Globally, geologists regard the California's Franciscan Complex as the type subduction complex. No other unit on Earth records as long a history of continuous subduction, although this distinction, when compared to Japan, for example, may partly be a consequence of nomenclature of units. The Franciscan provides the ideal natural laboratory to study subduction process, but suffers from its uniqueness that impedes comparisons to other subduction complexes. The Franciscan's vaunted complexity has intimidated generations of geologists, and in today's research climate of reduced field studies, has deterred research, as well as teaching in it. Recent Franciscan studies that have changed our views on subduction zone tectonics include field studies showing intact high-grade metamorphic units, geochronology bearing on the timing of metamorphism and deposition, and geochemical studies that give insight into element mobility during subduction zone metamorphism, subduction initiation, supra-subduction zone ophiolite development, plate reconstructions, subduction accretion versus subduction erosion, and sources of trench sediment. Many problems remain, including the exhumation mechanism of high-pressure metamorphic rocks, especially intact eclogites, a more difficult problem than exhuming continental ultrahigh pressure rocks, owing to high density nature of the mafic eclogites. The details of Franciscan tectonics and their relationship to tectonic events elsewhere in the North America Cordillera is still far from understood. The thermal history of the first 40-50 million years of Franciscan subduction, that may record anomalously slow cooling, is also a source of both controversy and mystery.
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