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► **To cite this version:**

Audrey Margirier, Xavier Robert, Laurence Audin, Cécile Gautheron, Matthias Bernet, et al.. Slab flattening, magmatism, and surface uplift in the Cordillera Occidental (northern Peru). *Geology*, 2015, 43 (11), pp.1031-1034. 10.1130/G37061.1 . insu-01677064

HAL Id: insu-01677064

<https://insu.hal.science/insu-01677064>

Submitted on 16 Feb 2018

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1 Slab flattening, magmatism and surface uplift in the
2 Cordillera Occidental (northern Peru)

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10 **ABSTRACT**

11 The impact of subduction processes on surface uplift and relief building in the
12 Andes is not well understood. In northern Peru we have access to a modern flat
13 subduction zone (3–15°S) where both the geometry and timing of the flattening of the
14 slab are well constrained. Some of the highest Andean peaks, the Cordillera Blanca (6768
15 m) and the Cordillera Negra (5187 m), are located just above the Peruvian flat-slab. This
16 is a perfect target to explore the impact of slab flattening and associated magmatism on
17 the Andean topography and uplift. We present new apatite (U-Th)/He and fission-track
18 data from three vertical profiles in the Cordillera Blanca and the Cordillera Negra. Time-
19 temperature inverse modeling of the thermochronological data suggest that regional
20 exhumation in the Cordillera Occidental started at ~15 Ma, synchronous with the onset of
21 subduction of the Nazca Ridge and eastward movement of regional magmatism. We
22 propose that ridge subduction at 15 Ma and onset of slab flattening drove regional surface

23 uplift, with an important contribution of magmatism to relief building in the Cordillera
24 Occidental.

25 **INTRODUCTION**

26 The Andes are often presented as the classic example of relief building along a
27 non-collisional convergent plate boundary, but many subduction zone processes,
28 specifically related to surface uplift, are still not fully understood. Along the western
29 Andean margin topography and slab dip vary significantly, resulting in a clear
30 segmentation along strike, with two modern flat-slab segments in northern Peru (3–15°S;
31 Fig. 1) and central Chile (28–32°S) (Barazangi and Isacks, 1976). These flat-slab
32 subduction zones influence the occurrence and location of magmatic activity along the
33 Andean range with the magmatic arc migrating away from the trench and even ceasing to
34 exist during slab flattening. Slab flattening also increases coupling at the plate interface,
35 resulting in an increase and eastward displacement of shortening in the overriding plate
36 and consequent surface uplift in both the Andean fore-arc and back-arc (e.g., Ramos and
37 Folguera, 2009). However, the impact of slab flattening on surface uplift in the western
38 part of the Andes (Cordillera Occidental) remains unclear.

39 The geometry and timing of slab flattening in northern Peru are constrained by the
40 subduction of two buoyant features, the Nazca Ridge and the Inca Plateau (e.g., Gutscher
41 et al., 1999; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). In this region the Cordillera Blanca (CB), a
42 Miocene batholith exhumed along a ~150 km long crustal-scale normal fault trending
43 parallel to the range, forms the highest Peruvian peaks (Fig. 1; e.g., McNulty and Farber,
44 2002). In the context of flat subduction, which is expected to produce shortening, the
45 presence of this major normal fault is surprising. Two models have been proposed to

46 explain the Cordillera Blanca Normal Fault (CBNF). Dalmayrac and Molnar (1981)
47 suggested that extension was induced by gravitational collapse of a thickened crust,
48 whereas McNulty and Farber (2002) suggested extension due to the arrival of the Nazca
49 Ridge beneath this region, which temporarily increased the coupling with the overriding
50 plate. Understanding the exhumation of the CB and extension along the CBNF in this
51 compressive regime is important for understanding the impact of ridges and flat
52 subduction on the Andean relief development.

53 The aim of this paper is to evaluate the relationship between changes in
54 geodynamics and relief evolution in the Cordillera Occidental in northern Peru. We infer
55 relief evolution from apatite (U-Th)/He (AHe) and fission-track (AFT) data of the CB
56 and the Cordillera Negra (CN). We compare time-temperature inverse modeling (QTQt;
57 Gallagher, 2012) with the timing of the arrival of the Nazca Ridge at the subduction zone,
58 periods of magmatic activity, and periods of uplift.

59 **GEOLOGIC AND GEODYNAMIC CONTEXT**

60 Reconstructions of the timing and location of the initial Nazca Ridge subduction
61 and its subsequent southeastward migration constrain the timing of slab flattening (e.g.,
62 McNulty and Farber, 2002; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). These reconstructions are based on
63 symmetric seafloor-spreading in a hotspot reference frame, and rely on the calculation of
64 the Nazca Plate motion with respect to South America, which may contain considerable
65 errors. Rosenbaum et al. (2005) presented a regionally refined plate circuit that suggests
66 ridge subduction beginning at 15 Ma at 10°S and the arrival of the Inca Plateau at the
67 trench at 5°S at 13 Ma (Fig. 1).

68 The CB is a 14–5 Ma granitic pluton (zircon U-Pb; Mukasa, 1984; Giovanni,
69 2007) intruded into Jurassic sediments. The high summits of the CB build the footwall of
70 the CBNF, which has produced > 4500 m of vertical offset since 5 Ma (Bonnot, 1984;
71 Giovanni, 2007). The Callejón de Huaylas, a 150 km long range-parallel intra-mountain
72 basin, separates the CB and the CN. The 8–3 Ma Yungay ignimbrites, in the northern part
73 of the basin (Farrar and Noble, 1976; Cobbing et al., 1981; Wise and Noble, 2003), and
74 5.4 ± 0.1 Ma ignimbrites at the base of the stratigraphy of this basin, constrain the timing
75 of basin formation in relation to CBNF activity (Giovanni et al., 2010). The CB batholith
76 and synchronous volcanic deposits indicate the last activity before the cessation of
77 magmatism (Petford and Atherton, 1992) associated with slab flattening.

78 The Cretaceous and Paleogene plutons (73–48 Ma; Beckinsale et al., 1985)
79 intruded into Jurassic sediments of the CN forms a plateau with summits > 5000 m and
80 1–2 km-deep valleys incised into its western flank. Some Neogene volcano-sedimentary
81 deposits cap the CN (54–15 Ma Calipuy Formation; Cobbing et al., 1981). Few studies
82 have addressed volcanism in the CN (Farrar and Noble, 1976; Myers, 1976; Noble et al.,
83 1990), and no thermochronologic data are currently available. In the CB, few AFT and
84 AHe data are available, mostly from glacial valleys along longitudinal profiles (Montario,
85 2001; Giovanni, 2007; Hodson, 2012). Thermochronological data outside of our CB and
86 CN study areas are limited (Wipf, 2006, Michalak, 2013, Eude et al., 2015), preventing
87 any regional thermal modeling. Due to the absence of thermochronologic data in the CN,
88 earlier exhumation models focused on the CBNF.

89 **METHODS**

90 AFT and AHe thermochronology record the temperature evolution of the crust
91 from 120 to 40°C (e.g., Gallagher et al., 1998; Gautheron et al., 2009), which can be
92 related to local exhumation or thermal events. Although thermochronological data do not
93 allow direct quantification of surface uplift, with complementary information exhumation
94 can be interpreted to be the result of surface uplift and enhanced erosion. We determine
95 the thermal history for a vertical profile using the QTQt software, which inverts AFT
96 annealing and AHe diffusion parameters with the Markov Chain Monte Carlo method
97 (Gallagher, 2012; details on sample processing, analysis and modeling are provided in the
98 GSA data repository¹). We use the multikinetic annealing model of Ketcham et al. (2007)
99 to model the AFT ages and track-length dispersion and the recoil damage model of
100 Gautheron et al. (2009) to model AHe ages.

101 **NEW THERMOCHRONOLOGICAL DATA**

102 We sampled three profiles with elevations spanning 0.9–1.9 km, one in the CB
103 batholith (>10 km from the CBNF to avoid a tectonic exhumation signal) and two in the
104 CN, providing 33 AFT ages, track-length measurements and single-grain AHe ages for
105 23 samples (Fig. 1). The AFT ages in the CB range from 1.5 ± 0.3 – 7.7 ± 1.1 Ma and AHe
106 ages range from 1.9 ± 0.2 – 13.7 ± 1.4 Ma (Fig. 1). The AHe ages are scattered and older
107 than AFT ages, raising the question of their reliability. Indeed, ⁴He implantation from an
108 external U-Th source can generate 50% of excess He and cause age dispersion
109 (Gautheron et al., 2012). In the CN AFT ages range from 21.1 ± 1.3 – 33.2 ± 1.9 Ma and
110 AHe ages range from 1.9 ± 0.2 – 32.6 ± 3.3 Ma.

111 **TIME TEMPERATURE INVERSION**

112 Thermal inversion of the CB age-elevation profile indicates rapid cooling at
113 $\sim 200^{\circ}\text{C}/\text{m.y.}$ between 4.5 and 4 Ma following batholith emplacement at high
114 temperatures (Fig. 2). This rapid cooling is bracketed by the batholith emplacement ages
115 (14–5 Ma; Mukasa, 1984; Giovanni, 2007) and AFT ages. At ~ 4 Ma the cooling rate
116 decreased to $25^{\circ}\text{C}/\text{m.y.}$

117 Inverse modeling of the northern CN suggests an initial cooling stage between 30
118 and 23 Ma, followed by a progressive reheating between 23 and 15 Ma (Fig. 2). Between
119 15 Ma and today the rocks cooled at $7^{\circ}\text{C}/\text{m.y.}$ The southern CN model indicates an initial
120 cooling episode between 30 and 18 Ma, and then a 18–15 Ma heating event. From 15 Ma
121 to today the rocks recorded a cooling phase with a rate around $7^{\circ}\text{C}/\text{m.y.}$ (Fig. 2). For both
122 CN profiles, the obtained Temperature-time (Tt) paths indicate slow cooling during the
123 Oligocene followed by reheating during the Early Miocene and finally monotonic cooling
124 since ~ 15 Ma (Fig. 2).

125 **DISCUSSION**

126 **Middle Miocene Exhumation of the Northern Peruvian Andes**

127 Both CN profiles indicate reheating of the crust over several million years before
128 15 Ma and subsequent cooling. This progressive reheating likely corresponds to regional
129 heating during emplacement of the volcanic Calipuy Formation (54–15 Ma; Cobbing et
130 al., 1981). The presence of the Calipuy magmatic arc possibly increased the geothermal
131 gradient in the Cordillera Occidental.

132 The cause of the onset of exhumation recorded by the cooling phase in the CN
133 between 15 and 0 Ma is not straightforward. Pollen analyses constrained a maximum
134 possible elevation of 2 km in the Peruvian Andes before the Middle Miocene (Hoorn et

135 al., 2010). At that time, the CN formed the drainage divide (Fig. 3A; Wise and Noble,
136 2003). McLaughlin (1924) suggested that the CN Jurassic sediments, deposited near sea
137 level, were uplifted and eroded to a low relief surface (Puna surface) until ~15 Ma,
138 during the Quechua 1 deformation event. This surface is presently located at ~4400 m
139 a.s.l.. Late Miocene volcanic rocks (7.4 Ma, Wipf, 2006) fill a paleovalley (now
140 reincised) along the Rio Fortaleza, which has its headwaters in the CN. This morphology
141 records a change in base level indicating that some uplift and incision occurred between
142 15 and 7 Ma (Farrar and Noble, 1976, Myers, 1976). Giovanni et al. (2010) showed from
143 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ analyses of paleolake deposits that high elevations in the Callejon de Huaylas basin
144 (Fig. 1) were attained by latest Miocene times. Therefore, the cooling recorded at 15 Ma
145 in the CN is likely related to erosion triggered by regional surface uplift. This scenario is
146 consistent with previous studies bracketing the uplift of the Western Andes of northern
147 Peru between the Early and Late Miocene (e.g., Farrar and Noble, 1976, Myers, 1976;
148 Giovanni et al., 2010; Hoorn et al., 2010).

149 **Ridge Subduction, Slab Flattening and Surface Uplift**

150 The initiation of exhumation at ~15 Ma in the CN correlates with subduction of
151 the Nazca Ridge (Fig. 3B; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Exhumation in the CN continued
152 after initial ridge subduction and its southward migration until today (Figs. 3C, 3D). The
153 timing (15 Ma) and location (10°S) of the initial Nazca Ridge subduction proposed by
154 Rosenbaum et al. (2005) is consistent with the Middle Miocene continental shelf uplift at
155 this latitude (von Huene and Suess, 1988), with the propagation of the orogenic front
156 toward the east at ~8 Ma (Mégard, 1987), and with the shift of magmatic sources toward
157 the east from the Calipuy Formation (54–15 Ma; Cobbing et al., 1981) to the CB magmas

158 (CB batholith, Fortaleza and Yungay ignimbrites, 14–3 Ma; Mukasa, 1984; Wise and
159 Noble, 2003; Wipf, 2006; Giovanni, 2007; Giovanni et al., 2010). Eakin et al. (2014)
160 suggested that slab flattening has an influence on the evolution of the overriding plate and
161 proposed ~1000 m positive dynamic topography in the Cordillera Occidental after slab
162 flattening. As no important compressive phase has been documented during the Middle
163 Miocene in the Cordillera Occidental in northern Peru (Mégard, 1987), we suggest that
164 regional uplift resulted from positive dynamic topography above the flat-slab.

165 **Magmatism and Exhumation in the Cordillera Blanca**

166 The CB thermal history indicates rapid cooling (200°C/m.y.) of the batholith
167 followed by slower cooling (25°C/m.y) beginning ~4 Ma. The rapid cooling likely
168 corresponds to the post magmatic cooling of the CB batholith; coeval exhumation is not
169 excluded. The slower cooling likely corresponds to exhumation. This cooling rate
170 suggests higher exhumation rates in the CB than in the CN. Following McNulty et al.
171 (1998) and Petford and Atherton (1992), we propose that strike-slip faulting facilitated
172 the earlier stage of CB exhumation (Fig. 3C). Our data combined with previously
173 published thermochronologic data (U-Pb and Ar-Ar; Giovanni, 2007) indicate that the
174 CB emplacement and onset of exhumation are coeval, suggesting that the crustal
175 emplacement of low-density magma participated in the exhumation of the CB (Petford
176 and Atherton, 1992). The presence of polished granitic clasts in Pliocene sediments
177 indicates glacial erosion of the CB (Bonnot, 1984), placing the CB at elevations at least
178 in excess of ~3500 m at this time. Finally, we suggest that magmatism and glacial
179 erosion (Fig. 3D) continued to drive the local CB uplift and exhumation in a context of
180 regional surface uplift following slab flattening.

181 The CB exhumation cannot be explained with models involving increased
182 coupling at the plate interface and shortening in the upper plate. Such models are not
183 compatible with extension related to the CBNF. The initiation of the CBNF (~5.4 Ma;
184 Giovanni et al., 2010) is ~10 Myr after the subduction of the Nazca Ridge (15 Ma;
185 Rosenbaum et al., 2005), demonstrating that the subduction of the ridge does not control
186 extension on the CBNF and CB exhumation, as suggested by McNulty and Farber
187 (2002). Collapse models (e.g., Dalmayrac and Molnar, 1981) are in contradiction with the
188 15–0 Ma exhumation of the CN. We suggest that the fault is accommodating the
189 differential exhumation of the two cordilleras.

190 **SUMMARY**

191 Thermochronological data and temperature-time history modeling, suggest
192 exhumation since 15 Ma in the CN. We interpret this exhumation phase as the result of
193 elevated erosion rates in response to regional surface uplift. This scenario is in agreement
194 with other studies bracketing the timing of uplift of the Cordillera Occidental between the
195 Early and Late Miocene (e.g., Hoorn et al., 2010), but contradicts models of extensional
196 or gravitational collapse of thickened crust (e.g., Dalmayrac and Molnar, 1981). We
197 propose that surface uplift in the Cordillera Occidental was driven by the Nazca Ridge
198 subduction, slab flattening, and associated magmatism (i.e., CB magmas). By
199 constraining the timing of heating and cooling of upper crustal rocks from the late
200 Oligocene to the present, this study provides new evidence linking flat subduction to the
201 topographic evolution of the northern Peruvian Andes.

202 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

203 This work was supported by a grant from Labex OSUG@2020
204 (Investissements d'avenir – ANR10 LABX56), ECOS-
205 NORD/COLCIENCIAS/ICETEX and SMINGUE. We thank the SERNAMP for
206 allowing sampling in the CB, and F. Coeur, F. Senebier, E. Hardwick, M. Balvay, R.
207 Pinna-Jamme, K. Hodson and M. Michalak for sample preparation. We thank C.
208 Lithgow and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive reviews.

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318 **FIGURE CAPTIONS**

319 Figure 1. A) Study area location within the Peruvian flat-slab and the South America
320 Pacific margin (modified after Ramos and Folguera, 2009). The respective positions of
321 the Nazca Ridge (NR) at ~15 Ma, 0 Ma; and of the Inca plateau (IP) at ~13 Ma
322 (Rosenbaum et al., 2005) are represented in red. B) Geological map of the Cordillera
323 Occidental (northern Peru) showing AFT ages (red) and AHe ages (blue) (modified from
324 INGEMMET geologic map of Ancash; INGEMMET, 1999.

325

326 Figure 2. Age-elevation plots and Temperature-time (Tt) paths predicted for
327 thermochronological ages using Gautheron et al. (2009) He diffusion model. A-C) Age-
328 elevation plots showing AFT ages (red), mean track length (MTL; yellow) and AHe ages
329 (blue), ages predicted by the thermal history are plotted in pastel colors. Northern
330 Cordillera Negra (CN) profile (A), southern CN profile (B), and Cordillera Blanca (CB)
331 profile (C). D-F) Tt paths for northern/southern CN, and CB profiles. Each line represents
332 the Tt path of a sample; red line represents the path of the lowest elevation sample and
333 blue line the highest, pastel shading represent uncertainties.

334

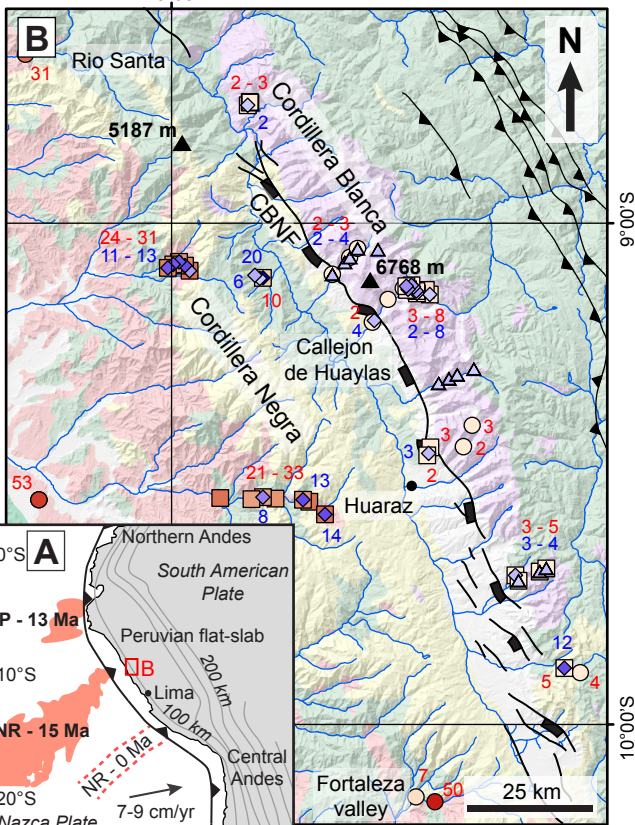
335 Figure 3. Block diagrams showing the uplift history and paleogeography of the Cordillera
336 Occidental in northern Peru. Diagrams represent surface uplift (bold arrow), volcanism
337 (black triangle), partial melting (red droplet), faults (dotted and continuous black lines),
338 drainage network, and the CB batholith. A) The Calipuy Formation emplaces in the CN

339 above a “normal” subduction (54–15 Ma). B) Subduction of the NR, slab flattening, and
340 corresponding surface uplift in the CN at 15 Ma. C) During the slab flattening,
341 magmatism shutdowns in the CN and moves eastward. The CB batholith emplaces at
342 depth and is exhumed in a strike-slip context. D) The CBNF accommodates the recent
343 exhumation of the CB resulting in modern elevations >6 km.

344

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78°00'W



Thermochronological data:

