Silica gel formation during fault slip: Evidence from the rock record

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ABSTRACT

Dynamic reduction of fault strength is a key process during earthquake rupture. Many mechanisms for causing coseismic weakening have been proposed based on theory and laboratory experiments, including silica gel lubrication. However, few have been observed in nature. Here we report on the first documented occurrence of a natural silica gel coating a fault surface. The Corona Heights fault slickenside in San Francisco, California, is covered by a shiny layer of translucent silica. Microstructures in this layer show flow banding, armored clasts, and extreme comminution compared to adjacent cataclasites. The layer is composed of ~100 nm to 1 µm grains of quartz, hydrous crystalline silica, and amorphous silica, with 10–100 nm inclusions of Fe oxides and ellipsoidal silica colloids. Kinematic indicators and mixing with adjacent cataclasites suggest the shiny layer was fluid during fault slip. The layer therefore represents a relict silica gel that formed during fault motion, and which could have resulted in frictional instability. These observations confirm that the silica gels formed in rock friction experiments do occur in natural faults and therefore that silica gel formation can act as a dynamic weakening mechanism in faults at shallow crustal conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Dynamic reduction of fault strength as a function of slip or slip rate is fundamental to earthquake propagation and slip (Rice, 2006). Silica gel lubrication (Goldsby and Tullis, 2002) is one of a variety of mechanisms that have been proposed to cause coseismic weakening based on theoretical and experimental work (e.g., Sibson, 1973; Brodsky and Kanamori, 2001; Di Toro et al., 2006; Rice, 2006; Han et al., 2007; Brantut et al., 2008), but only a handful of these mechanisms are documented in nature (e.g., Di Toro et al., 2006; Rowe et al., 2012). As silica is a major component of crustal rocks, silica gel lubrication is a particularly attractive mechanism, yet field evidence has been elusive.

Experiments on silica-rich rocks (chert and quartzite) show that steady-state friction values decrease with slip rate from ~0.6 at 10−6 m/s to <0.2 at >10−3 m/s, and show time-dependent strengthening (Goldsby and Tullis, 2002; Di Toro et al., 2004; Hayashi and Tsutsumi, 2010; Nakamura et al., 2012). The slip-weakening behavior is explained by the formation of a thixotropic gel on the slip interface, which is frequently invoked as a potentially important process for shallow crustal faults (Di Toro et al., 2004). The presence of gel is supported by observations of silica displaying flow structures (Niemeyer et al., 2012) and X-ray diffraction (XRD) and Raman microspectroscopy analyses demonstrating the formation of amorphous hydrous silica on the slip surface (Hayashi and Tsutsumi, 2010; Nakamura et al., 2012).

However, no clear natural examples of gels formed in situ along natural fault surfaces have been documented, so the significance of silica gel lubrication as a dynamic weakening mechanism remains unknown. Opaline veins that may have formed as silica gels occur in faults associated with hydrothermal systems (Power and Tullis, 1989; Stel and Lankreyer, 1994; Caine et al., 2010) and possible slip-surface gels have been described elsewhere (e.g., Ujiie et al., 2007; Faber et al. 2009), but the distinguishing characteristics, mechanisms for gel formation from a solid rock, and the relationship to fault slip have not been shown.

Here, we present observations of a distinctive silica layer coating a fault slickenside. The Corona Heights fault, in San Francisco, California, is an oblique-dextral fault that cuts chert of the Marin Headlands terrane of the Franciscan Complex, a rock similar to the novaculite used in the gel-producing experiments. Exposed by quarrying around the end of the 19th century, the fault has a mirror-like finish due to the presence of a 1–3-mm-thick layer of vitreous silica. We describe the microto nano-scale structure of this layer and evaluate the potential that it represents a natural example of silica gel formation.

COMPOSITION AND MICROSTRUCTURE OF THE SHINY LAYER

The fault is exposed in a 15-m-high cliff striking ENE-WSW, and can be traced for ~300 m along strike across the Corona Heights Park (Fig. 1A). No offset markers have been observed so the total offset on the fault is unconstrained. The dark red radiolarian chert host rock has been metamorphosed to prehnite-pumpellyite facies conditions (Meneghini and Moore, 2007), indicating peak temperatures >200 °C. Radiolarian tests are recrystallized to microcrystalline quartz, and XRD spectra confirm that only α-quartz and...
Fe oxides and hydroxides are detectable in the chert (see the GSA Data Repository1).

The slickenside surface is shiny due to the presence of a 0.5–3.0-mm-thick layer of translucent, vitreous silica. The shiny layer overlies red or white cataclasites, the color varying with the iron content and oxidation state of chert clasts. Fine grooves within the shiny layer form elongate troughs up to 5–10 cm long, ~1 mm wide, and <1 mm deep, oriented parallel to corrugations with centimeter-scale amplitudes (Fig. 1B). Together, these features define the short-wavelength roughness of the surface, which is self-affine (Candela et al., 2011). Circular cracks within the shiny layer are visible on the slickenside face. These cracks are often centered on small (<1 mm) fragments and locally form elongate clusters strung out parallel to the groove direction (Fig. 1C).

The shiny layer contains angular to rounded chert clasts in a matrix of mixed aphanitic and microcrystalline silica (Figs. 1C and 2). Flow banding in the matrix, defined by variations in iron oxide content and grain size of the silica, wraps around clasts. A set of bands ~10–50 μm wide, defined by preferred crystallographic orientation in the silica (c-axis parallel to the band margins in a plane perpendicular to the fault surface), forms angles of ~80°–90° to the edge of the layer in the X-Z plane (Fig. 2; similar to those reported by Power and Tullis [1989] and Caine et al. [2010]). Subsidiary shears at 20°–25° to the slip surface cross cut and offset all of the features in the shiny layer. Optically visible clasts ranging from a few tens of micrometers to 1 mm make up ~10% of the layer. Clasts consist of chert and more frequently fragments of cataclasite or reddish brown aphanitic silica. Some larger clasts have a cortex of similar reddish brown aphanitic silica. Some larger clasts have a cortex of similar reddish brown aphanitic silica. Some larger clasts have a cortex of similar reddish brown aphanitic silica. Some larger clasts have a cortex of similar reddish brown aphanitic silica.

The matrix of the layer consists of roughly hexagonal aggregates from <1 to 5 μm in size separated by micrometer-scale, angular pores (Fig. 2D). The aggregates are composed primarily of <100–300 nm grains of silica exhibiting various degrees of crystallinity (Fig. 3), as is evident from transmission electron microscope (TEM) diffraction patterns that show wider deviations in crystal structure (d-spacings) than justified by instrumental parameters. Silica phases recognized within the shiny layer include well-structured quartz, crystalline silica (locally hydroxid), on vulnerability to electron beam damage and TEM diffraction patterns) exhibiting quartz-like properties but with considerable inconsistency in crystal parameters, and clearly amorphous silica.

Amorphous silica exists as blebs surrounded by anhedral crystalline silica grains (Fig. 3A). Anhedral silica grains exhibit coherent electron scattering typical of long-range order and contain elliptical to hexagonal cells of slightly different crystallographic orientation (Fig. 3B). Cell boundaries are defined by variations in scattering contrast with no extended defects imaged. Induced ionization damage preferentially affects the cell boundaries, consistent with them comprising more hydrous material. Ellipsoidal crystalline silica and euhedral quartz grains 10–100 nm long are common inclusions within both cells and larger crystalline silica grains. Intracrystalline dislocations are rare in all phases, and form sessile loops characteristic of primary growth defects rather than deformation-induced dislocations. Elongate, nanometer-scale pores lie along grain boundaries between the ~100–300 nm grains. Elliptical grains of Fe oxides (and possibly hydroxides) ≤10 nm long are common. They are distributed throughout the layer and are occasionally arranged with long axes aligned in elliptical rings (Fig. 3C).

The fine grain size, flow banding, and Fe oxide content differentiate the vitreous silica layer from adjacent cataclasites. The boundary between the shiny layer and adjacent cataclasites is interdigitated and embayed, indicative of local mixing. In places the cataclasites are partially cemented with fine-grained quartz that resembles the shiny layer, but most of the cataclasites are clast rich with a granular matrix (Figs. 2A and 2B).

Figure 2. A: Plane light photomicrograph of shiny layer (shown by vertical white arrow) and adjacent cataclasite. Fault surface is at base of image, parallel to lower edge. Flow banding, defined by more opaque or reddish layers, wraps around clasts (black arrows). The sharp irregular boundary between the layer and cataclasites is shown by dashed line. Note banded appearance of shiny layer (open arrowheads, angle to fault plane shown). The same matrix material is distributed throughout adjacent cataclasites in wispy bands (white arrowheads). Elsewhere, cataclasites are composed of fragmented chert and silica at all scales of observation. B: Same image as in A, in cross-polarized light. C: Grains of broken cemented cataclasite in shiny layer with cortexes of silica and Fe oxides (arrows). D. Field emission scanning electron microscopy image of face of polished section of silica in shiny layer showing roughly hexagonal grains (e.g., black dashed lines) with abundant anhedral, sub-micrometer grains visible in pore spaces (arrowheads).

**RELECT GEL**

The shiny slickenside layer on the Corona Heights fault is composed of amorphous silica, hydrous crystalline silica grains locally containing cellular structures, quartz, and nanoparticles of Fe oxide. The textural relationships between these grains suggest progressive transformation of primary amorphous patches to more-ordered silica phases that have grown at the expense of the amorphous hydrous silica (Fig. 3).

Two features record the presence of colloidal silica particles within the layer when it formed (Fig. 3). The cells in the hydrous silica grains reflect nucleation of crystalline material onto...
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Together, these observations show that the shiny layer solidified from silica-supersaturated fluid containing colloidal silica particles with impurities (Fe oxides) segregated into discrete grains (cf. Herrington and Wilkinson, 1993). These characteristics define a sol or gel, and we therefore suggest the translucent layer is a relict silica gel (sensu Goldsby and Tullis, 2002).

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