



## PARTICLE SIZING OF SEDIMENTS

**Particle size analysis of a geological area can reveal a lot of information about the formation, history and climate of a region. It is an important tool for studying changes in geology and climate over time, mode of formation, and current environmental effects related to pollution transport, erosion, and sediment transport.**

### **Summary**

Sediments are geologic materials that are formed in one place, moved to another, and deposited. Study of ocean and lake sediments can provide a lot of information about the geological history of a particular area. Sediments are characterized with a number of parameters including size, composition, shape, spatial arrangement of grains, and the mode of formation (the origin of the material).

Geologists commonly use the Wentworth Scale (a geometric scale based on 1mm, decreasing in diameter by  $\frac{1}{2}$ ). The Phi Scale is a commonly-used modification that allows the use of simple whole numbers for class boundaries by applying the logarithmic transform:  $\phi = -\log_2 d$ , where  $d$  is the particle diameter in millimeters.

The geometric scale in size relates in a simple way to physical transport properties, specifically current velocity.

### **Correlating Particle Size to Environment**

The principal factors that control sedimentation are particle size and energy conditions at the site of deposition. Generally the particle size of a deposit is proportional to the energy level present at the time of deposition. Thus, high energy beaches are composed of coarse sands. Quiet lagoons are composed of fine mud.

Grain size and current velocity determine whether a particle will be eroded, transported, or deposited. There is a well known relationship between the grain size and current velocity represented by the Hjulstrom diagram.

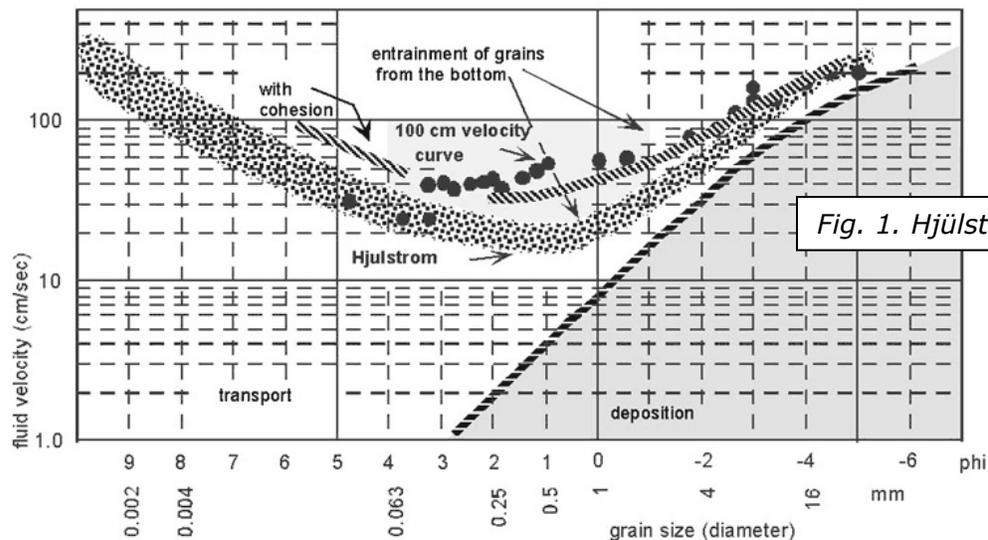


Fig. 1. Hjulstrom diagram



These basic principles allow us to measure grain size and density from an ancient deposit and infer energy of the formation event of a geological area. For example, deposits in West Texas and Central Mexico have been identified as coming from a 65 million year old tsunami.

### **Ocean Sediments**

Study of ocean-floor sediments allows us to learn specific information about the formation of these areas. Continental shelves are close to continental sediment supply and shallow. The deep sea shelves are far from continental sediment supply and see no wave energy.

The expectation is that, due to the greater energy in the shallow water, larger material will be moved in shallow depths, but not out into the ocean, so we would expect grain size to decrease offshore across shelves. The reality is that most continental shelves are covered with coarse sand.

### **Effects of Geological History**

Sea level has varied in the past because of continental glaciers. Up to a mile of ice covered Canada, Siberia, and Scandinavia. The water in ice came from the oceans, lowering sea levels. As sea levels rose, it deposited coarse material across the oceanic shelves. This "relic" sediment accumulated at an earlier time and under different conditions and can comprise up to 70% of all shelf sediment.

As these shelves were near sea level and exposed to the energy of the waves, a number of other factors can play a role. Tides cause the sediment to be mobilized once or twice daily. Waves can erode sediment from the shelf and allow other currents to

transport it. Rivers flowing across what is now the shelf either deposited sand, gravel, or deltas, or eroded slope canyons, increasing deposition in deep ocean areas.

### **Lake Sediments**

Grain-size variations in lake sediments reflect changes in the processes and energy of sediment transport. Particle sizes are closely linked to turbulence, wave energy, and proximity to shoreline; increased grain sizes generally correspond to higher energy conditions of sediment production or transport.

### **Tracing Climate Change**

Variability of sediments in lake core samples suggests that grain-size variation in sediments is an effective proxy for environmental change in the area. The absence of precise ages for the cores may allow only tentative correlations of the fluctuations to climatic events.

Making assumptions about sediment accumulation rate, different sediment levels can be correlated to a time period. If this assumption is valid, increases in sand size or content may indicate a period of lower lake levels corresponding to an arid or warm period. Conversely, decreases in sand content may reflect periods of wet and cold climates.

Prevalence of ostracodes can also be used to infer lake-level changes. Ostracodes are small, shelled crustacea commonly preserved in sediments. Because many ostracode species have narrow ecological limits controlled by temperature, salinity, oxygen, food and other factors, they can provide an important tool for paleoceanographic reconstruction.

**Sediment Formation**

Sediments originate from one of five general sources. Each can be identified by specific chemical and physical characteristics, including particle size.

*Terrigenous* sediments are derived from the land (terra). Rocks weather to small particles and are transported to the ocean. This is called erosion. Much of it is deposited in river deltas.

*Biogenic* sediments are the shells and skeletal remains of living organisms. Only the "hard parts" are preserved, typically  $\text{CaCO}_3$  and silica. These skeletons dominate the sediment in many places.

*Authigenic* sediments are formed in place by hydrothermal deposits at mid-ocean ridges and vents. Water circulates through the crust, dissolving minerals and bringing dissolved ions to the ocean floor. This water cools and the minerals precipitate out, leaving mineral-rich sediments. The most common are ferro-manganese nodules that have large potential economic value (Mn, Co, Ni, Cu and other trace metals).

*Volcanogenic* particles (ash) are produced by most volcanic eruptions, but can be transported large distances by wind. Major eruptions can affect sediments on a global scale.

*Cosmogenous* particles are produced from fragmented meteorites and products of their impacts. Although a small portion of the total, they are important tracers of "events".

**Environmental Applications**

Particle size of sediments is a primary factor in determining how efficiently it retains contaminants. Finer sediments will trap these contaminants for a

longer period of time. Larger particles have greater interstitial spaces, allowing the contaminants to be washed out and continue in the water stream, having a continued effect on the biosystem.

A profile of ocean or lake floor sediments is important to study the conditions necessary to suspend bottom material and to measure the transport of suspended sediment between different areas. Accurate modeling of the transport and fate of both nutrients and anthropogenic pollutants requires knowledge of the concentration and the particle size distribution of suspended particulates. Resuspension events have the capacity to inject considerable amounts of particulate material (along with their associated nutrients and/or pollutants) into the water.

Also, changes in the size distribution can be evidence of bioorganisms that disturb the sediment, causing a breakdown in sediment size. This can be related back to the amount of nutrients available to the organisms.

Increasing sediment loads entering lakes and rivers owing to widespread deforestation and erosion are increasing the need for understanding of the effects of influent sediment composition on a biosystem. Experiments have been conducted investigating the effects of exposure to sediments of differing particle size ranges on survival of plant and animal life in lakes and rivers.

It was found that survival rates decreased with decreasing sediment particle size. This suggests that runoff from areas that produce fine-grained sediments have greater detrimental effects on the ecosystem and require greater attention.

**Traditional Particle Analysis**

Traditional particle size measurement techniques include sieves for the larger size ranges, usually above  $63\mu\text{m}$  (230 mesh size). Sieves are limited in resolution (number of sieves = number of data channels), are slow and operator intensive, and are limited for measuring the smaller size classes. Pipette or sedimentation is used for the finer fractions. This is also a slow technique with significant operator dependency of the results.

Both are affected by particle shape influences. Particles pass through a sieve on the second smallest dimension, so a needle-like particle will be reported as the smaller dimension, not the length. Flat particles, like clay, will sediment in an orientation that gives the greatest hydrodynamic resistance, like a leaf falling. This will be reported as a much finer particle than the average of all dimensions. Care must be taken when interpreting results or correlating historical data to new analytical techniques.

**Modern Analysis Methods**

Modern automated analytical techniques used for sizing sediments include laser diffraction and digital image processing. These new techniques are fast, easy, operator independent, have a much broader range, and have a much higher resolution with many more data channels.

Laser diffraction measures light scattered from the particle as it passes through the measurement cell. The angle of scatter is related to the size of the particles. The measurement is essentially instantaneous, although total analysis times are on the order of 30 seconds for most samples. The Horiba LA-930 has proven popular for

this application because of its wide size range ( $0.02\text{--}2000\mu\text{m}$ ), speed, stability, and ease of use.

The large number of samples necessary to get a comprehensive profile of an area has made automation options popular. The SlurrySampler can accommodate 15 samples and completely automate the sample analysis task. Once configured properly, this automation can also improve reproducibility significantly by removing any remaining operator-dependency.

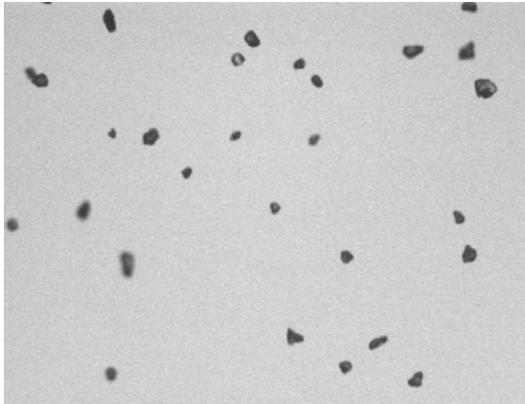


*Fig. 2. LA-930 with SlurrySampler*

Digital image processing uses CCD (digital) cameras and image analysis software to take a picture of the particles falling in front of a light source, then analyze the images to provide a range of size and shape information. The Horiba Camsizer measures dry samples over a size range of  $30\mu\text{m}$  –  $30\text{mm}$ , allowing analysis of even extremely coarse grades of material. The ability to measure shape parameters also allows



the user to correlate measurements to traditional techniques such as sieving. For samples containing finer grades and clay, this data is often combined with laser diffraction measurements, frequently the Horiba LA-300, to provide complete size range coverage.



*Fig. 3. Images from the Camsizer*

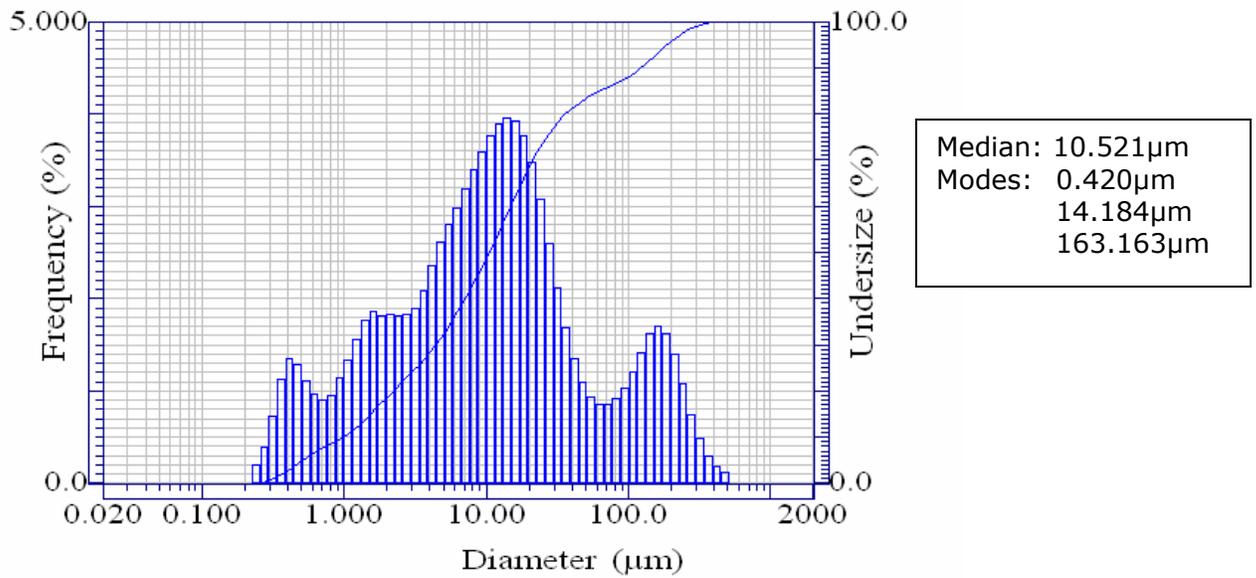
The higher resolution of these techniques allows for significantly more information to be obtained from a sample. Small changes in the mode may not be picked up by widely-spaced sieves, but are easily resolved along with more details of the total size distribution. The significantly greater speed of these techniques allows a much greater number of samples to be analyzed, providing more detailed information about an area of interest.

### **Sample Preparation and Testing Methods**

Depending on the source, samples may need to be pretreated with 30% H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> to remove organic materials or 1 M NaOH to remove biogenic silica (diatoms). Samples are generally dispersed in deionized water for analysis. Finer grades with clay fractions may require additional surfactant (usually 0.1% sodium polymetaphosphate) and ultrasonic treatment to disperse agglomerates.

Because of the wide range of sizes seen in a given sample, care must be taken to ensure that sufficient sample concentration is used. Particularly with the larger particle size ranges, the number of particles will be very low when compared to an equivalent volume or mass of smaller particles. The default light transmittance values may not serve as a good guide because of the total sample breadth.

There must be sufficient sample so that if the large particles were removed and analyzed separately, there would be enough sample to provide sufficient detector signal to get a good measurement. This may give laser transmission values below the default range. Method development will need to include tests at different sample concentrations and confirmation with other methods, like microscopy or sieving.



*Fig. 4. Lake sediment sample measured on the LA-930*

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For further information on this document or our products, please contact:  
Horiba Instruments, Inc.  
17671 Armstrong Ave.  
Irvine, CA 92614 USA  
(949) 250-4811  
[www.horiba.com](http://www.horiba.com)