

Continental break-up of the South China Sea stalled by far-field compression

Laetitia Le Pourhiet, Nicolas Chamot-Rooke, Matthias Delescluse, Dave A.

May, Louise Watremez, Manuel Pubellier

▶ To cite this version:

Laetitia Le Pourhiet, Nicolas Chamot-Rooke, Matthias Delescluse, Dave A. May, Louise Watremez, et al.. Continental break-up of the South China Sea stalled by far-field compression. Nature Geoscience, 2018, 11, pp.605-609. 10.1038/s41561-018-0178-5. hal-01828278

HAL Id: hal-01828278 https://hal.science/hal-01828278v1

Submitted on 8 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers. L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

1 Continental break-up of the South China Sea stalled by far field compression					
2	Laetitia Le Pourhiet *, Sorbonne Université, CNRS-INSU, Institut des Sciences de la Terre Paris,				
3	ISTeP UMR 7193, F-75005 Paris, France				
4	Nicolas Chamot-Rooke, Laboratoire de Géologie, Ecole normale supérieure, CNRS UMR8538,				
5	PSL Research University, 75005 Paris, France				
6	Matthias Delescluse, Laboratoire de Géologie, Ecole normale supérieure, CNRS UMR8538, PSL				
7	Research University, 75005 Paris, France				
8	Dave A. May, Department of Earth Sciences, University of Oxford, OX1 3AN Oxford, United				
9	Kingdom.				
10	Louise Watremez, Univ. Lille, CNRS, Univ. Littoral Côte d'Opale, UMR 8187, LOG, Laboratoire				
11	d'Océanologie et de Géosciences, Lille, France				
12	Manuel Pubellier, Laboratoire de Géologie, Ecole normale supérieure, CNRS UMR8538, PSL				
13	Research University, 75005 Paris, France				
14					

16	Outcome of decades of two-dimensional modeling of lithosphere deformation
17	under extension is that mechanical coupling between continental crust and the
18	underlying mantle controls how a continent breaks apart to form a new ocean.
19	However, geological observations unequivocally show that continental break-up
20	propagates in the third dimension at rates that do not scale with the rate of
21	opening. Here, we perform three-dimensional numerical simulations and
22	compare them with observations from the South China Sea to show that tectonic
23	loading in the direction of propagation exerts a first order control on these
24	propagation rates. The simulations show that in the absence of compression in
25	that direction, continental break-up propagates fast, forming narrow

26 continental margins independently of the coupling. When compression is 27 applied, propagation stagnates, forming V-shaped oceanic basins and wide 28 margins. Changes in out-of-plane loading therefore explain the alternation of 29 fast propagation and relative stagnation. These new dynamic constraints suggest 30 that the West-to-East topographic gradient across the Indochinese Peninsula 31 prevented continental break-up propagation through the 1000 km wide 32 continental rift of central and west basin of the South China Sea, until the 33 direction of stretching changed 23 million years ago resulting in bypassing and 34 acceleration of continental break-up propagation.

35

36 The relative movement of rigid plates on the sphere is described by rotation around a pole. 37 Assuming that continental break-up occurs after some constant amount of continental extension, 38 the propagation rate of break-up should scale with the gradient of stretching rate along strike. Far 39 from the pole of rotation, the velocity of opening is nearly constant over hundreds of kilometres and the model predicts that break-up should occur almost instantaneously¹ (Figure 1a). Within 40 41 this theory, V-shaped oceanic basins can form only in the close vicinity of the pole of rotation, 42 where variations in the stretching rate are important (Figure 1b). This scissors opening kinematic² model has been reproduced by dynamic experiments³ and numerical simulations¹. A 43 44 consequence of this model is that active shortening and thickening of the crust must be observed 45 in the close vicinity of the propagator (Figure 1b). Yet, several well-documented V-shaped propagators, like the East Basin of the South China Sea^4 , or the Coral $\text{Sea}^{5,6}$, are forming far 46 47 from the pole of rotation within zones of diffuse continental rifting⁷ (Figure 1c).

48 It is widely accepted that the rheological layering of the lithosphere controls the width and
49 structure of passive margins^{8,9,10}. Dynamic models have pointed out that mechanical
50 heterogeneities delay the localisation of deformation at the onset of continental rifting^{11,12}.

Extrapolating these models to continental break-up stage, it is generally hypothesized that Vink
kinematic model⁷ (Figure 1c) arises from variation in lithosphere strength. Yet, to date, V-shaped
oceanic basins have only emerged from dynamic simulations and experiments using scissor
opening, and or, simulations with two offset oceanic basins propagating in opposite direction^{13,14}.
An alternative explanation is therefore needed to explain the stagnation of uni-directional breakup far from the rotation pole.

57

3D tectonic loading impacts continental break-up

58 Assuming that break-up propagation is similar to the opening of cracks in an elastic media, local variations in the rate of propagation are expected with variation in loading^{15,16}. Here, we 59 60 study how a small amount of compression, and/or extension, acting normal to the direction of 61 propagation influences the rate of break-up propagation at lithospheric scale, discarding the local effect of magma supply¹⁷ (see methods). In order to study continental break-up propagation, a 62 63 lithospheric scale weak zone is place on one side of the models to trigger rapid continental 64 break-up after 10 to 15 Myr of stretching at 20 mm/yr. Three 3D simulations are presented in 65 Figure 2: a reference cylindrical experiment, and two experiments in which a small amount of 66 shortening or stretching is applied in the third dimension.

All these models include a mechanically weak lower crust, which is prone to slow
localisation of deformation and favour the development of wide rift structure^{8,10,18}. Further
details are provided in the supplementary method section. Time evolution of the models in 3D
and cross-section are provided in supplementary movies 1, 2 and 3.

After 23 Myr of evolution, the break-up has propagated in the pristine part of the three models.
Finite plastic strain outlines the orientation of major faults bounding the passive margin. The
passive margins are narrow and symmetric and very little differences in width are observed along
strike in the models with zero out-of-plane loading (Figure 2b), or with 2.5 mm/yr out-of-plane

extension (Figure 2c). In contrast, the model with 2.5 mm/yr out-of-plane compression (Figure
2a) shows the formation of a wide continental rift at the front of a V-shaped propagator. The
width of the rift increases with distance to the propagator and is bounded by minor strike slip
structures that make a 45° angle with the direction of extension.

Surface heat flow at the seafloor serves as a proxy for oceanic domain age¹⁹ and shows that with fast break-up propagation, the angle between the seafloor age and the margin is only a few degrees. On the contrary, owing to the slow propagation of break-up, the model with out-ofplane compression displays a typical V-shaped oceanic propagator with angles of more than 30°.

The location of the tip of the oceanic domain with time has been tracked for the three models (Figure 2d). The models with no tectonic forcing or with out-of-plane extension display a clear linear trend with propagation rates of approximately 150 mm/yr. The rate of propagation in the experiment in compression is not constant and the location of the tip of the oceanic domain with time is best approximated by a square root function, meaning that the propagation scales with $t^{-1/2}$, and rate decreases with $t^{-3/2}$ and tends towards zero. The initial break-up is also found to occur slightly later in the model in compression than in the other two models.

The width of passive margin and continental rift are often interpreted as a proxy for the
viscosity of the lower crust⁸. All the models presented here have a weak lower crust and
therefore should result in the formation of wide continental rifts, according to the current
paradigm in the field^{9,10,18,20}. Yet, the width of continental rift produced varies from 360 km to
1000 km (see cross-sections in Figure 2).

95 In order to evaluate the relative effects of lower crustal rheology and boundary conditions 96 on propagation, we provide the results of two supplementary simulations with a ten times larger 97 lower crustal viscosity. Comparing the amount of crustal thinning (Figure 3) indicates that the 98 rheology of the lower crust indeed influences both the rate of propagation of continental break-

up and the width of passive margin when compression is applied. Yet, in extension, rheological
effects are negligible as propagation occurs 10 times faster (150 mm/yr) than the far field plate
velocity (15 mm/yr).

Propagation of continental break-up modifies the dynamics of continental rifting because the horizontal strain rate increases at the tip of the propagator together with the viscous stress in the lower crust. This favours localised brittle strain at depth and rapid necking. For the fast propagation cases, this leads to the formation of narrow continental margins in a lithosphere with weak lower crust. For the slow propagation case, the width of the continental rift depends on the strength of the lithosphere.

108 The South China Sea propagator stalled due to Indochina

109 The South China Sea (SCS) is the largest area of immerged continental crust in the world. 110 The SCS has all the characteristics of a wide continental rift, but crust is thinner and extension 111 has led to continental break-up²¹. In map view, the width of the passive margin increases from 112 400 km up to 900 km towards the west²² as the age of sea floor decreases, an observation that is 113 clearly incompatible with typical scissor opening kinematics (Figure 1b). In the following, 114 geological ages are given in million annum (Ma) to contrast with time that remains in million 115 years (Myr).

116 From 32 Ma (magnetic anomaly 11) to 23 Ma (7-6b) (Stage 1, Figure 4b), the East SCS sub-

basin is the only one that accommodates regional extension by spreading. The North-South

118 opening direction at the time is best described by a pole of rotation located E65/N09, far enough

119 from the SCS to dismiss again the scissor-type model. From anomaly 6a the direction of opening

120 changes by $15^{\circ^{23}}$ as outlined by the change of orientation in magnetic anomaly in the yellow

- 121 oceanic domain (Figure 4a). The break-up propagates rapidly (Stage 2, Figure 4b) through the
- 122 central sub-basin, before stalling for 2 Myr until 20 Ma (6/5e) when the last increment of

propagation (Stage 3, Figure 4) took place. The last recorded magnetic anomaly (5c) marks the
end of spreading in the SCS^{24,25} at 16 Ma.

125 Discussing the controversial origin, and end, of opening is beyond the scope of this study, 126 since we focus here on the mechanism of propagation. Our interpretations mainly rely on the 127 relative timing of continental break-up of the three distinct oceanic sub-basins, each associated to 128 a V-shaped propagator, and on the change in the direction of spreading and propagation at a time close to magnetic anomalies 7 or 6b (Figure 4). Both observations are robust 23,25,26 . 129 130 Our study aims at understanding the dynamics of the wide continental rift which preceded the 131 opening of the central and west sub-basin, outlined in brown on Figure 4b and c. This continental 132 rift formed when the East basin was spreading and propagating slowly (Figure 4a and b, blue 133 spreading phase). Our modelling shows that from 32 to 23 Ma, the simultaneity of active 134 continental rifting over the 1000 km width in the west SCS basin, with spreading in the East 135 SCS, cannot be explained solely by a rheological contrast. The slow propagation of continental 136 break-up during this 9 Myr period (Figure 4a and b, blue) is only compatible in rate with models 137 with out-of-plane compression. On the contrary, the fast propagation periods observed in the 138 central and west basin (Figure 4a and b, yellow and pink) are compatible in rate with the 139 experiments with extensional or no tectonic loading at the front.

From the onset of rifting to 23 Ma, rifting occurs on structures that are perpendicular to the Indochinese Peninsula, as recorded by the magnetic anomaly in the East sub-basin and the abandoned rift branch of the Qiongdongnan basin (Figure 4a). As large topographic gradient can propagate compressive stress over hundreds of kilometers^{27,28} and dynamic sandbox experiments have witnessed non-instantaneous continental break-up propagation in presence of topographic gradient²⁹, we propose that the slow propagation results from the topographic load of Indochina. After the change in regional kinematics, the natural direction of propagation points obliquely to

the peninsula. From this moment, continental break-up starts to propagate through central and
west basin at rates, which can reach 200 km per Myr, as predicted by models with no out-of
plane compression.

150 The structure of the passive margin imaged along a refraction profile that cuts across the West and central SCS displays a series of basins overlying an almost flat $Moho^{30}$ (Figure 4c). 151 152 These basins lay on top of the thinned lower crust region, like in the model displayed in Figure 153 2a. These structures do not form with a stronger lower crust (Figure 3). Therefore, if the 154 differences in width of passive margin from East to West also result from the well-documented change in the nature of the lithosphere³¹, our simulations suggest the lower crust should be 155 weaker rather than stronger ^{11,22} in the West and Central Basin. Yet, the mechanical heterogeneity 156 of the crust in this region^{26,31} could well be responsible for the 6/5e stagnation period that our 157 158 simplistic models do not explain.

159 Oceanic propagators affect the width of passive margins

160 The width and architecture of magma-poor passive margins are often used as a proxy to

161 measure the initial effective strength of lithosphere, and particularly, the viscosity of the

162 continental lower crust. Here, we have shown that with cylindrical or tri-axial extension

163 boundary conditions, continental break-up propagates ten times faster than tectonic plate velocity

164 erasing the sensitivity of continental rifting structures on crustal rheology.

165 Furthermore, we also demonstrated that a slight component of shortening applied in the

166 direction of propagation reduces propagation rate of continental break-up to the order of

167 magnitude of plate tectonic velocity. This deceleration of rift propagation is recorded

168 geologically by a V-Shape oceanic basin, which cuts across a continental rift zone. While, we

169 point out the Indochinese Peninsula in the case of the SCS, any large gradient in topography can

cause the formation of V-shaped propagator. In the case of scissor opening, the stretching
gradient alone is responsible for the topographic gradient¹.



183 propagators have equal or even greater influence on the width of passive margins.

184

185 REFERENCES

1 Mondy, L.S., Rey, P.F., Duclaux, G. & Moresi, L. The role of asthenospheric flow during
rift propagation and breakup. *Geology* 46, 103-106 (2017).

188 2 Hey, R., Duennebier, F.K. & Morgan, W.J. Propagating rifts on midocean ridges. J.

189 Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth 85, 3647-3658 (1980)

1903Molnar, N.E., Cruden, A.R. & Betts, P.G. Interactions between propagating rotational rifts

and linear rheological heterogeneities: Insights from three-dimensional laboratory experiments.

192 *Tectonics* **36**, 420-443 (2017)

- 193 4 Briais, A., Patriat, P. & Tapponnier, P. Updated interpretation of magnetic anomalies and
- 194 seafloor spreading stages in the South China Sea: Implications for the Tertiary tectonics of

195 Southeast Asia. Journal of Geophysical Research: Solid Earth 98, 6299-6328 (1993)

- Weissel, J. K. & Watts, A. B. Tectonic evolution of the Coral Sea Basin. J. Geophys. Res.
 84, 4572-4582 (1979).
- Bulois, C., Pubellier, M., Chamot-Rooke, N. & Delescluse, M. Successive rifting events
 in marginal basins: the example of the Coral Sea region (Papua New Guinea). *Tectonics* 37, 3-29.
 (2017).
- 201 7 Vink, G.E. Continental rifting and the implications for plate tectonic reconstructions. *J.*202 *Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth*, 87,10677-10688 (1982)
- Buck, W.R. Modes of continental lithospheric extension. J. Geophys. Res. 96, 20161204 20178 (1991)
- Huismans, R. & Beaumont, C. Depth-dependent extension, two-stage breakup and
 cratonic underplating at rifted margins. *Nature* 473, 74-78 (2011)
- 207 10 Brune, S., Heine, C., Clift, P.D. & Pérez-Gussinyé, M. Rifted margin architecture and
- 208 crustal rheology: Reviewing Iberia-Newfoundland, Central South Atlantic, and South China Sea.
- 209 *Marine and Petroleum Geology* **79**, 257-281 (2017)
- 210 11 Van Wijk, J. W. & Blackman, D. K. Dynamics of continental rift propagation: the end-
- 211 member modes. *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* **229**, 247-258 (2005)
- 212 12 Brune, S., Corti, G. & Ranalli, G. Controls of inherited lithospheric heterogeneity on rift
- 213 linkage: Numerical and analog models of interaction between the Kenyan and Ethiopian rifts
- across the Turkana depression. *Tectonics* **36**, 1767-1786. (2017)

- Le Pourhiet, L., May, D. A., Huille, L., Watremez, L. & Leroy, S. A genetic link between
 transform and hyper-extended margins. *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 465, 184-192
 (2017)
- 218 14 Liao, J. & Gerya, T. From continental rifting to seafloor spreading: Insight from 3D
- thermo-mechanical modeling. *Gondwana Research* 28, 1329-1343 (2015)
- 220 15 Courtillot, V. Propagating rifts and continental breakup. *Tectonics* 1, 239-250 (1982)
- 221 16 Morgan, J.P. & Parmentier, E.M. Causes and rate-limiting mechanisms of ridge
- propagation: A fracture mechanics model. J. Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth 90, 8603-8612 (1985)
- 223 17 Buck, W.R. The role of magma in the development of the Afro-Arabian Rift System.
- 224 Geological Society, London, Special Publications 259,43-54 (2006)
- Huet, B., Le Pourhiet, L., Labrousse, L., Burov, E. & Jolivet, L. Post-orogenic extension
- and metamorphic core complexes in a heterogeneous crust: the role of crustal layering inherited
- from collision. Application to the Cyclades (Aegean domain). Geophysical Journal
- 228 International, 184, 611-625 (2011)
- 229 19 Parsons, B. & Sclater, J.G. An analysis of the variation of ocean floor bathymetry and
- 230 heat flow with age. J. Geophys. Res. 82, 803-827 (1977)
- 231 20 Buck, W.R., Lavier, L.L. & Poliakov, A.N. How to make a rift wide. *Philosophical*
- 232 Transactions-Royal Society of London Series A: Mathematical Physical and Engineering
- 233 Sciences 357, 671-689 (1999)
- 234 21 McIntosh, K., Lavier, L., van Avendonk, H., Lester, R., Eakin, D. & Liu, C.S. Crustal
- structure and inferred rifting processes in the northeast South China Sea. Marine and Petroleum
- 236 geology 58, 612-626 (2014)

- 237 22 Hayes, D.E. & Nissen, S. S. The South China sea margins: Implications for rifting
- contrasts. *Earth and Planetary Science Letters* 237, 601-616 (2005)
- 23 Sibuet, J.C., Yeh, Y.C. & Lee, C.S. Geodynamics of the South China Sea. *Tectonophysics*692, 98-119 (2016)
- 241 24 Li, C.F. et al. Ages and magnetic structures of the South China Sea constrained by deep
- tow magnetic surveys and IODP Expedition 349. *Geochemistry, Geophysics, Geosystems* 15,
 4958-4983 (2014)
- 244 25 Briais, A., Patriat, P. & Tapponnier, P. Updated interpretation of magnetic anomalies and
- seafloor spreading stages in the South China Sea: Implications for the Tertiary tectonics of
- 246 Southeast Asia. J. Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth 98, 6299-6328 (1993)
- 247 26 Franke, D. et al. The final rifting evolution in the South China Sea. *Marine and*
- 248 Petroleum Geology 58, 704-720 (2014)
- 249 27 Bird, P., Ben-Avraham, Z., Schubert, G., Andreoli, M. & Viola, G. Patterns of stress and
- strain rate in southern Africa. J. Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth 111, B08402 (2006)
- 251 28 Stamps, D. S., Flesch, L. M. & Calais, E. Lithospheric buoyancy forces in Africa from a
- thin sheet approach. Int. J. Earth Sci. 99, 1525-1533 (2010)
- 253 29 Ding, W. & Li, J. Propagated rifting in the Southwest Sub-basin, South China Sea:
- 254 Insights from analogue modelling. *Journal of Geodynamics*, **100**,71-86 (2016)
- 255 30 Pichot, T. et al. Deep crustal structure of the conjugate margins of the SW South China
- 256 Sea from wide-angle refraction seismic data. *Marine and Petroleum Geology* **58**, 627-643 (2014)
- 257 31 Pubellier, M., Savva, D., Sapin, F. & Aurelio, M., Structural Map of the South China
- 258 Sea; scale 1:3M, Commission for the Geological Map of the World

- doi:10.14682/2017STRUCTUSCS. http://ccgm.org/en/home/183-structural-map-of-the-south-
- 260 <u>china-sea-9782917310342.html</u> (2016)
- 261 32 Taylor, B., Goodliffe, A., Martiniez, F. & Hey, R. Continental rifting and initial sea-floor
- spreading in the Woodlark Basin. *Nature* **374**, 534-537 (1995)
- 263 33 Taylor, B., Goodliffe, A.M. & Martinez, F., How continents break up: insights from
- 264 Papua New Guinea. J. Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth 104, 7497-7512 (1999)
- 265 34 Nirrengarten, M., Manatschal, G., Tugend, J., Kusznir, N.J. & Sauter, D. Nature and
- 266 origin of the J-magnetic anomaly offshore Iberia–Newfoundland: implications for plate
- 267 reconstructions. *Terra Nova* **29**, 20-28 (2017)
- 268 35 Allken, V., Huismans, R.S. & Thieulot, C. Factors controlling the mode of rift interaction
- 269 in brittle-ductile coupled systems: A 3D numerical study. Geochemistry, Geophysics, Geosystems
- 270 *13*, Q05010 (2012)
- 271 36 Zwaan, F., Schreurs, G., Naliboff, J. and Buiter, S.J. Insights into the effects of oblique
- 272 extension on continental rift interaction from 3D analogue and numerical models. Tectonophysics
- **693,** 239-260 (2016)
- 274 CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
- 275 Material and correspondence should be addressed to Laetitia Le Pourhiet
- 276 laetitia.le_pourhiet@sorbonne-universite.fr
- 277
- 278 Acknowledgements
- 279 Maps were realised with GMT, post processing with Paraview. We thank Weiwei Ding and M.
- 280 Pérez-Gussinyé for their reviews. LLP acknowledge financial support of ERC Advanced

- 281 Research Grant RHEOLITH (grant agreement No.290864). DAM acknowledge financial support
- from (FP7/2007–2013)/ERC (Grant Agreement N° 279925) and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
- through the Deep Carbon Observatory (DCO) "Modeling and Visualisation" project.
- 284

285 Author contributions

- 286 LLP designed the experiments, analysed the results of the models and wrote the first draft of the
- 287 paper.
- 288 N.C-R drafted the map, discussed the timing of the anomaly and opening of SCS, MD helped for
- the comparison with the refraction profile and MP discussed the geodynamic setting and the
- 290 geological arguments.
- 291 DAM set up the solver options to run the numerical code efficiently.
- 292 LW discussed the results and participated writing the paper.
- 293
- 294 The authors declare no competing financial interests

295 FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Continental break-up propagation models and observations. a: Almost instantaneous opening far from the rotation pole. b: Scissor opening close to the rotation pole with associated active thickening at the front of the propagator. c: Sketch of propagator observed to form far from the rotation pole with the same colour code, also known as the Vink kinematic model. Contrary to a and b, this kinematic has never been demonstrated with dynamic experiments or simulations.

302



304 break-up. a, b and c present the results of the simulations 23 Myr after onset of rifting with

305 different boundary conditions in the direction of propagation illustrated on the bottom left

306 corners. The cross-sections bb' represent mantle temperature and crustal geometry overlaid with

307 brittle strain (>50%). Synthetic magnetic anomalies (blue-grey) highlight spreading in the

308 oceanic domain. d: Location of the oceanic propagator tip with time for the three models.

309 Interpretative sketches of structures associated with the two modes of propagation.

310



317

318 Figure 4: Rifting and spreading history of the South China Sea a: Bathymetry (ETOPO1) projected with pole of opening of stage 1 located E65/N09 (mean pole²⁵). Colour of sea floor 319 corresponds to the calendar presented in b and is based on the magnetic anomalies²⁵ shown as 320 321 blue lines. The red line represents today's location of the bb' cross section of the compression 322 model (Figure 2a). b: Continental break-up calendar (red arrows) is represented with the same 323 axes as Figure 2d to highlight periods of acceleration and stalling. The red circle indicates the bb' cross-section. c: Interpreted seismic refraction profile²⁹ with the Moho in white and the base of 324 325 the upper crust in black. See Methods for more details on the projection and basic reconstruction 326 possibilities.

328 Methods

329 Map:

330 Indochina has not move relative to the north margin of the SCS during the time period

- 331 considered so rather than proposing an ultimate version of these reconstructions that can be
- found in a number of papers, we use an oblique Mercator projection with the pole of projection
- being the mean pole of opening for the time period considered here.

334 The motion are then straight lines (small circles), just like in the model, and tracking the tip of

- the propagator or the margins at any time is straightforward: northward margin will not move,
- while southern margin will move straight. This holds until accretion switches to more SW-NE,
- i.e. the last propagating phase, which we are not comparing to the model.

338 Modelling Method:

339 This study uses $pTatin3D^{37,38}$ a highly scalable, massively parallel implementation of the

- 340 finite element method, which employs an Arbitrary Lagrangian Eulerian discretisation, together
- 341 with the material point method to solve for stokes flow

342 (1)
$$\nabla$$
. (2 η e) - $\nabla P = \rho$ g

343 It is coupled with time (*t*) dependent heat conservation

344 (2)
$$\nabla . (\kappa \nabla T) = DT/Dt$$

345 through non linear temperature (*T*) and pressure (*P*) dependant rheologies, detailed thereafter, as

346 well as temperature dependence of buoyancy

347 (3)
$$\rho = \rho_0 (1 - \alpha (T - T_0))$$

348 using Boussinesq approximation, which considers changes in density (ρ) are small enough to

349 approximate conservation of mass by an incompressible flow

350 (4)
$$\nabla . v = 0$$
,

351 Where **e** denotes the deviatoric strain rate tensor, **v** the velocity, ρ_0 the specific density at T_0 . κ

and α are respectively the thermal diffusivity and thermal expansion. Non-linear algebraic

353 solvers are based on PETSc³⁹ and customized with specific solve options^{13,38}.

354 **Rheology:**

355 The rheology of the models has been kept to a minimum of complexity, i.e temperature 356 dependence and brittle-plastic transition. In order to capture the brittle plastic transition at high 357 confining pressure, Drucker Prager yield stress is limited by von Misses perfect plasticity at high deviatoric stress following $\tau_v = \min[P\sin\phi + Co\cos\phi, \tau_m]^{40}$. Effective viscosity for brittle-plastic 358 behaviour depends on local second invariant of strain rate e^{II} following $\eta_Y = \tau_V / e^{II 41}$. In order to 359 360 simulate plastic wear, the friction (ϕ) decreases linearly from initial value of 30° to a final value of 6° after 30 % of plastic strain⁴². τ_m is set to 200 MPa in the crust and 300 MPa in the mantle. 361 362 The temperature dependence of the viscous strength of rock is approximated by the Frank-Kamenetskii flow rule $\eta_T = \eta_0 \exp(-T/\theta)$. The parameters η_0 and θ are set respectively to 10³⁰ 363 Pa.s and 55.6°C in the mantle, 10²⁶ Pa.s and 50°C in the lower crust and 10²⁷ Pa.s and 50°C in 364 365 the upper crust. Strong lower crust model have a lower crust viscosity 10 times larger than weak 366 crust models. The effective viscosity η is the smallest of η_T and η_Y . We did not run model with 367 dislocation creep law. This mode of deformation is however only expected to occur in the lower 368 crust because at warmer temperatures, the mantle is expected to flow by diffusion creep. As we 369 show in Figure 3 that models are only sensitive to lower crustal rheology in compression, we 370 therefore believe that this approximation will not drastically affect our conclusions.

371

Domain, boundary conditions and initial conditions:

The model domain is 600 km long in the direction of propagation (*z*) and 1200 km long in the stretching direction (*x*) and extends to 150 km depth. It is discretised using $128 \times 32 \times 256$ high order stable elements (Q2-P1), leading to spatial resolution of 5 km. Each simulation integrates deformation over a time span of 25 to 35 Myr, which corresponds to 2000 time

376 steps on average. The initial geometry includes three horizontal layers: upper crust (20 km),

lower crust (20 km) and mantle (110 km) with reference densities ρ_0 set respectively to 2700,

378 2800 and 3300 kg/m³ at $T_0 = 0^{\circ}$ C. The coefficient of thermal expansion, α in equation 3, is

379 constant and equal to 2×10^{-5} /° for all phases.

380 The initial geotherm corresponds to half-space cooling model for a thermal age of 300 Myr and a constant thermal diffusivity of 10^{-6} m²/s. This places the lithosphere-asthenosphere 381 382 boundary as defined by the 1300°C isotherm at 120 km depth initially. Boundary conditions 383 include symmetrical stretching at $v_{x1/2} = 10$ mm/yr on the left and right sides, free slip on front 384 boundary enforces the model to be cylindrical close to that side, the back side is either assigned 385 free slip or a shortening/stretching velocity of $v_z = \pm 2.5$ mm/yr. Infill of mantle material through 386 the bottom boundary compensates for material leaving and entering through the side wall of the 387 models.

In order to study propagation of break-up, it is necessary to ensure that break-up arise more rapidly on one side of the model. This initial localisation is obtained by ascribing larger amplitude (30% instead of a background value of 3%) of random brittle strain to a volume of 100 $\times 100 \times 120$ km located at front of the domain. The deformation in this section of domain is not analyzed in the paper.

393 Neglecting Magma supply:

394 It has been proposed that in pristine normally thick lithosphere when the supply of magma
395 is large, i.e. above large igneous provinces, individual dikes might propagate over 1000 km¹⁷,
396 weakening the lithosphere over long distance. Our model neglects these magma supply effects.
397 Yet, modelling study and data show that if dike propagation is directional at short time

- 398 scale (days), the polarity of propagation alternates at time scales of ten years or less. Upscaling
- to the timescale of one time step of our models (20 thousand years), dykes might act as a
- 400 weakening factor but they would not introduce directionality. At long timescale, propagation of

401 diking is therefore slaved to the magma supply, which occurs beneath the zone of active necking 402 of the mantle. Our model captures the propagation of these lithospheric weakness zones, which 403 are driven by tectonic stress. The lithospheric column located under the ridge is indeed extremely 404 weak and buoyant due to temperature (see Figure 2). When these highly localised zones of warm 405 mantle material reach the surface, they approximate the mid-oceanic ridges at large scale and 406 influences tectonic stress.

407

408 Data availability

- 409 The data used for the refraction profile that support the findings of this study are available
- 410 from the corresponding author upon request. The data used to produce the map are taken from
- 411 ETOPO1 public database⁴⁴, and magnetic anomalies have been digitalized from Briais et al. ²⁵.

412 <u>Code availability</u>

- 413 The code used to generate the numerical simulation 37,38 can be access at
- 414 <u>https://bitbucket.org/ptatin/ptatin3d</u>. Simulations can be reproduced using model RIFT3D_T with
- 415 example option file SCS.opts.

416 REFERENCES

- 417 37 May, D.A., Brown, J. & Le Pourhiet, L. pTatin3D: High-performance methods for long-
- 418 term lithospheric dynamics. In Proceedings of the International Conference for High
- 419 Performance Computing, Networking, Storage and Analysis, 274-284 (2014).
- 420 38 May, D.A., Brown, J. & Le Pourhiet, L. A scalable, matrix-free multigrid preconditioner
- 421 for finite element discretizations of heterogeneous Stokes flow. *Computer Methods in Applied*
- 422 *Mechanics and Engineering* **290**, 496-523 (2015)
- 423 39 Balay, S., et al. PETSc users manual revision 3.3. Computer Science Division, Argonne
- 424 National Laboratory, Argonne, IL (2012)

- 425 40 Watremez, L. et al. Buoyancy and localizing properties of continental mantle lithosphere:
- 426 Insights from thermomechanical models of the eastern Gulf of Aden. Geochemistry, Geophysics,
- 427 *Geosystems* **14**, 2800-2817 (2013)
- 428 41 Lemiale, V., Mühlhaus, H.B., Moresi, L. & Stafford, J. Shear banding analysis of plastic
- 429 models formulated for incompressible viscous flows. *Physics of the Earth and Planetary*
- 430 Interiors 171, 177-186 (2008)
- 431 42 Lavier, L.L., Buck, W.R. & Poliakov, A.N., Self-consistent rolling-hinge model for the
- 432 evolution of large-offset low-angle normal faults. *Geology* 27, 1127-1130 (1999).
- 433
- 434 43 Buck, W. R., Einarsson, P., & Brandsdóttir, B. Tectonic stress and magma chamber size
- 435 as controls on dike propagation: Constraints from the 1975–1984 Krafla rifting episode. J.
- 436 *Geophys. Res.: Solid Earth* **111,** B12404 (2006).
- 437
- 438 44 Amante, C. & B.W. Eakins ETOPO1 1 Arc-Minute Global Relief Model: Procedures,
- 439 Data Sources and Analysis. NOAA Technical Memorandum NESDIS NGDC-24. National
- 440 Geophysical Data Center, NOAA. doi:10.7289/V5C827 (2009)
- 441

442		
443		
444		





Compression

Extension



