

Radiocarbon evidence for alternating northern and southern sources of ventilation of the deep Atlantic carbon pool during the last deglaciation

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Recent theories for glacial–interglacial climate transitions call on millennial climate perturbations that purged the deep sea of sequestered carbon dioxide via a “bipolar ventilation seesaw.” However, the viability of this hypothesis has been contested, and robust evidence in its support is lacking. Here we present a record of North Atlantic deep-water radiocarbon ventilation, which we compare with similar data from the Southern Ocean. A striking coherence in ventilation changes is found, with extremely high ventilation ages prevailing across the deep Atlantic during the last glacial period. The data also reveal two reversals in the ventilation gradient between the deep North Atlantic and Southern Ocean during Heinrich Stadial 1 and the Younger Dryas. These coincided with periods of sustained atmospheric CO₂ rise and appear to have been driven by enhanced ocean–atmosphere exchange, primarily in the Southern Ocean. These results confirm the operation of a bipolar ventilation seesaw during deglaciation and underline the contribution of abrupt regional climate anomalies to longer-term global climate transitions.

ocean circulation | carbon cycle | abrupt change

The apparent ubiquity of abrupt millennial-scale climate anomalies on Pleistocene glacial–interglacial transitions (1) has prompted some to suggest these events may represent a necessary component of the deglacial process, primarily through their effect on atmospheric CO₂ (2–4). According to this hypothesis (hereafter referred to as the “millennial purge” hypothesis), incipient deglaciation triggers a transient collapse of the North Atlantic overturning circulation, as well as a warming around Antarctica via the “thermal bipolar seesaw” mechanism (5). This, in turn, is proposed to drive the release of previously sequestered “marine” CO₂ to the atmosphere via increased upwelling and/or air–sea exchange in the Southern Ocean, which would have resulted from changes in the density stratification (6), sea ice cover (4) or wind forcing (2) around Antarctica.

Despite the promise of this new theory for deglacial CO₂ release, and despite emerging data in its support (4, 7, 8), it rests on two key premises that have yet to be confirmed. The first premise is the existence before deglaciation of a deeply sequestered, and hence radiocarbon-depleted (9), marine carbon pool of significant extent. The existence of such a carbon pool continues to be questioned (e.g., ref. 10). The second premise is a necessary (or at least conditional) alternation between northern and southern Atlantic ventilation anomalies, broadly in line with the bipolar seesaw in deep ocean ventilation that was initially proposed by Broecker (11). Direct evidence for this is still lacking. At this time, the strongest support for the bipolar ventilation seesaw of ref. 11 comes from Southern Ocean opal productivity pulses that occur in time with the deglacial stadial events Heinrich Stadial 1 (HS1) and the Younger Dryas (YD) (2). However, even these data strictly remain mute on the anti-correlation or otherwise of southern versus northern (hemisphere)

ventilation of the Atlantic interior. Indeed, most other available proxy reconstructions have been interpreted as showing that Southern Ocean ventilation (as inferred, often ambiguously, from radiocarbon, stable carbon isotopes, carbonate preservation, or water mass sourcing) was reduced during North Atlantic stadials when CO₂ was increasing (e.g., refs. 12–14), in apparent conflict with the millennial purge hypothesis.

Results

To assess possible links between North and South Atlantic ventilation, we generated a continuous record of deep-water radiocarbon ventilation from the Northeast Atlantic, which we compare with similar data from the Atlantic sector of the sub-Antarctic Southern Ocean (4). Deep-water radiocarbon ventilation records specifically constrain the extent of isotopic equilibration between the deep-ocean and atmospheric carbon pools and therefore bear directly on the role of the ocean circulation on ocean–atmosphere carbon exchange. Here, radiocarbon measurements have been performed on paired samples of rigorously cleaned (15) monospecific planktonic and mixed benthic foraminifera from core MD99-2334K (37°48'N, 10°10'W; 3,146 m). The site of MD99-2334K, on the Iberian Margin in the Northeast Atlantic, is currently bathed in northward recirculating Northeast Atlantic Deep Water, which includes ~47% Lower Deep Water (derived from Antarctic Bottom Water) (Fig. S1). The chronology for core MD99-2334K is based on the alignment of local surface temperature trends [recorded in foraminiferal δ¹⁸O and Mg/Ca measurements (16)] to the uranium-series dated speleothem records from Hulu Cave (17–19) (Fig. S2). This alignment is

Significance

This study sheds light on the mechanisms of deglacial atmospheric CO₂ rise and, more specifically, on the hypothesized role of a “bipolar seesaw” in deep Atlantic ventilation. Comparing new high-resolution radiocarbon reconstructions from the Northeast Atlantic with existing data from the Southern Ocean, we show that a bipolar ventilation seesaw did indeed operate during the last deglaciation. Whereas today the deep Atlantic’s carbon pool is “flushed” from the north by North Atlantic Deep Water export, it was flushed instead from the south during Heinrich Stadial 1 and the Younger Dryas, in time with sustained atmospheric CO₂ rise.

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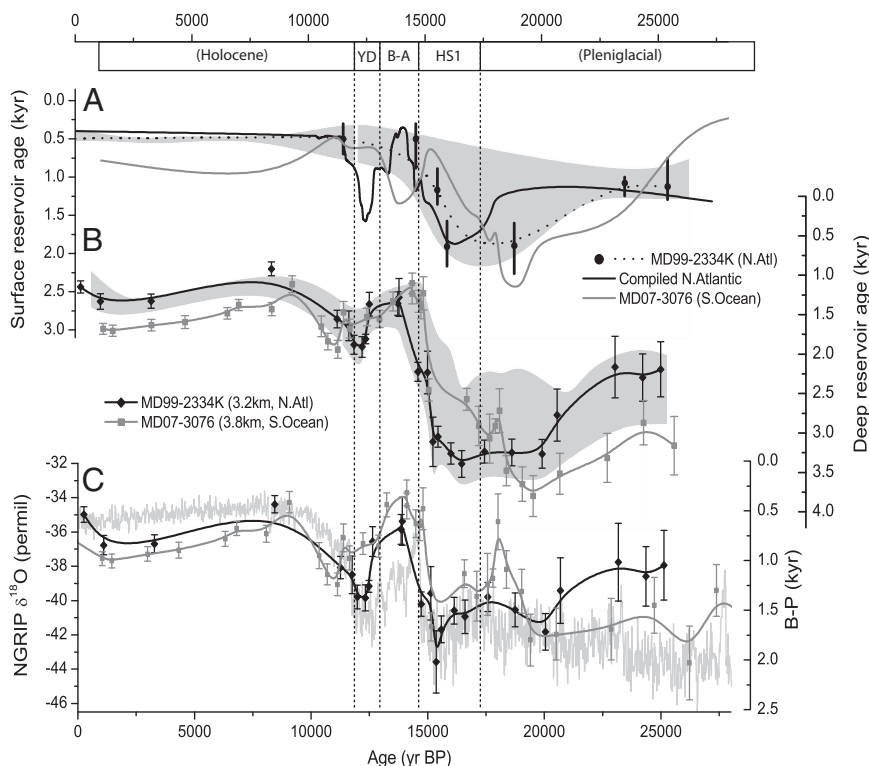


Fig. 2. Ventilation records from the North Atlantic (MD99-2334K) and Southern Ocean (MD07-3076). (A) Surface reservoir ages, as for Fig. 1. (B) Deep-water reservoir ages (i.e., benthic-atmosphere age offsets; B-Atm). (C) Benthic-planktonic age offsets (B-P) compared with the NGRIP $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ record (fine gray line) (35). Data from MD99-2334K are shown by black symbols and heavy lines; data from MD07-3076 are shown by gray symbols and heavy lines. B-A, Bølling-Allerød.

Fig. 2 compares the surface- and deep-water radiocarbon ventilation history of the northeast Atlantic (this study, MD99-2334K; 3,146 m) and the sub-Antarctic Atlantic (MD07-3076; 3,777 m) (4). For consistency, the sub-Antarctic records are shown here referenced to the same Hulu atmospheric radiocarbon values as used for MD99-2334K (see *Supporting Information*). The coherence between the surface and deep-water records in each hemisphere is striking, with similar patterns of variability and amplitudes of change exhibited at each location for all three measures of radiocarbon ventilation (surface reservoir ages, B-P age offsets, and deep-water reservoir ages; Fig. 2 A–C). However, important differences between the North Atlantic and Southern Ocean records emerge during HS1, and the YD in particular, when the radiocarbon ventilation gradient between the two sites collapsed. This is apparent in both surface- and deep-water reservoir ages and is expressed as a reversal of the north–south radiocarbon ventilation gradient on the “best guess” MD99-2334K calendar chronology. Benthic–planktonic offsets (Fig. 2B) also exhibit a clear reversal in the apparent ventilation gradient, although without a return to the “normal” north–south gradient seen in the B-Atm and surface reservoir age records during the Bølling-Allerød interstadial.

Discussion

These results confirm the operation of a bipolar “ventilation seesaw” across the last deglaciation, whereby the radiocarbon ventilation of the deep Southern Ocean increased during HS1 and the YD to a level commensurate with, or even above, that observed concurrently in the deep North Atlantic. This is further supported by the antiphase variability in shallow subsurface reservoir ages observed in each hemisphere (Fig. 2A). Fig. 3 shows how the reversal of the ventilation gradient between the North and South Atlantic corresponded with periods of sharply rising atmospheric CO_2 (25), as well as periods of inferred

Atlantic meridional overturning circulation “collapse” (26). New planktonic $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ measurements from core MD07-3076 in the Southern Ocean (*Supporting Information* and Fig. 3B) further demonstrate a close correspondence between increased nutrient supply to the surface ocean and pulses in opal accumulation from across the Southern Ocean (2), as well as pulses in the ventilation age of the deep Southern Ocean (4), a strong indication that enhanced upwelling was indeed the driver of the observed export productivity pulses. This inference is further supported by silicon and nitrogen isotope evidence for enhanced nutrient supply to the surface ocean during HS1 and the YD (27). Together with the radiocarbon data from the North Atlantic, these findings provide strong evidence of enhanced ventilation specifically of the ocean interior’s carbon pool, and specifically via the Southern Ocean in time with rapid atmospheric CO_2 rise during HS1 and the YD. Indeed, the sequence of events illustrated in Fig. 3 is essentially as required by the millennial purge hypothesis that has been advanced to explain the rapid and pulsed rise of atmospheric CO_2 across the last deglaciation (2, 3). According to the revised dating of the Antarctic ice cores (28), our data and chronologies indicate an overlap between the first indication of deep ocean hydrographic/circulation change in the Southern Ocean (at $\sim 19.7 \pm 0.6$ ka) and the initiation of Antarctic temperature and CO_2 rise (at $\sim 18.6 \pm 1.9$ ka; full absolute uncertainty). Given the chronological uncertainties, the apparent lag of $\sim 1,000$ y between the marine and atmospheric changes is not strictly significant, although superficially it might be seen as corroborating a proposed delay in the response of atmospheric CO_2 versus the onset of hydrographic change in the Southern Ocean (29). The suggested delay in the carbon cycle response would remain unexplained, and although our data cannot confirm or refute the speculation that it represents a threshold dependence of CO_2 rise on overturning circulation change (29), it is notable that a qualitatively similar threshold response does

calcite backgrounds, as well as primary and secondary standards for normalization and quality control. Pressed graphite targets were analyzed by single-stage accelerator mass spectrometry at the Australian National University (33). An additional suite of (similarly cleaned) samples were graphitized and analyzed by accelerator mass spectrometry at the Natural Environment Research Council/Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) radiocarbon facility. Radiocarbon ages are reported according to the standard protocol of ref. 34.

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