

Zeitschrift: Bulletin der Vereinigung Schweiz. Petroleum-Geologen und -Ingenieure
Herausgeber: Vereinigung Schweizerischer Petroleum-Geologen und -Ingenieure
Band: 55 (1989-1990)
Heft: 128

Artikel: The plane of superweakness as a temporary condition in geology
Autor: Gretener, P.E.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-212656>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The plane of superweakness as a temporary condition in geology

Geological Note

by P.E. GRETENER¹
with 2 figures

Overthrust structures after more than 100 years of study still attract a great deal of attention. There seem to be two particular reasons for this phenomenon:

- a) the spectacular outcrops in mountain chains around the world give undeniable and observable evidence of large rock packages moving laterally over long distances in an almost undistorted fashion, and
- b) the associated mechanical enigma of easy gliding referred to as the «basal lubrication» by early investigators.

The latter remains unsolved despite a number of hypotheses that have been developed in recent years. HUBBERT and RUBEY (1959) in their classic paper provided a new stimulus and in their wake a large number of papers on the subject have been published over the past three decades.

Some years ago (GRETENER, 1972) I showed that for easy sliding on a plane both cohesion and normal stress must be low. Only under such conditions of negligible cohesion and small normal stress can overthrust plates be moved over long distances with virtually no internal deformation. I postulated what I called the «plane of superweakness». Such a plane would exist in a shale, where the cohesive resistance to horizontal shear is minimal, and which is subject to high excess fluid pressure reducing or eliminating the effective overburden stress (**Figure 1**). However, unless the geopressure condition is confined to the particular horizon, the layers above and below will also be severely weakened, which in turn should lead to a broad zone of deformation rather than the observed, sharp gliding planes. At the time of publication this suggestion of sharply localized geopressures may have seemed far-fetched to some of the readers. It is the purpose of this short note to demonstrate that in the light of more recent evidence it is possible to build a reasonable scenario for the occurrence of such planes.

At the time of writing the earlier paper (GRETENER, 1972) rapid loading was about the sole process recognized for generating excess fluid pressures. We have come a long way since then and now acknowledge a number of processes as viable mechanisms for creating higher than normal fluid pressures (GRETENER and FENG, 1985). In particular we have come to accept the kerogen transformation as an efficient pore pressure generating mechanism. As a source rock moves through the oil window into the con-

1) Department of Geology and Geophysics, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, T2N 1N4, Canada

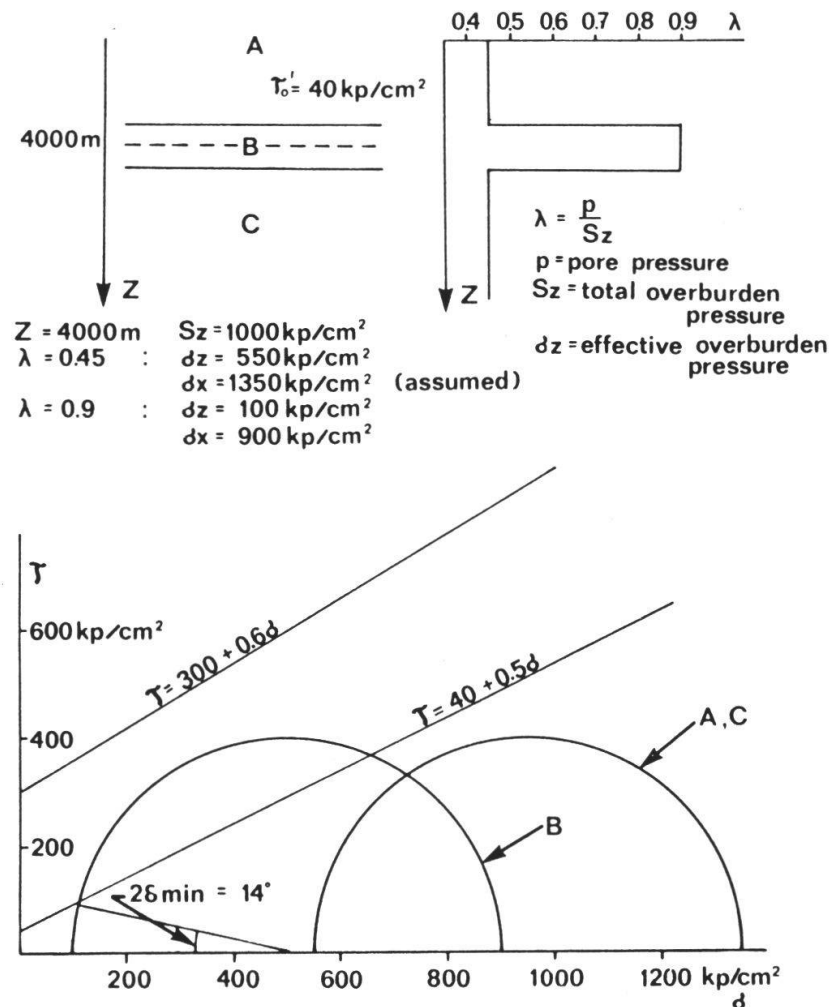


Figure 1 The concept of the plane of superweakness as proposed by GRETENER (from GRETENER, 1972)

densate and gas generating temperatures realms, overpressures are produced. The burial depth required for the onset of intense oil generation covers quite a range due to the variability of the geothermal gradient. It may be placed at roughly 2,500 m (8,000 ft) to 4,500 m (15,000 ft). MEISSNER (1978) has shown that the black shale of the Bakken Formation (a rich source rock) in the Williston Basin is strongly overpressured in the depth range where oil generation is intense (3,000+ m; 10,000+ ft). The overpressure is confined to the shale and shows as a sharp spike on the pressure-depth curve (**Figure 2**). It is now accepted that rich source rocks may be highly overpressured during intense oil/gas generation and in fact this is viewed as the driving mechanism for primary oil migration (DU ROUCHET, 1981).

We may conclude that formations such as the black shales of the Exshaw and Fernie Formations in the Southern Canadian Rockies were at one time good candidates for planes of superweakness. The Fernie shale is recognized as a major detachment horizon (DAHLSTROM, 1970, p. 344, Fig. 9) whereas for the Exshaw shale no such evidence has been produced to this date.

However, the overpressuring due to kerogen transformation is obviously a temporary situation, and after the main oil/gas generation ceases, excess pressure is likely to dissipate. An estimate of the residence time in the oil window under conditions of

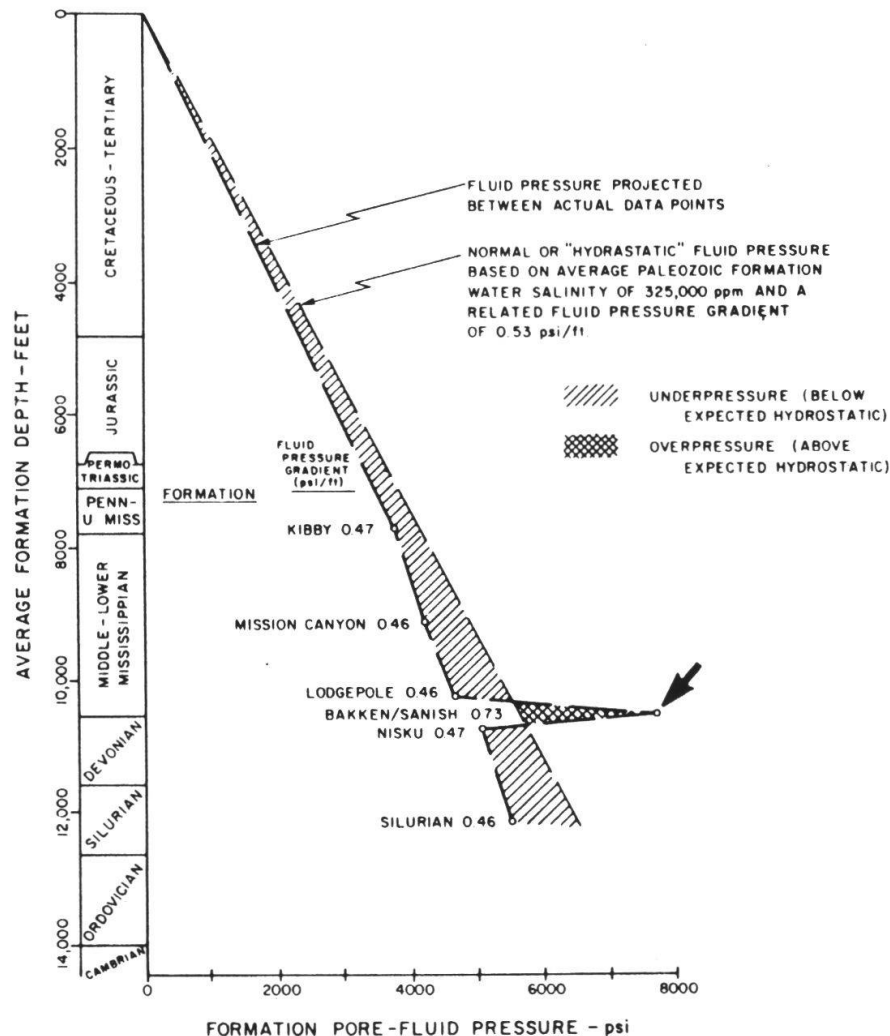


Figure 2

The sharply confined geopressure in the Bakken Formation as shown by MEISSNER (from MEISSNER, 1978).

continuous burial is found in the short communication on organic maturation following this note (GRETENER, 1989). Obviously timing is going to be an important factor. To leave a tangible, observable record the condition of superweakness must coincide with a tectonic pulse. The Bakken in the Williston Basin is unlikely to assist or trigger any deformation in this non-tectonic area.

One reviewer pointed out that the discussion in the previous two paragraphs could be construed to imply that the Fernie shales were in the state of intense oil generation during the Laramide deformation while this was not the case for the Exshaw shale. However, such a conclusion is not warranted at this time, and assembling the missing evidence — a major undertaking — is not the purpose of this short note.

Both geopressures and tectonic forces must exist simultaneously in order for this scenario to be plausible. This required coincidence also lends credibility to the episodic nature of most natural processes, another point raised in my earlier paper (GRETENER, 1972, p. 605, Fig. 16).

It is not my intention in this note to claim that most major thrusts have slid on rich source rock beds. This is certainly not the case and a yet different scenario remains to be developed. The present argument, combining GREENER (1972) and MEISSNER (1978) does, however, demonstrate that the concept of the plane of superweakness is not strictly an academic fiction but that it can at least in principle be reconciled with observable geological conditions. It also reminds us that most geological processes are episodic and most often action depends on the coincidence between two or more events. When such events are «in phase» (AGER, 1976, p. 154, Fig. 3) «things happen» in geology and leave us often puzzling over the apparently incongruous field evidence.

References

- AGER, D.V. 1976, The nature of the fossil record. *Proceedings of the Geologists Association*, v. 87, p. 131-160.
- DAHLSTROM, C.D.A., 1970, Structural geology in the eastern margin of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. *Bulletin of Canadian Petroleum geology*, v. 18, p. 332-406.
- DU ROCHET, J. 1981. Stress fields, a key to oil migration. *American Association of Petroleum Geologists Bulletin*, v. 65, p. 74-85.
- GREENER, P.E. 1972. Thoughts on overthrust faulting in a layered sequence. *Bulletin of Canadian Petroleum Geology*, v. 20, p. 583-607.
- GREENER, P.E. 1989, Organic Metamorphism - The Effect of a Burial Event / Likely Residence Time in the Oil Window Under Continuous Burial. *Bulletin Swiss Association of Petroleum Geologists and Engineers*, v. 55, p. 57-59.
- GREENER, P.E. and FENG ZENG-MO, 1985. Three decades of geopressures - insights and enigmas. *Bulletin Swiss Association of Petroleum Geologists and Engineers*, v. 51, p. 1-34.
- HUBBERT, M.K. and RUBEY, W.W. 1959. Role of fluid pressure in mechanics of over-thrust faulting. *Bulletin Geological Society of America*, v. 70, p. 115-166.
- MEISSNER, F.F. 1978. Petroleum geology of the Bakken Formation Williston Basin, North Dakota and Montana. *Williston Basin Symposium, Montana Geological Society, 24th Annual Conference*, p. 207-227.