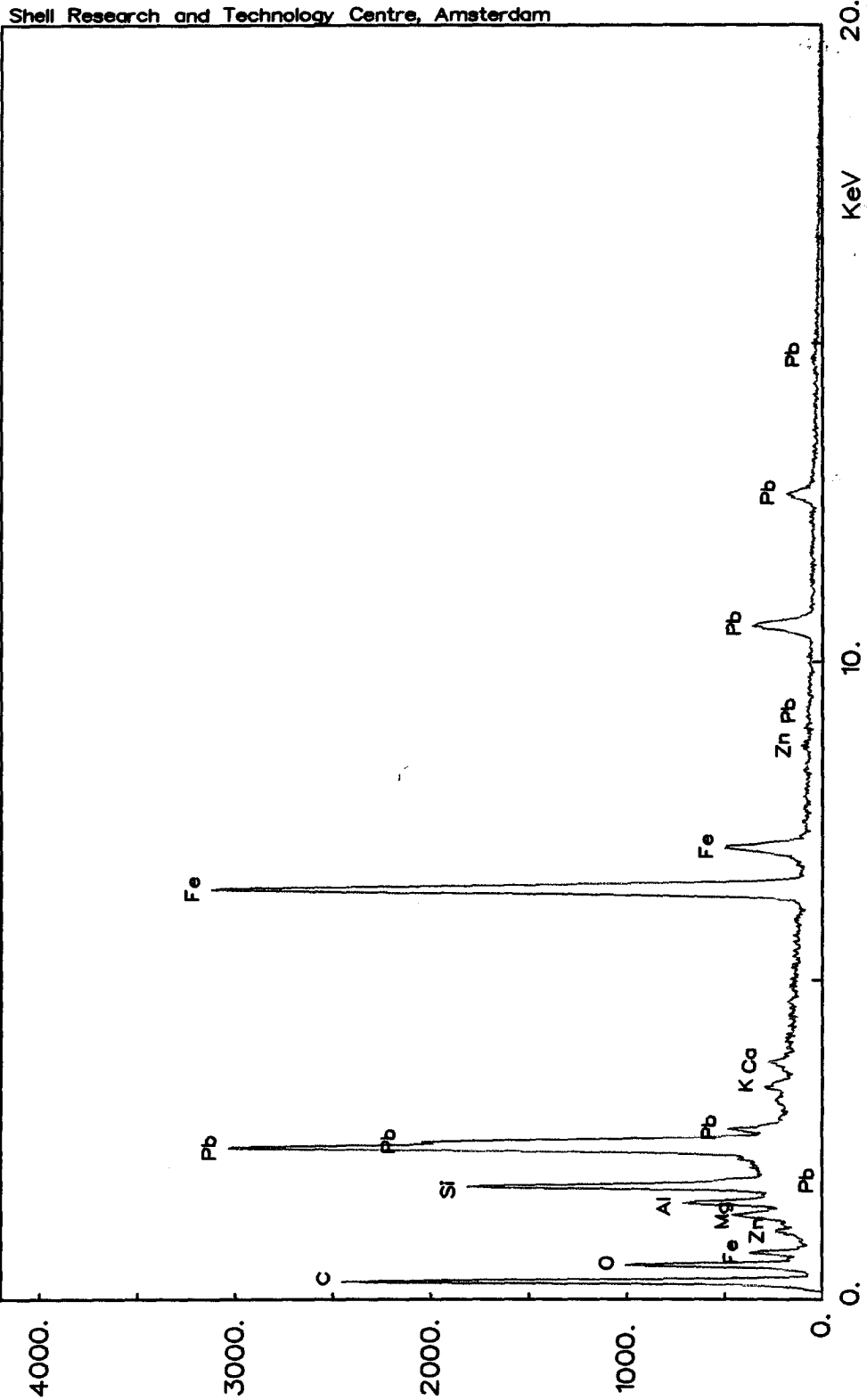
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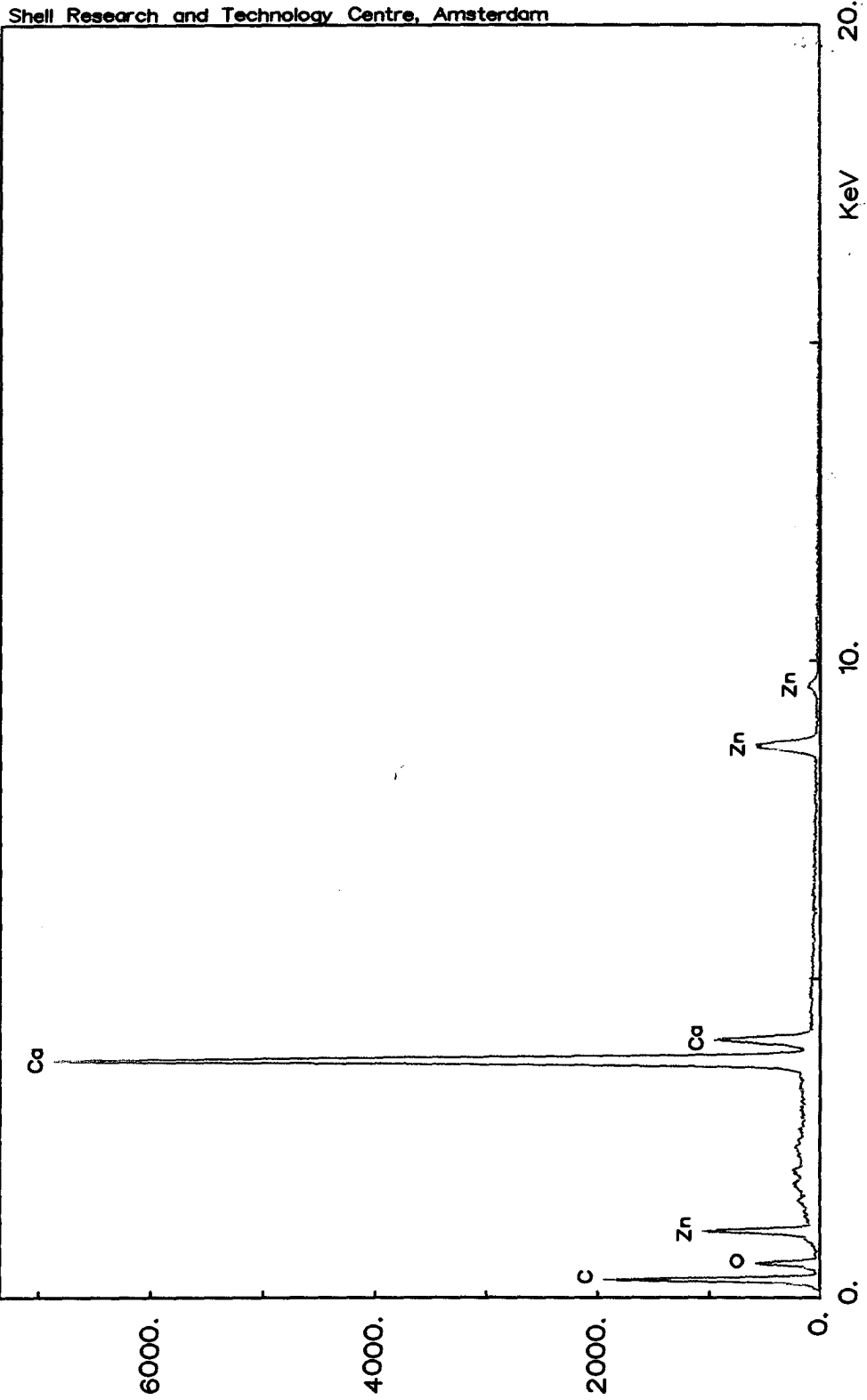
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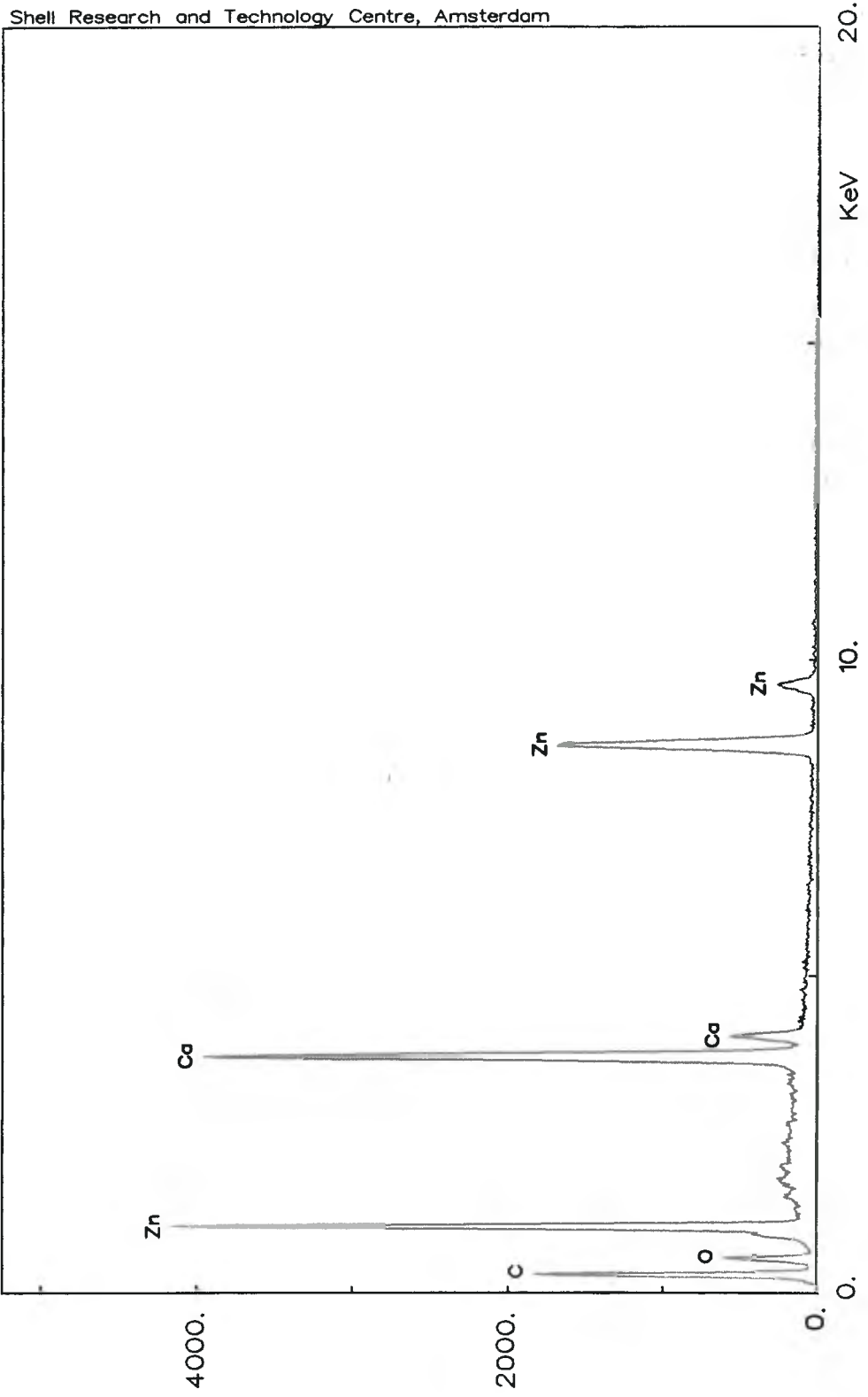
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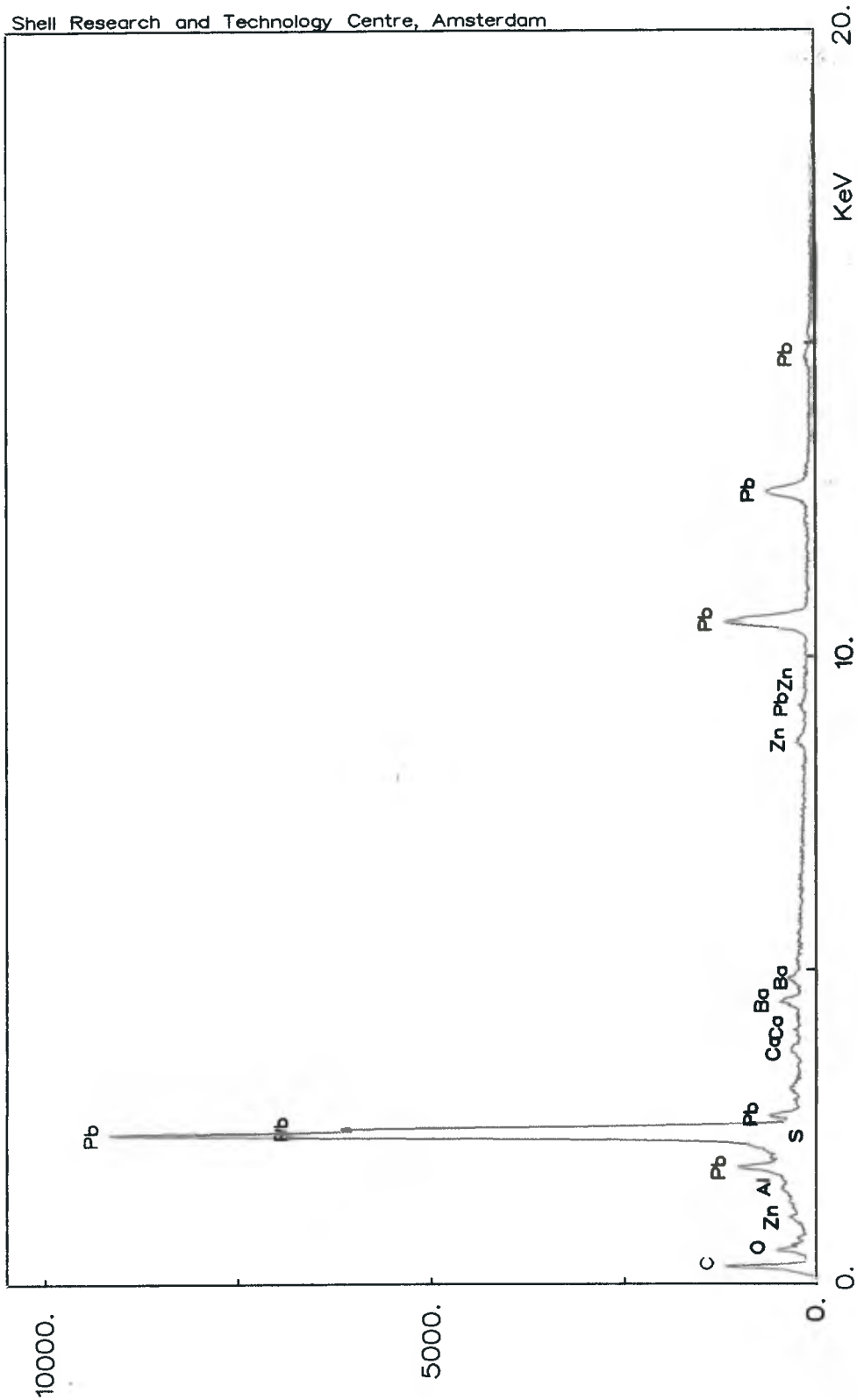
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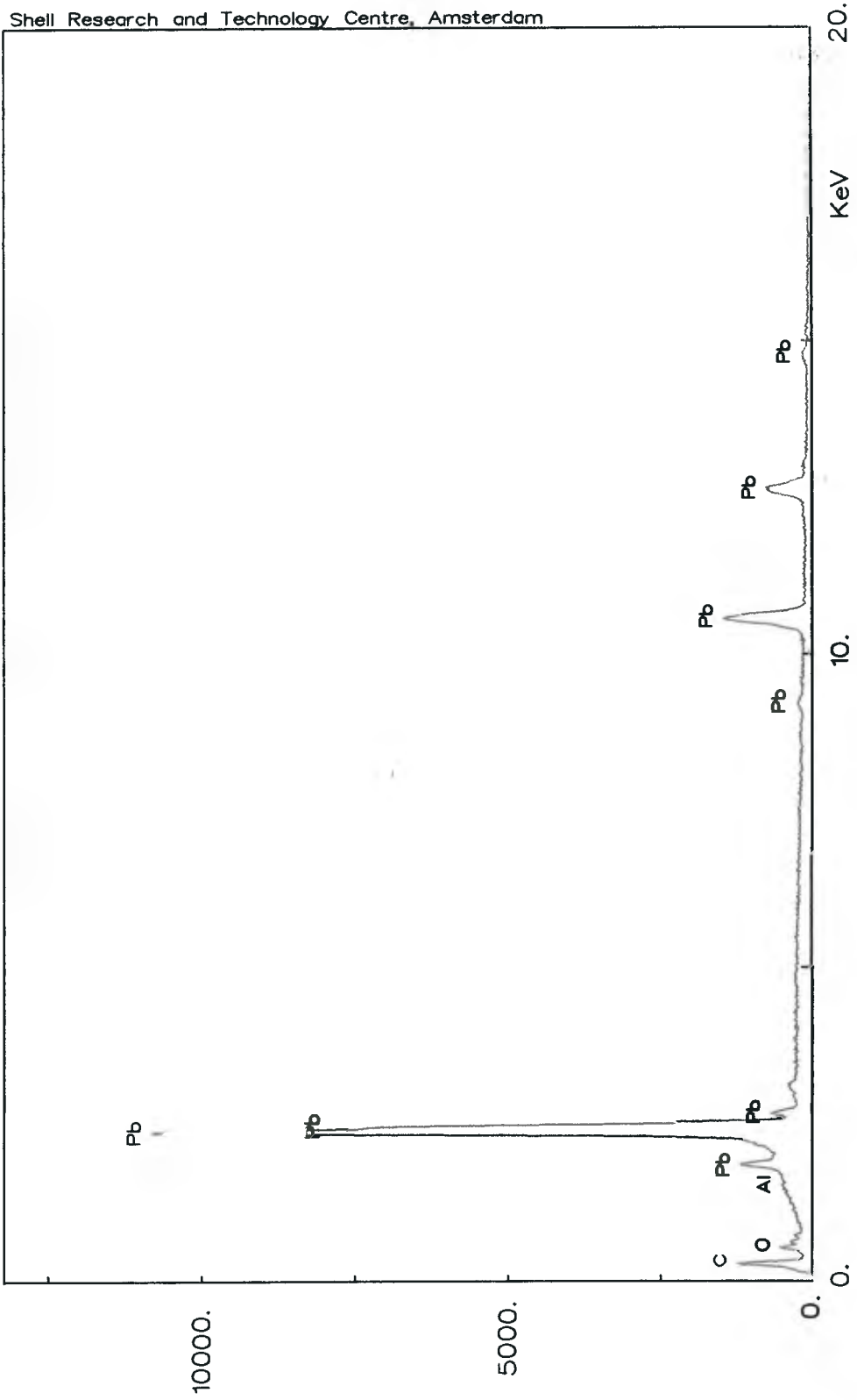
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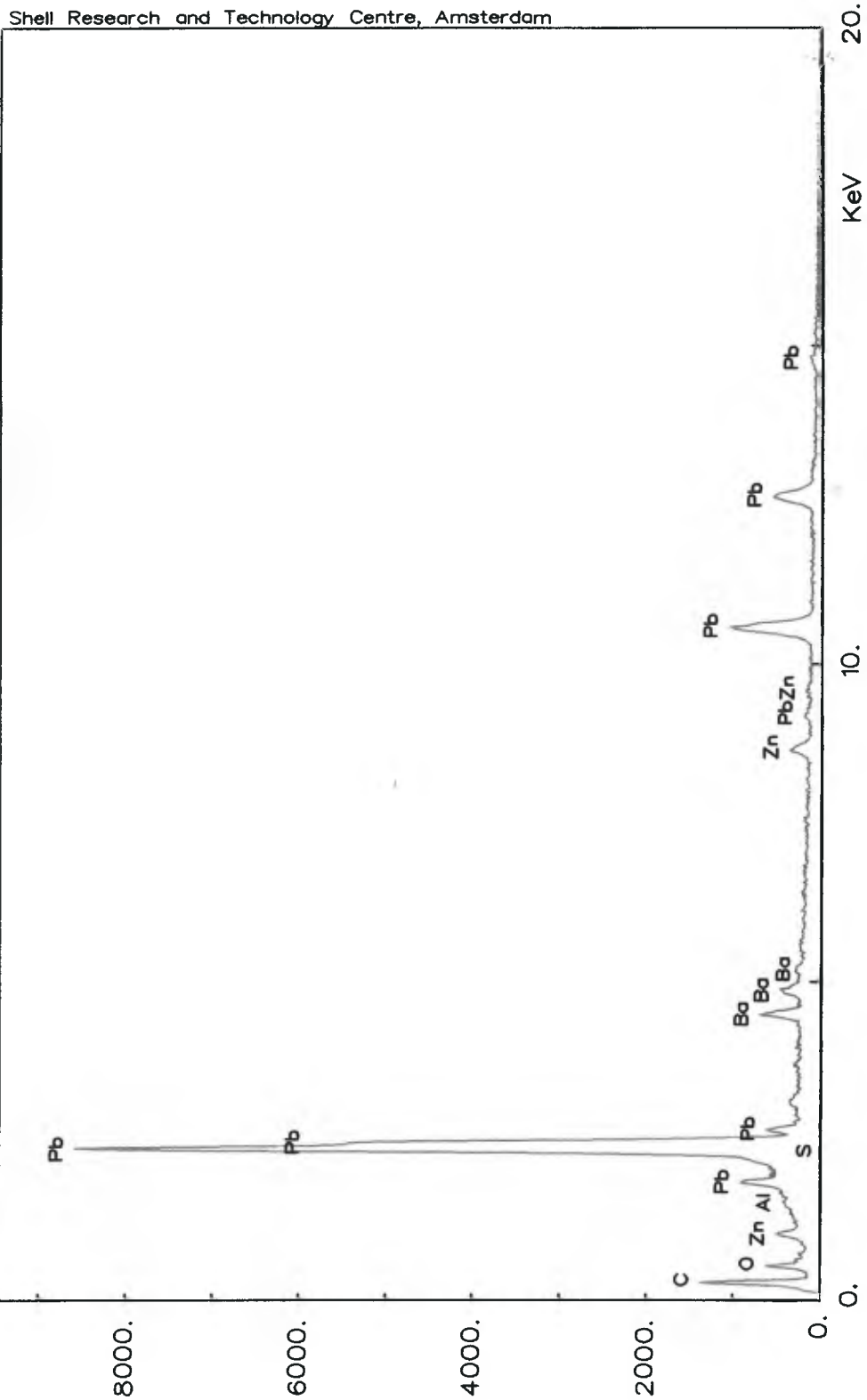
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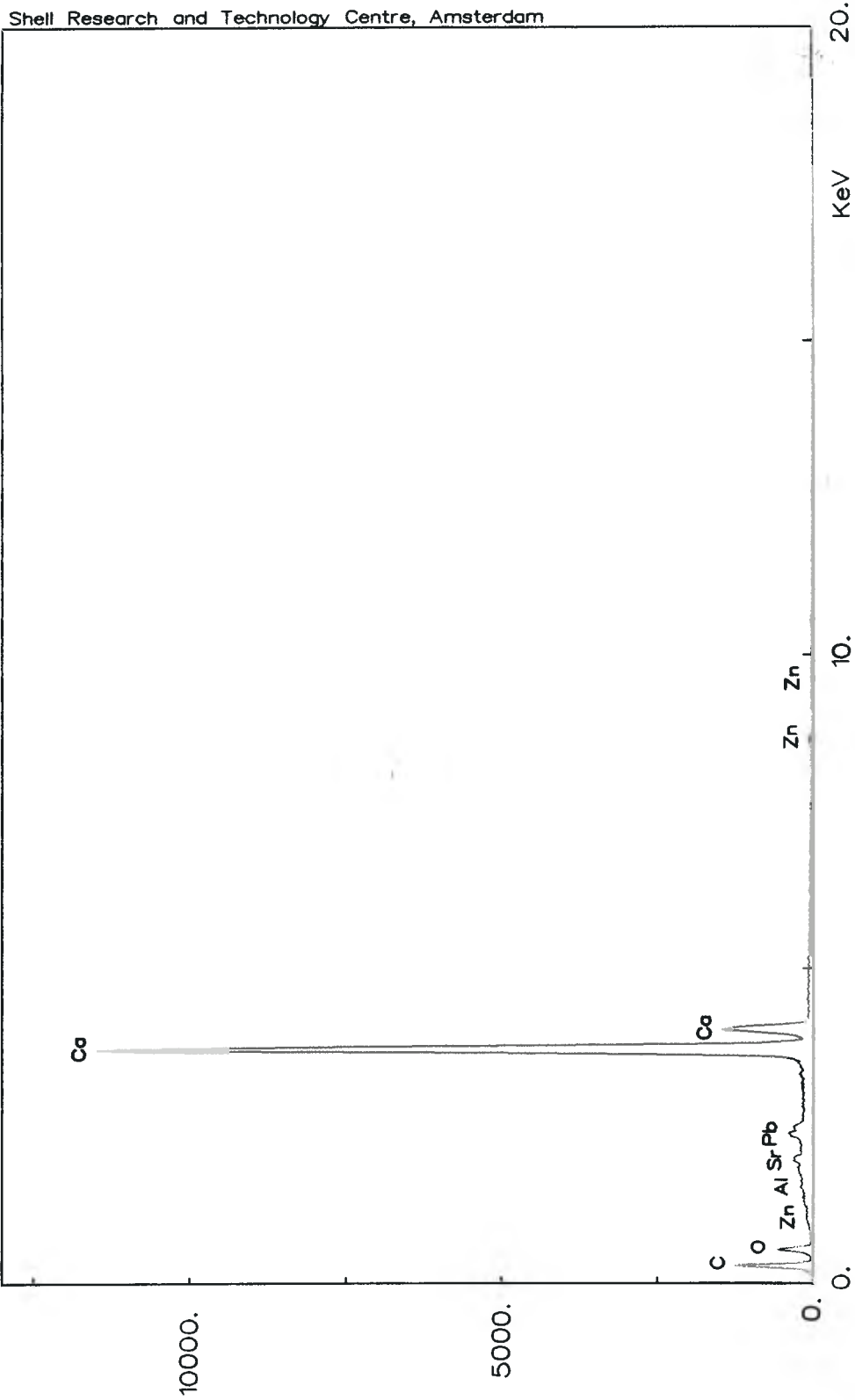
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-1.pt4
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
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EDX-spectrum for F209/3-1.pt5
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acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



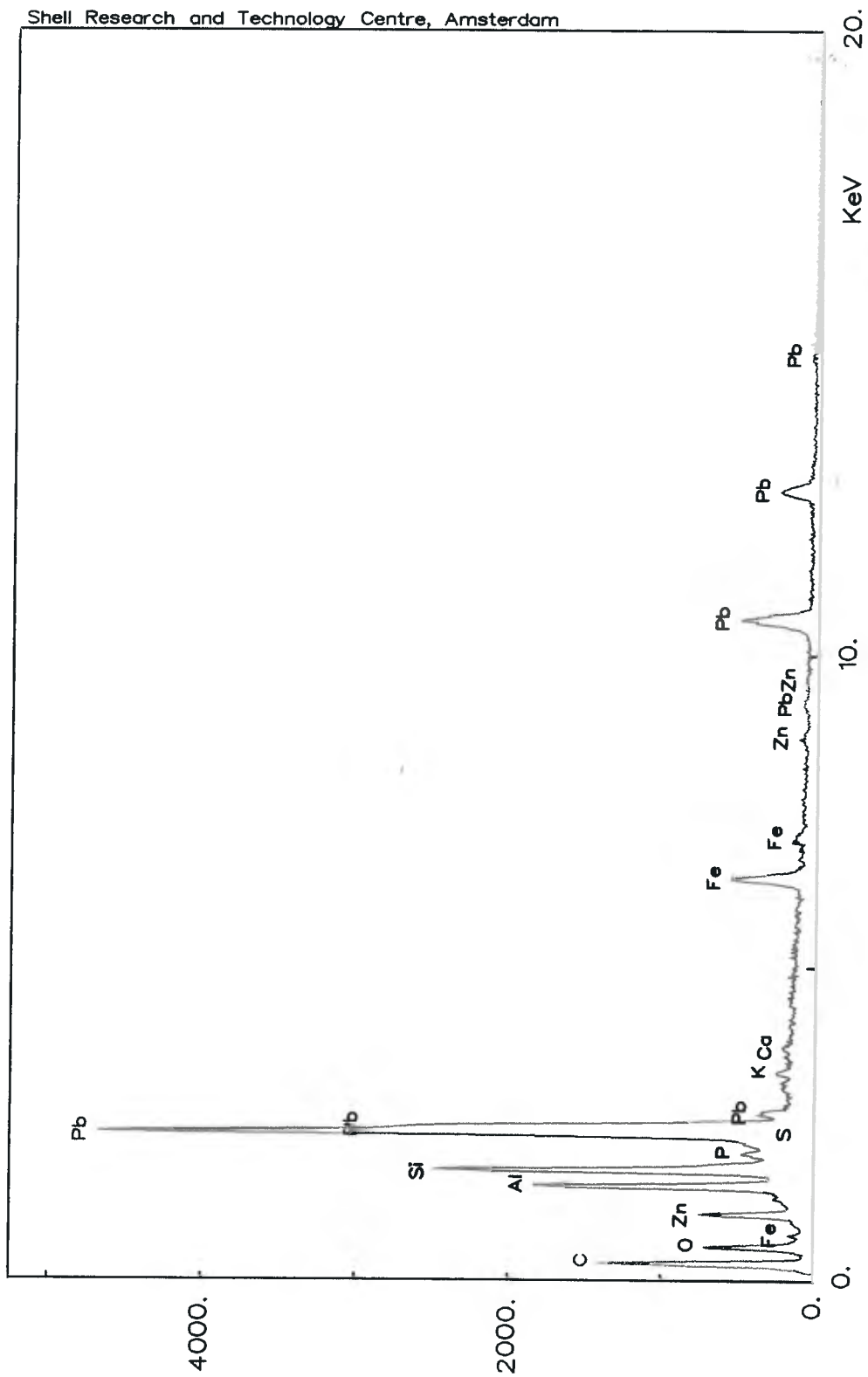
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LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



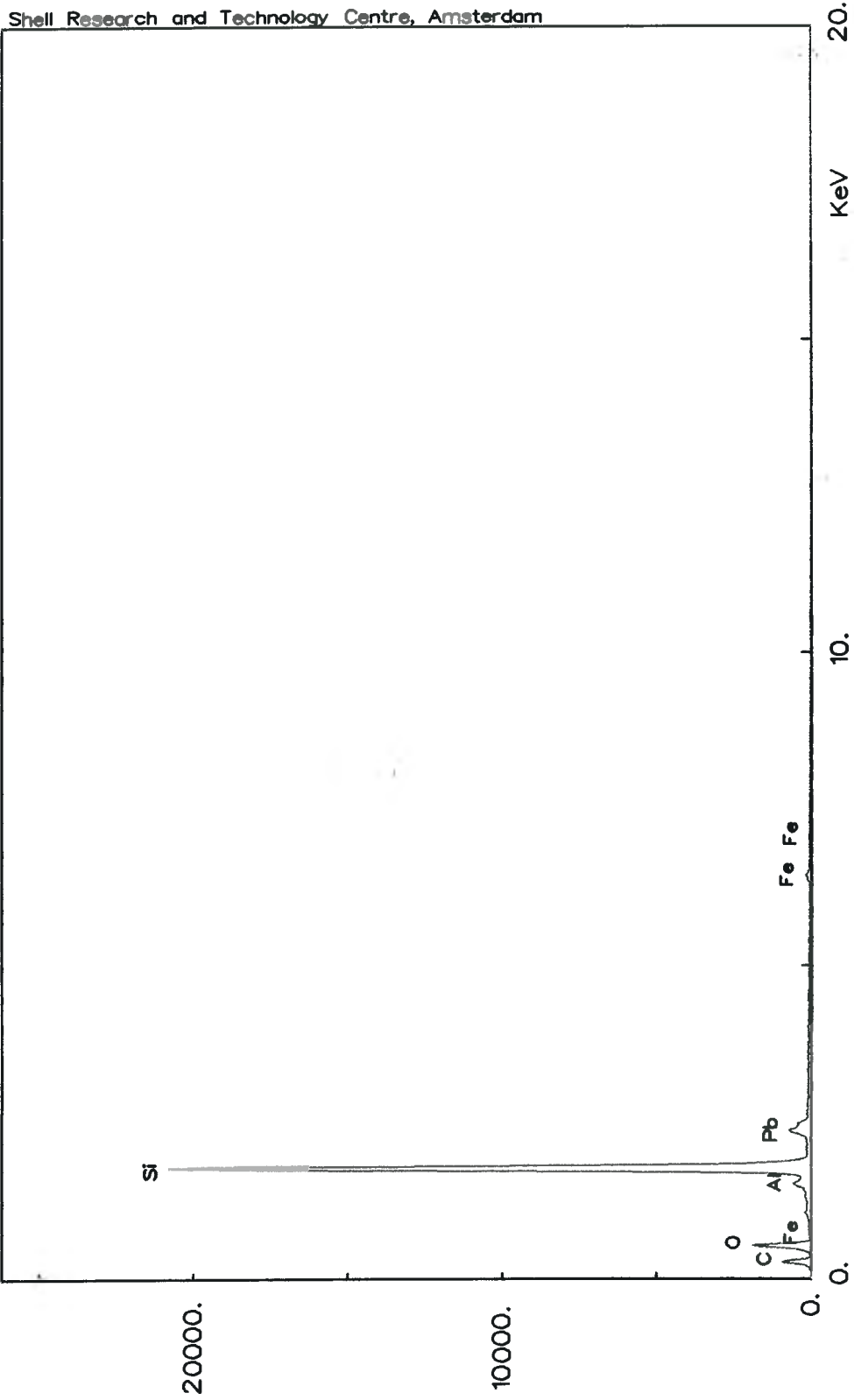
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-2.pt1

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



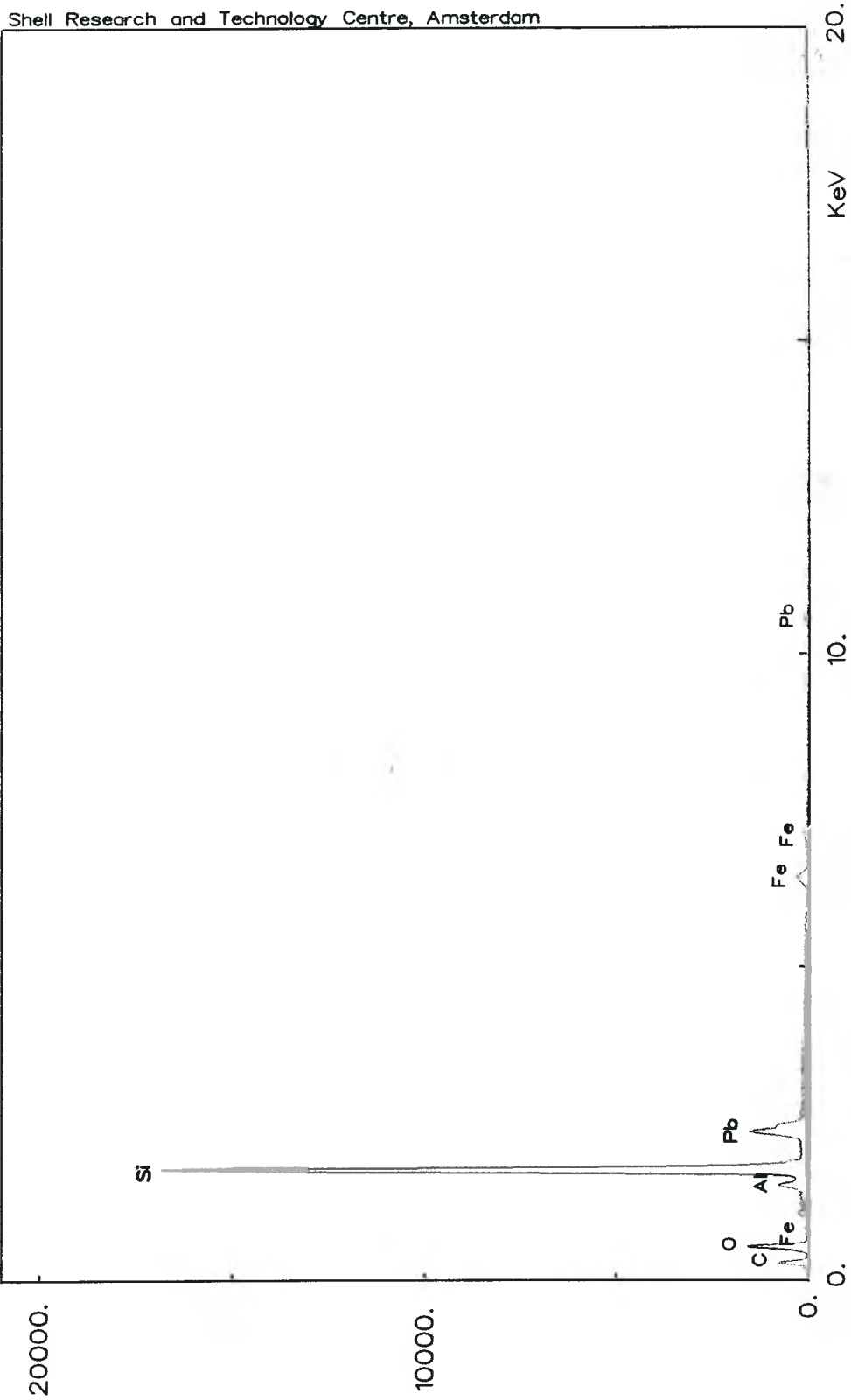
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-2.pt2
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-2.pt3

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

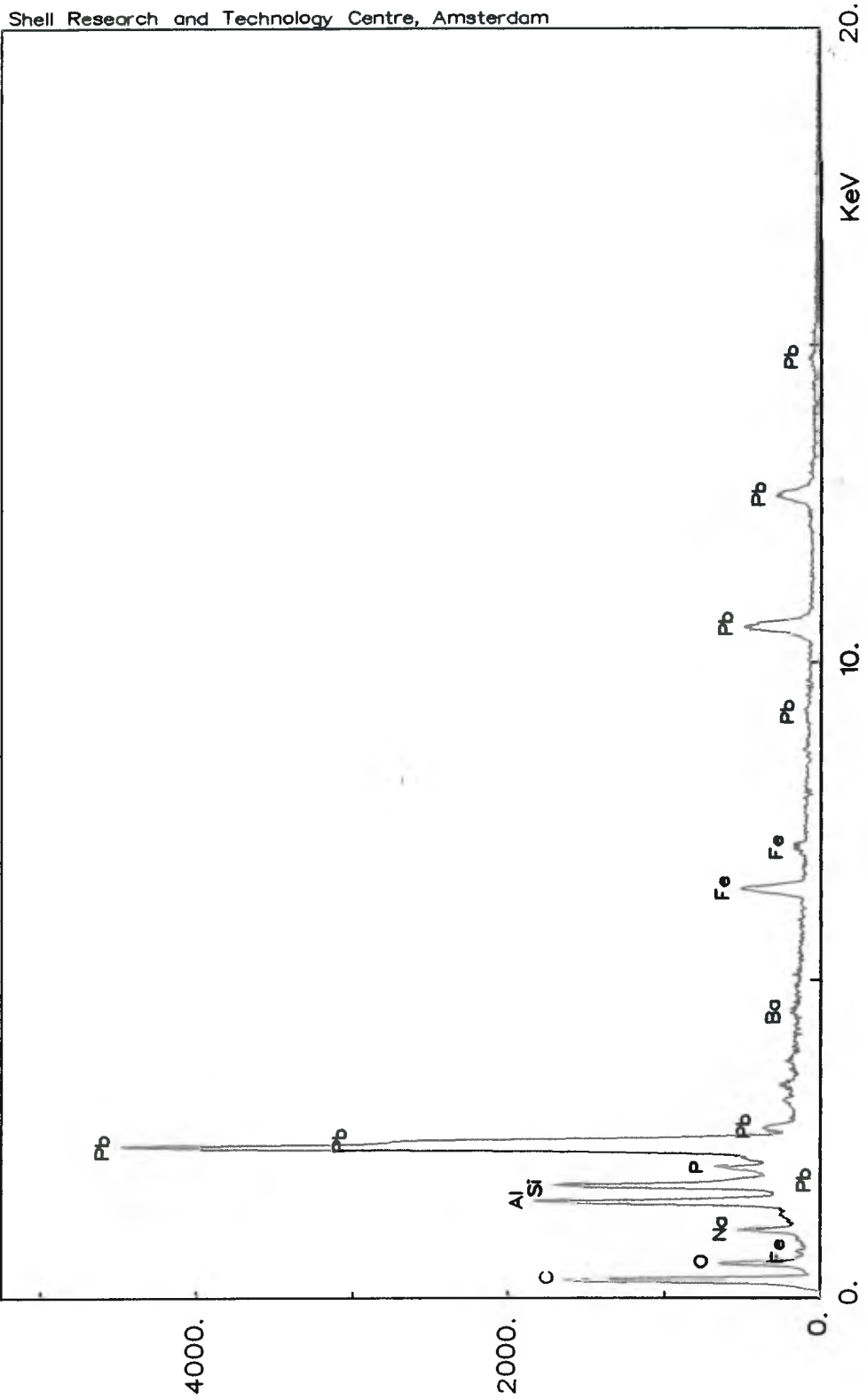
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



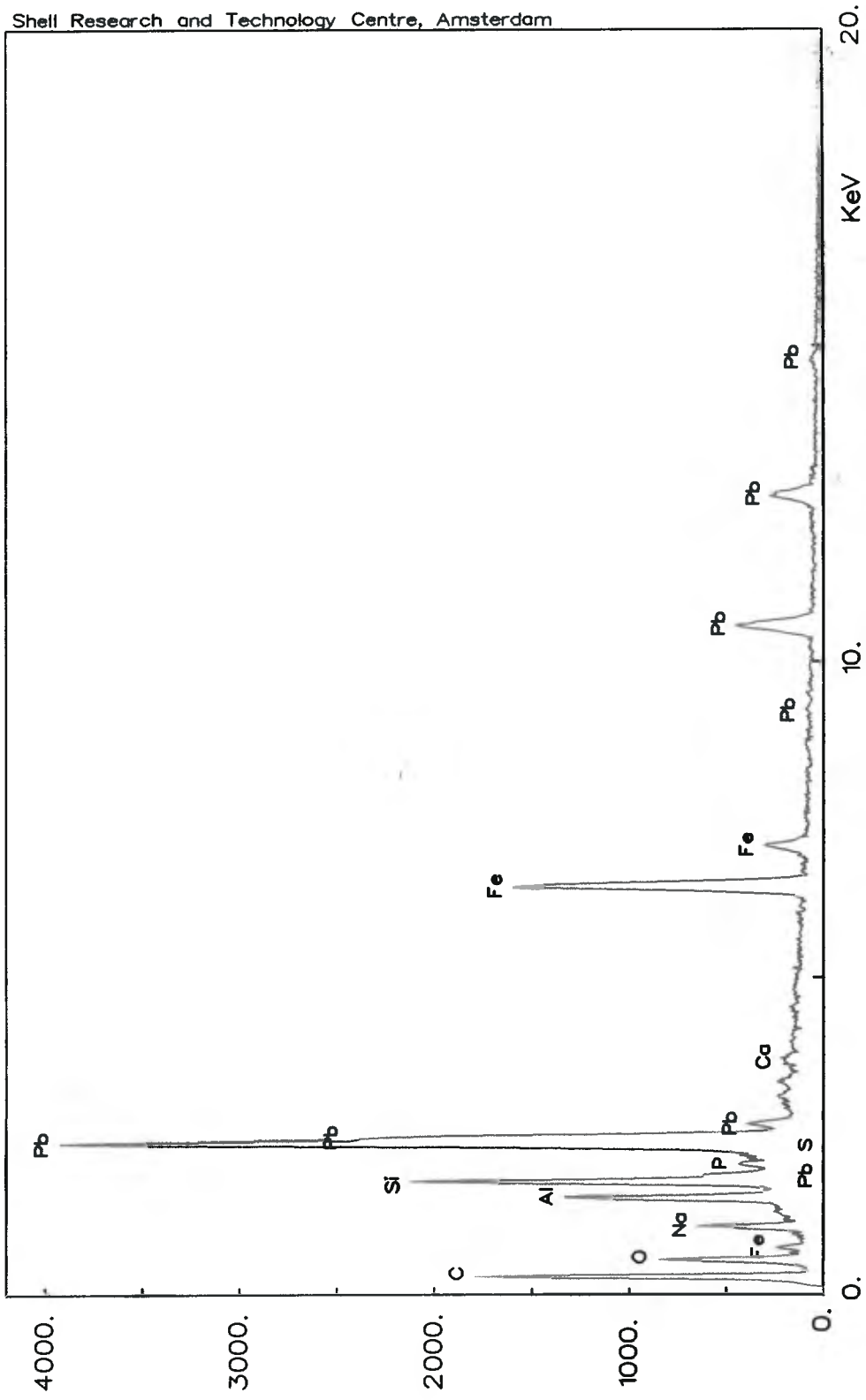
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-2.pt4

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



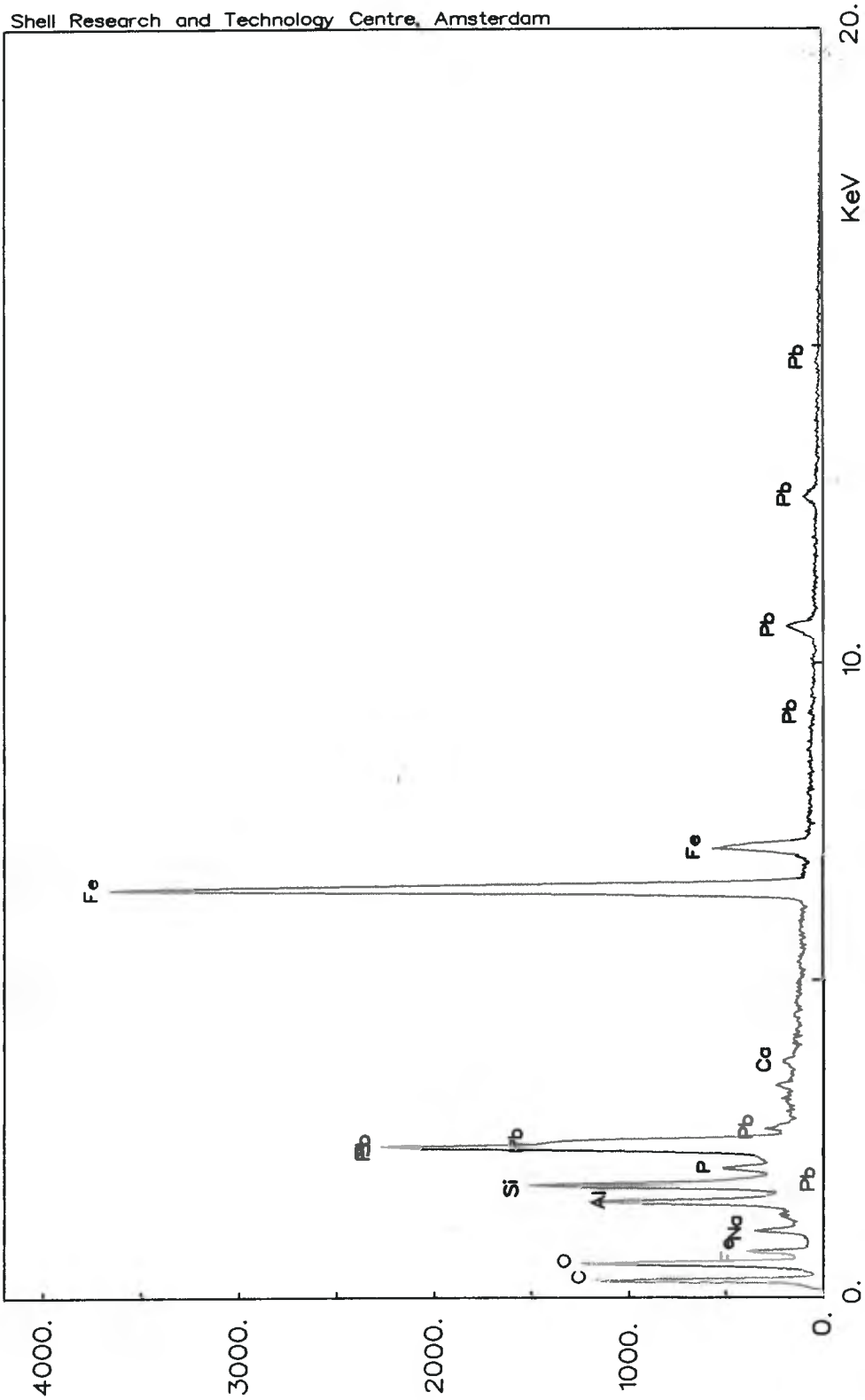
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-2.pt5
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



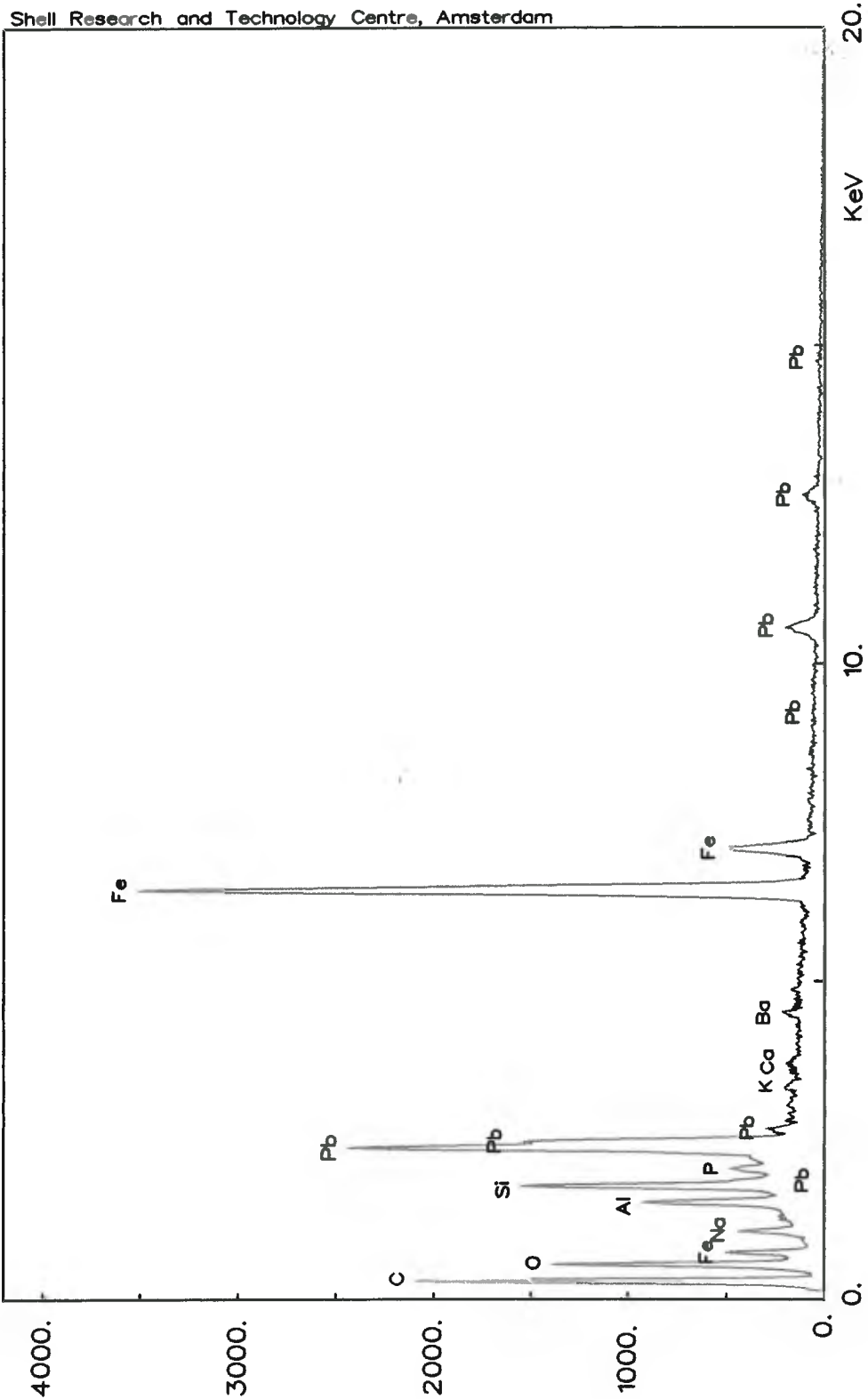
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-3.pt1

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



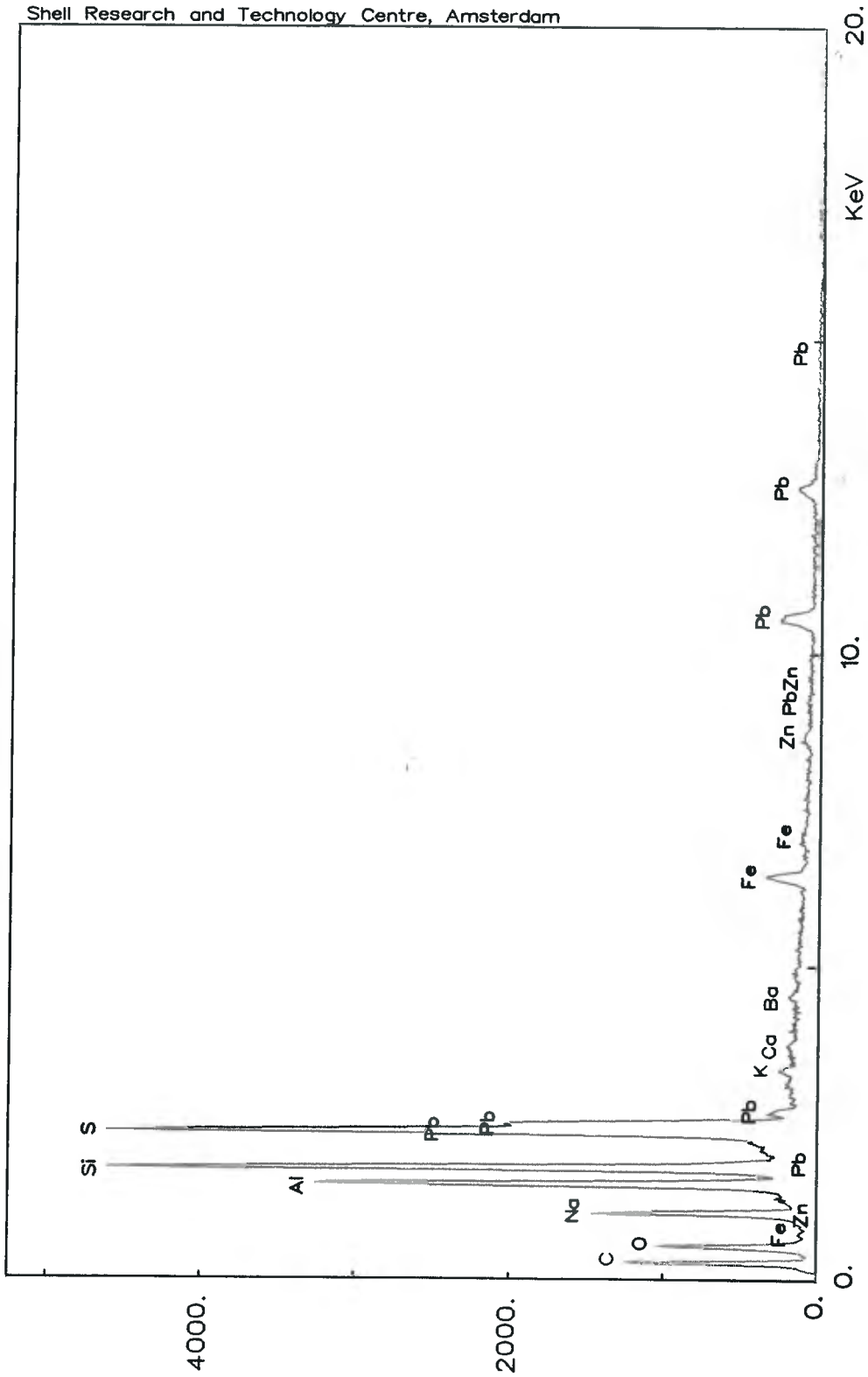
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-3.pt2
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-3.pt3

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV

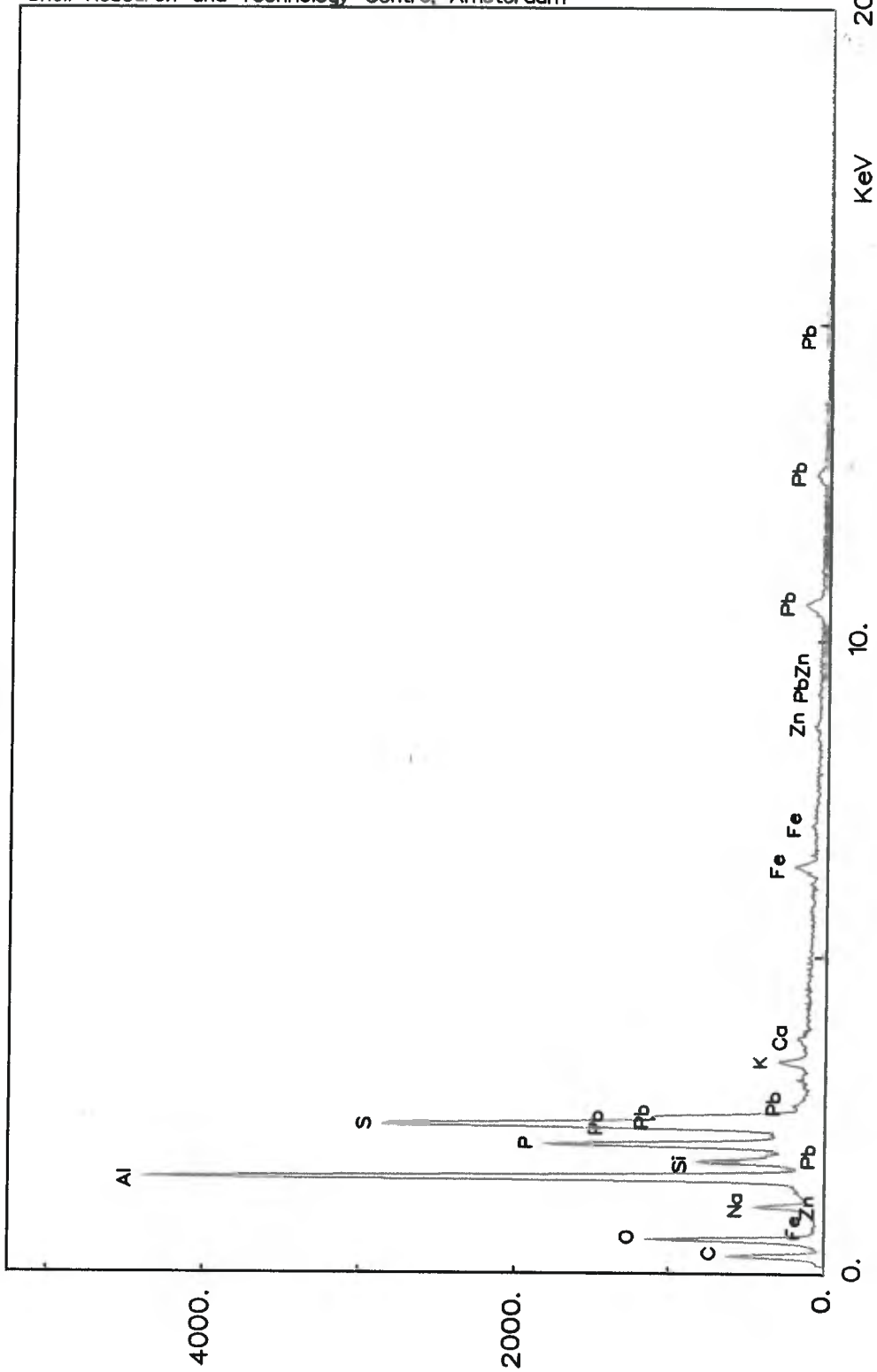


EDX-spectrum for F209/3-3.pt4

LIMS-ID: 20008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV

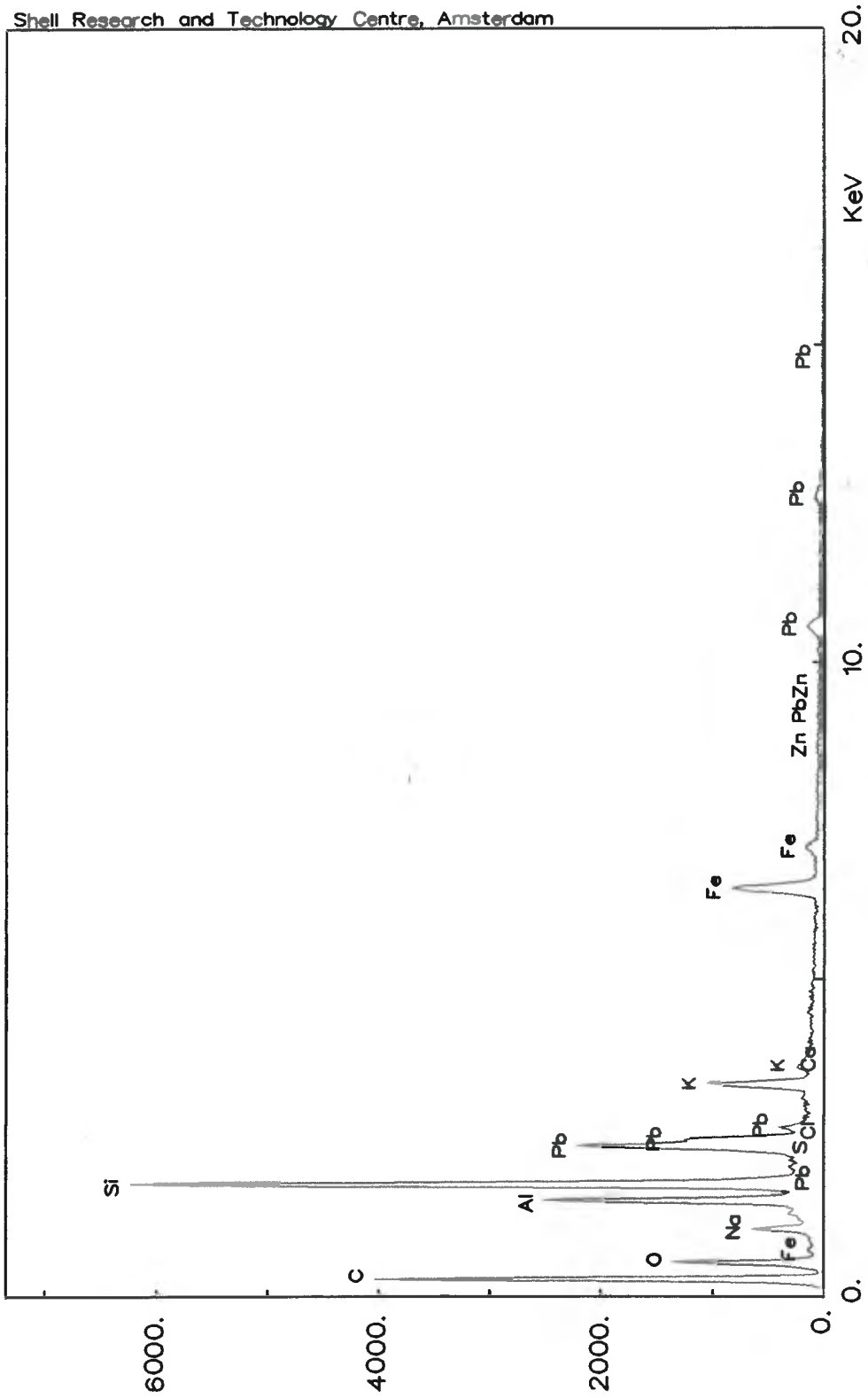
Shell Research and Technology Centre, Amsterdam



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-3.pt5

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

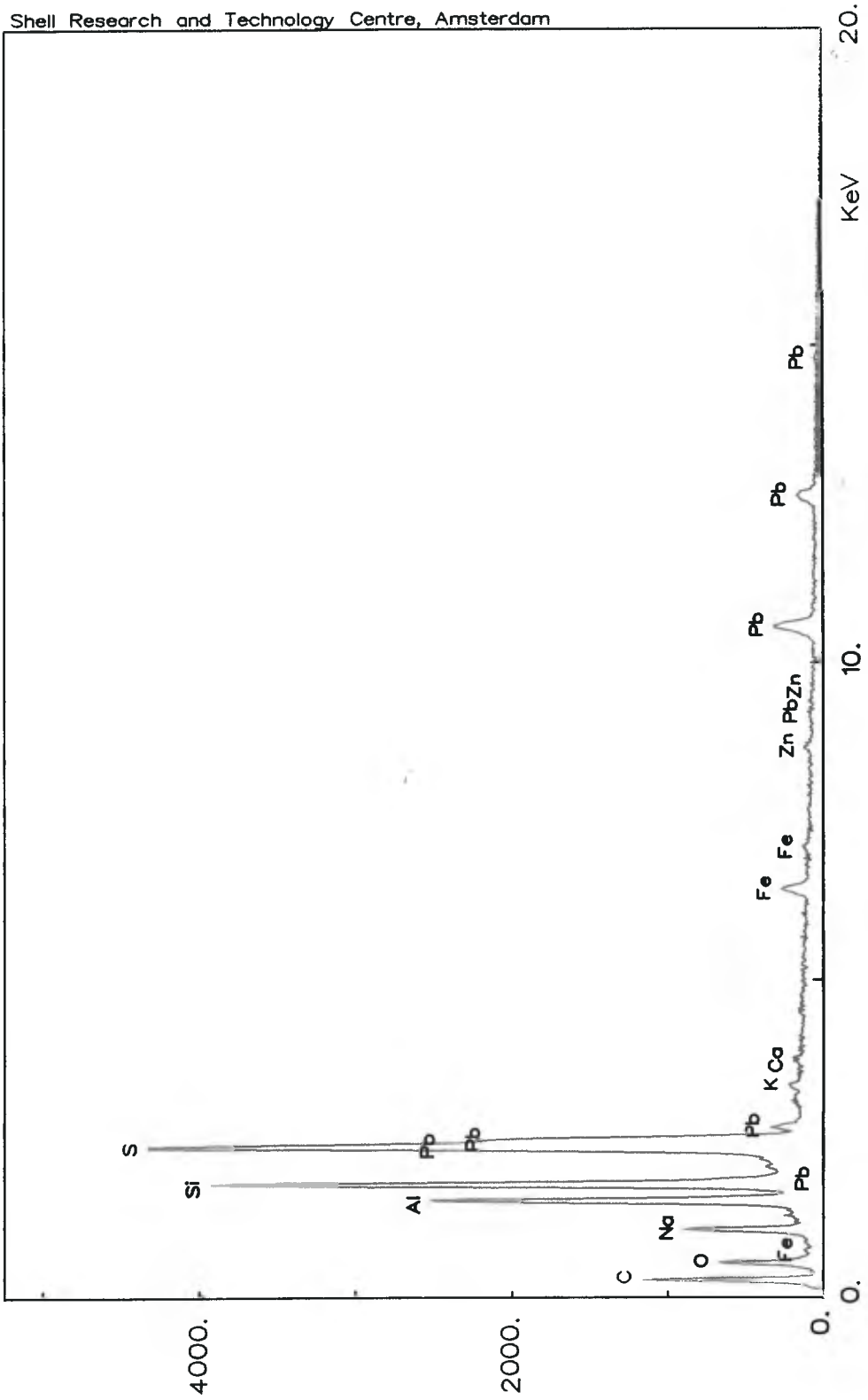
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-4.pt1

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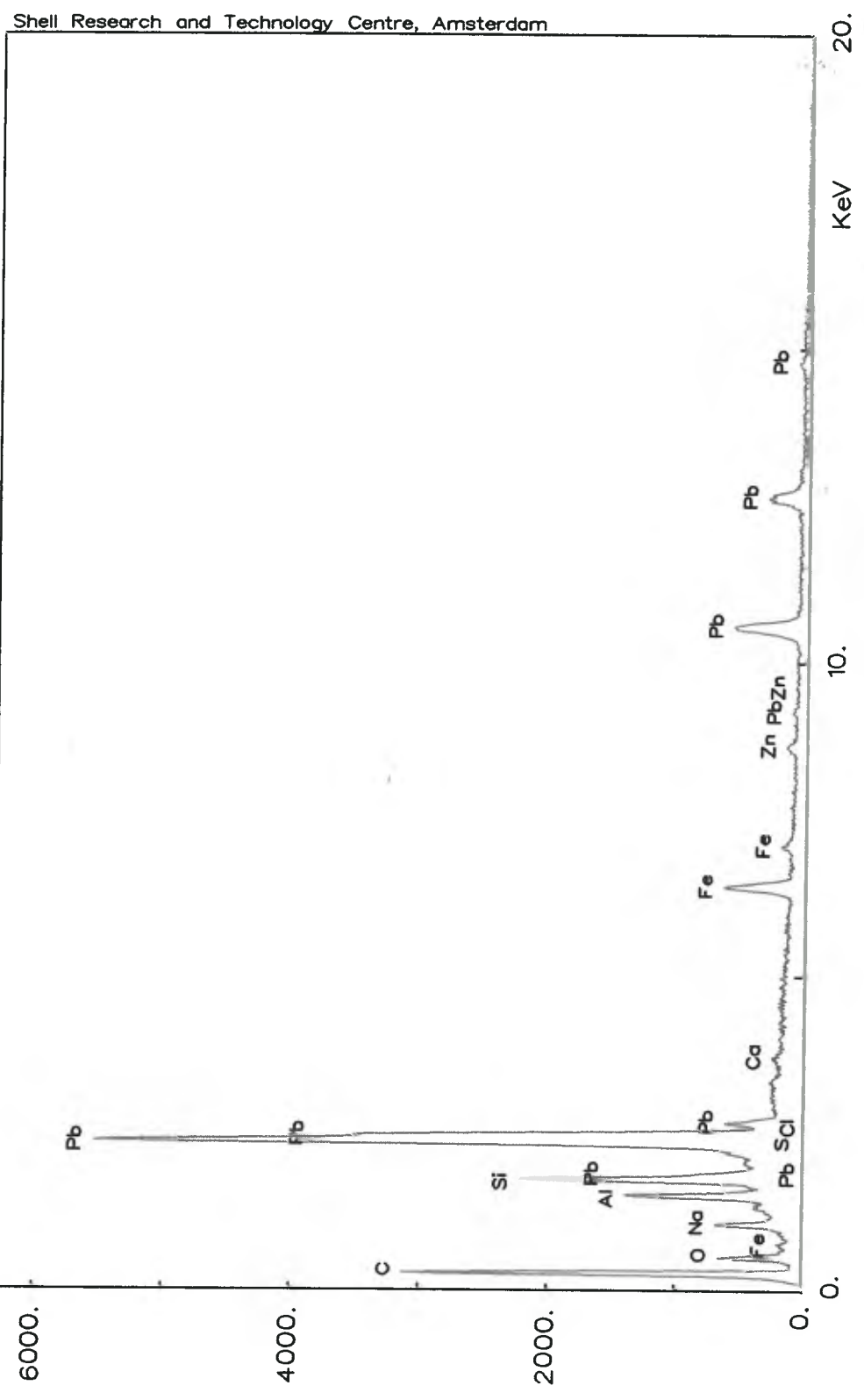
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



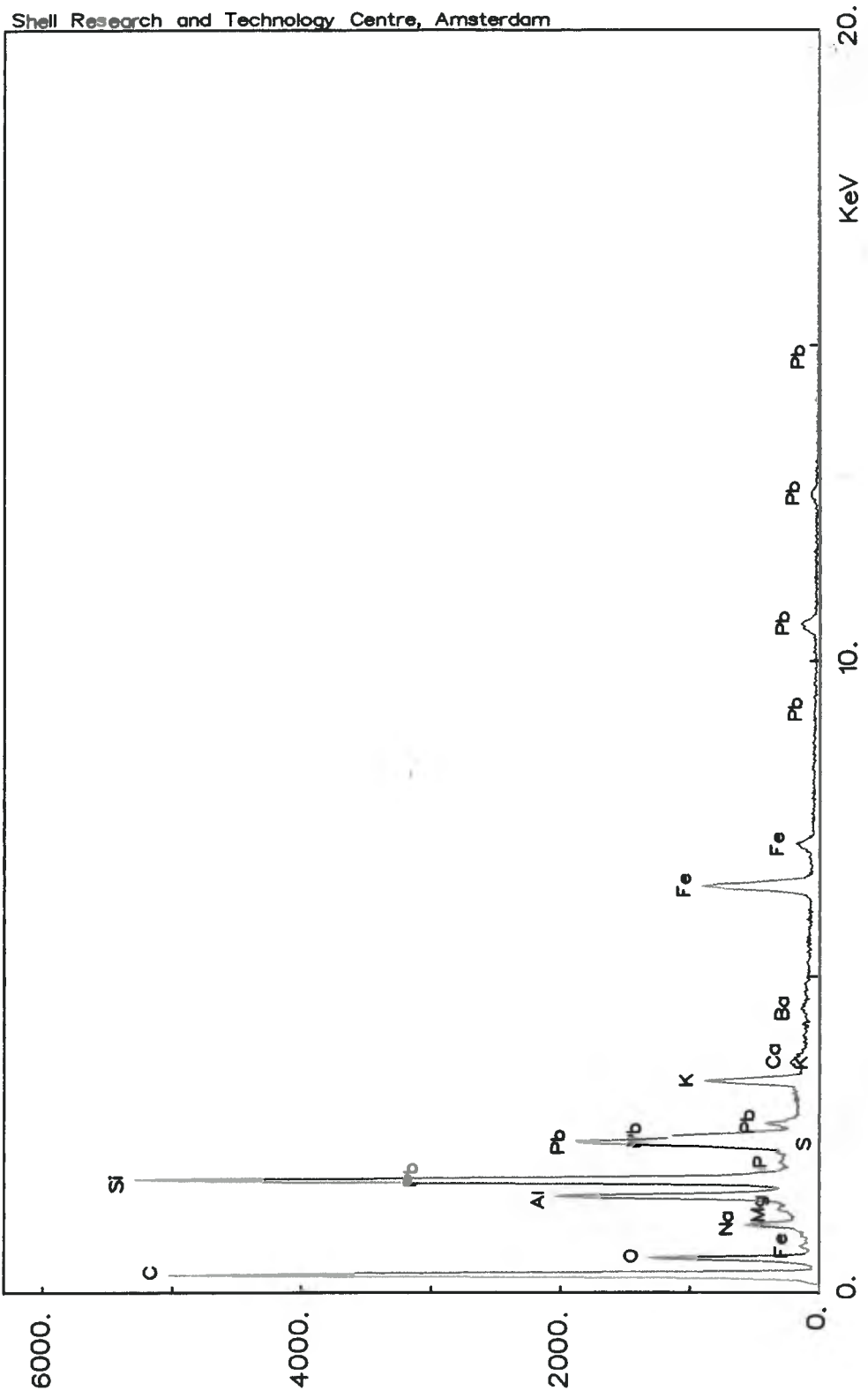
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-4.pt2

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

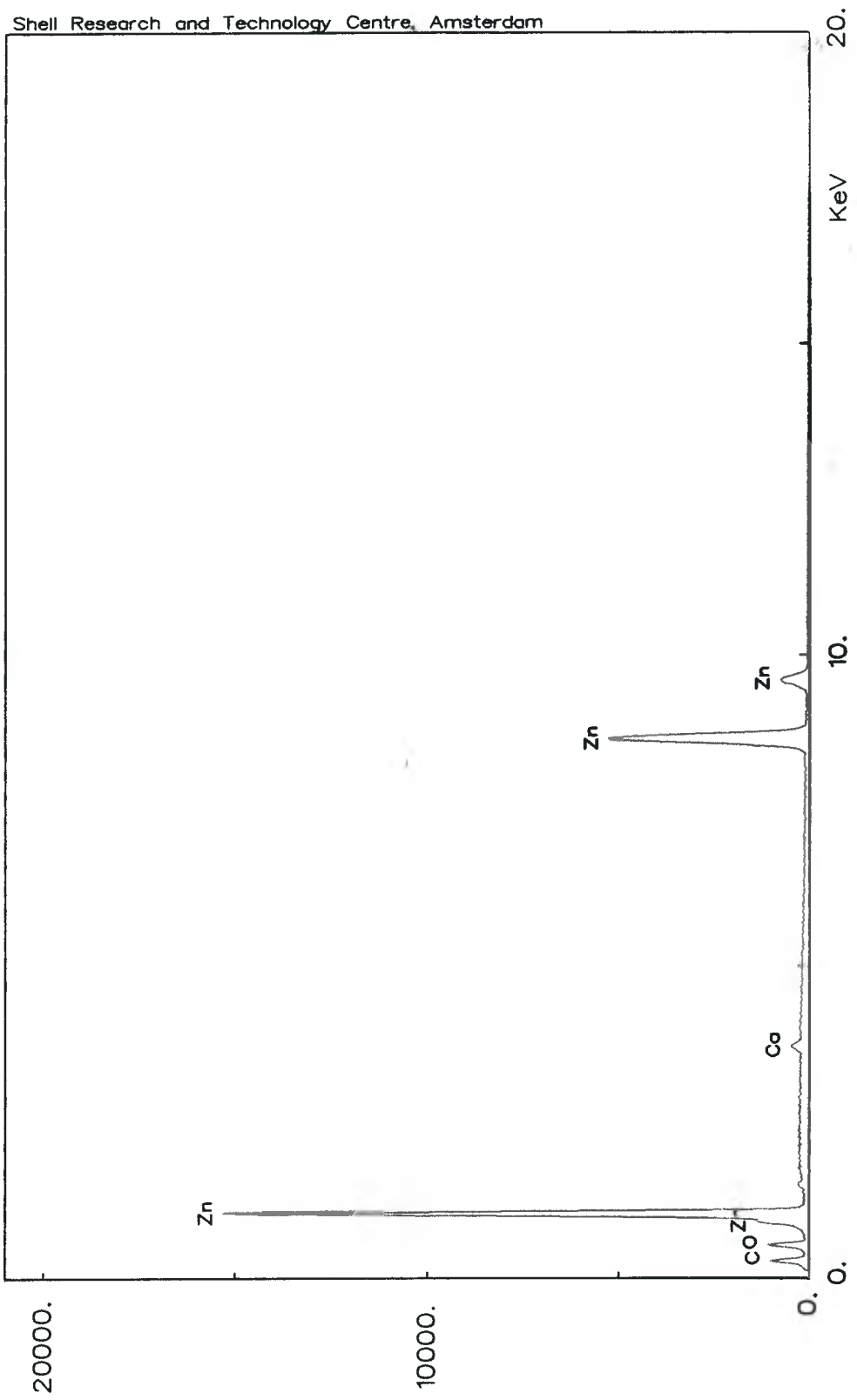
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-4.pt3
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



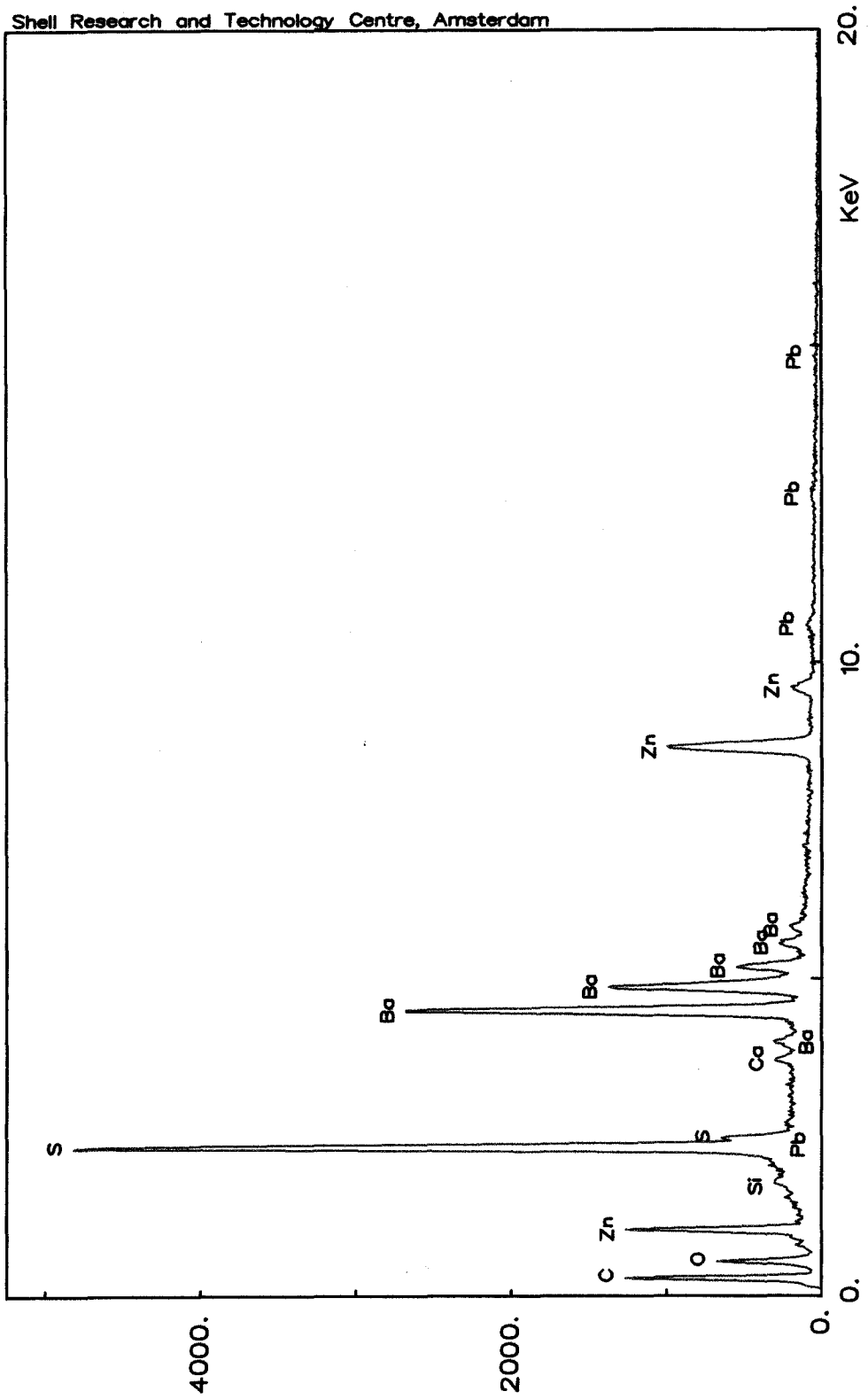
EDX-spectrum for F209/3-5.pt1
LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-6.pt1

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

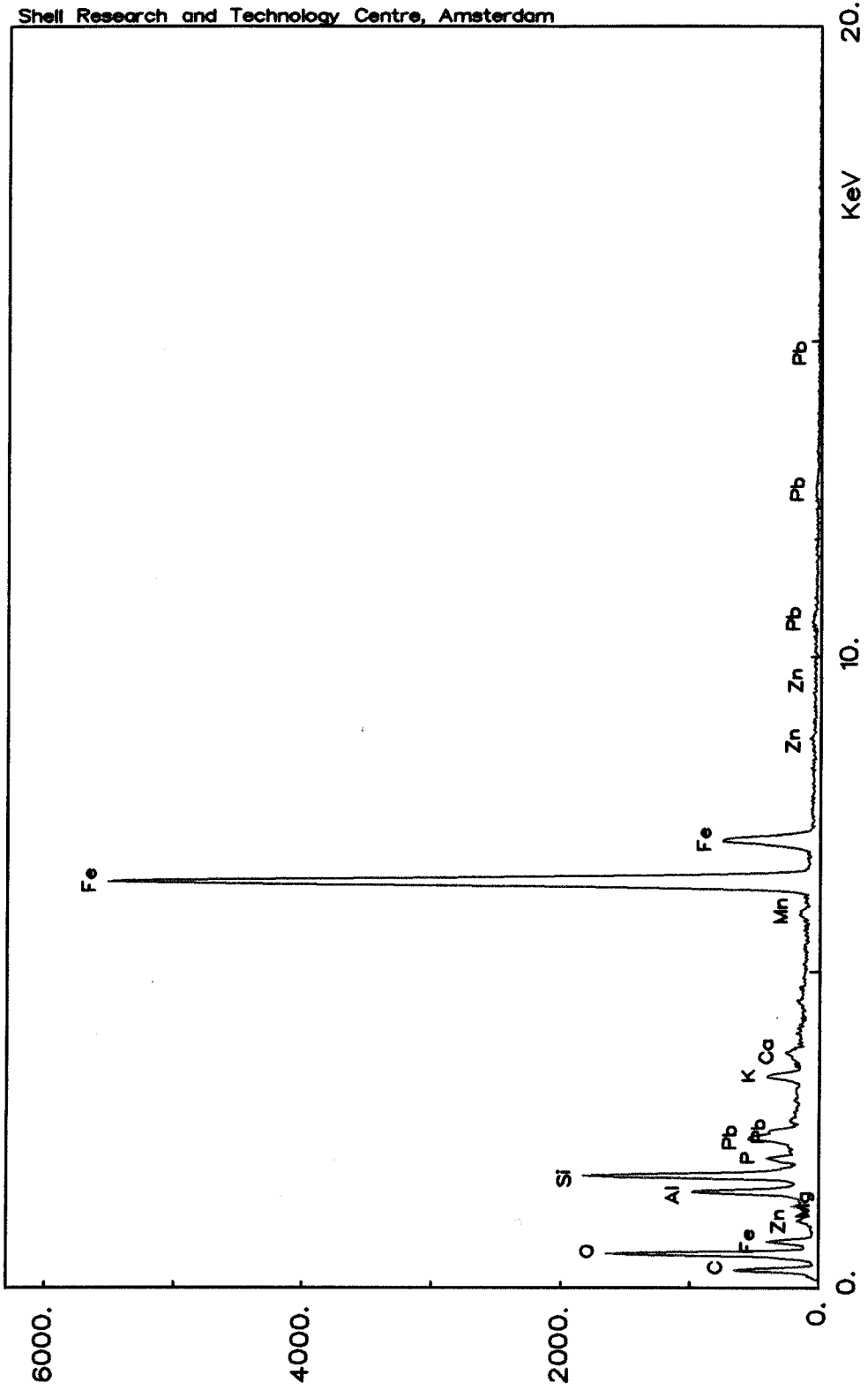
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-6.pt2

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

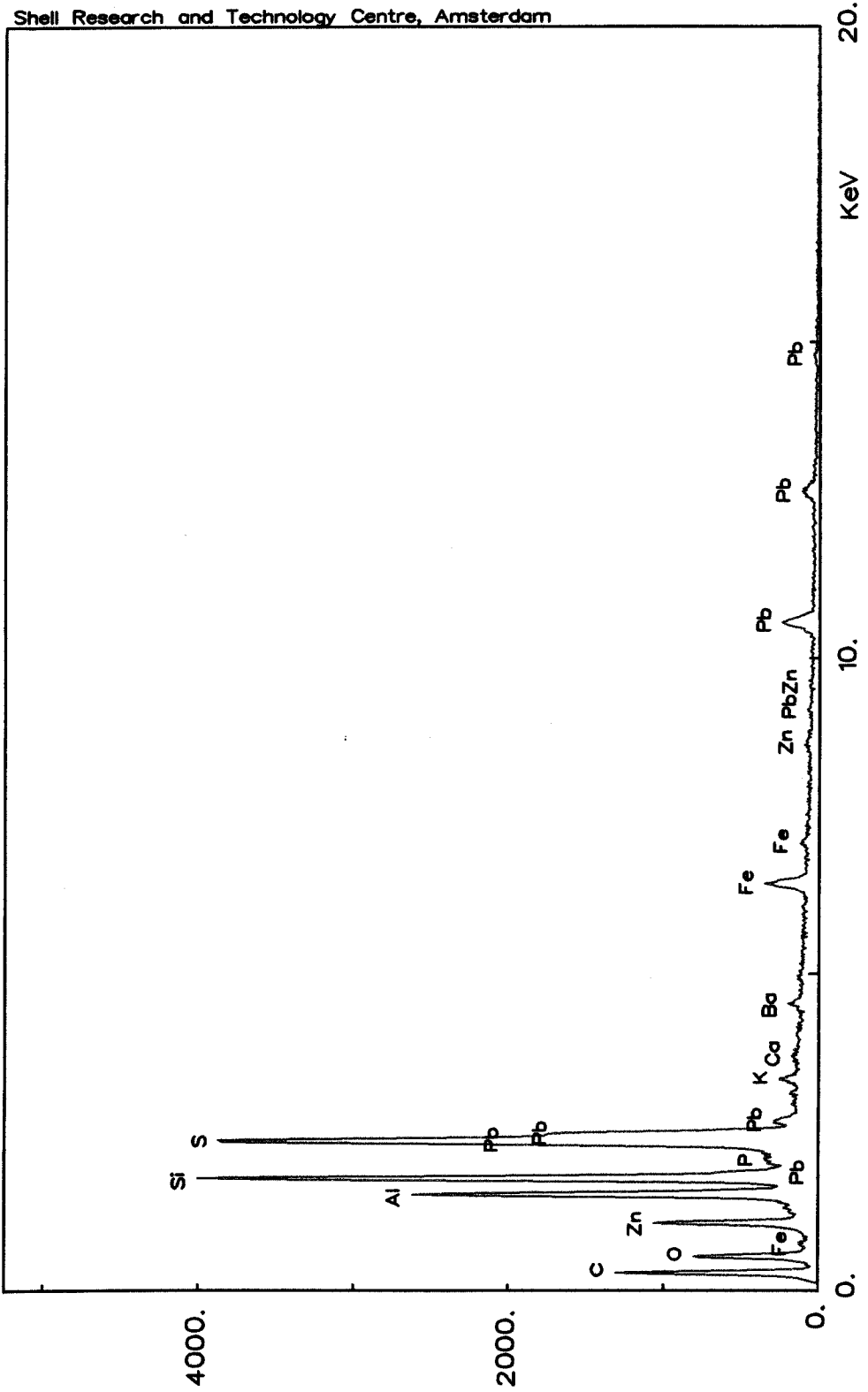
acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



EDX-spectrum for F209/3-6.pt3

LIMS-ID: 200008446 (100970319. 2)

acquisition time 60sec; electron-energy 25KeV



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