Significant plate motion during the early magmatic stage of North American Midcontinent Rift development

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Abstract. As the supercontinent Rodinia was assembling ca. 1.1 billion years ago, there was extensive magmatism on at least five Proterozoic continents including the development of the North American Midcontinent Rift. New paleomagnetic data from 84 lava flows of the Osler Volcanic Group of the Midcontinent Rift reveal that there was a significant and progressive decrease in inclination between the initiation of extrusive volcanism in the region (ca. 1110 Ma) and ca. 1105 ± 2 Ma (the "early stage" of rift development). Paleomagnetic poles can be calculated for the lower portion of the reversed Osler Group (41.0°N, 218.7°E, A_{95}=4.8°, N=30) and the upper portion of the reversed Osler Group (42.5°N, 201.6°E, A_{95}=3.7°, N=59; this pole can be assigned the age of ca. 1105 ± 2 Ma). This result is a positive test of the hypothesis that there was significant plate motion during the early stage of rift development. In addition to being a time of widespread volcanism on Laurentia and other continents, this interval of the late Mesoproterozoic was characterized by rapid paleogeographic change.

1. Introduction

Despite being active for more than 20 million years [*Davis and Green*, 1997] and resulting in the thinning of pre-rift crust to less than 10 km [*Cannon*, 1992], the 1.1 Ga Midcontinent Rift failed to dismember the Laurentian craton. This failure resulted in the preservation of a thick record of rift-related volcanic and sedimentary rocks that gives geoscientists insight into the development of this ancient rift. Most models for the development of the Midcontinent Rift attribute its origin to the upwelling and decompression melting of a mantle plume [*Shirey*, 1997]. On the basis of the great volume of generated magma and interpretation of geochemical data, it is argued that the early stage plateau flood basalts of the rift (ca. 1110-1105 Ma) and the main stage volcanics that erupted into the central basin (ca. 1100-1095 Ma) were both dominated by plume-sourced melts. This deep-plume origin for the rift needs to be considered in conjunction with paleogeographic change that has been inferred to have been ongoing throughout rift development. Fully constraining this paleogeographic change is essential for understanding rift development and for constraining late Mesoproterozoic paleogeographic reconstructions given the centrality of Laurentia's apparent polar wander path to such efforts.

It has long been noted that there is a significant difference in paleomagnetic inclination between the steep (dominantly reversed polarity) magnetizations of the oldest volcanics and intrusives of the Midcontinent Rift and the shallower (dominantly normal polarity) magnetizations from the younger main stage volcanics and intrusives [*Halls and Pesonen*, 1982]. This inclination change has been interpreted either as resulting from rapid plate motion [?*Davis and Green*, 1997] or as being the result of large non-dipolar contributions

40 to the late Mesoproterozoic geomagnetic field that led to asymmetry across reversals

41 *Pesonen and Nevanlinna* [1981]. The interpretation of the record as recording stepwise

42 inclination change across reversals associated with a significant sustained departure from

43 a geocentric axial dipole (GAD) dominated field was challenged by the observation of a

44 progressive decrease in paleomagnetic inclination across multiple geomagnetic reversals up

45 through the stratigraphy of Midcontinent Rift lavas at Mamainse Point, Ontario [*Swanson-*

46 *Hysell et al.*, 2009; **?**]. This progressive decrease in inclination leads to the interpretation

47 of multiple symmetric reversals when the data are considered in stratigraphic context

48 and these results have been used to support the hypothesis that rapid paleogeographic

49 change was ongoing during Midcontinent Rift magmatism [**??**]. To date, Mamainse Point

50 is the only succession where a progressive decrease in inclination through an exposure

51 of rift stratigraphy has been reported. At Mamainse Point, much of the decrease in

52 paleomagnetic inclination occurs within the lowermost reversed polarity portion of the

53 stratigraphy that erupted during the early magmatic stage of rift development [**?**]. This

54 result sets up the prediction that other localities in the rift that span the same period

55 of time should also record such a decrease. This work tests that hypothesis with new

56 paleomagnetic data developed in stratigraphic context from the Osler Volcanic Group.

2. Geology and context of the Osler Volcanic Group

2.1. Osler Volcanic Group lithologies

57 The Osler Volcanic Group overlies the epicontinental sediments of the Mesoproterozoic

58 Sibley Group. The lowest 100 m of stratigraphy of the Osler Volcanic Group contains

59 rift-related sandstones and conglomerates [*Hollings et al.*, 2007a], which are followed by

60 a succession of relatively continuous tholeiitic basalt flows. We studied these flows along

the east shore of Simpson Island in the Lake Superior Archipelago. This location has well-preserved basalt flows and exposure of a significant thickness of the stratigraphy. This location occurs at a great enough distance (> 10 km) from the intrusive St. Ignace Island Complex so that the magnetizations of the flows are apparently unaffected by its emplacement. The St. Ignace Island Complex is dominated by felsic lithologies and was emplaced into the mafic flows of the Osler Volcanic Group near the end of Midcontinent Rift volcanism [*Hollings et al.*, 2007b].

Along the east shore of Simpson Island, where we measured stratigraphic sections (Fig. 1), the stratigraphy is dominated by basaltic lava flows with typical thicknesses of ca. 5 meters. For the 105 flows in the measured stratigraphic sections where there is sufficient exposure of the flow base, interior and top to determine thickness, the median flow thickness is 4.9 meters with a first quartile thickness of 2.0 meters and third quartile thickness of 9.8 meters. Minor interflow siltstone and conglomerate occur between some flows and provide constraints on paleo-horizontal that were utilized for structural corrections of paleomagnetic data (Fig. 1). The red-brown siltstone beds are generally centimeters to tens of centimeters thick while the conglomerate beds can be up to several meters in thickness. Clasts in the conglomerate are basaltic in composition and are primarily pebble-sized, but can range up to 10 cm in diameter. Within the stratigraphic sections, individual flows can be distinguished by their characteristic transition in texture moving up through the flow: pipe vesicles at the base of flows, to massive basalt, to massive basalt with some amygdules, to a highly amygdaloidal texture at the top of the flows. There is well-preserved pahoehoe flow-banding on some flow tops. Using our measurements of

bedding orientation, we estimate that slightly over 3000 meters of Osler Volcanic Group stratigraphy is exposed on Simpson Island (Fig. 1).

2.2. Angular unconformity and associated paleomagnetic reversal

Southwest of Simpson Island in the Nipigon Strait region there is exposure on Puff Island, which contains an angular unconformity marked by a conglomerate that separates underlying flows of reversed magnetic polarity from overlying flows of normal magnetic polarity [*Halls*, 1974]. This unconformity is higher in the stratigraphy than the top of the exposure at Simpson Island where all studied flows have reversed magnetic polarity. Only ca. 110 stratigraphic meters of normally magnetized flows are exposed south (i.e. stratigraphically above) of the unconformity on Puff Island before the sequence is covered by Lake Superior. This unconformity has been interpreted to be due to a period of quiescence of local volcanism [*Halls*, 1974]. *Halls* [1974] was the first to suggest that such quiescence may have been widespread throughout the Midcontinent Rift—an idea that is now incorporated into models of rift development that utilize interpretations of the distribution of U-Pb dates and has been termed the "latent stage" [*Vervoort et al.*, 2007]. As occurs in sequences across the Midcontinent Rift, the lower reversed flows studied paleomagnetically by *Halls* [1974] have a steeper inclination, in an absolute sense, than the younger normal flows above the unconformity. The missing time evidenced by the angular unconformity likely correlates with the missing time inferred from radiometric dates on units within the stratigraphy of the North Shore Volcanic Group and the Powder Mill Group [*Davis and Green*, 1997; *Zartman et al.*, 1997]. In these rift successions, the stratigraphic intervals where time is inferred to be missing are associated with a switch from reversed to normal magnetic polarity.

105 The paleomagnetic data that *Halls* [1974] developed from Osler Volcanic Group flows

106 were in relatively close stratigraphic proximity below and above the unconformity (as the

107 goal of the study was to confirm the presence of a geomagnetic reversal that had been

108 inferred from aeromagnetic data; *Halls* [1972]). The aeromagnetic data demonstrated that

109 the reminder of the flows below the unconformity (i.e. to the north) and stratigraphically

110 below those studied by *Halls* [1974] are also of reversed magnetic polarity. On the basis

111 of polarity and the geochronology discussed below, the interval has been correlated with

112 the "early stage" of Midcontinent Rift development and the other basal sequences of lava

113 flows within the rift. These early stage flows are interpreted to be plateau lavas that

114 erupted over a broad geographic area prior to significant development of the main central

115 rift graben that underlies present day Lake Superior [*Cannon*, 1992]. Due to being limited

116 to the stratigraphy in close proximity to the angular unconformity, existing data have not

117 permitted evaluation of whether or not there is a progressive change in paleomagnetic

118 inclination through the reversed polarity flows as observed in the "early stage" volcanics

119 at Mamainse Point [*Swanson-Hysell et al.*, 2009].

2.3. Age constraints on the Osler Volcanic Group

120 In some locales, a quartz-feldspar, porphyritic felsic unit occurs near the base of the

121 Osler Group for which a U-Pb zircon date of 1107.5^{+4}_{-2} Ma has been reported [*Davis and*

122 *Sutcliffe*, 1985]. This date was obtained from an outcrop of felsic porphyry on Black

123 Bay Peninsula, ca. 40 km to the west of Simpson Island. This unit was tentatively

124 interpreted as extrusive [*Davis and Sutcliffe*, 1985; *Lightfoot et al.*, 1991] and the date has

125 been interpreted as constraining the time at which Osler Group volcanism commenced.

126 New observations made of a quartz-feldspar porphyry unit on Simpson Island, mapped as

127 equivalent to the unit from which the date was obtained [*Giguere*, 1975], provide additional

128 evidence for the inference made by *Giguere* [1975] that this unit is actually intrusive. On

129 Simpson Island, the basal sedimentary units of the Osler Volcanic Group are overlain

130 by the quartz-feldspar porphyry which itself underlies the basalt flows (Fig. 1). A thin

131 (1-2 mm thick) veneer of basalt is variably present overlying the porphyry. The basalt

132 veneer displays pahoehoe flow banding, which is unlikely to have developed if the flow was

133 originally this thin, implying that the felsic unit intruded into the basalt, cutting into an

134 originally thicker flow. An additional observation is that there are protrusions of porphyry

135 surrounded by host basalt, providing further support for an intrusive relationship. If

136 the Simpson Island intrusion is indeed equivalent to the Black Bay Peninsula unit, this

137 evidence suggests that the 1107.5^{+4}_{-2} Ma date is a minimum age for the eruption of the

138 first Osler basalt flows, rather than an absolute age for that point in the Osler Group

139 stratigraphy. This unit should be a target for future geochronology.

140 A sequence of quartz-feldspar phyric rhyolite flows occurs near the top of the magneti-

141 cally reversed portion of the stratigraphy at Agate Point (*Davis and Sutcliffe* [1985]; Fig.

142 3; stratigraphically higher than the highest flow on Simpson Island). *Davis and Green*

143 [1997] obtained a U-Pb zircon date from the Agate Point Rhyolite of 1105 ± 2 Ma which,

144 if the extrusive interpretation is correct, is a robust age for that point in the Osler Group

145 stratigraphy.

3. Methods

146 We collected oriented samples for magnetic laboratory measurements during the course

147 of measuring stratigraphic sections (Fig. 1). Each site consists of an individual lava flow

148 from which we collected 6 to 10 small (2 cm diameter) rock cores with a hand-held drill.

149 These small core samples were oriented with a magnetic and sun compass, when possible,

150 such that their spatial orientation is known. To minimize the visual impact of collecting

151 these small cores along the pristine Lake Superior shoreline, we knocked out the portion

152 of the outcrop from which they were collected.

153 At the Institute for Rock Magnetism, specimens were prepared from the samples and

154 subjected to progressive thermal or alternating field (AF) demagnetization (Fig 2A).

155 Initial results on sister specimens demonstrated the simplicity of the magnetizations and

156 the similarity between results obtained through thermal and AF demagnetization (Fig

157 2A). Low-temperature remanence experiments were run on representative samples and loss

158 of remanence across the Verwey transition demonstrates that the magnetic mineralogy is

159 dominated by low-titanium magnetite (e.g. Fig 2B). These results revealed the ability of

160 AF demagnetization to isolate the characteristic remanent magnetization (ChRM) held by

161 magnetite with relatively small and variably present overprints being effectively removed

162 by low-field AF steps. Given these results, the majority of flows were studied with AF

163 demagnetization alone.

4. Results and Discussion

164 Flow means from the data generated for 84 flows of the Osler Volcanic Group are sum-

165 marized in Figures 1 and 3 and the table in the supporting information. To consider

166 whether the flows of the Osler Volcanic Group record progressive paleogeographic change,

167 we take the approach of grouping and comparing data from the lower third of the stratig-

168 raphy (0 to 1041 meters; 30 flows), the middle third of the stratigraphy (1041 to 2083

169 meters; 20 flows) and the upper third of the stratigraphy (2083 to 3124 meters; 34 flows).

170 To test whether these subsets of the data could have been drawn from a common mean,

we apply both the Watson V_w test with Monte Carlo simulation [*Watson*, 1983] and the

bootstrap test for a common mean [*Tauxe*, 2010]. Full details associated with these statistical tests are provided in the supporting information. The results from these common

mean statistical tests show that the directions from the lower third of the stratigraphy

cannot be distinguished from those from the middle third, nor can the directions from

the upper third of the stratigraphy be distinguished from those in the middle third. In

contrast, directions from the lower third of the stratigraphy can be distinguished from

those of the upper third at the 95% confidence level. This result can be seen visually

in Figure 3 as the α_{95} ellipses associated with the directional means and the A_{95} ellipses

associated with the pole means do not overlap. The statistically significant difference

between the populations of flow means in the lower and upper third of the stratigraphy,

combined with the result that the middle third data has a mean that is an intermediate

direction between the lower and upper means, supports the hypothesis that progressive

paleogeographic change was ongoing throughout the eruption of the Osler Volcanic Group

with Laurentia moving to lower latitudes (see reconstruction Fig. 3). The paleomagnetic

poles calculated and used in the paleogeographic reconstruction in Fig. 3 are: lower third

Simpson Island Osler Group (40.9°N, 218.6°E, A_{95}=4.8°, N=30); middle third Simpson

Island Osler Group (42.7°N, 211.3°E, A_{95}=8.2°, N=20) and the upper portion of the re-

versed Osler Group (41.6°N, 205.4°E, A_{95}=4.8°, N=34). Stratigraphic subgroups of the

Simpson Island data can be made in many different ways than this approach of dividing

the stratigraphy into thirds. For example, comparing the 17 flows in the lowermost 500

meters against the 17 flows in the uppermost 500 meters, demonstrates that those popu-

lations are dramatically different such that the bootstrap test for a common mean shows

₁₉₄ their x, y and z components to be distinct at the 99% confidence level (see supporting

₁₉₅ information for details). Comparing the 41 flows in the lower half of the stratigraphy to

₁₉₆ the 43 flows in the upper half of the stratigraphy also reveals a statistically significant,

₁₉₇ but relatively small, difference between the populations (see supporting information for

₁₉₈ details). We focus on the lower, middle and upper third grouping in our analysis making

₁₉₉ the judgement that such an analysis strikes the balance between considering the possi-

₂₀₀ bility of change through the stratigraphy while binning enough data over thick enough

₂₀₁ intervals to not to be significantly biased by under-averaging secular variation.

₂₀₂ The paleomagnetic data developed by *Halls* [1974] come from the Osler Volcanic Group

₂₀₃ in the Nipigon Straits region. The data were obtained from the uppermost part of the

₂₀₄ stratigraphy below the angular unconformity on Puff Island that separates the flows of

₂₀₅ reversed polarity from younger flows of normal polarity (only a few of which are preserved

₂₀₆ before the sequence is submerged beneath Lake Superior). The *Halls* [1974] data of

₂₀₇ reversed polarity (N=25, http://earthref.org/MAGIC/9518) comes from a portion of the

₂₀₈ stratigraphy that should correlate with the upper third of the stratigraphy at Simpson

₂₀₉ Island. Watson and bootstrap tests for a common mean between the *Halls* [1974] data of

₂₁₀ reversed polarity and data from the upper third of the stratigraphy at Simpson Island are

₂₁₁ positive indicating that the populations of directions cannot be distinguished from one

₂₁₂ another—consistent with this stratigraphic correlation. In contrast, tests for a common

₂₁₃ mean between the reversed polarity *Halls* [1974] data and the lower third of the Simpson

₂₁₄ Island stratigraphy fail. This result indicates that the populations are statistically distinct,

₂₁₅ building on the result that there was significant paleogeographic change recorded by the

₂₁₆ Osler Volcanic Group. Given that the data from the upper third of the stratigraphy

on Simpson Island correlate stratigraphically and share a common mean with the Halls

(1974) data from the Nipigon Straits region, we can calculate a mean paleomagnetic pole

for the upper portion of the reversed Osler Group stratigraphy (42.5°N, 201.6°E, A_{95}=3.7°,

N=59) that can be assigned an approximate age of 1105 ± 2 Ma.

These new data from 84 flows of Osler Volcanic Group from the early stage of the Mid-

continent Rift bolster evidence from the succession at Mamainse Point that the decrease

in inclination through the history of the rift is a progressive change rather than a step-

wise change across reversals. The interpretation of a step-wise change of inclination across

reversals has been used to argue for reversal asymmetry at the time that was proposed

to result from significant deviation from an axial dipole geomagnetic field [*Pesonen and*

Nevanlinna, 1981]. The observed progressive change in inclination is more consistent with

the hypothesis that inclination decrease is a result of fast equatorward motion of Lau-

rentia [*Davis and Green*, 1997; *Swanson-Hysell et al.*, 2009]. The poles calculated from

the stratigraphic groupings of the Osler Group stratigraphy at Simpson Island fit the

progression along the path suggested by paleomagnetic poles from the lowermost polarity

zone at Mamainse Point, Ontario. These data sets combined indicate that there was sig-

nificant plate motion during early magmatic stage of North American Midcontinent Rift

development.

From the beginning of Midcontinent Rift extrusive volcanism in the early magmatic

stage to the voluminous volcanism associated with the main magmatic stage there was

ca. 25° of latitudinal motion of North America. The voluminous volcanism appears to

have been concentrated in the Lake Superior region both during the early magmatic stage

and during the eruption of the thick main stage volcanics in the central graben. Arguments

for a plume-origin for Midcontinent Rift volcanism have argued that a plume is necessary to explain isotopic signatures in lava flows (Nd isotopes, *Nicholson et al.* [1997]; Re-Os data, *Shirey* [1997]) and necessary as a heat source in generating the large volumes of basaltic magma associated with the rift [*Cannon*, 1992]. If a long-lived plume was in a fixed position relative to Earth's spin axis, large relative motion of Laurentia would make it unable to continue to be a source of melt to the rift. Furthermore, no evidence to date has revealed a hotspot track of progressively younger volcanics off-axis of the Midcontinent Rift. One possibility is that the North American plate and a deep-seated mantle plume traveled in unison to lower latitudes as a result of large-scale rapid true polar wander. The motion implied by the Keweenawan poles has been interpreted as a result of true polar wander [*Evans*, 2003; *Mitchell et al.*, 2012]. An interpretation of an active contribution from a narrow fixed plume throughout rift development implicitly favors this true polar wander hypothesis. The true polar wander explanation for Keweenawan paleogeographic change has posited that the entire swath from the early Midcontinent Rift poles down to the Grenville poles is the result of TPW about a fixed minimum inertia axis and can be fit with a great circle. With new paleomagnetic date from the Osler Volcanic Group, the progression of the apparent polar wander path through the early magmatic stage of the rift can be further resolved. The path that emerges from these additional data shows that there was a marked change in the trajectory of the path at the beginning of rift's main magmatic stage. Separate Euler poles are needed to explain the motion of the early+latent magmatic stages and the main+late magmatic stages. This result doesn't rule out the possibility that true polar wander was a significant contributor to the rapid paleogeographic change recorded by the Midcontinent Rift. However, it does demonstrate

that fitting a single great circle to all data from the beginning of the rift up through the apex of the Grenville loop (e.g. the ca. 1015 Ma Haliburton pole as done by *Mitchell et al.* [2012]) and explaining all of the paleogeographic changes as being a result of true polar wander about a single fixed minimum inertia axis is not a good fit to the data.

At the same time that the Midcontinent Rift was initiating in Laurentia the following igneous provinces were emplaced on four other cratons:

- the Umkondo large igneous province of the Kalahari Craton (many ID-TIMS U-Pb dates on zircon and baddeleyite between 1112 and 1108 Ma; *Hanson et al.* [2004])

- thick and extensive gabbro-norite (GN) dikes exposed in the southwest Angola portion of the Congo Craton (one of which has an ID-TIMS U-Pb date on baddeleyite of 1110.3 ± 2.5 Ma; *Ernst et al.* [2013])

- the Mahoba suite of dikes of the India Craton (one of which, the "Great Dike of Mahoba" has an laser ablation U-Pb date on zircon of 1112.7 ± 7.4 Ma; *Pradhan et al.* [2012])

- a putative ca. 1110 Ma large igneous province in the southwest portion of the Amazonia craton inferred from dates on two widely separated intrusions (ID-TIMS U-Pb date on baddeleyite from the Rincón del Tigre intrusion of 1110.4 ± 1.8 Ma and a sill within Aguepeí sediments with a ID-TIMS U-Pb date on baddeleyite of 1111.5 ± 1.5 Ma *Hamilton et al.* [2012])

This contemporaneous voluminous volcanism on five late Mesoproterozoic cratons is coincident with the onset of Laurentia's rapid plate motion. This temporal correlation suggests that this time period was characterized by particularly vigorous mantle con-

vection, which could have contributed to large igneous province development and to the driving forces that resulted in rapid plate motion and/or true polar wander.

5. Conclusion

Lava flows of the Osler Volcanic Group below the Puff Island unconformity erupted during the early magmatic stage of Midcontinent Rift development during a time interval characterized by reversed magnetic polarity. New paleomagnetic data from 84 Osler Volcanic Group lava flows reveal a significant decrease in paleomagnetic inclination through the stratigraphy. These results support the hypothesis that the difference between the steep paleomagnetic inclinations characteristic of the early magmatic stage and the relatively shallower inclinations of the main magmatic stage throughout the rift are the result of rapid plate motion that was recorded by the Osler Volcanic Group.

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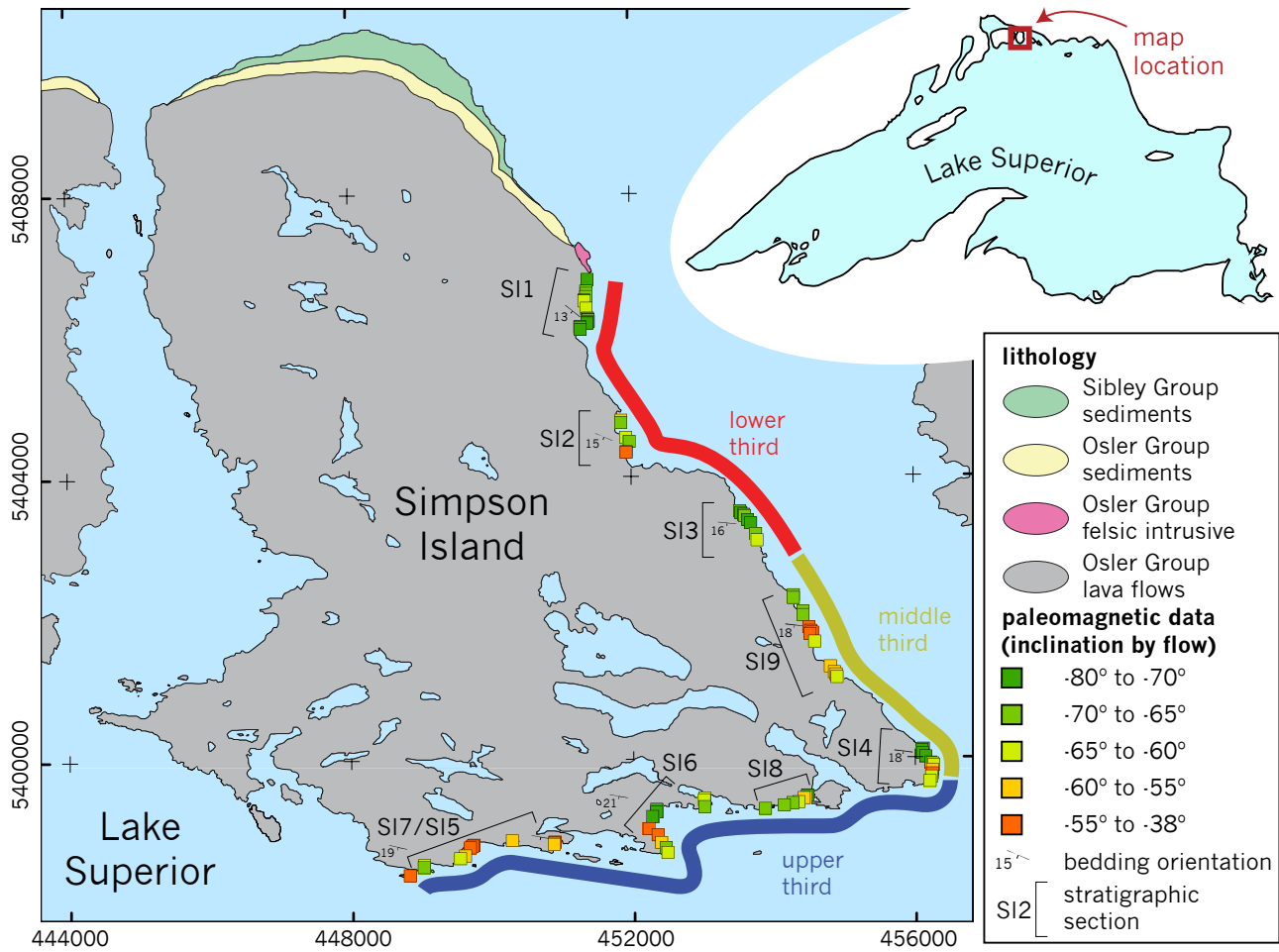376   *Journal of Earth Science*, *34*, 549–561, doi:10.1139/e17-044.

Figure 1.   Geological map of Simpson Island in the Lake Superior Archipelago with studied stratigraphic sections and lava flows shown. Data from flows are color-coded by inclination. The lava flows of the Osler Volcanic group are tilted such that more southward flows are higher in the stratigraphy. The lower, middle and upper thirds divisions of the stratigraphy that are used in the text and in Figure 3 are shown. The inset map shows the location of the geological map.
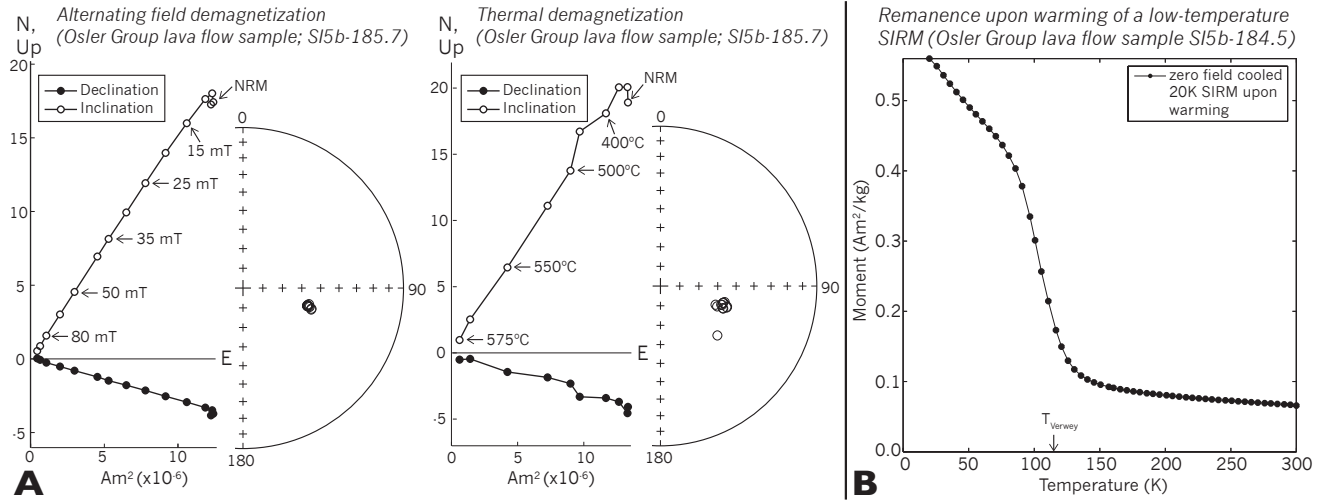
Figure 2.   A) Paleomagnetic data for basaltic lava flow sample SI5b-185.7. Alternating field and thermal demagnetization data are shown for sister specimens of this sample in vector component and equal area diagrams. These data reveal a dominantly single-component remanence with both demagnetization protocols isolating the same direction. B) Low temperature demagnetization data from a sample in the same lava flow wherein a saturating isothermal remanent magnetization (SIRM) was imposed at 20K after cooling in a zero field. Subsequent warming of this remanence led to significant demagnetization across temperatures characteristic of the Verwey transition indicating that the magnetic mineralogy of the sample is dominated by low-titanium magnetite.
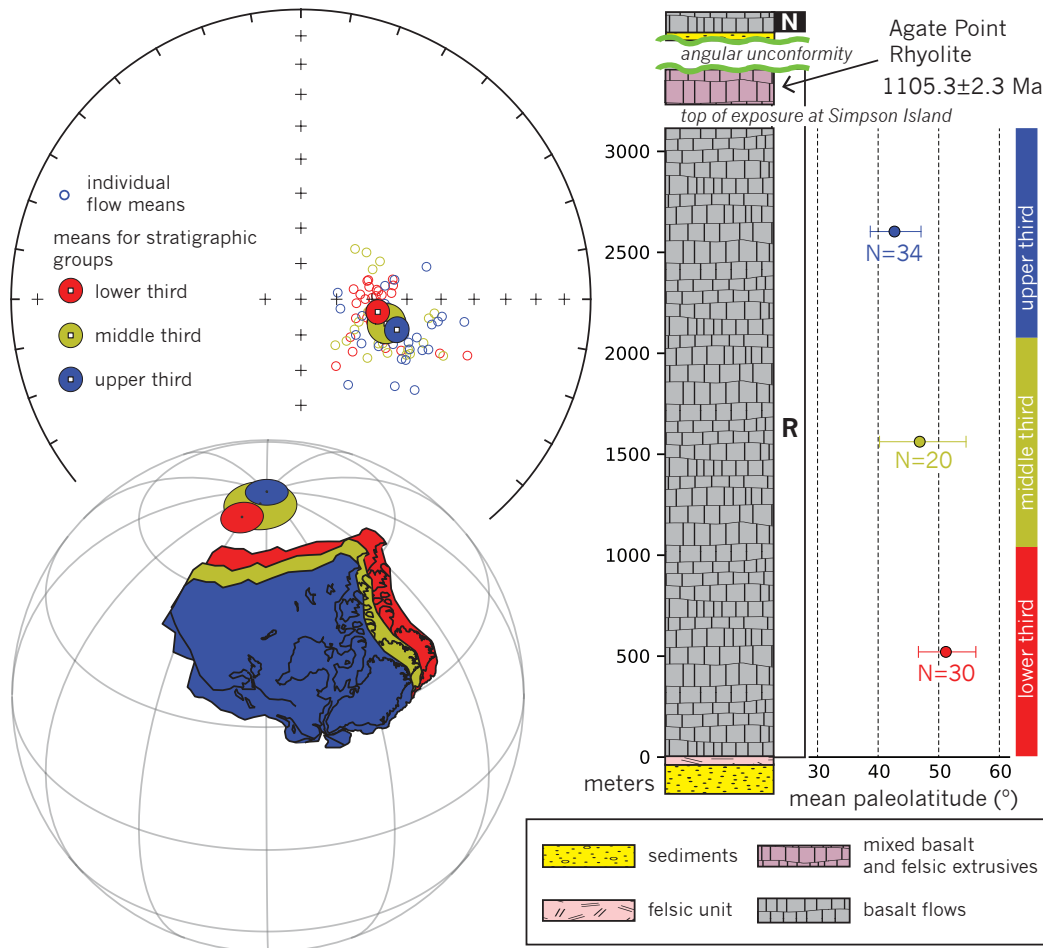
Figure 3. Summary of paleomagnetic data from the Simpson Island exposure of the Osler Volcanic Group. The equal area plot shows the mean directions for each of the individual studied flows (N=84). All studied flows are of reverse polarity such that the plotted directions are in the upper hemisphere of the projection. Means are calculated and plotted on the equal area plot with α_{95} confidence ellipses for flows in the lower third (red; Dec=99.3, Inc=-68.0, α_{95}=3.4, N=30), the middle third (yellow; Dec=105.9, Inc=-64.9, α_{95}=5.9, N=20) and upper third (blue; Dec=107.6, Inc=-61.6, α_{95}=3.5, N=34) of the stratigraphy. The mean paleolatitudes for these portions of the stratigraphy calculated from the Fisher means are also shown on the simplified composite stratigraphy with corresponding 2σ error bars. The paleogeographic reconstruction shows Laurentia's progressive equatorward motion as constrained by the poles from each of the stratigraphic groupings.