



# Climate variability, heat distribution, and polar amplification in the warm unipolar “icehouse” of the Oligocene

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Received: 17 November 2023 – Discussion started: 4 December 2023

Revised: 16 April 2024 – Accepted: 16 May 2024 – Published: 25 July 2024

**Abstract.** The Oligocene (33.9–23.03 Ma) had warm climates with flattened meridional temperature gradients, while Antarctica retained a significant cryosphere. These may pose imperfect analogues to distant future climate states with unipolar icehouse conditions. Although local and regional climate and environmental reconstructions of Oligocene conditions are available, the community lacks synthesis of regional reconstructions. To provide a comprehensive overview of marine and terrestrial climate and environmental conditions in the Oligocene, and a reconstruction of trends through time, we review marine and terrestrial proxy records and compare these to numerical climate model simulations of the Oligocene. Results, based on the present relatively sparse data, suggest temperatures around the Equator that are similar to modern temperatures. Sea surface temperatures (SSTs) show patterns similar to land temperatures, with warm conditions at mid- and high latitudes ( $\sim 60$ – $90^\circ$ ), especially in the Southern Hemisphere (SH). Vegetation-based precipitation reconstructions of the Oligocene suggest regionally drier conditions compared to modern times around the Equator. When compared to proxy data, climate model simulations overestimate Oligocene precipitation in most areas, particularly the tropics. Temperatures around the mid- to high latitudes are generally underestimated in models compared to proxy data and tend to overestimate the warming in the tropics. In line with previous proxy-to-model comparisons, we find that models underestimate polar amplification and overestimate the Equator-to-pole temperature gradient suggested from the available proxy data. This further stresses the ur-

gency of solving this widely recorded problem for past warm climates, such as the Oligocene.

## 1 Introduction

Simulations of future climate change, by current-generation fully coupled climate models, indicate that global average surface warming will continue over the coming centuries depending on future CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and sequestration (IPCC, 2022). The models and available temperature, CO<sub>2</sub>, and sea-level reconstructions of past Mesozoic and Cenozoic warm climates suggest that Earth’s climate may ultimately move towards unipolar conditions, with ice only remaining on Antarctica (Burke et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2016). Climate models additionally predict a global equilibrium surface warming between 1.5–4.5 °C per doubling of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations relative to pre-industrial values, most likely with a value around 3 °C (IPCC, 2022). This warming will be amplified at higher latitudes, notably the Arctic, by a factor of 2–3 relative to the global average (Fischer et al., 2018; Holland and Bitz, 2003; IPCC, 2022). However, model projections, particularly for such distant future non-analogue states, still include large uncertainties and are ideally independently constrained by data. Proxy-based reconstructions of past climates provide useful insights into the Earth’s natural response to CO<sub>2</sub> changes and are therefore an independent opportunity to quantify the sensitivity of various climate parameters to greenhouse forcing, including sea-

level and polar amplification (e.g., Burke et al., 2018; Lunt et al., 2016; Palaeosens Project Members, 2012). This way, climate models which are simulating past climate conditions can be compared against proxy data; hence the performance of the models can be evaluated.

It is likely that important climate parameters such as equilibrium climate sensitivity and polar amplification depend on the state of the climate (e.g., Farnsworth et al., 2019; Gaskell et al., 2022; Hutchinson et al., 2021; Köhler et al., 2015; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2013). Therefore, these parameters have been investigated for several past climate states. Traditional targets include the Pleistocene, Pliocene, and Eocene (e.g., Burke et al., 2018) and, more recently, the Miocene (Steinthorsdottir et al., 2021). These time intervals encompass a wide range of climate states, including those with ice sheets in both the Southern Hemisphere (SH) and Northern Hemisphere (NH), the Southern Hemisphere only, and ice-free states, in addition to a wide range of atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations (e.g., Rae et al., 2021).

Recent work (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2020) has highlighted the Oligocene as a potentially useful climate state which allows us to assess the dynamics of global climate with only an Antarctic ice sheet present. Though geographical boundary conditions during the Oligocene (33.9–23.03 Ma – million years ago) were different to today, along with the Miocene, the Oligocene is a useful and relatively recent analogue to future unipolar icehouse climate states (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2020; Liebrand et al., 2017; Miller et al., 1988). Sparse, glacially deposited sediments suggest the presence of NH glaciers as young as the late Eocene (Eldrett et al., 2007; St. John, 2008), but there is no evidence for late Eocene large-scale continental glaciation. Instead, the cryosphere potentially comprised localised glaciers and restricted sea ice in the Arctic Ocean (DeConto et al., 2008; Stickley et al., 2009). Reconstructions of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> range from over 1000 ppm (parts per million) to as low as ~ 300 ppm for the Oligocene (Foster et al., 2017; Rae et al., 2021), similar to the range projected for the future based on various emission scenarios (IPCC, 2022). Despite potentially low atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> conditions, the few available sea surface temperature (SST) reconstructions indicate temperatures warmer than modern climates throughout the Oligocene, with remarkable polar amplification (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Across the Eocene–Oligocene transition (EOT), atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations dropped from > 1000 ppm during the Eocene (56.0–33.9 Ma) to ~ 750 ppm or lower at the beginning of the Oligocene (Heureux and Rickaby, 2015; Pagani et al., 2005; Pearson et al., 2009). This drop coincides with a large increase (~ 1 ‰–1.5 ‰) in deep-ocean benthic foraminifer oxygen isotope ratios ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ), which includes the effects of both the formation of ice sheets and a drop in deep-sea temperatures (e.g., Coxall and Wilson, 2011). The forcings underlying the onset of the Oligocene so-called “icehouse” climate (i.e., with polar ice) are still highly debated. As of now, the leading hypothesis invokes a strongly non-

linear response to orbital forcing superimposed on a long-term drop in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels across a critical threshold (DeConto et al., 2008; DeConto and Pollard, 2003; Galeotti et al., 2016). However, the question that remains is if, or to what extent, tectonic changes and associated oceanographic reorganisations in the Southern Ocean (SO) played a role (e.g., Hill et al., 2013; Houben et al., 2019; Huber et al., 2004; Ladant et al., 2014; Sauermilch et al., 2021). Changes associated with the onset of polar glaciation include a drop in the global average temperature (Eldrett et al., 2009; Kotthoff et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2009; Meckler et al., 2022; Sluiter et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022; Zanazzi et al., 2007) and a profound change in deep-water temperatures (Meckler et al., 2022). Across the EOT, surface cooling (Liu et al., 2009), the accumulation of land ice that reached the Antarctic coastlines (Salamy and Zachos, 1999), and the consequent appearance of sea ice (Houben et al., 2013) were associated with pronounced changes in SH atmospheric circulation and oceanographic conditions (Diester-Haass and Zahn, 1996; Houben et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2009; Tripathi et al., 2005) and an increase in the poleward ocean heat transport (Goldner et al., 2014). Global change at the beginning of the Oligocene also influenced the global turnover of flora and fauna (e.g., Solé et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2014). Oceanographic changes, including upwelling and the formation of sea ice, rapidly transformed circum-Antarctic marine ecosystems to such an extent that they may have influenced the evolution of large animal groups, such as the diversification amongst odontocete and mysticete (baleen) whales (e.g., Fordyce, 1980; Salamy and Zachos, 1999; Houben et al., 2013). Thus, the EOT seems to mark a prominent change in the global climate system (Westerhold et al., 2020) as continental ice sheets expanded.

Although the Oligocene has been the subject of numerous studies, the documentation of global Oligocene climate conditions and their variability, including the hemispheric distribution of heat, meridional temperature gradients, and biotic change, is sparse and greatly relies on benthic foraminifer isotope data. With the Earth's high-latitude cryosphere and climate directly responding to astronomical insolation changes, astronomical forcing studies of high-resolution benthic foraminifer  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  records are of great importance. Those studies (e.g., De Vleeschouwer et al., 2017; Galeotti et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2019; Liebrand et al., 2017; Naish et al., 2001; Pälike et al., 2006b) suggest significant variability in continental ice volume, paced by eccentricity and obliquity. Multiple-proxy SST data, albeit of much lower resolution than the deep-ocean  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  records, revealed that the Oligocene was characterised by generally warm climates, with flattened meridional temperature gradients (Gaskell et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2020). Still, Antarctica retained a significant cryosphere (e.g., Hoem et al., 2021). The recorded trends, cycles, and events provide ample opportunity to study the dynamics of climate and the carbon cycle in what has

been called a “doubthouse” or “intermediate” climate state (O’Brien et al., 2020).

In this paper, we aim to review the current state of knowledge regarding the Oligocene climate to provide a baseline for focused future research. To this end, we first provide basic constraints regarding important climatic boundary conditions, such as palaeogeography and atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Additionally, a review of marine and terrestrial climate proxy records is presented, building on the compilation of marine records by O’Brien et al. (2020), to assess long-term trends and variability in the Oligocene climate. The temperature and precipitation data were subsequently compared to the results of two sets of Oligocene climate model simulations to evaluate how well we understand the data from a climate physics point of view. Lastly, we identify specific points of interest for follow-up research.

## 2 Oligocene stratigraphical and chronological framework

### 2.1 Oligocene chronostratigraphy

The Oligocene represents the epoch between two formal Global Stratotype Sections and Points (GSSPs), the Eocene–Oligocene boundary (EOB) and the Oligocene–Miocene boundary (OMB), at 33.9 and 23.04 Ma following GTS 2020 (Gradstein, 2020). The EOB GSSP was set in 1992 at the Massignano Quarry (Italy) and is defined by the extinction of the two planktic foraminifer genera *Hantkenina* and *Cribohantkenina* at 33.9 Ma (Silva and Jenkins, 1993). The GSSP for the OMB was defined by Steininger et al. (1997) in the Tertiary Piedmont Basin in Italy on the magnetic reversal from polarity chron C6Cn.2r–C6Cn.2n between two subunits of the Rigoroso Formation. Later, Beddow et al. (2018) dated the base of C6Cn.2n at 23.040 Ma. Within the Oligocene, Hardenbol and Berggren (1978) were the first to distinguish the Rupelian (33.9–27.29 Ma) from the Chattian (27.29–23.040 Ma) of northwestern Europe. They separated the two periods based on lithostratigraphy in Belgium into an open marine clayey unit which overlies a shallower marine sandy unit. The Rupelian (chron C13r–C9n) was introduced by Dumont (1849), describing the Boom Clay formation along the Rupel and Scheldt rivers in Belgium. The Chattian (chron C9n–C6Cn) was first officially mentioned by Fuchs (1894), who studied the “Kasseler Meeressande” (marine sands) in Hessen and Bünde, Germany (De Man et al., 2010; Van Simaëys, 2004; Van Simaëys et al., 2004). The GSSP for the Rupelian–Chattian boundary was set in 2016 by Coccioni et al. (2018) at the Monte Cagnero section near Urbania (Italy) and was bound by the (highest) last common occurrence (LCO) of the planktonic foraminifer *Chilouembelina cubensis* at the base of the planktonic foraminifer zone O5. Currently, the official GSSP age for the Rupelian–Chattian boundary is 27.29 Ma, after Coccioni et al. (2018).

### 2.2 Oligocene isotope stratigraphy

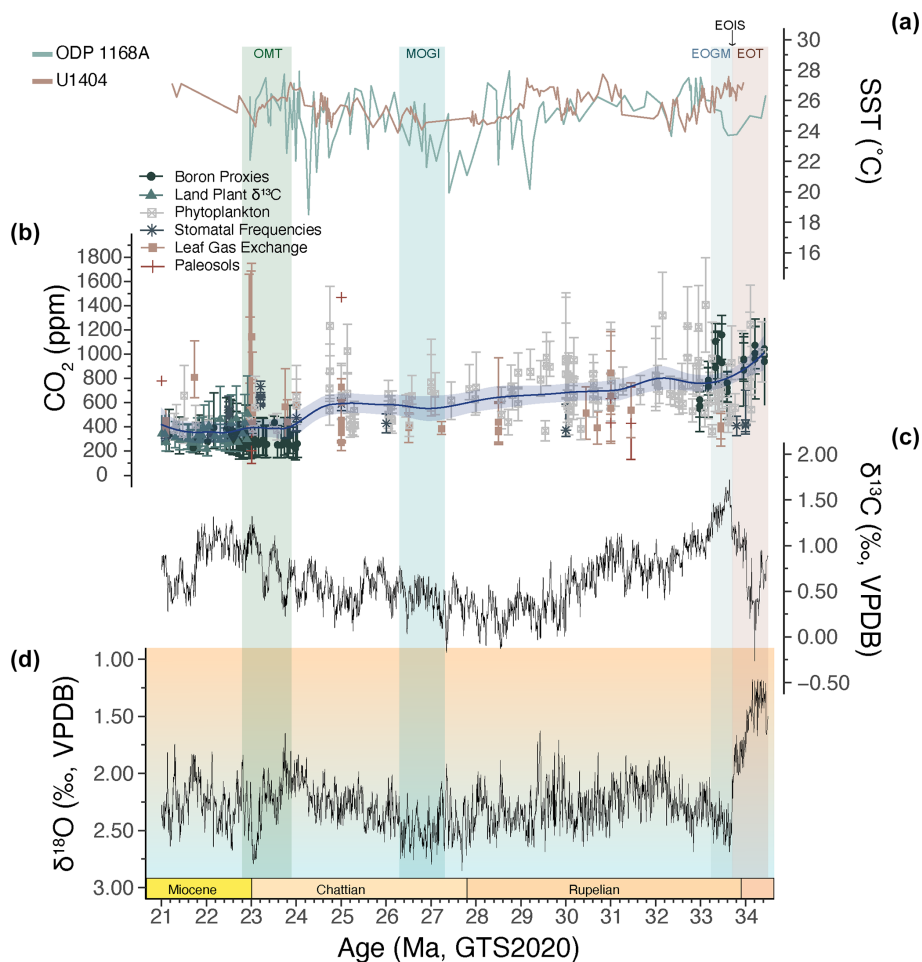
Several informal definitions are used to describe the various stratigraphic isotope events associated with the Oligocene (Fig. 1). The Eocene–Oligocene transition (EOT) refers to the numerous climatic and environmental events broadly associated with the epoch boundary (e.g., Coxall and Pearson, 2007; Eldrett et al., 2009; Houben et al., 2012; Zanazzi et al., 2007). However, Hutchinson et al. (2021) recently defined it as the  $\sim 790$  kyr interval between the extinction of the coccolithophore species *Discoaster saipanensis* ( $\sim 34.46$  Ma) and the Earliest Oligocene oxygen Isotope Step (EOIS). Hutchinson et al. (2021) also defined several other globally recognisable Oligocene isotope events, together replacing the classic Oligocene oxygen isotope zones of Miller et al. (1991). The EOIS, previously known as the onset of Oligocene oxygen isotope zone 1 (Oi-1; Miller et al., 1991), is an  $\sim 40$  kyr long  $\geq 0.7\text{‰}$   $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  increase (Coxall and Wilson, 2011; Zachos et al., 1996) which peaks at  $\sim 33.71$  Ma. The EOT and the EOIS are followed by the Early Oligocene Glacial Maximum (EOGM), which lasted  $\sim 490$  kyr from  $\sim 33.71$  to  $\sim 33.22$  Ma and chronostratigraphically correlates to most of the geomagnetic polarity timescale (GPTS) magnetochron C13n (33.726–33.214 Ma) (Hutchinson et al., 2021). The EOGM was first introduced by Liu et al. (2004) and spans the separate  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  maxima which were defined by Zachos et al. (1996) as Oi-1a ( $\sim 33.66$  Ma) and Oi-1b ( $\sim 33.26$  Ma), a consecutive period of colder climate and/or glaciation. The Mid-Oligocene Glacial Interval (MOGI) represents an  $\sim 1$  Myr long phase of strong variability in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  with marked maxima representing profound cooling and/or glacial expansion between 27.3 and 26.3 Ma (Liebrand et al., 2017), previously referred to as Oi-2b. The MOGI was followed by three warming phases ( $\sim 26.3$ ,  $\sim 25.5$ , and  $\sim 24.22$  Ma), after which cooling led up to the Oligocene–Miocene transition (OMT; 23.88–23.04 Ma). The beginning of the Miocene (23.040–5.33 Ma) is marked by an  $\sim 1\text{‰}$  rise in deep-ocean benthic foraminifer  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  values, traditionally referred to as the Mi-1 event (Billups et al., 2002; Flower et al., 1997; Miller et al., 1991).

## 3 Boundary conditions for Oligocene climate

### 3.1 Geographical boundary conditions

Oligocene plate tectonic geography differed from the modern configuration regarding several regions that are relevant to climate (Fig. 2). Specifically, plate tectonic movements may have been important for oceanographical change, influencing regional climate through changes in meridional and zonal heat transport. Here, we discuss the most prominent tectonic differences.

One of the most discussed tectonic changes since the Oligocene is the uplift of the Tibetan Plateau, the Himalayas, and the Hengduan Mountains. Although the collision be-



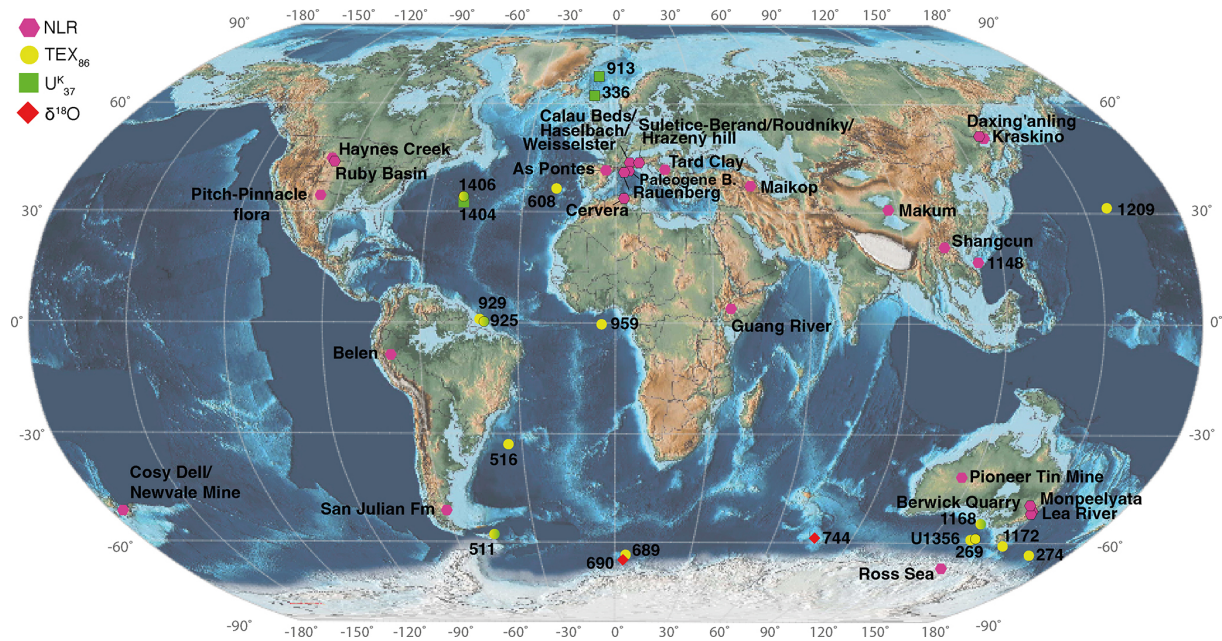
**Figure 1.** (a) In blue: SST of ODP 1168A (west of Tasmania, TEX<sub>86</sub><sup>H</sup>; Guitián and Stoll, 2021; Hoem et al., 2021). In brown: SST of U1404 (northwestern Atlantic, Uk37; Liu et al., 2018). (b) Published  $p\text{CO}_2$  records of the Oligocene. Dark-blue line and shading represent the median and 95 % credible interval. Grey squares: phytoplankton data. Brown squares: leaf gas exchange reconstructions. Black dots: boron isotopic data. Green triangles: land plant  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  data. Brown crosses: palaeosol data. Green stars: stomatal frequency data (Greenop et al., 2019; Moraweck et al., 2019; Pagani et al., 2005, 2011; Roth-Nebelsick et al., 2014; Witkowski et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2013; The CenCO2PIPm, 2023). (c, d) Deep-ocean benthic foraminifera stable carbon isotope and oxygen isotope records, respectively (Westerhold et al., 2020, notably representing the record of Pálike et al., 2006a). Red colour block: Eocene–Oligocene transition (EOT). Grey: Eocene–Oligocene Glacial Maximum (EOGM). Blue: Mid-Oligocene Glacial Interval (MOGI). Green: Oligocene–Miocene transition (OMT).

tween India and the Eurasian Plate predates the Oligocene (60–50 Ma; van Hinsbergen, 2022; Wang et al., 2014), continued collision also created further uplift of the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau in the Oligocene. The climatic consequences of the uplift are investigated both regionally (e.g., SE Asia; Ding et al., 2017; Su et al., 2019) and globally as a source of chemical weathering during the Cenozoic (e.g., Raymo and Ruddiman, 1992). Today, Tibet has an average elevation of over 4.5 km. During the Oligocene the elevation of Tibet was between 2.3 and 3 km, with central Tibet most likely at similar altitudes to today (Spicer et al., 2020, 2021a, b; Su et al., 2019).

Another important tectonic event during the Oligocene was the convergence of the European and Adriatic plates which led to the formation of the Alpine system. While

the collisional stage of the Alps began in the earliest Paleocene (65 Ma), during the Oligocene a slab from the subducted oceanic European lithosphere broke off, which resulted in the rapid and continued uplift of the Alps, which lasted until today but became stable in the mid-Miocene (Meschede and Warr, 2019). This resulted in an Oligocene uplift of  $\sim 1$  km of the Alpine area, from an average elevation of  $< 1$  to 2 km (Dielforder, 2017; Winterberg et al., 2020). Due to the strong tectonic changes around the eastern Alps and Tibet during the Oligocene, the so-called “Paratethys” (Laskarev, 1924), which reached from the western Molasse basin in Switzerland to the Aral Sea between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, became a semi-isolated inland sea at the beginning of the Oligocene (Schulz et al., 2005; Steininger and Wessely, 1999). The Paratethys consisted of a series of adja-





**Figure 2.** Palaeogeographic reconstruction of the Oligocene ( $\sim 28$  Ma). Yellow dots: Tex<sub>86</sub>-based data. Purple hexagons: nearest living relative (NLR) data. Green squares: U<sub>37</sub><sup>K</sup> data. Red diamonds:  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  data. Map created using GPlates, using the Scotese and Wright (2018) plate rotation.

cent sedimentary basins, of which the interconnections were rather unstable, resulting in the separation of the Paratethys into three main parts: the western (Alpine), central (Balkan), and eastern (Caucasian) Paratethys (Kováč, 2017; Palcu and Krijgsman, 2023; Rögl, 1998). A connection to the Mediterranean might have been established in the late Oligocene, connecting the Paratethys to the main oceans (Kováč, 2017).

Oceanic gateways in the Southern Ocean, including the Drake Passage (DP) and the Tasmanian Gateway, underwent tectonic changes in the Paleogene that were originally hypothesised to have strongly affected regional ocean circulation and associated heat and salt transport, as inferred from sedimentary data (e.g., Kennett, 1977; Murphy and Kennett, 1986). However, based on model simulations and biogeography, the extent to which the opening of these gateways affected Cenozoic cooling, either globally or regionally, remains the subject of debate (Houben et al., 2019; Huber et al., 2004; Kennett, 1977; Sauermilch et al., 2021; Scher and Martin, 2006; Toumoulin et al., 2020). While exact age estimates for the first opening of the DP lie most likely in the middle to late Eocene ( $\sim 50$  Ma; Eagles and Jokat, 2014), it remains likely that the DP opened once or experienced intermittent closures that resulted in staggered throughflow over several tens of millions of years (van de Lagemaat et al., 2021). The DP opened due to tectonic processes between the South American, Antarctic, and central Scotia plates (Eagles, 2016), and it involved a complex opening of isolated ocean basins which became oceanographically connected into one deep throughflow during the Oligocene ( $\sim 26$  Ma;

van de Lagemaat et al., 2021). During the early to middle Oligocene (34–26 Ma), subduction initiated between South America and the Scotia Plate (Crameri et al., 2020), which led to the opening and deepening of several ocean basins in the area between 29.5 and 21.2 Ma (van de Lagemaat et al., 2021). This tectonic development facilitated the formation of a deeper DP gateway (Maldonado et al., 2014).

Although spreading between Australia and Antarctica initiated in the Cretaceous, the South Tasman Rise connected the continents until the latest Eocene (see overview in Bijl et al., 2021). Dinoflagellate cyst biogeographical evidence suggests shallow-water connections between the Australo-Antarctic Gulf and the southwestern Pacific initiated close to the early–middle Eocene transition (Bijl et al., 2013). Lithological evidence for rapid deepening of the South Tasman Rise at  $\sim 35.7$  Ma (Stickley et al., 2004) was later found to be a Southern Ocean-wide phenomenon related to the initiation of the throughflow of a vigorous Antarctic Counter Current and a proto-Antarctic Circumpolar Current (ACC; Houben et al., 2019). It is generally accepted that the Tasmanian Gateway was open to deep waters by Oligocene times (Stickley et al., 2004), but the Australian continent obstructed the optimal flow of strong circumpolar ocean currents until the late Neogene (Evangelinos et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2013; Sauermilch et al., 2021).

### 3.2 Ocean circulation

Using marine magnetic data, Barker and Burrell (1977) found that the opening of the Southern Ocean gate-

ways (SOGs) (i.e., the Drake Passage and the Tasmanian Gateway) preconditioned the formation of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current (ACC) between Antarctica, South America, and Australia. As Earth's strongest ocean current, the modern ACC is not only responsible for the regulation of heat and carbon exchange from and to the atmosphere, but it also influences deep-water formation and nutrient distribution (Cox, 1989; Scher et al., 2015). The ACC encircles Antarctica and, in doing so, connects the deep waters of the Pacific, Indian, and Atlantic oceans. Models using middle Eocene to early Oligocene geographies and CO<sub>2</sub> values have sought to understand the influence of the SOG openings on the global ocean (e.g., Goldner et al., 2014; Hutchinson et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2015; Kennedy-Asser et al., 2019; Sauerlich et al., 2021; Baatsen et al., 2016). Model simulations suggest that, as soon as the DP opened, a weak current (the proto-ACC) from the Pacific to the Atlantic would have been established (Ladant et al., 2014). Additionally, the coupled model of Toggweiler and Bjornsson (2000) shows that winds around Antarctica raise cold, dense water, cooling the region. This upwelled water then becomes fresher and warmer as it moves northwards due to Ekman transport. North of the ACC, this lighter and warmer water is transported downwards into the thermocline. This thickens the lower thermocline and creates a bigger density contrast across the Icelandic sills, ultimately enhancing the formation of North Atlantic Deep Water (NADW). Subsequently, NADW cools the water, facilitating its southward transport. The model of Toggweiler and Bjornsson (2000) shows that the DP opening thus might have led to a cooling of the air and oceans around Antarctica of around 3 °C. The water in the SH takes up the solar heat, which is then transported northwards where it is released, consequently warming up the NH by the equivalent amount the SH was cooled (Toggweiler and Bjornsson, 2000).

Lagabriele et al. (2009) also discuss the influence of the proto-ACC on the formation and strength of Northern Component Water (NCW; later turns into NADW), which brings water from the NH to the Southern Ocean. Exactly when the formation of NCW began is unclear, but around 34 Ma the North Atlantic deepened rapidly due to its separation from Greenland in response to the Iceland mantle plume collapse, and significant deep-water production started in the NH (Lagabriele et al., 2009; Via and Thomas, 2006). Hence, along with tectonic changes in the North Atlantic region, the proto-ACC contributed to the inception of NCW/NADW and modulated its strength.

In the Eocene the SOGs were not open to deep-ocean circulation. Rather, shallow-ocean connections south of 60° S allowed a westward Antarctic Counter Current (e.g., Bijl et al., 2013; Houben et al., 2019). Although SOGs progressively opened in the Oligocene (Stickley et al., 2004), oceanographic changes associated with that were restricted to the Southern Ocean (Houben et al., 2019; Scher and Martin, 2008), and there was little effect on the Southern Ocean

oceanography for the remainder of the Oligocene (Evangelinos et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Hoem et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2018). Only in the late Oligocene did Southern Ocean latitudinal SST gradients increase, and perhaps the ACC strengthened, due to deep opening of Drake Passage (Hoem et al., 2022), although the ACC weakened again during the Miocene Climatic Optimum (Evangelinos et al., 2022; Sangiorgi et al., 2018).

### 3.3 Atmospheric pCO<sub>2</sub>

Only a few records of atmospheric pCO<sub>2</sub> cover the Oligocene entirely. Most are focused on the EOT and the OMT or are of low resolution. Trends are quite inconsistent between records and proxies (CenCO2PIP, 2023). The available records for the Oligocene are based on higher plant leaf gas exchange, phytoplankton <sup>13</sup>C-fractionation, and foraminifer boron isotope ratios (Fig. 1). Pagani et al. (2005) were the first to produce a pCO<sub>2</sub> record for the Oligocene using <sup>13</sup>C-fractionation of di-unsaturated alkenones extracted from various Deep Sea Drilling Project (DSDP) and Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) sediments. They recorded decreasing pCO<sub>2</sub> throughout the Oligocene from ~1500 ppm at the EOT to modern levels by the late Oligocene. Pagani et al. (2011) evaluated regional differences in pCO<sub>2</sub> and pCO<sub>2</sub> trends over the EOT by contrasting alkenone carbon isotope values from six DSDP and ODP sites. The estimated pCO<sub>2</sub> values yielded highly variable results among the different sites, showing a general atmospheric pCO<sub>2</sub> decline from around 1200 to around 600 ppm throughout the Oligocene, with pCO<sub>2</sub> decreasing around 40 % at the EOT. Zhang et al. (2013) critically evaluated confounding factors of the alkenone pCO<sub>2</sub> proxy and excluded data from several locations, arriving at a continuous CO<sub>2</sub> record covering the past 40 Ma based on di-unsaturated alkenone <sup>13</sup>C-fractionation at ODP Site 925 in the western tropical Atlantic Ocean. The general findings of Zhang et al. (2013) agreed with the pCO<sub>2</sub> trends reported in Pagani et al. (2005, 2011) but showed pCO<sub>2</sub> values to decrease from ~1000 ppm at the EOT to ~400 ppm in the late Oligocene. Lastly, Witkowski et al. (2018) compiled the longest consecutive pCO<sub>2</sub> record of the past ~100 Ma, solely based on phytane <sup>13</sup>C-fractionation from marine sediment and oil samples. Their results concur with the findings of Zhang et al. (2013), showing pCO<sub>2</sub> ranges from ~600–1000 ppm throughout the Oligocene with a decreasing trend from the EOT towards the OMT (Fig. 1). Both Roth-Nebelsick et al. (2014) and Moraweck et al. (2019) used fossil leaf stomata to reconstruct Oligocene atmospheric pCO<sub>2</sub> levels. Oligocene fossil leaves of *Platanus neptuni* from various sites in Saxony (Germany) suggest lower pCO<sub>2</sub> levels than the alkenone-based results, with a modelled range of ~400–600 ppm for the Oligocene (Roth-Nebelsick et al., 2014). Moraweck et al. (2019) reconstructed pCO<sub>2</sub> from the middle Eocene to the Oligocene using *P. neptuni* and *Rhodomyrtophyllum reticulosum* leaves

from seven central European sites. They found a similar  $p\text{CO}_2$  range to Roth-Nebelsick et al. (2014), with values also varying between  $\sim 400$ – $600$  ppm in the Oligocene. Greenop et al. (2019) created the only available boron-isotope-based  $p\text{CO}_2$  record; however they only focus on the OMT. While Greenop et al. (2019) did not find a strong decreasing trend over the OMT, they generally found low, stable values ranging from around 220 to 350 ppm, which increased to around 400 ppm after the OMT.

While there is a lot of variability between Oligocene  $p\text{CO}_2$  records, with plant and boron data showing relatively stable  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels, most other records suggest a steady decline in atmospheric  $p\text{CO}_2$  towards the Miocene (CenCO2PIP, 2023).

## 4 Climate proxy data

We compiled marine and terrestrial climate proxy data to assess long-term trends and variability in climate across the Oligocene. For sea surface temperatures, we have added recently published records to the compilation of O'Brien et al. (2020). To assess terrestrial climate, we compiled published records of fossil plant remains, notably pollen, spores, and macro-remains (Table A1). Where the fossil plant remains had been assigned taxonomic affinities, the nearest living relatives (NLRs) were determined and used as input for NLR-based probability density modelling, following the methodology of Willard et al. (2019) and Reichgelt et al. (2023), to assess terrestrial palaeoclimate. We adopt the age determination from the original sources (Table A1), corrected for the GTS 2020 stage boundaries (Gradstein, 2020), where, if absolute age determination is unavailable, an average age was taken. Based on the distribution of the NLR for each fossil species, the probability of plant co-existence in an assemblage is calculated for 60 000 combinations of mean annual temperature (MAT), winter mean temperature (WinT), mean annual precipitation (MAP), and driest-month precipitation (DMP), as plant species distributions are sensitive to these variables and significant differences exist in the analysed plant groups for these variables (see Supplement). Up to 20 different plant taxa were compared at a time, and, where there were more than 20 taxa, sets of 10 were randomly chosen to maximise data variability. We report the highest-probability climate combination, and the uncertainty range is based on those climatic combinations with a probability of  $\geq 2.5\%$  of the maximum probability combination.

We found 28 vegetation reconstructions of sufficient quality to assess palaeoclimate using the NLR method (see Table A1). The results can be assigned several potential quality “flags” based on diversity, depositional environment, and taxonomical assignments. Firstly, low convergence of multiple simulations of the same flora may suggest that the climate niche of one or multiple taxa has changed since the

Oligocene (Reichgelt et al., 2023). Additionally, some floras had fewer than 20 taxa recorded, for which convergence could not be tested. Secondly, microfloras (pollen and spores) likely include upland or even extra-basinal input and are therefore less indicative of local climatic conditions than macrofloras (leaves, fruits, and flowers) (Reichgelt et al., 2023). Thirdly and finally, some palaeobotanical studies assign fossils to parataxa based on limited anatomical evidence or by using literature that is inappropriate for the study region. The majority of the data derives from NH mid-latitudes, a handful derives from SH mid-latitudes, and two datasets derive from the tropical realm. The absence of high-latitude data may be partly due to the lack of vegetation owing to cool conditions. However, there are pollen assemblages in sediments from the Antarctic margin (e.g., Askin and Raine, 2000; Prebble et al., 2005; Raine and Askin, 2001), but to our knowledge no quantitative data suitable for our NLR method have been generated for any high-latitude site.

### 4.1 Temperature

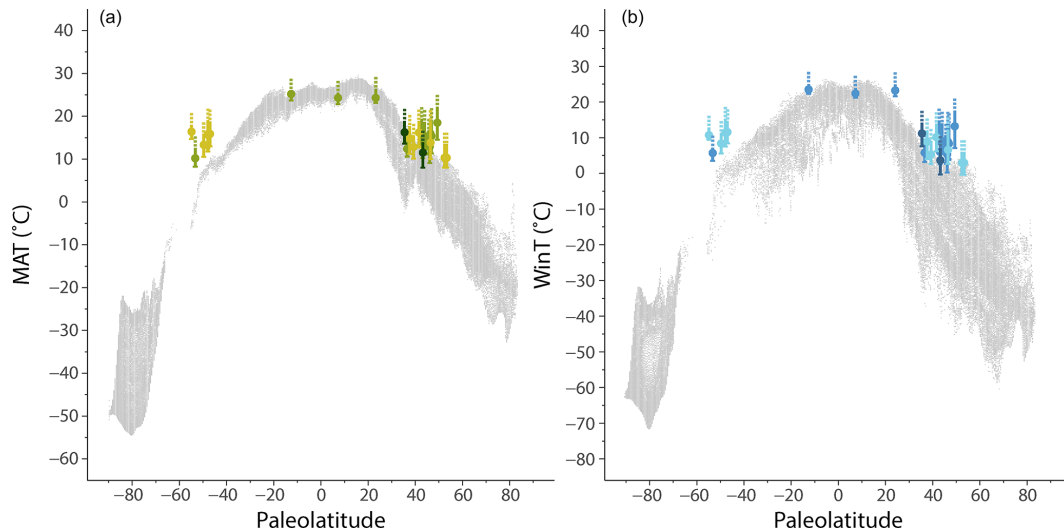
#### 4.1.1 Continental mean annual temperature (MAT)

The data produced by the NLR allow a first assessment of the general Oligocene meridional temperature gradient on land. Unfortunately, the data are too sparse to assess trends or variability at any location, on any timescale (Fig. 3). Although the sparsity of data from low- and mid-latitude datasets limits our view on global gradients, the mid-latitude data can be compared to the modern and model simulations of the Oligocene and to reconstructed Eocene and Miocene gradients.

The two low-latitude data points suggest MATs of around  $25^\circ\text{C}$  ( $\pm 1.5^\circ\text{C}$ ). At first sight, Oligocene low-latitude MATs were, on average, similar to modern MATs for the same latitudes. However, the NLR method is based on modern distributions; therefore reconstructed temperatures cannot exceed the global temperature maximum. Palaeobotanical temperature reconstructions from the tropics are susceptible to this problem and should therefore be regarded as minimum estimates. Most mid-latitude MAT reconstructions in both the NH and SH are between  $12$  and  $17^\circ\text{C}$ , with an average error of  $\pm 2.9^\circ\text{C}$  (Fig. 3). Mid-latitude MATs during the Oligocene, particularly in the SH, are generally higher (up to  $16^\circ\text{C}$ ) than modern temperatures. We did not encounter suitable data for high-latitude regions.

The reconstructed winter temperatures (WinTs) range from  $\sim 23^\circ\text{C}$  in the lower latitudes to  $\sim 3^\circ\text{C}$  in the highest-latitude samples ( $\sim 52^\circ\text{N}$ ). Temperatures around the Equator reveal limited change in winter cooling ( $\sim 1.8^\circ\text{C}$ ), while at higher latitudes the difference in temperature between WinT and MAT can be up to nearly  $8^\circ\text{C}$ . Compared to modern values, Oligocene WinTs show the same trend as MATs, with similar values (possibly underestimations) around the Equator and higher temperatures in the mid-latitudes (Fig. 3).





**Figure 3.** (a) Mean annual temperature (MAT; °C) plot over palaeolatitudes. In grey: pre-industrial (1900) MAT from Matsuura and Willmott (2018). (b) Winter temperature (WinT; °C) plot over palaeolatitudes. In grey: pre-industrial (1900) WinT from Matsuura and Willmott (2018). Darker colours represent a higher analytical certainty of the used site, and data with low reliability were excluded (see Table A1).

With the present dataset, it seems that Oligocene seasonality was similar to modern seasonality, with WinTs of the higher latitudes showing a difference of up to  $\sim 12$  °C compared to the MATs, thus reflecting a high temperature change between MATs and WinTs. Just as in the modern period, Oligocene WinTs had a large range at higher latitudes, with temperatures varying between  $\sim 5$ – $15$  °C, whereas WinTs of lower latitudes barely show any temperature difference (Fig. 3).

#### 4.1.2 Sea surface temperature

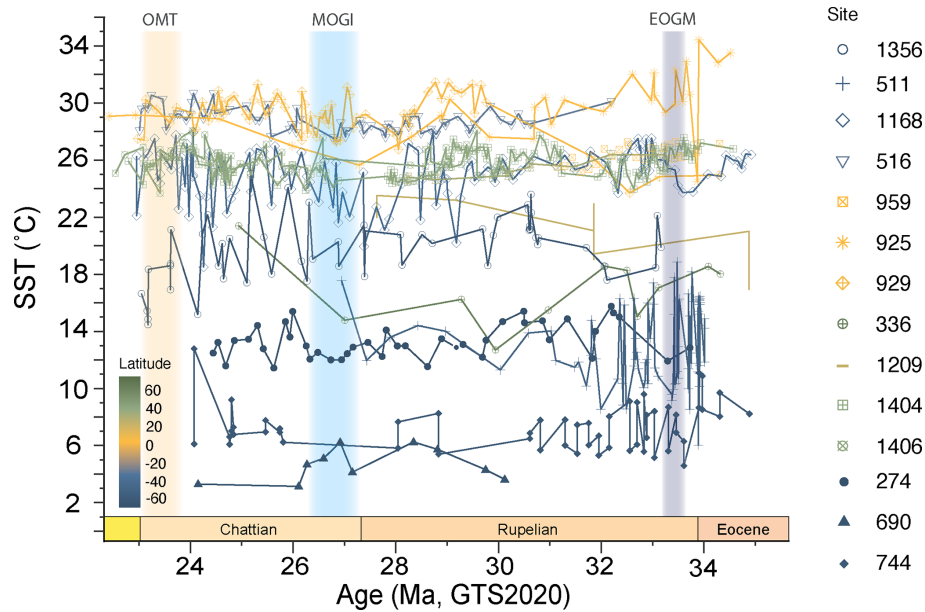
SSTs from three different proxies ( $U_{37}^k$ ,  $TEX_{86}$ , and biogenic calcite  $\delta^{18}O$ ) were compiled for the low-, mid-, and high latitudes of the Oligocene (Fig. 4). The alkenone-based SST reconstruction ( $U_{37}^k$ ) relies on the temperature dependence of di- and tri- $C_{37}$  ketones (Prahl and Wakeham, 1987). At  $U_{37}^k$  values of  $> 0.9$  (at SSTs  $> 27$  °C) the proportion of the tri-unsaturated  $C_{37}$  alkenone becomes very low, virtually absent and/or undetectable, setting an upper limit for the application of this proxy (Tierney and Tingley, 2018). In addition, the low proportion of this alkenone introduces analytical uncertainties that cause noise. Consequently, we regard all  $U_{37}^k$  values  $> 0.9$  as representing SSTs at or above 27 °C. Following the recommendations by Hollis et al. (2019), we use the calibration of Müller et al. (1998; see Table A2).

The  $TEX_{86}$  palaeothermometer is based on the temperature sensitivity of marine Thaumarchaeota membrane lipid (isoprenoid glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraether (isoGDGT)) distributions (Schouten et al., 2002). The proportion of GDGTs containing a greater number of cyclopentane rings increases with higher temperatures and can thus be used to calculate SSTs using a modern surface sediment calibration (Wuchter et al., 2004). Discussion remains on how  $TEX_{86}$

should be calibrated to represent seawater temperatures. The surface sediment calibration dataset shows virtually no response to temperatures below 15 °C, and it is debated if the response at the high-temperature end of the modern ocean – analogous to warmer climates in the past – can be assumed to be linear (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2017; Tierney and Tingley, 2014) or decreases exponentially (e.g., Cramwinckel et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2010). Moreover, isoGDGTs are barely produced in the mixed layer – they peak at  $\sim 50$ – $200$  m depth and sometimes somewhat deeper (e.g., Hurley et al., 2018; van der Weijst et al., 2022). Most calibrations include surface ocean temperatures in their calibration datasets, leading to an overestimation of the proxy slope (Ho and Laepple, 2016). As the Oligocene was most likely warmer than today, we therefore prefer a conservative approach to assess SST, using an exponential calibration that has a drop in proxy response at higher temperatures. Even though it is associated with regression dilution (Tierney and Tingley, 2014), we use the  $TEX_{86}^H$  of Kim et al. (2010; see Table A2) to assess SST, rather than a linear model, for reasons outlined in Fokkema et al. (2024). Linear models produce much higher SSTs in the Oligocene  $TEX_{86}$  range (Hollis et al., 2019). Moreover, any SST calibration assumes a similar relationship between surface temperature and the isoGDGT export zone in both modern and ancient oceans. Given the above uncertainties, it should be noted that absolute  $TEX_{86}$ -derived SST estimates come with large uncertainties.

Planktic foraminifer oxygen isotope ratios were also used to estimate Oligocene SSTs. This method is based on the direct correlation between the temperature-dependent fractionation of the oxygen isotopes  $^{16}O$  and  $^{18}O$  into biogenic calcite of foraminifera (Shackleton, 1974). Here, the calibration of Kim and O’Neil (1997) is used because it is based on in-





**Figure 4.** SST (°C) compilation for the Oligocene (CenCO2PIP, 2023). A linear interpolation was used between data points. Blue sites: SH high-latitude sites. Yellow sites: low-latitude sites. Green sites: NH high-latitude sites. See Fig. 2 for site locations and Table A3 for references.

organic calcite precipitated at temperatures between 10 and 40 °C and produces reliable results for foraminifera (Hollis et al., 2019). Foraminiferal calcite production has been found to decrease with increasing pH levels (Zeebe et al., 1999; Spero et al., 1997). The calibration of Kim and O’Neil (1997), may overestimate temperatures by up to 1.5 °C due to algal photosymbionts which modify the pH of the calcifying microenvironment (Spero and Williams, 1988). Although applying a direct correction is not recommended (Hollis et al., 2019) due to large uncertainties between symbiont activity levels, the influence of changing pH on SST reconstructions has to be considered.

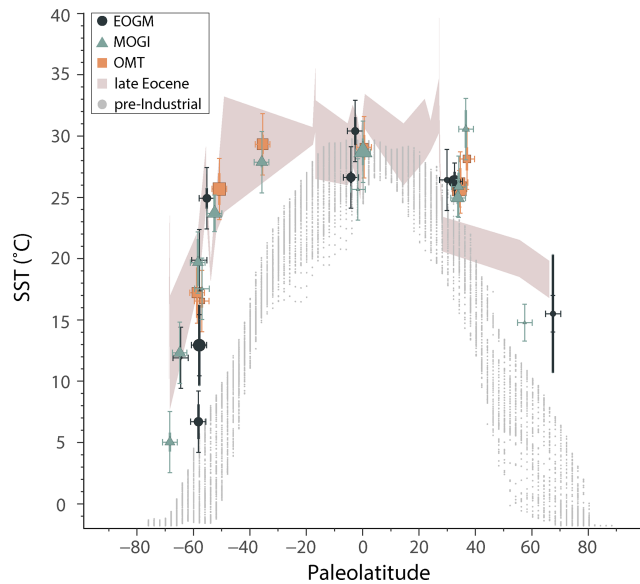
Most available Oligocene SST data are from the mid-palaeolatitudes; records for the low- and high latitudes, especially in the NH, are scarce. Moreover, most records have low temporal resolution or cover only specific segments of the Oligocene (notably the EOT and OMT). The high latitude SSTs vary from 9.8 to 25.1 °C. It is worth noting that these records are restricted to latitudes no higher than 67° N and 68° S. SST estimates from mid-latitude locations have the largest temperature range, 6.0–32.1 °C, while SST estimates from low latitude sites span a narrower temperature range, 23.7–34.4 °C. The mid latitude SSTs show a slight increase (1–2 °C) between 34 and ~27 Ma, followed by a small decrease of 1–2 °C towards 23 Ma (Fig. 4). However, overall, there is a remarkable absence of long-term trends in these SST records.

To assess long-term changes in temperature and meridional temperature gradients, we analyse data from three time slices: 33.7–33.2, 27.3–26.3, and 23.9–23 Ma, corresponding

to the EOGM, MOGI, and OMT, which are averaged for an age of 33.4, 26.8, and 23.4 Ma, respectively. When SSTs are corrected for palaeolatitude (see Table A3), Oligocene SSTs are closer to late Eocene (~38 Ma) than to modern values (Fig. 5). This is especially apparent in the Southern Ocean, where Oligocene SSTs are up to 10 °C warmer than modern SSTs. The high latitudes of the NH are challenging to assess due to data scarcity. However, the data available indicate that Oligocene SSTs were ~2 °C colder than Eocene SSTs but still ~4 °C warmer than modern SSTs. In contrast, low-latitude SST reconstructions show minimal differences, yielding similar temperature estimates for both the Oligocene and the Eocene. This leads to a flattened temperature gradient during the Oligocene between around 40° S and 40° N, where SSTs seem to be nearly the same.

## 4.2 Precipitation

Mean annual precipitation (MAP) and driest-month precipitation (DMP) were derived using the NLR approach (Table A1). The reconstructed MAP shows a range from ~850 to 1750 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>. The SH mid-latitudes show a generally higher MAP (~1200–1750 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>) for the Oligocene compared to the NH (~850–1650 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>). This differs from modern MAP values, where there is not a big discrepancy between SH and NH MAP. Generally, the Oligocene MAP values are higher than modern values, especially at mid-latitudes. The few data points in the tropics suggest a MAP that is similar to modern MAP. The values for the driest month range from ~10 to 85 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>, with generally lower



**Figure 5.** Sea surface temperatures (SSTs; °C) over palaeolatitudes for 33.4 Ma (EOGM, black dots), 26.8 Ma (MOGI, blue triangles), and 23.4 Ma (OMT, orange squares). Brown shaded area: Baatsen et al. (2020) SST record for the late Eocene (38 Ma). Grey area: pre-industrial (1900) SST over latitude (Huang et al., 2015). Thick vertical error bars show the SST standard deviation, and thin vertical error bars represent the calibration error for each proxy. Larger symbols represent a higher data resolution, with larger symbols representing more data used and smaller points representing where fewer data were available. See Table A3 for data referral and references used.

values around the Equator and the NH ( $\sim 10\text{--}45\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) and higher DMP in the SH ( $\sim 20\text{--}85\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ). The DMP values around the Equator are generally lower compared to modern values. In contrast to the Oligocene, the modern SH DMP values are on average lower than NH DMP values.

### 4.3 Data–model comparisons

The compiled surface temperature and precipitation data were regionally compared to the results from palaeoclimate model simulations (Figs. 7 and 8). Following the methodology described by O’Brien et al. (2020), two sets of modelling experiments were used: one from the NCAR Community Earth System Model version 1.0 (CESM1.0) and the other from the UK Hadley Centre Coupled Model version 3 (HadCM3L). The early and middle Oligocene simulations were performed using a  $\times 3^\circ$  nominal ocean and the T31 atmospheric resolution with varying glaciation conditions and  $p\text{CO}_2$  of 560 and 1120 ppm. The late Oligocene simulation used a  $\times 1^\circ$  nominal ocean and  $2^\circ$  atmospheric resolution with a  $p\text{CO}_2$  of 400 ppm. We compare data and simulations for three time slices: (a) early Oligocene, 33.9–33.0 Ma; (b) mid-Oligocene, 33.0–26.5 Ma; and (c) late Oligocene, 25.0–23.5 Ma (Fig. 7). For each time slice, the

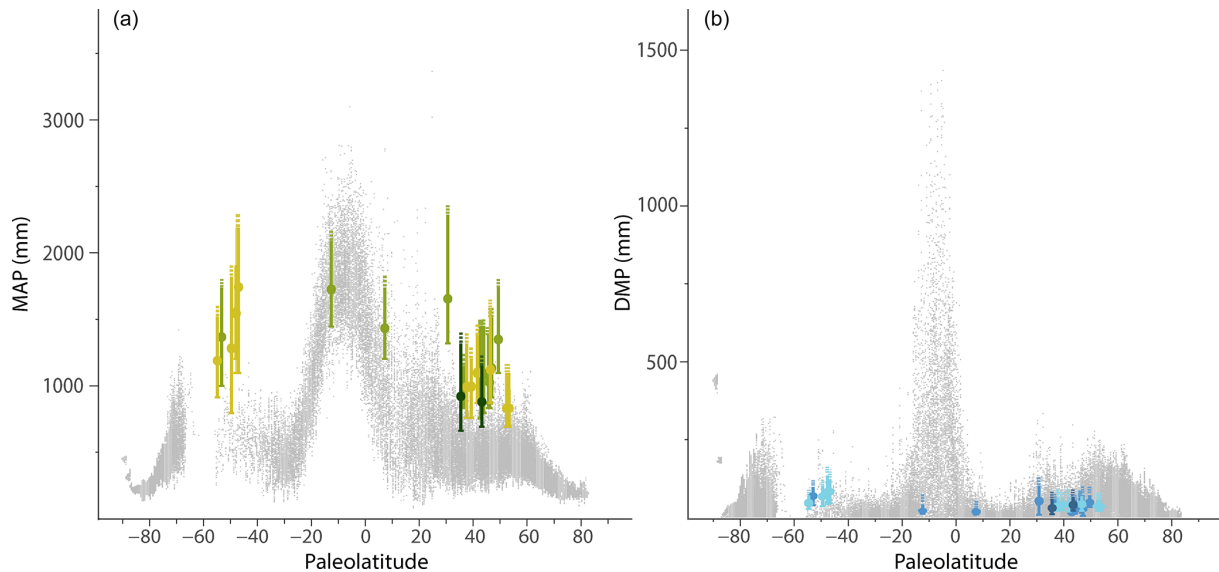
model ensemble mean is used to compare with the data, and the modelling details of the ensemble members are found in the Methods and Supporting Information Table S1 of O’Brien et al. (2020). The model annual mean values are derived from the nearest grid point to the study site.

#### 4.3.1 Temperature proxy–model comparison

Despite utilising two very distinct models with different boundary conditions, the temperature discrepancy between the model and data is similar. The comparison of sea and land temperatures of all three time slices show that the mid- and high-latitude proxy data generally suggest warmer local conditions than simulations predict (Fig. 7). For all investigated time slices, that discrepancy is largest in the North Atlantic and southwestern Pacific. Additionally, for every time slice, the tropics seem to be warmer in model simulations than what local proxy data find, with the most extreme discrepancies in continental southeastern Asia. For the early and middle Oligocene, there is a difference between the modelled higher latitudes and measured data. In both the early and middle Oligocene, the higher latitudes seem to be a lot warmer (up to  $20^\circ\text{C}$ ) in the proxy data than what the models predict. The lower latitudes, on the other hand, for both the early and middle Oligocene, seem somewhat colder (around  $5^\circ\text{C}$ ) than what models predict. In the early Oligocene, North America generally shows a similar temperature range to the European sites, with proxy data indicating warmer conditions compared to the model. This shifts in the middle Oligocene, where most of the recorded North American sites are colder than what the models predict. The late Oligocene seems to have a similar offset in the SH high latitudes, with reconstructed temperatures being up to nearly  $20^\circ\text{C}$  higher than the model results. Due to the lack of proxy data in the NH high latitudes and the tropics, temperature differences between models and records cannot be determined for the late Oligocene.

#### 4.3.2 Precipitation proxy–model comparison

Comparison of precipitation proxy data to modelled simulations shows that, for all three simulated times, models mostly slightly underestimate the daily precipitation on a global scale (Fig. 8). In particular, the SH mid- to lower latitudes seem to be much drier in the models than what the proxy data suggest. For the early Oligocene, only NH tropical and NH mid-latitude data are available, indicating a slightly wetter ( $300\text{--}400\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) climate in Europe, whereas eastern Asia and western North America appear to be drier ( $300\text{--}900\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) than model predictions. Due to limited proxy data, we cannot make definitive statements about the early Oligocene in North America and eastern Asia. In the middle Oligocene, although more proxy data are available compared to the early Oligocene, the patterns are similar. Compared to the model results, the proxy data suggest wet-



**Figure 6.** (a) Mean annual precipitation (MAP) plot over palaeolatitudes in  $\text{mm yr}^{-1}$ . In grey: pre-industrial (1900) MAP from Matsuura and Willmott (2018). (b) Driest-month precipitation (DMP) plot over palaeolatitudes in  $\text{mm yr}^{-1}$ . In grey: pre-industrial (1900) DMP from Matsuura and Willmott (2018). Darker colours represent a higher analytical certainty of the used site, and data with low reliability were excluded (see Table A1).

ter climates ( $300\text{--}400\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) in Europe and eastern Asia ( $600\text{--}900\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) and somewhat drier conditions ( $300\text{--}900\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) in North America. In both the middle and late Oligocene, model simulations appear to underestimate precipitation in SH mid- to high latitudes ( $300\text{--}900\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) (Fig. 8). Similarly to the early and mid-Oligocene, late Oligocene precipitation over central Europe and the region corresponding to today's Middle East also appears to be underestimated by models ( $300\text{--}900\text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ), although precise quantifications cannot be made due to the lower proxy resolution.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Temperature trends and variability

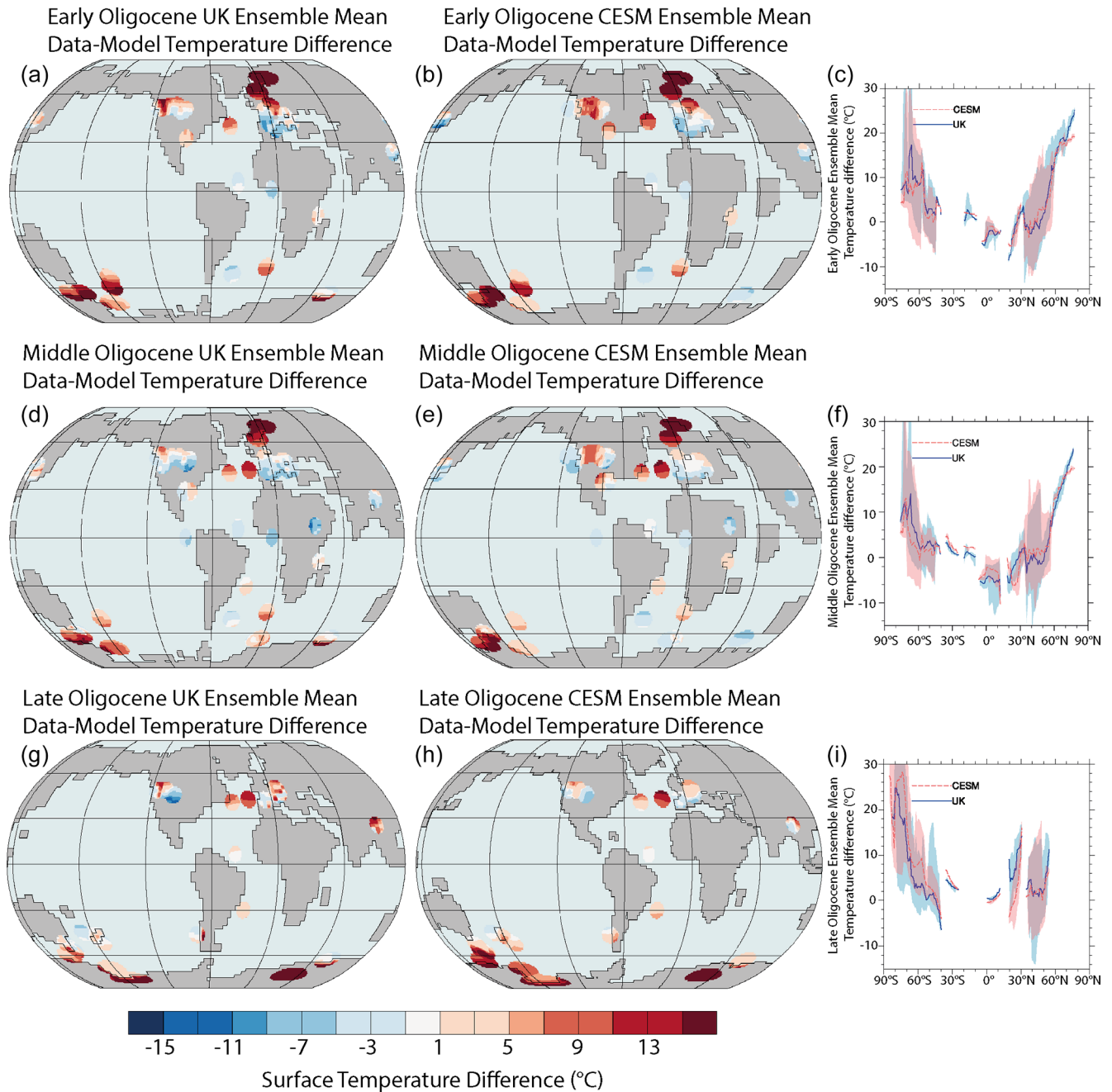
Not only does our compilation of data show that the Oligocene oceans were warm (O'Brien et al., 2020), but the sparsely available floral and faunal information from terrestrial settings shows pronounced warmth (Fig. 3). On average, the data indicate that the Oligocene was slightly cooler than the Eocene but much warmer than modern times (Figs. 3 and 5). Notably, the high latitudes were much warmer than in modern times. The current dataset suggests no or only modest tropical warming relative to the present, but it should be noted that this is based on few records and that the expected ocean warm pools have not yet been sampled. Both sea surface and terrestrial temperature gradients between the tropics and the SH midlatitudes were particularly small, which was previously recognised for the Eocene and for the Miocene (e.g., Baatsen et al., 2020; Burls et al., 2021; Hollis et al.,

2019; Lunt et al., 2021). For both Eocene and Oligocene SSTs, this is mainly the result of very high proxy values in the southwestern Pacific and the Australo-Antarctic Gulf (Baatsen et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2020). The gradient is very steep beyond  $50^\circ\text{S}$  (Fig. 5), while the Equator-to-pole temperature gradient in the NH is more gradual. This means that, despite the presence of ice in Antarctica, the mid-latitudes of the SH seem to be especially warm in the Oligocene.

Single-site high-resolution benthic foraminifer isotope data show a gradual decrease in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  values across the late Oligocene up to the onset of the OMT (Fig. 1; De Vleeschouwer et al., 2017; Liebrand et al., 2016; Pälke et al., 2006b). This suggests pronounced warming during the late Oligocene, termed late Oligocene warming. Regionally, this warming is supported by biogeographical information (De Man and Simaëys, 2004). However, the compiled temperature records show no consistent evidence for long-term warming throughout the mid- to late Oligocene. Rather, they show relatively stable values, with only few records (e.g., ODP 925, 744) indicating cooling from the early to mid-Oligocene, followed by long-term warming from the mid- to late Oligocene (Fig. 4). This suggests that the decrease in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  values may reflect regional warming at deep-water formation sites rather than global warming.

In the shorter term, there is strong variability within the temperature data, especially for the high and mid-latitudes (Fig. 4). Currently the resolution of all temperature records is insufficient to assess if any of this variability corresponds to orbital cyclicity. Similar variability apparent in deep-ocean

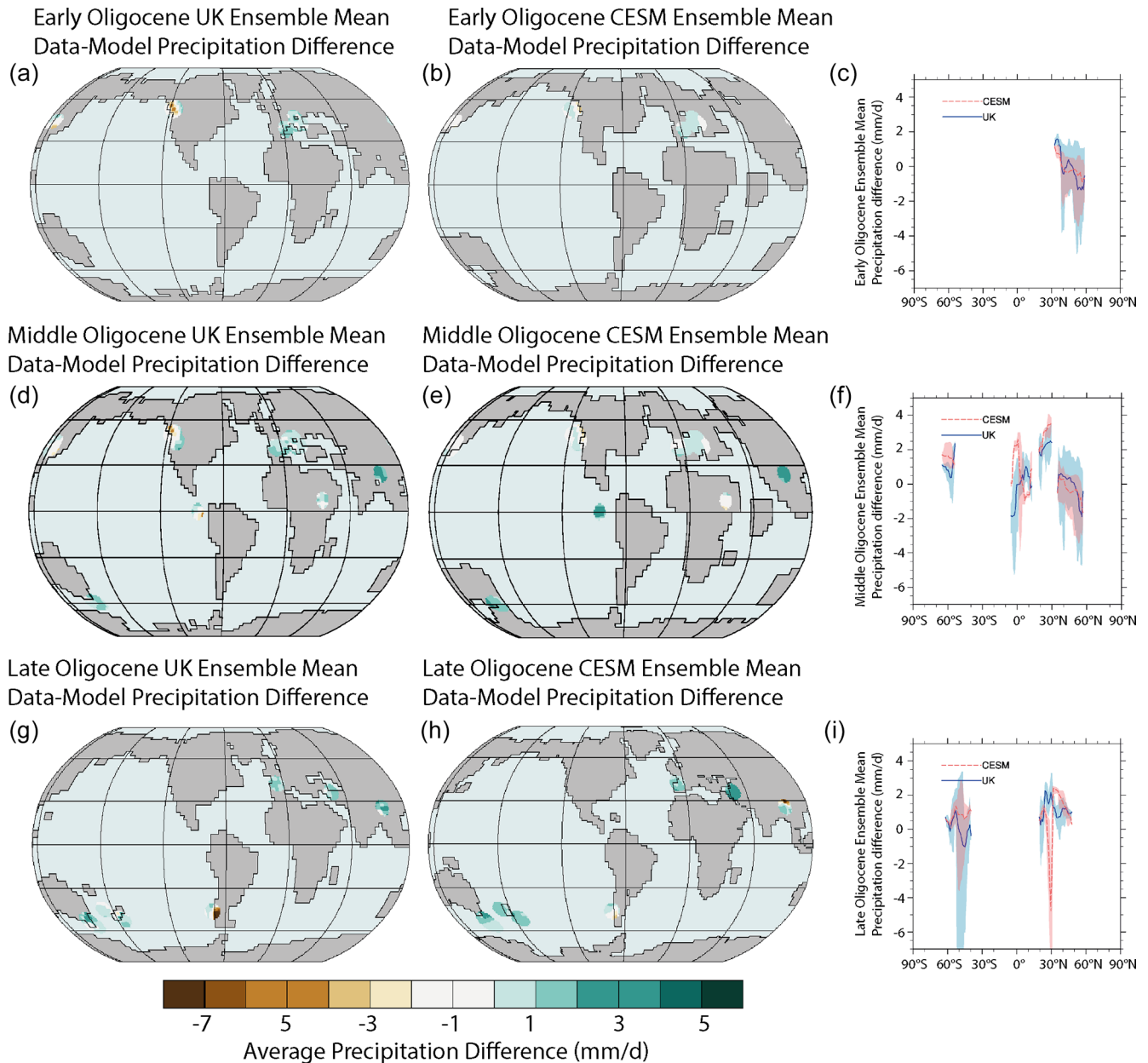




**Figure 7.** Oligocene temperature data–model comparisons. All proxy data were compared to ensemble means from HadCM3L (UK) and CESM. **(a–i)** Sea surface and land temperature data–model comparisons for three Oligocene time slices. Data–model temperature difference data are displayed both spatially **(a, b, d, e, g, h)** and as zonal means **(c, f, i)**. Temperature difference data in panels **(a), (b), (d), (e), (g), and (h)** are calculated as pointwise differences between the proxy mean value and the model annual mean. The pink and blue ribbons in panels **(c), (f), and (i)** represent the maximum and minimum differences associated with the zonal means. All proxy data are shown in Table A4.

benthic  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  records primarily reflects eccentricity signals on timescales around 110 ka (Pälike et al., 2006b; Westerhold et al., 2020). If the temperature variability is global in nature, its increasing amplitude towards higher latitudes would likely reflect a combination of climatic polar amplification (i.e., ice and/or snow albedo and humidity feedbacks)

and/or oceanographic variability (i.e., fronts and upwelling). However, due to the low resolution and lack of temperature records, especially in low latitudes and in the NH, the nature of and mechanism behind the temperature variability remain uncertain.



**Figure 8.** Oligocene precipitation data ( $\text{mm d}^{-1}$ )–model comparisons. All proxy data were compared to ensemble means from HadCM3L (UK) and CESM. (a–i) Precipitation data–model comparisons for three Oligocene time slices. The data are displayed both spatially (a, b, d, e, g, h) and as zonal means (c, f, i) of the different precipitations. Differences in panels (a), (b), (d), (e), (g), and (h) are calculated as pointwise differences between the proxy mean value and the model annual mean and then plotted as points of difference. The pink and blue ribbons in panels (c), (f), and (i) represent the maximum and minimum differences associated with the zonal means. All proxy data are shown in Table A5.

When compared to model simulations (Figs. 7 and 8), it is evident that the models show significantly less polar amplification of warming relative to the present day than in the proxy data. This is due to the extremely strong warming at higher latitudes and comparatively modest warming in the tropics in the proxy data compared to in the simulations. The dataset is limited, as floral data might underestimate tem-

peratures in tropical regions that are warmer than in modern times (e.g., Huber and Caballero, 2011). It should also be noted that some of the SST data are based on  $\text{TEX}_{86}$ , which suffers from large uncertainties in absolute SST reconstructions (see Sect. 4.1.2). However, plant-based (NLR) and  $U_{37}^{k'}$ -derived temperatures show similar warming to those based on  $\text{TEX}_{86}$  in the high latitudes, corroborating strong

polar amplification. In other parts, climate models are not able to fully reconstruct regional climate variations as closely as proxy data can and thus probably underestimate regional variability, particularly on land (e.g., Laepple et al., 2023). Additional high-quality SST data are necessary to fully evaluate tropical temperatures for the Oligocene.

In particular, the shallow gradient between the Equator and  $\sim 40^\circ$  N and S is difficult to reconcile with the simulations. Floral data and carbonate geochemical records support exceptional mid- to high-latitude warmth during the Eocene (e.g., Creech et al., 2010; Douglas et al., 2014; Willard et al., 2019), which still seems to be the case during the Oligocene. Collectively, the nature of the data might underestimate the latitudinal heat transfer for the Oligocene. Regardless, our findings agree with those of O'Brien et al. (2020), showing that most of the Oligocene was similar to the late Eocene greenhouse world. Like in the late Eocene (Baatsen et al., 2024), the recorded temperatures are difficult to reconcile with the formation and persistence of a large ice sheet on Antarctica. The model–data comparison highlights the ongoing challenges of fully understanding the complex nature of the Oligocene. Questions remain regarding the formation of ice in a world with a flattened meridional temperature gradient, when poles were much warmer than today and atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  levels were high (e.g., Baatsen et al., 2020, 2024).

## 5.2 Precipitation

Surprisingly, the few MAP data points at low latitudes are similar to today (Fig. 6), whereas mid-latitude MAP is higher compared to pre-industrial values. DMP for the Oligocene low latitudes is especially low compared to the pre-industrial period. The Southern Hemisphere mid- to high-latitude DMP ( $\sim 100 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ) is higher than pre-industrial records ( $< 100 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ), whereas the DMP for the Northern Hemisphere is lower ( $\sim 50 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ), which is more in line with the pre-industrial records ( $0\text{--}250 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ ). During periods that are globally warmer than today, the tropics and the mid-latitude zone of converging westerlies ( $30\text{--}60^\circ$  latitude) would be expected to be wetter than today, while the subtropics would be expected to be drier (e.g., Pierrehumbert et al., 2002). This is consistent with MAP reconstructions, especially at  $> 30^\circ$  (Fig. 6a), whereas the data from lower latitudes are less clear, but that is largely due to a dearth of data points. Overall, Northern Hemisphere MAP is lower than that of the Southern Hemisphere. This may be due to the prevalence of Northern Hemisphere continental climate systems in the Oligocene (e.g., Sun et al., 2014). The Oligocene reconstructed MAP is somewhat lower than that of the Eocene (Cramwinckel et al., 2022). This drier climate compared to the Eocene is also seen in other terrestrial records (e.g., Couvreur et al., 2021; Dupont-Nivet et al., 2007; Jaramillo et al., 2006; Kohn et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2012; Salard-Cheboldaef, 1979; Sun et al., 2014), which

suggests the expansion of arid regions and the reduction of rainforests during the Oligocene.

In addition, comparisons to modelled data show that the models underestimate, particularly in higher latitudes, precipitation levels from 300 up to over  $900 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ . Palaeoclimate models homogenise meso- and microclimates due to the large grid size, which leads to an averaged topography and thus less spatial precipitation variability. Proxy data, on the other hand, may experience a bias to wetter environments, as there is more plant data available where wetter climates persisted, including those in meso- or microclimates that were unrepresentative of the macroclimate, such as a riparian environment. Similar to temperature (Sect. 6.1), our understanding of global Oligocene precipitation relies on a limited dataset, mainly sampling Europe (Fig. 2); therefore a first-order goal to a more comprehensive understanding of Oligocene palaeoclimates would be to generate more terrestrial data from other continents, particularly from high-latitude regions.

## 6 Conclusions and outlook for future work

While the palaeogeography of the Oligocene differs from today, it still poses a useful analogue to a projected future unipolar climate state. It is becoming more and more clear that the Oligocene icehouse was in fact warmer than previously thought, particularly in mid- and high latitudes. However, the present dataset suggests that the tropical band was not much warmer than today. This is contrary to model simulations, which predict that tropical regions for the Oligocene were warmer than in modern times and are thereby most likely to underestimate polar amplification and subsequent Equator-to-pole heat distribution. From this perspective, the Oligocene also contrasts with reconstructions of tropical temperatures for the Miocene and Eocene (e.g., Steinhorsdottir et al., 2021; Hollis et al., 2019). Consequently, tropical climates during the Oligocene require further investigation in addition to the present dataset, which is notably based on biomarkers, so proxies based on well-preserved biogenic calcite derived from surface oceans are crucial. In contrast to tropical regions, proxy records at mid- and high-latitude regions suggest extreme warmth, as also noted for the Miocene and Eocene epochs (e.g., Steinhorsdottir et al., 2021; Hollis et al., 2019). The low temperature gradients indicated by our data remain a model–data mismatch that requires solving due to its implications for the processes governing polar amplification of greenhouse-gas-driven warming and the magnitude thereof.

The limited vegetation data available support higher precipitation in mid-latitude regions during the Oligocene, as predicted by theory and model simulations. However, the continental dataset is limited, and more data are required particularly for the tropical band and the high latitudes to test for



tropical hydrology and high-latitude winter temperatures, respectively.

Our temperature compilation does not show systematic long-term changes in temperature during the Oligocene. With the typically low resolution of the available long-term records, temperatures remained approximately stable. This is at odds with the long-term trends in the benthic foraminifera  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  record, which shows signs of early Oligocene cooling and late Oligocene warming, albeit low in magnitude. Higher-resolution SST reconstructions at multiple locations are required to fully evaluate if those trends are absent on Earth's surface. Moreover, the apparent absence of long-term trends in SST and the nature of the minor trends in benthic foraminifera  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  are both inconsistent with the recorded long-term drop in atmospheric  $p\text{CO}_2$ . This is a truly interesting conundrum and one that requires long-term high resolution  $p\text{CO}_2$  reconstructions to fully evaluate. Although the benthic foraminifera  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  records have identified the orbital-scale dynamics of deep-ocean temperature and/or continental ice volume in detail, orbital-scale climate variability of the Oligocene on the surface is poorly constrained. SST records resolving orbital-scale variability are required to ultimately characterise the nature of global mean surface temperature variability and the magnitude of polar amplification, its dependence on atmospheric  $p\text{CO}_2$ , and its relation to global continental ice volume.

Finally, an outstanding question remains on the relation of climate variability and subsequent biotic change. There is ample micropalaeontological evidence for a biotic response to orbital-scale temperature variability for the Oligocene (e.g., De Man and Simaey, 2004; Śliwińska et al., 2010; Hoem et al., 2021; Fenero et al., 2013). The interplay of long-term climate stability and superimposed orbital-scale variability provides a very interesting opportunity to investigate the systematic relation between such climate variability and biotic resilience. This requires long-term, high-resolution micropalaeontological records but might ultimately result in much better-defined thresholds of massive regime shifts.

Appendix A

**Table A1.** Results of the nearest living relative (NLR) analysis, showing mean annual temperature (MAT), winter mean temperatures (WinT), mean annual precipitation (MAP), driest-month precipitation (DMP), and their respective minimum and maximum values.

Locality	Average age (Ma)	Latitude	Palaeolatitude	Number of taxa simulations	Quality flags	Min MAT (°C)	Max MAT (°C)	Min WinT (°C)	Max WinT (°C)	Min WinT (°C)	Max WinT (°C)	Min MAP (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Max MAP (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Min DMP (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Max DMP (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	References					
As Pontes basin	26.1 ± 3.7	43.45	37.62	14	1 Taxa assignments dubious, one simulation, macroflora	11.2	14.8	17.7	4.0	8.9	12.1	-0.8	1.9	7.0	759	1000	1318	20	38	63	Cabeira et al. (1995)
Belén fruit and seed assemblage	29.25 ± 0.75	-4.75	-12.62	17	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, macroflora	23.7	25.2	25.9	22.3	23.5	25.0	15.1	16.9	18.9	1445	1738	2089	11	20	40	Manchester et al. (2012)
Berwick Quarry	25	-38.03	-47.02	33	10 Taxa assignments reliable, high convergence, macro- and microflora	13.0	15.9	18.8	8.4	11.6	14.7	3.5	6.1	9.5	1096	1754	2188	44	78	120	Pole et al. (1993)
Catau Beds	29.5 ± 1.5	51.78	46.86	56	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, macroflora	11.3	15.4	19.2	3.9	8.4	13.7	-1.3	2.6	6.5	912	1143	1514	4	24	69	Mai (1998)
Cervera (Rasqui quarry, Canda quarry, Mas Chriet, Brankó)	30.85 ± 3.05	41.65	35.44	28	10 Taxa assignments reliable, high convergence, macroflora	13.6	16.3	18.9	7.6	11.2	14.2	1.7	5.5	8.8	661	955	1318	9	24	58	Tosál and Martín-Choussat (2016)
Cosy Dell	24.9 ± 0.5	-46.15	-47.91	65	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, microflora	12.6	15.8	17.8	8.6	11.4	14.0	3.5	6.2	8.9	1202	1556	1905	48	74	115	Connan et al. (2014)
Daxing anding 2	31.15 ± 2.75	45.86	52.40	24	10 Taxa assignments reliable, high convergence, microflora	8	10.3	13.6	-0.4	3.0	6.0	-5.3	-1.5	1.5	692	843	1096	20	32	55	Ma et al. (2012)
Guang River	27.23	12.60	7.24	19	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, macroflora	22.8	24.3	25.5	21.2	22.4	23.9	14.3	16.9	18.4	1202	1445	1738	24.3	14	29	Pan (2007)
Havelbach horizon	29.75 ± 0.75	51.42	46.45	32	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, macroflora	12.8	15.9	18.8	4.9	8.9	13.9	-0.2	3.3	7.5	871	1143	1585	15.9	33	55	Kunzmann and Walther (2012)
Haynes Creek Flora	30	45.00	43.22	29	10 Taxa assignments reliable, high convergence, microflora	8	11.5	13.9	-0.3	3.7	7.1	-5.4	-0.7	2.4	692	891	1148	11.5	37	63	Axelrod (1998)
Hrazný hill	29.5 ± 1.5	50.98	46.11	32	10 Taxa assignments reliable, low convergence, microflora	9.1	12.9	16.2	0.2	5.4	9.0	-5.8	0.9	3.2	832	1038	1380	12.9	35	66	Kvaček et al. (2015)
Kraskino Flora	30	42.71	49.33	31	10 Taxa assignments reliable, low convergence, microflora	14.5	18.5	22.2	7.1	13.2	17.6	1.9	6.4	11.4	1096	1361	1738	18.5	43	69	Polyukin (2011)
River Lea	31 ± 1	-41.50	-53.28	10	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one convergence, microflora	8.2	10.2	12.6	3.5	5.7	7.2	-1.0	1.3	3.5	1000	1380	1738	10.2	63	95	Paull and Hill (2010)
Mailkop Group	25	40.55	39.29	30	10 Taxa assignments reliable, high convergence, microflora	10.1	12.8	15.6	2.6	5.3	9.1	-1.9	0.8	3.3	759	1005	1202	12.8	36	58	Popov et al. (2008)
Makum Coal Field	26.2 ± 3.2	27.25	25.46	23	10 Taxa assignments dubious, high convergence, microflora	23.1	24.3	26.4	21.6	23.2	24.9	16.4	18.5	20.7	1318	1667	2291	24.3	45	100	Awasthi and Mehrotra (1995)
Moupeiyata deposit	23.3 ± 0.9	-41.83	-49.68	43	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, microflora	10.5	13.3	15.9	5.6	8.4	11.3	0.2	3.2	6.5	794	1294	1820	13.3	63	100	Masphail et al. (1991)
New Vale Mine	24.1 ± 1.1	-46.14	-47.91	99	10 Taxa assignments reliable, low convergence, microflora	11.8	15.7	19.1	7.5	11.4	15.3	2.5	6.3	10.9	1096	1556	2188	15.7	84	132	Ferguson et al. (2010)
Paleogene basin	30.45 ± 3.45	46.35	41.54	26	10 Taxa assignments reliable, low convergence, microflora	12.8	16.2	18.9	6.2	10.2	13.9	1.1	4.0	7.6	871	1107	1380	16.2	38	63	Erdi et al. (2012)
Pitch-Pinnacle flora	30.95 ± 1.95	39.12	36.56	17	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, macroflora	10.6	12.4	13.9	3.2	5.8	7.8	-1.4	0.8	2.4	832	1047	1148	12.4	38	52	Gregory and Melmosh (1996)
Rauenberg	29.5 ± 2.5	49.27	43.97	35	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, microflora	12.3	15.3	18.7	5.6	9.0	14.0	0.9	4.1	8.1	794	1091	1445	15.3	30	55	Kovar-Eder (2016)
Roudhaly area	31.95 ± 1.95	50.65	45.75	33	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, microflora	11.2	14.1	16.8	2.8	6.9	10.6	-2.6	1.7	4.7	832	1102	1380	14.1	35	58	Kvaček et al. (2014)
Sau Julian Fm	24	-49.16	-54.85	18	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, microflora	14.7	16.4	18	9.4	10.7	12.8	2.5	4.1	6.9	912	1202	1514	16.4	42	69	Palazzesi and Barreda (2007)
Suletsee-Bernd	27.5 ± 1.5	50.61	45.89	17	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, microflora	12.6	14.5	16.1	6.0	8.7	10.3	0.5	1.8	4.4	871	1096	1380	14.5	42	60	Kvaček and Walther (1995)
Tard Clay1	32.9 ± 0.9	47.50	42.73	12	1 Taxa assignments reliable, one simulation, macroflora	14.6	16.9	19.4	8.3	11.6	14.8	2.5	7.0	8.9	759	1000	1445	8	13	35	Kvaček et al. (2001)
Upper Ruby Basin	32.9 ± 0.7	45.11	43.10	65	10 Taxa assignments reliable, medium convergence, macroflora	10.2	13.5	16.8	2.7	6.0	11.0	-2.8	1.3	5.4	794	1028	1318	18	34	58	Becker (1966)
Weissdler Basin	29.75 ± 0.75	51.42	46.45	79	10 Taxa assignments reliable, low convergence, macroflora	10.0	13.9	18.9	2.7	6.6	12.3	-1.7	1.5	5.7	871	1138	1585	20	39	66	Gastaldello et al. (1998)

**Table A2.** Summary of the calibrations and references thereof used for the respective sea surface temperature (SST) proxies.

SST proxy	SST calibration details	References
$U_{37}^K$	$U_{37}^K$ indices were converted to SST estimates using the global core-top calibration of Müller et al. (1998).	Müller et al. (1998)
TEX <sub>86</sub>	TEX <sub>86</sub> values were converted to SST using the global logarithmic TEX <sub>86</sub> <sup>H</sup> calibration of Kim et al. (2010)	Kim et al. (2010)
$\Delta_{47}$	$\Delta_{47}$ SST estimates and sample age were taken directly from the original publications.	Douglas et al. (2014), Petersen and Schrag (2015) Evans et al. (2018), Briard et al. (2020)
$\delta^{18}\text{O}$ coccoliths	SST estimates are original published values for small coccoliths with a vital effect correction in Tremblin et al. (2016).	Tremblin et al. (2016)
$\delta^{18}\text{O}$ planktic foraminifera	Palaeotemperature estimates were generated using the calibration of Kim and O'Neil (1997).	Kim and O'Neil (1997)



**Table A3.** Summary of all compiled sea surface temperatures (SSTs) for all site locations including the analytical and calibration errors used for each proxy. Top: available SST data for the Oligocene Miocene Transition (OMT). Middle: available SST data for the Mid-Oligocene Glacial Interval (MOGI). Bottom: available SST data for the Eocene Oligocene Glacial Maximum (EOGM).

Site	Latitude	Longitude	Event	Average age (Ma)	Proxy	Number of data points	Palaeolatitude	Lowest latitude	Highest latitude	Min latitudinal error	Max latitudinal error	Average SST (°C)	Standard deviation (°C)	Analytical error (°C)	Calibration error (°C)	References
<b>23.9–23.0 Ma</b>																
269	-61.68	14007	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	2	-57.1	-59.73	-54.53	2.7	2.5	16.54	0.54	1.00	2.50	Evangelinos et al. (2020)
1356	-63.31	13600	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	9	-58.7	-61.38	-56.18	2.6	2.6	17.23	2.04	1.00	2.50	Hartman et al. (2018)
1168	-42.61	14441	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub> , U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	14	-50.9	-53.54	-48.33	2.7	2.5	25.68	1.29	1.00	2.50	Gutián and Stoll (2021), Hoern et al. (2022)
1404	40.01	-51.81	OMT	23.4	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	18	34.2	31.69	36.89	2.5	2.7	25.70	0.58	0.30	1.50	Liu et al. (2018)
1406	40.35	-51.65	OMT	23.4	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup> , TEX <sub>86</sub>	7	34.5	32.01	37.22	2.5	2.7	26.21	1.17	1.00	2.50	Gutián et al. (2019)
608	42.84	-23.09	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	4	36.9	34.38	39.59	2.5	2.7	28.14	0.93	1.00	2.50	Super et al. (2020)
929	5.98	-43.74	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	5	0.4	-2.16	3.05	2.6	2.6	29.08	1.00	1.00	2.50	O'Brien et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2009)
516	-30.28	-35.29	OMT	23.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	10	-35.5	-38.20	-33.00	2.7	2.5	29.33	0.77	1.00	2.50	O'Brien et al. (2020)
<b>27.3–26.3 Ma</b>																
336	63.35	-7.79	MOGI	26.8	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	1	57.4	54.81	60.01	2.5	2.7	14.77	0.00	0.30	1.50	Liu et al. (2009)
511	-51.00	-46.97	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1	-57.0	-59.67	-54.47	2.7	2.5	17.54	0.00	1.00	2.50	Liu et al. (2009), Hoeben et al. (2019)
516	-30.28	-35.29	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	6	-35.8	-38.51	-33.31	2.7	2.5	27.87	0.41	1.00	2.50	O'Brien et al. (2020)
274	-69.00	173.43	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	6	-64.9	-67.57	-62.37	2.6	2.6	12.31	0.33	1.00	2.50	Hoern et al. (2021)
1356	-63.31	13600	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	5	-58.5	-61.14	-55.94	2.6	2.6	19.68	1.89	1.00	2.50	Hartman et al. (2018)
1168	-42.61	14441	MOGI	26.8	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	9	-52.6	-55.23	-50.03	2.7	2.5	23.69	1.44	0.30	1.50	Gutián and Stoll (2021), Hoern et al. (2022)
1404	40.01	-51.81	MOGI	26.8	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	8	33.7	31.15	36.36	2.5	2.7	24.95	0.48	0.30	1.50	Liu et al. (2018)
925	4.20	-43.49	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1	-1.7	-4.36	0.85	2.6	2.6	25.64	0.00	1.00	2.50	Liu et al. (2009), Zhang et al. (2013), Inglis et al. (2015), Cramwinckel et al. (2018)
1406	40.35	-51.65	MOGI	26.8	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup> , TEX <sub>86</sub>	4	34.0	31.48	36.68	2.5	2.7	25.86	1.15	1.00	2.50	Gutián et al. (2019)
929	5.98	-43.74	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	17	0.0	-2.59	2.62	2.6	2.6	28.72	1.08	1.00	2.50	O'Brien et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2009)
608	42.84	-23.09	MOGI	26.8	TEX <sub>86</sub>	2	36.5	33.97	39.18	2.5	2.7	30.57	1.52	1.00	2.50	Super et al. (2020)
690	-65.16	1.20	MOGI	26.8	δ <sup>18</sup> O	4	-68.4	-71.06	-65.86	2.6	2.6	5.03	0.77	1.00	2.50	Ehmann and Mackensen (1992), Gaskell et al. (2022)
<b>33.7–33.2 Ma</b>																
274	-69.00	173.43	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1	-64.6	-67.31	-61.91	2.7	2.7	11.91	0.00	1.00	2.50	Hoern et al. (2021)
511	-51.00	-46.97	EOGM	33.4	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup> , TEX <sub>86</sub>	13	-58.0	-60.77	-55.36	2.8	2.6	12.94	3.29	1.00	2.50	Liu et al. (2009), Planceq et al. (2014), Hoeben et al. (2019)
913	75.49	6.95	EOGM	33.4	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	2	67.4	64.76	70.17	2.7	2.7	15.51	4.80	0.30	1.50	Liu et al. (2009)
1356	-63.31	13600	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1	-58.0	-60.74	-55.34	2.8	2.6	19.87	0.00	1.00	2.50	Hartman et al. (2018)
1168	-42.61	14441	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	5	-55.3	-58.07	-52.67	2.8	2.6	24.92	0.83	1.00	2.50	Hoern et al. (2022)
1404	40.01	-51.81	EOGM	33.4	U <sub>37</sub> <sup>K</sup>	13	32.5	29.90	35.31	2.6	2.8	26.30	0.78	0.30	1.50	Liu et al. (2018)
1209	32.65	158.51	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	2	29.8	27.20	32.61	2.6	2.8	26.42	0.06	1.00	2.50	Kast et al. (2019)
959	3.63	-2.74	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub>	6	-4.2	-6.95	-1.54	2.7	2.7	26.63	0.46	1.00	2.50	Cramwinckel et al. (2018)
925	4.20	-43.49	EOGM	33.4	TEX <sub>86</sub> , δ <sup>18</sup> O	4	-2.7	-5.45	-0.03	2.7	2.7	30.41	1.13	1.00	2.50	Liu et al. (2009), Zhang et al. (2013), Inglis et al. (2015), Cramwinckel et al. (2018), Tremblin et al. (2016)
744	-61.58	80.60	EOGM	33.4	δ <sup>18</sup> O	6	-58.3	-61.08	-55.67	2.8	2.6	6.70	1.41	1.00	2.50	Barron et al. (1991), Gaskell et al. (2022)

**Table A4.** All sea surface temperature (SST) data per site location that were added to the O’Brien et al. (2020) data–model comparison, including standard deviations and lower quartile (LQ) and upper quartile (UQ) errors. Top: all available SST data between 33.9–33 Ma. Middle: all available SST data between 22–26.5 Ma. Bottom: all available SST data between 25–23 Ma.

Site	Age (Ma)	Palaeolatitude (33 Ma)	Palaeolongitude (33 Ma)	Proxy	Error (°C)	Mean (°C)	Median (°C)	Lower quartile (°C)	LQ incl. error (°C)	Upper quartile (°C)	UQ incl. error (°C)	True value		True value incl. error		Reference	
												Min value (°C)	Max value (°C)	Min value (°C)	Max value (°C)		
<i>33.9–33 Ma</i>																	
Cervera	33.9–27.8	38.44	2.43	NLR	1.8	16.3	16.1	14.5	12.7	18.0	19.7	18.0	13.6	18.9	11.8	20.7	Tosal and Martín-Closas (2016)
Daxing’anling	33.4–28.4	43.73	120.42	NLR	2.3	10.3	10.3	8.7	6.3	13.2	15.5	13.2	8.0	13.6	5.7	15.9	Ma et al. (2012)
IODP1168A	34.9–22.9	–62.90	149.63	TEX <sub>86</sub>	0.9	25.4	25.6	25.0	24.1	26.0	26.9	26.0	23.7	26.4	22.8	27.3	Hoem et al. (2022)
ODP 274	33.7–24.5	–70.24	177.16	TEX <sub>86</sub>	0.7	12.4	12.4	12.1	11.4	12.6	13.3	11.9	11.9	12.8	11.3	13.5	Hoem et al. (2021)
ODP 744	34.9–24.1	–63.68	75.30	δ <sup>18</sup> O	1.9	7.9	8.2	6.6	4.7	8.7	10.6	4.7	4.6	11.1	2.7	13.0	Barrera and Huber (1991), Gaskell et al. (2022)
<i>22–26.5 Ma</i>																	
Paleogene basin	33.9–27.0	42.08	14.10	NLR	1.6	16.2	16.1	14.2	12.6	17.5	19.1	17.5	12.8	18.9	11.2	20.5	Erdei et al. (2012)
Roudnfy area	33.9–30.0	46.27	15.68	NLR	1.8	14.1	14.4	12.6	10.8	16.2	18.0	16.2	11.2	16.8	9.4	18.6	Kvaček and Walther (1995)
Tard Clay	33.8–32.0	42.71	19.85	NLR	2.4	16.9	16.9	14.6	12.2	19.4	21.8	19.4	14.6	19.4	12.2	21.8	Kvaček et al. (2001)
Upper Ruby Basin	33.6–32.2	51.56	–115.06	NLR	1.7	13.5	13.3	11.6	9.9	15.0	16.7	15.0	10.2	16.8	8.5	18.5	Becker (1966)
<i>33–26.5 Ma</i>																	
As Pontes basin	29.8–22.4	41.37	–6.13	NLR	3.3	14.8	14.8	11.2	7.9	17.7	21.0	17.7	11.2	17.7	7.9	21.0	Cabrera et al. (1995)
Belén fruit and seed assemblage	30.0–28.5	0.05	–84.71	NLR	1.1	25.2	25.2	23.7	22.6	25.9	27.0	25.9	23.7	25.9	22.6	27.0	Manchester et al. (2012)
Calau Beds	31.0–28.0	47.80	15.65	NLR	1.8	15.4	15.6	13.3	11.5	16.8	18.6	16.8	11.3	19.2	9.5	21.0	Ferguson et al. (2010)
Cervera	33.9–27.8	41.65	1.33	NLR	1.8	16.3	16.1	14.5	12.7	18.0	19.7	18.0	13.6	18.9	11.8	20.7	Tosal and Martín-Closas (2016)
Daxing’anling	33.9–28.4	44.03	121.21	NLR	2.3	10.3	10.3	8.7	6.3	13.2	15.5	13.2	8.0	13.6	5.7	15.9	Ma et al. (2012)
Guang River	27.23	7.31	34.03	NLR	1.4	24.3	24.3	22.8	21.4	25.5	26.9	22.8	22.8	25.5	21.4	26.9	Pin (2007)
Haselbach horizon	30.5–29.0	47.48	14.95	NLR	1.5	15.9	15.6	14.1	12.6	17.1	18.7	17.1	12.8	18.8	11.3	20.3	Kunzmann and Walther (2012)
Haynes Creek Flora	30.0	50.89	–116.83	NLR	1.9	11.5	11.4	9.6	7.7	13.3	15.2	13.3	8.0	13.9	6.1	15.8	Axelrod (1998)
Hrazný hill	31.0–28.0	46.94	16.09	NLR	1.9	12.9	13.2	11.7	9.8	15.3	17.2	15.3	9.1	16.2	7.2	18.1	Kvaček et al. (2015)
IODP1168A	34.9–22.9	–60.95	148.67	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1.4	25.3	25.4	24.6	23.3	26.4	27.7	26.4	21.9	27.9	20.5	29.3	Hoem et al. (2022)
IODP1168A	29.2–22.9	–60.95	148.67	U <sub>37</sub>	1.5	21.3	21.1	20.4	18.9	22.1	23.6	22.1	19.2	23.4	17.7	24.9	Gutián and Stoll (2021)
Krasniko Flora	30.0	40.09	122.70	NLR	1.6	18.5	18.8	16.9	15.3	20.2	21.9	20.2	14.5	22.2	12.9	23.8	Pavlyutkin (2011)
River Lea	32.0–30.0	–59.66	149.94	NLR	2.2	10.2	10.2	8.2	6.0	12.6	14.8	12.6	8.2	12.6	6.0	14.8	Paull and Hill (2010)
Makum Coal Field	29.4–23.0	24.42	92.74	NLR	1.2	24.3	23.9	23.5	22.3	25.8	27.0	25.8	23.1	26.4	21.9	27.6	Awashi and Mehrotra (1995)
ODP 274	33.7–24.5	–70.03	176.95	TEX <sub>86</sub>	1.2	13.5	13.3	12.5	11.3	14.6	15.8	14.6	11.4	15.7	10.2	17.0	Hoem et al. (2021)
ODP 690	30.1–24.2	–64.25	–5.70	δ <sup>18</sup> O	1.2	4.6	4.5	3.7	2.6	5.6	6.7	5.6	3.1	6.2	2.0	7.4	Mackensen and Ehrmann (1992), Gaskell et al. (2022)
ODP744	34.9–24.1	–63.58	75.92	δ <sup>18</sup> O	1.2	7.0	6.9	6.0	4.8	7.8	8.9	7.8	5.3	9.6	4.1	10.8	Barrera and Huber (1991), Gaskell et al. (2022)
<i>25–23 Ma</i>																	
Paleogene basin	33.9–27.0	42.44	14.05	NLR	1.6	16.2	16.1	14.2	12.6	17.5	19.1	17.5	12.8	18.9	11.2	20.5	Erdei et al. (2012)
Pitch-Pinnacle flora	32.9–29.0	44.93	–108.88	NLR	1.7	12.4	12.4	10.6	8.9	13.9	15.6	13.9	10.6	13.9	8.9	15.6	Gregory and McIntosh (1996)
Rauenberg	32.0–27.0	45.68	10.51	NLR	1.8	15.3	15.1	13.6	11.8	17.2	19.0	17.2	12.3	18.7	10.5	20.5	Mai (1998)
Roudnfy area	33.9–30.0	46.65	15.57	NLR	1.8	14.1	14.4	12.6	10.8	16.2	18.0	16.2	11.2	16.8	9.4	18.6	Kvaček and Walther (1995)

Table A4. Continued.

Site	Age (Ma)	Palaeolatitude (33 Ma)	Palaeolongitude (33 Ma)	Proxy	Error (°C)	Mean (°C)	Median (°C)	Lower quartile (°C)	LQ incl. error (°C)	Upper quartile (°C)	UQ incl. error (°C)	True value		True value incl. error		Reference	
												Min value (°C)	Max value (°C)	Min value (°C)	Max value (°C)		
Suleitce-Berand	29.0–26.0	46.59	15.82	NLR	1.8	14.5	14.5	12.6	10.8	16.1	17.9	12.6	16.1	10.8	17.9	Cabrera et al. (1995)	
Tard Clay	33.8–32.0	43.17	19.82	NLR	2.4	16.9	16.9	14.6	12.2	19.4	21.8	14.6	19.4	12.2	21.8	Kvaček et al. (2001)	
Upper Ruby Basin	33.6–32.2	50.98	–114.80	NLR	1.7	13.5	13.3	11.6	9.9	15.0	16.7	10.2	16.8	8.5	18.5	Becker (1966)	
Weisselster	30.5–29.0	47.48	14.95	NLR	1.7	13.9	13.5	12.4	10.7	15.6	17.3	10.0	18.9	8.3	20.6	Gastaldo et al. (1998)	
25–23 Ma																	
As Pontes basin	29.8–22.4	41.80	–6.44	NLR	3.3	14.8	14.8	11.2	7.9	17.7	21.0	11.2	17.7	7.9	21.0	Cabrera et al. (1995)	
Berwick Quarry	25.0	–52.34	147.39	NLR	1.2	15.9	15.6	14.5	13.3	16.7	17.9	13.0	18.8	11.8	20.0	Gastaldo et al. (1998)	
Cosy Dell	25.4–24.4	–44.80	170.69	NLR	1.3	15.8	15.7	14.3	13.0	16.8	18.1	12.6	17.8	11.3	19.1	Conran et al. (2014)	
IODP1168A	34.9–22.9	–57.00	147.14	TEX <sub>86</sub>	2.3	24.6	25.2	23.0	20.7	26.4	28.7	18.5	27.9	16.2	30.3	Hoern et al. (2022)	
IODP1168A	29.2–22.9	–57.00	147.14	U <sup>K</sup> <sub>37</sub>	1.7	25.3	25.7	24.2	22.5	26.3	28.0	22.6	28.1	20.9	29.8	Guitián and Stoll (2021)	
Maikop Group	25.0	35.96	47.13	NLR	1.7	12.8	12.8	10.9	9.2	14.2	15.9	10.1	15.6	8.4	17.3	Popov et al. (2008)	
Makum Coal Field	29.4–23.0	25.46	93.70	NLR	1.2	24.3	23.9	23.5	22.3	25.8	27.0	23.1	26.4	21.9	27.6	Awasthi and Mehrotra (1995)	
Monpeiyata deposit	24.2–22.4	–55.94	149.71	NLR	1.9	13.3	13.3	11.1	9.1	14.9	16.8	10.5	15.9	8.6	17.8	Macphail et al. (1991)	
New Yale Mine	25.2–23.0	–51.28	–174.24	NLR	1.3	15.7	15.9	14.4	13.1	17.0	18.4	11.8	19.1	10.5	20.4	Conran et al. (2014)	
ODP 274	33.7–24.5	–69.65	176.37	TEX <sub>86</sub>	0.8	12.7	12.8	12.2	11.4	13.2	14.1	11.6	13.3	10.8	14.2	Hoern et al. (2021)	
ODP 744	34.9–24.1	–63.36	77.13	δ <sup>18</sup> O	3.3	7.9	6.3	6.1	2.8	8.1	11.4	6.1	12.8	2.8	16.0	Barrera and Huber (1991), Gaskell et al. (2022)	
San Julian Fm	24.0	–45.93	–74.05	NLR	1.7	16.4	16.4	14.7	13.0	18.0	19.7	14.7	18.0	13.0	19.7	Palazzesi and Barreda (2007)	

**Table A5.** All precipitation (MAP) data per site location that were used in the data–model comparison, including standard deviations and lower quartile (LQ) and upper quartile (UQ) errors. Top: all available MAP data between 33.9–33 Ma. Middle: all available MAP data between 22–26.5 Ma. Bottom: all available MAP data between 25–23 Ma.

Site	Age (Ma)	Paleolatitude (33 Ma)	Paleolongitude (33 Ma)	Proxy	Error (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Mean (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Median (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Lower quartile (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	LQ incl. error (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Upper quartile (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	UQ incl. error (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	True value			True value incl. error			Reference
												Min value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Max value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Min value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Max value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Min value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Max value (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	
<i>33.9–33 Ma</i>																		
Cervera	33.9–27.8	38.44	2.43	NLR	196.6	955	933	759	562.0	1148	1344.7	660.7	1318.3	464.1	1514.8	Tossal and Martín-Clossas (2016)		
Daxing anling	33.9–28.4	43.73	120.42	NLR	174.6	843	832	714	539.9	1057	1231.4	691.8	1096.5	517.2	1271.1	Ma et al. (2012)		
Paleogene basin	33.9–27.0	42.08	14.10	NLR	212.7	1107	1096	920	707.7	1343	1555.5	871.0	1380.4	658.3	1593.1	Erdel et al. (2012)		
Roudniky area	33.9–30.0	46.27	15.68	NLR	200.7	1102	1072	912	711.3	1306	1506.9	831.8	1380.4	631.0	1581.1	Kvaček and Walther (1995)		
Tard Clay	33.8–32.0	42.71	19.85	NLR	348.4	1000	1000	759	410.1	1445	1793.9	758.6	1445.4	410.1	1793.9	Kvaček et al. (2001)		
Upper Ruby Basin	33.6–32.2	51.56	-115.06	NLR	169.0	1028	1023	879	710.0	1213	1382.4	794.3	1318.3	625.3	1487.3	Becker (1966)		
<i>33–26.5 Ma</i>																		
As Pontes basin	29.8–22.4	41.37	-6.13	NLR	281	1000	1000	759	478	1318	1599	759	1318	477.9	1599.0	Cabrera et al. (1995)		
Belen fruit and seed assemblage	30.0–28.5	0.05	-84.71	NLR	322.4	1738	1738	1445	1123	2089	2411.7	1445.4	2089.3	1123.1	2411.7	Manchester et al. (2012)		
Calau Beds	31.0–28.0	47.80	15.65	NLR	195.4	1143	1122	973	777	1355	1550.6	912.0	1513.6	716.6	1708.9	Ferguson et al. (2010)		
Cervera	33.9–27.8	41.65	1.33	NLR	196.6	955	933	759	562	1148	1344.7	660.7	1318.3	464.1	1514.8	Tossal and Martín-Clossas (2016)		
Daxing anling	33.9–28.4	44.03	121.21	NLR	174.6	843	832	714	540	1057	1231.4	691.8	1096.5	517.2	1271.1	Ma et al. (2012)		
Guang River	27.23	7.31	34.03	NLR	268.1	1445	1445	1202	934	1738	2005.9	1202.3	1737.8	934.1	2005.9	Pan (2007)		
Hasselbach horizon	30.5–29.0	47.48	14.95	NLR	209.9	1143	1175	973	763	1387	1596.6	871.0	1584.9	661.1	1794.8	Künzmann and Walther (2012)		
Haynes Creek Flora	30.0	50.89	-116.83	NLR	170.6	891	912	755	584	1091	1262.1	691.8	1148.2	521.2	1318.8	Avedrod (1998)		
Hrazený hill	31.0–28.0	46.94	16.09	NLR	185.4	1038	1000	875	690	1242	1427.1	831.8	1380.4	646.4	1565.8	Kvaček et al. (2015)		
Kraskino Flora	30.0	40.09	122.70	NLR	214.0	1361	1380	1159	945	1585	1798.9	1096.5	1737.8	882.5	1951.8	Pavlyutkin (2011)		
River Lea	32.0–30.0	-59.66	149.94	NLR	369.0	1380	1380	1000	631	1738	2106.8	1000.0	1737.8	631.0	2106.8	Paull and Hill (2010)		
Makum Coal Field	29.4–23.0	24.42	92.74	NLR	331	1667	1660	1406	1075	2061	2391.8	1318.3	2290.9	987.1	2622.1	Awasthi and Mehrotra (1995)		
Paleogene basin	33.9–27.0	42.44	14.05	NLR	212.7	1107	1096	920	708	1343	1555.5	871.0	1380.4	658.3	1593.1	Erdel et al. (2012)		
Pitch-Pinnacle flora	32.9–29.0	44.93	-108.88	NLR	161.6	1047	1047	832	670	1148	1309.8	831.8	1148.2	670.2	1309.8	Gregory and McIntosh (1996)		
Rauenberg	32.0–27.0	45.68	10.51	NLR	222.9	1091	1072	871	648	1300	1523.0	794.3	1445.4	571.5	1668.3	Mar (1998)		
Roudniky area	33.9–30.0	46.65	15.57	NLR	200.7	1102	1072	912	711	1306	1506.9	831.8	1380.4	631.0	1581.1	Kvaček and Walther (1995)		
Sulstice-Berand	29.0–26.0	46.59	15.82	NLR	255.3	1096	1096	871	616	1380	1635.7	871.0	1380.4	615.7	1635.7	Cabrera et al. (1995)		
Tard Clay	33.8–32.0	43.17	19.82	NLR	348.4	1000	1000	759	410	1445	1793.9	758.6	1445.4	410.1	1793.9	Kvaček et al. (2001)		
Upper Ruby Basin	33.6–32.2	50.98	-114.8	NLR	169.0	1028	1023	879	710	1213	1382.4	794.3	1318.3	625.3	1487.3	Becker (1966)		
Weisselster	30.5–29.0	47.48	14.95	NLR	181.3	1138	1096	955	774	1312	1493.5	871.0	1584.9	689.7	1766.2	Gastaldo et al. (1998)		
<i>25–23 Ma</i>																		
As Pontes basin	29.8–22.4	41.80	-6.44	NLR	281	1000	1000	759	478	1318	1599.0	758.6	1318.3	477.9	1599.0	Cabrera et al. (1995)		
Berwick Quarry	25.0	-52.34	147.39	NLR	310	1754	1820	1387	1077	1995	2305.2	1096.5	2187.8	786.5	2497.7	Gastaldo et al. (1998)		
Cosy Dell	25.4–24.4	-44.80	170.69	NLR	255	1556	1549	1288	1034	1786	2041.0	1202.3	1905.5	947.7	2160.0	Conran et al. (2014)		
Maitkop Group	25.0	35.96	47.13	NLR	173	1005	1000	843	670	1186	1358.7	758.6	1202.3	585.6	1375.2	Popov et al. (2008)		
Makum Coal Field	29.4–23.0	25.46	93.70	NLR	331	1667	1660	1406	1075	2061	2391.8	1318.3	2290.9	987.1	2622.1	Awasthi and Mehrotra (1995)		
Monpeiyata deposit	24.2–22.4	-55.94	149.71	NLR	274	1294	1349	1038	763	1585	1859.1	794.3	1819.7	520.1	2093.9	Maephal et al. (1991)		
New Vale Mine	25.2–23.0	-51.28	-174.24	NLR	258	1556	1585	1324	1066	1837	2094.4	1096.5	2187.8	838.6	2445.6	Conran et al. (2014)		
San Julian Fin	24.0	-45.93	-74.05	NLR	301	1202	1202	912	611	1514	1814.4	912.0	1513.6	611.2	1814.4	Palazzesi and Barreda (2007)		



**Code availability.** All scripts and programs can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10144091> (Jenny et al., 2023a).

**Data availability.** All supplementary data are available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10143889> (Jenny et al., 2023b).

**Supplement.** The supplement related to this article is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.5194/cp-20-1627-2024-supplement>.

**Author contributions.** DKLLJ made the data compilation with CLO. The scripts and programs for the precipitation model were written by XL, and the scripts and programs for the sea surface temperature data were written by MH. TR ran the nearest living analysis on compiled fossil plant remains. DKLLJ wrote the article with PKB and AS with contributions from all authors.

**Competing interests.** At least one of the (co-)authors is a member of the editorial board of *Climate of the Past*. The peer-review process was guided by an independent editor, and the authors also have no other competing interests to declare.

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**Acknowledgements.** We thank the editor, the reviewers, and a colleague who contacted us informally for their constructive feedback on our paper.

**Financial support.** This work was carried out under the programme of the Netherlands Earth System Science Centre (NESSC); has been financially supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) through Gravitation (grant no. 024.002.001); and has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (grant no. 847504). Appy Sluijs has also been funded through support from the European Research Council Consolidator (grant no. 71497).

**Review statement.** This paper was edited by Gerilyn (Lynn) Soreghan and reviewed by two anonymous referees.

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