

Erosion during extreme flood events dominates Holocene canyon evolution in northeast Iceland

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Extreme flood events have the potential to cause catastrophic landscape change in short periods of time (10^0 to 10^3 h). However, their impacts are rarely considered in studies of long-term landscape evolution ($>10^3$ y), because the mechanisms of erosion during such floods are poorly constrained. Here we use topographic analysis and cosmogenic ^3He surface exposure dating of fluvially sculpted surfaces to determine the impact of extreme flood events within the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon (northeast Iceland) and to constrain the mechanisms of bedrock erosion during these events. Surface exposure ages allow identification of three periods of intense canyon cutting about 9 ka ago, 5 ka ago, and 2 ka ago during which multiple large knickpoints retreated large distances (>2 km). During these events, a threshold flow depth was exceeded, leading to the toppling and transportation of basalt lava columns. Despite continuing and comparatively large-scale ($500 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$) discharge of sediment-rich glacial meltwater, there is no evidence for a transition to an abrasion-dominated erosion regime since the last erosive event because the vertical knickpoints have not diffused over time. We provide a model for the evolution of the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon through the reconstruction of the river profile and canyon morphology at different stages over the last 9 ka and highlight the dominant role played by extreme flood events in the shaping of this landscape during the Holocene.

bedrock erosion | extreme floods | knickpoints | Iceland | cosmogenic ^3He

Extrême floods in both terrestrial and extraterrestrial environments can cause abrupt landscape change that can have long-term consequences (1–5), especially when a geomorphic threshold is exceeded (6). The timescale over which this change is visible is controlled by the ability and efficiency of background processes to reshape the landscape. As a result, progress in understanding both short-term and long-term landscape evolution requires better knowledge of bedrock channel erosion processes and thresholds over the different scales at which geomorphological processes operate (7–10).

The majority of research into extreme flood events has focused on the interpretation of deposited sediments (e.g., refs. 11 and 12) and the reconstruction of the hydraulic conditions prevailing during such events (e.g., refs. 13–15). Further work has defined the geomorphic impact of extreme flood events in proglacial areas close to the source of the flood water (e.g., refs. 16 and 17). Studies that examine the processes of bedrock erosion, especially large canyon formation, during extreme flood events can help establish a diagnostic link between formation processes and morphology in canyons in both terrestrial and extraterrestrial settings, but they remain scarce (e.g., refs. 18–20). Here, evidence for bedrock landscape change during extreme floods along the course of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum River (northeast Iceland) is used to test whether the contemporary landscape morphology reflects erosion during rare extreme events, or longer-term “background” erosional processes.

The Jökulsá á Fjöllum has experienced multiple glacial outburst floods (jökulhlaups) since the Last Glacial Maximum, with peak discharge for the largest flood estimated to be in the order of $0.9 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$ (14, 21). The landscape contains many characteristic

landforms associated with extreme flood events, including boulder bars and terraces, dry cataracts such as Ásbyrgi, numerous flood overflow channels, and the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon (Fig. 1) (e.g., refs. 16 and 22–25). The canyon has been carved through a volcanic system that was active 8.5 ka B.P. (26) ~ 4 km downstream of its head. As the canyon is cut directly through the fissure and associated lava flows and there is no evidence of lava from the fissure flowing into the canyon, the eruption age provides an independent constraint on the maximum age for the formation of the canyon upstream of the fissure (Fig. 1). The impact of the largest flood events has never been tied to the evolution of the bedrock landscape within the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon, as previous studies have focused on sedimentary deposits (e.g., refs. 24 and 25). This study uses topographic analysis and cosmogenic ^3He surface exposure dating of fluvial surfaces to determine the erosive impact of extreme flood events and assess the importance, and legacy, of high-magnitude low-frequency events in landscape evolution over multimillennial timescales.

Conceptual Model of Canyon Formation

Large canyons can be formed during extreme flood events through the toppling and removal of blocks in heavily jointed basaltic bedrock (18, 19), once a threshold flow depth has been exceeded (27). Bedrock erosion during extreme floods in such settings is therefore dominated by plucking rather than abrasion, resulting in the formation and upstream propagation of large vertical knickpoints [e.g., Box Canyon and Stubby Canyon, Idaho (18, 19)]. As the knickpoints propagate upstream, rock is removed typically over the thickness of one or more lava flows, exposing pristine rock surfaces to cosmic rays and initiating the accumulation of cosmogenic nuclides. The surface can subsequently

Significance

The importance of high-magnitude, short-lived events in controlling the evolution of landscapes is not well understood. This matters because during such events, erosion processes can surpass thresholds and cause abrupt landscape changes that have a long-lasting legacy for landscape morphology. We show that extreme flood events, during which the flow depth exceeds the threshold for erosion through plucking rather than abrasion, are the dominant control on the evolution of a large bedrock canyon in Iceland. The erosive signature of these events is maintained within a dynamic landscape over millennial timescales, emphasizing the importance of episodic extreme events in shaping landscapes.

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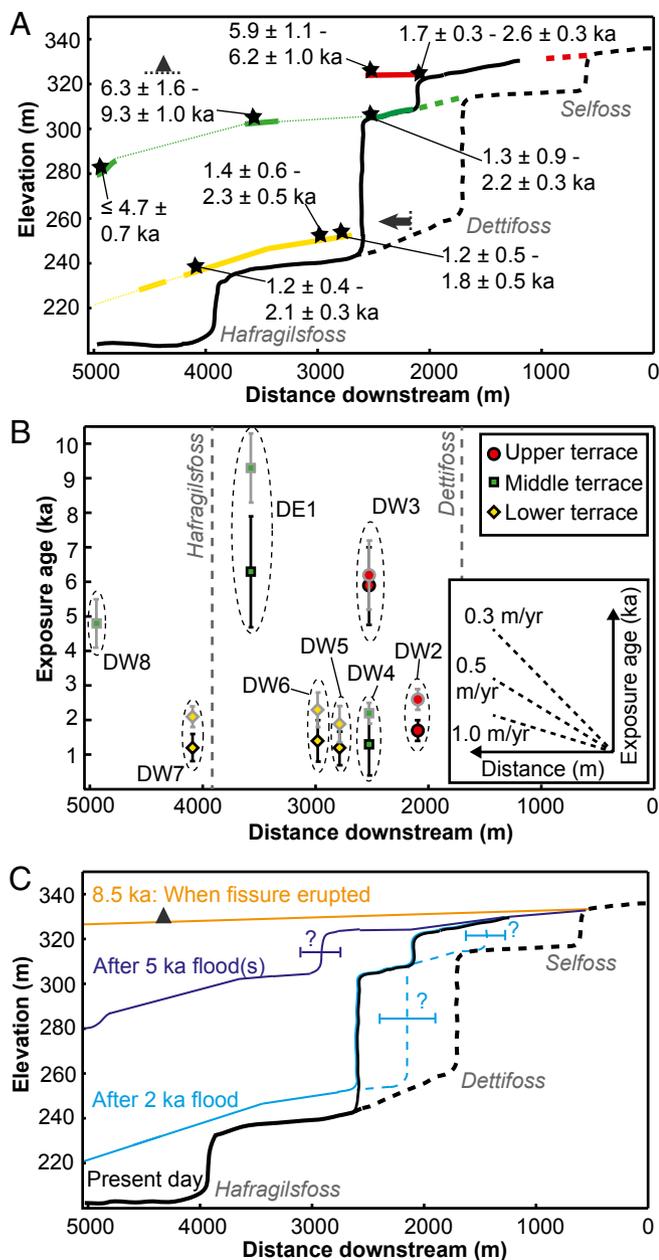


Fig. 3. Surface exposure ages and model of canyon evolution during the Holocene. (A) Long profile of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum through the study reach shown in black and locations and elevations of the strath terraces shown in red, green, and yellow (same colors as Figs. 1 and 2). Upstream of the confluence between the overspill channel and the main channel, the dashed lines indicate the topography within the main channel and the solid line indicates the topography within the overspill channel (same in C). Exposure age ranges are provided for each sample, with the younger age calculated assuming there is no radiogenic ^4He in the sample and the older age calculated assuming all ^4He is radiogenic in origin (see *Methods* and *SI Text, Surface Exposure Dating*). The triangle marks the elevation and the location of the volcanic fissure that erupted 8.5 ka ago. Bold arrow marks the beginning of the overwidened gorge within the main channel. (B) Surface exposure age ranges of the samples plotted against distance downstream (minimum age in black and maximum age in gray). Error bars represent the analytic error (2σ) for each sample (*SI Text*). The ages fit clearly into two clusters from 5.4 ka to 4.8 ka and from 2.3 ka to 1.4 ka, demonstrating that large stretches of the terraces were exposed at the same time, interpreted to result from the upstream propagation of knickpoints during extreme flood events during these periods. *Inset* shows lines of age = f (distance) corresponding to different knickpoint retreat rates (0.3 m/yr, 0.5 m/yr, and 1.0 m/yr), with 0.3 m/yr representing the rate at which Dettifoss would have retreated if

retreat were steady since 8.5 ka. *Inset* plotted at the same scale as the main graph, so slope of lines can be directly compared with the distribution of exposure ages. (C) Proposed evolution of the canyon during the Holocene. The strath terraces and exposure ages have been used to reconstruct the long profile of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum when the fissure erupted (in orange), after the 5-ka flood event(s) (in dark blue), and after the 2-ka flood event (in light blue). There has been no subsequent erosion since the 2-ka extreme flood event within the overspill channel. Bars with question marks indicate uncertainty on the position of knickpoints (paleo-Dettifoss at 2 ka ago is likely to be where the gorge overwidens).

contains samples that have ages in both clusters, which is evidence for erosion in this channel during both the identified canyon cutting periods. Ásbyrgi, located 25 km downstream of the study reach (Fig. 1), has a very similar morphology to canyons in Idaho, with an amphitheater-shaped canyon head and a vertical headwall, typical of formation during an extreme flood event (18, 19). There is no current overland flow or spring flow into the canyon capable of eroding or transporting the large boulders (size typically ranging between 0.5 m and 3 m) found in the canyon. Furthermore, the Klappir area immediately upstream of the canyon rim exhibits clear scabland morphology reminiscent of other landscapes that have experienced extreme flood events (e.g., ref. 1) (Fig. 1). A sample collected from scoured bedrock in an eroded notch at the rim of Ásbyrgi gives a range for the exposure age of 8.8 ± 1.6 ka to 11.0 ± 1.5 ka (see *Methods* and *SI Text, Surface Exposure Dating*, for explanation of upper and lower age limits on each sample), much earlier than either of the age clusters from the samples further upstream. Therefore, we infer that there was an erosive flood event along the Jökulsá á Fjöllum in the early Holocene. The absence of fluvial reworking and the outstanding preservation of the geomorphological features in the Klappir area indicate that the Jökulsá á Fjöllum never reoccupied the Klappir area following this flood event that likely carved the Ásbyrgi canyon. The floodwaters of the subsequent extreme flood events must therefore have been funneled through the modern Jökulsá á Fjöllum canyon further east, although overspilling with minimal erosive impact over the Klappir area cannot be ruled out.

Discussion

This study has identified three periods of intense canyon cutting in two reaches of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum throughout the Holocene. Our exposure ages alone do not allow us to distinguish between the impact of a single flood or a series of flood events during the periods of rapid canyon cutting identified, due to levels of uncertainty. However, previous work has identified one extreme flood event in the early Holocene and one in the late Holocene by dating sedimentary deposits (24); we tie the evolution of the bedrock landscape at Ásbyrgi and at Dettifoss to these early Holocene (~ 9 ka ago) and late Holocene (1.5–2 ka ago) flood events, respectively. Around 15 km downstream of Dettifoss, a sedimentary sequence containing up to 16 flood layers is believed to record events since 8 ka (24). The youngest two events in this sequence have been dated to 5.0 ka and 4.6 ka (25), consistent with our cluster of exposure ages at ~ 5 ka. We therefore hypothesize that the knickpoint retreat identified at ~ 5 ka is the result of one or both of these floods; the older floods identified in the sequence would have contributed to the migration of knickpoints between Ásbyrgi and Dettifoss. We believe the possible influence of inherited cosmogenic ^3He is minimal. Firstly, it is unlikely that all ^3He is inherited, because samples with different exposure ages are found on a single terrace. Secondly, exposure ages on different terrace levels overlap in two clusters that fit with the timing of floods identified in the stratigraphic record. We acknowledge that all ages are similar on

retreat were steady since 8.5 ka. *Inset* plotted at the same scale as the main graph, so slope of lines can be directly compared with the distribution of exposure ages. (C) Proposed evolution of the canyon during the Holocene. The strath terraces and exposure ages have been used to reconstruct the long profile of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum when the fissure erupted (in orange), after the 5-ka flood event(s) (in dark blue), and after the 2-ka flood event (in light blue). There has been no subsequent erosion since the 2-ka extreme flood event within the overspill channel. Bars with question marks indicate uncertainty on the position of knickpoints (paleo-Dettifoss at 2 ka ago is likely to be where the gorge overwidens).

the lower terrace, which could reflect inheritance (the real exposure age of the surface may be much younger); however, because these ages overlap with other ages on the middle and upper terrace (Fig. 3B), we privilege a scenario where inheritance is minimal and the ages reflect the true exposure age.

It is known that there was no incised gorge in the early Holocene when the volcanic fissure erupted onto the surface (Fig. 3C), but there was an extreme flood event around this time that carved Ásbyrgi further downstream. The clustering of ages from the middle terrace and the overspill channel shows that there was a second period of intense canyon cutting between 5.4 ka and 4.8 ka that led to ~40 m of vertical incision at the apex of the fissure and the formation of a knickpoint between the upper and middle terraces (Fig. 3C). Our exposure ages show that the entire length of the lower terrace within the study reach (>2.5 km) was exposed during another period of intense canyon cutting ~2 ka ago, associated with the retreat of the ~50-m-high knickpoint that makes up Dettifoss. It is hypothesized that this knickpoint retreated to where the canyon is no longer overwidened (where the contemporary river fills the whole width of the canyon; Figs. 1 and 3C), with Dettifoss migrating a further ~500 m to its current location since the last extreme flood event (at an average rate of ~0.3 m/y). There has also been some erosion since the last extreme flood event further downstream, with the lower terrace becoming abandoned, and we suggest that this has occurred during a series of small flood events, although we do not have direct evidence for this from our surface exposure ages, as it was impossible to collect samples from the bottom of the canyon. We suggest the knickpoints themselves were generated at the coast in the early stages of the Holocene, exploiting weaknesses in the lava flows due to the plucking of large blocks. Once the knickpoints were generated over the height of one or more lava flows, the vertical headwall of the knickpoints was maintained as they propagated upstream through the toppling and transportation of the lava columns.

Calculations based on the model described in ref. 27 indicate that a minimum water depth of 8.1 m would be required to initiate toppling of the basalt columns in the study area, corresponding to a minimum discharge of 3,250 m³/s at Selfoss (*SI Text, Calculation of Threshold Flow Depth and Discharge for Basalt Column Toppling*). Such discharge is 6 times higher than the maximum peak discharge recorded between 1973 and 1979 in this region (32) and twice the discharge associated with floods that occur approximately twice per century (33).

It is thought that the extreme flood events last for a period of days rather than months or years (34). The rates of knickpoint retreat during the short-lived Jökulsárgljúfur floods (hundreds of meters in days) are far greater than the highest documented long-term knickpoint retreat rates in other rivers of a similar scale, such as the ~1.5 m/y retreat rate of the Horseshoe Falls at Niagara between 1842 and 1905 (35). The cumulative effect of the two periods of intense canyon cutting in the mid and late Holocene, inferred to represent the effect of two or three extreme flood events, is 100 m of vertical incision at the downstream extent of the study reach over the last 8.5 ka, equivalent to an average of ~12 mm/y; this rate is similar to some of the most rapidly eroding rivers in tectonically active settings, such as the Nanga Parbat in the northwest Himalayas (36).

Vertical stepped knickpoints generated during extreme flood events can be diffused over time through abrasion and plucking of small blocks (19). This is exemplified by the incised slot gorge at Malad Gorge, Idaho: Following an extreme flood event ~46 ka that formed an ~50-m-high waterfall, the Pointed Canyon knickpoint has been retreating at 0.025 m/y for at least the last 33 ka while also diffusing the vertical headwall into a series of smaller steps (19). We do not find evidence for diffusion of the vertical headwalls of Selfoss, Dettifoss, or Hafragilsfoss since the last erosive extreme flood event 2 ka ago, suggesting that the river

has not made the transition from the plucking-dominated erosive regime during the floods to an abrasion-dominated erosive regime during background nonflood periods. Potential explanations for this observation include the following.

Firstly, bedload impact is the main driver of erosion and knickpoint retreat by abrasion (37); the persistence of plucking-dominated morphology may therefore be attributed to a combination of high resistance to abrasion of the fresh basalt with limited transport of coarse bedload over the last 2 ka, supported by qualitative field observation of lack of coarse sediment (i.e., coarser than pebble size) upstream of the gorge. Secondly, expected flow depths in a bedrock constriction during the extreme floods would be far greater than the 8.1-m threshold value [modeled flow depths are up to 59 m in constrictions further upstream of our study area (14)], which supports the assertion that the dominant erosion mechanism during the flood events is through column toppling and transportation. Nine small outburst floods inundated the depositional sandur plain downstream of the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon between 1655 and 1730 (38); they may have acted to maintain the vertical headwall of the larger knickpoints, while also contributing to the ~500-m retreat of Dettifoss, the retreat of Hafragilsfoss, and the abandonment of the lower terrace, possibly through the diffusion of small steps into rapids between Dettifoss and Hafragilsfoss. The recent spatial stability of Dettifoss despite an ~5-m retreat of the western part between 1953 and 1998 is demonstrated by analyzing historical aerial photographs (Fig. 1C), suggesting that a flow depth that exceeds the block toppling threshold has not occurred during this time period. Finally, a key part of the model of knickpoint retreat through block toppling (27) is the destabilizing effect of buoyancy forces acting in the plunge pool at the base of the headwall. There is a small set of rapids upstream of Selfoss, which possibly formed after a small vertical step (in the order of a couple of meters) was diffused through abrasion (Fig. 1B). We suggest that the larger plunge pools at the larger knickpoints may act to support the maintenance of a vertical headwall by promoting the collapse of basalt columns. Where knickpoints are not of sufficient size to generate a plunge pool, abrasion will act to diffuse the knickpoint into a series of rapids over time. In our study area, the threshold knickpoint height would be between 2 m and 13 m.

Conclusions

Our work demonstrates the importance of thresholds in landscape evolution, with significant landscape change occurring during extreme floods when a flow depth threshold has been surpassed. Two periods of intense canyon cutting in the mid and late Holocene are identified at the apex of the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon, thought to have been the result of discrete erosive flood events during these periods. The erosive impact of an additional flood in the early Holocene is also identified further downstream at Ásbyrgi. The effects of these floods have dominated the long-term (multimillennial) evolution of the system, with the resulting landscape morphology containing a legacy of rare extreme floods that can be maintained over millennial timescales, despite the occurrence of many other floods of lesser magnitude. Erosion is primarily through the upstream migration of knickpoints associated with the toppling and removal of basalt columns. During each period, up to three >13-m-high knickpoints retreated over distances that could exceed 2 km. The cumulative effect of the extreme floods at the apex of the canyon is up to 100 m of vertical erosion over the last 8.5 ka, equivalent to an average vertical incision rate of ~12 mm/y. This highlights the importance of high-magnitude, low-frequency flood events in shaping landscapes and the need to consider them when analyzing or forecasting the evolution of landscapes, especially those that are prone to flooding through landslide, moraine, or ice dam failures or subglacial lake outbursts. In landscapes dominated by stacked

basaltic lava flows, erosion through the toppling of columns generates a clear morphological signature characterized by vertical knickpoints. Limited bed load sediment transport and plunge pools at the base of high knickpoints may be responsible for the persistence of these morphological features over long periods of time (at least 2 ka).

Methods

Eight samples were collected for cosmogenic ^3He surface exposure dating from the main study reach at the head of the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon and one from the scoured rim of the Ásbyrgi canyon. Samples were taken from the upper 5 cm of surfaces that were clearly sculpted by fluvial action with no signs of weathering. Samples were collected from in situ partially plucked blocks showing less than 1 cm horizontal movement, to avoid unnecessary damage within the National Park but ensure that minimum disturbance had occurred since abandonment. We separated 300- to 500- μm -diameter olivine and pyroxene grains after crushing the samples using standard magnetic, heavy liquid, and hand-picking techniques. Each sample was then crushed in vacuo to release the mantle-derived (magmatic) He trapped in inclusions, which was measured using the VG5400 noble gas mass spectrometer at GeoForschungsZentrum Potsdam (39). The remaining He contained within the crystal lattice structure, together with any remaining magmatic He, was released through heating in an ultrahigh vacuum furnace to 1,750 °C, and the gases were again measured in the VG5400 mass spectrometer (40). Exposure ages were calculated using production rates based on a sea-level high-latitude production rate of 124 at $\text{g}^{-1} \text{y}^{-1}$ (41) and the scaling scheme

of Dunai (42) (*SI Text*). A range is given for the exposure ages: The younger ages are calculated assuming that all ^4He in the sample is magmatic He with a $^3\text{He}/^4\text{He}$ ratio as determined in the crushing extraction, while the older ages are calculated assuming that all ^4He in the sample is radiogenic in origin (i.e., produced by U and Th decay within the sample); 2σ uncertainties are given for both ages. The true exposure age of a sample lies within the given range, but it is impossible to be more specific, because depending on the eruption age of the basalt, the amount of radiogenic ^4He produced since eruption may be higher than the total measured concentration of ^4He (see *SI Text, Surface Exposure Dating*); thus an unknown fraction of radiogenic ^4He may have been lost. Assuming no radiogenic ^4He , the ratio of cosmogenic ^3He to total ^4He was calculated by subtracting the $^3\text{He}/^4\text{He}$ ratio determined in the crushing experiment from that determined in the melt measurement (e.g., ref. 40). Assuming all ^4He is radiogenic implies that all ^3He measured in the melt measurement is cosmogenic, and this value is used accordingly. Strath terrace level elevations were surveyed in the field using a Total Station.

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