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ORIGINAL PAPER

Late Paleozoic deformation and exhumation in the Sierras Pampeanas (Argentina): $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$-feldspar dating constraints

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Abstract Systematic $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data obtained from the Sierras Pampeanas are presented, filling the gap between available high- (>~300 °C) and low-temperature (<~150 °C) thermochronological data. Results show Silurian–Devonian exhumation related to the late stages of the Famatinian/Ocloyic Orogeny for the Sierra de Pocho and the Sierra de Pie de Palo regions, whereas the Sierras de San Luis and the Sierra de Comechingones regions record exhumation during the Carboniferous. Comparison between new and available data points to a Carboniferous tectonic event in the Sierras Pampeanas, which represents a key period to constrain the early evolution of the proto-Andean margin of Gondwana. This event was probably transtensional and played a major role during the evolution of the Paganzo Basin as well as during the emplacement of alkaline magmatism in the retroarc.

Keywords Carboniferous · Paganzo Basin · Andean foreland · Pampean flat-slab segment · Crustal exhumation

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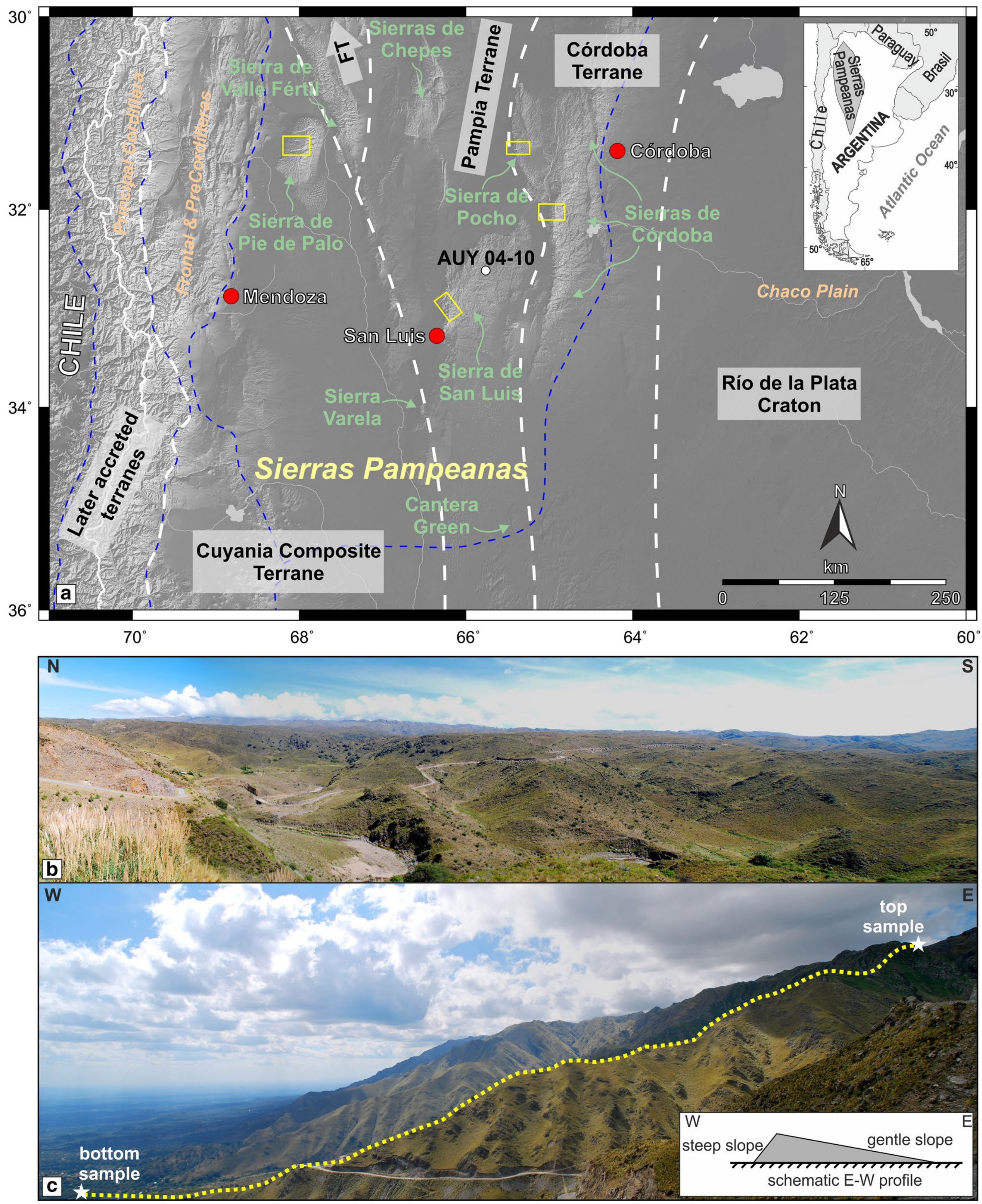
Introduction

Argon diffusion in feldspar has been widely applied to constrain the cooling and exhumation history of magmatic and metamorphic rocks (e.g., Burgess et al. 1992; Meert et al. 2001; Streepey et al. 2002; Cassata et al. 2009). It has been also used to date sub-greenschist events as well as authigenic growth of feldspars (e.g., Spötl et al. 1998; McLaren and Dunlap 2006; Mark et al. 2008; Mortimer et al. 2012). The closure temperature of this geochronological system is, however, a matter of discussion. Instead of having a single closure temperature (Dodson 1973), feldspars present multiple diffusion domains that can be potentially useful to reconstruct more complex cooling histories (Lovera et al. 1989; Burgess et al. 1992; Spötl et al. 1998; Sherlock et al. 2005; Mark et al. 2008; Benowitz et al. 2011, 2012, 2014). Hence, $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar methods constitute an important tool to fill the gap between high- and low-temperature thermochronometers between approximately 300–150 °C (McDougall and Harrison 1999; Streepey et al. 2002; Cassata et al. 2009), providing powerful insights into thermal evolution of complex tectonic settings like the Sierras Pampeanas in Argentina.

The Sierras Pampeanas constitute a morphotectonic unit, which is located in the Andean foreland of the Pampean flat-slab segment between 27°S and 33°S (Fig. 1). It is made up of mostly magmatic and metamorphic rocks of late Proterozoic-Paleozoic ages (e.g.; Caminos 1979; Gordillo and Lencinas 1979; Sims et al. 1998; Casquet et al. 2001; Steenken et al. 2006; Siegesmund et al. 2010). During the late Devonian, the collision of the Chilenia microcontinent to the west of the Sierras Pampeanas gave rise to the Chanic/Achalian Orogeny (e.g., Sims et al. 1998; Steenken et al. 2010; Willner et al. 2011), which was succeeded by subduction along the proto-Andean margin.


30°
32°
34°
36°
70°
68°
66°
64°
62°
60°
Sierras de Chepes
FT
Pampia Terrane
Córdoba Terrane
Sierra de Valle Fértil
Córdoba
Principal Cordillera
Frontal & PreCordilleras
Sierra de Pocho
Sierra de Pie de Palo
Sierras de Córdoba
AUY 04-10
Mendoza
San Luis
CHILE
Chaco Plain
Sierra de San Luis
Sierra Varela
Río de la Plata Craton
Later accreted terranes
Sierras Pampeanas
Cantera Green
Cuyania Composite Terrane
N
km
0
125
250
a
Paraguay
Brasil
Sierras Pampeanas
Chile
ARGENTINA
Atlantic Ocean
50°
30°
40°
50°
65°
b
N
S
c
W
E
top sample
bottom sample
steep slope
gentle slope
schematic E-W profile

◂**Fig. 1** Overview of the study area. **a** SRTM-3 model showing the different morphotectonic provinces (*sandy* and *yellow font*) separated by the *blue dashed line* (after Hilley and Coutand 2010), the different terranes (*FT* Famatinia Terrane) accreted during the different cycles of the Brasiliano Orogeny (*white dashed lines* mark the suture zones; after Vujovich and Ramos 1999; Leal et al. 2003; Rapela et al. 2007; Varela et al. 2011), and the different ranges of the Sierras Pampeans (*greenish font*). Beside the *white point* (AUY 04-10), investigated profiles are marked by the *yellow rectangles*. The *inset* in the *upper right* shows the area of the Sierras Pampeanas on the South American Continent. **b**, **c** The gentle dipping eastern slope and the steep western slope generally characterising the mountain ranges of the Eastern Sierras Pampeanas (e.g. the Sierra de Comechingones), respectively. This is also schematically exhibited in the lower right (modified from Löbens et al. 2011). The *white stars* in (**c**) mark the samples taken along the profiles indicated by the *yellow rectangles* in (**a**)

Nevertheless, the Carboniferous evolution of the Sierras Pampeanas is a matter of ongoing debate. Martino (2003), Siegesmund et al. (2004) and Steenken et al. (2010) argued that the area was characterised by a compressional/transpressional regime until the very early Carboniferous, whereas other authors (Chernicoff and Zappettini 2007; Alasino et al. 2012; Dahlquist et al. 2014) proposed the existence of an extensional/transtensional setting. The latter is further supported by the Carboniferous–Permian sediment record of the Paganzo Basin in the Sierras Pampeanas, which was linked to the evolution of pull-apart basins during dextral transtension (Fernández Seveso and Tankard 1995; Simpson et al. 2001). However, except of the work from Jordan et al. (1989), available data constraining the thermal evolution of the Sierras Pampeanas during this period are scarce.

This contribution presents systematic $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data for this region, which allow filling the gap between available high- and low-temperature thermochronological data (e.g. Jordan et al. 1989; Siegesmund et al. 2010; Steenken et al. 2010; Löbens et al. 2011, 2013a, b; Bense et al. 2013; Enkelmann et al. 2014; Garber et al. 2014). Moreover, these data provide constraints on the differential thermal histories in both the Western and Eastern Sierras Pampeanas, particularly related to the late Paleozoic exhumation and tectonic evolution.

Geological setting

In the late Proterozoic and middle Paleozoic, different allochthonous and parautochthonous terranes were accreted to the southwestern margin of the Río de la Plata Craton during the Pampean, Famatinian, and Achalian orogenies, which in part led to the formation of the Sierras Pampeanas (Ramos 1988; Rapela et al. 1998, 2007; Sims et al. 1998; Steenken et al. 2006, 2010; Willner et al. 2011). These ranges represent tectonic blocks, which are mainly characterised by crystalline basement and crop out in the Andean foreland (González Bonorino 1950; Caminos 1979; Gordillo and Lencinas 1979). Although ductile deformation associated with the early tectonometamorphic evolution of the Sierras Pampeanas is considered to be completed by the late Devonian-early Carboniferous (Fig. 1; Ramos 1988; Simpson et al. 2001; Ramos et al. 2002; Martino 2003; Steenken et al. 2004; Miller and Söllner 2005), exhumation and brittle deformation persisted until the Holocene (e.g. Jordan et al. 1989; Costa and Vita Finzi 1996; Simpson et al. 2001; Wemmer et al. 2011; Löbens et al. 2011, 2013a, b; Richardson et al. 2012; Bense et al. 2013, 2014; Siame et al. 2015).

During the late Paleozoic, calc–alkaline and alkaline magmatism was recorded in the Western and Eastern Sierras Pampeanas, respectively (Dahlquist et al. 2010, 2014, 2015; Alasino et al. 2012). Although the local tectonic setting (compression/extension) of this period of magmatism is still controversial, it was related to the subduction along the proto-Andean margin (Pankhurst and Rapela 1998). Likewise, Carboniferous–Permian sedimentation is recorded in the Paganzo Group, which constitutes the extensional retroarc Paganzo basin (Limarino and Spalletti 2006; Limarino et al. 2006). Subsequent inversion of this basin took place during flat-slab subduction during the late Permian San Rafael Orogeny (Geuna et al. 2010; Kleiman and Japas 2009). The first Mesozoic extensional reactivation of terrane boundaries occurred in the Late Triassic to Early Jurassic generating sedimentation of non-marine sediments in localised depocentres, which are characterised by NNW-trending basins (Criado Roque et al. 1981; Aceñolaza and Toselli 1988; Ramos et al. 2002). Extension during the early Cretaceous is associated with the opening of the southern Atlantic Ocean (Schmidt et al. 1995; Rossello and Mozetic 1999), developing major but narrow rift basins along the margins of the Pampia terrane.

Andean uplift was mostly related to the compression due to the subduction of the aseismic Juan Fernández Ridge that gave rise to Miocene flat-slab subduction (Pilger 1984; Gutscher et al. 2000; Yáñez et al. 2001). Deformation and exhumation of the Sierras Pampeanas during this period was mainly controlled by the orientation of the older late Proterozoic to Paleozoic structures, resulting in a dominance of east-dipping structures, which are morphologically expressed by a distinct asymmetry of the Pampean basement blocks, generally showing a steep dipping western slope and a gentle dipping eastern slope (Fig. 1b, c; González Bonorino 1950; Gordillo and Lencinas 1979; Criado Roque et al. 1981; González Diaz 1981; Jordan and Allmendinger 1986; Introcaso et al. 1987; Costa and Vita Finzi 1996; Ramos et al. 2002; Martino 2003). However, whether flattening of the Nazca Plate subduction angle caused the total uplift and exhumation of the

Table 1 Compilation of ages obtained by $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar dating

Sample name	Long (°) Lat (°)	Elevation (m)	Integrated age (Ma)	Plateau age (Ma)	Error (Ma)	Isochron age (Ma)	Error (Ma)	Age span (Ma)	Error (Ma)
APM 15–08	−65.029333 −32.047000	831	–	315.0	10.0	–	–	–	–
AUY 04–10	−65.759747 −32.598398	1121	327.5	–	1.2	–	–	320.3–331.0	1.1/1.4
APM 34–08	−66.203667 −33.004833	2085	308.2	–	1.1	–	–	302.8–319.4	2.1/2.2
APM 48–08	−66.243500 −32.976333	1269	325.8	–	1.2	–	–	313.0–330.6	1.6/2.0
APM 54–08	−65.296333 −31.375000	1075	–	418.9	1.8	421.6	3.1	–	–
AUY 56–10	−67.929343 −31.311922	3133	420.7	–	1.5	–	–	–	–

Due to the generally homogenous radiogenic content of the plateau release, isochron age determinations were not possible for most samples

Sierras Pampeanas has been a matter of discussion over the last decades (e.g. Jordan et al. 1983, 1989; Coughlin et al. 1998; Kay and Abbruzzi 1996; Ramos et al. 2002; Löbens et al. 2011, 2013a; Bense et al. 2013; Dávila and Carter 2013).

Methodology

Granitoid and gneiss rock samples from different mountain ranges in the Sierras Pampeanas were collected along elevation transects, in order to better evaluate the thermal and inferred exhumation history of these ranges using $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$-dating of feldspars. For this purpose, at least, one sample from the top and the bottom, respectively, is necessary to receive a robust dataset (Fig. 1a, c).

For $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ analysis, samples were crushed, sieved, washed and hand-picked for plagioclase and potassium feldspar mineral phases at the Geochronology laboratory at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (Fig. 1; Table 1). The monitor mineral MMhb-1 (Samson and Alexander 1987) with an age of 513.9 Ma (Lanphere and Dalrymple 2000) was used to monitor neutron flux (and calculate the irradiation parameter, J). The samples and standards were wrapped in aluminium foil and loaded into aluminium cans of 2.5 cm diameter and 6 cm height. The samples were irradiated in position 5c of the uranium enriched research reactor of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, for 20 megawatt-hours.

Upon their return from the reactor, the samples and monitors were loaded into 2-mm-diameter holes in a copper tray that was then loaded in an ultra-high vacuum extraction line. The monitors were fused, and samples heated, using a 6-watt argon-ion laser following the technique described in York et al. (1981), Layer et al. (1987) and Layer (2000). Argon purification was achieved using a liquid nitrogen cold trap and a SAES Zr–Al getter at 400 °C. The samples were analysed in a VG-3600 mass spectrometer at the Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks. The argon isotopes measured were corrected for system blank and mass discrimination, as well as calcium, potassium and chlorine interference reactions following procedures outlined in McDougall and Harrison (1999). System blanks generally were 2×10^{-16} mol ^{40}Ar and 2×10^{-18} mol ^{36}Ar which are 10–50 times smaller than fraction volumes. Mass discrimination was monitored by running both calibrated air shots and a zero-age glass sample. These measurements were made on a weekly to monthly basis to check for changes in mass discrimination.

A bulk furnace-run of sample AUY-56-10 consisting of 4K-feldspar crystals was reloaded in an aluminium packet and into the finger of a glass storage tree. It was then attached to the top of a Modifications Ltd. low-blank furnace connected online to the mass spectrometer. The sample was step-heated after being dropped into the furnace tantalum crucible. The furnace is controlled using a Eurotherm thyristor and controller. Temperature was monitored by means of a thermocouple positioned in a pit at the base of the crucible and a maximum temperature in excess of 1600 °C is achievable. A molybdenum liner was not used to (a) increase accuracy of the diffusion experiment recorded temperature by lessening the distance from the thermocouple to the degassing sample, (b) lessen thermal mass of the unit to decrease heating time and decrease cooling off time and (c) cost considerations.

The furnace was calibrated by both the colour temperature correlation assuming a black body (Davis 1931), by the temperature aluminium foil melts at (660 °C), and collaborated by the breakdown of volume diffusion behaviour in K-feldspar above 1150 °C (Lovera et al. 1991) demonstrated by irregular higher temperature age spectra. Temperature was recorded every 30 s and averaged to mitigate and take into account heat up time, cool off time and any slight over shot of set temperature. Recorded temperature is estimated to have an error of ±5 °C with a limited effect on thermal models based on numerous diffusion experiments on the same sample (Lovera et al. 2002).

Approximately 31 duplicated isothermal step-heating schedules were conducted on the K-spar separates in order to retrieve ^{39}Ar diffusion characteristics, to apply diffusion models, and to calculate model thermal histories (Harrison et al. 1994; Lovera et al. 1993). About three high-temperature step-heats (>~1150) were run to fully degas the furnace before the next analysis and were not input for MDD thermochronology. Twelve-minute blanks were run at room temperature (cold blank), ~588 and ~980 °C. Typical full system cold 12-min furnace blank values were generally 3×10^{-15} mol ^{40}Ar, 1×10^{-18} mol ^{39}Ar, 1×10^{-17} mol ^{38}Ar and 1×10^{-17} mol ^{36}Ar. Blanks at ~588 and ~980 °C were generally the same at 5×10^{-15} mol ^{40}Ar, 3×10^{-18} mol ^{39}Ar, 1×10^{-17} mol ^{38}Ar and 2×10^{-17} mol ^{36}Ar.

A summary of all the ^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar results is given in Table 1, with all ages quoted to the ±1 sigma level and calculated using the constants of Steiger and Jaeger (1977). The integrated age is the age given by the total gas measured and is equivalent to a potassium–argon (K–Ar) age. The spectrum provides a plateau age if three or more consecutive gas fractions represent at least 50 % of the total gas release and are within two standard deviations of each other (mean square-weighted deviation less than ~2.5).

Results and methodical interpretation

Just six out of 14 samples show reliable ages. Either the plagioclase or potassium feldspar-content of the other samples was too less for analyses or the K-content of the separates was limited, resulting in geologically meaningless ages that were thus rejected.

^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar ages are assigned to plagioclase or potassium feldspar mineral phases based on the Ca/K ratio >1 and the Ca/K ratio <1, respectively. The resulting ages of the samples from the Sierra de Pocho and Sierra de Pie de Palo as well as the Sierra de Comechingones and the Sierra de San Luis range between the Silurian-Devonian and the Carboniferous, respectively (Fig. 2; Table 1, supplementary material).

Sample APM 54-08 from the Sierra de Pocho was determined to be of the plagioclase mineral phase based on the Ca/K ratio being >1 for the steps chosen for the plateau age determination and shows Silurian ^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar ages. Since the integrated age (428.8 ± 1.9 Ma), the plateau age (418.9 ± 1.8 Ma) and the isochron age (421.6 ± 3.1 Ma) are comparable, the plateau age of 418.9 ± 1.8 Ma is preferred for this sample due to the higher precision compared to the isochron age.

Sample AUY 56-10 from the Sierra de Pie de Palo was determined to be of the potassium feldspar phase based on having a Ca/K ratio <1 and produced an integrated ^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar age of 420.7 ± 1.5 Ma (Silurian; Fig. 2; Table 1, supplementary material). The integrated age (420.7 ± 1.5 Ma) for unaltered potassium feldspar samples can reflect the complete cooling history of a sample that cools quickly from ~350 to ~150 °C (e.g. Benowitz et al. 2012). A down-stepping age spectra may reflect a more complex thermal history as is the case of this sample which is also reflected in its modelled thermal history (Fig. 3), which was produced by using the MDD software of Lovera et al. (2002). The sample cooled from 434.5 ± 1.6 Ma (maximum age steps used in thermal model) to ~150 °C by ~390 Ma (approx. 4.5 °C/Ma), where the sample sat till closure of the feldspar system (Fig. 3). The last ~5 % of the gas release had an unusual step down-stepping age pattern, which might reflect loss to alteration of continued thermally controlled Ar loss.

Sample APM 15-08 was determined to be of the plagioclase phase based on having a Ca/K ratio >1. ^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar-plagioclase dating of the sample APM 15-08 from the Sierra de Comechingones (Sierras de Córdoba) shows Carboniferous ages. The integrated age (318.7 ± 11.8 Ma) and the plateau age (315.0 ± 10.0 Ma) are within error. The plateau age of 315.0 ± 10.0 Ma is preferred because of the anomalously old ages produced during the high-temperature step-releases. These steps are also associated with a low K, high Ca phase of the mineral reflecting unreliable age dating for these components of the step-heat. An isochron age determination was not possible because of the generally homogenous radiogenic content of the plateau release.

Samples AUY 04-10, APM 34-08, and APM 48-08 were determined to be of the potassium feldspar phase based on a Ca/K ratio <1. The ^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar age determinations of potassium feldspar of the samples from the Sierra de San Luis (AUY 04-10, APM 34-08, and APM 48-08) show a slightly down-stepping age spectra; thus, a maximum/minimum age determination approach for these samples was selected. Additionally, the first step age of sample AUY 04-10 is likely affected by excess argon demonstrated by the high Cl/K ratio (supplementary material). Overall, the samples from the Sierra de San Luis show minimum ($KFAT_{min}$) and maximum ($KFAT_{max}$) ages lying in the Carboniferous. Particularly, the $KFAT_{max}$ and $KFAT_{min}$ ages of AUY 04-10 from the Las Chacras Batholith and of APM 48-08 from the bottom of the investigated transect are similar, ranging between 331.0 ± 1.0 and 330.6 ± 2.0 Ma as well as between 320.3 ± 1.1 and 313.0 ± 1.6 Ma, respectively (Table 1). APM 34-08 (the uppermost sample from the

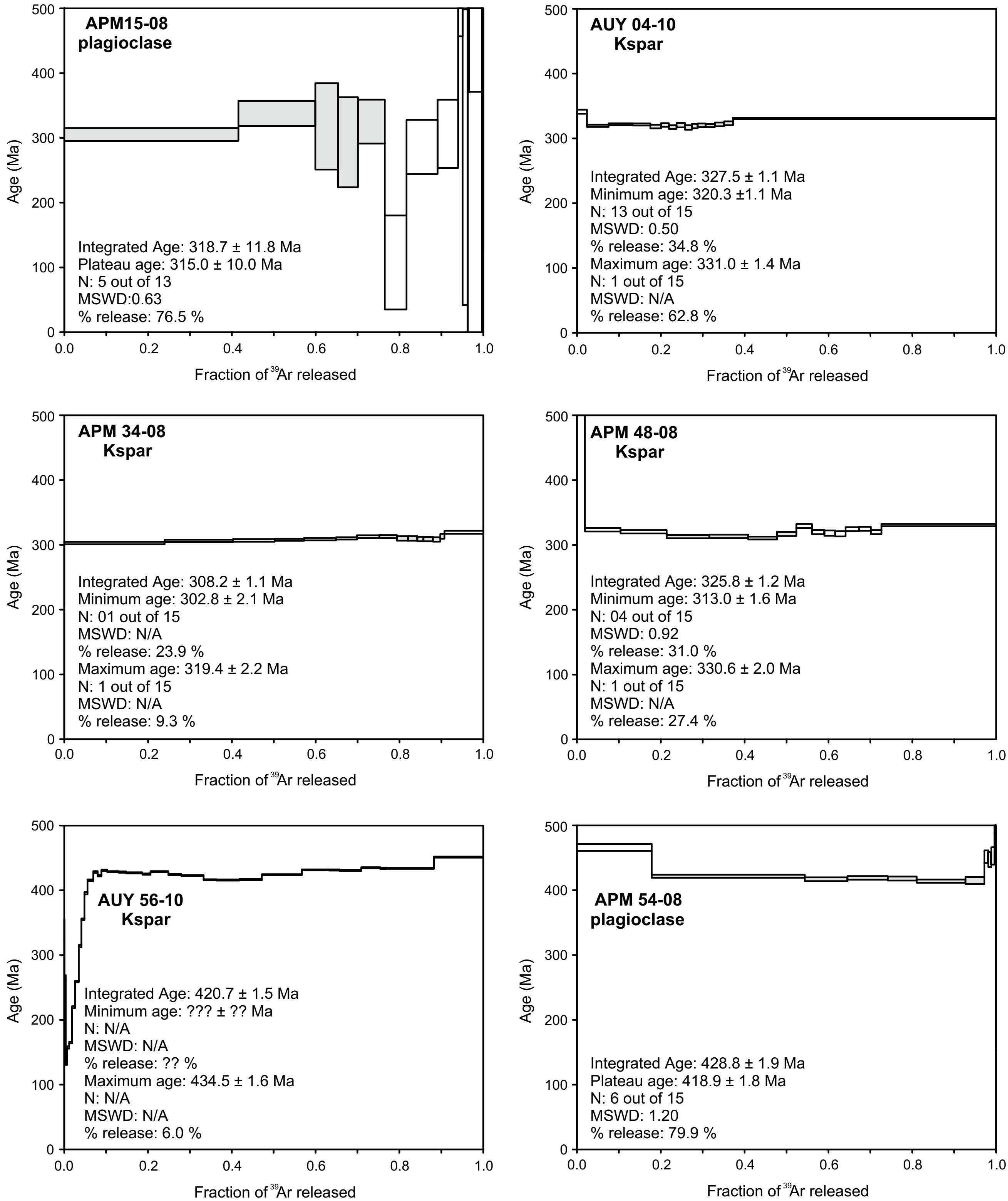


Fig. 2 $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ age spectra of the different samples. Details are mentioned in the text

transect) is characterised by ages between 319.4 ± 2.2 and 302.8 ± 2.1 Ma, thus being younger than the former mentioned samples.

Discussion

Thermal evolution

The obtained age for the Sierra de Pocho (418.9 ± 1.8 Ma) is in good agreement with available higher temperature K–Ar biotite (ca. 433–430 Ma; Steenken et al. 2010) and lower temperature (U–Th)/He zircon data (ca. 308 Ma; Bense et al. 2013). Based on K–Ar muscovite data, Steenken et al. (2010) constrained deformation along the Pachango shear zone in the southern Sierra de Pocho at ca. 420 Ma, which is equivalent to the data presented herein. Consequently, exhumation and cooling below 225 °C (plagioclase $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ results this study) of the Sierra de Pocho seems to be related to the latest stages of the Famatinian deformation during the late Silurian (Fig. 3).

Likewise, new data for the Sierra de Pie de Palo (434.5 ± 1.6 Ma $KFAT_{max}$; ~390 Ma $KFAT_{min}$) are younger than $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ hornblende and muscovite ages (441 ± 16 and 436 ± 4 Ma, respectively) reported by Mulcahy et al. (2011) for the Central Complex in the hanging wall of the Duraznos Shear Zone. On the other hand, $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ muscovite ages between ca. 432–394 Ma were obtained for the Central Complex (Ramos et al. 1998), suggesting differential cooling due to segmentation associated with other shear zones (Garber et al. 2014). Garber et al. (2014) reported both $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ hornblende and muscovite ages of ca. 405–400 Ma near the Bajo Pequeño shear zone, indicating progressive strain localisation along this shear zone and ductile deformation up to ~400 Ma. Likewise, the collision of the Chilenia microcontinent was constrained at ~390 Ma (Willner et al. 2011). Therefore, exhumation of the Sierra de Pie de Palo probably resulted mostly from the docking of the Cuyania terrane to the Gondwana margin during the Ordovician Ocloyic Orogeny as indicated by Ramos et al. (1998), and conditions below ~150 °C were attained almost contemporaneously with the onset of the collision of Chilenia (Fig. 3).

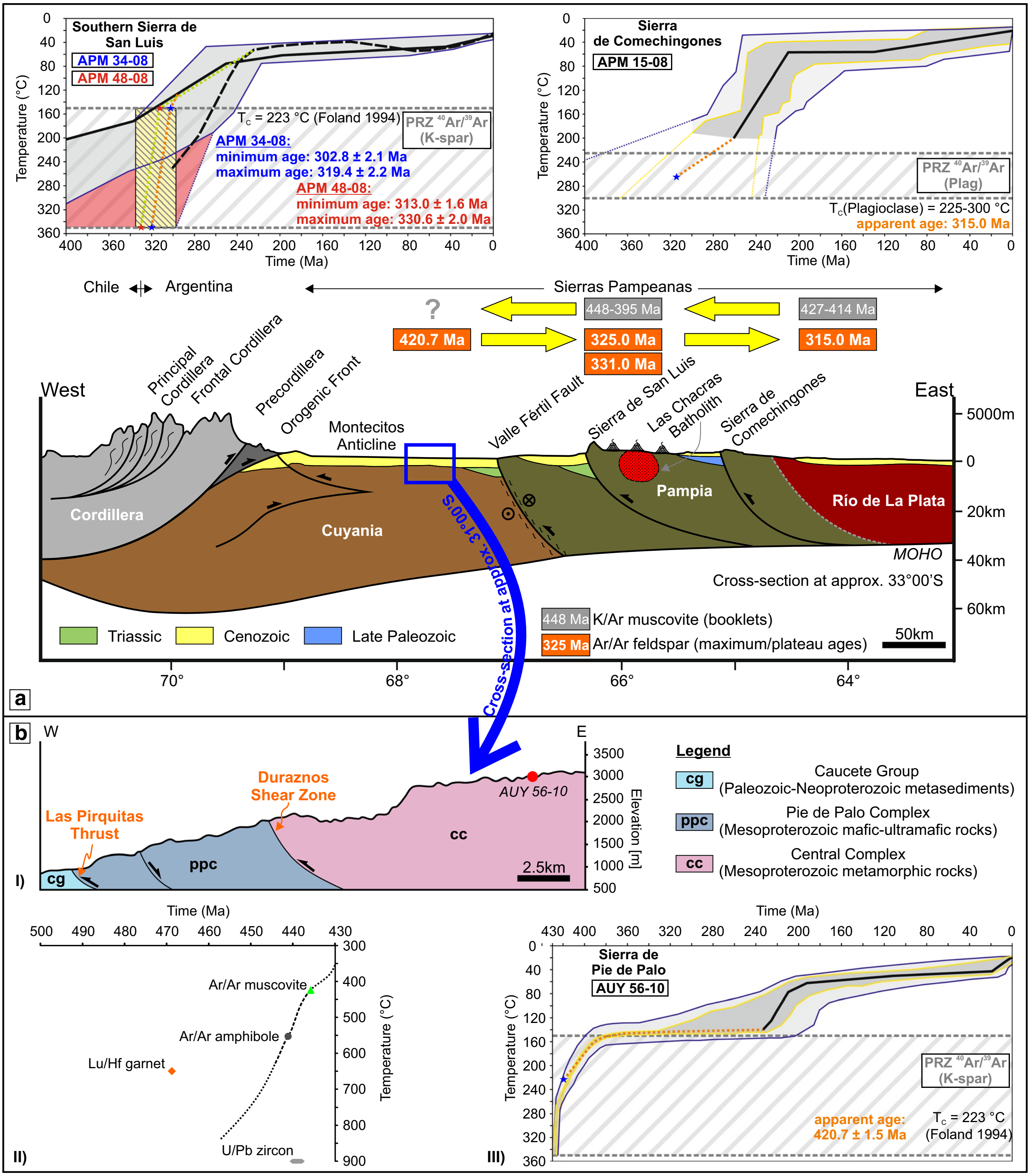
An $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ K-feldspar analysis of a single sample from the Sierras de Córdoba (Jordan et al. 1989) produced similar Carboniferous age results and age spectrum as new $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ K-feldspar data (Fig. 4). Jordan et al. (1989) interpreted their results to reflect slow cooling between the time interval from ~320 to ~260 Ma. This pioneering work was carried out before there was a paradigm shift in the understanding of Ar diffusion domains in K-feldspar (Lovera et al. 1991). Hence, $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ K-feldspar results from Jordan et al. (1989) are reconsidered in the context of the multi-diffusion domain approach and recalculated, providing a plateau age of 319.2 ± 1.7 Ma (62 % of non-discounted ^{39}Ar release). Based on the shape of the age spectrum, it is inferred that this sample cooled rapid at this time through the majority of the closure temperature (Tc) for $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ in K-feldspar providing similar cooling paths such as samples AUY 04-10 (Fig. 4).

Furthermore, the onset of deformation under conditions below brittle–ductile transition conditions is constrained at ~345–335 Ma by $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ biotite ultramylonite data for the Sierra de Comechingones (Whitmeyer 2008). This is further supported by K–Ar fault gouge ages indicating brittle deformation between 340 and 300 Ma (Löbens et al. 2011). Consequently, Carboniferous exhumation of the Sierra de Comechingones was clearly related to active deformation.

In a similar way, all $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data from the Sierra de San Luis show Carboniferous ages (~330–300 Ma), which are significantly younger than most K–Ar muscovite ages obtained elsewhere along this range (Sims et al. 1998; Krol and Simpson 1999; Krol et al. 2000; Siegesmund et al. 2004). Only scarce K–Ar mica ages of the Las Chacras Batholith record late Devonian to Carboniferous ages (>~340 Ma; Siegesmund et al. 2004), whereas zircons from basement units yield late Pennsylvanian (U–Th)/He ages (Bense et al. 2013). Therefore, the Sierra de San Luis underwent cooling below brittle–ductile transition conditions during the upper Carboniferous, which was associated with active deformation based on coeval K–Ar illite fine-fraction ages between ~330 and ~290 Ma (Wemmer et al. 2011).

Implications for the late Paleozoic evolution

New systematic $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data as well as recalculation of $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ K-feldspar data from Jordan et al. (1989) point to a differential cooling and exhumation of the blocks that constitute the Sierras Pampeanas during the late Paleozoic, supporting previous hypothesis of Jordan et al. (1989) indicating that the Sierras Pampeanas was a mountainous area during the deposition of the Paganzo sediments and thermochronological data presented by Löbens et al. (2011, 2013a, b) and Bense et al. (2013, 2014). Particularly, $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data indicate that the Sierra de Pie de Palo and the Sierra de Pocho underwent cooling below 150 °C during the Silurian-Devonian, whereas the Sierra de San Luis and the Sierra de Comechingones achieved similar conditions during the Carboniferous (Fig. 3). Silurian-Devonian exhumation was related to the last stages of the Famatinian/Ocloyic orogenic phase, but the Carboniferous regional tectonic setting of the Sierras Pampeanas demands further discussion (Wemmer et al. 2011; Bense et al. 2014).



The retroarc Paganzo Basin comprises Carboniferous–Permian sedimentary sequences that reflect provenance from the basement of the Sierras Pampeanas (Net and Limarino 2006; Limarino et al. 2013; Enkelmann et al. 2014). Sedimentation began during the Upper Mississippian (331–323 Ma) and basin inversion started at ca. 260 Ma during the San Rafael Orogeny (Geuna et al. 2010; Kleiman and Japas 2009). Additionally, this basin records the Mississippian Río Blanco orogenic phase as well as intra-Carboniferous tectonic discordances

◂**Fig. 3** $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar ages fill the gap between high- and low-temperature thermochronologic ages obtained for the different areas of the Eastern and Western Sierras Pampeanas. **a** schematic cross section through the Sierras Pampeanas along 33°00′ (modified after Ramos et al. 2002). The included K/Ar muscovite ages by Steenken et al. (2010) show a younging from east to west being related to the different accretional cycles of the Brasiliano Orogeny, whereas our $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar ages exhibit an opposite trend, younging towards the east, similar to the trend of low temperature results presented by Löbens et al. (2011, 2013b) and Bense et al. (2014). Additionally, $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar ages have been added to the cooling paths of samples from the Sierra de San Luis and the Sierra de Comechingones (Bense et al. 2014; Löbens et al. 2011), which are shown in the *upper left* and *right*, respectively. The extended paths suggest a distinct cooling in both areas during the Carboniferous. Concerning the cooling history of the Eastern Sierras Pampeanas further details are mentioned in the text. **b** Cross section of the Sierra de Pie de Palo along 31°00′ S [the position along W–E strike within the Sierras Pampeanas is indicated by the *blue rectangle* in (**a**)] showing the different tectonostratigraphic units (after Mulcahy et al. 2011 and Löbens et al. 2013b) and the location of sample AUY 56-10. In part *II* and *III* a general cooling path through the closure temperatures of different high-temperature chronometers for the Central Complex (ages obtained from Mulcahy et al. 2011; closure temperatures obtained from Harrison 1981; Foland 1994; Dahl 1997; Cherniak and Watson 2000; Harrison et al. 2009) as well as the inclusion of the modelled cooling path of the $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar dating into the low-temperature cooling model from Löbens et al. (2013b) are shown. The modelled time–temperature path indicates *i* a distinct cooling during the Late Silurian and *ii* that the $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar chronometer is an appropriate tool to reveal the mid-temperature (between approx. 350 and 150 °C) history of mountain ranges. Concerning the cooling history of the Western Sierras Pampeanas, further details are mentioned in the text

(Bahlburg and Breitkreuz 1991; Limarino and Spalletti 2006; Limarino et al. 2006; Gulbranson et al. 2010). Likewise, Carboniferous rapid exhumation was also reported for the Sierra de Chepes, which are comparable with tectonically active mountain ranges (Enkelmann et al. 2014).

Carboniferous deformation implied not only brittle reactivation of several basement structures but also nucleation of fault systems that cross-cut metamorphic fabrics (Simpson et al. 2001; Whitmeyer 2008; Limarino et al. 2013). Interestingly, Carboniferous polymetallic vein-type ore deposits are ubiquitously recorded in the Sierras Pampeanas (e.g. Mutti et al. 2007; Hongn et al. 2010), in which the Sierra de San Luis and Sierras de Córdoba are dominantly characterised by subvertical N- to NW-striking extensional veins (Brodtkorb et al. 1999; Mutti et al. 2007; Maffini et al. 2012; Maffini 2015). These systems have been typically interpreted as the result of strike-slip along ~N-striking structures with local areas of extension resulting from the presence of releasing bends (Mutti et al. 2007; Hongn et al. 2010). However, ~N-striking structures are sometimes mineralised (Brodtkorb et al. 1999; Mutti et al. 2007), indicating extension to some extent along these structures, thus pointing to a possible transtensional setting (Fossen and Tykoff 1998). A similar kinematic scenario can be inferred for the Paganzo Basin due to the presence of pull-apart depocentres and strike-slip deformation (Fernández Seveso and Tankard 1995; Simpson et al. 2001; Chernicoff and Zappettini 2007), whereas an extensional setting has been proposed for the Carboniferous magmatism (Dahlquist et al. 2010, 2014, 2015; Alasino et al. 2012). Therefore, retroarc sedimentation in the Paganzo Basin, emplacement of magmatism and associated mineralisations were probably controlled by transtension, although more structural and kinematic data are necessary to evaluate this hypothesis.

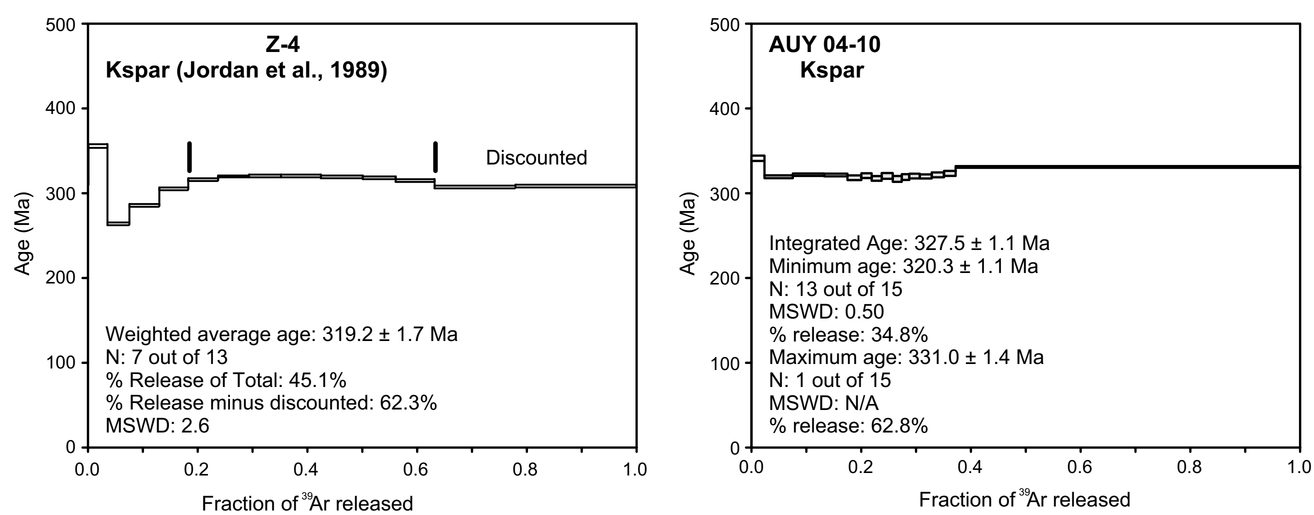


Fig. 4 Comparison of 40Ar/39Ar K-feldspar analysis of samples from the Sierras de Córdoba. On the *left side*, a recalculation of Z-4 from Jordan et al. (1989) is shown and on the *right side* the age spectra of sample AUY 04-10, achieved by applying the multi-diffusion domain approach, presented in this study. The age spectra do not show significant differences; thus, age and cooling history of these samples are similar

Conclusions

Systematic $^{40}Ar/^{39}Ar$ feldspar data reinforce the idea of pre-Neogene exhumation of the Sierras Pampeanas. These results show exhumation related to the Famatinian/Ocloyic Orogeny for the Sierra de Pocho and the Sierra de Pie de Palo, whereas the Sierras de San Luis and the Sierra de Comechingones record exhumation during the Carboniferous.

A review of new and available thermochronological data together with geological, structural and sedimentological evidences points to a distinct Carboniferous tectonic event in the Sierras Pampeanas, which postdates the late Devonian collisional orogeny and predates the Permian San Rafael orogenic phase. This possible transtensional event played a major role during the development and the evolution of the Paganzo Basin as well as during the emplacement of alkaline magmatism in the retroarc. Although data are still required to constrain the temporal and spatial relationships between exhumation, magmatism, sedimentation and deformation, the Carboniferous evolution of the Sierras Pampeanas constitutes a key point to constrain the early evolution of the proto-Andean margin of Gondwana.

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