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Large-scale slump facies in the “Arenarie di Serravalle” fm (Serravallian): the case of Rocca Grimalda (Piedmont Tertiary Basin, Alto Monferrato Sub-Basin, NW Italy)

ABSTRACT - In this paper the geological, palaeoenvironmental and structural meaning of an arenaceous and sandy sedimentary wedge outcropping near Rocca Grimalda (Alessandria, North-Western Italy) is briefly discussed.

On the basis of the lithostratigraphic setting inferred from field geological mapping and geomorphological evidences, this unit can be probably interpreted, in a three-dimensional view, as a lenticular sedimentary body enclosed in an arenaceous-marly succession.

The lithofacies analysis indicates sedimentary processes related to prevailing mass-flow gravity-driven depositional events.

The subvertical strata observed in two well exposed outcrops are interpreted as the result of large-scale synsedimentary gravity-driven post-depositional deformations rather than tectonic structures strictly related to field regional stresses.

KEY WORDS - Synsedimentary deformations, gravity-driven mass flow processes, Alto Monferrato Sub-Basin, “Arenarie di Serravalle” fm.

RIASSUNTO - *Deformazioni sinsedimentarie alla macroscale nella formazione delle “Arenarie di Serravalle” (Serravalliano): l'esempio di Rocca Grimalda (Bacino Terziario del Piemonte, Sottobacino dell'Alto Monferrato, Italia NW).*

Il Bacino Terziario del Piemonte (BTP) costituisce una successione sedimentaria eo-miocenica individuata in corrispondenza dell'attuale Italia nord-occidentale nel contesto dell'evoluzione geodinamica da meso-alpina a tardo-alpina ed appenninica del “Nodo Ligure” (Laubscher, 1991). Assumendo, in relazione alle diverse fasi orogenetiche, il significato di bacino tardo-orogenico, molassico, episeturale e di piggyback il BTP si colloca pertanto in un contesto estremamente diverso rispetto a quello caratteristico dei bacini cratonici o dei margini continentali passivi dove il controllo tettonico sulla sedimentazione è pressoché inesistente.

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La fase di progressiva bacinalizzazione è rappresentata, a scala regionale, da una successione trasgressiva di tipo fining-up. L'evoluzione deposizionale del BTP esordisce in particolare con sequenze continentali fluviali e marine costiere (Formazione di Molare – Oligocene; “Formazione di San Paolo” Oligocene superiore?-Aquitano superiore), alle quali fanno transizione, coerentemente con il continuo approfondimento dell'area bacinale, unità sostanzialmente marnose e rappresentative di una sedimentazione emipelagica distale (Formazione di Rocchetta – Oligocene superiore-Miocene inferiore; Marna di Paroldo – Aquitano superiore-Langhiano medio) (Lorenz, 1969; Gnaccolini, 1974; Gnaccolini, 1978; Gnaccolini, 1982; Gelati & Gnaccolini, 1980; Cazzola *et al.*, 1981; Andreoni *et al.*, 1981; Ghibaudo *et al.*, 1985; D'Atri, 1990; D'Atri *et al.*, 1997; Pastorino, 1998).

Importanti fenomeni di risedimentazione torbida al limite Oligocene inferiore-Oligocene superiore individuano il coinvolgimento della regione delle Langhe nel contesto dell'evoluzione compressionale appenninica.

In questo lavoro è stato discusso il significato geologico, paleoambientale e strutturale di una successione sabbioso-arenacea riferibile alla formazione delle “Arenarie di Serravalle” (Serravalliano) ed affiorante presso Rocca Grimalda (AL).

Sulla base di un rilievo geologico e di osservazioni geomorfologiche, quest'ultima costituisce verosimilmente un corpo sedimentario a geometria lenticolare intrastratificato nell'ambito di una successione essenzialmente marnoso-arenacea (Marne di Cessole - Langhiano).

L'analisi di facies condotta su tale unità è coerente con lo sviluppo di prevalenti processi sedimentari di tipo gravitativo sia sin- che post-deposizionali, mentre gli strati arenacei subverticali ben esposti in due affioramenti dislocati presso il concentrico sono stati interpretati come il prodotto di deformazioni gravitative sinsedimentarie piuttosto che la conseguenza di stress tettonici regionali.

INTRODUCTION AND GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Tertiary Piedmont Basin (TPB) is a sedimentary succession, Upper Eocene to Upper Miocene in age, deposited during the Oligo-Miocene tectonic phases related to the geodynamic evolution of the “Ligurian Knot” (Laubscher, 1991) (fig. 1). In this way, the TPB is usually considered as a piggyback basin developed on the alpine chain (Ori & Friends, 1984, Miletto & Polino, 1992) that evolved in episutural setting resting on the Europe-Adria suture (Gelati & Gnaccolini, 1998). Particularly, the Alto Monferrato Sub-Basin represents a minor tectono-stratigraphic domain of it bounded by the Valle Erro Fault toward west and by the Scrivia Fault in the east (Biella *et al.*, 1992).

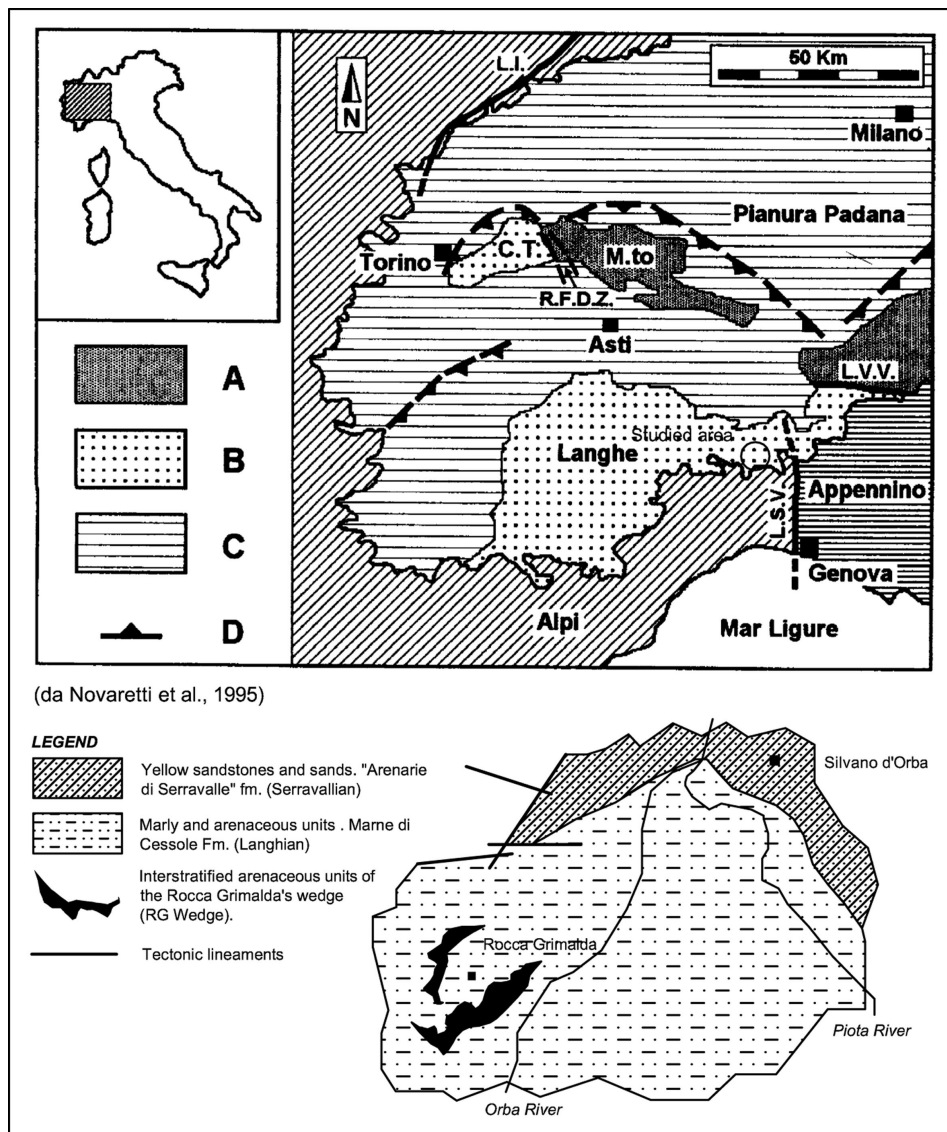


Fig. 1 - Geological sketch map of the investigated area - scale 1:50.000. A = Apennine-related basins; B = alpine-related basins; C = plio-quaternary basins; D = buried thrusts; L.I. = Insubric Line; L.V.V. = Villarvernia-Varzi Line; L.S.V. = Sestri-Voltaggio Line; R.F.D.Z. = Rio Freddo Deformation Zone; C.T. = Torino Hill; M.to = Monferrato (modified from Novaretti *et al.*, 1995).

The oldest fining-up sediments record the evolution of its margins from continental and shallow marine paleoenvironments (Molare Formation - Oligocene) towards emipelagic depositional settings (Marna di Paroldo fm. - Aquitaniano superiore-Langhiano medio).

The regional, compressional, tectonic stresses due to the evolution of the Apennine belt since Early Oligocene - Late Oligocene boundary induced conspicuous reworking events (Faletti *et al.*, 1995). The sedimentary succession of the TPB records the widespread occurrence of resedimented bodies deposited from submarine gravity-driven processes as described by many authors (Gelati & Gnaccolini, 1980; Cazzola *et al.*, 1981; Cazzola & Rigazio, 1983; Cazzola & Sgavetti, 1984; Cazzola & Fornaciari, 1990; Pastorino, 1998). Other informative papers about the Tertiary Piedmont Basin include those of Pasquarè (1968), Forcella (1976), Capponi & Giammarino (1982), Giammarino (1984), Gnaccolini (1989), Miletto & Polino (1992), Falletti *et al.* (1995), Mutti *et al.* (1995), Biella *et al.* (1997), Forcella *et al.* (1999), D’Atri *et al.* (2002).

Particularly, this paper focuses on the geological, paleoenvironmental and structural meaning of an arenaceous and sandy lenticular sedimentary body ascribed to the “Arenarie di Serravalle” fm. (*Serravallian*) as reported on the official geological map (Sheet 70 “Alessandria”, Geological Map of Italy, 1:100.000, Boni & Casnedi, 1970).

GEOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL SETTING

The sedimentary succession of the TPB outcropping in the studied area is topped unconformably by the oldest pleistocene fluvial lithofacies of the Orba River.

On the basis of both field mapping and geomorphological observations (because of high vegetation cover) the geological sketch map of fig. 1 has been outlined. The “Arenarie di Serravalle” fm. is relatively well exposed near Silvano d’Orba: the left loop of the Piota River before its confluence in the Orba River could be interpreted as due to the transition from marly units (Marne di Cessole fm. - *Langhian*) towards more competent sandstones. Although more detailed large-scale lithostratigraphic correlations can be at time unclear because transitional boundaries between these formations, we believe that the sandstones outcropping near Rocca Grimalda could be better interpreted as a lenticular body, approximately 90 m thick, interstratified within a prevalent marly-arenaceous succession (Rocca Grimalda’s Wedge - RG-Wedge). The more gentle topographic relief on

the left side of the Orba Valley between Rocca Grimalda and Silvano d'Orba could be related to the subsurface presence of prevailing marly units (fig. 2).

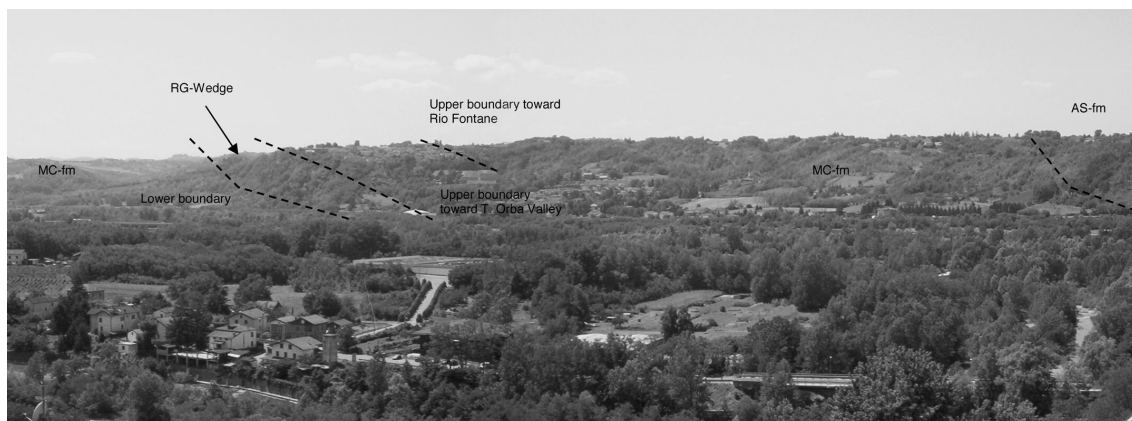


Fig. 2 - Panoramic view of the Rocca Grimalda's area (left side of the Orba River). The main litostratigraphic boundaries are indicated. **MC-fm** (Marne di Cessole fm.); **AS-fm** ("Arenarie di Serravalle" fm.); **RG-Wedge** (Rocca Grimalda's Wedge).

As showed in fig. 3, even if the attitude of bedding planes both in the Marne di Cessole fm. and "Arenarie di Serravalle" fm. is at time randomly distributed, the structural setting of the miocene formations in the area of Rocca Grimalda, characterized by an average dip direction toward N-NW, fully agree with the large scale regional one.

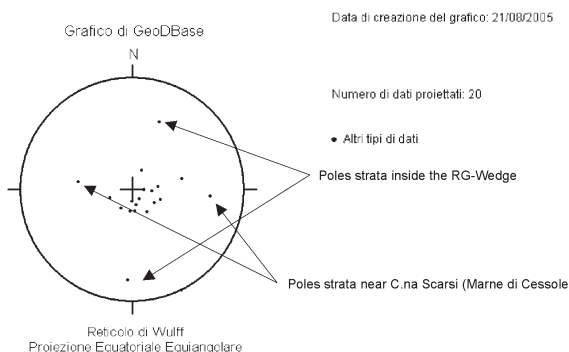


Fig. 3 - Stereographic plot of bedding planes (Marne di Cessole fm. and "Arenarie di Serravalle" fm.)

LITHOFACIES ANALYSIS

The large-scale structural setting of the RG-Wedge as well as the textural features of sedimentary strata appears extremely chaotic and disorganized.

In the RG-Wedge three main lithofacies can be described; particularly, in this paper the Shanmugam's (1996) terminology for submarine gravity-driven mass-flow processes has been followed. Refer to Bosellini *et al.* (1994) and Campbell (1967) for the classification of strata's thickness and textural features.

More detailed lithofacies analysis are difficult in field because high vegetation cover as well as for the inaccessibility of the main outcrops.

Lithofacies S1

Description

Structurelles yellow medium and coarse-grained sandstones organized in very thick beds ($1\div1,5$ m) bounded by erosional, wavy and parallel bedding planes (fig. 4a). At time, a parallel lamination can occur towards top as well as a faint normal grading. Flute casts, rip-up clasts and load-structures can be locally observed. Some strata show the presence of medium thick cross-lamine (fig. 4b).

Interpretation

These strata was probably emplaced by cohesionless and unchanellized mass-flow gravity-driven events, in which frictional freezing processes (Lowe, 1979) occurred during deposition. The presence, in some beds, of parallel laminations towards top and of a normal grading texture, can be explained with a decreasing of the flow density during deposition inside the main event. Turbulent flow conditions could be deduced by the presence of flute casts and rip-up clasts. In this view, the main, primary, sedimentary processes were probably related to the development of mixed sandy debris-flows and turbidity currents emplaced in the form of depositional lobes. These lithofacies could be compared to the lobe deposits described by Cazzola *et al.* (1981).

Also the occurrence of cross-lamine inside some strata fully agree with sedimentary processes related to low-density mass-flow events. This lithofacies can be compared with the Facies B described in his turbiditic depositional model by Ricci Lucchi (1980). In this way, a bottom meso-topography characterized by the presence of tractional bed-forms, such as dunes ($H = 1,0\div1,2$ m), can be supposed. A “dune” horizon is described by

Gnaccolini (1989) in the Bastia Mondovì body. Their origin as reworked textures related to deep-marine bottom-currents, evenly associated to grain by grain depositional processes, seems unlikely.

Lithofacies CS1

Description

Folded, structureless, chaotic and unstratified yellow medium and coarse-grained sandstones (fig. 4c).

Interpretation

This one is probably the most diffuse lithofacies, being the large-scale sedimentary feature of the RG-Wedge characterized by chaotic and folded strata. According to literature (Pickering *et al.*, 1986), these structures have been here interpreted as the product of submarine post-depositional slumping processes on plastic sediments. Small-scale folded beds also probably occur in the Marne di Cessole fm. near C.na Scarsi, although their origin is uncertain. Sinsedimentary sliding events are described in the Cortemilia Fm. by Gnaccolini (1968) and in the “Bastia Mondovì Fm.” by Pastorino (1998).

Lithofacies CS2

Description

Fine-grained marl, organized in thick strata (0,6÷1,0 m) with nodular and “strained” texture due to sharp, wavy and non-parallel discontinuities.

Interpretation

This lithofacies has been here interpreted as the product of post-depositional internal strains produced during sliding. Particularly, the sedimentary processes was probably related to slow sedimentary creeps inside decollement ooze strata during their downslope movements (Stow, 1994).

Fig. 4 - Main lithofacies of the RG-Wedge. **4a)** Lithofacies S1: structureless yellow medium and coarse-grained sandstones organized in very thick beds (1÷1,5 m) bounded by erosional, wavy and parallel bedding planes (scale bar 40 cm). **4b)** Lithofacies S1: medium thick cross lamine (scale bar 60 cm). **4c)** Lithofacies CS1: structureless, chaotic and unstratified yellow medium and coarse-grained sandstones. On the upper side of the outcrop a small-scale slump fold is visible. **4d)** Panoramic view of the subvertical strata outcropping near Rocca Grimalda. These ones have been interpreted as large-scale post-depositional slump facies. ➡





CONCLUSIONS

As previously outlined, the sedimentary oligo-miocene evolution of the TPB often records the regional occurrence of resedimented units at time emplaced in large-scale sedimentary wedges (Gelati & Gnaccolini, 1980; Cazzola *et al.*, 1981; Cazzola & Rigazio, 1983; Cazzola & Sgavetti, 1984; Cazzola & Fornaciari, 1990; Pastorino, 1998). Field analysis on a thick arenaceous succession outcropping near Rocca Grimalda allow us the following conclusions.

1. On the basis of both geological mapping and geomorphological observations, the sedimentary succession on which Rocca Grimalda developed can be interpreted as an arenaceous coarse-grained sedimentary three dimensional lenticular body interstratified in a mixed marly-arenaceous succession (Marne di Cessole fm.).

2. Lithofacies analysis carried out on sandstones are in agreement with prevailing sedimentary processes related to mass-flow gravity-driven events. Particularly, in this view two main depositional mechanisms has been described: mixed sandy debris-flows and turbidity corrents occurred as well developed very thick beds (lithofacies S1) and massive, chaotic sedimentary events probably related to more dense and important post-depositional submarine slumping processes (lithofacies CS1 and CS2). These lithofacies, although can occur at any location, tend to be dominant in slope environments (Shanmugam *et al.*, 1995). As depicted for other tectono-stratigraphic domains of the TPB (Pastorino, 1998), the sandstones of the RG-Wedge probably deposited in slope apron submarine paleoenvironments. The large-scale depositional features of the RG-Wedge appear chaotic and “structureless”, being probably related to mass-flow post-depositional processes. In this way, correlations between lithofacies S1, CS1 and CS2 with respect the lithostratigraphic setting of the sedimentary wedge in terms of depositional processes are unclear.

3. It is of note the presence of subvertical beds well exposed in two outcrops near the village of Rocca Grimalda (fig. 4d). The lack of structural correlations between these units and the regional setting indicates that these steeply dipping layers are enclosed in the sedimentary wedge. In this way, according to their lithostratigraphic and depositional features, we believe that these ones could be better interpreted as large-scale post-depositional slump facies, such as slump folds or contorted beds, rather than tectonic structures strictly related to field regional stresses.

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