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# SEDIMENTOLOGY, STRATIGRAPHY, AND CHEMOSTRATIGRAPHY OF THE ALBIAN-CENOMANIAN TOROK AND NANUSHUK FORMATIONS, NORTH SLOPE, ALASKA

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## INTRODUCTION

Cretaceous Arctic sedimentary strata provide a unique window into a greenhouse world shaped by elevated temperatures, high precipitation rates, near-maximum global sea-levels, and very active sea floor spreading and mountain building. Climatic and tectonic forces certainly had a strong affect on the sedimentology and stratigraphy of Cretaceous sedimentary systems, as well as ocean geochemistry and terrestrial ecology. Through the interpretation of stratigraphic sections, sandstone petrography, and mudstone geochemistry, the six students on this project compiled datasets that enhance our understanding of how the interplay between paleoclimate, orogeny, and autocyclic deltaic processes shape the stratigraphic record of the Albian-Cenomanian Torok and Nanushuk formations.

## **GEOLOGIC BACKGROUND**

The North Slope of Alaska is a physiographic province bordered by the Brooks Range to the south and east and the Chukchi and Beaufort seas to the north (Fig. 1). Brooks Range uplift initiated in response to a Jurassic collision between the Arctic Alaska microplate and an island arc system to the south (Bird and Molenaar, 1992). The Brooks Range foreland basin, known as the Colville basin, is a peripheral foreland basin that formed in response to the stacking of thrust sheets and subsequent loading along the Brooks Range orogenic front and the Herald Arch, a subsurface high beneath the Chukchi Sea (Hubbard et al., 1987; Coakley and Watts, 1991). The basin is unusual in that it has clinoform sequences



Figure 1. Slope Mountain (SM) lies on the eastern side of the North Slope of Alaska just south of the Colville foreland basin axis on the eastern side of the North Slope, along the Trans Alaska Pipeline. The foreland basin is constrained by the Brooks Range and Barrow Arch. Figure modified from Shimer et al. (2014) from a map originally published in Decker (2007).

with thicknesses of up to 2000 m (Houseknecht et al., 2009), and clinoform heights of up to 700 m (Houseknecht and Wartes, 2013). This unusually deep foreland accumulated a nearly continuous "Brookian" sedimentary record from the Early Cretaceous to the Paleocene (Fig. 2: Mull et al., 2003). Cenozoic deformation and subsequent erosion exposed Cretaceous Brookian sedimentary rocks in a series of anticlines and synclines that make up the Brooks Range foothills, including Slope Mountain (Fig. 3), the surface expression of the northern limb of the Marmot Syncline (Harris et al., 2002).

Bedrock exposures at Slope Mountain include the uppermost Torok Formation and a complete succession of the Nanushuk Formation (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. The Nanushuk Formation (bold line, light green) and Torok Formation (dark green) are the primary components of a depositional megasequence that filled much of the Colville foreland basin during the Albian-Cenomanian. A major transgression at the base of the Seabee Formation marked the end of the Nanushuk Formation and the onset of global sea-level rise (LePain et al., 2009). Figure modified from Shimer et al. (2014), from a figure originally published in Mull et al. (2003).



Figure 3. Slope Mountain is the topographic expression of the northern limb of the Marmot Syncline, an exposure of lower (Knl) and upper (Knu) Nanushuk Formation strata (highlighted with bold line) and the Torok Formation adjacent to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline (TAPS). A close-up of the study area (dashedline and inset box) depicts the eight study sites (SM1-8) for the eleven stratigraphic sections discussed in the text. The base geologic map is modified from Harris et al. (2002).

Previous studies at Slope Mountain include a broad analysis of Nanushuk Formation stratigraphy (LePain et al., 2009) and sandstone petrography (Johnson and Sokol, 1998). The Torok and Nanushuk formations are genetically related basin, slope, and shelf sediments deposited in a thick depositional sequence that largely advanced from west to east along the foreland basin axis during the Albian-Cenomanian, with a south to north component along the orogenic front (Decker, 2007; Houseknecht et al., 2009). Together the deposits display typical topset-foreset-bottomset seismic geometries (Houseknecht and Schenk, 2005). The Torok Formation, which comprises bottomset, foreset, and topset strata, consists of mudstones and rare sandstones deposited in basin, slope, and shelf settings (Mull et al., 2003), while the Nanushuk Formation comprises overlying alluvial, deltaic, and shallow marine facies solely deposited in topset environments (Ahlbrandt et al., 1979; LePain et al., 2009).

Sedimentary facies, stacking patterns, and sequence stratigraphic boundaries within the Torok and Nanushuk formations record many episodes of system response to autogenic and allogenic forces (LePain et al., 2009; Shimer et al., 2014). Previous research on the Cretaceous Arctic provides a crucial framework from which to assess allogenic climate forcing within the Torok and Nanushuk formations. Eustatic sea level rise began during the Albian (Hancock and Kauffman, 1978; Müller et al., 2008), but reached its peak during the Cenomanian (Müller et al., 2008). On the North Slope a major Cenomanian transgression marks the contact between the non-marine Nanushuk Formation and overlying deep marine shale of the Seabee Formation (LePain et al., 2009). Transgressive boundaries also separate the upper and lower Nanushuk Formation in the subsurface (Shimer et al., 2014), and were observed in a previous assessment of Slope Mountain (LePain et al., 2009). Gardner (this volume) identifies progradational and retrogradational successions within the Nanushuk Formation at Slope Mountain that we cannot proscribe to allogenic or autocyclic processes at this time.

Paleoclimate records indicate an Albian increase in global temperature that lasted into the Campanian-Maastrichtian (Huber et al., 2002). Analyses from the North Slope and Siberia indicate that Arctic mean annual temperature during the Cenomanian-Turonian ranged from 7.7-14.3°C (Spicer and Herman, 2010). The widening Late Cretaceous Arctic Ocean reached surface temperatures up to 15°C (Jenkyns et al., 2004), while siderite  $\delta^{18}$ O values from the Nanushuk Formation provide precipitation estimates of 485-626 mm/yr during the Late Albian (Ufnar et al., 2004). Two students (Ratigan, Beninati, this volume) sampled and analyzed the stable isotopic composition of organic carbon deposits and carbonate nodules from the Torok and Nanushuk formations and made new paleoclimate estimates for the Albian-Cenomanian that compare favorably to previous analyses.

Local tectonic forcing was the likely primary factor shaping Torok and Nanushuk formation depositional systems. The Brooks Range fold and thrust belt was very active during the Albian; blueschist facies metamorphic lithic fragments in the Nanushuk Formation are derived from the Brooks Range metamorphic belt to the south (Till, 1992), and phyllitic lithic grains derived from the exhumation of the metamorphic core of the Brooks Range are a major determinant of sandstone reservoir characteristics within the Nanushuk Formation (Fox et al., 1979; Bartsch-Winkler, 1985; Huffman et al., 1985). Petrographic analyses (Dickson, this volume) support previous analyses and emphasize the role of sedimentary facies in determining sandstone composition. Furthermore, geochemical analyses (Ratigan, Beninati, Lewis, this volume) indicate subtle fluctuations in mudstone composition related to influx of inorganic and organic sediment in the prodelta.

Regional volcanism was active during the Cretaceous, particularly in eastern Siberia (Akinin and Miller, 2011). Volcanic deposits in the Nanushuk Formation (Shimer et al., 2016) and smectites in Late Cretaceous paleosols (Salazar Jaramillo et al., 2015) attest to the influence of volcanoclastic sediments on depositional systems in the foreland basin. We identified one potential volcanic ash deposit in the Torok Formation and sampled it for geochemical analyses (Lewis, this volume).

### **METHODS**

We approached Slope Mountain from the east, using a Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) access road

that intersects with the Dalton Highway (Fig. 3). Over the course of two weeks students measured eleven stratigraphic sections at eight outcrops, with sections (SM) numbered based on the order they were established. Locations include a set of upper Torok Formation and lower Nanushuk Formation sections in transitional shallow marine to marginal marine shelf deposits (Fig. 4) and more widely dispersed sections in marginal marine and non-marine Nanushuk Formation deposits further up the mountain (Fig. 5). Thick intervals of talus and vegetation separate most of the stratigraphic sections (see inset, Fig. 4), but there are correlative relationships between sections SM1, SM2.1, and SM6 based on the lateral extent of the lower-most erosion-resistant Nanushuk Formation sandstone laver. SM3 and SM3.1 are also correlative. as they were measured a short distance from each other at the same sandstone outcrop.

Each measured section is based on field assessments of composition and texture (grain size, sorting), and bed thicknesses. Students also compiled paleocurrent orientations and morphological dimensions for sedimentary structures, and collected mudstones and sandstones for a variety of petrographic and geochemical analyses. Upon return to the University of Alaska Fairbanks, students selected sub-samples for further analysis, and trimmed billets for thin sections. Most samples were shipped to home institutions, while a subset was sent to Spectrum Petrographics (Vancouver, WA) for production of thin sections. Students conducted a variety of processing and analytical procedures at their home institutions with their research advisors. Analytical techniques included stable isotope analysis, X-ray diffraction (XRD), X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), and thin section petrography. We also used the Washington State University Stable Isotope Core Laboratory for analysis of organic carbon and nitrogen stable isotopes.

## RESEARCH

The six unique student projects included in this volume took shape in the field, as this was our first visit to the Slope Mountain site. We defined workable projects based on the strata encountered and direction of student interest, and we divide our short summaries



Figure 4. Stratigraphic sections SM1, SM2 and SM2.1, SM6, and SM7 encompass the transition between shelf and prodelta mudstones of the Torok Formation and overlying delta front sandstones of the Nanushuk Formation.

of each project into two broad areas of inquiry; physical analyses of sedimentary structures and sandstone composition, and instrumental analyses of sediment geochemistry.

## Facies, Paleocurrents, and Petrology

**Sarah Dickson (Smith College)** initially set out to characterize bioturbation intensities in the various facies of the transitional strata between the Torok and Nanushuk formations (SM1, SM2, SM2.1, SM6). Sarah described sedimentary structures and ichnofossil abundance in the field, and collected siltstone and sandstone samples to further analyze in the lab. Her project grew to include petrographic analysis of the



*Figure 5. Stratigraphic sections SM3, SM3.1, SM4, SM5, and SM8 fall within the Nanushuk Formation, and represent a variety of depositional environments.* 

sandstones and siltstones in that transitional interval, which was largely ignored in previous petrographic analyses at Slope Mountain that focused on coarsergrained sandstones (Johnson and Sokol, 1998). By characterizing the composition and microscopic texture of her samples, Sarah provided a unique insight into the evolution of the Torok-Nanushuk depositional sequence. Her results help pinpoint the transition from suspension- and density flow-dominated prodelta deposition to bed load deposition in the Nanushuk Formation delta front.

Kevin Gardner (Whitman College) conducted a detailed facies analysis of sand-dominated outcrops in the marginal marine to non-marine strata in the

Nanushuk Formation (SM 3, SM3.1, SM5, SM8). Kevin defined twelve facies based on sedimentary textures and observed sedimentary structures. He used the distribution of those facies to determine facies associations, and make depositional environment interpretations. The distribution of these facies associations allowed Kevin to assess changes in relative sea-level over time. He identifies a stratigraphic succession from a regressive, progradational deltaic system (SM5) to transgressive, retrogradational, tide-dominated estuarine system (SM3, SM3.1), followed by a return to a regressive channel-dominated deltaic or fluvial system above a prominent disconformity (SM8). His work supports and expands previous analyses of the stratigraphy at Slope Mountain (LePain et al., 2009).

### Lauren Williamson (Colorado College) took

detailed paleocurrent measurements on ripple marks, trough cross-bed foresets, flute casts, and scour marks throughout the Torok and Nanushuk formations. Patterns support prior interpretations of the evolution of the Torok-Nanushuk depositional sequence from elsewhere on the North Slope.

### Geochemistry and Chemostratigraphy

**Evan Lewis (Franklin and Marshall College)** sampled mudstones from sections SM1 and SM2 for XRD and XRF analyses and the construction of chemostratigraphic profiles of the Torok Formation. The goal of Evan's project was to identify changes in sedimentation rate, bioproductivity, and paleo-redox conditions in the prodelta environment. To do so, Evan collected major and trace element abundances using XRF, and further converted the trace elemental data to enrichment factors (EF values; Tribovillard et al., 2006) for comparative purposes. Evan's results show that the Torok Formation mudstones largely represent deposition under sub-oxic conditions. The chemostratigraphic profiles also allowed Evan to interpret a potential correlative surface between SM1 and SM2, something very difficult to do in mudstones based on physical observations. Evan also analyzed a curious layer encountered at  $\approx$ 32 m at SM2. A thorough geochemical investigation of the layer, which initially resembled a volcanic ash deposit, returned a very distinct chemical signature that disproved the preliminary hypothesis.

Ashley Ratigan (Oberlin College) collected carbonrich mudstones from the Torok and Nanushuk formations for stable isotope analyses of carbon and nitrogen, with the goal of defining the primary source of organic matter and making paleoenvironmental interpretations based on the isotopic results. Her work demonstrates that there is a substantial component of terrestrial plant matter in the prodelta mudstones of the Torok Formation. This information is valuable as it has bearing on the other two geochemistry projects. Ashley was also able to compare her data to other Cretaceous stable isotope analyses and confirm the paleoclimatic interpretations presented in those papers. Her project demonstrated the utility of bulk organic carbon stable isotope analysis and provides motivation for a higher-resolution study of such deposits at Slope Mountain

### Joe Beninati (Washington and Lee University)

analyzed the mineralogy and stable isotopic composition of a variety of iron-rich deposits recovered from marine and non-marine facies at Slope Mountain. These deposits, loosely defined as concretions or nodules, were assumed to be iron carbonates (FeCO<sub>3</sub>), and though often carbonate-rich. XRD analysis demonstrated that many samples lacked a definitive mineral structure. The stable isotope composition of carbon and oxygen in the carbonatebearing samples returned a series of values that fall within the range of previous studies of both marine carbonates (foraminifera and bivalve shells) and terrestrial sphaerosiderites. This work demonstrated that there is significant promise in the stable isotopic analysis of such deposits for paleoclimatic interpretations, though there is much work to be done in the refinement of sampling strategy, sample composition, and parsing of contributing factors such as terrestrial organic matter input (Ratigan, this volume) to the prodelta system.

### CONCLUSIONS

Though limited by time and budget for instrumental analyses, the students compiled a compelling dataset that demonstrates the promise of a thorough investigation of Cretaceous stratigraphy combining traditional facies analysis and field observations with advanced geochemical techniques. Given the overall thickness of the Torok and Nanushuk formations at Slope Mountain, we were only able to establish a small window into the complexity of high-Arctic deltaic depositional systems during greenhouse conditions. Despite its size, that window provides sufficient insight and motivation for future work at Slope Mountain. Higher resolution geochemical analyses, would improve our ability to recognize climatic effects on sediment influx, bioproductivity, and paleo-redox conditions and their relationships to eustatic sea level and local tectonic uplift. The student projects confirmed that the Slope Mountain location is too accessible and too complete to ignore for paleoclimate studies that may help us understand long-term geologic responses to climate change.

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