

Red Pigmentation of Mussel Shells at the Middle Grant Creek Site

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Introduction:

The Middle Grant Creek site is located in Northeastern Illinois, dating to the early seventeenth century.¹ It falls within the so-called Huber phase of the Oneota tradition, a prehistoric-protohistoric culture extending from Lake Michigan to the Missouri river.² Archaeological work at the site uncovered several mussel shells with fragments of red coloration on their exterior surfaces, appearing to be an applied pigment. This study utilizes several scientific analytical methods to examine the composition of these red portions, specifically interested in determining whether this color resulted from interactions with the surrounding soil following burial on site, or if it had been intentionally added.

Although mussels were used primarily as a food source within Oneota society, there is evidence that their shells were used, not only functionally as tools or as temper for pottery, but also for their appearance. For example, the elephant-ear and similarly striking shell varieties were buried with the dead.³ Similarly, marine shells were often found within burials, worked into goods such as beads or ear plugs.⁴ These examples demonstrate a possible interest in the shells within ritual contexts as ornamentation, manifesting possible motivation for adding coloration to their surfaces.

Mussel shells showing evidence of red pigmentation were found within subterranean storage pits, which were originally used to store maize, but eventually filled with refuse including ceramic, faunal and lithic debris.⁵ Within Oneota sites as a whole, most mussels were

¹ McLeester et al., "Protohistoric Marine Shell Working," 550.

² Pauketat, *The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology*, 414.

³ Theler and Boszhardt, *Twelve Millennia*, 209.

⁴ McLeester et al., "Protohistoric Marine Shell Working," 549–50.

⁵ McLeester et al., 550.

sourced from nearby bodies of water.⁶ The majority of shells at Middle Grant Creek were most likely originally drawn from the nearby Kankakee River.

A variety of sites of the Oneota Culture demonstrate extensive use of hematite, a naturally occurring iron (III) oxide, for painting wall designs and a variety of objects, most often pottery.⁷ Red ochre or paintstone were also used as pigment, although less frequently.⁸ As a result, it was hypothesized that hematite ore could have been similarly ground and applied these shells.



Figure 1: The three mussel shells analyzed, labeled (from left to right), shell A, B, and C.

Procedure:

This study examined three shells from Middle Grant Creek. Two display red surface coloration as potentially added pigment, named shells A and B for the purposes of this study. The third, shell C, is a modern rather than archaeological shell, displaying red splotches on the interior, likely deposited through natural processes and included for comparison (see Fig. 1). Finally, soil samples from three levels of the pit, 8, 9 and 13 were analyzed. The greatest focus was placed on level 13 as adjacent to the location of the buried shells of this study, and the others

⁶ Theler and Boszhardt, *Twelve Millennia*, 209.

⁷ Berry and Chapman, "An Oneota Site in Missouri 1," 299.

⁸ Chapman and Chapman, *Indians and Archaeology of Missouri, Revised Edition*, 73.

were included for comparison. Three primary scientific techniques were used to study the shell composition, detailed below.

X-ray fluorescence (XRF) is beneficial as a non-destructive technique allowing for fast and easy identification of elements contained within a sample.⁹ However, the elemental acquisition of XRF is limited, most consistently identifying elements in the titanium through niobium range. Elements with low atomic numbers or with very low concentration within the sample generally cannot be detected utilizing this technique.¹⁰ XRF analysis was used as a first method to compare red and plain white portions of shells A and B, alongside examining soil samples from the same storage pit. Both plain white portions of the shell from its exterior and interior were analyzed.

Additionally, a portion of shell B was analyzed using XRF mapping (Fig. 2), a process in which hundreds of points across a selected region, in this case approximately a centimeter, are analyzed and compiled to produce an image displaying the distribution of an individual element across the surface. In this case, images were produced to display the elemental distribution of Aluminum, Calcium, Iron, Potassium, Manganese, Silicon, and Titanium, all of which had appeared in single point analysis of the shell.

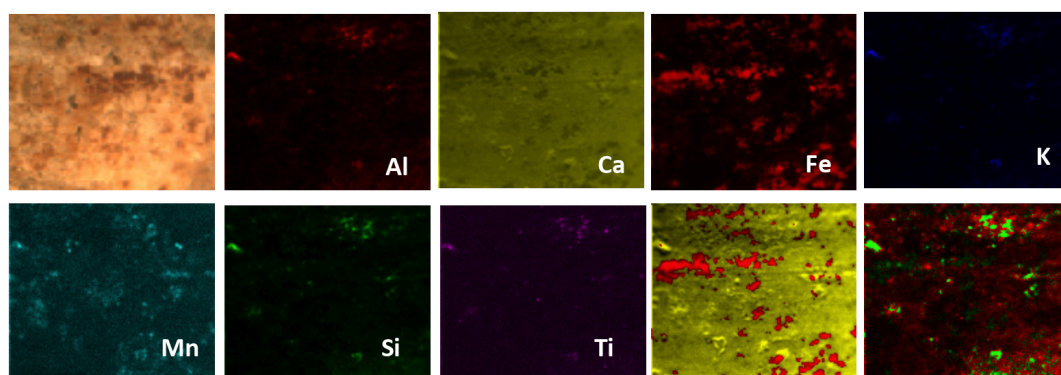


Figure 2: X-ray fluorescence mapping of Shell B

⁹ Shackley, *X-Ray Fluorescence Spectrometry (XRF) in Geoarchaeology*, 8–9.

¹⁰ Shackley, 10.

Information on the molecular composition of the shells and soil samples were acquired using Raman spectroscopy. Within this method, the Raman device bombards the sample with a laser beam of known wavelength. After hitting the sample, the scattered light reveals subtle energy variations due to changes in the vibrational states of the molecules making up the sample. The resulting Raman bands reflect the consequent difference between the incident radiation and scattered radiation. As a result, measuring this value reveals the energy of molecular vibrations, which in turn is determined through the atoms making up the molecule, the chemical bonds connecting them, and the physicochemical environment surrounding them.¹¹ Since the combination of bands and their relative intensities are unique to each molecular structure, comparing the resulting band with standard samples allows for identification of an unknown sample.

Raman spectroscopy as an analytical technique has several key advantages. It allows for in-situ study of the piece, without the need for removing an individual sample, is non-destructive, and has high spectral resolution. Additionally, a wide range of Raman data from a variety of archaeological artifacts allows for a wealth of comparative materials for identification and comparison of specific pigments. As a result, some scholars consider it to be the best analytical method for studying the pigmentation of archaeological artifacts.¹²

One major limitation to Raman spectroscopy, however, is fluorescence, especially challenging on an uneven and porous surface such as mussel shells. Fluorescence can be decreased using a lower power laser.¹³ However, in this study a green laser of 532 nm was used for all final analysis. Although data collection was also taken using a red laser of lower energy,

¹¹ Creagh and Bradley, *Radiation in Art and Archeometry*, 81.

¹² Creagh and Bradley, 98.

¹³ Creagh and Bradley, 98.

no improvement on peak size was observed. Instead, increasing the accumulations did demonstrate an observable decrease in fluorescence. Each of the final spectra included in Appendix B result from 20 accumulations of 20 seconds, for a total exposure time of 400 seconds.

The white surface was analyzed to determine specific shell composition, along with extensive studies of the red portions of shells A and B. These were compared both with the red portions from the interior of shell C and with the soil sample (level 13).

The final methodology used in this study, scanning electron microscopy (SEM), produces high-magnification images and elemental composition analysis of a sample. A beam of electrons, accelerated and focused on the sample, is scanned across the surface, providing a detailed picture of its surface morphology. The high depth of field additionally allows for the analysis of several layers of uneven surfaces.¹⁴ Additionally, measuring the X-rays emitted from the specimen when under bombardment of the energetic electrons gives a picture of the elemental composition across its surface.¹⁵

Results:

The XRF map of the shell surface revealed that the red portions corresponded with areas of higher iron content (Fig. 2). Additionally, the concentrations of aluminum and silicon appeared to align with several small concentrated specks likely resulting from the aluminum silicates of the soil. Individual point analysis confirmed iron as the primary source of red coloration on the surface of the shell (Fig. 3). The plain white shell surface had minimal iron content, while a strong iron peak appeared on analysis of red colored portions. The calcium

¹⁴ Frahm, "Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)," 755.

¹⁵ Frahm, 755.

content from the shell, composed of calcium carbonate, remained high within regions of red pigmentation, but dropped significantly within brown, dirty regions, indicating that the red pigment had seeped into the shell surface, while the dirt retained a separate layer on its surface.

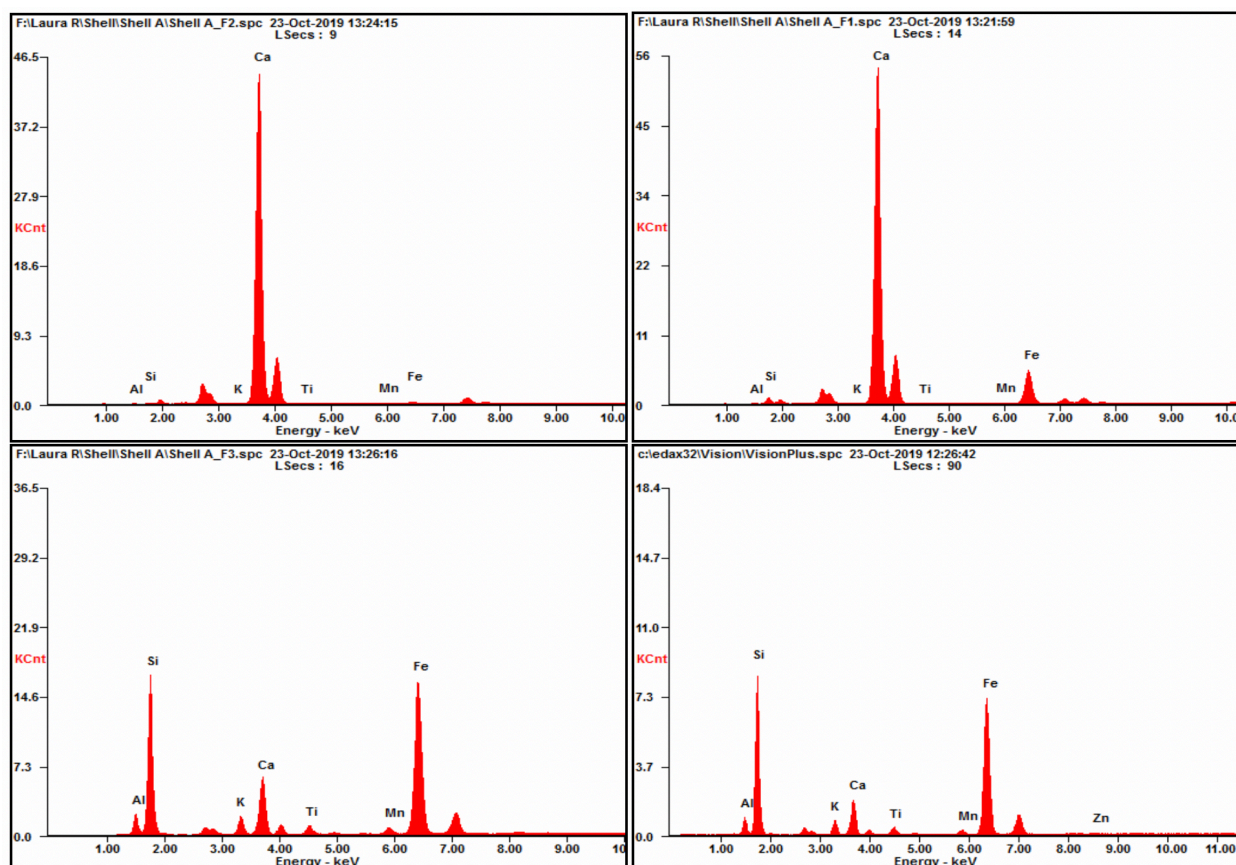


Figure 3: XRF graphs from shell B, from top left to bottom right, of the white, red, dirty portions of the shell, as well as a dirt sample (level 13). Figure 2: XRF graphs from shell B, from top left to bottom right, of the white, red, dirty portions of the shell, as well as a soil sample (level 13). See Appendix A for additional points and details.

The percent iron was higher both within dirty fragments on the shell and within the dirt sample (Fig. 3) with 9.22% and 9.17% iron by weight respectively compared to 7.19% within the red layer of the shell. As a result, the soil was not ruled out as a potential source for the iron coating the shell at this stage of analysis. However, the red pigmentation only appears on the exterior and XRF analysis of the interior surface of the shell confirmed minimal iron content, even in discolored

segments (see Appendix A). Likely, if iron were seeping from the soil onto the shell, it would be observed across both surfaces.

Raman analysis allowed for a distinction between the iron in the soil and within the red coloration of the shell. The soil sample had its highest intensity peak around 16000 cm^{-1} , which can be attributed to a C=C aromatic carbon double bond. Although carbon content in soil is not high, this peak is characteristic of soils because of its strong Raman scattering.¹⁶ This peak additionally appeared at a much lower intensity on the shell surface. The soil also revealed several iron-containing molecules, specifically hematite, Fe_2O_3 , and pyrite, FeS_2 (see Fig. 4).¹⁷⁻¹⁸

The largest peak of white portions of the shell appeared around 1080 cm^{-1} , which along with the peak at 710 cm^{-1} , can be attributed to calcite, the calcium carbonate making up the shell.¹⁹ Along with a small peak from the soil, traces of a goethite peak at 390 cm^{-1} were observed.²⁰ This goethite (FeOOH) peak increased in intensity within Raman analysis of red colored portions of the shell (Fig. 4). As a result, though both the soil and red pigmentation of the shell demonstrated iron content as seen within XRF analysis, Raman data demonstrated that the molecular forms of that iron varied.

¹⁶ Luna et al., “Classification of Soil Samples Based on Raman Spectroscopy and X-Ray Fluorescence Spectrometry Combined with Chemometric Methods and Variable Selection.”

¹⁷ “Hematite R070240 - RRUFF Database: Raman, X-Ray, Infrared, and Chemistry.”

¹⁸ “Pyrite R100166 - RRUFF Database: Raman, X-Ray, Infrared, and Chemistry.”

¹⁹ Marucci et al., “Raman Spectroscopic Library of Medieval Pigments Collected with Five Different Wavelengths for Investigation of Illuminated Manuscripts,” 1223.

²⁰ Bellot-Gurlet et al., “Raman Studies of Corrosion Layers Formed on Archaeological Irons in Various Media,” 150.

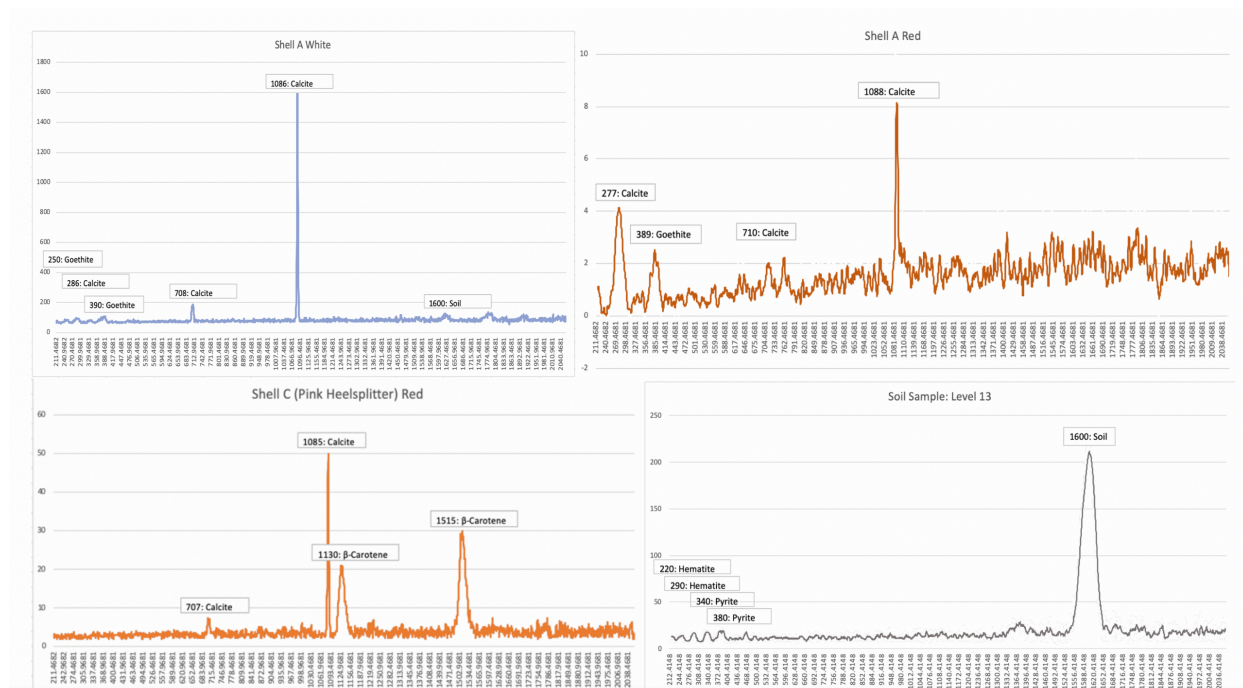


Figure 4: Raman spectra demonstrating three distinct sources of iron: goethite (iron oxyhydroxide, FeOOH), hematite (iron oxide, Fe_2O_3), pyrite (iron disulfide, FeS_2). Additionally, shell C demonstrated a non-iron source of red coloration, β -Carotene ($\text{C}_{40}\text{H}_{56}$). Additional Raman spectra included in Appendix B.

Finally, the red splotches inside shell C, the modern pink heelsplitter mussel shell were analyzed for comparison, as a natural surface red color similar in appearance. Raman spectroscopy confirmed that this red coloration was different in form from that on the archaeological samples. In this case, the red portions contained β -Carotene ($\text{C}_{40}\text{H}_{56}$).

The elemental composition observed through scanning electron microscopy (SEM) was drawn from an extremely small sample, allowing analysis to concentrate even more closely on red portions of the shell. As a result, a much larger percentage of iron than revealed through XRF analysis (see Fig 5). Additionally, the high oxygen content observed in SEM compositional analysis corresponds with the presence of iron oxyhydroxide, goethite, as an oxygen containing molecule.

Shell 1

Element	At. No.	Netto	Mass [%]	Mass Norm. [%]	Atom [%]	abs. error [%] (1 sigma)	rel. error [%] (1 sigma)
Oxygen	8	85397	21.57	31.07	49.81	2.48	11.48
Iron	26	84475	36.46	52.52	24.12	1.10	3.01
Carbon	6	9643	6.36	9.16	19.55	0.92	14.47
Silicon	14	40501	4.86	7.00	6.39	0.23	4.72
Titanium	22	768	0.17	0.24	0.13	0.03	19.78
		Sum	69.43	100.00	100.00		

Figure 5: SEM elemental composition analysis from red portion of Shell A

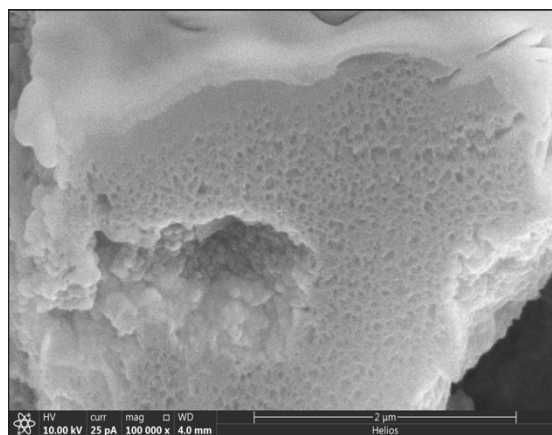


Figure 6: SEM image of shell cross-section

SEM additionally provided detailed images

demonstrating the interaction between the layer of red pigmentation with the shell material.

Specifically, in an approximately 4 μm cross-section of the colored shell surface, a smooth homogenous layer is observed laying on top of but also seeping into the porous shell (Fig. 6).

Images highlighting the concentrations of calcium, found in the calcium carbonate of the shell, and iron demonstrate a similar interaction between pigmentation and shell material. These SEM pictures demonstrate a distinct raised layer high in iron content on the surface of the shell. However, regions of iron and calcium are not entirely distinct. Iron-rich regions still show evidence of calcium, indicating that the red pigment seeped into the shell surface, exposing some calcium carbonate through the coating of red paint (Fig. 7).

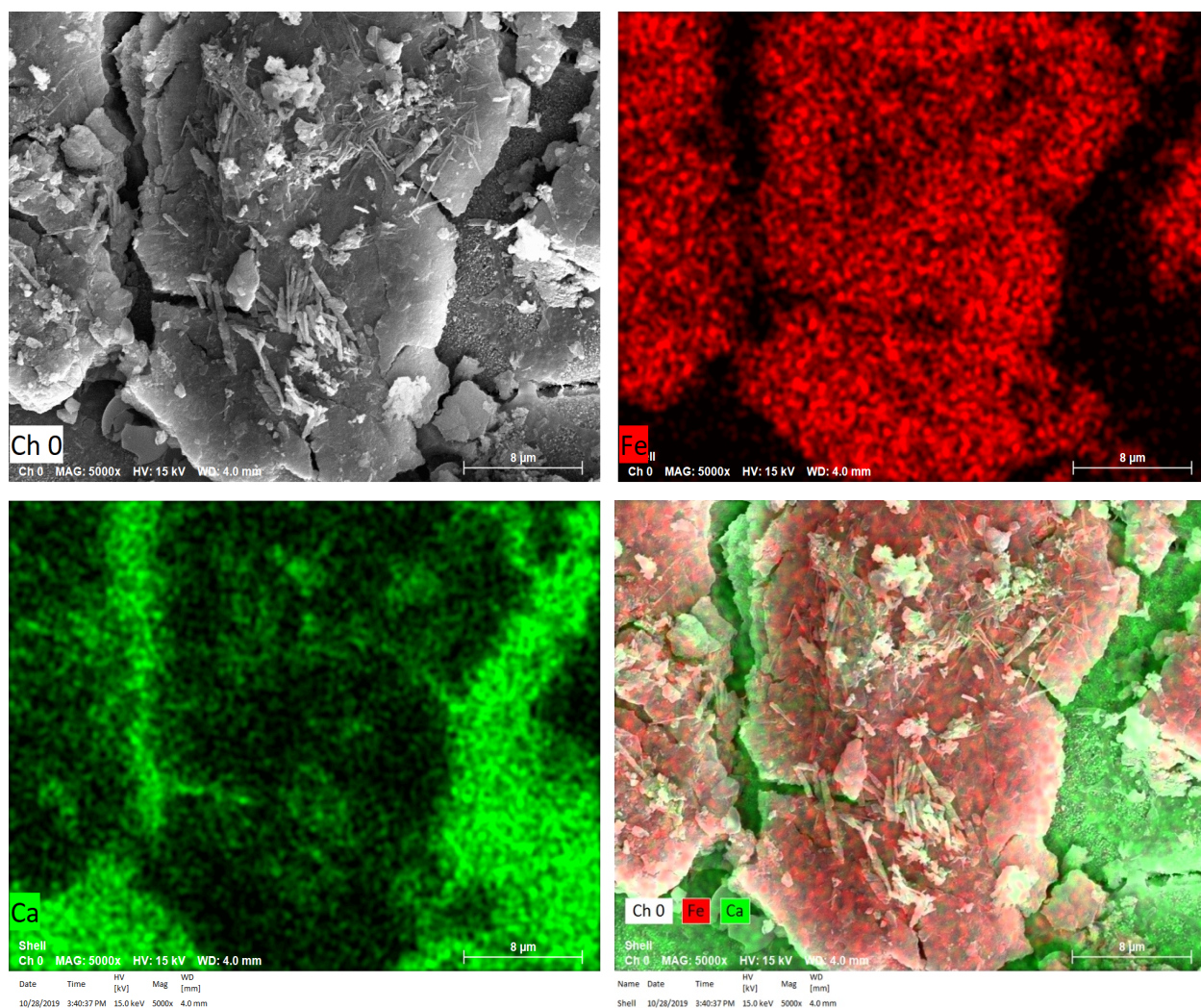


Figure 7: SEM images of red layer of shell with iron concentrated displayed in red and calcium in green

Conclusions:

Iron oxides often will change form over time or under exposure to light, especially common under the focused beam of the Raman spectrometer, making it challenging to narrow down original molecular structure. However, the dirt and shell analyzed in this study nonetheless displayed very distinct molecules. Hematite, found in the soil, is the most common and stable form of iron oxide, used at other Oneota sites for painting wall designs and objects, most often

pottery.²¹ However, the goethite layer on the surface of these shells is a feasible source, especially consistent to the region surrounding Middle Grant Creek. Goethite is the main component of bog iron ore, which, as hematite, could be ground into a pigment and applied as decoration to a surface. In fact, the Kankakee region of Illinois is said to have “near extensive bog iron ore.”²² As a result, the pigmentation of these shells could likely have been locally sourced.

Intentional coloration of the shells could indicate their role within a ritualistic context or as decorative ornamentation. A study of comparably red-colored shells from the Neanderthals of Iberia utilized similar scientific analysis to identify the pigmentation as a mixture of goethite and hematite.²³ These finds were used as evidence of body ornamentation and behavioral modernity within European Neanderthal communities, generally associated primarily with concurrent cultures of Africa.²⁴

Further study could compare Raman spectra of bog iron ore found near Middle Grant Creek to the results of this study as potential evidence for locally sourced pigmentation. Additionally, analysis could be carried out on other specimens of the site containing red pigmentation to determine if they also indicate goethite as the primary form of iron within paint. For example, a block of galena lead ore also excavated at the site was likely used for ritual purposes and displayed similar fragments of red paint to the shells. Finally, a study of the kinds of specimens found in the same level of the pit as the shells could look for objects with related functions. Other decorative or ritual objects could indicate a relation in use, ownership, and original context between the shells and specimens deposited alongside it.

²¹ Berry and Chapman, “An Oneota Site in Missouri 1,” 299.

²² Bateman et al., *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois*, 313.

²³ Zilhão et al., “Symbolic Use of Marine Shells and Mineral Pigments by Iberian Neandertals,” 1025.

²⁴ Zilhão et al., 1027.

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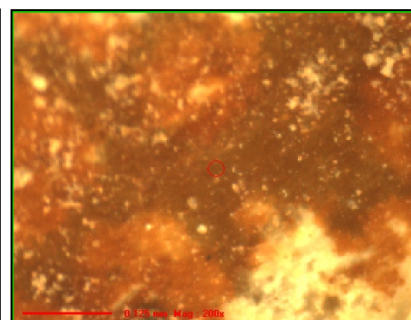
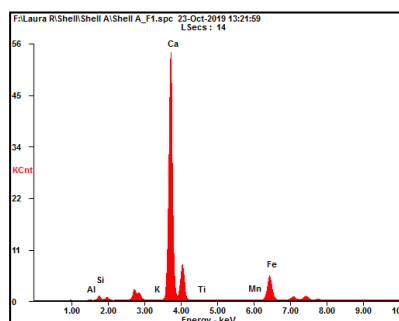
by Iberian Neandertals.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107, no. 3
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Appendices:

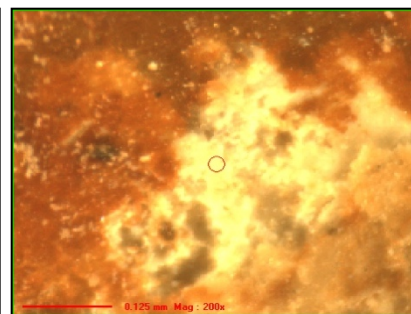
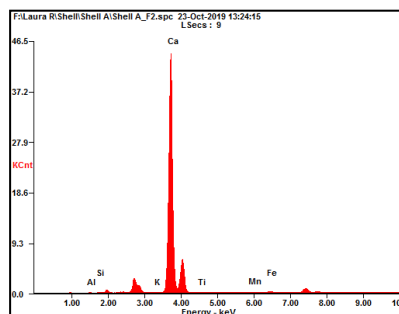
Appendix A: X-ray Fluorescence (XRF) Data

Shell A: Exterior

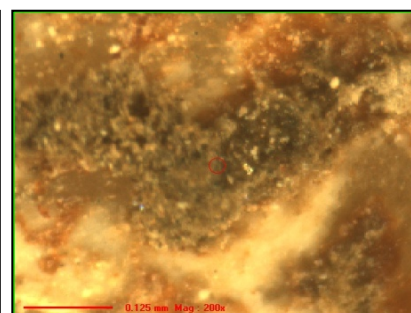
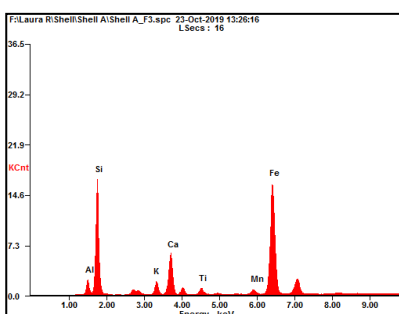
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<i>K K</i>	0.02	0.02
<i>CaK</i>	88.37	88.55
<i>TiK</i>	0.09	0.08
<i>MnK</i>	0.06	0.05
<i>FeK</i>	7.19	5.17



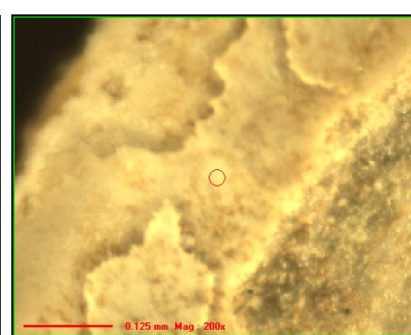
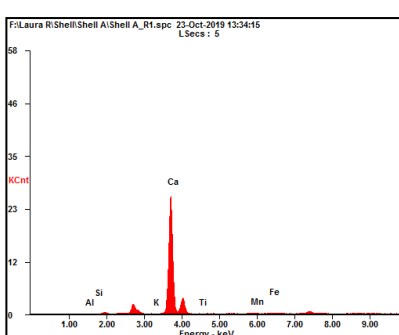
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<i>AlK</i>	0.40	0.60
<i>SiK</i>	0.48	0.68
<i>K K</i>	0.02	0.02
<i>CaK</i>	98.49	98.26
<i>TiK</i>	0.06	0.05
<i>MnK</i>	0.11	0.08
<i>FeK</i>	0.43	0.31



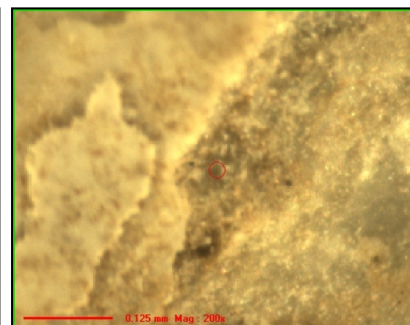
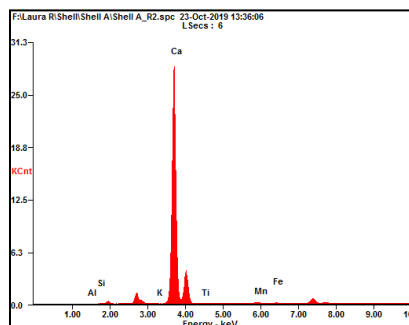
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<i>SiK</i>	58.85	65.66
<i>K K</i>	5.49	4.40
<i>CaK</i>	12.65	9.89
<i>TiK</i>	1.12	0.74
<i>MnK</i>	0.41	0.24
<i>FeK</i>	9.77	5.48



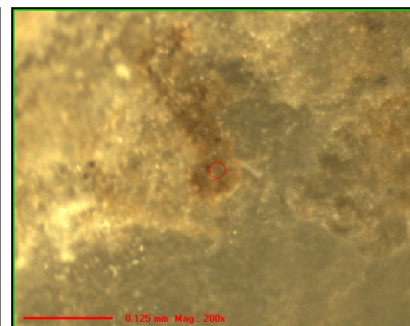
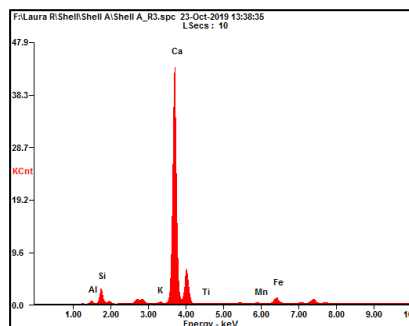
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<i>K K</i>	0.02	0.02
<i>CaK</i>	98.68	98.78
<i>TiK</i>	0.07	0.06
<i>MnK</i>	0.47	0.34
<i>FeK</i>	0.43	0.31



<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	0.24	0.36
<i>SiK</i>	0.30	0.42
<i>K K</i>	0.02	0.02
<i>CaK</i>	98.51	98.51
<i>TiK</i>	0.08	0.06
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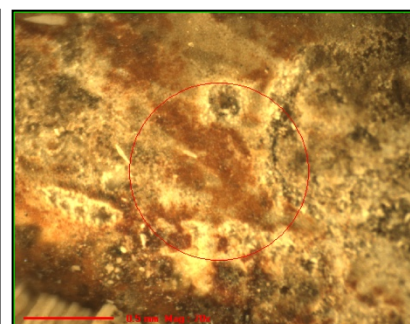
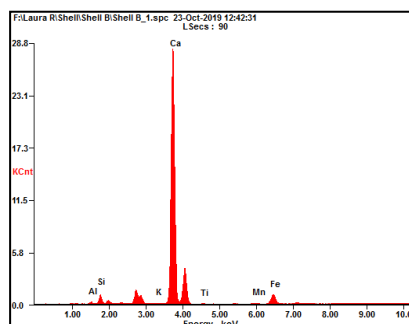


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<i>CaK</i>	81.49	76.37
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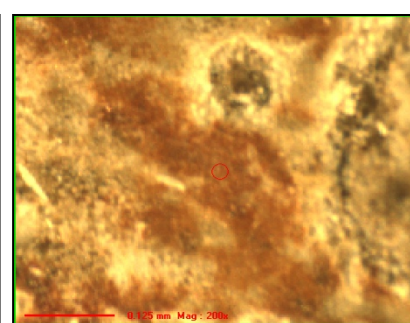
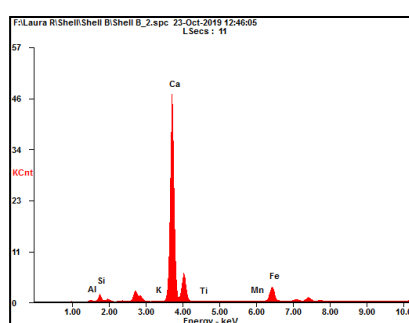


Shell B: Exterior

<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	2.75	3.94
<i>SiK</i>	6.72	9.26
<i>K K</i>	0.19	0.19
<i>CaK</i>	87.93	84.92
<i>TiK</i>	0.15	0.12
<i>MnK</i>	0.24	0.17
<i>FeK</i>	2.04	1.41

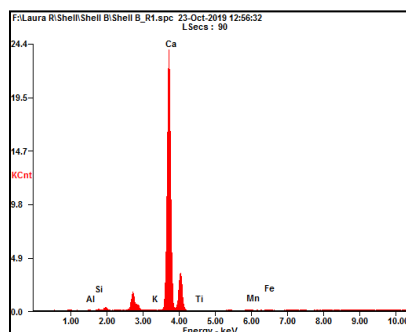


<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	2.48	3.59
<i>SiK</i>	6.45	8.97
<i>K K</i>	0.16	0.16
<i>CaK</i>	86.02	83.84
<i>TiK</i>	0.18	0.15
<i>MnK</i>	0.13	0.09
<i>FeK</i>	4.58	3.20

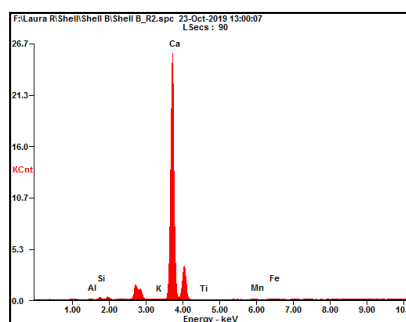


Shell B: Interior

<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	0.56	0.83
<i>SiK</i>	0.81	1.15
<i>K K</i>	0.06	0.06
<i>CaK</i>	98.24	97.72
<i>TiK</i>	0.02	0.02
<i>MnK</i>	0.21	0.16
<i>FeK</i>	0.09	0.06

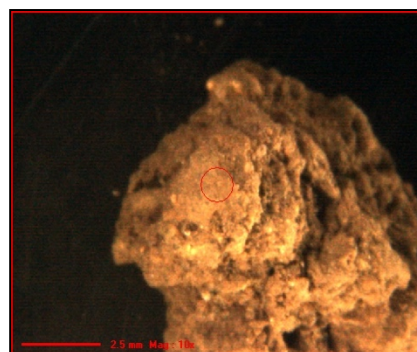
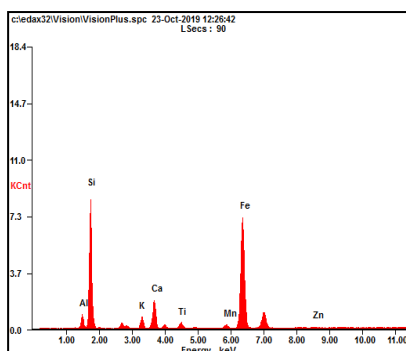


<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	1.07	1.57
<i>SiK</i>	1.90	2.68
<i>K K</i>	0.10	0.10
<i>CaK</i>	96.49	95.33
<i>TiK</i>	0.04	0.04
<i>MnK</i>	0.23	0.16
<i>FeK</i>	0.18	0.13

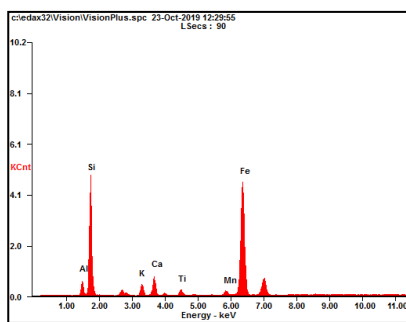


Soil Sample: Level 13

<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	10.35	11.85
<i>SiK</i>	64.31	70.74
<i>K K</i>	5.03	3.97
<i>CaK</i>	9.65	7.44
<i>TiK</i>	1.14	0.73
<i>MnK</i>	0.32	0.18
<i>FeK</i>	9.14	5.06
<i>ZnK</i>	0.06	0.03

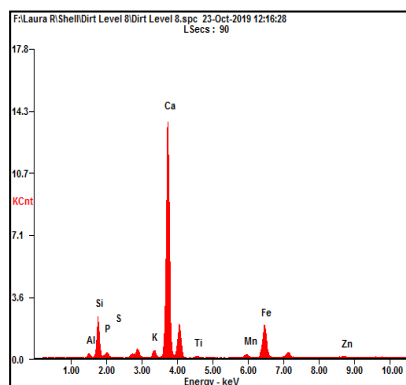


<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	11.78	13.28
<i>SiK</i>	66.88	72.43
<i>K K</i>	5.30	4.13
<i>CaK</i>	6.19	4.70
<i>TiK</i>	1.07	0.68
<i>MnK</i>	0.38	0.21
<i>FeK</i>	8.40	4.58



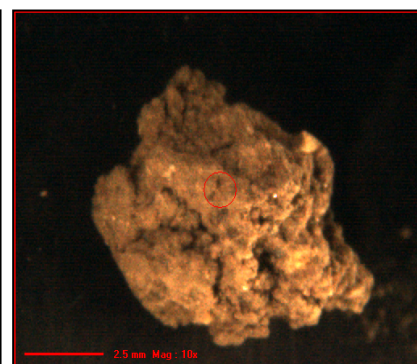
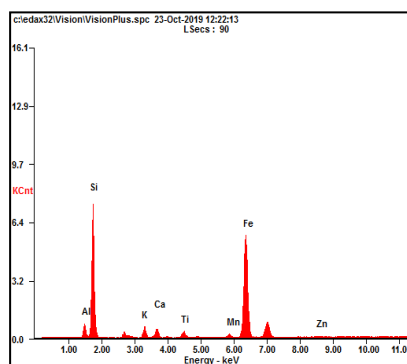
Soil Sample: Level 8

<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	3.97	5.38
<i>SiK</i>	19.35	25.19
<i>P K</i>	3.18	3.76
<i>K K</i>	2.21	2.06
<i>CaK</i>	65.37	59.65
<i>TiK</i>	0.63	0.48
<i>MnK</i>	0.58	0.39
<i>FeK</i>	4.63	3.03
<i>ZnK</i>	0.08	0.04

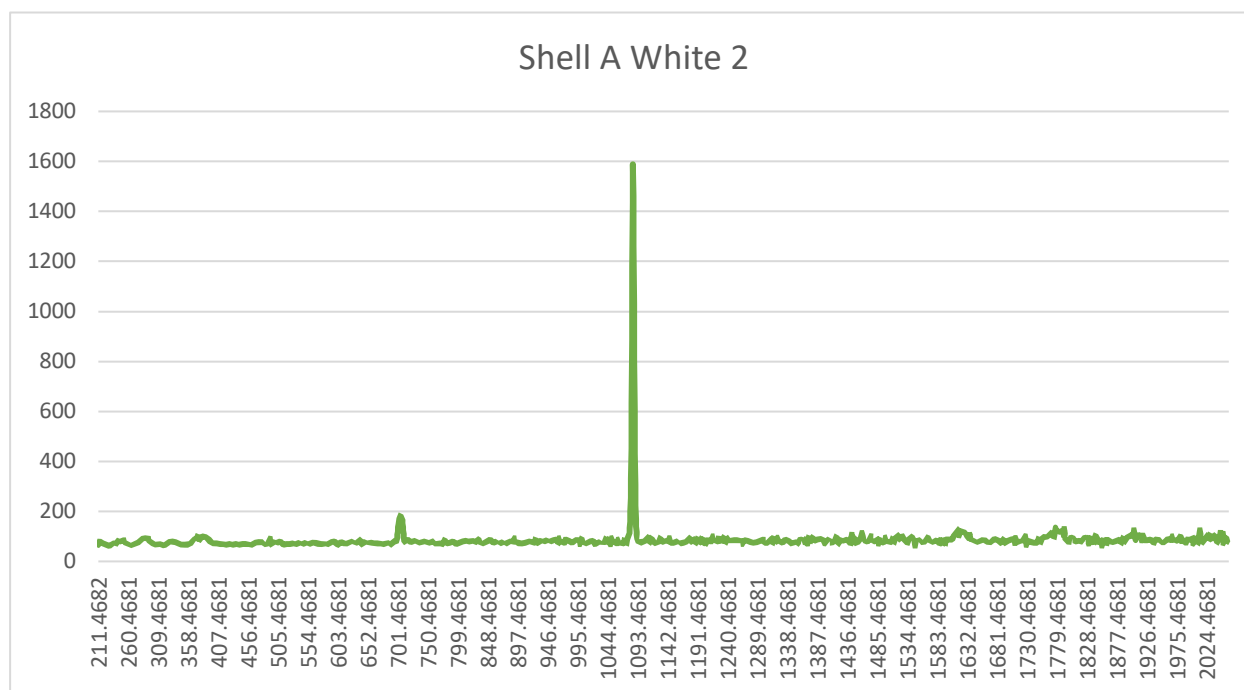
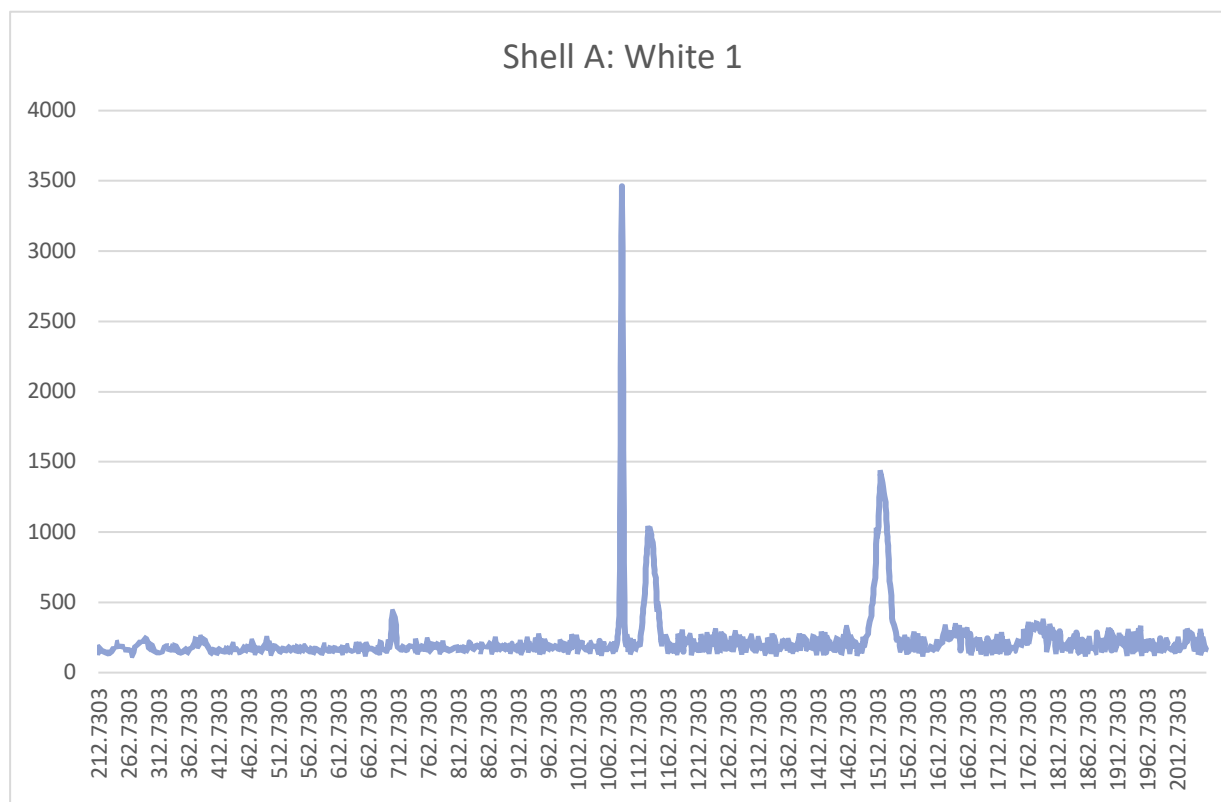


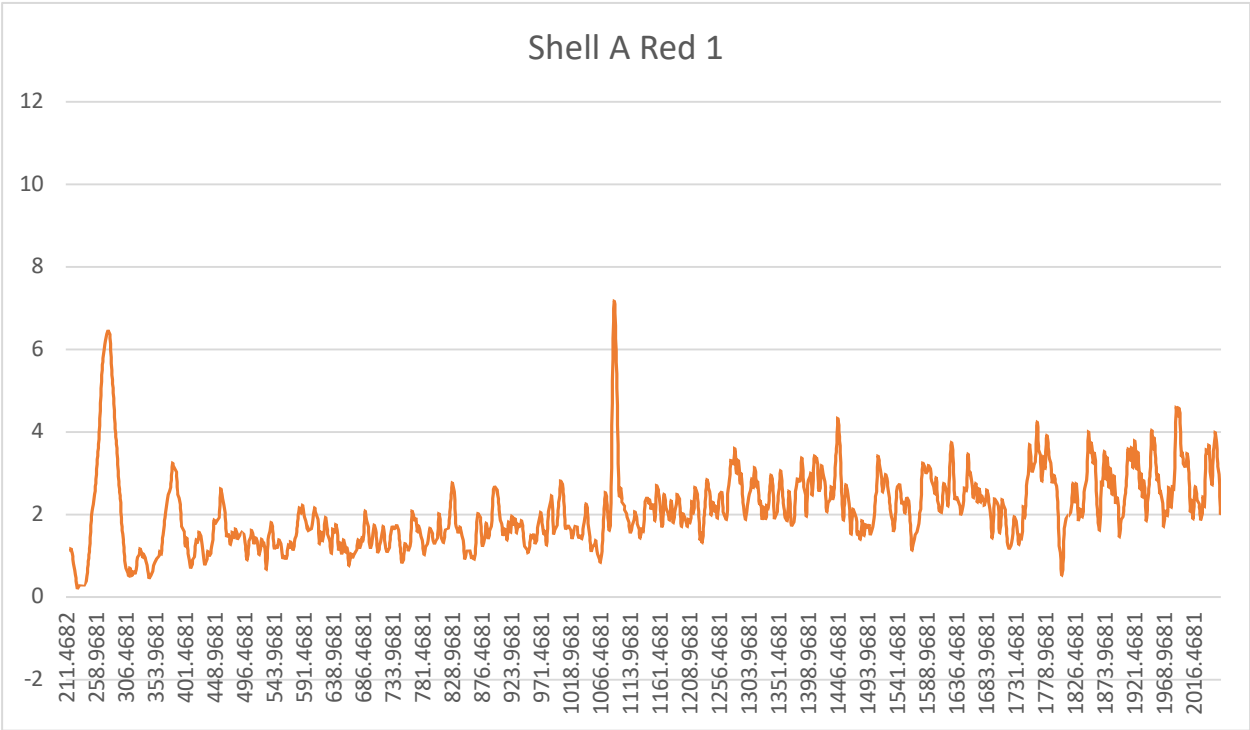
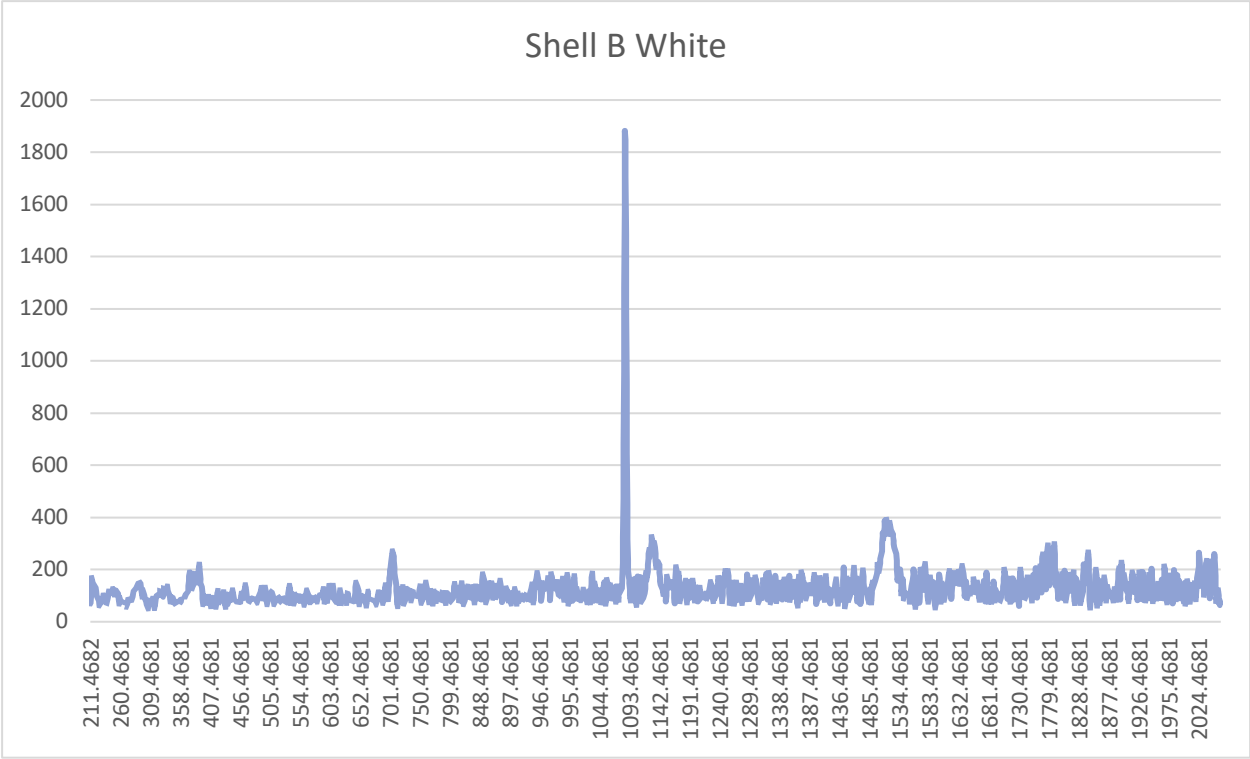
Soil Sample: Level 9

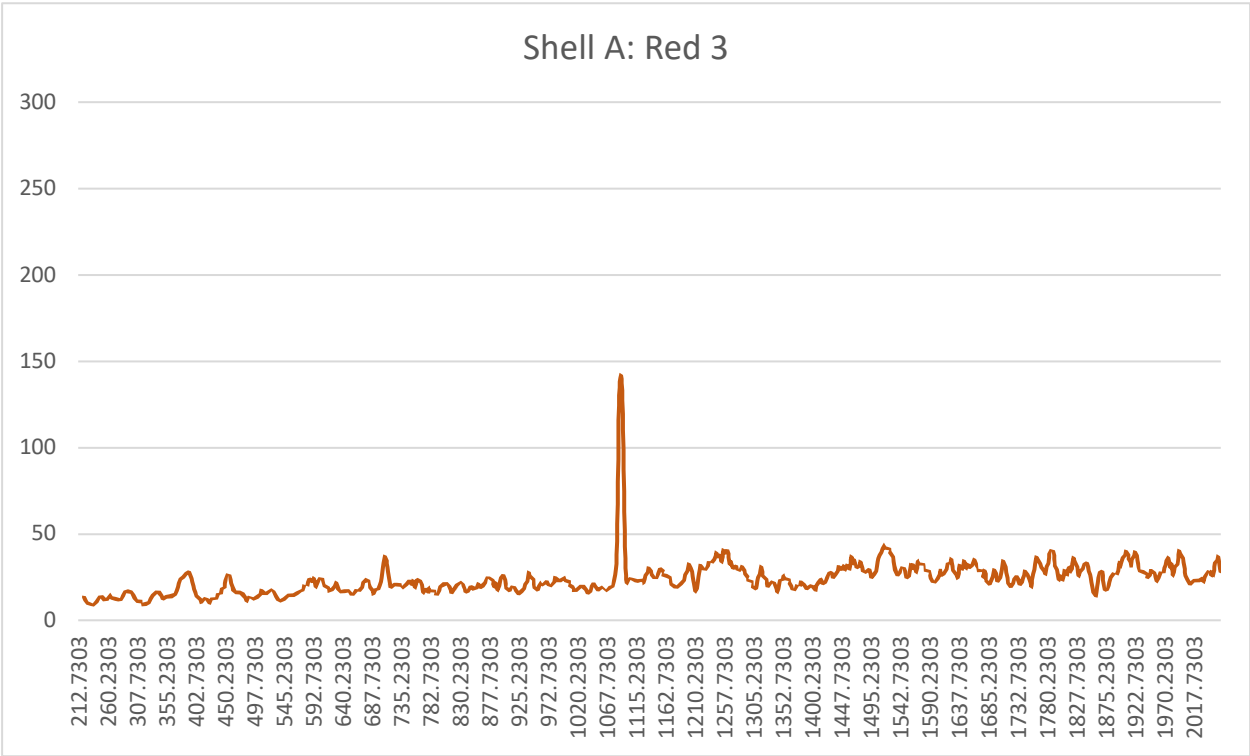
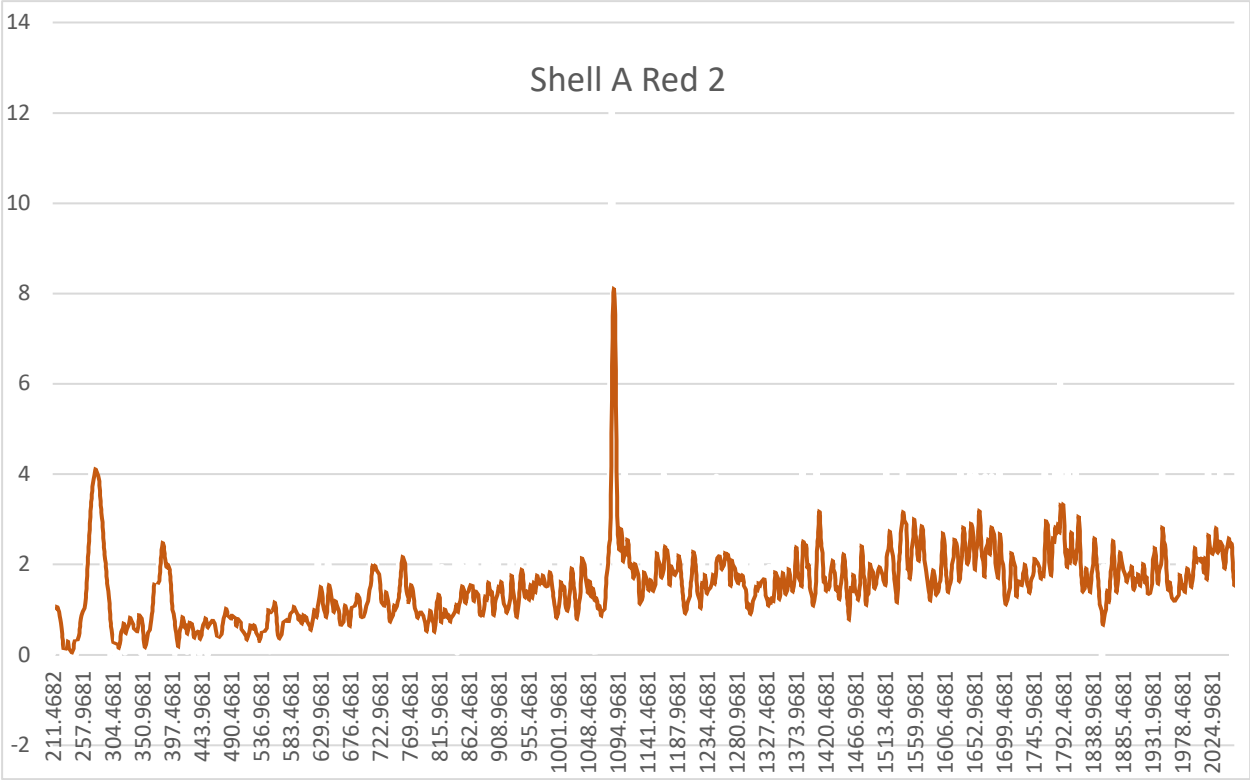
<i>Element</i>	<i>Wt%</i>	<i>At%</i>
<i>AlK</i>	10.78	12.06
<i>SiK</i>	70.55	75.83
<i>K K</i>	5.27	4.07
<i>CaK</i>	3.25	2.45
<i>TiK</i>	1.20	0.76
<i>MnK</i>	0.29	0.16
<i>FeK</i>	8.60	4.65
<i>ZnK</i>	0.05	0.02

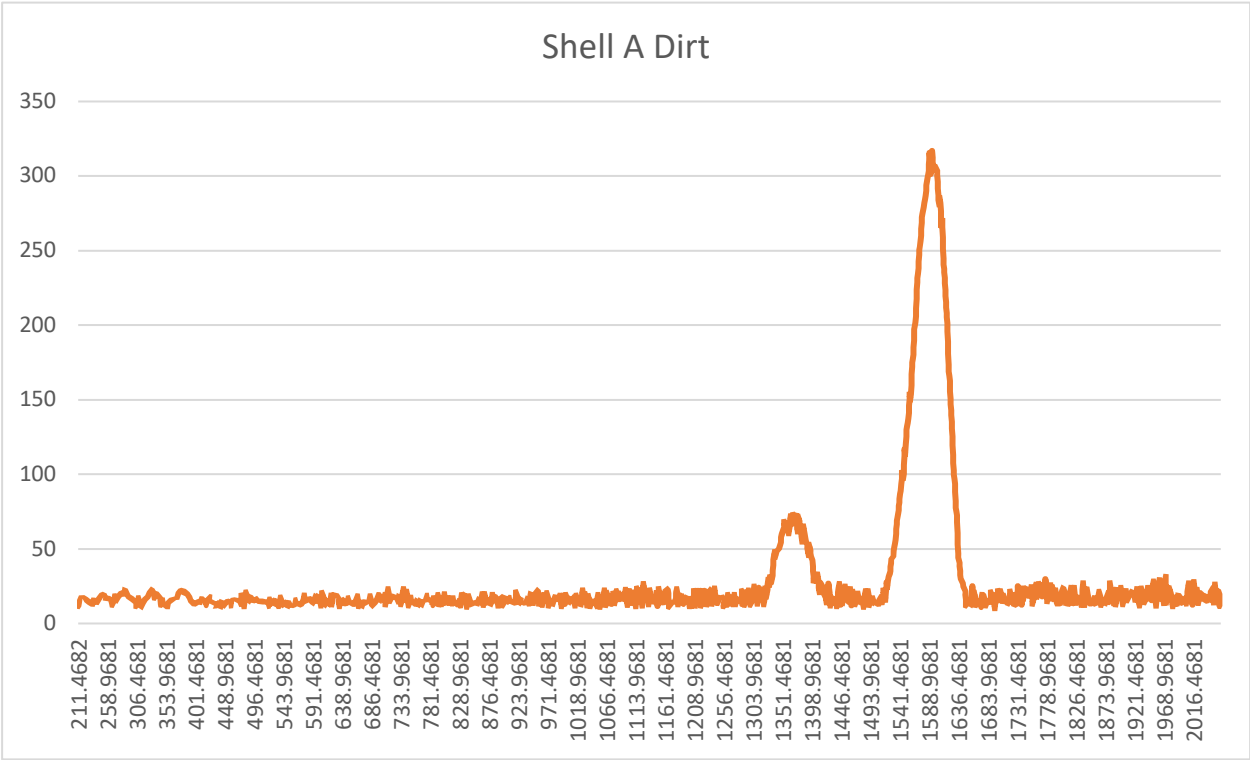
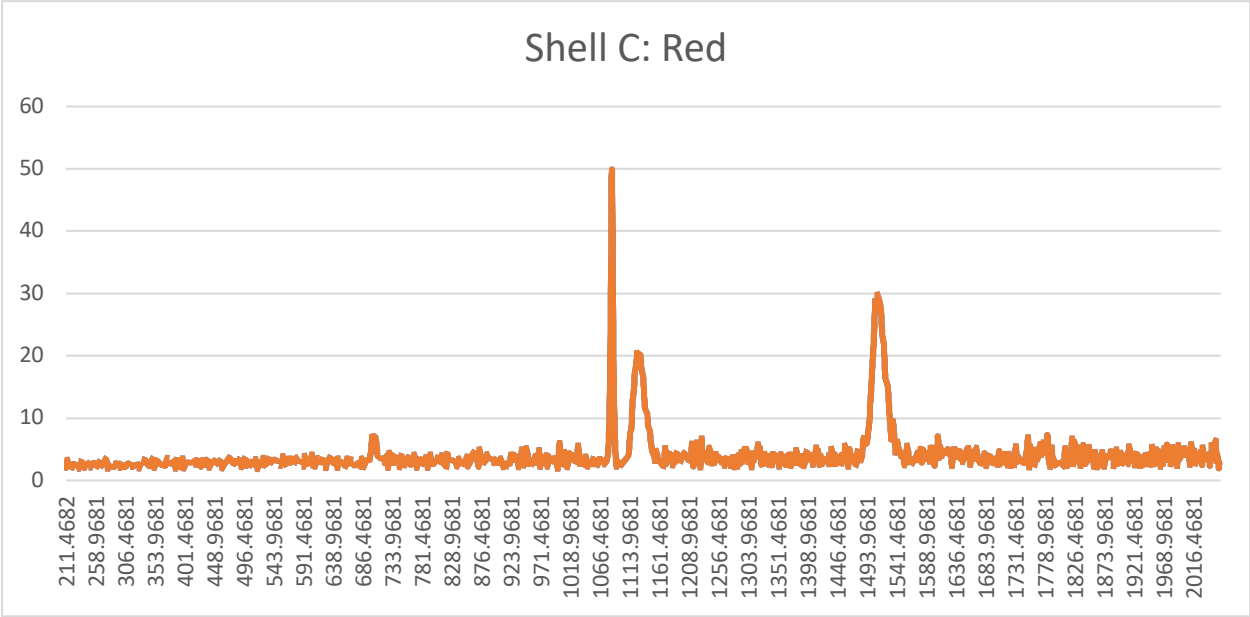


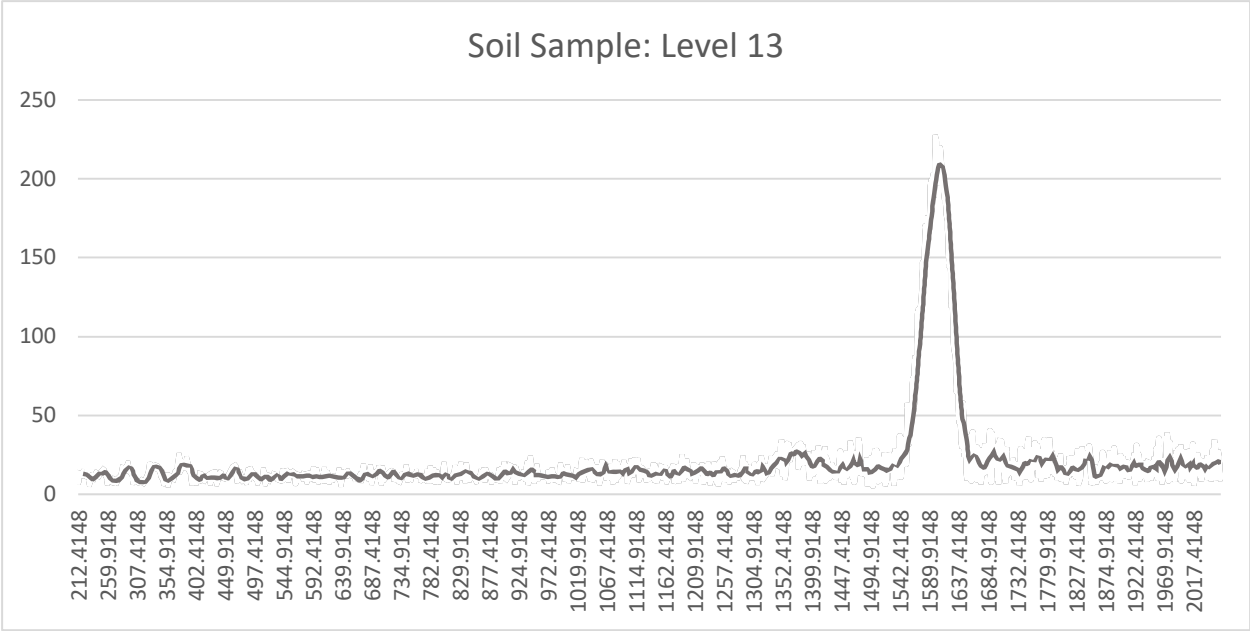
Appendix B: Raman Data



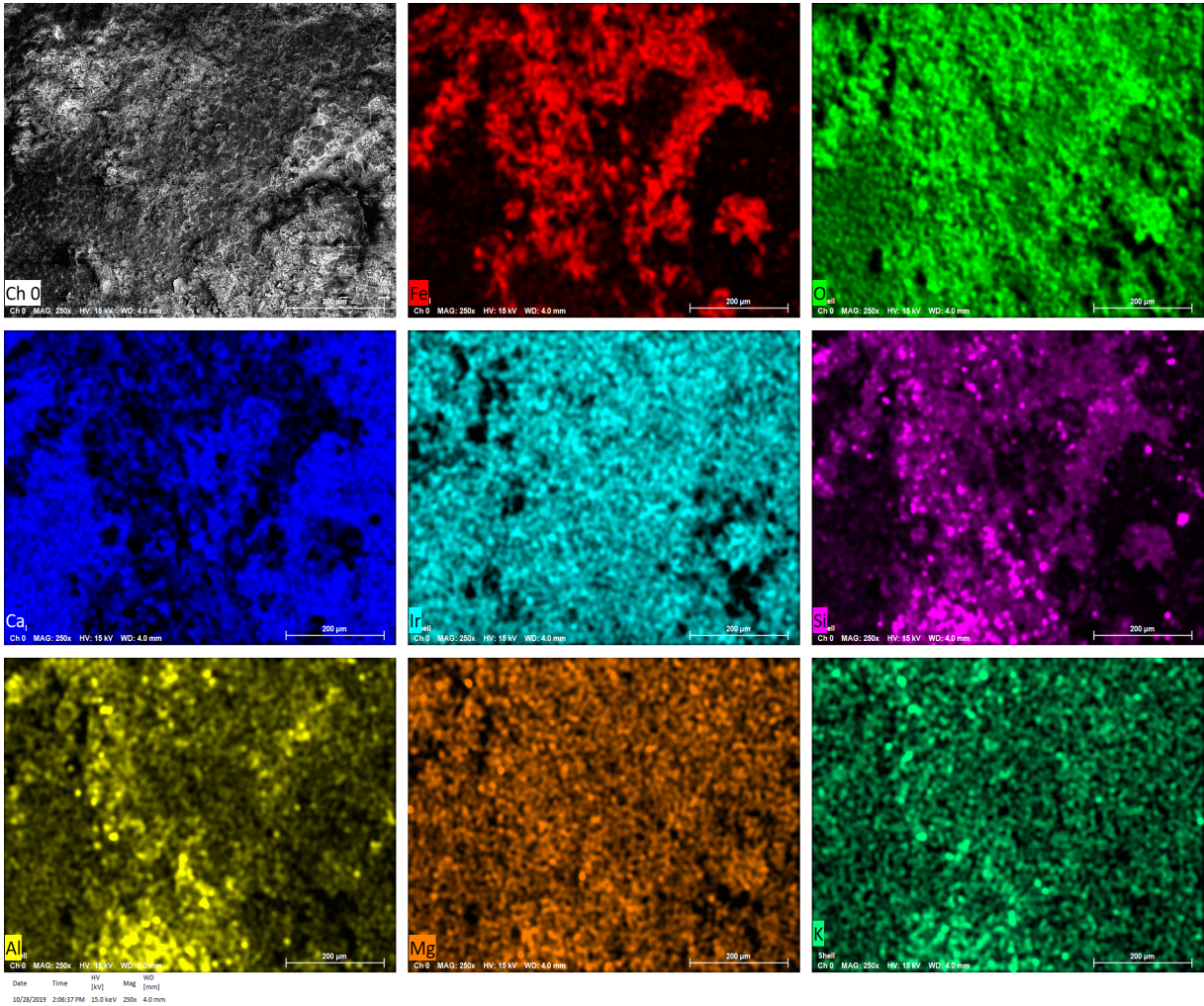
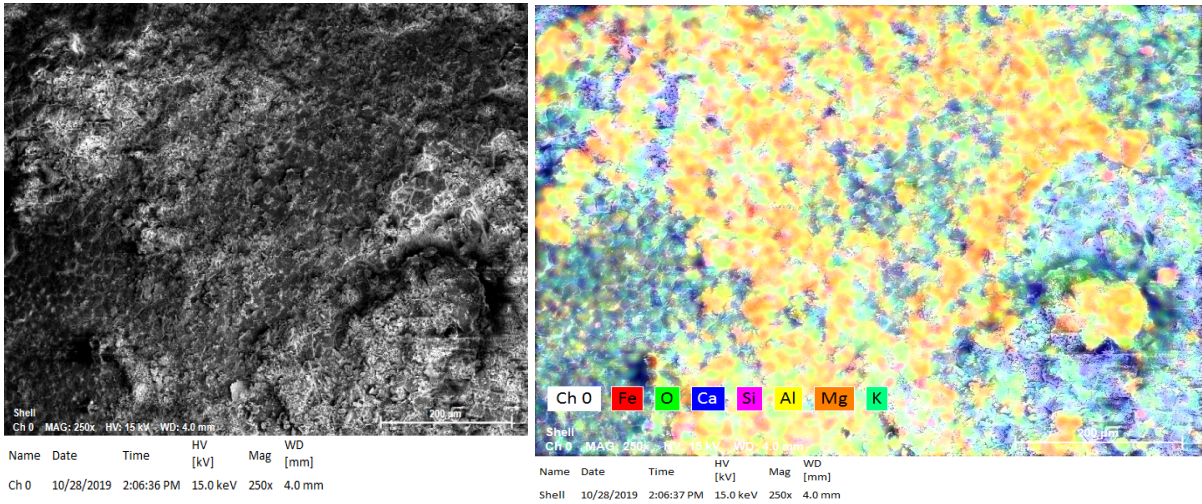


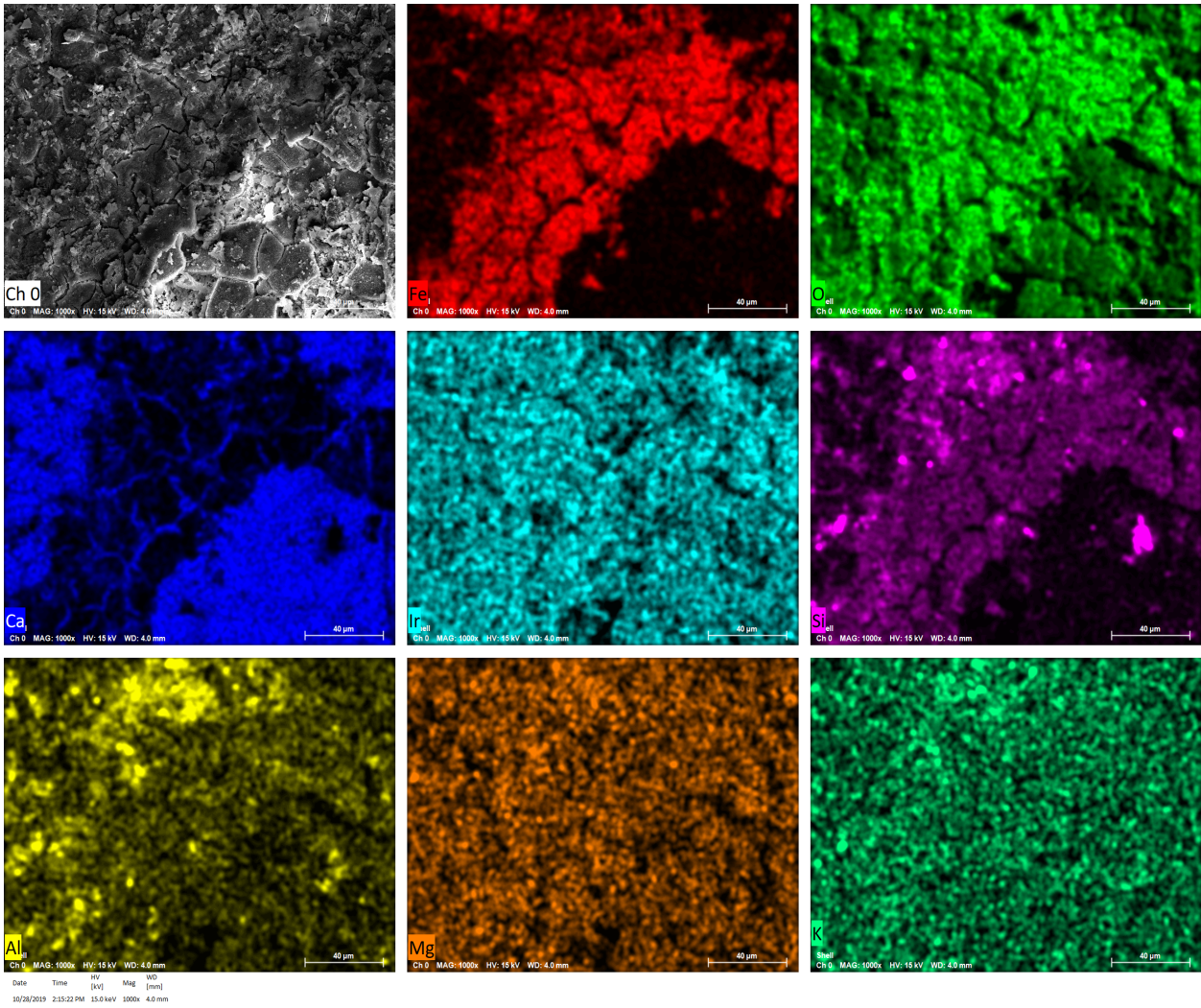
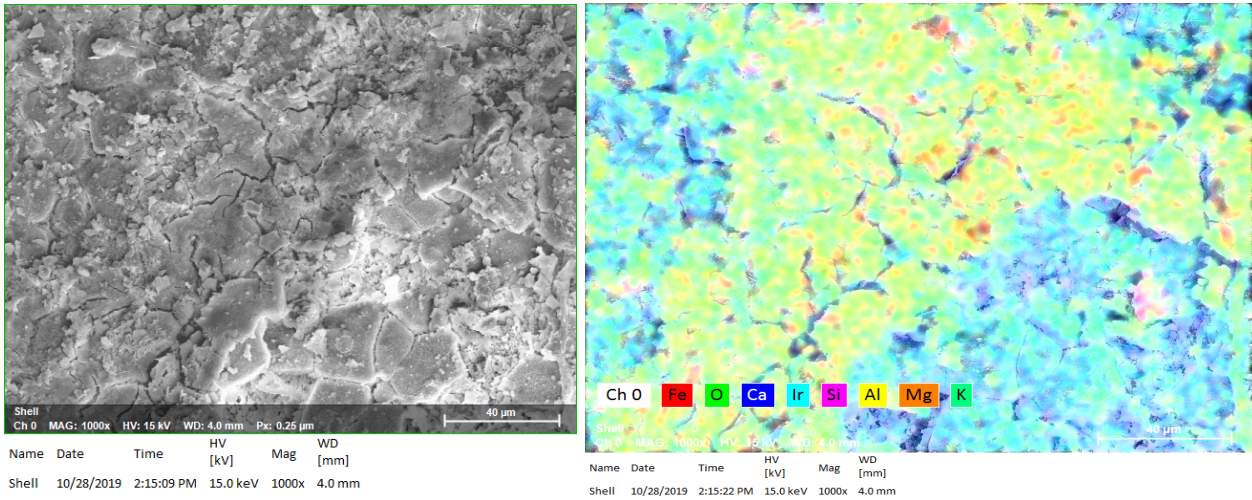


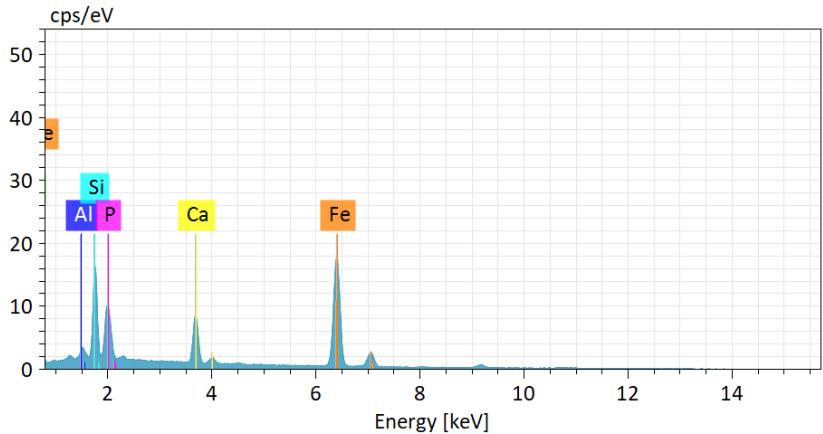
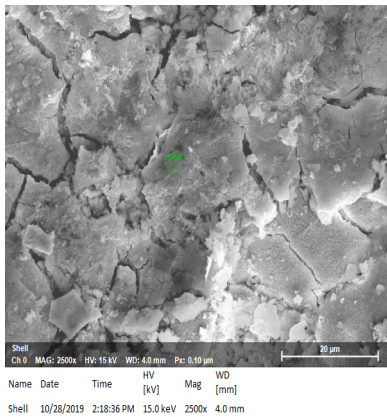




Appendix 3: SEM Data

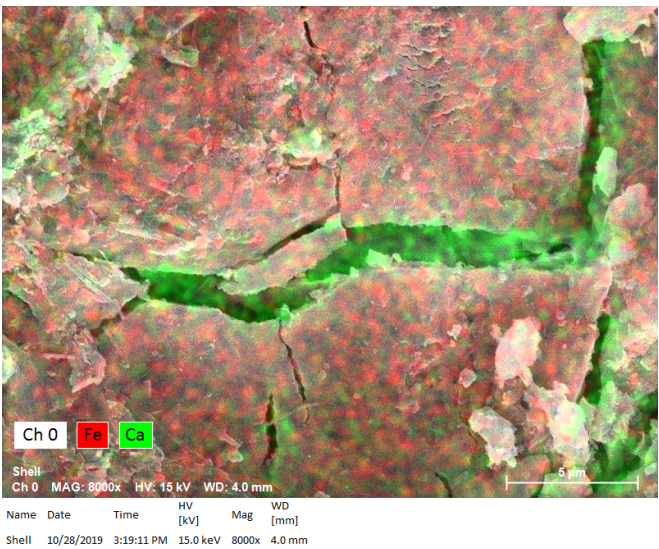
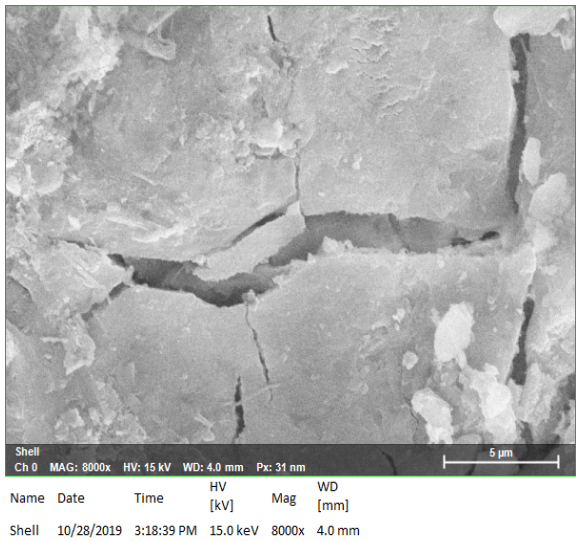


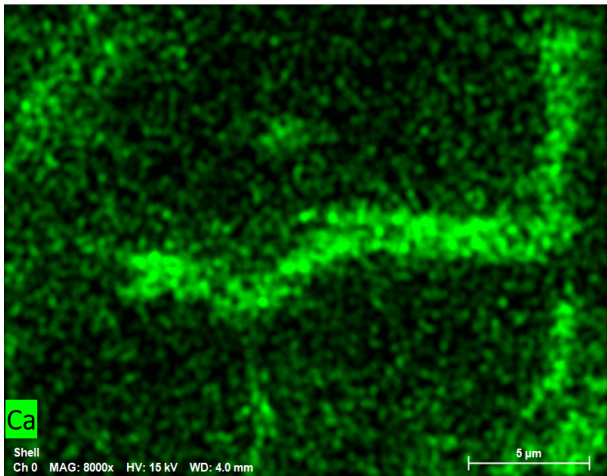
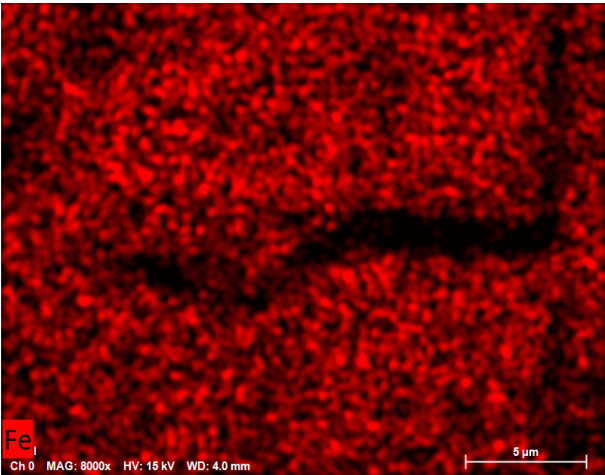
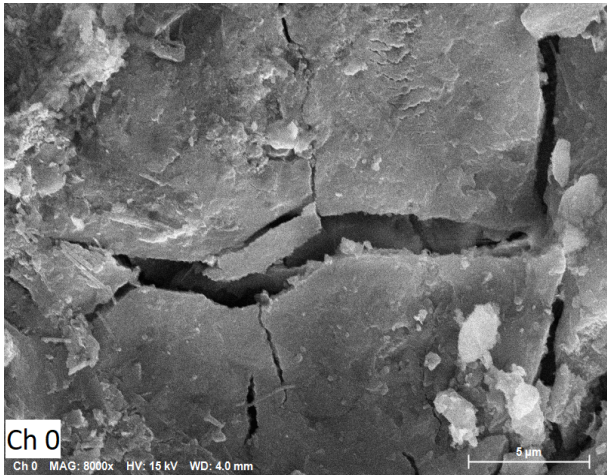




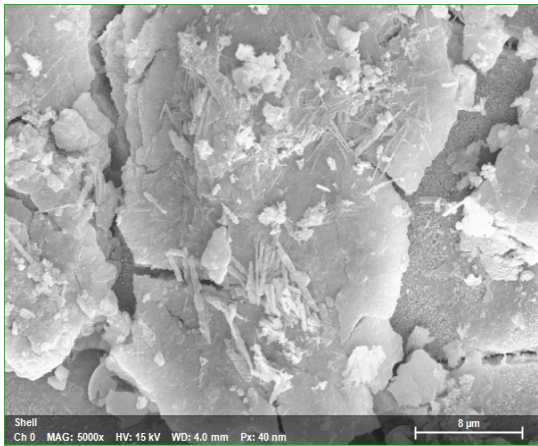
Shell 1

Element	At. No.	Netto	Mass [%]	Mass Norm. [%]	Atom [%]	abs. error [%] (1 sigma)	rel. error [%] (1 sigma)
Oxygen	8	85397	21.57	31.07	49.81	2.48	11.48
Iron	26	84475	36.46	52.52	24.12	1.10	3.01
Carbon	6	9643	6.36	9.16	19.55	0.92	14.47
Silicon	14	40501	4.86	7.00	6.39	0.23	4.72
Titanium	22	768	0.17	0.24	0.13	0.03	19.78
		Sum	69.43	100.00	100.00		

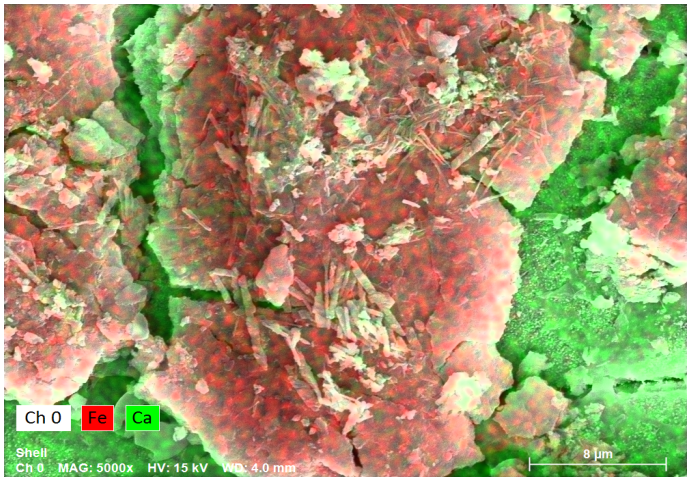




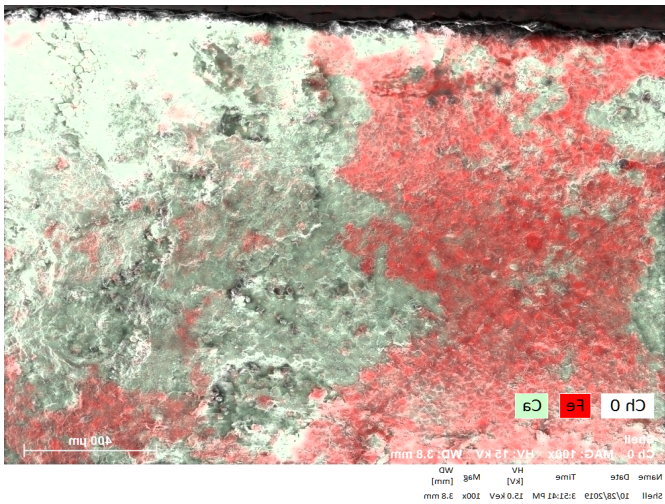
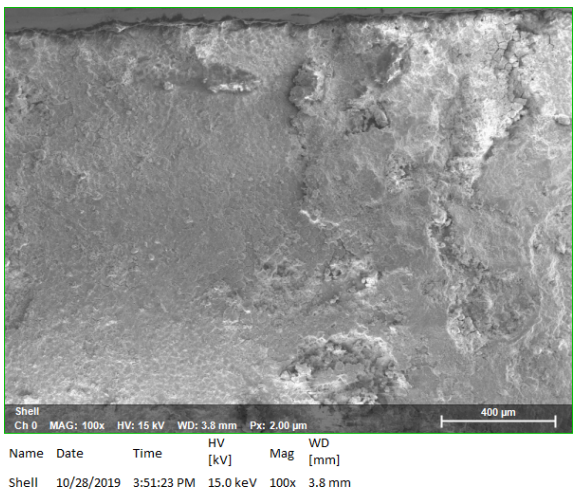
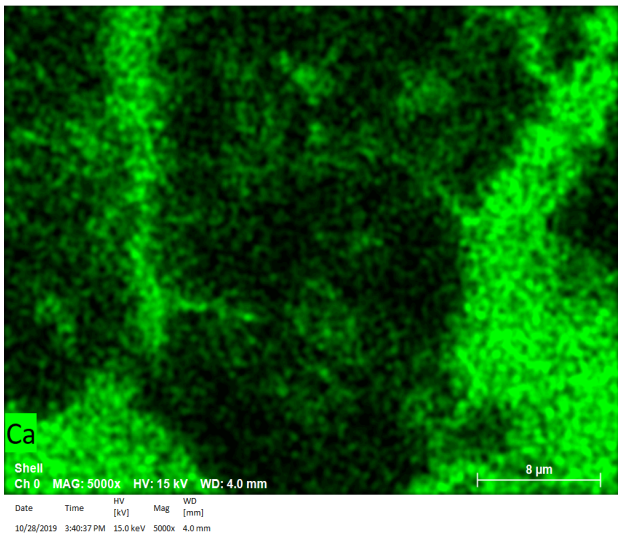
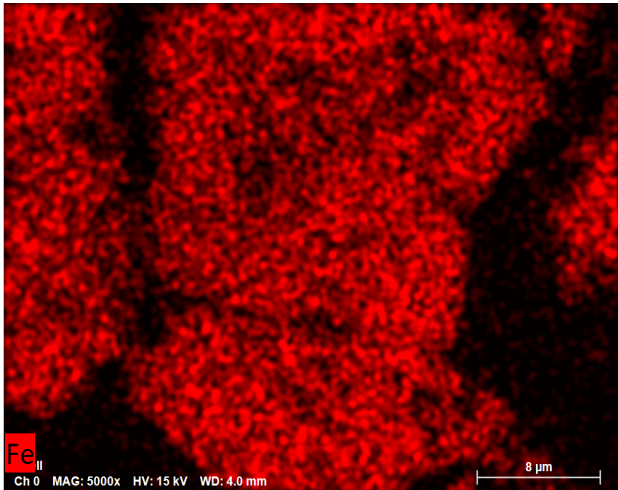
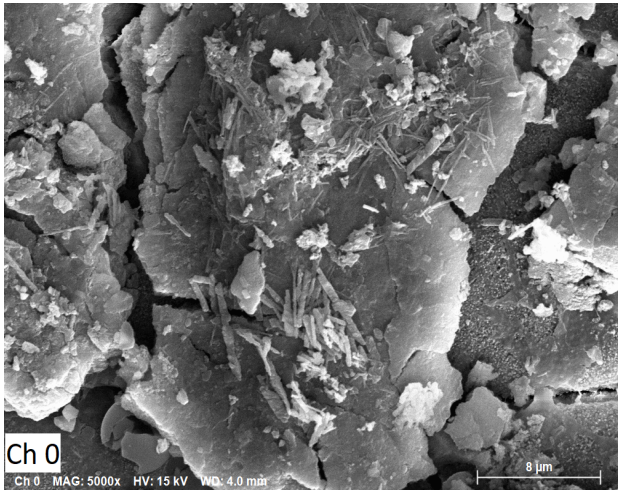
Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
10/28/2019	3:19:11 PM	15.0 keV	8000x	4.0 mm

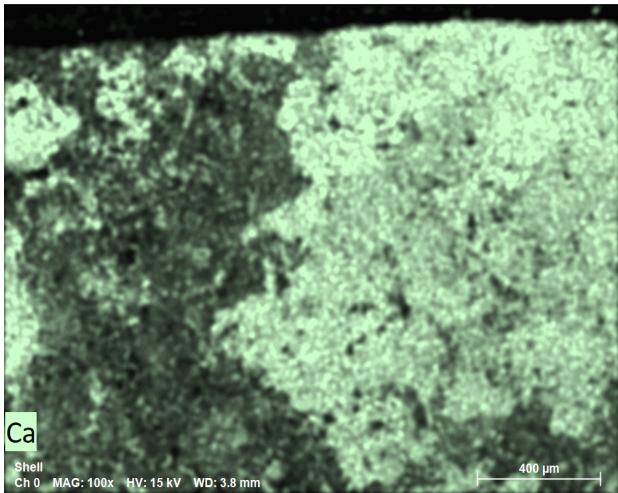
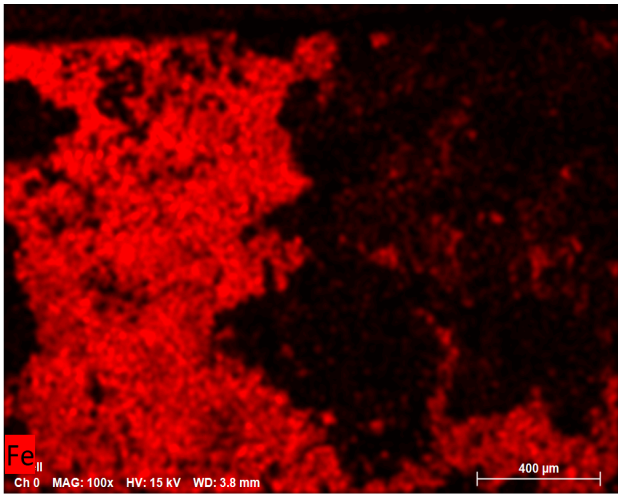
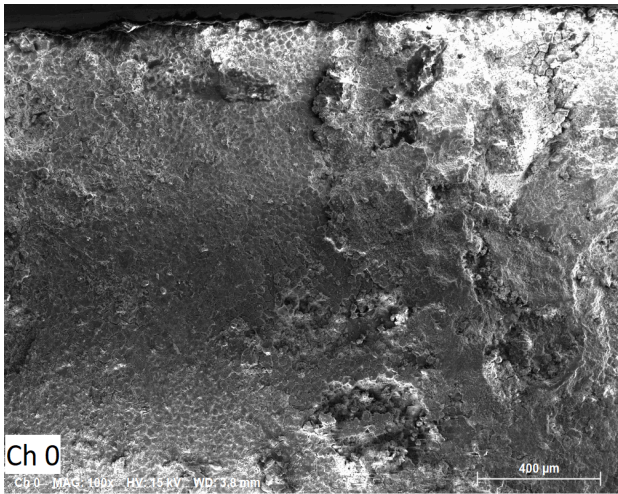


Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	3:40:19 PM	15.0 keV	5000x	4.0 mm

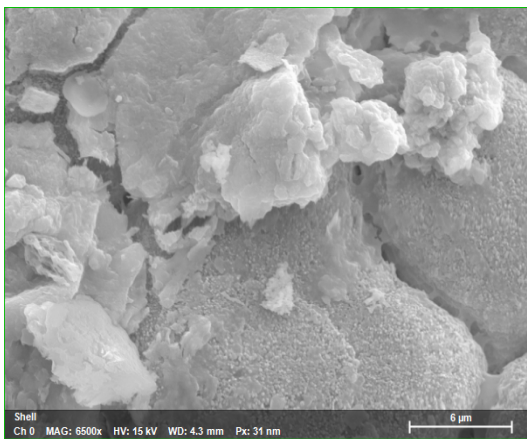


Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	3:40:37 PM	15.0 keV	5000x	4.0 mm





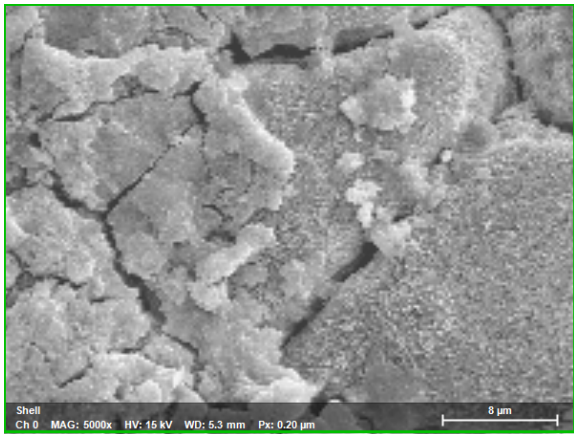
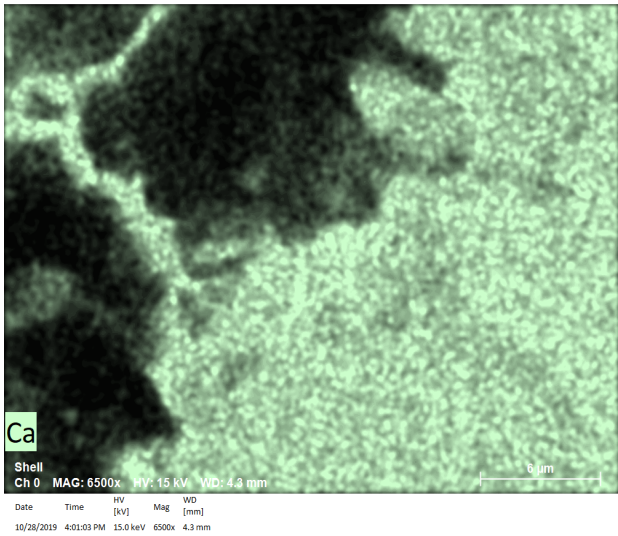
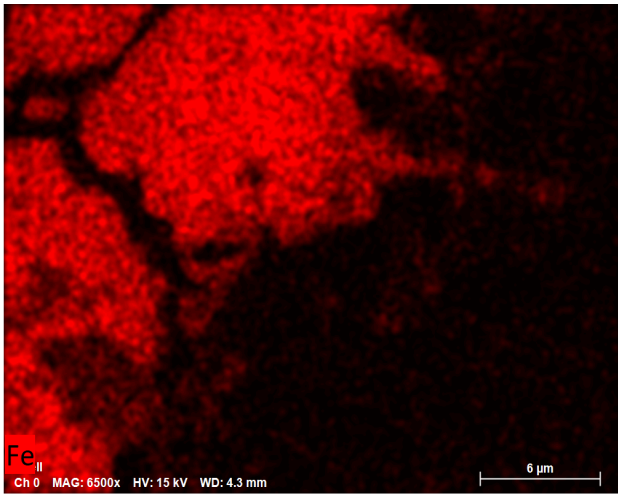
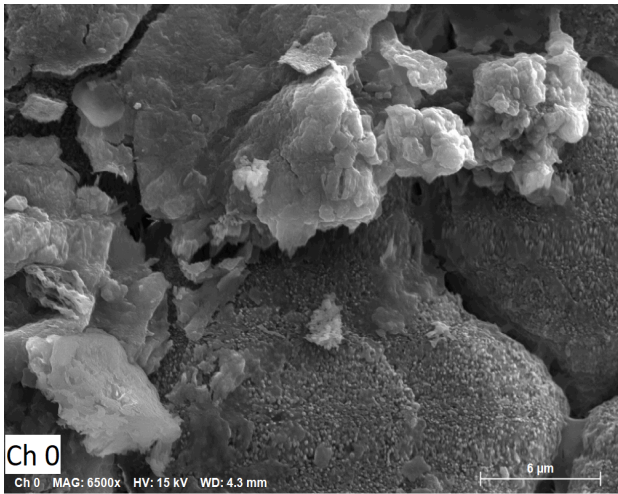
Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
10/28/2019	3:51:41 PM	15.0 keV	100x	3.8 mm



Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	4:00:44 PM	15.0 keV	6500x	4.3 mm



Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	4:01:03 PM	15.0 keV	6500x	4.3 mm



Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	4:38:31 PM	15.0 keV	5000x	5.3 mm



Name	Date	Time	HV [kV]	Mag	WD [mm]
Shell	10/28/2019	4:38:57 PM	15.0 keV	5000x	5.3 mm