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In-situ evidence for dextral active motion at the Arabia-India plate boundary

Marc Fournier[1,2*], Nicolas Chamot-Rooke[1], Carole Petit[2], Olivier Fabbri[3], Philippe Huchon[2], Bertrand Maillot[4] & Claude Lepvrier[2]

[1] Laboratoire de Géologie, Ecole normale supérieure, CNRS, 24 rue Lhomond, 75005 Paris, France

[2] Laboratoire de Tectonique, Université Pierre et Marie Curie-Paris6, CNRS, UCP, Case 129, 4 place Jussieu, 75252 Paris, France

[3] Département de Géosciences, Université de Franche-Comté, 16 route de Gray, 25030 Besançon, France

[4] Laboratoire de Tectonique, Université de Cergy-Pontoise, CNRS, UPMC, 5 mail Gay-Lussac, Neuville/Oise, 95031 Cergy-Pontoise

[*] Corresponding author: marc.fournier@upmc.fr

The Arabia-India plate boundary – also called the Owen fracture zone (OFZ) – is perhaps the least known boundary among large tectonic plates[1-6]. Although it has early been identified by Wilson[7] as a type example of transform fault converting the divergent motion along the Carlsberg Ridge into convergent motion in the Himalayas, its structure and rate of motion are still poorly defined. We here present the first direct evidence for active dextral strike-slip motion along this fault, based on seafloor multibeam mapping of the Arabia-India-Somalia triple junction in the NW Indian Ocean. The mapped segment of the OFZ trends N10°E, displays a finite offset of ~12 km, and terminates to the south into a 50 km-wide pull-apart basin bounded by active faults. Combining these new constraints with the ITRF2005 global geodetic solution, we determine a robust Arabia-India relative angular velocity implying a 2-4 mm yr^{-1} dextral motion along the OFZ. This transform fault probably initiated

~8 Myr ago, after the onset of widespread compression in the Indian Ocean associated with a regional kinematic reorganization[8-11], which induced a change of configuration of the triple junction. Infrequent strong M_w>7 earthquakes are expected along the Arabia-India plate boundary unless the fault is creeping.

Physiographically, the Arabia-India plate boundary consists of a curved and almost continuous topographic ridge called the Owen Ridge[12] (Fig. 1a). The Owen Ridge trends parallel to, and is bounded on its eastern side by the OFZ. From correlations of seismic profiles with DSDP drillings, the uplift of the Owen Ridge was dated Early Miocene[12] and was related to vertical motions on its eastern bounding fault (hereafter referred to as the “old” OFZ). The OFZ terminates northwards into the Dalrymple Trough. Southwards, it connects with the Carlsberg and Sheba ridge system at the Aden-Owen-Carlsberg (AOC) triple junction[13]. Earthquake focal mechanisms indicate dextral strike-slip motion[3,4]: Arabia is currently moving northward more rapidly than India with respect to Eurasia. With a rate estimated to 2 mm yr^{-1} [5,6], the OFZ is one of the slowest plate boundaries on Earth. Space geodesy models (GPS) were unable to unambiguously detect this slow motion so far, and conflicting solutions have been proposed for the relative India-Arabia motion with opposite senses of slip along the OFZ[14-18]. Two recent solutions predict dextral shear with different amounts of extension[16,17] (see Supplementary Table 1).

In October 2006, aboard the *R/V Beautemps-Beaupré*, we mapped the AOC triple junction and the southern extremity of the OFZ using a Kongsberg-Simrad EM120 deep-water multibeam echo-sounder. Sea-bottom reflectivity coverage, magnetic, gravity and sub-bottom (3.5 kHz) profiles were acquired simultaneously. The survey aimed at elucidating the configuration of the plate boundaries and the kinematic evolution of the triple junction. We here focus on the southern extremity of the OFZ where we discovered a recently formed major active fault.

Multibeam sounding data show that the axial rift of the slow-spreading Sheba Ridge is bounded by normal fault escarpments (Fig. 1b). The rift valley deepens progressively toward the southeast where it connects to the Owen transform fault (OTF). The northern boundary of the Somalia plate is thus well defined by the Sheba Ridge and the OTF.

In contrast, the Arabia-India plate boundary is poorly delineated. The OFZ is made up of a sinuous segment to the south and a rectilinear segment to the north (Fig. 1b). The sinuous segment corresponds to the seismically quiet segment of the OFZ and does not exhibit any evidence of active deformation on the multibeam map or on 3.5 kHz profiles. It separates two oceanic lithospheres of different ages and depths originated at the Carlsberg and Sheba ridges, respectively, and may correspond to the fossil trace of the OTF. The rectilinear segment of the OFZ consists of an active strike-slip fault trending N10°E ±3°, which crosscuts and offsets the southern extremity of the Owen Ridge (Fig. 2a). The rectilinear trace of the fault indicates that the fault plane is nearly vertical. Surprisingly, the active fault is not located at the foot of the east-facing 2000 m-high escarpment of the Owen Ridge, as suggested by earlier seismic profiles[12], but almost at the top of it. There is no evidence of active deformation at the foot of the escarpment and therefore the whole Arabia-India relative motion appears currently accommodated along the active fault (however, the active fault might reactivate at depth a weakness zone corresponding to an ancient fault zone). The fault displays a right-lateral apparent horizontal offset of 12 km ±1 and no noticeable vertical offset (Fig. 2b). To the south, the fault terminates in a ~50 km wide pull-apart basin bounded by N70°E to N90°E-striking normal faults (Figures 2b and 2c). Active normal faulting in the basin is attested by seismicity: a magnitude 5.5 (m_b) extensional earthquake occurred exactly at the northern edge of the basin (Fig. 2c).

3.5 kHz profiles across the basin show numerous normal faults offsetting the youngest turbiditic deposits conveyed by tributaries of the Indus cone (Fig. 3). The two border normal faults display vertical throws of about 100 m. Numerous smaller normal faults with throws of the order of 10 m are observed in the southern part of the basin. The basin is characterized by a strong negative gravity anomaly of ~100 mGal with respect to the surrounding crust (Fig. 3). 2D forward gravity modelling indicates that the gravity low can be explained by a combination of low-density sedimentary infill and low-density mantle below, possibly hot asthenosphere. A realistic model with a sediment thickness of 3-4 km yields a minimum finite stretching of 10 km, which is about the same as the 12 km total offset along the strike-slip fault.

The Arabia-India plate boundary terminates into the pull-apart basin some 250 km north of the Sheba Ridge. Multibeam and seismicity data do not provide evidence for a localized plate boundary that would connect the OFZ and the pull-apart basin to the Sheba Ridge. The present-day AOC triple junction therefore appears as a diffuse deformation zone (inset in Fig. 4). Before the initiation of the strike-slip fault and the development of the pull-apart basin, the southern sinuous segment of the OFZ was probably active (as part of the “old” OFZ) and accommodated the Arabia-India dextral relative motion inferred from magnetic data from the Sheba and Carlsberg ridges[4]. The AOC triple junction was then located at the junction of the old OFZ, the Sheba Ridge, and the OTF with a Fault-Fault-Ridge (FFR) geometry (inset in Fig. 4). Since this kind of triple junction is often unstable, it was probably abandoned when a change of the Arabia-India kinematics caused the activation of the strike-slip fault and pull-apart basin. Since then, an ultraslow divergent boundary is developing in the pull-apart basin and might join the Sheba Ridge in the future to reach a more stable Ridge-Ridge-Ridge triple junction[13]. At present, deformation is not clearly localised between the pull-apart basin and the Sheba Ridge, and the current configuration of the triple junction might correspond to a transient state preceding the birth of a new plate boundary. Estimating the timing of the change of configuration of the AOC triple junction requires to determine the slip rate along the active fault.

Data available for determining the rate of motion along the OFZ are scarce. In NUVEL-1, DeMets et al.[5] used two transform fault azimuths obtained from conventional sounding profiles[1] and six earthquake slip vectors to constrain the Arabia-India pole (Fig. 4). They found a dextral motion of 2 mm yr^{-1} along the Owen fracture zone, significantly lower than previous solutions[4,19].

The latest published geodetic solutions span a range of prediction for the motion along the OFZ going from sinistral shear[14,18] to dextral transpression[15] or dextral transtension[16,17]. We tested whether the latest solution for the International Terrestrial Reference Frame (ITRF2005) yields a more robust solution (see Methods and Supplementary Information). The resulting rotation pole (P1) predicts a pure strike-slip motion along the OFZ of 2.7 ±1.7 mm yr^{-1}. The predicted azimuth of motion along the newly mapped, N10°E striking, active fault is N7.5°E. This azimuth is more accurate than any of the previous models, NUVEL-1A (N18.5°E) included. The rate is consistent with the shear component of Reilinger et al. (2006) who used many more sites in the Arabian plate. However, our new pole does not predict their proposed extension component.

The location of the rotation pole can be independently determined from the earthquakes which occurred along the strike-slip portion of the OFZ between 15°N and 22°N latitudes, where it closely follows a portion of a small circle[13] over ~700 km. Using the relocated positions of these earthquake[20], we produce a set of acceptable poles for India-Arabia motion (see Methods). Only a small fraction of these acceptable poles satisfy the N10°E±3° azimuth of the active fault. We use this additional constraint to derive our best pole (P2 in Fig. 4).

Thus, three independent datasets (multibeam bathymetry, earthquakes focal mechanisms, and space geodesy) indicate that the India-Arabia boundary is a right-lateral transform fault that closely follows a small circle centred on a nearby pole of rotation. Combining all the available data, our best estimate of the present-day motion predicts a rate of 3 mm yr^{-1} along the OFZ.

To date the onset of motion along the active fault, we examine the recent evolution of the Arabia-India motion. The comparison of GPS motions with NUVEL-1A motions suggests that the Arabia-Eurasia relative motion might have slowed down by as much as 30% during the last 3 Myr[18,21]. During the same period, the India-Eurasia relative motion appears to have decreased in the same proportions[15,22,23]. Since the Arabia-India relative motion is small, any change of motion of one of the two plates could have dramatic consequences for the OFZ, for instance a change of slip sense. Our structural interpretation of the AOC cruise data shows that right-lateral shear prevailed along the OFZ for the last million years, long enough to form the pull-apart basin: we found no evidence for recent inversion tectonics. Moreover, the Arabia-India instantaneous rate that we obtain from GPS data (3 mm yr^{-1}) is not significantly different from the NUVEL-1A rate obtained for the last 3 Myr (2 mm yr^{-1}). The simplest interpretation is that India-Arabia motion remained close to this value at least during the last 3 Myr. In a constant rate model, the age of the fault – obtained by dividing its finite offset (12 km) by the mean rate of motion (2-4 mm yr^{-1}) – would be 3 to 6 Ma. Although such a young age cannot be ruled out, it is significantly younger than the age of the latest major kinematic reorganization, which occurred in the Indian Ocean ~8 Ma ago[8]. This age corresponds to the onset of intraplate deformation in the India-Australia plate dated at 7.5-8 Ma by ODP drillings[9], which is coeval with the rise of the Tibetan plateau to its maximum elevation[10,11]. It also coincides with a kinematic change bracketed between 11 and 9 Ma along the Carlsberg Ridge[8]. Since then, magnetic data along the Carlsberg and Sheba ridges indicate a steady motion between the Somalia-India and Somalia-Arabia plates, respectively[8,24]. An alternative to the constant rate model is a progressively increasing rate from 0 to 3 mm yr^{-1} starting some 8 Ma ago. This scenario is still compatible with the GPS and NUVEL-1A rates and would better agree with the regional tectonics.

These new findings have implications for seismic hazard and earthquake recurrence along the Arabia-India boundary. The OFZ seismicity reported for the last 40 years is negligible. Breaking the 120 km-long fault segment that we mapped would require a M_w>7 earthquake if the recurrence time is 10^2 years[25], and several earthquakes of that size would be required to break the entire fault. Yet, the centennial earthquake catalogue[26], supposed to be complete down to magnitude 7 earthquakes, does not report any significant event along the OFZ. Our interpretation is that the OFZ shares some of the characteristics of intraplate faults, such as small slip rate, small cumulative slip, and large recurrence time (>10^3 years). Infrequent but large earthquakes may then be expected, similar to the large (M_w7.9 and M_w7.6) strike-slip earthquakes that occurred in intraplate setting in the Indian Ocean[27,28].

METHODS

Kinematic analysis. Available Arabia-India Euler poles are shown in Supplementary Figure 1 and listed in Supplementary Table 1, together with their predictions at the location of the newly mapped fault. GPS measurement campaigns are generally dedicated to only one of the two plates, so that in many studies the Arabia-India motion is a poorly constrained by-product of the realization of the solution into a global reference frame using IGS continuous sites (cGPS). In October 2006, IGN made available the latest solution for the International Terrestrial Reference Frame (ITRF2005, available at http://itrf.ensg.ign.fr/ITRF_solutions /2005/ ITRF2005.php). The level of data accuracy is unprecedented and compensates the limited number of sites (for example, the 53 site velocities located onto rigid Eurasia have a mean residual vector of 0.4 mm yr^{-1}). We first determined the Arabia-ITRF2005 (3 permanent sites) and India-ITRF2005 (4 permanent sites) poles of rotation and associated variance-covariance matrices, and combined them to obtain the motion of Arabia with respect to India (pole P1, see Supplementary Table 1). One of the Indian stations (Diego Garcia) may arguably be located within the India-Australia deformation zone, but it is close enough to the India-Australia pole of rotation[30] to be included in the Indian set. Apart from the Colombo station (Sri Lanka), which has not been measured for a long time, the three other Indian sites have a mean residual of 0.5 mm yr^{-1}. The velocities of Arabian stations in the Indian reference frame are comprised between 4 and 6 mm yr^{-1}. The rotation pole P1 predicts a pure strike-slip motion along the OFZ of 2.7 ±1.7 mm yr^{-1}.

Multibeam data show that the OFZ is a pure strike-slip fault between 15°N and 16°N, and, at the other end of the fracture zone, one focal mechanism between 21°N and 22°N (Harvard CMT, April 7, 1985) indicates a dextral strike-slip motion along a N26°E-trending vertical fault plane. Between 16°N and 21°N, the OFZ follows a portion of small circle. The simplest interpretation is that the entire segment located between 15°N and 22°N is a predominantly strike-slip fault, with a motion gradually reorienting from N010°E in the south to N030°E in the north. Earthquakes along this strike-slip portion of the OFZ (red dots in Fig. 4) were used to map regions of allowable India-Arabia poles (green regions) using a simple rejection criterion: the pole is rejected if the distance of one earthquake from the best small circle is greater than the location error. The errors given in the catalogue[20] are small (4 to 18 km) and the retained rejection criterion is drastic. Keeping poles that fit the azimuth of our newly mapped fault within its uncertainty (N10°E ±3°), allows us to narrow the area of acceptable poles. The best pole P2 (red star in Fig. 4) located at 12.1°N and 76.2°E (-0.102°Myr^{-1}) was determined using earthquakes, fault azimuth, and GPS at Bahrein station (smallest uncertainty of the Arabian vectors).

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Author Information. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to M.F. (marc.fournier@upmc.fr).

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Location map and bathymetry of the OFZ and Arabia-India-Somalia triple junction. a, Satellite altimetry data[29], shallow seismicity between 1964 and 2004[20] (focal depth < 50 km; magnitude > 2), and all available earthquake focal mechanisms for the AOC triple junction. Inset shows the geodynamic framework of the triple junction. CaR: Carlsberg Ridge. OFZ: Owen fracture zone. OTF: Owen transform fault. ShR: Sheba Ridge. **b**, Multibeam bathymetry of the triple junction mapped during the AOC cruise in 2006. The Sheba Ridge displays a typical slow-spreading ridge morphology with a well-developed axial rift bounded by normal faults stepping down toward the volcanic axis. The axial rift is sinuous, not segmented by transform faults, and deepens progressively toward the southeast and then connects to the Owen transform fault (OTF) through a deep nodal basin.

Figure 2. 3D and map views of the active fault discovered at the southern extremity of the OFZ (location in Fig. 1b). a, The N10°E-trending fault crosscuts the Owen Ridge and terminates to the south in a pull-apart basin bounded by N70°E to N90°E-trending normal faults. **b**, The total displacement along the fault is determined from the right-lateral 12 km ±1 geomorphologic offset of the Owen Ridge. **c**, The fault activity is attested by shallow seismicity in the basin and by the extensional focal mechanism (Harvard CMT, September 12, 1990) of an earthquake on the northern bounding fault. The southward steeply dipping nodal plane of the earthquake focal mechanism likely corresponds to the bounding fault plane.

Figure 3. 3.5 kHz seismic profile across the pull-apart basin (location in Figures 1b and 2b). The present-day depocentre is delineated by numerous normal faults in the southern part of the basin. Inset shows the free air gravity profile across the basin and the northern flank of the Sheba Ridge (location in Fig. 1b). The basin is not in local isostatic equilibrium. The gravity minimum is offset southwards of about 5 km with respect to the basin center, suggesting an asymmetrical infill with a greater basement depth to the south in agreement with the high density of normal faults to the south. The main characteristics of this previously unknown basin – total width of 50 km, finite stretching of ~12 km, sediment thickness of 3-4 km, asymmetric infill – make it an equivalent in the oceanic domain of the Corinth continental rift.

Figure 4. Arabia-India GPS kinematics. Red and blue arrows display the ITRF2005 solution in the original and India-fixed reference frames with 95% confidence intervals. The best geodetic P1 (pink) and NUVEL-1A (purple) India-Arabia rotation poles are shown with their 95% confidence ellipsoids. Red dots show earthquake epicentres[20] along the OFZ used to map regions of allowable India-Arabia poles (green regions) with 4, 6 and 8 sigma errors on epicentre positions. Dashed lines delimit the region where the poles fit the azimuth of our new fault (yellow region). The red star shows the best pole P2 using earthquakes, fault azimuth, and GPS at Bahrein station. The predicted rate on the OFZ is 3.2 ±1.2 mm yr^{-1} (dashed circles). Inset shows the configuration of the AOC triple junction before (left) and after (right) the development of the strike-slip fault and pull-apart basin.

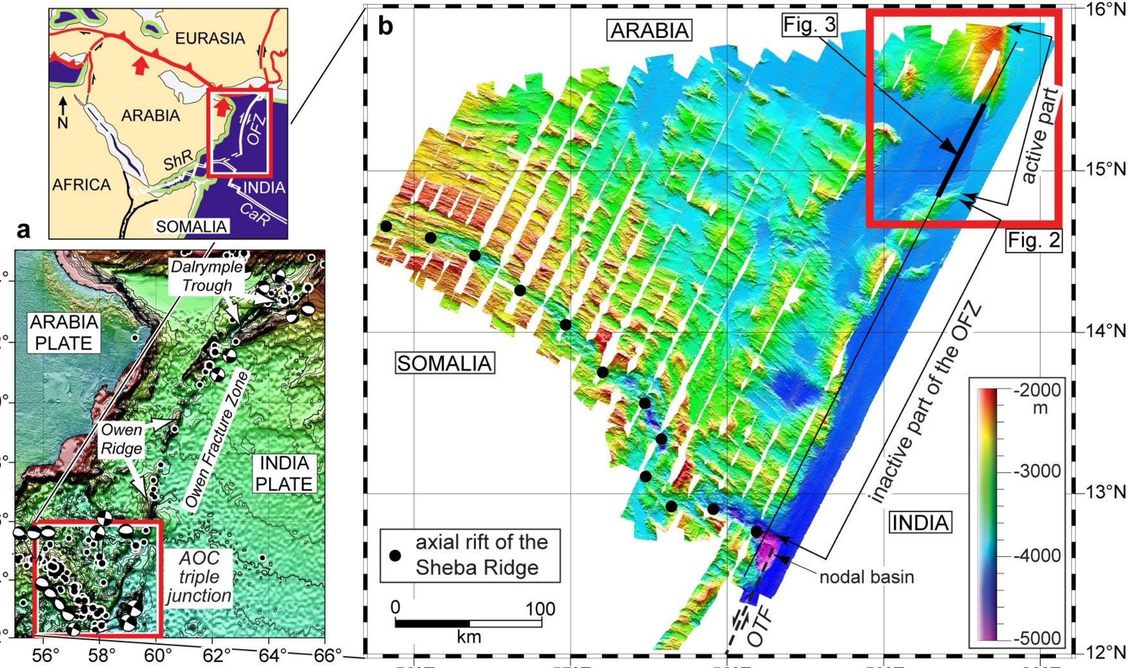

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Figure 1

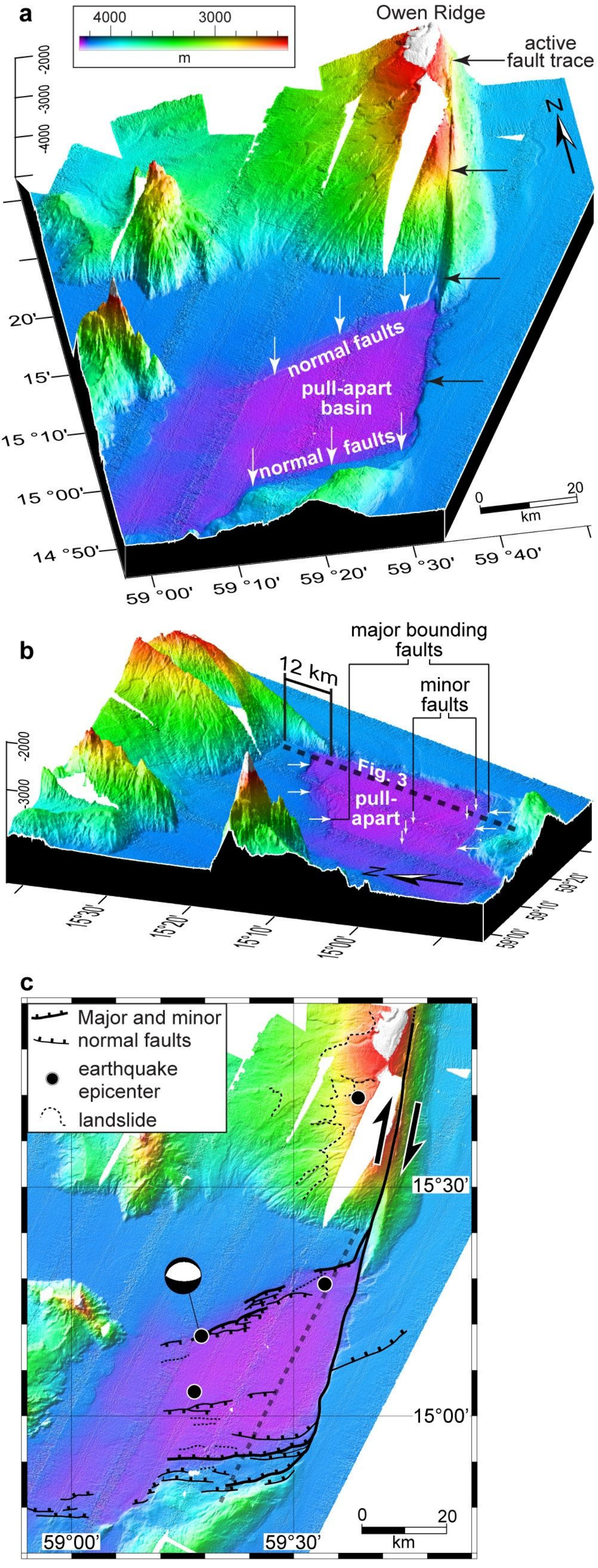
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Figure 2

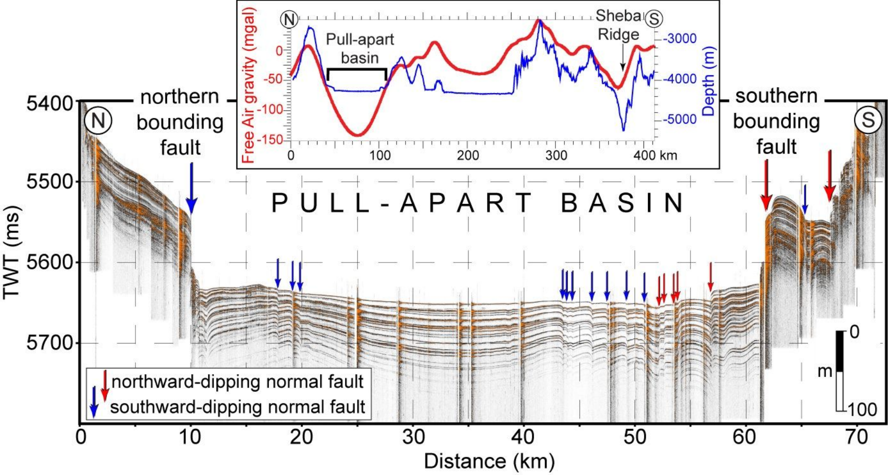
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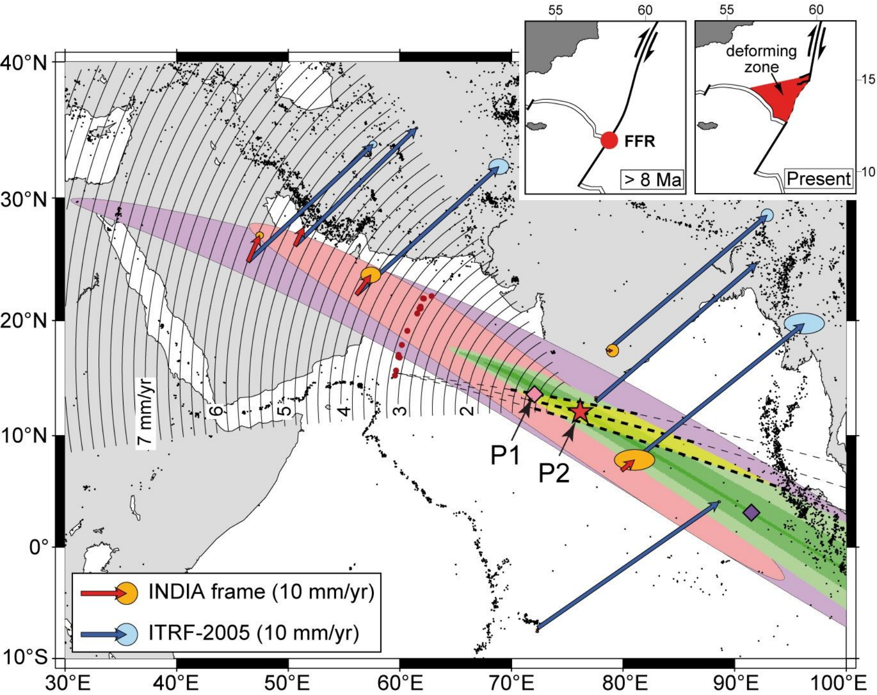
Figure 3



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0°
10°S
30°E
40°E
50°E
60°E
70°E
80°E
90°E
100°E
7 mm/yr
6
5
4
3
2
P1
P2
INDIA frame (10 mm/yr)
ITRF-2005 (10 mm/yr)

Figure 4