The evolution of a gypsum vein network in compressive tectonic settings: the Montsant anticlinorium case (NE Spain)

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ABSTRACT

The Montsant anticlinorium is part of the Pàndols-Cavalls-Montsant tectonic line situated in the southwestern area of the Catalan Coastal Ranges, adjacent to the contact with the Tertiary Ebro Basin. We have interpreted this Alpine structure as a triangular type I zone with two opposite faults. The centre of the anticlinorium is formed by middle Muschelkalk facies with intensively deformed gypsum layers and an intensively deformed zone with an associated framework of satin spar gypsum veins. A field structural analysis reveals that there are two sets of veins: one associated with a pre-folding stage (before the Alpine orogeny), and another one related to the development of the Montsant anticlinorium, and therefore syn-folding (and Alpine in age).

Key-words: gypsum rocks, gypsum veins, Middle Muschelkalk, Alpine orogeny, structural analysis.

Geological setting

The study area is located in the southwestern of the Catalan Coastal Ranges (CCR), close to its NW contact with the Tertiary Ebro Basin (Fig. 1A). The main structures of the CCR are NE-SW-trending polygenic basement faults, which acted as normal faults during the Mesozoic. Later on, they were reactivated as sinistral-reverse faults that produced the inversion of the Mesozoic rifted basins during the compressive Alpine orogeny (e.g., Guimerà, 1984). These basement faults controlled the deposition of the Tertiary cover and produced the development of a narrow band of intensive deformation (the Pàndols-Cavalls-Montsant tectonic line, PCM in Fig. 1B; Teixell, 1988) between two relative undeformed areas (the Ebro and Mora basins) (Fig. 1B). This tectonic line consists of a NE-SW elongate anticlinorium (Fig. 1). Fission track data indicate uplift and exhumation of the area during the Upper Cretaceous (Juez-Larré and Andriessen, 2006), and coherent with Cornudella group that predate main Alpine phase (Teixell, 1998).

The study area is located at the centre of this anticlinorium, along the Montsant river transverse, between the villages of La Villella Baixa and Cabacés (Fig. 1B). In this
area, different units with ages ranging between the Paleozoic and Tertiary crop out. A series of folds and thrusts affect the sedimentary cover. This study focuses on Middle Muschelkalk (M2) evaporites.

Methods

A detailed structural analysis of gypsum vein sets was performed in order to identify whether each gypsum vein filled with fibrous cement formed pre- or syn-tectonically with folding and thrusting. For this purpose, data were collected at three different localities: one at the middle of the high-strain zone (outcrops B1 and B2; Fig. 2), and two located at the two limbs of the anticlinorium, which are low-deformed regions (outcrops A and C, at the western and eastern fold limbs, respectively; Fig. 2). The relative angle between the vein wall and fibres was measured in the field using a protractor. The extensional direction was obtained using the convic method of Durney and Ramsay (1973). This method assumes that the extensional direction lays at the acute bisector between the vein normal and the fibres. In the high-strain bands the analyses were restricted to a 2D section using the software FraNEP (Fracture Network Evaluation Program; Zeeb et al., 2013). This code allows an automatic statistical analysis of 2D vein networks, and constructs rose diagrams of wall veins and gypsum fibre orientations.

Results and discussions

Middle Muschelkalk facies are composed of red siltstones interbedded with secondary gypsum layers, which comprise two different lithofacies (laminated-to-nodular gypsum and gypsum breccia). Secondary gypsum is formed by hydration of anhydrite. The M2 rocks host a dense network of veins that range from several dm to tens of meters in length and from less than 5 mm to more than 10 cm in width. These veins are parallel-to-oblique to the evaporite layers and are also hosted in the red siltstone interlayers.

Deformation appears strongly localized in a narrow synform band (high strain zone, Fig. 2) where intense folding of the M2 between the two thrusts with opposite vergence can be identified (i.e., facing to the foreland and the hinterland). A main thrust facing towards the foreland is found at the SE flank of the anticlinorium. The map, cross section (Fig. 2, outcrops B1 and B2) and field observations indicate that this structure corresponds to a vertical thrust with an associated hanging-wall anticline and a steeply dipping back-limb on the SE. The thrust facing towards the hinterland is observed at the NW flank of the anticlinorium and dips subvertically. Based on the cross section (Fig. 2), values of displacement range between approx. 250 m for the foreland thrust and less than 100 m for the backthrust. The structure corresponds to a “pop-down” or a type I triangular zone according to Couzens and Wiltschko (1996). Both thrusts develop a damage zone formed by breccias and reddish-brown gouge. A dense and complex network of gypsum veins, as well as large pieces of brecciated and laminated gypsum, are observed at the core of this structure. The maximum vein density is found at the high strain zone in the hinge of the synform, while gypsum veins sharply disappear near the damage zone associated with both faults (Fig. 3H).

Infilling formed in the following sequence (in chronological order): a) fibrous gypsum (satin spar) cements growing perpendicular to vein walls, and, b) large prismatic (or sub-euhedral) crystals that can partially or almost entirely overprint the fibrous crystals and grow from parallel to slightly oblique to the fibres. Although all described infillings can appear in all veins, veins hosted in the laminated-to-nodular and brecciated host unit (A

Fig. 1.- A) Simplified geological sketch of the Catalan Coastal Ranges in contact with the Ebro foreland basin. The Pàndols-Cavalls-Montsant tectonic line is indicated with a grey rectangle and the study area with a star. Modified from Playà et al. (2010). B) Geologic map of the studied area (modified from Institut Cartogràfic i Geològic de Catalunya, 2006). See colour figure on the Web.

Fig. 2.- Cross-section of the study area. Location of the studied outcrops marked in the cross-section. Outcrops B1 and B2 correspond to the narrow synform band, while A and C correspond to the antiform fold limbs. See orientation of the cross-section in figure 1. See colour figure on the Web.
and C outcrops) are less deformed and recrystallized. Prismatic recrystallization is much more abundant in veins located at the middle of the high strain zone (outcrops B1 and B2), where veins are interbedded in red siltstones, and not related with secondary gypsum hosts.

In the low deformed zones (outcrops A and C), veins display straight fibres oriented either normal or inclined (about ~30º) with regard to the walls. These veins usually appear at a low angle or parallel to bedding. There are also few veins showing sigmoidal or curved crystals, in which fibres are oriented at a high angle with respect to the vein walls and are subparallel to the walls in the centre. Veins of the NW flank of the anticlinorium (outcrop A) strike NE-SW and dip moderately to the NW, while fibres plunge approximately...
140/36 on average (Fig. 3C). Veins of the SE flank (outcrop C, Fig. 3D) also strike NE-SW (Fig. 3E) but dip to the SE. The average fibres orientation of these veins is 300/28 (Fig. 3F). On both fold flanks fibres are oriented at a high angle with regard to the vein walls, thus suggesting that they formed from mode I or tensile fractures. The extension direction of the veins on the NW flank is 310/38 (Fig. 3G) and is 142/30 for veins on the SE flank (Fig. 3F).

Two main trends of vein orientations are recognizable in the high-strain domain (outcrops B1 and B2). The first set of veins forms at low angles with bedding, which is folded and has very similar strike to those of large-scale folds (i.e., striking NW-SE and with east-dipping axial planes). The second set is composed of slightly folded veins with subvertical orientation, and crosscuts folded siltstones, gypsum layers and the first set of gypsum veins (at a low angle with bedding). The maximum frequency of the vein walls is found subvertical, and veins dominantly dip to the NW.

In addition to these two sets of veins, another important population of SE-dipping veins appears in outcrop B2 (Fig. 3I), but is missing in outcrop B1. These SE-dipping veins are folded in a similar way than the host rocks, but some of these veins are crosscutting other veins and folds. While we interpret the first two set of veins (NW dipping veins found in both outcrops) as pre-or syntectonic with the main deformation phase, the additional SE-dipping set found in outcrop B2 is clearly syntectonic. Fibre orientations at the outcrop B2 are very homogeneous, and plunge on average to the SE. Pre- and syntectonic fibres have a very similar orientation, although pretectonic veins tend to plunge less than syntectonic ones. Fibres of pretectonic veins are deformed and their orientation is very unlikely to indicate the extension direction. The calculated extension directions are very variable (Fig. 3M), but have three maxima frequency peaks. The maximum frequency is coincident with the fibre orientation and indicates the extensional direction during NW-SE folding. The other two peaks, at high and low dip angles, correspond to a pre-tectonic extensional direction, which is folded.

In order to test the chronology of the veins (before, during or after the fold) we have backtilted the data from low strain zones back considering initial horizontal layers (Fig. 3G). The results reveal that rotated data have a scattered distribution around the vertical axis, thus suggesting that at least a large number of veins formed before folding. Therefore, the formation of most of these veins is probably related to the rehydration of anhydrite layers during the Upper Cretaceous-Palaeogene exhumation (Juez-Larré and Andriessen, 2006), and before the main tectonic Alpine stage.

Finally, not all data in lower strain areas (outcrops A and C) are in agreement with this interpretation, as veins with sigmoidal or complex fibre patterns plot away from the vertical axis. Although we do not have enough data to interpret sigmoidal veins, a plausible hypothesis is that they are recording layer-parallel slip during folding and limb rotation during the Alpine orogeny.

Conclusions

A framework of gypsum veins cuts the host rock layers, composed of red siltstones and deformed gypsum rocks.

The relative chronology of the veins has been established according to the local Alpine structures (folds). The veins found at low angle to bedding predate folding and thus the main Alpine phase (i.e., they are pre-folding). These veins are observed in all the outcrops. The formation of high-angle veins with respect to bedding and SE-dipping veins observed in outcrop B2 are interpreted here to have developed synchronous with the formation of the Montserrat anticlinorium (i.e., they are syn-folding).

Although gypsum veins are preferentially observed at the core of the structure, and therefore could be interpreted as indicators of fluid flow and overpressure related to compressive deformation, our structural analysis indicates that most of these veins are probably related to the exhumation and rehydration of anhydrite before the main tectonic Alpine stage. Such type of structural analysis has not been previously used in fibrous gypsum veins.

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