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3	Atmospheric circulation patterns associated to the variability of River
4	Ammer floods: evidence from observed and proxy data
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39 Abstract

The relationship between the frequency of River Ammer floods (southern Germany) and atmospheric circulation variability is investigated based on observational Ammer discharge data back to 1926 and a flood layer time series from varved sediments of the downstream Lake Ammersee for the preinstrumental period back to 1766. A composite analysis reveals that, at synoptic time scales, observed River Ammer floods are associated with enhanced moisture transport from the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean towards the Ammer region, a pronounced trough over Western Europe as well as enhanced potential vorticity at upper levels. We argue that this synoptic scale configuration can trigger heavy precipitation and floods in the Ammer region. Interannual to multidecadal increases in flood frequency, as recorded in the instrumental discharge record, are associated to a wave-train pattern extending from the North Atlantic to western Asia with a prominent negative center over western Europe. A similar atmospheric circulation pattern is associated with increases in flood layer frequency in the Lake Ammersee sediment record during the pre-instrumental period. We argue that the complete flood layer time-series from Lake Ammersee sediments covering the last 5500 years, contains information about atmospheric circulation variability on inter-annual to millennial time-scales.

64 **1. Introduction**

Flood events are natural disasters which cause important economic losses. Therefore, the variability and predictability of flood occurrences have been addressed in many research studies (e.g. Jacobeit et al., 2003; Czymzik et al., 2010; Peña et al., 2015; Schillereff et al., 2014; Ionita et al., 2008, 2015).

Recent studies (Corella et al., 2014, and reference therein) identified pronounced temporal variability in 68 69 the occurrence of heavy precipitation and flood events using instrumental and environmental proxy time series. For example, during the last decades, the frequency of heavy precipitation in central 70 Europe increased (Zolina et al., 2008) while winter precipitation extremes in coastal Mediterranean 71 72 sites decreased (Toreti et al., 2010). On longer time-scales, flood frequency in different parts of Europe is characterized by distinct multi-decadal to centennial variability (Czymzik et al., 2010; Corella et al., 73 74 2014). Understanding flood responses to climate forcing is essential to anticipate possible changes in flood dynamics related to anthropogenic climate change. 75

76 The present study focuses on flood variability of River Ammer, located in the northern pre-alpine region. Heavy precipitation variability in the alpine region has been related to various internal or 77 external forcing on different scales. On the mesoscale, atmospheric flow is strongly influenced by local 78 topography triggering convective precipitation. On the synoptic-scale, high potential vorticity 79 80 intrusions over Western Europe play an important role in the forcing of heavy precipitation along the southern Alpine rim (Schlemmer et al., 2010, and references therein). Furthermore, heavy precipitation 81 82 and floods in the Ammer region are related to large-scale circulation patterns. Czymzik et al. (2010) 83 related major River Ammer floods (southern Germany) to the occurrence of particular flood-prone weather regimes. Glur et al. (2013) associate flood frequency increases in the alpine realm to periods of 84 colder climate with a higher occurrence of westerly and Vb tracks. Toreti et al. (2013) show that the 85 86 occurrence of debris flows in the Swiss Alps is connected to two synoptic atmospheric circulation patterns which favor anomalous southerly flow towards this area and high potential instability. Inter-87

annual to multi-decadal variability of heavy precipitation and flood events in the alpine region are also
related to large-scale atmospheric teleconnection patterns. Peña et al. (2015) emphasized the role of the
Summer North Atlantic Oscillation (SNAO) in generating flood variability in Swiss rivers. The East
Atlantic (EA) pattern and SNAO modify the frequency of atmospheric circulation patterns controlling
debris flow occurrences in the Swiss Alps (Toreti et al., 2013). Flood frequency variability in the preAlps on multi-decadal time-scales was further related to changes in solar activity (Czymzik et al., 2010;
Peña et al., 2015).

In this study we investigate the relationship between the frequency of River Ammer floods and 95 atmospheric circulation. Identifying the atmospheric mechanisms behind River Ammer floods allows a 96 better interpretation of the flood layer record from varved Lake Ammersee sediments reaching back the 97 last 5500 years (Czymzik et al., 2010, 2013). Flood layers form during Ammer River floods, when 98 99 detrital catchment material is eroded, transported into the lake and deposited on the lake floor when transport capacity of the inflowing turbidity diminishes in the water body. Here we use both, 100 instrumental River Ammer discharge and Lake Ammersee flood layer data in combination with long-101 102 term observed and reconstructed climatic fields to investigate the relationship between River Ammer 103 flood frequency and atmospheric circulation. This will improve the interpretation of River Ammer 104 flood frequency changes as presented in previous studies (e.g. Czymzik et al., 2010).

The paper is organized as follows. Data and methods are presented in Section 2. The main results follow in Section 3. In Section 3.1 the synoptic scale patterns that cause River Ammer floods are presented. The atmospheric circulation pattern associated to inter-annual to multi-decadal increases in River Ammer flood frequency during the observational period are presented in Section 3.2. The atmospheric circulation patterns associated with flood layer frequency increases during the instrumental and pre-instrumental period, with focus on the similarity with the corresponding patterns

111 derived from observational data, are described in Section 3.3. A discussion and the main conclusions

112 follow in Section 4.

113 **2. Data and methods**

River Ammer rises in the Bavarian Alps, southern Germany, (Fig. 1a) and flows northward to Lake Ammersee (Czymzik et al., 2010). The river is relatively small (84 km length) and has a catchment area of ~700 km². The Ammer catchment is located in the transition zone between maritime North Atlantic and continental climate influenced by both frequent cyclonic westerly airflow and atmospheric blocking through high-pressure fields (Petrow and Merz, 2009). The annual Ammer flow regime is characterized by strong seasonal variations with a maximum during late spring and summer (Czymzik et al., 2010).

The main quantity analyzed here is the mean daily Ammer River runoff recorded at gauge Weilheim (Bayerisches Landesamt für Umwelt, 2007) during the period 1926 to 2006. Although River Ammer floods occur mainly from May to August (Czymzik et al., 2010; Ludwig et al., 2013), we analyze the runoff data within entire year. As a proxy for River Ammer floods in the pre-instrumental period, we used the flood layer record from Lake Ammersee described in Czymzik et al. (2010, 2013). This record was downloaded from the online environmental data base PANGAEA (www.pangaea.de).

The atmospheric circulation patterns associated to River Ammer floods in the instrumental discharge and flood layer record are based on annual mean 500hPa geopotential height (Z500) and 850hPa temperature (T850) anomalies calculated using 20th Century Reanalysis, version 2 (hereafter 20CR) data (Compo et al., 2011) starting in 1871. The temperature pattern associated with River Ammer floods in the discharge record over the period 1926–2006 are based on the University Delaware air temperature and precipitation data set (UDel_AirT_Precip) provided by the NOAA/OAR/ESRL PSD, Boulder, Colorado, USA (available at http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/). Also from the 20CR data base we used daily fields of specific humidity (q), zonal (u) and meridional (*v*) wind. These quantities were used to calculate vertically integrated water vapor transport (IWT) over the period 1926–2006. The magnitude of daily IWT is calculated in an Eulerian frame-work as follows:

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$$IWT = \left[\left(\int_{1000}^{300} qu \frac{dp}{g}\right)^2 + \left(\int_{1000}^{300} qv \frac{dp}{g}\right)^2\right]^{1/2}$$

where *g* is the acceleration due to gravity. The vertical integration is limited to the 1000 to 300hPa pressure interval because specific humidity in the 20CR data is negligible above 300hPa. Daily Z500 were used to establish the synoptic scale atmospheric circulation pattern associated to high (>125 m³s⁻ 141 ¹) daily Ammer River runoff. The 250hPa divergence field, used to identify regions with anomalous vertical motions, is calculated from the daily 250hPa zonal and meridional wind fields.

Daily 200hPa potential vorticity (PV) field, for the period 1979–2006, were obtained from ERA-INTERIM (Dee et al., 2011) database. The upper-level PV anomalies are strongly related to extreme precipitation events (Schlemmer et al., 2010; Krichak et al., 2014) and are used here to find possible atmospheric mechanisms behind River Ammer floods at synoptic time scales.

We also use Z500 and air temperature (*T*) reconstructions for the period 1766 to 1870, extracted from the reconstructed gridded meteorological data set of Casty et al. (2007), to derive flood related patterns prior 20CR data.

150 **3. Results**

151 **3.1** Synoptic scale atmospheric patterns associated to River Ammer floods

The time series of mean daily River Ammer discharge (Fig. 1b) shows no significant linear trend during the period 1926–2006. However, visual inspection of the discharge time-series (Fig. 1b) reveals distinct inter-annual to multi-decadal flood frequency variations. Daily River Ammer discharge ranges between 2.6 and 534.6 m³s⁻¹. Mean discharge over the analyzed period is 15 m³s⁻¹, while the lower and upper quartiles are 8.9 and 18.3 m³s⁻¹ respectively. A discharge of 125 m³s⁻¹ is considered as threshold for flood layer deposition in the Lake Ammersee sediment record. Above this discharge threshold the
deposition of a flood layer during a flood is very likely (Czymzik et al., 2010).

During the 81 year period 1926–2006 32 days with River Ammer discharge higher than 125 m³s⁻¹ were 159 160 generated by 20 independent flood events (Fig. 1b). The composite map of daily Z500 anomalies during these River Ammer flood days (Fig. 2a, shaded) shows two centers of positive Z500 anomalies 161 northwest of the Iberian Peninsula and north of the Black Sea and two negative Z500 anomaly centers 162 over the Iceland region and southern Europe. The anomaly pattern (Fig. 2a, shaded) contains elements 163 of the two synoptic patterns associated to debris flows in the Swiss Alps as described by Toreti et al. 164 (2013) (their Fig. 2). The corresponding daily Z500 composite map (Fig. 2a, contours) depicts a wave-165 like structure with a pronounced trough over western and central Europe as well as two ridges over the 166 eastern North Atlantic and northeastern Europe. The IWT composite map for days with mean daily 167 River Ammer discharge higher than 125 m³s⁻¹ (Fig. 2b) depicts enhanced moisture transport from the 168 Atlantic towards to the northern alpine flank. Thereby, the Ammer region is located along the axis of 169 the highest IWT (Fig. 2b). To link this moisture transport to local heavy precipitation a mechanism is 170 171 needed to lift up the wet air. Previous studies (Browning, 1997; Schlemmer et al., 2010; Krichak et al., 172 2014) emphasized a strong relationship between PV anomalies and precipitation extremes. Southern 173 intrusions of air with relatively high PV in the upper troposphere or lower stratosphere are commonly 174 accompanied by a local lowering of the tropopause, intense vertical motions, high vertically integrated 175 water vapor transport, rapid cyclogenesis, intense convection and heavy rainfall (e.g. Krichak et al., 176 2014). Therefore, we investigate the 250hPa atmospheric circulation and 200hPa PV fields associated with flood days with discharge higher than 125 $m^3 s^{-1}$. The composite map of 250hPa circulation 177 associated with daily River Ammer floods indicates a continuous high speed wind system with two 178 179 regional maxima in the Atlantic and African region (Fig. 3a). A pronounced convergence zone, which 180 is indicative of descendent motions, is reflected between the exit region of the Atlantic branch and the

entrance region of the African branch of the jet (Fig. 3a, dashed contour lines). A pronounced 181 divergence zone is visible above the Ammer region (Fig. 3a, solid contour lines). This is indicative for 182 strong vertical motions and heavy rainfall. The poleward side of a jet exit region is preferred for 183 184 cyclonic growth, which in turn induces heavy rainfall events (Hoskins et al., 1978). A similar synoptic pattern was found to be responsible for high streamflow anomalies of the Rhine River (Ionita et al., 185 2012). Consistent with Fig. 3a, a region of relatively high PV is identified at 200hPa level (Fig. 3b). 186 Both divergence (Fig. 3a) and high PV (Fig. 3b) regions are relatively small, consistent with a strong 187 188 local character of the heavy precipitation events.

To better assess the atmospheric circulation patterns associated to River Ammer floods as revealed by 189 the composite analysis, we exemplary investigate the Z500, IWT and PV responses to the River 190 191 Ammer flood on 19 and 20 July 1981 (Fig. 4). During 19 July 1981 a prominent trough dominates 192 central and western Europe (Fig. 4a). The IWT (Fig. 4b) shows narrow bands over the Northeastern Atlantic and Western Europe, similar to atmospheric rivers (e.g. Lavers et al., 2012). An intrusion of 193 relatively high PV from the north is recorded at the 200hPa level (Fig. 4c). In addition, a relatively 194 195 narrow stream of high PV flows from the Mediterranean area to central Europe (Fig. 4c). This high PV 196 stream is accompanied by exceptional northward transport of moisture from the Mediterranean (Fig. 197 4b). On 20 July 1981 the axis of the trough above Europe remains in a similar position (Fig. 4d), while 198 the structure of the IWT changes significantly (Fig. 4e) compared to the previous day (Fig. 4b). 199 Furthermore, the high PV center above the Ammer region tends to isolate from the high PV pool at 200 higher latitudes (Fig. 4f). To conclude, the composite situation during the River Ammer flood on 19 an 20 July 1981 shares common characteristics with most River Ammer floods $>125m^3s^{-1}$ during the 201 period 1926-2006. However, there are also River Ammer floods that are associated to atmospheric 202 circulation patterns and mechanisms different than those presented in this case study. For example, the 203 204 circulation associated to the River Ammer flood on 14 June 1959 (not shown) is a typical omega blocking circulation with heavy precipitation produced on the eastern side of the block. However, most of the River Ammer floods (discharge > $125 \text{ m}^3 \text{s}^{-1}$) are related to synoptic patterns that are similar to those that characterize the 19 to 20 July 1981 flood, which is consistent with the composite analysis shown in Fig. 2.

209 **3.2 Observed River Ammer flood frequency and atmospheric circulation back to 1926**

The annual frequency of River Ammer floods, defined as the number of days when mean daily 210 Ammer River discharge is higher than 125 m³s⁻¹, shows pronounced decadal to multi-decadal 211 variability (Fig. 5a) with increased flood frequencies from 1940 to 1960 and during the 1980s and 212 2000s. The composite map of annual Z500 anomalies for the years with River Ammer flood frequency 213 is different from zero (Fig. 5b) shows a spatial structure that bears some similarities with the 214 corresponding synoptic scale pattern (Fig. 2a). Positive Z500 anomalies prevail in the North Atlantic 215 216 region and northeastern Europe while negative Z500 anomalies dominate over a broad area from Iceland to the Central Mediterranean (Fig. 5b). This Z500 anomaly pattern resembles the dominant 217 atmospheric circulation anomaly pattern associated with the occurrence of debris flows in the southern 218 219 Swiss Alps as described by Toreti et al. (2013) (their Fig. 2a). The spatial temperature pattern 220 associated with River Ammer floods (Fig. 5c) is consistent with the corresponding atmospheric 221 circulation pattern (Fig. 5a) depicting negative anomalies over central and southern Europe and strong 222 positive anomalies over northeastern Europe.

223 **3.3 Flood layer frequency and atmospheric circulation back to 1766**

In the following we investigate the relationship between changes in flood layer frequency in the Lake Ammersee sediment record and atmospheric circulation. The flood layer record used in this study is described in Czymzik et al. (2010). We investigate the atmospheric circulation patterns associated with flood layer variability for the period 1871–1999 using 20CR data and for the period 1766–1870 using reconstructed gridded meteorological data (Casty et al., 2007).

The Lake Ammersee flood layer record for the period 1871–1999 (Fig. 6a) shows increased flood frequencies in the 1980s and 1950s, comparable to the instrumental River Ammer discharge record in the overlapping parts (Fig. 5a). Older periods of enhanced flood frequency occur during the 1920s and 1880s (Fig. 6a). The average Z500 anomalies for all years with a deposited flood layer during this period (Fig. 6b) depicts a pattern similar to that based on the instrumental River Ammer flood record (Fig. 5b). A well-defined wave-train that appears in the 850hPa temperature field (Fig. 6c), is also visible during the period of instrumental River Ammer discharge measurements (Fig. 5c).

During the period 1766–1870, the flood layer time-series shows also distinct decadal to multi-decadal frequency variations (Fig. 7a) and higher flood layer frequencies during the second part of the 19 century, coincident with high flood frequencies in the greater Alpine region (Glur et al., 2013). Both Z500 (Fig. 7b) and temperature (Fig. 7c) patterns during the period 1766–1870 are similar to the corresponding patterns based on 20CR data for the period 1871–1999 (Fig. 6b and c).

241 **4. Discussion and conclusions**

We have shown that the majority of River Ammer floods (discharge higher than 125 m^3s^{-1}) is 242 associated with a pronounced ridge (trough) over the east Atlantic (western Europe), enhanced 243 moisture transport towards the Ammer catchment as well as relatively high potential vorticity at upper-244 245 levels (200hPa). The upper-levels positive PV anomalies are associated with strong vertical motions, a lowered tropopause and heavy precipitation in the Ammer region. Czymzik et al.(2010) have shown 246 that River Ammer flood events (discharge higher than $125 \text{ m}^3\text{s}^{-1}$) are related to specific atmospheric 247 248 circulation types. Five circulation types, as classified in the weather catalog of Gerstengarbe and Werner (2005), could be attributed to more than one flood event during the period 1926–1999. Four of 249 the five atmospheric circulation types are compatible with a northwest to southeast or north to south 250 251 trajectory of cyclones crossing the Ammer region (Czymzik et al., 2010, their Fig. 10). This is consistent with our IWT pattern and the corresponding 200hPa PV pattern associated to floods in theinstrumental River Ammer discharge record.

Floods over Europe are related with various moisture sources. For central European floods that occur in 254 255 June 2013, the main source of moisture was the land along the track of the three consecutive cyclones that generated very high rainfall amounts in central Europe (Grams et al. 2014). Continental moisture 256 sources play also an important role for eastern European flood in May 2010, in addition to moisture 257 sources in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean (Winschall et al. 2014). Our analysis suggests that the 258 North Atlantic Ocean is the main moisture source for River Ammer floods. Therefore the flood layer 259 record from Lake Ammersee could be used to obtain information about patterns of moisture transport 260 from the North Atlantic towards Europe during the last millennia. 261

Under current climate conditions heavy precipitation in the Alpine region are associated with zonal 262 263 westerly or meandering circulation regimes, like e.g. the Vb cyclone track (e.g. Zängl, 2007). The Vb track is characterized by low pressure systems moving northeastward from the Adriatic Sea into 264 continental Europe, causing orographic rainfall and potentially severe flooding along the Alpine crest 265 266 (e.g. Schlemmer et al., 2010) and in central Europe (Ionita et al., 2015). The synoptic scale pattern 267 associated to Ammer floods (Fig. 2a) is consistent with that provided by Schlemmer et al. (2010) and 268 Ionita et al. (2015). Moreover, it contains elements of the synoptic scale patterns associated to debris-269 flow events in the southern Swiss Alps (Toreti et al., 2013). Glur et al. (2013) propose that a more 270 southerly and weaker subtropical high pressure zone favors the occurrence of Vb circulation patterns. In particular, during the late 19th century which was characterized on average by cooler summers, 271 272 frequent Vb situations led to a higher frequency of floods in the Alpine region, coincident with higher flood frequencies in the Ammer region. The high flood frequency of River Ammer, as derived from 273 both, River Ammer discharge and Lake Ammersee flood layer data is related with increased frequency 274 of southerly intrusions of high PV favoring strong vertical motions and heavy rainfall in the region. 275

However, higher River Ammer flood frequencies are recorded during colder conditions over western
and central Europe and warmer conditions in Eastern Europe (Fig. 5). Cooler conditions over western
and central Europe are induced by enhanced advection of relatively cold air from the northwest while
warmer conditions over northeastern Europe are related to a flow of warm air from the southeast (Fig.
5). Another forcing factor for positive temperature anomalies over northeastern Europe is the negative
cloudiness anomalies which dominate this region during high flood frequency periods (not shown).

Heavy precipitation and floods in the Alps region variability was related to various atmospheric 282 283 teleconnection patterns, like the North Atlantic Oscillation (Swierczynski et al., 2012), the North Atlantic Oscillation and East Atlantic pattern (Toreti et al., 2013) and the Summer North Atlantic 284 Oscillation (Peña et al., 2015). The atmospheric circulation anomaly pattern associated to River Ammer 285 flood projects well on the negative phase of the East Atlantic-Western Russia (EA-WR) pattern, a 3-286 287 center east- west wave-train with one center of action close to the British islands, one in northeast China, and one centre with an opposite sign near the Caspian sea (e.g. Barnston and Livezey, 1987). 288 Indeed, the analysis of annual EA-WR index based on 20CR data reveals that the frequency of the 289 290 negative phase of the EA-WR pattern is significantly higher than the frequency of its positive phase 291 during River Ammer flood years from 1871 to -1999 (not shown). Therefore, the Lake Ammersee 292 flood layer record might provide the chance to reconstruct changes in the polarity of the EA-WR during 293 the late Holocene. An addition, we conclude that the Lake Ammersee flood layer record (Czymzik et 294 al., 2010, 2013) might be used to deduce information about past change in specific moisture transport 295 and atmospheric circulation patterns. In particular, the flood layer record from varved Lake Ammersee 296 sediments can be used to reconstruct the frequency of high potential vorticity intrusions over Western Europe during last millennia. 297

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Figure 1. (a) Geographical location of the Ammer catchment and (b) time series of the observed mean daily River Ammer runoff during the period 1926–2006.

b)



b)





Figure 2. (a) Composite map of daily 500hPa geopotential height (contour) and anomalies (shaded) corresponding to River Ammer floods (discharge higher than 125 m³s⁻¹) for the period 1926–2006 and (b) composite map of IWT for flood days (vector) and its magnitude (color). Units: Z500 (m) and IWT (kg m⁻¹ s⁻¹).



b)

PV 200 FLOOD DAYS 1979-2006



Figure 3. Composite map of (a) the 250hPa wind (vector), its magnitude (color) and divergence (contour) for Ammer flood days for the period 1926–2006 and (b) composite map of 200hPa potential vorticity for flood days during 1979–2006. Units: U250 (m s⁻¹), divergence (10^{-6} s^{-1}) and potential vorticity (PVU).



Figure 4. Synoptic-scale meteorology during the River Ammer flood days 19 and 20 June 1981:
(a) Z500, (b) IWT and (c) PV for 19 June 1981; (d), (e) and
(f) as in (a), (b) and (c) but for 20 June 1981.
Units: Z500 (m), IWT (kg m⁻¹ s⁻¹) and PV (PVU).



Figure 5. (a) Observed River Ammer flood frequency (daily discharge higher than 125 m³s⁻¹) and (b) composite map of Z500 and (c) air temperature anomalies for flood years. Hatched regions: anomalies significantly different from zero (90% level). Units: Z500 (m) and T (°C).



Figure 6. (a) River Ammer flood layer record for the period 1871–1999 (see text for details). Vertical bars depict years with flood layer. Composite map of (b) Z500 and (c) *T* anomalies for years with flood layer as shown in (a). Hatched regions: anomalies significantly different from zero (90% level). Units: Z500 (m) and *T* ($^{\circ}$ C).



Figure 7. Same as in Figure 6) but for the 1766–1870.