Flexural response of the Venetian foreland to the Southalpine tectonics along the TRANSALP profile

C. Barbieri,1 G. Bertotti,2 A. Di Giulio,1 R. Fantoni3 and R. Zoetemeijer2
1Department of Earth Sciences, University of Pavia, Italy; 2Department of Tectonics, Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam, The Netherlands; 3ENI, S. Donato Milanese, Italy

ABSTRACT

The Venetian Basin was affected by flexure related to the Southalpine shortening phase during the Middle Miocene – Early Pliocene. This downbending is quantified here using a two-dimensional flexural model. A recently improved data set on basin geometry based on the bottom of the Serravallian–Tortonian clastic wedge, on palaeobathymetry and gravity anomalies is used to constrain the components of flexure and to test the importance of the initial bathymetry in evaluating the contribution of surface loads to deflection. A good fit is obtained assuming a northward broken plate configuration of the downbent Adriatic plate with an effective elastic thickness of 20 km. Results highlight that, in the studied region, flexure related to the Eastern Southern Alps is totally due to surface loads (topographic load partly replacing initial bathymetry) and that no hidden loads are required. Furthermore, the palaeobathymetry contributes up to 50% to the total flexure in the studied region.

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Introduction

The present work aims to quantify the driving mechanisms for subsidence in the Venetian foredeep recorded during the main tectonic phases of the Eastern Southern Alps (middle Miocene to early Pliocene) along a NS-trending section. To this end, geophysical and geological data recently collected by the TRANSALP project have been used together with the interpretation and depth conversion of a well-calibrated industrial seismic line (Fig. 1). Further information is provided by revised micropaleontological associations in three wells (Barbieri et al., 2002) showing that palaeobathymetric changes occurred during middle–late Miocene times as an effect of flexure.

From a lithospheric point of view, this new seismic profile (Fig. 1: TRANSALP Working Group, 2001, 2002) extending from Munich (European foreland, Germany) to Treviso (Adriatic foreland, Italy) has added further detail to the crustal geometries already recognized (Fantoni et al., 1992; Scarascia and Cassinis, 1997, and references therein). According to the lithospheric models proposed by Castellarin et al. (2002) and Lammerer and TRANSALP Working Group, 2002) the European crust deepens to the south down to about 55–60 km depth beneath the Alps where it is overlain by Adriatic crust.

Gravity anomalies on the southern side of the analysed section show a short-wavelength positive variation, which is referred to as ‘Belluno nose’. Recent studies, related to the TRANSALP project (2002), interpreted this anomaly as due to the occurrence of high-density bodies located between the upper and the lower Adriatic crust or even deeper. Further positive anomalies exist south of this zone and are possibly due to a three-dimensional (3D) influence of either Eocene – late Oligocene volcanics occurring westward (e.g. De Vecchi and Sedia, 1995) or a relatively shallow Moho, related to an Apenninic forebulge in the Istrian area (Kruse and Royden, 1994).

In general, modelling studies have revealed that the flexural response to the load of mountain belts strongly controls the evolution of the adjacent foreland systems (Miall, 1995, and references therein; DeCelles and Giles, 1996). Initial water depth, sedimentary infill and overthrusting of a deep-water continental margin are further surface loads able to affect the flexure of the lower plate (Stockmal et al., 1986). However, models show that these components are not always sufficient to account for the total subsidence occurring in the foredeep basin. For this reason, subsurface loads, geologically related to the effect of slab pull, high-density bodies or asthenosphere mantle flows, have been assumed to solve the difference between observed and calculated flexure (Royden and Karner, 1984; Royden, 1988; Doglioni, 1993; Catuneanu et al., 1997; Buiter et al., 1998).

Several models have been proposed for the flexural response of the western edge of the Adria plate to the Northern Apennines belt load (Royden, 1988; Kruse and Royden, 1994; Buiter et al., 1998; Carminati et al., 1999; Kroon, 2002). Besides lateral variations in flexural parameters and determination of lithospheric characteristics such as effective elastic thickness (\(T_e\)), all interpretations have shown that subsidence in the Apenninic foredeep basins is strongly affected by hidden loads that change along strike.

By contrast, only one model has been proposed (Royden, 1993) for the response of the northernmost sector of the Adria plate, corresponding to the Venetian foredeep (NE Italy), to the Eastern Southern Alps load. At that time, relatively few data were available on the subsurface of the Po–Venetian Basin, on palaeowater depths before and during crustal flexure and on the deep structure of the Southern Alps. Therefore, the
resulting model was quite poorly constrained and we now conclude that the topographic load due to the Southern Alps is the main driving mechanism for subsidence, and no subsurface loads have to be applied to explain the observed northward bending of the Adria plate.

**Geological setting**

During Tertiary time, three partly overlapping foreland basins, different
in both age and polarity, developed in the Venetian plain, as a consequence of the main orogenic phases of the Dinaric belt to the east, the Eastern Southern Alps to the north and the Apennines to the south-west (Fig. 2; e.g. Doglioni and Carminati, 2002). The Dinaric foredeep formed in the east during the Palaeocene – middle Eocene (Massari, 1990; Tunis and Venturini, 1992) as a result of flexure of a Mesozoic platform beneath the Dinaric thrusts, whereas the westernmost sector, crossed by the studied section, was characterized by the progressive infilling of a basin inherited from Cretaceous bordering the Mesozoic platform (Fantoni et al., 2002a; Fig. 3).

The Southern Alps shortening had its maximum development during the middle – late Miocene (Castellarin and Cantelli, 2000) when a Southalpine foredeep formed, characterized by a northward-thickening wedge (Fig. 3). The accommodation space, recorded close to the mountain front during Serravallian time (Mellere et al., 2000; Fig. 3), is filled mainly by the first massive appearance of extrabasinal carbonate grains produced by the erosion of the Southern Alps (Stefani, 1987). The Serravallian to Messinian sedimentary infill is characterized by a shallowing- and thickening-upward trend ending with continental conglomerates. Studies performed on these units (Massari et al., 1993) revealed the occurrence of a still active tectonic setting responsible for frequent angular unconformities and a vertical change in composition that reflects the progressive unroofing of the chain.

The Southalpine foredeep did not grow significantly during Pliocene time, although a period of Southalpine deformation is recorded along the front of the Southern Alps (Bertelli et al., 2002). By contrast, a Plio-Quaternary SW-merging foredeep developed, according to Fantoni et al. (2002a,b), in the south-westernmost part of the Venetian Basin due to the Apenninic main orogenic phases, although it has been recognized to extend further to the

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north (e.g. Merlini et al., 2002; Carmi-

Method and model constraints

A 2D forward flexural model is

The input data required to calculate
flexure concern the present mountain
load, the initial water depth and the
densities of the bodies involved in the
system. Other parameters such as $T_e$,
subsurface loads and plate end loca-
tion are eventually entered and varied
to improve the fit.

Fig. 4 Results of the modelling for a continuous plate condition. Two tests with a homogeneous $T_e$ value corresponding to 5 and 20 km, respectively, have been carried out. The former corresponds to the value proposed by Braitenberg et al. (2002) for the $T_e$ in the central part of the Alps, on the basis of gravimetric analyses. The latter is the value generally found for the best fit on the Adriatic plate (Royden, 1993; Buitet al., 1998; Kroon, 2002). In the third case, both values are considered, the former used in the northernmost part, and the latter to the south, the change occurring beneath the Dolomites. TWG, Tauern Window; PF, Periadriatic Fault; VTB, Valsugana Thrust belt; BL, Belluno Line; ER, Eraclea 1. The trace of the model (inset map) consists of the TRANSALP, of the interpreted and depth-converted seismic lines and of a further prolongation (about 100 km) to the south, in order to avoid errors due to boundary effects in the study area.
Bathymetric analyses, based on a study of the foraminifera content, have been carried out on cuttings recovered from three wells located along section (Volpago1, San Donà di Piave and Eraclea1, Figs 1 and 3), according to the method proposed by Mancin and Pirini (2002). Besides wedge geometries, bathymetric results provide good evidence of the beginning of the flexure due to the Southern Alps load because the Langhian overall neritic environment was abruptly replaced, during Serravallian–Tortonian time, by bathyal conditions in the northernmost area close to the belt front, whereas neritic conditions persisted further south (Table 1).

The calculated flexure is compared to the observed depth of the foredeep base, obtained by interpretation and depth conversion (Table 2) of a detailed 210-km-long seismic section provided by ENI (Fig. 3). This surface, Serravallian–Tortonian in age, has been identified to deepen northward with an angle of about 2° (Fig. 3), consistent with the value obtained by Mariotti and Doglioni (2000).

Unlike the late Miocene succession, the Pliocene–Quaternary sediments do not constitute a Southern Alps related wedge-shaped infill. In spite of this, the model is performed for the present, the contribution of the Plio-Quaternary infill is considered and the estimation of the mountain load is based on the present topography of the Alpine chain. This choice allows us to avoid speculations regarding belt topography at the end of the Pliocene, which is difficult to constrain and is not part of the aims of the present study.

This numerical method also allows us to calculate the gravity anomaly curve induced by the geometry of the crust–lithospheric mantle boundary. In the present work, the Moho depth has been traced taking into account the interpretation of Deep Seismic Soundings (DSS) data given by Scarascia and Cassinis (1997).

The calculated Bouguer gravity anomalies represent an independent control to test the validity of the flexural model; with this aim in mind, they are compared with those obtained by the gravity anomaly map of Scarascia and Cassinis (1997).

The first step in the simulations is focused on the choice between continuous or broken plate conditions to model the complex transition between the European and the Adriatic plate beneath the Dolomites. In lithosphere analyses, the broken plate assumption is related to the isostatic decoupling concept, which
does not imply a real break between plates, because a strong decrease in $T_e$, from the foredeep to the innermost part of an orogen, can give similar results. Therefore, a broken plate condition should suggest a mechanical decoupling between the European and the Adriatic plate, although their physical continuation should not be excluded (Zoetemeijer et al., 1999). In fact, horizontal (de)coupling is still possible, but horizontal forces are not modelled in the present work. Because good bathymetric data are available for the beginning of the flexure, further information on the influence of this parameter is tested to quantify its contribution as surface load. This constitutes an important point of the present work because this parameter has not been well constrained in most previous models (Kruse and Royden, 1994; Kroon, 2002). A further test on the sensitivity of $T_e$ will be performed.

**Best fit conditions and model sensitivity**

Following the assumption of a continuous plate condition (Fig. 4) two tests have been carried out with homogeneous $T_e$ values of 20 and 5 km, respectively, while a heterogeneous $T_e$, corresponding to 5 km beneath the alpine belt and 20 km in the adjacent foredeep, has been used for a third test. Flexural curves obtained for 5 and 5–20 km $T_e$ values provide the best results even if they remain shallower and deeper than the observed surface, respectively, and, in addition, both models are not supported by a gravimetric fit. Therefore, the continuous plate configuration has been discarded and a broken plate condition has been tested (Fig. 5).

Assuming mechanical decoupling between the European and the Adria plate, a good fit can be observed for a fixed $T_e$ value of 20 km and a plate boundary at 164 km (Fig. 5). This model is consistent with the TRANS-ALP working group (2002) results and the data of Scarascia and Cassinis (1997) and Lueschen et al. (2002), who locate the Adria plate end beneath the Dolomites, just north of the Valsugana thrust, which is the most important tectonic line of the Southern Alps (Fig. 6).

The calculated gravity curve fits the overall trend of Bouguer anomaly data, but short-wavelength local anomalies, such as the 'Belluno nose', are not reproduced.

Although a good fit occurs close to the mountain front, a forebulge located close to sea-level is predicted, to the south, from the model but this is not observed in the present Adriatic Sea. To the best of our knowledge, this structure could have existed during the Miocene, but the Pliocene westward flexure of the Adria plate, possibly due to the Apenninic load (e.g. Carminati et al., 2003), should have allowed subsidence to flatten this gentle relief. As the influence of the Southern Alps load is here analysed in 2D, the 3D effect probably related to the Apenninic load cannot be analysed as well as the misfit occurring in the southernmost part of the gravimetric anomaly curve.

Tests on the sensitivity of the model to initial water depth have shown that the initial bathymetry is, together with the mountain load, the most important parameter determining subsidence in the adjacent foredeep (Fig. 7). Tests performed on the $T_e$ value suggest that the acceptable range for this parameter is quite narrow (Fig. 8), as expected because of the strong constraints used in the present work.

**Conclusions**

The very good fit of the 2D crustal flexural model, together with the results of detailed interpretation and depth conversion of a 210-km-long seismic line and the observed gravimetric field, give new insight into the mechanical behaviour of the Southern Alps – Adriatic plate geodynamic system, on its tectonic evolution and, more generally, on the influence of some variables on the fit of models to reality.

The first point to be highlighted is that the flexural response of the
Adriatic crust to the Southern Alps load definitely reflects broken plate behaviour, as no satisfactory fit resulted with a continuous plate model. This means that, according to its flexural response, the Adriatic crust must be considered mechanically decoupled from the Southern Alps crust. Our results apparently contrast with the conclusions recently reported by Barbieri et al. (2002) according to gravimetric data, even if the extremely approximate a broken plate configuration from a mechanical point of view.

The second point to be stressed is that the model requires a termination of the Adriatic plate located below the Dolomites. This conclusion fits well with recent results of deep seismics from the TRANSALP Project, which pointed to a clear Moho dislocation in the same region.

The last noteworthy point is that no subsurface loads can be assumed to explain the flexural response of the Adriatic crust to the Southern Alps topographic load, as a very good fit is obtained if the palaeowater depth of the reference stratigraphic unit is taken into account in addition to the topographic load. This is particularly relevant as the model used here proved to be extremely sensitive to the palaeobathymetric constraint, which conversely is quite poorly considered in many crustal models of collisional belt–foreland basins.

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