Educational Material

Script to Tectonics

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OMAN: an obduction orogen

In convergent oceanic / continental plate boundaries two major systems may develop:
- (1) The oceanic lithosphere may sink into the mantle, developing a Benioff-Wadati plane and a subduction system beneath the opposed continental plate. This system is stable and permanent as long as there is oceanic lithosphere to be subducted.
- (2) The oceanic lithosphere may be thrust over the continental lithosphere: this is called obduction, an accretionary mechanism that involves thickening of the continental lithosphere since there is superposition of oceanic lithosphere onto a continental margin. The transported oceanic rocks are identified as ophiolite. Obduction is particularly well documented in Oman where the convergence between Arabia and Eurasia resulted in the late-Cretaceous thrusting of Tethys oceanic lithosphere onto the Arabian continental margin.

The Oman Mountains

Location
The Oman Mountains occupy the northeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, in the zone of convergence between the Arabian and Eurasian plates.
The Oman Mountains form an arcuate, NW-SE trending chain approximately 700 km long and 40 to 120 km wide, stretching from the Straits of Hormuz to the northwest, to the Arabian Sea in the southeast.

The Arabian continental plate is bounded by:
- The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden spreading centres to the southwest and to the south.
- The Owen transform-fault in the Arabian Sea along the SE coast.
- The sinistral Levant Transform Fault to the west,
- The major Tethyan suture zones (Bitlis-Zagros-Makran) exposed in Turkey and Iran, along the northeastern margins.
- To the north, the Gulf of Oman is floored by Cretaceous oceanic crust currently subducting northward beneath the Makran active continental margin of Eurasian continental lithosphere.
**Geological Setting**

The Oman Mountains display the best exposed deformed passive margin ideal to study fundamental processes such as rifting, passive margin development, later thrusting, etc. The Oman Mountains define a continent-ocean collision boundary of dominantly Late-Cretaceous age, affected by further but minor compression and uplift during the Tertiary. In contrast with the remainder of the Alpine-Himalayan collisional system, continent-continent collision did not occur, leaving the obduction system undeformed. Instead, convergence has shifted into the active Makran subduction system.

The Oman Mountains comprise three major tectono-stratigraphic units. From the structural bottom upward they are:

- The pre-Permian basement unconformably overlain by mid-Permian to Cenomanian platform carbonates.
- Permian to Cenomanian rocks composing the relative autochthonous and allochthonous units.
- The upper unit, which is a neo-autochthonous sedimentary cover of Late-Campanian to Tertiary age.

![Structural profile through the Oman Mountains](image)

*Autochthonous and para-autochthonous units*

These units include:

* Remnants of Pre-Permian basement (the Arabian shield) exposed in windows (Hatat Schists) and further south, where basement is autochthonous.
* Remnants of mid-Permian to Cenomanian continental shelf carbonates of the former Arabian margin (Hajar Supergroup).
* The leading edge of the continental margin that has been subducted to depths where eclogite facies metamorphism took place (Saih Hatat window).

*Allochthonous units*

Three main types of allochthonous complexes were thrust onto the Arabian platform:

* Remnants of continental shelf: The Sumeini Nappe, which comprises Permian to Cretaceous carbonate slope deposits.
* Remnants of ocean basin sediments: The Hawasina and Haybi Complexes, a complicated assemblage of thrust sheets of proximal to distal deep-sea, Permian to Late Cretaceous sediments, volcanic and mélange units tectonically underlying the ophiolite thrust sheets. The Hawasina mélange units (Haybi) are particularly known for the exotic blocks they contain.
* Remnants of oceanic lithosphere: The Sumail Ophiolite, the world’s largest and best-exposed section of oceanic lithosphere. It is the structurally highest thrust sheet of the thrust stack of former Tethys Ocean relics.
Post-orogenic cover
Onlapping Maastrichtian to Miocene sediments dominated by shallow water carbonates, locally conglomeratic at the base, rest over the thrust stack.

The Afro-Arabian Shield

Craton
The structurally lowest units represent the autochthonous continent.
The Precambrian comprises metasediments of greenschist to amphibolite facies intruded by dolerites and large volumes of calc-alkaline granodiorites and granites. Geochronological data specify the rocks as late Proterozoic (ca. 850-600 Ma); therefore, they are similar to Pan-African rocks of the Afro-Arabian shield and would represent accretion of island arcs and microcontinents to Early Gondwana. The oldest non-metamorphic rocks (Huqf-Haushi, in southern Oman) are Vendian to Early Cambrian (they span the Cambrian-Precambrian-boundary). Two periods of glaciations are identified. The first one took place between ca 725 and ca 715 Ma, the second one between ca 660 and 635 Ma. Glaciogenic sediments alternate with shallow- and open-marine clastic sediments deposited in grabens and half grabens and overlain by a cap carbonate formation, which marks the abrupt termination of the glacial epoch.

The Neo-Proterozoic (Huqf) sequence is regionally overlain by a transgressive-regressive evaporitic – carbonate - shale (Ara and Fahud) formation or its time-equivalent (ca 545 Ma) carbonates-

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volcaniclastics (Fara) Formation in Jebel Akhdar. These evaporitic red sequences are a geological rarity because they contain rich hydrocarbon source rocks and large accumulation of oil. The cyclic sequences of carbonates and evaporites were deposited in a restricted basin whereas the source rocks were deposited in relatively deep anoxic parts of the basin. The reservoir rocks, most of them dolomitic, were deposited in shallow water on adjacent shelf area. These rocks have never been buried deeply and the thick evaporites provide regional seal.

Owing to the lack of time markers such as dyke swarms of different generations, possibly late Paleozoic deformation in Neo-Proterozoic rocks is not clearly separated from late Cretaceous deformation events.

**Continental margin**

In the Oman Mountains, the structurally deepest units occur in the Jebel Akhdar and Saih Hatat dome-shaped culminations.

Proterozoic and Lower Paleozoic sediments constitute the autochthonous basement of the Oman Mountains. There is principally a sedimentation gap from late Silurian to Carboniferous. Basement rocks have been subjected to NW-SE trending folding and very low grade metamorphism before deposition of the unconformable shallow-water carbonates of Permian age. The Permian to Cenomanian rocks are composed of platform carbonates followed in the Turonian by deeper marine sediments (foredeep of the orogen, the Turonian-Campanian Muti Formation). Owing to the lack of time markers such as dyke swarms of different generations, possibly Carboniferous (so-called Hercynian) deformation in Neo-Proterozoic rocks is not clearly separated from late Cretaceous deformation events.

In the Saih Hatat Dome, the pre-Permian structures have been overprinted by intense deformation and High Pressure / Low Temperature metamorphism (blueschist-facies to eclogite-facies) that affect the Permian to Mesozoic cover.

**From rifting to ocean spreading**

Lithologies contained in the few centimetres to hundred metres big exotic blocks represent different paleogeographic units, which are interpreted as redeposited tilted blocks of the Oman continental margin, on the northern edge of the Arabian shield. The sedimentary history of the Oman passive margin can be compared with that of present day passive margins such as the Atlantic ones. In an asymmetric extension system, Oman would represent the hanging wall margin. It documents the continental break-up of Pangea.

Opening of the Hawasina (Neo-Tethys) Ocean was under way by late Permian. Pulsed rifting in the Arabian craton in Early and Late Permian times was followed by mid to Late Triassic sea floor spreading and opening of the (Neo-)Tethys Ocean. Thermal subsidence of the passive margin continued along with oceanic expansion throughout the Jurassic and Early Cretaceous until the Mid-Cretaceous, perhaps with a pulse of crustal extension in the Late Jurassic. The geological record shows that:

1) Early Permian: “non-volcanic” rifting was dominated by block faulting.
2) Late Permian: rifting was accompanied by volcanism. The development of a carbonate platform began along the margin of the developing Tethys.
3) Mid Triassic to Early Jurassic alkaline volcanism records the final continental breakup.
4) Up to Late Cretaceous there was thermal subsidence and the growth of a carbonate platform on the proximal continental margin and a deep marine basin on the distal passive margin.
5) In the Late Cretaceous a foreland basin was created.

**Rifting**

The north Oman passive margin fully developed in the Permian. Flooding of the Arabian shield took place on almost unfaulted substratum. Asymmetrical rifting is indicated by low-angle normal faulting and associated tilted blocks:

*Late Carboniferous - Permian:* northward thinning of continental clastics indicates upwarping of an area roughly overlaying the Oman Mountains. Internal unconformities indicate contemporary uplift.
Early Permian: Alluvial and shallow marine deposits with ubiquitous cross-bedded sandstones were covered by bioturbated limestones, and stromatolitic mudstones. Currents were dominantly flowing southward. The sediments have glacial affinity and correspond to the Dwyka glaciogenic deposits of Gondwanaland. They are syn-rift deposits locally associated with bimodal (basalts and rhyolitic tuffs), mildly alkaline volcanism. This supports the idea that the margin was established at the expense of the continental crust now seen in the autochthonous parts of Oman. Early breakaway faults were dipping towards the oceanic basin, which helped later re-activation as thrust faults for some of them. Their asymmetry is consistent with a lithospheric shear model and an upper plate passive margin. The main extensional lithospheric fault would dip to the north (in the present day orientation).

Late Permian: Deep-water sediments off north Oman commenced in the early Late Permian. They are reef-derived sediments representing gravity flow deposits that have ammonoid fauna and record northward currents. Their substratum is tholeiitic pillows that may represent the oldest oceanic crust in the area (Neo-Tethys floor).

Platform and slope

By the late Permian a vast stable shelf carbonate platform was established on the whole northeast Arabian plate margin extending along the entire Zagros and Oman mountain region. This stable carbonate platform lasted for over 160 million years until the Cenomanian. The Hawasina, Sumeini and Haybi sequences are age-equivalent continental rise, continental slope, and proximal oceanic basins, respectively.

Late Permian: In the Late Permian, the autochthonous area and the rift shoulders are covered by transgressive shallow-water carbonates and reef limestones. Change of climate from glacial to tropical and the eustatic rise of the sea level are enhanced by the collapse of the Upper Permian rift zone and the beginning of thermal subsidence. The paleoclimatic change from sub-glacial in late Carboniferous times to intertropical in late Permian is attributed to the northward drift of the Arabian Peninsula from ca 50°S to 30°S.
Triassic–Early Jurassic: The sedimentary sequence of the Oman margin records thermal subsidence of both the thinned continental lithosphere and the attached, young oceanic lithosphere. During sedimentation of platform carbonates on the subsiding proximal margin (Jebel Akhdar), proximal to distal turbidites were deposited in the Hawasina (Tethys) basin. Turbidite facies changes reflect fluctuations of the oceanic environment (radiolaritic cherts below the CCD in the Middle Trias) and oscillations of the sea level (siliciclastic turbidites under lower sea level: the Rhetian–Early Liassic Guwayza sandstones). Further offshore, the Misfah platform of the Haybi Complex developed in the late Triassic on a volcanic seamount forming atolls that were the sedimentary source of large breccias (Al Aridh, Ibra) intercalated in pelagic sediments of the Hawasina basin throughout nearly all the Mesozoic. The Haybi seamount became a Guyot in the Early Jurassic: a hard ground separates the sunken carbonate platform from overlying Middle Jurassic to Cenomanian pelagic sediments.

Late-Jurassic-Cenomanian: During the Tithonian–Berriasian (150–130 Ma), drowning of the northern margin (radiolaritic cherts, onlap of pelagic sediments onto the platform under higher sea level in the Late Jurassic) and doming of the interior zones of the platform is associated with tilting of the Arabian margin. Normal faulting and a marked unconformity in the shallow marine carbonate of the Jurassic platform also reflect this flexure event. Tilting of the margin also occurred in the Albian–Turonian interval. Subsequently, a marked increase in subsidence rate in the Cenomanian may represent downward flexure of the margin due to the initiation of obduction.

All was reorganised from the late Turonian onwards, which signs the building of the Oman Mountains. Platform deposition halted abruptly at the end of the Cenomanian, 90 Ma ago, when the passive margin was flexed down to form the “Aruma” foreland basin. Upward flexure and erosion, then subsidence and slumping into the syntectonic foredeep ended in the Campanian (70 Ma) with the formation of a subduction obduction type mountain range.

Deep-sea basin
The Hawasina oceanic basin can be restored as a nearly 300 km wide outer continental margin basin. Pelagic rocks were deposited in a Late Permian to late Cretaceous distal passive margin and ocean basin northeast of the Arabian craton.

Ophiolite
The Sumail Ophiolite was generated during the Cenomanian (there are 98–95 Ma plagiogranites, trondhjemites and gabbros). It is one of the most complete sequences of oceanic crust and upper mantle at the Earth’s surface, exposed as a ca. 550 km long, 50-100 km wide and >10 km thick
crescent-shaped nappe. The ophiolite nappe has been disrupted by post-obduction tectonic events into twelve main, relatively intact massifs. Petrology, structures and geochemistry of Sumail Ophiolites indicate formation at a fast spreading ridge whose tectonic setting as mid-ocean-ridge versus arc-related basin is still debated. Paleo-ridge segments have been identified from structural and petrological characteristics of the sheeted dikes, gabbros and underlying peridotites. Plutonic and volcanic rocks with calc-alkaline geochemistry are attributed to incipient island-arc magmatism that intruded the Sumail ophiolites once they became a supra-subduction lithosphere.

**Crustal rocks**

The crustal sequence is 4 to 9 km thick. It is locally intruded by pyroxenites, gabbronorites, olivine gabbros, and wehrlites related to the younger arc magmatism.

**Sediments**

The uppermost sedimentary layer consists of pelagic, deep-sea sediments, e.g., radiolarian chert, calcilutite, red argillites and minor volcano-elastic material.
Lavas
The underlying lava unit consists predominantly of pillowed and massive MORB-like basalt with interstitial palagonite and/or pelagic sediment; dykes, sills, lava tubes, and massive flows are present. Hydrothermal fluids have often pervasively altered the basalts metamorphosed in the greenschist facies.

The top lava units include island arc-type volcanites (in particular boninites) covering ophiolitic upper crustal lavas and sediments. Their sporadic occurrence discloses incipient and short-lived (between about 97 and 92 Ma) arc magmatism emplaced near the former spreading ridge on the hanging plate of intra-oceanic subduction.

Sheeted dike complex
The sheeted dike complex grades at its upper boundary into the lava unit. Along the base of this complex, the sheeted dikes either intrude or are intruded by gabbros and subsidiary plagiogranites, implying continuing magmatic activity. The mostly doleritic, with minor gabbro, albite, and rodingite dikes regionally strike NW-SE, which is assumed to be the present-day orientation of the paleo-ridge axis.

Gabbros
The upper part of the gabbroic sequence (< 1 km thick) mostly consists of massive quartz gabbro, gabbro and troctolite with minor diorite, quartz diorite, trondhjemite, plagiogranite, and granophyre. The gabbroic sequence is characterised by the upward steepening of the fabric, which may be primary. Foliation at the top is parallel to the strike of the sheeted dyke complex. The bottom, lower crustal gabbroic sequence (1-4 km thick) is characterized by rhythmic compositional layering on scale of 0.5 cm to 2 m, parallel to the flat, bottom contact with ultrabasic mantle rocks. Most layers are homogeneous between sharp top and bottom boundaries. Few graded layers demonstrate the normal position of the sequence. Layering is attributed to cyclic plating on the inverted walls of a tent-shaped magma chamber. Layered gabbros have been intruded by various wehrlites with MORB-like and calc-alkaline affinity.

The crust/mantle transition zone (Moho) is few meters to few hundred meters thick. Gabbro lenses are imbedded in dunite, plagioclase and clinopyroxene-impregnated dunite, and depleted harzburgite. The gabbro content increases upwards at the expenses of other rock types.

Note:
Since the crust/mantle interface is preserved, the Moho is not a plane of subduction and décollement.

Mantle rocks
Most of the mantle sequence is composed of coarse-grained harzburgite with dunite and pyroxenite “layers”. Early high-temperature orthopyroxene fabrics are interpreted as mantle flow patterns. Residual orthopyroxene shows that most dunite results from dissolution of harzburgite pyroxene by melts circulating towards the crust at the time of ophiolite formation.

The dominant mantle flow is orthogonal to the spreading axis in a plane sub-parallel to the lower boundary of the layered gabbros, i.e. the petrological Moho, which suggests steady-state oceanic
accretion. This regular flow geometry is disturbed by diapirs, 10-15 km across, around which the uppermost mantle flow diverges. These diapirs were the conduits through which melt was channelled on its ascent beneath the ridge. Along-strike variations in both the geometry of the asthenospheric flow and in the sheeted dyke complex show that the ridge was segmented on a scale of 50-100 km.

The mantle peridotites witness two successive plastic deformations:
-1) the earlier produced a pervasive coarse porphyroclastic foliation. It is related to high-temperature, low-stress asthenospheric flow (lithospheric accretion).
-2) the second one produced a fine-grained mylonitic foliation in the lower 150-2000 m of the peridotite. It reflects the lower temperature, higher stress imprint of intra-oceanic thrusting setting the initial stages for the obduction. Related shear zones strike parallel to the paleo-ridge, as defined by the orientation of the dikes, and are in structural continuity with the underlying metamorphic sole.

Metamorphic sole
The base of the Sumail Ophiolite is a high-temperature metamorphic shear zone, the metamorphic sole. The few hundred meters thick sole includes HT (800 to 1000°C) peridotite-mylonites underlain by discontinuous lenses of amphibolite grade metabasalts, marbles, schists and metacherts, which were scrapped off the subducted plate. These rocks, overprinted by greenschist-facies assemblages, are geochemically different from the overlying ophiolites. Instead, they may represent an oceanic crust older (Triassic or Jurassic) than the Sumail Ophiolite. A major thrust separates the metamorphic sole from footwall lower-grade sedimentary and volcanic rocks. The sole fabrics are consistent with transport in a NE-SW direction.

Obduction
Convergence began in the Aptian–Albian (110-120 Ma). It is related to a change in the displacement of Africa with respect to Eurasia (and the coeval opening of the South Atlantic Ocean), which in turn may have been triggered by a superplume event. The geological record permits to decipher two main stages:
1) Thrusting of the oceanic lithosphere soon after its creation onto the adjacent oceanic crust without emergence. The Mesozoic Tethys oceanic lithosphere and its sedimentary cover were first consumed in a NE-dipping, intraoceanic subduction zone.
2) Thrusting of the oceanic lithosphere onto the continental margin with emergence. As the continental margin of the Arabian plate arrived in the trench, the slab pulled it down into subduction.

**Intra-oceanic subduction**

There are three independent arguments for early intra-oceanic subduction:
- Transitional to calc-alkaline volcanism found on the ophiolites indicates fusion of a hydrated, thin mantle wedge with partial melting at high temperature (hence subduction bringing hydrated material beneath this wedge).
- Negative εNd and U-Pb dates from hydrated mantle dikes further suggest that intra-oceanic thrusting was established within 0.25–0.5 Ma after formation of the ophiolitic crust.
- Ar-Ar ages of hornblende separates from the metamorphic sole range from 96 to 91 Ma, which, owing to fast cooling, slightly post-dates the inception of intra-oceanic thrusting. The brief time span between crystallisation of the oceanic crust and cooling of the metamorphic sole supports the interpretation of cold material subducted beneath an active spreading centre, i.e. near-ridge subduction.

Therefore, the Sumail ophiolites were up-thrusted while young and hot. This conclusion raises the question of how old was and can be the youngest subducted oceanic lithosphere.

**Isostatic conditions**

Lithospheric buoyancy is the factor that determines the ability of a plate to be subducted. The density of oceanic lithospheres increases with cooling, after formation at spreading ridges, which is reflected in the deep bathymetry of the ocean floor away from the spreading ridge axis. Rewording the question from density considerations is: where does thermal maturation produce a lithosphere cold – dense enough to be more likely subducted than obducted?
Approximations assuming local isostasy indicate that average oceanic lithospheres become negatively buoyant when they are 5-10 Ma old, 15-20 km thick. This age is still difficult to reconcile with the interpretation of a near-ridge event, if the ridge was fast (the 10 Ma old crust is 500 km away from the ridge for a 5 cm/a half-spreading rate). Since a gravitational instability was not sufficient to initiate subduction in Oman, a tectonic event (a change in plate motions) should be responsible for choking the ridge and causing shortening.

**Exercise**

Calculate the average density of the oceanic lithosphere in function of its age. Assume a constant thickness of 5 km and a density of 2.9 g/cm³ for the oceanic crust, a density of 3.3 g/cm³ for the mantle lithosphere and 3.25 g/cm³ for the asthenosphere. Generate the resulting curve and comment on isostasy property of the oceanic lithosphere.

These considerations lead to the following general conclusions concerning obduction:

1. Ophiolites are only 0–10 Ma old oceanic lithospheres at the time of obduction.
2. Mechanical considerations require maximum temperature about the decoupling zone to be no greater than 1000°C.

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**Thrusting of the oceanic lithosphere**

Progressive thrusting and eventual emplacement of the ophiolites on to the continental rocks led to the development of a peripheral bulge and foreland basin. Thin-skinned tectonics dominates the entire northern Oman continental margin with a main basal detachment in the Pre-Permian basement.
High Pressure-Low Temperature (HP-LT) metamorphism in the basement and shelf deposits of the continental margin (Saih Hatat window) indicates subduction of the leading edge of the continental margin. This event is responsible for Fe/Mg-carpholite ± lawsonite-bearing rocks (6–10 kbar), blueschists (12–15 kbar) and eclogites (ca. 20 kbar). Ar-Ar geochronology on white micas yields cooling ages (130-82 Ma) older than nappe emplacement (75-70 Ma).

### Sedimentary record

The tectonic / sedimentary records of early obduction are:

* Accumulation of siliceous sediments and redeposited lithoclastic carbonates in a foredeep basin in the Turonian.

* Formation of a mélange in the NE (Batain). This is a tectonic formation, with indefinite, non-stratigraphic contacts and scanty matrix. It has been more or less gravity driven sliding. Blocks of Permian and Triassic limestones are often associated with basalts. These features are used in the following interpretation:

  (1) Initial imbrication of deep-water successions far from the continental margin. That was foreland-directed, piggy-back thrusting with thrusts propagating into the foot-wall. The overall structure is simple and all the stratigraphic section preserved; therefore restoration is possible

  (2) Mid-Late Cretaceous emplacement (Campanian)

### Metamorphic record

The two-stage obduction history produced two distinct types of Cretaceous metamorphism:

1) High temperature at the base of the Sumail ophiolites;

2) Blueschist - eclogite facies metamorphism in rocks of the Arabian continental margin that outcrop in the Saih Hatat tectonic window.

#### High Temperature metamorphic sole

High temperature infra-ophiolite metamorphic soles are produced by downward heat transfer from hot young oceanic lithosphere thrust over colder lithosphere; this interpretation explains inverted metamorphic field gradients, which in Oman is sharply decreasing downward from ca 1000°C mylonitic peridotite through superposed slices of granulite-, amphibolite- (T = 750-900°C and P = 5-14 kb, i.e. 15 to 50 km depth) and greenschist-facies (T ~ 500°C) basic rocks onto unmetamorphosed material. The high temperature metamorphic conditions of the partially molten lower granulite to upper amphibolite facies sole (< 500m thick) are consistent with ridge inversion and thrusting of peridotites with sublithospheric temperatures. Cooling of the metamorphic sole is dated at ca. 95 Ma (Ar-Ar age of hornblende and concordant zircons in leucosomes). Same ages for the high temperature metamorphism in the sole and for ophiolitic trondhjemites further suggest intra-oceanic thrusting of very young oceanic lithosphere, i.e. near the ridge.

#### High Pressure sequences

Both strain and metamorphic grade increase towards the northeast, with the successive appearance of pumpellyite, epidote and blue amphiboles in the autochthonous and par-autochthonous units. This...
bulk zonation is consistent with a northeast-dipping subduction but actually exhibits two separate structural levels:

1) The deepest structural levels, in a window within the Saih Hattat window, are represented by eclogitic mafic boudins that have recorded minimum pressures of 20 kbar. They indicate that the northern margin of the Arabian continental crust was subducted to depths of more than 60 km. Glauconehane indicates that eclogites recrystallized at 10-12 kbar 500-580°C. U–Pb dating of zircons extracted from eclogites and Sm-Nd garnet-garnet leachate -- whole rock isochrons constrain the age of peak metamorphism between 110 ± 11 and 79.1 ± 0.3 Ma. Ages older than the 95-Ma-old ophiolite indicate subduction-related metamorphism. Cooling ages (Ar-Ar and K-Ar methods) related to this metamorphism range between 90 and 70 Ma.

2) Higher structural levels, in the southern part of the Saih Hattat window and in the northeastern Jebel Akhdar window, are high-pressure greenschist facies schists containing carpholite, lawsonite and sodic amphibole. Carpholite-kaolinite assemblages were recrystallized at 180-250°C, 8-10 kbar and carpholite-pyrophyllite assemblages at 250-350°C, 6-8 kbar. The actual petrology is not sufficient to accurately reconstruct their P-T path. Ar-Ar ages on micas from low-pressure fabric elements are about 80 Ma.

High-pressure rocks were brought to the surface as early as late Maastrichtian (before 65 Ma), and remained virtually undisturbed afterwards. The exhumation rate of blueschists and eclogites can be estimated at 3 to 5 mm.a⁻¹.

**Exhumation problem?**

Structural studies demonstrated that partial exhumation of the high pressure rocks occurred during northeastward shearing, while high-pressure metamorphism was still taking place. To explain this vergence, opposite to the regional stack of thrust units, exhumation of the high-pressure rocks has been attributed to:

- Extension;
- Extensional collapse;
- Buoyancy during regional convergence.
Kinematics and structures

As the Sumail Ophiolite was converging with Arabia, the continental margin approached the subduction zone and thin-skinned thrusts flaked the basin sediments onto the margin. Strain increases from the southwestern edge of Jebel Akhdar to the Saih Hatat window characterised by intense transposition foliation. Associated stretching directions are NNE-SSW and sense of shear criteria indicate south-southwestward thrusting. This deformation phase corresponds to subduction of the Arabian continental margin.

Overprinting surge zones, extensional duplexes and isoclinal folds are related to northeastward-shearing. This opposite sense of shear is attributed to exhumation of the subducted material.

Thin-skinned tectonics

The Sumail Ophiolite formed an orogenic lid that acted, like the East-Alpine nappes in the Alps, as a “traîneau écraseur”. Thrusting of the ophiolite involved piggyback emplacement of successively outboard thrust sheets including Permian–Mesozoic ocean floor and continental rise sediments (Hawasina sequence), which in turn overlie time equivalent Permian–Mesozoic slope and shelf facies carbonates (Sumeini and Haybi Groups).

The Hawasina, Sumeini and Haybi sequences represent sedimentary nappes separated from their original basement. The major sole thrust lies into pre-Permian rocks (as pre-Permian occurs within the culminations) and emerges to the S.

Hawasina nappes

A part of the Hawasina sequence was intensely deformed and metamorphosed below the ophiolite nappe. This part crops out in the Hawasina window, and is analogue to the sedimentary nappes in the Valais and Grisons regions of the Alps. The other part has been pushed towards the foreland by the Sumail Ophiolites and forms a typical fold-and-thrust belt in the Hamrat Duru Ranges, analogue to the pre-Alpine fold nappes in the Alps. Thrusting has first transported the youngest, Jurassic and Cretaceous sediments of the Hawasina Basin, which are tectonically overlain by the older, Triassic sequences. Typically, the sequences are repeated several times by thrusting and folding, a standard imbricate stack that usually comprises more distal units overlying more proximal ones.

The major translation of Hawasina accretionary wedge took place in the Coniacian-Campanian (90-72 Ma). This thrusting event is marked by structural growth of culminations. WSW propagating sole
thrusts are emergent to the S and the stack displays a characteristic arcuate shape sub-parallel to the Oman Mountains. Full travel of the Hawasina sediments is estimated at around 400 km.

The end of the emplacement process is signalled by the first appearance of igneous detritus on the Arabian craton in the mid to Late Campanian (78-72 Ma). Restoration of the thrust sheets suggests that the ophiolite travelled 250-350 km over basin, slope and shelf deposits and another 150 km over the continent after the ~95 Ma intraoceanic thrusting along the metamorphic sole and before the arrival of the ophiolite on the continent by ~75 Ma.

This equates with underthrusting-accretion beneath the Sumail Ophiolite with stacking of distal to proximal units.

**Exercise**

*Since the obduction history spans ca. 27 Ma, calculate the average convergence rate of the Sumail ophiolite relative to the passive continental margin. Does it fit the plate tectonic data?*

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**Northeast-directed shearing**

The northern boundary of the Saih Hatat window exposes a major detachment surface that separates high-pressure blueschist facies rocks and eclogites from less metamorphosed rocks. Both sides of the detachment are derived from Permian sediments. A drastic metamorphic contrast (up to 6 kbar) occurs along this north-dipping and shallow-dipping normal shear zone. This metamorphic gap implies large displacement of the hanging wall, which displays an intense fabric denoting non-coaxial, top-to-the-northeast shearing. The related exhumation rate of high-pressure rocks in the footwall of these shear zones is estimated at 3-5 mm/a between 80 and 70 Ma. Northeast-directed shearing is responsible for regional foliation and duplex-like imbrications in the Permian-Cretaceous platform sediments of the Jebel Akhdar region.

Gravity folds occur on both flanks of the domes, with relative movements towards both the south and the north. Extensional structures are attributed to gravity sliding on the flanks of the syn-obduction culminations. This culmination collapse varies in age.

**Dome structures**

Cenozoic deformation of the Oman Mountains has produced large antiforms eroded to form a series of box-shaped tectonic windows (from east to west: Saih Hatat, Jebel Akhdar and Hawasina) that fold the ophiolitic nappe and the underlying basement. The domal culminations are usually interpreted to be ramp-related anticlines that fold an earlier, pre-Permian foliation. Ramp anticlines would be contemporaneous with the emplacement of the ophiolite nappes. Alternatively, they may represent post-obduction frontal tip folds of Cenozoic age, possibly above blind thrusts affecting the basement.

**Saih Hatat Window**

The Saih Hatat window represents the deepest exposed levels of the Oman Mountains. It contains a major, refolded, NE-facing, recumbent, anticlinal fold-nappe within Pre-Ordovician sedimentary cover (autochthon) and Mesozoic platform carbonates. Deformation intensity and metamorphic grade increase towards the NE where eclogites occur as mafic boudins in the As Sifah sub-window, in the northeast part of the Saih Hatat Window.

**Jebel Akhdar window**

The Jebel Akhdar window exposes an external zone of the Arabian units with respect to the Saih Hatat window. The two major phases of ductile deformation are accompanied by NE-SW striking stretching lineations are found in this window.

**Cenozoic tectonics**

Maastrichtian shallow marine carbonate sedimentation resumed over the subsiding obduction structures. Carbonate sedimentation was nearly continuous until into the Oligocene, local angular
unconformities suggesting minor block faulting attributed to differential uplift along the eroded mountain belt and sea level fluctuations on a rather stable continental margin.

The uplift and present day morphology of Oman Mountains is due to Oligocene foreland-directed thrusting and folding. Renewed compression reactivated Late Cretaceous thrusts, producing fault-propagation folds parallel to the arcuate Oman Mountains. Related shortening seems to increase northward around the mountain arc with thin-skin tectonics caused by increasing proximity to the Cenozoic continent-continent (Arabia-Eurasia) collision zone in the Zagros Mountains. Fission track data suggest a post-obduction, two-stage cooling history: rapid at ca. 45–35Ma followed by slow cooling from 25 Ma to the present. The first stage may represent a distant, early phase of the Zagros collision, to the northwest; coeval erosional exhumation led to deposition of a thick sedimentary succession in the foreland basin. The post 20 Ma event and contemporaneous fan conglomerates are tentatively linked to the main folding phase and subsequent erosion of the Zagros orogeny.

Mid-late Miocene is dominated by gravity tectonics.

Several levels of terraces and raised strandlines along the coast demonstrate recent uplift.

**Platform deposition after thrust emplacement**

A major unconformity with late Maastrichtian (68–65 Ma) rudist-bearing beach deposits overlies all allochthonous units, and in particular the obducted Sumail ophiolites. This unconformity indicates that the Oman Mountains were emergent in the early Maastrichtian with evidence for erosion transgression, onlapping, fluviatile to shallow marine Maastrichtian.

Shallow marine, fossiliferous carbonate sedimentation resumed along the northern flank of the mountains during the late Palaeocene to Middle-late Eocene (58–42 Ma) while the north Oman Mountains remained structurally high.

Stable, shallow marine carbonate sedimentation lasted 20–25 million years from middle Palaeocene to late Eocene, before regression. Oligocene marine carbonates deposited on both the northern and southern flanks of the mountains. This cover, shelf sequence has been folded in the Miocene, a deformation phase associated with the major uplift of the Oman Mountain. Gentle upright folds indicate minor amounts of shortening. Both N–S and E–W fold axes of Tertiary structures indicate a dome and basin type fold interference pattern as a result of biaxial compression.

Tertiary (35-45 Ma) alkaline volcanic rocks occur along reactivated fault zones and indicate an intermediate extension period, possibly predating the Red Sea Rift.
Paleomagnetic data

Paleomagnetic data suggest large clockwise rotation of the ophiolites during intraoceanic thrusting and continental obduction. Metalliferous sediments interbedded within the volcanics and the ophiolites (Albian-Cenomanian) define a well dated paleo-horizontal. Low inclinations confirm that the Sumail ophiolites were formed and thrust at equatorial latitudes.
for these multiple phases of magnetisation. Systematic sampling of continuous ophiolite sections indicate that ENE magnetizations at the top of the lower crust changes downwards to NNW in foliated and layered gabbros. This reveals remagnetization from the base upwards, replacing early remanences in lower crustal gabbros but preserving original ENE magnetizations at higher levels.

**Seismic information**

**Crustal-scale structure**

Oil exploration seismic profiles and wells along with gravimetric data constrain well the structure of the upper 5 km of the crust. The depth and shape of the Moho is less constrained. However limited, the information indicates a 60 km deep crustal root beneath the dome-shaped windows.

The foreland Arabian crust is 40-45 km thick, in consistency with an old craton. Conversely, the depth to Moho decreases northward to less than 40 km beneath the coastal plain, which is consistent with the area representing the former passive margin. Further north, the Moho is 25-30 km deep below the Oman seafloor. The allochthonous interpretation of ophiolites is confirmed, with the main klippen being ca 1km thick to the south of the main tectonic windows whereas ophiolites are ca 5 km thick to the north.

**Mantle**

Tomography shows that Arabia has a cold lithospheric mantle, as expected beneath an old craton. On a larger scale, Eurasia is underlain by a hot lithospheric mantle, with the Arabia–Eurasia lithospheric suture approximately following the surface suture mapped in Zagros along the north-eastern side of the Zagros Mountains. The lithospheric suture seems to be offset at the Zagros-Makran boundary from where the Arabia lithosphere is inferred to extend northward beneath the Lut Block of Central Iran.
The high velocity Arabian lithosphere has a sharp contact with a low velocity region beneath western Makran, which in turns displays a sharp boundary with velocities beneath eastern Makran. This lithospheric-scale information suggests segmentation of the Oman subduction zone, but the seismic network is insufficiently dense to provide high resolution pictures of the active system.

**Conclusions – Tectonic evolution of the Oman Mountains**
- Oman and Central Iran were together parts of Gondwana in Precambrian to Paleozoic times.
- An Uplift event in the Late Carboniferous is associated with abundant volcanism, which may be the earliest signs of rifting and separation of these two continental blocks.
- Mid- to Late Permian extension produced a large intracontinental basin on the northeast margin of the Arabian platform. Further rifting of the basin and crustal separation along the northern margin of Arabia led to the initiation of the Tethys Ocean in Middle to Late Triassic time. From Late Permian to mid-Cretaceous times Oman formed part of a large carbonate platform on the passive, southern continental margin of the Tethys Ocean in which sediments typified by the Hawasina deep sea sequences were deposited.
- In Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, slow pelagic sedimentation was dominant.
- Intraoceanic subduction initiated at ca. 95 Ma near a dead oceanic ridge. This subduction starting age is remarkably consistent along the collision zone from Turkey to Oman. The Tethys oceanic lithosphere was consumed in the late Cretaceous, north-dipping and intra-oceanic subduction zone located to the north of the Arabian continent. The sedimentary cover of Tethys built up an accretion wedge (Hawasina and coloured mélange) until the Late Campanian.
- As the Arabian plate moved progressively northwards, it entered into the subduction zone below a slice of the Tethys oceanic lithosphere belonging to the hanging wall plate of the subduction system. Obduction (i.e. subduction of the Arabian continental margin under the overriding oceanic plate) began at near 90 Ma; 200 to 600 km of the transient and continental lithosphere was subducted in this zone. The entire obduction-emplacement of the Sumail ophiolites lasted about 27 million years from 95 to 68 Ma, during the Late-Cretaceous, while the ophiolite displacement was about 400 km at an average rate of ca. 2cm/a. During this time interval, the allochthonous nappes were assembled from the intense imbrication of oceanic and slope sediments originally developed on the Oman continental margin with Tethys ocean floor.
- High-Pressure rocks were brought to the surface just after obduction (80-70 Ma).
- Continuing convergence created another subduction trench (proto Makran). The resulting crustal relaxation on the earlier subduction site permitted uplift of the half-buried Oman continental margin. The ophiolitic thrust sheet was subsequently disrupted by gravity-driven extension around basement structural culminations further onto the Arabian shelf. The mechanisms of rapid exhumation during
plate convergence are a subject of discussion. The question is how normal faulting and associated rapid exhumation of high pressure rocks combine with coeval thrusting and plate convergence. By Maastrichtian time (70-65 Ma) all nappes had been partially eroded and transgressed by shallow water carbonate rocks. The Makran accretion wedge of Maastrichtian to Eocene age underlies an ophiolite hanging-wall due to post Eocene and still active convergence between Eurasia and Arabia. Zagros folds began their main development in the Pliocene. Continent/continent collision has not occurred between Oman/Makran.
QUESTIONS

Why did Obduction stopped and shifted northward in the Makran system?

How were deep rocks (blue-schist sequences) exhumed in a convergent system?

Recommended literature


