Development of nano-fabrication and high-resolution electron microscopy techniques: their possible applications to resource geology

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In order to explore accessible and profitable natural resources, scientific elucidation of their origin and evolution are an essential issue. The natural resources often have fine-grained textures and minute mineral/fluid inclusions in the host minerals. Therefore, microanalysis is required to clarify their mineralogical and geochemical characteristics in detail. Focused-ion beam (FIB) microfabrication and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) are potentially effective techniques for this purpose. FIB allows to precisely extract portions of interest in sub-micron scale from various types of samples. Using TEM, microtextural, chemical, and crystallographic information can be obtained in nano-scale spatial resolution from ultrathin-film (100–200 nm) samples. With taking these technical advantages, state-of-the-art FIB and TEM at JAMSTEC KOCHI have been applied to a variety of geosciences including clay mineralogy [1], biomineralization [2], mantle rheology [3], and meteoritics [4].

One of uniqueness of the FIB/TEM laboratory at KOCHI is a combined FIB-FESEM instrument equipped with an energy dispersive spectrometer (EDS) and a cryo-holder system [5]. We are currently developing a FIB-fabrication scheme of fluid inclusions in minerals such as olivine and halite, so that those fluids are exposed in frozen state for their in-situ chemical analysis including X-ray elemental mapping using EDS [6]. 3D tomography by micro X-ray CT is effective to visualize distribution of fluid inclusions especially in nontransparent minerals prior to nanofabrication and analysis by the FIB-FESEM system.

The nanoscale occurrence of fluid (as voids) and mineral inclusions can be further characterized by high-resolution TEM. This technique would be useful for mineralogical analysis of fine-grained resource materials such as deep-sea mud containing abundant rare-earth elements [7] and manganese deposits. As a typical example, we have mineralogically characterized several-micron-sized Mn-rich microparticles recently discovered in seafloor sediments, and found vernadite-like mineral therein based on their electron diffraction patterns and elemental mappings [8]. We are further developing the linkage fabrication/analysis scheme to extend toward more comprehensive sample analysis including trace elemental and isotopic analyses using NanoSIMS [9]. These microanalysis techniques would play a key role for our better understanding of environments for the formation of resource materials.

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