

An absolutely dated mid-Holocene English yew chronology offers new opportunities for archaeological and palaeoenvironmental research

The Holocene
1–8

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/09596836251407634

journals.sagepub.com/home/hol



Tatiana Bebchuk,¹  Darren Davies,² Neil J Loader,² Otmar Urban,³ Tito Arosio,^{1,4} Lukas Wacker,⁵ Natálie Pernicová,³ Josef Čáslavský,³ Miroslav Trnka,^{3,6} Alexander V Kirilyanov,^{7,8} David Brown,⁹ Jan Esper,^{3,10} Clive Oppenheimer¹ and Ulf Büntgen^{1,3,11}

Abstract

Research on Holocene climate variability and human history greatly benefits from annually resolved and absolutely dated tree-ring chronologies. The quality and quantity of such records, however, decline back in time, with little tree-ring evidence available for the Early and Middle Holocene. Here, we present a tree-ring width (TRW) chronology from 100 subfossil yews (*Taxus baccata* L.) excavated from peat-rich soils in the Fenland region of eastern England. To precisely date the record, we measured stable oxygen ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) isotopic ratios of over 1500 tree rings from a subset of 12 disc samples and used an absolutely dated oak (*Quercus* spp.) $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology from the same region for cross-dating. Statistically significant isotopic agreement between the two species precisely dates the yew TRW chronology from 2668 to 2213 years BCE ($r=0.4$, t -value=7.9, probability of error $> 10^6$, Isolation Factor $> 10^3$). This 456-year period in the mid-Holocene marks the Neolithic-to-Bronze Age transition, coincides with the spread of the Bell Beaker culture across the British Isles, and precedes the still debated 4.2ka climate anomaly. Emphasizing the advantages of tree-ring stable isotopes, our absolutely dated yew record offers new opportunities for archaeological interpretations and palaeoclimatological reconstructions in eastern England and beyond. We further expect our results to help dating the Icelandic eruptions of Katla and Hekla 4 and refining the next radiocarbon calibration curve.

Keywords

archaeology, cross-dating, dendrochronology, multi-proxy, palaeoclimatology, radiocarbon dating, stable isotopes, tree rings

Received 20 May 2025; revised manuscript accepted 3 November 2025

Introduction

Due to their annual resolution and absolute dating, tree-ring chronologies play an essential role in archaeological, climatic, and environmental research (Cook and Kairiukstis, 2013; Fritts, 1976). Further to dating relict wood remains (Bannister and Robinson, 1975; Tegel et al., 2022), dendro data are extensively used for reconstructing temperature and hydroclimate variability over centuries to millennia (e.g. Esper et al., 2016; Jungqvist et al., 2020). Tree-ring records may also contain precise signatures of post-volcanic summer cooling (e.g. D'Arrigo et al., 2001; Esper et al., 2013), contribute to the interpretation of historical events (e.g. Büntgen et al., 2016; Oppenheimer et al., 2018), and refine the international radiocarbon (^{14}C) calibration curves (IntCal; Reimer et al., 2020; Reinig et al., 2020). The quantity and quality of relict wood from different sources, however, decrease back in time, and limited tree-ring evidence is available for the early- and mid-Holocene (Bebchuk et al., 2024; Büntgen and Esper, 2025).

The Fenland region in eastern England comprises a vast, yet rapidly disappearing archive of subfossil wood (Figure 1; Bebchuk and Büntgen, 2025). Since the 1630s, this peat-rich flat lowland spreading at sea-level from Cambridge in the south to Lincoln in the north and from Peterborough in the west to the Wash Bay in the

east, has been extensively drained for agricultural use (Darby, 1940). As peat thickness was reducing due to intensive farming,

¹Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, UK

²Department of Geography, Swansea University, UK

³Global Change Research Institute, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

⁴Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL, Switzerland

⁵Laboratory of Ion Beam Physics, ETHZ, Switzerland

⁶Department of Agrosystems and Bioclimatology, Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic

⁷Siberian Federal University, Russia

⁸Sukachev Institute of Forest SB RAS, Federal Research Center

'Krasnoyarsk Science Center SB RAS', Russia

⁹School of Natural and Built Environment, The Queen's University, UK

¹⁰Department of Geography, Johannes Gutenberg University, Germany

¹¹Department of Geography, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Corresponding author:

Tatiana Bebchuk, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 3EN, UK.

Email: tb649@cam.ac.uk

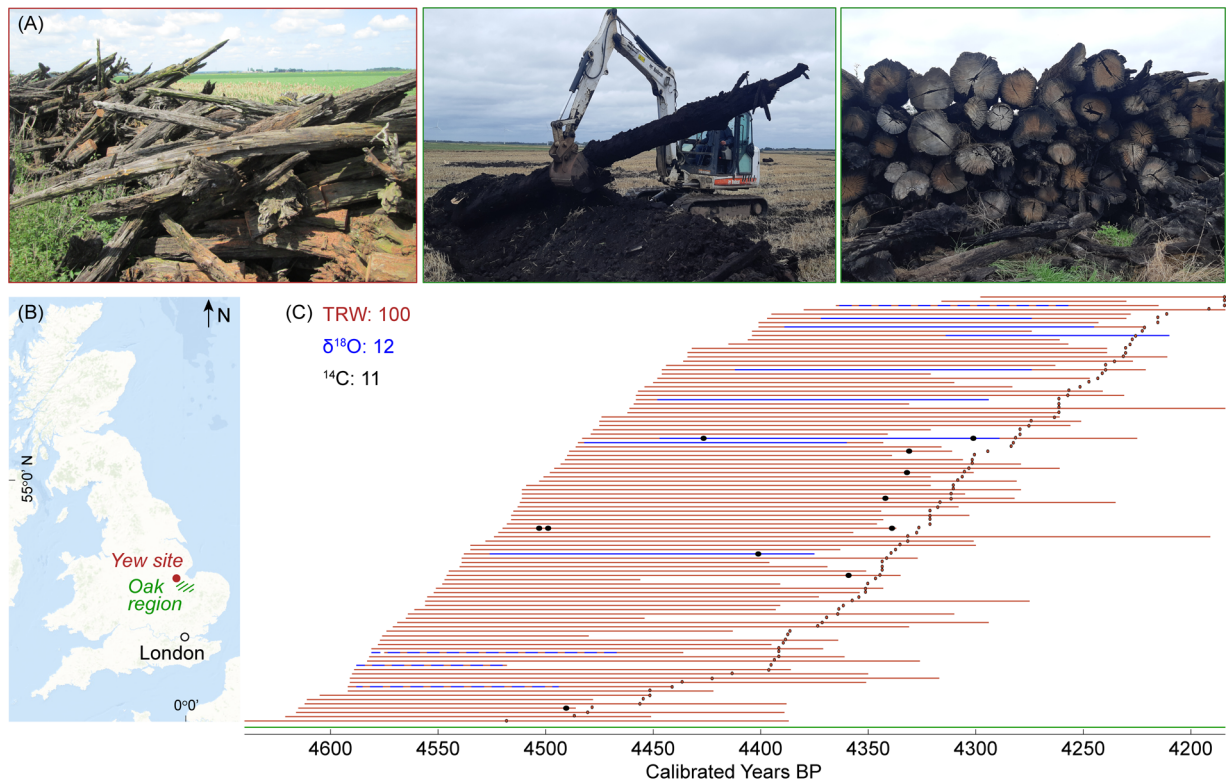


Figure 1. Samples characteristics. (a) Photos of sampling sites with subfossil yews (left) and oaks (middle and right). (b) Sampling locations of subfossil yew (red) and oak (green) wood. (c) Temporal distribution of 100 yew tree-ring width (TRW, red bars) series provisionally radiocarbon (^{14}C) dated and sorted by their first ring. Small dots indicate sample distribution when sorted by end dates. The 12 samples used for stable oxygen isotope ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) analysis are shown in blue, of which eight passed the ISODATE statistical thresholds (solid line) and four did not pass (dashed line). Black dots mark the samples used for ^{14}C analysis. Data are in calibrated years Before Present (BP) at an uncertainty of 7 years at the 95.4% probability. The green bar shows the span of the reference oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology.

wind erosion and decomposition of organic materials, countless oak, yew, pine, willow, elm, birch, and ash trees came to the surface and have been excavated and subsequently burnt by generations of farmers (Astbury, 1958; Darby, 1983; Ennion, 1951; Godwin, 1978; Pryme, 1701; Pryor, 2019; Skertchly, 1877). Although the antiquity of trees was long recognized, their age remained unknown. English antiquary Abraham de la Pryme was the first to systematically describe these ‘subterranean trees’ in 1701, arguing in his letter to the *Philosophical Transactions* that ‘Romans were the destroyers of all those great Woods and Forests’ (Pryme, 1701). After a gap of almost two centuries, English geologist Sidney B. J. Skertchly mapped the stratigraphy of these buried trees and hypothesized that some of them ‘may date back 70,000 years’ (Miller and Skertchly, 1878; Skertchly, 1877). It was only in the 1980s that dendrochronology was applied to contemporaneously unearthed oak trunks, so-called ‘bog oaks’, resulting in a 1,500-year-long TRW chronology for the mid-Holocene (Baillie and Brown, 1988). This record was absolutely dated against two continuous oak chronologies from Ireland and Germany (Brown et al., 1986; Pilcher et al., 1984). The recent academic discovery of hundreds of exceptionally well-preserved yew trunks has given new momentum to Fenland dendrochronology (Bebchuk et al., 2024, 2025). Despite its large sample size and close linkages to changes in sea level, the mid-Holocene yew chronology from eastern England is still floating and only absolute calendar dating will release its full potential for archaeological and paleoenvironmental research.

Calendar dates of wood samples are usually established via cross-dating – a fundamental technique in dendrochronology that associates ring width patterns with absolute calendar dates (Douglass, 1941; Wigley et al., 1987). While the method works reliably at climatically extreme sites, it may fail where tree growth is not sufficiently stressed by a single dominant climate

factor. The sparse distribution of subfossil wood finds worldwide, along with the limited number of contributing tree species further constrains the potential to develop absolutely dated tree-ring records over several millennia and from different regions and species (Tegel et al., 2022). To varying extents, most tree-ring chronologies for the early- and mid-Holocene therefore rely on provisional radiocarbon dating, which has resulted in important, yet floating tree-ring chronologies being developed for England (Batchelor et al., 2020), Greece (Christopoulou et al., 2024), Albania and North Macedonia (Hafner et al., 2021), Turkey (Pearson et al., 2020), Egypt (Kuniholm et al., 2014), and China (Shi et al., 2025), for example.

Tree-ring stable oxygen isotopes ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) have been recently employed as an alternative dating tool (e.g. McCarroll et al., 2019; Nakatsuka et al., 2020; Römer et al., 2023). The $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ in tree-ring cellulose is captured in wood without the need for plants to be climatically stressed as it is primarily controlled by the isotopic composition of source water and evaporative enrichment during transpiration (McCarroll and Loader, 2004; Siegwolf et al., 2022). As a result, a common $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ signal is usually recorded even under favourable growth conditions at non-extreme sites with mild climates (Hartl-Meier et al., 2015; Loader et al., 2008). Another advantage of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ over traditional TRW cross-dating is that a relatively small sample replication and short measurement series can be sufficient to develop a reliable $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology (Loader et al., 2019). These benefits have facilitated cross-dating of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ records for different species (Loader et al., 2021) and broad geographical regions (Haneca et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025), with promising applications for archaeological dating (Nayling et al., 2024a, 2024b; Sano et al., 2022).

Here, we present a TRW chronology from a 100 subfossil yew (*Taxus baccata* L.) trees from eastern England and analyse $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ in the annual growth rings of selected samples to enable precise

dating against an absolutely dated oak (*Quercus* spp.) $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology from the same region. We discuss the implications of our results for archaeological and environmental research and further demonstrate the potential of our dataset to contribute to the next IntCal product.

Data and methods

Between 2020 and 2024, we collected cross-sectional discs from over 400 subfossil yew trees in the Fenland region of eastern England (Figure 1a and b) and measured TRW along 2–5 radii per sample (for details, see Bebchuk et al., 2024). Visual cross-dating of all TRW measurements and statistical verification were performed using the TSAP-Win and COFECHA software, respectively (Holmes, 1983; Rinn, 1996). To provisionally date the yew record, 11 blocks of 10–20 tree rings from 8 samples were selected for ^{14}C analysis. The samples were processed via the base-acid-base-acid method followed by bleaching and graphitization, using a high precision MICADAS facility at ETH in Zurich, Switzerland (Figure 1c; Němec et al., 2010; Sookdeo et al., 2020; Wacker et al., 2010). All ^{14}C dates were wiggle-matched (Bronk Ramsey et al., 2001) and statistically resolved against IntCal20 (Reimer et al., 2020) using the OxCal v.4.4 software (Bronk Ramsey, 1995, 2021). The resulting 456-year-long TRW chronology comprises 100 yew samples (Supplemental Table S1) and spans from 4634 to 4179 ± 7 calibrated years BP at the 95.4% probability (Figure 1c). Since no yew TRW chronology extends continuously from the present back into the mid-Holocene, we compared our record against an absolutely dated oak TRW chronology from the same region (Figure 1a), which was developed at Queen's University in Belfast (QUB) in the 1980s (Baillie and Brown, 1988). We also compared our floating yew TRW chronology against English pine and German oak TRW chronologies (Billamboz, 2002, 2003; Boswijk, 1998). However, no statistically significant match was found with any of the existing chronologies.

To overcome these dating constraints, we analysed $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values from the tree rings of 12 yew samples (Figure 1c). Annual rings, including both early- and latewood, were split under a stereo microscope, with alpha-cellulose extracted following the modified Jayme-Wise isolation method (Boettger et al., 2007). Approximately 1 mg of the material was pyrolysed to carbon monoxide (CO) at 1450°C using a varioPYROcube elemental analyser (Elementar Analysensysteme, Germany), and the stable oxygen isotopes in the CO gas were measured using an ISOPRIME100 continuous-flow Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometer (IRMS; IsoPrime, Manchester, UK) at the Global Change Research Institute in Brno, Czech Republic. Prior to each set of analyses, the IRMS was tuned and tested for signal stability (standard deviation $\leq 0.04\text{‰}$ over 10 pulses of reference gas) and linearity ($\leq 0.03\text{‰}/\text{nA}$) across the expected ion current range obtained from the measurements of the test samples. Precision was maintained with standard deviations $\leq 0.10\text{‰}$ based on 5 consecutive measurements of the same alpha-cellulose sample. Isotopic values were calibrated against certified reference materials from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, Vienna, Austria). The $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values were referenced to benzoic acids (IAEA-601 and IAEA-602), and are reported in permil (‰) relative to Vienna Standard Mean Ocean Water (VSMOW; Coplen, 1995).

The individual yew $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series were cross-dated using the novel ISODATE software package (Davies et al., 2025). After indexation with a 9-year rectangular filter by subtraction, the series were first compared against each other and then against a reference oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology that is currently under development at Swansea University, UK.

To date, the reference oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology is anchored using ring width dendrochronology and has a near continuous coverage between 2982 and 1954 BCE (datum considers the year zero;

Büntgen and Oppenheimer, 2020). It consists of 15 oak samples, out of which 11 form part of the absolutely dated TRW chronology developed at QUB by Baillie and Brown (1988), and the other four samples were recently included to the chronology to increase its sample replication (Supplemental Figure S1). These samples were cross-dated with the QUB samples using ring-width or stable oxygen isotope dendrochronology (Supplemental Table S2). The chronology's coverage is being constantly extended as further samples from the QUB English chronology, that had precise dates previously assigned to them, are processed and added to the developing record. All reported dates are currently dependent on the dendrochronological dating of the QUB English archive. Once complete, the third millennium BCE isotope reference chronology will be made publicly available. This will include all cross-matching statistics between the isotope series used in its construction. Additionally, the series will be made publicly accessible via ISODATE (Davies et al., 2025) for dating purposes. For the stable oxygen isotope analysis, the α -cellulose was extracted only from the latewood component of each oak sample, homogenized and freeze-dried (Loader et al., 1997; Wieloch et al., 2011). It was then weighed into silver capsules and pyrolyzed to carbon monoxide gas at 1400°C . The $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ were measured on an isotope ratio mass spectrometer at Swansea University, UK. The measurements are reported in permil (‰) relative to the VSMOW standard (Coplen, 1995), with a typical analytical precision (σ_{n-1}) of $\pm 0.3\text{‰}$ (Loader et al., 2013). The 15 oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series were indexed using a 9-year rectangular filter, and once securely cross-dated, averaged to produce the dating reference record. Following the statistical framework proposed by Loader et al. (2019), the agreement between the $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series was assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficients r , Student's t -values, probability of error estimates $1/p$, and Isolation Factor values IF defined as the ratio of probabilities between the most and second most probable matches. A fit is indicated for consideration if $1/p \geq 100$ and $\text{IF} \geq 10$ (Loader et al., 2019).

Results

Independent cross-dating of the 12 yew $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series against each other positions 8 of them in agreement with the original TRW-based cross-dating results. The 8 series correlate with each other with Pearson's r values between 0.4 and 0.6, Student's t -values between 4.4 and 5.3, probabilities of error $1/p$ values between 145 and 10,546 and Isolation Factor IF values between 15 and 1000 (Figure 2, Supplemental Table S3). The other four $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series do not pass the ISODATE statistical threshold for dating and currently remain undated, despite a high statistical agreement of these samples with the TRW master chronology (Supplemental Table S1). These results suggest that a lack of a strong limiting climate factor and a high percentage of locally absent rings in our yew wood samples (Bebchuk et al., 2024) complicate TRW cross-dating, and a multi-parameter/proxy approach should be used for dating verification. The eight $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series were crossmatched and merged in a stepwise manner into a single chronology spanning 311 years. Comparison between the yew and reference oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronologies returns a statistically significant match with a correlation r of 0.37, Student's t -value of 6.64, $1/p \geq 10^6$, and $\text{IF} \geq 1000$ (Figure 2, Supplemental Figure S2, Supplemental Table S3).

Intriguingly, our study presents the first example of oxygen isotopic agreement between oak and yew wood. We further emphasize that tree-ring stable isotopes can help overcome challenges associated with traditional TRW cross-dating, especially if a species has an irregular growth pattern, or tree growth is influenced by multiple climatic drivers and species exhibit different climate sensitivities. This approach can significantly advance archaeological and palaeoclimatic research, which are strongly limited by the availability of relict material.

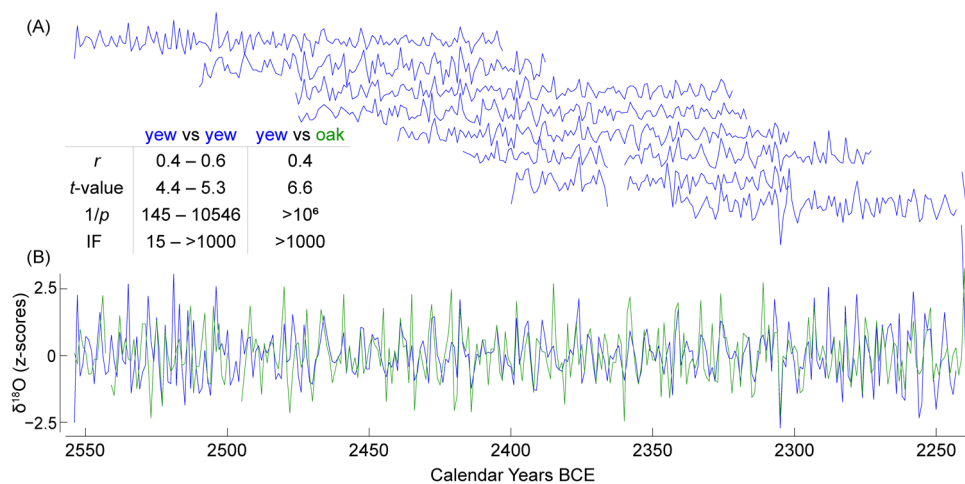


Figure 2. Cross-dating characteristics. (a) Eight individual yew $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ series between which a statistically significant match is found, and that are used to develop a mean yew $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology, all detrended with a 9-year rectangular filter. Note that the gaps in data are due to a loss of samples at the lab. (b) Yew (blue) and reference oak (green) $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronologies, both z-transformed. The inset table presents summary statistics of cross-dating the eight individual yew series against each other and their mean against the reference oak chronology: r is the Pearson's correlation coefficient, t is the Student's t -value, $1/p$ is the probability of error, IF is the Isolation Factor (for full statistics, see Supplemental Table S3 and Figure S2). A match is indicated for consideration if $1/p \geq 100$ and $IF \geq 10$ (Loader et al., 2019).

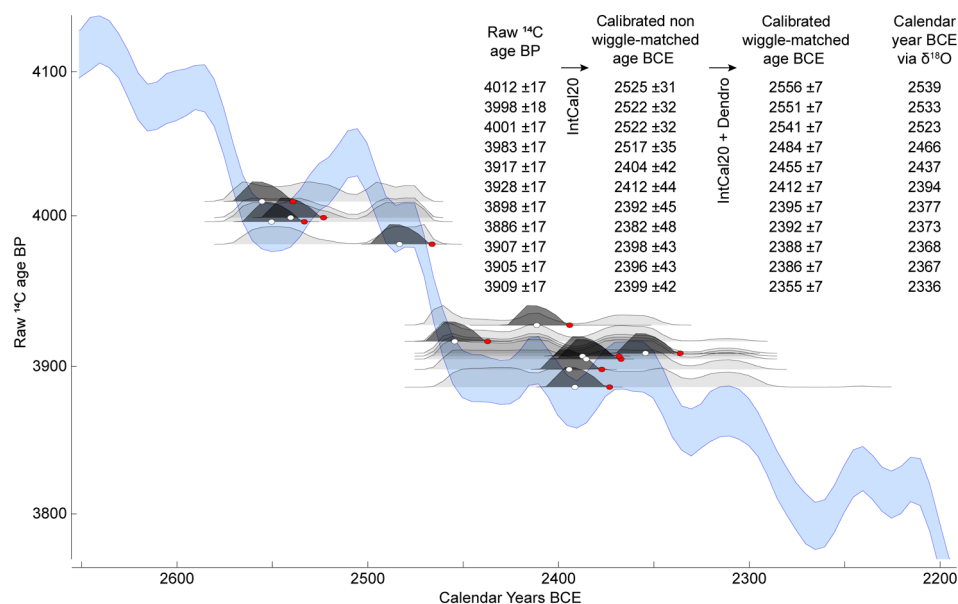


Figure 3. Radiocarbon and absolute dating. Raw results of radiocarbon dating are listed in the first column of the inset table (for full statistics, see Supplemental Table S4). The individual ^{14}C dates are resolved against the most recent radiocarbon calibration curve for the Northern Hemisphere IntCal20 (in blue; Reimer et al., 2020) with their probability distributions shown in light grey and calibrated ages BCE given in the second column. To further reduce the temporal uncertainty, the dates are wiggle-matched using dendrochronological information (dark grey shadings and white dots for mean values, third column). Note that the ^{14}C dates are integrated over 10–15 years, and this uncertainty is not taken into account in OxCal calibration (Bronk Ramsey, 2001, 2021). The calibrated dates are reported at the 95.4% probability. Absolute cross-dating of the yew $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology against the reference oak $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ chronology assigns a calendar year BCE to each sample (red dots, last column). The difference between wiggle-matched and calendar dates (white and red dots, respectively) is 17 years.

Our absolute dating supports the results of the initial radiocarbon analysis (Figure 3, Supplemental Table S4). The calendar dates newly assigned to the 11 samples that were used for ^{14}C measurements are within the 99.7% probability range given by wiggle-matching (Bronk Ramsey et al., 2001). Although the ^{14}C values are slightly higher than the IntCal20 curve, especially across the plateau between circa 2450 and 2350 BCE, this discrepancy likely arises from both, samples integrating over 10–15 years and the calibration curve itself lacking a high temporal precision. Our study emphasizes the importance of increasing the total number of absolutely dated and annually resolved Holocene tree-ring chronologies, which

may further help constrain radiocarbon calibration curves (Pearson et al., 2022).

The statistically significant inter-species isotopic agreement now places our yew TRW chronology precisely from 2668 to 2213 years BCE (Figure 4a). By establishing an absolute date, we secure a benchmark for further improvement of Fenland dendrochronology, add a new species into the limited list of high-resolution Holocene chronologies, and enable additional investigations of long tree-ring chronologies from Ireland (Baillie and Brown, 1988; Brown et al., 1986), Fennoscandia (Eronen et al., 2002; Grudd et al., 2002; Helama et al., 2008), and western Europe (Boettger et al., 2007; Eckstein et al., 2009; Leuschner et al., 2002).

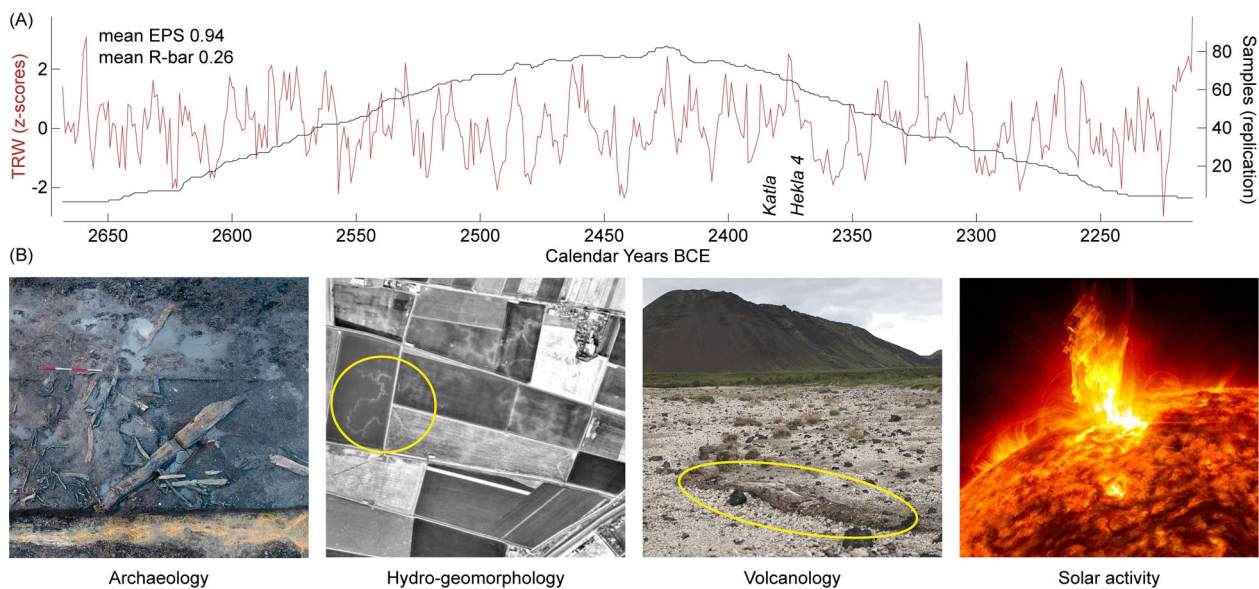


Figure 4. Chronology characteristics and applications. (a) Absolutely dated yew TRW chronology in red and its sample replication in black. EPS is the expressed population signal and $R\text{-bar}$ is the inter-series correlation, both derived from 70-year windows lagged by 25 years from 2579–2309 BCE. Icelandic eruptions of Katla and Hekla 4 dated to 2388 ± 8 and 2375 ± 8 BCE, respectively, are labelled (Davies et al., 2024). (b) Potential applications of our new mid-Holocene record are: (i) dating archaeological finds of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods (wood exposed during hand excavation of an area of Late Neolithic–Early Bronze Age lower peat at the archaeological site of Must Farm in the Fenland, UK; credits: Cambridge Archaeological Unit), (ii) reconstructing hydro-geomorphological and sea-level changes that may offer new insights into the yet debated 4.2 ka climate anomaly around 4200 years ago (paleo-streams encircled yellow, so-called roddons (Fowler, 1932), are visible next to the sampling site with subfossil yew wood; credits: Cambridge Air Photos, 1982; reproduced with permission of the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography (c) Copyright reserved), (iii) dating volcanic eruptions (a tree trunk encircled yellow was buried by an Icelandic eruption some four thousand years ago; credits: UB), and (iv) reconstructing solar activity via annually resolved ^{14}C measurements (a sudden explosion on the Sun generating a solar storm; credits: NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory).

Discussion

Spanning the transition from the Late Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age, our absolutely dated yew chronology offers new opportunities for refining archaeological interpretation (Figure 4b). Systematic archaeological surveys in eastern England have unveiled vast and well-preserved evidence of early human activity (Godwin, 1997; Hall and Coles, 1994). Numerous houses, causewayed enclosures, trackways, and burial round borrows have been found (Medlycott 2011). Moreover, the period is characterized by the spread of metal-work and a remarkably wide range of pottery styles across the Fenland attributed to the Peterborough, Grooved Ware, and Beaker cultures (Bullmore, 2022; Glazebrook, 1997; Yates and Bradley, 2010). Despite a seemingly uniform landscape, regional diversity in archaeological findings has always been recognized, and developing a more precise spatiotemporal framework has consistently been identified as a research priority (Brown and Glazebrook, 2000; Cooper, 2024; Glazebrook, 1997; Medlycott, 2011). The calendar-dated yew TRW record now offers an opportunity for precise archaeological attribution.

The mid-Holocene hydroclimate reconstruction recently developed from Fenland yew wood (Bebchuk et al., 2025) is now anchored to the period 2645–2228 BCE. Further to shedding new light onto the hydro-geomorphological and biogeographic consequences of sea-level changes in the North Sea (Figure 4b) and their possible impacts on human migration and societal transformation, the record secures a timescale for high-resolution palaeoclimatic research on the still debated climate anomaly around 4200 years ago, the so-called ‘4.2 ka event’ (Helama, 2024; Weiss et al., 1993). Associated with an extreme drought in central Asia, its effect and extent across the North Atlantic remain unclear (Bradley and Bakke, 2019; McKay et al., 2024). Several lines of

evidence point to increased storminess (Goslin et al., 2019; Sorrel et al., 2012) and a sea-level rise in the North Sea (Bebchuk et al., 2024, 2025; Shennan et al., 2018; Waller, 1994), which could have shifted (or be triggered by the shift of) the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone southwards and contributed to drying across parts of Asia (Yan and Liu, 2019) and the European Alps (Arosio et al., 2025). We expect our yew archive to serve as a reference in advancing the quest for the causes and mechanisms of the 4.2 ka event.

Furthermore, our new absolutely dated yew chronology may help establish calendar dates for Icelandic volcanic eruptions, such as those of Katla and Hekla 4 that are currently estimated at 2388 ± 8 and 2375 ± 8 BCE, respectively (Figure 4b; Davies et al., 2024). This far distant dating might be possible through wood anatomical investigations of ‘blue rings’ that are known to occur in coniferous species and to be indicative of abrupt summer cooling often caused by large, sulphur-rich volcanic eruptions (Büntgen et al., 2022; Piermattei et al., 2015). We also expect many absolutely dated and annually resolved radiocarbon dates from our still growing yew archive to contribute to the refinement of the next IntCal curve (Reimer et al., 2020), and thus help reconstruct changes in solar activity during the mid-Holocene (Figure 4b). In the light of these opportunities, we hope that our study will stimulate measurements of tree-ring stable isotopes in relict wood across different species and regions and showcase their potential for advancing archaeological and paleoenvironmental research worldwide.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Inna Roshka for her work at the Czech isotope laboratory, Danny McCarroll and the QUERCUS project team for support, Adamson Low and Martin Bridge for sample provision

and dating, and Iona Robinson Zeki and David Matzliach from the Cambridge Archaeological Unit for providing the photo of wood remains at the archaeological site.

Author contribution(s)

Tatiana Bechuk: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Darren Davies: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Resources; Software; Writing – review & editing.

Neil J Loader: Conceptualization; Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Otmar Urban: Methodology; Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Tito Arosio: Methodology; Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Lukas Wacker: Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Natálie Pernicová: Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Josef Čáslavský: Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Miroslav Trnka: Resources; Writing – review & editing.

Alexander V Kirilyanov: Writing – review & editing.

David Brown: Resources.

Jan Esper: Writing – review & editing.

Clive Oppenheimer: Writing – review & editing.

Ulf Büntgen: Conceptualization; Investigation; Supervision; Visualization; Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: TB was funded by the Hill Foundation Cambridge Trust, DD and NJL are supported by UKRI EP/X025098/1, TA by SNSF P500PN_225686, and JE and UB received funding from the Czech Science Foundation (# 23-08049S; Hydro8) and the ERC Advanced Grant (# 882727; Monostar). UB received the ERC Synergy Grant (# 101118880; Synergy-Plague). Stable isotope analyses were performed using analytical infrastructure that is part of AnaEE Czech Republic and AnaEE-ERIC networks (<https://www.anaee.eu/>), supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic through the CzeCOS programme, grant number LM2023048.

ORCID iD

Tatiana Bechuk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3952-2290>

Data availability

Raw yew tree-ring width (TRW) measurements are available at the International Tree-Ring DataBase (ITRDB) at <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/paleo-search/study/41020>, and raw yew tree-ring stable oxygen isotope (TRSIO) measurements are published at the NOAA for Palaeoclimatology data repository at <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/paleo-search/study/41021>. Oak stable isotope measurements form part of an evolving 7000-year chronology for the UK, which is currently being developed at the Swansea University, UK. Once complete, the data will be publicly available. Radiocarbon dates are provided in the Supplementary material. The ISODATE software is freely available at <https://isodate.swansea.ac.uk>.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

Arosio T, Leuenberger M, Nicolussi K et al. (2025) Tree-ring stable isotopes from the European Alps reveal long-term summer drying over the Holocene. *Science Advances* 11: eadr4161.

- Astbury AK (1958) *The Black Fens*. Cambridge: Golden Head Press.
- Baillie MGL and Brown DM (1988) An overview of oak chronologies. In: *Science and Archaeology. Presented at the Science and Archaeology, B.A.R. British Series 196, Glasgow, 1987*. Glasgow.
- Bannister B and Robinson WJ (1975) Tree-ring dating in archaeology. *World Archaeology* 7: 210–225.
- Batchelor CR, Branch NP, Carew T et al. (2020) Middle-Holocene environmental change and archaeology in coastal wetlands: Further implications for our understanding of the history of Taxus woodland. *Holocene* 30: 300–314.
- Bechuk T, Krusic PJ, Pike JH et al. (2024) Sudden disappearance of yew (*Taxus baccata*) woodlands from eastern England coincides with a possible climate event around 4.2 ka ago. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 323: 108414.
- Bechuk T and Büntgen U (2025) Securing the past for the future – why climate proxy archives should be protected. *Boreas* 70039.
- Bechuk T, Urban O, Arosio T et al. (2025) Tree-ring stable isotopes reveal a hydroclimate shift in Eastern England around 4.2 ka ago. *Geophysical Research Letters* 52: e2024GL114313.
- Billamboz A (2002) NOAA/WDS Paleoclimatology - Billamboz - Upper Suevia Bog 4 Archaeological - QUSP - ITRDB GERM030. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25921/574E-XY23>
- Billamboz A (2003) Tree Rings and Wetland Occupation in Southwest Germany Between 2000 and 500 BC: Dendroarchaeology Beyond Dating in Tribute to F. H. Schweingruber.
- Boettger T, Haupt M, Knöller K et al. (2007) Wood cellulose preparation methods and mass spectrometric analyses of $\delta^{13}C$, $\delta^{18}O$, and nonexchangeable δ^2H values in cellulose, sugar, and starch: An interlaboratory comparison. *Analytical Chemistry* 79: 4603–4612.
- Boswijk IG (1998) *A dendrochronological study of oak and pine from the raised mires of the Humberhead Levels, Eastern England*. Ph.D. Thesis. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield.
- Bradley RS and Bakke J (2019) Is there evidence for a 4.2 ka bp event in the Northern North Atlantic region? *Climate of the Past* 15: 1665–1676.
- Bronk Ramsey C (1995) Radiocarbon calibration and analysis of stratigraphy: The OxCal program. *Radiocarbon* 37: 425–430.
- Bronk Ramsey C (2001) Development of the radiocarbon calibration program. *Radiocarbon* 43: 355–363.
- Bronk Ramsey C (2021) OxCal v4. 4.4. Available at: <https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html>.
- Bronk Ramsey C, van der Plicht J and Weninger B (2001) ‘Wiggle matching’ radiocarbon dates. *Radiocarbon* 43: 381–389.
- Brown DM, Munro MAR, Baillie MGL et al. (1986) Dendrochronology—The absolute Irish standard. *Radiocarbon* 28: 279–283.
- Brown N and Glazebrook J (eds) (2000) *Research and Archaeology: A Framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research Agenda and Strategy*. Norwich: East Anglian Archaeology.
- Bullmore H (2022) *Houses of the living: Domestic architecture in England and Wales, 4000-1500 BC*. Doctoral Thesis. UCL, University College, London.
- Büntgen U, Crivellaro A, Arseneault D et al. (2022) Global wood anatomical perspective on the onset of the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA) in the mid-6th century CE. *Science Bulletin* 67: 2336–2344.
- Büntgen U and Esper J (2025) The need for high-resolution paleoclimate research. *Dialogues Clim. Change* 2: 18–25.
- Büntgen U, Myglan VS, Ljungqvist FC et al. (2016) Cooling and societal change during the late antique little ice age from 536 to around 660 AD. *Nature Geoscience* 9: 231–236.

- Büntgen U and Oppenheimer C (2020) The importance of “year zero” in interdisciplinary studies of climate and history. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117: 32845–32847.
- Christopoulou A, Özarslan Y, Elzanowska A et al. (2024) Dendroarchaeology in Greece – From humble beginnings to promising future. *Dendrochronologia* 85: 126196.
- Cook ER and Kairiukstis LA (2013) *Methods of Dendrochronology: Applications in the Environmental Sciences*. Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Coplen TB (1995) Letter to the editor: New IUPAC guidelines for the reporting of stable hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen isotope-ratio data. *Journal of Research of the National Institute of Standards and Technology* 100: 285.
- Darby HC (1940) *The Draining of the Fens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darby HC (1983) *The Changing Fenland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies D, Loader NJ, McCarroll D et al. (2025) ISODATE – Software for stable isotope dendrochronology. *Dendrochronologia* 93: 126385.
- Davies SM, Albert PG, Bourne AJ et al. (2024) Exploiting the Greenland volcanic ash repository to date caldera-forming eruptions and widespread isochrons during the Holocene. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 334: 108707.
- Douglass AE (1941) Crossdating in dendrochronology. *Journal of Forestry* 39: 825–831.
- D’Arrigo R, Frank D, Jacoby G et al. (2001) Spatial response to major volcanic events in or about AD 536, 934 and 1258: Frost rings and other dendrochronological evidence from Mongolia and Northern Siberia: Comment on R. B. Stothers, ‘Volcanic Dry Fogs, Climate Cooling, and Plague Pandemics in Europe and the Middle East’ (Climatic Change, 42, 1999). *Climatic Change* 49: 239–246.
- Cooper A (2024) Early and Middle Bronze Age Resource Assessment (2024) In: Research and archaeology: East of England research framework. Available at: <https://researchframeworks.org/eoe/resource-assessments/early-and-middle-bronze-age/#section-13>
- Eckstein J, Leuschner HH, Bauerochse A et al. (2009) Subfossil bog-pine horizons document climate and ecosystem changes during the mid-Holocene. *Dendrochronologia* 27: 129–146.
- Ennion EAR (1951) *Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and the Isle of Ely*. London: Hale.
- Eronen M, Zetterberg P, Briffa KR et al. (2002) The supra-long Scots pine tree-ring record for Finnish lapland: Part 1, chronology construction and initial inferences. *Holocene* 12: 673–680.
- Esper J, Krusic PJ, Ljungqvist FC et al. (2016) Ranking of tree-ring based temperature reconstructions of the past millennium. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 145: 134–151.
- Esper J, Schneider L, Krusic PJ et al. (2013) European summer temperature response to annually dated volcanic eruptions over the past nine centuries. *Bulletin of Volcanology* 75: 736.
- Fowler G (1932) Old river-beds in the Fenlands. *Geographical Journal* 79: 210–212.
- Fritts HC (1976) *Tree Rings and Climate*. Tucson, Arizona, USA: Academic Press, Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, University of Arizona.
- Glazebrook J (ed.) (1997) *Research and archaeology: A framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment*. Norwich: East Anglian Archaeology.
- Godwin H (1978) *Fenland: its ancient past and uncertain future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Godwin H (1997) The contribution of radiocarbon dating to archaeology in Britain. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A (Mathematics, Physical and Engineering Sciences)* 269: 57–75.
- Goslin J, Galka M, Sander L et al. (2019) Decadal variability of North-Eastern Atlantic storminess at the mid-Holocene: New inferences from a record of wind-blown sand, Western Denmark. *Global and Planetary Change* 180: 16–32.
- Grudd H, Briffa KR, Karlén W et al. (2002) A 7400-year tree-ring chronology in Northern Swedish Lapland: Natural climatic variability expressed on annual to millennial timescales. *Holocene* 12: 657–665.
- Hafner A, Reich J, Ballmer A et al. (2021) First absolute chronologies of neolithic and bronze age settlements at Lake Ohrid based on dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating. *Journal of Archaeological Science Reports* 38: 103107.
- Hall D and Coles J (eds) (1994) *Fenland Survey: An Essay in Landscape and Persistence*, dgo-digital original edn. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Haneca K, Debonne V, Davies D et al. (2025) Oxygen isotope dendrochronology allows dating of historical timbers across a wide geographical region. *Dendrochronologia* 89: 126283.
- Hartl-Meier C, Zang C, Buntgen U et al. (2015) Uniform climate sensitivity in tree-ring stable isotopes across species and sites in a mid-latitude temperate forest. *Tree Physiology* 35: 4–15.
- Helama S (2024) The 4.2 ka event: A review of palaeoclimate literature and directions for future research. *Holocene* 34: 1408–1415.
- Helama S, Mielikäinen K, Timonen M et al. (2008) Finnish supra-long tree-ring chronology extended to 5634 BC. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography* 62: 271–277.
- Holmes RL (1983) Computer-assisted quality control in tree-ring dating and measurement. *TREE-RING Bull* 43: 69–78.
- Kuniholm PI, Newton M, Sherbiny H et al. (2014) Dendrochronological dating in Egypt: Work accomplished and future prospects. *Radiocarbon* 56: S93–S102.
- Leuschner HH, Sass-Klaassen U, Jansma E et al. (2002) Subfossil European bog oaks: Population dynamics and long-term growth depressions as indicators of changes in the holocene hydro-regime and climate. *Holocene* 12: 695–706.
- Ljungqvist FC, Piermattei A, Seim A et al. (2020) Ranking of tree-ring based hydroclimate reconstructions of the past millennium. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 230: 106074.
- Loader NJ, McCarroll D, Miles D et al. (2019) Tree ring dating using oxygen isotopes: A master chronology for Central England. *Journal of Quaternary Science* 34: 475–490.
- Loader NJ, McCarroll D, Miles D et al. (2021) Dating of non-oak species in the United Kingdom historical buildings archive using stable oxygen isotopes. *Dendrochronologia* 69: 125862.
- Loader NJ, Robertson I, Barker AC et al. (1997) An improved technique for the batch processing of small wholewood samples to α -cellulose. *Chemical Geology* 136: 313–317.
- Loader NJ, Santillo PM, Woodman-Ralph JP et al. (2008) Multiple stable isotopes from oak trees in Southwestern Scotland and the potential for stable isotope dendroclimatology in maritime climatic regions. *Chemical Geology* 252: 62–71.
- Loader NJ, Young GHF, McCarroll D et al. (2013) Quantifying uncertainty in isotope dendroclimatology. *Holocene* 23: 1221–1226.
- McCarroll D and Loader NJ (2004) Stable isotopes in tree rings. *Isotopes in Quaternary Paleoenvironmental reconstruction* 23: 771–801.
- McCarroll D, Loader NJ, Miles D et al. (2019) Oxygen isotope dendrochronology of Llwyn Celyn; one of the oldest houses in Wales. *Dendrochronologia* 58: 125653.
- McKay NP, Kaufman DS, Arcusa SH et al. (2024) The 4.2 ka event is not remarkable in the context of holocene climate variability. *Nature Communications* 15: 6555.
- Medlycott M (ed.) (2011) *Research and Archaeology Revisited: A Revised Framework for the East of England*. Norwich: East Anglian Archaeology.

- Miller SH and Skertchly SBJ (1878) *The Fenland Past and Present*. London: Leach and Son.
- Nakatsuka T, Sano M, Li Z et al. (2020) A 2600-year summer climate reconstruction in Central Japan by integrating tree-ring stable oxygen and hydrogen isotopes. *Climate of the Past* 16: 2153–2172.
- Nayling N, Loader NJ, Bale RJ et al. (2024a) Inter-genus oxygen isotope dendrochronology of the Newport medieval ship keel. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 53: 535–540.
- Nayling N, Loader NJ, Bale RJ et al. (2024b) Oxygen isotope dendrochronology of the Newport medieval ship. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 53: 245–253.
- Němec M, Wacker L, Hajdas I et al. (2010) Alternative methods for cellulose preparation for AMS Measurement. *Radiocarbon* 52: 1358–1370.
- Oppenheimer C, Orchard A, Stoffel M et al. (2018) The Eldgjá eruption: Timing, long-range impacts and influence on the Christianisation of Iceland. *Climatic Change* 147: 369–381.
- Pearson C, Salzer M, Wacker L et al. (2020) Securing timelines in the ancient Mediterranean using multiproxy annual tree-ring data. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117: 8410–8415.
- Pearson CL, Leavitt SW, Kromer B et al. (2022) Dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating. *Radiocarbon* 64: 569–588.
- Piermattei A, Crivellaro A, Carrer M et al. (2015) The “blue ring”: Anatomy and formation hypothesis of a new tree-ring anomaly in conifers. *Trees* 29: 613–620.
- Pilcher JR, Baillie MGL, Schmidt B et al. (1984) A 7,272-year tree-ring chronology for Western Europe. *Nature* 312: 150–152.
- Pryme ADL (1701) III. Part of a letter from the Reverend Mr Abraham de la Pryme to the publisher, concerning trees found under ground in Hatfield Chace *Philos. Trans* 1683-1775 2222: 980–992.
- Pryor F (2019) *The Fens: Discovering England's Ancient Depths*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Reimer PJ, Austin WEN, Bard E et al. (2020) The IntCal20 Northern Hemisphere radiocarbon age calibration curve (0–55 cal kBP). *Radiocarbon* 62: 725–757.
- Reinig F, Sookdeo A, Esper J et al. (2020) Illuminating intercal during the younger dryas. *Radiocarbon* 62: 883–889.
- Rinn F (1996) *TSAP - Time Series Analyses Presentation. Reference Manual (Version 3.0)*. Heidelberg: RinnTech Heidelberg.
- Römer P, Reinig F, Konter O et al. (2023) Multi-proxy crossdating extends the longest high-elevation tree-ring chronology from the Mediterranean. *Dendrochronologia* 79: 126085.
- Sano M, Li Z, Murakami Y et al. (2022) Tree ring oxygen isotope dating of wood recovered from a canal in the ancient capital of Japan. *Journal of Archaeological Science Reports* 45: 103626.
- Shennan I, Bradley SL and Edwards R (2018) Relative sea-level changes and crustal movements in Britain and Ireland since the Last Glacial Maximum. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 188: 143–159.
- Shi S, Shi J, Nakatsuka T et al. (2025) Tree-ring oxygen isotope cross-dating between southeastern China and central Japan. *Dendrochronologia* 91: 126319.
- Siegwolf RTW, Brooks JR, Roden J et al. (2022) *Stable Isotopes in Tree Rings: Inferring Physiological, Climatic and Environmental Responses, Tree Physiology*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Skertchly SBJ (1877) *The geology of the Fenland*. Order of the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury. London.
- Sookdeo A, Kromer B, Büntgen U et al. (2020) Quality dating: A well-defined protocol implemented at ETH for high-precision 14C-dates tested on late glacial wood. *Radiocarbon* 62: 891–899.
- Sorrel P, Debret M, Billeaud I et al. (2012) Persistent non-solar forcing of Holocene storm dynamics in coastal sedimentary archives. *Nature Geoscience* 5: 892–896.
- Tegel W, Muigg B, Skiadaresis G et al. (2022) Dendroarchaeology in Europe. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 10: 823622.
- Wacker L, Bonani G, Friedrich M et al. (2010) MICADAS: Routine and high-precision radiocarbon dating. *Radiocarbon* 52: 252–262.
- Waller M (1994) *The Fenland Project, Number 9: Flandrian Environmental Change in Fenland, East Anglian Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridgeshire Archaeological Committee.
- Weiss H, Courty M-A, Wetterstrom W et al. (1993) The Genesis and collapse of third millennium North Mesopotamian civilization. *Science* 261: 995–1004.
- Wieloch T, Helle G, Heinrich I et al. (2011) A novel device for batch-wise isolation of α -cellulose from small-amount wholewood samples. *Dendrochronologia* 29: 115–117.
- Wigley TML, Jones PD and Briffa KR (1987) Cross-dating methods in dendrochronology. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 14: 51–64.
- Yan M and Liu J (2019) Physical processes of cooling and megadrought during the 4.2 ka BP event: Results from TraCE-21ka simulations. *Climate of the Past* 15: 265–277.
- Yates D and Bradley R (2010) Still water, hidden depths: The deposition of Bronze Age metalwork in the English Fenland. *Antiquity* 84: 405–415.