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SKARN FORMATION BENEATH LASCAR VOLCANO, N CHILE: EVIDENCE FOR THE WESTERN CONTINUATION OF THE

YACORAITE FORMATION (LATE CRETACEOUS) OF NW ARGENTINA

Rosa A. MAR QUILL AS(^) & Stephen J. MATTHEWS(~)

(1) Facultad de Ciencias Naturales, CONICET-Universidad Nacional de Salta, Buenos Aires 177, 4400 Salta, Argentina.
(2) Department of Geology, University of Bristol, Wills Memorial Building, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 lRJ, UK.

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INTRODUCTION

We report the occurrence of skarn xenoliths in the eruption products
of Lascar volcano, N Chile. These rocks are samples of a chemically zoned metamorphic-metasomatic skarn body developed around the subvolcanic magma chamber. This skarn system is still actively developing at present. Using a variety of geochemical techniques we have identified the host rock as impure limestones and carbonate-cemented sandstones belonging to the Late Cretaceous Yacoraite formation, which outcrops extensively in NW Argentina, thus proving that this unit extends a considerable distance westwards beneath the young volcanic zone in this area.

YACORAITE FORMATION

In the Early Cretaceous several rift troughs opened in northwest Argentina and surroundings, thus starting the accumulation of the Salta Group basin and equivalents. During Mid-Eocene times the Inca diastrophism inverted the basin and interrupted sedimentation (Marquillas and Salfity, 1988; Salfity and Marquillas 1994). The Yacoraite Formation (Maastrichtian-Eopaleocene) is an extensive, partly dolornitic limestone of the postrift accumulations of the Salta Group. This unit has developed not only over the former synrift troughs but also over the San Pablo high and other structural highs (Figure 1). In the Argentinian Puna the limestone lies on Ordovician basement at the northern El Toro Lineament, and on Precambrian basement in the south. In the Puna the outcrops are scarcer and more isolated than in other areas. The development of these accumulations also affected the territories of Bolivia and very probably the north of Chile. The Yacoraite Limestone was deposited by epeiric flooding, in a frame of tectonic quiescence; deposition occurred under shallow water conditions, with frequent subaerial exposure. These transgressive deposits are mainly ooid grainstone, packstone, stromatolites,

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sandstone, and in the relatively deep facies, shales and the calcareous mudstones. A maximum thickness of 200 m has been recorded.

Figure 1. Isopach map of the Yacoraite formation, showing the
position of Lascar volcano. 1: Basement high. 2: Isopach in metres. 3: Fault or lineament. 4: Isopach control point. 5: Salar. Hu = Huaytiquina, PO = Poquis, Ch = Chaupiorco, CC = Casa Colorada, CO = Coranzuli, QY = Quebrada Yacoraite, AC = Abra Calvario.

LASCAR VOLCANO

Lascar is a composite calc-alkaline stratovolcano located on the
volcanic front in NE Chile (5,592m, 23'22'S, 67'44'W). Its eruption products are medium- to high-K andesitic to dacitic rocks in the form of lavas and pyroclastic flows (Matthews et al., 1994a). The magmas are the product of

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combined magma mixing, fractional crystallization and assimilation of country rocks. The dominant magmas are 2-pyroxene andesites although 2- pyroxene dacites and hornblende- and biotite - rich dacites are also important. Lascar magmas are highly oxidized, containing anhydrite phenocrysts, and this has been attributed to f02 buffering by a coexisting S02
- H2S rich gas phase (Matthews et al., 1994b).

SKARN XENOLITHS

Skarn xenoliths are common throughout the stratigraphy of the
volcano (Matthews et al., 1994a; 1996). They have a variety of mineralogies, ranging from contact-metamorphic wollastonite-rich rocks to pyroxene-garnet and magnetite-pyroxene-rich samples which are interpreted as the product of Fe-Mn-Mg-Ti-A1 metasomatism. These xenoliths originated in a zoned skarn system around the subvolcanic magma chamber of the volcano. Retrograde alteration by magma-derived acid sulphate fluids produced secondary carbonate veins and sulphate alteration.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE YACORAITE FORMATION

Skarn xenoliths from Lascar are interpreted as fragments of a zoned
skarn body around the subvolcanic magma chamber. The protolith has been identified as the Yacoraite formation on the basis of whole-rock major element and REE compositions. Following normalization of the whole rock major elements in both the xenoliths and samples of Yacoraite rocks by removal of the C02 from the analyses (e.g. CaOn = CaO X TOTAL / (TOTAL - C02), the wollastonite skarns fall in the range of Yacoraite compositions. Other skarn types can be related to the Wollastonite skarns by metasomatic addition of Fe, Mn, Mg, Ti and Al. Examples are shown in Figure 2.

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$ Buchite

Di-Gt

CaO n

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90
CaO n

Figure 2. Plot of normalized whole-rock A1203 and Fe203 showing the relationship between various types of Lascar skarn xenoliths and rocks of the Yacoraite formation. The wollastonite skarns are the product of thermal metamorphism.

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Chondrite-normalized REE spiderplots of Yacoraite samples are similar
to those of the skarn xenoliths (light REE enrichment, positive and negative Eu anomalies). The slopes of the plots for both Yacoraite samples and the skarn xenoliths fall in the same range. The wollastonite skarns have a negative Ce anomaly of variable size which can be traced to late-stage retrograde calcite veins. REE and stable isotopic data (13c and 180) indicate that this calcite was dissolved from Yacoraite country rocks and redeposited in the skarn by magma-derived acid fluids (Matthews et al., 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Lascar volcano is underlain by a zoned skarn body developed within
impure limestones which have been identified on geochemical grounds as belonging to the Yacoraite formation. The limestone protolith was geochemically similar to outcropping Yacoraite rocks along the Chile-Argentina border, indicating that similar facies are likely to underlie Lascar. This confirms previous interpretations that this unit extends a considerable distance westward beneath the Puna of NE Chile. It is likely that the subvolcanic intrusions beneath the volcanic zone in this area have

developed an extensive field of skarn orebodies and that the volcanoes represent the surface expression of such an orefield.

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