Mechanical Properties of the Rocky Interiors of Icy Moons

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Key points:

1. We established the failure envelope of chondritic materials under conditions relevant to the rocky interiors of small icy moons
2. Chondritic material has a yield cap around 50 MPa confining pressure, above which its porosity is very small
3. Pressurization and deformation of chondritic material creates energetic cracks, which could contribute to heat dissipation

Abstract

Icy moons in the outer Solar System contain rocky, chondritic interiors, but this material is rarely studied under confining pressure. The contribution of rocky interiors to deformation and heat generation is therefore poorly constrained. We deformed LL6 chondrites at confining pressures ≤ 100 MPa and quasistatic strain rates, and recorded acoustic emissions (AEs) using ultrasound probes. We defined a failure envelope, measured ultrasonic velocities, and retrieved elastic moduli for the experimental conditions. Chondritic material stiffened with increasing confining pressure, and reached its peak strength at 50 MPa confining pressure. Microcracking events occurred at low stresses, during nominally "elastic" deformation, indicating that dissipative processes are possible in rocky interiors. These events were most energetic at lower differential stresses, and occurred more frequently at lower confining pressures. We suggest that chondritic interiors of icy moons are therefore stronger, less compliant, and less dissipative with increasing pressure and size.

Plain language summary

Many icy moons in the outer Solar System have warm, active interiors, but the source of the heat that maintains this activity is sometimes unknown. Many of these moons contain rocky layers which are made of the same material as meteorites that have landed on the Earth. However, we have never previously studied how this material deforms under confining pressures like those found within icy moons. We conducted a lab study of the deformation mechanisms of meteoritic material to study how the deformation response applies to the interior of icy moons. We also analyzed cracking in response to small stress changes, which occurred at all stages of deformation. We found that the material behaved differently at low and high confining pressures, with a peak strength at ~50 MPa. This indicates that icy moons with smaller oceans and thinner crusts may deform differently than larger icy moons, and can receive some of the heat needed to maintain their oceans through cracking processes in their porous cores.

1. Introduction

Icy moons in the outer Solar System are considered excellent candidate bodies for hosting extraterrestrial life. The interior properties of these moons are important for determining the feasibility of life, lander missions, and future priorities in exploring the outer Solar System. The mechanical properties of the cores of these moons are relatively less well-studied than the properties of their icy crusts and water oceans, as the cores are likely less dissipative than the ice or liquid layers (e.g., Tobie et al., 2005). The deformation mechanisms of core material are thus presently still unknown, leaving large uncertainties as to how dissipation proceeds throughout the entire body: there is an order-of-magnitude difference in potential heat release from Enceladus' core, for example, depending on if it is stiff and elastic or if it is highly deformable and (poro)viscoelastic (Aygün and Čadek, 2022; Rovira-Navarro et al., 2022).

The yield strength of a material, which modelers use to predict how a body responds to stress, is almost always pressure-dependent, and often strain-rate dependent (Mair et al., 2002; Mulliken and Boyce, 2006). Rocky components of icy moons are frequently chondritic in nature (Kuskov and Kronrod, 2005; Néri et al., 2020; Neumann and Kruse, 2019), and most strength tests of meteoritic material are conducted at asteroidal conditions: no confinement, and fast strain rates.

Confining pressures at the core-ocean or core-mantle boundary of icy moons frequently reach tens of MPa and more (Neveu et al., 2015; Styczinski et al., 2022; Vance et al., 2018). Almost all tests on meteoritic material occur at room pressure (Pohl and Britt, 2020). The few tests that do assess strength and deformation mechanisms of chondritic material under pressure (Ramesh et al., 2017; Voropaev et al., 2017) do not report strength at pressures relevant to rocky interiors of icy moons. Voropaev et al. (2020) did study a single sample at confining pressure of 50 MPa, but did not apply any differential stress and therefore could not measure the strength of the material. Dynamic (fast) deformation experiments simulating crater formation and impacts on chondrites are also common. These experiments are not easily applied to planetary strain rates, and there is a larger rate sensitivity in unconfined meteoritic material than in terrestrial rocks (Kimberley and Ramesh, 2011). Hogan et al. (2015) used Brazilian disk tests in a Kolsky bar apparatus under confined planar configuration at dynamic strain rates of $10^1 – 10^3$ s^{-1}, which yielded a higher peak strength (~300 MPa) than the unconfined tests at similar strain rates, but did not record enough data at low strain rates to establish a definite change in peak strength for quasistatic tests conducted at no confining pressure vs. those conducted under confinement.

Here, we report the mechanical properties of deforming chondritic material under confining pressure. These measurements represent the first experimental investigation of chondritic material deformation under confining pressure similar to that found inside an icy moon. We used fallen meteoritic material, which is inherently pre-deformed and high-strength. These fallen meteorites are analogs for the rocky cores and mantles of moons, which have survived accretion and continuous tidal deformation for billions of years (Nimmo and Pappalardo, 2016).

In addition to the bulk mechanical response to deformation, we also studied microcracking behavior as the rocks were pressurized, and subsequently deformed at elevated confining pressures. Cracks associated with damage emit dynamic stress waves, observable as acoustic emissions (AEs) with characteristic frequencies depending on the source characteristics of deformation (Eitzen and Wadley, 1984; Ghaffari et al., 2014; Lei and Ma, 2014; Li et al., 2021; O'Ghaffari et al., 2023). The internal structure can also be sampled using throughgoing waves, which acquire signatures of the microstructure as they propagate through and interact with the material. We used ultrasonic probes in passive and active modes to measure 1) energy release associated with acoustic emissions, and 2) variations of sound velocities and their transmissivity in the samples under confining pressure. As macroscale behavior arises from microscale effects, data from all scales is needed to produce a robust picture of deformation dynamics.

This paper presents mechanical results from deformation tests, followed by observations of internal structure based on acoustic emissions and ultrasonic pulsing. We show that as the meteoritic material encounters higher confining pressures up to 50 MPa, the samples become stronger and emitted high-energy acoustic waves. Above 50 MPa confining pressure, the material became weaker, and dissipated less energy via AEs. Our observations indicate that the mechanisms of deformation are controlled by porosity closure, and that the dissipation of stored energy via microcracking is more pronounced at lower confining pressures.

2. Methods

These tests were conducted on samples from the Kilabo meteorite, an LL6 chondrite. Moons have broadly chondritic silicate interiors: Néri et al. (2020) suggest that the cores of Titan and Ganymede (and possibly Callisto) are carbonaceous chondrites, while Kuskov and Kronrod (2005) infer an low metallicity and/or low iron (L/LL) composition for the interior of Europa (and, again, possibly Callisto), and Neumann and Kruse (2019) find an ordinary chondritic (OC) composition (likely L/LL) for the rocky core of Enceladus. Previous experiments suggest that strength differences between carbonaceous and ordinary chondrites are related to the higher porosity of carbonaceous chondrites rather than any inherent difference in the material (Flynn et al., 2018; Pohl and Britt, 2020).

The meteoritic material was impregnated in epoxy before being drilled into 6.25 mm diameter cores for laboratory deformation. The samples were jacketed in soft PVC tubing, then encased in Teflon heat shrink tubing prior to deformation (Supplementary material). This material has ~15% microporosity and a mean density of ~2.5 g/cm^3. However, these (and other) properties are heterogeneously distributed throughout the sample. Samples were taken from the interior of the meteorite, and there is no alteration crust present. Deformation was performed in a Paterson gas medium deformation apparatus (Paterson, 1990) housed in the Rock Mechanics Laboratory at MIT. A summary of the experimental parameters can be found in Supplemental Table 1, and a setup schematic can be found in Figure S1.

We applied isostatic confining pressures (σ_3) of up to 100 MPa, and deformed the samples at room temperature (296 K) and constant strain rates of 10^{-5} s^{-1}, resulting in triaxial stress ($\sigma_1 > \sigma_3 = \sigma_2$). Differential stress ($|\sigma_1 - \sigma_3|$) continued to increase until failure, the point at which the samples no longer supported increasing stress and began to weaken (Figure 2a).

A custom data acquisition system (DAQ) was used in order to record passive AEs and pass active ultrasonic waves through the samples. Miniature piezoelectric sensors with a diameter of 1.5 mm were created by cementing a piezo-element (0.5 mm tall) within a metallic tube. The piezo-element was then coated with gold, to achieve high electrical conductivity. These sensors were attached to microsprings and threaded through pistons to allow constant coupling between the sensor and the sample during deformation. Signals were amplified at ~60 dB and recorded at 50 MS/s rate with 12 bit resolution using a digital oscilloscope (TiePie HS4-50). The majority of amplified signals fell in the frequency range of ~50 kHz to 2 MHz. One of the sensors was set to pulse P-waves (Y-cut LiNbO3), and the other one could receive both P and S waves (X-cut).

Microcracking occurred during both pressurization and deformation, releasing strain energy and causing vibrations within the sample. The received signals are recorded as displacements at the end of the sample, representing a convolution of three main controlling parameters of wave propagation: source characteristics, the medium through which waves travel, and the sensor response. We took Fourier Transforms of the displacements u at times t into corresponding frequencies ω, such that $u(\omega) = \sum_t u(t)e^{-i\omega t}$, with amplitudes $\psi_\alpha = \{u(\omega_\alpha)\}$ over frequency levels α. This expansion yields modulations to the energy state with amplitudes C_α and eigenvectors ϕ_α, which we use to characterize the state of the system $\vec{\psi}$ such that

$$\vec{\psi}(t) = \sum_\alpha C_\alpha e^{-i\omega_\alpha t}\vec{\phi}_\alpha.$$

For each acoustic emission, we smoothed over the raw emitted waveform with a window of 5 count intervals (0.1 μs), and denoised using wavelet decomposition. From this data, we computed a spectrogram using the window function W and time index τ to yield power P, such that

$$P(\tau,\omega) = \sum_t W(t-\tau)\psi(t)e^{-i\omega t} .$$

We integrated over the duration and frequency range of each event to compute the total power, then normalized by the mean power of background noise during each test. The power is a direct indication of how much energy was dissipated due to AEs. We present this quantity as a scalar value relative to the noise threshold, and discarded any events with a power-to-noise ratio below 1.5.

See Supplementary Information (figures S2, S3) for more details on acoustic emission data calibration and acquisition. A comprehensive proof of this integration can also be found in the discussion of the P-parameter by Ghaffari et al. (2021).

After deformation, entire samples were imaged with the table-top micro-computed tomography (micro-CT) Skyscan system at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, using 5-hour scan times at a 4 μm pixel size under 100 kV acceleration voltage.

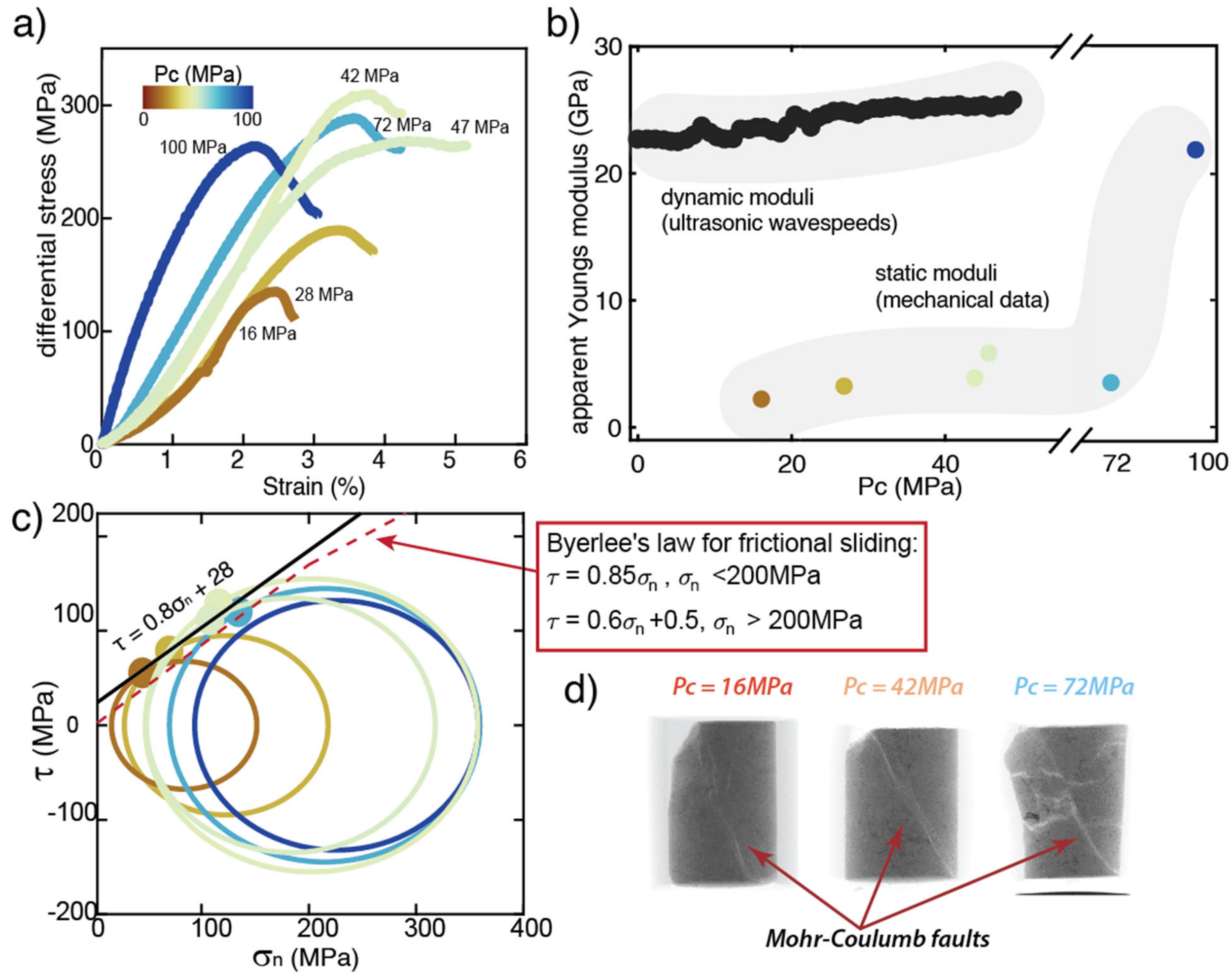

Figure 1: Mechanical results from deformation tests, represented as a) stress/strain curves, colored by confining pressure, b) observed Youngs moduli from ultrasonic and mechanical data, c) Mohr circles, with a tangent line indicating the Mohr-Coulomb failure envelope, large dots represent fault orientation developed at failure and d) CT images of deformed samples, with final faults from peak stress indicated.

3. Results

3.1. Mechanical data

The peak strength of the samples generally increased with confining pressure before reaching a maximum at ~50 MPa Pc (Figure 1a). Above ~50MPa confining pressure, peak strength decreased with increasing confining pressure. The σ_1 did not exceed ~350 MPa in any experiment, and so increases in confining pressure above 50 MPa lead to decreases in differential stress (Figure 1c). In all cases, the strain at peak strength at the point of failure remained close to 3%.

The failure envelopes of the experimentally deformed samples are represented as Mohr circles in Figure 2c. These Mohr circles are a graphical representation of the stress state within a rock at the point of failure, plotted in normal stress (σ_n) vs. shear stress (τ) space such that

$$\sigma_n = \frac{\sigma_1+\sigma_3}{2} + \frac{\sigma_1-\sigma_3}{2}\cos 2\theta \; ; \; \tau = \frac{\sigma_1-\sigma_3}{2}\sin 2\theta \; ,$$

where θ is the orientation of the normal to the fault plane with respect to σ_1. The Mohr-Coulomb failure envelope tangent to the circles indicates the stress conditions expected at failure:

$\tau = 0.8\sigma_n + 28$ (units in MPa).

This linear failure envelope is valid only for samples deformed below ~50 MPa Pc. Byerlee's Law, which defines the shear stress needed to slide rocks along a pre-existing fault surface, falls below the range of stress states recorded during deformation tests, as expected for the deformation of intact rocks. Notably, no test was able to reach σ_1 greater than 350 MPa; the three highest-pressure tests all failed at this point.

During several tests of up to 50 MPa confining pressure, we monitored sound velocities using the piezoelectric sensors placed above and below the sample (See Supplementary Table 1). From these measurements, we characterized dynamic (unrelaxed) Youngs moduli via p- and s-wave arrival times,

$$E_{dyn} = \frac{\rho V_S^2 (3V_P^2 - 4V_S^2)}{V_P^2 - V_S^2}.$$

We compared the unrelaxed, microscale E_{dyn} with the observed macroscale Youngs modulus derived from mechanical data on stress, σ, and strain, ε, such that

$$E_{qs} = \frac{\sigma}{\epsilon} \,.$$

As materials are stiffer at higher frequencies and shorter length scales (Jackson, 2015), the calculated Youngs modulus is higher during dynamic probing than during quasistatic bulk deformation (Figure 1b).

3.2. Ultrasonic probes

3.2.1. Acoustic emissions

All samples released energy via microcracking, both during pressurization and deformation. Microcracking occurred at all sampled pressures (Figure 2a, 2d). The integrated power and maximum amplitudes of each AEs decreased slightly with increasing differential stress ($|\sigma_1 - \sigma_3|$) (Figure 2b, 2e), and the power-to-noise ratio was largest for low values of σ_1 (Figure 2c, 2f). Many of these energetically dissipative events occurred during the nominally "elastic" deformation period, when differential stress is low and no energy release is expected. The material also emitted energy through microcracking during isotropic pressurization cycles (Figure 3d), when differential stress is zero.

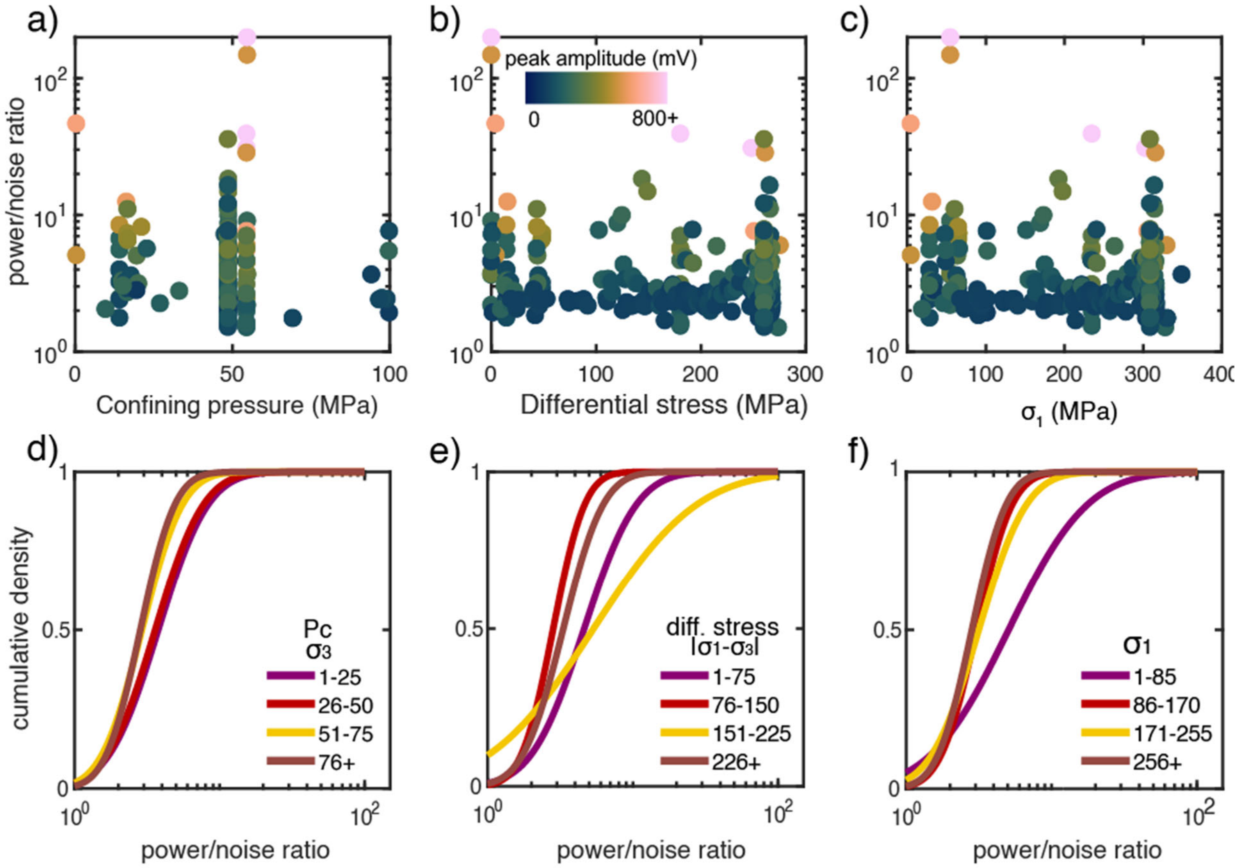

Figure 2: (a-c) Power of AEs, normalized by noise threshold for each test, as a function of a) confining pressure, b) differential stress, c) σ_1. Each point represents one AE event, and is colored by the maximum amplitude of that even following the colorbar in panel b). (d-f) Lognormal cumulative distribution functions of total power per event, evolving as a function of d) confining pressure, e) differential stress, and f) σ_1. Colored lines correspond to specific stress ranges, in MPa, which are defined specifically for each panel in its interior legend.

3.2.2. Ultrasonic pulsing

To determine wavespeeds as a function of pressure, we sent ultrasonic pulses through a sample while cycling confining pressure between 0 and 50 MPa, (Figure 3a, 3b, 3c). This procedure allowed us to examine if pressure oscillations changed the internal structure of our material and validate our results. We examined the entire waveform to see how the structure is affecting throughgoing waves (Figure 3d, 3e). The amplitudes and arrival times of throughgoing waves mimicked the pressure conditions, such that at lower pressures, comparable parts of the waveform arrived later, and at higher pressures, they arrived earlier (Figure 3d). The waveforms also remained similar at the same pressure even after a pressurization-depressurization cycle and associated AEs (Figure 3e; S5), suggesting that the modifications to internal structure of the material occur on smaller length scales than sampled by ultrasonic waves and therefore would not be visible to seismic waves, regardless of the pressure history.

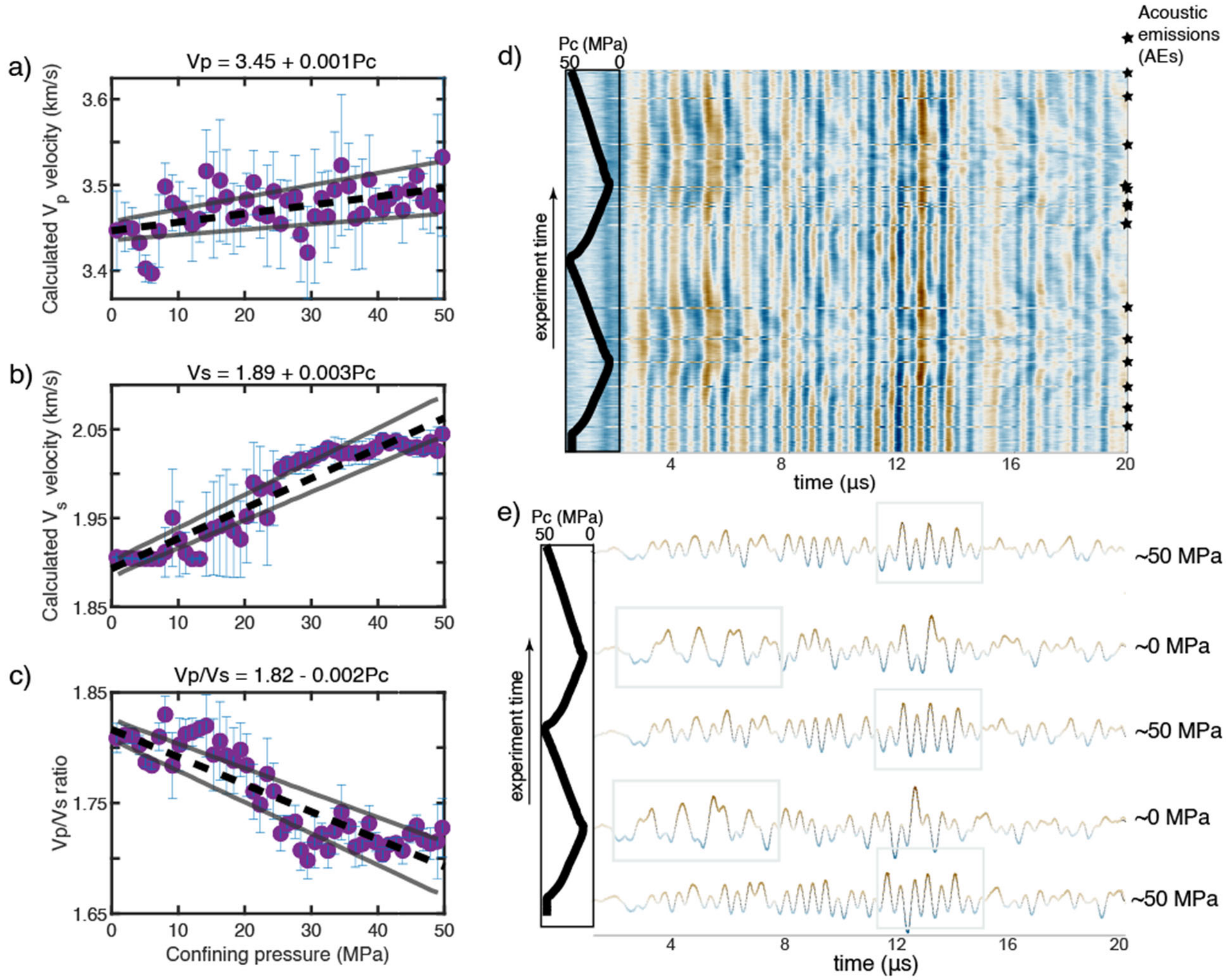

Figure 3: Results from ultrasonic pulsing during confining pressure oscillation. a) Vp wavespeeds. b) Vs wavespeeds. c) Vp/Vs ratio. For a-c, linear trendlines are shown in black, with grey lines denoting 90% confidence interval. d) Two full depressurization-repressurization cycles and resultant waveforms. Black line indicates pressure conditions. Waveforms are stacked with increasing experimental time, and color corresponds with amplitude over wavelength time, from blue (high negative amplitude) to brown (high positive amplitude). Horizontal, discontinuous lines marked with stars are energetic acoustic emission events, which are separate from the pulsed ultrasonic waves shown here. e) Sample waveforms from 0 and 50 MPa confining pressure at each inflection point in the cycle. Similar parts of the waveform at 0 and 50 MPa are highlighted in light grey boxes. See Supplementary Information for further discussion of waveform analysis (S4-6).

4. Discussion

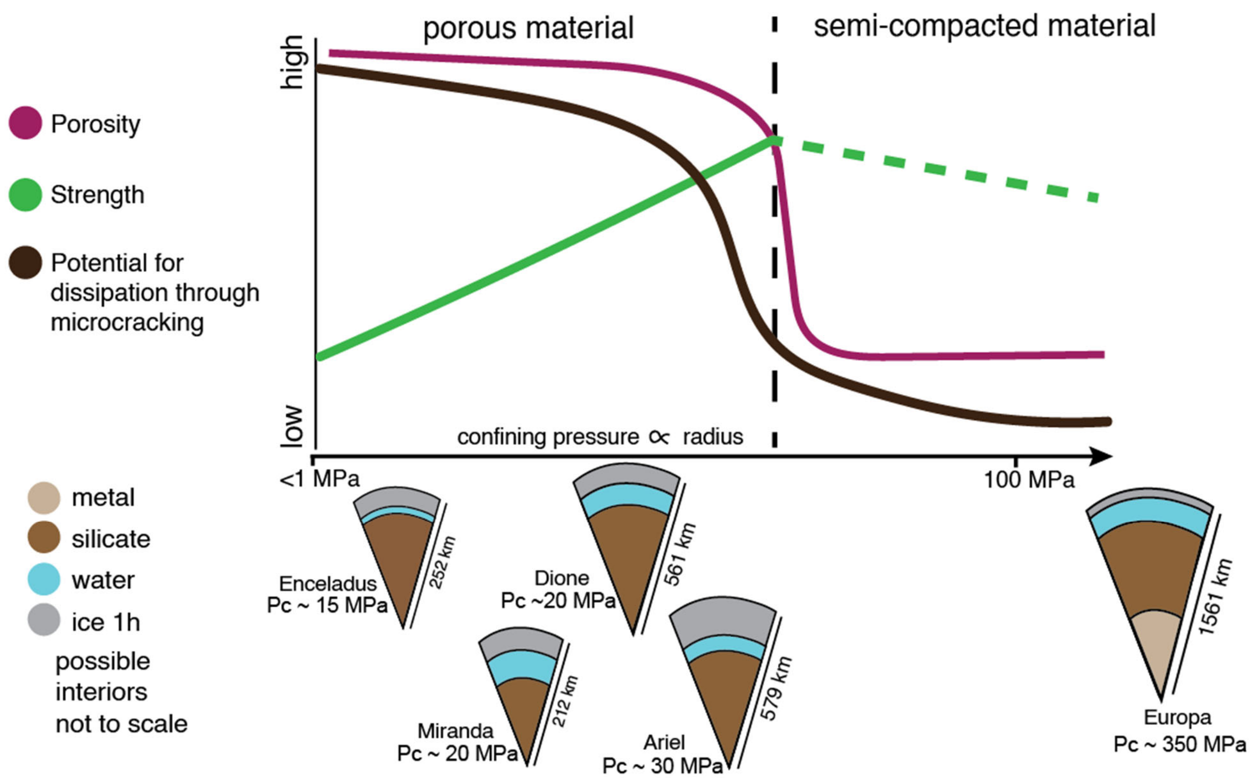

Figure 4: A conceptual diagram showing the effects of confining pressure on porosity, strength, and the power released via microcracking. Sample interior models for small icy moons are shown in order of increasing Pc at the ocean-rock interface, based on estimates from PlanetProfile by Vance et al (2018).

The above results show that the mechanical and acoustic properties of chondritic material, and therefore the cores of icy moons, are dependent on confining pressure. Several of these relationships are depicted schematically in Figure 4.

4.1. Discussion of mechanical data

Chondritic material initially strengthens with increasing confining pressure, then undergoes a drop in peak differential stress above confining pressures >50 MPa (Figure 1a, 1c). This behavior is similar to the "cap model" for compaction and deformation of porous Earth materials. In the cap model porosity drops steadily with increasing pressure before dropping rapidly at a point of compactive yield (C*), where the load-bearing framework collapses and above which cataclastic flow takes over as the primary mode of deformation (Wong and Baud, 2012).

Pore closure may therefore proceed in a predictable, yet discontinuous manner across icy moon environments. The maximum pressure at which porosity is maintained within a rocky interior should decrease with increasing Pc, then suddenly drop, rather than a slow closure similar to that within the outer layers of rocky planets as is often assumed in planetary models (e.g. Vance et al., 2018). The pores do not close entirely at this point, but most porosity is lost. It is possible that the maximum normal stress seen in our test, 350 MPa, represents the condition for total pore closure. Assumptions of density and permeability within cores should see a similar jump. These observations indicate that the mechanisms of deformation may be different in larger moons than in smaller moons, due to the increased confining pressures from increased overburden at the rock-ocean or rock-ice interface. In bodies where rocky interiors are under higher confining pressures, pore closure effects may not be as important and material may be stiffer; in lower-pressure environments, material may deform more easily.

Viscoelastic deformation of silicate interiors has been suggested as a mechanism for heat generation and tidal dissipation in Enceladus and Europa (Kang et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2020; Rovira-Navarro et al., 2022), but a true viscous response is unlikely in a cold, chondritic layer. Silicates typically require elevated pressures and temperatures for viscous deformation (e.g. Kohlstedt and Hansen, 2015). Brittle creep, a mechanism that is active in silicate rocks at low pressures and temperatures (Bernabé and Peč, 2022; Brantut et al., 2013) may generate an additional apparent viscous response, contributing to the total heat dissipation via microcracking. Similar effects may arise from pore closure and reopening. While not truly a viscous response, the presence of brittle creep could serve as a nonlinear viscous element over short timescales and thus should be considered in models for viscoelastic core deformation.

4.2. Discussion of acoustic and ultrasonic data

Dissipative acoustic emissions from microcracking events occurred at all pressures sampled, even at low differential stresses, indicating that even small changes to local stresses can initiate cracks (Figure 2). The Vp/Vs ratio also decreased with increasing confining pressure (Figure 3c), which occurs as damage increases (Wang et al., 2012). We suggest that microcracking could be continuously occurring in rocky interiors of icy satellites, where deviatoric stresses can be on the order of 1 MPa or higher, changing periodically with the orbit of the satellite (Gao and Stevenson, 2013; McKinnon, 2013). As these cracks occurred during the nominally elastic component of deformation (low differential stress, low strain; see Figure 2b, 2e), we suggest that that the energy from these microscale plastic mechanisms should be associated with the apparent viscous response necessary for dissipation in the silicate core.

Moons with thinner crusts and oceans could receive proportionally more heat over their lifetimes from the deformation of their rocky interiors than larger moons, as their cores will be more deformable at low pressures and therefore able to dissipate heat during viscoelastic deformation. Local values of σ_1 will be lower in smaller moons as well, corresponding to the most energetic cracking events seen in our tests (Figure 2c, 2f). As this energy is released, it could contribute to processes such as ice overturn, ocean maintenance, and possibly even geyser activity as seen on Enceladus' south pole. Pore fluids change the local stress state by lowering the effective pressure, so that materials at the ocean-silicate interface could experience even more fracture than we observe in lab. Additionally, while our deformation experiments are conducted at relatively slow strain rates, they are not identical to timescales and frequencies of tidal deformation. Under realistic tidal forcing periods, the strength of porous rocks is lower (Bagde and Petroš, 2009; Peng et al., 2020), increasing the likelihood of cracking in response to small stress changes. One excellent opportunity for future laboratory studies is the measurement of acoustic properties of aqueously altered chondritic material, which should exist at the rock-ocean boundary.

In addition to releasing heat at the time of their formation, cracks create new surface area. Modeling by Rovira-Navarro et al. (2022) found that rock-water interaction (via increasing permeability) increases dissipation throughout a porous core. Fresh surface area would encourage serpentinization, which has been suggested as a mechanism for generating hydrogen within the oceans of icy bodies (Kamata et al., 2019; McCollom et al., 2022; Neveu et al., 2015; Vance and Melwani Daswani, 2020) or cultivation of organic materials which have risen to Titan's surface (Castillo-Rogez and Lunine, 2010). Many of these reactions include volume increase which modifies the local stress field, encouraging further cracking within the silicate body and providing a self-sustaining heating process.

5. Conclusions

We characterized the mechanical properties of stony chondritic material under a range of confining pressures, defined a failure envelope, measured wavespeeds, and retrieved both static and dynamic elastic moduli. The mechanical results suggest that porosity decreases significantly at lab confining pressure of ~50 MPa, such that the silicate interiors of larger icy moons will be relatively dense and impermeable. The interiors of larger moons are less deformable, and therefore contribute proportionally less energy in response to tidal forcing, than those of smaller moons. We also observed semi-continuous energy release arising from microcracking under small changes to stress. These microcracks may represent an apparent viscous response which enhances heat dissipation within rocky cores and mantles. The energy release from microcracking occurred during pressurization and depressurization as well, and transmissivity of the material (likely dependent on its porosity) was a function of current confining pressure rather than pressure history. Pressure, and the resultant amount of porosity that a material can maintain, is therefore a strong control on the dissipative potential of silicate interiors. These findings are useful for determining the level of heat generated in the cores and mantles of icy moons, which may then drive ocean circulation and/or maintenance. We also see that the release of energy persists as deformation continues, indicating that ongoing deformation on a diurnal timescale may remain important for the total heat flux of an icy body.

Acknowledgements: CS received support from Massachusetts Space Grant fellowship and MathWorks. Figures were plotted using perceptually uniform colormaps from Crameri (2021). CORD laboratory technician support by NSF grant # 2054414 is gratefully acknowledged. Thank you to Veronique LeRoux for CT scans, Mark Panning, Mohit Melwani Deswani, and Laurent Pou for discussions on icy moon interiors, and to Rick Binzel for early input on the project.

Data Availability Statement: All mechanical, ultrasonic, and acoustic data can be found at https://zenodo.org/records/10211457 (Seltzer, 2023).

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