

# Geophysical Research Letters

## RESEARCH LETTER

10.1029/2019GL084350

### Key Points:

- Atlantic ocean-atmosphere circulation links drought in North America, Europe, and the Mediterranean
- Coupled modes of drought variability can be used to infer atmospheric circulation and ocean temperature anomalies
- Coupled terrestrial drought patterns reveal the start of the Little Ice Age to be characterized by a negative NAO and cold Atlantic SSTs

### Supporting Information:

- Supporting Information S1
- Figure S1
- Figure S2

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### Citation:

Anchukaitis, K. J., Cook, E. R., Cook, B. I., Pearl, J., D'Arrigo, R. D., & Wilson, R. (2019). Coupled modes of North Atlantic ocean-atmosphere variability and the onset of the Little Ice Age. *Geophysical Research Letters*, 46, 12,417–12,426. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019GL084350>

Received 1 JUL 2019

Accepted 23 SEP 2019

Accepted article online 16 OCT 2019

Published online 7 NOV 2019

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## Coupled Modes of North Atlantic Ocean-Atmosphere Variability and the Onset of the Little Ice Age

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**Abstract** Hydroclimate extremes in North America, Europe, and the Mediterranean are linked to ocean and atmospheric circulation anomalies in the Atlantic, but the limited length of the instrumental record prevents complete identification and characterization of these patterns of covariability especially at decadal to centennial time scales. Here we analyze the coupled patterns of drought variability on either sides of the North Atlantic Ocean basin using independent climate field reconstructions spanning the last millennium in order to detect and attribute epochs of coherent basin-wide moisture anomalies to ocean and atmosphere processes. A leading mode of broad-scale moisture variability is characterized by distinct patterns of North Atlantic atmosphere circulation and sea surface temperatures. We infer a negative phase of the North Atlantic Oscillation and colder Atlantic sea surface temperatures in the middle of the fifteenth century, coincident with weaker solar irradiance and prior to strong volcanic forcing associated with the early Little Ice Age.

### 1. Introduction

Hydroclimate extremes including droughts and floods in North America, Europe, and the Mediterranean are linked to Northern Hemisphere ocean and atmosphere anomalies across a range of time scales. In the North Atlantic, these events are associated with changes in both atmospheric pressure and wind patterns (Barnston & Livezey, 1987; Rodríguez-Fonseca et al., 2006) including the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO; Hurrell, 1995; Hurrell et al., 2003; Kingston et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2001; Zanardo et al., 2019) and coherent large-scale interdecadal (Kushnir, 1994) and multidecadal sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies, including the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation (AMO; Enfield et al., 2001; Knight et al., 2006). Thus, hydroclimate anomalies and extremes on both sides of the North Atlantic are linked via their origins in the dynamics of the coupled ocean-atmosphere system.

A challenge to understanding internal and forced climate system variability and ocean-atmosphere circulation in the North Atlantic is the limited length of the instrumental period as well as evidence for substantial decadal and multidecadal variability (Wang et al., 2017). Paleoclimate reconstructions provide the potential to observe these systems over a longer period in order to better characterize time scales of variability as well as the response to radiative forcing due to volcanic eruptions and solar variability (Driscoll et al., 2012; Shindell et al., 2003; Sjolte et al., 2018). However, terrestrial paleoclimate proxies like tree rings do not directly record the atmospheric pressure or wind anomalies associated with the NAO nor the SSTs used to characterize the AMO but can reflect these indirectly via their influence on precipitation or temperature at the location of the tree-ring chronology. Marine records from sediments or corals may be used to reconstruct SSTs, but only some have the temporal resolution, age model precision, and length to do so at decadal time scales over the last millennium in the North Atlantic itself (Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014a; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014b; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2019; Thirumalai et al., 2018). A common approach to reconstructing the NAO or AMO is therefore to directly target indices of these modes as predictands in a statistical regression model where tree-ring chronologies are the potential predictors (cf. Cook et al., 2002; Cook et al., 2019; D'Arrigo et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2004; Ortega et al., 2015). If local and regional patterns of terrestrial temperature and precipitation variability consistently reflect the influence of large-scale modes of atmospheric circulation, tree-ring chronologies and other high-resolution proxies that record local climate variability may

be used to estimate large-scale but distal patterns of wind, pressure, or SST anomalies (Evans et al., 2001; Fritts et al., 1971).

Here, we use an alternative approach to infer the past and long-term behavior of these coupled ocean-atmosphere modes. We use two independent terrestrial drought reconstructions from both sides of the North Atlantic spanning the last millennium and isolate their common behavior through time. We identify a persistent leading mode of North Atlantic basin drought variability over the last millennium that is associated with coherent atmosphere and ocean temperature anomalies, although the latter with greater uncertainty. The most anomalous period in the North Atlantic drought record occurs in the midfifteenth century, and we can therefore infer the likely state of the North Atlantic ocean-atmosphere system at that time. Our findings provide new insight and support for interpretation of independent proxies of North Atlantic climate and suggest a dynamical contribution to pronounced cooling in the fifteenth century.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Drought Atlases

We analyze coupled North Atlantic drought patterns using the Living Blended Drought Atlas update (LBDA2010) of the North American Drought Atlas (NADA; Cook et al., 2004; Cook et al., 2010) and the Old World Drought Atlas (OWDA; Cook et al., 2015, 2016). The atlases are 0.5° gridded reconstructions of the Palmer Drought Severity Index (hereafter PDSI; Dai et al., 2004; van der Schrier et al., 2013; Wells et al., 2004) from two independent networks of moisture-sensitive tree-ring chronologies using the Point-by-Point Regression climate field reconstruction approach (Cook et al., 1999, 2004, 2013, 2015). We conduct our analyses over a common period of 1000 to 2005 CE, which reflects a compromise between the temporal length of the comparison and the domain of continuous spatial reconstruction coverage.

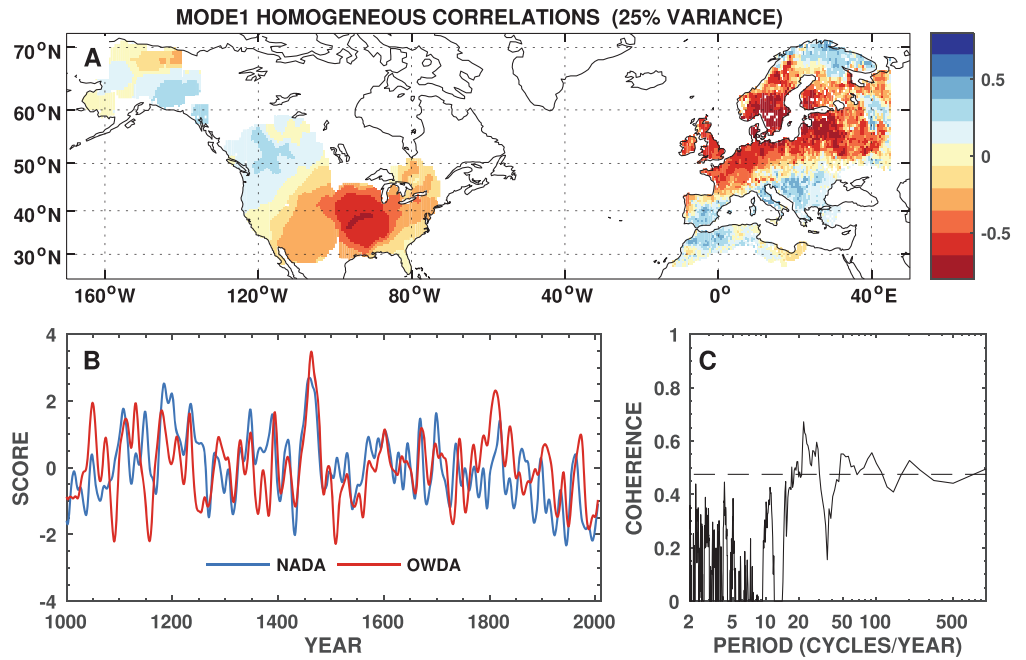
### 2.2. Climate Data

In order to identify and interpret the atmosphere and ocean phenomena associated with coupled patterns of North Atlantic drought variability, we use gridded observational and reanalysis data. We extract atmospheric data fields including surface pressure, geopotential height, and winds from the NOAA-CIRES 20th Century Reanalysis (v2C; Compo et al., 2011), while SST data are from the Hadley Centre ISST version 1.1 (HadISST; Rayner et al., 2003). In order to compare drought patterns with radiative forcing over the last millennium, we used time series of total solar irradiance (TSI) data compiled by Schmidt et al. (2012) and the most recent estimate of Common Era volcanic forcing from Toohey and Sigl (2017). For comparison between our coupled drought modes and last millennium temperatures, we use the Northern Hemisphere summer temperature reconstruction from Wilson et al. (2016).

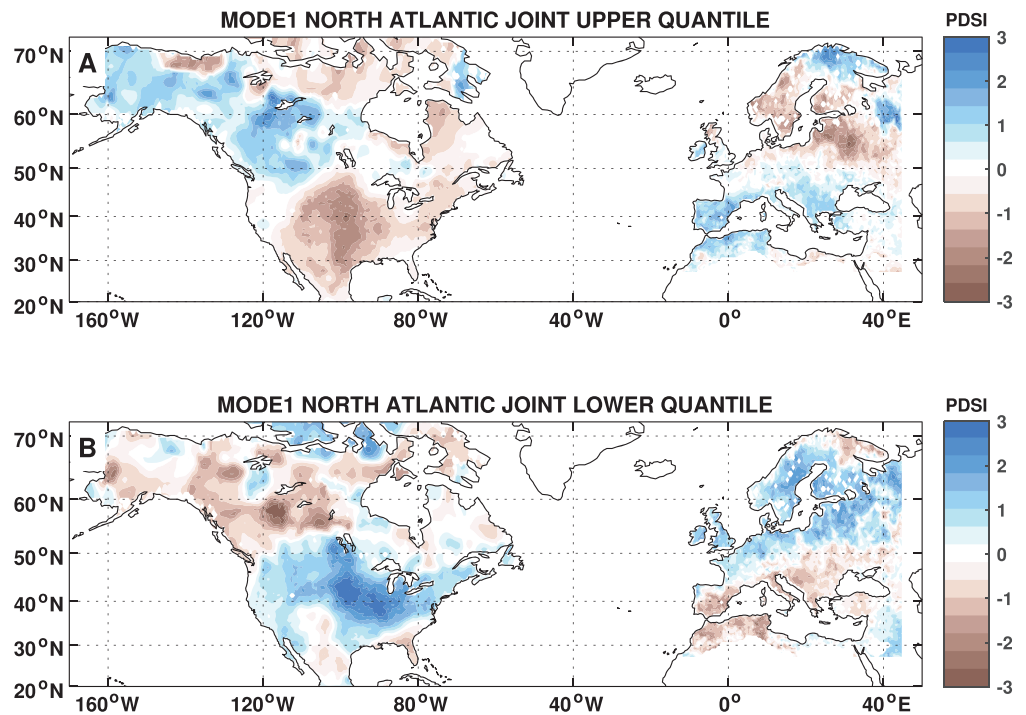
### 2.3. Analyses

We identified coupled patterns of North Atlantic PDSI covariance using the singular value decomposition (SVD) described by Bretherton et al. (1992) and Cherry (1996). We calculated the cross-covariance of the two independent fields over the common period 1000 to 2005 CE. We then decomposed this matrix into eigenvectors (or loadings) and the associated singular values. For each mode, we calculated the corresponding time series expansion (or scores) by multiplying the eigenvectors and the centered data matrix from each drought field. The procedure therefore produces eigenvectors and their associated time series for each of the two domains used in the analysis. Homogeneous correlations were calculated as the correlation between the time series expansion for each drought atlas and the corresponding original field (Bretherton et al., 1992). We assessed the interpretability and significance of these coupled modes using a Monte Carlo approach. We repeatedly ( $n = 1,000$ ) randomized the temporal order of both fields independently, disrupting their temporal relationship but maintaining the spatiotemporal covariance in each individual atlas. We then compared the variance accounted for by each of the SVD modes against those from the randomized fields. We measured the coherence of the temporal expression of each mode using the multitaper method (Chave et al., 1987; Huybers, 2004; Lall & Mann, 1995; Thomson, 1982).

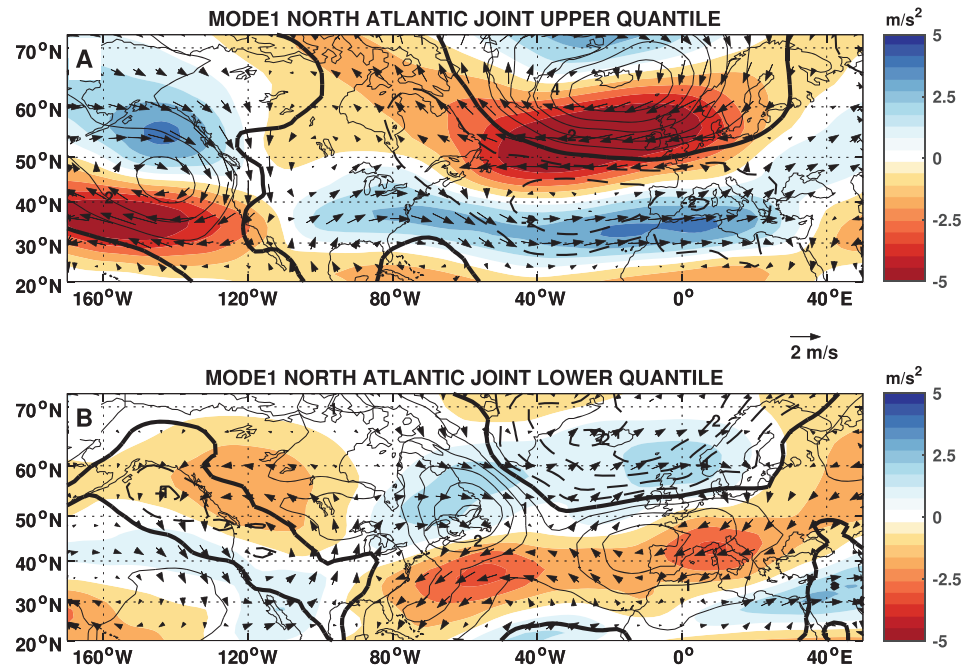
We analyzed the association between the leading modes of drought variability and large-scale climate using composite analysis. Composite analysis has two advantages here: First, it does not require that opposite sign anomalies have a symmetrical spatial structure or magnitude, which is a concern for North Atlantic climate (Cassou et al., 2004; Hurrell & Deser, 2010). Second, composite analysis can be used to identify years and analyze the corresponding mean fields when both the NADA and OWDA regions have the same-sign time series anomalies. To create the composite fields, we identified those years in which the SVD1 time series



**Figure 1.** The leading mode (SVD1) of coupled North Atlantic terrestrial drought variability. This coupled spatiotemporal pattern accounts for 25% of the total North Atlantic drought variability over the last millennium. (a) The spatial pattern of homogeneous correlations suggests opposite sign Palmer Drought Severity Index anomalies in the Mediterranean versus those in Northern and western Europe and the central and eastern United States. (b) The temporal expression of this mode smoothed with a 21-year spline to emphasize coherent variability at multidecadal-to-centennial time scales shown in (c).



**Figure 2.** Composite Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) for the North American Drought Atlas and Old World Drought Atlas when their time series expansion for the leading mode (SVD1) are both in the (a) upper quantile and (b) lower quantile during the period 1900 to 2005.



**Figure 3.** Composite winter (January–March) 250-mb geopotential height zonal wind speed (filled contours) and wind magnitude and direction (vectors) anomalies from the 20th Century Reanalysis (1850–2014; Compo et al., 2011) when the time series expansion of the North American Drought Atlas and Old World Drought Atlas in SVD1 are both in their (a) upper quantile and (b) lower quantile. Line (unfilled) contours show the corresponding surface pressure anomalies, with dashed lines showing negative anomalies and solid lines showing positive anomalies. The zero line is shown by a heavy black line.

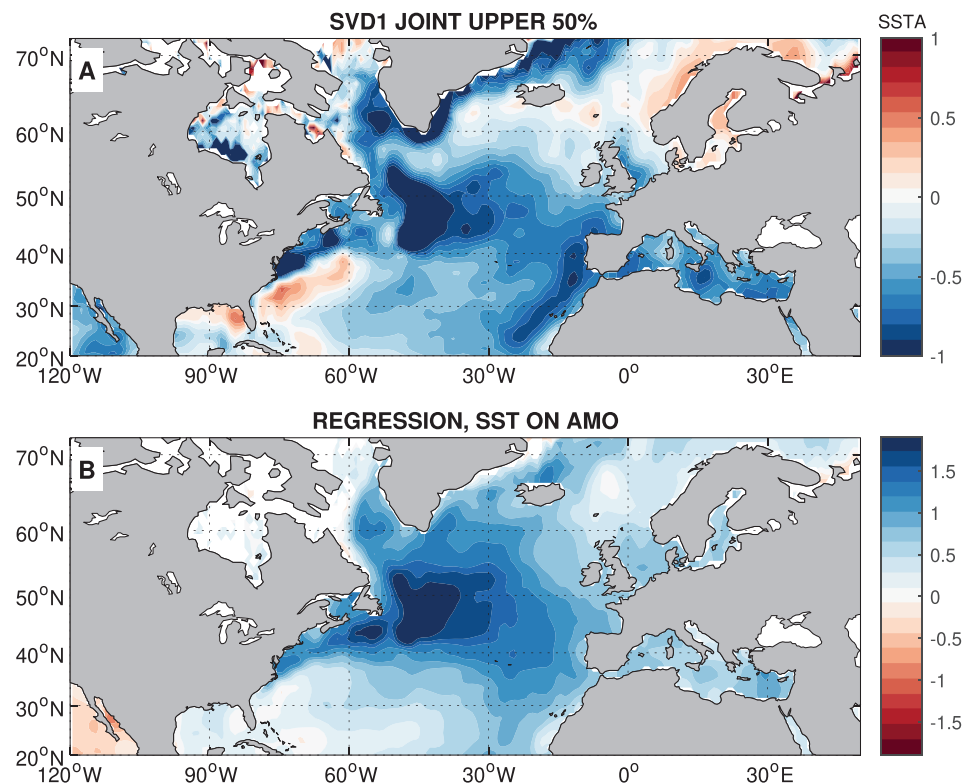
were both above or below their respective 25th and 75th quantiles. For our decadal-scale SST analyses, we further identified those epochs where the smoothed (21-year spline) SVD time series were both above or below their respective medians. For correlation analysis of smoothed series, we use the method described by Ebisuzaki (1997) to account for the reduced degrees of freedom.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Coupled SVD of the NADA and OWDA reveal two leading patterns that account for 25% (SVD1; Figure 1) and 17% (SVD2, not shown) of the total North Atlantic drought variance during the last millennium. Our Monte Carlo randomization procedure indicates that only these first two modes are significant at the 99% level. We focus on the leading mode of variability (SVD1) for the remainder of this paper, as it is linked to North Atlantic ocean-atmosphere variability.

The leading mode of coupled hydroclimate variability (SVD1) is characterized by same-sign PDSI anomalies over the continental United States and northern and western Europe and the opposite sign over the Mediterranean and North Africa (Figure 1). At annual time scales, the NADA and OWDA SVD1 time series (1000 to 2005 CE) are weakly but significantly correlated at  $r = 0.28$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). Greater similarity is observed at decadal to centennial time scales (Figure 1b), and the two series are significantly coherent at time periods longer than  $\sim 15$  years (Figure 1c) and correlated at  $r = 0.49$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). The homogeneous field correlations and composite PDSI fields indicate that over the last millennium when the Mediterranean is dry, much of the United States and northern and western Europe are wet and vice versa (Figures 1a and 2). The leading coupled mode in the OWDA domain is similar to the leading mode when OWDA is considered in isolation (Cook et al., 2015), while the coupled pattern in the NADA domain is distinct from any of its individual leading empirical orthogonal functions (Cook et al., 2011).

Years when both SVD1 time series are in their respective upper quantile are characterized by a weaker North Atlantic meridional surface pressure gradient, similar to the negative phase of the NAO (Figure 3a). These years are associated with a wetter Mediterranean and drier Northern Europe and show stronger and southerly displaced upper level (250 mb) westerly winds. Conversely, dry years in the Mediterranean and

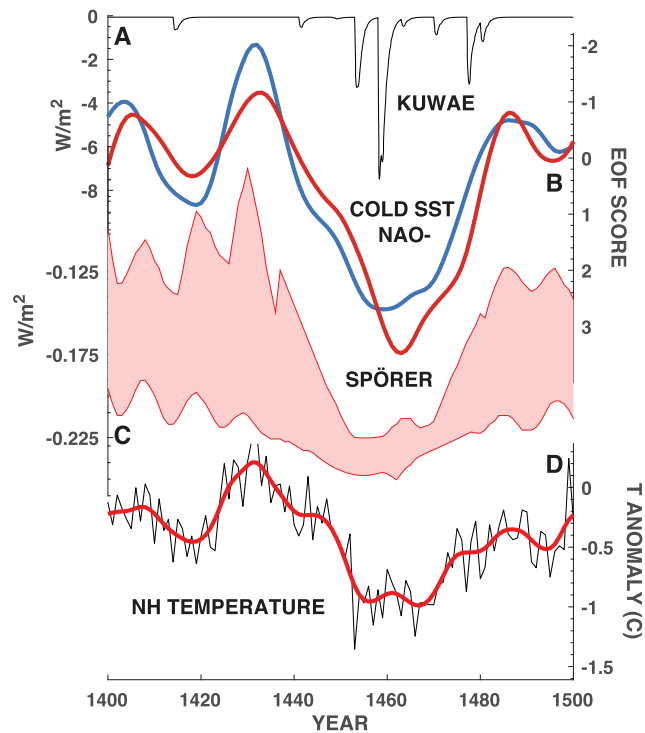


**Figure 4.** (a) Annual mean (January–December) sea surface temperature anomaly (SSTA) composites (Rayner et al., 2003) for when the SVD1 time series expansion of both the North American Drought Atlas and Old World Drought Atlas are greater than their median value over the period from 1900 to 2015 and (b) the regression of the HadISST field on the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation (AMO) index calculated from the field (the mean SSTA from the global mean over the region from 25° to 60°N and 7° to 75°W).

wet years in Northern Europe have a stronger North Atlantic surface pressure gradient, and upper level winds are shifted to the north (Figure 3b), a pattern similar to that associated with the positive phase of the NAO. The covariability of the temporal expressions of the circum-Atlantic drought modes can therefore be used to infer the state of atmospheric circulation at any time during the last millennium, including changes in the position and strength of the upper level jet.

SSTs during epochs when both the NADA and OWDA SVD1 series are above their median value (Figure 4a) are characterized by widespread cold anomalies in the Atlantic although warmer SSTs are observed around Fennoscandia and in the Gulf Stream, the latter likely because of the link between Gulf Stream position and North Atlantic climate (McCarthy et al., 2018; Thirumalai et al., 2018). In the Atlantic, the pattern is similar to the regression of the SST field on the AMO index (Figure 4b), including the large anomalies in the Labrador Sea and weaker anomalies in the western subtropical Atlantic. Using ERSST (v5; Huang et al., 2017) results in similar patterns (supporting information Figure S1). Anomalies in the OWDA series and indices of North Atlantic atmospheric circulation are coincident, while correlations with the AMO are lagged by up to a decade (Figure S2). This lag is consistent with both observations and modeling indicating the atmosphere leads the Atlantic SST response (Clement et al., 2015; Li et al., 2013). SSTs are influenced not only by atmospheric dynamics but also directly by radiative forcing, and therefore, the inferred patterns and magnitude of past SST anomalies should be interpreted cautiously.

This persistent and coherent mode of decadal-to-centennial coupled climate variability throughout the last millennium may reflect a combination of a forced response and internal variability (Deser et al., 2014; Goosse et al., 2005; Luterbacher et al., 2002; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014b; Semenov et al., 2008). Solar minima in the eleventh (Oort), fifteenth (Spörer), and eighteenth centuries (Dalton) are associated with inferred negative phases of the NAO and colder SSTs but not in the thirteenth (Wolf) or sixteenth (Maunder) centuries, and we observe no consistent response to volcanic eruptions. Multidecadal internal ocean-atmosphere variability is an important control on North Atlantic climate during the Common Era (Luterbacher et al., 1999, 2002), and



**Figure 5.** Inferred state of the North Atlantic ocean-atmosphere in the fifteenth century. (a) Northern Hemisphere (NH) volcanic forcing from Toohey and Sigl (2017) scaling aerosol optical depth to estimated forcing based on Hansen et al. (2005); (b) the leading (SVD1) time series expansions from North American Drought Atlas (blue) and Old World Drought Atlas (red), as in Figure 1. Note the axis here is inverted, and the inferred ocean-atmosphere state during the middle fifteenth century is labeled; (c) the range of total solar irradiance anomalies compiled by Schmidt et al. (2012) and indicating the Spörer minimum; (d) Northern Hemisphere summer temperature reconstructed by Wilson et al. (2016), with annual values in black and a 30-year Gaussian smoothed series shown in red.

successful simulation of this in climate models is therefore important for projections of the future change and investigation of past variability (Osborn, 2004; Parker et al., 2007).

While multidecadal variability in this leading mode is persistent throughout the last millennium, the largest and most coherent coupled feature across the North Atlantic drought reconstructions is the positive anomalies in the fifteenth century (Figures 5 and 1b), indicating dry conditions in North America and western Europe and wetter conditions in the Mediterranean. This event occurs during the beginning of the Little Ice Age (LIA) in the 1450s (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2013; Matthews & Briffa, 2005), and we interpret it as a decadal-scale period of sustained colder SSTs and atmospheric anomalies similar to the negative phase of the NAO, consistent with multiproxy NAO reconstructions (e.g., Cook et al., 2002; Ortega et al., 2015; Trouet et al., 2009) and reconstruction of colder North Atlantic SSTs (Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014a, 2014b). This event in the terrestrial drought records is coeval with several large volcanic eruptions (Figure 5a; Toohey & Sigl, 2017), reduced TSI during the Spörer Grand Solar Minimum (Figure 5c; Schmidt et al., 2012), and colder Northern Hemisphere summer temperatures (Figure 5d; Wilson et al., 2016). The precise chronology and annual resolution of the drought reconstructions and their coupled modes allow us to observe the timing of the ocean-atmosphere anomalies relative to radiative forcing.

Inferred cooler SSTs and negative NAO conditions actually begin in the early 1400s, prior to the large volcanic eruptions of the 1450s and before the start of the LIA as defined in Masson-Delmotte et al. (2013). Drijfhout et al. (2013) showed that sustained enhanced blocking over the North Atlantic could cause rapid shifts in the southward extension of sea ice, colder SSTs, and LIA-type conditions. The occurrence of atmospheric blocking patterns would be greater during the negative phase of the NAO we infer for the early and middle fifteenth century, and therefore, unforced variability of the NAO itself may have been important in initiating and sustaining LIA conditions (cf. Camenisch et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2019; Croci-Maspoli

et al., 2007; Luterbacher et al., 2001; Mellado-Cano et al., 2018). Alternatively, the Spörer Grand Minimum may also have played a preconditioning role. That is, cooling, a negative NAO, and enhanced initially caused by reductions in TSI allowed for sustained cold anomalies and feedbacks when large eruptions occurred in the 1450s and 1460s (e.g., Ineson et al., 2011; Lockwood et al., 2010; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014b). Glacier advances and the onset of LIA conditions in the early fifteenth century have been linked to indicate sustained sea ice and ocean feedbacks leading to North Atlantic cooling (Andres & Peltier, 2016; Lehner et al., 2013; Massé et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2012; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2010), and Slawinska and Robock (2018) observed that in the Community Earth System Model Last Millennium Ensemble simulations, the model runs using all forcings caused a more sustained LIA than in runs forced only with volcanic eruptions and concluded that the solar forcing amplified the volcanic cooling. However, Yoshimori et al. (2005) demonstrated that even during periods of strong radiative forcing, internal variability at multidecadal significantly modulate the response of the climate system. The lack of similar strongly coherent events during other solar minima (Figure 1) suggests that either the co-occurrence of reduced TSI, large volcanic eruptions, or a sea ice feedback is important for creating the strong coupled responses we observe in the fifteenth century (Slawinska & Robock, 2018) or that unforced variability plays an important role (Luterbacher et al., 2001; Palastanga et al., 2011; Zanchettin et al., 2012).

Ocean sediment cores suggest the early LIA was characterized by a weakened Gulf Stream, reduced Atlantic surface-ocean circulation, and colder SSTs (Lund et al., 2006; Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2019, Thirumalai et al., 2018). While model simulations show that an abrupt weakening of the subpolar gyre can cause LIA conditions in the Atlantic (Moreno-Chamarro et al., 2016), in agreement with ocean sediment proxies (Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014b), models are inconsistent on the forced response of the gyre (e.g., Lehner et al., 2013; Schleussner & Feulner, 2013). Similarly, the modeled response of AMOC to forcing depends on the background state, volcanic eruption characteristics, and model configurations (Andres & Peltier, 2016; Mignot et al., 2011; Palastanga et al., 2011; Slawinska & Robock, 2018; Zanchettin et al., 2012). Our coupled North Atlantic drought mode is diagnostic of a negative NAO and consistent with colder SSTs in the North Atlantic (Moffa-Sánchez et al., 2014b, 2019), but from our terrestrial data alone, we cannot determine to what extent these inferred SST anomalies were caused by endogenous ocean circulation changes, a response to NAO forcing, or the direct radiative response.

#### 4. Conclusions

We have demonstrated that analysis of independent terrestrial hydroclimate reconstructions associated with North Atlantic climate variability can be used to infer the state of the ocean-atmosphere system and complement climate modeling, temperature reconstructions, and marine proxy studies. Internal decadal-to-centennial scale variability is a persistent feature of North Atlantic climate of the last millennium. Although the majority of this record appears to be independent of changes in radiative forcing, we do find that a decadal-scale negative phase of the NAO and cold North Atlantic are most consistent with proxy reconstructions of drought on both sides of the Atlantic during the onset of the LIA in the fifteenth century. While decadal-scale coupling emerges as a robust feature of North Atlantic terrestrial climate variability, there is no indication in our analysis here of persistent multicentennial-scale phases of the NAO (Trouet et al., 2009), in agreement with models and reconstructions (Cook et al., 2019; Landrum et al., 2013; Lehner et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2015; Palastanga et al., 2011; Touchan et al., 2011). Rather, decadal-to-centennial variability is present throughout the last millennium. Nor do the coupled drought patterns reveal significant multicentennial variability as reconstructed using temperature proxies (Wang et al., 2017). These observations suggest both caution and opportunities when interpreting multiproxy Northern Hemisphere networks whose records may comprise a mix of different components of the forced and internal climate variability in both temperature and hydroclimate with a range of characteristic time scales.

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#### Acknowledgments

This research was funded by grants from the U.S. National Science Foundation P2C2 program (AGS-1501856 and AGS-1502224). B. I. C. was supported by the NASA Modeling, Analysis, and Prediction program (NASA 80NSSC17K0265). We thank Mukund Rao for helpful discussion. Both drought atlases are available from the NCEI World Data Service for Paleoclimatology (<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/data-access/paleoclimatology-data>). The 20th Century Reanalysis data are available from NOAA-CIRES ([https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/data/gridded/data.20thC\\_ReanV2c.html](https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/data/gridded/data.20thC_ReanV2c.html)), and HadISST data are available from the U.K. Met Office (<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/hadisst/>). This is Lamont contribution #8358.

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