Arctic rift system driven by a giant stagnant slab

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Key Points:

- High-resolution *P* wave tomography of the whole mantle beneath the circum-Arctic region is obtained.
- A giant stagnant slab with subducted oceanic ridge is revealed below the 660-km discontinuity beneath Canada and Greenland.
- Division between Canada and Greenland at 63−35 Ma might be induced by complex tensional field associated with the stagnant slab.

Abstract

A detailed 3-D tomographic model of the whole mantle beneath the circum-Arctic region is obtained by applying an updated global tomography method to a large amount of *P*-wave arrival time data. Our model clearly shows the subducted Izanagi and Farallon slabs penetrating into the lower mantle beneath Eurasia and North America, respectively. In the region from Canada to Greenland, a giant stagnant slab lying below the 660-km discontinuity is revealed. Because this slab has a texture that seems to be due to subducted oceanic ridges, the slab might be composed of the Izanagi, Farallon, Kula and Vancouver slabs that had subducted during ~80−20 Ma. During that period, a complex rift system represented by division between Canada and Greenland was developed. The oceanic ridge subduction and hot upwelling in the big mantle wedge above the stagnant slab caused a tensional stress field, which might have induced these complex tectonic events.

Plain Language Summary

The circum-Arctic region has many clues for understanding global-scale tectonics and revolution of the Earth. Seismic tomography is a well-established method for obtaining 3-D images of the underground structure by inverting a large number of seismic wave arrival times. We obtain detailed tomographic images of the whole mantle beneath the circum-Arctic region by using an updated global tomography method. Our high-resolution results clearly show the subducted Izanagi and Farallon slabs penetrating into the lower mantle beneath Eurasia and North America, respectively. In the region from Canada to Greenland, a giant stagnant slab lying below the 660-km discontinuity with a total length of ~4,000 km is revealed. Because this slab has a texture that seems to be due to subducted oceanic ridges, the slab might be composed of the Izanagi, Farallon, Kula and Vancouver slabs that had subducted during ~80−20 Ma. During that period, a complex

rift system represented by division between Canada and Greenland was developed. The oceanic ridge subduction and hot upwelling in the big mantle wedge above the stagnant slab caused a tensional stress field, which might have induced these complex tectonic events.

1. Introduction

The underground structure beneath the circum-Arctic region (Figure 1) is a frontier of our geoscientific knowledge that has been poorly understood compared to other regions of the Northern Hemisphere. Especially in recent years, the underground structure and tectonics of this area have received widespread attention because, for example, a possibility of resource mining has increased due to decrease in ice in the Arctic Ocean, and the underground temperature affects melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet and global sea level rise (Martos et al., 2018; Toyokuni et al., 2020a).

One of the major mysteries of tectonics in this area is the existence of the Canadian Arctic Rift System (CARS). Its latest activity was the Eurekan Rifting Episode (ERE), symbolized by the division between Greenland and Canada and complex movement of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago (CAA), which took place between 63 and 35 Ma (Gion et al., 2017). It is known that this division began in the Labrador Sea on the south side and propagated to Baffin Bay on the north side. Simultaneously, flood basalts erupted widely in West Greenland, Davis Strait, and Baffin Island (Chalmers et al., 1995; Larsen et al., 2016). Traditionally, these events were thought to be induced by the rising Iceland plume (Gerlings et al., 2009; Gill et al., 1992). However, from reconstruction of the plume track (Peace et al., 2017), geothermal heat flow estimation (Artemieva, 2019; Martos et al., 2018), and seismic velocity structure (Toyokuni et al., 2020a), it is unlikely that the Iceland plume passed through this area. Peace et al. (2017)

proposed a far field tectonic force as an alternative mechanism that caused the division, but they did not mention its direct cause.

In Greenland, a seismograph network had recently been developed with international cooperation, and high-quality data have been accumulated (Clinton et al., 2014; Toyokuni et al., 2014). Structures beneath Greenland, Iceland, and surrounding regions have been intensively investigated by seismic waveform analyses (Kumar et al., 2007; Mordret et al., 2016; Toyokuni et al., 2015, 2018, 2021a), surface wave tomography (Antonijevic & Lees, 2018; Darbyshire et al., 2004, 2018; Levshin et al., 2017; Mordret, 2018; Pilidou et al., 2004; Pourpoint et al., 2018), body wave tomography (Toyokuni & Zhao, 2021; Toyokuni et al., 2020a, 2020b), and full-wave tomography (Rickers et al., 2013). However, the previous studies targeting the whole circum-Arctic region focused on the structure shallower than 700 km depth (Jakovlev et al., 2012; Lebedev et al., 2017). Seismic tomography, especially body-wave tomography, is a well-established and high-resolution method for investigating deep structure of the Earth. To investigate the relationship between tectonics of the circum-Arctic region and large-scale geodynamic events such as plate subduction and hot mantle plume that occurred or are occurring in surrounding regions, we need to study the whole mantle structure with high resolution over a vast horizontal scale. In this study we exploit the updated global tomography method that can reveal the whole mantle structure beneath a specific area with high resolution (Toyokuni et al., 2020b; Zhao et al., 2017) to execute multiple computations for different areas, and to obtain detailed panoramic tomography by stitching the individual images together. The purpose of this study is to investigate the cause of ERE from a tectonic viewpoint using our novel tomographic model.

2. Data & Method

We apply the multiscale global tomography method by Zhao et al. (2017), which adopts a fine 3-D grid for the target region and a coarse 3-D grid for the surrounding regions of the globe. Thus, the structural model beneath the target region can be obtained with high resolution while saving computational resources. Applying this method to the Izu-Bonin subduction zone, Zhao et al. (2017) investigated the detailed 3-D structure of the subducted Pacific slab where the 2015 Bonin deep earthquake (*M*7.9; depth ~ 680 km) took place. This method was also applied to investigate the whole mantle structure beneath Greenland (Toyokuni et al., 2020b) and Southeast Asia (Zhao et al., 2021).

We apply a coordinate transformation that moves the center of the target area to (longitude, latitude) = (90°, 0°) to treat high latitude areas by nearly rectangular grid distributions (Takenaka et al., 2017; Toyokuni et al., 2020a, 2020b). To clarify the relationship between tectonic phenomena with a large horizontal scale such as plate subduction and a hot mantle plume, our target covers the entire region north of ~30°N latitude. The computation cost is reduced by performing independent calculations with 12 different regions and superimposing the results to obtain a final tomographic model.

Table S1 shows the central location (longitude and latitude) for each of the 12 regions. Each calculation is performed for a region covering the longitude range from 60° to 120° and the latitude range from −30° to 30° after the coordinate transformation. In the vicinity of the North Pole, where only a few seismic stations and earthquakes exist, calculations are performed in two regions rotated by ~40° around the North Pole to reduce the distortion of the results due to the grid arrangement (Regions 1 and 2). In addition, 10 regions with different positions and angles are further arranged around them (Regions 3−12) (Figure S1).

Data are collected from the ISC-EHB catalog at the International Seismological Centre (ISC) website (http://www.isc.ac.uk/) and further selected for our analysis. The *P*, *pP*, and *PP* (Figure S2) arrival times from 170,435 earthquakes are selected. To make the hypocentral distribution uniform, the entire crust and mantle are divided into small cubic blocks, and only one earthquake with the largest number of data in each block is extracted. We extract as many earthquakes as possible that occurred inside the target region, by adopting finer blocks inside the target region and coarser blocks outside it. The block size is changed for each calculation to roughly homogenize the number of earthquakes and data used in each calculation (Table S1 and Figures S3−S14). Table S1 also shows the numbers of seismic stations and arrival time data used.

We set a fine 3-D grid with a lateral grid interval of 55.6 km (a great circle distance of 0.5° on the surface) in the target region, and a coarse 3-D grid with a lateral grid interval of 222.39 km (a great circle distance of 2.0° on the surface) outside the target region. The vertical grid intervals inside and outside the target region are also different (see Table S2). Theoretical traveltimes are calculated using a 3-D ray tracing method (Zhao, 2004) that simultaneously uses the pseudo-bending scheme (Um & Thurber, 1987) and Snell's law. The IASP91 model (Kennett & Engdahl, 1991) is taken to be the 1-D initial Vp model for the tomographic inversion (Figure S15). The tomographic inversion is conducted using the LSQR algorithm (Paige & Saunders, 1982) with damping and smoothing regularizations (Zhao, 2004). The optimal values of the damping and smoothing parameters are adopted according to the previous studies (Toyokuni et al., 2020b; Zhao et al., 2017, 2021).

To reduce the influence of boundary of the target region, the edges of each tomographic model obtained by the individual inversion for the 12 regions are cut off, and we extract only the results 4° inside the longitude and latitude ranges of the target region. Then we rearrange the 12

Vp models according to the coordinate system of Region 1, and take weight average using the ray hit count. As a result, the final tomographic model is obtained from the surface to the core-mantle boundary (CMB) beneath the region north of ~30°N latitude. Such jointing of multiple tomography results has been adopted by previous studies targeting a wide area (e.g., Jakovlev et al., 2012).

3. Results

Map view images of the tomographic results are shown in Figures 2 and S16. For the areas where some of the 12 regions overlap, the ray hit count (HC) in each region is averaged, and the regions where average HC < 20 (Figure S17) are masked in white. At a depth of 160 km, high-Vp anomalies are visible in forearc regions, and low-Vp and high-Vp anomalies appear in the eastern and western parts of North America, respectively, which is consistent with previous tomographic models (e.g., Golos et al., 2018). At a depth of 400 km, a low-Vp zone beneath the Iceland and Azores hotspots is visible. At a depth of 800 km, a wide range of high-Vp from North America to North Eurasia and low-Vp in surrounding regions are prominent. At a depth of 1500 km, no distinctive features are visible, but at a depth of 2100 km, the "Greenland plume" (Toyokuni et al., 2020b) and low-Vp beneath the western Pacific are prominent. At a depth of 2880 km, there is a marked increase in high-Vp and low-Vp amplitudes near CMB.

Vertical cross-sections of our model (Figure 3) clearly image the subducting Farallon slab beneath the North American continent, which has penetrated into the lower mantle (Figure 3a). Beneath the Eurasian continent, the Izanagi slab penetrating into the lower mantle is also clearly resolved (Figure 3c). As a plate becomes thicker and heavier as it moves away from the ridge axis, it is likely to fall into the lower mantle after stagnation around the 660-km discontinuity. The penetration of the Farallon slab into the lower mantle has already been revealed by many tomographic studies (e.g., Schmid et al., 2002; Zhao, 2004). On the other hand, penetration of the Izanagi slab was only predicted by studies based on mantle convection modeling (Peng & Liu, 2021). This is the first time that the penetrating Izanagi slab is clearly imaged by seismic tomography. In Figure 3a, we can also see low-Vp, which appears to be a hot plume rising from the CMB below Hawaii toward the west coast of North America.

Beneath Canada and Greenland, located between the two penetrating slabs, a high-Vp anomaly lies at depths of ~800 km (Figure 3b). While this high-Vp anomaly can be seen almost near the surface at the western end, it deepens toward the east and continues for a total length of ~4,000 km. This feature reminds us of a giant stagnant slab. Vertical cross-sections with a finer grid interval beneath Canada and Greenland are shown in Figure S18. Comparisons with other tomographic models (Amaru, 2007; Lu et al., 2019; Ritsema et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2010, 2012) show that the main features in Figure 3a are robust, but those in Figures 3b and 3c vary depending on the model (Figures S19−S21).

The resolution of the tomographic images is investigated using multiple synthetic tests including the checkerboard resolution test (CRT) (Humphreys & Clayton, 1988; Zhao et al., 2017) and restoring resolution test (RRT) (Toyokuni et al., 2021b; Zhao et al., 2017). Specifically, the following four input Vp models are constructed and tested (Toyokuni et al., 2020b): (1) CRT1: the checkerboard has a lateral grid interval of 278 km (a great circle distance of 2.5° on the surface) inside the study region, (2) CRT2: the lateral grid interval is 167 km (a great circle distance of 1.5° on the surface) inside the study region, (3) RRT1: highlighting the pattern of the obtained tomographic result, (4) RRT2: the same as RRT1 but a regional rectangular high-Vp anomaly is added at depths of 650-800 km. Figures S22−S25 show the recovery rate of CRT (Toyokuni et al., 2020b) and the RRT results. The CRT results show that the resolution in our study region is 1.5° in the lateral direction and the distances comparable to the vertical grid interval in the depth direction for regions with average HC ≥ 20. The RRT results also show that the pattern of tomographic results can be recovered very well. Figures S26−S28 also show the reliability of main features in Figure 3.

4. Discussion

The map view at a depth of 800 km (Figures 2c and 4a) shows that the amplitude of high-Vp anomalies in the region from Canada to the Arctic Ocean is not uniform, and that the amplitude changes like stripes. Comparison of RRT1 and RRT2 results indicates that this feature is reliable (Figure S29). Overlapping the results of plate reconstruction by Müller et al. (2019), these stripes are coincident with the oceanic ridge axis subducted approximately normal to the trench axis. Specifically, the regions with the lineament of weaker high-Vp amplitudes are consistent well with the ridge axis between the Farallon and Izanagi plates subducted during 160−85 Ma, and the ridge axis at the boundary of the Kula and Vancouver plates subducted during 85−20 Ma (Figure 4 and Video S1). Therefore, we consider that the lineament of weak high-Vp anomalies indicates the subducted oceanic ridge where the slab is thin, and the lineament with strong high-Vp zones on its both sides indicates the part where the slabs are relatively thick. This correspondence reinforces the possibility that the high-Vp anomaly beneath this region reflects a stagnant slab.

According to a recent study (Domeier et al., 2017), the traditionally considered Kula plate is a complex of the western Kronos plate and the eastern Kula plate, with subduction of the Kula plate beneath the Kronos plate forming a westward slope. In this case, the subduction axis of the Kula plate runs almost parallel to the eastern Kula−Farallon ridge, which better corresponds to the two parallel lineaments of weak high-Vp zones beneath North America in our tomographic results.

The plate near the ridge axis is young and less heavy, so it is easy to stagnant at a depth in the mantle. Furthermore, the trench axis due to the subduction of this area continued to retreat (Figure 4), providing an environment where the slab stagnation was likely to occur. When the slab is light enough, it does not fall into the lower mantle but keeps to stagnate until it is thermally assimilated with its surroundings (Nakakuki et al., 2010).

Above the long stagnant slab, a huge wedge-shaped mantle is formed, which is called the Big Mantle Wedge (BMW) and was firstly found in East Asia (Zhao, 2004; Lei & Zhao, 2005; Zhao et al., 2009). In the BMW, subduction-driven corner flow and fluids from deep dehydration reactions of the stagnant Pacific slab in the mantle transition zone result in upwelling of hot and wet asthenospheric materials, causing intraplate volcanism and continental rift systems in East Asia. The BMW above the subducted Farallon/Nazca slab also caused Cenozoic intraplate magmatism in Patagonia (Navarrete et al., 2020). Referring to these previous studies, combining our tomography and the plate reconstruction results, we propose that the BMW above the stagnant slab in the circum-Arctic region caused the continental breakup during ERE and the accompanying volcanism in West Greenland, Davis Strait, and Baffin Island in Tertiary.

Unlike East Asia and Patagonia, the stagnant slab in the present study region is characterized by the oceanic ridge axis subducted nearly orthogonal to the trench axis. Because the oceanic plates diverge to both sides of the ridge axis, when the ridge is subducted, a tensional stress field is likely to form in the trench-parallel direction in the overlying plate. Combined with the dominant trench-normal tensional stress regime formed by upwelling flows in the BMW, the upper plate in this area is likely to be dominated by tensional stresses oriented in various directions, which might have induced the complex division of CAA (Figure 5).

The root of this stagnant slab is located between the Cascadia and Alaska subduction zones in North America, where currently only the strike-slip Queen Charlotte Fault exists, and the subduction has already ceased. After the ERE, CARS became inactive and the entire rift system is now moving as part of the North American Plate. This fact also supports our proposal that CARS was induced by the stagnant slab. Toyokuni et al. (2020b) discovered the Greenland plume ascending from CMB beneath Greenland, which rises up eastward and is connected with Svalbard and Jan Mayen. The direction of plume fluttering is opposite to the moving direction of the plate on which Greenland is placed. However, considering that the stagnant slab may obstruct the upwelling flow, the strange flowline of the Greenland plume (Toyokuni et al., 2020b) can be well explained.

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(http://www.isc.ac.uk/). Archiving of data from this study is underway through Zenodo. Currently these data can be seen in Supporting Information for review purposes.

Author contributions

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Methodology: Genti Toyokuni, Dapeng Zhao

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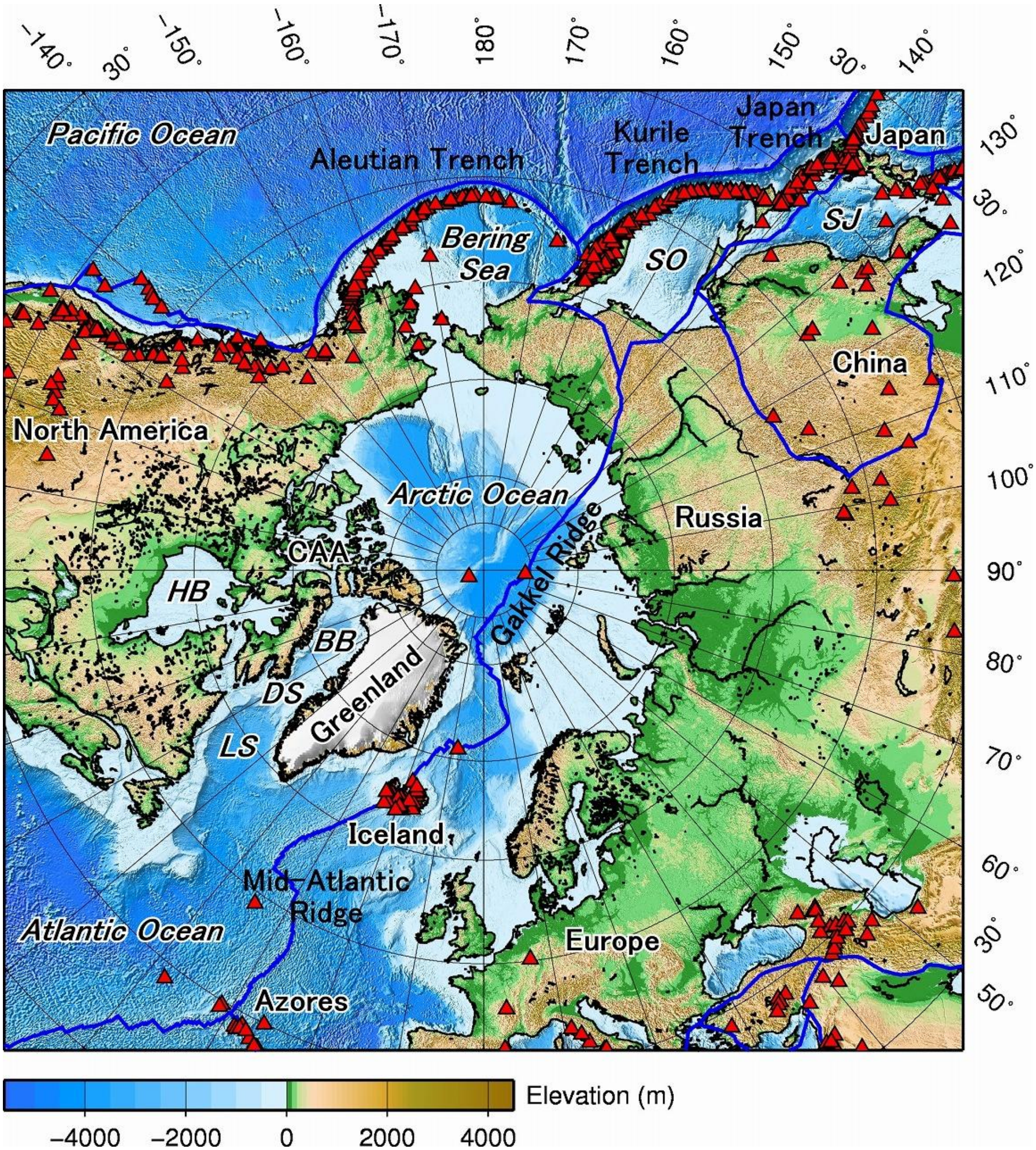
440



Pacific Ocean
Aleutian Trench
Kurile Trench
Japan Trench
Japan
Bering Sea
SO
SJ
China
North America
Arctic Ocean
Russia
CAA
HB
BB
Gakkel Ridge
Greenland
DS
LS
Iceland
Mid-Atlantic Ridge
Atlantic Ocean
Europe
Azores
Elevation (m)
−4000
−2000
0
2000
4000

Figure 1. Map of the circum-Arctic region. The color scale for the topography is shown at the bottom. White color denotes the Greenland Ice Sheet. Red triangles: active volcanoes; thick blue lines: plate boundaries. CAA = Canadian Arctic Archipelago; BB = Baffin Bay; DS = Davis Strait; HB = Hudson Bay; LS = Labrador Sea; SJ = Sea of Japan; SO = Sea of Okhotsk.

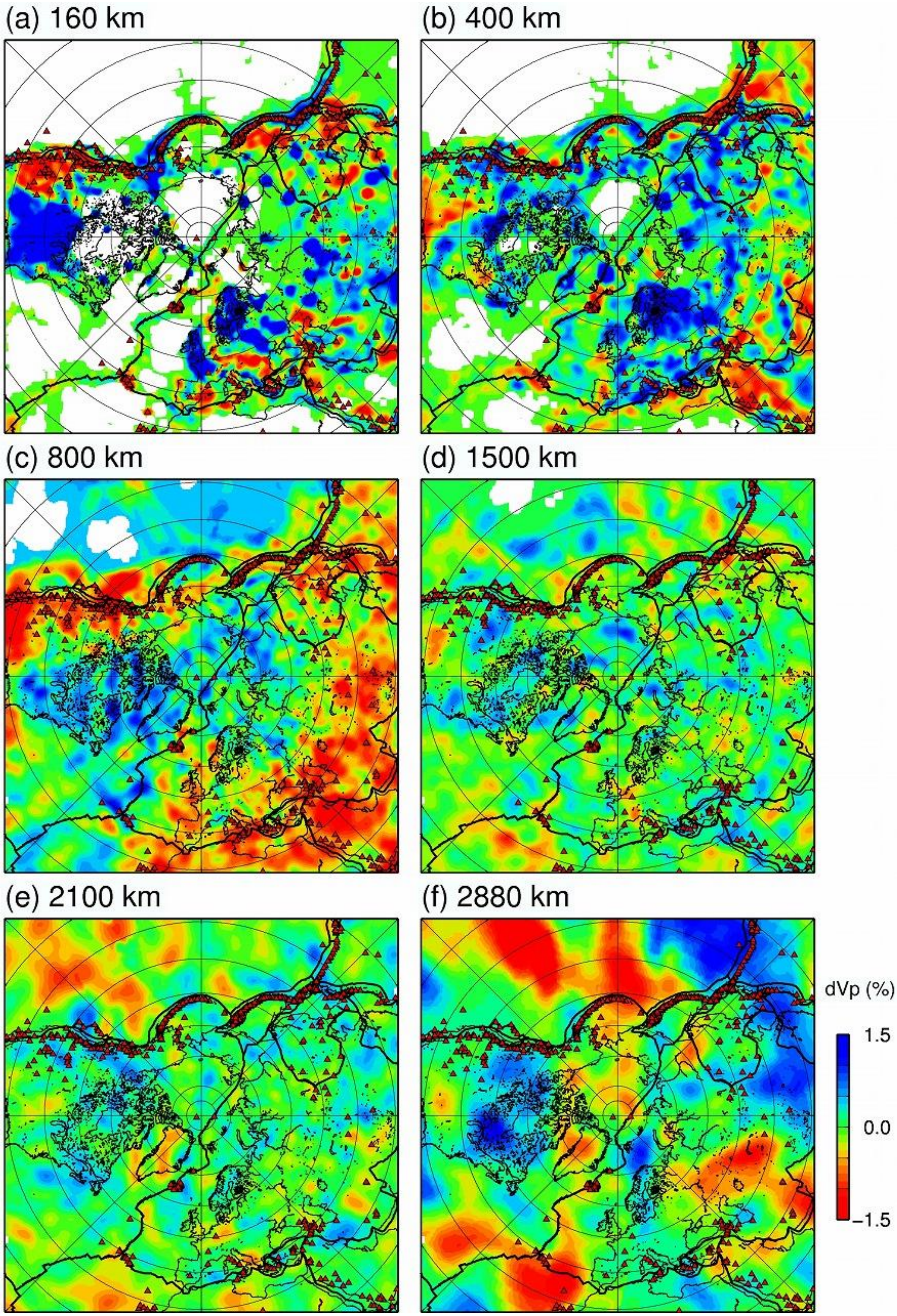
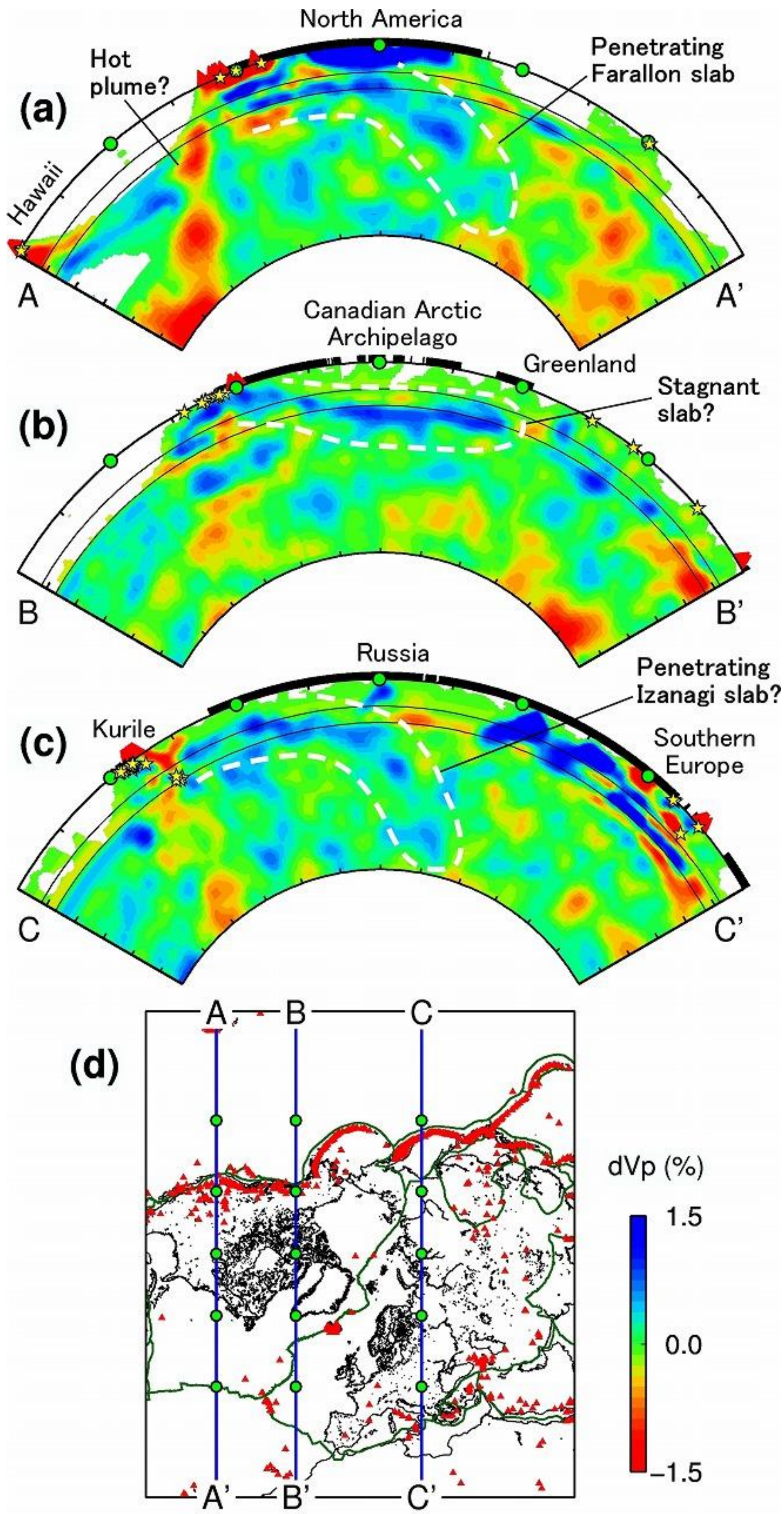
446 

Figure 2. Map views of Vp tomography at six depths obtained by this study. The layer depth is shown above each map. The blue and red colors denote high and low Vp perturbations, respectively, whose scale (in %) is shown on the right. Areas with average hit counts < 20 are masked in white. Red triangles: active volcanoes; thick black lines: plate boundaries.


North America
Hot plume?
Penetrating Farallon slab
(a)
Hawaii
A
A'
Canadian Arctic Archipelago
Greenland
Stagnant slab?
(b)
B
B'
Russia
Penetrating Izanagi slab?
Kurile
Southern Europe
(c)
C
C'
(d)
A
B
C
A'
B'
C'
dVp (%)
1.5
0.0
−1.5

451

Figure 3. Vertical cross sections of Vp tomography showing main tectonic features. **(a–c)** Vertical cross sections along three profiles as shown on the map **(d)**. The scale for Vp perturbation (in %) is shown on the right. The 410 and 660 km discontinuities are shown in black solid lines. The thick black lines on the surface denote land areas. Areas with average hit counts < 20 are masked in white. Red triangles: active volcanoes existing within $\pm 2°$ of each profile; yellow stars: large earthquakes ($M \geq 6$) that occurred during 1964–2015 within $\pm 2°$ of each profile; green circles: points dividing the section equidistantly using the central angle of the earth, which correspond to those in **(d)**. In the map **(d)**, red triangles: active volcanoes; thick green lines: plate boundaries.

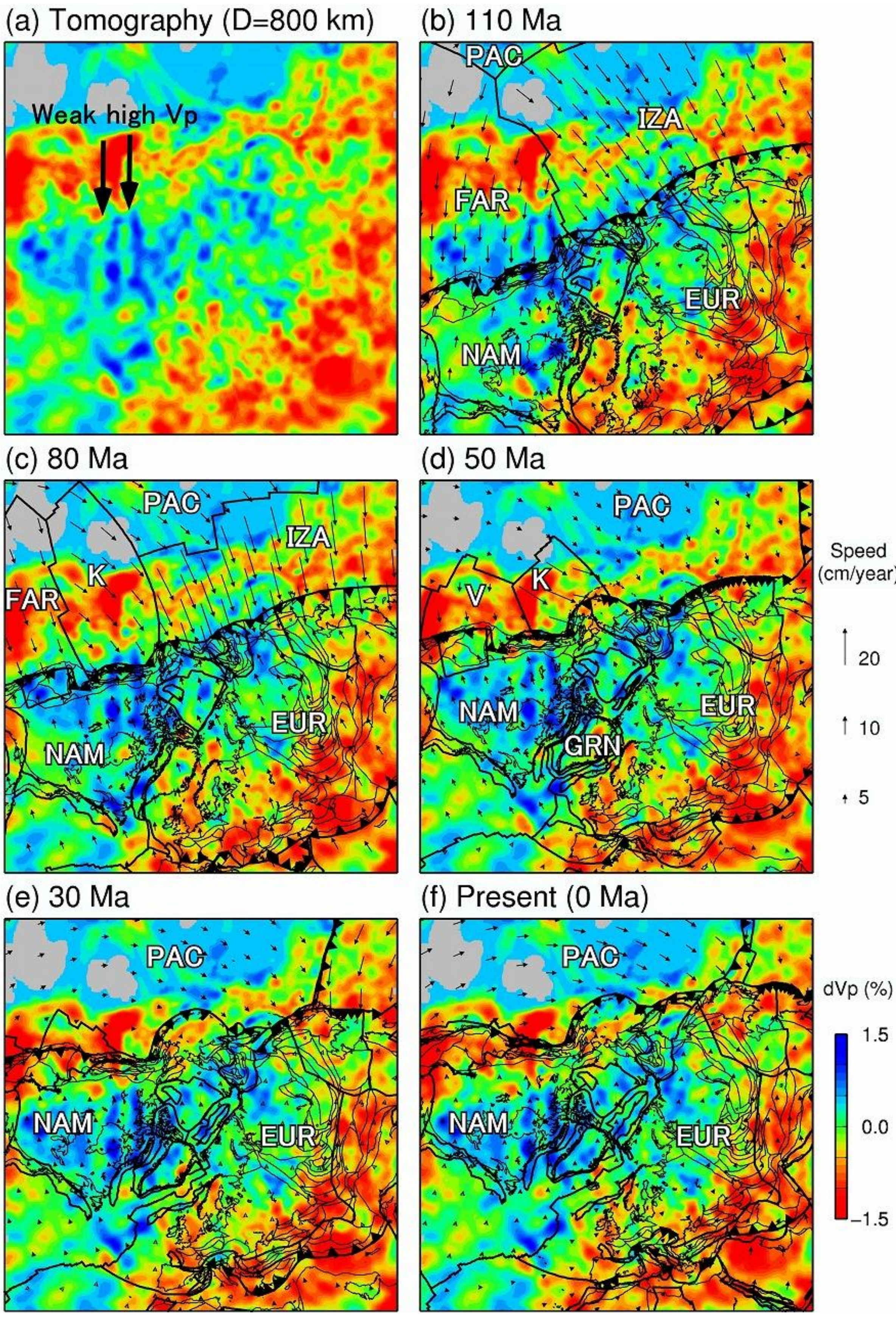
461 
(a) Tomography (D=800 km)
Weak high Vp
(b) 110 Ma
PAC
IZA
FAR
EUR
NAM
(c) 80 Ma
PAC
IZA
K
FAR
EUR
NAM
(d) 50 Ma
PAC
V
K
NAM
EUR
GRN
Speed (cm/year)
20
10
5
(e) 30 Ma
PAC
NAM
EUR
(f) Present (0 Ma)
PAC
NAM
EUR
dVp (%)
1.5
0.0
−1.5

Figure 4. **(a)** Map views of Vp tomography at a depth of 800 km (same as in Figure 2c) and **(b–f)** comparison with plate reconstructions (Müller et al., 2019) from 110 Ma to the present day. The scale for Vp perturbation (in %) is shown on the right. In **(a)**, thick arrows show locations of weak high Vp lineaments. In **(b–f)**, the age of reconstruction is shown above each panel. Black toothed lines delineate subduction zones, and other black lines denote mid-ocean ridges and transform faults. The length and azimuth of each arrow denote the speed and direction of the absolute plate motion, respectively. The scale for plate speed is shown on the right. EUR = Eurasian Plate; FAR = Farallon Plate; GRN = Greenland Plate; IZA = Izanagi Plate; K = Kula Plate; NAM = North American Plate; PAC = Pacific Plate; V = Vancouver Plate.

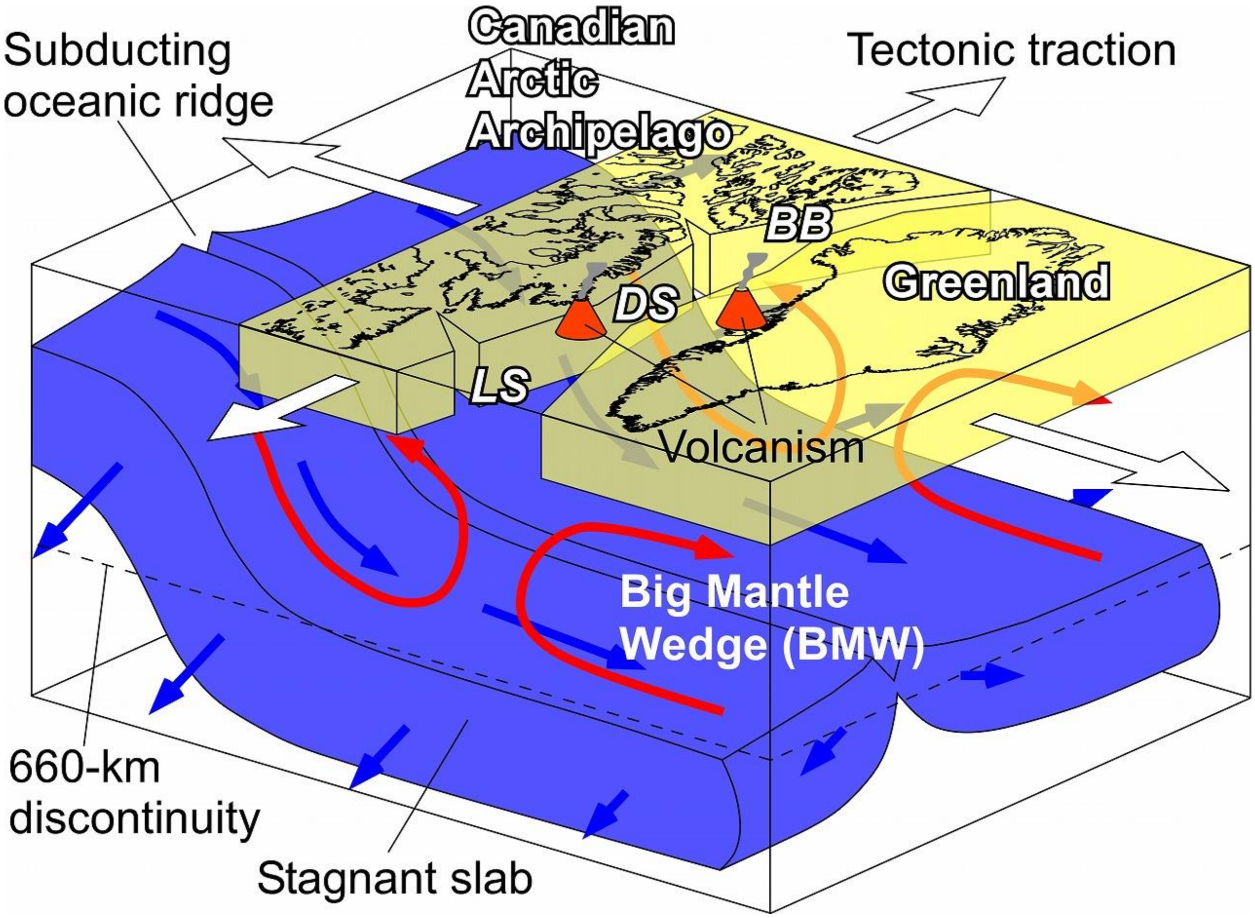


Figure 5. Schematic diagram showing a possible mechanism of the division between Greenland and Canada and tearing of crust beneath the Canadian Arctic Archipelago revealed by this study. The subducting slab with oceanic ridge becomes stagnant beneath the 660-km discontinuity beneath Canada and Greenland. The red arrows indicate upwelling of hot asthenospheric materials due to convective circulation process in the Big Mantle Wedge. The blue arrows indicate subduction and divergence directions of the subducted slab. The white arrows on the surface indicate tectonic traction, whose length conceptually indicates the traction strength. BB = Baffin Bay; DS = Davis Strait; LS = Labrador Sea.