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1 **Fracturing controlled primary migration of hydrocarbon fluids during**
2 **heating of organic-rich shales**

3

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12

13 **Abstract**

14 Time-resolved three-dimensional *in situ* high resolution synchrotron x-ray tomographic
15 imaging was used to investigate the effects of slowly heating organic-rich Green River Shale
16 from 60° to 400°C, in air without confinement, to better understand primary migration of
17 hydrocarbon fluids in very low permeability source rock. Cracks nucleate in the interior of the
18 sample at a temperature around 350°C. As the temperature increases, they grow and coalesce
19 along lamination planes to form bigger cracks. This process is accompanied by a release of light
20 hydrocarbons generated by decomposition of the initially immature organic matter, as
21 determined by thermogravimetry and gas chromatography. These results provide the first 4D
22 monitoring of an invasion percolation-like fracturing process in organic-rich shales. This process
23 increases the permeability of the sample and provides pathways for fluid expulsion - an effect
24 that might also be relevant for primary migration under natural conditions. We propose a 2D
25 fracture model that reproduces both the observed non-linear crack growth in a lamination plane
26 and the irregular geometry of the crack fronts.

27

28 **1. Introduction**

29 A wide variety of geological phenomena involve the generation and migration of fluids in
30 low permeability rocks. For example, dehydration of sediments in subduction zones generates
31 large fluxes of water that rise along low-permeability subduction interfaces, and provide a
32 mechanism for creep and/or slow earthquakes [Obara, 2002]. Similarly, the illitization of clays
33 at depth and the production of methane in organic-rich shales are responsible for the
34 development of overpressure and the formation of piercement structures that are manifest on the
35 surface as mud volcanoes [Mazzini *et al*, 2009]. The emplacement of magmatic bodies into
36 sedimentary basins may also rapidly decompose organic matter, and the resulting gasses may
37 migrate through low permeability rocks in quantities sufficient to bring about mass extinction
38 due to global warming and ozone depletion [Svensen *et al.*, 2004].

39 Primary migration, *i.e.* the transport of hydrocarbon fluids from extremely low
40 permeability source rocks in which they are generated to more permeable rocks through which
41 they migrate to a trap (reservoir) or to the surface is an example of both economic and
42 fundamental interest. As the organic-rich fine grained sediment from which the source rock is
43 formed is buried, the organic material is transformed into complex high molecular weight/cross-
44 linked organic oil and gas precursors (kerogen). On continued burial, the temperature and
45 pressure rise, and kerogen decomposes into low molecular weight hydrocarbon fluids (gas and
46 oil) which have a much lower viscosity than the kerogen. Part of the generated hydrocarbon
47 fluids escape from the shale into secondary migration pathways, by processes that remain
48 enigmatic, in spite of decades of investigation [Bjorlykke, 2010]. The rest is retained in the
49 source rock explaining why shales are becoming an important source of unconventional
50 hydrocarbon fuels, particularly natural gas [Mohr, 2010].

51 Fracturing is commonly cited as the most likely mechanism to increase the permeability
52 of source rocks and provide pathways for the generated hydrocarbons [*Vernik, 1994; Berg and*
53 *Gangi, 1999; Lash and Engelder, 2005*]. During kerogen decomposition, generation of less dense
54 fluids leads to pore-pressure build-up, which may cause cracking of the host rock. The presence
55 of microcracks in shales was highlighted by several authors [*Capuano, 1993; Marquez and*
56 *Mountjoy, 1996*], based on 2D imaging techniques. Here we present the first *in situ* 3D
57 experimental investigation of crack formation in organic-rich shale during kerogen
58 decomposition. We show that the 3D crack fronts have complex irregular geometries, and that
59 the fracture process is similar to invasion percolation.

60 Under natural conditions, this fracture process takes place at depths of several kilometers
61 over millions of years, making its monitoring impossible. Therefore, it is very important to
62 construct adequate models of primary migration. Recently, *Jin et al. [2010]* introduced a fracture
63 mechanics model of subcritical crack propagation and coalescence, based on the assumption of
64 linear elastic behavior of the rock. Although the model provides an estimate of the fracture
65 propagation time, the geometry and mechanism of fracture formation were oversimplified. Here
66 we propose a 2D fracture model, assuming short-ranged interactions only, which reproduces the
67 complex crack front shape and the invasion-percolation-like fracturing process observed
68 experimentally.

69 **2. Characterization of Green River Shale samples**

70 The samples were obtained from an outcrop of the organic-rich R-8 unit, of potential
71 commercial interest, in the Green River Formation of the Piceance Basin in northwestern
72 Colorado, USA. It was formed from Eocene lacustrine sediments [*Ruble et al., 2001*], it presents
73 well-developed lamination and anisotropic mechanical properties [*Vernik and Landis, 1996*] and

74 it contains organic matter (total organic content 9.92 wt%) present in the form of patches of
75 kerogen, distributed preferentially along lamination planes. Before the experiment, this shale had
76 not been exposed to temperatures that would cause significant thermal maturation.

77 Cylindrical core samples (5mm height, 5mm in diameter) cut perpendicular to lamination
78 were prepared for X-ray tomography. Thin sections were taken before and after heating. Thin
79 section microscopy (optical, scanning electron microscopy [SEM]) was performed to map micro-
80 structural features. Optical microscope images highlight the micro-fabric of the shale consisting
81 of alternating light colored carbonate and pyrites-rich lamina with darker clay-rich intervals.
82 Organic-matter can be observed as dark lenses, which are laterally extensive or localized within
83 the clayey and micrite-rich layers (Figure 1A-B). SEM on carbon-coated thin sections using
84 back-scattered electron imagery [BSE] with X-ray spectroscopy was used to identify the
85 elemental composition of the minerals in the matrix. The rock matrix consists of detrital mineral
86 grains with diameters ranging between 10-50 μm , with clay-rich micritic calcite filling the pores
87 in the groundmass. The largest mineral grains are recognized as quartz, pyrites, carbonates and
88 feldspar crystals (Figure 1D).

89 Thermogravimetry [TGA] coupled with gas chromatography-mass spectrometry [GC-
90 MS] was used to analyze the outgoing products during heating, and to determine the temperature
91 of catagenesis. Using TGA, we monitored mass loss of the sample during heating at 10°C/min in
92 air or nitrogen. GC-MS gave information about the amount of outgoing hydrocarbons, water and
93 carbon dioxide during heating at 5°C/min in air or nitrogen. Water release was almost constant
94 between 200 and 1000°C. Carbon dioxide and hydrocarbon emission and mass loss in the
95 thermogravimetry diagram started at around 350°C.

96 **3. Time-lapse 3D imaging and data processing**

97 X-ray tomographic 3D imaging of the shale samples was carried out using beamline ID19
98 at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble, France. This non-invasive
99 imaging technique measures the absorption of X-rays, to produce a 3D map of X-ray attenuation.
100 The experimental equipment includes a sample manipulator for alignment, a rotation stage for
101 the tomography scan and a high resolution imaging X-ray detector. The 3D data were obtained at
102 a voxel resolution of $5\mu\text{m}^3$ at a beam energy of 20 keV.

103 The prepared cylinder was located in a home-built furnace in contact with air, with no
104 confining pressure, and it was gradually heated *in-situ* from 60°C to 400°C at approximately
105 1°C/min. 28 time-lapse scans of this sample were acquired during the heating phase, then several
106 at 400°C. Each scan required 11-14 minutes, and a new scan was started immediately afterwards.
107 Several other samples were imaged before and after heating only, and used to test experimental
108 reproducibility. For all scans, 1500 radiographs were acquired while the sample was rotated over
109 180°. Based on the sets of radiographs, a filtered back-projection reconstructing algorithm was
110 used to calculate the 3D raw-tomograms representing the microporous structure of the sample at
111 different stages of heating. The final 3D volumes were represented by raw files of 830^3 voxels
112 coded in 8-bit gray levels.

113 The 3D images were processed in two ways. First, the strain field both along and
114 perpendicular to lamination were measured, in a typical 2D centered vertical slice of the volume,
115 using digital image correlation [*Hild and Roux, 2006*]. Second, in order to determine crack
116 geometries and track crack propagation, the shape, volume and morphology of the cracks was
117 analyzed in 3D using an imaging software package (AvizoFire ©). Quantitative analysis of the
118 crack formation required isolation of the cracks from the rock matrix. Due to the small crack
119 opening (3-4 voxels), the following procedure was applied: first a binary mask was used to delete

120 the background and the central noisy part of the volumes (imaging artifact); then, an edge-
121 preserving smoothing filter based on Gaussian smoothing combined with a non-linear diffusion
122 algorithm was applied; and finally a “watershed” procedure enabled individual cracks to be
123 isolated [Sonka *et al*, 1999]. The final result of the segmentation process is a series of cracks
124 represented by connected voxels, marked by different labels (represented in different colors in
125 Figure 2A).

126 **4. Observation of deformation and crack formation**

127 A set of thin sections and the tomography images were studied in order to compare
128 petrographic and morphological characteristics of the shale before and after heating. Before
129 heating, organic precursors, which are preferentially oriented parallel to the lamination can be
130 distinguished throughout the sample in the thin section optical images (Figure 1A-B). The color
131 of the shale matrix in the optical images of thin sections after heating was lighter than that before
132 heating due to the loss of organics. Also an abundance of cracks, partially filled with residual
133 organic material, was distributed parallel to the lamination.

134 Tomographic scans of unheated samples identified the densest grains (pyrites) of the
135 shale matrix, which appear as bright inclusions (Figure 1C). The presence of these grains enabled
136 deformation of the sample to be monitored and strain variations to be measured during heating.
137 The analysis of the time lapse 3D imaging during heating revealed two distinct deformation
138 regimes: first the sample expanded almost homogeneously, and then the deformation abruptly
139 localized at open cracks. The 2D correlation analysis showed different strain evolutions with
140 temperature depending on the direction. Strain along lamination increased linearly with
141 temperature from 0 at 60°C to 0.6% at around 350°C (just before cracks appeared). Strain

142 perpendicular to lamination increased almost linearly from 0 at 60°C to 1.2% at 290°C, before
143 increasing rapidly to 1.9% at around 350°C.

144 3D image analysis was then performed to determine the geometry of propagating cracks.
145 Figure 2A shows a 3D rendering of the fracture pattern at T=391°C and Figures 2B and 2C show
146 a cut perpendicular to the lamination. The general direction of crack propagation follows
147 lamination planes (no perpendicular fracture was observed). They have essentially constant
148 aperture widths (typically 15-20 micrometers) and rough surfaces in both the horizontal and
149 vertical planes. Figure 3 shows the time evolution of crack propagation in a given lamination
150 plane. As the temperature rises, cracks nucleate, grow and coalesce in a quasi-static manner until
151 they almost fill the plane. Pyrite grains, which can be seen as bright spots in the tomography
152 images (Figure 2C), affect crack growth by pinning the crack front, and control the out-of-plane
153 excursions of the crack path.

154 **5. Discrete model of crack propagation**

155 Based on the fracturing behavior observed during the experiments, a 2D model of in-
156 plane crack nucleation and growth during shale maturation was developed. The model contains
157 the minimum number of components needed to reproduce the key characteristics of the crack
158 growth process (see Supplementary Material). The model focuses on a layer of shale that
159 fractures more rapidly than nearby layers because it has higher kerogen content and/or it is
160 weaker. The layer is modeled by a regular square lattice in which every site represents a small
161 organic-rich shale element. The temperature rises gradually with time and kerogen decomposes,
162 causing a progressive pressure build-up. Each site is characterized by a breaking threshold $\sigma_{c,i}$,
163 and when the pressure exceeds this threshold $p_i > \sigma_{c,i}$, the site breaks and either nucleates a new
164 crack or increases the size of a pre-existing crack. This relaxes the stress, which is distributed

165 equally to the nearest neighbours (long-range elastic interactions are neglected), bringing them
166 closer to failure. This was implemented by reducing the breaking threshold, $\sigma_{c,i} \rightarrow \sigma_{c,i} - d\sigma$, for
167 all nearest neighbors. Each crack is represented by a cluster of broken sites. As soon as sites
168 belonging to different clusters become adjacent, both clusters are merged to form a single crack,
169 and all the merged sites are given the same label/color.

170 Figure 4A shows three successive snapshots during a simulation. In the early stage, the
171 system contains many small independent cracks. Each crack has a rough front, and over time,
172 individual cracks grow slowly and merge until the whole plane is covered. Figure 4B displays
173 the increase of the surface area of the largest final simulated crack. Crack growth occurs in three
174 stages: (1) the fractures are all separated and their surface areas grow gradually; (2) the fractures
175 start to connect and their areas increases in small jumps; and (3) after some time, the system is
176 dominated by one large fracture, with an area that grows by intermittent increases. This
177 intermittent growth dynamics is similar to the behavior of cellular automata earthquake models
178 [Bak, 1987] and the crack pattern grows like those produced by invasion percolation processes
179 [Dias and Wilkinson, 1986].

180 We suggest that this local deformation approach to the modeling of crack propagation in
181 tight rocks can be applied to other geological systems in which chemical reactions induce
182 volume increase and stress build-up within the rocks. These systems are widespread, including
183 weathering of rocks near the surface [Røyne *et al.*, 2008], dehydration of serpentines in
184 subduction zones [Jung *et al.*, 2004] and primary migration of hydrocarbons.

185 **6. Discussion and conclusion**

186 Fracturing during fluid generation in a tight organic-rich rock (oil shale) was investigated
187 experimentally using thin section imaging (optical and SEM), gas chromatography,

188 thermogravimetry and 3D x-rays tomography. At temperatures below $\approx 300^{\circ}\text{C}$ degrees, the
189 sample undergoes a simple linear expansion, with an anisotropy related to the rock lamination.
190 Above 300°C , the expansion perpendicular to lamination significantly accelerates up to a
191 temperature of $\approx 350^{\circ}\text{C}$, the temperature at which the first cracks can be detected on the 3D
192 images. Thermogravimetry analysis indicates rapid mass loss in the same temperature range, and
193 chromatography of the outgoing gas indicates kerogen decomposition.

194 Time-resolved high-resolution synchrotron x-rays tomography allowed us to follow the
195 dynamics of the fracturing process accompanying hydrocarbon expulsion. At 350°C , many small
196 cracks were nucleated. With continued heating and kerogen decomposition, cracks grow parallel
197 to lamination and coalesce, until a percolating crack network spanning a single lamination plane
198 has formed. This process occurs simultaneously on different lamination planes. In our
199 experiments, cracks propagate due to heating. However, we emphasize that the crack
200 propagation mechanism we observed might be of much wider relevance since nucleation, growth
201 and coalescence has been observed in a large variety of heterogeneous rocks under different
202 loading conditions (see e.g. [Moore and Lockner, 1995]).

203 The analysis of the evolution of the area of the biggest crack in a given lamination plane
204 (Figure 4C) shows a very slow initial increase followed by a rapid increase as cracks coalesce.
205 We managed to qualitatively reproduce this behavior (Figure 4B) with a 2D model, based on the
206 assumption of nearest-neighbor stress transfer upon cracking. The crack patterns are similar to
207 the irregular crack fronts observed in the experiment and the non-linear crack growth also occurs
208 through the sudden merging of individual cracks.

209 Our results provide the first 4D monitoring of an invasion percolation-like fracturing
210 process in organic-rich shale. Most likely, cracks are caused by local volume increase and stress

211 generation produced by organic matter decomposition. These growing and coalescing cracks
212 enhance the permeability of the sample and the hydrocarbon fluids generated by kerogen
213 decomposition can escape through the dynamically created pathways. Similar mechanisms might
214 be relevant for primary migration under natural conditions.

215 Several questions remain open. What is the origin of the anomalous vertical thermal
216 expansion of the sample between 300 and 350°C, well before any crack can be detected on the
217 images? It might be the signature of the nucleation of microcracks with a size much smaller than
218 the spatial resolution of our 3D imaging, throughout the volume of the sample. What would be
219 the effect of stress and/or confinement similar to that in natural environments? It would probably
220 cause the fractures to close once the fluid has escaped, making it difficult to identify the fracture
221 network in exhumed rock samples.

222

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225 the tomography scans.
226

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271 hydrocarbon generation and primary migration, *AAPG Bull.*, 80, 531-544.

272 **Figure 1:** Finely laminated Green River Shale samples before heating. (A) Optical image of
273 interlaminated silt and clay minerals. (B) Enlarged optical image of a kerogen patch located
274 between silt grains. (C) X-ray tomography slice of the sample, perpendicular to lamination.
275 Bright spots are pyrites grains. (D) Back scattered electron micrograph of silt layer including
276 cracks filled with organics (arrows) surrounded by feldspar (f), pyrite (p), carbonate (c) and
277 quartz (q) grains.

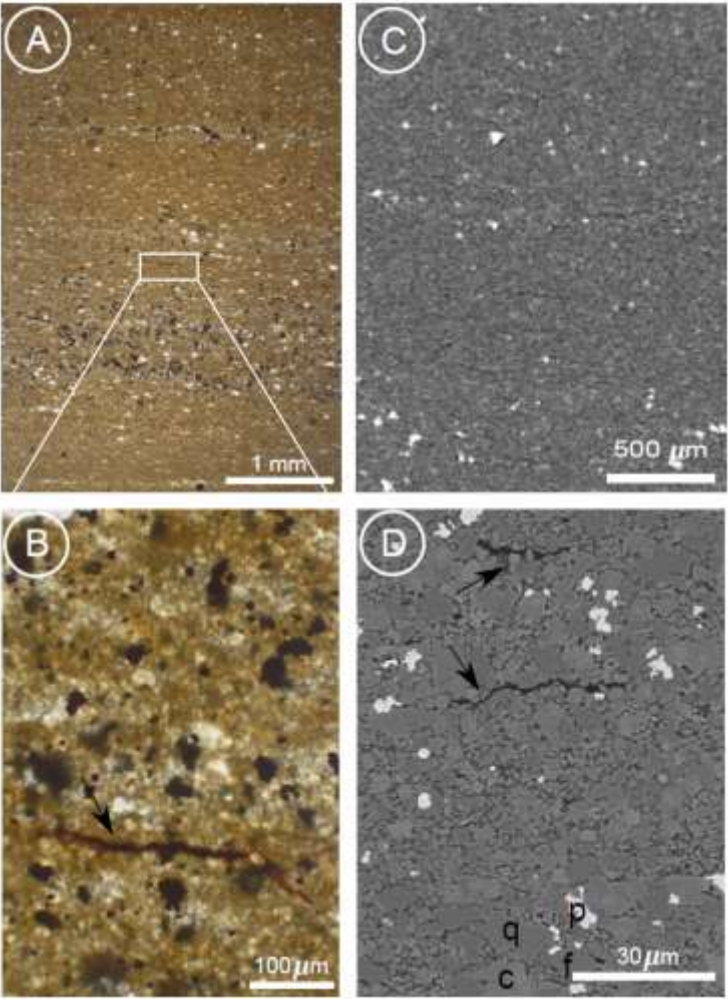
278 **Figure 2:** Tomography images of the shale sample after heating. (A) 3D rendering of final crack
279 network. Each crack corresponds to a different color. (B) 2D slice showing (dark) elongated
280 cracks parallel to the bedding. The central vertical noisy line is an artifact of the micro-
281 tomography technique. (C) Enlargement of (B) showing a crack around a grain of pyrite (arrow).

282 **Figure 3:**

283 Crack propagation dynamics in a lamination plane. (A) Many small cracks nucleated around
284 350°C. Each crack has a different color. (B) Cracks grow with temperature. (C) At some critical
285 stage all cracks have merged into a single sample-wide crack. The circular central region was
286 removed because of a data acquisition artifact.

287 **Figure 4:**

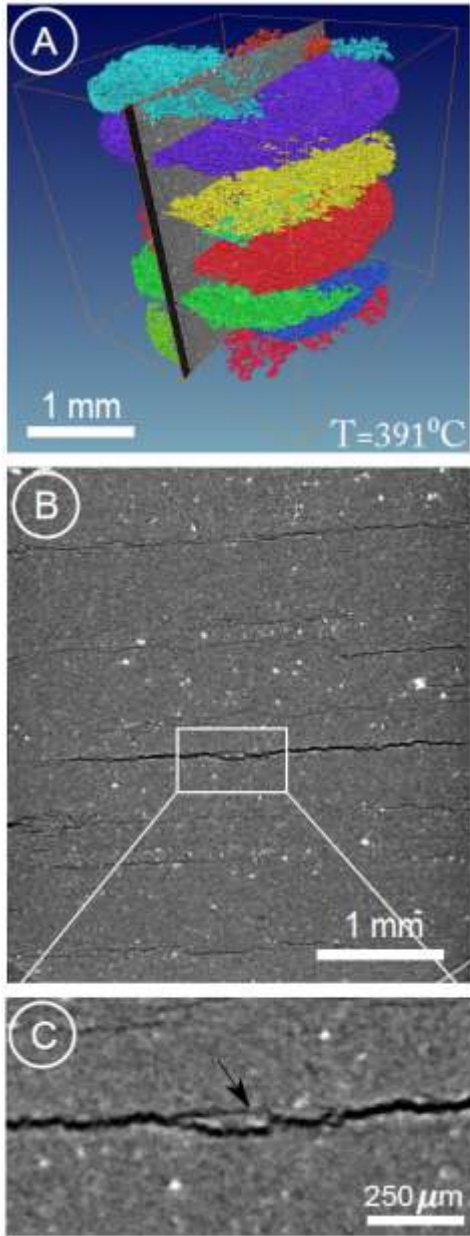
288 2D model of primary migration-related fracturing. (A) Three stages of the evolution: nucleation,
289 growth and percolation of cracks. (B) Growth of the area of the biggest crack as a function of
290 time (i.e. kerogen reaction progress). (C) Analogous evolution in a lamination plane in the
291 experiment. The decrease observed after temperature 390°C corresponds to partial crack closing
292 after fluid expulsion.



293

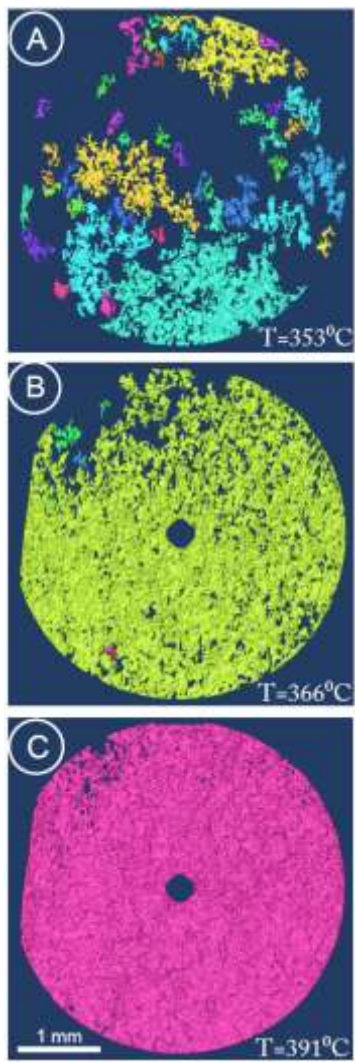
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Figure 1



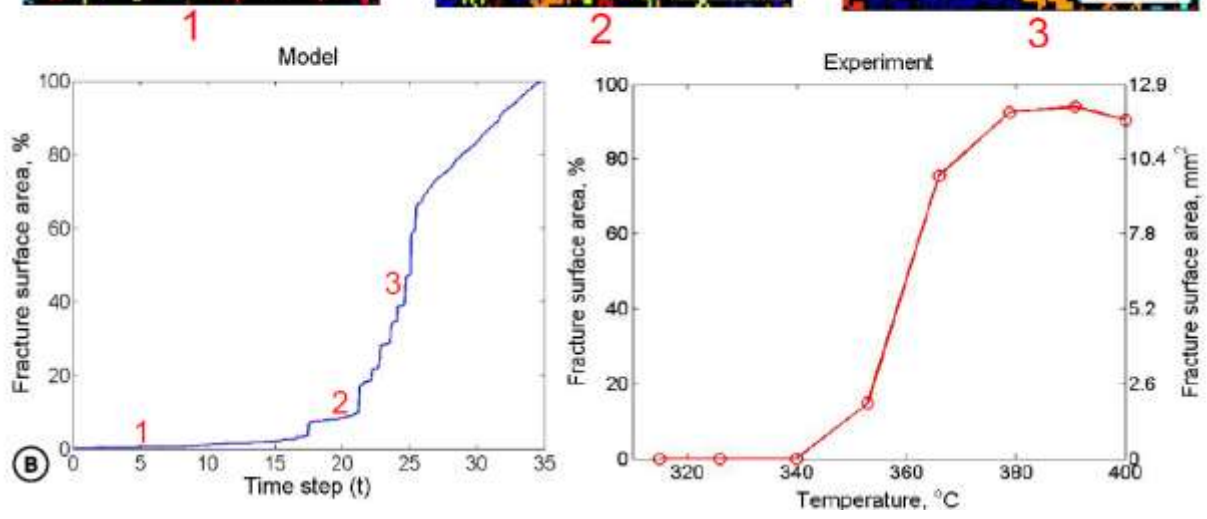
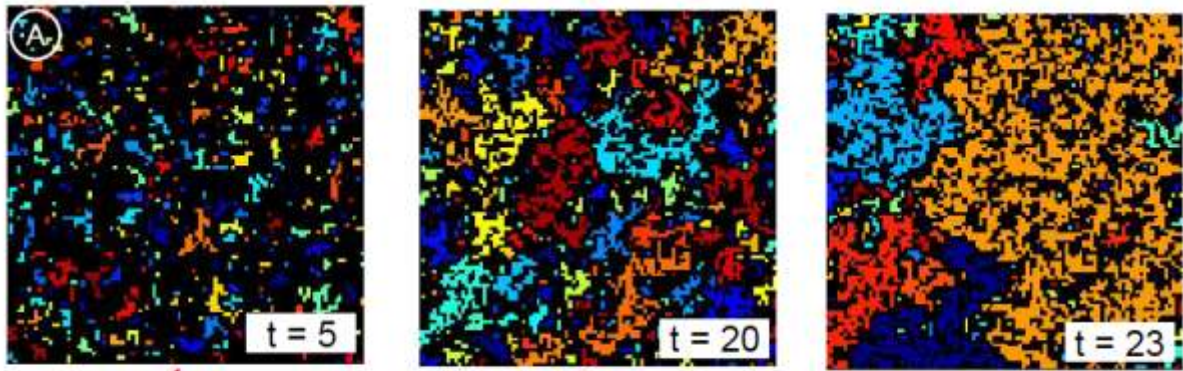
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296 **Figure 2**



297
298

Figure 3



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302

Figure 4