Neogene uplift of central eastern Patagonia: Dynamic response to active spreading ridge subduction
Benjamin Guillaume, Joseph Martinod, Laurent Husson, Martin Roddaz, Rodrigo Riquelme

To cite this version:

HAL Id: insu-00392782
https://hal-insu.archives-ouvertes.fr/insu-00392782
Submitted on 29 Jun 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Neogene uplift of central eastern Patagonia: Dynamic response to active spreading ridge subduction?

Benjamin Guillaume, Joseph Martinod, Laurent Husson, Martin Roddaz, and Rodrigo Riquelme

Received 2 May 2008; revised 8 October 2008; accepted 23 December 2008; published 10 April 2009.

[1] The Chile Triple Junction (CTJ) episodically migrated northward during the past 14 Ma from 54°S to its present-day position at 46°30’S, as different almost trench-parallel spreading segments entered in subduction. This migration resulted in the opening of an asthenospheric window below Patagonia, inducing a disturbance in the regional mantle convection. On the overriding plate, the middle Miocene time corresponds to a major change in the central Patagonian basin dynamics, with a transition from subsidence to generalized uplift. The detailed mapping and the morphological study of post-middle Miocene terraces evidence regional-scale trench-parallel tilt histories that differ depending on latitude. South of 46°30’S, the slopes of the fluvial terraces indicate a change from northward to southward tilt during late Miocene. Terraces younger than the early Pliocene do not show any trench-parallel tilt. North of 46°30’S, in contrast, only northward tilt, active until the Pleistocene, is recorded. We use a semianalytical model of dynamic topography which suggests that the northward migration of the Chile Triple Junction should be accompanied by a dynamic uplift of the central Patagonian basin. Uplift would cause both north directed and south directed tilt, north and south of the triple junction, respectively, with values of ~0.1–0.2% 500 km east of the trench. Tilt measured in the southeastern part of the central Patagonian basin (~0.1%) is comparable to values predicted using the semianalytical model. The dynamic topography associated to the Chile ridge subduction may have exerted a major control on the Neogene dynamics of Patagonia. Citation: Guillaume, B., J. Martinod, L. Husson, M. Roddaz, and R. Riquelme (2009), Neogene uplift of central eastern Patagonia: Dynamic response to active spreading ridge subduction?, Tectonics, 28, TC2009, doi:10.1029/2008TC002324.

1. Introduction

[2] Geologists often consider that the topography of the Earth essentially results from isostasy, topographic highs being balanced by crustal roots and/or hot lithospheric mantle [Airy, 1855; Pratt, 1859; Froidevaux and Isacks, 1984; Molnar et al., 1993; Garzione et al., 2006]. Mantle dynamics, however, also induce forces that deflect the Earth topography. Global numerical models predict associated vertical displacements of several hundreds of meters [Hager and Clayton, 1989; Ricard et al., 1993; Le Stunff and Ricard, 1997; Čadek and Fleitout, 2003] and, therefore, that the direct contribution of mantle dynamics in the topography of the Earth is far from being negligible. Dynamic topography reaches its maximum amplitude above subduction zones, where mass anomalies are large at depth [e.g., Mitrovica et al., 1989; Gurnis, 1993; Zhong and Gurnis, 1994; Husson, 2006].

[3] In continental domains, the dynamic component of topography is difficult to discriminate because the altitude is largely controlled by lithospheric loads and composition, which are highly variable. Active continental margins are nevertheless affected by long-wavelength surface deflections, and changes in the dynamics of subduction should be accompanied by vertical movements that can be recorded by the geological imprint [Mitrovica et al., 1989; Mitrovica et al., 1996; Catuneanu et al., 1997; Pysklywec and Mitrovica, 2000; Lock et al., 2006]. For instance, Mitrovica et al. [1989] showed that the process of subduction beneath western North America during the Cretaceous resulted in large-scale vertical deflection and tilting of the continental lithosphere that was followed by a Tertiary uplift of the area.

[4] In this paper, we study the Neogene evolution of central Patagonian, which was uplifted following the subduction of the Chile Ridge below the Andes since the middle Miocene. We focus our study on the mild deformed central Patagonian basin (Figure 1), which extends in the W-E direction from the eastern foothills of the Patagonian Andes to the Atlantic coast and in the N-S direction from the Sierra San Bernardo to the Desaiedo massif because this area is poorly affected by post-middle Miocene tectonics. Moreover, this region remained ice-free during glaciations. It shows a pristine morphology preserved from the erasure of glaciers that will be used to evidence its long-term Neogene uplift. The central Patagonian basin, which almost overlays the inland part of the San Jorge Gulf basin...
[Bianchi, 1981], is located at the latitude of the present-day Chile Triple Junction (CTJ), where the Chile active spreading ridge subductions beneath South America.

During the past 14 Ma, the CTJ migrated northward, from the latitude of 54°S at its present-day position at about 46°30'S, west of the Taitao Peninsula, as different segments of the Chile spreading ridge successively entered the subduction zone [Cande and Leslie, 1986]. North of the CTJ, the convergence rate between Nazca and South America plates is 7.8 cm a⁻¹, whereas south of the CTJ, the convergence rate between South America and the Antarctic oceanic plate decreases to 2 cm a⁻¹ [De Mets et al., 1994], leading to the opening of an asthenospheric window [Ramos and Kay, 1992; Kay et al., 1993; Gorring et al., 1997, 2003; D'Orazio et al., 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005; Gorring and Kay, 2001; Guivel et al., 2003, 2006; Lagabrielle et al., 2004, 2007; Espinoza et al., 2005; Breitsprecher and Thorkelson, 2008] that disturbs mantle dynamics beneath the continent (Figure 1). In order to investigate the impact of the associated mantle flow on the vertical surface motion, we synthesize published data and analyze the evolution of sedimentation, erosion, and tectonic features as well as evidence of deformation during the Neogene. We produce a regional-scale map of the post-middle Miocene system of terraces, and measure the tilting affecting each of the terraces to characterize the uplift of the central Patagonian basin. Then, we compare its evolution with a semianalytical model of dynamic topography simulating the geodynamic context of Patagonia.

2. Geological Setting of Central Patagonia

2.1. Late Oligocene to Early Middle Miocene: Marine Transgression and Synorogenic Continental Molasse

From late Oligocene to early Miocene, a widespread transgression occurred in the Patagonian basin. This transgression is marked by the deposition of nearshore marine Centinela Formation and lateral equivalents (Figure 2). The “Patagonian transgression” covered most of southern Patagonia [Malumián, 1999]. The epicontinental seaway was largely open to the south, south of the Deseado massif, and to the east, north of the Deseado massif [Malumián, 1999]. Close to the present-day Atlantic coast, the corresponding marine series are the Chenque (San Jorge Gulf) and Monte León formations. In Chile, marine series corresponding to the Centinela Formation are assigned to the Guadal Formations [Suárez et al., 2000; De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006]. The marine transgression extended to the west above part of the present-day Cordillera, and Oligo-Miocene marine sediments are preserved in the Cosmelli syncline [Flint et al., 1994; De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006], south of the Buenos Aires—General Carrera Lake. Although this locality is only 100 km east of the Miocene outcrops of the Penas Gulf area on the Pacific coast (Figure 1), the different macroinvertebrate fauna suggest that the marine transgression that invaded Patagonia from the Atlantic to the Guadal area was separated from the Pacific Ocean by the continuous geographic barrier of the Andean Cordillera [Frassinetti and Covacevich, 1999; Flynn et al., 2002]. Marine series form an Oligocene to early Miocene eastward prograding sequence of coarse conglomerates, sandstones, and shales containing shells and microfossils [Ramos, 1989; Barreda and Caccavari, 1992; Bellosi and Barreda, 1993; Frassinetti and Covacevich, 1999, Malumián, 1999]. The thickness of the deposits reaches 500 m on the Atlantic coast [Bellosi and Barreda, 1993]. It generally varies between 225 and 375 m in the Cordillera foothills [Ramos, 1989], and in the Cosmelli syncline, measured thicknesses range between 110 m [De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006] and 650 m [Flynn et al., 2002].

South of the CTJ, marine series are followed by fluviatile deposits of the Santa Cruz Formation and its lateral equivalent (Río Zeballos Group) [Ramos, 1989; Suárez et al., 2000; De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006] (Figure 2). This synorogenic formation consists of sandstones and silts, interbedded with conglomerate lenses that deposited in a high-energy fluviatile environment [Ramos, 1989; De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006]. The Santa Cruz Formation thickness locally reaches up to 1500 m, south of Buenos Aires—General Carrera Lake [Ramos, 1989] and exhibits minimum thicknesses of 900–1000 m in the Cosmelli basin [De la Cruz and Suárez, 2006]. These deposits have been dated using intercalated tuffs levels between 22 and 14 Ma [Blisniuk et al., 2005]. North of the CTJ, the Rio Frias Formation and lateral
equivalents (Río Mayo and Pedregoso formations) also correspond to fluvial series that were deposited during the middle Miocene [Marshall and Salinas, 1990]. The maximum outcropping thickness of the Río Frias formation is about 250 m. Contractional tectonics during deposition of the continental series are evidenced by synsedimentary structures. Growth folds and intraformational thrusts have been reported in Chile in the Cosmelli syncline and south of the region of Río Las Horquetas and Meseta del Guenguel [Flint et al., 1994; Suárez and De la Cruz, 2000; Lagabrielle et al., 2004]. The Patagonian transgression and the deposition of the overlying continental series are the result of a major change in the Andean geodynamic context. At around 26 Ma, the Farallon plate broke up [Lonsdale, 2005]. This period is also marked by a change to a more trench-perpendicular and faster convergence between the oceanic and South American plates [Pardo-Casas and Molnar, 1987; Somoza, 1998; Lonsdale, 2005]. Fission track analyses evidence an acceleration of the denudation at the western margin of the Cordillera during the late Oligocene [Thomson et al., 2001], coeval with the deposition of the Oligo-Miocene series. Then, Oligocene and Miocene series were deposited during a major contractional period of the Andes at the latitude of the central Patagonian basin [Ramos, 1989; Lagabrielle et al., 2004]. Between 47°30'S and 49°S, this shortening resulted in the formation of a complex fold-and-thrust belt in which the Tertiary molasse sequence (marine and continental) is involved [Ramos, 1989]. Shortening varies between 45 and 22 km from the north (47°40'S) to the south (49°S) of the fold-and-thrust belt [Ramos, 1989] and is at least of 35 km during the late Miocene in the fold belt at 50°S [Kraemer, 1998]. The segment of the Patagonian Andes located north of the present-day triple junction is characterized by a weaker Oligo-Miocene shortening, resulting in restricted areas of foreland sedimentation that only accumulated about 100 m of synorogenic deposits [Ramos and Kay, 1992].

2.2. Late Miocene to Holocene: Back-Arc Plateau Basalts and Widespread Detrital Cover

The Patagonian back-arc region has been the locus of widespread volcanic activity during the entire Cenozoic. South of 46°S, a magmatic pulse started ~13 Ma ago during middle Miocene [Ramos and Kay, 1992; Gorring et al., 1997; Guivel et al., 2006]. The late Miocene to Pleistocene magmatism mainly consists of massive tholeiitic plateau lavas covered by less voluminous alkalic postplateau lavas [Gorring et al., 1997]. The emplacement of main plateau lavas has been dated between 12.4 and 3.3 Ma at the Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires and between 8.2 and 4.4 Ma at the Meseta Chile Chico [Guivel et al., 2006]. South of 46°30'S, the main plateau lavas range between 12 and 7 Ma in the western part of the back-arc region and between 5 to 2 Ma in the eastern part of the Deseado massif [Gorring et al., 1997]. The Plio-Pleistocene postplateau basalts have ages from 3.4 to 0.125 Ma [Gorring et al., 2003] at the Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires. Therefore, most of the plateau and postplateau basalts postdate the deposition of the early to middle Miocene continental molasses, and their emplacement helps in dating the subsequent evolution of the region. In the region of Buenos Aires–General Carrera Lake, plateau basalts are emplaced on a planar surface gently tilted toward the east, and seal the eastern thrust front of the Patagonian Andes [Ramos, 1989; Lagabrielle et al., 2004]. This implies that the compressive tectonic activity in this part of the orogen essentially ceased before 13 Ma [Lagabrielle et
al., 2007]. The same observation has been done by Coutand et al. [1999] at the latitude of Viedma lake (49°S), where gently tilted early Pliocene basalts [Mercer et al., 1975] unconformably overlie deformed Paleogene sediments.

[10] In northern Patagonia, in contrast, transpression is still active. Oblique thrusting predominates outside the magmatic arc, and dextral strike-slip shear zones develop within it [e.g., Lavenu and Cembrano, 1999; Cembrano et al., 2002]. The transpressional dextral Liquiñe–Ofqui fault, whose present-day activity is demonstrated by seismic records [Lange et al., 2008], is a more than 900-km-long structure that initiates close to the current Chile Triple Junction.

[11] In central Patagonia, following the deposition of the Santa Cruz Formation, the depositional environment drastically changes. The Santa Cruz Formation is overlain by late Cenozoic continental deposits, as the so-called “Rada dos Patagonicos,” which have formerly been accurately described by Feruglio [1950]. These series correspond to poorly consolidated conglomerates that are widespread from the Andean foothills to the Atlantic coast and which thickness often does not exceed 10 m. The pebbles generally have a roughly constant size from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean. They form a piedmont mantle cover in which the activity of fluvial systems elaborated a succession of fluvial terraces (Río Senguerr, Río Deseado, Cañadón Salado, Cañadón del Carril, Río Mayo) [see Panza [2002] for a review].

3. Post-Middle Miocene Landscape Evolution

[12] We mapped the conglomeratic surfaces, (piedmont mantle cover and fluvial terraces), on the basis of the synthesis of Panza [2002], complemented by 1:250,000 scale geological maps of the Servicio Geológico Minero Argentino [Dal Molin et al., 1998; Giacosa, 1998; Sciuotto et al., 2000; Cobos and Panza, 2001; Servicio Geológico Minero Argentino, 2001; Ardolino et al., 2003; Escosteguy et al., 2003; Sciuotto et al., 2004; Panza and Genini, 2005] and observations of Landsat images and SRTM digital elevation model, analyses being confirmed by field observations (Figure 3). We will use the different surfaces as geologic markers to infer the geomorphologic and tectonic evolution since middle Miocene.

3.1. Description of Piedmont Mantle Cover and Fluvial Terrace Systems

[13] We distinguish three sectors in which piedmont mantle cover deposits have been preserved (Río Guenguel and Arroyo Verde areas to the west, and Pampa del Castillo area to the east), extending from the Andes foothills to the Atlantic coast (Figure 3). Piedmont mantle cover gently dips eastward and results from the coalescence of alluvial cones [Panza, 2002], that generally lie more or less conformably on the Santa Cruz continental formation (early to middle Miocene) in the western region, and on the marine Patagonia and Chenque formations (late Oligocene to early Miocene) close to the Atlantic Ocean. The higher surface is ~850 m above sea level (asl) in the Río Guenguel area and is still remarkably high close to the Atlantic coast (~750 m asl in Pampa del Castillo, only 25 km NW of the coast). Seven younger levels of piedmont surfaces (T2Gu to T8Gu, see Figure 3) are preserved in the Río Guenguel area. The difference in elevation between the first and last level is roughly 200 m.

[14] Fluvial terrace levels correspond to more recent systems of terraces resulting from the activity of rivers flowing from the Andes into the Atlantic Ocean. We distinguish three main groups of terraces corresponding to different fluvial systems: (1) the Cañadón Salado–Cañadón del Carril, (2) the Río Senguerr, and (3) the Río Deseado. These fluvial terraces result from the action of rivers whose flow has been incomparably larger than that of the present-day rivers going to the Atlantic Ocean. The semi-arid climate of the continent, east of the Cordillera, and the fact that the present-day drainage divide between rivers flowing toward the Atlantic Ocean versus rivers flowing toward the Pacific Ocean is essentially located on the eastern and drier side of the mountain belt explains the modest flow of these rivers at present-day. In fact, the drainage divide shifted eastward after Neogene glaciations remodeled the Andean landscape. Between 45°S and 47°30′S, several major glacial valleys crosscut the chain, the most striking example being the valley occupied by the Buenos Aires–General Carrera Lake and the Río Baker. Their formation resulted in the capture of Andean rivers flowing eastward by the Pacific side, subsequently starving rivers flowing into the Atlantic Ocean. During cold periods, however, the ice cap covers the Patagonian Andes, fills valleys in the Cordillera and the eastward flowing drainage is reactivated [Feruglio, 1950; Mercer, 1976; Turner et al., 2005]. This evolution of the watershed system explains the presence of several major fluvial terrace systems that do not correspond to the flow of the present-day rivers.

[15] The Cañadón Salado–Cañadón del Carril fluvial system, located southwest and south of the Río Senguerr system, is the oldest preserved fluvial system of the study area. The Cañadón Salado and Cañadón del Carril are currently temporary rivers flowing into the Río Senguerr (Figure 3). The second level of this fluvial system (T2Cs) covers the Ruta 16 valley, indicating that the paleo-Río Senguerr, that was flowing at that time in the arc-shaped Hermoso valley (Figure 4). The capture of the Cañadón Salado occurred before the emplacement of the T3Cs deposits since the latter displays the same spatial organization than the present-day river (Figure 4).

[16] The Río Senguerr is currently 395 km long, flowing from Fontana Lake at an elevation of 925 m asl, into the Musters and Colhue-Huapi lakes at an elevation of 270 m asl. Its main tributaries are the Arroyo Verde and the Río Mayo. It produced a system of eight terraces, exposed from Nueva Lubecka to the north to the abandoned Hermoso valley. The presence of wide fluvial terraces north of 45°S (northern extent of the present-day course of the Río Senguerr) shows that during their formation, the major flow was coming from the north. In the region of Los Monos, the Río Senguerr abandoned the Hermoso valley during or after the deposition of the terrace T7Se (Figure 4), resulting in the present-day river flow toward the basin of the Musters and Colhue-Huapi lakes.
Figure 3. Map of the conglomerate surfaces covering central Patagonia. T1Ma and T2Ma, Río Mayo fluvial terraces; T1De to T12De, Río Deseado fluvial terraces; T1Se to T8Se, Río Senguerr fluvial terraces; T1Cs to T3Cs, Cañadón Saladón–Cañadón del Carril fluvial terraces; T1Ca and T2Ca, piedmont alluvial surfaces of the Pampa del Castillo area; T1Gu to T8Gu, piedmont alluvial surfaces of the Río Guenguel area; T1Ve, piedmont alluvial surface of the Arroyo Verde area.
Rio Deseado is a major fluvial system of the Patagonian foreland, located in the Santa Cruz province, in the southern part of the study area. Rio Deseado currently originates from the region of Perito Moreno, east of the eastern edge of the Buenos Aires–General Carrera Lake, and flows on a length of 520 km to the Atlantic Ocean at Puerto Deseado. The river produced a system of twelve terraces (Figure 3). The course of the Rio Deseado also changed through time, abandoning in the Meseta Espinosa, the T1De to T3De deposits tens of kilometers north of the present-day river course.

In fact, all regional major river courses changed during the deposition of fluvial terrace systems. The courses of the northern rivers (Río Senguerr, Cañadon Salado) shifted northward, while the Río Deseado valley moved to the south, resulting in the present-day divergent hydrographic network. The Río Deseado now joins the Atlantic Ocean ~160 km south of the San Jorge Gulf, while the Río Senguerr flows through the Río Chico valley to the northeast and reaches the ocean ~300 km north of the San Jorge Gulf.

3.2. Age of Terraces

Most of the ages proposed in the literature are relative ages based on stratigraphic relationships, which leads to discrepancy between authors. Only radiometric ages of basalt flows overlying some piedmont surfaces and fluvial terraces give some absolute constraints.

All the terraces overlie the deposits of the Santa Cruz Formation and are consequently younger than ~14 Ma. Levels of piedmont mantle cover are older than the first level of each fluvial system (Río Senguerr, Cañadon Salado–Cañadon del Carril, Río Deseado). From their relative topographic position, we infer that T1Cs and T2Cs are older than T3Se, and T3Cs is at least older than T4Se and T1De.

Five basalts crop out in the Río Senguerr valley. K/Ar radiometric ages have been obtained by Bruni [2007] in the basalts of Cerro Chenques (2.26 ± 0.11 Ma and 2.49 ± 0.18 Ma), Cerro Grande (2.87 ± 0.68 Ma) and Monte Pedrero (2.71 ± 0.10 Ma) (Figure 3). T3Se is covered by both the Cerro Chenques and Cerro Grande basalts, T4Se is covered by the Monte Pedrero basalts, and T5Se is covered by the Cerro Grande basalts. Thus, T5Se and older terraces of the Río Senguerr valley are older than 2.87 Ma and are at least middle Pliocene in age. T7Se bypasses the Cerro Grande basalts, suggesting that it formed following their emplacement and would therefore be younger than 2.87 Ma.

Some absolute constraints on the age of the Río Deseado terrace system is also given by Ar/Ar radiometric ages on basalts emplaced above terraces. Ages of 5.13 ± 0.11 Ma and 5.28 ± 0.11 Ma have been obtained by Gorring et al. [1997] in the Cerro Monjón and Cerro Negro basalts, respectively. The Cerro Monjón basalts cover T5Se, and the Cerro Negro basalts also cover younger terraces (T6De to T8De), indicating that the eight older terraces of the Río Deseado fluvial system are older than 5.28 Ma, i.e., that they are late Miocene. T9De, in contrast, is younger than 5.28 Ma and appeared during Pliocene.

Figure 5 summarizes our knowledge of the age of the systems of terraces. Piedmont mantle terraces are middle to...
late Miocene in age, and the fluvial terrace system began its formation before Pliocene.

3.3. Local Tectonics

As detailed above, the end of the deposition of the Santa Cruz Formation corresponds to the end of the major Oligo-Miocene shortening episode of the Cordillera. Further east, at about 150 km from the Cordilleran thrust front, in the Sierra San Bernardo and farther south, mild deformation is attested by the presence of gentle folds and reverse faults that result from the reactivation of pre-Cretaceous extensional fault systems [Barcat et al., 1989; Homovec et al., 1995; Peroni et al., 1995; Chelotti, 1997]. The San Bernardo fold belt, a 150-km-long and 50-km-wide NNW-SSE trending band, corresponds to the easternmost evidence of Andean shortening. Rodriguez and Littke [2001] present a detailed mapping of the folds affecting the top of the Lower Cretaceous Castillo Formation (Figure 6). Structures involve rocks of ages up to early middle Miocene, belonging to the Superpatagoniano succession, contemporaneous of the Santa Cruz Formation [Peroni et al., 1995]. The San Bernardo fold belt is still today marked in the geomorphology of that part of Patagonia, locally reaching altitudes of 1500 m asl. The Río Senguerr deviates its course to the south to bypass the San Bernardo fold belt, approaching the Cañadón Salado and Río Deseado rivers.

The San Bernardo folds do not deform the fluvial terraces of the Río Senguerr, showing that shortening in the Sierra San Bernardo is now inactive. However, older terrace systems are uplifted above the San Bernardo fold belt. The elevation of the piedmont cover terrace T4Gu and of the older fluvial terraces of the Cañadón Salado system (T1Cs and T2Cs) locally increases eastward approaching the western boundary of the fold belt (Figure 6). The elevation of T4Gu increases by ~90 m, and that of T1Cs of ~50 m over a distance of about 15 km. The ~E-W oriented Cañadón Salado valley is steep-sided within older piedmont terraces, evidencing that the local west directed slope of its oldest terraces does not result neither from lateral sediment supply nor from flows coming from the east (Sierra San Bernardo). Therefore, a modest-amplitude, large-wavelength uplift of the San Bernardo fold belt posterior to the formation of the Cañadón Salado–Cañadón del Carril terrace systems must have occurred, and this uplift is almost not accompanied by shortening.

3.4. Regional Tilt

We studied the present-day slopes of terraces to investigate a possible long-wavelength regional uplift. If the initial downstream slope of terraces is difficult to constrain, it is reasonable to consider that terraces displayed horizontal profiles in the direction perpendicular to the paleovalleys. On the basis of this assumption, tilts would correspond to any deviation from this horizontality. Topographic profiles through terraces have been obtained using SRTM Digital Elevation Models.

3.4.1. South of the Current CTJ Position

Figure 7 shows that at least the five older levels of the Río Deseado terrace system (south of 46°30’S) are inclined toward the south. The fact that steep scarps separate the different levels and that the southward slope of terrace levels is similar on both sides of the present-day Río Deseado valley shows that these slopes do not result from lateral sediment supply. In fact, southward tilt resulting from a larger regional uplift north of the terraces must have occurred to explain the observed slopes. In the N-S direction, however, T1De exhibits a slight slope toward the south (0.05 ± 0.01%) and appears locally subhorizontal. T2De and T3De, which can be followed on large distances, present a regional slope of 0.11 ± 0.01% and 0.10 ± 0.02% toward the

---

Figure 5. Age distribution of the piedmont mantle cover, fluvial terraces, and tectonic events north and south of the Chile Triple Junction. Absolute ages of basalts covering terraces are from Gorring et al. [1997] and Bruni [2007].
south, respectively, at the longitude of Koluel Kaire. The southward slope of T4De is smaller (0.07 ± 0.01% north of the Cerro Negro basalt and close to the mouth of the Río Deseado), and that of T5De, west of the Cerro Negro basalt, is even smaller (0.05 ± 0.01%). For comparison, these slopes are comparable to the longitudinal WNW-ESE trending slope of these terraces in the same area and to the present-day slope of the Río Deseado (0.08%). Terraces T6De and T7De are not extended enough to detect a potential tilt using SRTM data. The younger levels of the Río Deseado system (T8De to T12De) are not tilted. In fact, the present-day topography of the Río Deseado terrace system suggests that a gentle southward regional tilt occurred following the deposition of T3De and before T6De (or T8De). It would have been preceded by a northward regional tilt between the deposition of T1De and T2De, explaining why the present-day slope of T1De toward the south (0.05 ± 0.01%) is smaller than that of T2De (0.11 ± 0.01%). Figure 7 shows that the southward tilt that occurred between the formation of T2De and T8De resulted in the southward shift of the course of the Río Deseado, leaving abandoned the valley that resulted in the formation of T3De.

3.4.2. North of the Current CTJ Position

In contrast, the analysis of the topography of terraces located just north of 46°30’S suggests that this region has essentially been tilted toward the north. East of the San Bernardo fold belt, T1Ca forms a wide planar surface that extends over 400 km from the Pampa del Castillo, west of Comodoro Rivadavia, to the Río Chico mouth to the north (Figure 8). The topography of this surface is tilted toward the northeast with a slope of 0.14 ± 0.05%. Clearly, part of the present-day slope of T1Ca results from its genesis and does not reflect subsequent tilt. However, paleocurrents observed using psephites orientations [Beltramone and Meister, 1992], although controversial [Bellosi, 1996], indicate an eastward flow direction in the Pampa del Castillo whereas the corresponding terrace is tilted toward the northeast. In addition, the present-day slope of this surface is more than three times larger than the longitudinal profile of Río Chico and larger than the longitudinal slope of other terraces that have been preserved in the eastern part of the study area (Hermoso valley, distal part of the Río Deseado terrace system). Thus, we propose that the present-day observed slope...
of T1Ca would partly result from a postdepositional tilt toward the north or northeast of that area.

The northward tilt of the region located north of 46°30'S is also suggested by the longitudinal profile of the second terrace of the Cañadon Salado system in the Ruta 16 valley. This terrace corresponds to an abandoned valley incised within Oligo-Miocene sediments (Monte León and Santa Cruz formations). Its upstream portion is WNW-ESE oriented whereas the downstream part is directed toward the NE (Figure 8). The valley-parallel profile AA' in Figure 8 shows that the present-day longitudinal slope of that terrace is inverted toward the upstream direction in the upper WNW-ESE oriented part of the valley, whereas it goes down toward the NE in the lower part of the valley. In fact, again, this change in the slope of the terrace suggests that the area has been tilted northward. Tiltling would have inverted the longitudinal slope of the part of the valley flowing toward the ESE and increased the slope of the lower part of the valley. Another possibility could be that the activity of the Sierra San Bernardo fold-and-thrust belt would have subsequently produced the uplift of the upper part of the valley and the observed counterslope for T2Cs. However, the nearest known tectonic structure along the course of T2Cs is the Perales anticline [Homovc et al., 1995; Rodriguez and Little, 2001] and its location at depth does not fit the change of slope observed in the Ruta 16 valley (Figure 8). Since T2Cs is not involved in any tectonic structure and since the change in its present-day slope coincides with the changing orientation of the valley, we suggest that a regional northward tilt may have caused this abnormal longitudinal profile.

The longitudinal profiles of the seven terraces of the Río Senguerr system suggest that the northward tilt of the northern part of the study area pursued during their formation (Figure 9). The slope of each terrace is measured in the direction parallel to the current valley and obtained values are systematically smaller for the older terraces. For instance, T6Se lies 85 m above the present-day Río Senguerr bed just above the elbow of capture. Upstream, the difference in elevation decreases to 35 m, south of Cerro Chenques. Close to the capture, T2Se is 70 m above T6Se, while the two levels are close together 35 km NE of Cerro Chenques (Figure 9).

Clearly, the higher longitudinal slope of the present-day Río Senguerr valley may also result from its capture by the Musters Lake basin. But in fact this capture may also

---

Figure 7. Topographic profiles of Río Deseado terraces (see map for location and Figure 3 for color legend) and values of N-S slope for each terrace. Numerical age of the Cerro Negro basalts is 5.28 Ma [Gorring et al., 1997].
Figure 8
have been triggered by the northward tilt of this region, as it has done for the capture of the Cañadon Salado by the Hermoso valley (Figure 4). Moreover, this capture having occurred following the formation of T7Se, it cannot explain the smaller longitudinal slopes of older terraces compared to that of T7Se. These captures would argue for a continuation of the northward tilt until recent times since the capture of the Río Senguerr postdates the deposition of the next to last terrace of the Río Senguerr fluvial system.

3.5. Synthesis of N-S Tilts Deduced From the Analysis of the Present-Day Slopes of Terraces

Regions located north and south of the current CTJ position had different tilting histories from the late Miocene. In the northern area, the trench-parallel tilting is permanently northward directed and may have pursued until recent times. Absolute values of tilting are difficult to constrain since the course of the main valleys is almost parallel to the direction of tilting, the present-day slope of these terraces resulting both from tilting and from the process of terrace formation. Nevertheless, in the Río Senguerr fluvial system, if we consider that all terraces share a common upstream elevation at a latitude of 44°20'S (see Figure 9), the values of tilt can be approximated measuring the difference in elevation between the terraces at the latitude of the elbow of capture (46°S). We obtain values ranging between ~0.01 and 0.02% between successive terraces and the cumulative northward tilt between T2Se and T7Se would be ~0.06%. Present-day different slopes of the upstream and downstream segments of the older terrace T2Cs suggest a cumulative tilt of 0.12 ± 0.04% since its formation.

[31] In contrast, south of the CTJ, before 5.28 Ma, the area recorded a minimum northward tilt of 0.06 ± 0.02% (difference of N-S slope between T1De and T2De), that has been followed by a cumulative southward tilt of 0.11 ± 0.01% between T2De and T8De. Since the transition between the late Miocene and the Pliocene (T8De), southward tilting is not anymore recorded by the terraces of the Río Deseado.

[34] Both northward and southward tilts, north and south of the CTJ, resulted in captures that explain the present-day diverging pattern of the hydrographic network east of the Sierra San Bernardo and Deseado massif.

4. Possible Causes for the Post-Middle Miocene Uplift of Central Eastern Patagonia

The analysis of the geological and morphological evolution of central Patagonia, east of the Andean front during the Neogene, shows a major shift from subsidence marked by the accumulation of the Santa Cruz Formation, followed by a regional uplift contemporaneous with the deposition of the piedmont mantle cover and fluvial terraces. The Oligo-Miocene transgression starts when the convergence between the Nazca and South American plates becomes more orthogonal to the margin, and is coeval to the major episode of shortening in central Patagonian Andes.

[36] Sedimentation of the Oligo-Miocene marine strata, followed by the deposition of the early to middle Miocene molasse east of the Andean front, could partly result from the flexural subsidence of the foreland induced by the growth of the chain at that time. Fission tracks data [Thomson et al., 2001], indeed show that denudation accelerates in the western part of the mountain chain at that latitude in the Oligocene, which suggests that the Andes where uplifting close to the Pacific coast. We interpret the sedimentary record of the basin and especially the deposition of the Santa Cruz Formation and its equivalents, with a maximum depocenter.
located close to the Cordillera foothills, as a result of the overfilling of a subsiding basin. Although the subsidence of this basin may result from the flexural response of the continental lithosphere to the growth of the Cordillera, it may also have been enhanced by the dynamic deflection of the lithosphere generated by the increasing velocity of the subduction of the Nazca slab [Gurnis, 1993] (see discussion below).

[37] The end of the deposition of the Santa Cruz continental series corresponds to drastic changes in the paleogeography of Patagonia. The end of early Miocene is marked by an increased aridity of the eastern side of southern Andes [Bellosti, 1999; Blisniuk et al., 2005]. This climatic change essentially results from rain shadow phenomenon, the Cordillera being high enough to become a barrier to atmospheric circulation [Blisniuk et al., 2005]. Blisniuk et al., in turn, suggest that the end of the deposition of the Santa Cruz Formation 14 Ma ago would also result from the increased aridity of the Patagonian foreland. Our data suggest that the main cause for the end of sedimentation is the uplift of the foreland. As a matter of fact, although Patagonia east of the Andes has been arid enough to preserve the fluvial terrace systems described in this paper since the late Miocene, the widespread occurrence of vast terraces covered by decimeter-scale pebbles covering the entire zone from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean indicates that powerful streams episodically flowed from the Cordillera. These streams would certainly have brought sediments to the basin in case its subsidence would have pursued more recently than middle Miocene.

[38] Then, the question is to understand why the uplift of the Andes, controlling from the middle Miocene the semi-arid climate of eastern Patagonia, has been rapidly followed by the slow uplift of its foreland. Uplift of central eastern Patagonia correlates with a period of colder climate, culminating with the formation of an ice cap above the Andes. The long-term increasing ice load from the upper Miocene should have triggered subsidence of the Andean foreland, contrary to the observed uplift. In contrast, foreland uplift may have resulted from a decreasing load of the Cordillera, possibly enhanced by glacial erosion. We show below that flexural foreland rebound cannot explain the large dimension of the uplifted area. In contrast, dynamic topography resulting from the opening of the asthenospheric window may explain the continental-scale observed uplift.

4.1. Flexural Response of the Lithospheric Plate

[39] The growth of southern Andes in the Oligo-Miocene resulted from crustal shortening, which, in turn, triggered subsidence in the foreland and deposition of the Santa Cruz molasse [e.g., Ramos, 1989; Alvarez-Marrón et al., 1993; Thomson et al., 2001; Kraemer et al., 2002; Lagabrielle et al., 2004; Ramos, 2005]. Then, the subsequent uplift of the foreland may have resulted from the diminution of the Andean load above the continental plate. As a matter of fact, crustal shortening has been very small in the Patagonian Andes since middle Miocene [Ramos, 1989; Coutand et al., 1999; Lagabrielle et al., 2004, 2007]. Moreover, the very humid climatic conditions on the western side of the chain that has been enhanced by its uplift, and the development of Neogene glaciations may have increased the rapid erosion of the Pacific side of the continent and central part of the Cordillera. The flexural response of these accelerated erosion processes would favor uplift of the eastern foreland.

[40] The elastic thickness of the Patagonian continental lithosphere has been estimated between about 20 km and 30 km by Tassara et al. [2007] at the CTJ latitude using gravity data. Using standard elastic parameters [e.g., Turcotte and Schubert, 1982], the distance between the chain and the forebulge would range between 150 and 210 km. Flexural parameters of the continental plate are also evidenced by the distribution of the Santa Cruz continental deposits, which are restricted to the western part of the Patagonian foreland, less than 250 km from the Andes. In turn, the flexural uplift of the foreland resulting from the diminution of the Andean load should be restricted to a narrow area close to the chain, and should not affect the distal zones close to the Atlantic coast, ~500 km away from the present-day Cordillera.

4.2. Dynamic Topography

[41] Dynamic topography on Earth is the deflection of the surface in response to the viscous flow that occurs in the convecting underlying mantle. Over subduction zones, it may result in long-wavelength downward deflections of the overriding topographic surface exceeding 1000 m [Mitrovica et al., 1989; Gurnis, 1993; Zhong and Gurnis, 1994; Husson, 2006]. The northward migration of the CTJ from middle Miocene lead to the opening of an asthenospheric window below southern Patagonia. South of 46°30'S, the Antarctic oceanic plate is now slowly subducting below the continent. The corresponding slab is short. A recent slab window reconstruction shows that the Antarctic slab should not have reached depths greater than 45 km [Breitsprecher and Thorkelson, 2008]. Thus, the dynamic effect of that subduction on the overriding continent is virtually absent. North of the CTJ, in contrast, the Nazca plate subducts rapidly, which in turn deflects the continental plate downward. We propose that this downward deflection has been progressively canceled in southern Patagonia as the CTJ was migrating northward, resulting in the uplift of that part of the continent. The free air anomaly is positive north of the CTJ (40 mGal) while it is neutral to slightly negative south of it; this observation outlines the departure of topography from an isostatic situation north of the CTJ and the fact that the dynamic deflection vanishes south of it.

[42] We computed the dynamic deflection induced by a slab subducting within the upper mantle with a dip angle of 37°, using a simple 3-D Newtonian model based on the Stokeslet approximation [Morgan, 1965; Batchelor, 1967; Harper, 1984; Husson, 2006]. A subducting slab of finite width is discretized into elementary spheres, or “Stokeslet,” for which an analytical flow solution exists. Each point mass i induces an elementary spherical flow (Stokeslet) for which the Stokes stream function is known and can be written $\Psi_i = (\Delta \rho_i g / 8 \pi \eta) r_i \sin \theta_i$, where $\Delta \rho_i$ is the mass anomaly associated with each point mass, $g$ is the gravitational acceleration, $\eta$ is the viscosity, $r_i$ is the distance from each point mass to the observation point j, and $\theta_j$ is the angle between the vector $ij$ and the direction of $g$. The normal
stress on the upper free surface of a half-space can be calculated using the image technique [Morgan, 1965]. It writes \( F_{zzij} = 3\Delta \rho z_i / \pi \rho_m g \), where \( z_i \) is the depth of the point mass body beneath the surface. Because inertial terms are negligible, stress does not depend on viscosity. If the surface is stress free, then there will instead be a deflection of the surface by a distance \( h_{ij} \), such that \( h_{ij} = F_{zzij} / \rho_m g \). The total Stokes flow is given by the sum of the Stokeslets; in aerial domains the total surface deflection \( H_j \) will be the sum of the deflections resulting from each point mass; hence,

\[
H_j = \sum_i \frac{3\Delta \rho z_i^3}{\pi \rho_m^2 g}.
\]

where \( \rho_m \) denotes the density of the mantle.
Deflections have been calculated for a 50-km-thick slab with a negative buoyancy of $-80 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$. We assume that the deflection, south of the triple junction, is null. This is supported by the fact that the Antarctic slab currently reaches depths smaller than 45 km [Breitsprecher and Thorkelson, 2008]. Conversely, the dynamic effect of the trailing edge of the Nazca slab south of the CTJ should not be negligible but is difficult to quantify since it depends on many poorly constrained parameters like the slab geometry, the convergence velocity, the rheological stratification of the slab, and other factors.
upper mantle, thermal erosion of the slab edge. Anyway, its effect would only introduce a delay between ridge subduction at trench, and dynamic uplift. A first-order approximation of this delay can be evaluated calculating the time necessary for the horizontal projection of the trailing edge of the slab to reach an horizontal distance greater than that of the central Patagonian basin (~5 Ma).

4.3. Discussion

The calculations presented above show that dynamic topography resulting from subduction may result in significant long-wavelength deflections of the lithospheric plate, far enough from the trench to affect the entire width of Patagonia. At the end of Oligocene, the increase of trench-perpendicular convergence velocity between the Farallon-Nazca plate and South America may have resulted in a larger downward deflection of the continental plate, which would explain part of the Oligo-Miocene Patagonian transgression.

Following the deposition of the Miocene continental molasse, the entire continental plate uplifted, resulting in the appearance of continental-scale terraces. Available ages on basalts covering terraces [Gorring et al., 1997] show that the older terraces are middle-late Miocene, and that only the lower terraces of the Río Senguerr and Río Deseado fluvial systems are Pliocene to Pleistocene. The present-day topography of these ancient terraces underlines periods of northward and southward tilt in the foreland of the Patagonian Andes. South of 46°S, terraces of the Río Deseado system evidence a former 0.06% northward tilt event (0.11% minus 0.05%) that occurred before the deposition of T2De, and partly following the deposition of T1De, followed by a 0.11% southward tilt that followed the deposition of T2De and ended before the deposition of T8De, i.e., before 5.28 Ma. Just to the north of 46°S (Cañadon Salado and Río Senguerr terrace systems), the oldest surfaces are tilted toward the north, and the northward tilt recorded by the youngest terraces of the Río Senguerr fluvial system [Bruni, 2007].
system indicates that the tilt continued after the deposition of the Cerro Grande basalts, 2.87 Ma ago.

This general pattern of tilt basically reproduces the predicted vertical movements from dynamic topography modeling (Figure 12) that accommodate the northward migration of the CTJ: south of the CTJ, our model predicts that the uplift is accommodated by northward tilt followed by southward tilt, and north of the CTJ, only northward tilt should occur. Moreover, observed tilt values are approximately 0.1% at the longitude of the Atlantic coast, which corresponds to the range of values predicted by the semi-analytical models.

However, model results suggest that southward tilt of the region located between 46°30'S and 48°S would occur following the final step of migration of the CTJ that resulted from the subduction of the SCR0 ridge segment, 3 Ma ago. Moreover, as discussed above, our simple analytical model does not integrate the effect of the trailing edge of the Nazca slab at depth, south of the triple junction, which should introduce a delay between ridge subduction and the corresponding dynamic response. Ages of the Río Deseado fluvial system, in contrast, suggest that the southward tilt occurred in the Miocene, before the deposition of the 5.28 Ma old Cerro Negro basalts. This discrepancy outlines the limitation of our simple analytical analysis in explaining the timing and/or location of observed tilt. In the semianalytical model presented above, dynamic deflections are computed for a slab having an uniform buoyancy while the Nazca slab is in fact younger and therefore less negatively buoyant next to the CTJ. Thus, taking precisely into account the age structure of the subducting slab would subsequently shift the maximum deflection northward with respect to

Figure 13. Cartoons illustrating the geodynamic setting south of the Chile Triple Junction. (a) Before the subduction of the Chile ridge, the Nazca slab subduction induces mantle flow that causes a downward deflection of the overlying Patagonian lithosphere. The rapid convergence rate is responsible for the emplacement of the eastern Patagonian fold and thrust belt and associated subsiding flexural basin. (b) After the subduction of the Chile ridge, the opening of the asthenospheric window cancels the downward mantle motion that deflected the South American plate, resulting in the uplift of the continent at that time.
model results (Figure 11) and southward tilt would occur earlier.

Another possibility is that the migration of the CTJ has been preceded by a slab break-off, resulting in the opening of an asthenospheric window before the subduction of the last ridge segments, as already proposed by Guivel et al. [2006] to explain the occurrence of back-arc basaltic dykes off San Juan, Argentina. The slab break-off is likely to have triggered the opening of a slab window below southern Patagonia, cancelling the dynamic deflection of the continental plate above the subduction zone and induces the uplift (or better said the cessation of the dynamic deflection) of the overriding plate (Figure 13). The uplift resulting from the dynamic response of the continental lithosphere to subduction explains the diverging present-day pattern of the hydrographic network at the latitude of the CTJ, the region located north of the CTJ being tilted northward while the region located to the south tilts toward the south. The comparison between the model and the observations show that both the occurrence of the Patagonian basin and its evolution are of dynamic origin.

5. Conclusions

The major Oligo-Miocene transgression that occurred in the southern Patagonia results both from shortening of the Cordillera and larger downward dynamic deflection of the continental plate resulting from the increase of the trench-perpendicular convergence velocity between the subducting and overriding plates (Figure 13). The Santa Cruz Formation deposited in the overfilled subsiding Patagonian basin.

References


Coudert, I., M. Diraison, P. R. Cobbold, D. Gappa, E. A. Rosselli, and M. Miller (1999), Structure


Servicio Geológico Minero Argentino (2001), Hoja Geológica 4569-III Sarmiento, provincia del Chubut, scale, 1:250,000, Buenos Aires.


Suárez, M., R. De la Cruz, and C. M. Bell (2000), Timing and origin of deformation along the Patagonian fold and thrust belt, Geol. Mag., 137, 345–353, doi:10.1017/S0016756800004192.


