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Climate of the Past Discussions

Land-sea coupling of Early Pleistocene glacial cycles in the southern North Sea exhibit dominant Northern Hemisphere forcing

Timme Donders[1,2], Niels A.G.M. van Helmond[3], Roel Verreussel[2], Dirk Munsterman[4], Johan Ten Veen[4], Robert P. Speijer[5], Johan W.H. Weijers[3]*, Francesca Sangiorgi[3], Francien Peterse[3], Gert-Jan Reichart[3,6], Jaap Sinninghe Damsté[3,6], Lucas Lourens[3], Gesa Kuhlmann[7] and Henk Brinkhuis[3,6]

[1] Department of Physical Geography, Fac. of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584CD, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

[2] TNO - Applied Geosciences, Netherlands Organisation of Applied Scientific Research Princetonlaan 6, 3584 CB Utrecht, The Netherlands.

[3] Department of Earth Sciences, Fac. of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584CS, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

[4] TNO - Geological Survey of the Netherlands, Netherlands Organisation of Applied Scientific Research, Princetonlaan 6, 3584 CB Utrecht, The Netherlands.

[5] Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, KU Leuven, 3001 Heverlee, Belgium

[6] NIOZ Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, P.O. Box 59, 1790 AB, Den Burg, Texel, The Netherlands

[7] BGR - Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources, Geozentrum Hannover Stilleweg 2, D-30655 Hannover

* Currently at: Shell Global Solutions International B.V., Grasweg 31, 1031 HW, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence to: t.h.donders@uu.nl

Abstract

We assess the disputed phase relations between forcing and climatic response in the Early Pleistocene with a spliced Gelasian (~2.6 – 1.8 Ma) multi-proxy record from the southern North Sea. The cored sections couple climate evolution on both land and sea during the onset of Northern Hemisphere Glaciations (NHG) in NW Europe, providing the first well-constrained stratigraphic sequence of the classic terrestrial Praetiglian Stage. Terrestrial signals were derived from the Eridanos paleoriver, a major fluvial system that contributed a large amount of freshwater to the northeast Atlantic. Due to its latitudinal position, the Eridanos catchment was likely affected by Early Pleistocene NHG, leading to intermittent shutdown and reactivation of river flow and sediment transport. Here we apply organic geochemistry, palynology, carbonate isotope geochemistry, and seismostratigraphy to document both vegetation changes in the Eridanos catchment and regional surface water conditions and relate them to Early Pleistocene glacial-interglacial cycles, and relative sea level changes. Paleomagnetic and palynological data provide a solid integrated timeframe that ties the obliquity cycles, expressed in the borehole geophysical logs, to Marine Isotope Stages (MIS) 103 to 92, independently confirmed by a local benthic oxygen isotope record. Marine and terrestrial palynological and organic geochemical records provide high resolution reconstructions of relative Terrestrial and Sea Surface Temperature (TT and SST), vegetation, relative sea level, and coastal influence.

During the prominent cold stages MIS 100, 98 and 96, the record indicates increased non-arboreal vegetation, and low SST and TT, and low relative sea level. During the warm stages MIS 99, 97 and 95 we infer freshwater influx increases causing stratification of the water column together with higher % arboreal vegetation, high SST and relative sea level maxima. The Early Pleistocene distinct warm-cold alterations are synchronous between land and sea, but lead the relative sea level change. The record provides evidence for a dominantly NH

driven cooling and glacial build up which is obliquity driven. Timing of southward migration of Arctic surface water masses, indicated by relative SST, are furthermore relevant for the discussion on the relation between the intensity of the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation and ice sheet growth in order to identify lead-lags between forcing and response of Early Pleistocene glaciations.

Keywords: Glacial-interglacial climate, palynology; organic geochemistry; obliquity, land-sea correlation, Eridanos delta, southern North Sea

1 Introduction

The build-up of extensive Northern Hemisphere (NH) land ice started around 3.6 Ma ago (Ruddiman et al. 1986; Mudelsee and Raymo, 2005; Ravelo et al., 2004; Ravelo, 2010), with stepwise intensifications between 2.7 and 2.54 Ma ago (e.g., Shackleton and Hall, 1984; Raymo et al., 1989; Haug et al., 2005; Lisiecki and Raymo, 2005; Sosdian and Rosenthal, 2009). In the North Atlantic region the first large-scale Early Pleistocene glaciations, Marine Isotope Stages (MISs) 100 - 96, are marked by e.g. appearance of ice-rafted debris and southward shift of the Arctic front (see overview in Hennissen et al., 2015). On land, the glaciations led to faunal turnover (e.g. Lister, 2004; Meloro et al., 2008) and widespread vegetation changes (e.g. Zagwijn, 1992; Hooghiemstra and Ran, 1994; Svenning, 2003; Brigham-Grette et al., 2013). Many theories have been put forward to explain the initiation of these NH glaciations around the Plio-Pleistocene transition interval. Causes include tectonics (Keigwin, 1982, Raymo, 1994; Haug and Tiedemann, 1998; Knies et al, 2004; Poore et al., 2006), orbital forcing dominated by obliquity-paced variability (Hays et al., 1976; Maslin et al., 1998; Raymo et al., 2006)and atmospheric CO_2 concentration decline (Pagani et al., 2010; Seki et al., 2010; Bartoli et al., 2011) driven by e.g. changes in ocean stratification that affected the biological pump (Haug et al., 1999). Changes were amplified by NH albedo change (Lawrence et al., 2010), and possibly tropical atmospheric circulation change and breakdown of permanent El Niño (Ravelo et al., 2004; Brierley and Fedorov, 2010; Etourneau et al., 2010).

Key aspects in this discussion are the phase relations between temperature change on land, in the surface and deep ocean, and ice sheet accretion (expressed through global eustatic sea level lowering) in both Northern and Southern Hemispheres. According to Raymo et al.

(2006), Early Pleistocene obliquity forcing dominated global sea level and $\delta^{18}O_{benthic}$, because precession-paced changes in the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets cancelled each other out. In this view, climate records independent of sea level variations should display significant variations on precession timescale. Alternatively, variations in the total integrated summer energy, which is obliquity controlled, might be responsible for the dominant obliquity pacing of the Early Pleistocene (Huybers, 2006; Tzedakis et al., 2017). The dominance of the obliquity component has been attributed to feedbacks between high-latitude insolation, albedo (sea-ice and vegetation) and ocean heat flux (Koenig et al., 2011; Tabor et al., 2014). Sosdian and Rosenthal (2009) suggested that temperature variations, based on benthic foraminifer magnesium/calcium (Mg/Ca) ratios from the North Atlantic, explain a substantial portion of the global variation in the $\delta^{18}O_{benthic}$ signal. North Atlantic climate responses were closely phased with $\delta^{18}O_{benthic}$ changes during the Early Pleistocene, suggesting a strong common NH high latitude imprint on North Atlantic climate signals (Lawrence et al., 2010). Following this reasoning, glacial build-up should be in phase with decreases in NH sea surface temperatures (SST) and terrestrial temperatures (TT). To explicitly test this hypothesis we perform a high-resolution multiproxy terrestrial and marine palynological, organic geochemical, and stable isotope study on a marginal marine sediment sequence from the southern North Sea (SNS) during the Early Pleistocene "41 kyr-world". We investigate the leads and lags of regional marine vs. terrestrial climatic cooling during MIS 102-92, and assess the local sea level response relative to global patterns from the $\delta^{18}O_{benthic}$ stack of Lisiecki and Raymo (2005; LR04). In addition, the record can better constrain the signature and timing of the regional continental Praetiglian stage (Van der Vlerk and Florschütz, 1953; Zagwijn, 1960) that is still widely used, but which stratigraphic position and original definition is questionable (Donders et al., 2007; Kemna and Westerhoff, 2007).

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2 Geological setting

During the Neogene the epicontinental North Sea Basin was confined by landmasses except towards the northwest, where it opened into the Atlantic domain (Fig. 1) (Bijlsma, 1981; Ziegler, 1990). Water depths in the central part were approximately between 100 to 300 m as deduced from seismic geometry (Huuse et al., 2001; Overeem et al., 2001). In contrast, the recent North Sea has an average depth between 20-50 m in the south that deepens only towards the shelf edge towards 200 m in the north-west (e.g., Caston, 1979). From the present-day Baltic region a formidable river system, known as the Eridanos paleoriver, developed which built up the Southern North Sea delta across southern Scandinavia (Sørensen et al., 1997; Michelsen et al., 1998; Huuse et al., 2001; Overeem et al., 2001).

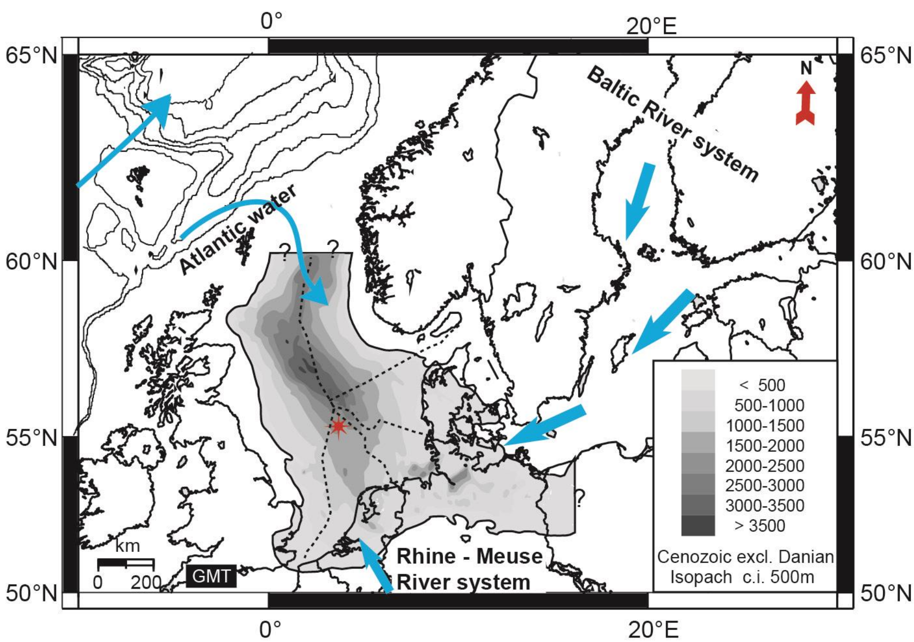

Figure 1: Geographical map of the North Sea region with the superimposed thickness of Cenozoic sediment infill after Ziegler (1990) and the offshore sectors (stippled lines). The different water types influencing the Pliocene North Sea hydrography including the

freshwater supply of the Baltic river system, the Rhine-Meuse river system and Atlantic surface waters are indicated with black arrows. The location of the boreholes A15-3 (UTM X 552567.1, Y 6128751.6) and A15-4 (UTM X 557894.4, Y 6117753.5) is marked by an asterisk, see also Fig. S1.

This delta was characterized by an extensive distributary system that supplied large amounts of freshwater and sediment to the shelf sea (Overeem et al., 2001), resulting in a sediment infill of ~1500 m in the central North Sea Basin (Fig. 1). This system was fed by rainfall as well as by melt-water originating from Scandinavian glaciers (Kuhlmann et al., 2004), principally from the Baltic Shield in the east with some contribution from the south (Fig. 1) (Bijlsma, 1981; Kuhlmann, 2004). The sedimentation rates reached up to 84 cm/kyr at the studied locations (Fig. 2) (Kuhlmann et al., 2006b). Today, the continental river runoff contributes only 0.5 % of the water budget in the North Sea (Zöllmer and Irion, 1996) resulting in sedimentation rates ranging between 0.4 to 1.9 cm/kyr in the Norwegian Channel, and 0.5 - 1 cm/kyr in the southern part of the North Sea (de Haas et al., 1997).

3 Material, core description and age model

Recent exploration efforts in the SNS led to the successful recovery of cored sedimentary successions of marine isotope stages (MIS) 102-92 and continuous paleomagnetic logs (Fig. 2) (Kuhlman et al, 2006ab). An integrated age model is based on a multidisciplinary geochronological analysis of several boreholes within the SNS (Kuhlmann et al., 2006ab) and dinocyst biostratigraphy. The magnetostratigraphy and age-diagnostic dinocyst events used for this age-model are summarized in Fig. 2. For quantitative palynological and geochemical analyses, discrete sediment samples were taken from two exploration wells A15-3 and A15-4 located in the northernmost part of the Dutch offshore sector in the SNS at the Neogene sedimentary depocentre (Fig. 1). The recovered material mainly consists of fine-grained, soft sediments (clayey to very fine sandy), sampled from cuttings, undisturbed sidewall cores and core sections (Fig. 2). Geochemical analyses were limited to the (sidewall) core intervals. Clear cyclic variations in the gamma ray signal and associated seismic reflectors across the interval can be correlated across the entire basin (Kuhlmann and Wong, 2008; Thöle et al. 2014). Samples from the two boreholes were spliced based on the gamma-ray logs (Fig. 2) and biostratigraphic events to generate a composite record. The age model is mainly based on the position of the Gauss-Matuyama transition at the base of log unit 6 correlating to the base of MIS 103, and the identification of the X-event, which correlates the top of log unit 9 to MIS 96 (Kuhlmann et al., 2006a,b) (Fig. 2). The depositional model by Kuhlmann and Wong (2008) relates the relatively fine-grained, high gamma ray intervals to interglacials characterized by river high run off. Around glacial terminations, when sea-level was low, massive amounts of very fine-grained clayey to fine silty material were deposited in the basin, the ultimate waste-products of intense glaciation. During warmer periods with high sea-level more mixed, courser-grained sediments characterize the deposits, also reflecting a dramatically changed hinterland, retreated glaciers, and possibly (stronger) bottom currents (Kuhlmann and Wong, 2008). Based on this phase relation, detailed magneto- and biostratigraphy, grain size measurements, and previous low resolution relative SST indices (Kuhlmann et al., 2004; Kuhlmann et al., 2006a,b), the finer grained units are consistently correlated to MIS 102 – 92. Based on this correlation, the sequence is here transferred to an age scale based on the corresponding LR04 MIS transitions (Fig. S3).

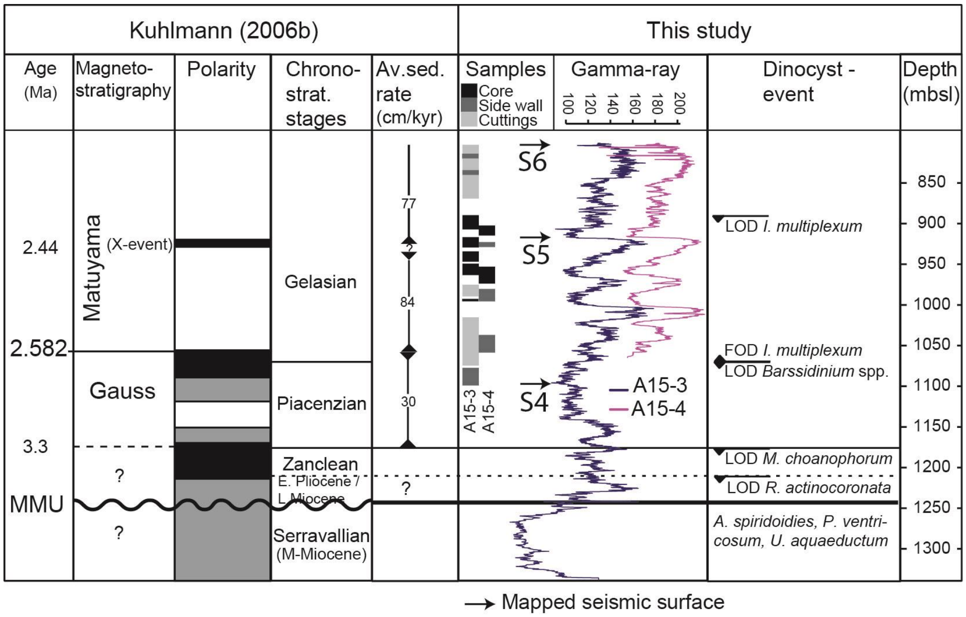

Figure 2: Chronology and mean sedimentation rates as derived from biostratigraphy and paleomagnetic data (Kuhlmann, 2006ab) in combination with the gamma-ray log of A15-3 and A15-4 used in this study on a common depth scale. The position of various sample types and the mapped seismic horizons S4-6 (Fig. S1) are indicated. Material for the sidewall cores is limited, and used only for palynology and organic geochemistry. LOD/FOD: Last/First occurrence datum. LODs of M. choanophorum *and* R. actinocoronata *are updated according to De Schepper et al. (2009).*

The regional structure and development of the delta front across the Plio-Pleistocene transition interval is very well constrained by a high-resolution regional geological model that represents the anatomy of the Eridanos (pro-) delta (Kuhlmann and Wong, 2008; Ten Veen et al., 2013). A total of 25 seismic horizons in the Plio-Pleistocene transition interval were mapped using series of publically available 2D and 3D seismic surveys across the northern part of the Dutch offshore sector. For all these surfaces the distribution of delta elements such as of topset-, foreset- and toeset-to-prodelta has been determined, resulting in zonal maps (250 m grid size) that represent the present day geometry of the surfaces. The paleoenvironmental reconstructions are compared to these maps to constrain the regional setting and aid the interpretations.

4 Paleoenvironmental proxies and methods

4.1 Benthic oxygen and carbon isotopes ($\delta^{18}O_b$ and $\delta^{13}C_b$)

Oxygen and carbon isotopes were measured on tests of Cassidulina teretis, a cold water species of endobenthic foraminifera that is generally abundant in the samples and common in fine sediment and relatively low salinities (Mackensen and Hald, 1988; Rosoff and Corliss, 1992). Because of their endobenthic habitat, they record isotope compositions of pore waters, which leads to somewhat reduced ($\delta^{13}C_b$) values compared to the overlying bottom waters. Since the amount of material from the sidewall cores is limited, the isotope data is only produced for the cored intervals with the principal aim to confirm the phase relationship described by Kuhlmann and Wong (2008) between facies and climate. Between ~20 and 50 µg of specimen per sample was weighed after which the isotopes of the carbonate were measured using a Kiel III device coupled to a 253 ThermoFinnigan MAT instrument. Isotope measurements were normalized to an external standard 'NBS-19' ($\delta^{18}O$ = -2.20‰, $\delta^{13}C$ = 1.95‰). Isotope data from specimens of poor to very poor preservation, due to recrystallization and dissolution, particularly in MIS 96, were rejected.

4.2 Palynological proxies

In modern oceans, dinoflagellates are an important component of the (phyto-)plankton. About 15-20% of the marine dinoflagellates form an organic walled cyst (dinocyst) during the life cycle that can be preserved in sediments (Head, 1996). Dinocyst distribution in marine surface sediments has shown to reflect changes in the sea surface water properties, mostly responding to temperature (e.g., Rochon et al., 1999; Zonneveld et al., 2013). Down-core changes in dinocyst assemblages is a widely used and successful tool for reconstructing past environmental changes especially in the Quaternary (e.g., De Vernal et al., 2009). However, paleoecology of Paleogene, Miocene and Pliocene fossil dinocysts has also been established in the last years (e.g., Versteegh and Zonneveld, 1994; Head et al., 2004; Pross and Brinkhuis, 2005; Sluijs et al., 2005; Schreck et al., 2013; De Schepper et al., 2011; 2013; Hennissen et al., 2017).

Here we use the preference of certain taxa to cold-temperate to arctic surface waters to derive sea surface temperature (SST) trends. The cumulative percentage of the dinocysts *Filisphaera microornata, Filisphaera filifera, Filisphaera sp., Habibacysta tectata and B. tepikiense* on the total dinocysts represents our cold surface water indicator (Versteegh and Zonneveld, 1994; Donders et al., 2009; De Schepper et al., 2011). Interestingly, *Bitectatodinium tepikiense*, the only extant dinocyst among our cold-water loving species, has been recorded from the mixing zone of polar front oceanic waters with cold brackish meltwaters from glacier ice (e.g., Bakken and Dale, 1986) and at the transition between the subpolar and temperate zones (Dale, 1996). The combined abundance of *Lingulodinium machaerophorum, Tuberculodinium vancampoae*, *Polysphaeridium zoharyi* and *Operculodinium israelianum* is used here to indicate generally warm, coastal waters. In particular, high percentages of *L. machaerophorum* are typically recorded in eutrophic coastal areas where reduced salinity and (seasonal) stratification due to runoff occur (Dale, 1996; Sangiorgi and Donders, 2004; Zonneveld et al., 2009). At present, *T. vancampoae*, *P. zoharyi* and *O. israelianum* are also found in lagoonal euryhaline environments (Zonneveld et al., 2013), and hence could be used to indicate a more proximal condition relative to *L. machaerophorum* (Pross and Brinkhuis, 2005).

At present, Protoperidinioid (P) cysts are mostly formed by heterotrophic dinoflagellates and the percentage of P cyst may be used as indicator of high eukaryotic productivity (cf. Reichart and Brinkhuis, 2003; Sangiorgi and Donders, 2004). This link has been also extrapolated to the past assemblages (Sluijs et al., 2005). Here we use the percentage of P cysts (*Brigantedinium* spp., *Lejeunecysta* spp., *Trinovantedinium glorianum*, *Dionaeacysta* spp., *Selenopemphix* spp., *Islandinium* spp., *Barssidinium graminosum*, and *B. wrennii*) to indicate eukaryotic productivity.

Terrestrial palynomorphs (sporomorphs) reflect variations in the vegetation on the surrounding land masses and provide information on climate variables such as continental temperatures and precipitation (e.g. Heusser and Shackleton, 1979; Donders et al., 2009; Kotthoff et al., 2014). A ratio of terrestrial to marine palynomorphs (T/M ratio) is widely used as a relative measure of distance to the coast and thereby reflects sea level variations and shallowing trends in the basin (e.g. McCarthy and Mudie, 1998; Donders et al., 2009; Quaijtaal et al., 2014; Kotthoff et al., 2014). Morphological characteristics of Late Neogene pollen types can, in most cases, be related to extant genera and families (Donders et al., 2009; Larsson et al., 2011; Kotthoff et al., 2014). In A15-3/4, the relatively long distance to the site of deposition means that the pollen assemblage is not a direct reflection of vegetation cover and climate, but includes information on the mode of transport. Assemblages with a relatively high number of taxa, including insect pollinated forms, are indicative of substantial pollen input through water transport (Whitehead, 1983), whereas wind-transported pollen typically show a low-diversity. Sediments of a location proximal to a river delta likely receive a majority of pollen that is water-transported, while distal locations are dominated by wind-transported pollen and particularly bisaccate taxa (Hooghiemstra, 1988; Mudie and McCarthy, 1994). To separate these effects, the percentage of arboreal pollen (AP), representing relative terrestrial temperatures, was calculated excluding bisaccate forms. The non-arboreal pollen (NAP; mainly Poaceae and also *Artemisia*, Chenopodiaceae and Asteraceae) consist only of non-aquatic herbs. High AP percentages indicate warm, moist conditions, whereas open vegetation (NAP and Ericaceae) is indicative for cooler, dryer conditions consistent with a glacial climate.

4.3 Palynological processing

The samples were processed using standard palynological procedures (e.g., Faegri et al., 1989) involving HCl (30%) and cold HF (40%) digestion of carbonates and silicates. Residues were sieved with 15 µm mesh and treated by heavy liquid separation (ZnCl, specific gravity 2.1 g/cm^3). The slides were counted for dinoflagellate cysts, dinocysts (with a minimum of 100 cysts) and pollen (with a preferable minimum of 200 grains). The dinocyst taxonomy is in accordance with that cited in Williams et al. (2017). Resulting counts where expressed as percent abundance of the respective terrestrial or marine groups of palynomorphs.

4.4 Organic geochemical proxies

We applied two measures for the relative marine versus terrestrial hydrocarbon sources. The Carbon Preference Index (CPI), based on C_{25}-C_{34} *n*-alkanes, originally devised to infer thermal maturity (Bray and Evans, 1961), has high values for predominantly terrestrial plant sources (Rieley et al., 1991). Values closer to one indicate greater input from marine microorganisms and/or recycled organic matter (e.g., Kennicutt et al., 1987). Further, peat mosses like *Sphagnum* are characterized by a dominance of the shorter C_{23} and C_{25} n-alkanes, whereas longer chain n-alkanes (C_{27}-C_{33}) are synthesized by higher plants (e.g., Pancost et al., 2002; Nichols et al., 2006), while the C_{25} n-alkane is characteristic for *Sphagnum* and other mosses in high arctic environments (Vonk and Gustafsson, 2009). Here we express the abundance of *Sphagnum* relative to higher plants as the proportion of C_{23} and C_{25} relative to the C_{27}-C_{33} odd-carbon-numbered n-alkanes. Finally, the input of soil organic matter into the marine environment was estimated using the relative abundance of branched glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraethers (brGDGTs), primarily produced by soil bacteria, versus that of the marine Thaumarchaeota-derived isoprenoid GDGT crenarchaeol, which is quantified in the Branched and Isoprenoid Tetraether (BIT) index (Hopmans et al., 2004). The relative distribution of brGDGTs in soils is temperature dependent (Weijers et al., 2007; Peterse et al., 2012). Annual mean air temperatures (MAT) were reconstructed based on down-core distributional changes of brGDGT and a global soil calibration that uses both the 5- and 6-methyl isomers of the brGDGTs (MAT_{mr}; De Jonge et al., 2014a). Cyclisation of Branched Tetraethers (CBT) ratios, was shown earlier to correlate with the ambient MAT and soil pH (Weijers et al., 2007; Peterse et al., 2012). The much improved CBT' ratio (De Jonge et al., 2014a), which includes the pH dependent 6-methyl brGDGTs, is used here to represent soil pH. The Total Organic Carbon (TOC) and total nitrogen measurements are used to determine the atomic C/N ratio that in coastal marine sediments indicate the preferential source, with marine C/N values at ~10 and terrestrial between 15 and 30 (Hedges et al., 1997).

4.5 Organic geochemical processing

Organic geochemical analyses were limited to the core and sidewall core samples. For TOC determination For TOC determination ~ 0.3 g of freeze dried and powdered sediment was weighed, and treated with 7.5 ml 1 M HCL to remove carbonates, followed by 4 h shaking, centrifugation and decanting. This procedure was repeated with 12 h shaking. Residues were washed twice with demineralised water dried at 40-50°C for 96 h after which weight loss was determined. ~15 to 20 mg ground sample was measured in a Fisons NA1500 NCS elemental analyzer with a normal Dumas combustion setup. Results were normalized to three external standards (BCR, atropine and acetanilide) analyzed before and after the series, and after each ten measurements. % TOC was determined by %C x decalcified weight/original weight.

For biomarker extraction ca. 10 g of sediment was freeze dried and mechanically powdered. The sediments were extracted with a Dichloromethane (DCM):Methanol (MeOH) solvent mixture (9:1, v/v, 3 times for 5 min each) using an Accelerated Solvent Extractor (ASE, Dionex 200) at 100°C and ca. 1000 psi. The resulting Total Lipid Extract (TLE) was evaporated to near dryness using a rotary evaporator under near vacuum. The TLE then was transferred to a 4 ml vial and dried under a continuous N_2 flow. A 50% split of the TLE was archived. For the working other half elemental sulfur was removed by adding activated (in 2M HCl) copper turnings to the TLE in DCM and stirring overnight. The TLE was subsequently filtered over Na_2SO_4 to remove the CuS, after which 500 ng of a C_{46} GDGT internal standard was added (Huguet et al., 2006). The resulting desulphurized TLE was separated over a small column (Pasteur pipette) packed with activated Al_2O_3 (2 hours h at 150°C). The TLE was separated into an apolar, a ketone and a polar fraction by eluting with n-hexane : DCM 9:1 (v/v), n-hexane : DCM 1:1 (v/v) and DCM : MeOH 1:1 (v/v) solvent mixtures, respectively. The apolar fraction was analyzed by gas chromatography (GC) coupled to a flame ionization detector (FID) and gas chromatography/mass spectroscopy (GC/MS) for quantification and identification of specific biomarkers, respectively. For GC, samples were dissolved in 55 µl hexane and analyzed using a Hewlett Packard G1513A autosampler interfaced to a Hewlett Packard 6890 series Gas Chromatography system equipped with flame ionization detection, using a CP-Sil-5 fused silica capillary column (25 m x 0.32 mm, film thickness 0.12 µm), with a 0.53 mm pre-column. Temperature program: 70°C to 130°C (0 min) at 20°C/min, then to 320°C at 4°C/min (hold time 20 mins).The injection volume of the samples was 1 µl.

Before GC/MS analyses, 2 µg 5α-androstane standard was added to the apolar for quantification purposes, assuming a similar ionization efficiency for all components. Analyses were performed on a ThermoFinnigan Trace GC ultra, interfaced to a ThermoFinnigan Trace DSQ MS using the same temperature program, column and injection volume as for GC analysis.

Prior to analyses, the polar fractions, containing the GDGTs, were dissolved in *n*-hexane : propanol (99:1, v/v) and filtered over a 0.45 µm mesh PTFE filter (ø 4mm). Subsequently, analyses of the GDGTs was performed using ultra high performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (UHPLC-MS) on an Agilent 1290 infinity series instrument coupled to a 6130 quadrupole MSD with settings as described in Hopmans et al. (2016). In short, separation of GDGTs was performed on two silica Waters Acquity UHPLC HEB Hilic (1.7µm, 2.1mm x 150mm) columns, preceded by a guard column of the same material. GDGTs were eluted isocratically using 82% A and 18% B for 25 mins, and then with a linear gradient to 70% A and 30% B for 25 mins, where A is *n*-hexane, and B = *n*-hexane:isopropanol. The flow rate was constant at 0.2 ml/min. The $[M+H]^+$ ions of the GDGTs were detected in selected ion monitoring mode, and quantified relative to the peak area of the C_{46} GDGT internal standard.

5 Results

5.1 Stable isotope data

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The *Cassidulina teretis* $\delta^{18}O$ ($\delta^{18}O_b$) confirms the relation between glacial stages and fine grained sediment as proposed by Kuhlman et al. (2006a,b), but the data are somewhat scattered (Fig. 3). The glacial-interglacial range in $\delta^{18}O_b$ is ~1‰ between MIS 98 and 97, and ~1.3‰ between MIS 95 and 94, but with considerably more variation in especially MIS 95. The $\delta^{13}C_b$ data very consistently with the oxygen, and have a glacial-interglacial range of ~1.1‰, and one strongly depleted value in MIS 94 (-3.5‰). The $\delta^{13}C_b$ during MIS 95 are less variable than the $\delta^{18}O_b$, pointing to an externally forced signal in the latter. The glacial to interglacial ranges are very similar in magnitude with those reported by Sosdian and Rosenthal (2009) for the North Atlantic, but on average lighter by ~0.5‰ ($\delta^{18}O_b$) and ~1.8‰ ($\delta^{13}C_b$).

5.2 Palynology

Palynomorphs, including dinocysts, freshwater palynomorphs and pollen, are abundant, diversified, and well-preserved in these sediments. Striking is the dominance by conifer pollen. Angiosperm (tree) pollen are present and diverse, but low in abundance relative to conifers. During interglacials (MIS 103, 99, 97, 95, and 93) the pollen record generally shows increased and more diverse tree pollen (particularly *Picea* and *Tsuga*), and warm temperate *Osmunda* spores, whereas during glacials (MIS 102, (100), 98, 96, and 94) herb and heath pollen indicative of open landscapes are dominant (Fig S2). The % arboreal pollen (AP) summarizes these changes, showing maximum values of >40% restricted to just a part of the coarser grained interglacial intervals (Fig. 3). The percentage record of cold-loving dinocysts is quite scattered in some intervals but indicates generally colder conditions within glacial stages, and minima during %AP maxima (Fig. 3). After peak cold conditions and a TOC maximum (see below), but still well within the glacials, the % Protoperidinoid consistently increases. Some intervals (e.g., top of MIS 94) are marked by influxes of freshwater algae, indicating a strong riverine input, these data however do not indicate a clear trend. This robust in-phase pattern of glacial-interglacial variations is also reflected by high T/M ratios during glacials, indicating coastal proximity, and low T/M during (final phases of) interglacials. The Glacial-Interglacial (G-IG) variability in the T/M ratio is superimposed on a long-term shoaling trend of the marine environment. The coastal (warm-tolerant) dinocyst maxima are confined to the interglacial intervals and their abundance increases throughout the record. Successive increases of coastal inner neritic *Lingulodinium machaerophorum*, followed by increases in coastal lagoonal species in the youngest part, mirror the shoaling trend in the T/M ratio, which reflect the gradual progradation of the Eridanos delta front (Fig. S1).

5.3 Organic geochemical proxies

Lowest TOC weight % values are reached in the clay intervals, and typically range between 0.5% in glacials and 1% in interglacials (Fig. 3). Nitrogen concentrations are relatively stable resulting in C/N ratios primarily determined by carbon content, ranging between ~8-9 (glacials) and ~14 and 17 (interglacials). The Carbon Preference Index (CPI) is generally high, reflecting a continuous input of immature terrestrial organic matter. Minimum CPI values of ~2.8 - 2.9 are reached at the transitions from the coarser sediments to the clay intervals after which they increase to maxima of 4.5 - 5.0 in the late interglacials. The n-C_{23} *Sphagnum* biomarker correlates consistently with the T/M ratio, %AP, and cold water dinocysts, while the variation in the CPI index is partially out of phase; it is more gradual and lags the % TOC and other signals. Generally lower Branched and Isoprenoid Tetraether (BIT) values during interglacials indicate more marine conditions, i.e. larger distance to the coast and relatively reduced terrestrial input from the Eridanos catchment (cf. Sinninghe Damsté, 2016). As both brGDGT input (run off, soil exposure and erosion) and sea level (distance to the coast) vary across G-IG timescales, for example during deglaciation and subsequent reactivation of fluvial transport (Bogaart and van Balen, 2000), the variability of the BIT index is somewhat different compared to the T/M palynomorph ratio, but is generally in phase with gradual transitions along G-IG cycles. The MAT_{mr}-based temperature reconstructions vary between 5 and 17°C, reaching maximum values in MIS 97. However, in the MIS 99/98 and MIS96/95 transitions the MAT_{mr} shows variability opposite to the identified G-IG cycles and the signal contains much high-order variability. Low values during interglacials coincide with low reconstructed soil pH (CBT-pH).

Figure 3: spliced record of A15-3 and A15-4 showing the principal organic geochemical and palynological indices. Shaded blue intervals represent the identified glacial MIS delimited by the gamma-ray transitions following Kuhlmann et al. (2006a,b). Data density is dependent on type of sample as indicated in Fig. 1. Age scale is based on correlation and LOESS interpolation of the identified MIS transitions to the LR04 benthic stack (Lisiecki and Raymo, 2005) as shown in Fig S3. Data is available in Tables S and 2.

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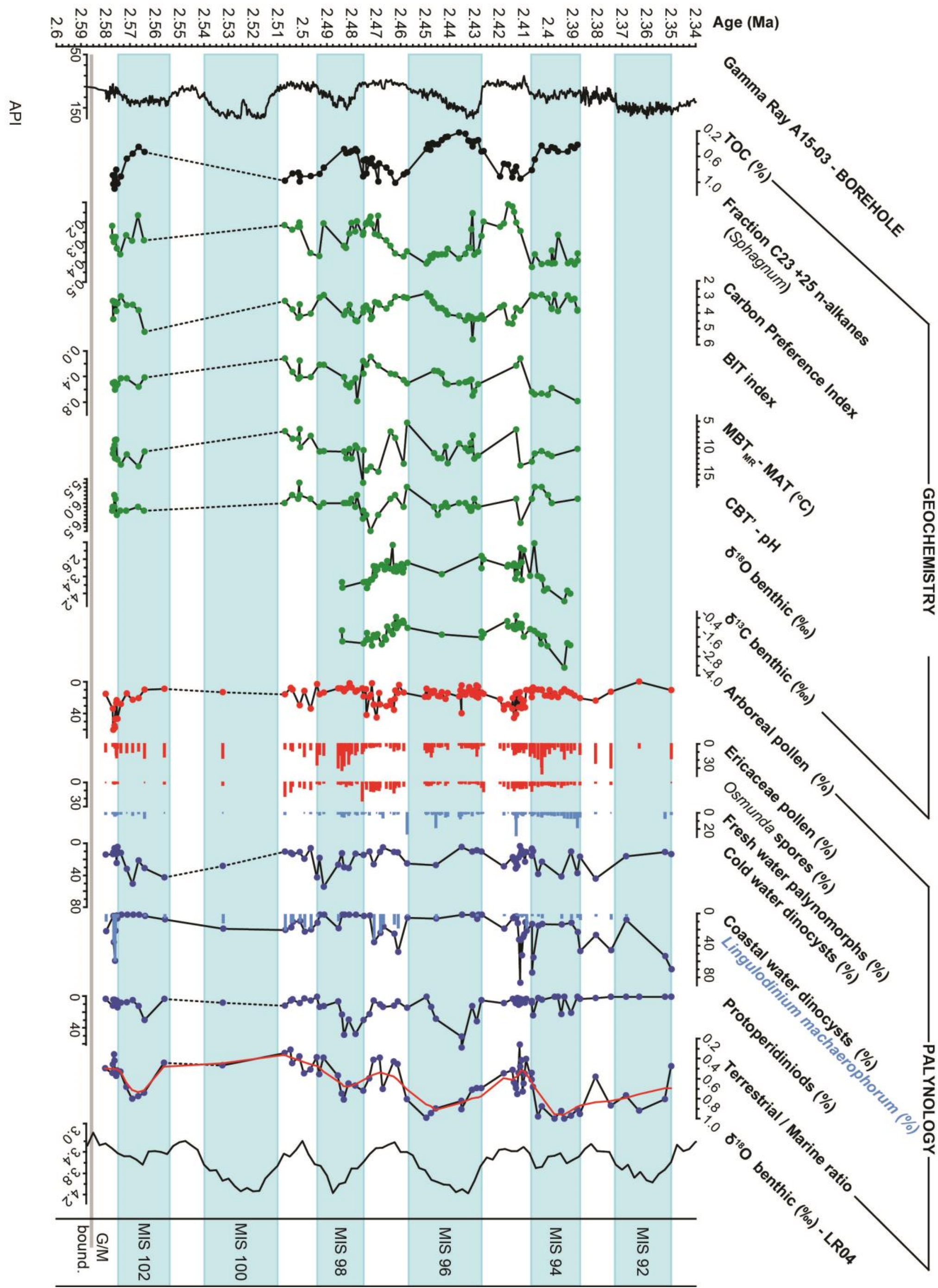

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6 Discussion

6.1 Paleoenvironmental setting

During MIS 103, 99, 97, 95, and 93 the pollen record indicates generally warmer and more humid conditions than during MIS 102, 98, 96, and 94 (Fig. 3). The cold-water temperature signal based on dinocysts is more variable than the terrestrial cooling as derived from pollen. Pollen represents mean standing vegetation in the catchment, and also depends on dominant circulation patterns and short-term climate variations (Donders et al., 2009). Due to exclusion of bisaccate pollen, the %AP is generally low. However, in this way we excluded the climate signal bias due to direct effect of sea level changes (Donders et al., 2009; Kotthoff et al., 2014). Given the average sample distance, on a glacial-interglacial time scale no significant phase differences between the terrestrial and the marine signal appear. In the record there are small time lags between proxies, which have important implications for explaining the forcing of G-IG cycles and will further be explained in more detail. In the best constrained MIS transition (98 to 97), the G-IG transition is seen first in decreases of the cold water dinocysts and *n*-C_{23+25} *Sphagnum* biomarkers, subsequently the BIT decrease, MAT and the %AP increases, and finally in the $\delta^{18}O_b$ and T/M ratio decreases that lag by a few thousand years (Fig. 3). The CPI signal is more gradual, but generally in line with T/M. The high variability and strongly depleted values in $\delta^{18}O_b$ during MIS 95 occur during peak coastal dinocyst abundances, suggesting high run off phases during maximum warming. During cold water dinocysts maxima, the high abundance of Protoperidinioids indicates high nutrient input, and productive spring/summer blooms, which point to strong seasonal temperature variations. This productivity signal markedly weakens in MIS 94 and 92 and the gradual T/M increase is consistent with the basin infill and gradually approaching shelf-edge delta (Fig. S1). As Protoperidinioid minima generally occur during TOC maxima there is no indication for a preservation overprint of the P-cysts. Combined, the high TOC and CPI values, coastal and stratified water conditions, and intervals of depleted $\delta^{18}O_b$ document increased Eridanos run-off during interglacials. These suggest a primarily terrestrial organic matter source that, based on mineral provenance studies (Kuhlmann et al., 2004) and high conifer pollen abundance documented here, likely originated from the Fennoscandian Shield. The fine-grained material during cold phases is probably transported by meltwater during summer from local glaciers that developed since the Late Pliocene at the surrounding Scandinavian mainland (Mangerud et al., 1996; Kuhlmann et al., 2004).

Whereas the BIT index reflects the G-IG cycles, the MAT_{mr} record, which is also based on brGDGTs, has a variable phase relation with the G-IG cycles and high variability. The use of MAT_{mr} in coastal marine sediments is based on the assumption that river-deposited brGDGTs reflect an integrated signal of the catchment area. As the Eridanos system is reactivated following glacials, glacial soils containing brGDGT are likely eroded causing a mixed signal of glacial and interglacial material. The lowest MAT_{mr} and highest variability is indeed observed during high TOC input and minima of CBT'-pH below 6 (Fig. 3), consistent with increased erosion of acidic glacial (peat) soil. This suggests that the variability in the MAT_{mr} record is not fully reliable. Alternatively, the terrestrial brGDGT signal may be altered by a contribution of brGDGTs produced in the marine realm. BrGDGTs were initially believed to be solely produced in soils, but emerging evidence suggests that brGDGTs are also produced during river transport (e.g., Zell et al., 2013; De Jonge et al., 2014b) and in the coastal marine environment (e.g., Peterse et al., 2009; Sinninghe Damsté, 2016), which, points to significant terrestrial contributions in our record. Based on the modern system, the degree of cyclisation of tetramethylated brGDGTs ($\#rings_{tetra}$) has been proposed to identify a possible in situ overprint (Sinninghe Damsté, 2016). However, the $\#rings_{tetra}$ in this sediment core is <0.37, which is well below the suggested threshold of 0.7, and thus suggests that the brGDGTs are primarily soil-derived. Finally, selective preservation in the catchment and during fluvial transport may have affected the brGDGT signal, although experimental evidence on fluvial transport processes indicates that these do not significantly affect initial soil-brGDGT compositions (Peterse et al., 2015). The T/M ratio variability corresponds well to the LR04 benthic stack (Fig. 3), which is primarily an obliquity signal. Within the constraints of the sample availability, our record captures the approximate symmetry between glaciation and deglaciation typical of the Early Pleistocene (Lisiecki and Raymo, 2005).

6.2 Implications for the onset of Northern Hemisphere glaciations

The classic Milankovitch model predicts that global ice volume is forced by high northern summer insolation (e.g. Hays et al., 1976). Raymo et al. (2006) suggested an opposite response of ice sheets on both hemispheres due to precession forcing, cancelling out the signal and amplifying obliquity in the Early Pleistocene. That suggestion predicts that regional climate records on both hemispheres should contain a precession component that is not visible in the sea level and deep sea $\delta^{18}O_b$ record. Our results show that the regional NH climate on both land and sea surface varies in concert with local relative sea level which, with the best possible age information so far, is consistent with the LR04 $\delta^{18}O_b$ record. Contrary to the model proposed by Raymo et al. (2006), this suggests that the NH obliquity forcing is the primary driver for the glacial-interglacial in the Early Pleistocene. The small lead of the temperature proxies over the local sea level further supports the NH obliquity forcing scenario as cooling would precede ice buildup. Various studies indicate the importance of gradual CO_2 decline in the intensification of NHG (Kürschner et al., 1996; Seki et al., 2010; Bartoli et al., 2011) combined with the threshold effects of ice albedo (Lawrence et al., 2010; Etourneau et al., 2010) and land cover changes (Koenig et al., 2011). Simulations of four coupled 3-D ice models indicate that Antarctic ice volume increase responds primarily to sea level lowering, while Eurasian and North American ice sheet growth is initiated by temperature decrease (De Boer et al., 2012). The latter dominate the eustatic sea level variations during glacials. Our observations agree with the modelled temperature sensitivity of NH ice sheet growth. The dominant obliquity signal further suggests a seasonal aspect of the climate forcing. The combination of high summer productivity, based on increased Protoperidiniod dinocysts, and increased proportions of cold dinocysts during the glacials in the SNS record indicate a strong seasonal cycle. This confirms similar results from the North Atlantic (Hennissen et al., 2015) and is consistent with an obliquity-driven glacial-interglacial signal in a mid-latitudinal setting, likely promoting meridional humidity transport and ice buildup.

The southward migration of Arctic surface water masses indicated by increases in cold water dinocysts (Fig. 3) is furthermore relevant for understanding the relation between the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC) intensity and ice sheet growth (e.g. Bartoli et al., 2005; Naafs et al, 2010). Mid Pliocene increased heat transport and subsequent decrease during NHG due to AMOC intensity changes has been invoked from many proxy records but is difficult to sustain in models (Zhang et al., 2013). Our results indicate that the NW European Early Pleistocene climate experienced severe cooling during sea level lowstands, which is consistent with southward displacement of the Arctic front and decreased AMOC (Naafs et al., 2010). The data-model mismatch in AMOC changes might be due to dynamic feedbacks in vegetation or (sea-) ice (Koenig et al., 2011; de Boer et al., 2012) that are prescribed variables in the model comparison by Zhang et al. (2013).

Our SNS record provides a well-dated Early Pleistocene Glacial-Interglacial succession integrating marine and terrestrial signals improving on the classic terrestrial Praetiglian stage. While conceptually valid, the earliest Pleistocene glacial stages defined in the continental succession of the SE Netherlands (Van der Vlerk and Florschütz, 1953; Zagwijn, 1960) and currently considered text book knowledge, are highly incomplete and locally varied (Donders et al., 2007). This shallow marine SNS record provides a much more suitable reflection of large-scale transitions and trends in NW Europe and merits further development by complete recovery of the sequence in a scientific drilling project (Westerhoff et al, 2016).

7 Conclusions

The independently dated Late Pliocene-Early Pleistocene sedimentary succession of the southern North Sea Basin provides a record that straddles the onset of Northern Hemisphere Glaciation and the subsequent climate fluctuations in a shallow marine setting in great detail. The onset of the glaciation and the correlation to marine isotope stages 103 to 92, including the conspicuous stages 100, 98 to 96 representing the first cold Pleistocene stages, is well expressed in the marine and terrestrial palynomorph and organic biomarker records of the southern North Sea. The independent relative sea- and land-based temperature records show clearly coeval (at this resolution) cold and warm glacial-interglacial and sea level cycles that are well-correlated to the LR04 benthic stack. Critically, both the biomarker signals, %AP, and cold water dinocyst variations show consistent in-phase variability on obliquity time scales, leading sea level changes, which supports a dominantly direct NH insolation control over Early Pleistocene glaciations. Based on this integrated record, NH obliquity forcing is the primary driver for the glacial-interglacial in the Early Pleistocene. Furthermore, our findings support the theory of temperature sensitivity of NH ice sheet growth. The interglacials are characterized by (seasonally) stratified waters and/or near-shore conditions as glacial-interglacial cycles became more expressive and the Eridanos delta progressed into the region. The strong seasonality at mid-latitudes point to a vigorous hydrological cycling that should be considered as a potential factor in ice sheet formation in further investigations.

8 Author contributions

THD, HB and GK designed the research. NvH carried out the geochemical analyses under supervision from GJR, JSD, JW and FP. RV, DM and THD carried out the palynological analyses and interpreted the data together with FS. LL and RPS provided stable isotope data onbenthic foraminifera. JtV provided seismic interpretations. THD integrated the data wrote the paper with contributions from all authors.

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