

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische mineralogische und petrographische Mitteilungen = Bulletin suisse de minéralogie et pétrographie
Band: 77 (1997)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Geology and evolution of the Proterozoic-Paleozoic basement in the Alps : an introduction
Autor: Schaltegger, Urs
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-58483>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Geology and evolution of the Proterozoic-Paleozoic basement in the Alps: an introduction

by Urs Schaltegger¹

Why should we bother about the early Paleozoic and Proterozoic evolution of the Alpine basement? There are too many unresolved problems concerning Alpine and Variscan orogenic evolutions that should be treated with priority! Any extrapolation further backwards remains purely speculative and is thus not interesting.

This provoking comment of one of my colleagues (we will not mention his name here!) was the start for this special volume of the Swiss Bulletin of Mineralogy and Petrology. The volume could be realized by a combined effort of colleagues from Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, in order to summarize the state of knowledge on this topic in various areas of the Alps, and/or to present new evidence for the story of the Alpine region going beyond the Variscan orogenic cycle! It is thus the logic extrapolation and extension of VON RAUMER and NEUBAUER'S (1993) treatise on "Pre-Mesozoic Geology in the Alps". It is a matter of fact that the Alpine basement displays a nearly continuous outcrop of the Variscan orogen and is the best place to study Variscan and pre-Variscan orogenic processes, despite the Alpine overprint. This is a further argument to focus our interest onto the Alpine area and its Paleozoic-Proterozoic evolution.

Looking through this special volume, the reader realizes the emphasis put on the evolution of the Silvretta and Ötztal crystalline complexes (Austria/Switzerland), reflected by research papers of HOINKES et al., POLLER, KLÖTZLI-CHOWANETZ et al., KÖPPEL et al. and SCHALTEGGER et al. The focus on this area is fortuitous and just reflects a common research interest of several university institutes in Europe. Proterozoic-Early Paleozoic terranes are, in contrary, spread over the entire Alpine basement, from Austroalpine and Penninic units of the Eastern Alps (SCHULZ, and VON QUADT et al., this vol., in

addition to the manuscripts mentioned above) to the central and western Alps (EISELE et al., this vol.) and Southern Alps (BORIANI and VILLA, ZURBRIGGEN et al., this vol.).

The investigation of geological processes in the far past demands the application of quantitative techniques in petrology, structural geology, geochemistry and geochronology. With the help of these methods we are able to correlate between terranes that have been disrupted, overprinted, moved around and reassembled by subsequent orogenic processes. Far-field correlations in geology often use distinct magmatic events of large regional importance. The Proterozoic-Early Paleozoic terranes within the Alpine basement host rocks formed during two important magmatic phases on the former Gondwana continental shelf:

(a) oceanic magmatism of late Precambrian to Ordovician age took place in both divergent and convergent settings. The resulting rocks are ophiolitic assemblages (MÉNOT et al., 1988), continental tholeiites (VON RAUMER et al., 1990), and members of ocean-island or island-arc systems (EISELE et al., VON QUADT et al., SCHALTEGGER et al., this vol.; ABRECHT et al., 1995; STILLE and TATSUMOTO, 1985). Geochemical characterization is the only way to distinguish between the different settings, which leads into all the problems of dealing with polymetamorphic rocks. This oceanic stage probably started at around 530 Ma and ended at ca. 470 Ma (ABRECHT et al., 1995; GEBAUER and SÖLLNER, 1993; GEBAUER et al., 1988; MILLER and THÖNI, 1996; OBERLI et al., 1994; VON QUADT, 1992; VON QUADT et al., SCHALTEGGER et al., this vol.). At the same time, granites and migmatites were formed on a continental mass, remnants of which can be found in Silvretta and Ötztal units (KLÖTZLI-CHOWANETZ et al., POLLER, this vol.) or in the Bohemian massif (e.g. KRÖNER et al., 1994).

¹ Institut für Isotopengeologie und Mineralische Rohstoffe, ETH-Zentrum, CH-8092 Zürich, Switzerland.
E-mail: schaltegger@erdw.ethz.ch.

(b) A second phase of continental acid magmatism is of paramount importance, forming vast orthogneiss terranes spread over the entire Alpine basement. As recent studies show (BUSSY and VON RAUMER, 1994; POLLER et al., 1997; SCHALTEGGER, 1993; SERGEEV and STEIGER, 1993; ZURBRIGGEN et al., this vol.), it spans an age range from ca 460 to 430 Ma in the Upper Ordovician and coincides with acid volcanism in Upper Austroalpine units (LOESCHKE and HEINISCH, 1993).

KÖPPEL et al. (this vol.) use the Pb isotopic approach to model source compositions and mantle/crust ratios of some of group a and b rocks in the Silvretta nappe, demonstrating the presence of a continental mass that has been structured and mainly formed during the Cadomian orogenic cycle, a conclusion that also can be derived from Nd isotopes (SCHALTEGGER et al., this vol.). What about the isotopic age results at around 1 Ga, published by STILLE and TATSUMOTO (1985), SCHENKWENGER and STILLE (1990), and MAGGETTI and FLISCH (1993)? This problem is addressed in the manuscript by VON QUADT et al. (this vol.): Their 870 Ma whole-rock isochron of amphibolites from the Tauern Window is assumed not to represent any geological event since no zircon U–Pb data exist that could substantiate an event at that time. There is only one exception, i.e. the 870 Ma-old SHRIMP U–Pb zircon age by GEBAUER et al. (1988) from the Gotthard massif. A mantle event has generally been invoked to explain ages around 0.9 Ga. On the other hand, there are plenty of indications for the existence of ca 0.6–0.65 Ga-old protoliths in the Alpine basement, one of them being dated by SCHALTEGGER et al. (this vol.) in the Silvretta unit.

The assembly of all the Proterozoic–Early Paleozoic terranes was subsequently covered by sediments of a passive continental margin during the Devonian and acted as substratum for the Variscan orogenic evolution. Knowledge of the pre-Variscan lithologies and structures is therefore crucial for the understanding of the Variscan (and Alpine) processes, especially for the onset of Variscan collision and its temporal definition. Variscan overprinting of Proterozoic–Early Paleozoic assemblages is the topic of the manuscripts by SCHULZ, BORIANI and VILLA, and ZURBRIGGEN et al. (all this vol.).

In a conclusive remark, I would like to address two aspects: (1) What is the importance of Proterozoic–Early Paleozoic terrane studies for the younger orogenic cycles, and (2) what has to be done in future in order to proceed to a more coherent picture of Proterozoic–Early Paleozoic units in the Alpine basement?

(1) The characterization of the former Gondwana continental margin is a pre-requisite for reconstruction of the Devonian plate assembly at the onset of Variscan orogenesis. It may answer the question whether there has been a microcontinent between the two large continental plates (Laurasia and Gondwana), for which we find evidence in the Silvretta nappe (POLLER; SCHALTEGGER et al., this vol.) and in the Southern Alps (ZURBRIGGEN et al., this vol.). It may also help to determine where, when and how Variscan orogeny started, an enigmatic problem for the Alpine basement.

(2) Correlations are only meaningful, if we do not compare apples with pears: We need exactly coeval rock suites within the same geodynamic setting to be compared. This asks for integrated studies comprising precise geochronology with optimum precision of ± 1 to 2 million years, achievable with state-of-the-art U–Pb techniques, involving procedural Pb blanks on the picogram and subpicogram level, as well as reliable geochemical and isotope geochemical data. The relationship between sedimentary facies and magmatism has to be established, which may give important information on the geodynamic setting, even in polymetamorphic terranes. This may be achieved by looking at relic fossils even in high-grade rocks (see HANEL et al., 1997), dating detrital zircons and establishing a Nd isotope "stratigraphy" of the metasediments. All this is hard to achieve and it still needs lots of effort to get there.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to A. Stahel for his enthusiasm for my idea of this special volume and his professional help in the final editing. Comments of D. Gebauer and J. von Raumer are kindly acknowledged.

References

- ABRECHT, J., BIINO, G.G. and SCHALTEGGER, U. (1995): Building the European continent: Late Proterozoic–Early Paleozoic accretion in the Central Alps of Switzerland. EUG 8, Strasbourg. Terra abstracts 7/1, 105.
- BUSSY, F. and VON RAUMER, J. (1994): U–Pb geochronology of Paleozoic magmatic events in the Mont-Blanc crystalline Massif, Western Alps. Schweiz. Mineral. Petrogr. Mitt. 74, 514–515.
- GEBAUER, D. and SÖLLNER, F. (1993): U–Pb dating of zircons from eclogites of the Austroalpine Ötztal crystalline complex (E-Alps, Austria): Conventional and SHRIMP data. Abstracts 4th Int. Eclogite Conf., Cosenza/I, 10.
- GEBAUER, D., VON QUADT, A., COMPTON, W., WILLIAMS, I.S. and GRÜNENFELDER, M. (1988): Archean zircons

- in a retrograded Caledonian eclogite of the Gotthard Massif (Central Alps, Switzerland). Schweiz. Mineral. Petrogr. Mitt. 68, 485–490.
- HANEL, M., MONTENARI, M. and LIPPOLT, H.J. (1997): Ages of sedimentation and mylonitization of paragneisses from the Schwarzwald (SW Germany) deduced from palynology and $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$ dating. Terra Nova 9, Abstr. Suppl. 1, 102.
- KRÖNER, A., HEGNER, E., HAMMER, J., HAASE, G., BIELICKI, K.-H., KRAUSS, M. and EIDAM, J. (1994): Geochronology and Nd–Sr systematics of Lusitanian granitoids: significance for the evolution of the Variscan orogen in east-central Europe. Geol. Rundschau 83, 257–376.
- LOESCHKE, J. and HEINISCH, H. (1993): Palaeozoic volcanism of the Eastern Alps and its palaeotectonic significance. In: von RAUMER, J. and NEUBAUER, F. (eds): Pre-Mesozoic Geology in the Alps. Springer, Heidelberg, 441–455.
- MAGGETTI, M. and FLISCH, M. (1993): Evolution of the Silvretta Nappe, in: von RAUMER, J. and NEUBAUER, F. (eds): Pre-Mesozoic Geology in the Alps. Springer, Heidelberg, 469–484.
- MÉNOT, R.P., PEUCAT, J.J., SCARENZI, D. and PIBOULE, M. (1988): 496 Ma age of plagiogranites in the Chamrousse ophiolitic complex (external crystalline massifs in the French Alps): evidence of a Lower Paleozoic oceanization. Earth Planet. Sci. Lett. 88, 82–92.
- MILLER, CH. and THÖNI, M. (1996): Origin of eclogites from the Austroalpine Ötztal basement (Tirol, Austria): geochemistry and Sm–Nd vs Rb–Sr isotope systematics. Chem. Geol. (Isot. Geosci. Sect.) 122, 199–225.
- OBERLI, F., MEIER, M. and BIINO, G.G. (1994): Time constraints on the pre-Variscan magmatic/metamorphic evolution of the Gotthard and Tavetsch units derived from single-zircon U–Pb results. Schweiz. Mineral. Petrogr. Mitt. 74, 483–488.
- POLLER, U., LIEBETRAU, V. and TODT, W. (1997): U–Pb single-zircon dating under cathodoluminescence control (CLC-method): application to polymetamorphic orthogneisses. Chem. Geol. 139, 287–297.
- VON QUADT, A. (1992): U–Pb zircon and Sm–Nd geochronology of mafic and ultramafic rocks from the central part of the Tauern Window (eastern Alps). Contrib. Mineral. Petrol. 110, 57–67.
- VON RAUMER, J.F., GALETTI, G., PFEIFER, H.R. and OBERHÄNSLI, R. (1990): Amphibolites from Lake Emosson / Aiguilles Rouges, Switzerland. Tholeiitic basalts of a Paleozoic continental rift zone. Schweiz. Mineral. Petrogr. Mitt. 70, 419–436.
- VON RAUMER, J.F. and NEUBAUER, F. (1993): Pre-Mesozoic Geology in the Alps. Springer-Verlag, Heidelberg, 677 p.
- SCHALTEGGER, U. (1993): The evolution of the polymetamorphic basement in the Central Alps unravelled by precise U–Pb zircon dating. Contrib. Mineral. Petrol. 113, 466–478.
- SCHENK-WENGER, K. and STILLE, P. (1990): Geochemische und isotopengeochemische Hinweise auf eine 1000 m.y. alte Ophiolithsuite in der Wurzelzone, Südpenninikum. Abstract. Schweiz. Mineral. Petrogr. Mitt. 70, 166–167.
- SERGEEV, S.A. and STEIGER, R.H. (1993): High-precision U–Pb single zircon dating of Variscan and Caledonian magmatic cycles in the Gotthard Massif, Central Alps. Terra abstracts 5, 394–395.
- STILLE, P. and TATSUMOTO, M. (1985): Precambrian tholeiitic-dacitic rock-suites and Cambrian ultramafic rocks in the Pennine nappe systems of the Alps: Evidence from Sm–Nd isotopes and rare earth elements. Contrib. Mineral. Petrol. 89, 184–192.