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Abrupt change in North African hydroclimate and landscape evolution 3.2 million years ago

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1 **Dark organic-rich layers (sapropels) have accumulated in Mediterranean**
2 **sediments since the Miocene due to deep-sea dysoxia and enhanced carbon burial**
3 **at times of intensified North African run-off during ‘Green’ Sahara Periods (GSPs).**
4 **The existence of orbital precession-dominated Saharan aridity/humidity cycles is**
5 **well known, but lack of long-term, high-resolution records hinders understanding**
6 **of their precise relationships with environmental and hominin evolution. Here we**
7 **present continuous, high-resolution geochemical and environmental magnetic**
8 **records for the Eastern Mediterranean that span the past 5.2 million years, which**
9 **reveal that organic burial in sapropels intensified 3.2 Myr ago. We deduce that**
10 **fluvial terrigenous sediment inputs during GSPs doubled abruptly at this time,**
11 **whereas monsoon run-off intensity remained relatively constant. We attribute the**
12 **increase in sediment mobilisation to an abrupt non-linear North African landscape**
13 **response associated with a major increase in arid:humid contrasts between GSPs**
14 **and intervening dry periods. This likely limited hominin (and other animal)**
15 **inhabitation of, and migration through, the Sahara region to GSPs only.**

16
17 ‘Green Sahara Periods’ (GSPs) have been a fundamental characteristic of North African
18 climate change for more than 8 Ma^{ref.1}. Only the most recent GSP during the early-mid
19 Holocene (~11 to 6 thousand years ago, ka; the ‘African Humid Period’) has been studied
20 in detail at numerous locations²⁻⁴, and it extended to East Africa⁵⁻⁷. However, there are

21 few continuous, well-dated records of GSPs that extend beyond the Pleistocene (or
22 beyond the last 300 ka), and no high-resolution North African humidity reconstructions
23 encompass the entire Plio-Pleistocene. Mediterranean sediments contain a particularly
24 rich archive of past GSPs. Here, organic-rich layers ('sapropels') form in response to deep-
25 sea anoxia and nutrient inputs when significantly increased run-off enters the basin via
26 the Nile and wider North African margin⁸. These periods correspond to enhanced boreal
27 summer insolation maxima and minima in Earth's orbital precession cycle, resulting in a
28 more northerly and intensified African rainbelt^{8,9}. Sapropels are a natural testbed for
29 understanding deep-sea redox and carbon burial processes; however, their formation
30 mechanisms are still debated⁸, and there is currently no continuous high-resolution
31 proxy record of Plio-Pleistocene sapropels.

32

33 Ba/Al, Ti/Al, and planktic $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ in Eastern Mediterranean sediments are useful proxies of
34 past GSPs and sapropels. Ba/Al reliably tracks sapropel intervals because it correlates
35 with original organic carbon burial (C_{org}) in sapropels and is mostly unaffected by post-
36 depositional redox reactions¹⁰, while surface water freshening due to monsoon run-off is
37 recorded by strong negative $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ peaks^{11,12}. Ti/Al in the open Eastern Mediterranean
38 reflects relative variations in North African aeolian vs riverine inputs to the basin¹³. Both
39 elements are supplied within clays, but aeolian-sourced Ti in the open Eastern
40 Mediterranean is enhanced relative to fluvially-sourced Ti because heavier (Ti-bearing)
41 suspended particles preferentially settle near the Nile fan. Al normalisation (for Ti and
42 Ba) removes clay dilution effects.

43

44 Here, we address the dual need for high-resolution records of North African
45 humidity/aridity changes and sapropel deposition through the entire Plio-Pleistocene, by
46 presenting the first continuous, astronomically dated GSP and sapropel proxy records
47 back to 5.2 Ma from Eastern Mediterranean Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) Site 967
48 (Figures 1-2; Supplementary Figure S1). From the same site, we also present high-
49 resolution records of Saharan dust and riverine inputs over the past 5.2 Ma. Our data
50 reveal a fundamental change in sapropel development, provide much-needed context for
51 understanding hominin evolution and migrations out of Africa, and are essential for
52 modelling the mid-Pliocene—the most recent interval with CO_2 levels approximating
53 modern levels¹⁴.

54

55 **Green Sahara Periods**

56 Ti/Al, Ba/Al, and planktic $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ record GSP timings over the Plio-Pleistocene (Fig. 3). The
57 Ba/Al signal is consistent with a typical sapropel sequence^{10,15}, and lower Ti/Al values
58 correspond to Ba/Al spikes, $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ minima, and precession minima. The $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ record
59 reflects long-term global sea level/ice volume changes¹⁶, with superimposed negative
60 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ excursions that relate to African run-off into the Eastern Mediterranean and
61 warming within fresher surface-water layers^{12,17,18}. African run-off reaching ODP967
62 would have derived primarily from the Nile^{18,19}, which is fed by East African precipitation
63 influenced by both the Indian and African Monsoons and their moisture convergence at
64 the Congo Air Boundary²⁰. African run-off also entered the Eastern Mediterranean from
65 the wider North African margin when the African rainbelt migrated northward^{18,21,22}.
66 This rainbelt is associated with the intertropical convergence zone (ITCZ), the West
67 African monsoon (WAM), and East African precipitation^{20,23}. Thus, ODP967 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ reflects
68 both WAM and East African precipitation. While changes in local Eastern Mediterranean
69 precipitation over the entire Plio-Pleistocene are not well-constrained, their impacts on
70 ODP967 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ are likely to be minimal compared to African run-off because Eastern
71 Mediterranean surface waters are the evaporative source for local precipitation (with
72 little excess $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ fractionation)^{8,12}. The similar range of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ minima at precession
73 minima throughout the record (Fig. 3, note by convention reversed $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ axis) suggests
74 that maximum African (monsoon) run-off into the Eastern Mediterranean reached
75 roughly similar intensities throughout the Plio-Pleistocene. Furthermore, the ODP967
76 Ba/Al, Ti/Al, and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ records all attest to continuity of run-off maxima and 'sapropel-
77 like' Pliocene C_{org} fluxes.

78

79 The longest continuous (albeit low-resolution) time-series of Saharan/North African
80 hydroclimate changes extend back to ~4-4.5 Ma and are based on terrigenous (=non-
81 biogenic) sediment fluxes offshore of Northwest Africa and Arabia^{24,25}, where terrigenous
82 components are primarily sourced from aeolian dust²⁵. At ODP967, an isothermal
83 remanent magnetization (IRM) proxy for hematite ($\text{IRM}_{900@120\text{mT}}$; see Methods) reflects
84 Saharan dust inputs to this site²⁶. $\text{IRM}_{900@120\text{mT}}$ values remain relatively low until ~1.4
85 Ma, with notable increases at 1.2 and 0.9 Ma, coincident with the Mid-Pleistocene
86 transition (MPT) (Fig. 4e). Increased dust fluxes at the MPT are also observed in a lower

87 resolution ODP967 IRM record extending back to 3 Ma^{ref.26,27}, and in dust records from
88 ODP sites 664 (Fig. 4h) and 721/722 (Arabian Sea)²⁷. There are also discrepancies among
89 these records, and among terrigenous (dust) records from other ODP sites off Northwest
90 Africa^{25,27} (Fig. 1). For example, sites more proximal to the Sahara (e.g. ODP659) have
91 high-amplitude dust fluxes throughout the Plio-Pleistocene²⁵, whereas more distal sites
92 (e.g., ODP662/3 and 664) record higher-amplitude dust fluxes from ~3 Ma and 2.7 Ma
93 (Fig. 4g,h). At ODP Site 959, Ti/Al values suggest increasing aeolian dust inputs from ~3.5
94 Ma, with potentially a slight increase at 3.2 Ma (Fig. 4i), although the record may partly
95 reflect Guinea Current changes²⁸. Lower dust inputs tend to coincide with GSPs, but not
96 consistently (Supplementary Figure S3); instead, they likely relate to distance from dust
97 source areas and prevailing dust trajectories^{25,27}, i.e., factors other than humidity/aridity
98 changes.

99

100 **The Plio-Pleistocene sapropel record**

101 Intriguingly, there are no visibly preserved sapropels in most of the Pliocene portion of
102 ODP967^{ref.29} (Fig. 2) – visible sapropels appear from 3.2 Ma onward. However, not all
103 Eastern Mediterranean ODP sites record the same lithological change at 3.2 Ma (Table 1):
104 Sites 964 and 967 lack visible sapropels prior to this time, while Sites 966 and 969 contain
105 a continuous visible sapropel sequence down to the core base at 4.5 and 5.3 Ma,
106 respectively²⁹. This difference remains unexplained. It is unlikely to relate to Pliocene
107 sedimentation rates which are similar among the four sites (Supplementary Fig. S4), but
108 may relate to water depth, because Pliocene sapropels are absent from the deepest
109 sites²⁹. Spatial offsets in the timing, duration, and intensity of sapropel formation are
110 expected^{8,30}, but such a dramatic contrast in Pliocene sapropel preservation among
111 Eastern Mediterranean sites implies basin-wide changes in the balance of deep-water
112 oxygen supply (ventilation) vs demand (C_{org} remineralization and, likely, export).

113

114 The ODP967 sapropel-sequence change coincides with a shift to larger amplitude Ba/Al
115 and Ti/Al fluctuations (Fig. 4b-d), a two-to-threefold increase in terrigenous element
116 concentrations (Supplementary Fig. S5), and a shift in the mean and variance of Ti/Al
117 based on change-point analysis (Fig. 4c). Elevated terrigenous element concentrations at
118 ODP967 (Supplementary Fig. S5) are associated with insolation maxima, in line with their
119 primarily riverine transport via the Nile and wider North African margin^{19,22,31}. In

120 contrast, ODP967 element fluxes reflect sediment density changes associated with
121 sapropel lithology (Supplementary Fig. S6); hence, relative variations in terrigenous
122 *versus* biogenic element concentrations more accurately indicate terrigenous inputs. The
123 3.2 Ma geochemical shift and sapropel deposition/preservation change thus implies a
124 major increase in monsoon run-off and/or suspended load, or a fundamental
125 reorganization of Eastern Mediterranean deep-water circulation and sedimentation. We
126 formulate four testable hypotheses (Table 2) that invoke: a) a marked change in North
127 African climate/landscape (Hypotheses 1-2; $H_{1,2}$); and b) Sicily Sill uplift ($H_{3,4}$). We now
128 consider our results in the context of these scenarios.

129

130 **African climate/environment shift at 3.2 Ma**

131 Considering H_1 (see Table 2), a marked increase in freshwater run-off into the Eastern
132 Mediterranean would be registered in ODP967 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$, irrespective of the freshwater
133 source. However, ODP967 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ reaches similar minima throughout the last 4.5 Ma (Fig.
134 3). H_1 also implies a shift to more rainfall after 3.2 Ma, which is inconsistent with pollen
135 data³² (Fig. 4f) and modelling results³³⁻³⁵ that indicate a generally greener Pliocene
136 Sahara (i.e., forests and wetlands). Leaf wax $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{31}$ at ODP Site 659 (Fig. 1) is generally
137 more negative in the Pliocene compared with the last glacial cycle, which is consistent
138 with elevated Pliocene North African humidity³⁶. Similarly in Northeast Africa, high-
139 resolution pollen and tree index records from the Baringo Basin reveal a marked shift to
140 drier conditions at 3.2 Ma^{ref.37} (Fig. 4j), which is consistent with leaf wax isotope data from
141 DSDP Site 231 in the Gulf of Aden³⁸ (Fig. 4k). Leaf wax isotope records (δD , $\delta^{13}\text{C}$) in that
142 study were interpreted in combination with other regional palaeoclimate records, and
143 suggest two main shifts to drier conditions: at 5-4.5 and 3.3-3.0 Ma. Hence, available
144 evidence causes us to reject H_1 .

145

146 H_2 implies a more erodible North African landscape from ~ 3.2 Ma onward, which in turn
147 suggests more arid or variable climate conditions, or the emergence of new—possibly
148 seasonal—drainage pathways. Equally, a reduction in soil-stabilizing vegetation would
149 facilitate sediment erosion through existing channels. Pollen records support a shift to
150 increased aridity and climate variability after 3.2 Ma (see above), while dust records are
151 more equivocal: only two ODP sites (662/3 and 664) record a shift to higher amplitude
152 dust inputs at around 3 Ma (Fig. 4g,h). However, aeolian dust records can reflect other

153 factors (e.g., wind patterns, distance to dust source), which could explain some offsets
154 (Sites 662/3 and 664 are more distal from the Sahara than Site 659). Furthermore, if the
155 amplitude increase in ODP967 Ti/Al variations (aeolian vs riverine proxy) at 3.2 Ma is
156 African-climate driven, then the lack of a coeval shift in ODP967 IRM_{900@120mT} (aeolian
157 proxy) implies that the Ti/Al change primarily reflects a change in riverine rather than
158 aeolian components. At ODP967, this component is sourced primarily from the Nile^{18,19}.
159 While the Sahara has likely existed since the Miocene³⁹, the Nile evolved through the Plio-
160 Pleistocene⁴⁰⁻⁴². The timings of its various development stages are not well constrained,
161 but a recent synthesis⁴¹ proposes a Late Pliocene/early Pleistocene connection of the
162 Blue Nile/Atbara-Tekeze rivers to the palaeo-Nile, and emergence of the modern
163 Egyptian Nile flood plain and delta (the White Nile joined the main channel within the last
164 0.5 Ma^{ref.41}). Nile evolution could, therefore, account for a major mid/late Pliocene shift
165 in drainage pathways and suspended sediment.

166

167 It is implicit to H_2 (and inferred from our ODP967 $\delta^{18}O$ record) that freshwater run-off
168 fluxes during GSPs must have been decoupled from long-term changes in suspended
169 sediment loads. Several lines of evidence suggest that this is plausible. First, factors
170 determining river sediment loads over geological time reflect a complex interplay of
171 tectonics (e.g., rock type, relief) and climate (e.g., precipitation, run-off). Peak suspended
172 load does not always correspond to peak run-off, unlike typical annual cycles, so
173 landscape changes driven by tectonic (and climate) evolution can result in more erodible
174 surfaces, and thus increased sediment loads, without an attendant change in local
175 rainfall⁴³. Second, ecological modelling and data suggest that African biomes are highly
176 sensitive to small reductions in precipitation⁴⁴. Major biome changes in tropical Africa
177 have been simulated without a total annual precipitation change, simply by altering
178 rainfall seasonality⁴⁵. Moreover, inclusion of soil feedbacks in GSP simulations can
179 reproduce pollen-inferred vegetation shifts at around 400mm/yr mean precipitation,
180 relative to ~600 mm/yr in the absence of soil feedbacks⁴⁶.

181

182 We also cannot ignore potential effects of large-scale global changes ca 3.2 Ma. The first
183 major Northern Hemisphere glaciation (based on global benthic $\delta^{18}O$) is in stages M2-
184 MG2 at 3.295–3.340 Ma^{ref.47} (Fig. 2 and 4n), although the onset was spatially variable and
185 as early as 3.6 Ma^{ref.48}. However, the average time-dependent standard deviation of

186 benthic $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ from 25 high-resolution records starts to increase at 3.2 Ma^{ref.48}. Stronger
187 high-latitude cooling and intra- and inter-hemispheric SST gradients are observed from
188 ~ 3.3 Ma^{ref.49,50}, coeval with a tenfold IRD (ice-rafted debris) flux increase off East
189 Antarctica⁵¹ (Fig. 4m). Central Asian aridification has also been dated to 3.3 Ma, based on
190 halite content, grain size, and magnetic proxies from the Qaidam Basin⁵². All of these
191 developments would have impacted atmospheric dynamics and latitudinal temperature
192 gradients that drive seasonal North African climate variability; we therefore retain H_2 as
193 a possibility.

194

195 **Strait of Sicily reconfiguration**

196 Considering H_3 and H_4 (Table 2), Mediterranean tectonics could alter basin and sill
197 depths, which would in turn affect deep-water ventilation. Tectonics within the wider
198 Eastern Mediterranean catchment could also affect terrigenous fluxes to the seafloor, by
199 rerouting transportation pathways and/or facilitating more continental erosion. The
200 Mediterranean Basin has been tectonically active since reaching its modern configuration
201 in the Oligocene-Miocene⁵³. Detailed palaeomagnetic work on Pliocene sections from
202 Sicily suggests a rapid (80,000-100,000 yrs) differential clockwise rotation at 3.21 Ma,
203 near the C2An.2n-C2An.2r boundary⁵⁴ (Fig. 4a). The rotation compressed the Sicilian
204 fold-and-thrust belt and its foreland⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ and accelerated Tyrrhenian Sea opening
205 between 3.5 and 2 Ma^{ref.54}, and is consistent with evidence of middle Pliocene tectonics in
206 the Sicilian Strait⁵⁶. The timing corresponds with the Trubi-Narbonne Formation
207 boundary and may correspond with a rotational phase in northern Italy and a tectonic
208 event north of Crete⁵⁴.

209

210 The close timing between lithological changes at ODP967 (and likely also at Site 964^{ref.29})
211 and inferred tectonic adjustment of the Sicilian Strait is tantalizing. In the modern
212 Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean deep-water flushing over the Sicily sill depends
213 on Bernoulli aspiration (akin to 'pulling' waters out of the eastern basin) and Eastern
214 Mediterranean deep-water formation 'pushing' deep waters out⁸. At the present sill depth
215 (440 m), Bernoulli aspiration is limited to <800 m; deep Eastern Mediterranean
216 ventilation therefore relies on the deep-water formation pump. During sapropel phases,
217 this pump was effectively turned off, leading to anoxic deep waters⁸. Calculations suggest
218 that a 200-400 m deeper Sicily Sill would only marginally affect deep Eastern

219 Mediterranean ventilation (Methods); nevertheless, we retain H_3 and H_4 for further
220 evaluation.

221

222 **Deep-sea ventilation versus carbon export**

223 Reduced deep Eastern Mediterranean ventilation during sapropel/monsoon periods is
224 forced by surface buoyancy gain (i.e. freshening), yet the relationship between sapropel
225 C_{org} content and degree of buoyancy forcing is complex⁸. Sapropel C_{org} is typically of
226 marine origin, but the type, mechanism, and amount of primary/export production is
227 uncertain; however, consensus suggests a well-developed deep chlorophyll maximum for
228 most sapropels⁸. If increased terrigenous fluxes from 3.2 Ma onward (e.g. hypothesis H_2)
229 brought more labile terrestrial C_{org} and nutrients to the Eastern Mediterranean, they may
230 have fuelled higher primary productivity and C_{org} export rates relative to the Pliocene,
231 leading to more intensely developed sapropels. Evidence to support/refute this is
232 equivocal or non-existent. Riverine nutrient inputs remain unquantified even for the
233 most recent sapropel⁵⁷. Pliocene sapropels in astronomically dated sections from Sicily
234 and Cyprus contain lower C_{org} concentrations than typical Pleistocene sapropels^{58,59}, but
235 sapropels in outcrops typically contain less C_{org} and total N than sapropels in offshore
236 cores⁶⁰. There is a general consensus among earlier studies⁶⁰⁻⁶² that Pliocene and
237 Pleistocene sapropels are similar, and that Pliocene sapropels can contain high C_{org}
238 ($\leq 30\%$)^{ref.62}, but the down-core depth intervals studied in these examples correspond to
239 ages younger than 3.1 Ma. Meanwhile, similar early/mid-Pliocene and Pleistocene
240 abundances of *Florisphaera profunda*—indicative of a deep chlorophyll maximum—are
241 observed in sapropels from outcrops in Cyprus⁵⁹ and at ODP967^{ref.63}, implying similarly
242 elevated Pliocene and Pleistocene primary productivity during sapropel deposition.

243

244 Nonetheless, hypothesis H_2 cannot account for Eastern Mediterranean ventilation
245 changes after 3.2 Ma, so improved sapropel preservation after 3.2 Ma must be solely due
246 to increased C_{org} export. In contrast, Sicilian Strait shoaling (H_{3-4}) could, in principle,
247 induce an increased tendency toward Eastern Mediterranean deep-water stagnation,
248 but—as yet—the evidence remains circumstantial and sparse. Major benthic
249 foraminiferal turnovers are documented between 3.6 and 2.6 Ma in the Punta Piccola
250 section⁶⁰ (Southern Italy) and deep ODP sites in the Western and Eastern Mediterranean
251 basins⁶¹, which indicate increasing instability in bottom-water conditions. However, the

252 main change is focussed at ~ 2.7 Ma, some 500,000 years after the events discussed here.
253 Coupled Mg/Ca- $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ and ϵNd trends suggest that Mediterranean Outflow Water (MOW)
254 intensified between 3.5 and 3.3 Ma^{ref.62}, but this pre-dates our observed geochemical
255 shift. Nevertheless, seismic data and drill-core sediments from the Gulf of Cadiz (Fig. 1)
256 indicate a hiatus ca 3.2-3.0 Ma and subsequent contourite deposition, which is attributed
257 to MOW intensification in response to Strait of Gibraltar tectonics⁶³. The timing is based
258 on shipboard biostratigraphy, but may be older (~ 3.4 -3.3 Ma) according to a revised mid-
259 late Pliocene chronology for Site U1387^{ref.64}. Regardless, deep-water exchange through
260 the Sicilian Strait, rather than the Strait of Gibraltar, is the critical factor for deep
261 ventilation of the Eastern basin⁸. Contributions to Pliocene buoyancy forcing from local
262 precipitation/evaporation are unknown, but we assume that they were negligible
263 relative to African run-off forcing. Likewise, elevated SSTs cannot solely account for
264 buoyancy forcing, given that they only partially contribute to water-column stratification
265 during Last Interglacial sapropel formation^{17,18}, and mostly in response to salinity-driven
266 stratification.

267

268 **Mid-Late Pliocene climate and landscape evolution**

269 We have evaluated different hypotheses (climatic vs tectonic) to explain a marked shift in
270 Eastern Mediterranean sediments 3.2 Ma ago. We find that sill tectonics ($H_{3,4}$) could
271 account for reduced ventilation after 3.2 Ma (which best explains subsequently increased
272 ODP967 Ba and S concentrations), and may coincide with inferred tectonic activity in the
273 Strait of Gibraltar. However, hypothesis H_3 cannot satisfactorily account for a doubling
274 (or more) of terrigenous element concentrations at ODP967 after 3.2 Ma. Hypothesis H_4
275 might account for this if the terrigenous influx was locally sourced (i.e., Eastern
276 Mediterranean borderlands), but circumstantial evidence is lacking, and—more
277 importantly—Pleistocene terrigenous sediments at ODP967 predominantly originated
278 from North Africa¹⁹. Conversely, a non-linear response of riverine terrigenous loads to
279 African climate/landscape evolution (hypothesis H_2) better accounts for increased
280 ODP967 terrigenous element concentrations and Ti/Al fluxes after 3.2 Ma. H_2 can also be
281 directly linked to mid-late Pliocene global climate evolution. Indeed, the 3.2 Ma shift could
282 represent a critical transition in North African landscape in response to a global climate
283 state-shift to icehouse conditions⁶⁹. Increased geochemical signal variance is common
284 prior to critical transitions in Eastern Mediterranean sediments⁷⁰, and the biggest

285 systematic Ti/Al variance increase is from 3.4 to 3.2 Ma (Fig. 4d). African pollen evidence
286 attests to a more arid Pleistocene compared to the Pliocene^{32,71}, and a significantly more
287 erodible landscape must exist before a stepwise amplitude increase in fluvial suspended
288 sediment can occur. Furthermore, North African desert-soil albedo and vegetation
289 feedbacks strongly amplify rainfall variability^{46,72,73}. The 3.2 Ma increase in ODP967 Ti/Al
290 and fluvial-sourced terrigenous elements might, therefore, signify the onset of modern-
291 day North African aridity. Nevertheless, we cannot (yet) fully reject H_4 . It is conceivable
292 that both H_2 and H_4 are valid and are coupled to major global climatic and tectonic
293 changes; future model-data comparisons should test this.

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Contributions

KMG designed and led the study and write-up; KMG, UA, JA, TP, YQ and LRS generated $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ and magnetism data; DH, PXH and XZ assisted with magnetism measurements; DL performed XRF core-scanning; DL and TW developed the ODP967 composite depth splice and chronology; KMG and RH calibrated scanning XRF data; KMG and SG performed WD-XRF analyses; LL contributed WD-XRF data; all authors contributed to manuscript development.

Ethics declarations

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Figures



Figure 1

Locations of sites discussed in this study. Eastern Mediterranean sites are from Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) Leg 160ref.29.

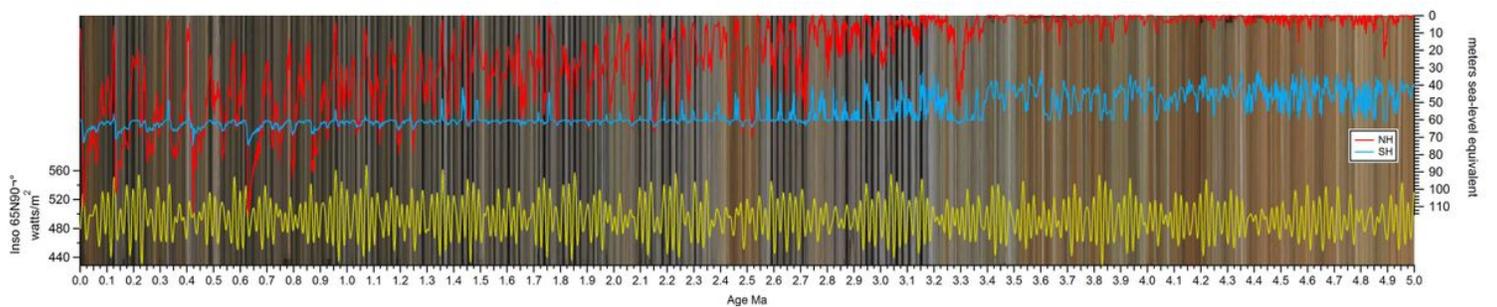


Figure 2

ODP967 composite core image. Northern and Southern Hemisphere ice-volume changes (NH, red; SH, blue), in equivalent sea-level fall, and June 21 insolation at 65N (yellow) illustrate timing relationships between climate forcing and lithology.

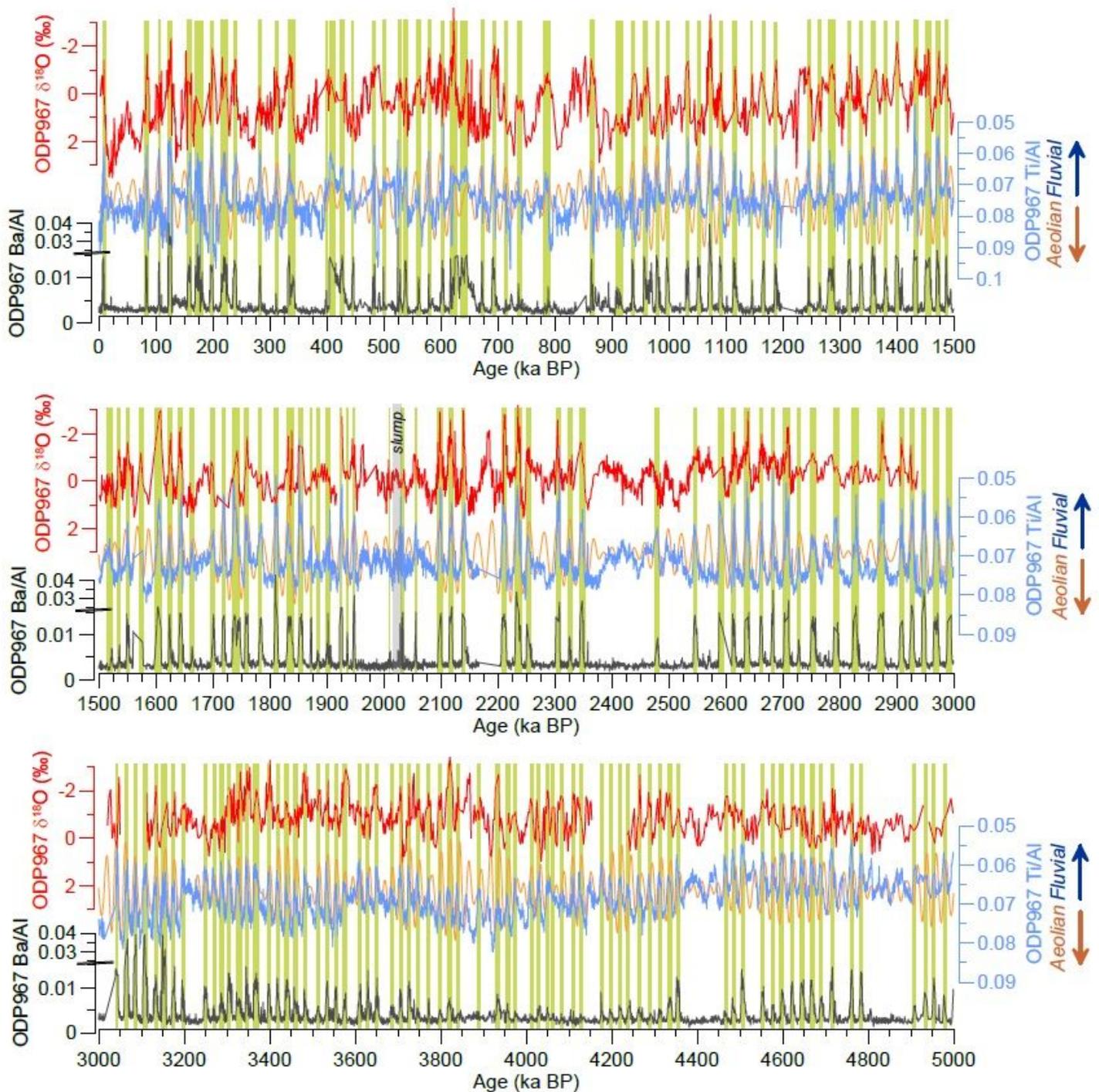


Figure 3

Site 967 records of planktic foraminifera (*G. ruber*) 180 (red), Ti/Al (blue), and Ba/Al (grey) for time intervals 0-1.5 Myr ago (top), 1.5-3 Myr ago (middle) and 3-5 Myr ago (bottom), with time in kiloyears

before Present. Upward peaks correspond to precession minima (orange) and Green Sahara Periods (green shading). (See Supplementary Fig. S2 for detail over a selected interval).

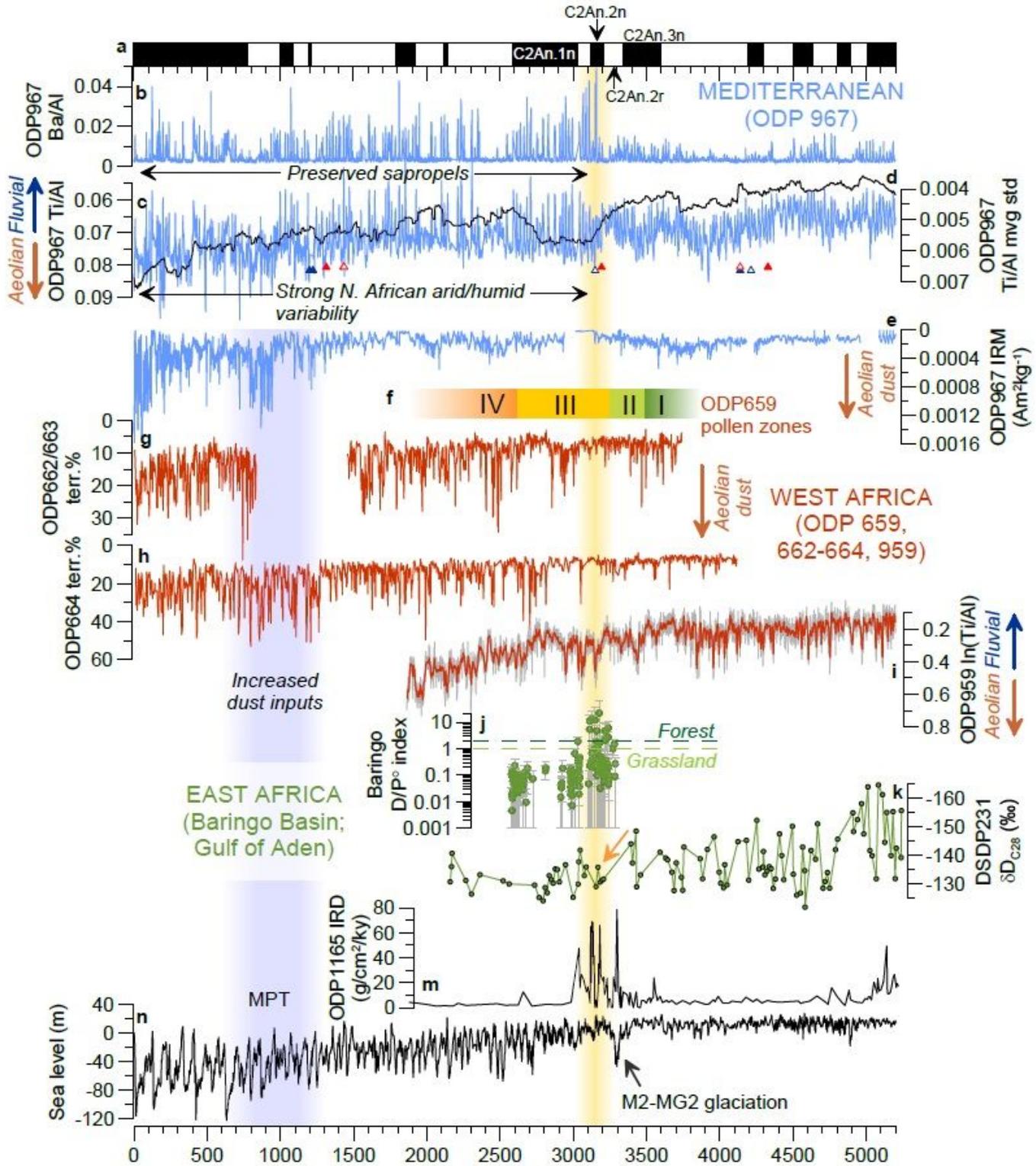


Figure 4

Chronological and environmental context for ODP967 geochemical shift at 3.2 Ma (see Fig. 1 for site locations). a) Tectonic event around Sicily in Chron 2An.2n; b-e) ODP967 Ba/Al, Ti/Al, 400-kyr moving standard deviation of Ti/Al (black), and magnetic dust proxy (IRM900@120mT) (this study). Change-

points in (c) are based on changes in the mean (red) and standard deviation (blue) of the Ti/Al time-series (closed triangles) and Ti/Al residuals (open triangles) after removing low-frequency (140-1200 kyr) variability; f) pollen zones from ODP Site 659ref.32 (green = more humid; yellow/orange = increasing aridity and humid/arid variability); g-h) aeolian dust records from offshore West Africa^{24,25}; i) ODP Site 959 Ti/Al (grey)²⁸ with 11-point running average (red); j) tree index based on pollen from Baringo Basin core BTB13, with 95% confidence intervals³⁷ (downward bars limited to y-axis); k) DSDP Site 231 leaf wax δD with inferred shift to more aridity at 3.3-3.0 Mref.³⁸; m) ODP Site 1165 ice-rafted debris (IRD) fluxes⁵¹; n) global sea-level reconstruction⁷⁴ based on benthic $\delta^{18}O$ (ref. 69). All records are plotted on their original chronology. Vertical shading denotes the Mid-Pleistocene Transition (MPT; grey) and geochemical shift at ODP967 (yellow).

Supplementary Files

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