

Termitaria as regolith landscape attributes and sampling media in northern Australia

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26th May, 2009

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Abstract

This study provides one of the first accounts of the relationships between termites, termitaria and the pedolith, towards developing their application as a biogeochemical sampling medium for mineral exploration. Mapping regolith–landforms, termitaria, and the associated termitaria biogeochemistry show that termites are an integral control on the organisation of trace metals in the landscapes of northern Australia. In particular, termites are important for transporting geochemical signatures from depth, through the pedolith and to the ground surface. This occurs by way of bioturbative and constructional activities of the mound-building termites, which in this study included *Nasutitermes triodiae*, *Amitermes vitosus*, *Drepanotermes rubriceps*, *Tumulitermes hastilis* and *T. pastinator*. Termitaria from these species are mappable regolith–landform attributes at the local scale; this highlights their specific preferences for colony sites, such as access to vegetation, drainage, and the availability of construction materials. The mound-building termites featured in this study are also soil modifiers, altering the pedolith terms of both structure and chemistry. Developing an understanding of these processes has helped to refine a model for pedolith development through biotic processes, which is applicable to subtropical and tropical climatic regions, where termites act as important ecosystem engineers. This research project fills a niche for new scientific investigation of deeper regolith profiles and associated terrains; it moves away from theories of shallow soil development overlying an abiotic deep regolith, towards understanding pedolith development as wholly biotically driven. For mineral explorers this means that ore-related elements, such as Au, As and Zn, are re-organised and moved towards the land surface in settings such as buried Au-deposits and mineralisation in the Tanami region, and Pine Creek Orogen. A key finding within the study of the application of this technique is that the fine, silt-clay (<79 µm) from termitaria is capable of accurately delineating the surficial expression of buried Au mineralisation. Termitaria can therefore provide an accessible surficial biogeochemical sampling media that can be used in mineral exploration programs

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed,

Anna E. Petts

26th May, 2009

Acknowledgements

Most of all, I would like to acknowledge my supervisors Dr Steven Hill and Ms Lisa Worrall, for being absolutely awesome, inspiring and patient, as well as being fantastic mentors and friends.

For the companies which have supported my project, financially and through assistance with analyses or have provided feedback on my research directions, or have assisted with information and travel — Newmont Asia-Pacific Limited, in particular Dr Nigel Radford and Dr Simon Bolster; Tanami Gold NL and Dr James Andersen; Anglo American, Barrick Gold, CRCLEME, Geoscience Australia, the employees of Twigg Gold Ltd. Also to the Department of Geology & Geophysics at the University of Adelaide for the award of the Eric Rudd Travel Scholarship in 2006, and to the SA Division of the Geological Society of Australia for financial support to attend conferences.

Thankyou to the researchers involved in the Tanami Collaboration Project over the years, including Dr Brad Pillans, Dr Dirk Kirste, Dr John Joseph, Dr Tony Eggleton, Nathan Reid, Simeon Robinson, Sally Moon, and Dr Martin Smith. To some inspirational CRCLEME researchers and supporters of my research, including Gerry Govett and Colin Dunn, and also Steve Rogers, Graham Taylor, David Gray, Ian Roach, Mehrooz Aspandiar, Colin Pain, Graham Heinson, Rob Hough, Ravi Anand, and Ryan Noble. At Geoscience Australia — Liz Weber, and Bill Pappas for such fantastic assistance with labwork and analyses. For support from the Tropical Savannahs CRC — David Garnett, Tracey Dawes-Gromadzki, Peter Jacklyn, and especially Gus Wanganen for assistance with termite identification, and Mark Raven at CSIRO.

To the CRCLEME researchers and students, and University of Adelaide co-conspirers and friends — John Wilford, Dr Vanessa Wong, Luisa Ruperto, Karen Hulme, Robert Dart, Nathan Reid, Aaron Brown and family, Beau Rule, Dr Ian Lau, Greg Lawrence, Adrian Fabris, Matthew Gray, Lachlan Gibbins, David Haberlah, Michael Neimanis, Stephan Thiel, Rachel Meier, Dr Caroline Forbes, Dr Guillaume Backe, Helen Alexander, Dr Graham Baines, Dr Mark Tingay, Dr Ros King, Kerrie Deller, Jessie Davey, Andreas Schmidt-Munn and his family, Dr Alan Collins and family, Dr Martin Hand, Dr Karin Barovich, Mike Hatch, Bunchy and Megan, Dr Galen Halverson and family, and the PhD and honours students of the University of Adelaide who have kept me smiling these last four years. I would also like to thank my Melbourne friends, including Bence, Kate, Kat, Lauren, Jules, Hannah, Ben, Mel, and Stefan for their inspiration and also, for their patience and love.

The Petts-Rwueler-Enright Family, and close relatives, who have been both my motivation and my distraction, and have brought me so much love and happiness throughout this experience — Ray, Nancy, Howard & Carmen and the boys, John, Loz, Auntie Jeanette and James, The Herring Family, The Ruweler Family, The Enright Family, Cheri and Michelle, Nick and Ryan, Suzy and the girls, Bronx and Ralph. Also, much thanks to the families and friends in Wagga Wagga and around the world who lent so much support and whose inspiration and memory have been with me during this journey. And massive thankyou's to Simon for being so patient, and helpful, in giving advice and support during the final stages of my research project.

The author acknowledges also the assistance of Valerie Mobley of LynxEdit, who provided professional proofreading advice. The service included assistance with language and formatting illustrations, and checking for completeness and consistency in the text. This editing service was performed within the guidelines of the current Australian Standards for Editing Practice (ASEP), for the standards C and D.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the strong, intellectual, wonderful women who have touched my life and given me the inspiration, and motivation, to achieve in whatever I choose to do. This is for you, Nancy Sue and Bette Belle.

Mom, Grandma, Friend, Listener, Loved.

