OCCURRENCE, ORIGIN AND MINING OF MESOZOIC MANGANESE NODULES IN COSTA RICA, CENTRAL AMERICA

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The geologic basement of southern Central America is made up of oceanic complexes, partly of ophiolitic affinity, with Jurassic to Early Tertiary ages (Denyer & Gazel, 2009). Most of these rocks are deep-sea tholeittic basalts, gabbros and serpentinite which are regionally associated with units of volcaniclastic breceias as well as radiolarian cherts (Gursky, 1989). In the Nicoya Peninsula (NW Costa Rica) manganese mineralizations are present within some of these oceanic rocks. They occur mostly as clearly hydrothermal ores: in form of massive stratiform and cross-cutting mineralizations. generally associated with recrystallized bedded cherts or bodies. However, radiolarian cherts of probable Middle Jurassic to Cretaceous ages contain in places sedimentary manganese nodules, which either are set in masses within dark-grey manganiferous siliceous mudstone interculated in radiolarian chert sequences or occur isolated within red relatively pure radiolarian chert (Gursky, 1989). The manganese ores are of minor dimensions and thus were called 'pockets' by the early miners. Massive hydrothermal deposits were preferentially mined, as shown by the material of relictic dump ores found locally. Documented mining in small open pits and trenches was active mainly from 1916 to 1920 (Roberts, 1944; Webber, 1942), triggered by the metal shortage during World War I, and was temporarily profitable due to low local salaries and transport expenses. Mining was only once re-activated in the year of 1938, but at a very small scale and without later efforts. All together, some 32,000 metric tons of Mn ore were mined from tens of localities spread over the northwestern part of the Nicoya Peninsula. The mined ore was mostly transported by ex-carts to near-by shipping places, from there on board of small shallow lighters to steamers anchoring offshore in Pacific waters, and then shipped to North America for manganese extraction. The nodules are deep black, with smooth surfaces, discoidal, compact, very dense and generally orientated parallelly to bedding, and show diameters of up to 9 cm. Most nodules are single individuals, aggregated nodules are very subordinate. In alternations with radiolarian chert, nodules may grade horizontally to stratified lenses and layers. Some nodules show tectonic fractures. For some time in the past, all manganese mineralizations were interpreted as being of hydrothermal origin, including the nodules (Kuijpers & Denyer, 1979). This was mainly due to the co-occurrence of nodules and clearly hydrothermal

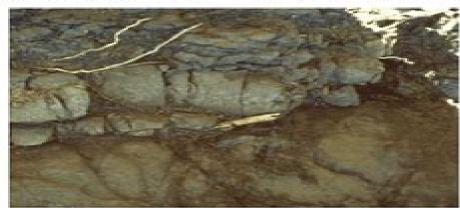


Fig. 1: Outcrop of manganese nodules interlayered with manganiferous mudstones and radiolarian chert beds.

Ancient El Francés Mine, NW Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica.

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