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STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF SULFATE VEIN NETWORKS IN GALE CRATER (MARS)

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12	Abstract
13	The Curiosity rover's campaign in the Gale crater on Mars provides a large set of close-up images
14	of sedimentary formations outcrops displaying a variety of diagenetic features such as light-toned
15	veins, nodules and raised ridges. Through 2D and 3D analyses of Mastcam images we herein
16	reconstruct the vein network of a sample area and estimated the stress field. Assessment of the
17	spatial distribution of light-toned veins shows that the basin infillings, after burial and
18	consolidation, experienced a sub-vertical compression and lateral extension coupled with fluid
19	overpressure and cracking. Overall, rock failure and light-toned veins formations could have been
20	generated by an overload produced by a pulse of infilling material within the basin.
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22	Keywords: Mars – veins – fluid circulation – Curiosity rover – hydrofracturing
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NASA's Mars Science Laboratory mission, Curiosity, has been surveying the Gale crater since 26 27 August 2012. It is equipped with a set of 17 cameras and 10 scientific instruments that allow rock 28 and soil sample observation and analysis. Thanks to the *in situ* observations of the rover it has been possible to recognize fluid circulation features emplaced during diagenesis subsequent to burial 29 30 and consolidation of the sediments. Specifically cross-cutting light-toned veins (Grotzinger et al., 2014, L'Haridon et al., 2018; Nachon et al., 2014, 2017), nodules (Stack et al., 2014) and raised 31 ridges (Siebach et al., 2014; Léveillé et al., 2014; McLennan et al., 2014) were detected. According 32 to ChemCam's Laser Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy (LIBS) measurements, the light-toned 33 veins have a Ca-sulfate mineralogy (Nachon et al., 2014) mainly interpreted to be bassanite 34 35 $(CaSO_4 \times 0.5 H_2O)$ at least on the surface exposed portions of the investigated outcrops (Rapin et 36 al., 2016). These veins are observed throughout most of the outcrops recorded on the Curiosity traverse, especially in the fine-grained sandstones and mudstones, interpreted to be fluvial and 37 lacustrine in origin (Grotzinger et al., 2014, 2015). The genesis of the veins is suggested to be 38 39 ascribable to fluid flows that led to dissolution and re-precipitation of sulfate-rich materials 40 (L'Haridon et al., 2018; Vaniman et al., 2018; Rapin et al., 2016; Schwenzer et al., 2016, Caswell and Milliken, 2017). Veins with mineral infilling are associated to two main stages of formation: 41 42 i) the generation of fractures, which is a consequence of stresses and/or fluid overpressure produced by several factors such as fluid thermal expansion, the generation of fluid (i.e. diagenetic 43 fluid expulsion), or chemical compaction; ii) the mineral infilling, which implies mineral 44 45 dissolution, transport and precipitation that may occur to form single or multiple veins (e.g. Bjørlykke, 1997; Philipp, 2008). Thus fluids, a material source (with suitable T and P conditions 46 for precipitation) and fractures providing space for precipitation are the key ingredients to produce 47 48 a network of mineral veins such as the ones observed at Gale crater.

The purpose of this study is to assess the structural behaviour recorded by a well-exposed crack system in a case study area along the rover traverse, to reconstruct the fracturing mechanisms, deduce the pattern of stress during fluid circulation and therefore provide some insights on the origin of the regional deformation involved during the formation of these features.

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2. Geological Background

Gale is a complex crater located on the border of highlands close to the Martian dichotomy 54 55 (5.37°S, 137.81°W) and filled by sedimentary deposits forming a central mound, Aeolis Mons (informally known as Mount Sharp). Gale crater is around 150 km in diameter and displays ~5 km 56 57 of elevation difference between the floor and the central peak and rims (Young and Chan, 2017; Stack et al., 2016; Grotzinger et al., 2014, 2015; Le Deit et al., 2013; Wray, 2012). The meteor 58 impact that formed Gale crater has been estimated to have occurred around the Noachian-59 60 Hesperian boundary (e.g. Le Deit et al., 2013; Thomson et al., 2011; Irwin et al., 2005). In the Late Noachian/Early Hesperian epoch a major climatic change led water to be increasingly unstable at 61 62 surface conditions that Gale crater experienced and recorded. In fact, Gale crater has experienced an intricate evolution involving the past presence of surface water indicated by rim-crossing carved 63 channels and lacustrine deposits at the mound base (e.g. Le Deit et al., 2013, Palucis et al., 2014, 64 Grotzinger et al., 2014; Thomson et al., 2011; Milliken et al., 2010), this site is invaluable for the 65 paleoenvironment reconstruction and pivotal for the investigation of Martian habitability (e.g. 66 Rubin et al., 2017, Caswell and Milliken, 2017). 67

Three main sedimentary groups have been identified in-situ by Curiosity rover investigations: the Bradbury group, the Mount Sharp group and the Siccar Point group (Fig.1; Grotzinger et al., 2014, 2015; Treiman et al., 2016). The first two groups are representative of a fluvio-lacustrine environment recorded by laminated and cross stratified mudstones, sandstones and pebble conglomerates, recognized especially at Pahrump Hills which is part of the Murray formation of Mount Sharp group (e.g. Le Deit et al., 2016; Treiman et al., 2016; Stack et al., 2015; Bristow et al., 2015; Grotzinger et al., 2014, 2015). The third group is dominated by eolian sedimentary rocks
that were accumulated unconformably over the other two and cemented (Banham et al., 2018).

Light-toned veins have been observed pervasively inside the Bradbury and Mount Sharp 76 77 group at a varying frequency (Watkins et al., 2017, L'Haridon et al., 2018). Some veins cross the unconformity with the overlying eolian sedimentary rocks from the Siccar Point group (e.g. 78 79 Frydenvang et al., 2017) showing that some of them formed well-after the cementation and erosion 80 of the sedimentary layers. A remarkable part of the collected evidence related to the light-toned veins are based on the compositional information acquired with ChemCam (Maurice et al., 2012; 81 Wiens et al., 2012) and its synergy with other instrument suites onboard Curiosity (e.g. CheMin, 82 83 Chemical and Mineralogy, and MAHLI, Mars Hand Lens Imager). The light-toned veins have a 84 calcium and sulfur-rich chemistry consistent with a Ca-sulfate mineralogy (Nachon et al., 2014), 85 mainly interpreted to be bassanite from the analysis of the hydrogen emission line (Rapin et al., 86 2016).

The sedimentary rocks of interest for our work are located in the Murray formation, which is 87 88 at the base of the Mount Sharp group. The Murray formation is composed of mudstones 89 predominantly, with local fine-grained sandstones (Stein et al., 2018). An enhanced chemical alteration has been suggested from the presence of a large fraction of phyllosilicates (up to 25% in 90 91 volume) and high values of chemical indices of alteration (Bristow et al., 2018, Mangold et al., 92 2019). The Murray mudstones have been affected by a widespread post-depositional history as observed through features such as fracture fills, veins, ridges and nodules, all indicating a complex 93 94 diagenetic history, not limited to the light-toned veins focused in our study (Grotzinger et al., 2015, 95 Nachon et al., 2017, L'Haridon et al., 2018). Investigating possible source of fluids that interplayed 96 in fractures development would lead to a better understanding of the sulfate veins' origins (e.g. 97 Schwenzer et al., 2016; Grotzinger et al., 2014, 2015, L'Haridon et al., 2018, Gasda et al., 2018). 98 Sources of sulfates have been suggested to be localized on higher (Nachon et al., 2017), lower (Grotzinger et al., 2014; McLennan et al., 2014; Nachon et al., 2017) or lateral (McLennan et al., 99

2014) layers with the respect of the fractured ones, whose fluid content underwent mobilization 100 101 during a late diagenetic event (Nachon et al., 2017; Young and Chan, 2017 and references therein). Because of the ubiquitous presence of veins, a recent study proposed a paleoenvironmental 102 103 evolution at the entire basin scale that could lead to deposition, accumulation, burial, dissolution and reprecipitation of the sulfates that filled the light-toned veins of Gale (Schwenzer et al., 2016). 104 105 The light-toned veins of the Gale Crater seem to be similar to those observed in many sedimentary 106 basins on Earth. This is especially the case for bedding-parallel fibrous gypsum veins called 'beef' 107 veins (Buckland & De La Bèche, 1835) or 'BPV' for Bedding-parallel veins (e.g. Ukar et al., 2017). Several recent worldwide reviews demonstrate that these mineralized veins are very widespread 108 109 on Earth, especially within impermeable and anisotropic materials such as mudstones (Cobbold et al., 2013; Gale et al., 2014). These veins are interpreted to be the result of fluid-assisted fracturing 110 due to pore fluid overpressures and stresses (e.g. Cobbold & Rodrigues, 2007; Cobbold et al., 111 112 2013)

We collected structural data based on the distribution of light-toned veins distinguishable in the area that the Curiosity rover observed between sol (Martian days)1536 and 1545 (Fig.1a). While many outcrops of the Murray formation were either flat or partly buried below sand, this location was chosen because of the presence of clean blocks, less than 1 m high, where light-toned veins are visible enabling a detailed structural analysis using image analysis and photogrammetry helped by the large number of image available.

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3. 3D reconstruction and measurements

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To investigate the light-toned veins that have been detected in Gale crater we performed 2D
 and 3D analyses of Mastcam and Navcam Curiosity images. Mastcam takes colour images of 1600
 × 1200 pixels that can be stitched together to create panoramas of the landscape around the rover.

125 Mastcam consists of a two-camera system that can acquire true RGB colour images, using a Bayer 126 filter, approximating what human eyes would perceive on Mars (Bell et al., 2012). With respect of the scientific purpose of Mastcam, the Navcam camera pairs were planned for operational use 127 128 including acquisition of images for the rover's navigation, robotic planning and documentation, remote sensing science instrument pointing, but also general surface imaging (Maki et al., 2011). 129 130 We coupled 2D mosaics of Mastcam images and the production of a 3D Digital Outcrop Model 131 (DOM) (e.g. Caravaca et al., 2019) of the same region from both Mastcam and Navcam in order 132 to reconstruct the fracture distribution in the area of interest which covers $\sim 100 \text{ m}^2$ (Fig.2).

2D images were observed raw and stitched together, where overlapping acquisitions of 133 134 neighbouring areas were available, in order to exploit full resolution image data for the detection 135 of fractures' characterizing marks (e.g. junctions and lateral continuity) and local distributions in 136 relation to other fracture sets and sediment laminations. We performed 3D reconstruction of the 137 same investigated outcrops by means of the Agisoft software (Wagner et al., 2014) from multiple 138 images taken by Mastcam binocular stereo vision and Navcam systems. Agisoft PhotoScan 139 (recently renamed Metashape) is a 3D advanced modelling package based on image data 140 processing which can automatically build the models without setting initial values and control points. It processes images taken at any position and angle as far adjacent photos share 141 142 corresponding points recognizable on the targets. The scale computed by the software was tested 143 by comparing it with known size objects such as rovers' wheels. Loading the images into Agisoft, 144 the software automatically searches for the corresponding points matching and aligning the photos 145 and finally generating a sparse point cloud. When the automatic alignment procedure failed, tie points were manually implemented in the system to exploit the maximum number of images 146 147 available. On the point cloud, that is generally denser closer to the observation point and favourably oriented surfaces, an irregular triangle net can be built, then the texture mapping is 148 carried out according to the produced triangle net. We carried out the further step of elaboration 149 by using the Cloud Compare environment, which is a 3D point cloud and triangular mesh 150

processing software that allows the user to interact with 3D entities rotating, translating, drawing 2D polylines, picking points and extracting correspondent 2D and 3D information. In this context veins were marked by tracing polylines and further structural information (i.e. dip direction and dip angle, intersections angles, kinematics estimates) was developed by plane fitting and contextual data extraction through the Cloud Compare compass plugin.

- 156
- **4. Results**
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Both from 2D images and 3D reconstruction, the presence of different sets of non-randomly distributed fractures was neatly recognizable. All the fractures appear to have a higher resistance against erosion with respect of the host rock, in fact they tend to stick out from the knobs leading to an easy identification all over the outcrops. The first general distinction is the overall presence of one population of bedding-parallel light-toned veins and a second population of middle to highangle dipping light-toned veins (Fig.3).

165 Bedding-parallel veins do not show significant thickness variations (averagely <1 cm) both at 166 the single vein scale and among the general population, although lateral continuity is unclear and visible edges appear rounded and jagged, thus a patched distribution seems to be overall the most 167 168 reasonable. Bedding-parallel veins show a well recognizable undulate, slightly wandering trend as 169 recognizable in the measurements which display an averagely 15° dipping angle variation range 170 and a broad variability among the recorded dip directions (Fig.4g) due to the variability of the 171 available data, i.e. the outcropping visible veins, randomly sampling the undulate trend. Despite a 172 consistently average horizontal sub-parallel behaviour at the scale of the study area, bedding-173 parallel veins show in places a cross cutting relationship bending and stopping on the neighbouring ones (Fig.3b). 174

Oblique veins appear less frequent than the sub-horizontal population. These veins display
clear "en-echelon" structures well recognizable by the distinctive arrays of sigmoidal shaped

177 cracks (Nicholson and Pollard, 1985) that propagate from the margin of a larger parent crack, 178 twisting out and bending as the result of mechanical interaction between tips of adjacent parallel cracks (Pollard et al. 1982). Such geometries are used to infer the state of deformation (Ramsay & 179 180 Huber 1983) or the state of stress (Pollard et al. 1982, Rickard & Rixon 1983) in the surrounding rock at the time of cracking and accordingly, in the specificity of this case study, the "en-echelon" 181 features display an extensional component. We measured two different sets of oblique cracks 182 183 based on dip/dip-direction trends: (i) one with an average value of dip direction: 290°N and dip: 67° (spanning between minimum and maximum values of: 264°-309° dip direction and 54°-77° 184 dip) and a (ii) second one showing a dip direction-dip average value of 155°N - 53° (spanning 185 between minimum and maximum values of: 126°-184° dip direction and 31°-71° dip). On a 186 vertical section (as the ones provided by the outcrops walls facing toward the Curiosity rover), the 187 188 two populations of oblique fractures are thus intersecting at an average angle of 60° according to 189 the measurements, as illustrated by single outcrops where fractures from both the oblique sets are visible (Fig.3). 190

191 In the study area it was also possible to observe cross-cutting relationships between the 192 different sets above distinguished by orientation. No evidence of displacement was found and 193 neither recurrent truncation of one set on the other were observed to determine an occurrence 194 sequence (Fig.3c).

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196 **5.** Discussions

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198 On Mars, the combination of 2D and 3D products on the Gale crater floor with high-resolution 199 in situ data along the rover track allows to pursue a structural interpretation of the basin at the time 200 of the generation of the light-toned veins. The general trend of all the plain sets to crosscut the host 201 rock laminations leads in first place to exclude a depositional layering interpretation. The presence 202 of two cross-cutting sets of light-toned vein sets arranged ~ 60° apart and displaying en-echelon 203 structures highlighting shear sense that led to a lowering of the hanging wall suggest an, at least 204 partial, regime of extension. Accordingly, the maximum principal stress is suggested to bisect the 205 acute angle occurring between the sets that in the specificity of this case would mean that $\sigma 1$ lays 206 on a sub-vertical axis. The minimum $\sigma 3$ orientation accordingly lays on a sub-horizontal plane and 207 displays NW-SE direction (Fig.4).

The set of horizontal veins is well-matching disposition and morphology of failures induced by fluid overpressure recorded on Earth that happened during the fluid resurgence cracking the host rock along fresh planes or exploiting previously existing surfaces of weakness such as the mudstone bedding and laminations.

An example of the formation process that produced the horizontal vein set is the paleo-212 213 hydrofracturing model of gypsum veins in the lower Mercia Mudstone Group (Philipp, 2008). This 214 group outcrops on the Somerset Coast of SW England, Watchet Bay, and display analogue 215 characteristics to the rocks observed in the Gale crater (e.g. Young and Chan, 2017; Cobbold et 216 al., 2013). The lower part of the Mercia Mudstone Group consists of several tens of meters of 217 poorly bedded, red to reddish-brown unfossiliferous mudstones and siltstones (Whittaker and Green, 1983; Leslie et al., 1993), whereas in the upper part the red mudstones are characterized by 218 219 laterally discontinuous evaporite-rich horizons, mainly composed of white nodular gypsum 220 (Philipp, 2008). In the Mercia Mudstone Group vein dips show variations from horizontal to 221 vertical and the strikes are in broad range of directions, no clear predominant attitude was detected. 222 Crosscutting relationships were investigated as well and indicated no prevalent age relationship 223 suggesting that the veins may all have formed at the same time (Philipp, 2008). The formation is 224 interpreted to have formed in a playa lake or desert plain conditions (Bennison & Wright, 1969; 225 Simms & Ruffell, 1990), where ephemeral pools were likely to be present and remobilization and accumulation of gypsum primarily disseminated in the sediment could have happened (Leslie et 226 al., 1993). In Watchet Bay fluid transport took place mainly along faults and fractures since 227

228 mudstones have a very low original permeability and are commonly effective barriers to fluid 229 circulation (Philipp, 2008; Cartwright, 1997). The outcrops show discontinuous anastomosing networks of gypsum veins confined to portions of the hosting mudstone. The phenomenon is not 230 231 pervasive to the whole mudstone group though, but it is confined to specific portions often overlain by thick grey siltstone layers weakly calcareous (Philipp, 2008). It may in fact occur that veins 232 233 produced by hydrofracturing stop where mechanical contrast boundaries occur (e.g. Brenner and 234 Gudmundsson, 2004b; Gudmundsson et al., 2002; Cosgrove, 2001; Gudmundsson and Brenner, 235 2001). There is no need of active slipping faults to allow fluid circulation and hydrofracturing, that are triggered when the pressure of the fluids sited within the veins exceed the lithostatic pressure 236 237 (Ramsey, 1980). When fluids are involved (e.g. geothermal fluids), buoyancy overpressure can convey a significant contribution to the fracturing process. Depending on the stress field, fluids 238 can be transported along the veins (i) leading to hydrofracturing propagation of already existing 239 240 fracture plains and anisotropies (i.e. bedding plains and laminations) or (ii) generating hydrofracturing into the host rock (Philipp, 2008 and references therein). Philipp (2008) suggests 241 242 an hydrofracturing model to explain the sulphate vein network systems that cut the Mercia 243 Mudstone Group based on low permeability of the mudstone that drove fluids, flowing from the highest to the lowest hydraulic potential (Domenico & Schwartz, 1998), to enter the rocks along 244 245 faults and fractures and prevented them to penetrate intimately the host rock.

The fluid source for the Martian case study is not entirely clear; fluid flow can be triggered by very diverse physical and chemical disequilibria that might generate fluid overpressure. Some examples could be compaction due to burial, diagenetic fluid expulsion and buoyancy, crystallization, porosity changes and thermal expansion (Neuzil, 1995; Bjørlykke, 1997; Osborne & Swarbrick, 1997). On Mars, Gale experienced water-rich early stages (Late Noachian/Early Hesperian) during which the crater could have been connected to both surficial and underground water reservoirs (e.g., Villanueva et al. 2015; Andrews-Hanna et al., 2010), thus implying potentially transient flooding and drying in sabkha or ephemeral lake environments leading to
mineral (e.g. salts) precipitation and accumulation in the basin (Rapin et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, these veins are not likely to have formed early in the basin history, but when 255 256 compaction, consolidation and diagenetic processes started affecting the region. In fact a significant part of the vein population consists of well recognisable fractures cross-cutting rock 257 258 bedding, hence the mudstone must have had some shear strength at the time of formation to trigger 259 a brittle response thus excluding a young soft host rocks (Schwenzer et al., 2016; Philipp, 2008; Bell, 2000). Thus, subsequent dissolution and mobilization by diagenetic fluids of initial deposits, 260 of unclear stratigraphic position yet, may have led to the formation of the sulphate veins observed 261 262 on the rover traverse (L'Haridon et al., 2018; Schwenzer et al., 2016; Nachon et al., 2017; Grotzinger et al., 2014; McLennan et al., 2014). 263

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265 **6.** Conclusions

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267 Light-toned fracture networks have been observed repeatedly along Curiosity rover traverse 268 (e.g. Watkins et al., 2017) and their distribution reflects the stress field they have been exposed to at the moment of fracturing. Within the window of ten sols (sol 1536 - sol 1545) herein analysed, 269 270 Curiosity acquired a large number of images from different angles of a field of bedrock knobs 271 cropping out from the sand where many sulphate veins were neatly visible. This asset allowed the 272 3D reconstruction of the area and, contextually, the 3D reconstruction of the plane set where 273 fractures lay. On Earth, similar arrangements can be observed at Watchet Bay where networks of 274 intersecting sulphate veins developed thanks to hydrofracturing regimes within reddish mudstone levels. 275

In Gale, the fracturing process is therefore to be ascribed to two different complementary contributions: (i) the 60° dipping fractures are to be considered the product of an extensional regime where the principal stress lays on a vertical axis (Fig.3a); (ii) the set of bedding-parallel 279 fractures are the result of a hydrofracturing process where fluid overpressure was energetic enough 280 to open new fractures just in places, but mostly used pre-existing weakness surfaces constituted by mudstone layering. Additionally, the formation of the bedding-parallel vein set might have been 281 282 synchronous to the formation of the other two sets since no truncation or displacement have been observed around the available outcrops. This interpretation is well supported by the geological 283 284 context. Gale is a large crater that experienced water and sediment infilling, the vertical maximum 285 stress is reasonably to be ascribed to such progressive overload. The cracking drive of hydrofracturing, can be triggered either by the emplacement of an overburden that perturbs fluid 286 pressure, or as response to an unloading event when pressurized fluids are already stored in the 287 288 subsurface. The origin of fluids at Gale is still debated and overpressure cracking itself does not carry enough information to discriminate it. In the hypothesis of a coeval genesis of the oblique 289 and the bedding-parallel vein networks, a pulse of material overload within the crater could have 290 291 been responsible both for the extensional failure and the fluid escape from the already consolidated deposits on the crater floor. In this context, due to the crater circular shape, maximum extension is 292 293 accordingly expected to develop along the radial directions. This is confirmed by σ 3 NE-SW 294 direction recorded in the study area, σ 3 thus locally appears to develop radially compared to the 295 closest crater rim. However, to better constrain the scenario, it would be necessary to collect data 296 from multiple sites along the rover traverse in order to check the behaviour of $\sigma 3$ at different 297 position with the respect of the crater rim.

Veins mapping and reconstruction allowed the production of a well constrained structural context interpretation and cracking driving forces identification which are likely to have been active in the whole crater area so producing a structural context for the entirety of the fracture and vein networks that have been recorded along the rover traverse.

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Figure 1. In panel (a) the yellow line with stops displays the Curiosity rover traverse; in the red
circle the study area is highlighted; the blue dashed line represents the contact between the
Bradbury group (NW) and the Mount Sharp group (SE). (b) Gale crater surveyed region. (c)
Stratigraphic column of Gale crater sedimentary rocks (modified after Hurowitz et al., 2017).



Figure 2. (a) 3D Digital Outcrop Model (DOM) of the region of interest within the area that
Curiosity rover observed between sol 1536 and 1545. (b) Computation output and histogram of
the point cloud volume density (green portions display maximum density values). (c)
Magnification of a portion of the study area. Plains are displayed on the texture and the dense point
cloud.



Figure 3. Stitched landscape of the main outcrop within the area of interest. The three different identified sets are highlighted below. (a) oblique set of veins where "en-echelon" structures have been recorded and preserved; (b) horizontal set, veins following the crosscutting lamination trend are highlighted; (c) conjugate oblique vein set where the crosscutting relationship between sets is well visible.



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Figure 4. The stereo plots show: the orientation of the oblique (a,f) and bedding-parallel (b,g) fracture planes detected on the study area on Mars; the maximum and minimum stress orientations (c,d) and the kinematics extracted from the oblique vein set's data (e). Dataset extracted from the 3D DOM: 46 planes.

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