

Multidisciplinary study of Marine archives: reconstruction of Sea-level, Sediment yields, Sediment sources, Paleoclimate, Paleoceanography and vertical movement on margins: examples from the Western Mediterranean Sea

Marina Rabineau^{1,*}

Romain Pellen^{1,2}, Virgil Pasquier¹, Massimo Belucci¹, Shray Badhani^{1,2}, Stéphane Molliex¹, Marta Garcia-Garcia²,

Estelle Leroux², Mohamed Arab³, Damien Do Couto⁴, Gwenael Jouet², François Bache^{1,5}, Elda Miramontes²,

Johanna Lofi⁶, Maryline Moulin², Philippe Schnurle², Jeffrey Poort⁴, Bernard Denielou², Alexandra Afilhado, Speranta-Maria Popescu¹⁰, Maria-Angela Bassetti¹¹, Samuel Toucanne², Sidonie Révillon¹, Antonio Cattaneo²,

Didier Granjeon⁷, Christian Gorini⁴, Jean-Pierre Suc⁴, Sierd Cloetingh⁸, Philippe Joseph⁷, François Guillocheau⁹, Serge Berné¹⁰, Laurence Droz¹, Jean-Loup Rubino¹² and Daniel Aslanian²

¹ CNRS, Univ Brest, Univ. Bretagne-Sud, UMR6538, F-29280 Plouzané, France

² IFREMER, GM, LGS, Centre de Brest, F-29280 Plouzané, France

³ Sonatrach, Alger, Algeria

⁴ Sorbonne Université, ISTeP, France

⁵ Santos Ltd, Australia

⁶ Univ Montpellier, France

⁷ IFPEN, France

⁸ Univ Utrecht, Netherlands

⁹ Univ Rennes 1, France

¹⁰ GeoBioStratData.Consulting, Rillieux la Pape, France

¹¹ Univ Perpignan, France

¹² TOTAL, Pau, France

* marina.rabineau@univ-brest.fr

Abstract. The numerous processes (superficial and deep) occurring on margins, their origins, consequences, interactions and quantifications are only very partially described and understood. The identification of the relative role of factors is sometimes completely contradictory between authors. Here, we show the results of a long term multidecadal and multidisciplinary study (using geophysical, geological, stratigraphic, paleontological, geomorphologic, geochemical, microbiological and numerical model) in the Western Mediterranean Sea, that acts as a natural laboratory at many different scales. We show how sediments efficiently record at the same time: variations of glacio-eustatic sea-level

changes, variations of sediments yield and sources, and also enable to quantify vertical movements and geodynamic worldwide events but also detailed regional mass transport, turbidites and contourites deposits. They are also an archive of paleoclimatic, palaeoceanographic and diagenetic processes.

Keywords: Sea-level, Subsidence, Sediment yields, Erosion, Isostasy, Messinian, Pliocene, Quaternary, Mass-transport, Contourites.

1 Introduction

The study of margins is stimulated by several economic challenges: that of the oil industry on one hand, that of mineral exploitation (extraction of sand, gravel, diamonds, ...), and finally that of coastal activities (coastal management, fishing activities, renewable marine energy and human settlement), all in relation to global changes, in particular the consideration of past, present and future climate change.

However, the mechanisms active on the so-called passive margins are numerous (Figure 1) and their interactions remain poorly understood and specially the link between deep structural processes (opening, extension, subsidence...) and surficial processes (erosion, transfer, deposition processes from the continent to the deep basin, impact of currents, diagenetic processes...).

The study of sediments on margins is fundamental for a better understanding of the organization and mechanisms of deposition in 4 dimensions, in space and time and their link to deeper processes. It is in fact the geological history that needs to be reconstructed while determining, prioritizing and quantifying the relative importance of the various parameters (tectonic, climatic, eustatic and hydrodynamic) that have controlled sedimentation and sediment preservation. These fundamental questions are recurrent at all scales of time and space.

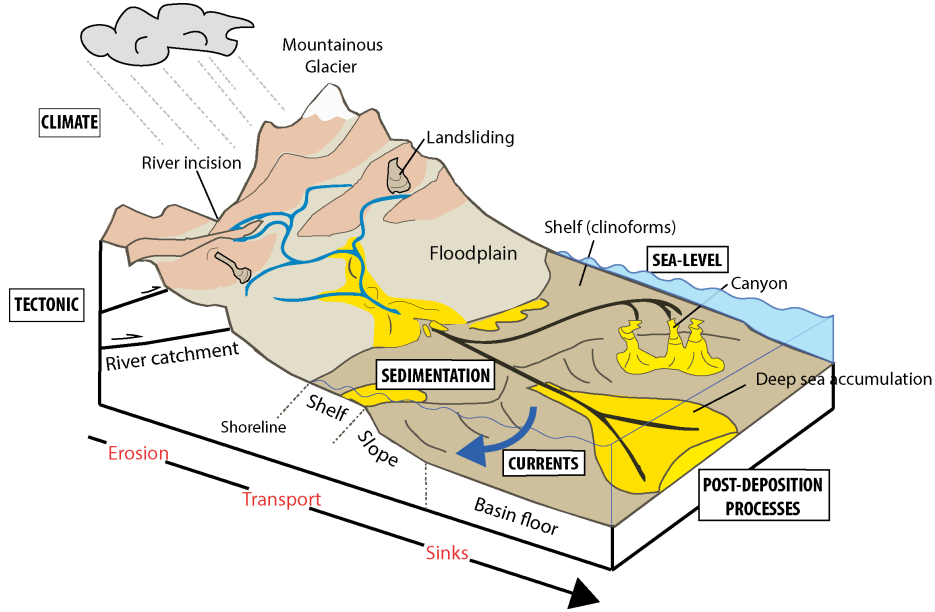


Fig. 1. The different factors influencing sediment transfer and sediment registration (Modified from Pasquier, 2017 after Battacharya et al. 2016).

2 Settings and Materials

Here we show a long term multidecadal study in the Western Mediterranean Sea that has been underway at different scales. Due to its geographical and political situation, the Western Mediterranean represents a key area whose exploration allows crucial progress on the study of margins. The Mediterranean represents what can be called a natural laboratory, i.e. a small site where hypotheses and models of fundamental interest for Earth Sciences can be tested in a more global way: on the formation and evolution of margins, on sedimentary records, sediment fluxes, on the influence of tectonic heritage and that of vertical movements.

This long term study took advantage of a large academic and industrial database and effective collaborations during the GDR Marges Gulf of Lions (2000-2007), then the Action Marges Programs (2008-2016) and the Labex Mer (2010-2018) and ISblue (2019-2029) ANR Programs, all with numerous cruises using the French Oceanographic vessels and facilities (<http://campagnes.flotteoceanographique.fr>).

3 Results & Discussion

3.1 Sediments: an archive of Glacio-eustatic variations and their impacts

We showed for the first time through a combination of seismic stratigraphic interpretation, cores and stratigraphic modelling that the sequences preserved on the outer shelf corresponded to 100,000 year climate cycles (Rabineau et al. 2005), resolving a controversy dating back to the 1990s. We then proposed a re-evaluation of sea level amplitudes at the last 5 glacial maxima based on direct observation of paleo-shorelines by correcting their present day depths from postdepositional subsidence (Rabineau et al., 2006 ; Rabineau et al., 2014).

A higher-frequency eustatism is also imprinted in sediments at 20 to 40 ka but also at much smaller scale that would be linked to a cyclicity of 5 ka (Bassetti et al., 2006; Jouet et al., 2006; Jouet, 2007).

Those glacio-eustatic sea-level changes have a strong impact on canyons functioning (Baztan et al., 2006; Gaudin et al., 2006) and sediment delivery to the deep-sea through turbidites, mass-transport deposits and contourites (Droz et al., 2006; Denielou et al., 2019; Miramontes et al., 2016, 2019; Badani et al., accepted).

On larger scale, two erosional surfaces D1 and D0 have been interpreted as corresponding to two major paleoclimatic stages over the entire Plio-Quaternary period: the establishment of 100,000 year cyclicities around 0.9 Ma and the establishment of glaciations in the Northern Hemisphere around 2.6 Ma (Leroux et al., 2014).

3.2 Sediments: an archive of Sediment fluxes

Leroux (2012) established for the first time and with an unprecedented resolution on a global scale, the sedimentary volumes and Erosion/Deposit balances over the last 6 Ma in the Liguro-Provençal Basin. It describes a very strong increase (x2) in detrital flows around 1 Ma in relation to the climate changes of the Mid-Pleistocene Revolution. The global acceleration (x 3) of terrigenous flows over the last 5 Ma, defended by many authors and correlated with an uplift of the great orogens (here in connection with the Alps), is also observed in our basin, even if the famous Messinian Salinity Crisis tends to disturb the signal (Leroux et al., 2017). These results are confirmed by onshore multi-approach quantification of denudation rates using cosmologic and geomorphologic methods (Molliex et al., 2016). A similar study has been done in the Valencia Basin (Pellen, 2016, Pellen et al., in progress). Pellen also addressed the apparent paradox concerning the Ebro and Rhône basins, i.e. the fact that the current drainage areas of the two rivers are equivalent (85,835 km² and 98,800 km² respectively) while the Messinian river networks identified so far were very different (<100 km for the Ebro and >400 km for the Rhône). Pellen solves this paradox by showing an incision length of the Ebro that extends well beyond the edge of the Miocene platform into the Valencia Basin and actually reaches 270 km. Pellen also shows that at the outlet of this river network, the product of Messinian erosion is preserved in the form of a forced regression prism identified in the Minorca Sub-basin (Pellen et al., 2019).

3.3 Sediments: an archive of Vertical Movements and geodynamic

The precise and detailed reading of sediment markers makes it possible to quantify vertical movements over the entire margin (Rabineau et al., 2006, Rabineau et al., 2014) and to show that sediments reflect, until very recent periods, the crustal structure of the margin and thus represent a window into the Earth's deep processes (Leroux et al., 2015; Afilhado et al., 2015; Moulin et al., 2015; Arab et al., 2016). Using these same markers, we were also able to propose a novel estimate of the isostatic rebound associated with the Messinian Erosion and Salinity Crisis (MESOC), which reached 1.3 km at the edge of the platform in less than 700,000 years (maximum duration estimated for the crisis) (Rabineau et al., 2014).

3.4 Sediments: an archive of Onshore Sources

Can we read in the offshore sediments the relative impact of the differentially eroded zones and therefore quantify the relative influence of onshore sources of sediments? This was studied using radiogenic isotopes Nd and Sr. This work has revealed unexpected variations in isotopic compositions of Gulf of Lion sediments between periods of low sea level and periods of high level. Thus, during the glacial periods, sediments from the catchment basins draining the Languedoc-Roussillon, Lower Rhône and the Pyrenees dominate. Conversely, during interglacial periods, sediments from the Rhône catchment area (especially the upper Rhône) are predominant in the sediment mixture (Révillon et al., 2011, Révillon et al., in prep.).

Finally, the question of the relative part of terrigenous inputs compared to that of biogenic (in situ) inputs is critical for sediment fluxes studies and difficult to understand; it is therefore a strong uncertainty factor for quantifications. This question is particularly true with regard to carbonate inputs, which occur in different forms (terrigenous, biogenic, dissolved). In the "classical" studies, the authors focus mainly on the terrigenous fraction, i.e. the sedimentary fraction resulting from continental erosion transported to the sea by the action of rivers, winds, etc., as opposed to the carbonate fraction of biogenic origin, resulting mainly from biological production (organisms synthesizing carbonate exoskeletons such as foraminifera, nannofossils, bivalve shells, etc.). As a result, the authors equate the non-carbonated flux with the terrigenous flux.

The original use of elemental and isotopic geochemistry ($^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$) on the carbonate fraction alone demonstrated that the sediments of the Aude-Hérault interfluvial (Promess drilling) correspond to a mixture between current and recent biogenic carbonates but also to much older carbonates (Jurassic, Cretaceous, Miocene) directly exported from the onshore watersheds (Pasquier et al., 2019a).

3.5 Sediments: an archive of Paleoclimate and microbial activities

The variations in isotopic carbon ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) and nitrogen ($\delta^{15}\text{N}$) compositions of organic matter preserved in Gulf of Lion sediments, shows a correlation of variations with sea level for the last G/IG cycle (MIS4 to MIS2). At the lowest sea level, the borehole is in a prodeltaic position with more negative (lighter) isotopic values. On the other

hand, for the previous glacial (MIS6) and last interglacial (MIS5) it is the climate that predominates with strong periods of river discharges. We propose that the latter results from the intensification of North Atlantic disturbances and precipitation in the Mediterranean (Pasquier et al., 2019b).

In addition to the analyses of organic carbon and nitrogen, a characterization of sulphur isotopes preserved in sedimentary pyrite was also carried out (Pasquier, 2017). Pasquier shows that the sediments deposited in the Gulf of Lions over the past 500,000 years have one of the highest isotopic variations reported to date. In addition, the cyclicity observed suggests that strong climate control is at play, which calls into question the overall aspect of this geochemical tool. Two important mechanisms are proposed to explain this isotopic fractionation: (i) a modulation of bacterial activity by climate, and/or (ii) a local modulation related to the nature of the sediments involved in the formation of pyrite in relation to eustatic variations (Pasquier et al., 2017).

4 Conclusions

Our results obtained on the continental margins from oceanographic campaigns, deep boreholes or land-based studies, do shed new lights on the understanding of the dynamics of the mantle, the lithosphere and their interactions with the hydrosphere and the biosphere and challenge certain concepts considered as established.

However some key questions remain unanswered : two examples 1) the need for a better qualification of sediment origin and explanation of the variability of initial (upstream) erosion and flows and 2) reconsider the origin, importance and consequences of major oceanographic currents and their influence on the sediment record.

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