Low-angle shear within the exposed Manzalesti salt diapir, Romania: incipient decapitation in the Eastern Carpathians fold-and-thrust belt

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Abstract

In salt-detached fold-and-thrust belts, contractional modification of salt structures may include decapitation by thrusting, but examples are not well known in the subsurface and unreported in outcrop. Here we present a surface exposure of an intrasalt, sub-horizontal shear zone at the boundary between the Tarcau and Subcarpathian nappes in the Romanian Eastern Carpathians. The Manzalesti diapir forms the largest rock salt outcrop in Europe, with unique salt-karst geomorphology. Numerous wells show that the outcrop is above deep-seated salt of a precursor salt-cored anticline or passive diapir whose base is at > 3500 m. Multiscale observations using UAV-based digital outcrop models, fieldwork, and microstructure analysis show that the outcrop is characterized by sub-horizontal foliation with isoclinal folds, unlike the subvertical fabric of most Romanian diapirs. The halite is rich in clastic inclusions, with a power-law size distribution caused by tectonic reworking of originally dirty salt. Microstructures show that the halite matrix is strongly deformed by dislocation creep, forming subgrains and dynamically recrystallized grains around large porphyroclasts with piezometry indicating relatively high differential stress of around 4 MPa, at pressures sufficient to suppress dilatancy. The observations are best explained by sub-horizontal shear generated by an overriding nappe, overprinting an original coarse-grained salt fabric during decapitation of the salt body.

2 the Eastern Carpathians fold-and-thrust belt

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14 Key points

- the Mânzălești salt diapir originated as either a salt-cored anticline or a passive diapir
- 16 in front of the Tarcău nappe
- foreland-directed movement of the nappe decapitated the salt body, shearing its upper
 portion at a shallow depth and fast strain rates
- this shear zone, exposed by uplift and erosion, forms the present-day outcrop
- 20

21 ABSTRACT

- 22 In salt-detached fold-and-thrust belts, contractional modification of salt structures may
- 23 include decapitation by thrusting, but examples are not well known in the subsurface and
- 24 unreported in outcrop. Here we present a surface exposure of an intrasalt, sub-horizontal
- shear zone at the boundary between the Tarcău and Subcarpathian nappes in the Romanian

Eastern Carpathians. The Mânzălești diapir forms the largest rock salt outcrop in Europe, 26 with unique salt-karst geomorphology. Numerous wells show that the outcrop is above deep-27 seated salt of a precursor salt-cored anticline or passive diapir whose base is at >3500 m. 28 Multiscale observations using UAV-based digital outcrop models, fieldwork, and 29 microstructure analysis show that the outcrop is characterized by sub-horizontal foliation 30 with isoclinal folds, unlike the subvertical fabric of most Romanian diapirs. The halite is rich 31 32 in clastic inclusions, with a power-law size distribution caused by tectonic reworking of originally dirty salt. Microstructures show that the halite matrix is strongly deformed by 33 34 dislocation creep, forming subgrains and dynamically recrystallized grains around large porphyroclasts with piezometry indicating relatively high differential stress of around 4 MPa, 35 at pressures sufficient to suppress dilatancy. The observations are best explained by sub-36 horizontal shear generated by an overriding nappe, overprinting an original coarse-grained 37 salt fabric during decapitation of the salt body. 38

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Keywords: salt tectonics, fold and thrust belt, sheared diapir, UAV photogrammetry,
microstructures

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43 INTRODUCTION

Numerous orogenic fold-and-thrust belts involve salt, with notable examples in Arctic Canada, the Sierra Madre Oriental of Mexico, the Atlas Mts., the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Carpathians, the Zagros Mts., the Salt Ranges of Pakistan, the Kuqa Basin of China, and the Flinders Ranges of Australia (see Davis & Engelder, 1985; Letouzey et al., 1995; Hudec & Jackson, 2007; Duffy et al., 2018 for compilations and further references). In all cases, the salt layer served as an excellent décollement for salt-cored folds and salt-detached thrusts (Davis & Engelder, 1985). In some, diapirs exerted a profound influence on structural styles

(e.g., Rowan & Vendeville, 2006; Callot et al., 2007). Some of these were preexisting passive 51 diapirs that localized contractional strain (e.g., Zagros Mts.; Letouzey & Sherkati, 2004; 52 Jahani et al., 2009, Alps; Granado et al., 2019); others developed only during the shortening. 53 Late diapirs may initiate by salt breaking through the thin roof of an early salt-cored anticline 54 or the thicker roof of a later fold that is thinned erosionally (Coward & Stewart, 1995), or by 55 salt in the hanging wall of a thrust carried up to shallow levels where it can break through to 56 57 the surface (Rowan, 2020). Also, salt carried up in the hanging wall of a thrust fault is also a form of diapir because the salt has a truncating relationship with younger strata in the 58 59 footwall (Hudec & Jackson, 2011). This includes a late thrust that cuts one or both limbs of a precursor salt-cored anticline (break-thust fold of Willis, 1893; thrusted diapir fold of 60 Mrazec, 1910; injection fold of Beloussov, 1959). 61 Whatever the timing and nature of their origin, early salt structures are subsequently modified 62 by ongoing contractional deformation. One form of modification is decapitation, in which the 63 upper part of a salt body or its equivalent weld is offset and transported laterally away from 64 its deeper stem or pedestal by thrust faults. Indeed, partly or wholly decapitated diapirs have 65 been produced in analogue and numerical models (e.g., Callot et al., 2007; Ferrer, 2012; 66 Pichel et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2018) and interpreted in the subsurface (e.g., Parravano et al., 67 2015; Snidero et al., 2019). The thrusts may emanate from within the precursor salt body 68 itself, for example in the case of break-thrust folds, or originate away from the diapir and 69 70 ramp up through the stratigraphy to intersect the salt higher up on the structure. Developing a proper understanding of how precursor salt structures and ongoing 71 contractional deformation interact is an important and ongoing research topic for both 72 73 academia and industry. Despite their being generated in models, interpreted on seismic data, and depicted in cross sections, decapitated diapirs have not, to our knowledge, been 74 documented in exposures in orogenic fold-and-thrust belts. Thus, this paper aims to use 75

subsurface data, UAV-based digital outcrop models, outcrop observations, and

77 microstructural analysis to demonstrate that the Mânzălești diapir in the Eastern Carpathians

79 salt-cored anticline. We anticipate that our findings will spur others, specifically those who

of Romania is a decapitated salt structure, whether that was a precursor passive diapir or a

are taking a renewed interest in the role of salt in fold-and-thrust belts, to consider the process

of diapir or fold decapitation and perhaps identify and analyze further examples.

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83 **GEOLOGIC SETTING**

84 Tectonics and stratigraphy

The study area is located in the south of the Romanian Eastern Carpathians, in the thinskinned part of this fold and thrust belt (Fig. 1). The Carpathians are an Alpine orogen that
records the late Jurassic to middle Miocene closure of the Alpine Tethys (Săndulescu, 1988,
1984; Schmid et al., 2008; Csontos & Vörös, 2004; Maţenco, 2017; Schleder et al., 2019;
Fig. 1).

The Mânzălesti diapir (Fig. 2) is one of many salt outcrops located in front of the Tarcău 90 nappe (Dumitrescu, 1948, 1952), in this case at its exposed boundary with the Subcarpathian 91 nappe (Mrazec & Voitesti, 1914; Băncilă, 1958; Fig. 2a, b). These nappes were emplaced 92 mainly during the middle Miocene contractional event, when the Subcarpathian nappe was 93 thrusted over the undeformed foreland (Săndulescu, 1988, 1984; Mațenco & Bertotti, 2000). 94 The foreland deposits (Fig. 2) are represented by Sarmatian (middle Miocene) to recent 95 clastic sedimentary rocks deposited in the Dacian Basin (see Lazarev et al., 2020, for more 96 details). 97

98 The rocks in the Tarcău nappe are of Mesozoic to middle Miocene age, while the sequence of
99 the Subcarpathian nappe is predominantly Eocene to mid-Miocene, although of different
100 facies compared to the Tarcău nappe (i.e. Băncilă, 1958, Săndulescu, 1984). The number of

101 salt formations in the Romanian Carpathians and their precise age (early or middle Miocene)

102 is interpreted differently by different authors (i.e. Cobălcescu, 1883; Athanasiu, 1916;

103 Mrazec & Teisseyre, 1902; Voitești, 1943; Tămaș et al., 2018; Filipescu et al., 2020).

104 However, because this discussion is not critical for our interpretation, we use an early

- 105 Miocene age for the salt in this paper.
- 106

107 The Mânzălești diapir

108 The Mânzălești diapir is located between the villages of Mânzălești and Lopătari (Fig. 2a), at

the contact between the Tarcău and Subcarpathian nappes (Figs. 2a, b, Murgeanu et al.,

110 1968). The western flank of the diapir is represented by the hanging wall of the Tarcău nappe

and comprises early Miocene strata (Dumitrescu et al., 1970; Stoica & Gherasie, 1981;

112 Matenco & Bertotti, 2000; Fig. 2a, b). Immediately east of the diapir, the stratigraphy is

represented by early Miocene rocks assigned to the Subcarpathian nappe (Dumitrescu et al.,

114 1970; Stoica and Gherasie, 1981; Matenco and Bertotti, 2000; Fig. 2b, c).

115 The top of the salt diapir, known as the Meledic Plateau, is capped by Quaternary fluvial

sediments. The area has been the focus of multiple studies related to salt karst formation. This

outcrop hosts the 6S cave, which has 3234 m of passages and is the longest salt cave in

Europe and the second longest in the world (Giurgiu, 2010; Melinte-Dobrinescu et al., 2017;

119 Ponta, 2019). The caves within the salt diapir host multiple vegetal and animal remains (i.e. a

120 >12000-year-old molar from an Eqvus hemionus; Giurgiu, 2010). The salt is eroded quite

121 rapidly: it is estimated that the Slănicul de Buzău river carries ~500.000 tons of dissolved

122 halite per year (Stoica & Gherasie, 1981).

123 The salt is rather impure (82 vol % halite; Stoica & Gherasie, 1981; Giurgiu, 2010), even

124 excluding the very large (decimeter- to meter-scale) inclusions (i.e. sandstones, limestones,

125 metamorphics). The origin of the inclusions (tectonic or sedimentary) has long been debated.

They have a range of lithologies and could be derived from multiple sources, i.e. the Tarcău
or older nappes or Miocene conglomerate within the Tarcău nappe (Stoica & Gherasie, 1981;
Meruțiu, 1912; Dumitrescu et al., 1970; Mrazec & Teisseyre, 1902; Popescu, 1951; Olteanu,
1951; Melinte-Dobrinescu et al., 2017).
More than twenty salt and hydrocarbon exploration wells were drilled in the area. They
indicate that the base of the salt is at ~3500 m (Meruțiu, 1912; Stoica & Gherasie, 1981;
Maţenco & Bertotti, 2000; Fig. 2b).

133

134 METHODS AND DATA

135 In this study we combine well data, satellite images and Digital Elevation Model (DEM) data

136 with Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) photogrammetry, field observations and

137 microstructural analysis in a multiscale analysis of internal deformation and structural

138 evolution of the Mânzălești salt diapir.

During recent years, the use of UAV photogrammetry has become a key component of
fieldwork in geoscience. Tools for interpreting 3D outcrops in Digital Outcrop Models

141 (DOM) are emerging, and extracting structural data from outcrops that are not easy or safe to

142 reach is now possible. Studies using UAV-based methods can much improve observations

regarding both geomorphology and deformation (i.e. Weismüller et al., 2019; Mercuri et al.,

144 2020; Fernandez et al., 2021). Field studies in outcrop and salt mines, combined with

145 microstructural analysis, provide a scale of observation and resolution which complements

146 3D seismic and drill core data on geometry and allow microtectonic analysis, which provides

147 information on rheology and deviatoric stress (i.e. Talbot & Rogers, 1980; Urai et al., 1986;

148 Talbot, 1998; Jahani et al., 2007; Desbois et al., 2010; Schorn & Neubauer, 2014; Závada et

al., 2015; Gutiérrez & Lizaga, 2016; Burliga et al., 2018; Sarkarinejad et al., 2018; Zucker et

150 al., 2019).

A vintage 2D seismic line along the Râmnicul Sărat valley and seven exploration wells (for 151 salt mining and hydrocarbons) were available for this study in the area of the diapir (Merutiu, 152 1912; Marica, 2016; Stoica & Gherasie, 1981). The seismic line has an overall poor quality 153 but was useful to interpret some geometries in the Miocene stratigraphy of the Subcarpathian 154 nappe and foreland deposits to the east of the diapir. The wells were critical to better define 155 the subsurface shape of the diapir as well as the base of the salt body. Preexisting maps, field 156 157 measurements and detailed observations were used to complement the interpretation of the subsurface data. Results from analogue modelling experiments aiming to understand 158 159 deformation in the Eastern Carpathian Bend Zone (Tămaș et al., 2019) provided useful structural analogues in interpreting the sub-surface data. 160

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162 Satellite data

The satellite imagery is publicly available from ESRI. DEM data is from the European
Environment Agency under the framework of the Copernicus programme (European Digital
Elevation Model, version 1.1 (EU-DEM v1.1), with a pixel size of 25 m and a vertical
accuracy of +/- 7 m (land.copernicus.eu).

167

168 Unmanned aerial vehicle photogrammetry

In an earlier UAV-based study (Urecheatu et al., 2018), we explored data acquisition and processing for the diapir outcrops. This gave a first indication of the unexpectedly shallow dip of foliation and allowed the selection of optimal parameters for the second-generation data presented in this paper. The UAV photo data were collected using a DJI Mavic Air drone with a 12 MP image sensor. A total of 1725 digital images were acquired to create the DEM, and an orthorectified image and another 2420 digital images were acquired for the nine detailed DOM. Before image acquisition, ground control points (GCP) were defined and their locations
measured. Manual flight and photograph acquisition were used for the steep faces of the
outcrops from altitudes ranging from 50 m to 150 m (Fig. 3). The photographs of the
sediment-covered flat top of the diapir were taken using both manual flight paths and
automated flight paths as two orthogonal flight grids. For the automated data acquisition, we
used Pix4Dcapture. When flying the manual flight paths, we aimed to achieve a similar
photograph overlap as with the automated acquisition.

For the creation of the DOM, DEM and orthorectified models, we used Agisoft Metashape Professional (v.1.6.2). The first step in the process aligns the photographs, generating a sparse point cloud (Fig. 3). The next step was the generation of the dense point cloud. We then generated both the DEM and the mesh from the dense point cloud, which we later textured (Fig. 3). The position match between the UAV-based orthomosaic and satellite imagery is very good, thus we have high confidence in the orientation and position of the DOM.

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191 Structural data extraction

The DEM and orthomosaic data were imported in QGIS (QGIS v. 3.14, 2020), used to extract 192 boundaries of the salt outcrops and map larger inclusions in the salt, lineations and the size 193 and geometries of the valleys and sinkholes. The 3D textured meshes (DOM) together with 194 the dense point cloud data were imported into Virtual Reality Geological Studio (VRGS 195 v.2.52) software (Hodgetts, 2010) with the scope of interpreting them and extracting the 196 orientation of structural features. We measured the orientation of salt foliation, shear zones 197 and fold axial planes. Orientation data were processed in Stereonet (Allmendinger et al., 198 2013; Cardozo & Allmendinger, 2013) and Structural Geology to Post Script (SG2PS; 199 Sasvári & Baharev, 2014). 200

202 Ground-based fieldwork

Field observations provided information on lithology, orientation of bedding (non-salt units) 203 and foliation in salt and on the structure of salt crusts covering much of the outcrop (Fig. 4). 204 Where accessible, dip and azimuth measurement were taken using both a Freiberg geological 205 compass and FieldMove on an iPad. This helped ground-truth the UAV-DOM observations. 206 207 We note here that access to outcropping rock salt which is not covered by salt crust is limited, because access to the steep outcrop faces is dangerous. We collected one unoriented sample 208 209 which looked representative to other outcrops which were visible but not accessible, from the south-eastern area of the diapir (see Fig. 5). Another sample we studied was received from a 210 fellow researcher (Dan Jipa) for microstructural study. 211

212

213 Microstructural analysis

Samples for microstructural analysis were cut in a dry laboratory with a diamond saw cooled
by a small amount of slightly undersaturated salt brine to reduce damage. Gamma-irradiation
was done at a temperature of 100°C to a total dose of about 4 MGy, at a DFG-supported,
purpose-built irradiation facility at the Research Reactor FRM II in Munich, Germany. Thin
sections were polished to a thickness of approximately 1 mm and then chemically polished
and etched using the technique described in Urai et al. (1987).

The thin sections were imaged in plane polarized (ppl) and reflected light using a Zeiss optical microscope. Halite grain and subgrain boundaries were manually traced with a touchpen and tablet and analyzed with Fiji (Schindelin et al. 2012) for subgrain size piezometry (Schleder & Urai 2005). Thereby the grain size was calculated as equivalent circular diameters by only taking halite grains into account. Non-halite inclusions of one hand specimen were peeled onto acrylic foil, scanned and image processed with Fiji (Schindelin et al. 2012). This contributed to an accurate mapping of non-halite inclusions by
the utilization of Fiji image thresholding. For X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis of inclusions,
a hand specimen was dissolved in water, and the insoluble residue was hand-picked into three
particle classes based on colour (black, beige and greenish). Qualitative and quantitative
XRD measurements were then performed on a Bruker D8 equipped with a graphite
monochromator and a scintillation counter. Scans were measured with Cu-kα radiation.

233 **RESULTS**

234 Geomorphology

The extent of salt close to the surface is about 2.7 km by 1.3 km, with karstified halite cut by 235 hypersaline streams (Fig. 5). The maximum elevation difference between the lowest point in 236 the riverbed crossing the salt diapir and the highest point of the diapir is 198.5 m. The highest 237 point (613 m) is located in the east-central part of the salt outcrop. Much of the flat top of the 238 salt is covered (Figs. 5-8) by thin quaternary strata and soil, grass, bushes and trees. Salt is 239 only outcropping in steep exposures. When exposed, the salt is usually white to light-grey 240 and the surrounding stratigraphy is pale yellow-brown. Combining our data with geological 241 maps and other published data, we estimated the area of salt which is covered by thin 242 quaternary strata (dashed red line in Fig. 5). 243

244

245 UAV-based models

Four of the nine high-resolution digital outcrop models provided sufficient outcrop quality to
allow interpretation and analysis of structures; three of these are described in the paper (Fig.
5). The models have been classified as good (green color in Fig. 5), moderate (yellow color in
Fig. 5) or poor quality (orange color in Fig. 5) based on the exposure quality, amount of
debris cover and model generation quality.

251 The models presented expose the foliation and other structures of the salt. Foliation

orientation measurements were possible because the deep gullies in the outcrop faces provide
two apparent dip measurements (Fig. 5). As will be discussed below, foliation in the salt is
generally gently dipping, with some variations between outcrops.

255

256 Digital Outcrop Model 1

This DOM (shown in Fig. 6) is located in the northern part of the Mânzălești salt diapir (Fig. 5). This is the only area in the north where salt layering is visible in DOM. The model is 170 m long and 85 m high and has an east-west orientation (Figs. 5, 6). The exposure and model quality are relatively good, with some areas covered by recrystallized salt crusts and debris (Fig. 6). The salt foliation (n = 30) has an average dip of 23° to the SW (Fig. 6d). Sandstone interlayered with the salt are shown in detail in (Fig. 6c).

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264 Digital Outcrop Model 2

The DOM (shown in Fig. 7) is from the south-western edge of the study area, located along the main road between Mânzălești and Lopătari (Fig. 5). The model is 200 m long and 47 m high and has a WSW–ENE orientation (Figs. 5, 7a, c). The exposure and model quality are relatively good, locally covered by recrystallized salt crusts and debris. Several sinkholes can be identified in the model (Fig. 7a, c), ranging from 2-40 m in width and with depths up to 23 m.

Folds in the salt could not be identified in this outcrop. The salt foliation orientations are the

steepest in this area, 53° to the NE (Fig. 7b, e)), locally cross-cut by white, subparallel, low-

273 dipping bands (17° NW; Fig. 7b) whose origin is discussed below. In the western edge of the

model, near-vertical (82° WSW; Fig. 7a, d, f) rocks of the Tarcău nappe are exposed and

truncated by Quaternary fluvial sediments (Fig. 7d).

277 Digital Outcrop Model 3

The DOM (Fig. 8) is located near the southern edge of the study area, along the main road 278 between Mânzălești and Lopătari (Fig. 5). It is west-east oriented with a length of 300 m and 279 a height of 90 m (Fig. 8). The good exposure quality of the 3-D model enabled the extraction 280 of 172 foliation measurements, with an average dip of 20° to the NW (Fig. 8d). We mapped 281 282 multiple isoclinal folds of the foliation defined by different shades of grey banding (caused by varying amounts and types of inclusions), which are locally slightly anastomosing, 283 284 forming tectonic lenses (Figs. 8a, c). The foliation is locally cross-cut by sub horizontal white bands (8° NE; Figs. 8a, b). 285

286 The inclusion-rich halite is locally exposed in outcrops at the base of the DOM, while in

other parts it is covered by a precipitated layer of fine-grained porous halite that mimics the

288 colour of the underlying salt. The exposed halite contains inclusions in a halite matrix

consisting of cm-size halite porphyroclasts surrounded by finer-grained halite (Figs. 4c, d, 9).

290 The non-halite inclusions have a wide range in size and show no preferred orientation.

291

292 Results of microstructural analysis

Both samples (Fig. 9a, c) are rich in non-halite inclusions (14 wt %, Fig. 9a). Additionally, a 293 sample from the specimen shown in 9a has been gamma irradiated to allow for decoration of 294 halite microstructures (Fig. 9b). Embedded in a halite matrix around the elongate halite 295 porphyroclasts (Fig. 9d).. XRD analysis of three particle classes in the insoluble residue 296 shows beige sandstone, greenschist, and volcanic rock. Inclusions have a power-law 297 distribution of grain sizes (Fig. 9c) and locally have fibrous strain shadows (Fig. 9f). 298 The halite matrix has a characteristic dynamically recrystallized microstructure with grains of 299 about 1.5 mm, which are slightly elongated parallel to the foliation and have irregular, 300

amoeboid shapes. Halite fibres are locally present in boudin necks between fragmented 301 inclusions (Fig. 9f). Gamma irradiation developed a blue colour in part of the halite grains. 302 Some of these show a finely striped blue pattern in-between non-halite inclusions (Fig. 9b, e) 303 indicating solution-precipitation processes. Most halite grains (including the porphyroclasts) 304 are rich in subgrains with an average size of 52 μ m (n=520). Locally, halite grains are 305 subgrain-free and have 120° grain boundaries (Fig. 9g). Using subgrain size piezometry 306 307 (Schleder & Urai, 2005), this corresponds to a relatively high differential stress of about 3.5 MPa. Recrystallized grainsize piezometry (Ter Heege et al., 2005) indicates a differential 308 309 stress of about 4 MPa. High-angle grain boundaries in halite are rich in fluid inclusions and smaller non-halite particles are often present at grain boundaries and triple junctions. 310

311

312 Cross-sectional geometry

313 The cross-sectional geometry (Fig. 10) is constrained by a combination of the surface geology (stratigraphic boundaries, dip/azimuth of the layers, structural features) and 314 subsurface well and seismic data. The maximum distance the well data have been projected is 315 ~1 km. The data show that the diapir is roughly 3,500 m tall and leans to the east, with a 45° 316 dipping western flank and a slightly steeper overhanging eastern flank. 317 Flanking lower Miocene strata to the west, belonging to the Tarcău Nappe, are steeply 318 dipping (82/245) in the proximity of the salt and shallow dipping (18/234) about 200 m west 319 320 of the diapir, with seismic reflections dipping on average 45° to the west, parallel to the underlying top salt (Figs. 2b, 10). Overall, they are part of a highly internally deformed major 321

322 lower Miocene synform.

323 On the eastern flank of the diapir, the contact of the salt with adjacent layers is not visible,

being covered by Quaternary deposits, but regional maps show Subcarpathian units to the

east of the diapir (Fig. 2). About 500 m east of the salt edge, lower Miocene strata are

exposed and dip steeply to the east. They become highly folded and thrusted, with midMiocene deposits in the hinges of small-scale synclines. Underlying seismic reflections
suggest the presence of several thrust imbricates. This stratigraphy is buried to the east
beneath the foreland deposits.

330

331 DISCUSSION

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333 Nature of the Mânzălești salt outcrop

The Mânzălești diapir is the largest rock salt outcrop in Europe, described by many authors. 334 335 However, its structure and origin were not clear, perhaps due to difficulties of access (unstable and dangerous, steep halite faces) and lack of microtectonic investigations. Using 336 our high-resolution UAV-models and microstructural data allows for the first time a detailed 337 structural analysis. In the discussion below, we consider four possible interpretations for the 338 Mânzălești outcrop: (i) original subhorizontal layering of inclusion-rich depositional salt 339 layers, (ii) eroded top of a long-lived passive diapir, (iii) salt glacier emplaced by lateral flow 340 at the surface, and (iv) the sheared top of a decapitated salt structure. 341 The origin of non-halite inclusions in some salt bodies in Romania has a long history of 342 343 debate because they have aspects compatible with either sedimentary or tectonic melanges. Discrete layers of mixed halite and siliciclastics exist in the spectacular domal salt mine 344 exposures in Romania (e.g., Ocnele Mari, Târgu Ocna, Slănic Prahova, Cacica), and in our 345 samples, original halite porphyroclasts contain clastic inclusions. Both observations suggest a 346 depositional origin, but the isoclinal folds together with the subhorizontal, gently 347 anastamosing salt foliation in halite with large porphyroclasts surrounded by small 348 recrystallized grains indicates intense subhorizontal shear overprinting primary layering 349 and/or diapiric foliation within the salt. Thus we reject hypothesis (i): in our interpretation, 350

the inclusions most likely formed as debris flows shed into the depositional evaporite basin 351 during orogenic uplift (similar to what is observed in the Polish and Ukrainian Carpathians; 352 Peryt & Kovalevich, 1997; Ślączka & Kolasa, 1997), with the consequent interbedded halite 353 and non-halite layers subsequently sheared during the superimposed deformation. 354 The fabric in the Mânzălești diapir contrasts strongly with the typical "domal" salt fabric 355 observed in other Romanian diapirs. These are characterized by vertical to steeply-dipping, 356 357 folded layers with larger, more equisized recrystallized grains deformed at lower differential stress. In our samples, microstructures show that halite was deformed by dislocation creep 358 359 and water-assisted dynamic recrystallization under relatively high differential stresses of about 4 MPa, with solution-precipitation creep and fragmentation of the inclusions during 360 deformation (see also Leitner et al., 2011). We interpret the gamma decorated halite stripes to 361 have formed during solution-precipitation creep, between non-halite inclusions. The large 362 porphyroclasts are interpreted as the remnants of the original halite fabric (Schleder & Urai 363 2005, 2007; Závada et al., 2015). Thus, the subhorizontal fabric and high differential stress 364 lead us to reject the interpretation in which the Mânzălesti outcrop is the eroded top of a 365 passive diapir. 366

Salt glaciers are characterized by fine-grained salt deformed at very low differential stress by dominantly solution-precipitation creep (Schleder & Urai, 2007; Desbois et al., 2010), with porphyroclasts rich in subgrains inherited from the rise of salt in the cold diapiric stem. Our microstructural observations (recrystallized grains contain abundant subgrains) and calculated differential stress levels are also incompatible with this, and thus we conclude that the surface outcrop at Mânzălești is not a salt glacier.

After combining the outcrop and microstructural analyses, our preferred explanation is that the Mânzălești exposure represents a low-angle tectonic shear zone. Given the depth of salt proven by wells and the location of the diapir at the boundary between the Tarcău and Subcarpathian nappes (Fig. 10), along with the large displacement of the Tarcău Nappe (REFS), we suggest that the intense shear records decapitation of a large salt structure by the foreland-directed movement of the Tarcău nappe. This happened at a shallow depth and fast strain rate to generate the relatively high differential stress during dominantly dislocation creep and water-assisted dynamic recrystallization with solution-deposition creep, but at sufficient depth to supress dilatancy (500 m is a reasonable estimate; see Urai et al., 2008).

383 Origin of the Mânzălești diapir

384 If the Mânzălești outcrop records tectonic shear during decapitation, the question remains what kind of underlying structure has been modified. Decapitated salt structures may take 385 several forms. First, after a passive diapir is squeezed shut, forming a secondary salt weld, 386 further shortening leads to a thrust emerging from the diapir pedestal and offsetting the weld 387 from its root (Fig. 11a). Second, decapitation may occur slightly higher on the diapir stem 388 during rift-basin inversion, where thrust faults ramping up over basement steps may intersect 389 diapirs located in the footwalls of the basement faults (Fig. 11b). Third, a thrust fault may 390 break out of a salt-cored detachment fold, thereby generating a diapir (again, break-thrust 391 fold, thrusted diapir fold, or injection fold), shearing the salt, and ultimately translating the 392 upper portion completely off its base (Fig. 11c). Fourth and fifth, a shallow nappe may 393 intersect the upper part of a passive diapir (Fig. 11d) or a salt-cored anticline (Fig. 11e). 394 Some of these styles have been produced in analogue models or interpreted in the subsurface 395 (e.g., Callot et al., 2007, 2012; Ferrer, 2012; Parravano et al., 2015; Pichel et al., 2017; Duffy 396 et al., 2018; Snidero et al., 2019; Santolaria et al., 2021). The example in Fig. 11f shows 397 another variation, with one flanking minibasin of a passive diapir elevated and thrust over the 398 other minibasin in a stage of incipient decapitation. 399

The intersection of the Tarcău Nappe front and the Mânzălești diapir strongly suggests that 400 we have one of the scenarios in Fig. 11d or e. Thus, the data shown in Fig. 10 are used to 401 generate two alternative cross sections showing either a deep salt-cored anticline or a deep 402 passive diapir. In Fig. 12a, a truncated syncline of lower Miocene is inferred beneath the 403 Tarcău thrust plane on the western flank of the diapir, and strata concordant to the salt edge 404 are also indicated at the deeper levels of the eastern flank. In contrast, Fig. 12b shows lower 405 406 Miocene strata truncated on both flanks. Although we have no data at Mânzălești to allow us to distinguish between these two options, we favour the salt-cored anticline interpretation 407 408 (Fig. 12a). This structural style, also suggested by previous workers (i.e. Stefănescu et al., 1984; Matenco and Bertotti, 2000; Schleder et al., 2019), is compatible with seismic data and 409 existing boreholes along strike to the north and south. A seismic profile (Fig. 12a, inset; 410 Schleder et al., 2019) shows a salt-cored anticline at the lower Miocene level truncated by a 411 prominent unconformity with more gently dipping upper Miocene strata above, on either side 412 of a thin vertical sliver of salt (constrained by wells). If a thrust fault intersected this 413 geometry beneath the unconformity, the result would be a decapitated salt-cored anticline 414 (Figs. 11e, 12a); if it intersected above the unconformity, it would be a decapitated passive 415 diapir (Figs. 11d, 12b). The existence of lower Miocene rocks preserved on the eastern side 416 of the Mânzălești diapir supports our favored interpretation of a decapitated salt-cored 417 anticline. 418

Taking an average displacement rate on the frontal Tarcău thrust of 2 cm/year (Roure et al., 1993; Schleder et al., 2019) and a shear zone of 100 m thickness, the computed shear strain rate is $5 \times 10^{-12} \text{ s}^{-1}$. If the original shear zone, including portions removed by erosion, was thicker, then the strain rate was lower. Combining this with the independently obtained estimate of the differential stress of 4 MPa, we get an estimate of the rheology of the shear zone in reasonable agreement with the constitutive equation for halite rocks deforming by 425 equal amounts of dislocation creep and solution-precipitation creep (cf. fig. 5.2.5 of Urai et426 al., 2008; ter Heege et al., 2005).

Finally, we interpret the near-horizontal surfaces of white salt, sometimes cross-cutting the salt foliation, as dilatant shear zones. Although we have not been able to sample and analyse them due to inaccessibility, they likely formed during the final stages of deformation at low confining pressures close to the surface, with the colour modified by fluid flow (e.g., Urai et al., 2008; Davison, 2009). This presumably occurred during uplift and erosional unroofing of the diapir during the latest stages of nappe advance.

433

434 CONCLUSIONS

We integrated UAV-based digital outcrop models, outcrop observations, microstructural
analysis and subsurface data to gain new insights into the Mânzălești diapir located in the
Eastern Carpathians of Romania. The results of our study show:

- The extent of the salt at or just beneath the surface is about 2.7 km by 1.3 km wide,
 with about 200 m of relief. In the subsurface, the diapir extends downward for about
 3.5 km, demonstrating a deep-rooted salt body.
- In outcrop, especially in steep faces, the halite is locally exposed. It presents solution
 grooves (rillenkarren), while in other parts it is covered by a precipitated layer of fine grained porous halite that mimics the colour of the underlying salt.

• UAV-based digital outcrop models enabled the measurement of generally low-

- 445 dipping (20-34°) salt foliation, with a higher average in the SW edge of the salt dome
- 446 (53°) . Isoclinal folds and low-dipping shear zones have also been identified.
- The exposed salt is rich in impurities, ranging from micrometer to m-scale fragments
 of various lithologies (sandstones, limestones, green schists, volcanics). These are

449 interpreted as originating as sedimentary layers interbedded with the halite, and later450 disrupted by deformation.

The impurities are hosted in a matrix of halite consisting of cm-size porphyroclasts
surrounded by finer-grained halite.

Microstructures show that halite was deformed by dislocation creep and water assisted dynamic recrystallization under relatively high differential stresses of about 4
 MPa, with solution-precipitation creep and fragmentation of the non-halite inclusions
 during deformation.

The observed fabric and microstructural analysis, combined with subsurface data and the 457 location of the outcrop at the frontal edge of the Tarcău nappe, document a low-angle shear 458 zone that records decapitation of a deep-seated salt structure during advance of the nappe. 459 Although the deep salt structure might have been a passive diapir, we interpret it instead as 460 having originated as a salt-cored anticline based on other observed structures along strike. 461 Foreland-directed movement of the nappe sheared the top of the fold during decapitation. The 462 deformation happened at a shallow depth and fast strain rates, as demonstrated by the 463 microstructural analysis. 464

465

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473 DATA AVAILABILITY

- The three digital outcrop models as well as the overview 3D model have been uploaded toPangaea repository and will soon be available.
- 476

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- 718
- 719 FIGURES



722 Figure 1.

- 723 Regional geological setting of the Romanian Carpathians. a) Topography of the Alpine–
- 724 Dinaride–Carpathian system with solid black polygon indicating the location of (b) (after
- 725 Merten et al., 2010). b) Simplified tectonic map of the Alps, Carpathians, and

Dinarides (after Schmid et al., 2008; Merten et al., 2010). ALCAPA = Alps, Carpathians,
Pannonian unit. Red box is indicating the location of the geological map (Fig. 2a) and red
lines are indicating the locations for the regional cross-sections (Figs. 2b, c). The red dot
indicated the location of the small seismic line insert in figure 12a.









Figure 3.

Figure illustrating the main steps used in creating the digital outcrop models in Agisoft

745 Metashape Professional (see Fig. 7 for more details on this DOM). Note that the photograph

thumbnails in the figure are not the real number of images used to create this model.



Figure 4.

Field photographs. (a, b) Folded gypsum layers on the northern flank of the diapir. (c, d) Salt
exposure characterized by rillenkarren (solution grooves) – note the elongated and euhedral
halite grains and large porphyroclasts. Most of the walls are covered by shale debris and
recrystallised salt crusts. (e) Example of dm-scale exotic block – such cm- to m-scale
clasts/blocks are found all along the valleys crossing the salt and on the steep outcrops, with
the source for these from both the salt and the fluvial deposits on top of the salt diapir being

- roded. (f) Drone close-up photograph of salt illustrating isoclinal folding. Figure locationis
- 757 marked in Figs. 5, 8a.
- 758





Orthomosaic (light shading) overlaid on ESRI satellite image illustrating streams cutting the
diapir (blue lines), the outline of the salt body (red dashed line), salt outcrops (white-lightgrey outcrops), and the locations and exposure quality of the detailed DOM (Figs. 6-8). The

764 models have been classified as good (green), moderate (yellow) or poor (orange) quality based on exposure, amount of debris cover and model-generation quality. Lower-hemisphere 765 stereonet plots show poles to salt foliations and average orientations as great circles. 766



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Figure 6. 769

(a) Sideview of DOM 1, located in the N of the Mânzălești salt diapir (with location of Figs. 770

- 6b, c). (b) Detailed image extracted from the DOM illustrating the salt foliation (marked with 771
- yellow dashed lines). (c) Detailed image extracted from the DOM illustrating salt interlayered 772

with sandstones. (d) Lower-hemisphere stereonet plot showing poles to foliation and average

orientation as a great circle.









(a) Sideview of DOM 2, located in the SW of the Mânzălești salt diapir (with location of
Figs. 7b, c). (b) Detailed image extracted from the DOM illustrating the salt foliation (marked
with yellow dashed lines; Fig. 7e) and the white bands cutting the foliation at a low angle
(dashed red lines, see also Fig. 8a, b). (c) Digital elevation model (topview) illustrating a

large number of sinkholes in the model and the location of Figs. 7b, d. (d) Detailed image

extracted from the model illustrating the almost vertical bedding (dashed yellow lines) of the
lower Miocene stratigraphy flanking the diapir and the discordant (dashed red line) nature of
the Quaternary fluvial deposits and modern flow of salt on top of these. (e) Lowerhemisphere stereonet plot showing poles to salt foliation and average orientation as a great
circle. (f) Lower-hemisphere stereonet plot showing the bedding planes of the near-vertical
lower Miocene strata.

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⁷⁹¹ Figure 8.

⁽a) Sideview of DOM 3, located in the S of the Mânzălești salt diapir (with locations of Figs.
4d, 8b, c). (b) Detailed image extracted from the DOM illustrating the salt foliation (marked
with yellow dashed lines; Fig. 8e) and the white bands cutting the foliation at a low angle
(dashed red lines, see also Fig. 7b). (c) Detailed image extracted from the model illustrating
isoclinal folding and tectonic lenses. (e) Lower-hemisphere stereonet plot showing poles to
foliation (i.e. yellow dashed lines of Figs. 8b, c) and average orientation as a great circle.



- *Figure 9*.

(a) Thin-section photograph showing beige and black non-halite inclusions of variable grain
sizes in a halite matrix with halite porphyroclasts *p* of up to 1 cm in diameter. (b) Micrograph
of gamma-irradiated sample in ppl showing black non-halite inclusions and decorated blue
halite. (c) Halite sample (left) showing distribution of particles (right) that was used for grain-

805 size analysis. (d) Map of traced halite grain boundaries, inclusions, and pores from sample in Fig. 9a showing elongated and euhedral halite grains and large porphyroclast in the center; 806 note inclusion fragments inside the porphyroclast. (e) Micrograph in ppl showing opaque 807 inclusions *i* and blue striped gamma decoration in halite grains, indicated by strippled lines 808 (location in Fig. 9b). (f) Reflected light micrograph showing halite fibres between fragmented 809 non-halite inclusion (location in Fig. 9d). (g) Reflected light micrograph showing subgrains 810 811 inside halite grain and subgrain-free halite grains with 120° grain boundaries and impurities along the boundaries (location in Fig. 9d). Small dark particles and brown halos (f, g) are due 812 813 to etching residues on sample surface.

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816 *Figure 10.*

817 Surface (Murgeanu et al., 1968) and subsurface well (Stoica & Gherasie, 1981; Marica, 2016)
818 and seismic control on the cross-sectional geometry, with inset photos showing surface

and seishine control on the closs sectional geometry, with inset photos showing surface

819 exposures. Thick black lines at the surface are measured bedding attitudes; thin black lines in

- 820 the subsurface are tracings of seismic reflections. Wells are projected onto the line of section
- no more than 1 km. Location of cross section shown in Fig. 2a.





824 Figure 11.

825 Salt-body decapitation. (a-e) Schematic diagrams showing different types of salt decapitation (salt in grey, pairs of dots indicate salt welds): (a) thrust fault emanating from pedestal after 826 formation of vertical weld due to squeezing of diapir; (b) offset of diapir stem and squeezing 827 of upper portion due to thrust fault ramping up from a basement step and intersecting a 828 footwall diapir above pedestal; (c) salt-cored detachment fold modified by thrust fault, 829 thereby becoming a decapitated diapir; (d) thrust nappe intersecting the upper part of a 830 passive diapir; (e) salt-cored anticline decapitated by a thrust nappe. (f) Arbitrary line taken 831 from 3-D depth-migrated seismic data from the Gulf of Mexico (where it is a combined 832 833 divergent and convergent margin) showing salt diapir (blue) in the process of being decapitated during shortening (no vertical exaggeration, WesternGeco high-quality WAZ 834 image). 835 836



839 Figure 12.

Alternative cross-sections through the Mânzălești diapir based on the surface, seismic and
well data shown in Fig. 10: (a) deep salt-cored anticline; (b) deep passive diapir. Sub-salt, the
layers are most likely characterized by a duplex as suggested by Schleder et al. (2019) and
Tămaș et al. (2019). Observations along strike (i.e. seismic insert in Fig 12a; Schleder et al.,
2019) support the interpretation in (a).