

Reply to the comment by Andrea Argnani

1. Introduction

Argnani in his comment on Dellong et al., 2020 (Geometry of the deep Calabrian subduction (Central Mediterranean Sea) from wide-angle seismic data and 3-D gravity modeling), proposes an alternate interpretation of the final velocity models presented by Dellong et al., 2018 and Dellong et al., 2020. Additionally, he claims that a part of the literature was not reported properly. While we basically agree with some of the interpretations presented in his comment (activity of the northern Malta Escarpment, presence of subducting crust at the base of the Calabrian crustal block), we fundamentally disagree with him on the presence and the activity of the lithospheric tear fault in the Ionian Sea south of Mt. Etna. We will respond to his points in the order that he raised them.

2. Active tectonics and Tear faults at the Malta Escarpment.

Tectonic activity of the Malta Escarpment (ME)

The activity of the ME has been discussed previously (Gallais et al., 2013; Gutscher et al., 2016, 2017; Dellong et al., 2018). We agree with Argnani that the ME is a currently active structure in its northern portion (North of Siracusa) showing primarily normal faulting (extension to transtension). However, the central and southern part of the ME (south of Siracusa) does not exhibit significant crustal earthquakes nor seismic images of active faulting. This aspect of Argnani's comment seems much more directed towards earlier work (Dellong et al., 2018), which clearly explains why the Alfeo Fault System is preferred as the current-day location of the STEP (Subduction Transform Edge Propagator). Dellong et al., 2018 specify that the Malta escarpment affects the crust but represents probably an inherited structure from the Early Mesozoic and previous studies show that activity is mostly normal (Torelli et al., 1998). The observation of strongly thinned continental crust at the foot of the escarpment cannot be explained without invoking a major phase of rifting and crustal thinning in the Mesozoic. But the tectonic history of the ME is not the main subject of the Dellong et al., 2020 article and it is thus only briefly mentioned in the introduction and accordingly cites earlier work (Argnani and Bonazzi 2005; Dellong et al., 2018). In reply to comment key point one, it is unclear which article Argnani is referring to when he states (lines 27 - 28): "that at least in one case previous literature was not adequately cited", since he does not specifically mention the article that we allegedly cited not adequately.

3. Wide-angle seismic data alternate interpretation

Deep and asymmetrical sedimentary basin

Argnani questions the applicability of the rift basin interpretation, given a lack of expression in the surface morphology (line 76). He also comments that other authors have extended this interpretation to the entire area between the Alfeo Fault and Ionian Fault and to be possibly related to serpentine diapirs (Polonia et al., 2017). To clarify this point, the "rifting" proposed in Dellong et al., 2018 affects only the upper plate, the Peloritan - Calabrian basement block, which structurally represents the continental backstop of the Ionian-Tyrrhenian subduction. We never discussed nor implied it could affect the oceanic basement further south between the Alfeo and Ionian Faults. Indeed, there is abundant evidence of NE-SW to E-W oriented extension in the straits of Messina area: from the pure normal faulting focal mechanism of the Messina 1908 M7.2 earthquake, to the extensional mechanisms of recent moderate magnitude earthquakes, to GPS data indicating up to 1mm/yr extension across the straits of Messina (Palano et al., 2012). And there is the observation of the 10-15 km deep basin of sediments above a thin (continental to transitional) crust discussed in earlier work (Dellong et al., 2018). However, as Argnani correctly points out, the surface morphology is not characteristic of a large-scale continental rift basin. The explanation likely lies in the unique tectonic setting that this particular "rift" at depth, is overlain by 10-15 km of highly deformed, primarily folded, (by compressional to transpressional deformation) accretionary wedge sediments. In a sense as soon as the space (at depth) is made available, it is immediately filled by the overwhelmingly large quantity of actively deforming accretionary wedge sediments, present all

around, and ready to fill the gap. This unusual sedimentary-tectonic history will not produce a classic syn-rift depositional sequence.

Alternate interpretation of the Calabrian Block

The study region exhibits a highly complex 3-D lithospheric structure and as more profiles became available, the original interpretation of the DY-P3 profile evolved. We agree that the lower portion of the crustal block, initially interpreted as Calabrian continental crust along profile DY-P3 in fact represents oceanic crust of the downgoing Ionian Sea slab (Figure 1; Comment key point 2). We note in the text: “*While along DY-P3 no slab was modeled, along the profile DY-P4, the slab is clearly imaged by the data from the land stations [...] The Moho depth along model distance 80–120 km on profile DY-P3 (31 km) corresponds to the depth of the oceanic Moho along DY-P4; however, the backstop-slab interface was not detected along DY-P3 (Figure 9 and Figure S6 in Dellong et al., 2020; electronic supplements)*”. This new interpretation is due to the better data quality of the well-coupled landstations than the seabottom instruments. So we agree with some parts of the interpretation offered in this comment, which is different from Dellong et al., 2018, but less so with Dellong et al., 2020.

Oceanic crustal thickness, Gravity models and Figure 2 of the comment

As to differences in crustal thickness between the oceanic crust imaged along DY-P4 and DY-P3, the top of the oceanic crust along the DY-P3 velocity model, was never shown in Dellong et al., 2018 nor 2020 as it was not directly observed in the DY-P3 OBS data. If the author of the comment is referring to the oceanic crust location presented in the gravity models, it is worth mentioning that this specific “best fit” model was built to fit the free-air gravity anomaly and consequently does not reflect our latest interpretation of the area. The starting point of these models was the DY-P3 velocity model only, without the knowledge of the DY-P4 velocity model. The resulting interpreted oceanic slab depth coming from the gravity models was at around 30 km but with a high uncertainty. Later, the DY-P4 velocity model was produced and it the oceanic slab depth was found around 25 km more precisely. Finally, in Figure 2 of the comment, the author is using an arbitrary iso-velocity line as “top of Ionian slab”. This iso-velocity line does not correspond to any layers from the model, and does not correlate well with the DY-P4 velocity model (20 km depth instead of 25 km) which may explain the differences in crustal thickness observed by the author of the comment.

Differences with the interpretation of DY-P3 proposed by Argnani

The interpretation of the DY-P3 velocity model proposed by the author of the comment disagrees with the one proposed in the Dellong et al., 2020 on two major points: **1/** the interpretation of the green layer of intermediate velocities that was interpreted as the upper-crustal layer of the Calabrian bloc and is interpreted as a sedimentary layer by the author of the comment. And **2/** the Continent-Ocean Boundary (COB) location along the DY-P3 profile and the western edge of the oceanic slab along this same profile.

1/ In both articles (Dellong et al., 2018 and 2020) this hypothesis was investigated, but a satisfactory answer with solid proof could not be achieved that this layer was an upper-crustal layer. We still prefer our final interpretation for at least two main reasons:

- Along the southern profile DY-P1, the intermediate velocity layer (4.5-4.8 km/s) is of sedimentary origin, as demonstrated by the CROP reflection seismic data section, along which a well-stratified layer is imaged in this depth. Unfortunately no such high-resolution MCS data exist for the northern profile DY-P3, however, seismic velocities are substantially higher than along DY-P1 (4.9-5.1 km/s) indicating a non-sedimentary origin of this layer here.
- Second, arrivals on the OBS from this layer differ between arrivals from the overlying layer, indicating more resemblance to the arrivals at the WSW of the profile. The lateral change takes place along a narrow region but is gradual and no abrupt contact was determined.

2/ It is worth noting that many of the regions where the author of the comment proposed a different interpretation from ours are in the deepest portions or at the ends of our velocity model, where ray coverage is sparse or absent and thus poorly constrained by the wide-angle seismic data. Thus, with the Dionysus velocity models presented

in this study the location of the COB along the DY-P1 cannot be precisely determined. With this interpretation it makes sense that the thinned continental crust in the middle of the DY-P3 profile could belong to the ME as discussed in the Dellong et al., 2018 because of the overall structure of the ME is similar between DY-P1 and DY-P3. Regarding Figure 2 of the comment, it remains unclear what Argnani is suggesting with the two curved red lines below the asymmetric basin near the profiles crossing point.

4. “There may be no lithospheric tear fault south of Mount Etna”.

Comment key point 3, Line 109 and the Conclusion lines 129-130

We strongly disagree with this, the crux of Argnani’s comment. We stand by the interpretation given in the body of earlier work (Gallais et al., 2013; Gutscher et al., 2016; 2017; Dellong et al., 2018) that from Siracusa southward the central and southern portions of the ME show no sign of modern activity. Argnani also agrees with this (Argnani and Bonazzi, 2005; Argnani Comment, this issue). On the other hand, the AFS located 50 km eastwards (along profile DY-P1) matches all the expected characteristics of a crustal scale tear-fault, specifically a 50 km long elongated basin with a 500 – 800 m thickness of syn-tectonic Neogene sediments, bounded by transtensional faults as imaged by high-resolution seismic images and morpho-bathymetry of the seafloor (Gutscher et al., 2016; 2017). Moreover, these bounding faults show continuity with large-scale crustal heterogeneities imaged by deep seismic profiling (Cernobori et al., 1996; Nicolich et al., 2000; Polonia et al., 2011; Gallais et al., 2013; Dellong et al., 2018). A recent seismic imaging study, based on a network of industry profiles, cited in the comment (Maesano et al., 2017) (the 2016 reference is a conference abstract and should not be referenced) in fact confirms the perfect correlation between the geomorphological expression of the transtensional structures (elongate basin, linear strike-slip to normal faults) and their deep expression as active faults affecting the basement. Here a quote from their work regarding the identification of the Alfeo Fault system as the STEP fault: “Here we show the lateral continuity of the STEP fault system at depth for over 150 km length, and confirm its importance as a lithospheric structure” (Maesano et al., 2017). We could not agree more. The latest work by this group (Maesano et al., 2020) reinforces the same conclusions: “we confirmed the role of the AFS as a lithospheric tear”, though their report on decoupling between shallow and deep fault segments, due to the effect of the accretionary wedge sediments. We have explained briefly here (in this paragraph) and in greater detail in earlier work (Gallais et al., 2013; Gutscher et al., 2016; 2017; Dellong et al., 2018) why the shallow and deeply-rooted tectonic activity of the Alfeo Fault System qualifies it as the best candidate for the present-day lithospheric tear fault. It is clearly distinct from, and located 30 – 80 km east of the Malta Escarpment over most of its length (except in the Catania – Mt. Etna region, where the two structures intersect).

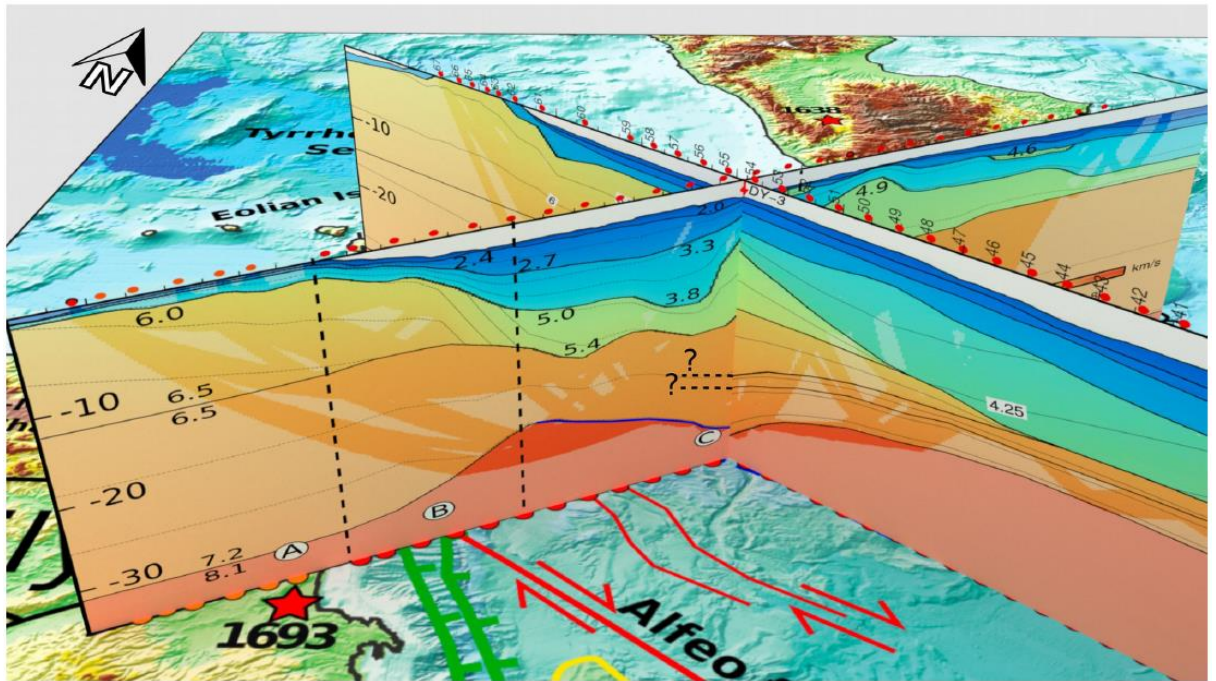


Figure 1 : 3D view of the crossing point between DY-P3 and DY-P4 above the bathymetric map (Figure 1 & 2 of Dellong et al., 2020). The dotted line with question marks are showing a possible extension of the upper and lower crustal oceanic layers along the DY-P3 profile given the depth and location of the Oceanic crust along the DY-P4 profile. (Figure V.13 of Dellong PhD thesis, 2018).

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