Pennsylvanian Pewamo Formation and Haybridge strata of central Michigan: The youngest rocks of the Michigan Basin?

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ABSTRACT

Pennsylvanian red beds are the youngest known rocks in the Michigan Basin. Two new formation-level units, the Pewamo Formation and the Haybridge strata, have recently been described. The Pewamo Formation, composed of Pennsylvanian red sandstones and minor laminated mudstones, is known from outcrops, abandoned quarries, and one core in Ionia County. The Haybridge unit is located in the shallow subsurface and in coal mine tailing piles in Shiawassee County. It consists of red sandstone, red mudstone, coal, and gray mudstone, all hosting Pennsylvanian macroscopic plant fossils. Neither the Pewamo nor the Haybridge rocks have any demonstrated relationship to red core cuttings reported as Jurassic from the central Lower Peninsula of Michigan. No firm evidence exists for Jurassic, or any other post-Pennsylvanian rocks in the Michigan Basin. The red core cuttings may be glacial sediments with reworked palynomorphs from rocks transported from elsewhere. A shallow coring project, followed by detailed sedimentologic, petrographic, mineralogic, and paleontologic studies, is necessary to: (1) refine the vertical and lateral stratigraphy of the Pennsylvanian rocks in Michigan; (2) solve the “Jurassic red bed problem”; and (3) understand the late Pennsylvanian–Pleistocene history of the Michigan Basin.

INTRODUCTION

The Michigan Basin is rich in geologic resources, including oil, gas, salt, groundwater, and sand and gravel. Michigan even had a small but thriving coal mining industry in the past. Despite subsurface investigations prompted by exploration and extraction for these economic resources, there is still a gap in the knowledge of the middle Pennsylvanian–Pleistocene history of Michigan. This time has been referred to as the “missing interval” for the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to provide an overview of the state of knowledge about the “missing interval”; (2) to pose some possible scenarios that might explain the limited geologic record; and (3) to make a case for future geological investigations, including a shallow subsurface coring program. In particular, we focus on the recently described middle–late Pennsylvanian

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Pewamo Formation and Haybridge strata, and their stratigraphic relationships to underlying and overlying strata.

BACKGROUND

Shallow Sedimentary Deposits of Mid-Michigan

The great majority of the bedrock of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan is covered by Pleistocene till and outwash glacial sediments, up to ~150 m thick in some parts of central Michigan. Holocene fluvial, lacustrine, and beach sediments, soils, and reworked glacial sediments are thin, localized, and composed of gravels, sands, and/or muds. Outcrops of pre-Pleistocene rocks in the Lower Peninsula are uncommon. In the central Michigan region, above the center of the Michigan Basin, outcrops are rare and are restricted to Pennsylvanian sandstones, shales, and coal.

The early middle Pennsylvanian Saginaw Formation and overlying Grand River Formation are the best studied of the post-Mississippian rocks of the Michigan Basin (i.e., Catacosinos et al., 2001; Dorr and Eschman, 1970; Kelly, 1931, 1933, 1936; Landing and Wardlaw, 1981; Price and Velbel, 2000; Velbel and Brandt, 1989; Venable et al., 2013). Outcrops of the Saginaw and Grand River Formations in Grand Ledge in Eaton County are well known to Michigan’s sedimentary geologists. The Saginaw Formation rocks have also been recovered in some shallow cores from Ingham County and Ionia County, just a few miles from the Grand Ledge outcrops (Benison et al., 2011; Price and Velbel, 2000; Venable, 2006; Venable and Barnes, 2006). The Saginaw Formation is composed of gray sandstones, gray shales, and coal, and it has been interpreted as deposits of marginal marine environments, such as deltas and coastal plains (Velbel et al., 1994; Venable et al., 2013). Conodonts in the Saginaw Formation constrain its age to the early middle Pennsylvanian (Atokan; Landing and Wardlaw, 1981). The Grand River Formation, stratigraphically situated above the Saginaw Formation in some outcrops, is a buff, cross-bedded sandstone interpreted as a fluvial deposit (Shideler, 1969; Velbel and Brandt, 1989; Velbel et al., 1994; Venable et al., 2013). The age of the Grand River Formation is not well constrained. Its stratigraphic relationship with the Saginaw Formation indicates that it can be Atokan at the oldest. The only known upper contact for the Grand River Formation is with Pleistocene glacial sediments, making its exact age challenging to interpret. The official Stratigraphic Lexicon for Michigan assigned a late Pennsylvanian age to the Grand River Formation (Catacosinos et al., 2001).

Other siliciclastics suspected to be from the Pennsylvanian or Jurassic have been named informally. In general, locations and lithological descriptions for these rocks are limited, and their identification and ages are contested. The Parma sandstone is an informal sandstone unit with rare plant fossils that is considered to be either late Mississippian or early Pennsylvanian (Catacosinos et al., 2001; Westjohn and Weaver, 1998). A small outcrop along U.S. I-94 near Jackson, Michigan, may be the Parma sandstone (Catacosinos et al., 2001). The Eaton and Woodville sandstones are other informal and controversial stratigraphic names for rocks that have not undergone detailed study and may simply be alternate names for parts of the Saginaw and/or Grand River rocks (Catacosinos et al., 2001).

Other rocks of suspect age and location in the central Michigan Basin region include red beds known only from drill cuttings and from building stones (Cross, 1975, 1986, 1998a, 1998b; Shaffer, 1968, 1969). Known as the “Jurassic red beds of Michigan” and the “Ionia formation,” respectively, Michigan geologists have used the two names interchangeably and have regarded them as “problematic” for decades (Catacosinos et al., 2001). A palynological study of the red drill cuttings found reworked and poorly preserved pollen of various ages and suggested that the rock was likely Jurassic, based on identification of the genus Classopollis (Shaffer, 1968, 1969). However, more recently, a wider geologic time period of Early Triassic–Neogene has been recorded for Classopollis (White et al., 2009; The Paleobiology Database: https://paleobiodb.org/#/; accessed on 25 July 2017), calling into question the age of the red drill cuttings (Benison et al., 2011). The red sandstone building stones were assumed to be lithologic- and age-equivalents of the red drill cuttings, despite lack of study of their mineralogy, palynology, or sedimentology (Cross, 1975, 1986, 1998a, 1998b). Regardless of the highly suspect age, lack of any sedimentary description, and no known in situ location for these building stones, one sandstone sample from the Ionia County Courthouse was used for a detrital zircon provenance study. Results were used to make interpretations about flow direction of large rivers through Michigan and across North America during the Jurassic (Dickinson et al., 2010a, 2010b). These interpretations were questioned because only a building stone of unknown depositional location was used, the Jurassic age was debatable, and no sedimentary descriptions had been made to support a fluvial environment of deposition (Benison and Knapp, 2010).

Pewamo Formation and Haybridge Strata: Two Newly Documented Pennsylvanian Units of Michigan

More recently, two other Pennsylvanian formation-scale stratigraphic units from central Michigan were described and named (Benison et al., 2011). The Pewamo Formation is located in outcrops and quarries in the Grand River State Game Area between the towns of Ionia and Lyons in Ionia County (Fig. 1). It was mined for red sandstone building stones in the 1880s and again in the 1950s. In 2008, a core was drilled near these outcrops (Figs. 2 and 3; Benison et al., 2011). The core consisted of Saginaw Formation at the base, unconformably overlain by a 24.1-m-thick (79-ft-thick) section of the Pewamo Formation, and capped by glacial sand and gravel. The Pewamo Formation consists mainly of orange, cross-bedded quartz and hematite sandstone interpreted as eolian deposits. Interbedded with the orange sandstones, there are thin, laminated and mud-cracked, lacustrine siliciclastic mudstones. Palynomorphs extracted from the mudstones, Calamospora hartungiana, Granulatisporites granularis,
Figure 1. Location and stratigraphic setting of the Pewamo Sandstone and Haybridge strata. (A) Lower Peninsula of Michigan, highlighted in red on map. (B) Approximate location of Pewamo sandstone (SS) near Ionia (pink circle; 42.98175°N, 84.99513°W) and Haybridge strata near St. Charles (orange triangle; 43.3557°N, 84.0726°W). (C) Proposed stratigraphic column for the shallow subsurface of central Michigan.

Figure 2. Stratigraphic column measured from Pewamo 1-08 core from Ionia County, Michigan.
and Lycospora pellucida, indicate a Pennsylvanian age (Palyno-
data and White, 2008; M. Zobaa, 2010, personal commun.) and a flora distinct from the Saginaw Formation (Venkatachala and Salujha, 1971). This palynological data, along with the Pewa-
mo’s stratigraphic position above the Atokan Saginaw Forma-
tion, suggested that the Pewamo is middle–late Pennsylvanian in age. This unit was proposed as a new formation for Michigan because it is lithologically unique in the Michigan Basin, is strati-
graphically distinct from the underlying Saginaw Formation and overlying glacial sediments, and is located in situ in outcrops and core (Benison et al., 2011).

The second newly described Pennsylvanian red bed unit in the central Michigan region is the Haybridge strata (Benison et al., 2011). The Haybridge strata are located in situ, but in the shallow subsurface, in and near the Shiawassee River State Game Area and the Shiawassee Federal Wildlife Refuge near the town of St. Charles in Shiawassee County (Fig. 1). There are no true outcrops; the rocks are situated just below the surface,
much of which is covered today by rivers and adjacent wetlands, surrounded by agricultural land composed of thin soils. In the 1880s–1940s, this area contained many working shallow underground coal mines (Lane, 1902, 1908). Historical records indicate that the main coal seam was 1.4 m thick and was ~70 m below the surface (Kalliokoski and Welch, 1977). Some of the coal mines were filled with cement in recent decades to prevent collapse (personal communications with several landowners). These Haybridge rocks are known from old mine waste piles (Fig. 4) and from farmers’ fields. Waste mine rocks (mainly the noncoal lithologies) were used to build a small road with a bridge used by local coal miners and later farmers to transport coal and hay by wagons. This was known locally as “the haybridge.” Four lithologies have been identified in this region and include:
THE “MISSING INTERVAL” AND REMAINING QUESTIONS ABOUT POST-PENNSYLVANIAN STRATIGRAPHY OF MICHIGAN

Youngest Known Rocks of Michigan

The Grand River Formation, the Pewamo Formation, and the Haybridge strata are the youngest rocks known in Michigan. No known deposits from the Permian, Mesozoic, or Tertiary exist in Michigan. Pleistocene glacial sediments and Holocene lake, fluvial, beach, and eolian sediments, as well as soils, are known throughout the state. Where the base of these Quaternary sediments has been observed, the underlying rocks are Pennsylvanian or older bedrock. However, the Grand River Formation, Pewamo Formation, and Haybridge strata are found exclusive of one another; that is, these three stratigraphic units have not been documented in the same cores or outcrops. The Grand River and Pewamo have both been found in contact with the Saginaw Formation. The Pewamo and Haybridge have been dated with paly-
same at the suspected Jurassic red core cuttings, and the informal Ionía formation name should no longer be used in Michigan.

The limited geological information, combined with the questionable age, about the “Jurassic red beds” of the Michigan Basin leads to a healthy skepticism about any Jurassic deposition there. Multiple scenarios may be possible to explain these core cuttings: (1) They could indeed have been deposited in continental environments during the Jurassic; (2) they could have been deposited in continental environments in the Michigan Basin at any time from the Triassic to Pleistocene; (3) they may have been reworked sediments or sedimentary rock transported and deposited by glaciers during the Pleistocene; or (4) they may have formed as paleosols during interglacial periods in central Michigan. With the little information known about these red bed core cuttings, the scientific community should take care in making any interpretations about Jurassic red beds in the Michigan Basin.

**Possible Geologic Scenarios for the Limited Record of the “Missing Interval” of Michigan**

To the best of our current knowledge, the post–middle Pennsylvanian geologic record of Michigan consists of unconsolidated siliciclastic sediments. Investigations have focused on studies of Pleistocene glacial landforms, near-surface Pleistocene sediment, and Holocene reworked sediments and their landforms (i.e., Hansen et al., 2009; Howard, 2010; Schaeztl and Weisernborn, 2004). However, much of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan is blanketed with a thick cover of post-Pennsylvanian unconsolidated gravel, sand, and mud; deeper strata from this package have not been studied. What is in the geologic record between the Pennsylvanian Pewamo, Haybridge, and Grand River Formations and the Quaternary sediments near the surface? The best place to look for answers to this question is in the central counties of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, where the unconsolidated sediments are thickest.

Glacial erosion, reworking, and deposition are the most likely processes that led to the thick unconsolidated sedimentary column above the mid-Pennsylvanian rocks. How many glaciations occurred, and is there evidence of any other geologic events? One likely scenario is that continental environments existed continuously in Michigan from the late Pennsylvanian to today. Sedimentary rocks may remain from past lakes, rivers, and soils, but they have not yet been found. In contrast, such deposits may have been eroded and reworked by the Pleistocene ice sheets. Melting glaciers likely deposited some material original to mid-Michigan to the south. Likewise, some of the material deposited in mid-Michigan was eroded from the north. Some sediments eroded by Pleistocene glaciers in mid-Michigan could have been redeposited locally. We know that ice sheets surged and retreated several times during the Pleistocene. We do not know how much sediment and rock were available to be eroded. If late Pennsylvanian–Pleistocene environments were continental, they may have had close net deposition:erosion ratios, depending upon tectonics and eustasy, sediment supply, surface processes, climate, and timing of cementation (i.e., Benison et al., 2015; Soreghan, 1994). Regardless, it seems feasible that Pleistocene glacial sediments may be the only record left from this missing interval.

There is a possibility that more than one major glaciation acted upon Michigan during the missing interval. If one looks to more regional and global events, glaciation in the late Pennsylvanian must be considered. This major ice age drove ice sheets to low latitudes (i.e., Fielding et al., 2008; Soreghan et al., 2008) and likely would have influenced Michigan. Is there any evidence of late Pennsylvanian glaciation in Michigan? Rhoads et al. (1984) examined well data in Gratiot, Clinton, and Ionía Counties for organic material. They identified organic-rich strata that they interpreted as marking past land surfaces from interglacial times. These wells logs averaged 40 m in depth, so they did not reach bedrock in most wells. Do these organic strata vertically distinguish deposition by different glacial lobes? Are they all Pleistocene glacial events? Could late Paleozoic glacial deposits also be present, or would any late Paleozoic glacial sediment have been reworked by Pleistocene ice sheets? At this time, not enough data exist for detailed interpretations to be made about the geological history of the missing time.

**A CASE FOR FUTURE GEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

The topmost Pennsylvanian rocks and the “missing interval” present unanswered questions about the Michigan Basin. Recent work that located and described the Pewamo Formation and the Haybridge strata (Benison et al., 2011) has added to our knowledge about the Pennsylvanian time in Michigan. This work was made possible by limited shallow coring, extensive field work, and careful historical research of water well, mining, and construction records. This was followed by detailed petrographic, mineralogical, and paleontological studies. However, some of the lateral and vertical stratigraphic relationships, especially amongst the Grand River, Pewamo, and Haybridge formations are unknown (Fig. 1). The thicknesses and lateral extents of these formations are also unknown.

The red core cuttings that launched the “Jurassic red beds” interpretation have remained mysterious for over 50 yr. Their palynological assemblage shows no relationship whatsoever to those of the Pewamo or Haybridge red beds.

The best way to better understand the Pennsylvanian–Holocene history of Michigan is to conduct a shallow drilling program that can retrieve intact cores (i.e., Soreghan et al., 2015). The first goal of this program should be coring the center of the Michigan Basin (in Clare, Isabella, Mecosta, and/or Montcalm Counties) to ~500 m in depth, to aim to retrieve the full package of glacial sediment and the topmost bedrock. This core would greatly help to solve mystery of the “problematic Jurassic red beds” and also allow recognition of the topmost bedrock (likely Pennsylvanian?) of the Michigan Basin. The second objective of a shallow drilling program should focus on drilling one to two shallow (~100 m deep) cores near St. Charles, Michigan,
to investigate the stratigraphic properties of the Haybridge strata and to test its relationship to underlying rocks. Finally, a series of shallow cores (~100 m deep) may target the areas near Grand Ledge and Ionia, Michigan, to gain more subsurface data about the Saginaw, Grand River, and Pewamo Formations and to constrain their stratigraphic relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The topmost rocks of the Michigan Basin appear to be Pennsylvanian continental sedimentary rocks of the Grand River Formation, Pewamo Formation, and Haybridge strata. No solid evidence for “Jurassic red beds” exists. A shallow coring program is recommended for unraveling the mystery of the “Jurassic red beds” core cuttings, for refining stratigraphic relationships of Pennsylvanian rocks, and for tracing the most recent 300 m.y. of geologic history in the Michigan Basin.

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