

1 Earthquake fingerprint of an incipient subduction of a bathymetric high

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12 13 Key points

14 An unusually energetic earthquake sequence provides information about the
15 subduction dynamics of the Loyalty Ridge at the Vanuatu trench.

16
17 Spatio-temporal patterns of normal faulting earthquakes along the ridge indicate large-scale
18 fracturing in resistance to its subduction.

19
20 Ridge subduction leads to low-coupled and locked segments at the interface where $M_w \geq 8$
21 earthquakes are unlikely to occur.

22 23 Abstract

24 The resistance of bathymetric highs to subduction results in large-scale morphological
25 distortions of the outer-rise, trench, and fore-arc regions. Once subducted, bathymetric highs
26 induce frictional segmentation along the plate interface that may result in increase or decrease
27 of the plate coupling. However, the mechanics of the collision is inferred mostly from
28 geophysical and geological surveys since earthquakes rarely illuminate finer details of the
29 subduction of seafloor relief. A year-long and energetic seismic sequence at the Loyalty Ridge-
30 Vanuatu Trench allowed us to characterize how strain is released along the collision zone.
31 Earthquakes revealed complex fracturing in the outer-rise and fore-arc regions and
32 segmentation of the interface with both limited magnitude events and aftershock productivity.
33 The complex earthquake activity associated to the collision and subduction of the Loyalty
34 Ridge appears to support a frictionally segmented interface where $M_w \geq 8$ megathrust
35 earthquakes are unlikely to nucleate.

36 Plain language summary

37 Subduction zones are regions under the sea where two tectonic plates collide and one plate
38 plunges underneath the other. There, the seafloor of the plunging plate slides and rubs under
39 the overlying plate producing high earthquake activity and large earthquakes called megathrust
40 earthquakes. The seafloor is not everywhere flat, but has kilometer long seamounts in some
41 places that form bathymetric highs. When close to subduction, bathymetric highs resist the

42 plunging motion and plough through the overlying plate. This is a catastrophic process that
43 changes both shape of the subduction and associated seismicity. However, it is not well
44 understood whether subducted bathymetric highs can produce large megathrust earthquakes or
45 not. We studied the earthquake activity along the Loyalty Ridge (Pacific Ocean) where it
46 collides and slides underneath the Vanuatu subduction zone. The analysis of the seismicity
47 along the Loyalty Ridge indicates that the earthquakes are caused by the resistance and bending
48 of the ridge due to the subduction motion. At the plates' contact, less earthquakes occur than
49 expected and they are not as large as in the neighboring subduction segments. In this area, with
50 increased damage induced by the plunging ridge, larger megathrust earthquakes (above $M_w 8$)
51 are unlikely to occur.

52

53 **Introduction**

54 Subduction of bathymetric highs results in structural and frictional variations along the plate
55 boundary that impact how tectonic strain is accumulated and released (Das & Watts, 2009;
56 Wang & Bilek, 2011; Watts et al., 2010). Subducting seamounts and ridges can produce trench
57 indentation, increase the outer rise curvature, and intense fracturing in the overriding plate
58 (Morell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2005; Vannucchi et al., 2013). Once subducted, bathymetric highs
59 modify the interface coupling that can result in increased locking or aseismic creep (Scholz &
60 Small, 1997; Wang & Bilek, 2014). Most of these processes occur over geological time scales
61 and can only be inferred via geomorphological studies and seismic imaging. On rare occasions,
62 however, recorded earthquakes have helped to identify processes related to subduction of
63 bathymetric highs and changes in the frictional properties at the interface (Bell et al., 2014;
64 Morton et al., 2018).

65

66 A simple elastic model of a subducting seamount predicts a local normal stress increase due to
67 the elastic response of the overriding plate, resulting in an asperity that can rupture in large-
68 size earthquakes (Cloos, 1992; Scholz & Small, 1997). However, this model defies
69 explanations of the geomorphological and laboratory observations that indicate more complex
70 fracturing of the forearc region as a consequence of subducting bathymetric highs (Dominguez
71 et al., 1998; Ruh et al., 2016; Wang & Bilek, 2011). Laboratory and numerical experiments
72 and observations of scars on the fore-arc seafloor show that the subducting high induces a
73 complex pattern of both compressional and extensional stresses in the overriding plate
74 (Dominguez et al., 1998; von Huene, 2008; Ruh et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020; Zeumann &

75 Hampel, 2015). This intense deformation, due to basal erosion (Singh et al., 2011), sediment
76 entrainment (Li et al., 2018), and fracturing of the overriding plate (Ruh et al., 2016), should
77 enhance fluid circulation and could lead to changes of the interface frictional properties,
78 allowing for a wider range of interface behaviors from stable creep to strong locking (Bilek et
79 al., 2003; Collot et al., 2017; Mochizuki et al., 2008).

80

81 Global observations highlight the lack of large $M_w \geq 7.5$ megathrust earthquakes at convergent
82 margins with subducting seamounts, ridges and other bathymetric highs (Bassett & Watts,
83 2015; van Rijsingen et al., 2018). Megathrust regions where bathymetric highs subduct have
84 low interface coupling as a consequence of a fractured overriding plate that hinders large elastic
85 strain to accumulate (Geersen et al., 2015; Marcaillou et al., 2016). The low coupled and
86 segmented interface can host intense foreshock seismicity, repeating earthquakes and aseismic
87 slip (Ruiz et al., 2014; Valenzuela-Malebrán et al., 2021), as well as tremor and very-low
88 frequency events (Todd et al., 2018; Yokota et al., 2016), and it can halt megathrust ruptures
89 (Yokota et al., 2016) or nucleate tsunami earthquakes (Bell et al., 2014). At the Japan trench,
90 an 80-year-long series of repeating interplate $M_w \sim 7$ earthquakes re-ruptured the same interface
91 patch downdip of a creeping seamount (Mochizuki et al., 2008), compatible with an increase
92 of compressive strain at the leading edge of the subducting high (Ruh et al., 2016; Sun et al.,
93 2020). Conversely at the Ecuadorian margin, a seismically imaged subducting relief collocates
94 with a high coupled patch with the potential for hosting $M_w 7+$ megathrusts (Collot et al., 2017).
95 These seismological and geodetic observations highlight a complex pattern of seismic and
96 aseismic strain release at those plate margins characterized by subduction of rough seafloor.

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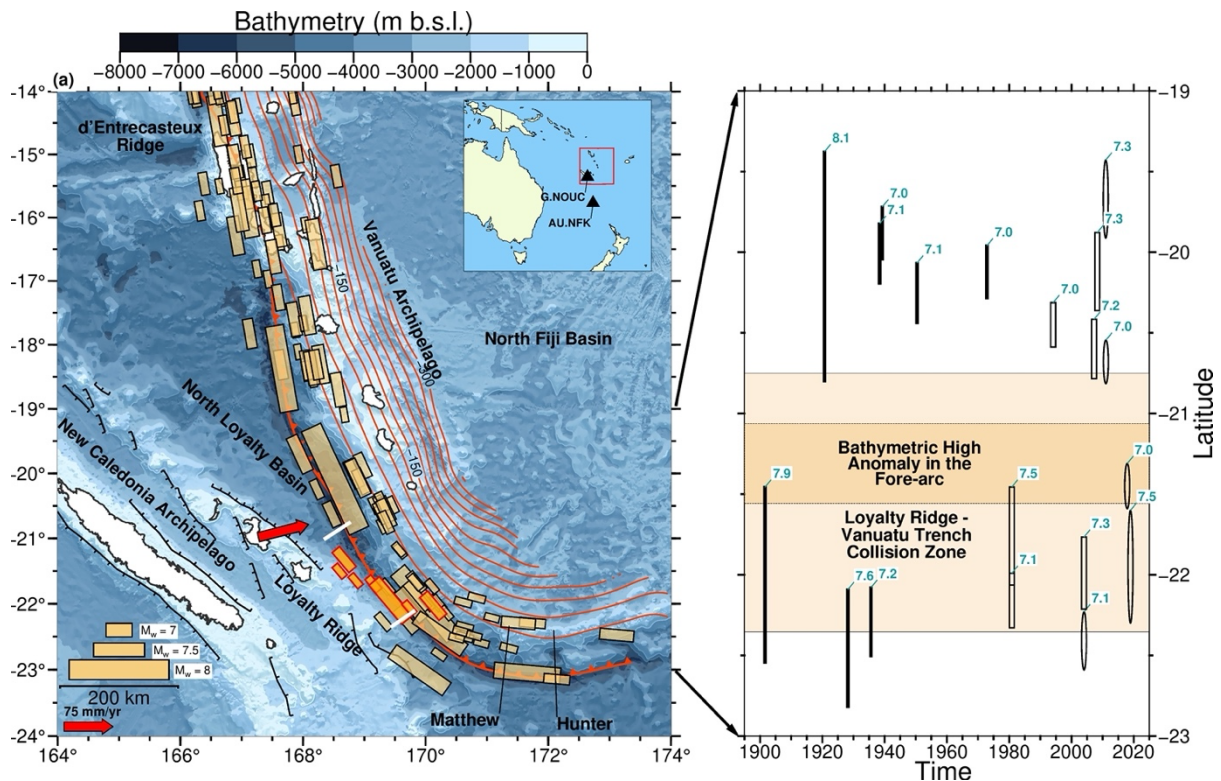
98 We report on an unusually energetic (10 $M_w 6.5-7.5$) and complex seismic sequence along the
99 collision zone of the Loyalty Ridge (LR) at the Vanuatu Trench (VT) subduction zone that
100 occurred in 2017-2019 (Figs. 1 and 2). The intricate development of large normal faulting
101 seismicity along the outer rise is compatible with fault-assisted subduction of the LR. The
102 earthquakes at the subduction interface suggest a prominent frictional segmentation caused by
103 the LR subduction.

104

105 **Geological background and past seismicity**

106 The southern VT marks the SW-NE subduction of the Australian plate underneath the North
107 Fiji Basin (Louat & Pelletier, 1989) at a convergence rate of ~ 120 mm/yr in the ENE direction

108 along the Vanuatu Archipelago (Fig. 1) (Calmant et al., 2003). The trench-perpendicular
 109 convergence slows down to ~ 40 mm/yr and rotates to a N-S direction at the southern end of
 110 the subduction below Matthew and Hunter Islands (Calmant et al., 2003) (Fig. 1a). The LR is
 111 a large, 25 km thick and 50 Myr old volcanic arc lying on top of a continental basement
 112 (Maurizot et al., 2020) trending N120°E and consists of subparallel horst-and-graben structures
 113 bounded by large and steep normal faults (Bogdanov et al., 2011; Lafoy et al., 1996).
 114



115
 116 **Figure 1. Map of southern Vanuatu subduction and seismicity. a)** Rectangles are earthquakes (1900-2021,
 117 $M_w \geq 6.5$ and < 100 km depth) (ANSS catalog, 2016) whose sides scales with rupture lengths and widths
 118 (Thingbaijam et al., 2017). Thicker-outlined rectangles highlight earthquakes of this study (Oct.2017–Feb.2019).
 119 Lines are trench and Slab2.0 contours (30km) (Hayes, 2018) and major fault traces (Bogdanov et al., 2011; Lafoy
 120 et al., 1996). Red vector indicates velocity of Australian plate for fixed Pacific plate (DeMets et al., 2010). The
 121 bathymetry is SRTM30plus (Becker et al., 2009). Two white segments mark the LR-VT (Monzier et al.,
 122 1990). Inset shows the study area (box) and the two seismic stations used in waveform similarity. **b)** Latitude
 123 [23S-19S] vs Time for $M_w \geq 7$ earthquakes. Vertical extensions of symbols as in panel a). Vertical bars are
 124 earthquakes before 1976, rectangles (thrust) and ellipses (normal) are earthquakes after 1976, and text labels are
 125 M_w . Large shaded area indicates latitude of LR-VT-CZ (white segments in panel a)). Small shaded area marks the
 126 extension of the residual bathymetric high (Bassett & Watts, 2015) (see also Fig. S1d-f). All symbols are projected
 127 onto latitude with an average trench strike 315°.

128
 129 The increase of the outer rise curvature measured along the Loyalty Archipelago indicates that
 130 the north-eastward LR-VT collision (Fig. 1 and S1) started 1-2 Myr B.P. (Dubois et al., 1974)
 131 and led to the subduction of the ridge ~ 0.3 -0.5 Myr B.P. (Lafoy et al., 1996). Bathymetric
 132 profiles confirm the ridge subduction by a ~ 1 km topographic resurgence along the trench and

133 steepening of the LR slope near the trench (Figs. S1 and Fig. 2d). To date, the LR has tunneled
134 obliquely downdip the interface for ~15-45 km (slab dip 10°-20°, plate velocity 50-100 mm/yr
135 for 0.3-0.5 Myr). Analysis of residual bathymetric data along the VT evidences a topographic
136 high in the northern part of the forearc region of the LR-VT collision zone (hereafter LR-VT-
137 CZ) (Fig. 1b and Fig. S1d) (Bassett & Watts 2015). This bathymetric high extends ~50 km
138 trench-perpendicular and ~75 km trench-parallel (Fig. S1e,f) and overlaps with a seismicity
139 gap in the northern segment of the LR-VT-CZ (Figs. 1a,b and S1d) that we discuss later. The
140 ~50 km trench-perpendicular extension of the flexural uplift (Fig. S1d) matches well with our
141 kinematic estimation of the LR downdip penetration (~15-45 km). Therefore, the forearc high
142 anomaly is likely the indication of a pronounced penetration of the LR in the north while only
143 incipient in the south of LR-VT-CZ (Fig. S1d,e).

144

145 Seismicity recorded since 1900 around the LR-VT-CZ exhibits intense activity that includes
146 two megathrust earthquakes; a M_w 7.9 earthquake in 1901 in the south of the LR-VT-CZ, and
147 a M_w 8.1 in 1920 located at the southern end of the North Loyalty Basin (Ioualalen et al., 2017;
148 Power et al., 2012) (Figs. 1 and S2). In addition, five $M_w \geq 7$ earthquakes repeatedly broke the
149 south of the LR-VT-CZ (Fig. 1), with a doublet of M_w 7.1 and 7.5 occurred 4 hours apart in
150 1980 (Dziewonski et al., 1981; Ekström et al., 2012) (Fig. 1b). Conversely, the northernmost
151 part of the collision zone has shown only moderate seismicity ($M_w < 7$), exhibiting a notable
152 ~100 km gap of $M_w \geq 7$ earthquakes in a segment that did not break in the two largest megathrust
153 earthquakes in 1901 and 1920 (Fig. 1 and S2). Other noticeable events include a M_w 7.7 normal
154 faulting earthquake in 1995 along the LR but south of the LR-VT-CZ (Fig. 1a), and a M_w 7.1
155 normal earthquake in 2004 at the southern end of the of LR-VT-CZ (Figs. 1 and S2). Outside
156 the LR-VT-CZ, the largest megathrust ($M_w \geq 7.7$) earthquakes struck in regions characterized
157 by smooth seafloor (van Rijsingen et al., 2018), i.e., south of Matthew and Hunter Islands, in
158 the North Loyalty Basin and north of the d'Entrecasteux Ridge subduction. (Fig. 1a and S2).

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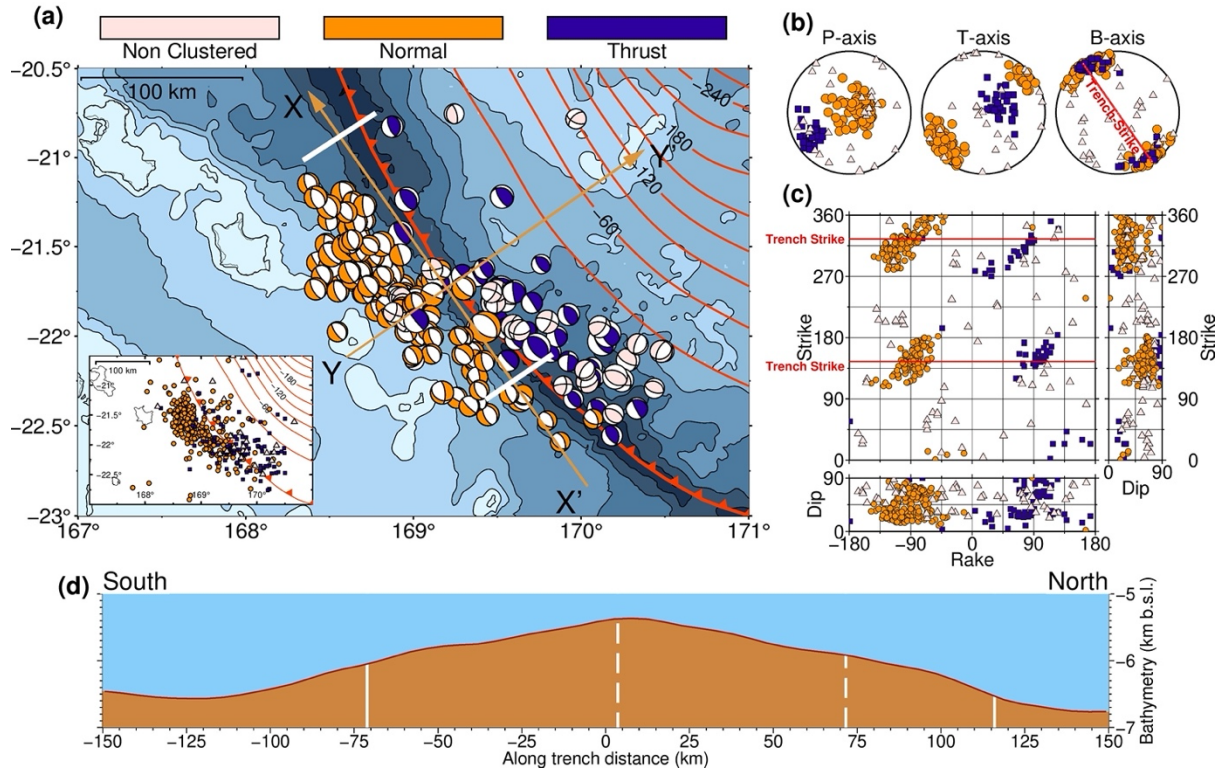
162 **The 2017-2019 seismicity in the LR-VT-CZ**

163

164 We use seismic data from two global earthquake catalogs. A total of 777 were retrieved from
165 the ANSS catalog (USGS Earthquake Hazards Program, 2017) and 192 from the GEOFON
166 Data Center (1993), both having complementary events. The seismicity occurred within a
167 roughly 310 km x 330 km rectangular area (168°-171°E, 20°-23°S) between 31 October 2017

168 and 28 February 2019. We performed a full moment tensor inversion with a pure double couple
 169 constraint (Cesca et al., 2010) and obtained 177 stable focal mechanisms (FMs) with $M_w=4.5-$
 170 7.5 (Fig. 2) that we then classified according to the similarity of the FMs (Cesca, 2020) (see
 171 Supplementary material).

172



173

174 **Figure 2. Map of the Oct.2017 – Feb.2019 seismicity along the LR-VT. a)** Beach ball focal mechanisms (this
 175 study) with size scaling with magnitude and colors for clustered families. Trench line, slab contours, bathymetry,
 176 and LR-VT-CZ are as in Fig.1. The cartesian axes X'X (-150,150)km and YY' (-75,150)km are centered at
 177 (169.198°E,21.732°S). Inset map shows normal (circles), thrust (squares) and non-clustered (triangles)
 178 earthquakes from waveform similarity. **b)** Stereographic plots of the P-, T- and B-axes of the 177 FMs shown in
 179 a), the red-line is the trench strike direction. **c)** Strike, rake and dip for both focal planes of the 177 FMs in main
 180 panel a), and red-lines are trench strike directions. **d)** Bathymetry profile (in km b.s.l. in the X'X-YY' Cartesian
 181 system in panel a)) of a 5km swath centered along the curved trench line and low-pass filtered at 100 km (Savitzky-
 182 Golay moving average). Vertical solid and dashed lines delineate LR-VT-CZ and fore-arc bathymetric high
 183 anomaly (Bassett & Watts, 2015), respectively (see Fig.1b and S1d-f).

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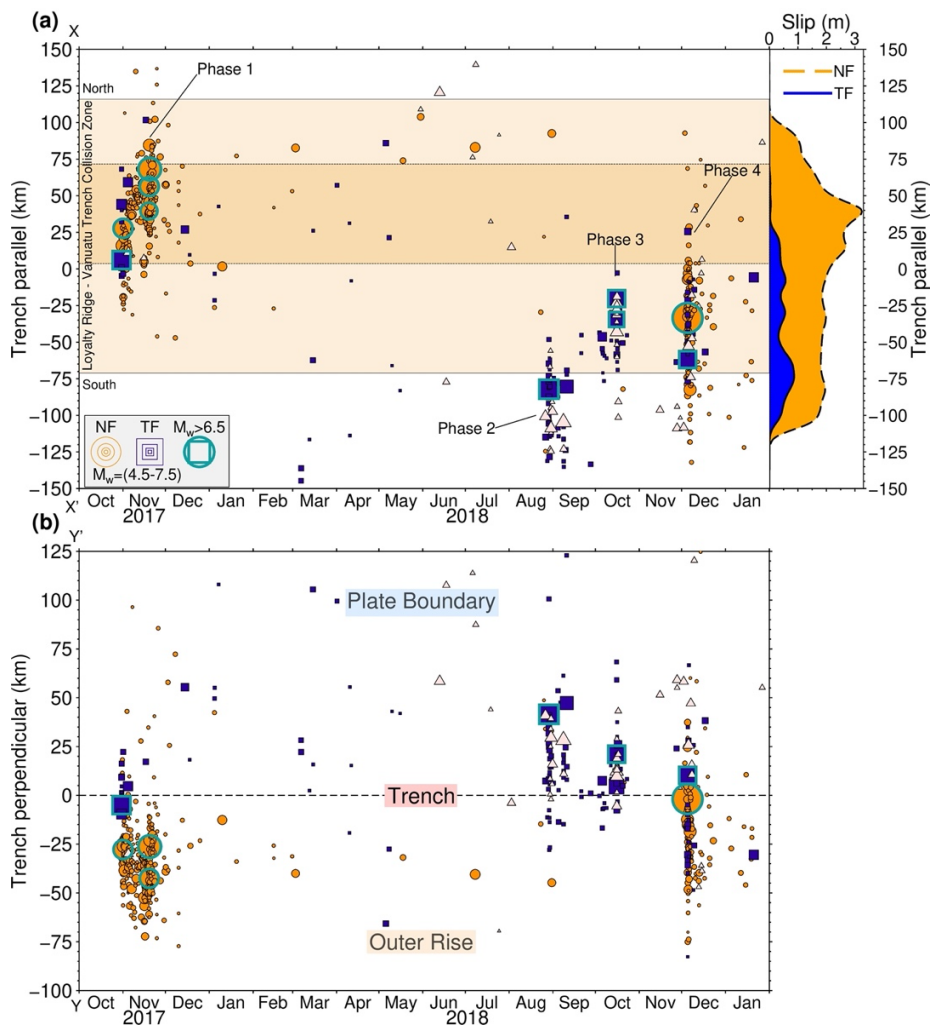
185 Three main families of events were identified: a cluster of 114 normal faulting earthquakes,
 186 one with 34 thrust mechanisms, while the remaining non-clustered 29 have both large strike
 187 and rake variability (Figs. 2a-c and S3). To extend the source analysis to smaller events, we
 188 pair-wise cross-correlated the waveform of each of the 177 FMs to the remaining earthquakes
 189 in both the ANSS and GEOFON catalogs (Fig. S4) using recordings at two nearby stations
 190 (Fig. 1a). This procedure allowed to further categorize 441 events (cross-correlation>0.9, Fig.
 191 S4) to one of the three previously identified families of events (Fig. 2a). We also attempted to

192 relocate the earthquakes using a relocation algorithm (Nooshiri et al., 2017) and the LLNL-
193 G3Dv3 3D velocity model (Simmons et al., 2012), but without achieving a satisfactory
194 improvement on the earthquake hypocenters (see Supplement Material and Figs. S6).
195 Therefore, for consistency, we opted to use the ANSS catalog epicenters that have horizontal
196 errors of 2-25 km with a median of 7 km. The earthquake depths (5-45 km) in the catalog are,
197 however, poorly constrained and so are the depths of our relocated events (depths 0-50 km)
198 (Fig. S5). The determined FM centroid depths, also poorly resolved, indicate that the
199 earthquakes were systematically shallow at depths of 0-25 km (Fig. S7).

200
201 The P-, T- and B-axis distribution indicate seismicity controlled by compression at the
202 subduction interface (thrust faulting) and by extension in the outer rise (normal faulting) (Fig.
203 2b). In Fig. 2c, the thrust FMs are within $\pm 20^\circ$ of the average trench strike ($N145^\circ \pm 10^\circ E$) and
204 the strikes of the normal-faulting FMs, while more variable, match the orientation of mapped
205 faults sub-parallel to the ridge axis in the LR-VT-CZ (Fig. 1) (Bogdanov et al., 2011; Monzier
206 et al., 1990). Focal planes of reverse FMs that are eastward and shallowly dipping ($\sim 10^\circ$ - 30°)
207 are compatible with activity at the slab interface (Fig. 2c). Steep planes (dip $\sim 50^\circ$ - 85°) of the
208 normal-faulting FMs, both westward and eastward dipping, are in accordance with the steeply
209 dipping faults mapped across the LR, similar to other outer rise regions (Craig et al., 2014)
210 (Fig. 2c). The smaller and non-categorized events indicate a range of other fault orientations at
211 the plate boundary, a complexity that indicates complex fracturing in the overriding plate (Fig.
212 2a and 3).

213
214 From October 2017 and until February 2019 the seismicity in the LR-VT region evolved in
215 four distinct temporal phases (Figs. 3 and 4a-d). Phase 1 started with a $M_w 6.8$ tsunamigenic
216 thrust earthquake on the 31 October 2017 (Figs. 3 and 4a) whose location and shallow focal
217 plane (dip= 25°) are compatible with a rupture at the interface (slab dip= 10° - 20°) (Fig. 2),
218 although we cannot completely exclude that the earthquake occurred on the steep thrust faults
219 in the compressional accretionary trench outer-wall (Monzier et al., 1990). This thrust event
220 was followed by a month-long swarm of normal-faulting earthquakes (10 events with $M_w > 6$)
221 illuminating $\sim 100 \times 80$ km² area of the LR (Fig. 3). Within the first 24 hours, three large normal
222 events ($M_w > 6$) occurred with the largest $M_w 6.7$ triggering another small tsunami (Roger et al.,
223 2019) (Figs. 3 and 4a). The seismicity then gradually expanded northward, where on 19
224 November a $M_w 7$ earthquake struck a few hours after two $M_w 6.3$ and 6.7 events (Figs. 3 and

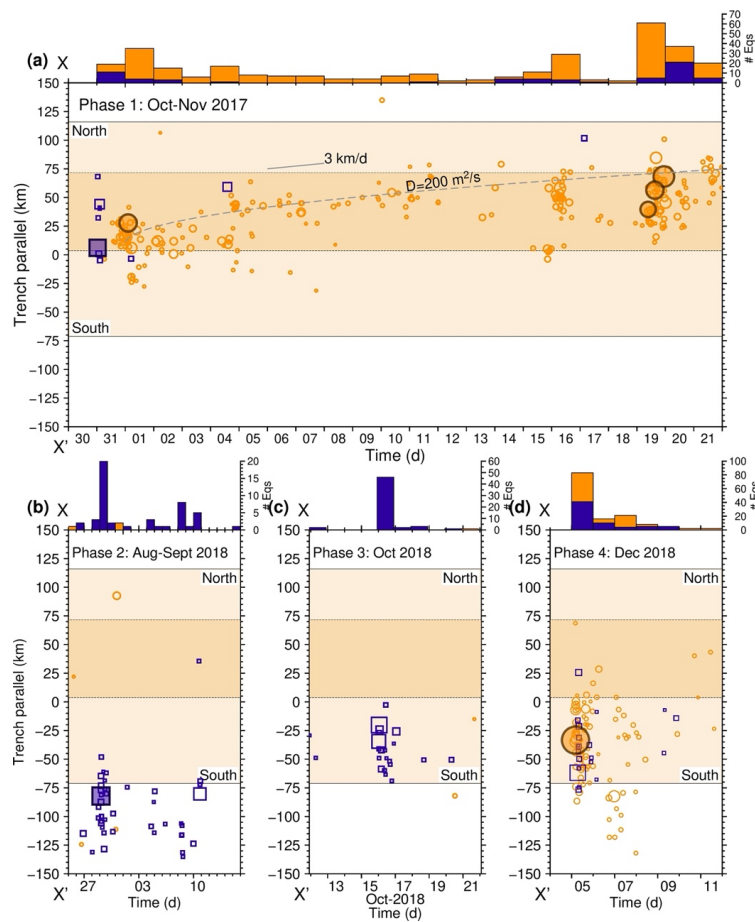
225 4a). Almost no thrust earthquakes occurred on the subduction interface after the first M_w 6.8
 226 thrust event at the beginning of Phase 1 (Figs. 3 and 4a).
 227



228
 229 **Figure 3. Earthquake epicenters vs time of occurrence along and across the LR-VT region. (a)** Trench-
 230 parallel event locations vs time with circles (normal fault), squares (thrust fault) and triangles (non-clustered)
 231 color-coded as in Fig. 2. Symbol sizes scale with magnitude (see legend). Thicker outlined symbols are events of
 232 $M_w > 6.5$ discussed in the text. Large and small shaded areas as in Fig. 1b. Cumulative seismic slip is in the right-
 233 hand panel (see Supplementary Material). **(b)** Same as panel a) for trench perpendicular locations vs time with
 234 the outer rise ($y < 0$) and plate boundary ($y > 0$), and trench ($y = 0$) regions indicated. Here earthquake y -coordinates
 235 are corrected for the trench curvature with respect to axis YY' in Fig. 2a.
 236

237 After a relatively quiet 9-month period, Phase 2 (Fig. 4b) started on 29 August 2018 with a
 238 large tsunamigenic M_w 6.9 thrust event that occurred 100 km south of the earthquake at the start
 239 of Phase 1 and was followed by aftershocks until mid-September (Figs. 3 and 4b). About a
 240 month later, in phase 3 (Fig. 4c) the activity jumped ~ 50 km north where on 16 October, a
 241 M_w 6.5 and 6.7 thrust doublet occurred one hour apart (Figs. 3 and 4c) followed by a short-
 242 lasting aftershock activity (Fig. 3). Phase 4 (Fig. 4d) started on 5 December with a large M_w 7.5
 243 normal-faulting earthquake, anticipated by 3.5 minutes by an identical M_w 6 foreshock

244 (undetected by global agency), and followed two hours later by a M_w 6.9 thrust aftershock at
 245 the subduction interface (Figs. 3 and 4d). The M_w 7.5 generated a large tsunami and caused
 246 aftershocks in the entire LR-VT outer rise segment as well as along the slab interface (Fig. 3a).
 247 The cumulative average slip (Fig. 3a) indicates normal faulting occurred along a \sim 200 km long
 248 section of the LR but a lack of reverse slip in the northern segment of the LR-VT-CZ (see Fig.
 249 2a and Supplementary Material).



250
 251 **Figure 4. Earthquake locations along trench vs time of occurrence for normal- and thrust-faulting events.**
 252 Panels (a)-(d) are the four activity phases discussed in the text and highlighted in Fig. 3a. Symbols and color-code
 253 are as in Fig. 3. Thicker-outlined symbols are tsunamigenic earthquakes. Number of earthquakes per day are
 254 indicated in the above histograms. In panel (a), the thin dashed line is pore-pressure diffusion fit and the solid line
 255 indicates migration velocity. Large and small shaded areas as in Fig. 1b.

256
 257
 258

259 Seismicity unveils mechanisms of the ridge subduction

260 The uniform normal-fault slip release along the LR (phases 1 and 4) suggest frictional
 261 variability of the ruptured faults that developed through a migrating swarm-like sequence in
 262 the north and a single M_w 7.5 in the south (Fig. 4a). In both segments, the two largest M_w 7+
 263 likely ruptured the whole 25 km of crustal thickness of LR (Maurizot et al., 2020). In addition,
 264 the overlap of ruptures along the trench (Fig. 4) and their extent across the \sim 80 km wide LR

265 (Fig. 3b) indicate the activation of the whole outer rise fault system. The complex source time
266 functions of largest normal earthquakes (Vallée et al., 2011) (Fig. S8a) and the swarm-like
267 characteristic of seismicity supports frictional variability of the LR normal fault system. The
268 compositional heterogeneities of the ridge crust (Maurizot et al., 2020) and the asymmetric
269 bending deformation induced by the oblique collision can probably explain the differences in
270 the fault slip release via earthquake swarm in the north and a single M_w 7.5 in the south (Fig. 3
271 and 4). Moreover, the locations of two $M_w > 7$ earthquakes close to the trench (Fig. 3b) suggest
272 that the largest amount of slip focused on ridge-bounding faults (Lafay et al., 1996). This can
273 likely be to accommodate the incipient subduction of the LR via normal faulting as similarly
274 was suggested from geomorphological investigation of the incipient subduction of the Daiichi-
275 Kashima seamount in Japan (Lallemant et al., 1989).

276

277 Reverse slip at the subduction interface unclamps the normal faults in the outer rise promoting
278 seismicity (Sladen & Trevisan, 2018). Similarly, normal ruptures in the outer rise transfer
279 positive Coulomb Failure Stress changes (Δ CFS) on the plate interface (Ogata & Toda, 2010).
280 We verified the mutual positive Δ CFS transfer of a thrust event on the interface onto a normal
281 fault in the outer rise and vice versa (Fig. S9). The static stress transfer can thus explain the
282 mutual triggering between thrust and normal faulting activity and the trench parallel evolution
283 of the seismicity. In particular, for phase 1, the km/day expansion of seismicity cannot be
284 explained with a pore-pressure diffusion model, because the inferred permeability (diffusivity
285 ~ 200 m²/s, see Fig. 4a) would be unrealistically high (Talwani et al., 2007). The expansion of
286 the seismicity front along the LR (Fig. 3a and b) seems instead to indicate a gradual and fast
287 flexural fracturing of the LR, driven by incremental increase of Δ CFS beyond the edges of the
288 earthquake ruptures. The large accrued flexural stresses (Bogdanov et al., 2011), low friction
289 coefficient (Craig et al., 2014), and abundance of crustal fluids (Ranero et al., 2003) of the
290 outer rise faults might have facilitated this propagation mechanism.

291

292 At the plate boundary, the seismicity shows lower activity and uneven slip distribution (Fig.
293 3d). The fit of Omori-Utsu law for large thrust and normal events either fails to and/or
294 overpredicts the observed low aftershock rate (Fig. S10). The extremely low number of
295 aftershocks of the first M_w 6.8 thrust is remarkable (Fig. 4 and S10a) and locates in the
296 seismicity gap along the interface (Fig. 1), although the synchronous normal earthquake swarm
297 activity continuously transferred positive Δ CFS back onto the interface (Fig. S9). Low
298 aftershock productivity is consistent with nucleation of tsunamigenic earthquakes in frictional

299 conditionally stable regions along the interface (Scholz, 1998). Here, velocity weakening
300 asperities loaded by the rupture release completely the accrued stresses and limit the aftershock
301 productivity (Polet & Kanamori, 2000). The LR subduction in the north of LR-VT-CZ (Figs.
302 1 and S1d) produces rough and weakly coupled interface, the ideal habitat to reduce the amount
303 of fracture energy released seismically. The multiple peaks and long duration of the moment-
304 rate distribution of thrust events (Fig S8) support the above scenario.

305

306 Reduced elastic strain accumulation at the interface is expected where a seamount subducts
307 due to the intense deformation of the fore-arc (Wang & Bilek 2011). The resulting low-coupled
308 megathrust can host slow slip transients and stop large megathrust ruptures (Geersen et al.,
309 2015; Ruiz et al., 2014). The forearc uplift at the northernmost part of LR-VT-CZ (Bassett &
310 Watts, 2015) (Figs.1b and S1d) coincides with the interface segment with a lack of M_w7+ thrust
311 earthquakes, low aftershocks productivity and the stop of the 1901, 1920 and 1980 $M_w\sim 8$
312 ruptures (Fig. 1 and S2). Here, plate convergence is likely accommodated via creep or episodic
313 slow slip, and only a relatively small amount of slip is released seismically (Fig. 3a).
314 Conversely, the southern segment of the interface — where the LR penetration is incipient —
315 is repeatedly ruptured by frequent M_w7+ earthquakes (Fig. 1b). Such intense thrust activity is
316 compatible with compressive stresses imparted onto the interface by the leading edge of the
317 LR, as observed in Japan (Mochizuki et al., 2008) and predicted by numerical models (Ruh et
318 al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020). Moreover, the oblique ridge subduction (Shulgin et al., 2011;
319 Zeumann & Hampel, 2015) generates a complex stress field in the fore-arc that matches well
320 with the heterogeneous and small magnitude focal mechanisms located there (non-clustered
321 events in Fig. 2a). However, we cannot completely exclude that the heterogeneous mechanisms
322 represent activation of conjugate splay faults in the overriding plate.

323

324 **Conclusions**

325 We have demonstrated that the collision and subduction of the LR along VT result in a complex
326 release of tectonic strain. The swarm-like activity on the northern segment of the LR can be
327 indicative of the flexural fracturing driven by static stress transfer and low effective friction
328 along a lubricated outer rise fault system. In the northern sector of the LR, large slip on normal
329 faults also occurs close to the trench to largely accommodate the subduction of the ridge and
330 uniform normal slip release implies a homogeneous accumulation of stresses along the LR. At
331 the plate boundary, a frictionally segmented interface induced by the ridge subduction is

332 supported by a persistent M_w7+ gap and repeated equally-sized M_w7 earthquakes in the north
333 and south of LR-VT-CZ, respectively. This ridge-trench collision and interaction are far more
334 complex than a simple increase of elastic coupling along the interface and favor the hypothesis
335 of a complex and segmented interface where M_w8+ megathrust earthquakes are unlikely to
336 nucleate.

337

338

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342 DEEP-GEOTHERMICA.

343

344 **Open Research**

345 Seismic data used in this study are open and available at **IRIS** (<https://service.iris.edu/fdsnws/>),
346 **GEOFON** (<https://geofon.gfz-potsdam.de/waveform/webservices/fdsnws.php>) and **ORFEUS**
347 (<https://www.orfeus-eu.org/data/eida/webservices/>) data centers through FDSN web service.
348 Seismicity catalogs and phase arrival time can be downloaded at
349 <https://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/search/> (ANSS-USGS) and [https://geofon.gfz-](https://geofon.gfz-potsdam.de/eqinfo/list.php)
350 [potsdam.de/eqinfo/list.php](https://geofon.gfz-potsdam.de/eqinfo/list.php) (GEOFON). Software used for analysis of seismic data is open
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