

**RECENT AND NOT-SO-RECENT DEVELOPMENTS
IN URANIUM DEPOSITS AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR EXPLORATION**

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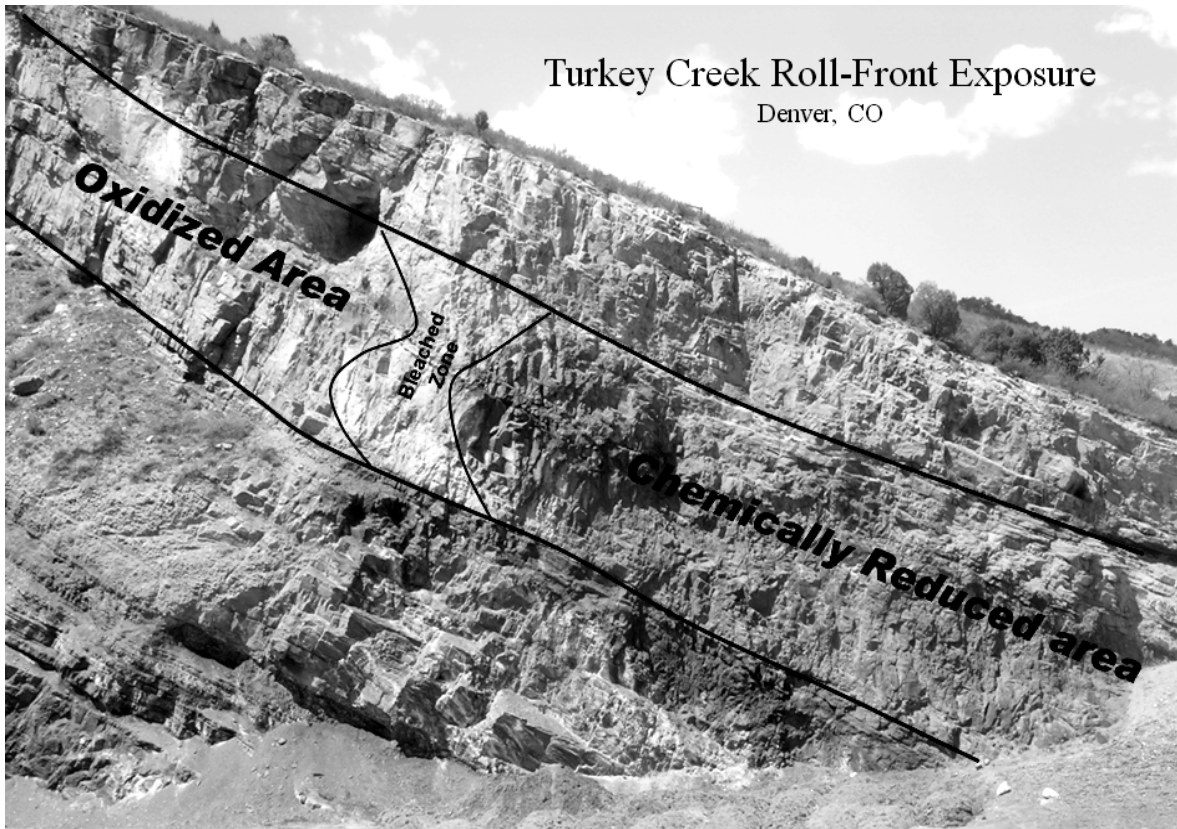
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Cover photograph: outcrop of the Turkey Creek roll-front uranium deposit, near Denver, Colorado, showing a sandstone layer with roll front between the oxidized and reduced zone enhanced by bleaching.
Photo courtesy K. Kyser and G. Drever

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	xii
1. Introduction	1
2. The Effect of Economic and Research Factors in Understanding Uranium Exploration and Discovery of Deposits	15
3. Geochemical Characteristics of Uranium and Analytical Methodologies	23
4. Deposits Related to Magmatic Differentiation	57
5. Deposits Related to Partial Melting	79
6. Deposits Related to Na-Metasomatism and High-Grade Metamorphism	97
7. Hydrothermal Uranium Deposits Related to Igneous Rocks	117
8. Unconformity-Related Uranium Deposits	161
9. Sandstone-Hosted Uranium Deposits	221
10. Other Types of Uranium Deposits	241
11. Implication for exploration strategies	253

DETAILED LIST OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
NUCLEAR POWER	2
The nuclear fuel cycle	2
Concerns about nuclear power	4
MAJOR DEPOSIT TYPES	5
Unconformity-relate deposits	5
Sandstone uranium deposits	8
Vein deposits	8
Metasomatic deposits	8
Breccia complex deposits	8
Intrusive deposits	9
Volcanic associated deposits	9
Quartz-pebble conglomerate deposits	9
Surficial uranium deposits	9
Collapse breccia pipe deposits	9
Phosphorite deposits	9
Black shale and seawater	10
THORIUM	10
DISTRIBUTION OF MINES AND RESOURCES	10
MINING AND PROCESSING METHODS FOR URANIUM	11
Open pit	11
Underground	12
<i>In situ</i> leaching	12
SYNOPSIS	12
REFERENCES	12

2. THE EFFECT OF ECONOMIC AND RESEARCH FACTORS IN UNDERSTANDING URANIUM EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY OF DEPOSITS	
ECONOMIC FACTORS	15
RESEARCH IN EXPLORATION AND DEPOSIT STUDIES OF URANIUM	19
REFERENCES	22

3. GEOCHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF URANIUM AND ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGIES	
URANIUM IN ROCKS AND MINERALS	23
URANIUM SOLUBILITY IN AQUEOUS FLUIDS	24
Low temperature uranium geochemistry	25
High temperature uranium geochemistry	27
URANIUM SOLUBILITY IN SILICATE MELTS AND MAGMATIC FLUIDS	28
Uranium in fluids from granite	29
Application to natural examples	29
ALTERATIOIN OF URANIUM MINERALS	29
Mobility of uranium in groundwaters	31
BIOGEOCHEMISTRY OF URANIUM	32
Uranium and human health	33
ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGIES	33
Radiogenic isotopes and uranium ore deposits	33

Decay schemes	34
The age equation	35
U-Pb systems	38
Sm-Nd systems	40
K-Ar and Ar-Ar systems	41
Radiogenic isotopes as tracers	42
Stable isotope geochemistry	43
Application of stable isotope geochemistry to uranium	46
Fluid inclusion studies	47
REFERENCES	49

4. DEPOSITS RELATED TO MAGMATIC DIFFERENTIATION

MAGMATIC DIFFERENTIATION	57
Ilímaussaq (South Greenland)	58
Regional geology	58
Geochemistry	59
Uranium mineralization	61
Resource estimations	64
Bokan Mountain (USA)	64
Regional geology	64
Geology of the pluton	65
Geochemistry	65
Uranium mineralization	66
Genetic model	69
Other occurrences of albitic episyenite	70
Other world occurrences of mineralized peralkaline granite	70
Poços de Caldas U-Mo-Zr mineralization (Brazil)	70
Thor Lake (Canada)	73
Palabora carbonatite (South Africa)	74
REFERENCES	74

5. DEPOSITS RELATED TO PARTIAL MELTING

INTRODUCTION	79
THE RÖSSING DEPOSIT, NAMIBIA	79
General geology	79
General characteristics of the U mineralization	84
Alaskite Geochemistry	85
Parameters controlling the location of the ore bodies at Rössing	87
Origin of mineralized alaskite	89
OTHER WORLD OCCURRENCES OF RÖSSING-TYPE MINERALIZATION	90
Archean occurrences	90
“Hudsonian” <i>S.L.</i> occurrences	90
The Wollaston and Mudjatik domains	90
Steward Lake, Quebec	91
Northern Quebec, Ungava Bay and Baffin Island	91
Litsk district, Kola Peninsula	91
Mineralized pegmatoid bodies in the Wheeler Basin, Colorado	91
The Orrefjell mineralized pegmatite	91
The late orogenic potassic granite of Southern Finland	91

Crocker Well, Olary Province, South Australia	92
Six Kangaroos area of Cloncurry-Mt. Isa District	92
Nanambu, Nimbuwah, and Rum Jungle complexes	92
“Grenvillian” occurrences	92
Grenville orogen	92
“Pan-African occurrences	92
Valencia deposit	92
Ida	92
Goanikontes	93
Hollard’s Dome	93
Currais Novos, Brazil	93
REFERENCES	93

6. DEPOSITS RELATED TO NA-METASOMATISM AND HIGH-GRADE METAMORPHISM

INTRODUCTION	97
Na-metasomatism-related deposits of Ukraine	98
Regional geology	98
The Krivoy-Rog district	99
The Michurinskoye deposit	100
Resources	100
Genetic model	102
Lagoa Real (Bahia, Brazil)	103
Regional geology	103
The Lagoa Real granite	103
Na-metasomatism	103
Uranium mineralization	103
Geochemistry	104
Genetic model	108
Other world occurrences of uranium deposits associated with Na-metasomatism	110
Valhalla (NW Queensland, Australia)	110
Skuppesavon (northern Sweden)	110
Uranium deposits related very high temperature metasomatism, Tranomaro, Madagascar	110
Regional geology	110
Metasomatic skarns	111
Th-U mineralization	112
Genetic model	112
REFERENCES	113

7. HYDROTHERMAL URANIUM DEPOSITS RELATED TO IGNEOUS ROCKS

IGNEOUS ROCK TYPES AND URANIUM METALLOGENESIS	117
Peraluminous leucogranite and volcanic rocks	117
Highly fractured calc-alkaline granite	118
S-type granite bodies	118
Guéret-type biotite-cordierite granite (G-type)	119
Two-mica leucogranite	119
Peralkaline granite, syenite and volcanic rocks	120
High K calc-alkaline granite	121
INTRA- AND PERI-GRANITIC URANIUM DEPOSITS	121
Relations between Variscan granite types and U mineralization	122

Radioelement distribution in the Variscan crust	124
Characterization of the protoliths of U-enriched peraluminous leucogranite	124
Successive fractionation in the Saint Sylvestre granite complex	125
Relations between magmatic U enrichment and hydrothermal deposits	130
Alteration and uranium mobility	131
Characteristics of vein uranium deposits	132
OTHER VEIN-TYPE URANIUM DEPOSITS	133
METALLOGENETIC MODELS FOR THE VARISCAN GRANITE-RELATED URANIUM DEPOSITS	133
VOLCANIC-RELATED URANIUM DEPOSITS	134
Streltsovskoye caldera (Transbaikalia, Russia)	136
Uranium distribution in the granite	138
Uranium deposits	138
Uranium sources	142
Other volcanic-related uranium districts of Asia	143
Dornot (northeastern Mongolia)	143
Other volcanic-related uranium districts of the world	144
U-Mo Kitts-Michelin deposit	144
Th-U-REE Rexpar deposits	145
U-Zr-F Moonlight and U-Hg Aurora deposits	145
U-Mo-F Marysvale deposit	145
The Lakeview district	145
U-Be-Li-F Spor Mountain mineralization	145
U-Mo mineralization of the Sierra Peña Blanca	145
U-Mo Ben Lomond deposit	145
U-Mo-Sn-F Maureen uranium deposit	145
Arjeplog-Arvidsjour U province	146
Duobblon deposit	146
Skuppesavon uranium district	146
Macusani mineralization	146
The Los Frailes U occurrences	146
La Puna uranium mineralization	147
Novazza (U-Mo-Zn) and Val Vedello (U, Cu, Pb, Zn, Sb, As and Hg) deposits	147
Very recent (0.4 to 0.06 Ma) Vulsini fissures and calderas and the Vico caldera (Italy)	147
Uranium deposits related to volcanic units in Bulgaria	147
MODEL FOR URANIUM DEPOSITS ASSOCIATED WITH VOLCANISM	147
Nature of the magmatism	147
Melt chemistry recorded by magmatic inclusions	148
Nature of the volcanic system	148
Olympic Dam	149
Geological setting	149
The Roxby Downs Granite	149
The Gawler Range Volcanic Complex	149
The IOCG mineralization	149
Uranium mineralization	150
REFERENCES	151

8. UNCONFORMITY-RELATED URANIUM DEPOSITS

UNCONFORMITY-RELATED DEPOSITS	161
Proterozoic Basins – why so much uranium?	162
THE ATHABASCA BASIN	166
General geology	166

Alteration	170
Uranium deposits	172
Constraints on ore genesis	175
Timing of fluid events and their relationship to mineralization	178
THELON BASIN, CANADA	180
Geologic setting	181
Sedimentology and stratigraphy	182
Uranium deposits	183
Paragenesis and fluid evolution in the Thelon Basin	184
THE KOMBOLGI BASIN, AUSTRALIA	187
Sedimentology and stratigraphy	189
Paragenesis and fluid evolution in the Kombolgie Basin	190
Uranium deposits	192
Jabiluka	192
Nabarlek	195
Westmoreland	196
Timing and spatial extent of the mineralizing fluids	198
OTHER BASINS HOSTING UNCONFORMITY-RELATED URANIUM MINERALIZATION	198
Kintyre	198
Hornby Bay	200
Otish Basin	201
Karku, Russia	203
SUCCESSOR BASINS	206
CONCLUSIONS	207
REFERENCES	208

9. SANDSTONE-HOSTED URANIUM DEPOSITS

INTRODUCTION	221
Basal type	223
Tabular type	223
Uravan Mineral Belt & Colorado Plateau	228
Monument Valley-White Canyon Districts	229
Powder River Basin, Wyoming	230
Asia	230
Roll-front type	230
Franceville Basin, Gabon	232
Tectonic/lithologic type	232
Solution collapse breccia-type deposits, Arizona, USA	232
Shinkolobwe, Dem. Rep. Congo	236
REFERENCES	237

10. OTHER TYPES OF URANIUM DEPOSITS

QUARTZ-PEBBLE CONGLOMERATE URANIUM DEPOSITS	241
Blind River-Elliot Lake district	242
The Witwatersand Basin	244
Koli	246

SURFICIAL URANIUM DEPOSITS	246
Calcrete-hosted uranium deposits	246
Wetland deposits	249
Phosphate and shale deposits	250
REFERENCES	250

11. IMPLICATIONS FOR EXPLORATION STRATEGIES

COMMON DENOMINATORS	253
Timing is everything	253
Knowledge of the nature of fluids	253
Gradients in redox environments	254
The source of uranium	254
Carbon is an effective reductant for fixing U	254
Uranium deposits are geochemical anomalies	254
Specific tectonic environments, structural settings and lithologies required, but are not definitive indicators of mineralization	254
Exploration for uranium deposits requires the integration of geology, geophysics and geochemistry	255
EXPLORATION STRATEGIES	255
Geology	255
Geophysics	255
Geochemistry	255
REFERENCES	257

**TABLE OF CONTENTS OF SHORT COURSE 3
URANIUM DEPOSITS: THEIR MINERALOGY AND ORIGIN (1978)
(located on DVD)**

Introduction	3
1. Uranium Solution – Mineral Equilibria at Low Temperatures with Applications to Sedimentary Ore Deposits D. Langmir	17
2. The Mobility and Concentration of Uranium and its Decay Products in Temperate Surficial Environments W. Dyck	57
3. High Temperature Uranium Geochemistry M.M. Kimberley	101
4. Uranium Minerals in Canada: Their Description, Identification and Field Guides H.R. Steacy and S. Kaiman	107
5. The Identification of Uraniferous Minerals R.D. Morton	141
6. Genetic Aspects and Classification of Important Canadian Uranium Deposits R.H. McMillan	187
7. Uranium Deposits in Australia F.F. Langford	205
8. Phanerozoic Uranium Deposits and Occurrences in Europe and Eastern North America V. Ruzicka	217
9. Uranium Deposits in Ontario J.A. Robertson	229
10. Uranium Mineralization in Shallow Intrusive Environments J.E. Tilsley	281
11. Uranium in Phanerozoic Sandstone and Volcanic Rocks R.W. DeVoto	293
12. Uranium in Black Shales – a Review R.T. Bell	307
13. Mineralogy and Setting of Elliot Lake Deposits N.J. Theis	331
14. Origin of Stratiform Uranium Deposits in Sandstone, Conglomerate, and Pyroclastic Rock M.M. Kimberley	339
15. Mobility and Concentration of Uranium in Arid Surficial Environments F.F. Langford	383
16. Classification of Uranium Deposits in Northern Saskatchewan J. Hoeve	397
17. Application of Mineralogy to the Study of Multistage Uranium Mineralization in Remobilized Uranium Deposits, Saskatchewan J. Rimsaite	403

18. Geologic Setting of the Beaverlodge-type of Vein-Uranium Deposit and its Comparison to That of the Unconformity-type L.P. Tremblay	431
19. Mineralogy and Geological Settings of Unconformity-type Uranium Deposits in Northern Saskatchewan J. Hoeve and T.I.I. Sibbald	457
20. Uranium Concentrations Related to the Sub-Athabasca Unconformity, Northern Saskatchewan, Canada J. Hoeve and T.I.I. Sibbald	475
21. Origin of Unconformity-type Pitchblende Deposits in the Athabasca Basin of Saskatchewan F.F. Langford	485
Glossary	501

PREFACE

The purpose of this short course, co-sponsored by the Society for Geology Applied to Mineral Deposits (SGA) and MAC, is to highlight data and research that have developed over the past 30 years, as well as discuss new techniques and ideas that can be integrated into effective exploration strategies for uranium. A short course in 1978 sponsored by the MAC is included in this volume as a base on which to build the developments over the last thirty years.

The Mineralogical Association of Canada (MAC) was among the first organizations to support a short course on uranium, which was presented as its third short course volume in 1978 entitled *Uranium Deposits: Their Mineralogy and Origin* and edited by M.M. Kimberley. This proved to be the most popular short course volume ever for MAC, and has been used in both undergraduate and graduate courses on mineral deposits geology and by the exploration industry. Although about half of the volume was dedicated to deposits in Canada because of the discovery of unconformity-related deposits in the Athabasca Basin, this short course volume was so successful that it is currently out of print. There have been various conferences supported by international uranium concerns such as the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA), but MAC was among the few professional organizations that saw value in promoting a knowledge base for uranium deposits. Subsequently, other organizations, such as the International Atomic Energy Commission, Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, Saskatchewan Energy and Resources, Mineralogical Society of America, Canadian Institute of Mining, Metallurgy, and Petroleum and CREGU have supported short courses and conferences on uranium, with most of these occurring during the last few years in response to the renewed interest in uranium as an alternative energy source. An international group of scientists (Grenthe *et al.* 1992) supported by the NEA and OECD published the only available compilation of selected thermodynamic data on uranium in 1992.

The lack of interest in uranium by the mining industry and subsequently by the research community was largely the result of the low spot price which began in 1987 and continued until recently. The low price of uranium had a ripple effect in that not only were expenditures in

exploration for uranium depressed, but support for research in uranium deposit studies also decreased. Despite the demise in uranium exploration and support for research, some government organizations and companies that specialized in uranium such as Uranerz, Cameco and Cogema (now AREVA) continued to support research, albeit at a reduced level. The authors of this volume are among those who continued with their research on uranium through such support. During this time in the former Soviet Union and then Russia, where uranium geologists are considered critical, research continued. During the 1990s, other nations such as Japan, India and China continued their research efforts as nuclear energy was strategic in their energy policies and they were less tied to the global market. Research supported by state agencies and the IAEA continued during this time on aspects of the geochemistry of uranium in solution and in the environment (*e.g.*, Grenthe *et al.* 1992). Studies of the Oklo natural reactors in Gabon (*e.g.*, Gauthier Lafaye *et al.* 1996), the Cigar Lake deposit in the Athabasca Basin (*e.g.*, Cramer & Smellie 1994), Poços de Caldas in Brazil (*e.g.*, Chapman *et al.* 1991) were undertaken as natural analogs for the long term disposal of nuclear waste in geologic formations and remediation of closed uranium mines (Merkel *et al.* 2006).

New models developed for different deposits and the mechanisms that control their genesis are central themes in this new short course volume. This volume is divided into the following chapters:

1. Introduction discusses the discovery and properties of uranium, which countries have the greatest reserves and which use nuclear energy, what are the types of deposits and in which geological environments are they found.
2. Economics and Research describes the interplay between the market price of uranium and the exploration and research that have occurred during the past thirty years. As a commodity, interest in uranium is driven by the spot price of uranium, and *vice versa*, although the spot price serves as a guide for the value of uranium because not anyone can simply purchase it. Most of the uranium sold for use in reactors is brokered through long-term contracts.
3. Geochemistry of Uranium consists of a brief review of the geochemical properties of uranium

that figure greatly in the development of uranium deposits. Our goal here is not to discuss in detail the geochemistry of uranium, which is not very well known except by those in the processing or disposal industries, but to present an overview of the characteristics of uranium in natural fluids at a variety of temperatures.

4. Magmatic Differentiation describes uranium mineralization generated by high temperature magmatic processes related to peralkaline magmas and granitoid rocks in migmatitic environments such as alaskite and carbonatite bodies. Extreme fractional crystallization of peralkaline magmas can lead to the formation of very large low-grade U and Th resources because of the high solubility of U and Th in highly depolymerized magmas.

5. Partial melting discusses the effects of crustal melting processes on the production of melts that host uranium mineralization.

6. Metasomatic Deposits is concerned with high temperature hydrothermal processes associated with regional Na metasomatism and quartz dissolution, forming discontinuous occurrences of uraniferous Na metasomatized granite, metasedimentary or metavolcanic units that extend over several tens of kilometres.

7. Hydrothermal (granite-related and volcanic-related) Deposits is concerned with a diverse category of deposits generally exhibiting vein-type morphology, but also as disseminated ore in syenitic bodies. They may be hosted by granite, volcanic rocks or without any direct relation with granite. High-temperature hydrothermal deposits can also be associated with IOCG-type deposits.

8. Unconformity-related Deposits examines uranium mineralization related to a reduction front near the unconformity between Proterozoic sandstone units and underlying metamorphosed basement lithologies. The deposits are structurally hosted either in the basement or in the overlying sandstone. Models involving the source of uranium from breakdown of uranium-bearing phases in altered basement rocks along fault zones or from an oxidized basinal brine carrying uranium leached from detrital phases are also discussed, as are the role of paleoaquifers in the prospectivity of a basin.

9. Sandstone-hosted Deposits discusses breccia pipes and sandstone-hosted low-temperature deposits such as roll-front, tabular and sedimentary copper associated deposits. These occur in medium to coarse-grained sandstone

deposited in a continental fluvial or marginal marine sedimentary environment such that impermeable shale/mudstone units immediately above and below the mineralized sandstone confine fluid flow so that uranium can precipitate under reducing conditions within the sandstone because of carbonaceous material, sulfides, hydrocarbons and interbedded basic volcanic rocks with abundant ferromagnesian minerals.

10. Other types of deposits examines the Elliot Lake quartz pebble conglomerate deposits in Canada and the Witwatersrand gold/uranium deposits in South Africa, the latter a resource of increasing importance. Also discussed are surficial deposits that include the young near-surface uranium concentrations in sediments and soils, with those in calcrete being the largest deposits.

11. Implication for exploration strategies briefly discusses what we have learned during the past thirty years that may help us to explore for uranium deposits.

These chapters are by no means meant to be comprehensive as the knowledge base for uranium deposits is vast. Unfortunately, much of the knowledge on uranium is manifest in the literature on uranium deposits research prior to 1990, and much of this is outdated, or in the minds of those individuals associated with the last uranium boom, many of whom have long since moved on. We have learned a great deal in formulating this short course, and we hope that some of this knowledge will be useful to you. Those interested in uranium should find the list of references, particularly some of the books listed below, to be useful in expanding their knowledge base.

We are indebted to many for their support of this volume, including the Mineralogical Association of Canada and the Society for Geology Applied to Mineral Deposits for their sponsorship. In particular, Rob Raeside of the MAC is thanked for his patience and diligence in editing this volume. Several others, particularly Paul Alexandre, Don Chipley, April Vuletich and the group at the Queen's Facility for Isotope Research, and Dr. Narelle Neumann of Geoscience Australia provided constructive criticism and editorial skills that greatly improved this volume.

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