Multi-stage formation of REE minerals in the Palabora Carbonatite Complex, South Africa

R. Johannes Giebel1,2,*, Christoph D.K. Gauret1,3, Michael A.W. Marks1, Gelu Costin4,5, and Gregor Markl1

1Department of Geoscience, Eberhard Karls University, Wilhelmstrasse 56, 72076 Tübingen, Germany
2Department of Geology, University of the Free State, 250 Nelson-Mandela-Drive, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa
3Department of Applied Geology and Geohazards, Geological Survey of Saxony-Anhalt, Köthener Str. 38, 06118 Halle (Saale), Germany
4Department of Geology, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Artillery Road, Grahamstown 6140, South Africa
5Department of Earth Science, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas, 77005, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

The 2060 Ma old Palabora Carbonatite Complex (PCC), South Africa, comprises diverse REE mineral assemblages formed during different stages and reflects an outstanding instance to understand the evolution of a carbonatite-related REE mineralization from orthomagmatic to late-magmatic stages and their secondary post-magmatic overprint. The 10 rare earth element minerals monazite, REE-F-carbonates (bastnäsite, parisite, synchysite), ancylite, britholite, cordylite, fergusonite, REE-Ti-betafite, and anzaite are texturally described and related to the evolutionary stages of the PCC. The identification of the latter five REE minerals during this study represents their first described occurrences in the PCC as well as in a carbonatite complex in South Africa.

The variable REE mineral assemblages reflect a multi-stage origin: (1) fergusonite and REE-Ti-betafite occur as inclusions in primary magnetite. Bastnäsite is enclosed in primary calcite and dolomite. These three REE minerals are interpreted as orthomagmatic crystallization products. (2) The most common REE minerals are monazite replacing primary apatite, and britholite texturally related to the serpentinization of forsterite or the replacement of forsterite by chondrodite. Textural relationships suggest that these two REE-minerals precipitated from internally derived late-magmatic to hydrothermal fluids. Their presence seems to be locally controlled by favorable chemical conditions (e.g., presence of precursor minerals that contributed the necessary anions and/or cations for their formation). (3) Late-stage (post-magmatic) REE minerals include ancylite and cordylite replacing primary magmatic REE-Sr-carbonates, anzaite associated with the dissolution of ilmenite, and secondary REE-F-carbonates. The formation of these post-magmatic REE minerals depends on the local availability of a fluid, whose composition is at least partly controlled by the dissolution of primary minerals (e.g., REE-fluorocarbonates).

This multi-stage REE mineralization reflects the interplay of magmatic differentiation, destabilization of early magmatic minerals during subsequent evolutionary stages of the carbonatitic system, and late-stage fluid-induced remobilization and re-/precipitation of precursor REE minerals. Based on our findings, the Palabora Carbonatite Complex experienced at least two successive stages of intense fluid–rock interaction.

Keywords: Rare earth minerals, Loolekop, monazite, britholite, anzaite, fluoro-carbonates, ancylite, cordylite, fergusonite, REE-Ti-betafite

INTRODUCTION

Carbonatites are important exploration targets for rare earth elements (REE) and high field strength elements (HFSE, e.g., Mariano 1989; Wall and Mariano 1996; Verplanck et al. 2016). Since REE have become increasingly important for industrial use (Chakhmouradian and Wall 2012; Hatch 2012; Wall 2014) and were categorized as critical and strategic metals (European Commission 2014; Nassar et al. 2015), the scientific interest to understand the complex REE mineralizations found in carbonatitic systems has tremendously increased (e.g., Verplanck et al. 2016). Processes potentially responsible for REE enrichment in carbonatites include fractional crystallization of carbonatitic magma, enrichment of REE in magmatic fluids and subsequent precipitation, breakdown of primary carbonatitic minerals with sequestration of REE in secondary minerals, and subsolidus redistribution of REE (e.g., Verplanck et al. 2016). In all these processes, REE-bearing minerals (such as apatite, calcite, and dolomite) have to be distinguished from actual REE minerals with REE as major constituents. The most common REE minerals in carbonatites include REE-phosphates (mostly monazite) and various hydrous and anhydrous carbonates (e.g., ancylite, burbankite, and carbocernaite) and fluorocarbonates, such as bastnäsite, parisite, and synchysite (e.g., Wall and Zaitsev 2004b; Kanazawa and Kamitani 2006).

This study presents detailed textural observations on the vari-