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Principles of Alluvial Fan Morphology



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Front cover: Aerial view of the distal front of the Ze'elim alluvial fan, prograding toward the receding Dead Sea, the Rift Valley, Israel. The drainage pattern changes from diverging and aggrading at the alluvial fan front (lower part of photo) to a converging and entrenching dendritic system on the exposed coastal area (the upper part of photo). (Map data Google Earth, DigitalGlobe, CC BY-4.0)

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This volume is devoted to my mother Trude Schneider Bowman and to my father Dr. Robert Schneider from Eger (Cheb) Czechoslovakia, who was killed by the British Navy when entering Palestine on board of the refugee vessel "Tiger Hill" and to my stepfather Dr. Ernst Bowman, to whom I owe my education. We were all escaping the Nazi regime.

Preface

Alluvial fans have been studied and restudied by many researchers worldwide, amounting to an inventory of hundreds of publications and more, many of which have been studied while preparing this volume. The challenge was to bring together the knowledge dispersed widely in the literature, including regional case studies. The manifold aspects addressed in the present volume – morphology, processes, systems, ratios, rates, temporal aspects, controlling factors, and human impacts – should provide a useful basis for understanding alluvial fans. A selection of papers has been attached to each chapter for additional, more focused reading. The complex interdependence of the fan morphology and the mechanism of sediment transport and distribution along confined channelized flows or unconfined surfaces needs, for example, additional reading.

This volume is intended to serve students in earth sciences, engineers, and planners. Of significant help was my experience in lecturing the Alluvial Fan course at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, including field trips to the Dead Sea rift with its multiple examples of alluvial fans in different stages of evolution.

Efforts have been made in the past to summarize various aspects of alluvial fans. This volume is an attempt to submit the principles of the great bulk of material in a textbook mode. The following are the main former reviews, summary papers, conference proceedings, and special volumes devoted to alluvial fans:

Blair TC, McPherson JG (1994) Alluvial fans and their natural distinction from rivers based on morphology, hydraulic processes, sedimentary processes, and facies assemblages. *J Sediment Res* 64A:450–489

Blair TC, McPherson JG (2009) Processes and forms of alluvial fans. In: Parsons AJ, Abrahams AD (eds) *Geomorphology of desert environments*, 2nd edn. Springer, New York, pp 413–467

Bull WB (1977) The alluvial fan environment. *Prog Phys Geogr* 1(2):227–270

Clark LE (2015) Experimental alluvial fans: advances in understanding of fan dynamics and processes. *Geomorphology* 244:135–145

Ethridge, FG (1985) Modern alluvial fans and deltas in recognition of fluvial depositional systems and their resource potential. In: Flores RM, Ethridge FG, Miall AD, Galloway WE, Fouch TD (eds), *SEPM short course*. Tulsa, SEPM, 19, pp. 101–143

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Thanks to Ruth, my friend for life, who brought the desert morphology into our home by her aquarelle paintings which I, Michal, Ehud, and Tomer endlessly enjoyed.

I am grateful for the permissions granted to all the republished figures.

Dan Bowman

Contents

1	Definitions and Setting	1
	References	10
2	Magnitude and Sourcing	13
2.1	Fan Sourcing	13
2.2	Dimensions	16
2.2.1	How Small Can Alluvial Fans Be?	16
2.3	Megafans	18
2.3.1	The Kosi and the Okavango Megafans	21
	References	23
3	Slope Gradients	25
3.1	Slopes and Profiles	25
3.2	Controlling Factors	29
	References	35
4	Fan Morphometry	37
4.1	Definitions	37
4.2	Fan Area vs Drainage Area	39
4.3	Fan Slope vs Drainage Area	41
	References	41
5	Drainage	43
5.1	Fan Zonation	43
5.2	The Spread of Activity	45
5.3	Avulsion	45
5.4	Compensational Stacking	47
	References	47
6	Flows	49
6.1	Water and Hyperconcentrated Flows	49
6.2	Debris Flows	50
	References	55
7	Aggradation	57
	References	60

8	Fan Entrenchment	61
8.1	The Switch to Entrenchment	61
8.2	Controls of Entrenchment	62
8.3	Erosional Morphology	64
	References.	66
9	Textural and Facies Characteristics	69
9.1	Grain Size.	69
9.2	Facies	72
	References.	75
10	Pedogenic Processes	77
10.1	Development of Reg Soils	78
10.2	Calcretization and Salt Weathering	79
10.3	Varnish and Soil Rubification	80
10.4	Desert Pavement.	80
	References.	81
11	The Tectonic Control	83
11.1	Faulting of Alluvial Fans	84
11.2	Displaced Fans	85
11.3	Subsidence and Stacking	86
11.4	Sinuosity of the Mountain Front	87
	References.	88
12	The Climatic Control	91
12.1	The Effect of Vegetation and of the Water/Sediment Ratio.	92
12.2	The Paraglacial Impact.	93
12.3	Humid and Arid Impacts	94
	References.	95
13	The Base-Level Effect	97
	References.	99
14	Groundwater	101
14.1	Compartmentalization	102
14.2	Contamination, Recharge, and Tectonic Effects	104
14.3	Subsidence	104
	References.	105
15	Morphology of the Fan Surface	107
15.1	Fan Terraces	108
15.2	Surface Roughness.	109
15.3	Geomorphological Data	112
	References.	112

16	Dating of Alluvial Fans	115
16.1	Absolute Dating.....	116
16.2	Relative Dating.....	118
16.3	Rates of Deposition and Erosion.....	119
	References.....	120
17	The System Approach	123
17.1	Transitional Unstable Conditions.....	123
17.2	Feedbacks.....	124
17.3	Controls.....	124
17.4	Coupling.....	126
	References.....	126
18	Natural Hazards	127
18.1	The Hazards.....	127
18.2	Hazard Mapping.....	128
18.3	Protective Devices.....	130
	References.....	132
19	The Regional Approach: Alluvial Fans along the Dead Sea-Arava Rift Valley	135
19.1	Setting.....	136
19.2	Lake Lisan and the Dead Sea.....	136
19.3	The Terminal Retreat of Lake Lisan.....	139
19.4	Fan Incision.....	141
19.5	The Lowering Base-Level Effect.....	142
19.6	Alluvial Fans of the Arava Rift Valley.....	144
	References.....	148



Definitions and Setting

1

Abstract

The alluvial fan is a sediment storage in form of a prism by the mountain front, above a local base-level. Fans show in plan-view a triangular cone-shaped form, bridging in between highly erosive upland catchments and down-fan valleys. To form fans requires (a) an elevational difference and (b) a sharp change in the alluvial geometry when exiting the mountain front. Fan deltas are subaerial alluvial fans that prograde into a standing water body often as Gilbert-type fan deltas, recognizable by a tripartite internal geometry. Distinction should be made between mountain-front fans and tributary-junction fans.

Keywords

Playa · Fluvial geometry · Base-level · Triangular facet · Bajada · Apex · Fan embayment · Mid-fan · Toe · Pediment · Terminal fan · Accommodation space · Fan delta · Gilbert-type fan delta · Mountain-front fan · Tributary-junction fan

Drew created the term *alluvial fan* in 1873. The alluvial fan morphology bridges between the highly erosive upland catchments, where channels are confined and the sediment is produced and the down-fan basins or valley floors where channels can spread and the material is finally deposited. The classic alluvial fan type is a three-dimensional distributive stream deposit at the mountain feet, below a front escarpment (Fig. 1.1), piled up and stored on the way down to an ultimate sink. The initial condition for depositing alluvial fans requires *elevational differences* as between mountains and adjacent intermontane basins which operate as an *accommodation space* for sediment accumulation. A fault system may control the accommodation space and cause tilting and differential subsidence of the basin. Rise of a marine or a lacustrine base-level will likewise create an accommodation for alluvial sedimentation. Fans typically veneer mountain fronts of internally drained closed basins which are tectonic troughs, often with a salt terminal lake or with an extreme flat valley floor called *playa*.

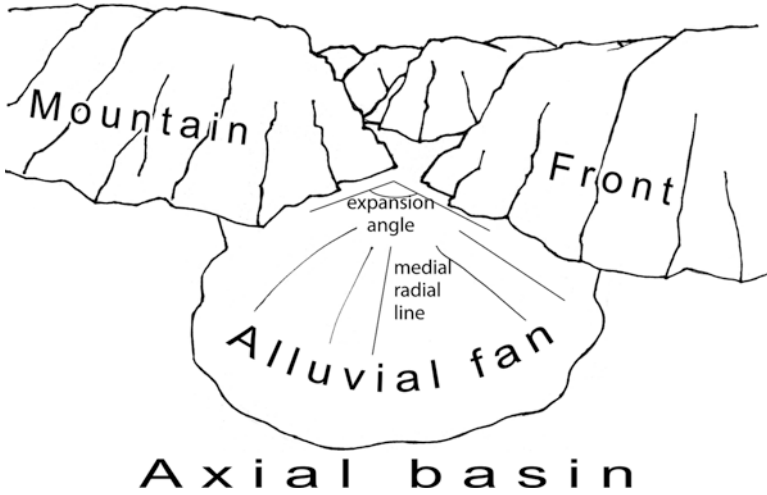


Fig. 1.1 An alluvial fan located at the feet of a mountain front

Each fan has its upstream *sourcing drainage basin* from which water and sediments are funneled through a confined mountain stream, whether perennial, intermittent, or ephemeral. From the point where the channel issues toward the valley, flows expand and become free to swing laterally, to braid and to form a distributive triangular network. Such branching systems are typically associated with environments of net deposition. The classical alluvial fan resembles a cone with an expansion angle, radiating downslope from a sharp termination of the mountainous relief, making a convex pattern of downslope bowing contours. Debris flows, landslides, and talus cones often demonstrate similar conical fan-shaped landforms. A *medial radial line* often splits fans into two halves. Because of confinement problems along their boundaries, not all alluvial fans are semi-conical shaped.

Alluvial fans are the outcome of the erosional response to a rising relief. The fans compose a sediment storage in the form of a prism by the mountain front and serve as a periodic buffer for sediments and water in their move from mountainous erosive catchments. The alluvial fan environment is often hundreds of meters above the *local terminal base-level*. The bedrock slopes along the range front display *triangular facets* between the fan outlets, i.e., triangular mountain-front bedrock slopes between the V-shaped valleys (Figs. 1.2 and 1.3). The magnitude of the facets depends mainly on the width of the drainage basins. Between long and narrow drainage basins, the facets are small and closely spaced.

The term *terminal fan* (Tunbridge 1984) has been suggested for fluvial distributary ephemeral systems in arid and semiarid environments, where high evaporation and percolation into the channel bed make a significant downstream reduction in discharge. The flow splits into smaller distributaries and causes runoff to vanish gradually (Kelly and Olsen 1993; Nichols and Fisher 2007). The morphological,

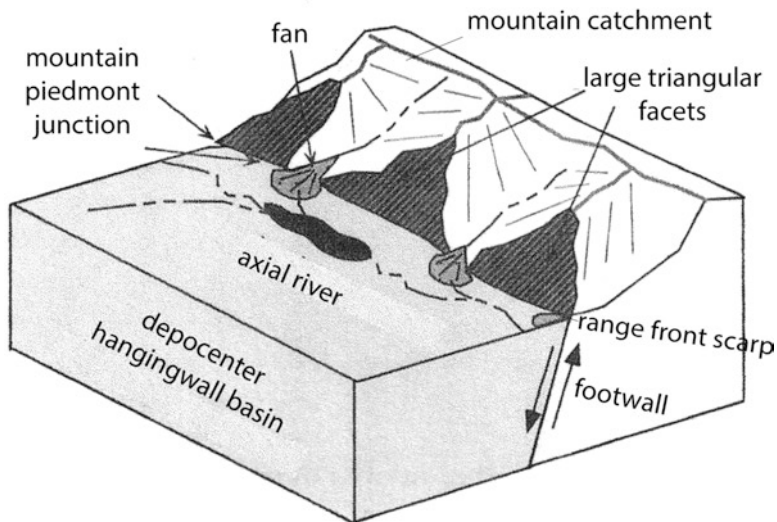


Fig. 1.2 Typical alluvial fans location along a normal fault at a range front. Sourcing drainage basins are entrenched in the mountainous footwall. Triangular facets indicate the mountain front. The fans prograde towards the axial river in the hanging wall basin. (Modified after Burbank and Anderson 2011)

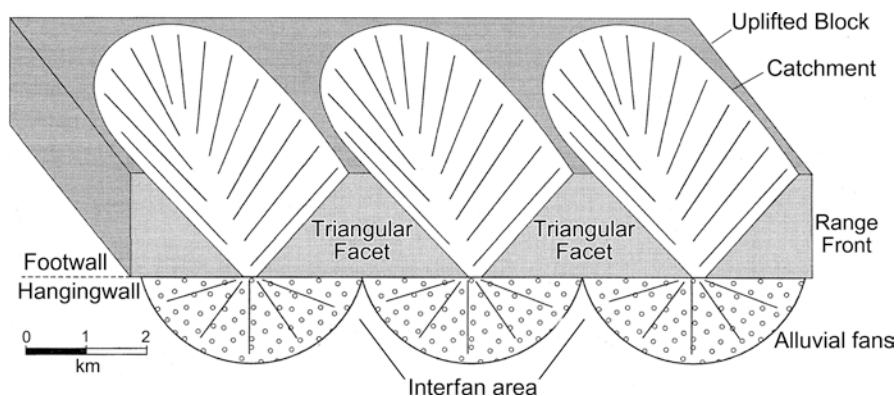


Fig. 1.3 Typical alluvial fan location along a range front. The triangular facets may retain partly the initial fault plane. They owe their size to the spacing of the channels. (Modified after Blair 1999)

sedimentological, stratigraphical, and dynamic characteristics which have been related to terminal fans (Friend 1978; Olsen 1987; Abdullatif 1989; Kelly and Olsen 1993; Friend et al. 1999; Arzani 2007; Stephen and Mountney 2009) are those typical to alluvial fans. The terminal fan concept does not contribute to an improved

understanding of the alluvial fan environment. It seems unjustified to use the *terminal fan* concept as a distinctive fan model, a conclusion also shared by North and Warwick (2007).

Alluvial fan evolution is often triggered by thrusting (Fig. 1.4). Deformation pulses may uplift and rejuvenate the source areas. Long periods of mountain uplift and sinking of the nearby basins are important for maintaining the elevational differences and allowing continuous fan sourcing. Fan progradation is controlled by the ratio of subsidence of the accommodation space to the sediment supply from the hinterland. If the rate of sediment delivery and the flux from the source basin exceeds the subsidence, fans will overflow and prograde (Clevis et al. 2004). Fans may prograde tens of kilometers away from the active thrust front. Increase in accommodation space by subsidence will confine the accumulation of fans closer to the mountain front.

Alluvial fans can be distally confined by an axial river and laterally by neighboring fans or stay unconfined (Fig. 1.5). Alluvial fans may thus appear individually uncoalesced as a well-defined single unit with interfan areas drained by channels sourced from the mountain front. Fans may alternatively show lateral

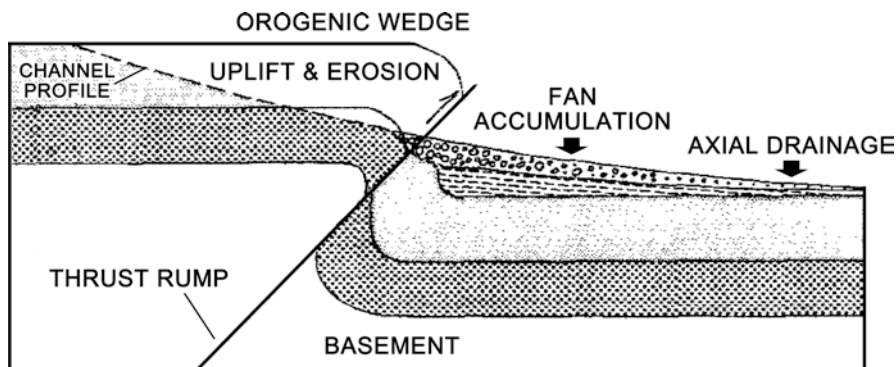


Fig. 1.4 The location of alluvial fans in front of a foreland uplift following unroofing. The uplifted orogenic wedge above the thrust ramp includes the sourcing drainage basins. (Modified from Decelles et al. 1991)

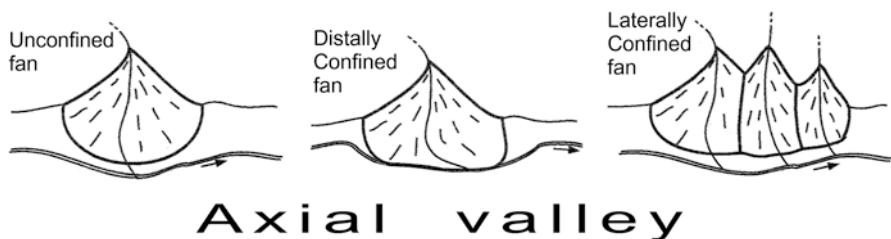


Fig. 1.5 Categorization of alluvial fan confinement. (After Crosta and Frattini 2004)

coalescing with neighboring fans or with the axial basin deposits. Closely spaced alluvial fans may interfinger but not merge, each remaining an individual structure. The narrower the spacing between the catchment outlets, the more the fans become coalesced. Fully merged alluvial fans are called *bajada* (Eckis 1928) and lack a fan-shaped form. It may attain lengths of over 100 km and a thickness of a few tens to a few hundreds of meters, composing a continuous depositional apron. The convexity of its individual fan cones is lost, and contour lines become parallel and linear (Blair and McPherson 2009). Topographically, alluvial fans display typical half-circular contours and show typical convex cross profiles parallel to the mountains (Figs. 1.6 and 1.7) with the central part of the fans almost invariably higher because of more deposition (Hooke and Rohrer 1979). The typical

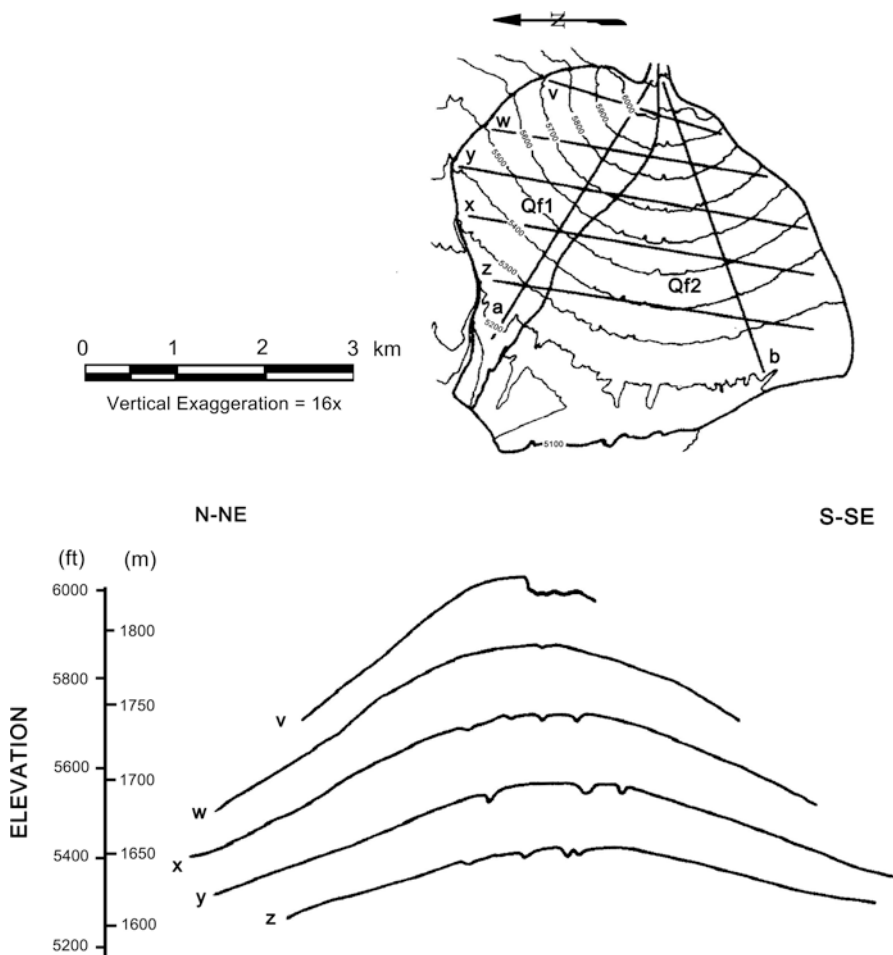


Fig. 1.6 Characteristic convex cross-fan profiles of Cedar Creek alluvial fan. (Following Ritter et al. 1993)