

Factors Influencing Occurrence, Scale, Mobility, Runout, and Morphology of Mass Movements on the Continental Slope

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Award Number: N0001403IP20008
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LONG-TERM GOALS

Our long term goals are to understand how geotechnical and physical properties develop in marine sedimentary deposits on continental margins as a result of various biological, geochemical and mechanical processes. From these considerations we also want to understand how these properties influence sediment transport processes and the development of the final geomorphology. Our studies include predicting the stability of slopes within the continental terrace and distinguishing morphologic features caused by slope failure from those caused by other gravity-driven processes, including turbidity-current flow. A major component is the development of mobility so that we can understand the transition from initial slope failure to the development of debris flows and turbidity currents. Another component is predicting the rheological properties that determine the dynamics of such flows.

OBJECTIVES

Our main objectives for FY03 focused on the following: (1) complete our final contributions to STRATAFORM related to long coring and data analysis; (2) initiate our involvement in project PASTA and EuroSTRATAFORM by focusing our study on (i) the development of flows in marine sediment and (ii) evaluating the origin of crenulated sediment in the Adriatic Sea; (3) estimate the effect of bioturbation on strength development ; (4) quantify the impact of repeated earthquake events on sediment shear strength. Within EuroSTRATAFORM we are continuing to work on (5) predicting sediment mobility and the regional variation of erodability, stability, and penetrability of the nearshore seabed by (6) developing index property relationships that can be determined easily or, potentially, mapped remotely in order to identify regionally distributed geotechnical properties. Another objective of FY03 was to (7) assess the signatures of catastrophic events to determine whether they are produced by deformational (landsliding) or depositional (turbidity current sediment waves) processes (Lee et al., 2002). A final objective was to (8) provide modelers with easily determined relationships that can be used to predict sediment strength and rheological properties of sediments.

APPROACH

Our research focuses on the sedimentological and environmental factors determining sediment properties and their influence on failure and post failure behavior. We develop improved correlations between engineering classifications and strength factors. We relate compressibility, physico-chemical properties and strength to sediment microstructure and sediment stress history. We simulate sediment accumulation in specially designed large cells. We measure sediment rheological properties in a viscometer. Geotechnical properties are related to sediment density state, obtained from detailed logs of downcore variability of sediment density and sound velocity. Basic strength parameters are obtained

using triaxial drained and undrained tests and undrained cyclic tests. Using available bathymetry, and seismic profiles, we develop models for stability, mobility, and risk (Leroueil et al. 2003). Driving stresses are balanced against strength variations in a geographic Information System (GIS) to obtain a regional estimate of relative slope stability. Seismic loading is simulated in the laboratory using cyclic shear testing of representative marine sediment. Seismic strengthening is evaluated within the context of critical state soil mechanics.

Our work is fully coordinated with a matched project at Laval University directed by Jacques Locat. Key individuals, at Laval: Jacques Locat, Jean-Marie Konrad, Serge Leroueil, Marie-Claude Lévesque and Pierre Therrien: strength and compressibility measurements, SEM studies, rheology measurements, and simulation of sediment accumulation; at the USGS: Homa Lee, Dianne Minasian, Pete Dartnell, and Kevin Orzech: physical property logs of sediment cores and relations between geotechnical and classification properties, algorithms relating sediment properties, environmental factors, and slope stability within the framework of a GIS, and strength development from seismic shaking.

WORK COMPLETED

During FY 03, we completed work related to the STRATAFORM project on the New Jersey margin and made significant advances in completing related publications. We contributed to the effort in evaluating the potential use of the GLAD800 for coring on the shelf and slope and providing geotechnical quality samples. We completed SEM and mineralogical analyses of San Francisco Bay mud samples used to test our hypothesis of seismic strengthening (Lévesque and Locat 2003). We conducted simulations of repeated seismic loading and developed estimates of the magnitude of shear strength that could be gained in such a manner (Figure 1). We conducted a survey of rapid flows in marine sediment and presented a keynote paper on this subject at an international meeting (Lee and Locat, in press).

RESULTS

Our analysis of the GLAD800 indicated that this drilling platform is not ready yet (as of November 2002) for operating efficiently on the shelf under typical wave conditions. Our final slope stability analysis of the Hudson Apron along the New Jersey Margin has indicated that if the ODP geotechnical investigation is correct, the actual factor of safety of the slope is marginal and that the required pore pressures to trigger a failure had to be significantly high. For the Hudson Apron site, the yield strength required to maintain the slope in a stable state is close to the measured undrained shear strength at a depth of about 150 to 200 m below the sea floor. Our preliminary analysis of the microstructure of Ortona samples in the Adriatic Sea identified a flow layer, as presented at the EuroSTRATAFORM session at the AGU meeting in Nice (Lévesque et al. 2003). We are in the process of defining ways to quantify the bio-porosity index of a sediment, so that we can illustrate the extent of bioturbation by looking at down core variations in the index. We showed that significant strength increases (greater than 50%) can be achieved by repeated non-failure seismic loading events.

IMPACT/APPLICATION

Relationships developed in this project show the importance of sediment liquidity index and seabed density profiles in representing the physical behavior of marine sediment. These values can be used to predict regional slope stability, rheological behavior of debris flows, and resistance to object penetration. General strength-density relationships can be used for modeling sediment accumulation

and stability. We are also currently working on the definition of a bio-porosity index to include in the measurement of the shear strength of near surface sediments. By understanding the influence of seismic strengthening, we can better explain the relative lack of slope failures in seismically active environments. Models of strength development for these environments can be used to forecast object penetration and other engineering issues.

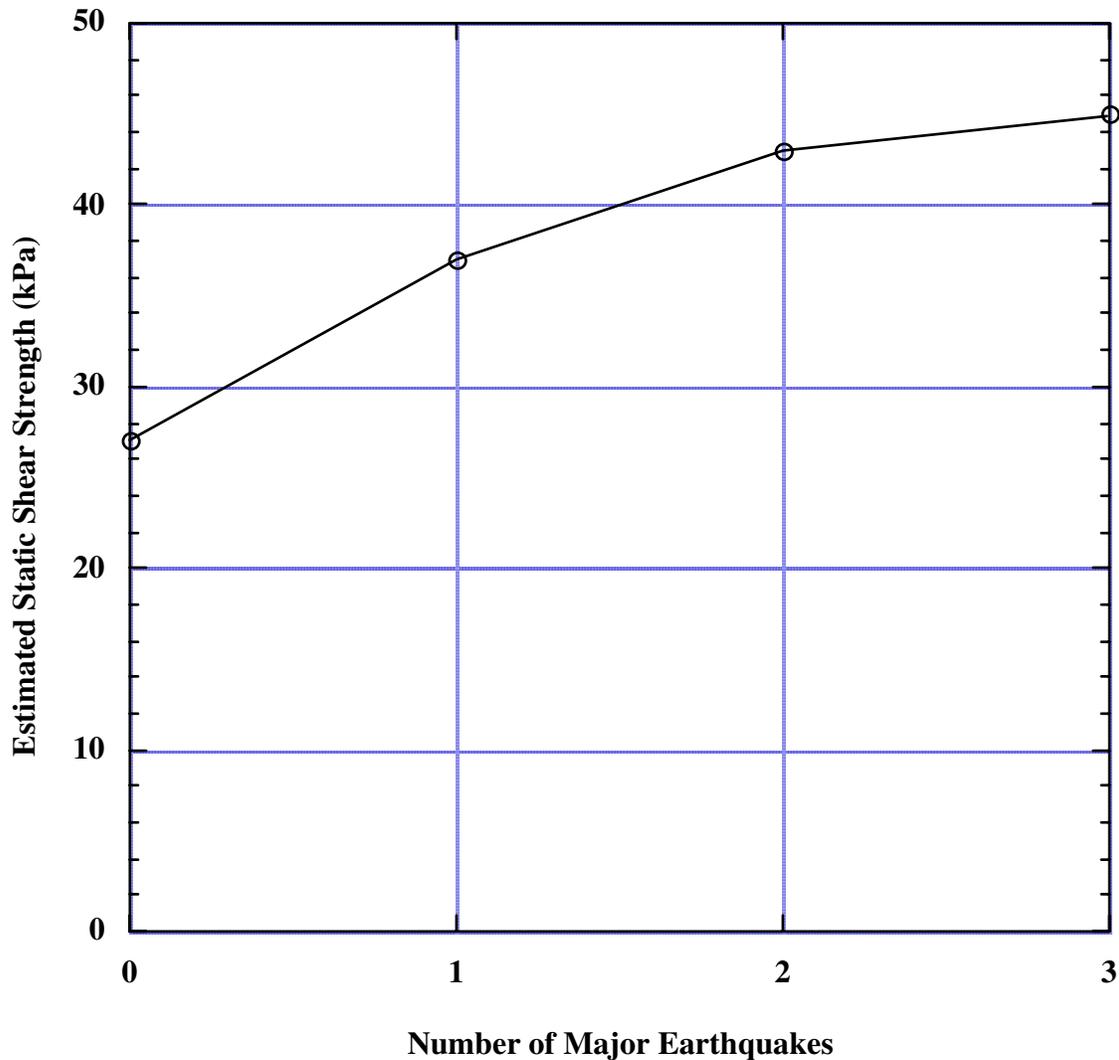


Figure 1. Results of cyclic simple shear tests on characteristic marine sediment. These results show that the application of repeated simulated earthquake loading events, which are not sufficient to fail the sediment themselves, actually cause the sediment to be stronger (in this case by 67% after 3 earthquakes) and better able to resist earthquake loads in the future.

TRANSITIONS

Geoacoustic properties are being used by mappers and acousticians to identify lithologies acoustically (Locat and Sanfacon, 2002). Rheological properties (Locat, 1997) are being used by modelers to represent debris flows (Imran et al. 2001). Landslide generation models are being used by landscape evolution modelers. Offshore research groups interested in margin and in oil and energy development

were used as a platform to present our knowledge on submarine slope stability and hazard acquired as part of STRATAFORM. We have also contributed to a major effort in assembling all the existing knowledge on submarine mass movements and their consequences by publishing a book containing refereed papers on the topic (Locat and Mienert 2003) including papers by Lee et al. (2003) and Locat et al. (2003a) related to STRATAFORM. We also transferred our knowledge developed as part of STRATAFORM to those interested in tsunami modeling (Locat et al. 2003b).

RELATED PROJECTS

Lee has developed a USGS project to investigate sediment and pollutant transport on the Los Angeles margin that uses techniques produced by STRATAFORM. The development of this project benefited from approaches developed within STRATAFORM. Recently, a group of Canadians led by J. Locat, and H. Lee developed a new project with project COSTA (CONTinental Slope STAbility) in Europe that will last until 2005.

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