Skewness of Temperature Data Implies an Abrupt Change in the Climate System between 1982 and 1993

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November 24, 2022

Abstract

Instrumental records of mean annual temperature extend back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at multiple sites in Europe. For such long time series, we expect histograms of mean annual temperature data to become skewed towards higher temperatures with time because of global warming. This occurs, but at 15 of 17 sites, we find that skewness changed abruptly and started increasing rapidly between 1982 and 1993. We argue that this finding may imply an abrupt change in the climate system affecting Europe at that time. One possible cause is a climate tipping point having been passed. Of known tipping elements, we find Arctic sea loss, potentially linked to reduced sulfate aerosol emissions, and coupled to temperature by an albedo or some other feedback mechanism, a likely candidate. This is based on good correlations of sea ice extent and sulfate aerosol emissions with skewness of mean annual temperature data.

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Key Points:

- Skewness is used to search for abrupt changes in temperature time series from Europe
- An abrupt change is identified at 15 of 17 sites in between 1982 and 1993
- Arctic sea ice loss potentially coupled with sulfate aerosol emission reductions is a possible cause
- Slowdown of Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation is less likely as a cause

Abstract

Instrumental records of mean annual temperature extend back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at multiple sites in Europe. For such long time series, we expect histograms of mean annual temperature data to become skewed towards higher temperatures with time because of global warming. This occurs, but at 15 of 17 sites, we find that skewness changed abruptly and started increasing rapidly between 1982 and 1993. We argue that this finding may imply an abrupt change in the climate system affecting Europe at that time. One possible cause is a climate tipping point having been passed. Of known tipping elements, we find Arctic sea loss, potentially linked to reduced sulfate aerosol emissions, and coupled to temperature by an albedo or some other feedback mechanism, a likely candidate. This is based on good correlations of sea ice extent and sulfate aerosol emissions with skewness of mean annual temperature data.

Plain Language Summary

In this study we find evidence of a sudden change in the climate that affected Europe between 1982 and 1993. This finding is based on a statistical analysis of temperature data collected since the seventeenth or eighteenth century at 17 sites in Europe. Our analysis shows that the chance of a given year being warmer than average started to rise quickly at some point between 1982 and 1993 at most sites. We compared the results of our analysis with possible causes of a change to the climate. The causes we considered were changes of ocean circulation, loss of sea ice from the Arctic Ocean and a reduction in particle emissions in Europe. Based on this comparison, we were able to show that loss of sea ice, possibly linked to particle emission reductions, was a possible cause of the change we detected. We note that sea ice loss is a known tipping point in the climate system. This is because sea ice loss makes the Earth darker which allows it to absorb more heat from the Sun, making the Earth even warmer. Based on our findings, we suggest that this climate tipping point may have been passed between 1982 and 1993.

1 Introduction

The one instrumental record of temperature extending back to the seventeenth century (1659) is held at the Hadley Centre in England. Instrumental records of temperature extending back to the eighteenth century are held in Uppsala, Stockholm, Torino, Milan, Kremsmünster, Regensburg, Padua, Prague, Vienna, Innsbruck, Karlsruhe, Budapest, Hohenpeissenberg, Münster, Verona and Stuttgart. Data collected from these stations show 2000-2009 average temperatures ranging from 1.2°C (Hadley Centre) to 2.7°C (Münster) higher than corresponding 1850-1899 averages (Manley, 1953; 1974; Parker et al., 1992; Auer et al., 2007). These values can be compared with corresponding average temperature increases, calculated here from the HadCRUT4 temperature time series (Morice et al., 2012), of 1.4°C for Europe and 0.7°C globally. The rates of warming from 1990 to 2018, calculated here from the same temperature time series, are 0.37°C/decade (r^2 = 0.58) in Europe and about 0.17°C/decade (r^2 = 0.71) globally. For comparison and of relevance for this study, Arctic air temperatures increased at a rate of 0.76°C/decade from 1998 to 2012 (Huang et al., 2017). Here, we use change in asymmetry in the distribution of mean annual temperature data, quantified by change in skewness, to test the hypothesis that the observed increase in the rate of warming occurred abruptly. We focus on the time period from 1900 to 2018 and restrict our analysis to Europe because of the availability of instrumental records of mean annual temperature that extend back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, i.e. >100 years before our time period of study, which is required for our statistical approach to give meaningful results.

2 Time series of mean annual temperature measurements

With the exception of the record held at the Hadley Centre, all instrumental records used in our study (Table 1; Fig. 1) are from recognized World Meteorological Office (WMO) Centennial Observing Stations or catalogued as part of the Historical Instrumental Climatological Surface Time Series of the Greater Alpine Region (HISTALP: Auer et al., 2007). Mean annual temperature data are homogenized at all sites with the exception of Prague-Klementinum. The purpose of homogenization is to filter effects, such as changes in location, changes in site surroundings (urban heat island), change of instruments and changes of observation times from the data. The procedures used for homogenization of data from the HISTALP sites are described by Auer et al. (2007). The procedures used for homogenization of data from Stockholm and Uppsala are described by Moberg et al. (2002) and Bergström & Moberg (2002). The instrumental record held at Hadley is compiled from overlapping records from multiple sites in central England. The record until 1991 was compiled by Manley (1953, 1974) and Parker et al. (1992) and is kept up to date by the Hadley Centre at the UK Meteorological Office. The procedures used for homogenization of data are described by Parker et al. (1992) and presently a -0.2°C adjustment for urban warming is applied.

3 Skewness as a test for abrupt changes of mean annual temperature

Skewness has been used previously to test for regime shifts in ecological systems (Guttal and Jayaprakash, 2008) and for abrupt changes in precipitation (He et al., 2013). Here we use change of skewness to test for abrupt changes of mean annual temperature. For a time series from year *y* (which is the first year of measurement) to a given year *Y* consisting of measurements of mean annual temperature (T_i: $i = y, \ldots, Y$), the sample Pearson skewness coefficient (γ_Y) is given by:

$$\gamma_Y = \frac{\sum_{i=y}^{Y}(T_i - \bar{T})^3/(Y-y)}{s^3} \qquad (1)$$

where $\bar{T}$ is the sample mean and *s* is the standard deviation. For each instrumental record of mean annual temperature (Fig. 1), we calculate skewness (γ_Y) from 1900 to the last year for which measurements have been published. We then plotted time series of skewness for each instrumental record (Fig. 2a-d).

The skewness of mean annual temperature data from all sites except for Stockholm and Uppsala shows an abrupt change at some point between 1982 and 1993. This change can be seen on time series of skewness of mean annual temperature data (Figs. 2a-d) and on time series of annual change of skewness (Fig. 2e-h). Before this change occurred, there was no skewing with skewness close to zero (mostly ± 0.2) at all sites except for Hadley, where more negative skew (γ_Y) was observed because of cooler temperatures in the latter part of the seventeenth century (Fig. 1). After this change occurred, skewness increased sharply (0.01-0.05/year) at all sites including Hadley but excluding Stockholm and Uppsala. Reinforcing this finding, an overall change from negative skew, i.e. towards cooler temperatures (before 1901) to positive skew i.e. towards warmer temperatures (after 1990) can be visualized qualitatively on histograms of mean annual temperature data (Fig. 3). This pattern is even seen in data from Stockholm and Uppsala. However, skewing is offset because of warmer temperatures in the eighteenth century (Fig. 1).

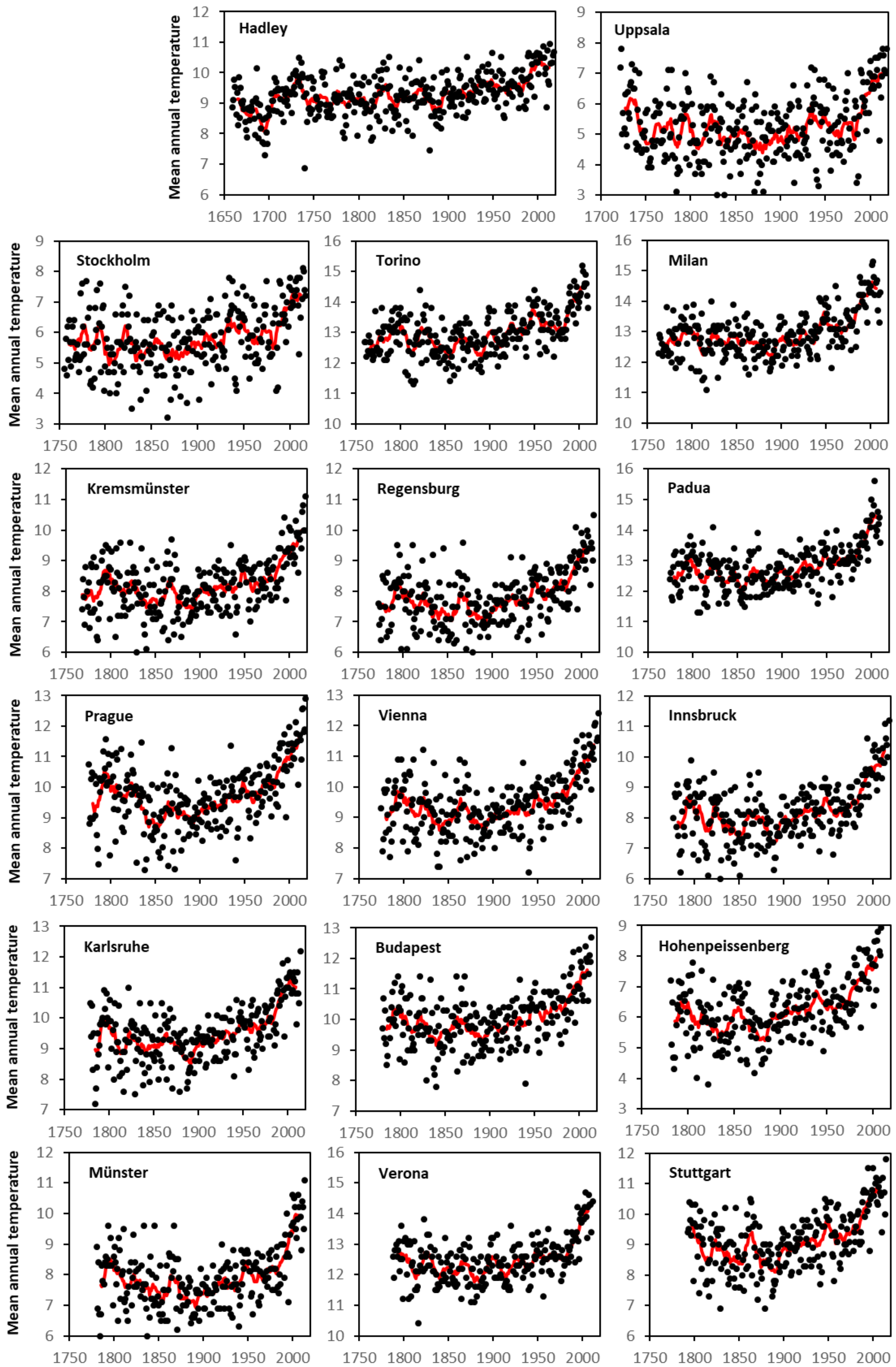

Figure 1. Time series of mean annual temperature data. Temperature data (black dots) with 11-year moving averages (red line) are shown for stations and time intervals listed in Table 1. Note that the length of the y-axis (mean annual temperature) is the same (6 degrees) for all plots but values differ between plots. Also, note that the x-axis is from 1650 to 2018 for Hadley, 1700 to 2018 for Uppsala, and 1750 to 2018 for all other stations.

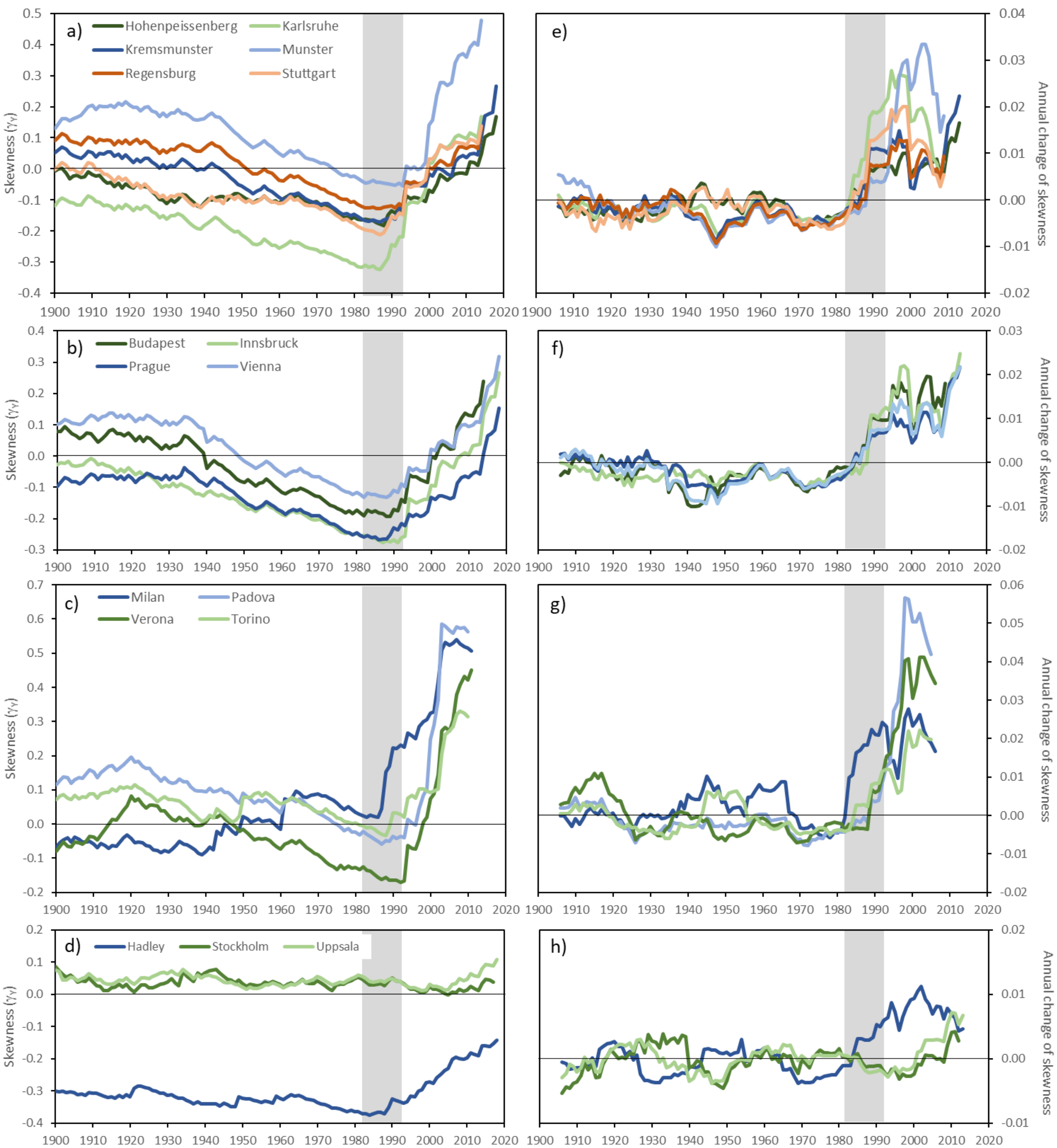

Figure 2. Time series of skewness (γ_Y) of mean annual temperature data. Skewness (γ_Y) is shown from year y (1900) to year Y (plotted on horizontal axis) for sites from a) Germany, b) Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary, c) Italy and d) England and Sweden. Time series of annual change of skewness calculated from its 11-point moving average are shown for the same sites from e) Germany, f) Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary, g) Italy and h) England. The time interval from 1982 to 1993 is shaded on all plots.

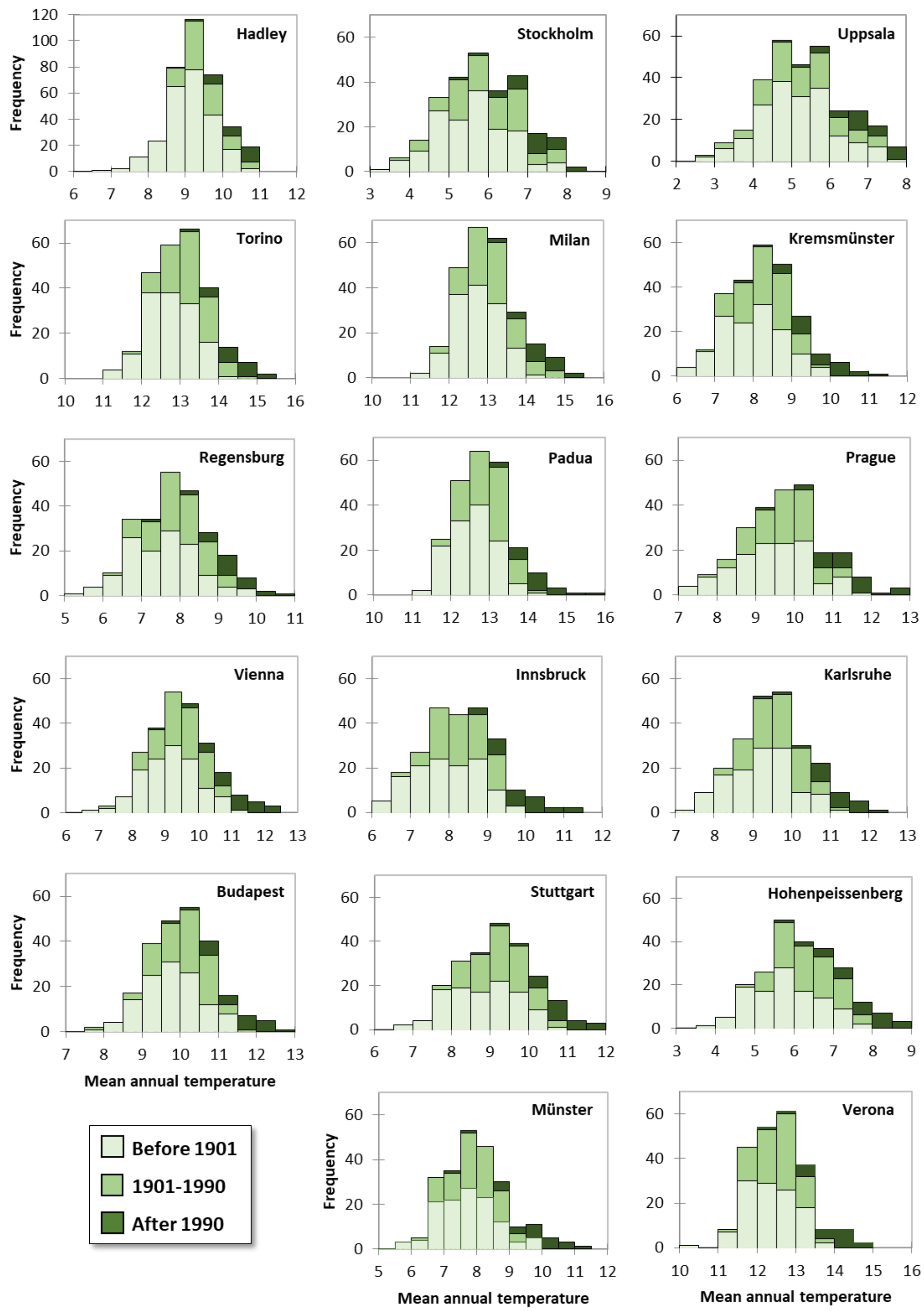

Figure 3. Histograms of mean annual temperature data. Histograms show mean annual temperature data for stations and time intervals listed in Table 1. The x-axes are the same for all sites except Hadley and that the length of the y-axis (mean annual temperature) is the same (6 degrees) for all plots except for Vienna and Münster but values differ between plots.

4 An abrupt change in the climate system

Here we argue that the sharp increase of positive skewness between 1982 and 1993 at 15 of 17 sites in our study points records an abrupt change in the climate system or some other anthropogenic change causing warming in Europe. Possible candidates which are known to have changed between 1900 and 2018 include slowdown of Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (Rahmstorf et al., 2015), reduced sulfate aerosol emissions (Acosta Navarro et al., 2016) and Arctic sea ice loss (Schweiger et al., 2019).

The Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) is a system of ocean currents which are driven by water density differences related to temperature and salinity. The AMOC redistributes heat making it an integral part of the climate system. Observed cooling in the subpolar Atlantic as well as direct measurements indicate that the AMOC has been slowing down (Sroskosv and Bryden 2015, Rahmstorf et al., 2015, Caeser et al., 2018), a change which has been identified as a tipping element in the climate system (Lenton et al., 2008; 2019). It has been argued that AMOC slowdown couples with warming in Europe and might, for example, have been a contributory cause of the 2015 heat wave (Duchez et al., 2016). The AMOC started slowing down in the 1950s, recovered partly between 2000 and 2010, but has slowed down again since then (Fig. 4a). Here, we plot the AMOC index of Caeser et al. (2018) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre to test the hypothesis that its abrupt change between 1982 and 1993 relates to AMOC slowdown. We use data from the Hadley Centre as this is our longest time series. The AMOC index used by Caeser et al. (2018) was calculated from sea-surface temperature (SST) data from the Hadley Centre Sea Ice and Sea Surface Temperature data set (HadISST) using a calibration factor to convert from SST to flow in Sverdrups, Sv (1 Sv = $1 \times 10^9\ m^3\ s^{-1}$) of 3.8 Sv/K which was derived from the CMIP5 models. This plot (Fig. 4b) shows that AMOC index and skewness are not correlated, based on a Pearson product-moment correlation (r) of -0.018 (95% confidence interval (CI): -0.199, 0.144) and a two-sided p-value of 0.85, implying that we can rule out AMOC slowdown as a primary cause of the abrupt change of skewness with good confidence.

Sulfate aerosols emissions have decreased since the 1980s in Europe (Fig. 4c). Because sulfate aerosols reflect solar radiation, reduced emissions of sulfate aerosols are thought to increase radiative forcing (Myhre et al., 2013). Also, reduced sulfate aerosol emissions have been put forward as one cause of amplified warming in the Arctic region (Acosta Navarro et al., 2016). Here, we plot sulfate aerosol emissions in Europe from Smith et al. (2011) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre to test the hypothesis that its abrupt change between 1982 and 1993 relates to sulfate aerosol emissions reductions. This plot (Fig. 4d) shows that sulfate aerosol emissions and skewness are probably correlated, based on a Pearson product-moment correlation (r) of -0.655 (95% CI: -0.752, 0.530) and a two-sided p-value of 2.7×10^{-14}, implying that we cannot rule out reduced sulfate aerosol emissions in Europe as a contributory cause of the abrupt change of skewness.

Arctic sea ice loss has also been identified as a tipping element in the climate system (Lenton et al., 2008; 2019). Gridded extent from historical observations (Walsh et al., 2019) and model reconstructions (Schweiger et al., 2011; 2019) indicate a reduction in sea ice extent and volume. This loss of sea ice has been highlighted as a cause of amplified warming in the Arctic (Dai et al., 2019). The Pan-Arctic Ice Ocean Modeling and Assimilation System (PIOMAS and PIOMAS-20C) reconstructions of Arctic sea ice volume show a weak decline from 1900 to 1940, an overall increase from 1940 to 1990, and thereafter a rapid decline (Fig. 4e). Here we plot sea ice volume from the PIOMAS and PIOMAS-20C model reconstructions (Schweiger et al., 2011; 2019) and sea ice extent from historical observations (Walsh et al., 2019) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre to test the hypothesis that its abrupt change between 1982 and 1993 relates to Arctic sea ice loss. This plot (Fig. 4f) shows that PIOMAS and PIOMAS-20C model reconstructed sea ice volumes as well as SIBT1850 sea ice extent measurements are probably correlated with skewness, based on respective Pearson product-moment correlations (r) of -0.953 (95% CI: -0.975, -0.911), -0.785 (95% CI: -0.848, -0.701) and -0.754 (95% CI: -0.823, -0.663) as well as two sided p-values below 2.2×10^{-16} for all three correlations, implying that we cannot rule out Arctic sea ice loss as a contributory cause of the abrupt change of skewness.

5 Conclusions

Based on skewness of mean annual temperature data from 15 of 17 sites in Europe, we identify an abrupt change in the climate system affecting Europe between 1982 and 1993. By plotting AMOC index, sulfate aerosol emissions as well as measures of Arctic sea ice loss against skewness of main annual temperature data, we identify Arctic sea ice loss and sulfate aerosol emission reductions in Europe as possible contributory causes of this abrupt change. We note that sulfate aerosol emission reductions in Europe, as one potential cause of Arctic warming (Acosta Navarro et al., 2016), and Artic sea ice loss are coupled and may both have contributed to the abrupt change discussed in the present study. We further note that Pistone et al. (2013) estimated that measured albedo forcing due Arctic sea ice loss (0.21 ± 0.03 W/m^2) equates to 10% of radiative forcing from increased carbon dioxide concentrations (estimated to 2.1 W/m^2 for 412 ppmv CO_2 using the equation of Myhre et al., 1998). We thus infer that that coupling between mean annual temperature in Europe and Arctic sea loss could relate to an albedo (or some other) feedback mechanism. If so, we argue that a climate tipping point might have been passed between 1982 and 1993. We conclude by emphasizing the urgent need for a rapid reduction of greenhouse gas emissions so as to limit further irreversible damage to the climate system due to anthropogenic global warming.

Acknowledgments, Samples, and Data

All data used in this study can be obtained from the Bolin Centre Database (https://bolin.su.se/data/). This research was conducted using funds provided by the Bolin Centre for Climate Research at Stockholm University.

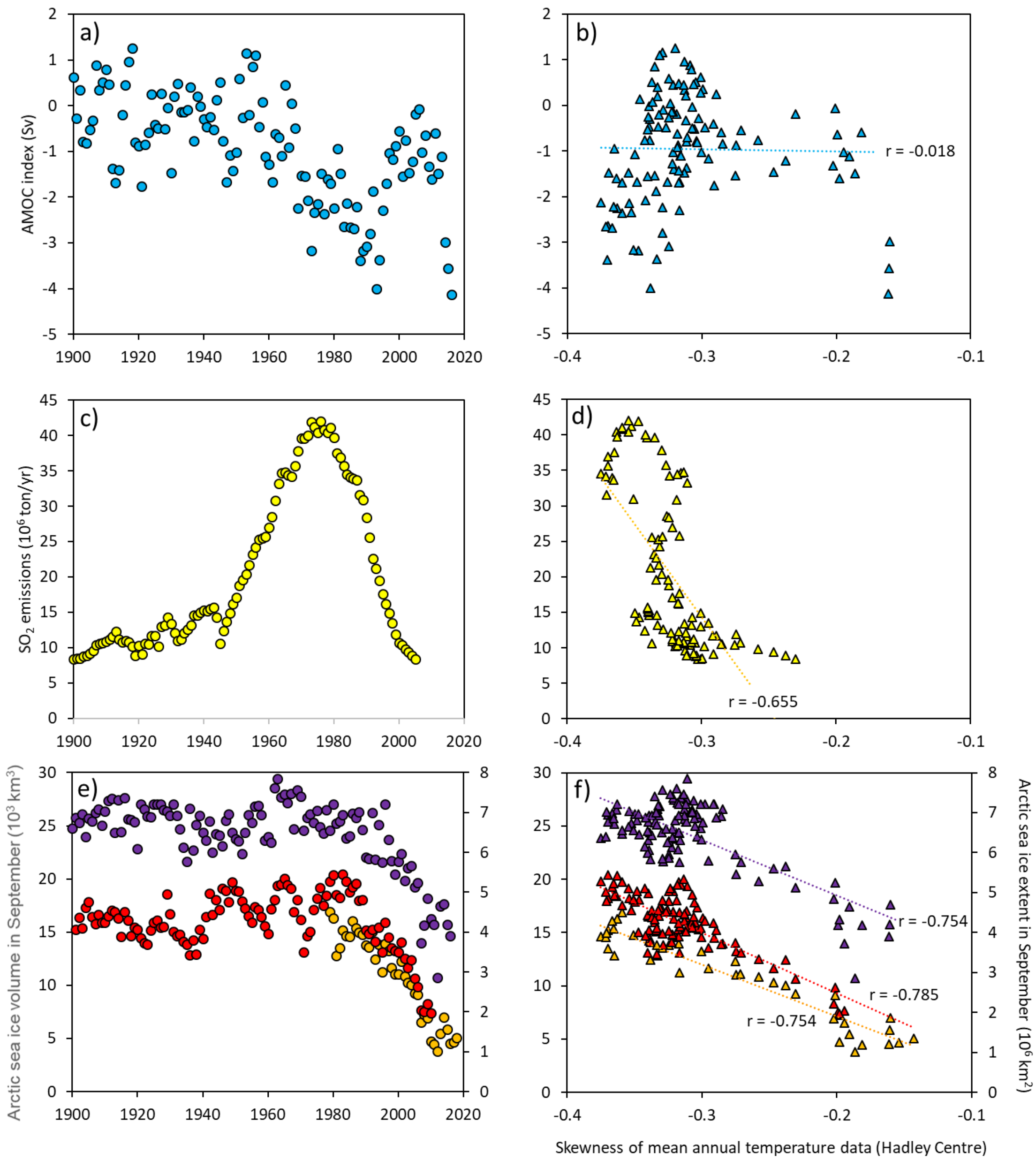

Figure 4. AMOC index, SO_2 emissions and Arctic sea ice volume/extent shown as time series and plotted against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre. The AMOC index of Caeser et al., 2016 (blue symbols) is plotted a) as a time series (circles) and b) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre (triangles). Sulfate emissions reported by Smith et al., 2011 (yellow symbols) are plotted c) as a time series (circles) and d) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre. The PIOMAS (orange symbols, primary axis) and PIOMAS-20C (red symbols, primary axis) model reconstructions (Schweiger et al., 2011; 2019) and SIBT1850 data (purple symbols, secondary axis) from historical observations (Walsh et al., 2019) of Artic sea ice extent are plotted e) as a time series (circles) and f) against skewness of mean annual temperature data from the Hadley Centre (triangles). Best-fit linear regressions and Pearson correlations (r) are shown.

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Table 1. Instrumental records of mean annual temperature, sorted according to starting year of time series.

Site	Country	Time series	Homogenized	WMO	HISTALP	Reference
Hadley	England	1659-2018	x			Parker et al. 1992
Uppsala	Sweden	1722-2018	x	x		Bergström & Moberg 2002
Stockholm	Sweden	1756-2018	x	x		Moberg et al. 2002
Torino	Italy	1760-2010	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Milan	Italy	1763-2011	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Kremsmünster	Germany	1768-2018	x	x	x	Auer et al. 2007
Regensburg	Germany	1773-2014	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Padua	Italy	1774-2010	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Prague	Czech Republic	1775-2018		x		CHMI
Vienna	Austria	1775-2018	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Innsbruck	Austria	1777-2018	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Karlsruhe	Germany	1779-2014	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Budapest	Hungary	1780-2014	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Hohenpeissenberg	Germany	1781-2018	x	x	x	Auer et al. 2007
Münster	Germany	1781-2014	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Verona	Italy	1788-2011	x		x	Auer et al. 2007
Stuttgart	Germany	1792-2014	x		x	Auer et al. 2007

Note. Abbreviations WMO = World Meteorological Office Centennial Observing Stations; HISTALP = Historical Instrumental Climatological Surface Time Series of the Greater Alpine Region; and CHMI = Czech Hydrometeorological Institute.