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# 1 Permafrost Degradation Pathways during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of 2 High-elevated Rock Ridge in the Mont Blanc Massif

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4 Florence Magnin<sup>1</sup>, Benjamin Pohl<sup>2</sup>, Jean-Yves Josnin<sup>1</sup>, Julien Pergaud<sup>2</sup>, Philip Deline<sup>1</sup>,  
5 Ludovic Ravanel<sup>1</sup>

6

7 <sup>1</sup> Laboratoire EDYTEM, UMR5204, CNRS, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, Le Bourget du Lac,  
8 France

9 <sup>2</sup> Biogéosciences, UMR6282, CNRS, Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté, Dijon, France

10

11

## 12 **Abstract**

13 Rockwall permafrost is increasingly investigated because of its possible role in bedrock failure, related  
14 hazards and geotechnical practices. In this study, we simulate the possible permafrost pathways during  
15 the 21<sup>st</sup> century of one of the coldest rock ridge in the European Alps: the Grand Pilier d'Angle (4305  
16 m a.s.l). Rockwalls permafrost evolution is primarily driven by air temperature and we thus run  
17 simulations with 13 climate models declined with the most contrasted greenhouse gas emissions  
18 scenarios (RCP2.6 and 8.5) until 2100 to account for climate models uncertainty. Results show that by  
19 2050 permafrost would have warmed by about 1°C down to 35 m depth compared to 2020, and that  
20 about 50, and 30 % of this perturbation will reach depths of 80 and 130 m respectively. But  
21 uncertainty remains rather high before mid-century and possible permafrost pathways are more  
22 reliable after 2050. By the end of the century, a “business as usual” scenario would result in a surge in  
23 permafrost degradation with  $+3 \pm 1.3$  and  $+1.4 \pm 0.6$  °C at 35 m and 130 m depth respectively. In  
24 narrow topographies where heat fluxes from opposite faces merge such as the top of our study site, the  
25 temperature increase would be enhanced, reaching  $+4^\circ\text{C} \pm 1.9^\circ\text{C}$ . In this scenario, permafrost would  
26 thaw in most alpine rockwalls except shaded rock faces  $> 4000$  m a.s.l. that are several tens to  
27 hundreds of meters apart from sun-exposed faces such as the north face of our study site. Conversely,  
28 drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions would result in a stabilization in permafrost degradation,  
29 restricting bedrock thawing to sun-exposed and shaded faces below 4000 and 3000 m a.s.l.  
30 respectively, where warm permafrost is currently present.

## 31 **Introduction**

32 Permafrost (*i.e.* ground that remains at or below 0°C for at least two consecutive years<sup>1</sup>) is commonly  
33 regarded as a geological manifestation of climate. In this respect, the evolution of its temperature is  
34 recognized as an Essential Climate Variable by the Global Climate Observation System (GCOS) and is  
35 thus monitored throughout the world by the Global Terrestrial Network for Permafrost (GTN-P). In the  
36 frame of this monitoring, temperature collected into boreholes within the last decade has shown a general  
37 warming of about  $+0.19 \pm 0.05^\circ\text{C}$  to  $+0.39 \pm 0.15^\circ\text{C}$ , depending on regions<sup>2</sup>. Locally, permafrost  
38 evolution does not only depend on regional climate but also on ground type and permafrost temperature  
39 (*i.e.* more or less close to 0°C). The closer to 0°C and the greater the ice content, the more delayed its  
40 response to warming signal due to latent heat consumption<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, bedrock permafrost is  
41 particularly sensitive to air temperature because of its relatively low ice content, which is restrained to  
42 pore space and fractures. In alpine environment, the sensitivity of rockwall permafrost to air temperature  
43 is furthermore exacerbated by the topographical settings, as steepness favors a direct coupling with the  
44 atmosphere, due to limited accumulation of snow or debris, and because of the multi-sided heat  
45 propagation in peaks, ridges and spurs<sup>4</sup>.

46 Permafrost ice is also a key component for ground mechanical properties and rheology<sup>5,6</sup>, and is thus of  
47 concern for geotechnical engineering practices<sup>7,8</sup>. Since the remarkably high number of rockfalls  
48 observed during the heat wave that struck the European Alps in summer 2003<sup>9</sup>, systematic observations  
49 have shown that low magnitude rockfalls (a few tens to a few hundreds of cubic meters) mostly occur  
50 during hot summers<sup>10,11</sup>. The role of permafrost is also suggested by frequent observations of ice in  
51 rockfall scars, hinting at laboratory studies that showed the physical and mechanical alteration of ice-  
52 filled fractures cementing bedrock compartments when warming towards 0°C<sup>6,12,13</sup>. The recent increase  
53 in periglacial rock slope failures is consequently attributed to permafrost degradation<sup>10,14</sup> and rises  
54 concerns for alpine communities as it jeopardizes mountain practices, professions and infrastructure<sup>15-</sup>  
55 <sup>17</sup>. In a further extent, rockfalls detached from high-elevation rockwalls may threaten people and  
56 infrastructure down to the valley floor by provoking high magnitude hazard cascades<sup>18-21</sup>. Indeed, in  
57 high mountain environments, rockfalls may impact sediment storages, lakes or glaciers and trigger the  
58 sudden displacement of high volumes of non-consolidated materials. Such catastrophic chains of  
59 processes constitute a new threat in deglaciating landscapes<sup>22</sup>. In this context, estimating the evolution  
60 of rockwall permafrost throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century is crucial to anticipate hazardous areas and bears  
61 strong implications for land planning, risk mitigations and practice adaptations.

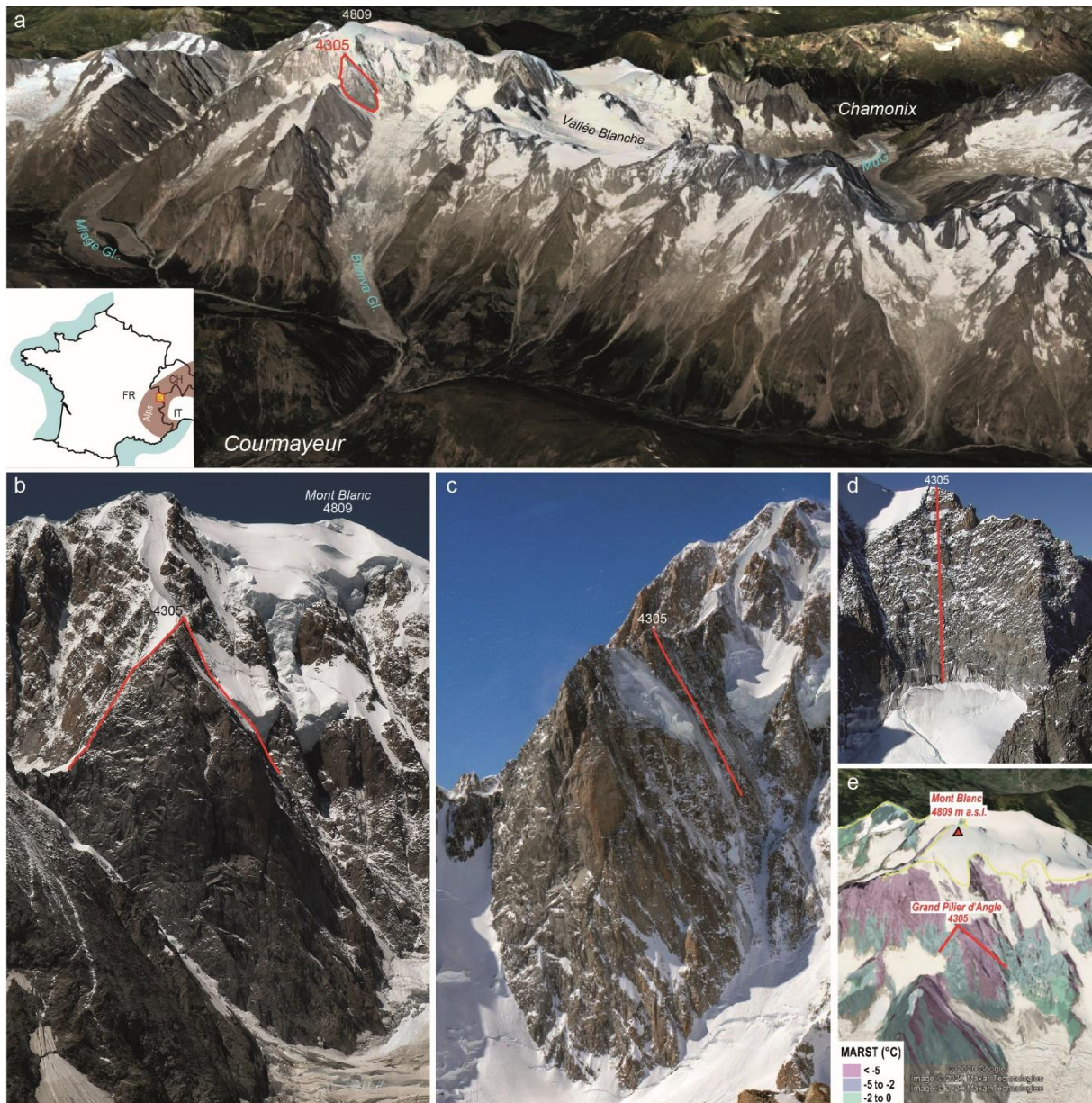
62 Due to its enhanced sensitivity to climate signal, rockwall permafrost evolution is primarily driven by  
63 air temperature and local topographical settings. Thus, the realism of permafrost projections strongly  
64 relies on the skill of climate models. Within the 5<sup>th</sup> Coupled Model Intercomparison Project (CMIP5<sup>23</sup>)  
65 of the IPCC 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report (AR5<sup>24</sup>), fully coupled climate models were forced by idealized

66 radiative forcing approximating anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. These scenarios, named  
67 Representation Concentration Pathways (RCPs), correspond to additional radiative forcing of +2.6 to  
68 +8.5 W.m<sup>-2</sup> by 2100 compared to the pre-industrial era. Considering an ensemble of climate models is  
69 necessary to quantify the model dependency of the results, and thus, the uncertainties associated with  
70 the climate change projections. However, these models have rather coarse spatial resolutions (typically,  
71 a few tens of kilometers) that make their use for impact studies rather difficult, especially in complex  
72 environments like mountain massifs. Thus, efforts are conducted to provide downscaled climate  
73 projections at high spatial resolution in realistic topographical settings for the coming decades. Recently,  
74 Joly et al.<sup>25</sup> have downscaled 13 models taken from the CMIP5 modeling exercise under the most  
75 contrasted scenarios (namely, RCP2.6 and 8.5) in the Mont Blanc massif (Northwestern European Alps;  
76 MBM hereafter) at a spatial resolution of 200 × 200 m. Their results show major decrease in frost  
77 frequency over and around the Mont Blanc summit<sup>26</sup>. These results provide a unique opportunity to  
78 assess how climate pathways could affect rockwall permafrost within the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

79 In this study, we run simulations of permafrost evolution at the Grand Pilier d'Angle site (4305 m a.s.l.)  
80 in the MBM (Fig. 1) by combining mean annual rock surface temperature distribution (MARST)  
81 statistically determined from air temperature and potential incoming solar radiation<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 1e) with the  
82 physic-based Feflow® (DHI-WASY) modeling tools, to simulate heat conduction and latent heat  
83 processes<sup>28</sup>. These simulations are forced by the aforementioned downscaled CMIP5 projections under  
84 RCP2.6 and 8.5.

85 The Grand Pilier d'Angle is the outermost part of the ridge extending eastwards of the Mont Blanc  
86 summit (4809 m a.s.l.). Its north and east faces respectively stand 700 and 1000 m above the Brenva  
87 glacier, while its south face dominates the summital cirque of the Frêne glacier by about 200 m height.  
88 A part of its north face is covered by a hanging glacier witnessing of cold permafrost (< -2°C)  
89 occurrence, which is also suggested by the permafrost map produced by Magnin et al. <sup>27</sup> (Fig. 1e and  
90 2a). Its east face has been affected by several rock avalanches within the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a succession  
91 of five events in November 1920 with a total rock volume around 3 × 10<sup>6</sup> m<sup>3</sup>, and a similar magnitude  
92 event in January 1997 <sup>29, 30</sup>. Despite the historical recurrence of such hazards, the Grand Pilier d'Angle  
93 is famous for his highly challenging climbing routes.

94 This site was chosen as a theoretical study-case because (i) its high elevation guarantees that permafrost  
95 will persist by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>28</sup>, (ii) its > 300 m wide basis helps in disentangling the  
96 respective effects of the climate signal and topographical perturbation in the temperature evolution, and  
97 (iii) its narrow summit is representative of high alpine rockwalls, where temperature reflects the  
98 enhanced and mixed lateral heat fluxes coming from the opposite rock faces<sup>4</sup>. Such topographical  
99 characteristics allow us to assess the broad significance of the results for high-alpine permafrost  
100 evolution pathways.



101

102 **Figure 1. a.** Location of the Grand Pilier d'Angle (red polygon) in the Mont Blanc massif (Google  
 103 Earth image). **b.** Profile on South face (on left) and North face (on right) of the GPA. **c.** North face of  
 104 the GPA. **d.** South face of the GPA. **e.** Mean Annual Rock Surface Temperatures (MARST) at the  
 105 GPA mapped by Magnin et al.<sup>27</sup>. Elevations in m a.s.l.

106

### 107 **Modeling the rockwall temperature evolution**

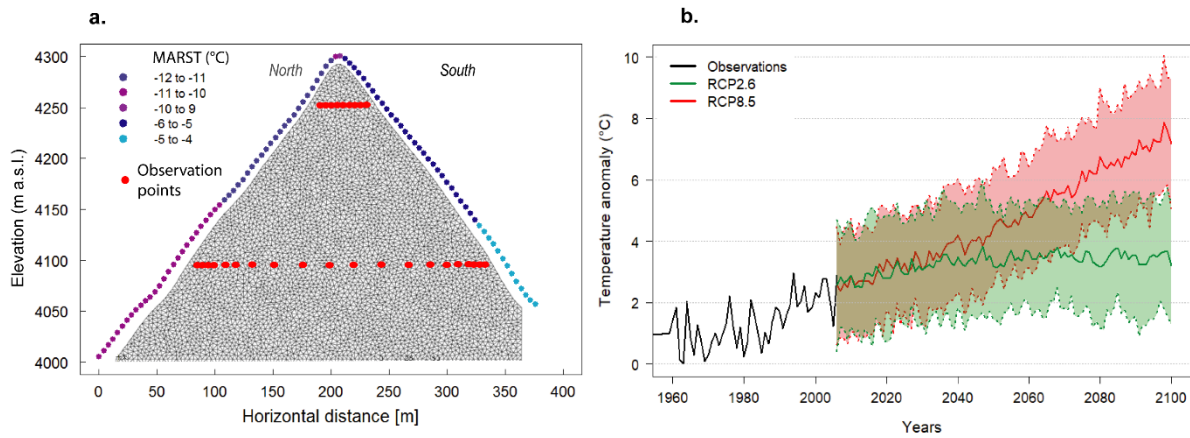
108 Rockwall temperature modeling is a common tool to investigate permafrost dynamics and predict  
 109 evolutions at mountain sites<sup>4,28,31–34</sup>. In a first step, rock surface temperature time series are obtained by  
 110 mean of energy balance modeling, measurements, or statistical relationship between rock surface  
 111 temperature, air temperature, incoming solar radiation and snow depth. These time series are then used  
 112 to calculate heat transfers from surface to depth, by generally considering heat conduction and latent

113 heat processes into a homogeneous, isotropic and saturated rock media with a higher porosity value than  
114 in natural rock to indirectly account for ice or water content in fractures. Complex convective heat  
115 transfer processes possibly induced by water percolation or air ventilation into bedrock fractures<sup>35,36</sup> are  
116 assumed to play a secondary role in pluri-decadal permafrost evolution and are thus overlooked in such  
117 approaches.

118 In the MBM, Magnin et al.<sup>27</sup> have mapped the (MARST (Fig. 1e) by mean of average potential incoming  
119 solar radiation at the rock surface and air temperature of the period 1961-1990. By using measured and  
120 reconstructed air temperature time series, Magnin et al.<sup>28</sup> have later simulated the past evolution of  
121 rockwall permafrost between the end of the Little Ice Age (1850) and the present time for N-S profiles  
122 of three sites distributed along an altitudinal profile in the MBM, including the Grand Pilier d'Angle.  
123 This study has shown that modeled temperature match measured temperature in 10 m deep boreholes  
124 for depths > 8 m. Authors also proposed a preliminary projection for permafrost evolution by the end of  
125 the 21<sup>st</sup> century, showing that, under RCP8.5, permafrost will likely subsist only at the Grand Pilier  
126 d'Angle, the highest-elevated study site. These projections were based on the IPSL-CM5A-MR model  
127 run at a spatial resolution of  $1.25 \times 2.5^\circ$  (that is roughly  $140 \times 200$  km at this latitude, one of the highest  
128 spatial resolutions available among the CMIP5 ensemble). Orographic effects on the local climate were  
129 still largely insufficient to produce realistic climate boundary conditions to force rockwall permafrost  
130 simulations. Here, we apply the same modelling approach (details in Supplementary materials S1) to  
131 the Grand Pilier d'Angle site (Fig. 1) with the downscaled CMIP5 ensemble.

132 To ensure model comparability throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century and account for uncertainty in our  
133 conclusions, climate models are run from 2006 only (Fig. 2a), while the air temperature history –  
134 required to initialize permafrost conditions prior to 2006 – is identical for all models and based on  
135 assumptions ( $-1^\circ\text{C}$  in 1850 compared to 1961) and local temperature observations (from 1961 to 2006)  
136 similarly to Magnin et al.<sup>28</sup>.

137 Permafrost evolution is then analyzed by mean of respectively 9 and 20 observation points spread along  
138 two crosscutting profiles (Fig. 2a). Shallowest points are located at 10 m depth below the SE and NW  
139 faces as bedrock temperature near the surface is influenced by a variety of processes not accounted for  
140 in our modelling approach. We register simulated bedrock temperature at each time step for each of  
141 these observation points and use the simulated time series to analyze permafrost evolution in details  
142 while 2D images are extracted the 1<sup>st</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> September of the years 2015, 2035, 2050, 2075 and  
143 2100.



145

146 **Figure 2. a.** Model geometry of the Grand Pilier d'Angle (a 5 km box is drawn below and crossed by  
 147 the geothermal heat flux, not shown here; see S1 in the Supplements) with initial MARST and  
 148 observation points recording simulated temperature at each time step. **b.** Local air temperature  
 149 anomaly pathways (compared to 1961-1990 as calculated by Magnin et al.<sup>27</sup>) under RCP8.5 and 2.6  
 150 applied to the initial MARST. The thick lines show the means of the 13 models while the filled areas  
 151 set the  $\pm 1$  standard deviation around the mean to account for models uncertainty.

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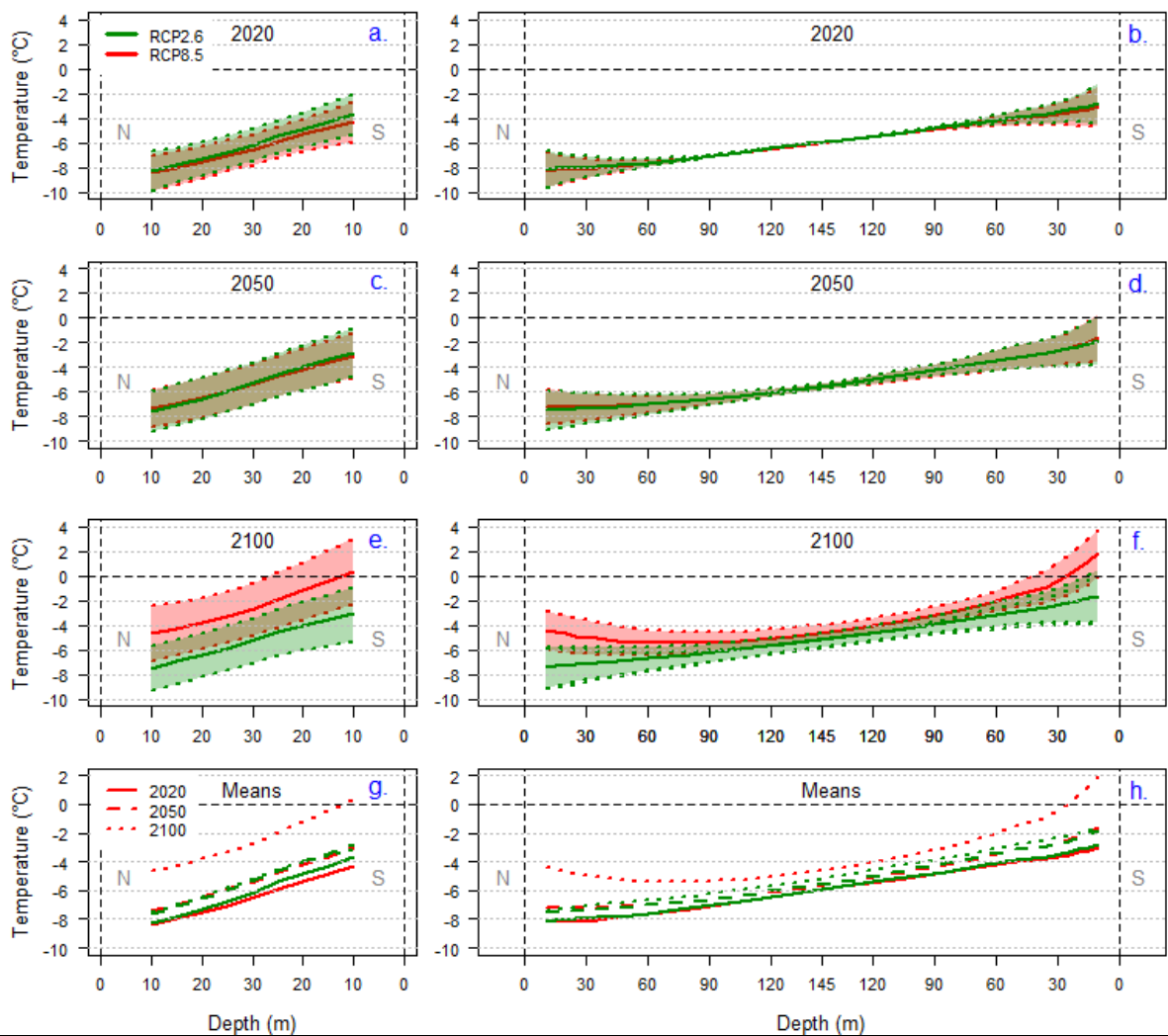
### 153 **No distinctive pathways in rockwall permafrost evolution prior to 2050**

154 Air temperature trends are very similar between RCP2.6 and RCP8.5 until 2035 (Fig. 2a) and  
 155 distinctive pathways only appear between 2035 and 2050. RCP8.5 increasingly differentiates  
 156 from RCP2.6 during the second half of the century, when the radiative forcings themselves  
 157 strongly differ. The strong decrease in anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions in RCP2.6 leads  
 158 to a rapid stabilization of air temperature, while the latter continuously increases under RCP8.5,  
 159 in line with rather similar trajectories in corresponding greenhouse gas concentrations.

160 The consequence of these uniform air temperature trends is that permafrost evolution is similar  
 161 whatever the considered scenario until 2050 (Fig. 3a-d). In 2020, the first 15 years of climate  
 162 projections have impacted the bedrock temperature down to about 80 m depth (Fig. 3b). Close  
 163 to the top, where the ridge is narrow, the bedrock temperature is thus entirely controlled by the  
 164 different climate models and scenarios which respective propagation from the SE and NW faces  
 165 add up at the core (Fig. 3a). Transient effects of the historical data have a marginal influence  
 166 for narrow (< 80 m wide) ridges or peaks and bedrock temperature is thus in a certain  
 167 equilibrium with recent climate evolution. This is notably revealed by the steady temperature  
 168 gradient between N and S faces, depicting near vertical isotherms such as shown in idealized  
 169 steady state cases<sup>4</sup>. The slightly higher temperature for RCP2.6 than the one of RCP8.5 is

170 consequently reflecting the past 15 years of climate projections and the little influence of  
171 radiative forcing at this time. Conversely, the core of the bottom profile remains isolated from  
172 the thermal disturbance induced from 2006 until 2050 (Fig. 3b, d) in reason of its remoteness  
173 from the surface ( $> 140$  m below the NW and SE surfaces) and the slow heat propagation  
174 throughout the bedrock medium.

175 When comparing the averaged trends of 2020 and 2050, bedrock temperature has increased by  
176  $1 \pm 1$  °C at 35 m depth,  $0.5 \pm 0.5$  and  $0.3 \pm 0.3$  °C at 80 and 130 m depth respectively for RCP8.5.  
177 The top profile is marked by a  $1.1 \pm 1.4$ °C increase in average (Fig. 3g-h) and uncertainty  
178 remains fairly high within this horizon. It however appears very unlikely that the highest part  
179 of the ridge will start to thaw before mid-century, with respectively 1 model out of 13 showing  
180 positive temperature at 10 m depth in the SE face under RCP2.6, and none under RCP8.5 (Fig.  
181 4). Thawing may possibly occur at the foot of the SE face according to the three warmest  
182 predictions of each RCP. It may reach a maximum of 15-20 m depth by 2050, according to the  
183 warmest predictions, but  $> 75$  % of the models predict the absence of thawing. Major changes  
184 will rather occur within the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



186

187 **Figure 3.** Permafrost temperature pathways from 10 m depth to the core of the rock mass in  
 188 the top profile (left) and the bottom profile (right). Profile locations are shown on Figure  
 189 1. Thick lines are the means of the 13 models while the dashed lines represent the 68 %  
 190 confidence interval.

191

### 192 Pathways stabilizing versus surging by 2050

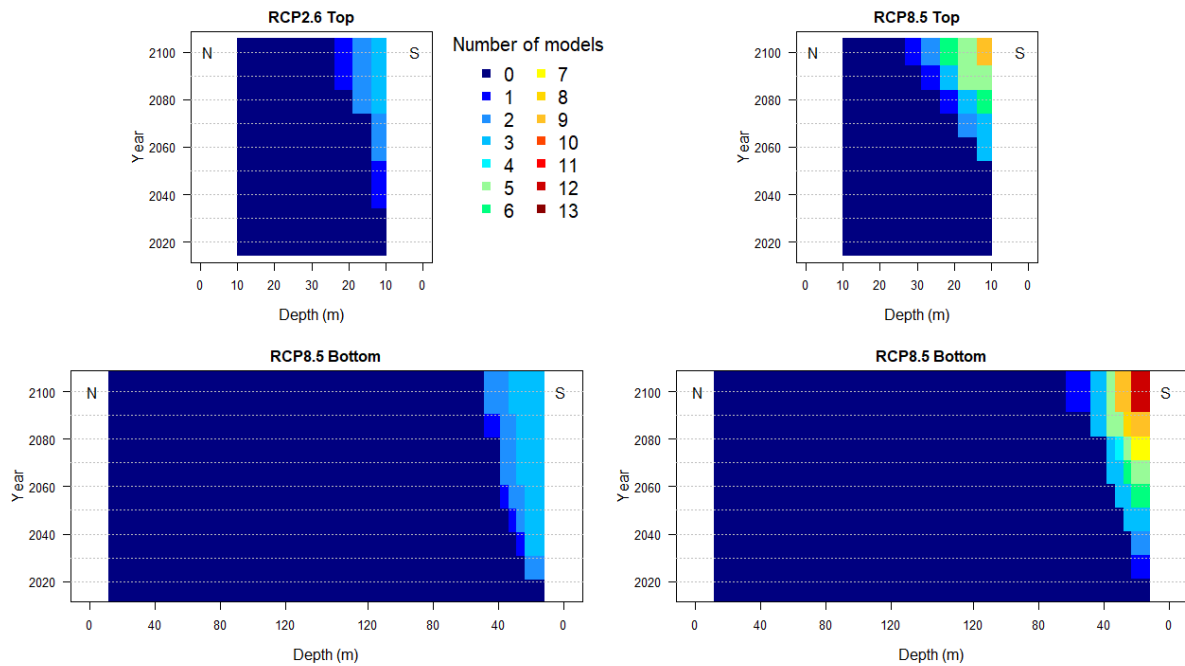
193 By 2050, the effect of the different RCPs becomes clearly predominant upon internal climate  
 194 variability, and has a strong impact on permafrost degradation pathways. Under RCP2.6, the  
 195 permafrost evolution almost reaches an equilibrium by 2050, as revealed by identical averaged  
 196 temperature trend in the top profile between 2050 and 2100 (Fig. 3g), steady temperature  
 197 gradient from the N to the S face (Fig. 3h), and the near vertical isotherms close to the top (Fig.  
 198 5b)<sup>4</sup>. Because of this temperature balancing, the average temperature slightly increases between  
 199 2050 and 2100 in the core of the bottom profile, as a result of transient effects of the first half  
 200 of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

201 Conversely to RCP2.6, RCP8.5 results in major temperature changes within the second half of  
202 the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will reach  $+4 \pm 1.9$  °C compared to 2020 in the top profile in 2100 compared  
203 to 2020,  $+3 \pm 1.3$ ,  $+1.8 \pm 0.8$  and  $+1.4 \pm 0.6$  °C at 35 m, 80 and 130 m depth respectively in the  
204 bottom profile. When considering the 68 % confidence interval, the average warming is well  
205 higher than the 68% confidence interval (Fig. 3 c-h). When considering a higher confidence  
206 interval, one of the colder RCP8.5 models (95 % confidence interval) displays significant  
207 permafrost thawing on the S face, while this only occurs with the warmer RCP2.6 model. (Fig.  
208 5b, d). The warmer climate models (95 % confidence interval) result in similar temperature  
209 field patterns on the S face for both scenarios but a significant curling up of the -4°C isotherm  
210 below the N face under RCP8.5 (Fig. 5c, f).

211 Permafrost thawing still remains very unlikely under RCP2.6, even though it slightly progresses  
212 down to 25 m depth in the top profile for the warmest prediction as a delayed response to  
213 thermal perturbation from the previous decades (Fig. 3e, 4). However, permafrost thawing  
214 becomes very likely under RCP8.5 as 50 % of the models predict positive temperature down to  
215 25 m depth by 2100 in the S side of the bottom profile (Fig. 4). Closer to the surface, permafrost  
216 thawing is predicted by > 90 % of the RCP8.5 models. The warmest RCP8.5 model even  
217 predicts permafrost thawing at a depth of 45 m for the bottom profile and down to the core of  
218 the top profile in the SE side by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By contrast, the N face will remain  
219 frozen in any case due to its very cold state at present time.

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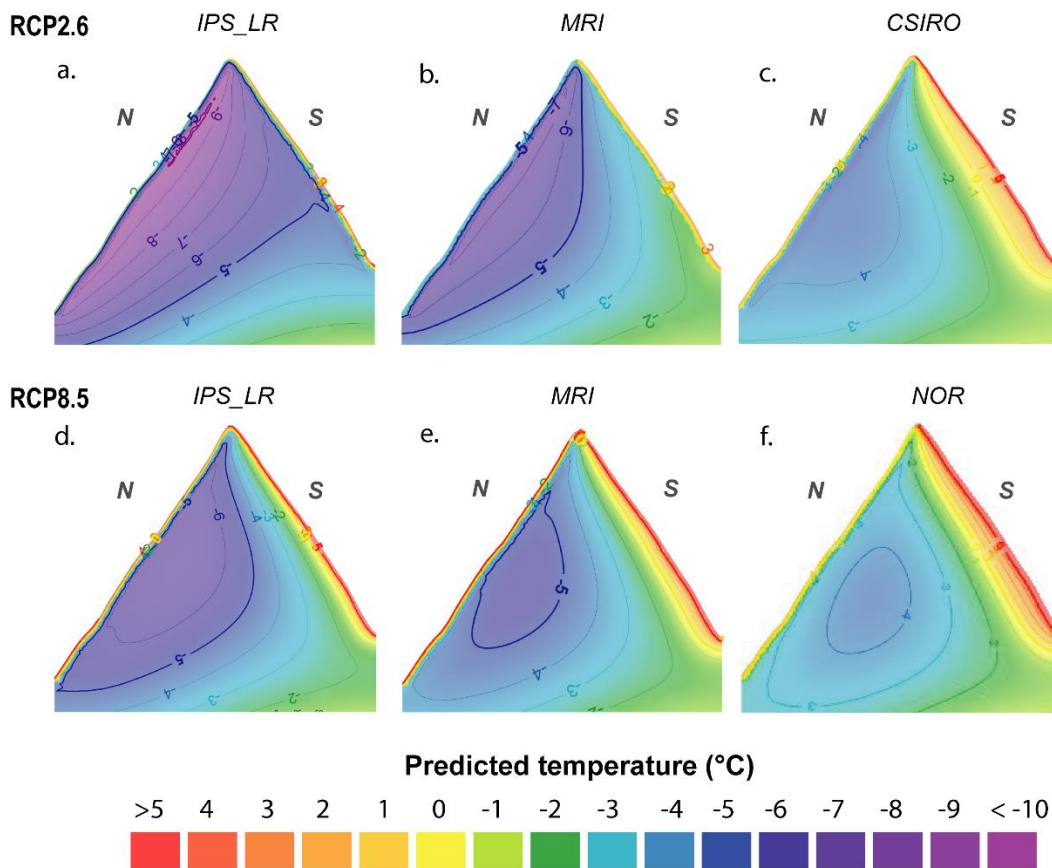
223 **Figure 4.** Number of models predicting permafrost thawing (i.e. mean annual temperature  
 224 becomes positive) for both profiles and both RCPs according to depth, time and aspect.

225

226 Figure 5 further shows that the average and colder models (within the 95 % confidence interval)  
 227 have significantly different temperature fields according to RCP. The colder RCP8.5 will result  
 228 in a substantial permafrost thawing and warm permafrost progression below the entire S face  
 229 (Fig. 5d) which will remain in cold permafrost conditions for the same colder model forced  
 230 with RCP2.6 (Fig. 5a). Similarly, the average model shows a certain thermal equilibrium and  
 231 warm permafrost only at the foot of the S face under RCP2.6 (Fig. 5b), but a substantial  
 232 shrinking of the cold permafrost body ( $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  isotherm) and a significant deepening of permafrost  
 233 thawing and warm permafrost when forced with RCP8.5 (Fig. 5e). These latter patterns  
 234 (significant permafrost thawing and warm permafrost progression) are actually similar for the  
 235 three RCP8.5 models, witnessing of their reliability under a scenario of enhanced anthropogenic  
 236 greenhouse gas emissions. However, affected depths are about twice greater with the warmer  
 237 model compared to the colder, and this result in permafrost disappearance at the top of the  
 238 Grand Pilier d'Angle with the former, due to the predominance of lateral heat fluxes from the  
 239 S face<sup>4</sup> – a pattern which is also found for the same model under RCP2.6 (Fig. 5, c, f).

240

## September 2100



241

242 **Figure 5.** Extreme (95 % confidence interval) and average permafrost predictions in  
243 September 2100. High temperature at the very near surfaces (including the NW face) are  
244 related to seasonal thawing (i.e. active layer) which is usually near its maximum thickness at  
245 this time of the year. IPS\_LR (a, d), MRI (b, e), CSIRO (c) and NOR (f) are some of the  
246 colder, average and warmer models, respectively, among the 13 used models.

247

### 248 **Key messages on high elevated permafrost degradation pathways within the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

249 The Grand Pilier d'Angle is one of the highest and coldest rockwall permafrost site of the  
250 European Alps and may be one of the few sites above 4000 m a.s.l. where permafrost will  
251 subsist by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a “business as usual” scenario. However, under drastic  
252 reduction of the greenhouse gas emissions, climate stabilization by the turn of mid-century  
253 would significantly slow down the ongoing permafrost degradation.

254 The thermal perturbation caused by atmospheric warming within the first half of the century  
255 would be similar whatever the considered RCP (about 1°C), and would affect a depth of about  
256 30-40 m below the surface. About 50 and 30% of this perturbation will reach depths of 80 and  
257 130 m. However, model uncertainty is as least as high as the predicted average evolution, if not

258 higher, and firm conclusions are thus limited within this horizon. Current temperature increase  
259 is already up to 1°C per decade in alpine bedrock according to Hock et al.<sup>37</sup> and the discrepancy  
260 between the projected temperature increase and the observed one within the early 21<sup>st</sup> century  
261 partly results from climate models adjustment compared to air temperature observations. In this  
262 respect, predictions are more certain for the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when model  
263 uncertainty is well lower than the projected anomalies and that climate models have aligned  
264 with the climate history.

265 During the second half of the century, bedrock temperature may reach a certain thermal  
266 equilibrium under RCP2.6. Such scenario will restrict permafrost thawing where warm  
267 permafrost is currently present, *i.e.* below 4000 m a.s.l. for south-facing rock faces, tops of  
268 peaks and ridges, and sun-exposed spurs, as well as for north-exposed faces below 3000 m  
269 a.s.l.<sup>4,28</sup>. In such scenario, warm permafrost will certainly spread in most of the high-elevation  
270 S-facing slopes such as the one of the Grand Pilier d'Angle while cold permafrost conditions  
271 will remain in N-facing slopes. However, under a “business as usual scenario”, permafrost may  
272 almost entirely disappear of most of the alpine rockwalls by 2100 and only subsist in high-  
273 elevated (> 4000 m a.s.l.), north-exposed and several tens and even hundreds of meters apart  
274 from sun-exposed faces such as the middle of the Grand Pilier d'Angle N face.

275 These models do not account for a couple of factors contributing to permafrost degradation  
276 dampening such as snow deposit in sun-exposed faces<sup>34</sup> or air ventilation in highly fractured  
277 bedrock<sup>36</sup>. Such factors may also experience substantial changes in the coming decades and in  
278 turn have opposite effects on permafrost dynamics. Snowfall for example, which occur  
279 nowadays all year round at high elevation may give way to rainfall in reason of the projected  
280 reduction in frost frequency<sup>26</sup>. Instead of protecting the bedrock surface from intense solar  
281 radiation<sup>34</sup>, this may accelerate permafrost degradation by causing advective heat transport in  
282 bedrock clefts<sup>35</sup>.

283 Enhanced permafrost degradation will result in increasing bedrock destabilization with  
284 considerable consequences for mountain communities facing endangered practices such as  
285 tourism, mountaineering, use of natural resources (e.g. hydroelectricity), and for valley floors  
286 due to possible chain reaction hazardous processes<sup>19,22</sup>.

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## Acknowledgments

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