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3 Trace element fractionation in magnetite as a function of Fe depletion  
4 from ore fluids at the Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit, eastern China:  
5 Implications for Co mineralization in Fe skarns

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## ABSTRACT

23 Magnetite is common in various magmatic and hydrothermal ore deposit types,  
24 and its trace element geochemistry has become increasingly used in ore genesis  
25 studies and mineral exploration. While fractional crystallization has been shown to  
26 influence the chemistry of igneous magnetite, the extent to which this process  
27 regulates the trace element composition of hydrothermal magnetite remains poorly  
28 understood. In this study, we analyzed trace elements in hydrothermal magnetite from  
29 the Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit in eastern China and used Rayleigh and equilibrium  
30 fractionation modeling to demonstrate the importance of magnetite precipitation in  
31 controlling fluid and magnetite chemistry during Fe skarn mineralization.

32 The Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit has 3 stages of magnetite. From early Mag-1  
33 to later Mag-2 and Mag-3, the concentrations of compatible elements (Ni and V)  
34 decrease, whereas those of incompatible elements (Zn, Mn and Co) increase. There  
35 are obvious trends of increasing incompatible/compatible element ratios (e.g., Co/Ni,  
36 Zn/V, and Zn/Ni) and decreasing compatible/incompatible element ratios (e.g., V/Mn,  
37 Ni/Mn, and V/Co) from Mag-1 to Mag-3, with strong correlations between each of  
38 these ratios. Such systematic trace element variations in successive stages of  
39 magnetite can be best explained by increasing degrees of fractional crystallization  
40 with time. The wide range of incompatible/compatible element ratios (spanning 2-4  
41 orders of magnitude) in Mag-2 and Mag-3 suggests that magnetite crystallization  
42 follows a process akin to Rayleigh fractionation.

43 Results from this study highlight the significant role that magnetite

44 crystallization during skarn formation has on the trace element chemistry of this  
45 mineral. Moreover, as the crystallization of magnetite progresses, the Co/Fe ratio of  
46 residual hydrothermal fluids is elevated, which favors the precipitation of Co in  
47 late-stage sulfides. This process helps to explain why some Fe skarn deposits as well  
48 as magnetite-rich IOA and IOCG deposits are potentially important economic sources  
49 for Co, currently necessary as one component in Li-ion batteries.

50

51 **Key words:** Magnetite geochemistry; Rayleigh fractionation; Cobalt mineralization;  
52 Iron skarn

53

## INTRODUCTION

54 Magnetite is a common accessory mineral in a wide range of rocks and is a  
55 major mineral phase in a variety of hydrothermal ore deposit types, such as Fe skarns,  
56 Kiruna type iron oxide-apatite (IOA) deposits, and iron oxide-copper-gold (IOCG)  
57 deposits ([Nadoll et al., 2014](#); [Dare et al., 2014](#); [Hu et al., 2014](#); [Huang et al., 2018](#);  
58 [Reich et al., 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). Magnetite has an inverse spinel structure and  
59 can accommodate a range of trace elements into its structure. It is resistant to  
60 mechanical breakdown and low temperature weathering/alteration, thus making it a  
61 powerful tool in igneous petrology and provenance studies ([Grigsby, 1990](#); [Lindsley,](#)  
62 [1991](#); [Dare et al., 2014](#); [Canil and Lacourse, 2020](#); [Luo et al., 2022](#)). Recent studies  
63 have demonstrated the utility of magnetite trace element geochemistry as an important  
64 indicator for ore genesis studies and mineral exploration ([Dupuis and Beaudoin, 2011](#);  
65 [Nadoll et al., 2012](#); [Dare et al., 2015](#); [Knipping et al., 2015](#); [Duparc et al., 2016](#); [Canil](#)  
66 [et al., 2016](#); [Pisiak et al., 2017](#); [Ward et al., 2018](#); [Huang and Beaudoin, 2019](#); [Song et](#)  
67 [al., 2021](#); [Zeng et al., 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2020](#)).

68 The melt/fluid composition has been considered as the primary control on  
69 magnetite chemistry. In igneous systems, the melt composition can be significantly  
70 modified by the process of fractional crystallization ([Gast, 1968](#)). This process allows  
71 the residual melt, and thus magnetite crystallizing from it, to be depleted in  
72 compatible elements and enriched in incompatible elements. For example, [Dare et al.](#)  
73 [\(2014\)](#) found that compatible elements (Mg, Ni, Co, V, and Cr) in magnetite gradually  
74 decrease while incompatible elements (Ga, Ge, Hf, Mn, Mo, Nb, Sc, Sn, Ta, Ti, W, Zn,

75 and Zr) increase going from the lower to upper zones of the layered intrusions, such  
76 as the Bushveld Complex and Sept Iles. They interpreted this variation trend in terms  
77 of fractional crystallization of olivine, pyroxene, and magnetite. To date, however,  
78 few studies have investigated the effect of fractional crystallization on the  
79 composition of magnetite in hydrothermal regimes, and it remains unclear whether  
80 progressive precipitation of magnetite has a significant effect on fluid and mineral  
81 chemistry in hydrothermal magnetite deposits, such as Fe skarn, IOA, and IOCG  
82 deposits.

83 Iron skarns are among the largest skarn deposits in the world, with many  
84 containing >1 billion tons of ore ([Meinert et al. 2005](#) and references therein). Iron  
85 skarns often contain significant quantities of Co, a technologically important metal in  
86 high demand, which occurs as a co-product or by-product ([Einaudi et al., 1981](#); [Rose](#)  
87 [et al., 1985](#); [Meinert et al. 2005](#); [Slack et al., 2017](#); [Zhao et al., 2019](#); [Wei et al., 2021](#);  
88 [Yan et al., 2021](#); [Shi et al., 2023](#)). Magnetite is the predominant ore mineral in Fe  
89 skarns, while sulfides, although minor, serve as the primary host for Co in these  
90 deposits ([Slack et al., 2017](#); [Zhao et al., 2019](#); [Wei et al., 2021](#); [Yan et al., 2021](#); [Shi et](#)  
91 [al., 2023](#)). In this study, we analyze the trace element composition of magnetite from  
92 the Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit in the North China Craton (NCC). Building upon  
93 recent experimental findings on magnetite-fluid trace element partitioning ([Tauson et](#)  
94 [al., 2015, 2017](#); [Smagunov et al., 2021](#)), we perform Rayleigh and equilibrium  
95 fractionation modeling in order to illustrate how progressive magnetite precipitation  
96 influences both the fluid and magnetite chemistry during formation of an Fe skarn

97 deposit. Furthermore, we discuss the key role that magnetite precipitation has on Co  
98 enrichment in late-stage sulfides.

99

## 100 **GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

### 101 **Regional geology**

102 The Baijian Fe skarn deposit is located in the northeastern part of the  
103 Handan-Xingtai district in the central NCC. It is bounded to the north by southern  
104 margin of the Central Asian Orogenic Belt and to the south by the Dabie-Sulu  
105 ultra-high pressure belt (Fig. 1). The NCC was formed and subsequently stabilized at  
106 ca. 1.85 Ga following the collision between the Western and Eastern Blocks along the  
107 Trans-North China Orogen (Zhao et al., 2005). The Handan-Xingtai district is  
108 characterized by unmetamorphosed Paleozoic marine sedimentary rocks of ~3,500 m  
109 thickness that are underlain by the Precambrian crystalline basement (Fig. 1). The  
110 Cambrian strata consist of limestones, sandstones, and shales, which are conformably  
111 overlain by early Ordovician dolomites. Middle Ordovician strata conformably overly  
112 the early Ordovician dolomites and consist chiefly of evaporite-bearing carbonates.  
113 Carboniferous and Permian shales, mudstones, siltstones, sandstones and coal beds,  
114 with a total thickness of 1,300 to 1,600 m, unconformably overlie the Ordovician  
115 sequences and are mainly exposed in the eastern part of the district.

116 The Paleozoic sedimentary rocks are intruded by several major plutons and  
117 associated numerous smaller stocks and dikes, which are dominated by diorite,  
118 monzodiorite or syenite (Fig. 1). The Handan-Xingtai district hosts more than 100 Fe

119 skarn deposits that combined have total Fe reserves over 900 million tons (Mt). Those  
120 deposits are hosted in the diorite and monzodiorite intrusions, along the contact zones  
121 between the intrusions and surrounding carbonate sequences, or within fracture zones  
122 of the carbonate proximal to the intrusions. Zircon U-Pb geochronological studies  
123 have shown that the district-wide intrusions are early Cretaceous in age that were  
124 emplaced in the interval of  $136 \pm 2$  to  $128.9 \pm 0.9$  Ma (Sun et al., 2014; Deng et al.,  
125 2015; Sun et al., 2019a). Geochemistry and Sr-Nd-Hf isotope data indicate that they  
126 formed as a result of mixing between crustal-derived and enriched mantle-derived  
127 magmas, which originated during the thinning and destruction of mantle lithosphere  
128 beneath the NCC. This process was ultimately triggered by subduction of the  
129 paleo-Pacific plate underneath the eastern China continental margin (Chen et al., 2004;  
130 Chen et al., 2008; Shen et al., 2013).

131

### 132 **Deposit geology**

133 The Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit has proven reserves of 112 million tons (Mt)  
134 ore at an average grade of 47.6 % Fe and contains 17,186 t Co as by product (Zhao,  
135 2013). Drill cores reveal the ore hosting sedimentary rocks at Baijian Fe skarn are the  
136 middle Ordovician Majiagou Formation and Cixian Formation (Fig. 2), which mainly  
137 consist of dolomitic limestone and limestone with interlayered evaporites. The deposit  
138 is related to a fine grained, pinkish-gray, monzodiorite stock, which consists of  
139 amphibole, plagioclase, K-feldspar, and quartz, with minor to trace amounts of  
140 magnetite, titanite, fluorapatite, and zircon. The monzodiorite stock has experienced

141 extensive albitization. The most intensely albitized rocks consist of albite (70–80  
142 vol.%), amphibole, plagioclase, K-feldspar, epidote, pyroxene, calcite, and titanite,  
143 along with minor magnetite and fluorapatite. A diorite porphyry intrudes the Fengfeng  
144 Formation but is not associated with hydrothermal alteration or mineralization.

145 The Baijian skarn deposit consists of two major Fe bodies (No.1 and No.2) that  
146 developed at or proximal to the contact zone between the monzodiorite intrusion and  
147 dolomitic limestone of the Middle Ordovician Majiagou Formation (Fig. 2). Both  
148 orebodies strike northwest and have flat lenticular to stratiform morphologies. No.1  
149 ore body is 1,450 m long and, 500 m wide, and ranges from a few to 138 m thick. It  
150 occurs 450 to 1000 m below the present ground surface. The ore body extends  
151 upwards from the monzodiorite contact into the dolomitic limestones of the Majiagou  
152 and Cixian Formations (Fig. 2). No.2 ore body is 1,200m long, 600 m wide, has an  
153 average thickness of 9 m and occurs at a depth of 580 to 750 m below the surface.  
154 The ore body follows the contact between the monzodiorite and dolomitic limestones  
155 of the Majiagou Formation.

156 Skarns are variably developed in the contact zones. Endoskarn mostly occurs as  
157 irregular veins within the albitized, monzodiorite stock. The endoskarn veins are  
158 typically a few centimeters wide, consisting chiefly of pyroxene with minor amounts  
159 of fluorapatite, albite, and calcite. The pyroxene in the endoskarn belongs to diopside  
160 (Di)-hedenbergite (Hd) series, ranging in composition from  $Di_{89}Hd_{11}$  to  $Di_{70}Hd_{30}$   
161 (Wen et al., 2020). Exoskarn is massive in the lower part of the contact zone (Fig. 2),  
162 which consists of an early prograde and a late retrograde assemblage. The prograde



163 skarn assemblages are dominated by pyroxene (Figs. 3A) with minor olivine, titanite,  
164 and fluorapatite. Pyroxene in the exoskarn is diopside-rich ( $\text{Di}_{75-97}\text{Hd}_{3-24}$ ) (Wen et al.,  
165 2020). The retrograde skarn assemblages are composed of tremolite, phlogopite, and  
166 serpentine that commonly overprint or replace the prograde skarn minerals. Magnetite  
167 is the predominant ore mineral (Figs. 3B-F). It is disseminated through the exoskarn  
168 close to the intrusive contact and as massive bodies close to enclosing marble.  
169 Sulfides mainly occur in the upper part of ore bodies in the vicinity of marble. The  
170 sulfides are dominated by pyrite locally associated with traces of chalcopyrite and  
171 sphalerite. They are disseminated through the magnetite ores (Figs. 3E and F). Drill  
172 core logs reveal a general zonation pattern from massive pyroxene skarn close to the  
173 intrusive contract, followed by a magnetite-tremolite-phlogopite assemblage in the  
174 middle, and a distal magnetite-pyrite-calcite-serpentine assemblage close to marble.

175

## 176 **SAMPLES AND METHODS**

177 Three samples of massive pyroxene skarn and 21 samples of magnetite ore  
178 were collected for this study. Polished sections were examined using a petrographic  
179 microscope and SEM at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in Denver. The  
180 massive pyroxene skarn samples are dominated by diopsidic pyroxene (> 90 vol.%)  
181 with minor disseminated magnetite (Fig. 3A). The magnetite ore samples can be  
182 categorized into two types based on their mineral assemblages: (1) magnetite ore  
183 associated with the retrograde skarn assemblage (n=11) and (2) magnetite ore  
184 associated with sulfides (n=10). Ore samples from the retrograde skarn contain 60 to

185 90 vol.% magnetite, and various amounts of tremolite, phlogopite, and serpentine;  
186 sulfides are absent (Figs. 3B-D). Ore samples containing sulfides consist of massive  
187 magnetite (>vol. 70%) with small amounts of pyrite and calcite that occur as  
188 disseminations or in veinlets; retrograde minerals are absent or present locally (Fig.  
189 3E-F).

190 Trace element concentrations in magnetite were determined by laser ablation  
191 inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS) at the USGS (Denver).  
192 Analyses were conducted using a Photon Machines Analyte G2 LA system (193 nm, 4  
193 ns excimer) attached to a Perkin Elmer DRC-e ICP-MS. Depending on the size of the  
194 magnetite grains targeted, ablation was carried out using a spot size of 40 or 65  
195 micrometers at 8 J/cm<sup>2</sup>. Single spot analyses were ablated using 10 and 13 pulses/sec  
196 (10 and 13 Hz). Ablated materials were transported via a He carrier gas to a modified  
197 glass mixing bulb where He and sample were mixed coaxially with Ar prior to the ICP  
198 torch. Concentration calculations were conducted using the protocol of [Longerich et](#)  
199 [al. \(1997\)](#). Signals were calibrated using USGS GS-series basaltic glasses GSD-1g  
200 and GSE-1g ([Nadoll and Koenig, 2011](#)). Reference materials were analysed 5 to 10  
201 times at the beginning of each analytical session and monitored throughout the session  
202 for drift. Signals were screened visually for heterogeneities such as micro-inclusions  
203 or zoning. The Fe content of an ideal stoichiometric magnetite was used as the  
204 internal standard ([Dare et al., 2012](#)).

205 Additionally, five least-altered samples were collected from the Baijian  
206 monzodiorite for major elements and cobalt concentration analysis. Samples were

207 cleaned with deionized water, subsequently crushed and powdered in an agate mill.  
208 Both major elements and cobalt concentration analysis were conducted at the ALS  
209 Mineral (Guangzhou) Co. Ltd, Guangzhou, China. The major oxides were measured  
210 by an X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometer. The lithium borate fusion method was  
211 used and the relative standard deviations are better than 5%. Whole-rock cobalt  
212 concentrations were analyzed by ICP-MS with an Agilent 7900. For each sample, 50  
213 mg of sample powder (200 mesh) was digested in Teflon bombs with perchloric, nitric  
214 and hydrofluoric acids. The residue was leached with dilute hydrochloric acid and  
215 diluted to volume. It was then analyzed by ICP-MS. Results were corrected for  
216 spectral inter-element interferences.

## 217 **RESULTS**

### 218 **Magnetite petrography**

219 Three types of magnetite were identified in this study based on their distribution  
220 in the drill core logs and textural relationships with other minerals observed in  
221 polished thin sections. Type 1 (Mag-1) is found in massive pyroxene skarn (Fig. 3A)  
222 and occurs as inclusions within, or in interstices between, the pyroxene crystals (Fig.  
223 4A-B). It is subhedral, ranging in diameter from 200  $\mu\text{m}$  to 1 mm and commonly  
224 contains mineral inclusions mainly of fluorapatite and pyroxene (Fig. 4C). The  
225 aforementioned textural relationships indicate broadly coeval formation of magnetite  
226 and pyroxene. Type 2 magnetite (Mag-2) occurs in the magnetite ore associated with  
227 the retrograde skarn assemblage (Fig. 3B-D). It is subhedral to euhedral, ranges in  
228 diameter from 500  $\mu\text{m}$  to 1 cm. It is intergrown with retrograde minerals such as

229 tremolite, phlogopite, and serpentine, which locally replace prograde pyroxene and  
230 olivine (Fig. 4D-I). Type 3 magnetite (Mag-3) occurs in magnetite ore associated with  
231 sulfides (Fig. 3E-F). It is subhedral to euhedral, 500  $\mu\text{m}$  to 5 mm in size, and coexists  
232 with pyrite and calcite (Fig. 4J). Some Mag-3 grains are replaced by hematite, calcite,  
233 and siderite (Fig. 4K-L). The textural relations suggest that overall, Mag-1 predates  
234 Mag-2 that formed earlier than Mag-3.

235

### 236 **Trace element compositions of magnetite**

237 Results from LA-ICP-MS spot analysis of magnetite ( $n = 257$ ) are listed in  
238 [appendix table A1](#) and are displayed on [Figure 5](#). Most of the spots analysed revealed  
239 variable concentration in Mg, Al, Ti, V, Cr, Mn, Co, Ni, Zn, and Ga. Mag-1 has high  
240 concentrations of Ti, V, Ni, Cr, and Ga and relatively low concentrations of Mg, Mn,  
241 and Zn (Fig. 5). Mag-2 contains significantly lower concentrations of Ti, V, Ni, Cr,  
242 and Ga but higher concentrations of Mg, Mn and Zn (Fig. 5). Mag-3 has the lowest  
243 concentration of Ti, V, Ni, Cr and Ga but the highest concentration of Mg, Mn, and Zn.  
244 Cobalt is enriched in Mag-2 relative to Mag-1 and Mag-3 (Fig. 5). Compared with the  
245 other two equivalents, Mag-3 has a wider range of Co contents (Fig. 5). The Zn/Ni  
246 ratios are positively correlated with Zn/V and Co/Ni ratios, whereas the reverse trend  
247 is not only observed between Zn/Ni and V/Mn, but also with Ni/Mn, V/Co, and Ni/Cr  
248 ratios (Fig. 6). It is noted that the Zn/Ni, Zn/V, and Co/Ni ratios increase progressively,  
249 whereas V/Mn, Ni/Mn, V/Co, and Ni/Cr ratios decrease gradually from Mag-1  
250 through Mag-2 to Mag-3 (Fig. 6).

251

## 252 **Whole-rock compositions of the monzodiorite**

253 Whole rock compositions of the monzodiorite samples (n=5) are listed in  
254 **appendix table A2**. The least altered samples of monzodiorite have 59.6–60.0 wt.%  
255 SiO<sub>2</sub>, 16.5–16.9 wt.% Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, 2.4–2.8 wt.% MgO, 5.1–6.2 wt.% Na<sub>2</sub>O, 3.4–4.1 wt.%  
256 K<sub>2</sub>O, 3.4–4.2 wt.% CaO, and 4.5–5.1 wt.% FeO<sub>total</sub>. These samples contain 10.8–14.5  
257 ppm Co (avg.= 12.4) with Co/Fe ratio ranging from  $290 \times 10^{-6}$  to  $364 \times 10^{-6}$  (avg.  
258  $=333 \times 10^{-6}$ ). The average Co/Fe ratio of the monzodiorite samples are comparable to  
259 that of the Fe skarn associated with magmatic rocks from the Handan-Xingtai district  
260 (avg. Co/Fe  $=351 \times 10^{-6}$ , n=35; [Sun et al., 2019b](#)) but are lower than that of the bulk  
261 continental crust (avg. Co/Fe ratio  $=511 \times 10^{-6}$ ; [Rudnick and Gao et al., 2003](#)).

262

## 263 **DISCUSSION**

### 264 **Efficient Fe precipitation**

265 Iron solubility in hydrothermal fluids is sensitive to temperature, salinity and  
266 acidity ([Chou and Eugster, 1977](#); [Whitney et al., 1985](#); [Kwak et al., 1986](#); [Simon et al.,](#)  
267 [2004](#)). For chloride solutions equilibrated with granitoid rocks, [Whitney et al. \(1985\)](#)  
268 experimentally demonstrated that a temperature decrease from 500 to 400 °C can  
269 cause a tenfold decrease in the Fe concentration, whereas a threefold decrease in fluid  
270 salinity produces a commensurate decrease in the Fe concentration as temperature  
271 decreases from 600 to 400 °C. Additionally, the experimental and theoretical studies  
272 of [Chou and Eugster \(1977\)](#) showed that a tenfold decrease in the acid concentration

273 (mHCl) would produce a hundredfold decrease in the Fe concentration (mFeCl<sub>2</sub>) in  
274 supercritical chloride solutions equilibrated with magnetite. Therefore, ore fluids in Fe  
275 skarn systems ought to precipitate a major part of their Fe in response to: (1) cooling  
276 as fluids move across steep geothermal gradients in the contact zone (e.g., [Meinert et  
277 al., 2005](#)); (2) mixing with meteoric water with consequent decreases in temperature  
278 and salinity (e.g., [Pons et al., 2009](#)); and (3) neutralization of acidic fluids by reaction  
279 with enclosing marble ([Holser and Schneer, 1961](#)). Collectively, these factors  
280 facilitate efficient Fe precipitation. The Fe-phases precipitated from ore fluids can be  
281 oxides, silicates, sulfides, or carbonates depending on the activities of oxygen, silica,  
282 sulfur, and carbon dioxide in the fluids ([Whitney et al., 1985](#)). In the case of the  
283 Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit, the gangue consists of Mg-rich silicates such as  
284 diopside, pyroxene, tremolite, and serpentine that contain minor Fe. More importantly,  
285 these minerals are volumetrically minor relative to magnetite in the ore bodies ([Fig. 2](#)).  
286 Other Fe-bearing phases such as hematite, siderite, and pyrite are all subordinate and  
287 only locally present. Thus, most of the Fe in the ore fluids precipitated as magnetite  
288 during formation of the Baijian Fe-(Co) deposit.

289

### 290 **Modeling of trace element fractionation in magnetite**

291 Among the physiochemical parameters, fluid composition is considered to be the  
292 primary factor controlling trace element chemistry of magnetite ([Nadoll et al., 2014](#)).  
293 As magma-derived fluids move through the contact zone, intense magnetite  
294 precipitation is expected to occur along the fluid path ways ([Fig. 7](#)). High degree

295 fractional crystallization of magnetite would have progressively modified the fluid  
296 composition and therefore the chemical composition of magnetite crystallized. To  
297 evaluate the effect of magnetite precipitation on fluid and mineral chemistry in the  
298 Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit, we conducted modeling of Rayleigh and equilibrium  
299 fractionation. These models assume that hydrothermal fluids exsolved from cooling  
300 intrusions are confined by hot marble during skarn formation, which has exceedingly  
301 low hydraulic conductivity (Woessner and Poeter, 2020). In the case of Rayleigh  
302 fractionation, magnetite crystals are removed from contact with the fluid after they  
303 form. In the case of equilibrium fractionation, the fluid remains at all times in  
304 equilibrium with magnetite and elements exchange continuously between magnetite  
305 and fluid.

306 **Rayleigh and equilibrium fractionation models.** Rayleigh fractionation  
307 models are formulated using the equations below (the original equation is from  
308 [Rayleigh, 1896](#)):

309 
$$\frac{C_{fluid}^j}{C_{fluid}^{Fe}} / \frac{C_{fluid}^{j(0)}}{C_{fluid}^{Fe(0)}} = F^{K_d(j)-1}, \quad (1)$$

310 
$$\frac{C_{fluid}^j}{C_{fluid}^i} / \frac{C_{fluid}^{j(0)}}{C_{fluid}^{i(0)}} = F^{K_d(j)-K_d(i)}, \quad (2)$$

311 
$$\frac{C_{Mag}^j}{C_{Mag}^{Fe}} / \frac{C_{Mag}^{j(0)}}{C_{Mag}^{Fe(0)}} = F^{K_d(j)-1}, \quad (3)$$

312 
$$\frac{C_{Mag}^j}{C_{Mag}^i} / \frac{C_{Mag}^{j(0)}}{C_{Mag}^{i(0)}} = F^{K_d(j)-K_d(i)}, \quad (4)$$

313 where  $F$  is the fraction of Fe in the fluid ( $1 > F > 0$ );  $j$  and  $i$  are two trace elements of  
314 interests;  $C_{fluid}^j$ ,  $C_{fluid}^i$ , and  $C_{fluid}^{Fe}$  are concentrations of  $j$ ,  $i$  and Fe in the fluid,  
315 respectively;  $C_{fluid}^{j(0)}$ ,  $C_{fluid}^{i(0)}$ , and  $C_{fluid}^{Fe(0)}$  are concentrations of  $j$ ,  $i$ , and Fe in the  
316 initial fluid, respectively;  $C_{Mag}^j$ ,  $C_{Mag}^i$ , and  $C_{Mag}^{Fe}$  are the concentrations  $j$ ,  $i$ , and Fe

317 in magnetite, respectively;  $C_{Mag}^{j(0)}$ ,  $C_{Mag}^{i(0)}$ , and  $C_{Mag}^{Fe(0)}$  are the concentrations of  $j$ ,  $i$ ,  
 318 and Fe in magnetite equilibrated with the initial fluid, respectively;  $K_d(j)$  and  $K_d(i)$   
 319 are the magnetite-fluid distribution coefficients for  $j$  and  $i$ , which are defined as:  $K_d(j)$   
 320  $= \left(\frac{C_{Mag}^j}{C_{Mag}^{Fe}}\right) / \left(\frac{C_{fluid}^j}{C_{fluid}^{Fe}}\right)$  and  $K_d(i) = \left(\frac{C_{Mag}^i}{C_{Mag}^{Fe}}\right) / \left(\frac{C_{fluid}^i}{C_{fluid}^{Fe}}\right)$ , respectively.

321 Because of the low abundance of trace elements in hydrothermal magnetite and  
 322 the stoichiometric control of Fe for this mineral (Nadoll et al., 2014; Dare et al., 2014;  
 323 Wen et al., 2017),  $C_{Mag}^{Fe}$  and  $C_{Mag}^{Fe(0)}$  are assumed to be equal. Equation (3) can then  
 324 be reduced to:

$$325 \quad C_{Mag}^j / C_{Mag}^{j(0)} = F^{K_d(j)-1}. \quad (5)$$

326 In the Rayleigh fractionation model, equations (1) and (2) respectively describe the  
 327 variation of  $j/Fe$  and  $j/i$  ratios in the fluid, whereas equations (4) and (5) respectively  
 328 describe the variation of the  $j/i$  ratio and  $j$  content in magnetite.

329 The equilibrium fractionation models are formulated using the equations (e.g.,  
 330 Sharp, 2007):

$$331 \quad \frac{C_{fluid}^j}{C_{fluid}^{Fe}} / \frac{C_{fluid}^{j(0)}}{C_{fluid}^{Fe(0)}} = 1 / [K_d(j) + F * (1 - K_d(j))], \quad (6)$$

$$332 \quad \frac{C_{fluid}^j}{C_{fluid}^i} / \frac{C_{fluid}^{j(0)}}{C_{fluid}^{i(0)}} = [K_d(i) + F * (1 - K_d(i))] / [K_d(j) + F * (1 - K_d(j))], \quad (7)$$

$$333 \quad \frac{C_{Mag}^j}{C_{Mag}^{Fe}} / \frac{C_{Mag}^{j(0)}}{C_{Mag}^{Fe(0)}} = 1 / [K_d(j) + F * (1 - K_d(j))], \quad (8)$$

$$334 \quad \frac{C_{Mag}^j}{C_{Mag}^i} / \frac{C_{Mag}^{j(0)}}{C_{Mag}^{i(0)}} = [K_d(i) + F * (1 - K_d(i))] / [K_d(j) + F * (1 - K_d(j))]. \quad (9)$$

335 The variable definitions in equations (6-9) are the same as those in the previous  
 336 equations described above. Given that  $C_{Mag}^{Fe}$  equals  $C_{Mag}^{Fe(0)}$ , equation (8) can be  
 337 simplified to:

$$338 \quad C_{Mag}^j / C_{Mag}^{j(0)} = 1 / [K_d(j) + (1 - K_d(j)) * F]. \quad (10)$$



339 In the equilibrium fractionation model, equations (6) and (7), respectively, describe  
340 the variation of  $j/\text{Fe}$  and  $j/i$  ratios in the fluid, whereas equations (9) and (10),  
341 respectively, describe the variation of the  $j/i$  ratio and  $j$  content in magnetite.

342 **Fractionation of V, Cr, Mn, Co, Ni, and Zn in magnetite.** The following  
343 elements, V, Cr, Mn, Co, Ni and Zn, were selected for modeling because: (1) They are  
344 among the main discrimination elements for magnetite from various settings ([Nadoll](#)  
345 [et.al., 2014](#)) and their concentrations in magnetite are generally above the detection  
346 limits of LA-ICP-MS; (2) Their concentrations are low in the host dolomitic  
347 limestone and limestone as well as in the gangue minerals such as diopsidic pyroxene,  
348 tremolite, phlogopite, and serpentine ([Wen, 2017](#)), such that fluid-rock reactions and  
349 the precipitation of gangue minerals has a limited influence on the budget of these  
350 elements in the hydrothermal fluid; and (3) The distribution coefficients for these  
351 elements between magnetite and chloride solutions are available ([Ilton and Eugster,](#)  
352 [1989; Tauson et al., 2015, 2017; Smagunov et al., 2021](#)).

353 The experimental investigation of [Ilton and Eugster \(1989\)](#) showed that Mn and  
354 Zn are incompatible relative to Fe in magnetite in equilibrium with chloride solutions  
355 at 600 to 800 °C and 200 MPa. Recent experimental partitioning studies by [Tauson et](#)  
356 [al. \(2015, 2017\)](#) and [Smagunov et al. \(2021\)](#) confirmed the incompatibility of Mn and  
357 Zn along with Co in magnetite equilibrated with chloride solutions at 450 °C and 100  
358 MPa with the oxygen fugacity ( $fO_2$ ) close to the magnetite-hematite buffer.  
359 Corresponding distribution coefficients are as follows:  $K_d(\text{Mn}) = 0.009 \pm 0.002$ ;  
360  $K_d(\text{Zn}) = 0.0017 \pm 0.0008$ ; and  $K_d(\text{Co}) = 0.16 \pm 0.07$ . Their experiments further

361 demonstrate the high compatibilities of V and Ni and similar compatibility of Cr  
362 relative to Fe in magnetite with distribution coefficients of  $K_d(\text{V}) = 6.6 \pm 3.8$ ;  $K_d(\text{Ni})$   
363  $= 3 \pm 1.5$ ; and  $K_d(\text{Cr}) = 1.2 \pm 1$ . We used the mean distribution coefficients for V, Cr,  
364 Mn, Co, Ni, and Zn between magnetite and fluid from [Tauson et al. \(2015, 2017\)](#) and  
365 [Smagunov et al. \(2021\)](#) for the Rayleigh and equilibrium fractionation modeling. The  
366 P, T, and  $f\text{O}_2$  conditions for these distribution coefficients are comparable to those  
367 during magnetite mineralization at Baijian ([Wen 2017](#)) and other skarn Fe deposits  
368 worldwide (e.g., [Meinert, 1984](#); [Rose et al., 1985](#); [Pons et al., 2009](#); [Li et al., 2019](#)).

369 In both the Rayleigh and equilibrium fractionation models, Mn, Zn, and Co  
370 concentrations increase slowly as magnetite precipitation proceeds ([Fig. 8A, C](#)). The  
371 modeling results are consistent with the trace element compositions of magnetite from  
372 the Baijian Fe-(Co) skarn deposit that show a slight increase in the average Mn and  
373 Zn concentrations from early Mag-1 to late Mag-3 ([Fig. 5](#)). The average concentration  
374 of Co increases from Mag-1 to Mag-2 but decreases from Mag-2 to Mag-3 coexisting  
375 with pyrite ([Figs. 3E-F; Fig. 5](#)), which suggests that pyrite fixes Co more efficiently  
376 than magnetite ([Dare et al., 2012, 2014](#); [Zhao and Zhou, 2015](#)). It is noteworthy that  
377 decreasing temperature generally results in decreasing trace element abundances in  
378 magnetite ([Dare et al., 2014](#)). Independent evidence that temperature decreased during  
379 precipitation of Mag-1 to Mag-3 is provided by decreases in the Ti concentration of  
380 magnetite ([Fig. 5](#)), which can be used as a proxy for temperature ([Dare et al., 2014](#)).  
381 The measured increases in the concentration of incompatible Mn, Zn, and Co from  
382 Mag-1 to Mag-2/Mag-3 suggests that the effects of magnetite fractional crystallization

383 were greater than cooling. In contrast, the Cr concentration of magnetite is insensitive  
384 to magnetite fractional crystallization in both of the models (Fig. 8A, C). Thus, the  
385 measured decrease in the Cr concentration from Mag-1 to Mag-3 is probably due to  
386 decreasing temperature.

387 The compatible elements, V and Ni, in magnetite behave differently between the  
388 two models, with their concentrations decreasing more rapidly by Rayleigh  
389 fractionation than by equilibrium fractionation (Fig. 8A, C). In the Baijian deposit, the  
390 sharp decrease in the concentration of V and Ni from Mag-1 to Mag-3 (more than 2  
391 orders of magnitude different; Fig. 5) is best explained by Rayleigh fractionation (Fig.  
392 8A), because with 60% of the Fe in the fluid consumed by magnetite precipitation  
393 there is over a hundred-fold decrease in the concentration of V in the magnetite  
394 (calculated with  $K_d(\text{V}) = 6.6$ ; Fig. 8A). It is worth noting that if the maximum  
395 distribution coefficient for V ( $K_d(\text{V}) = 10.4$ ) is applied in Rayleigh fractionation  
396 modeling, achieving such a hundred-fold decrease in V concentration in the magnetite  
397 would only require 40% of the Fe to be consumed by magnetite precipitation.  
398 Alternatively, the decrease in V and Ni from Mag-1 to Mag-3 may be attributed to a  
399 decrease in temperature, though the extent to which temperature affects abundances of  
400 V and Ni in the magnetite would require further experimental studies.

401 Compared to their abundances, the ratios of trace elements in magnetite are  
402 much less affected by temperature (Ilton and Eugster, 1989; Smagunov et al., 2021)  
403 and thus, most likely, reflect variations in the fluid chemistry. In our samples, the  
404 ratios of incompatible to compatible elements, such as Co/Ni, Zn/Ni, and Zn/V, and

405 compatible to incompatible elements, such as V/Mn, Ni/Mn, and Ni/Cr, remain  
406 relatively constant in Mag-1 when compared to Ti (Fig. 9). However, these ratios vary  
407 over 2 to 4 orders of magnitude in Mag-2 and Mag-3 as Ti has a narrow range of  
408 concentrations (Fig. 9). Since a narrow range in Ti concentrations is indicative of a  
409 narrow temperature range, the large variations in metal cation ratios for Mag-2 and  
410 Mag-3 must be due to changing metal cation ratios in the fluid. As Mag-2 and Mag-3  
411 represent the main stages of magnetite mineralization, the ore fluids must have  
412 undergone high degrees of magnetite precipitation during these stages. During  
413 Rayleigh fractionation (Fig. 8B), once 90% of the Fe had precipitated as magnetite  
414 there is a circa thousand-fold increase in the Zn/Ni and Co/Ni ratios in the residual  
415 fluid and magnetite. Raleigh fractionation can, therefore, explain the large range of  
416 metal ratios in Mag-2 and Mag-3. In comparison, equilibrium fractionation is less  
417 efficient in fractionating the metal ratios in magnetite (Fig. 8D). Overall, there are  
418 obvious trends of increasing incompatible/compatible element ratios (e.g., Co/Ni,  
419 Zn/V and Zn/Ni; Fig.6) and decreasing compatible/incompatible element ratios (e.g.,  
420 V/Mn, Ni/Mn and V/Co, Fig. 6) from Mag-1 to Mag-3. These ratios are strongly  
421 correlated with each other (Fig. 6). Such trends and correlations are best explained by  
422 increasing degrees of magnetite fractional crystallization.

423

424

## IMPLICATIONS

### 425 Interpretations of magnetite trace element data

426 Previous studies have suggested that the trace element composition of

427 hydrothermal magnetite is mainly controlled by fluid chemistry, temperature, oxygen  
428 fugacity, fluid-rock interactions, and co-precipitation of other minerals (Dare et al.,  
429 2012, 2014; Nadoll et al., 2014). Based on such relationships, magnetite trace element  
430 geochemistry has been used to decipher the properties and evolution of  
431 magnetite-forming fluids. In this study, we further demonstrate that efficient  
432 magnetite precipitation is a significant process leading to large variations in its trace  
433 element composition. Such a process should not be overlooked in interpreting  
434 magnetite trace element data, especially in hydrothermal systems that generate  
435 magnetite-rich ores such as Fe skarn, IOCG, and IOA deposits. For example, a  
436 decreasing V concentration in magnetite has been interpreted to reflect the increasing  
437  $fO_2$  of the ore-forming fluids. Alternatively, a decreasing magnetite V concentration  
438 can be readily explained by progressive precipitation of magnetite. Similarly, low  
439 Ni/Cr ratios ( $< 1$ , Dare et al., 2014) and high Co/Ni values (Acosta-Góngora, et al.  
440 2014) are considered indicators for magnetite of igneous origin and magnetite  
441 associated with Cu-U ( $\pm$ Co) Fe oxide breccia systems, respectively. However, they  
442 are also typical for magnetite that crystallized from a fluid that underwent intense  
443 magnetite precipitation, as exemplified by the Baijian Fe skarn (e.g., majority of  
444 Mag-3, Figs. 6B and F, Table A1), and therefore could be interpreted differently.

445

#### 446 **Cobalt mineralization in Fe skarns**

447 Pyrite, which is the main host of Co in the Baijian Fe-(Co) deposit, is  
448 paragenetically later than the main stage of magnetite mineralization (Wen, 2017).

449 Because magnetite preferentially consumes Fe over Co from ore fluids as magnetite  
450 precipitates, the Co/Fe ratio of the residual fluid increases. In the Rayleigh  
451 fractionation model, precipitation of 90% of the Fe in magnetite produces about a  
452 seven-fold increase in the Co/Fe ratio of the fluid (Equation 1; Fig. 7A). High fluid  
453 Co/Fe ratios would facilitate substitution of Co for Fe in pyrite via the reaction:  $\text{Co}^{2+}$   
454  $+ \text{FeS}_2(\text{pyrite}) \rightarrow \text{Fe}^{2+} + (\text{Fe}, \text{Co})\text{S}_2$  (Co-rich pyrite). Cobalt sulfides may form when  
455 the fluid is exhausted in Fe or during late-stage hydrothermal recrystallization of  
456 Co-rich pyrite (Qiu et al., 2021). Such increases in fluid Co/Fe ratios can explain the  
457 common occurrence of Co-rich pyrite and Co sulfides in numerous other Fe skarn  
458 deposits around the world (Einaudi et al., 1981; Rose et al., 1985; Meinert et al., 2005;  
459 Nimis et al., 2014; Slack et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2021; Yan et al.,  
460 2021; Shi et al., 2023). Notably, other magnetite-dominant deposit types such as  
461 IOCG and IOA deposits also contain appreciable Co-rich sulfides (Williams et al.,  
462 2005), such as the Ernest Henry IOCG deposit in the Cloncurry district of Australia  
463 (Mark et al., 2000) and the Los Colorados IOA deposit in northern Chile (Reich et al.,  
464 2016). These large tonnage deposits contain large amounts of hydrothermal magnetite  
465 and small amounts of late stage Co-rich sulfides. This would support our conjecture  
466 that magnetite precipitation could play an important role in elevating fluid Co/Fe  
467 ratios and the subsequent precipitation of Co-rich sulfides in these  
468 magnetite-dominant ore deposits. The formation of Co-rich pyrite and Co sulfides is  
469 required for economic Co exploitation.

470 The average Co/Fe ratio of magnetite ( $\text{Co/Fe} = 83 \cdot 10^{-6}$ ; Table A1) and the

471 magnetite-fluid Co/Fe partition coefficient ratio ( $K_d(\text{Co}) = 0.16 \pm 0.07$ ; [Smagunov et](#)  
472 [al. 2021](#)), were used to calculate the average Co/Fe ratio for the Baijian ore fluid of  
473  $(517 \pm 226) \times 10^{-6}$ , which is comparable to that of the monzodiorite (avg.  $333 \times 10^{-6}$ ,  
474 represented by the average values of the least altered samples, [Table A2](#)). This  
475 consistency indicates that Co/Fe fractionation between aqueous fluids and magmas is  
476 insignificant, as suggested by [Williams-Jones and Vasyukova \(2022\)](#). If the magmatic  
477 fluids that form Fe skarns have Co/Fe ratios that are similar to those of related plutons,  
478 then deposits with significant Fe reserves ( $>50$  Mt Fe) have the potential to contain  
479 substantial amounts of Co. In the case of Baijian, mass balance calculations suggest  
480 that the 53.3 Mt of Fe (112 Mt ore at 47.6 wt.% Fe) in this deposit may contain  
481 17,749 t of Co. This calculated Co content is close to the Baijian deposit's Co reserve  
482 (17,186 t), approximately 1/40 of global Co reserves (700,000 t; [USGS, 2020](#)). Our  
483 findings underscore the importance of assessing Co resources in Fe skarn deposits, as  
484 they can potentially contribute significant production to meet the ongoing demand for  
485 this metal.

486

487

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740

#### 741 **Figure and table captions**

742

743 Figure 1. Geologic map of the Handan-Xingtai district (IGSNC and HGI, 1976)  
744 showing the distribution of Fe skarn deposits and associated granitoid intrusions in  
745 Ordovician carbonates. The inset shows the major tectonic units of the North China  
746 Craton and the location of the Handan-Xingtai district. Abbreviations: CAOB =  
747 Central Asian Orogenic Belt; YZC = Yangtze Craton.

748 Figure 2. A representative cross section of the Baijian Fe skarn deposit showing  
749 drill holes, rock units, and the morphology of the two major orebodies.

750 Figure 3. Representative photographs showing the textures and mineralogy of the  
751 samples used in this study. (A) Sample of massive pyroxene skarn, consisting of over  
752 90 vol.% diopsidic pyroxene. (B-D) Samples of magnetite ores associated with  
753 retrograde skarn assemblages. These samples contain variable amount of phlogopite,  
754 tremolite and serpentine; (E-F) Samples of magnetite ore associated with sulfides.  
755 Pyrite occurs as disseminations within massive magnetite. Calcite veinlets locally  
756 replace magnetite. Mineral abbreviations: Px-pyroxene; Mag-magnetite;  
757 Phl-phlogopite; Tr-tremolite; Srp-serpentine; Py-pyrite; Cal-calcite.

758 Figure 4. BSE images showing typical features of magnetite observed in the

759 samples studied. (A) Subhedral magnetite enclosed in a pyroxene crystal; (B-C)  
760 Magnetite contains abundant mineral inclusions of apatite and pyroxene; (D-E)  
761 Magnetite intergrown with tremolite, which replaces pyroxene; (F) Magnetite and  
762 phlogopite replacing pyroxene; (G-I) Magnetite intergrown with serpentine, which  
763 locally replaces olivine; (J) Magnetite mantled by pyrite and calcite; (K) Magnetite  
764 replaced by calcite and hematite; (L) Calcite and siderite veinlets and replacements in  
765 magnetite. Mineral abbreviations: Ap-apatite; Px- pyroxene; Mag-magnetite;  
766 Phl-phlogopite; Tr-tremolite; Srp-serpentine; Py-pyrite; Cal-calcite; Ol-Olivine;  
767 Hem-hematite; Sid-siderite.

768 Figure 5. Box plot showing the abundance of trace elements in magnetite.

769 Figure 6. Plots of Zn/Ni vs. Zn/V (A), Zn/Ni vs. Co/Ni (B), Zn/Ni vs. V/Mn (C),  
770 Zn/Ni vs. Ni/Mn (D), Zn/Ni vs. V/Co (E), and Zn/Ni vs. Ni/Cr (F). The Zn/Ni ratios  
771 are positively correlated with Zn/V and Co/Ni ratios (A-B) and are negatively  
772 correlated with V/Mn, Ni/Mn, V/Co, and Ni/Cr ratios (C-F). From Mag-1 through  
773 Mag-2 to Mag-3, the Zn/Ni, Zn/V, and Co/Ni ratios increase progressively (A-B),  
774 whereas the V/Mn, Ni/Mn, V/Co, and Ni/Cr ratios decrease gradually (C-F).

775 Figure 7. Schematic illustration of ore fluids migrating through the contact zone in  
776 the Baijian Fe skarn deposit. The Fe-charged ore fluids undergo significant magnetite  
777 precipitation at the initial mineralization front and final mineralization front, which is  
778 confined by the marble halo. As magnetite continues to precipitate, the ore fluids  
779 undergo progressive Fe depletion with escalating degrees of fractionation between  
780 compatible elements (V and Ni) and incompatible elements (Mn, Zn, and Co). These

781 fractionations in the ore fluids are recorded in magnetite formed in the ore zone (T2  
782 and T3 magnetite). See the text for further explanation. Abbreviation: Mag-magnetite;  
783 Py-pyrite.

784 Figure 8. Rayleigh (A, B) and equilibrium (C, D) curves for trace elements and  
785 trace element ratios during magnetite fractional crystallization in a closed system. The  
786 magnetite-fluid distribution coefficients for each trace element are assumed to be  
787 constant during the fractional crystallization process.

788 Figure 9. Plots of Ti vs. Zn/V (A), Co/Ni (B), V/Mn (C), Ni/Mn (D), V/Co (E),  
789 and Ni/Cr (F). These trace element ratios remain relatively constant in Mag-1 but vary  
790 over 2 to 4 orders of magnitude in Mag-2 and Mag-3 within a narrow range of Ti  
791 concentrations.

792

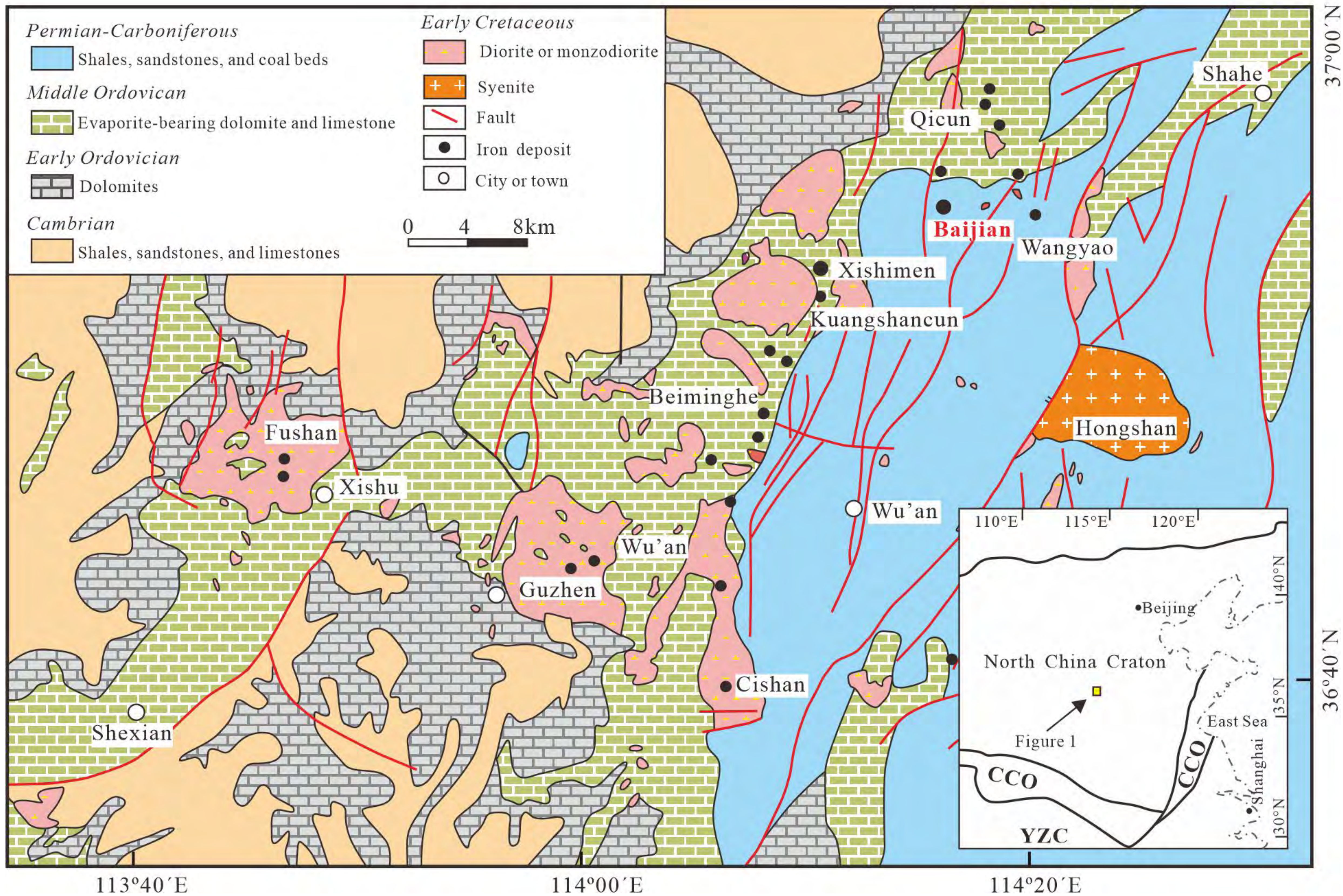
## 793 **Appendix**

794 Appendix Table A1. Trace element data of magnetite from the Baijian Fe skarn.

795 Appendix Table A2. Whole-rock major element compositions and Co concentration of  
796 the ore-related monzodiorite.

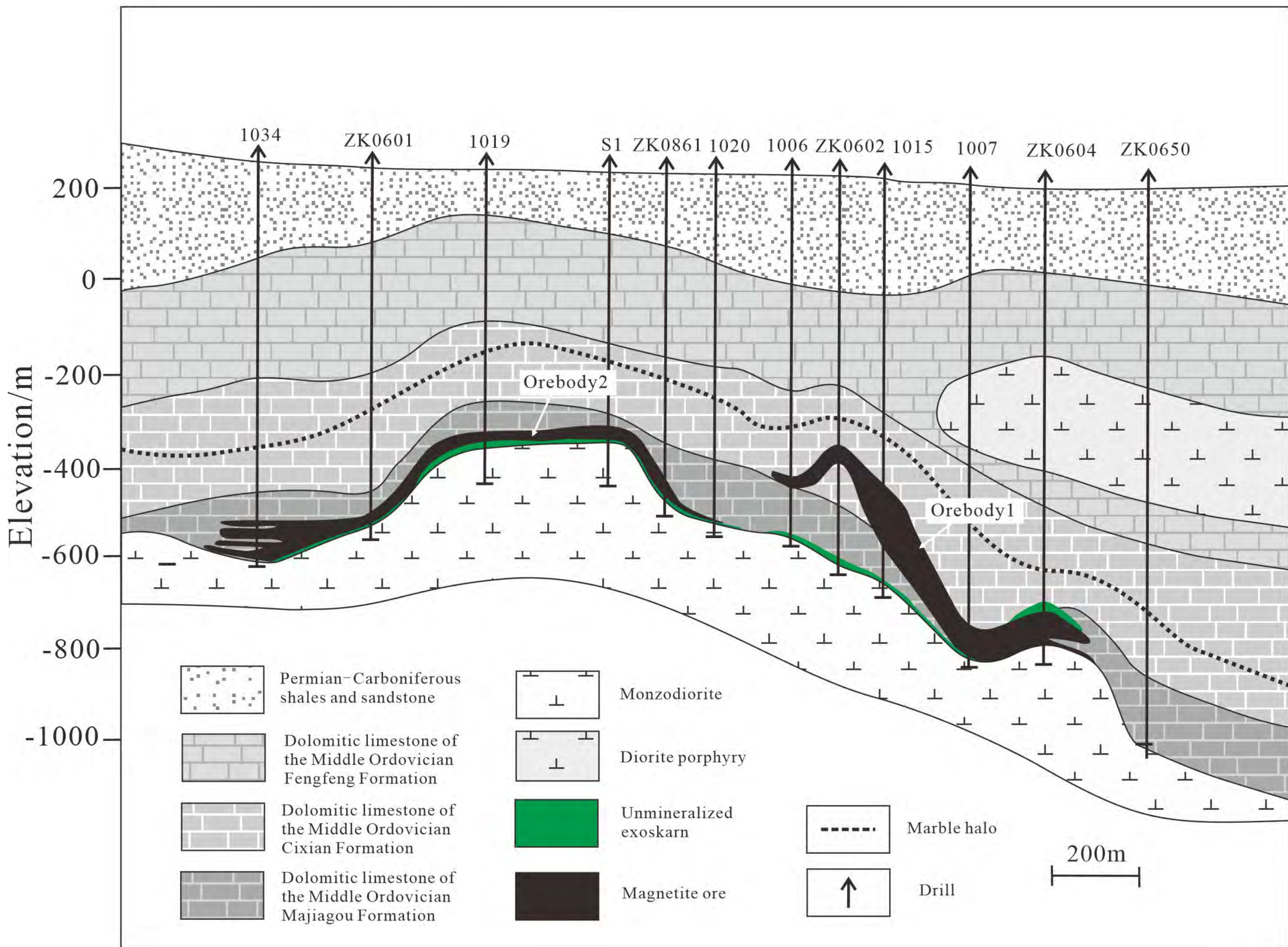


# Figure 1



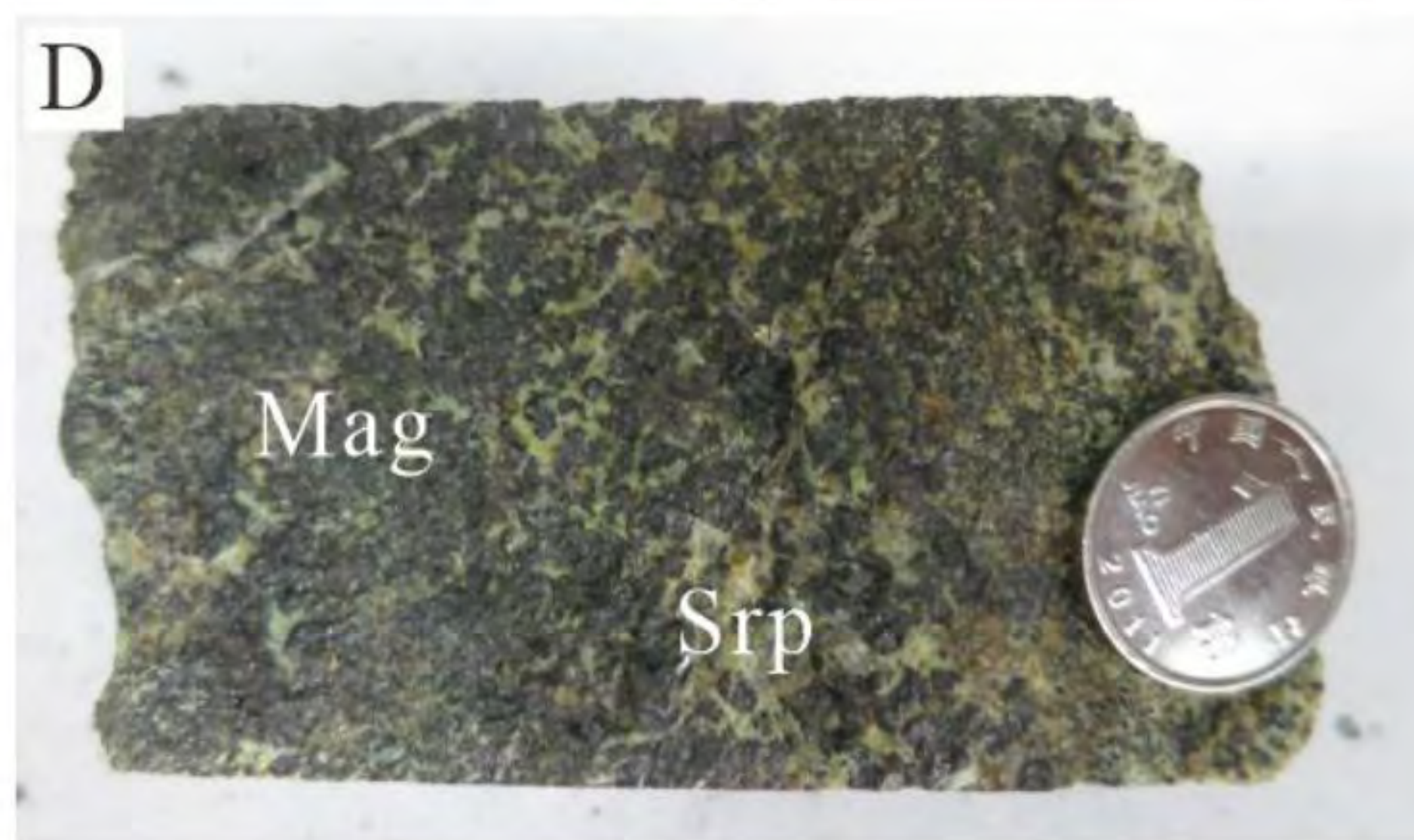
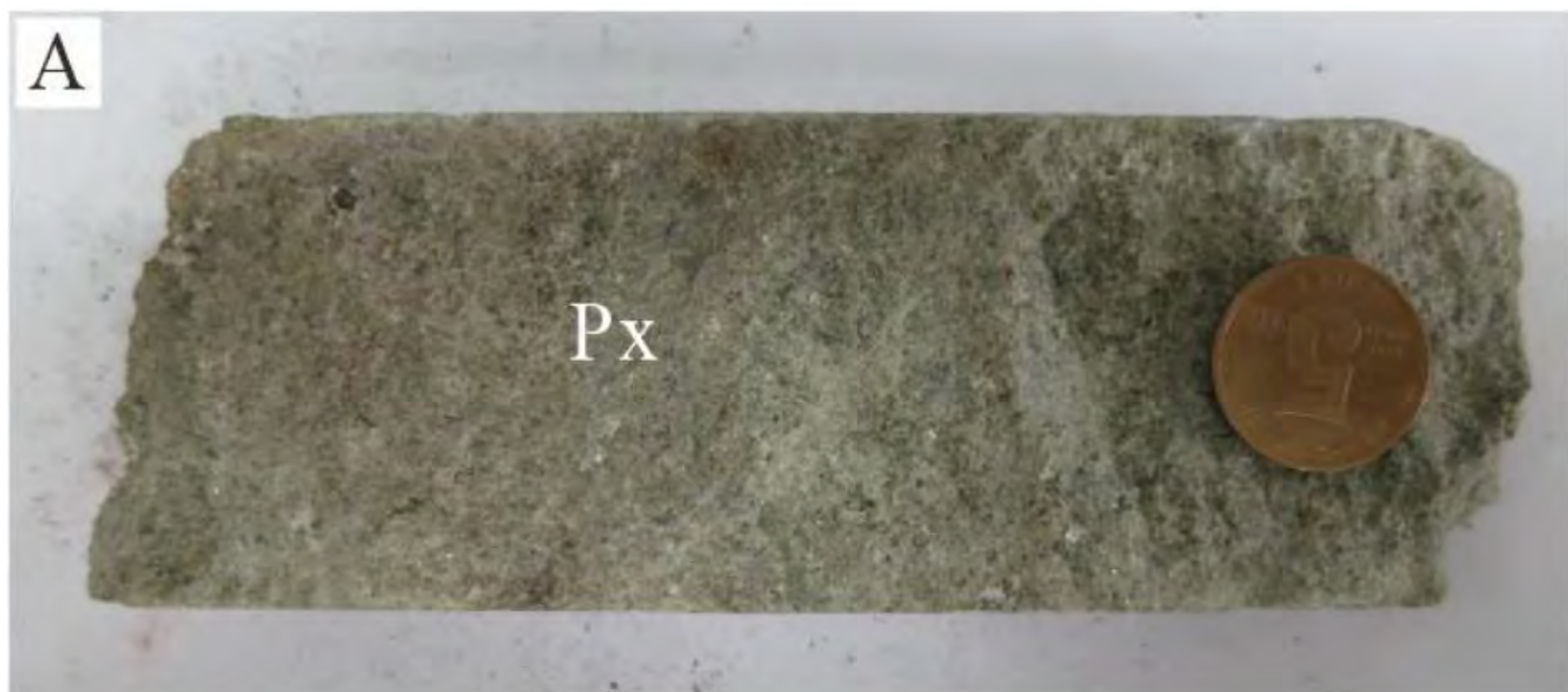


# Figure 2



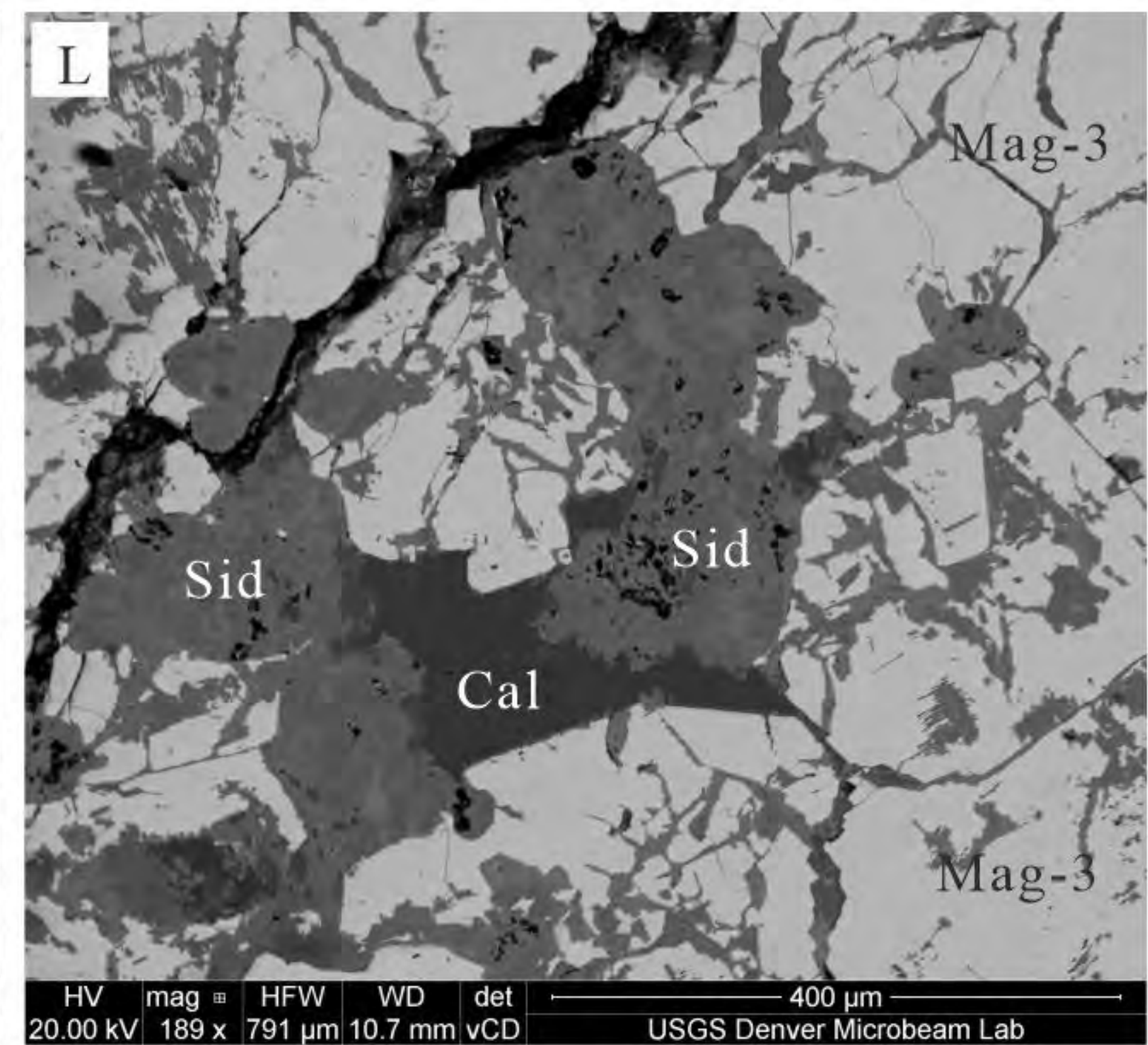
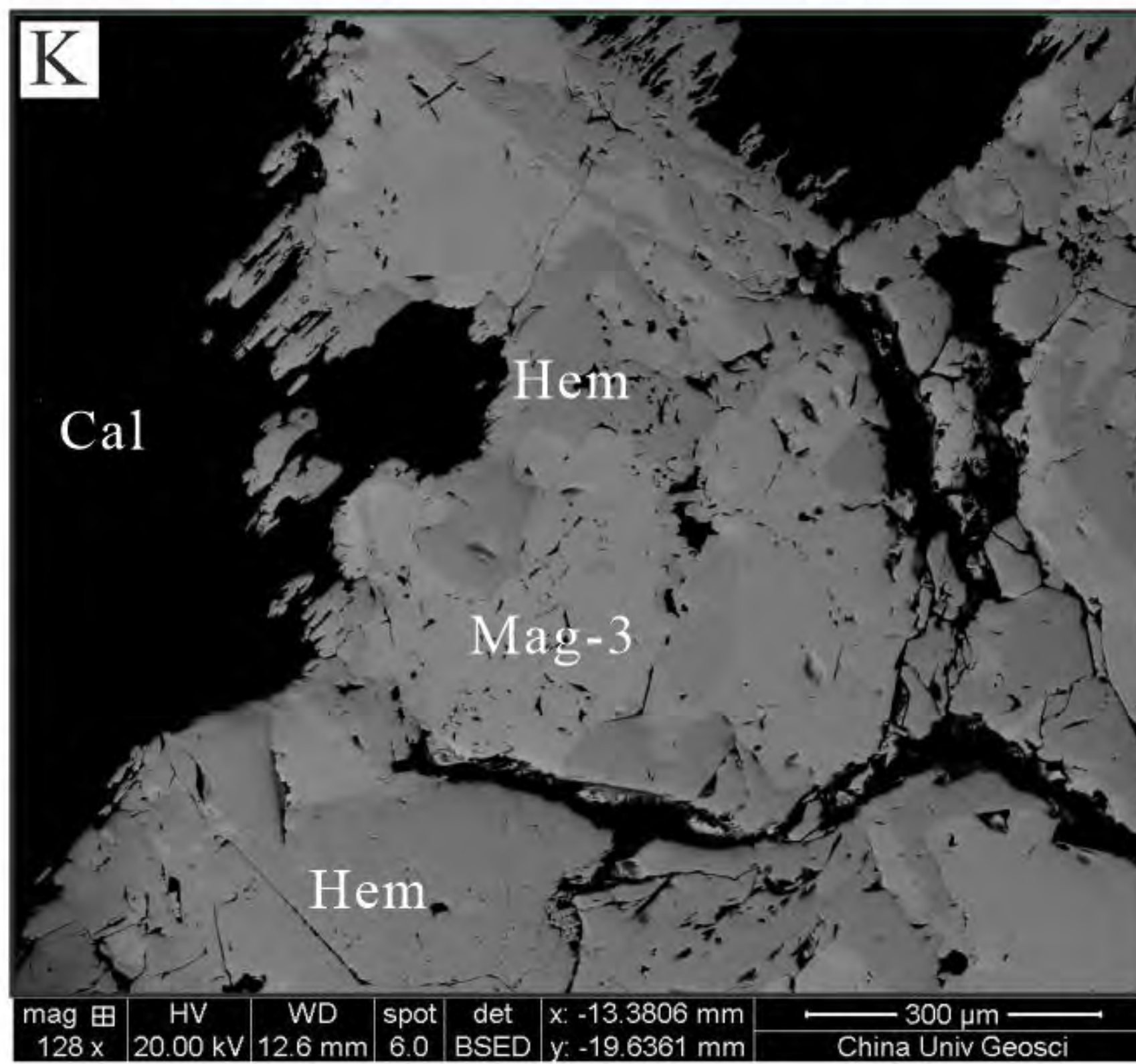
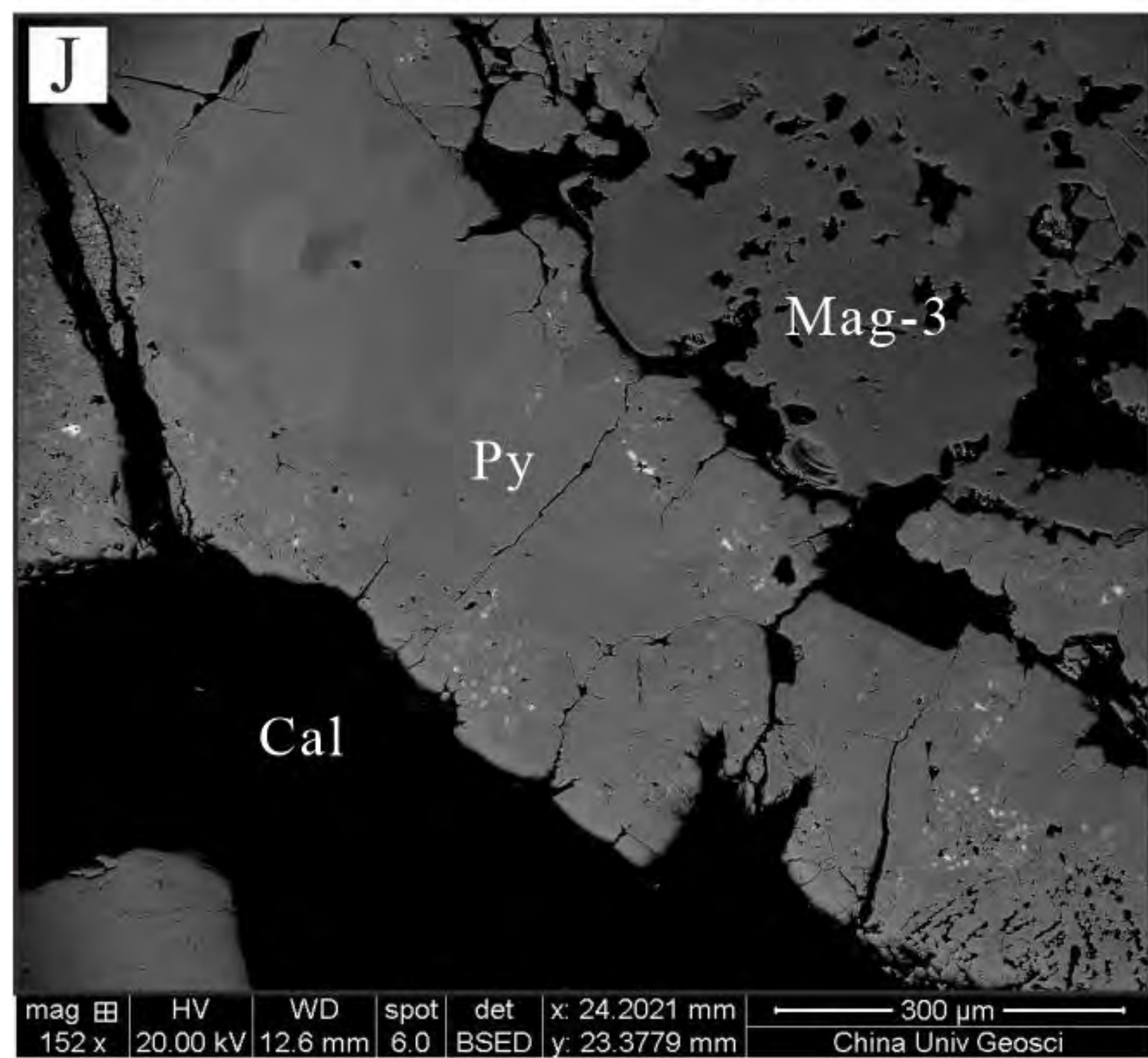
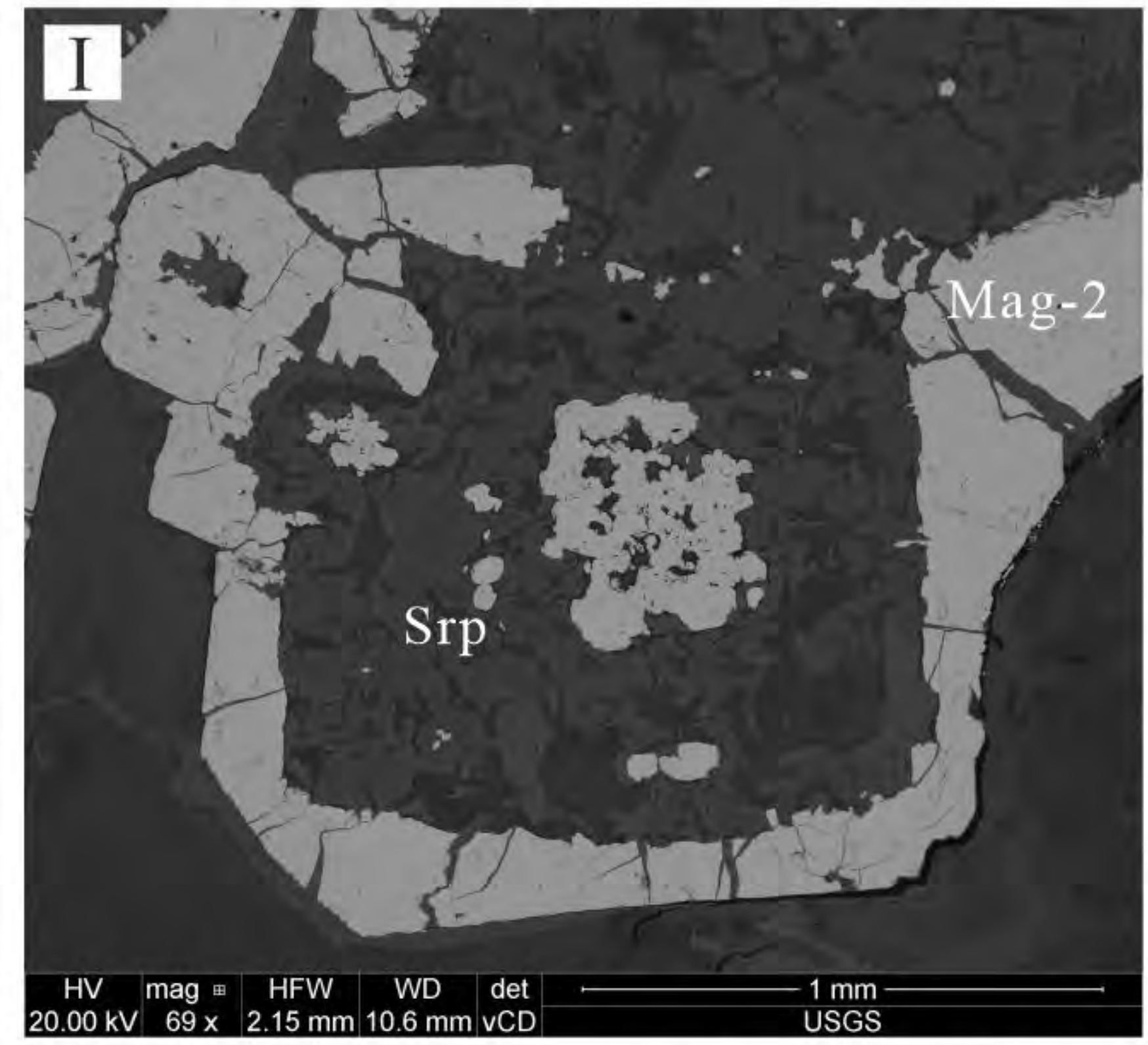
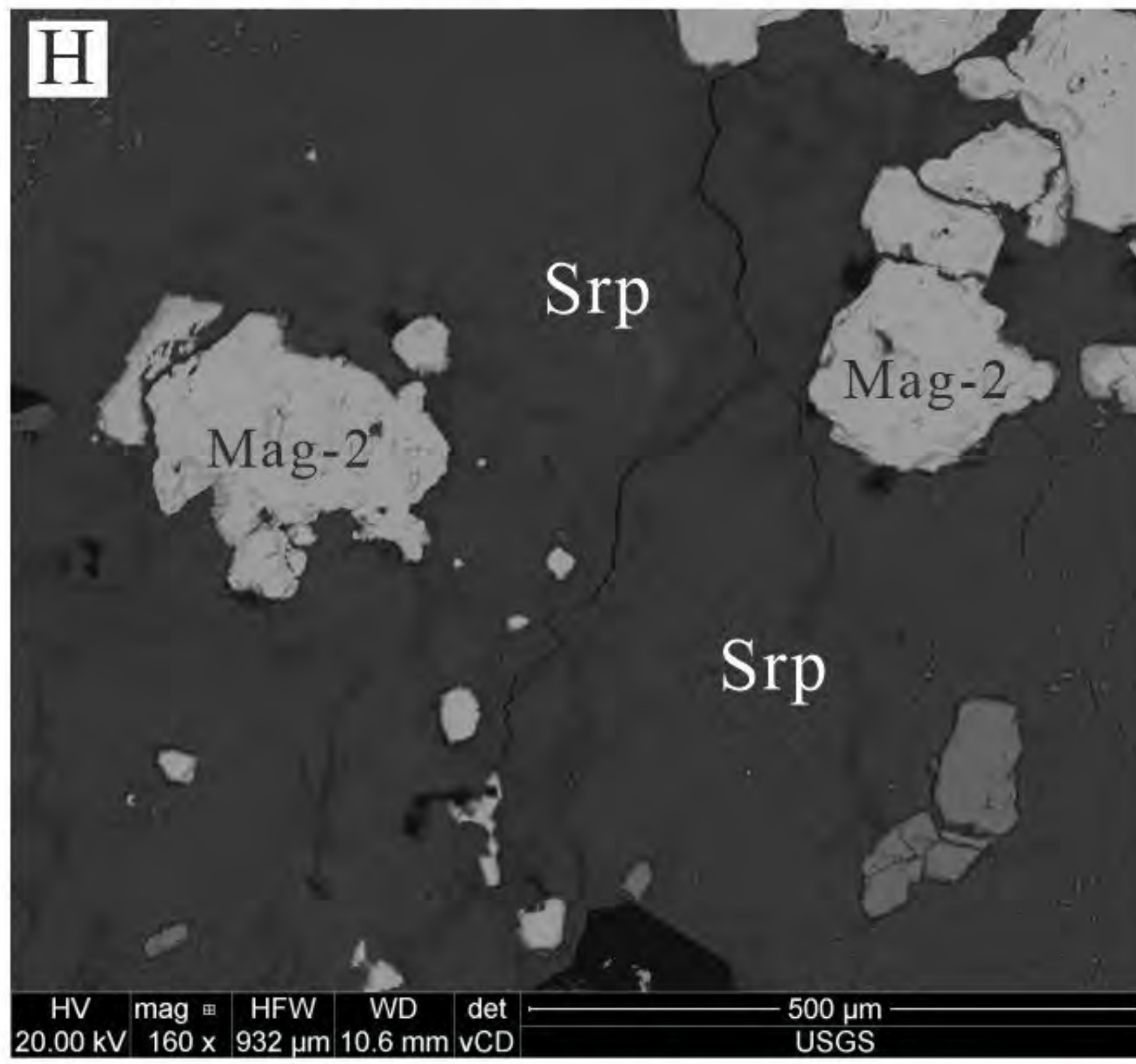
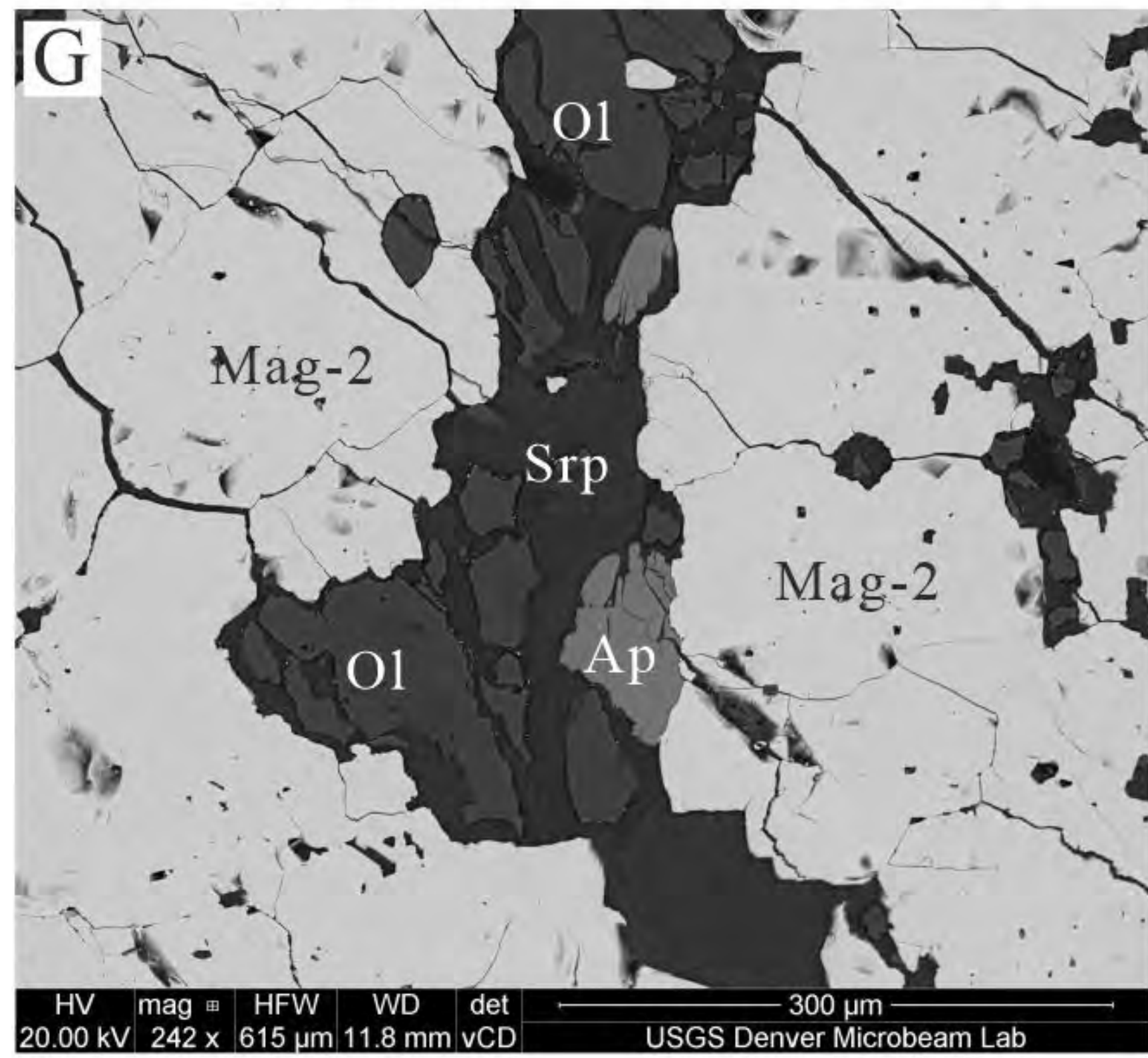
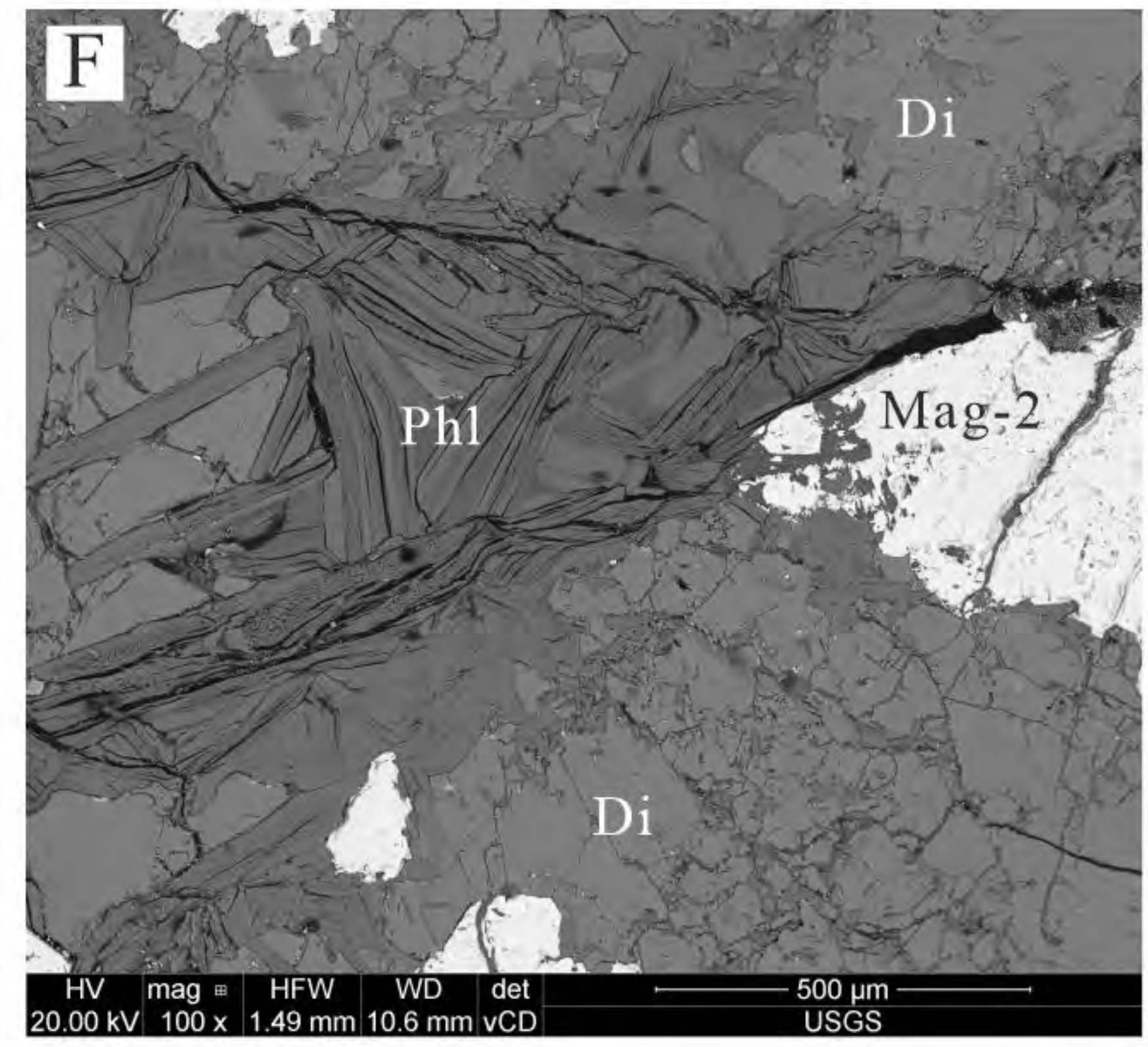
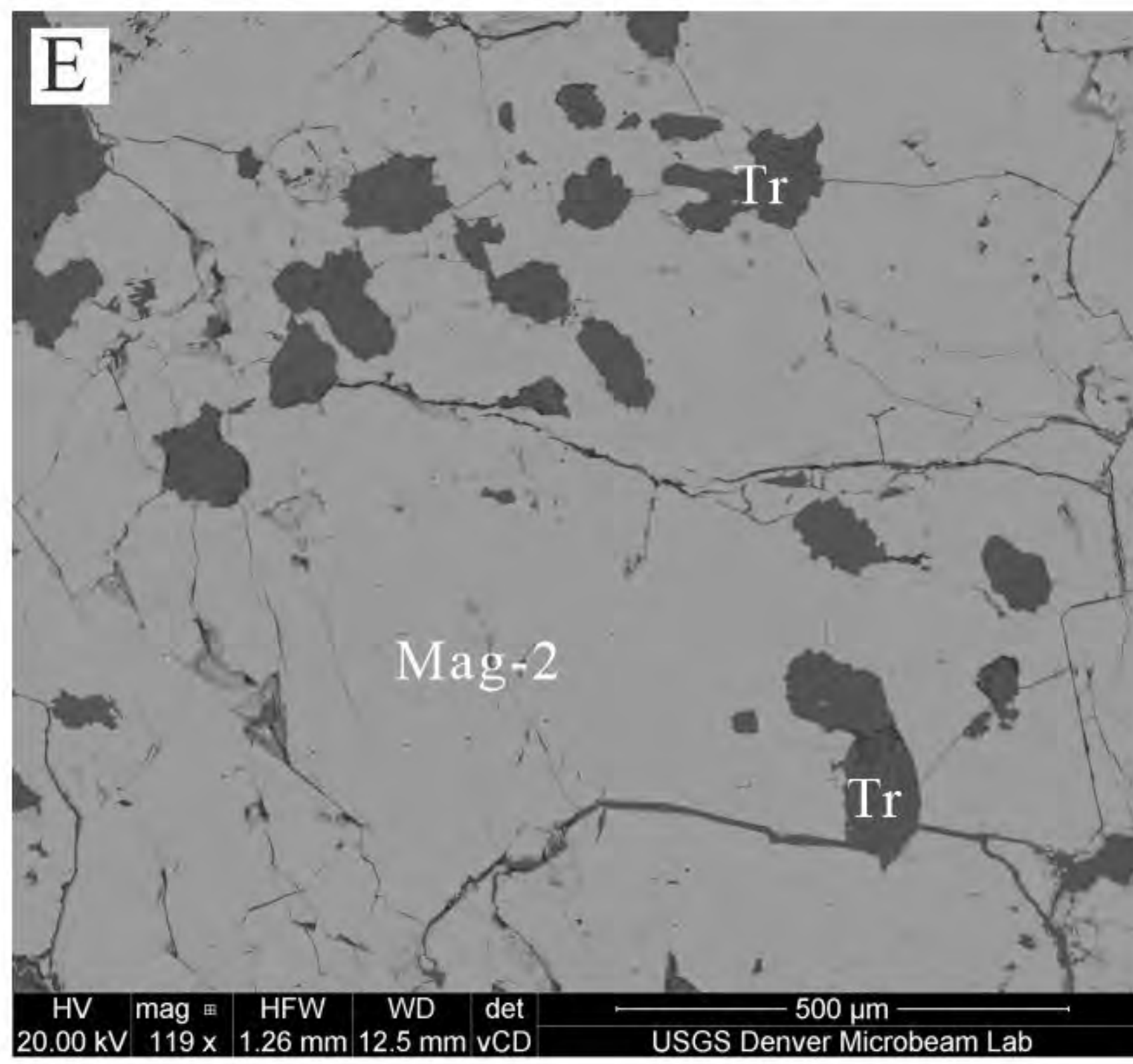
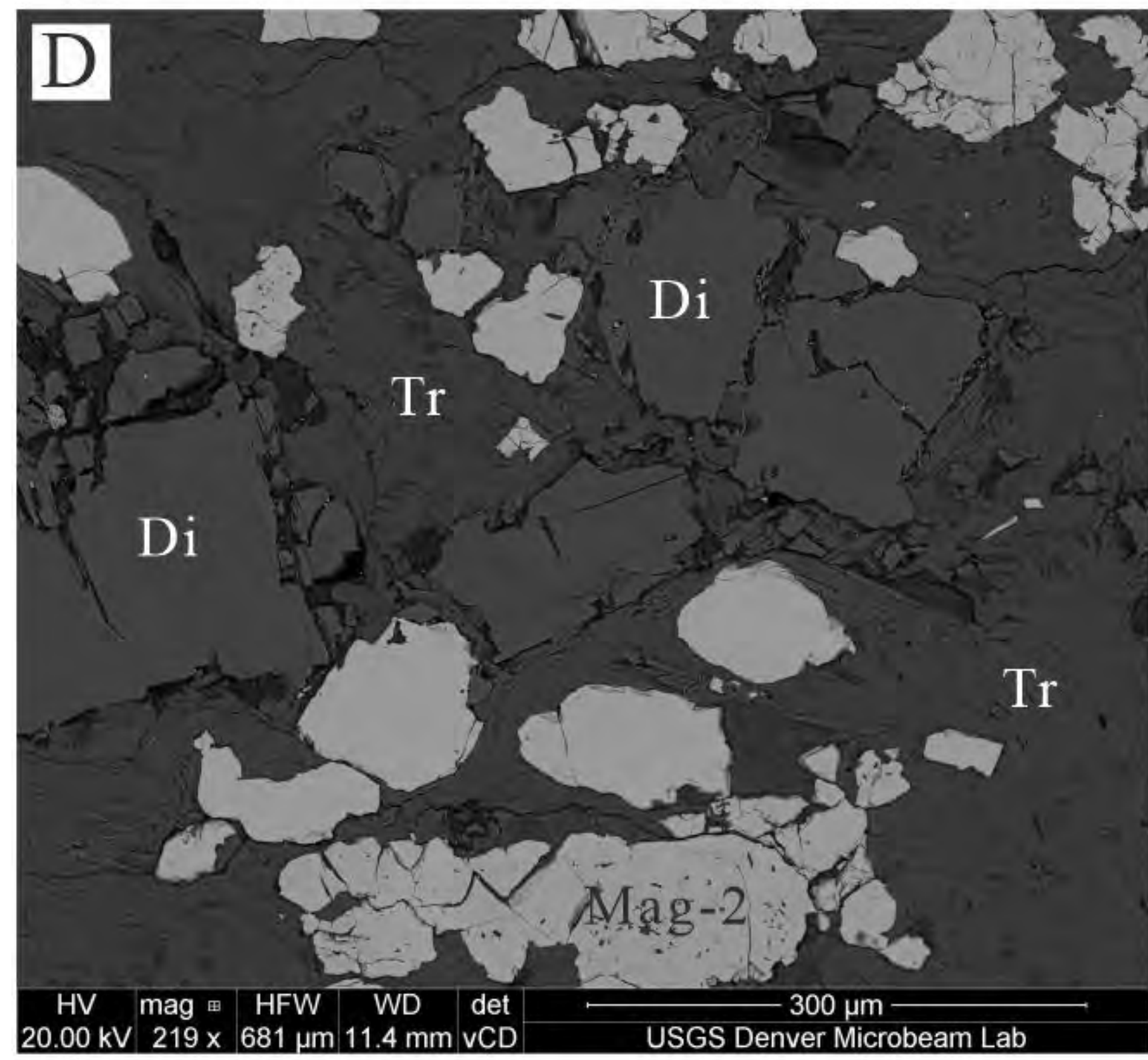
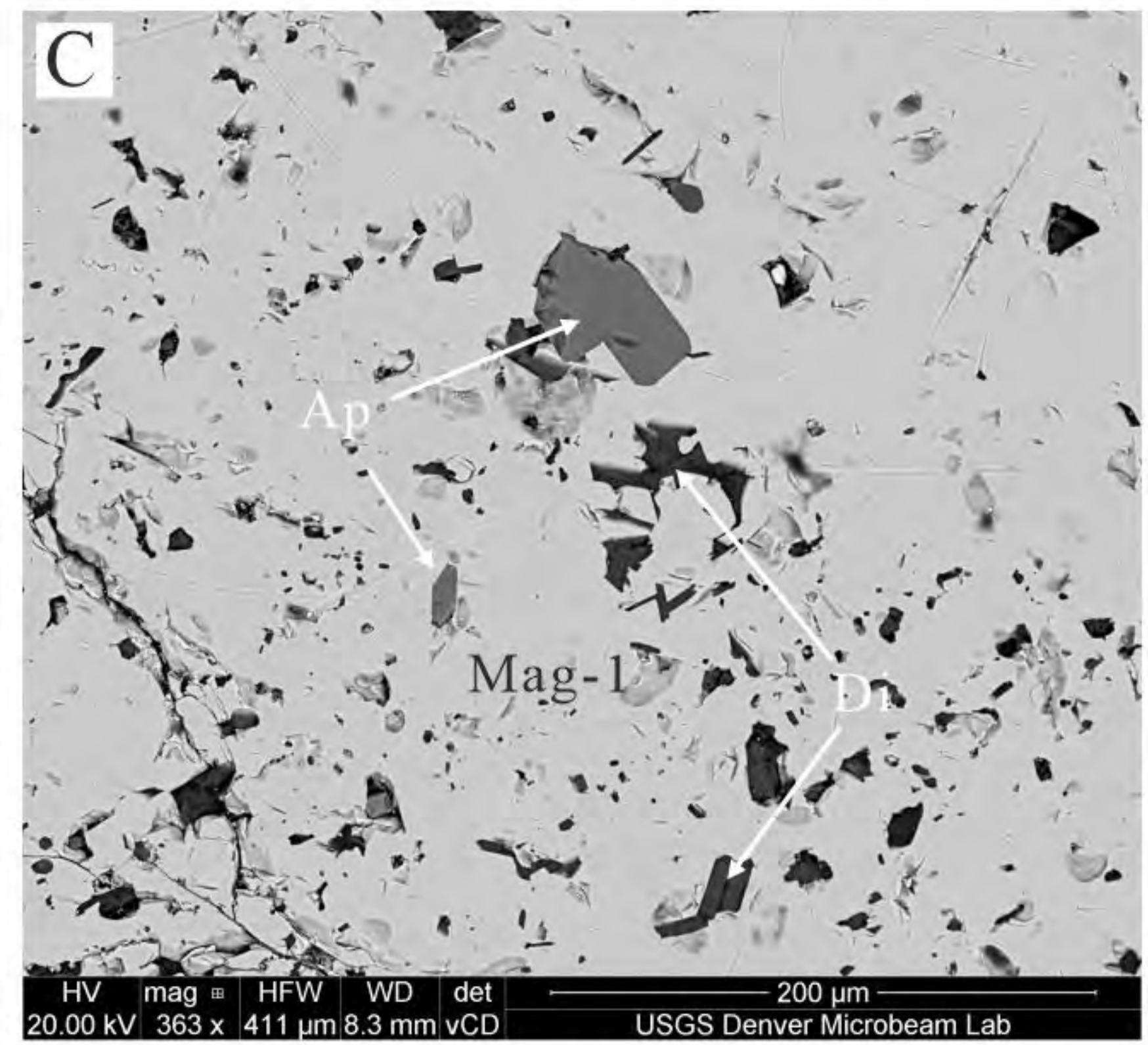
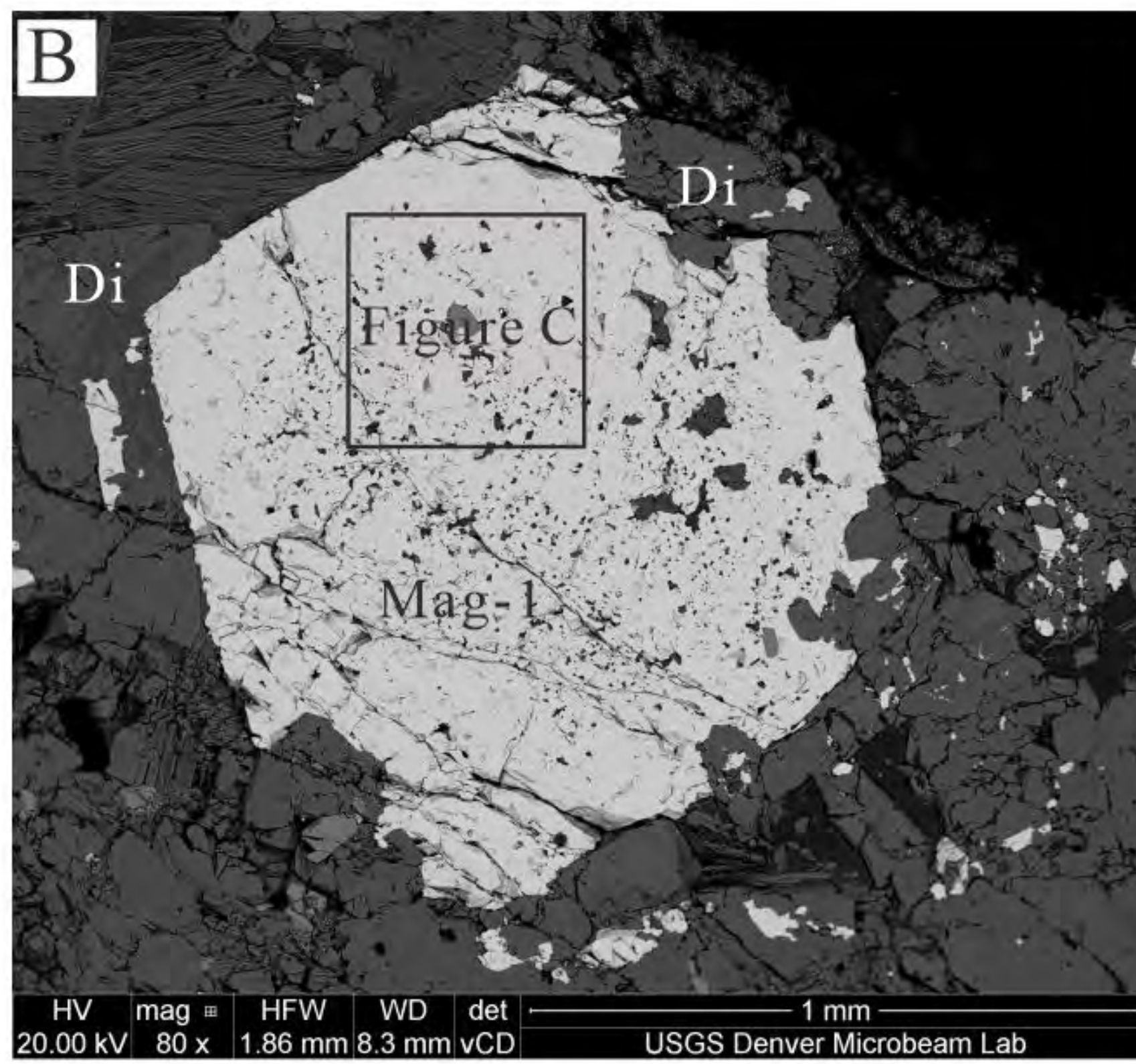
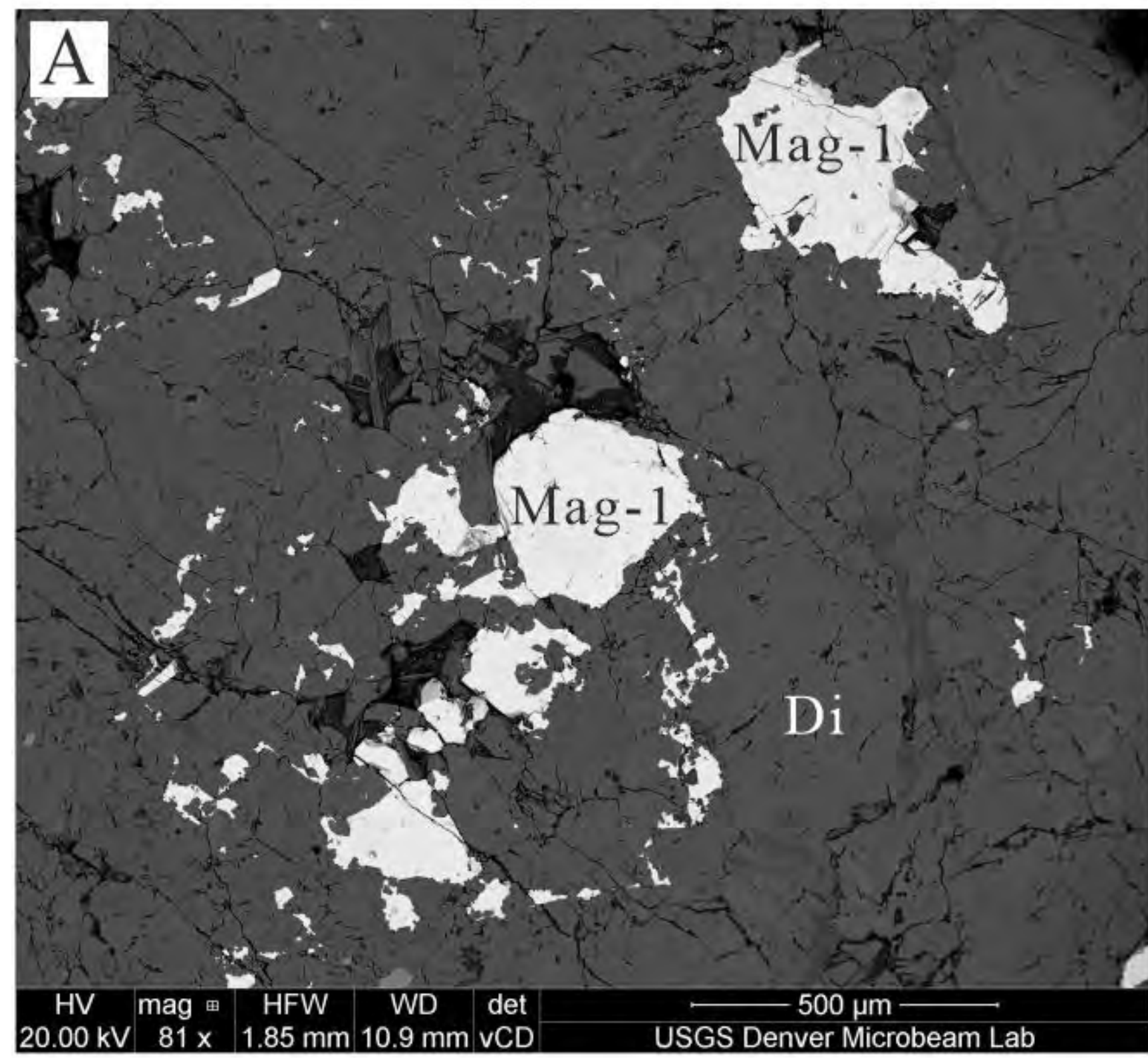


# Figure 3



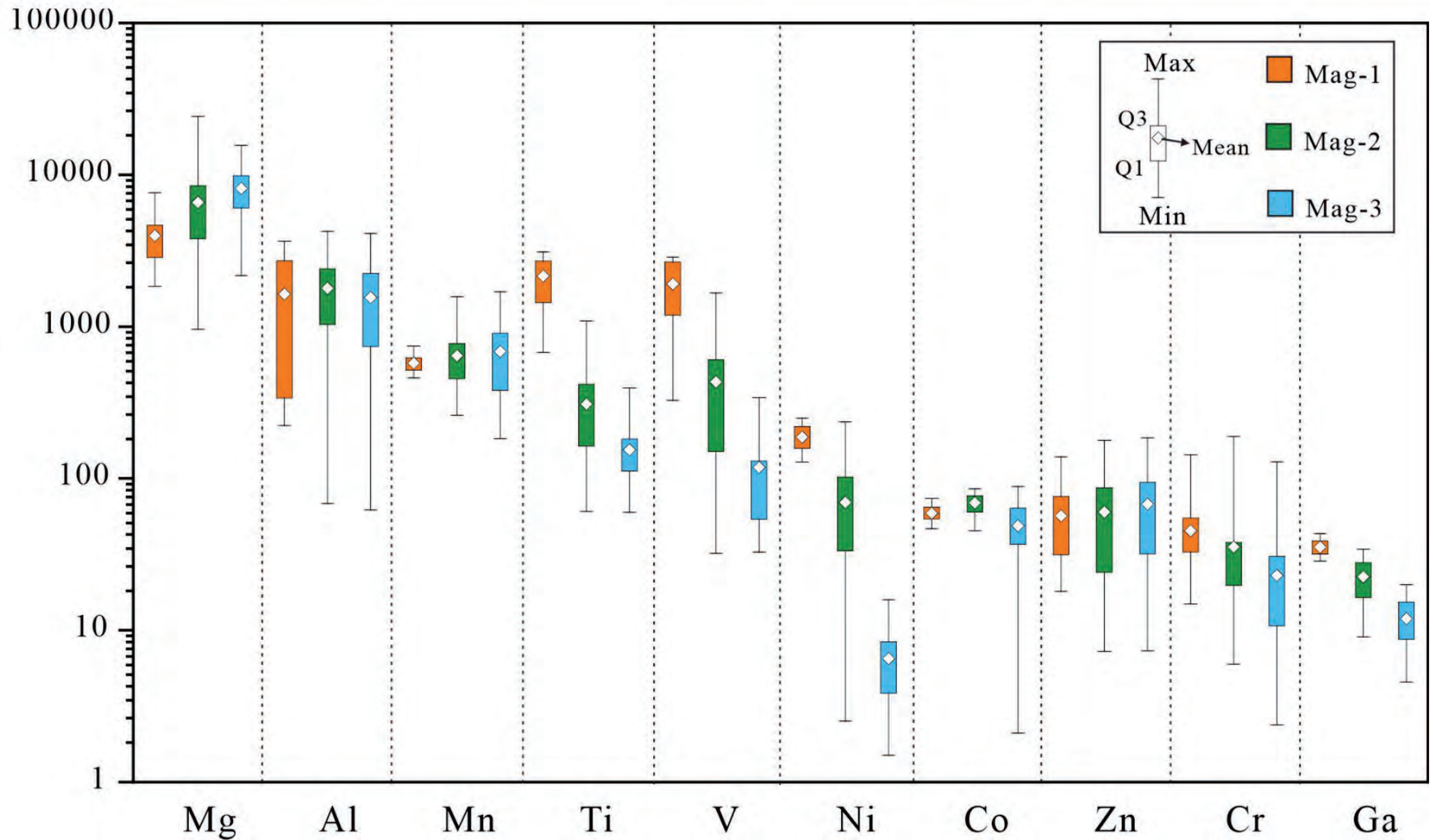


# Figure 4



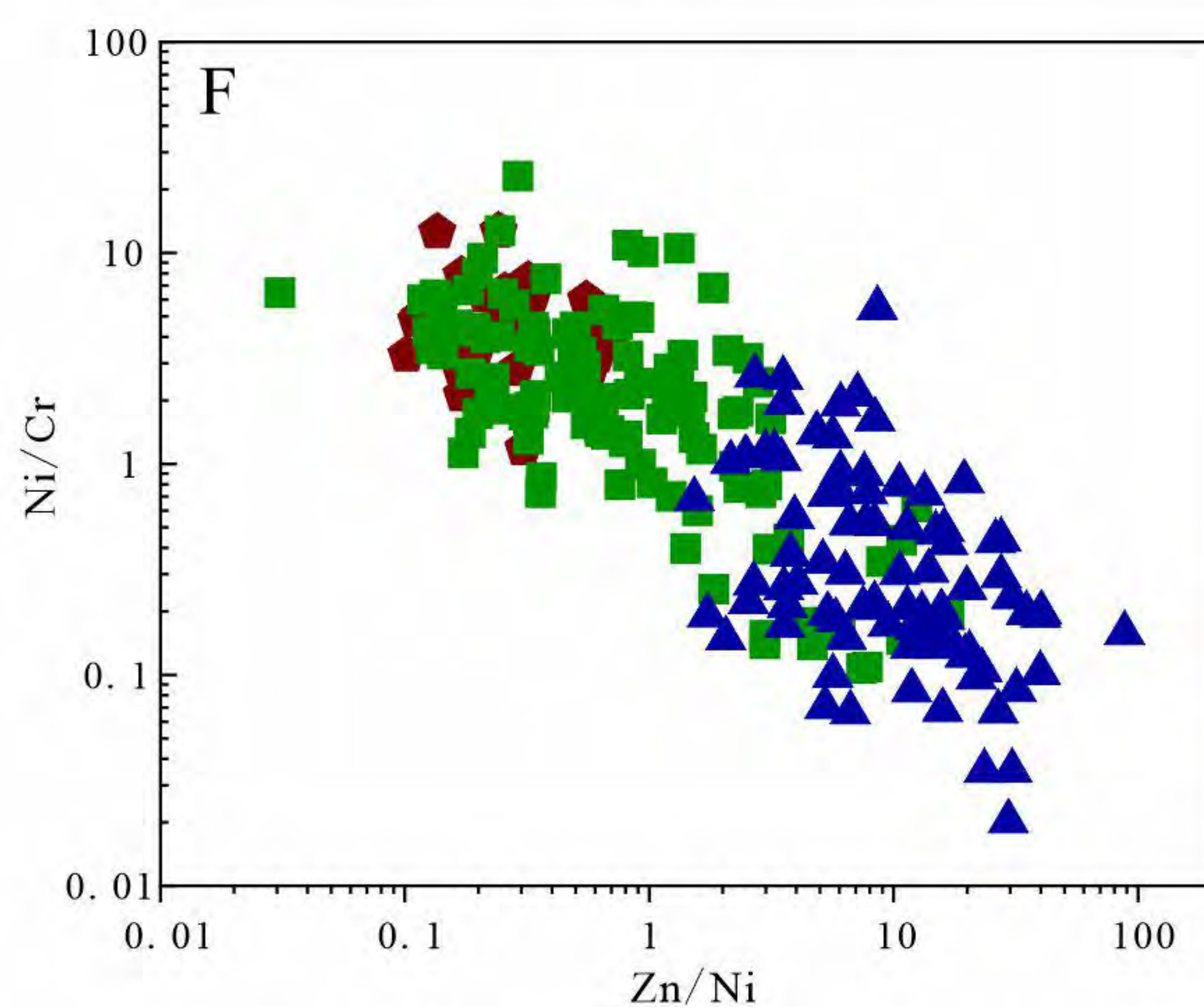
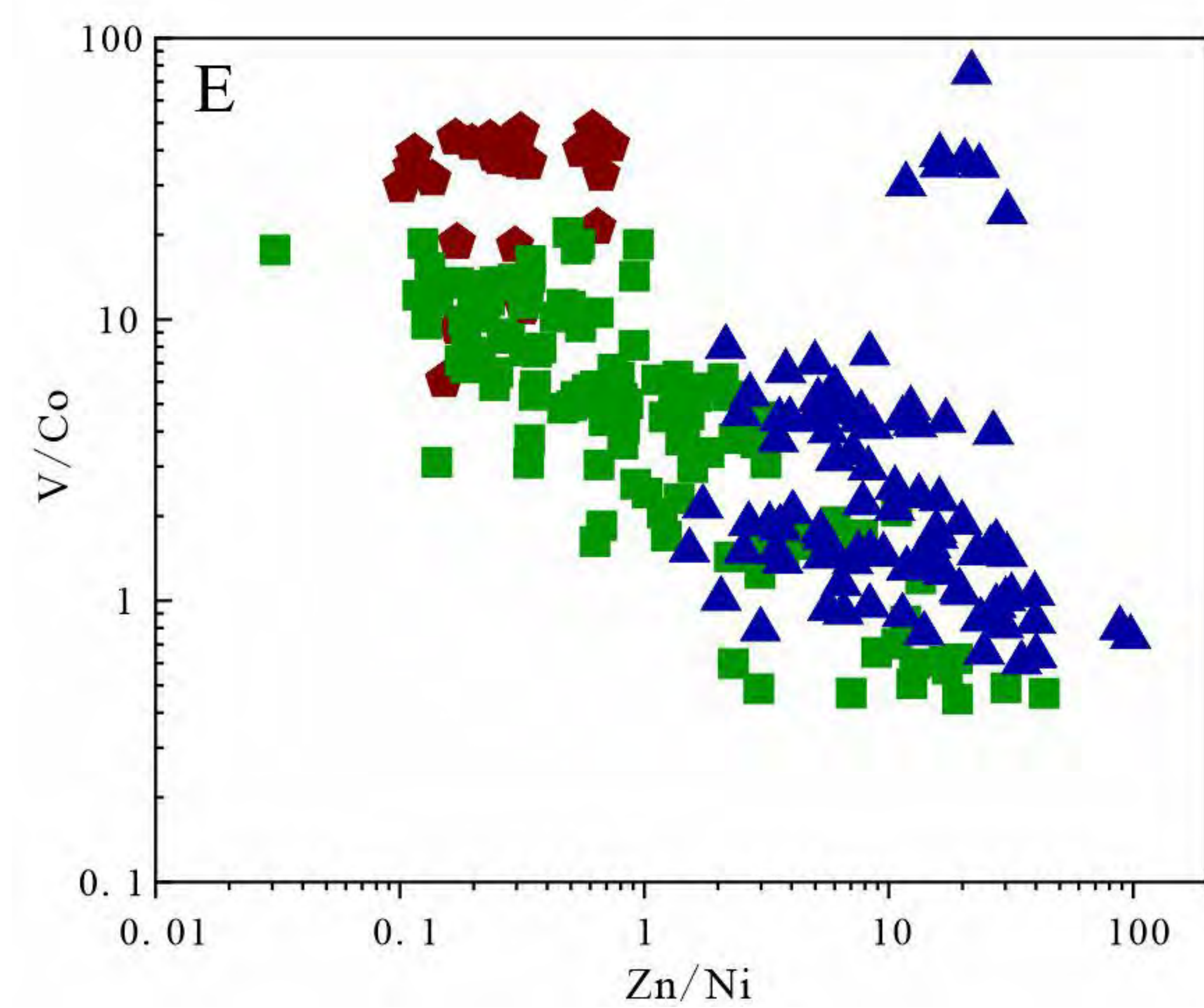
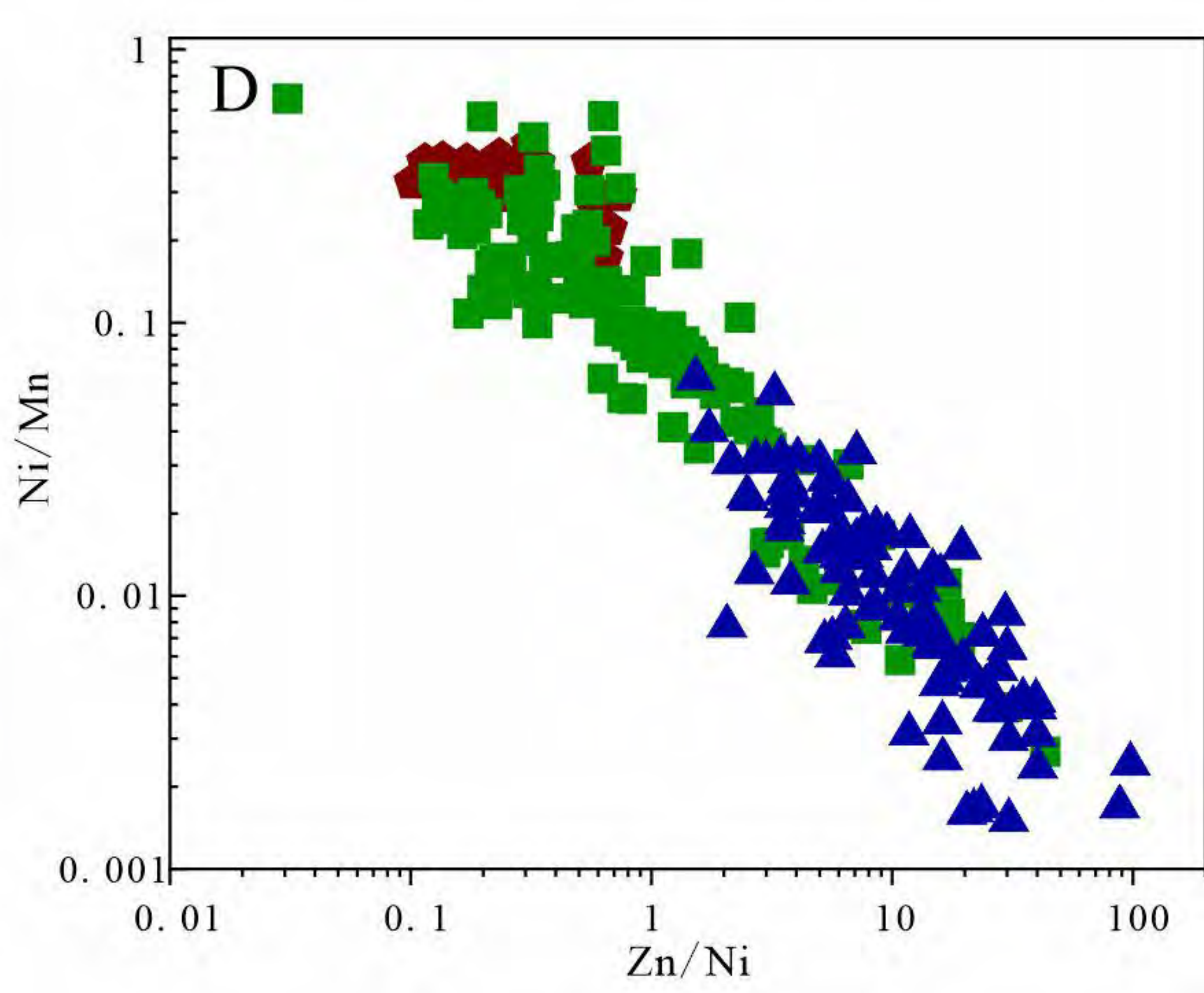
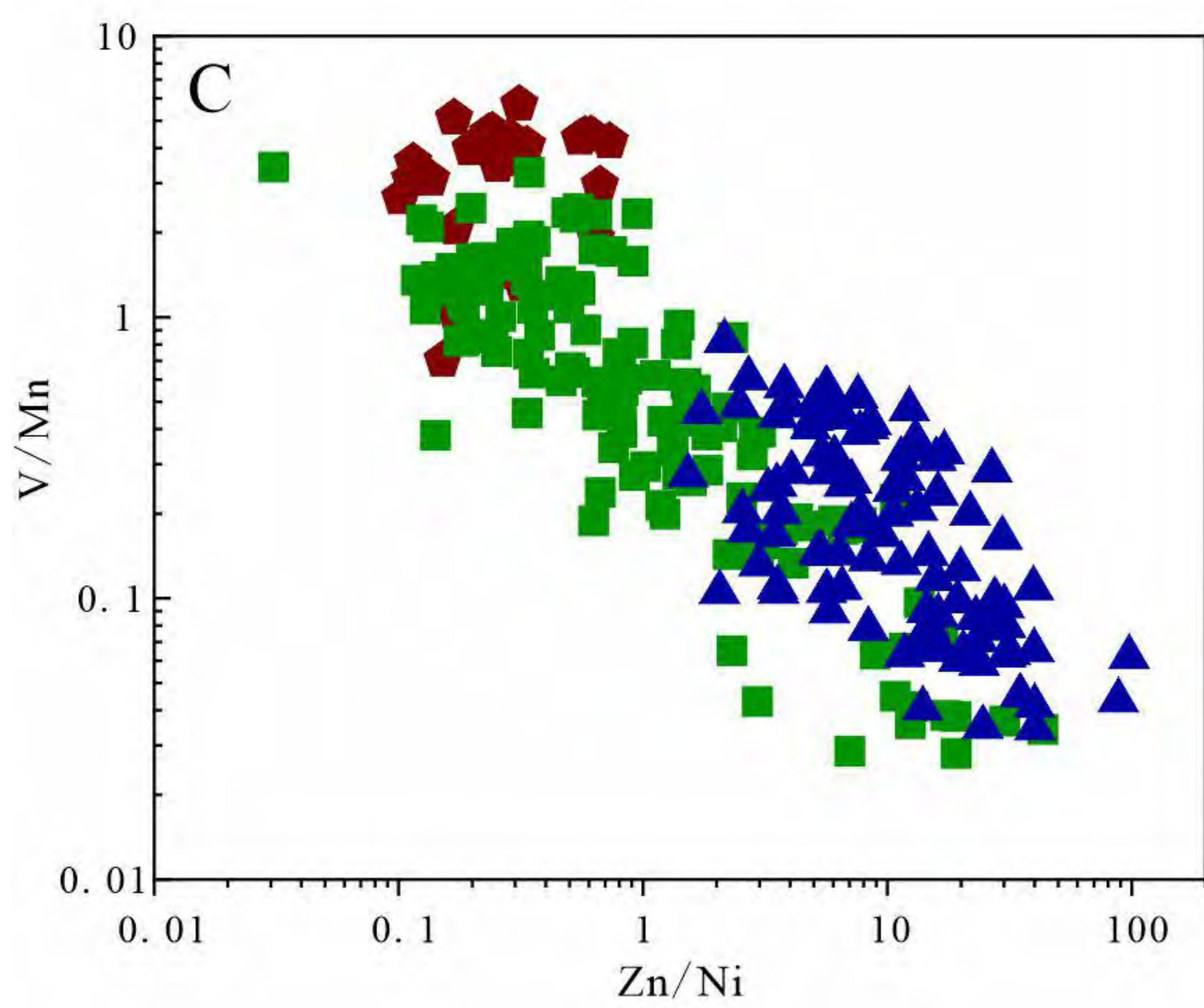
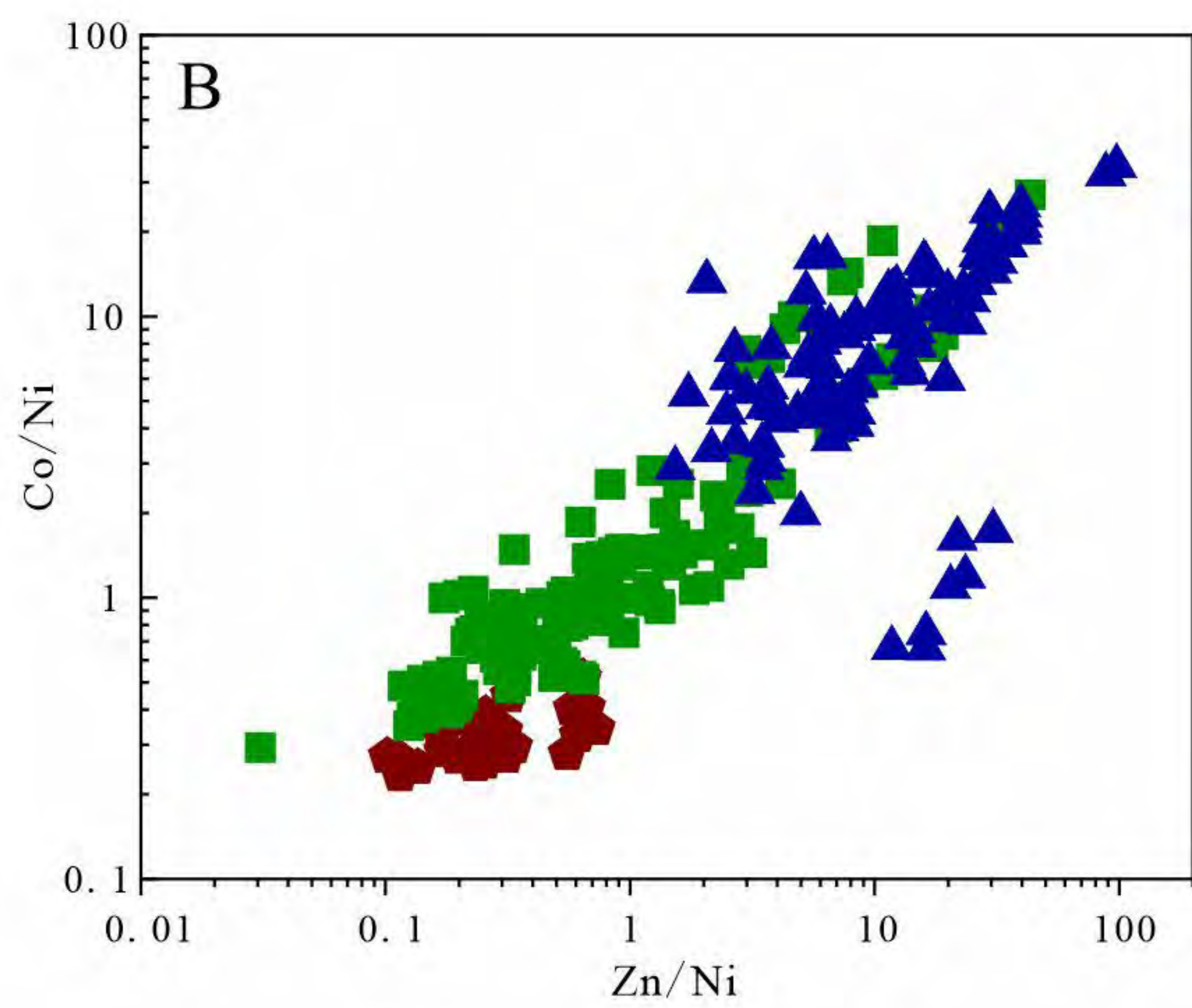
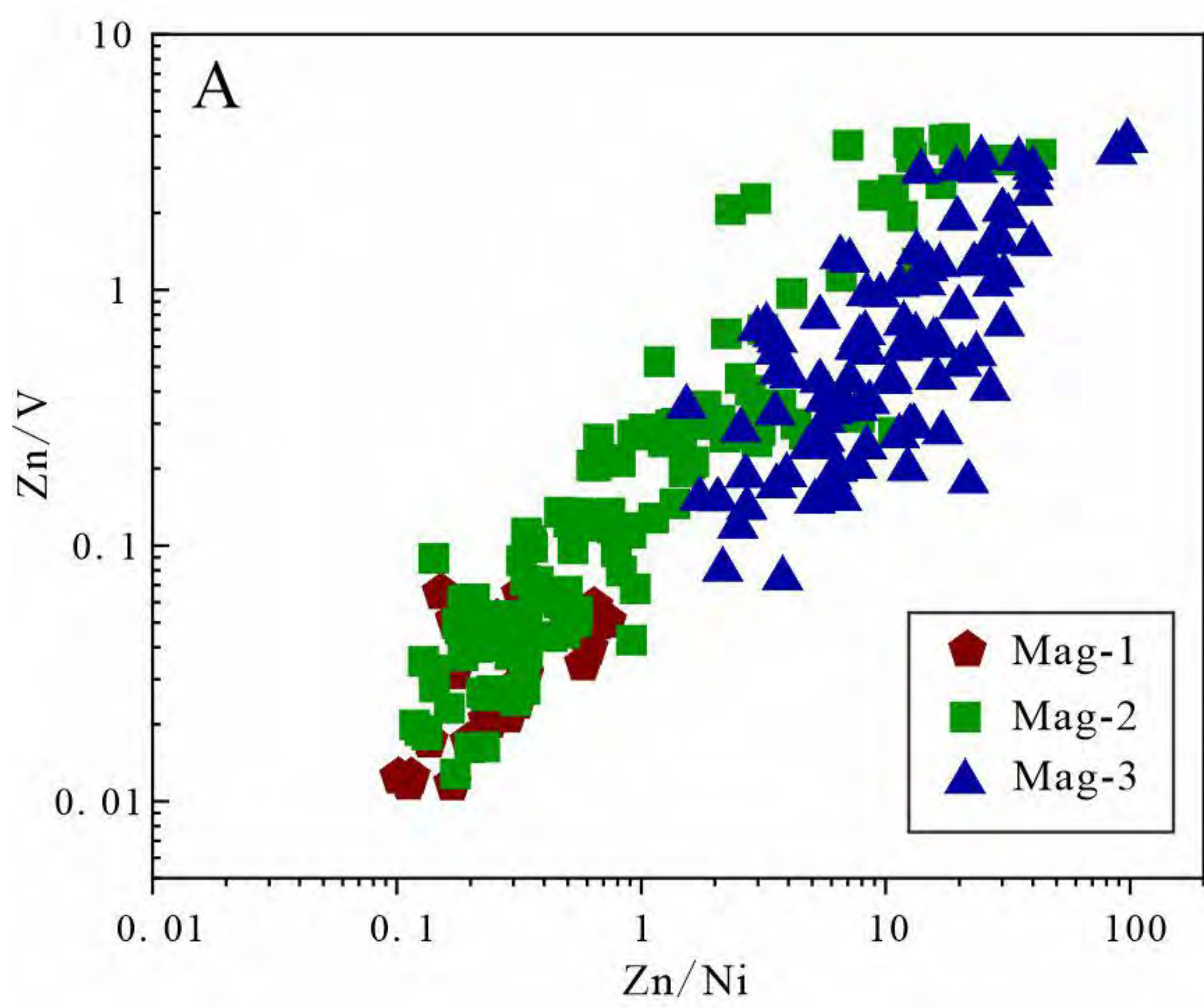


# Figure 5



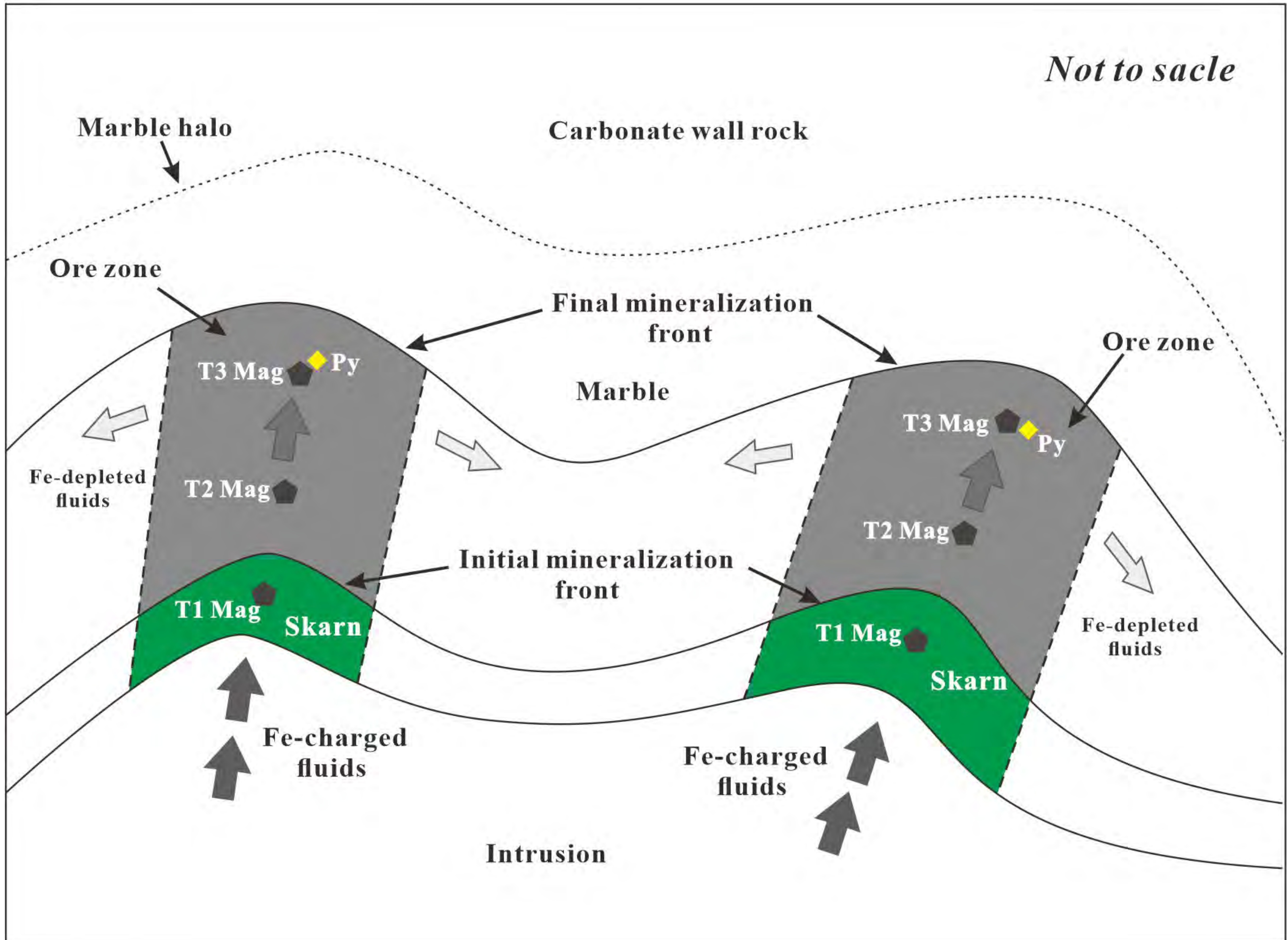


# Figure 6



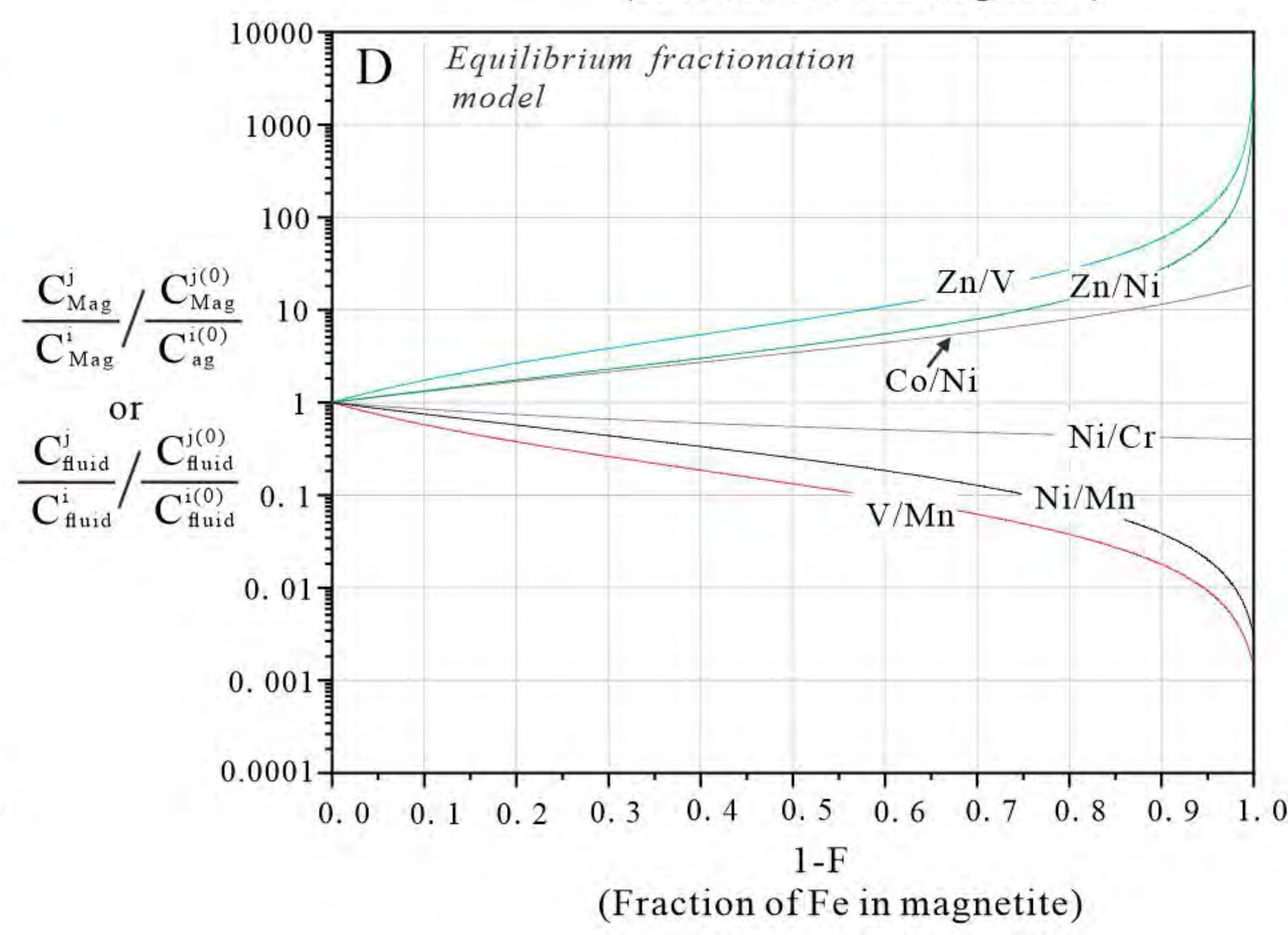
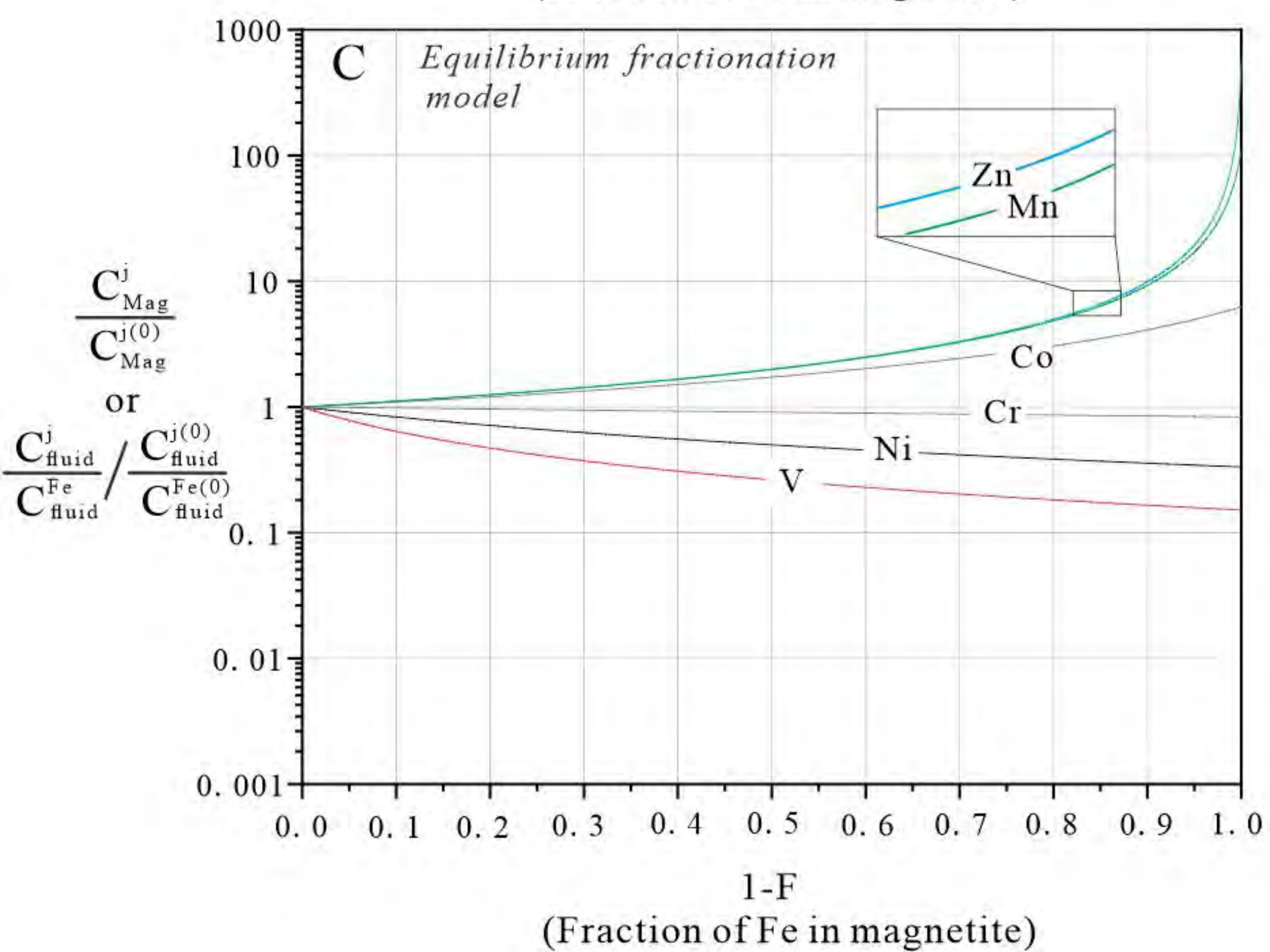
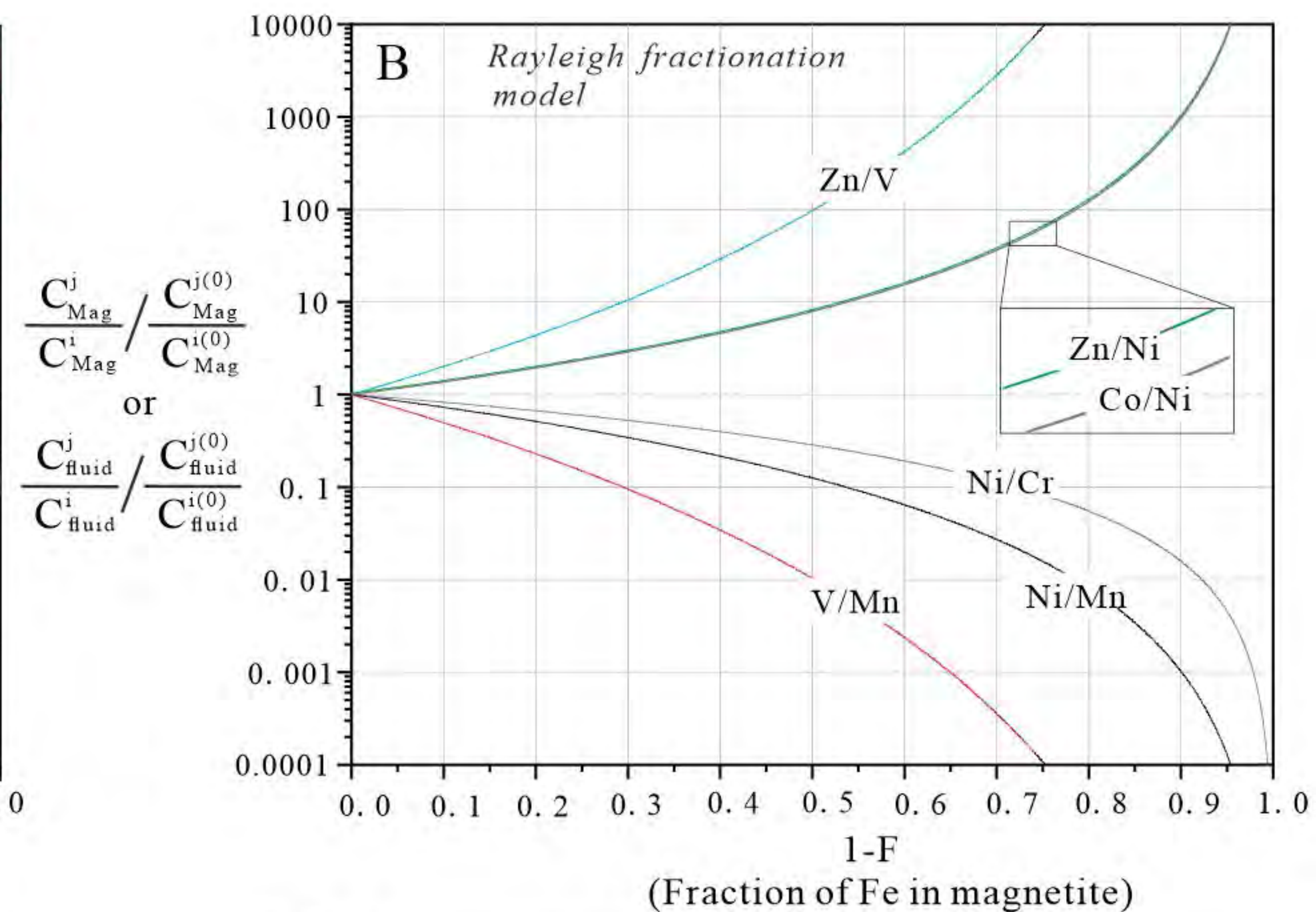
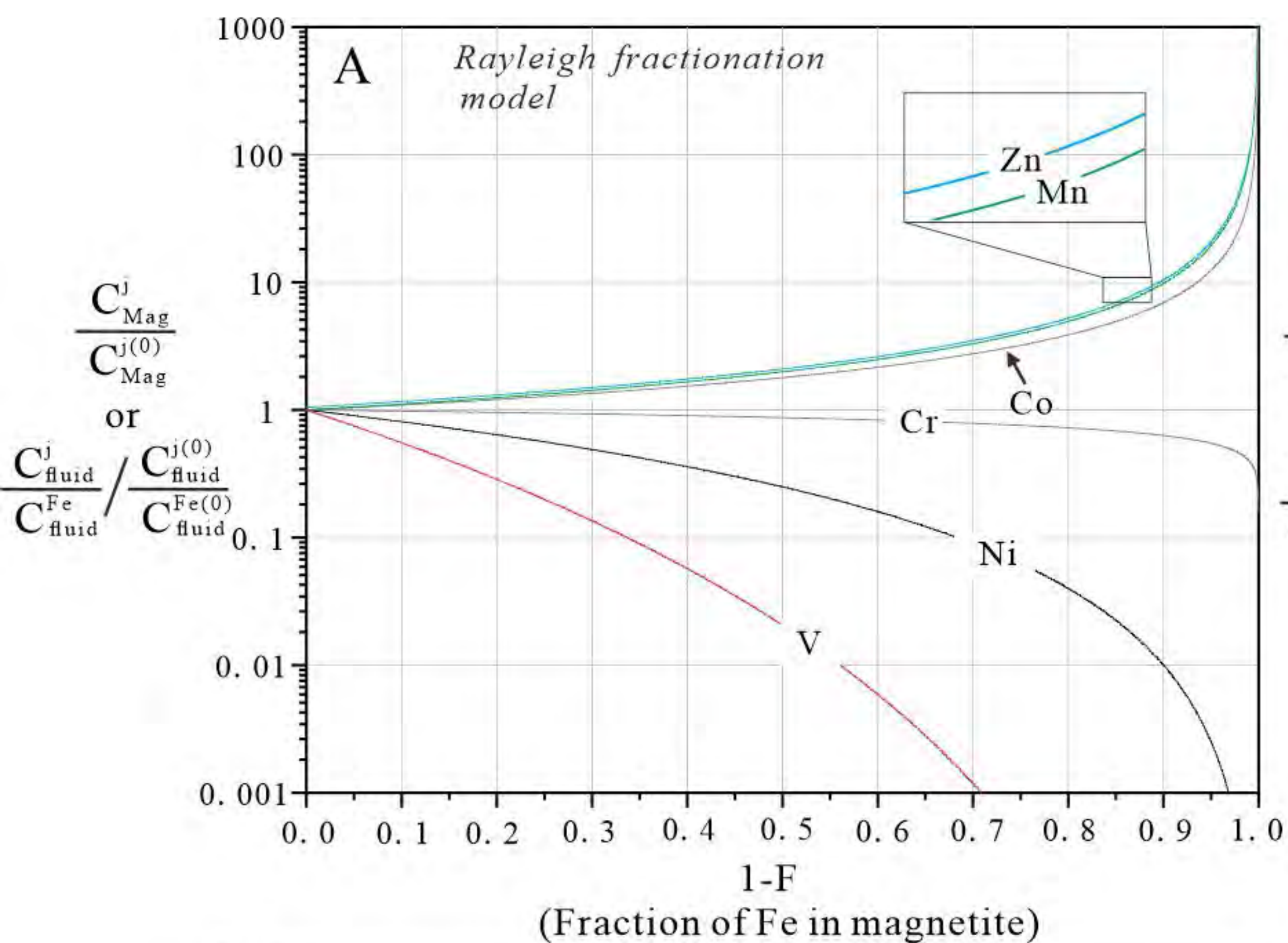


# Figure 7





# Figure 8





# Figure 9

