Glacial cycle ice-sheet evolution controlled by ocean bed properties

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Key Points:

- Ocean bed properties exert a critical control on ice-sheet geometry over full glacial cycle
- Ice thickness and grounding-line position differ by up to 1000 m and 50 km between hard-bed and soft-bed simulations
- Ice-sheet change is characterized by short periods of advance or retreat followed by long periods of ice-sheet stability

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Abstract

Improving constraints on the basal ice/bed properties is essential for accurate prediction of ice-sheet grounding-line positions and stability. Furthermore, the history of grounding-line positions since the Last Glacial Maximum has proven challenging to understand due to uncertainties in bed conditions. Here we use a 3D full-Stokes ice-sheet model to investigate the effect of differing ocean bed properties on ice-sheet advance and retreat over a glacial cycle. We do this for the Ekström Ice Shelf catchment, East Antarctica. We find that predicted ice volumes differ by >50%, resulting in two entirely different catchment geometries triggered exclusively by variable ocean bed properties. Grounding-line positions between simulations differ by >100% (49 km), show significant hysteresis, and migrate non-steadily with long quiescent phases disrupted by leaps of rapid migration. These results highlight that constraints for both bathymetry and substrate geologic properties are urgently needed for predicting ice-sheet evolution and sea-level change.

Plain Language Summary

The Antarctic ice sheet is completely surrounded by oceans. However, what type of rock is at the bottom of these oceans is poorly known. During previous glaciations the ice sheet has advanced and retreated multiple times over areas of contemporary oceans. As the ice comes into contact with the ocean floor, friction between ice and ocean floor determines how fast the ice flows and influences the ice-sheet size and shape. Here we present computer simulations of the Ekström Ice Shelf, East Antarctica, that show the importance of the type of rock at the bottom of contemporary oceans for ice sheet advance and retreat. Our simulations reveal that different materials could result in a 50% volume difference. Even though Ekström Ice Shelf is relatively small, there is evidence that similar conditions are present over large areas surrounding the Antarctic ice sheet. This means that the Antarctic ice sheet might have looked very different during past glaciations than previously thought.

1 Introduction

Shortcomings in the description of ice dynamics have been recognized as a major limitation for projecting the evolution of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets (IPCC AR5, Pachauri et al., 2014). If present sea-level rise rates continue unabated, up to 630 million people will be at annual flood risk by 2100 (Kulp & Strauss, 2019), making improved ice-sheet model projections a priority of high socioeconomic impact. The current state-of-the art for long-term (>1,000 year) ice-sheet simulations requires simplifications in the ice-dynamical equations that result in two limitations. First, it is questionable whether the transition zone between grounded and floating ice (e.g. the grounding zone) is adequately represented in existing long-term simulations (Schoof, 2007). Second, the omission of membrane and bridging stress gradients hamper disentangling the relative contributions of basal sliding and ice deformation to the column averaged ice discharge (MacGregor et al., 2016; Bons et al., 2018). The former is one of the main uncertainties for projecting the sea-level contribution of contemporary ice sheets (Durand et al., 2009; Pattyn & Durand, 2013). The latter is a bottleneck for the inclusion of basal processes such as erosion and deposition of sediments which critically depend on the magnitude of basal sliding (e.g., Humphrey & Raymond, 1994; Egholm et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2011; Yanites & Ehlers, 2016; Alley et al., 2019) and may govern the formation and decay of ice streams (Spagnolo et al., 2016).

Recently, a number of simplified model variants of the full ice-flow equations have been successfully applied to sea-level rise projections using ensemble simulations that account for uncertainties in atmospheric and oceanic boundary conditions over timescales of >1,000 years (e.g., Golledge et al., 2012; Briggs et al., 2014; Pollard et al., 2016). More realistic full-Stokes simulations, on the other hand, have thus far only been applied to a maximum of 1,000 years for real-world geometries due to the high computational demands, both, in terms of mesh resolution and the physics required to solve for a freely evolving grounding line (Gillet-Chaulet et al., 2012; Seddik et al., 2012; Favier et al., 2014; Schannwell et al., 2019).

A particular challenge that arises in model simulations over long time scales ($\geq$40,000 years) is that the ice sheet advances and retreats over ocean beds where bathymetry and its geological properties are often poorly known. While the slopes of the ice-shelf cavity and the bed topography farther upstream have received much attention because of their control on ice-sheet stability (e.g., Schoof, 2007; Tsai et al., 2015), comparatively little research has focused on the corresponding geological properties controlling basal sliding or the lack thereof. Estimating basal friction parameters under contemporary ice sheets (e.g. basal friction between the ice sheet and the underlying substrate) is virtually impossible by direct measurements and can only be inferred indirectly on a continental scale by solving an optimization problem matching todays surface velocities and/or ice thickness (e.g., MacAyeal, 1993; Gillet-Chaulet et al., 2012; Cornford et al., 2015). Furthermore, the inferred basal friction coefficient is often spatially heterogeneous and can vary by up to five orders of magnitude under the present-day Antarctic ice sheet (Cornford et al., 2015). To what extent this variability truly reflects variability in geology, or is falsely introduced by the approximations in the ice-dynamical equations or omission of ice anisotropy is unknown. Even less is known about the properties of ocean beds under contemporary ice shelves. In previous sensitivity studies, basal properties of ocean beds have been identified as a major source of uncertainty in ice-dynamic models (e.g., Pollard & DeConto, 2009; Pollard et al., 2016; Albrecht et al., 2019). However, the lack of a comprehensive Antarctic-wide distribution map of sedimentary deposits and crystalline rock, together with the absence of a full-Stokes model over the time scales required, leaves characterization of basal friction parameters and their consequences for ice-sheet growth and decay poorly constrained.

Here we employ a three-dimensional (3D), isotropic, thermomechanically-coupled full-Stokes model (Elmer/Ice, Gagliardini et al. (2013)) to narrow the time gap between projections from simplified model simulations over long timescales, and ice-dynamically more complete simulations over shorter time scales. We do this with a highly parallelized numerical scheme allowing to maintain a high mesh resolution ($\sim$1 km) and a freely evolving grounding line over glacial/interglacial timescales. Our simulations focus on the effect of ocean bed properties seawards of today's grounding line and to quantify their impact on the evolution of the entire catchment. This is done for the Ekström Ice Shelf catchment, Dronning Maud Land, East Antarctica (Fig. 1), containing multiple ice rises and pinning points (Schannwell et al., 2019; Drews et al., 2013), and hosting Neumayer Station III. Uncertainties in the contemporary ice-sheet geometry are minimal because of previous dense airborne radar surveys in the vicinity of Neumayer Station III (Fretwell et al., 2013). Unlike many other ice shelves, the bathymetry in this area is known to a high accuracy, across much of the sub-ice-shelf, from extensive seismic reflection surveying (Smith et al., 2019). This has been extended to cover the whole cavity by aero-gravimetry measurements (H. Eisermann 2019, personal communication). Furthermore, there is evidence in this area from multiple geophysical observations about contrasting ocean bed properties (Kristoffersen et al., 2014). While much recent research has focused on the fast flowing outlet glaciers of Antarctica, we stress the importance of also studying catchments characterised by slower moving ice (<300 m/yr), as they occupy $\sim$90% of the contemporary Antarctic grounding line and account for 30% of the total ice discharge (see SI, sec. 5; Bindschadler et al., 2011; Rignot et al., 2011).

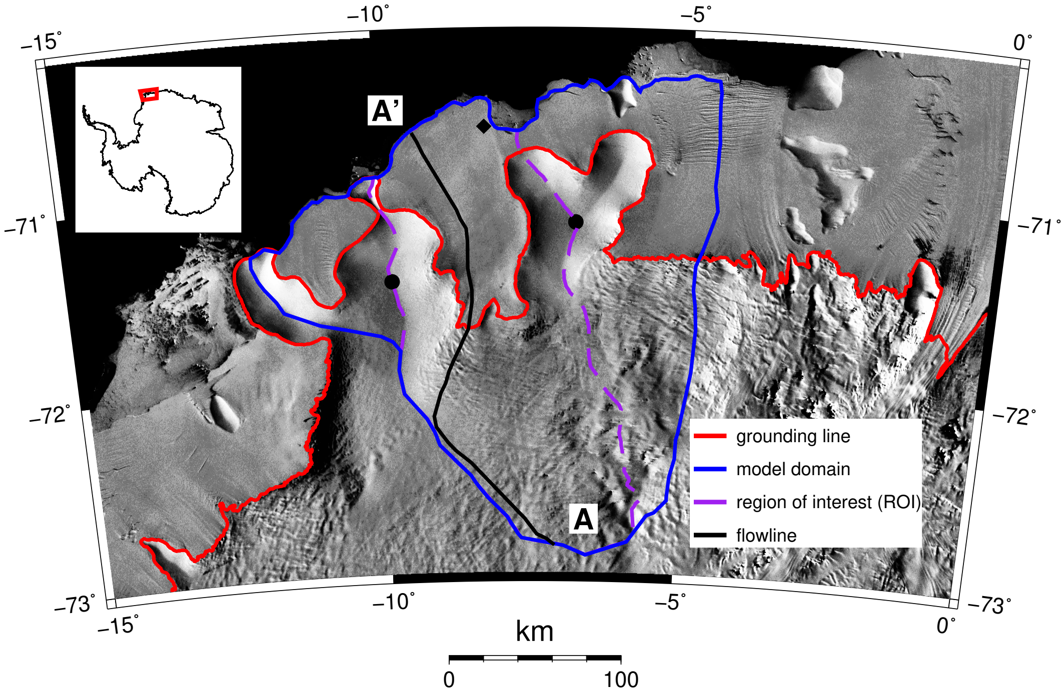

Figure 1. Overview of the Ekström Ice Shelf catchment with present-day grounding line and model domain. Black square shows location of Neumayer Station III. Filled black circles indicate location of ice rises. Flowline (A-A') is shown in Fig. 4.

The results we obtain for the Ekström Ice Shelf catchment are therefore relevant for many other catchments around Antarctica and hence the total budget.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Ice sheet model and external forcing

We use the transient, thermomechanically-coupled full-Stokes model Elmer/Ice (Gagliardini et al., 2013). The finite element model solves the full ice-flow equations in 3D for ice deformation and incorporates a freely evolving grounding line without parameterizations. The equations are solved on a model grid that has a background resolution of 6 km, and is locally refined down to 1 km at today's grounding line and seaward of today's grounding line at the Ekström Ice Shelf. Subglacial topography is taken from Bedmap2 (Fretwell et al., 2013) for the grounded ice sheet, but updated for the bathymetry underneath Ekström Ice Shelf based on recent seismic surveys and aero-gravimetry (H. Eisermann 2019, personal communication). Underneath ice shelves outside the area of interest, the Bedmap2 bathymetry is lowered by ∼300 m to ensure that the ice shelf is floating, as Bedmap2 is unrealistically shallow. Our present day surface elevation is a merged product of CryoSat-2 and, where available, higher-resolution TanDEM-X digital elevation models (Schannwell et al., 2019). Ice temperature is initialized to a steady state for present-day conditions (see SI, sec. 2.4; Zhao et al., 2018; Rückamp et al., 2018). The temperature model is forced at the ice surface by a present-day temperature distribution (Comiso, 2000) plus a temporal surface temperature change that is derived from the nearby EDML ice core (Graf et al., 2002), located some 700 km to the south-east of the region of interest (ROI; Fig. 1) on the Antarctic plateau. At the grounded basal boundary, a spatially variable but time-invariant heat flux is prescribed (Martos et al., 2017), while ice temperature is set to the pressure-melting-point at the bottom of floating ice. The surface mass balance (SMB) parameterization follows Ritz et al. (2001). We apply a present-day SMB field (Lenaerts et al., 2014). Temporal change in the SMB is proportional to the exponential of surface temperature change (see SI, sec. 2.3.2). The basal mass balance (BMB) applied at the ice-shelf underside is proportional to the square of the temperature difference between the ice-shelf underside and the ocean temperature at the continental shelf edge (Beckmann & Goosse, 2003). Ocean temperature variations are a damped (∼40%) and delayed (∼3,000 years) version of the surface temperature variation (Bintanja et al., 2005). Sea level is varied according to Lambeck et al. (2014) which includes isostatic and tectonic contributions. Underneath the grounded ice sheet, we apply a linear Weertman-type sliding law.

2.2 Experimental design

We investigate ice-sheet growth and decay over 40,000 years. During the first 20,000 years the atmospheric and oceanic forcing simulates the transition from an interglacial to a glacial (henceforth called the advance phase). We then symmetrically reverse the climate forcing to simulate deglaciation (henceforth called the retreat phase). The symmetrical reversal of the model forcing enables investigation of hysteresis effects. The interglacial starting conditions are chosen with present day properties and characteristics, so that the best possible basal friction coefficient beneath the grounded ice sheet can be found using today's ice-sheet geometry and surface velocities (Schannwell et al., 2019). The glacial conditions are chosen to resemble the Last Glacial Maximum for which we have good constraints for atmospheric forcing from the nearby EDML ice core. We consider two end-member basal-property scenarios by prescribing either soft ocean bed conditions (mimicking sediment deposits) or hard ocean bed conditions (mimicking crystalline rock) for all present-day ocean cavities in the modelling domain. The tested end-member scenarios of basal traction coefficients encompasses what other ice-sheet models have inferred (e.g., Cornford et al., 2015) for the grounded portion underneath the present-day Antarctic ice sheet (basal traction coefficient ranging from 10^{-1} MPa m^{-1} yr for sediments to 10^{-5} MPa m^{-1} yr for crystalline bedrock). This means that simulated differences in ice volume and grounding-line position should be interpreted as the maximum envelope of uncertainties resulting from different ocean bed properties. We perform the simulations with a) the standard Elmer/Ice setup using the Multi-frontal Massively Parallel Sparse (MUMPS) direct solver for ice velocities; and b) using a stable iterative solver for ice velocities (see SI, sec. 2.6; Malinen et al., 2013), resulting in a total of four simulations.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Influence of bed hardness on ice-sheet growth and decay

The two scenarios of hard vs. soft bed result in two fully different ice sheet geometries at the glacial maximum with different volumes (Fig. 2), fluxes, and grounding line positions through time (Figs. 3 and 4). For example, the simulated hard bed ice sheet is in many areas more than twice as thick as the soft bed ice sheet, with maximum ice thickness differences between hard and soft bed reaching 1,036 m or 120% (Fig. 3). In more detail, the differences between these simulations are as follows:

First, the hard bed ice sheet results in a thick, slow, and large volume ice sheet after 20,000 years at glacial conditions. During the advance phase, volume increases occur step-wise with three distinct periods of volume increases (Fig. 2). These periods of volume increase in the ROI are short (<2000 years) and are interrupted

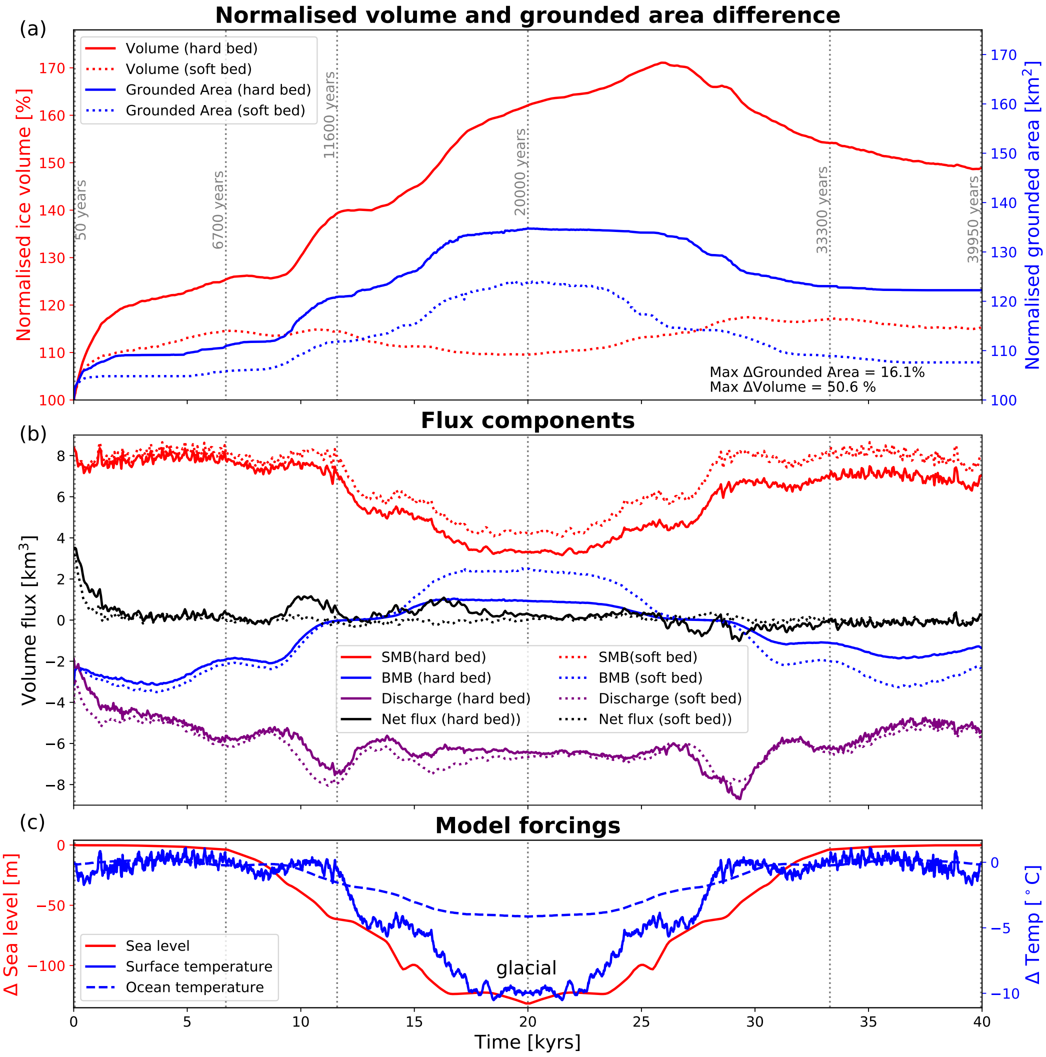

Figure 2. Ice-sheet evolution and model forcing for soft and hard-bed simulations. (a) shows volume and grounded area evolution normalsied to present-day. (b) shows corresponding mass balance fluxes, and (c) shows most important model forcings. Vertical grey stippled lines show time slices shown in Figs. 3 and 4.

by longer periods of little ice volume change. At the glacial maximum, the volume increase in comparison to the interglacial is ∼60%. During the first ∼8,000 years in the retreat phase, the hard bed simulation continues to gain volume albeit at a slow rate. The continued raising of the sea level finally forces the hard bed ice sheet to start losing volume. However, the rate of volume loss is small, such that after a full glacial cycle, the total ice volume is still ∼47% more of what is was at the beginning of the simulation. This relative stability of the hard-bed ice sheet during the retreat phase is a consequence of the higher levels of basal friction provided by the hard bed.

Second, unlike the hard-bed simulations, the soft-bed simulation leads to a thin, fast, and small volume ice sheet at glacial conditions. During the advance phase, this simulation does not show a step-wise volume gain pattern. In fact, apart from an initial volume gain in the first 1,000 years of the advance phase (∼10%), there is very little volume change. This leads to a volume increase of merely ∼8% at the glacial maximum. The trend of little volume variations continues during the retreat phase, where in the first 10,000 years a volume increase of ∼8% occurs, before the volume remains approximately constant for the remainder of the retreat phase.

The entirely different ice-sheet geometries for soft and hard-bed simulations have consequences for the two ice rises present in the catchment (Fig.1). While both ice rises and their divide positions are very little affected by the soft bed simulations, they are partly overrun in the hard bed simulation such that their local ice flow centre vanishes (SI video 1).

The predicted differences between the hard-bed and soft-bed simulations underline the high significance of a proper choice of basal properties used for ocean beds. The higher basal friction in the hard-bed case leads to elevated back stress and corresponding dynamical thickening of the inland ice sheet far upstream of the grounding line. Although the SMB and BMB forcings equally depend on the ice-sheet geometry through the applied parameterizations, these effects are small compared to the ice-dynamically induced thickening (Fig. 3). This clearly shows that in the absence of other forcing mechanisms, ocean bed properties exert a first-order control on ice-sheet growth and decay. Geomorphological evidence from underneath Ekström Ice Shelf indicates that the grounding line was likely near the shelf front at the LGM (Smith et al., 2019). This observation matches well with our hard-bed simulations.

Owing to the paucity of observational constraints, numerical modelling studies have often applied a binary distribution of sediment-based ocean beds and crystalline-based ocean beds (e.g., Pollard & DeConto, 2009; Whitehouse et al., 2012). Hereby, most of the ocean bed areas surrounding Antarctica are assumed to be sediment-based. However, geophysical observations in our study area and elsewhere in Antarctica (e.g., Gohl et al., 2013; Kristoffersen et al., 2014) indicate a much more heterogeneous substrate distribution of sediment deposits and crystalline bedrock on the continental shelf. Some of these crystalline bedrock features like the Explora Wedge in Dronning Maud Land are more than 1000 km long (Gohl et al., 2013; Kristoffersen et al., 2014). Based on our simulations, such crystalline outcrops under ice shelves will have large impacts on ice thickness and ice volume of the Antarctic ice sheet over the last glacial cycle. The differences in ice volume and ice thickness between hard and soft bed are such that they may help to explain the "missing ice" (Clark & Tarasov, 2014) problem at the LGM, if extrapolated to the Antarctic ice sheet. This problem relates to the fact that current sea-level reconstructions suggest a sea-level drop of ∼130 m at the LGM compared to present-day conditions (Simms et al., 2019). However, reconstructions of all major ice sheets at the LGM only account for ∼114 m of sea-level drop, so that ∼16 m of sea-level equivalent is unaccounted for.

Finally (third), the ramifications of heterogeneous ocean bed properties go beyond ice volume considerations. Different levels of basal traction strongly affect the magnitude of basal sliding. This in turn determines how much material is eroded underneath the ice sheet and transported across the grounding line. As erosion rates are commonly approximated as basal sliding to some power (e.g., Herman et al., 2015; Koppes et al., 2015), any differences in basal sliding velocities are exacerbated when erosion volumes are computed (see SI, sec. 6). This uncertainty in eroded material produced has implications for how much sediment is available at the ice-bedrock interface and therefore if it is a hard- vs. soft-bed interface and its temporal variablity.

3.2 Grounding-line and ice-sheet stability

Stable grounding-line positions for both simulations are associated with periods of ice-sheet stability (Fig. 2). In our simulations, there are three distinct periods of grounding-line stability in the advance phase and one period of grounding-line stability in the retreat phase. All of these four periods are longer than 3,000 years. Periods of grounding-line advance in comparison are characterized by short leaps taking no longer than 1,000-2,000 years (Fig. 2). These stable ice-sheet configurations are not controlled by a single specific forcing alone, but are due to a combination of sea-level forcing, basal traction of the ocean bed, and ocean bathymetry. Other forcing mechanisms such as the SMB and BMB are of secondary importance.

During the advance phase, differences in grounding-line positions between the hard-bed and soft-bed simulations gradually increase from 7 km after ∼1,500 years to over 37 km after 11,600 years, and finally to its maximum difference of 49 km at the glacial maximum (Fig. 4). This means that grounding-line advance for the hard bed is more than twice as far (∼110% larger) than its soft bed counterpart in the advance phase.

In the retreat phase, the soft-bed simulation shows higher grounding-line fidelity compared to the hard-bed simulation. The soft bed starts to exhibit grounding-line retreat after ∼4,000 years into the retreat phase, whereas the hard bed does not show grounding-line retreat for ∼8,000 years into the retreat phase. This can be attributed to the fact that ice discharge for the soft-bed simulation is dominated by basal sliding and higher ice velocities. In comparison, in the hard bed simulation ice discharge is dominated by internal deformation and almost no basal sliding, resulting in a mucher thicker ice sheet. This means that more ice needs to be removed before the grounded ice can detach from its subglacial material and initiate grounding-line motion, thereby resulting in a much slower response time to changes in the model forcing.

While our employed modelling approach make it unlikely that the timing of our modelled stable grounding-line positions are correct, they can still serve as spatial markers of areas where depositional landforms such as Grounding-Zone Wedges (GZWs) may be found. Their height and width can be exploited to estimate the erosive power of the upstream catchment at the time of deposition (Batchelor & Dowdeswell, 2015). Assuming similar supply of subglacial material to the grounding line, the hard-bed case should result in thicker grounding zone wedges, because it exhibits longer periods of grounding-line stability. However, if erosion is approximated by basal sliding to some power, sediment supply should be much higher for the soft-bed simulation (SI Fig. 8), potentially offsetting the effect of higher temporal grounding-line fluctuation. Our calculations indicate that for current erosion laws, this effect could outweigh greater grounding-line stability, but other processes such as sediment transport ought to be considered before a definitive assessment can be made.

3.3 Hysteresis of ice-sheet simulations

Next we compare the ice-sheet history and results from the advance phase and the retreat phase simulations. We focus on the effect of basal properties and their impact on ice-sheet hysteresis. After a full glacial cycle in which atmospheric and oceanic forcing are essentially symmetrically reversed for the advance and retreat phase, both of our simulations show hysteresis because the ice sheet does not return to its initial geometry. However, the hysteresis effect is smaller for the soft-bed case with the grounding-line being 19 km farther downstream compared to its initial position (Fig. 4), resting on the last subglacial topographic high before the retrograde sloping topography would cause it to retreat to its initial position. The hysteresis

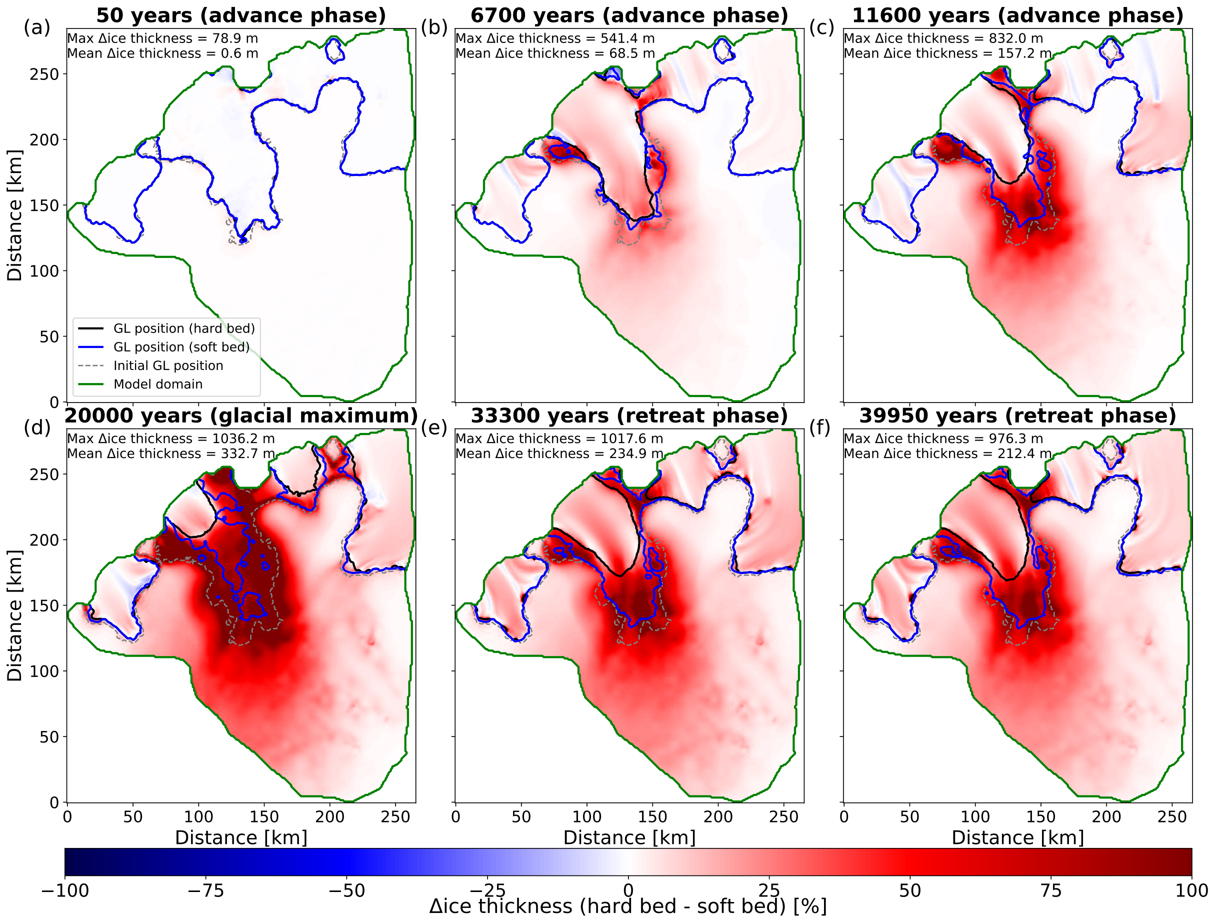

Figure 3. Differences in plan-view of ice thickness and grounding-line positions between the hard and soft-bed simulations at selected time slices. (a-d) show differences in the advance phase and (e,f) show differences in the retreat phase.

effect is much more pronounced in the hard-bed simulation in which the grounding line is 57 km downstream of its initial position (Fig. 4). This means that during the retreat phase, the grounding-line retreats only ∼39% in comparison to the simulated grounding-line advance during the retreat phase of the hard-bed simulation. Both simulations show very little retreat in the last 9,000 years of the retreat phase with grounding-line retreat magnitudes <7 km in this time span. This coincides with the period of little sea-level variations, leading us to conclude that at least for the retreat phase, sea-level forcing is the most important model forcing.

Our results underline the dependence of the final ice-sheet geometry on the model's initial state over timescales of a glacial cycle or longer. The modelled hysteresis behavior shows the non-linear response of ice-sheet evolution to very similar model forcing, a particularly challenging problem for model simulations over at least one advance and retreat cycle (Pollard & DeConto, 2009; Gasson et al., 2016). This means that the employed modelling framework will likely not result in the correct ice-sheet geometry at the LGM due to non-linear feedback mechanisms such as the marine-ice-sheet instability (Schoof, 2007; Durand et al., 2009), the height-mass balance feedback (Oerlemans, 2002), and remaining uncertainties regarding the subglacial topography.

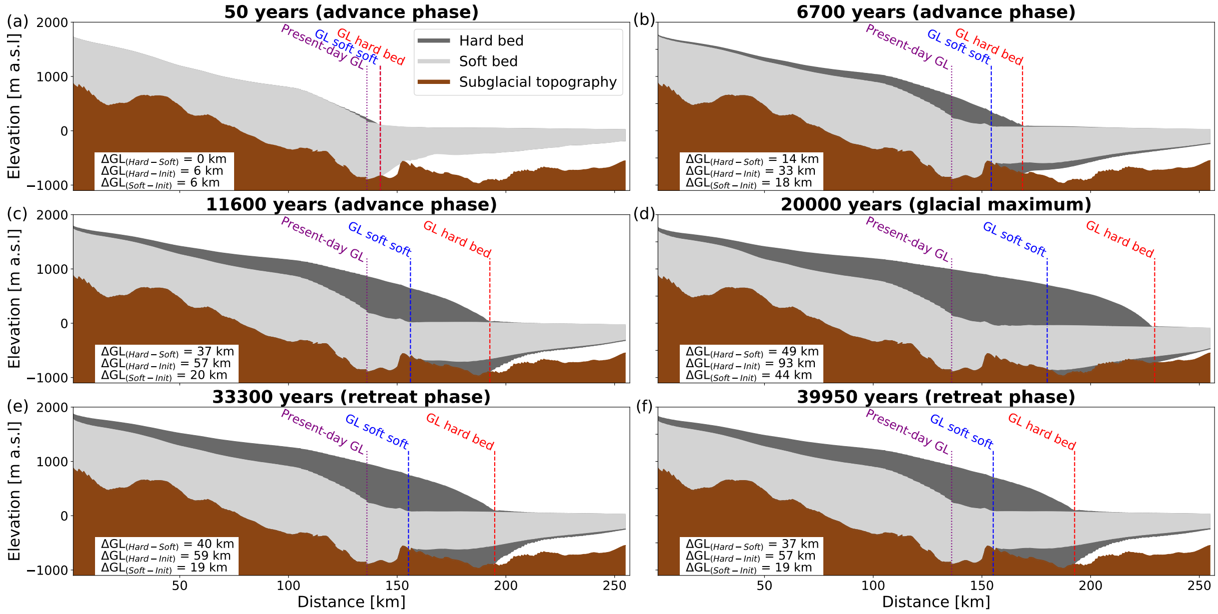

Figure 4. Difference in ice-sheet geometry and grounding-line position along a flowline (A-A' in Fig. 1) for the soft and hard-bed simulations. (a-d) show differences in the advance phase and (e,f) show differences in the retreat phase.

3.4 Model limitations

The modelling approach presented here is tailored towards capturing ice and grounding-line dynamics to high accuracy at the cost of comparatively naive parameterizations for the SMB and BMB which can be improved in the future. Also, we have not considered glacial isostatic adjustment (GIA). Until recently, GIA was considered to be only important on timescales exceeding 1,000 years. However, recent progress has revealed that due to lower than previously assumed mantle viscosities, response times of GIA to ice unloading can be as short as five years for certain sections in Antarctica (Barletta et al., 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2019). While present-day GIA rates for East Antarctica are relatively low ($\sim$1mm/yr (Martín-Español et al., 2016)) in comparison to regions of high mass loss in Antarctica, the effect over 20,000 years could amount to $\sim$20 m of elevation drop for the subglacial topography. This number is small in comparison to for example sea-level variations ($\sim$130 m), but may nevertheless result in a grounding-line position that is not as far advanced at the glacial maximum as presented in our simulations.

4 Conclusions

We investigated the effect of basal ocean bed properties on ice-sheet geometry over a full glacial cycle. We find that sediment-covered 'slippery' ocean beds result in entirely different ice-sheet geometries, ice-sheet advance and retreat patterns, and grounding-line positions in comparison to crystalline 'sticky' ocean beds. Based on our simulations in conjunction with geophysical observations (Smith et al., 2019), we think that substrate distribution (sediments vs. crystalline bedrock) on the continental shelf might be more heterogeneous than previously thought. Recent geomorphological evidence indicates that the grounding line was close to the continental shelf front at the LGM, leading us to conclude that the hard ocean bed simulation matches better with observations than the soft ocean bed simulation.

The differences between hard-bed and soft-bed simulations (>50% ice volume, >1000 m ice thickness, and >100% grounding line motion) are such that they may help to reduce the discrepancy between reconstructed sea-level drop and sea-level equivalent stored in all ice sheets at the LGM ("missing ice" problem (Clark & Tarasov, 2014)). For example, if we extrapolate our volume difference between hard and soft bed (∼50%) to the entire ice sheet at the LGM, we could reduce the discrepancy by ∼33% to ∼10 m sea-level equivalent. However, additional studies like ours are needed for other locations to establish if our results are more regionally valid, or if local conditions within each catchment lead to different results.

Owing to our new modelling setup, we reduced computation times in comparison to previous simulations by ∼80% and extended the temporal range of full-Stokes simulations by a factor of 40 compared to previous studies. Considering the uncertainties surrounding internal ice dynamics, this provides an important step forward to reduce uncertainties and brings us closer to a process-based understanding of a number of subglacial processes (e.g. glacial erosion).

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