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Measured Section of the Pennsylvanian Hermosa Group Near Hermosa, Colorado

by

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Introduction

A comprehensive study of the Paradox Basin is being conducted from 1989-1994 under the U.S. Geological Survey's Evolution of Sedimentary Basins Program. As part of the investigation of the Pennsylvanian System in the Paradox Basin, a detailed study of the Pennsylvanian Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain (about 20 km (12 mi) north of Durango, Colorado) on the west side of the Animas River Valley was undertaken. The objectives of this study were to establish better correlations between Pennsylvanian strata along the eastern basin margin and central basin area and between the Hermosa Mountain outcrops and those to the north in the San Juan Mountains area. A detailed sedimentologic interpretation of the Hermosa Mountain section provides a better understanding of the depositional processes operative along the active margin of the Paradox Basin.

For nearly a century, Pennsylvanian outcrops along the Animas River Valley have been an object of study. Spencer (in Cross and Spencer, 1899-1900, p. 48) first applied the name Hermosa Formation to these rocks. Although no type section was designated, Spencer derived the name from Hermosa Creek in the area where it enters the Animas River. Roth (1934) measured a section of the Hermosa, which he designated the type section, in secs. 26 and 35, T. 37 N., R. 9 W. (just north of the confluence of Hermosa Creek and the Animas River). Later, Bass (1944) provided a diagram of his Hermosa measured section from the same area and correlated this section to other Pennsylvanian outcrop and subsurface sections in the Four Corners area. Wengerd and Strickland (1954) presented data from a section they measured at Hermosa Mountain. Later, Wengerd and Matheny (1958) presented the diagram of this section, and they proposed raising the Hermosa Formation to Group status that included, in ascending order, the Pinkerton Trail Formation, the Paradox Formation, and the Honaker Trail Formation.

The exposure of the Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain is the southernmost exposure of Pennsylvanian strata on the eastern side of the Paradox Basin. To the west, Pennsylvanian strata are in the subsurface and crop out again in the canyons of the San Juan River, about 100 mi (160 km) west of Hermosa Mountain. The Hermosa Group undergoes abrupt and dramatic facies changes across the Paradox Basin. Along the eastern margin of the Paradox Basin, near the basin-margin Uncompahgre Uplift, interbedded clastic and carbonate lithologies compose the Hermosa Group. These lithologies grade abruptly westward into interbedded evaporite, carbonate, and minor clastic units that characterize the Hermosa of the central part of the basin. From the central to the southwestern part of the basin, the Hermosa Group grades into shelf carbonate deposits having locally abundant algal-mound buildups and minor clastic units.

The Pennsylvanian outcrops from Hermosa Mountain northward to Silverton show the facies characteristic of the eastern basin margin, whereas the outcrops in the canyons of the San Juan River show the facies characteristic of the southwestern shelf area. By using the abundant subsurface geophysical data obtained from numerous oil fields in the southern part of the Paradox Basin, good correlations of Pennsylvanian strata between the southwestern shelf facies and the evaporite-bearing basin-center facies have been established. Correlation of the eastern basin-margin facies to the basin center facies is less well established because of the paucity of subsurface data along the eastern part of the basin. This detailed study of the Hermosa Mountain section will determine if the predominantly eustatically controlled cycles that are recognized in Pennsylvanian strata throughout the rest of the Paradox Basin can be recognized along the southeastern margin of the basin.

This report presents the lithologic descriptions, macroscopic observations, and interpretations of depositional environments from the Hermosa Mountain measured section of the Hermosa Group. The format used here enables more detail to be shown than would be possible in a standard manuscript figure or appendix. Ongoing studies of clastic and carbonate petrography and of brachiopod assemblages from this measured section will be

compiled with the lithologic and sedimentologic data into a large plate that will be published in the USGS Miscellaneous Investigations Series.

Methods

The Hermosa Mountain measured section (fig. 2) is comprised of six segments located within sections 24, 25, 26, 35, and 36, T. 37 N., R. 9 W., in the Hermosa 7.5 minute quadrangle map (La Plata County, Colorado). Hermosa Mountain (not designated on the quadrangle map) is the local name of the cliff-forming highlands due north of the small town of Hermosa, Colorado. Vegetated to densely vegetated slopes characterize most of the Hermosa Mountain area. The location of each segment was chosen based on the quality of exposure and the presence of a traceable bed to offset to the next segment. With the exception of segment B, all segments are located in gullies, which generally have the most complete exposures. The abundance of vegetation and slope-cover prohibits lateral tracing of most units.

The section was measured with a Jacobs staff and Abney level except for the thick, cliff-forming units where a tape was dropped from the top of the cliff. Carbonate units and coarser-grained sandstone units over 3 ft (1 m) thick generally form resistant outcrops. Claystone, siltstone, and fine-grained sandstone units generally weather to a slope. These units were trenched and then described. Field descriptions were recorded at a scale of 1 in. to 10 ft. These descriptions were simplified to the 1 in. to 20 ft scale presented in this report.

Regularly spaced samples of the sandstone units were taken throughout the section to document changes in mineralogy. Preliminary analysis of these samples indicates that feldspar abundance is low (< 5 percent) from the base of the section to about 168 m (550 ft), above which it increases dramatically and may compose as much as 30 percent of the sandstone (Franczyk and others, in press).

Nearly every carbonate unit within the Hermosa Mountain section was sampled for slabbing and thin section analysis. Ongoing study of the carbonate samples is determining the faunal assemblages and abundances. The faunal types shown in the accessories column of figure 4 is based on macroscopic field observations and will be expanded with the final analysis of these carbonate samples.

Samples of dark-gray claystone, mudstone, and shale throughout the section were also collected for organic geochemistry and palynomorph analysis. Palynomorphs were sparse from these outcrop samples, and only long-ranging Pennsylvanian species were recovered (R.M. Kosanke, USGS, Denver, oral commun., 1992).

Figure 4 shows the measured section data, and figure 3 provides the explanation. The measured section shown in figure 4 covers 22 pages. Part or all of the unit at the top of each page is repeated at the base of the succeeding page to facilitate splicing the section into a continuous vertical column. The profile on the left side of the lithology column shows the grain size for clastic units. The lithologic profile for carbonate units is arbitrarily extended to the medium-grained interval; the texture of the carbonate unit is shown in the carbonate fabric column. An interpretation of depositional environments for units or packages of units is listed on the far left side of figure 4. Based on the interpreted environments, a relative sea level curve was constructed. Marine carbonate units are considered to represent the highest relative sea level and alluvial units the lowest. Marine deltaic and delta plain units are transitional between the two end members. Abrupt changes from high or intermediate relative sea level to low may correspond to a period of base level drop and subaerial exposure.

Geologic notes

Based on changes in the characteristics of carbonate units, the Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain can be divided into three parts: a 85-ft (26 m)-thick lower part (from

25-110 ft (8-34 m) in the section) characterized by fossiliferous limestone and rare dolomite and clastic units; a 1700-ft (518 m)-thick middle part (from 110-1810 ft (34-552 m) in the section) characterized by clastic units interbedded with thin, partly to extensively dolomitized, nonfossiliferous carbonate beds; and a 955-ft (291 m)-thick upper part (from 1810-2765 ft (552-843 m) in the section) characterized by clastic units interbedded with thick to thin fossiliferous limestone beds.

The lower part is equivalent to the Pinkerton Trail Formation of the Hermosa Group, a unit that is recognized at this stratigraphic horizon throughout much of the Paradox Basin. In the Hermosa Mountain area, the Pinkerton Trail is generally covered or only partially exposed. Segment A is at the best local exposure of the Pinkerton Trail and is in the area where Wengerd and Strickland (1954) first named and described this unit at the surface. At segment A, a 25 ft (8 m) thick covered section immediately overlies the Mississippian Leadville Limestone. Throughout most of the Paradox Basin the red, fine-grained Pennsylvanian Molas Formation of highly variable thickness lies between the Leadville and the Pinkerton Trail. At segment A there is no evidence of red material in the slope-covered interval between the Leadville and the lowest exposed carbonate bed of the Pinkerton Trail. The Molas is probably thin to absent in the Hermosa Mountain area. The covered intervals within the Pinkerton Trail may be fine-grained clastic units. Locally carbonaceous shale and scattered coally material is between the carbonate units, but there is no definitive evidence at this location of subaerial exposure within the Pinkerton Trail. The upper contact of the Pinkerton Trail is not exposed in the Hermosa Mountain area. A few miles to the north, a road cut through the upper part of the Pinkerton Trail shows a sandstone-dominated interval sharply overlying the carbonate unit at the top of the Pinkerton Trail.

Because the upper contact of the Pinkerton Trail is not exposed in the Hermosa Mountain area, the base of segment B was begun at the top of the Leadville Limestone. A covered interval 220 ft (67 m) thick is between the top of the Leadville and the well exposed units of the Hermosa Group. The basal 110 ft (33.5 m) of the covered interval is equivalent to the Pinkerton Trail, and the remaining 110 ft (33.5 m) of this interval is probably similar to the lithologies that are throughout segment B: dominantly clastic units and minor thin carbonate beds.

The middle part and approximately the lower 200 ft (61 m) of the upper part of the Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain are equivalent to the evaporite-bearing Paradox Formation in the central part of the Paradox Basin. In this Hermosa Mountain section, I have not subdivided the Hermosa Group above the Pinkerton Trail because at this time the exact position of the contact between the Paradox and Honaker Trail Formations is uncertain. There are about 100 ft (30 m) of gypsum interbedded with a minor amount of shale starting at about 1320 ft (402 m) in the measured section. The gypsum pinches out to the north, but the exact location of the pinchout is unknown because of extensive cover in this part of the Hermosa along the length of the Hermosa Cliffs. The thickness and stratigraphic position of the gypsum interval suggests that it correlates with cycle 6 of Hite's (1961) evaporite sequence in the central part of the Paradox Basin.

The upper 765 ft (233 m) of the upper part of the Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain correlates to part of the Honaker Trail Formation in the central part of the Paradox Basin. The Hermosa at Hermosa Mountain has a gradational contact with the overlying alluvial red beds of the Cutler Formation, and the top of the Hermosa is placed at the top of the highest carbonate bed of probable marine origin. The only carbonate material observed in the Cutler is of pedogenic origin.

I have chosen not to apply the name Rico Formation at Hermosa Mountain because the entire Hermosa Group contains a significant amount of nonmarine clastic units. Because the Rico was defined as being a unit transitional between the Hermosa (which was interpreted to be entirely marine) and the Cutler (which was interpreted to be entirely nonmarine), it does not appear to be present in this section. There is no horizon in the

Hermosa Group in this area where interbedded marine clastic and carbonate units grade upwards into interbedded nonmarine clastic and marine carbonate units, which then grade into the nonmarine Cutler Formation.

North of Hermosa Mountain to Elbert Creek, the upper part of the Hermosa Group is well exposed, though inaccessible, along the Hermosa Cliffs. North of Elbert Creek, the Hermosa Group is generally well exposed along an outcrop belt that continues nearly to the Silverton area. Spoelhof (1974) did a thorough study of the Hermosa Group between Engineer Mountain and the Silverton area. He divided the Hermosa Group into two formations: the Pinkerton Trail Formation, which ranges in thickness from 0-275 ft (0-84 m), at the base overlain by the Honaker Trail Formation, which locally is as thick as 2800 ft (853 m). Spoelhof recognized three subdivisions within his Honaker Trail: a lower and upper clastic-dominated part separated by a middle carbonate-dominated part. This middle part is equivalent to a more carbonate-rich interval at the Hermosa Mountain section that extends from 1780 to 2220 ft (543 to 677 m).

Preliminary analysis of the brachiopod assemblages collected in the Pinkerton Trail Formation at Hermosa Mountain has identified a species that occurs in earliest Desmoinesian time, a species that could be either Atokan or Desmoinesian, and a species that spans latest Atokan to earliest Desmoinesian time. Based on the combined fusulinid and brachiopod assemblages, the Pinkerton Trail at Hermosa Mountain was probably deposited close to the Atokan-Desmoinesian boundary, most likely in earliest Desmoinesian time (Franczyk and others, in press). Brachiopod assemblages collected 165-295 ft (50-90 m) below the top of the Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain indicate a latest middle- to earliest late-Desmoinesian age (Franczyk and others, in press). The basal part of the Cutler at Hermosa Mountain is inferred to be of late Desmoinesian age based on the age of the uppermost part of the Hermosa, the gradational contact with the overlying Cutler Formation, and the lack of fossils in the Cutler.

Paleocurrent measurements obtained primarily from trough cross-stratification within deltaic marine and nonmarine sandstones throughout the Hermosa Mountain measured section show dominantly southwesterly transport directions (fig. 2, samples and paleocurrent column). An average mean vector of 230° is calculated from all the measurements (140 readings) taken within the measured section (fig. 4). Rivers flowing southwesterly from a drainage basin in the adjacent Uncompahgre Uplift brought sediment to the alluvial and deltaic environments in the Hermosa Mountain area. Spoelhof (1974) recorded similar southwesterly paleocurrent measurements through the Hermosa Group in the Engineer Mountain to Silverton area. North of Silverton, the Pennsylvanian drainage appears to have shifted to a more westerly direction. The most northerly exposure of the Hermosa Group occurs in the Ouray area, about 40 km (25 mi) north of Silverton. An average mean vector of 281° is calculated from 78 measurements taken throughout the Hermosa Group in the Ouray area (Franczyk, unpub. data).

Acknowledgements

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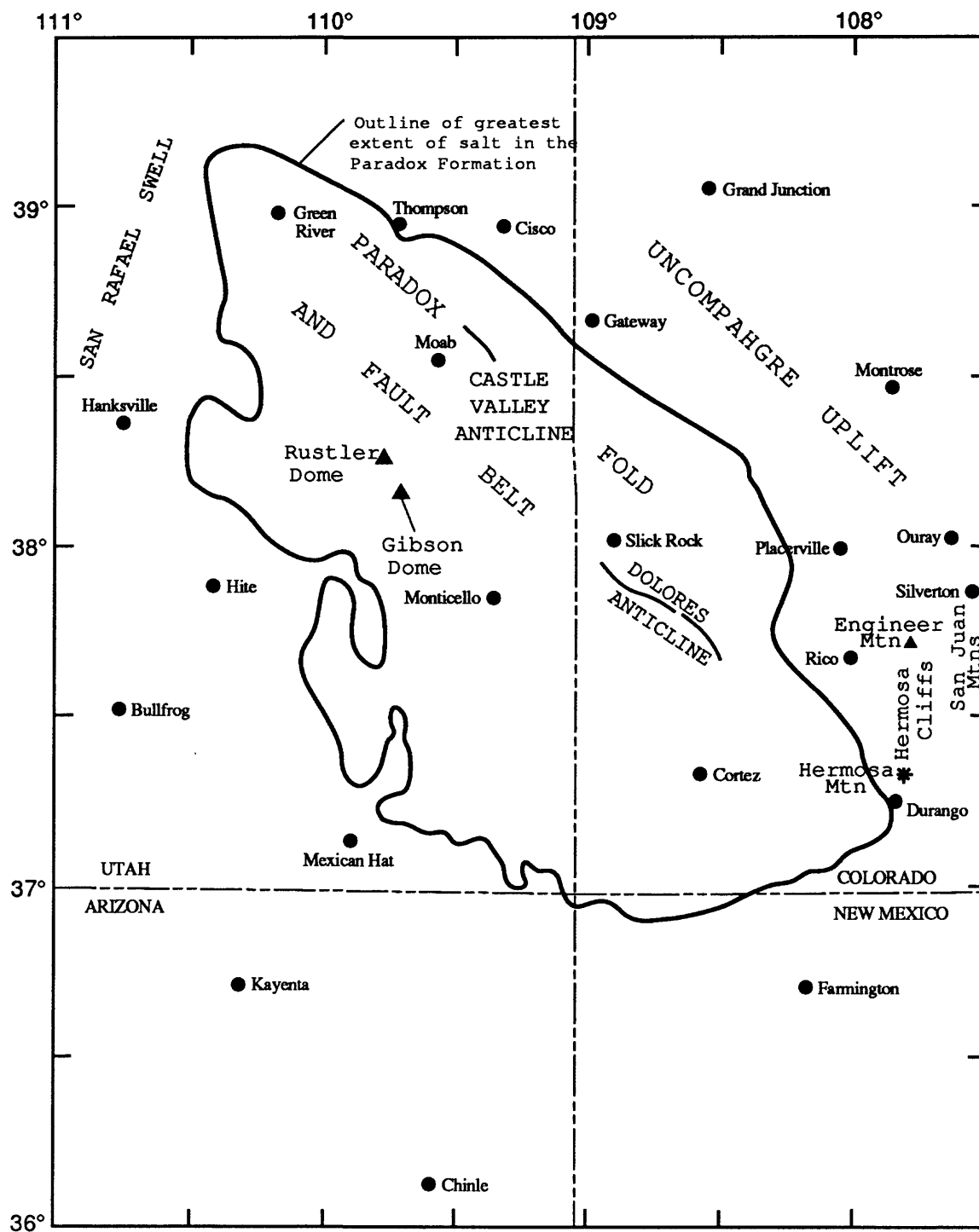


Figure 1. Location map showing the Paradox Basin, which here corresponds to the maximum extent of salt in the Paradox Formation, and surrounding geologic features. The star shows the location of the Hermosa Mountain measured section, which is slightly northeast of Durango, Colorado.

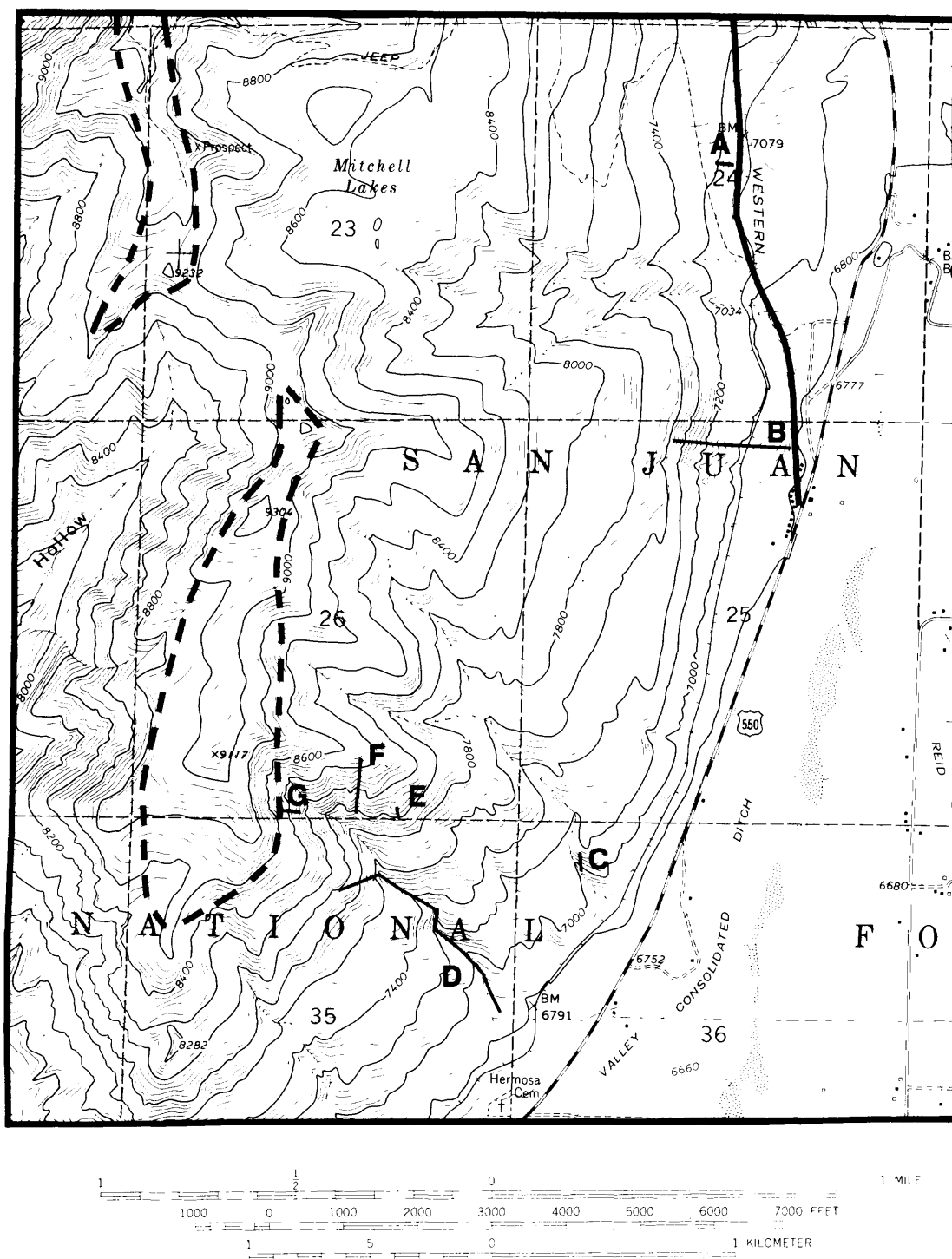
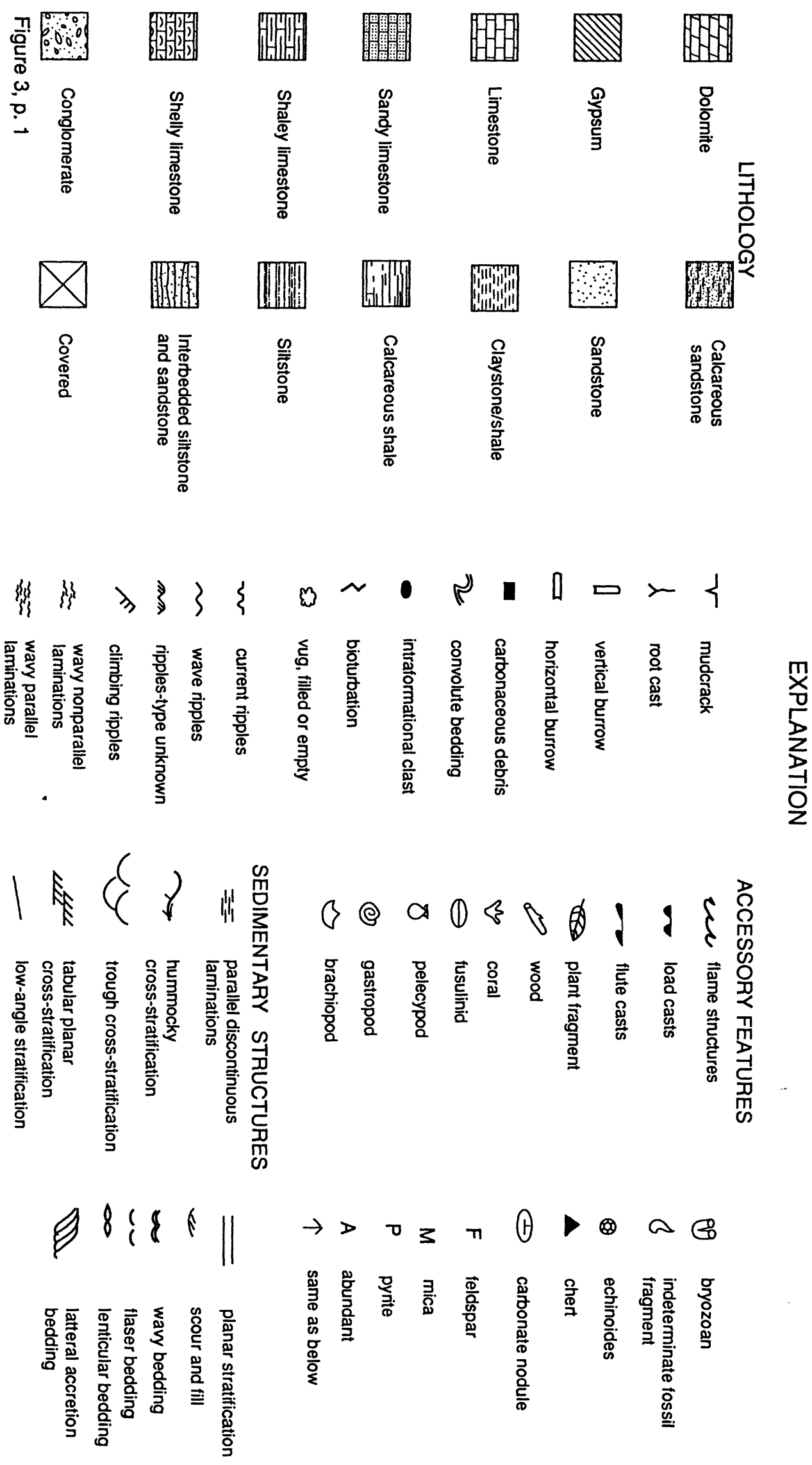


Figure 2. Location map of the Hermosa Mountain measured section. A, B, C, D, E, F, and G identify segments of the measured section that are indicated in the description in figure 4. The Hermosa Group lies between the Leadville Limestone (approximate top shown by the solid heavy line) and the Cutler Formation (approximate base shown by dashed heavy line). Base from the Hermosa 7.5' topographic map.



EXPLANATION			
DEPOSITIONAL ENVIRONMENT	CARBONATE FABRIC	BEDDING THICKNESS	CONTACT TYPE
NM Nonmarine	M Lime mudstone	VTH Very thin	S Sharp
AL Alluvial	W Wackestone	TH Thin	SI Sharp, irregular
DP Delta plain	P Packstone	M Medium	G Gradational
DF Delta front	G Grainstone	TK Thick	C Covered
PD Prodelta	X Crystalline	VTK Very thick	
T Tidal	COLOR		
SM Shallow marine	B Brown	Or Orange	D Dark
M Marine	Bl Black	Pk Pink	L Light
ME Marine evaporite	G Gray	R Red	M Medium
	Gr Green	Y Yellow	P Pale
	O Olive		

Figure 3, p. 2

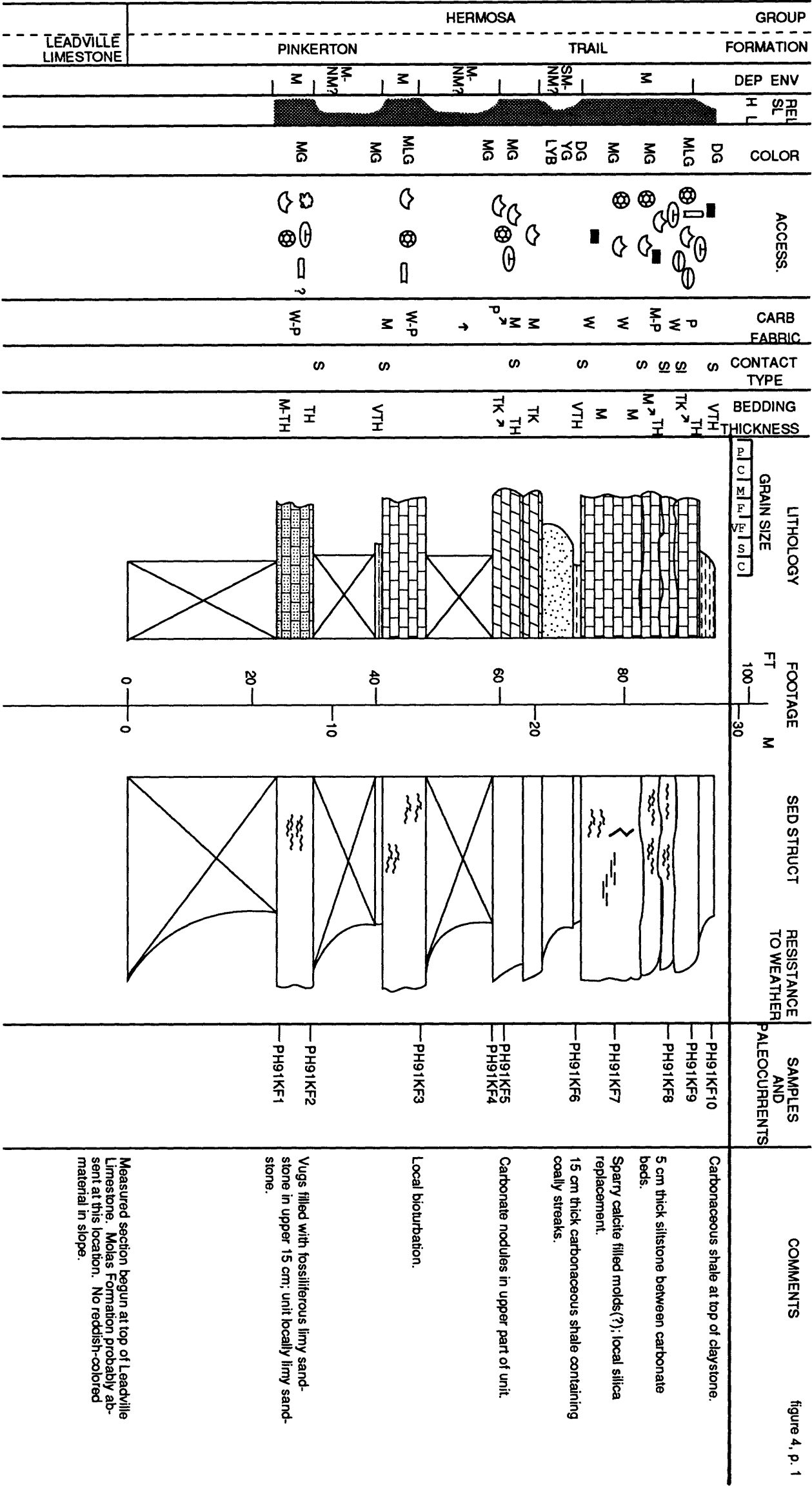


figure 4, p. 1

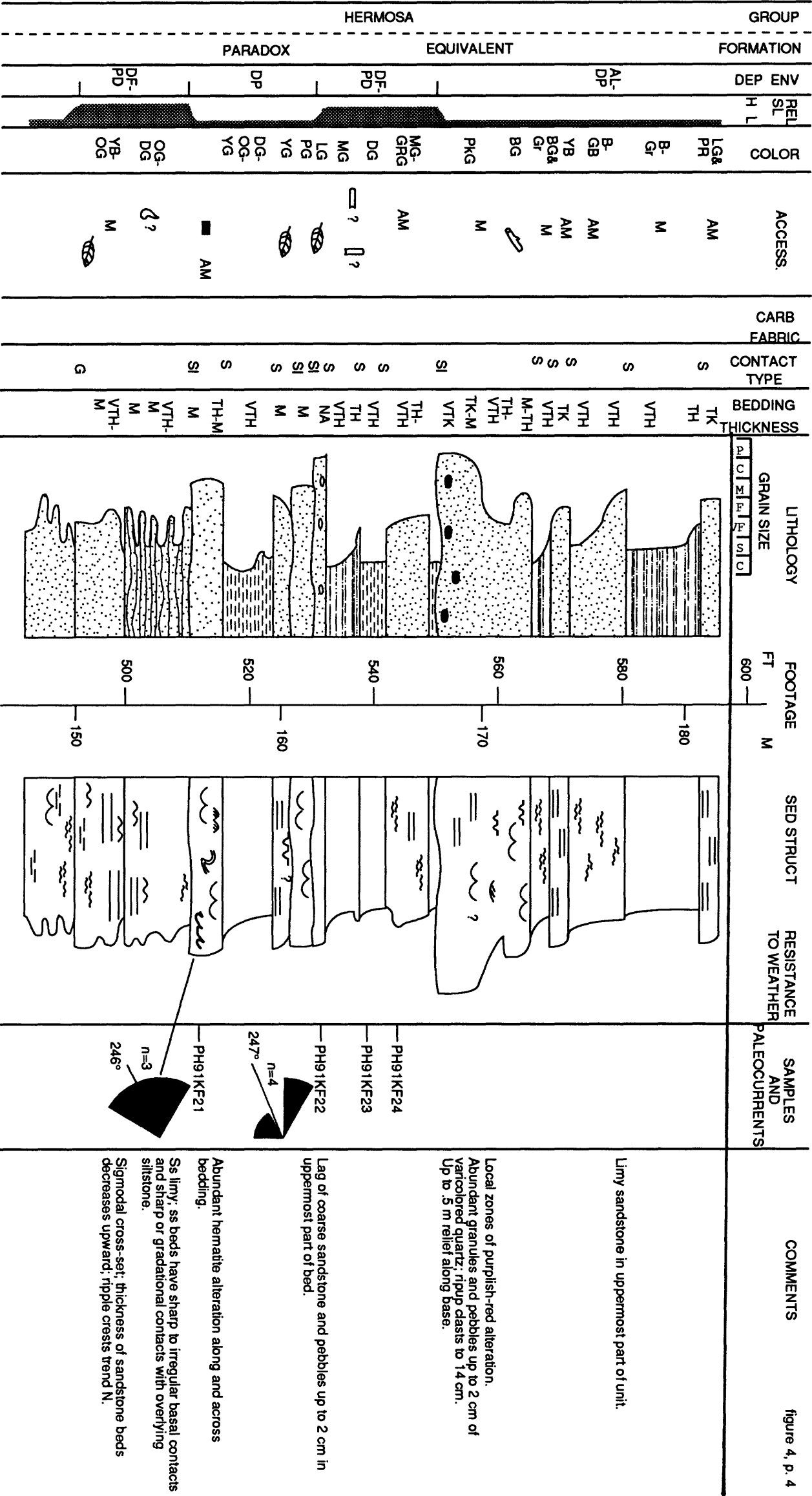


figure 4, p. 4

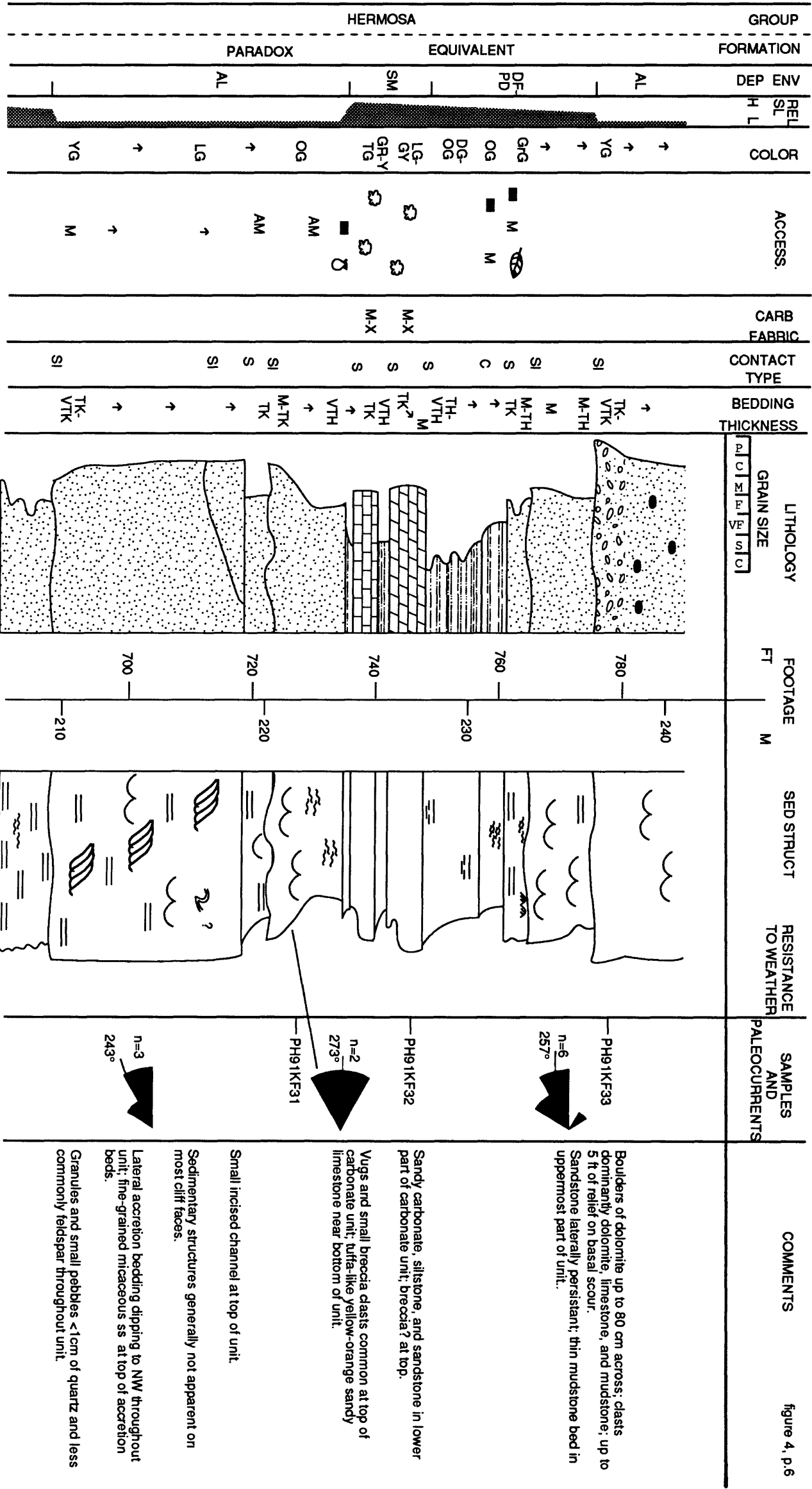
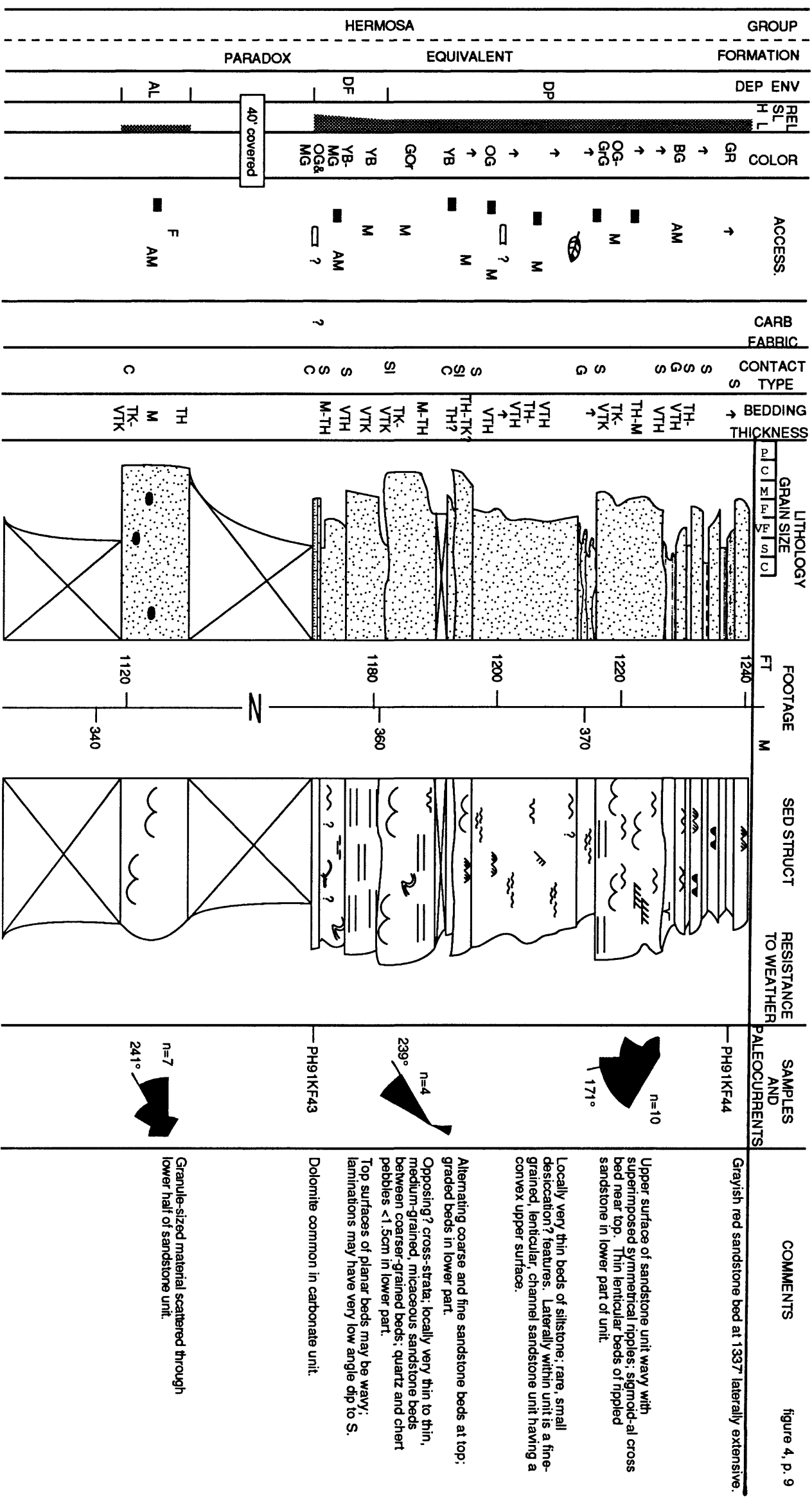
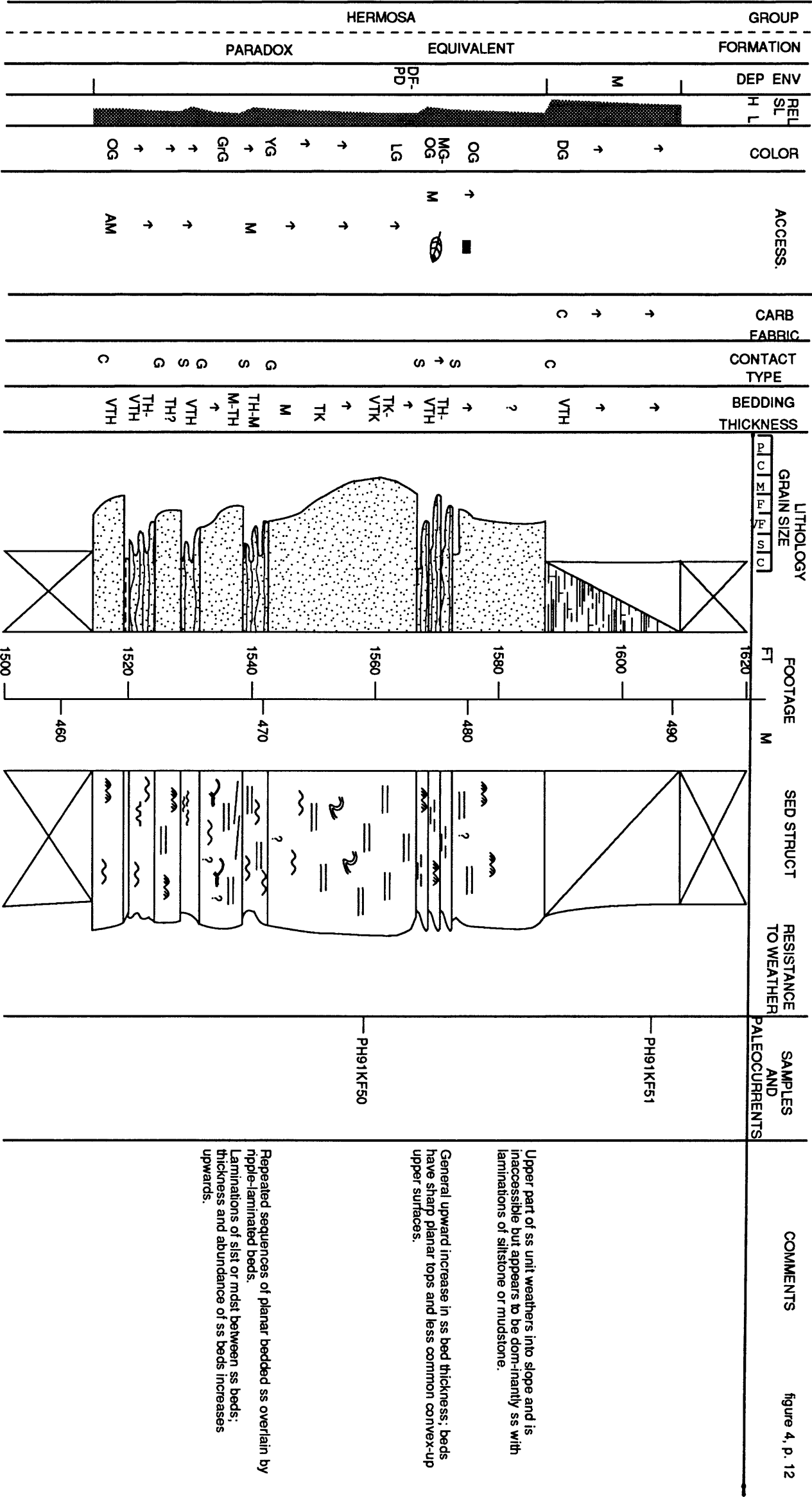


figure 4, p 6

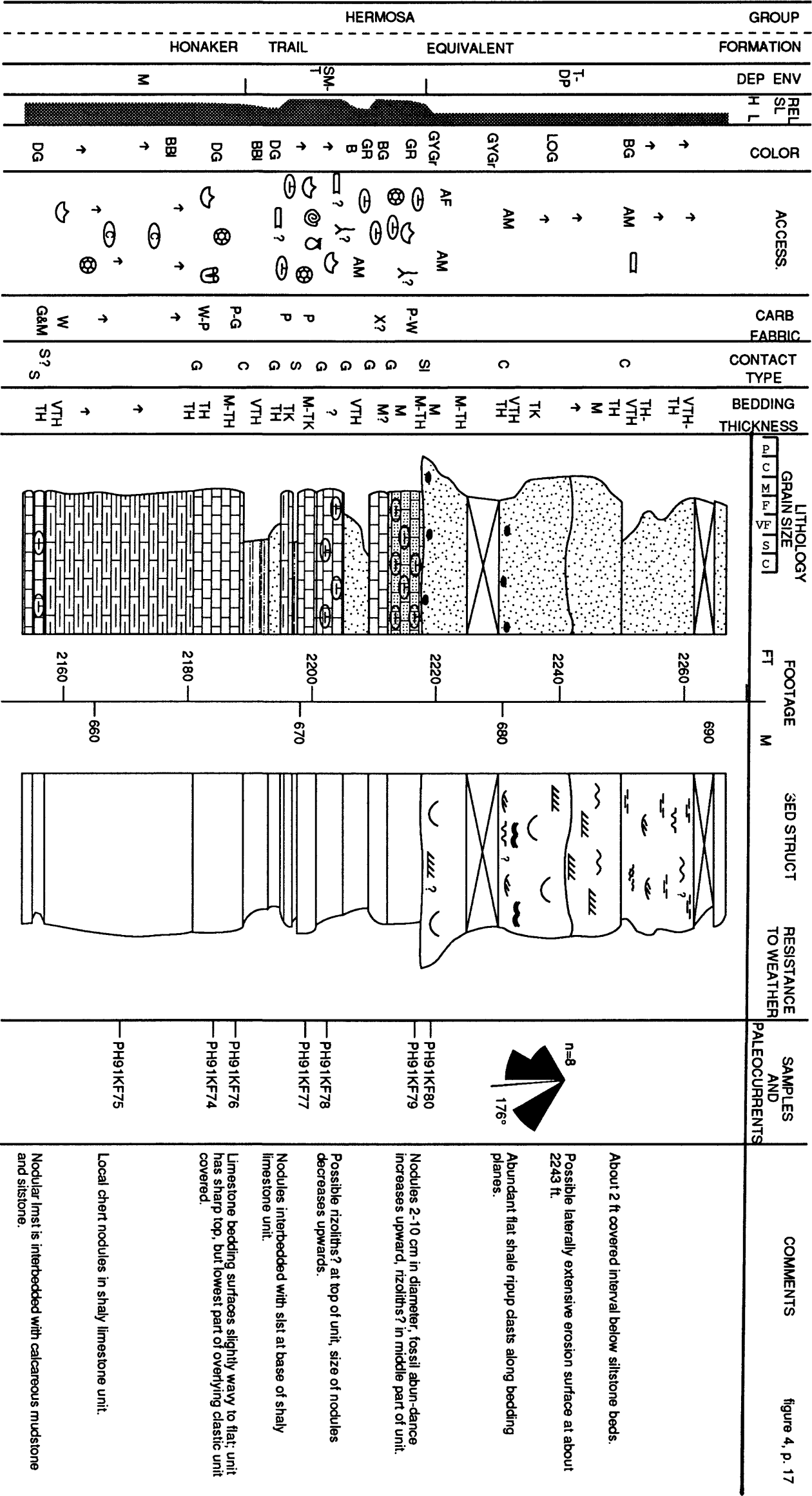


HERMOSA		GROUP
PARADOX	EQUIVALENT	FORMATION
ME	DF	DEP ENV
VL-LG	OG	REL SL H L
↑	↑	COLOR
↑	↑	ACCESS.
↑	↑	CARB FABRIC
?	?	CONTACT TYPE
VT-H-TH?	VT-H-TH	BEDDING THICKNESS
1340	1440	LITHOLOGY
1360	1460	FOOTAGE
1380	1480	SED STRUCT
1400	1500	RESISTANCE TO WEATHER
1420	1520	SAMPLES AND PALEOCURRENTS
1440	1540	COMMENTS
1460	1560	figure 4, p. 11



GROUP		HERMOSA		PARADOX		EQUIVALENT		HONAKER TRAIL FORMATION EQUIVALENT	
DEP	ENV	AL	DP	DF	PD	SM	M	AL	DP
REL	SL	H	L						
COLOR		BG	→	→	→	→	→	→	→
ACCESS.		⊕ ⊕		→	→	→	→	→	→
CARB FABRIC		W-P W		W-P M-W → W-P W					
CONTACT TYPE		C		SI ?		SI		SI	
BEDDING THICKNESS		→ TH-M		→ M		→ VTK?		→ VTK?	
LITHOLOGY		al cl sl ls fs st sc							
FOOTAGE		FT							
SED STRUCT									
RESISTANCE TO WEATHER									
SAMPLES AND PALEOCURRENTS		PH91KF67 PH91KF66 PH91KF65		PH91KF64		PH91KF63 PH91KF62			
COMMENTS		<p>Nodular weathering texture common; bedding surfaces wavy to irregular; laminations of silty limst or limy siltstone common.</p> <p>Most of sandstone forms inaccessible cliff face. Troughs show transport to the SW, no apparent reversal of transport directions. Sandstone unit is laterally persistent and contains an extensive high relief scour surface that is best observed from across Animas Valley.</p> <p>Clay ripup clasts up to 14 cm common near base of sandstone but decrease rapidly in abundance upward.</p> <p>Laterally discontinuous clay drapes above HCS? beds.</p> <p>Sedimentary structures not apparent in upper part of unit. In lower part of sandstone unit thin siltstone beds overlie sandstone beds; sharp contacts between beds.</p> <p>Ss beds commonly separated by VTH-TH siltstone or mudstone beds.</p> <p>Wavy to irregular bedding surfaces in carb-onate unit.</p> <p>Locally TH-M beds of siltstone between carbonate beds; bedding surfaces of carbonate irregular to wavy. Fossils rare in micrite beds.</p> <p>Carbonate contains interbeds of siltstone.</p>							

figure 4, p. 15



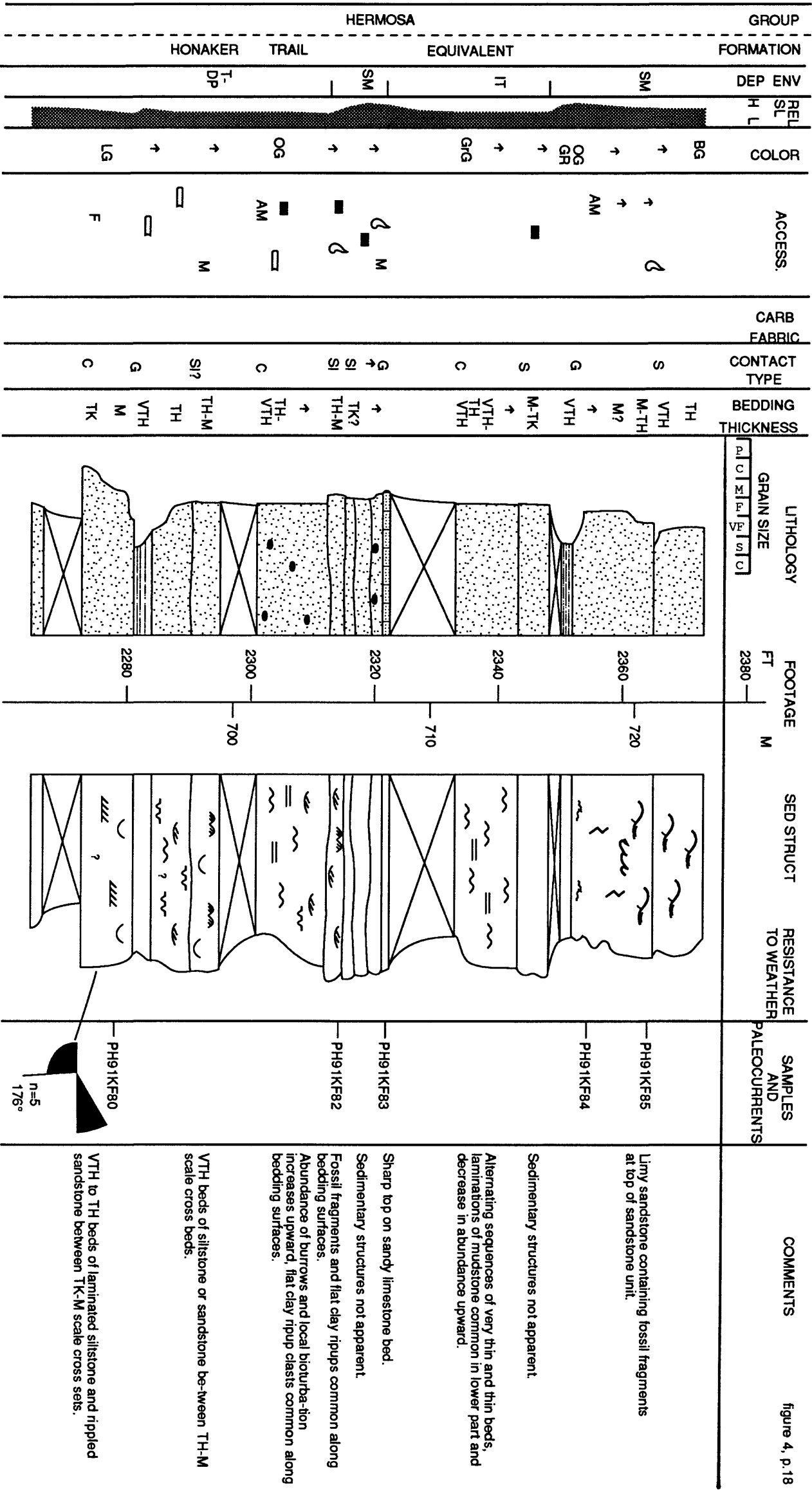


figure 4, p.18

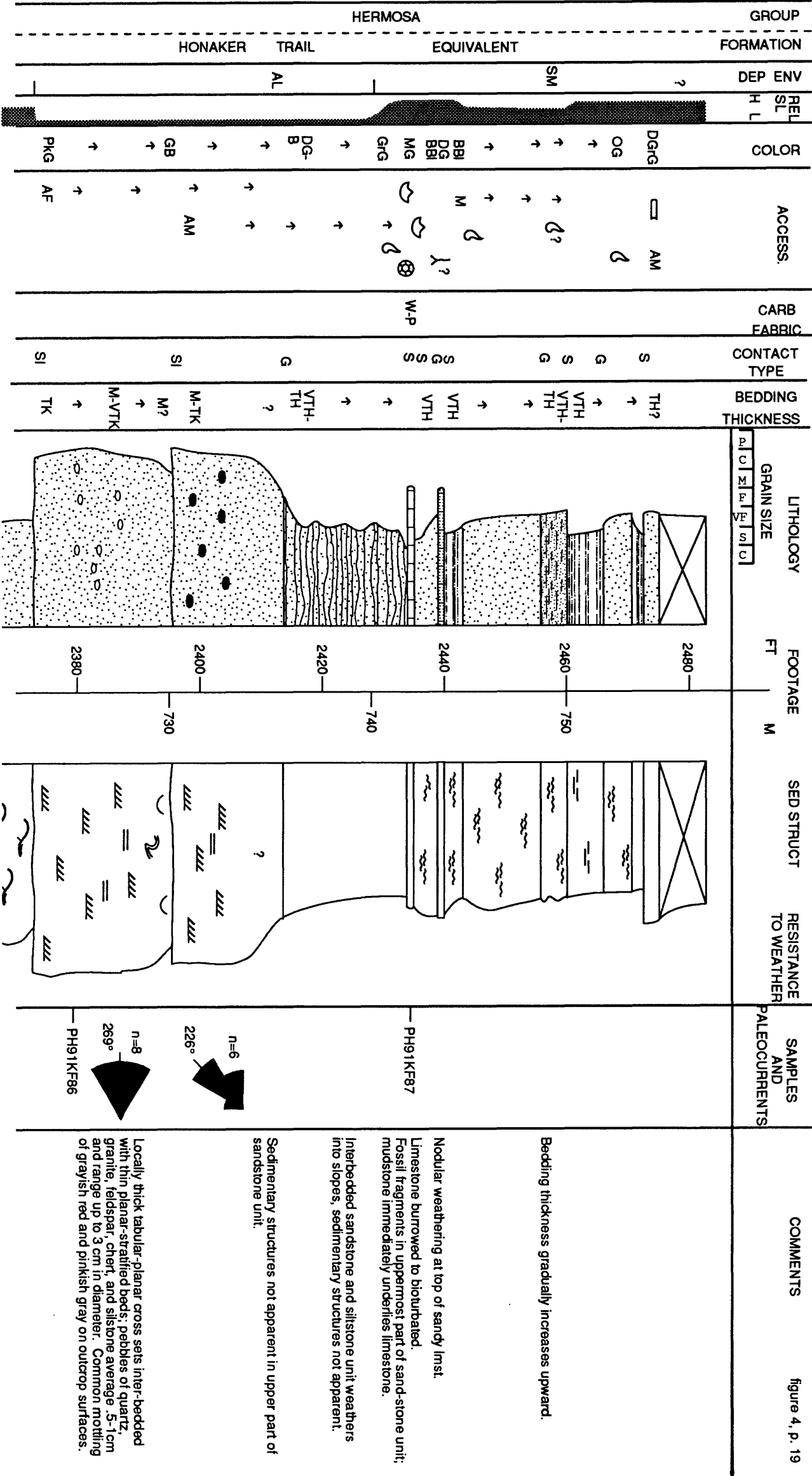


figure 4, p. 19

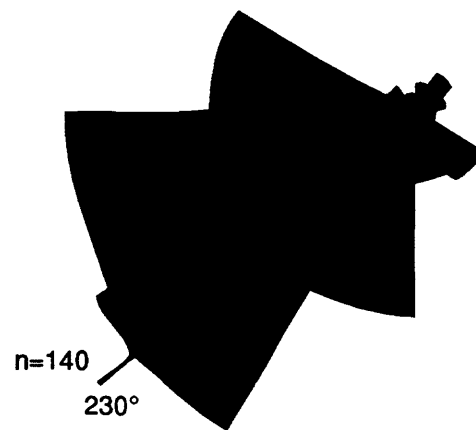


Figure 5. Rose diagram showing combined data from the entire Hermosa Group at Hermosa Mountain. Average mean vector is 230°; N is the number of measurements.