The Italian Solfatara as an analog for Mars fumarolic alteration

JESSICA FLAHAUT 1,*,†, JANICE L. BISHOP3, SIMONE SILVESTRO2,3, DARIO TESDES4,5, ISABELLE DANIEL6, AND DAMIEN LOIZEAU7

1Centre de Recherches Pétrographiques et Géochimiques (CRPG), UMR7358 CNRS-Université de Lorraine, 15 rue Notre-Dame des Pauvres, 54500 Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy, France. Orcid 0000-0002-0866-8086
2Carl Sagan Center, The SETI Institute, Mountain View, California 94043, U.S.A.
3INAF—Osservatorio Astronomico di Capodimonte, Napoli, Italy
4Campania University—Luigi Vanvitelli, Caserta, Italy
5Osservatorio Vesuviano—Istituto Nazionale di Geochimica e Vulcanologia, Napoli, Italy
6Université de Lyon, Université Lyon 1, Ens de Lyon, CNRS, UMR 5276, Lab. de Géologie de Lyon, Villeurbanne F-69622, France. Orcid 0000-0002-1448-7919
7IAS, CNRS/Université Paris Sud, 91400 Orsay, France

ABSTRACT

The first definitive evidence for continental vents on Mars is the in situ detection of amorphous silica-rich outcrops by the Mars Exploration Rover Spirit. These outcrops have been tentatively interpreted as the result of either acid sulfate leaching in fumarolic environments or direct precipitation from hot springs. Such environments represent prime targets for upcoming astrobiology missions but remain difficult to identify with certainty, especially from orbit. To contribute to the identification of fumaroles and hot spring deposits on Mars, we surveyed their characteristics at the analog site of the Solfatara volcanic crater in central Italy. Several techniques of mineral identification (VNIR spectroscopy, Raman spectroscopy, XRD) were used both in the field and in the laboratory on selected samples. The faulted crater walls showed evidence of acid leaching and alteration into the advanced argillic-alunitic facies, with colorful deposits containing alunite, jarosite, and/or hematite. Sublimes containing various Al and Fe hydroxyl-sulfates were observed around the active fumarole vents at 90 °C. One vent at 160 °C was characterized by different sublimes enriched in As and Hb sulfide species. Amorphous silica and alunite assemblages that are diagnostic of silicic alteration were also observed at the Fangiaa mud pots inside the crater. A wide range of minerals was identified at the 665 m diameter Solfatara crater that is diagnostic of acid-steam heated alteration of a trachytic, porous bedrock. Importantly, this mineral diversity was captured at each site investigated with at least one of the techniques used, which lends confidence for the recognition of similar environments with the next-generation Mars rovers.

Keywords: Mars analog, hydrothermalism, vents, fumaroles, alteration patterns, Solfatara, VNIR spectroscopy, Raman spectroscopy, XRD; Special Collection: Earth Analogs for Martian geological materials and processes

INTRODUCTION

Hydrothermal systems have often been proposed as a possible cradle for early life (e.g., Shock 1996; Glavin and Kring 2005). Evidence for warm and wet environments include the orbital detections by recent VNIR spectral-imagers of a wide range of hydrated minerals (Bibring et al. 2006; Murchie et al. 2009; Carter et al. 2013). Hydrothermalism is also invoked as a likely source for alteration in localized surface environments (fumarolic fields or hot springs), leading to the formation of the clays, sulfates, and silica-rich deposits identified in Valles Marineris Chasma (Milliken et al. 2008; Thollot et al. 2012), the silica detections in the Nili Patera caldera (Skok et al. 2010) or the serpentinite and Mg-carbonate detections in Nili Fossae (Viviano et al. 2013). Hydrothermalism is also invoked as a likely source for alteration in localized surface environments (fumarolic fields or hot springs), leading to the formation of the clays, sulfates, and silica-rich deposits identified in Valles Marineris Chasma (Milliken et al. 2008; Thollot et al. 2012), the silica detections in the Nili Patera caldera (Skok et al. 2010) or the serpentinite and Mg-carbonate detections in Nili Fossae (Viviano et al. 2013). However, the first definitive evidence for volcanic hydrothermal activity (continental vents) on Mars is the in situ detection of amorphous silica-rich outcrops (>90% wt opal-A) by the Mars Exploration Rover (MER) Spirit Miniature Thermal Emission Spectrometer (Mini-TES) instrument (Squyres et al. 2008). The detection of abundant opaline silica at Home Plate, combined with high Ti content in local soils, was interpreted as evidence for the dissolution of basaltic soils by low pH fluids (Squyres et al. 2008). Iron- and phosphate-rich soils detected nearby, at Paso Robles, were also interpreted as acid-sulfate alteration products in a hydrothermal (possibly fumarolic) environment of primary phosphate-rich materials (Haus RAT et al. 2013). The nodular aspect of the Home Plate outcrops led to