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Pyroclastic Density Currents and the Sedimentation of Ignimbrites

Michael J. Branney and Peter Kokelaar



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Pyroclastic density currents and the sedimentation of ignimbrites

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GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY MEMOIR No. 27

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Contents

Preface	vii		
Acknowledgements	viii		
Chapter 1 Introduction and key concepts	1		
Deposits of pyroclastic density currents	1		
The role of ignimbrites in ideas about pyroclastic density currents	1		
Key concepts	2		
Current steadiness and uniformity	2		
Lower flow-boundary zones: sites of segregation and variable deposition	4		
Ignimbrite architecture: a record of flow-boundary zone evolution through time and space	4		
Chapter 2 The origin, nature and behaviour of pyroclastic density currents	7		
Origin and development of pyroclastic density currents	7		
Eruption styles	7		
Current concentration and rheology	8		
Deflation reappraised	10		
The nature of pyroclastic density currents	10		
The leading part of the current	10		
Current velocity	11		
Velocity profiles and turbulence intensity	11		
Plug flow	13		
Current stratification	14		
Partitioning of mass flux in density-stratified currents	15		
The behaviour of pyroclastic density currents	16		
Inertia, buoyancy, runout distance and lofting	16		
Internal waves, hydraulic jumps and granular jumps	16		
Thalwegs (flow axes) and lateral migration	18		
Effects of topography	18		
A new twofold classification of pyroclastic density currents	20		
Chapter 3 Mechanisms of particle support and segregation	23		
Significance of current heterogeneity and pyroclast diversity	23		
Fluid turbulence	24		
Support by fluid turbulence	24		
Vertical segregation of clasts in the current during turbulent transport	24		
Segregation at the flow-boundary zone due to turbulence	24		
Support on an interface	25		
Sustained support: rolling and sliding	25		
Intermittent support: saltation	25		
Overpassing: downcurrent segregation at an interface	28		
Granular temperature and dispersive pressure	29		
Clast interactions and current mobility	29		
Segregation in granular flows	29		
Fluidization	31		
Fluidization and transport	31		
Segregation by fluidization	33		
Hindered settling, fluid escape and sedimentation-fluidization	33		
Hindered settling and current mobility	34		
Segregation by fluid escape and hindered settling	34		
Clast buoyancy	34		
Buoyancy and transport	34		
Segregation by buoyancy	34		
Acoustic mobilization	35		
Acoustic mobilization and transport	35		
Segregation by acoustic mobilization	35		
Support by strength	35		
Quasi-static grain contacts	35		
Cohesion	35		
		Segregation associated with strength	35
		Particle interlocking	35
		Chapter 4 Conceptualizing deposition: a flow-boundary zone approach	37
		Deposition from steady currents	37
		Direct fallout-dominated flow-boundary zone	37
		Traction-dominated flow-boundary zone	37
		Granular flow-dominated flow-boundary zone	39
		Fluid escape-dominated flow-boundary zone	39
		Gradational types of flow-boundary zone	41
		Selective filtering: flow-boundary zone segregation and overpassing during deposition	41
		Traction carpets	42
		Deposition during unsteadiness	43
		Fluctuating deposition	43
		Sustained gradual changes	43
		Rapid deposition	45
		En masse deposition	45
		Non-uniform deposition	47
		Interpreting ignimbrite lobes and levees	47
		Postdepositional remobilization	49
		Effects of deposition on current behaviour	49
		Chapter 5 Interpreting ignimbrite lithofacies	51
		A lithofacies scheme for ignimbrites	51
		Massive lapilli-tuff lithofacies	51
		Description	51
		Interpretation	56
		Origin of fabrics in massive lapilli-tuff lithofacies	56
		Massive to stratified lithic breccia lithofacies	57
		Description	57
		Interpretation	57
		Segregation of blocks from pumice and ash	60
		Interpretation of stratified breccias and breccia lenses	60
		Classifications of ignimbrite breccias	60
		Massive agglomerate lithofacies	61
		Description	61
		Interpretation	61
		Lithofacies with fines-poor (elutriation) pipes, sheets or pods	61
		Description	61
		Interpretation	66
		Vertical grading patterns	66
		Description	66
		Interpretation	66
		Diffuse-stratified and thin-bedded lithofacies	71
		Description	71
		Interpretation	71
		Stratified and cross-stratified tuffs	74
		Description	74
		Interpretation	74
		Pumice-rich layers, lenses and pods	76
		Description	76
		Interpretation	76
		Massive and parallel-bedded lapilli deposits	77
		Description	77
		Interpretation	77
		Parallel-bedded and parallel-laminated tuffs	83
		Description	83
		Interpretation	83
		Eutaxitic, rheomorphic and lava-like lithofacies	83
		Description	83
		Interpretation	83
		Origin of poor sorting in ignimbrites	84

Chapter 6 Ignimbrite architecture: constraints on current dynamics	87	Interpreting lithofacies at the top of ignimbrites	109
Conceptualizing architecture in a time-geometry framework	87	Transverse lithofacies variations	109
Longitudinal architectures	90	Splay-and-fade stratification	109
Transverse architectures	91	Scour splay-and-fade stratification	110
Interpreting longitudinal (proximal to distal) lithofacies variations	91	Effects of current thalwegs and braiding	111
Longitudinal coarse-tail grading	91	Gradations between massive valley-filling ignimbrite and stratified topographic veneers	111
Downcurrent lithofacies changes from stratified to massive	91	Radially symmetrical ignimbrite distributions	113
Distal lithofacies changes from massive to stratified	93	Ignimbrite fans and asymmetric ignimbrite distributions	115
Interpreting vertical lithofacies variations	95	Interpreting the shape of ignimbrites	115
Gradational versus sharp lithofacies variations	95	A classification of ignimbrite shapes	115
Bedding and flow-unit boundaries	95	Significance of aspect ratio	117
Repetitious and rhythmic lithofacies successions	98	Top surfaces of ignimbrites	118
Disordered lithofacies successions	98	Chapter 7 Overview, key implications and future research	119
Intercalated massive and stratified divisions	98	Overview and key implications	119
Complex longitudinal architectures	98	Future research	121
Interpreting lithofacies successions at bases of ignimbrites	99	Definitions of terms used	123
Stratified bases	99	References	127
Basal pumice lenses	101	Index	137
Fines-poor bases	101		
Fine-grained layers at the base of ignimbrites	101		
Some common successions of basal lithofacies	108		
Sheared or loaded substrate	108		

Preface

Ignimbrites are vast, landscape-modifying deposits composed mainly of pumice fragments and ash. They derive from the most hazardous types of explosive volcanic eruptions and record rapid sedimentation from catastrophic pyroclastic density currents that sweep across the ground. Since early work on ignimbrites by P. Marshall (1935), H. Kuno (1941), R. L. Smith (1960) and R. V. Fisher (1966), there has been a dramatic increase in research into these enigmatic deposits. Particularly instructive field studies include those of ignimbrites from the large caldera volcanoes of the western USA, from the arc volcanoes of the Mediterranean region, Japan, Southeast Asia, South America and New Zealand, and from intraplate volcanoes such as the Canary Islands. Experimental-analogue and numerical modelling of pyroclastic density current behaviour and sedimentation have recently complemented the field-based work. Now there is a bewildering plethora of ignimbrite classification schemes, emplacement models and deposit interpretations. It is therefore timely to take stock, to synthesize modern understanding, and, in particular, to consider how field investigations of ignimbrite lithofacies can best be used both to infer actual pyroclastic density current behaviour and to constrain or test the various models. A fresh look at ignimbrite emplacement is all the more important with the recognition that ignimbrites can relate to eruptions with magnitudes sufficient to impact global climate and biota.

This Memoir reviews what is known about pyroclastic density currents and presents a new *conceptual framework* for investigating the deposition of all types of ignimbrite lithofacies. After introducing some key concepts in Chapter 1, we review important observations and experiments that bear on the nature and behaviour of pyroclastic density currents (Chapter 2), and on the mechanisms by which diverse particles are supported and variously segregated within them (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4 we present the conceptual framework that we have devised to comprehend how different ignimbrite lithofacies are deposited. In this framework, ignimbrite sedimentation is treated as a sustained flow-boundary

process in which the sorting and bed-form characteristics of the deposit relate to different types of concentration and shear distributions within the *flow-boundary zone* that spans the basal part of the current and the uppermost part of the aggrading deposit. Chapter 5 describes and illustrates a wide variety of common ignimbrite lithofacies, including examples from around the world, and in it we apply the flow-boundary zone approach to provide some insights into how they may have formed. In Chapter 6, we elaborate the paradigm developed in earlier chapters to consider how the various architectures of ignimbrites may be used to reveal how flow-boundary zones of sustained currents evolved through time and space. We consider the diverse vertical and lateral lithofacies sequences exhibited by ignimbrites with reference to a temporal framework provided by time-surfaces called *depochrons* and *entachrons*. Such sheet-scale analysis is important because an individual lithofacies provides information primarily only about the local flow-boundary zone, whereas the properties and behaviour of the current as a whole may only be deduced when the sheet-scale depositional history is understood.

The flow-boundary zone approach to interpreting ignimbrite sedimentation, linked with the scheme for analysis of ignimbrite lithofacies architecture, provides a powerful means to constrain the overall behaviour and evolution of unseen pyroclastic density currents. The approach begs further research into the mechanisms and rates of the various processes that are inferred. It also has applications for the interpretation of deposits from lahars, turbidity currents, and other types of granular, liquefied or fluidized sediment gravity flows. We hope that this Memoir both stimulates and facilitates further research into pyroclastic density current deposits and into experimental quantification of physical conditions and process rates.

KEY WORDS: density current, sedimentation, ignimbrite, pyroclastic flow, pyroclastic surge, granular flow, fluidization, hindered settling, granular segregation.

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to the memory of R. V. Fisher (1928–2002).