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Radouan El Bamiki, Michel Séranne, Fleurice Parat, Jérémie Aubineau, El Hassane Chellai, et al.. Post-phosphogenesis processes and the natural beneficiation of phosphates: Geochemical evidence from the Moroccan High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments. *Chemical Geology*, 2023, pp.121523. 10.1016/j.chemgeo.2023.121523 . hal-04085568

HAL Id: hal-04085568

<https://hal.science/hal-04085568>

Submitted on 29 Apr 2023

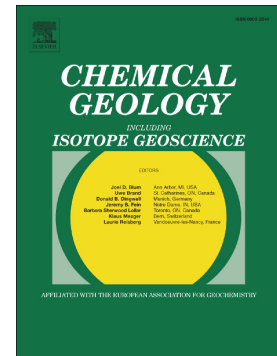
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Journal Pre-proof

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PII: S0009-2541(23)00223-1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemgeo.2023.121523>

Reference: CHEMGE 121523

To appear in: *Chemical Geology*

Received date: 7 September 2022

Revised date: 25 April 2023

Accepted date: 27 April 2023

Please cite this article as: R. El Bamiki, M. Séranne, F. Parat, et al., Post-phosphogenesis processes and the natural beneficiation of phosphates: Geochemical evidence from the Moroccan High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments, *Chemical Geology* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemgeo.2023.121523>

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Post-phosphogenesis processes and the natural beneficiation of phosphates: Geochemical evidence from the Moroccan High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments

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Abstract

The Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene sedimentary series of the High Atlas hosts underexplored phosphate-rich sediments and presents an excellent example of how complex interactions between various geological processes control the accumulation and distribution of phosphates. Genetically-linked phosphate lithofacies from this series were investigated for their mineralogical and geochemical compositions with the purpose of assessing the impact of post-phosphogenesis sedimentary processes on the geochemical behavior of genetically-linked phosphatic lithofacies, and understanding the distribution of chemical elements. Sampled phosphatic horizons from five representative sections along the Marrakesh High Atlas borders were investigated using optical and scanning electron microscopies (OM and SEM), X-ray diffraction (XRD), inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES), and inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) techniques. Results indicated that the studied lithofacies are composed of a mixture of phosphatic and non-phosphatic particles in variable proportions depending on the facies type. However, the phosphatic fraction is dominated by carbonate fluorapatite (CFA), showing an average CO_3^{2-} content of 8.40 ± 0.37 wt.%. Geochemical results revealed variations in the chemical

composition of the different phosphate facies. Low-grade pristine phosphatic sediment (P_2O_5 <12 %wt.) can be turned by the effects of storms and bottom currents into high-grade granular phosphate beds containing up to 24 wt.% P_2O_5 . This natural enrichment is mirrored in the bulk rock by increasing P_2O_5 concentrations against decreasing detrital phase-associated chemical elements (K, Al, Si, and Ti). Among the investigated lithofacies, karst-filling phosphate show relatively lower uranium and cadmium contents as it experienced a polyphase evolution, including winnowing, submarine reworking, transport, and subaerial weathering, traced using some redox-sensitive proxies such as cerium and uranium. Despite this polyphase sedimentary differentiation, the apatite resisted chemical changes and preserved its original geochemical signature, specifically the rare earth elements signal that reflects oxic seawater conditions. However, the differentiation processes modified the bulk rock composition of phosphates through the preferential leaching of gangue phases (e.g., carbonates). Furthermore, these processes triggered the oxidation of organic matter and sulfides, removing some associated elements of environmental concern, such as uranium and cadmium. Conclusively, the combination of mechanical winnowing/reworking and subaerial chemical weathering is the most effective way of the natural beneficiation of phosphate, both economically and environmentally.

Keywords: Phosphate, Winnowing, Reworking, Weathering, Geochemistry, Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene, High Atlas, Morocco

1. Introduction

Marine sedimentary phosphates are a major sink of phosphorus (P), a vital element supporting all forms of life (Filippelli, 2008; Föllmi, 1996; Ruttenger, 2003). P interacts with nitrogen (N) and carbon (C) cycles and consequently regulates the primary biological production and the Earth's climate over geological timescales (Filippelli, 2008; Föllmi, 1996). During its marine cycling, P switches sink from organic matter and Fe/Mn-oxyhydroxides particulates to an authigenic mineral phase (Ruttenger, 2003, 1993). Sedimentary phosphates are famed for their remarkable chemical variability (Altschuler, 1980; Jarvis et al., 1994; Nathan, 1984; Prévôt and Lucas, 1979). In these sediments of economic interest, P is carried by the carbonate-fluorapatite (CFA, also known as francolite) of the general formula $(\text{Ca}_{10-x-y} \text{Na}_x \text{Mg}_y) [(\text{PO}_4)_{3-z} (\text{CO}_3)_z \text{F}_{0.4z}] \text{F}_2$ (Jarvis et al., 1994; McClellan, 1980). This mineral of the apatite group exhibits significant compositional variations because of its crystalline structure, which stimulates several systematic isomorphous substitutions (Aubineau et al., 2022b; Hughes and Rakovan, 2015; Jarvis et al., 1994; McArthur, 1985; McClellan, 1980; Nathan, 1984). CFA is also a paramount scavenger of trace elements, mainly rare earth elements (REE) (Hughes and Rakovan, 2015; Jarvis et al., 1994; McArthur, 1985; McClellan, 1980; Nathan, 1984). Hence, sedimentary phosphates are among the most suitable geological archives to study the behavior of chemical elements in the marine realm to trace the multiple controlling processes, as well as to faithfully reconstruct paleoclimatic and paleo-redox conditions of the past oceans (Jarvis et al., 1994; Kocsis et al., 2016; Lumiste et al., 2019; Shields and Stille, 2001).

The primary composition of phosphatic sediments depends on seawater chemistry, oceanographic conditions, and the redox state at the time of CFA precipitation (Altschuler, 1980; Jarvis et al., 1994; McLennan, 2001; Pufahl and Groat, 2017). This primary composition is prone to modification by several post-phosphogenesis processes at different

points of time, from the sub-contemporary scale to burial and then to weathering (Lucas et al., 1980; Lumiste et al., 2019; McArthur, 1985, 1980; Prévôt and Lucas, 1979). Indeed, the mechanical transport and reworking of phosphatic sediments can significantly modify the initial chemical composition and the primary signature of rare earth elements (REE) (Auer et al., 2017). Additionally, subaerial alteration of phosphates plays a considerable role in modifying the initial geochemical signal by the leaching out of weathering-sensitive chemical elements (e.g., Ca^{2+} et CO_3^{2-}) (Lucas et al., 1980; McArthur, 1980; Prévôt, 1988). In light of these considerations, visualizing the interaction between sedimentary processes and the geochemical behavior of phosphates is the key to understanding and predicting the distribution patterns of chemical elements, chiefly those of environmental concern.

Morocco holds the world's largest phosphate accumulations with a remarkable lithofacies diversity. Yet, relatively few geochemical studies were conducted within the Moroccan phosphate series (Aubineau et al., 2022a, 2022b; Belfkira, 1980; Kocsis et al., 2021, 2016; McArthur, 1988; Nathan et al., 1975; Prévôt, 1988). These studies have focused on understanding the mechanisms and processes involved in apatite formation and the prevailing marine paleo-conditions. Prévôt (1988) concluded, in her work on the geochemistry of phosphates in the Ganntour Basin located in central Morocco, that phosphate formation is a biochemical phenomenon that occurs under very low detrital input conditions, where apatite is formed by direct precipitation in confined pore water microsystems and by epigenetic replacement of a precursor phase. The paleo-redox conditions in which apatite formation occurred have been of interest to several researchers. The study of REE distribution in Moroccan fossil bioapatite, along with other geochemical proxies, indicated that phosphogenesis occurred from seawater-dominated early diagenetic fluids (Kocsis et al., 2016) in oxic to sub-oxic environments with limited diagenetic alteration (Aubineau et al., 2022b; Buccione et al., 2021; Kocsis et al., 2021, 2016). Gradual time-related changes in

redox conditions were highlighted by tracing the evolution of the cerium anomaly (Ce/Ce^*) (Kocsis et al., 2021, 2016). This time-controlled Ce/Ce^* variation can be used as a stratigraphic provenance indicator (Kocsis et al., 2021).

The effects of subaerial alteration on the CFA composition in the Eocene phosphate series of Morocco were studied by McArthur (1980), who showed that Na, Sr, CO_3 , and SO_4 , as well as U and REE, are more likely removed from highly substituted CFA during weathering. More recently, Aubineau et al., (2022b) have explored the high variability of CO_3^{2-} content in apatite grains from the Ganntour and Oued Eddahab basins. In these previous studies, the sedimentological features of phosphates, driving hydrodynamics, relative sea-level variations, and depositional environments were little discussed. Yet, sedimentary processes in depositional environments impact the chemistry of sediments (Singh, 2009). Given this potential influence, a deeper understanding of the interaction between sedimentary processes and the geochemical behavior of phosphates is required. The High Atlas phosphate series offers a suitable context for studying such interaction due to its remarkable facies diversity and the excellent exposure of outcrops (El Bamiki et al., 2020). Additionally, no geochemical study has been addressed in this area. Therefore, we targeted this phosphatic series to examine the geochemical signature of the different phosphatic lithofacies in the light of their sedimentological evolution to highlight the prevailing conditions during their formation and subsequent accumulation. We explore the effect of the various accumulation processes on the enrichment or depletion of the primary phosphate within the High Atlas. We also analyze the impact of post-phosphogenesis sedimentary processes, which affect primary phosphates, on the distribution of chemical elements, including those of environmental concern (e.g., uranium and cadmium).

2. Geological setting

The Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene phosphate deposits in Morocco correspond to the westernmost part of the South Tethyan phosphogenic province extending to the Middle East (Notholt, 1985). Moroccan phosphorites accumulated on extensive shallow water platforms fed by strong Atlantic upwelling currents, active since the Turonian (Einsele and Wiedmann, 1982). At the Tethyan province scale, the post-Santonian cooling of high latitudes led to an intensification of deep ocean circulation, which in turn increased the P content in the Tethyan basin. At the same time, the strengthened Tethyan circumglobal current and the folded shelf likely resulted in coastal and topographically-induced upwelling, which supplied P-rich intermediate waters to southeastern Tethys shelves (Soudry et al., 2006). However, during the Paleocene-Eocene, major changes in global circulation occurred, including the narrowing of the Tethys and the widening of the Atlantic. Consequently, phosphogenesis shifted its high-intensity locus to the western (Atlantic) Tethys and West African Atlantic coasts (Soudry et al., 2006), where the world's largest phosphate deposits were accumulated. Upwelled seawater on the Moroccan shallow shelf area experienced gradual redox and/or pH changes indicated by an age-related Ce anomaly trend in bio-apatite towards lower values (Kocsis et al., 2016). These changes were likely driven by extended global oceanic circulation and enhanced water exchange between the North and South Atlantic Oceans (Kocsis et al., 2016). Spatially, different redox conditions in north African phosphate deposits are linked to the difference in seawater supply, which is controlled by the Atlantic Ocean in Morocco and influenced by the Tethys Ocean in Algeria and Tunisia (Buccione et al., 2021; Garnit et al., 2017; Kechiched et al., 2020).

Morocco's foremost exploited phosphate deposits are located within the vast Atlantic plateaus of the Meseta domain and the southern Oued Eddahab basin (El Bamiki et al., 2021). However, contemporaneous phosphate-rich sediments are situated along the northern and southern margins of the Moroccan High Atlas belt in the Marrakesh-Ouarzazate region (Fig.

1A). The High Atlas belt is a NE-striking intracontinental orogen, including Precambrian-Paleozoic basement and Mesozoic-Cenozoic sedimentary sequences. This mountain range resulted from the tectonic inversion of the Mesozoic-Cenozoic intracontinental basin (Atlasic Basin) (Fekkak et al., 2018; Frizon De Lamotte et al., 2008; Michard et al., 2008; Skikra et al., 2021).

The Central Atlantic opening initiated the creation of the Atlasic basins. The thermally-enhanced post-rift subsidence of the Atlantic passive margin facilitated the accommodation of km-thick sequences of Mesozoic sediments in the Atlasic basins (Ellouz et al., 2003). By the Upper Cretaceous, the thermal cooling faded away, triggering a drastic subsidence decrease. As a result, relatively thin Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene sedimentary successions, hosting phosphate-rich sediments, accumulated in the Atlasic basin. The High Atlas recorded the major uplift and inversion event during the Neogene (Chellai and Perriaux, 1996), i.e., postdating the accumulation of phosphate-rich series. The convergence between Africa and Eurasia plates caused the reactivation and inversion of the former syn-rift faults. Deep thermal processes also enhance this ongoing uplift (Leprêtre et al., 2015; Missenard et al., 2008; Teixell et al., 2005). The erosion of the uprising High Atlas belt is delivering substantial sedimentary material feeding the foreland basins created north (Marrakesh) and south (Ouarzazate and Tassoult) of the orogen (Görler et al., 1988; Chellai and Perriaux, 1996; El Harfi et al., 2001; Michard et al., 2008). The large Paleozoic fold belt of the Anti-Atlas constituted the southern hinterland area of the Atlas phosphatic basins; however, the deformed Variscan basement of the Western Meseta bordered the basins to the north and east (Herbig and Trappe, 1994). These phosphatic basins extended westwards to the Atlantic passive margin (Boujo, 1976). The High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments are hosted by a marine-dominated sedimentary succession bounded by under- and overlying continental sediments (Fig. 1B). Facies and facies associations indicate shallow-water platform

environments progressively deepening westwards (El Bamiki et al., 2020). The phosphate-rich sedimentary succession of the High Atlas evolved during a second-order transgressive-regressive cycle, resulting in the deposition of two sedimentary systems separated by a regional scale discontinuity (Chellai et al., 1995; El Bamiki et al., 2020; Marzouqi and Pascal, 2000).

3. The genetically-linked phosphatic lithofacies of the High Atlas

The phosphatic lithofacies of the High Atlas phosphate series are genetically linked, and all derive from a sedimentary differentiation of a primary phosphate (pristine) (Fig. 2) containing scattered CFA grains formed by authigenesis within the hosting marls (El Bamiki et al., 2020, El Bamiki, 2020). The pristine primary phosphate consists of intervals of phosphatic marls with low concentrations of phosphate peloids (Fig. 2A). Winnowed or granular phosphate corresponds to a dense accumulation of phosphatic peloids resulting from the in-situ mechanical winnowing of the primary phosphatic lithofacies by storm and bottom currents (Fig. 2B). Phosphatic lags correspond mainly to phosphatic sandstones and coquinas that result from the transport and reworking of primary and granular phosphatic lithofacies in the proximal parts of the carbonate platform (Fig. 2C). The phosphate content of phosphatic lags is often diluted in the presence of significant coarse detrital material delivered by the adjacent hinterland (Fig. 2C). However, the karst-filling phosphate consists of weathered phospharudites derived from other types of phosphate transported and reworked by the early-transgressive currents (Fig. 2D) and then trapped in and above the karst cavities in the Ouarzazate basin (El Bamiki et al., 2020, El Bamiki, 2020).

4. Data and methodology

This geochemical study is based on bulk rock analysis of 30 representative samples of the different phosphatic lithofacies. Selective sampling was carried out on three sections located

on the northern edge of the Marrakesh High Atlas and two sections in the Ouarzazate basin (Fig. 3).

Optical microscope observations were carried out using an Olympus BH2-UMA microscope combined with a Leica EC4 microscope camera. Scanning electron microscope (SEM) investigations were performed using an FEI Quanta 200 FEG SEM equipped with an Oxford Instruments energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer (EDX) at the MEA platform, University of Montpellier. Image acquisition is performed in backscattered electron (BSE) and secondary electron (SE) modes, operated under a low vacuum at an accelerating voltage of 15 kV, 1 nA beam current, and a working distance of 10 mm.

The mineralogical composition of the investigated phosphatic lithofacies was determined by X-ray diffraction (XRD) on bulk powdered samples. XRD diffractograms were acquired with a 40 kV and 40 mA at the RRXG platform, University of Montpellier. Analysis of bulk powders was performed over an angular range of $5-62^{\circ} 2\theta$ and a step size of $0.02^{\circ} 2\theta$ per 2 s. Bruker Eva software was used for peaks indexing. Moreover, XRD patterns have been compared with reference data (Brindley and Brown, 1980). The semi-quantification of bulk mineralogy was achieved through the Rietveld refinement of XRD patterns using the Profex 4.3.1 interface with the program BGMN (Doebelin and Kleeberg, 2015).

Major element concentrations were measured on bulk rocks using a Thermo Fischer iCAP 6500 emission spectrometer (ICP-OES) at the *Service d'Analyse des Roches et des Minéraux* (SARM) of the *Centre de Recherches Pétrographiques et Géochimiques* (CRPG) in Nancy, France. Samples were prepared according to the protocol of Carignan et al. (2001). One gram of whole rock powder is dissolved with HNO_3 , and the sample mixture (with LiBO_2) is fused. Standard references were SLRS-5, and the errors (1σ) were estimated to be $< 2\%$. For minor elements, the errors (1σ) were estimated to be $< 15\%$. Whole-rock carbon (total carbon and total organic carbon) and sulfur contents of the samples were determined using a C/S

elemental analyzer at the SARM service. The organic carbon determination protocol consists of sample decarbonation by hot acid treatment using diluted hydrochloric acid, followed by the Corg measurement on the C/S elemental analyzer by infrared after an induction heating under oxygen flow. F and Cl were determined by wet precipitation ferrithiocyanate spectrophotometry using a Varian Cary 50 spectrophotometer. Standard solutions were used to check the accuracy of the analyses. Standard deviations are less than 5%.

Trace element concentrations were determined using a quadrupole mass spectrometer coupled to a plasma torch, Agilent 7700x, at the AETE-ISO platform (OSU OREME, University of Montpellier, France). Prior to analyses, 100 mg of powdered samples went through a preparation protocol that consisted of two acid digestions at 110°C for 48 hours each (1 ml HNO₃+ 2.5 ml HF and 0.5 ml HNO₃+ 1.5 ml HCl) and three evaporations to dryness at increasing temperatures of 150°C to 190°C (0.5 ml HClO₄, 0.5 ml HNO₃, and 0.25 ml HNO₃). The obtained solid residues were subsequently diluted before analysis by adding 2 ml of Milli-Q water and then 1.5 ml of ultrapure HNO₃. In addition to phosphate rock samples, international standard samples (BCR32, BEN, BHVO-2, NIST, and UB-N) were also prepared likewise to control the accuracy of analyses, which is overall better than ±5%.

5. Results

5.1. Petrography and mineralogy

The phosphate series of the High Atlas hosts different types of phosphatic lithofacies showing typical sedimentological features indicating different accumulation modes (El Bamiki et al., 2020, El Bamiki, 2020). The phosphatic lithofacies of the Marrakesh High Atlas yielded a wide variety of phosphatic particles coexisting with various types of non-phosphatic grains in a clayey or carbonate matrix (Fig. 4). The phosphatic phase comprises non-skeletal grains, dominated by rounded peloids (Fig. 4A-D), coated grains, coprolites (Fig. 4E), lithoclasts, aggregates, and composite grains. The dominant phosphatic peloids are

rounded and structureless, with sizes ranging from 200 to 500 μm . The presence of weakly developed concavo-convex contacts between phosphatic grains indicates a weak to moderate mechanical compaction (Fig. 4A). Peloids may contain quartz or carbonate material inclusions (Fig. 4A). They are composed of sphere-like micro-crystallites with an average diameter lower than 0.6 μm (Fig. 4C).

The phosphatic fraction also includes skeletal grains, corresponding mainly to phosphatized bioclasts, bone debris, and fish teeth (Fig. 4E). However, non-phosphatic particles include mainly calcite (Fig. 4F), dolomite (Fig. 4F), and detrital phases, namely clay minerals, titanium oxides (Fig. 4F), and quartz (Fig. 4G).

Primary and winnowed phosphates consist mostly of rounded phosphatic grains in a clayey (Fig. 4A-B) or carbonate matrix. The densely-packed peloids, forming the winnowed phosphate, do not show any irregular and discontinuous phosphate layers or grain overgrowth (Fig. 4A-B), suggesting low transport of particles and supporting an in-situ accumulation by hydrodynamic winnowing. Phosphatic lags are composed of well-rounded, mostly structureless peloids, rod-shaped corrolites, fish teeth, bone fragments, and bioclasts associated with non-phosphatic grains, mainly sub-angular quartz grains (Fig. 4G). In karst-filling phosphate, unconsolidated phospharudite fills and covers several cm-wide and m-deep karstic cavities and pockets developed on carbonates (Fig. 4H). Karst-filling phosphate is composed of very coarse to granule-sized, medium-sorted phosphatic grains contained in a grey carbonate matrix (mostly dolomitic). Larger phosphate grains consist of agglomerated peloids. Phosphatic grains in karst-filling phosphate are frequently fractured and show evidence of corrosion, indicating an important transport (Fig. 4I).

XRD analysis of the bulk fraction provides the mineralogical assemblage and associated relative abundances of minerals (Fig. 5). XRD data reveal that the main phosphate phase in all the studied phosphatic lithofacies is carbonate fluorapatite (CFA), which shows (211),

(112), and (300) strong diffraction peaks in the 2.79 to 2.69 Å region (Fig 4 A-D). The mineralogical assemblage of the studied lithofacies includes calcite, dolomite, quartz, and clay minerals such as palygorskite, sepiolite, and smectite (Fig 5 A-D). CO_3^{2-} concentrations of CFA were determined using the empirical equation between the concentration of CO_3^{2-} and the difference in 2θ ($\Delta 2\theta$) of the (004) and (410) CFA peaks (Schuffert et al. 1990). The estimated CO_3^{2-} content of CFA in the studied High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments varies between 7.92 to 9.30 wt.% with an average of 8.40 wt.% \pm 0.37 wt.% (Table. 1).

5.2. Major element composition

The different examined phosphatic lithofacies exhibit variable concentrations of major elements. The major element composition of the studied phosphatic lithofacies is summarized in Table. 1. CaO , SiO_2 , and P_2O_5 major oxides dominate the bulk composition. The ternary diagram (Fig. 6) illustrates the distribution and variation range of the different phosphate types with respect to the P_2O_5 , SiO_2 , and CO_2 poles, which mirror apatite, clay minerals and quartz, and carbonates, respectively. These are the main constituents of the studied phosphate rocks (Fig. 6). It is noteworthy to mention that a part of the bulk CO_2 is delivered by apatite, which incorporates CO_3^{2-} into its crystalline structure by substitution for PO_4^{3-} (Aubineau et al., 2022b; Nathan, 1984). In this diagram, the primary phosphate (pristine) samples are standing out from the other phosphate types by their low P_2O_5 content (<12 wt.%) and their remarkable SiO_2 dispersion and enrichment (28 to 52 wt.%). In the winnowed (granular) phosphate group, samples are bundled almost parallel to the SiO_2 - P_2O_5 axis, spreading out towards the apatite pole, with an average P_2O_5 of 20 wt.%. This sample cluster also includes karst-filling phosphate samples that share similarities with the winnowed phosphate. However, phosphatic lags are clustered near the silica pole (up to 63 wt.% SiO_2) and show low P_2O_5 concentrations. The different compositions represented on this ternary diagram show a progressive evolution of the primary phosphate facies (pristine) towards winnowed

and karst-filling phosphates, approaching the composition of enriched phosphorite (Fig. 6; BCR32: international standard for phosphorites, which is an enriched natural phosphorite from Morocco (Potts et al., 1992; Serrini, 1981)).

SiO₂ and P₂O₅ behave oppositely in all phosphatic lithofacies. Significant dispersion of SiO₂ concentrations is observed in samples with low P₂O₅ content and a narrowing of SiO₂ concentration range towards high P₂O₅ contents ($r^2=0.6$ for overall samples and $r^2=0.8$ for karst-filling phosphate), converging towards the typical content of enriched phosphorite (BCR32) (Fig. 7A). The maximum SiO₂ dispersion is observed in phosphatic lags and the most carbonate-rich pristine phosphates (Fig. 7A). The K₂O, Al₂O₃, and TiO₂ oxides, typically associated to the detrital phase of the sediments, show overall low concentrations in the different phosphatic lithofacies of the studied series, not exceeding 0.7 wt.%, 2.7 wt.% and 0.22 wt.%, respectively. These maximum values are recorded in the pristine lithofacies. K₂O, Al₂O₃, and TiO₂ also evolve inversely to P₂O₅ ($r^2=0.3$, $r^2=0.2$ ($r^2=0.5$ in karst-filling phosphate), and $r^2=0.4$, respectively), although the dispersion is greater compared to SiO₂ (Fig. 7B-D). In contrast, the CaO content increases with increasing P₂O₅ concentrations (Fig. 7E). A decrease in CaO dispersion is also observed with P₂O₅ enrichment, converging to classical phosphorite values ($r^2=0.6$). The CaO/P₂O₅ ratio is high and extremely variable for pristine phosphate (9 wt.% >20); however, winnowed and karst-filling phosphates show fairly homogeneous CaO/P₂O₅ ratios (from 1.6 to 2.7) with concentrations that can exceed 40 wt.% CaO (Fig. 7E). MgO concentrations, related to the presence of dolomite in the binding phase, are relatively low (<10 wt.%). Organic carbon content is low in the phosphate-rich sediments of the High Atlas (< 0.5 wt.% C_{org}) with a slightly positive correlation with P₂O₅ ($r^2=0.5$ for the full set of samples and $r^2=0.7$ in winnowed phosphate) (Fig. 7F).

5.3. Trace element composition

Trace element concentrations in the investigated phosphate-rich sediments are highlighted in Table. 2. Most of these elements have concentrations that increase with increasing P_2O_5 content. Strontium is the most abundant trace element regardless of phosphatic lithofacies, with concentrations ranging from 144 to 1349 ppm and an average of 879 ppm. In this paper, uranium, thorium, cadmium, zinc, and REE are presented and used as proxies.

Uranium, which is a sensitive chemical element to redox state variations (Baturin and Kochenov, 2001), exhibits relatively low concentrations within the High Atlas phosphates (between 2.9 and 74.9 ppm) and shows a positive correlation with P_2O_5 (overall $r^2=0.5$ and $r^2=0.9$ in pristine phosphate) and organic carbon ($r^2=0.6$) (Fig. 8A-B). With an average of 24.4 ppm (SD=17.1 ppm), uranium concentrations in the High Atlas phosphates are up to 5 times lower than the average concentration of uranium in sedimentary phosphorites, which is around 120 ppm calculated from the assemblage of 18 regional averages representing different world phosphatic basins, including Ouled Abdoun phosphorites from Morocco (Altschuler, 1980). The winnowed phosphate displays a high variability in uranium content (from 17.6 to 74.9 ppm, with mean=37 ppm; SD=18 ppm). However, the karst-filling phosphate, sharing geochemical similarities with the winnowed phosphate, displays the lowest uranium concentrations (mean=19.81 ppm; SD=4.16 ppm). Thorium has concentrations varying from 0.8 to 3.7 ppm and does not show any significant correlation with P_2O_5 ($r^2=0.04$) (Fig. 8C).

Cadmium is a transition metal, considered an environmental pollutant when it accumulates in water and soil from industrial and agricultural activities (Evangelou et al., 2004; Kelepertzis, 2014). The cadmium limit in the European Union Regulation (EU) 2019/1009 is set at 60 mg kg^{-1} P_2O_5 in organo-mineral phosphate fertilizers (European Parliament, 2019). The different types of phosphate in the High Atlas contain overall low levels of cadmium, with an average

of 14.46 ppm Cd (max=66.96 ppm; min=0.27 ppm; SD=13.4 ppm), which is below the average for phosphorites (18 ppm; (Altschuler, 1980)). Karst-filling phosphate exhibits the lowest cadmium content with an average of 2 ppm (SD=2.08 ppm). Cadmium evolves in a similar way to zinc (Fig. 8D), whose concentrations in the different phosphatic lithofacies vary between 29 and 283 ppm. These two elements do not significantly correlate with P_2O_5 ($r^2=0.01$ for both elements) (Fig. 8E-F). Instead, they are positively correlated with organic carbon ($r^2=0.5$ in pristine phosphate for Cd and $r^2=0.7$ in pristine phosphate for Zn) (Fig. 8G-H).

Among trace elements, rare earth elements (REE) show a positive correlation with P_2O_5 and F in all analyzed phosphatic lithofacies ($r^2=0.5$ for REE and $r^2=0.5$ for F in pristine phosphate) (Fig. 9A-B). This correlation is stronger in pristine lithofacies. The Σ REE concentration reaches 260 ppm (126 ppm on average with SD= 57.56 ppm), well below the average content of phosphorites (Altschuler 1980; Jarvis et al., 1994). In-situ microanalyses of CFA grains from winnowed phosphate of Amizmiz showed important Σ REE concentrations in CFA with an average of 150 ppm (SD=69 ppm) (Aubineau et al., 2022a).

The $(Yb/Nd)_N$ ratio, which measures the fractionation degree in REE series between heavy REE (HREE) and light REE (LREE) (Johannesson et al., 2017), is higher in karst-filling phosphate (>2) compared to other phosphatic lithofacies, with around 1.5 (Fig. 10). The normalized REE with respect to PAAS (Post-Archean Australian Shale; (Taylor and McLennan, 1985) show similar patterns for the different phosphate types (Fig. 11). They are characterized by a flat enriched HREE segment and LREE depletion with a negative cerium anomaly (Fig. 11). The pristine phosphate normalized spider diagrams show relatively flat patterns, smoother slope, and lower Ce anomalies compared to the other phosphatic lithofacies (Fig. 11). In this study, the cerium anomaly (Ce/Ce^*) is calculated as $2 * Ce_N / (La_N + Pr_N)$ (Bau and Dulski, 1996). The magnitude of the negative cerium anomaly is greater in

karst-filling phosphate compared to the other phosphatic lithofacies (Fig. 11). The PAAS-normalized REE patterns also display a slight positive gadolinium anomaly, which is less expressed in the pristine phosphates.

6. Discussion

6.1. The natural enrichment of phosphatic sediments

The different phosphatic lithofacies of the High Atlas are genetically-linked, arising from a sedimentary differentiation of a primary phosphate by winnowing, reworking, transport, and weathering (El Bamiki, 2020; El Bamiki et al., 2020). Similarly, the natural enrichment of phosphatic sediments by hydrodynamics is documented in different phosphate deposits. For instance, Bou Craa phosphorites in southern Morocco accumulated in a proximal and high-energy oxic shelf environment, where winnowing and reworking of pristine phosphate during periods of sea-level fall has led to the formation of high-grade phosphorite that can also be transported during subsequent transgressive events (Nguidi et al., 2021). Analogously, Kef Essennoun phosphorites in Algeria accumulated from storm-wave winnowing of a pristine phosphate that is locally preserved (Dassamiour et al., 2021). Winnowing, transport, and reworking of primary phosphate also have many impacts on phosphatic sediments other than P-related enrichment. Reworking and weathering can induce important variations in the $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ isotopic ratio of shark teeth, as documented in the Paleogene Gafsa basin in Tunisia (Kocsis et al., 2013). Winnowing and reworking processes cause significant modifications in the amplitude of the negative Ce anomaly and induce rapid oxidation of organic matter (Kechiched et al., 2018).

The investigated bulk phosphatic sediments are composed of a mixture of phosphatic grains coexisting with non-phosphatic phases, mainly terrigenous particles and carbonate minerals.

The degree of phosphatic sediment enrichment depends on the relative abundance of phosphorus-bearing grains with respect to other phases. Hence, enriched high-grade

phosphatic sediments are expected to host low detrital content compared to low-grade non-enriched phosphatic sediments. The terrigenous fraction in the studied phosphatic sediments is dominated by detrital clay and quartz. These components are rich in some distinctive chemical elements, such as Si, K, Al, and Ti, considered markers of detrital input in marine sedimentary systems. In the High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments, the decrease of these detrital tracers' concentrations goes hand in hand with an increase in the P_2O_5 content. Sediments with low P_2O_5 concentration (<12 wt.%) show a wide range of variation with respect to the detrital tracers. This dispersion is likely related to the interplay between clay and coarse detrital inputs and *in-situ* carbonate production in the basin at the time of deposition. For its part, high silica content characterizes phosphatic lags that contain a large fraction of detrital quartz grains delivered from an adjacent continental terrigenous source (i.e., Anti-Atlas). In addition to the detrital-derived silica, another part of the silica content in phosphatic sediments would be of a biogenic origin related to the abundance of siliceous microfossils, mainly diatoms (Maldonado et al., 2011; Prévôt, 1988).

Calcium, which is positively correlated to P_2O_5 and a principal component of the studied sediments, is predominantly controlled by the CFA as it constitutes a major ion in its open lattice (Jarvis et al., 1994; Nathan, 1984). The crystallographic site of calcium in the CFA allows many chemical substitutions (Jarvis et al., 1994; McArthur, 1985; Nathan, 1984). The high calcium content in the winnowed and karst-filled phosphates is due to the relatively high concentration of phosphatic grains at the expense of the terrigenous fraction. However, part of the calcium emanates also from the carbonate fraction of the binding phase.

During the sedimentary differentiation of the primary phosphatic lithofacies (pristine), the storm-induced winnowing process eliminates the fine clay fraction of the sediment, which is less dense than the phosphatic grains (the specific gravity of phosphatic grains is around 2.9 g/cm^3 versus 1.5 to 2.5 g/cm^3 for the other sedimentary particles; (Föllmi, 1996; Pufahl and

Grimm, 2003)). This process is mirrored by a progressive decrease in the content of detrital tracers (SiO_2 , Al_2O_3 , K_2O , and TiO_2 ; Fig. 12) with increasing P_2O_5 content. The degree of relative enrichment of phosphatic sediments by fine clay fraction removal is controlled by the intensity of winnowing and hydrodynamic reworking and its repetitiveness over time. Repeated winnowing and reworking of phosphatic sediments leads to the formation of thick amalgamated phosphate-rich beds (Pufahl and Groat, 2017). Winnowing events in the High Atlas phosphates show an episodic style, which is reflected by the metric alternation of high-energy winnowed granular phosphatic beds and low-energy intervals of phosphatic marls (El Bamiki et al., 2020). This natural enrichment process gives rise to the granular facies of densely-packed peloids and high P_2O_5 content. Electron probe microanalysis of Amizmiz winnowed phosphate revealed that phosphatic peloids contain an average P_2O_5 concentration of 30.64 ± 2.26 wt.% (Aubineau et al., 2022a). The observed similarities between winnowed and karst-filling phosphates suggest that the latter are derived from the transport and reworking of previously winnowed lithofacies. In phosphatic lags, fine particles are similarly removed by wave hydrodynamics in a shallow proximal environment (El Bamiki et al., 2020). However, the proximity of a detrital source, delivering significant amounts of terrigenous coarse-grained particles (mainly quartz), diluted the phosphate content of the bulk sediment. This documented sedimentological evolution in the High Atlas phosphates corresponds to a natural hydrodynamic enrichment process turning low-grade primary phosphatic sediments into high-grade granular phosphates (Fig. 12).

6.2. Phosphogenesis conditions and subsequent evolution

Prior to the mechanical enrichment, the formation of phosphatic grains is triggered within porewater microsystems, a few centimeters beneath the sediment-water interface under specific conditions (Glenn et al., 1994; Jarvis et al., 1994; Pufahl and Groat, 2017). These phosphogenesis conditions can be traced using geochemical proxies such as REE and other

redox-sensitive elements. Indeed, trace elements are widely used as reliable proxies for paleoenvironments and paleo-redox conditions in the sedimentary realm (Algeo and Maynard, 2004; Auer et al., 2017; McArthur and Walsh, 1984). The concentrations of trace elements in phosphorites are higher than their average concentrations in the upper crust (Altschuler, 1980). Therefore, phosphatic sediments are among the reliable geological archives widely used for studying trace element proxies (Lumiste et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2017). Some of these trace elements are of environmental concern (e.g., uranium and cadmium), which makes understanding their distribution and behavior extremely important.

The REE group is distinguished from the rest of the trace elements by a consistent chemical behavior during deposition owing to their identical outer electron shell configuration (Deng et al., 2017). This feature makes these elements reliable tracers of redox conditions at the time of sediment deposition as well as the geological and chemical processes involved (e.g., Auer et al., 2017; Jarvis et al., 1994; Lumiste et al., 2019; McArthur and Walsh, 1984; Reynard et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1987). In the different studied phosphatic lithofacies, the positive correlation between REE and the main constituent elements of the CFA (e.g., phosphorus, fluorine), along with the in-situ microanalysis data of CFA in the High Atlas phosphate (Aubineau et al., 2022a), suggests a crystallo-chemical control of the latter on REE that are preferentially trapped within the crystal structure of this mineral, mainly by substitution processes (Elderfield and Greaves, 1982; Pan and Fleet, 2002; Wright et al., 1987; Yang et al., 2021). Indeed, the “Open Lattice” feature of the CFA facilitates the incorporation of REE and other trace elements (Nathan, 1984).

The incorporated REE into the CFA can be delivered directly from seawater, ferromanganese oxyhydroxides and organic particles, biogenic silica, clay minerals, or a carbonate precursor (Jarvis et al., 1994; Krajewski et al., 1994; Pufahl and Groat, 2017). CFA initially precipitates with a very low REE content (McArthur and Walsh, 1984). For instance, fish debris initially

contain very low concentrations of REE but rapidly gains high postmortem concentrations (Grandjean et al., 1987; Liao et al., 2019). Thus, REE enrichment of CFA continues following its formation during early diagenesis by substitution processes (Jarvis et al., 1994; Nathan, 1984). Therefore, low sedimentation rates and slow burial would favor greater REE incorporation (Elderfield and Pagett, 1986). Similar conditions of sediment accumulation were documented in the studied series in the High Atlas area during periods of phosphate accumulation, specifically within phosphogenic windows (El Bamiki et al., 2020). During the Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene, low sedimentation rates and slow burial during phosphate accumulation were maintained owing to the drastically lowered subsidence (Ellouz et al., 2003) and the limited terrigenous inputs to the outer platform zone, where phosphogenesis was active (El Bamiki et al., 2020). It is relevant to note that there is no siliciclastic detrital influence on the REE composition of CFA peloids as suggested by the absence of correlation between Y/Ho values and Zr in the Moroccan High Atlas CFA peloids (Aubineau et al., 2022a).

Despite the subsequent burial and diagenesis upon REE incorporation into the CFA, the primary REE signature is seemingly preserved (Jaisi and Blake, 2010). The Y/Y^* vs. $(La/Nd)_N$ cross-plot (Fig. 13A) shows that the studied samples fall predominantly within the seawater field (Shields and Stille, 2001). The Y/Y^* ratio shows an increasing trend from pristine phosphate towards winnowed and karst-filling phosphates (Fig. 13A). In the $(La/Yb)_N$ vs. $(La/Sm)_N$ cross-plot (Fig. 13B), PAAS-normalized La/Sm ratios shows that all samples fall in modern seawater field. However, PAAS-normalized La/Yb ratios are slightly higher, suggesting preferential early diagenetic adsorption of light REE without any modification of $(La/Sm)_N$ ratios (Reynard et al., 1999). In the Ce/Ce^* vs. Pr/Pr^* binary diagram (Fig. 13C), all samples fall within the true negative Ce anomaly field, reflecting oxygenated seawater. This suggests that the Ce anomalies in the High Atlas phosphates can

be used to track redox conditions. Conclusively, the primary signal of REE is preserved, and no effects of diagenesis and weathering are observed. This preservation of the primary signature is also evidenced in the High Atlas phosphates by the typical primary CO_3^{2-} content of the studied CFA, showing an average CO_3^{2-} of 8.40 ± 0.37 wt.%, suggesting a primary CFA in equilibrium with seawater (Nathan, 1984). Equivalent unaltered CFA from the Ganntour phosphate series shows similar CO_3^{2-} contents of 7.42 ± 0.74 wt.% on average (Aubineau et al., 2022b).

The REE signature in the High Atlas phosphate series is comparable to that of different phosphate deposits across the Tethyan phosphogenic province (e.g., Algeria, (Kechiched et al., 2020); Saudi Arabia, (Al-Hobaib et al., 2013); Fig. 14). The PAAS-normalized spiders follow the same pattern even though the concentrations vary between the different deposits that belong to the same Upper Cretaceous-Paleogene South Tethyan phosphogenic province (Notholt, 1985). These similar signatures are indicative of broadly homogeneous geochemical conditions for the incorporation of REE across the Tethyan province. However, the observed differences in concentrations may be related to variations in the seawater REE content, probably linked to differences in seawater supply (Buccione et al., 2021; Garnit et al., 2017; Kechiched et al., 2020). REE concentration differences could also be linked to P_2O_5 concentrations of the sediment (i.e., the abundance of phosphatic grains); considering the crystallo-chemical control of CFA on REE, high P_2O_5 phosphates would contain more REE in the bulk rock. The crystallographic control of CFA on REE is well documented in different phosphate deposits (Jarvis et al., 1994; Lumiste et al., 2021, 2019). LA-ICP-MS microanalyses of different mineral phases of the High Atlas phosphates revealed that REE are mostly associated with CFA (Aubineau et al., 2022a).

The PAAS-normalized REE patterns in the High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments are similar to modern oxygenated seawater (Fig. 11 and Fig. 14) (Bau and Dulski, 1996; Bau and

Koschinsky, 2009; Jarvis et al., 1994; McArthur and Walsh, 1984). The relatively flat patterns observed in pristine phosphate reflect the presence of an important fine detrital fraction in the bulk sediment compared to other facies. Contributions of terrigenous particles may induce changes to the bulk signature of REE of phosphatic sediments (Altschuler, 1980). The overall patterns in the High Atlas phosphates, along with $(Yb/Nd)_N$ ratios, suggest quantitative incorporation, without significant fractionation, of REE into the crystal structure of CFA. This incorporation took place in confined pore water systems under bacterial mediation (Jarvis et al., 1994; Krajewski et al., 1994; Prévôt, 1982). This microbially induced phosphorus concentration is related to polyphosphate metabolism (Crosby and Bailey, 2012; Diaz et al., 2008). Under oxic conditions of shallow seawater, HREE are more stable in aqueous complexes (Byrne and Kim, 1990; Cantrell and Byrne, 1987) with a longer residence time (Haley et al., 2004). However, LREE are readily adsorbed by fine suspended particles (Byrne and Kim, 1990). Cerium, which has two valence states (Ce^{3+} and Ce^{4+}), is sensitive to redox state changes. Under an oxic water column, Ce^{3+} is scavenged from seawater by sorption to Mn and Fe-oxyhydroxide surfaces and subsequent oxidation to Ce^{4+} (Bau and Koschinsky, 2009). This preferential scavenging process creates a noticeable depletion of Ce in seawater (Bau and Dulski, 1996; Bau and Koschinsky, 2009; German and Elderfield, 1990; Tostevin et al., 2016). Therefore, the oxidation of Ce^{3+} to Ce^{4+} is responsible for the negative cerium anomaly pointed out from the different phosphatic facies. The observed intensification of this anomaly in hydrodynamically-accumulated lithofacies is likely linked to winnowing and reworking processes (McArthur, 1980). McArthur (1980) documented a decrease of cerium by 44% during submarine reworking. During winnowing, slightly buried phosphates are returned to the primary phosphogenesis zone at the sediment-water interface to experience further oxidation. Consequently, cerium depletion is further enhanced. Subsequently, subaerial weathering of apatite can also cause an additional removal of cerium

(McArthur, 1980). Therefore, the combination of winnowing and subaerial alteration processes increases the cerium anomaly, which explains its intensity in karst-filled phosphates compared to the other lithofacies.

Another appealing anomaly in the REE signal of the studied lithofacies is the positive gadolinium anomaly, which is commonly observed in similar marine sediments (Kim et al., 1991). Kim et al. (1991) linked this positive anomaly to the high stability of this element in seawater due to the 4f orbital layer being half-filled (Tetrad effect; (Bau, 1999; Kim et al., 1991)). The behavior of gadolinium is also controlled by the ligands involved in its complexation, which triggers a difference with respect to neighboring elements; thus, the anomaly is created (Kim et al., 1991).

6.3. Evolution of redox conditions within the depositional environment

The sedimentary differentiation of phosphate lithofacies was allocyclically controlled by variations in the relative sea level in the High Atlas domain (El Bamiki et al., 2020). Such variations can trigger changes in redox conditions throughout the evolution of the depositional environment. Key elements such as uranium, cerium, and cadmium can faithfully trace these redox changes across the depositional environment (Jarvis et al., 1994; Lucas and Abbas, 1989; Fumagalli et al., 2019; Soudry et al., 2013). The positive correlation between P_2O_5 and uranium indicates that the latter is incorporated into the CFA structure. In-situ micro-analyses of CFA peloids from three samples of the Amizmiz winnowed phosphate revealed uranium concentrations of 58.6 ± 5.7 ppm, 45.1 ± 6.8 ppm, and 42.7 ± 9.6 ppm (Aubineau et al., 2022a). This crystallo-chemical control has also been documented in several phosphorites across the Tethyan province (Baturin and Kochenov, 2001; Lucas and Abbas, 1989). Uranium in seawater occurs in various chemical species, mainly uranyl ions $(UO_2)^{2+}$, uranyl carbonate complexes $UO_2(CO_3)_3^{4-}$, and organic-bound uranium (Tribovillard et al., 2006). Uranium in the form of U^{4+} enters the structure of the CFA by substitution for Ca^{2+}

and can also be adsorbed onto crystal surfaces (Jarvis et al., 1994; Tribovillard et al., 2006). However, part of uranium would be carried by organic matter, as suggested by its positive correlation with organic carbon. The role of organic matter in uranium scavenging is also well-known in similar phosphogenic contexts (Baturin and Kochenov, 2001; Lucas and Abbas, 1989). High uranium concentrations in phosphatic sediments are not necessarily indicative of anoxic conditions because of the efficient redox cycling of this element (Jarvis et al., 1994; Trappe, 1998). Similarly to uranium, thorium in seawater present as Th^{4+} may enter the apatite structure by replacing Ca^{2+} (Altschuler, 1980; Glinkskaya et al., 1993). It is noteworthy to underline that part of thorium in the bulk phosphatic sediment might be associated with clay minerals (Altschuler, 1980). In subaerial environments, uranium undergoes substantial leaching compared to thorium (Altschuler, 1980; Burnett and Gomberg, 1977). This behavior is illustrated in the Ce/Ce^* vs. U/Th diagram (Fig. 15) that traces the history of redox conditions during the sedimentary evolution of the different phosphatic lithofacies of the High Atlas. In this diagram, karst-filling phosphate lithofacies is discriminated from the other phosphatic lithofacies by lower Ce/Ce^* and U/Th ratios. During winnowing and submarine reworking, slightly buried phosphates are returned to the primary phosphogenesis zone at the sediment-water interface to experience further oxidation and amplification of the Ce depletion. Additionally, winnowing causes an increase in the relative uranium concentration in the sediment because part of it is associated with phosphatic peloids that are concentrated by this process. Consequently, the U/Th ratio increases with increasing winnowing degrees. The low Ce/Ce^* and U/Th ratios in the karst-filling phosphate are due to the polyphase evolution of this phosphatic lithofacies and repeated oxidation during submarine reworking and subaerial weathering with preferential leaching of uranium in the subaerial domain.

Karst-filling phosphate contains low cadmium concentrations (min=0.28 ppm; max=6.25 ppm; mean= 2.27 ppm; SD= 2.08 ppm). Vertical distribution profiles of this element in seawater show a significant depletion in surface waters compared to deep waters (Boyle et al., 1976). This nutrient-like pattern suggests the fixation of cadmium by organisms at the seawater surface during photosynthesis and implies short residence times (Boyle et al., 1976). Like phosphorus, cadmium is transferred to the phosphogenesis zone by upwelling currents (Nathan et al., 1997). Cadmium bonds mainly to organic matter and can also be trapped in clay minerals and sulfides (Kitano and Fujiyoshi, 1980). This is supported in the High Atlas phosphates by the observed positive correlation of cadmium with organic carbon and zinc. The observed loss of cadmium in karst-filling phosphates is, therefore, related to significant oxidation of organic matter and associated sulfides in the sediment. In all phosphatic lithofacies, cadmium and zinc do not show any significant correlation with P_2O_5 , ruling out a possible crystallo-chemical control of the CFA on these elements. Under oxic conditions, released cadmium can be reincorporated into the sediment by adsorption onto iron-rich particles, clay minerals, or even phosphatic peloids (Nathan et al., 1997). Thus, effective cadmium removal requires not only oxidation but also repeated hydrodynamic winnowing and reworking. Following its removal, cadmium can be trapped in the carbonate layers because its ionic radius is close to that of calcium, facilitating the incorporation into calcium minerals (Papadopoulos and Rowell, 1988). The low cadmium content in the bulk rock and the lack of a crystallo-chemical control of CFA on this pollutant element imply that its concentrations should not be enriched during the processing and industrial beneficiation of the raw phosphate rock.

6.4. Karst-filling phosphate: An example of the natural enrichment and quality enhancement of phosphate

The karst-filling phosphate lithofacies shows several specific features, notably the low occurrence of chemical pollutants. From a sedimentological standing point, the karst-filling phosphates found in the Ouarzazate Basin are derived from a granular winnowed phosphate facies formed earlier and redistributed by early transgressive currents (El Bamiki et al., 2020). During the Maastrichtian, the sea flooded the shallow platform corresponding to northwest Morocco and the present-day High Atlas (Fig. 16A). In the Ouarzazate and the Marrakesh High Atlas basins, carbonate production was active, resulting mainly in dolomitic limestones. However, further west, towards the Souss basin, a phosphogenic window was active, giving rise to primary phosphates that were continuously winnowed (Fig. 16B). At the end of the Maastrichtian, the area underwent a widespread regression (Chellaï et al., 1995). This regional event caused the emersion of proximal zones and karstification of carbonates by dissolution, as well as an extensive submarine reworking and subaerial weathering of previously formed granular phosphate on the platform. This resulted in chemical changes in the bulk phosphatic sediment, including releasing some ions such as Ca^{2+} and CO_3^{2-} and removing oxidation-sensitive elements associated with organic matter and sulfides such as uranium and cadmium. The subsequent transgressive episode transported these phosphates to the Ouarzazate Basin, where they accumulated in karst cavities created during regression (Fig. 16C). This accumulation occurred under oxidizing conditions. Thus, the oxidation of organic matter and sulfides further enhanced the removal of uranium and cadmium. Despite this polyphase evolution of karst-filling phosphate, the apatite grains resisted submarine reworking and subaerial weathering, and the primary REE signature was preserved. However, these processes triggered important changes in the bulk rock composition as carbonate phases and organic matter are more easily altered. The karst-filling phosphate is an

excellent example of how submarine reworking and subaerial weathering processes increase the phosphate ore grade and enhance the quality of phosphatic sediments by removing chemical elements of environmental concern.

7. Conclusions

This study illustrates the control of the post-phosphogenesis sedimentary processes on the bulk chemical composition of phosphatic lithofacies and explains the high variability and changes in their chemical composition. The investigated phosphatic lithofacies are the result of a sedimentary differentiation of primary authigenic phosphate particles formed under oxic seawater conditions. This sedimentary differentiation is faithfully mirrored by the geochemical signature of the phosphatic lithofacies. Hydrodynamically-driven winnowing and reworking processes remove chemical elements related to the detrital fraction of the sediment, turning low-grade phosphatic sediment into phosphorite. The efficiency of reworking processes can be weakened in proximal settings in the presence of significant coarse detrital inputs. In the late stage of phosphatic lithofacies evolution, subaerial weathering enhances the natural enrichment of phosphate and contributes to its purification by removing chemical pollutants such as uranium and cadmium associated with organic matter and sulfides. Despite the sedimentary differentiation of phosphates, CFA resisted chemical changes and preserved its original geochemical signature. These enriched phosphatic lithofacies are primary exploration targets. Considering the control of sedimentary differentiation processes on the chemistry of phosphatic sediments, trace element paleo-redox proxies should be carefully interpreted in light of the sedimentary evolution of the primary phosphatic sediment and the primary mineral residence phases of each element. Furthermore, assessing the impact of weathering is required before drawing inferences regarding the paleo-redox conditions.

8. Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the support through the R&D *Initiative – Appel à projets autour des phosphates APPHOS* – sponsored by OCP (OCP Foundation, R&D OCP, Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, National Center of Scientific and Technical Research CNRST, Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Professional Training of Morocco MESRSFC) under the project ID: GEO-CHE-01/2017. This project was also financially supported by CAMPUS FRANCE (PHC TOUBKAL 2017 (French-Morocco bilateral program) Grant Number: 36816NA). Geosciences Montpellier supported part of this research through the CS-GM/2022 project. The authors would like to thank Céline Martin for helping with the sample preparation protocol for ICP-MS analyses.

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Table captions

Table.1. XRD reflections and estimated CO_3^{2-} contents (wt.%) of the studied phosphatic sediments. CO_3^{2-} content is calculated following the empirical equation of Schuffert et al. (1990).

Section	Sample	(410) Å	(004) Å	(410) °2θ	(004) °2θ	Δ2θ	CO_3^{2-} content
Moulay Brahim	MBG4	1.7617				1.22	
		5	1.7239	51.855	53.082	6	8.59
	MBG3	1.7615	1.7239			1.21	
		4	8	51.862	53.079	7	8.84
MBG2	1.7607	1.7237			1.20		
	3	3	51.883	53.087	0	9.30	
Talentloute	TLG9	1.7621	1.7238			1.24	
		4	2	51.843	53.084	1	8.20
	TLG6		1.7241			1.23	
		1.7622	5	51.841	53.073	2	8.44
TG4	1.7618	1.7236			1.23		
Amizmiz (Aubineau et al., 2022a)	AMZ1	1.7615	1.7232			1.24	
		3	1	51.863	53.105	1	8.20
	AMZ9	1.7612	1.7236			1.24	
		5	3	51.843	53.091	8	8.03
AMZ8	1.7618	1.7236			1.23		
Ait Fars	AFB1	1.7605	1.7225			1.23	
		3	7	51.894	53.126	2	8.45
	AFB2	1.7612	1.7226			1.25	
Taifest	TSB1	1.7607	1.7227			1.23	
		2	5	51.888	53.120	2	8.45
	TSB2	1.7606	1.7220			1.25	
		5	9	51.890	53.142	2	7.92

Table.2. Bulk rock major element composition (wt.%) of the studied phosphatic lithofacies.

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Pristine phosphate

Winnowed phosphate

Pho
sph
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lags

Karst-filling
phosphate

S A A A T T T T T T T R R R A A A M M M M M T T A R A A T T T T

		1.7612	1.7226			1.25	
	AFB2	2	6	51.872	53.123	1	7.95
		1.7607	1.7227			1.23	
Taifest	TSB1	2	5	51.888	53.120	2	8.45
		1.7606	1.7220			1.25	
	TSB2	5	9	51.890	53.142	2	7.92

Table.3. Bulk rock trace element composition (ppm) of the studied phosphatic lithofacies.

Lithofacies	Pristine phosphate														Winnowed phosphate														Phosphatic lags		Karst-filling phosphate	
	A	A	A	T	T	L	T	T	T	T	R	R	R	A	A	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	T	T	R	A	A	T	T			
Sample	Z	Z	Z	L	L	G	L	L	L	L	M	M	M	Z	Z	B	B	B	B	B	B	L	L	A	A	F	F	S	S	T	T	
	1	1	1	G	G	1	G	G	G	G	Z	Z	Z	7	1	1	1	G	G	G	G	G	1	1	H	H	B	B	B	B	S	S
	7	4	2	4	5	0	6	7	9	3	6	8	9	9	3	5	3	2	3	4	5	2	0	3	5	1	2	1	2	5	6	
	3	2	3	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	3	1	2	4	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2
	8	5	7	8	8	4	2	3	5	1	5	7	2	2	0	0	9	3	2	1	3	8	5	7	5	5	7	0	6	8	5	
	0	2	9	2	1	1	5	7	1	0	2	6	3	4	9	7	8	7	9	4	6	5	2	5	3	0	9	4	0	8	5	
	1	3	8	8	3	7	6	6	6	4	7	1	7	7	5	1	4	5	5	5	8	4	3	4	3	4	7	3	6	3	4	
	6	0	1	6	1	1	5	5	9	3	2	1	4	6	4	4	9	0	2	3	9	3	3	8	7	4	0	7	0	6	9	
	0	4	5	5	1	1	2	5	7	9	3	8	0	0	2	7	7	0	2	1	0	6	3	2	2	7	2	0	6	3	7	
	2	8	8	8	0	3	9	5	7	2	8	5	4	9	6	2	8	0	9	8	1	3	7	6	4	4	8	3	0	4	0	
	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	
	0	6	4	1	1	7	2	1	1	5	9	1	6	1	7	8	3	0	5	4	7	5	2	1	9	4	8	7	0	2	6	
	9	5	3	3	2	4	1	7	4	7	4	3	8	3	3	7	5	7	2	1	9	5	5	0	3	9	0	8	9	4	0	
	7	1	7	0	3	0	9	4	1	0	3	1	5	4	9	5	1	2	1	7	0	7	0	3	7	1	1	0	3	8	7	
	5	1	0	2	6	8	1	5	3	8	3	1	7	8	5	2	0	2	4	4	6	2	6	8	8	9	6	3	1	0	9	
	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	
	3	1	7	9	8	8	2	3	9	2	8	1	3	1	4	5	9	7	6	6	3	9	6	9	7	7	8	6	0	8	6	
	5	6	5	5	6	7	1	7	4	1	4	7	8	9	7	7	5	1	7	0	7	2	9	6	1	8	9	1	9	2	1	
	2	1	1		1	1				1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	
	8	9	7	7	8	0	9	8	1	7	3	1	7	8	7	6	4	2	7	1	1	0	5	2	9	4	8	5	1	1	1	
	7	7	7	7	6	3	7	6	1	9	7	6	3	9	5	2	8	2	4	2	7	7	3	2	6	3	3	3	5	7	3	
	1	7	4	4	2	8	3	0	0	2	1	0	9	0	1	5	5	2	2	7	9	8	4	3	7	0	9	4	8	5	6	
	1	4	6	6	5	4	5	4	5	7	0	3	5	2	9	1	7	7	8	8	0	7	6	6	7	3	2	3	3	1	1	
	0	6	7	0	5	3	9	9	1	8	5	2	8	6	2	9	1	1	3	3	3	4	1	1	2	4	7	0	9	0	9	
	6	3	7	3	3	4	4	2	5	4	4	3	8	7	8	7	8	3	3	7	2	1	0	3	0	6	6	3	3	1	5	
	2	1	1	1	1	4	8	6	8	1	9	1	2	1	8	2	1	8	9	1	1	1	1	9	7	4	5	2	5	4	4	
	6	7	2	1	0	5	5	5	0	3	3	0	8	1	2	0	1	7	1	4	8	2	0	4	7	3	7	9	4	5	5	

dots stand for fine detrital particles. The clay and carbonate matrix supporting phosphatic grains is represented in gray color; white coarse grains in phosphatic lags correspond to quartz. The respective phosphatic lithofacies colors will be respected in all the following figures. (A) Field photograph showing pristine thinly parallel-laminated phosphatic marls. (B) Transmitted light photomicrograph showing densely-packed peloids in winnowed granular phosphate. (C) Transmitted light photomicrograph showing the composition of a phosphatic lag sample. (D) Transmitted light photomicrograph of karst-filling fractured phosphatic grain. pp: phosphatic peloid.

Fig. 3. Location map and lithologic logs of the studied sections illustrating the position of analyzed samples. Sections are horizontalized with reference to the maximum flooding surface (El Bamiki et al., 2020).

Fig. 4. Petrographic characteristics of the Uighur Atlas phosphate-rich sediments based on optical and scanning electron microscopes observations. (A) SEM image in back-scattered electron mode (BSE) of the Amizmiz winnowed phosphatic peloids observed in a clayey and phosphatic matrix in association with carbonates. Red arrows indicate the concavo-convex grain contacts suggesting low to moderate compaction. (B) SEM image in secondary electron mode (SE) showing rounded phosphatic peloids embedded in a clayey matrix. (C) SEM image in SE mode revealing that phosphatic peloids are formed of densely-packed sphere-like microcrystallites. (D) Transmitted light photomicrograph showing an elongated phosphatic coprolite associated with rounded phosphatic peloids. (E) Transmitted light photomicrograph of fish teeth in association with other phosphatic particles. (F) SEM image in BSE mode of a phosphatic sample from Amizmiz showing some gangue minerals such as calcite, dolomite, and accessory Ti oxide. (G) Transmitted light photomicrograph of a phosphatic lag illustrating the association of phosphatic particles with an important detrital quartz fraction. (H) Field photograph showing a karst cavity from Taifest section filled with

phosphatic material. (I) Transmitted light photomicrograph showing agglomerated and fractured phosphatic grains from the karst-filling phosphate. pp: phosphatic peloid; copr: coprolite; ft: fish teeth; ag: agglomerated phosphatic grain; cal: calcite; dol: dolomite; qtz: quartz; Ti Ox: Titanium oxide.

Fig. 5. XRD patterns of the $<2 \mu\text{m}$ clay fraction of the High Atlas phosphate-rich sediments. (A) Pristine phosphate from Talentloute section. (B) Winnowed phosphate from Moulay Brahim section. (C) Winnowed phosphate from Amizmiz section from Aubineau et al. (2022a). (D) Karst-filling phosphate from Ait Fars (AFB) and Taifest (TSB) sections.

Fig. 6. $\text{P}_2\text{O}_5\text{-SiO}_2\text{-CO}_2$ ternary diagram displaying the bulk composition of the investigated phosphatic lithofacies. The green diamond represents the composition of the BCR32 sample, which is an international standard of enriched sedimentary phosphate from Morocco (Potts et al., 1992; Serrini, 1981).

Fig. 7. Binary cross-plots of the different major oxides and organic matter versus P_2O_5 . SiO_2 , Al_2O_3 , K_2O , and TiO_2 are inversely correlated to P_2O_5 ; however, CaO and C.org exhibit a positive correlation with P_2O_5 .

Fig. 8. Binary cross-plot of the different trace elements against P_2O_5 and C.org .

Fig. 9. Binary cross-plots of ΣREE versus P_2O_5 and F showing a positive correlation between these elements.

Fig. 10. $(\text{Yb/Nd})_N$ vs. P_2O_5 cross-plot. $(\text{Yb/Nd})_N$ ratio measures the fractionation degree between HREE and LREE. Karst-filling phosphates exhibit higher $(\text{Yb/Nd})_N$ compared to the other phosphatic lithofacies. PAAS values are from Taylor & McLennan (1985).

Fig. 11. PAAS-normalized spider diagrams of the studied samples in the different phosphatic lithofacies. The patterns are similar and show a flat HREE segment and a depleted LREE

segment with a negative cerium anomaly. The patterns of the pristine phosphatic facies are slightly different, showing less LREE depletion. PAAS values are from Taylor & McLennan (1985).

Fig. 12. Binary diagram highlighting the evolution of phosphatic lithofacies in the High Atlas through the relationship between detrital markers ($\text{SiO}_2 + \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 + \text{K}_2\text{O} + \text{TiO}_2$) and P_2O_5 concentrations.

Fig. 13. REE cross-plots highlighting the potential effects of depositional setting and diagenesis on REE signature. (A) Y anomalies and PAAS-normalized La/Nd ratios. The grey field represents seawater field values *sensu* Shields and Stille (2001). PAAS-normalized La/Yb ratios vs. PAAS-normalized La/Sm ratios after Reynard et al. (1999). (C) Ce anomalies vs. Pr anomalies with fields drawn after Fau and Dulski (1996). PAAS values are from Taylor & McLennan (1985).

Fig. 14. PAAS-normalized spider diagrams of the different phosphatic lithofacies compared to Djebel El Kouif phosphate in Algeria (Kechiched et al., 2020) and Hazm Al-Jalamid phosphate in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hobaihi et al., 2013). Plotted data correspond to the average composition of each phosphatic lithofacies and selected deposits from the Tethyan province. PAAS values are from Taylor & McLennan (1985).

Fig. 15. Ce/Ce* vs. U/Th binary diagram emphasizing the interaction between sedimentary differentiation processes and the geochemical behavior of phosphatic lithofacies and tracing the evolution of redox conditions during sedimentary differentiation and weathering.

Fig. 16. 2D conceptual diagram depicting the accumulation of karst-filling phosphate and its geochemical evolution, resulting from the interaction between relative sea-level variations, hydrodynamic processes, and subaerial weathering.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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Highlights

- Bulk geochemistry traces the evolution of genetically-linked phosphatic facies.
- Winnowing, reworking, and weathering processes enrich primary low-grade phosphate.
- Apatite resists post-phosphogenic sedimentary differentiation processes.
- The natural sedimentary beneficiation of phosphate may remove cadmium and uranium.

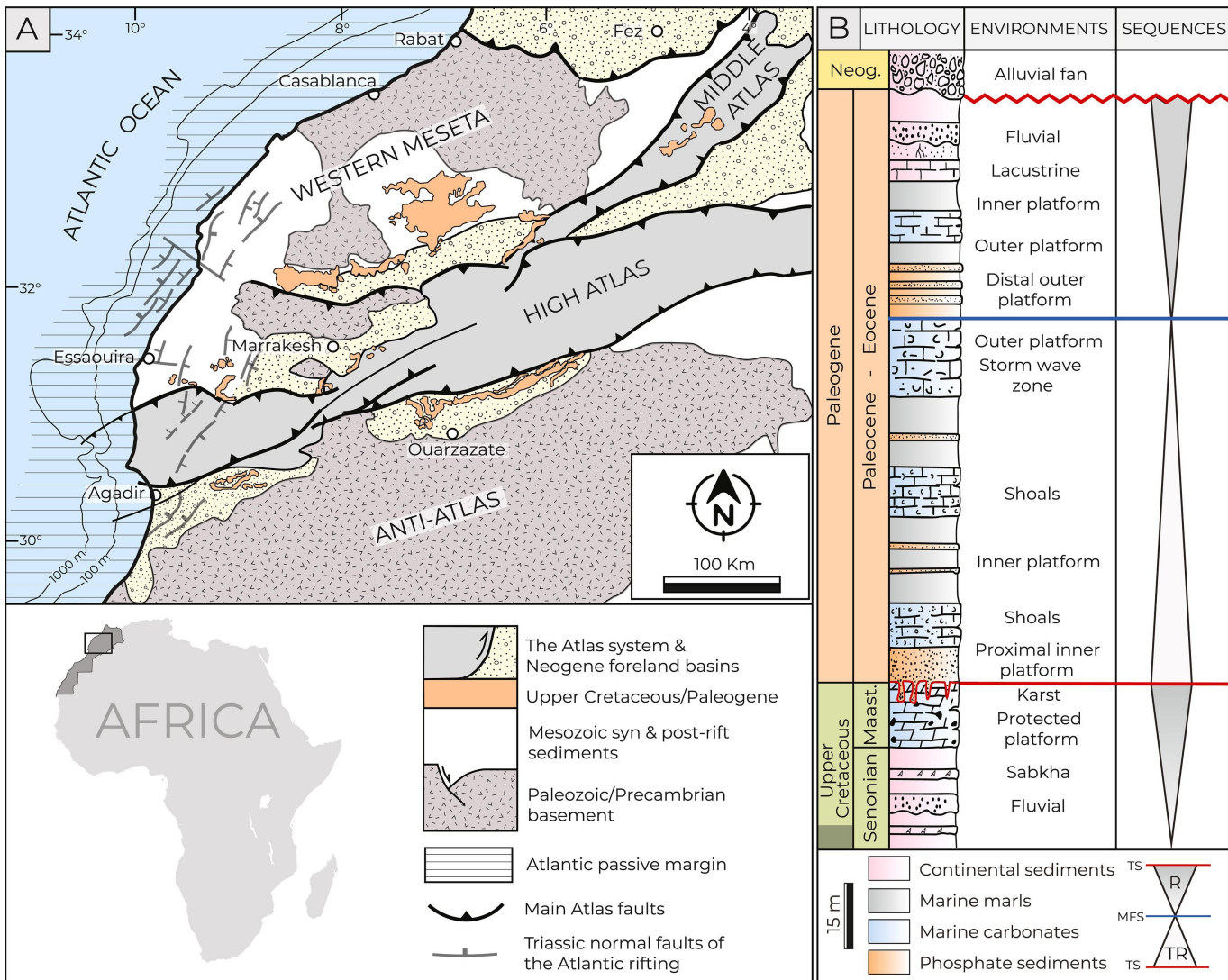


Figure 1

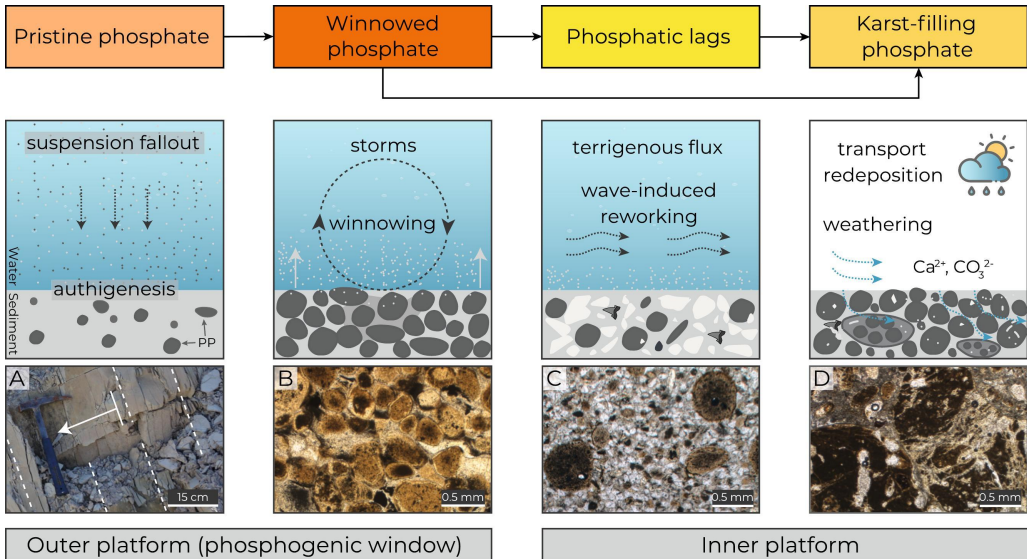


Figure 2

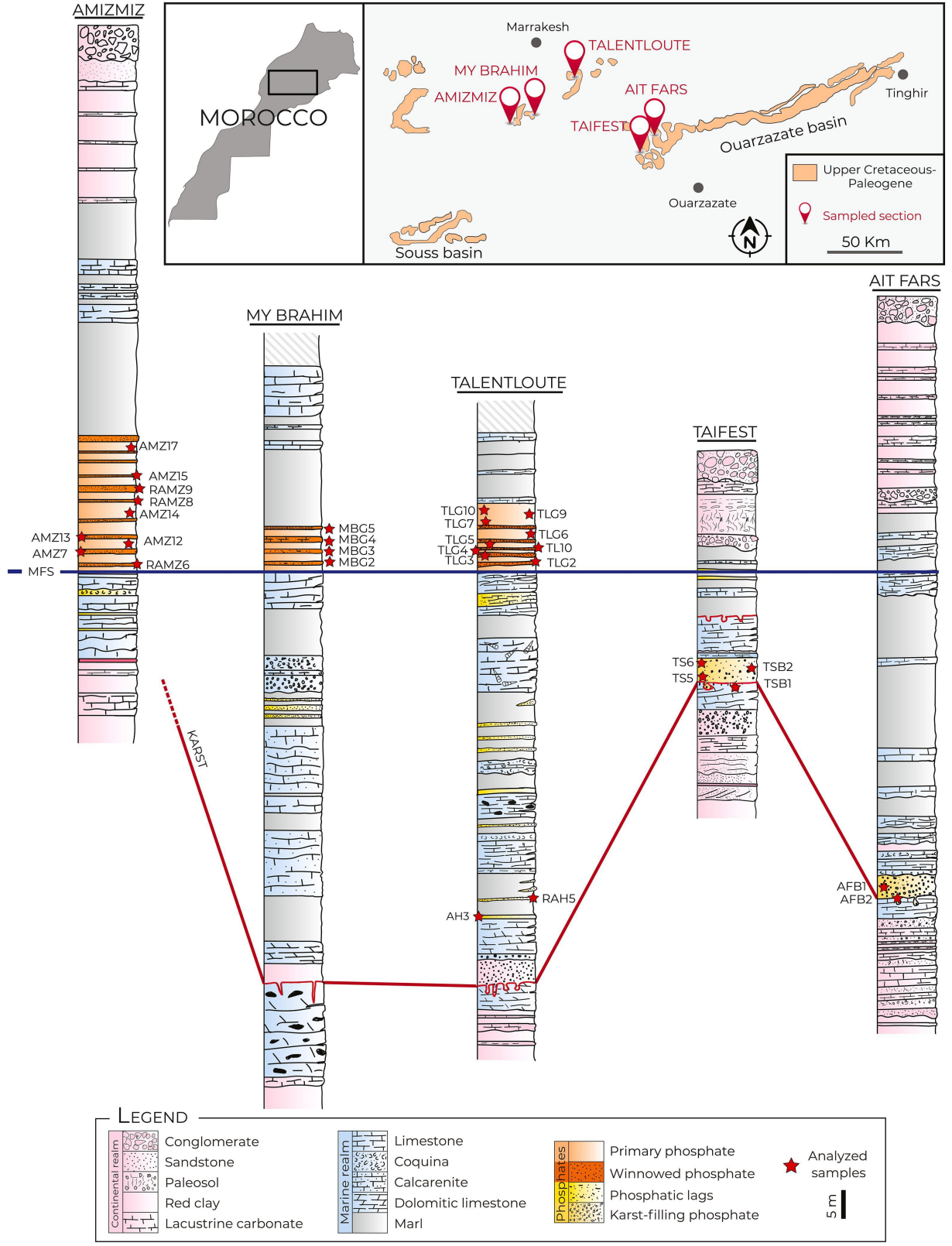


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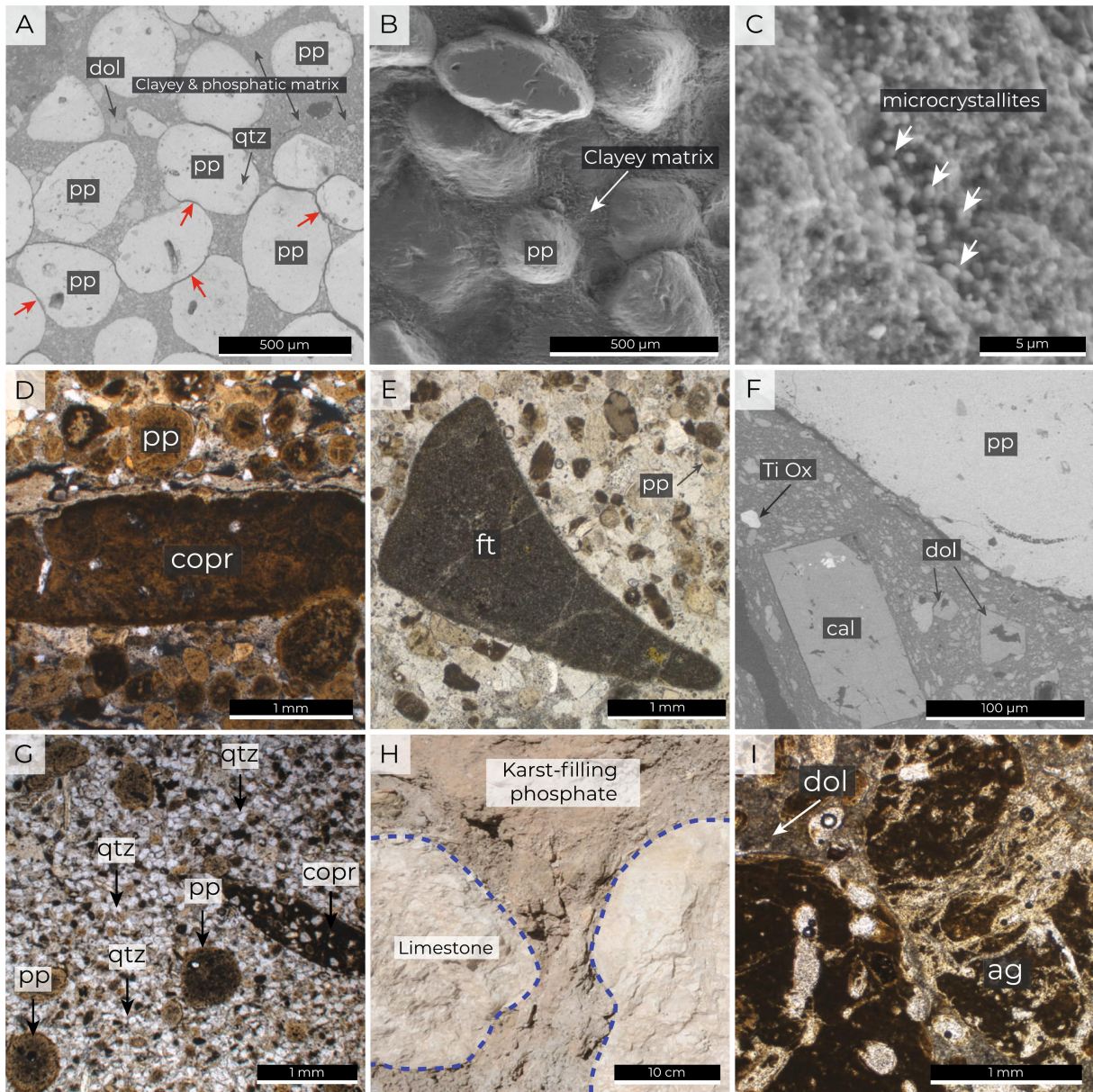


Figure 4

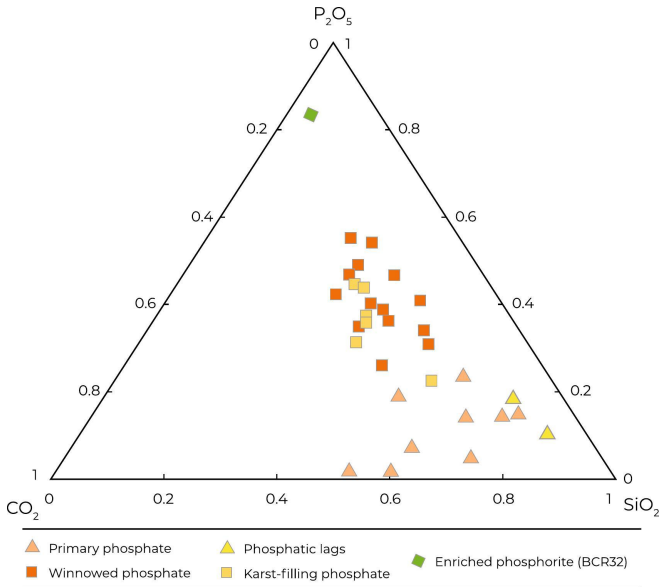


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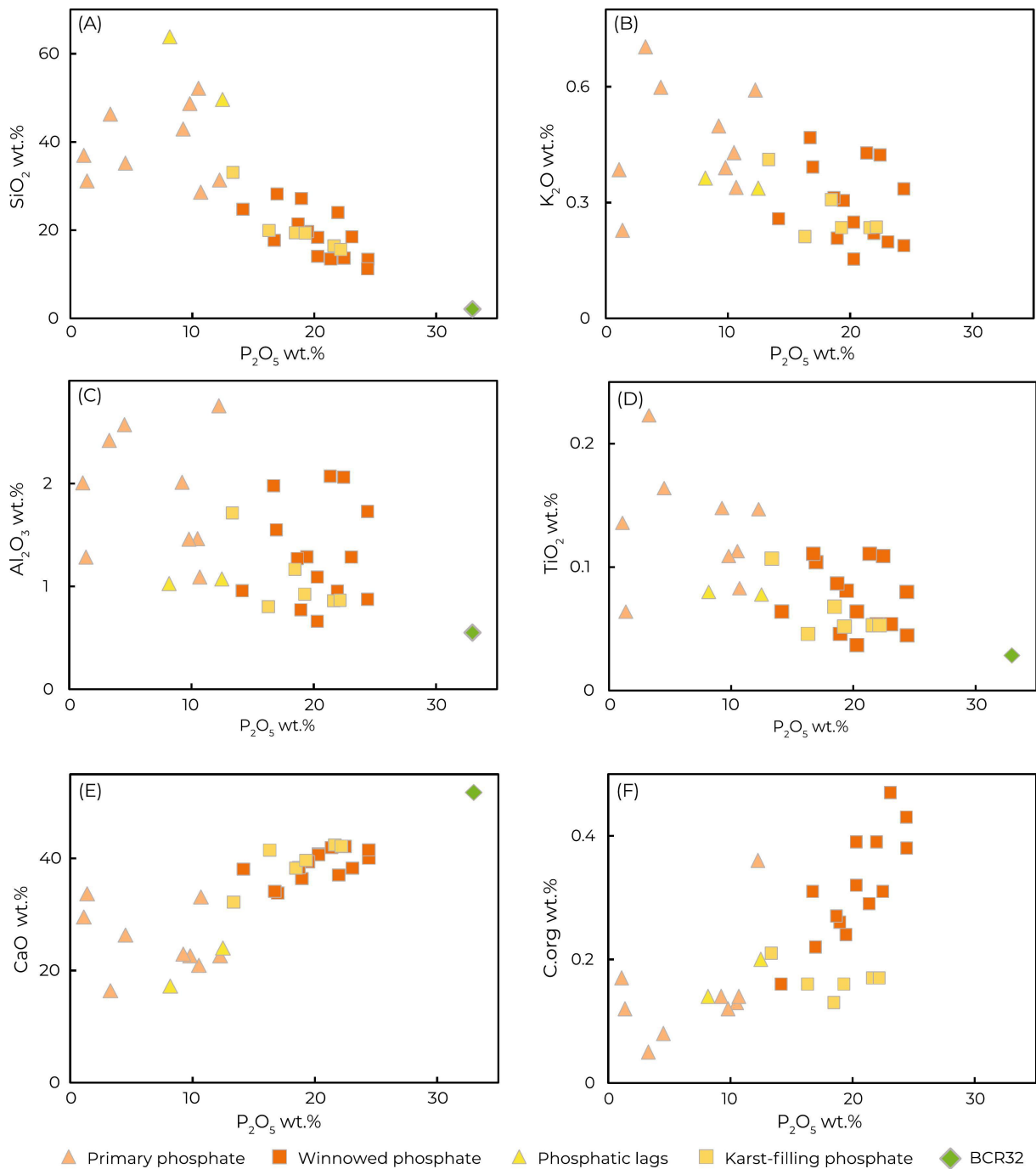


Figure 7

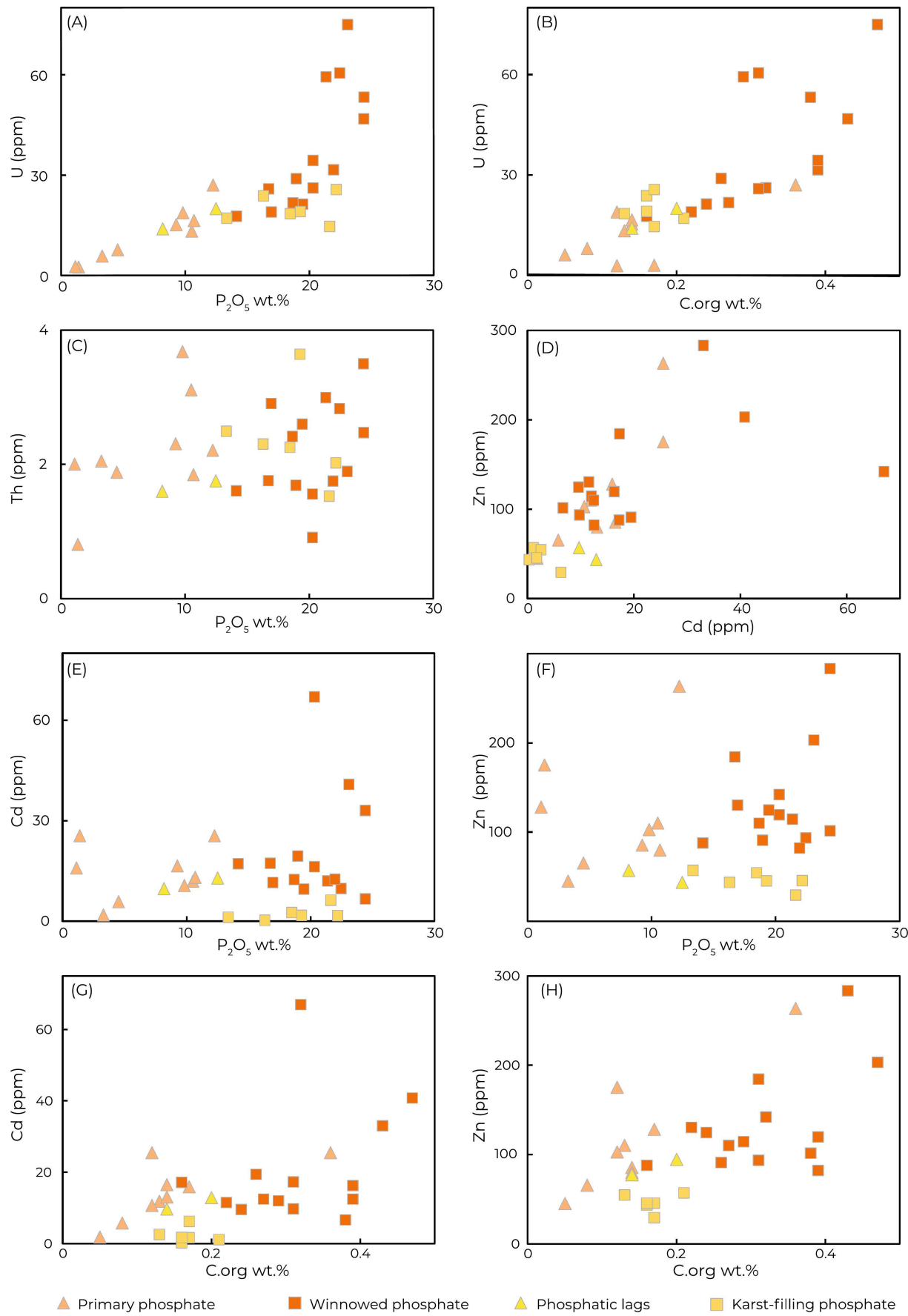


Figure 8

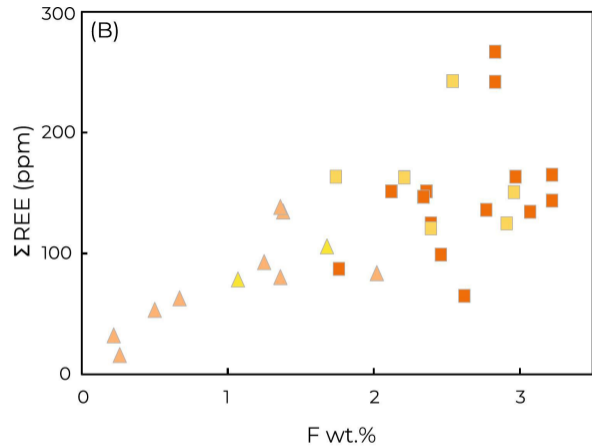
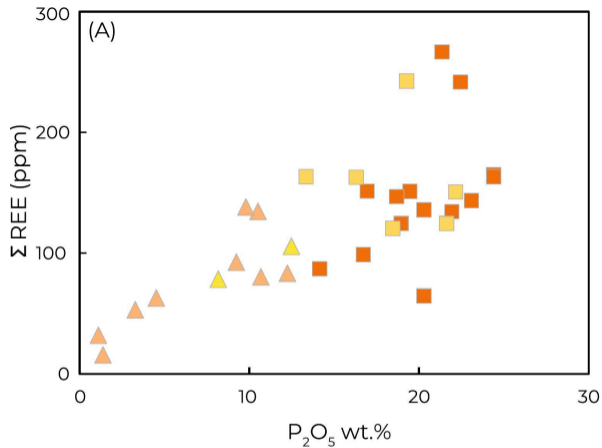


Figure 9

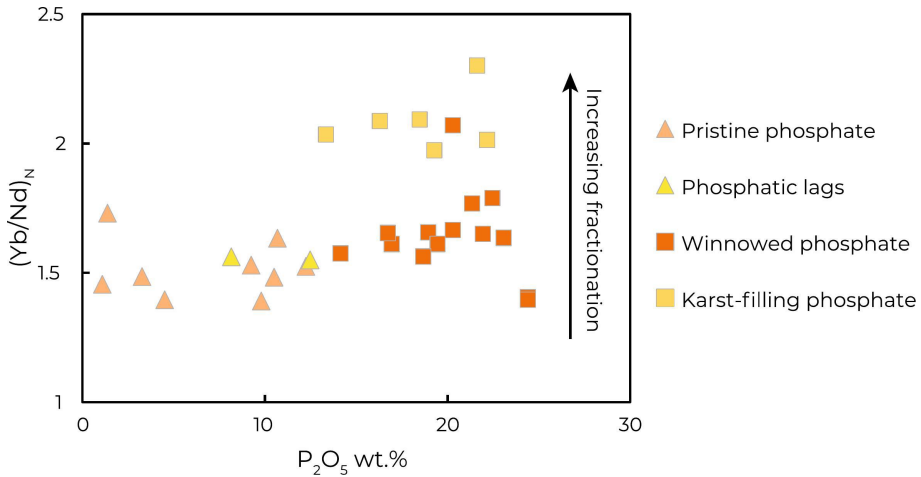


Figure 10

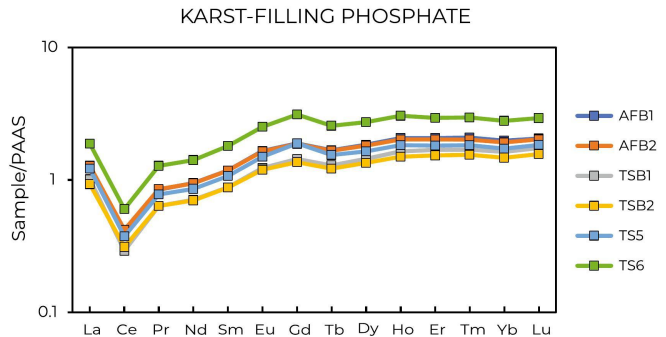
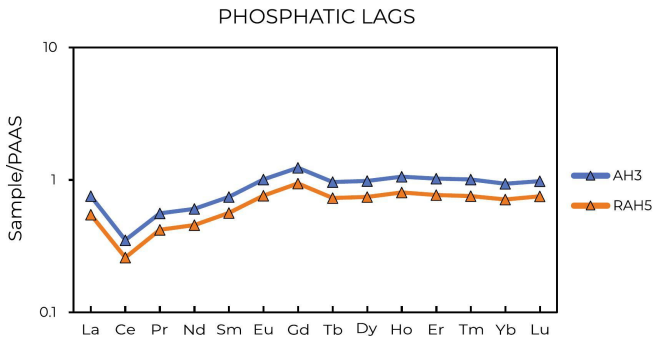
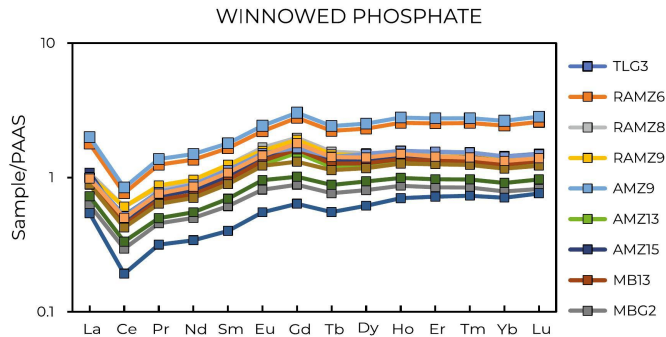
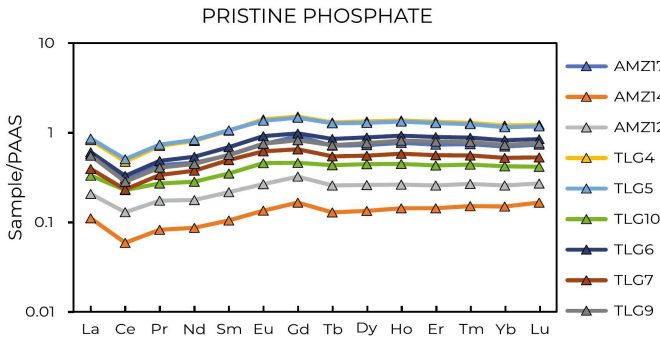


Figure 11

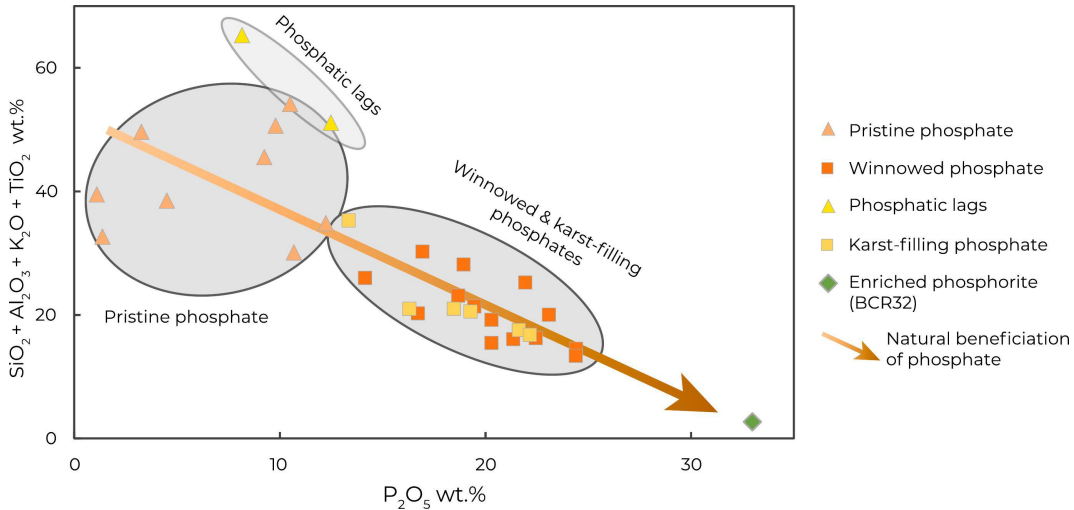


Figure 12

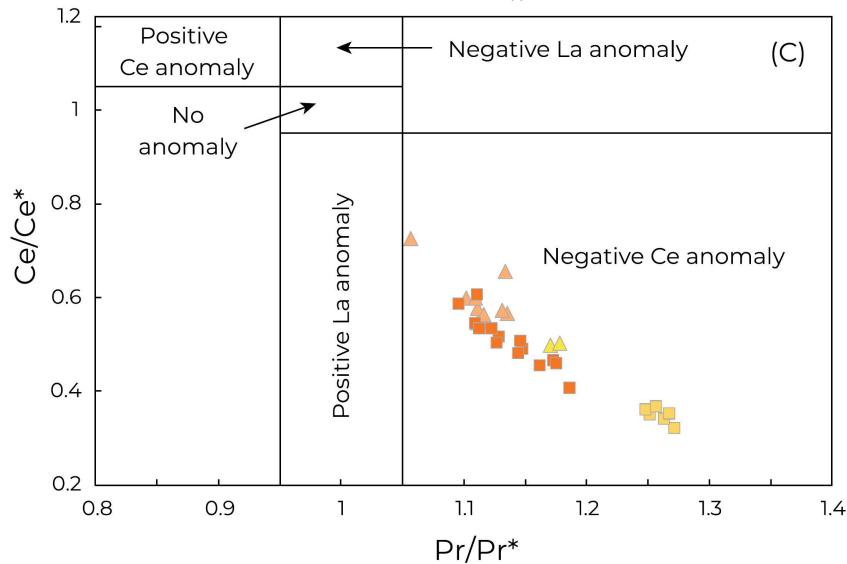
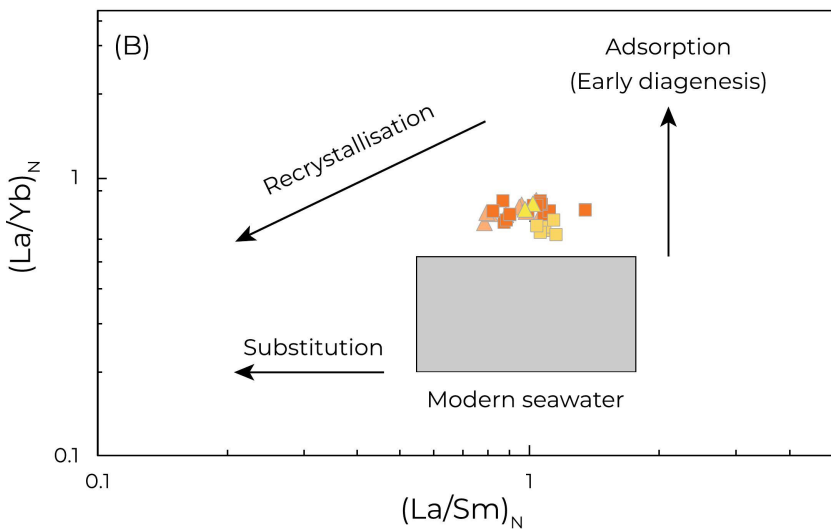
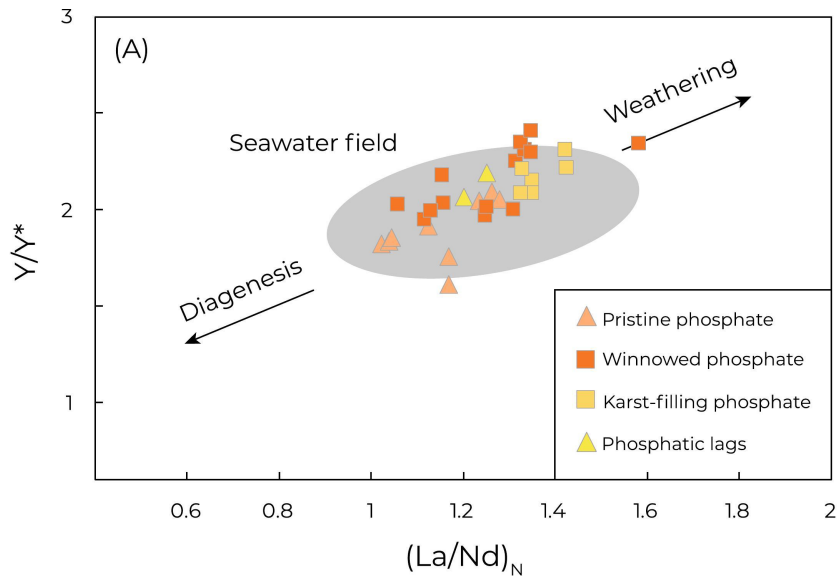


Figure 13

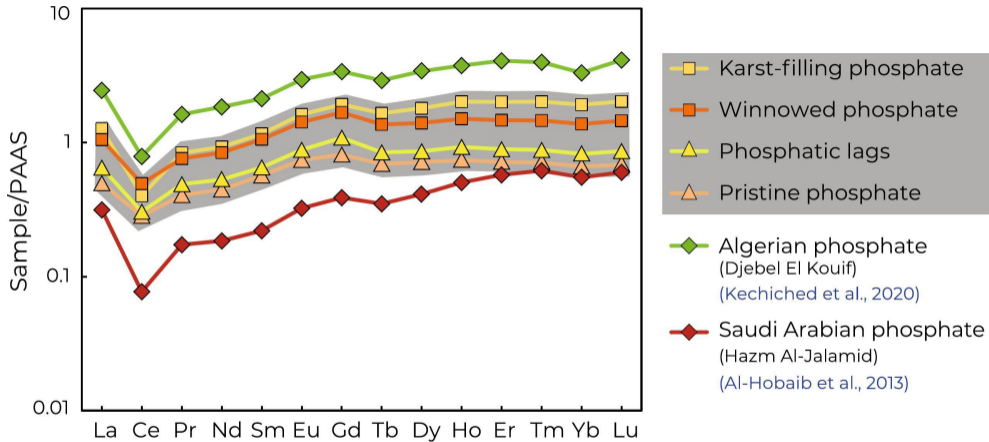


Figure 14

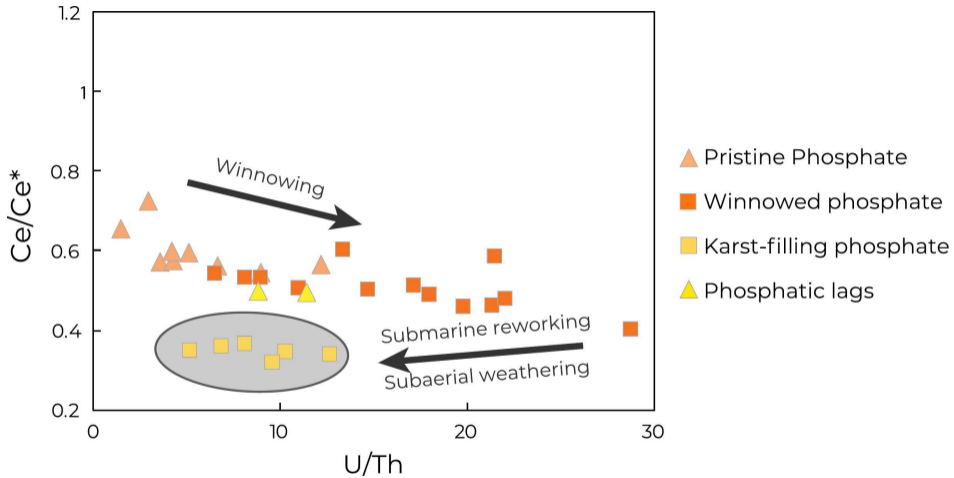


Figure 15

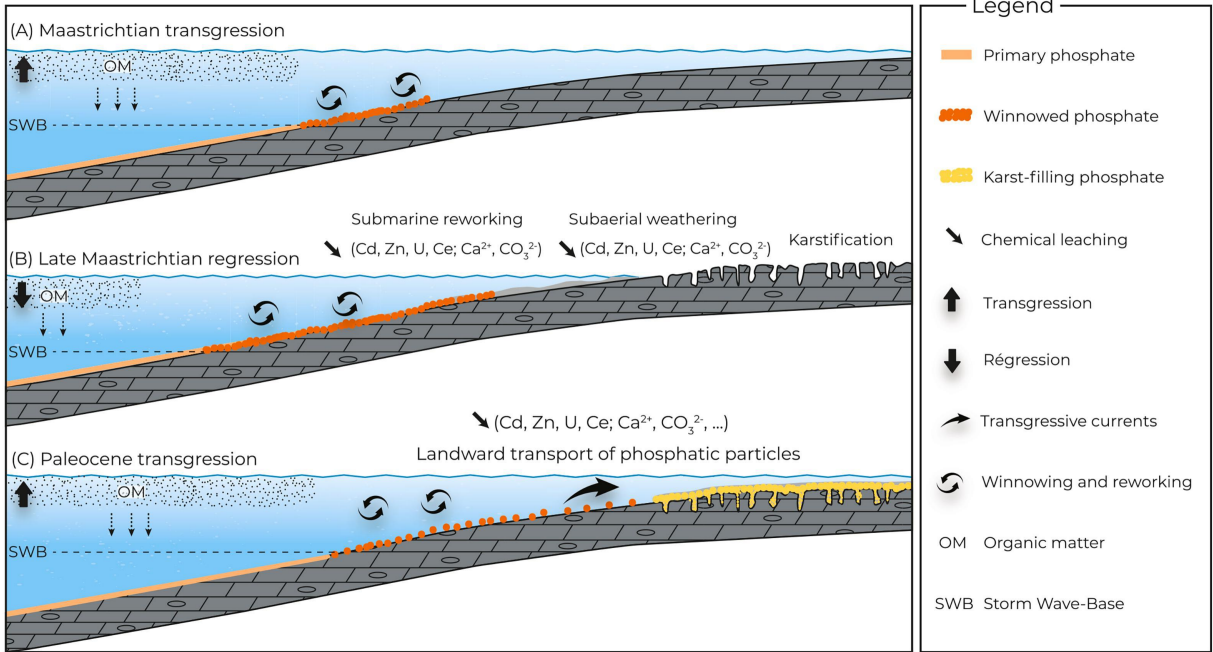


Figure 16