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Landscape channelization cascade

Sara Bonetti^a, Milad Hooshyar^{b,c}, Carlo Camporeale^d, and Amilcare Porporato^{b,c,1}

^aDepartment of Environmental Systems Science, ETH Zurich, 8092 Zurich, Switzerland; ^bDepartment of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544, USA; ^cPrinceton Environmental Institute, Princeton university, Princeton, New Jersey 08544, USA; ^dDepartment of Environment, Land and Infrastructure Engineering, Politecnico di Torino, 10129 Turin, Italy

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1 **The hierarchy of channel networks in landscapes displays features**
2 **that are characteristic of non-equilibrium complex systems. Here we**
3 **show that a sequence of increasingly complex ridge and valley net-**
4 **works is produced by a system of partial differential equations cou-**
5 **pling landscape evolution dynamics with a specific catchment area**
6 **equation. By means of a linear stability analysis we identify the cri-**
7 **tical conditions triggering channel formation and the emergence of**
8 **characteristic valley spacing. The ensuing channelization cascade,**
9 **described by a dimensionless number accounting for diffusive soil**
10 **creep, runoff erosion, and tectonic uplift, is reminiscent of the sub-**
11 **sequent instabilities in fluid turbulence, while the structure of the**
12 **simulated patterns is indicative of a tendency to evolve toward op-**
13 **timal configurations, with anomalies similar to dislocation defects**
14 **observed in pattern-forming systems. The choice of specific geomor-**
15 **phic transport laws and boundary conditions strongly influences the**
16 **channelization cascade, underlying the nonlocal and nonlinear char-**
17 **acter of its dynamics.**

Ridge and valley patterns | Landscape evolution model | Detachment limited | River networks | Drainage area

1 **T**he spatial distribution of ridges and valleys, including the
2 formation of evenly spaced first order valleys as well as
3 more complex branching river networks (see Fig. 1), is one of
4 the most striking features of a landscape. It has long fascinated
5 the scientific community, leading to the development of a rich
6 body of work on the statistical, theoretical, and numerical
7 analysis of landscape organization. Early works focused on
8 the definition of stream ordering systems for the river basin
9 characterization (1–3) and the coupled dynamics of water and
10 sediment transport to identify stability conditions for incipient
11 valley formation (4–6), followed by the statistical description
12 of river networks, including scaling laws and fractal properties
13 of river basins (7–10), the related optimality principles (9, 11),
14 and stochastic models (12–14). These studies have shed light
15 on the spatial organization and governing statistical laws of
16 developed river networks and explored the linkages to other
17 branch-forming systems (13, 15, 16), but have not tackled the
18 physical origin of the underlying instabilities and feedback
19 mechanisms acting over time in the formation of the observed
20 ridge and valley patterns (17). To this purpose, landscape evo-
21 lution models have been employed for the analysis of branching
22 river networks (18, 19) in relation to the main erosional me-
23 chanisms acting on the topography. These works represented
24 an important step forward in the study of spatially organized
25 patterns of ridges and valleys. However, lacking a rigorous
26 formulation of the drainage area equation (20, 21) precluded
27 the theoretical investigation of the underlying instabilities in
28 relation to the leading geomorphological processes involved.

29 In this work, we focus on landscapes characterized by runoff
30 erosion, expressed as a function of the specific drainage area
31 a (21) to obtain grid-independent solutions without the in-

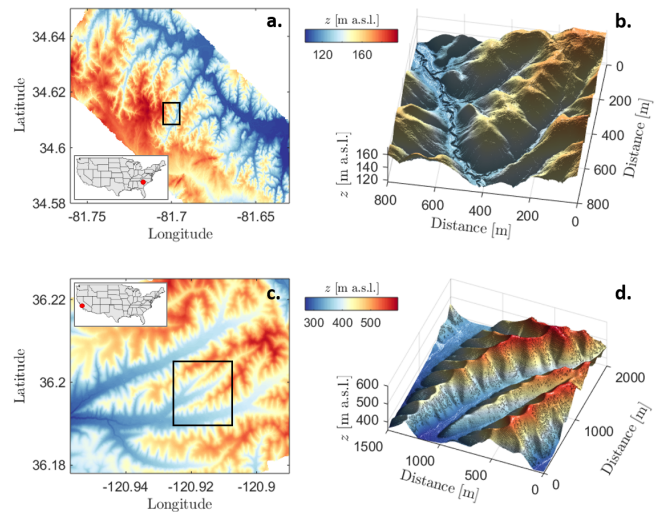


Fig. 1. Ridge and valley patterns in natural landscapes. 1-meter resolution LiDAR topographies of (a) the Calhoun Critical Zone landscape in South Carolina and (b) Gabilan Mesa in California. Panels b and d show three-dimensional surfaces for two subsets (black rectangles in panels a and c) where regular evenly spaced valleys are visible. Data were obtained from the National Center for Airborne Laser Mapping (NCALM) and retrieved from the OpenTopography facility.

32 introduction of additional system parameters. The resulting
33 system of coupled, nonlinear partial differential equations
34 (PDEs) provides a starting point for the theoretical analysis of
35 channel-forming instabilities and landscape self-organization
36 and allows us to describe the resulting ridge and valley pat-
37 terns as a function of the relative proportions of diffusive soil

Significance Statement

We show that a sequence of increasingly complex ridge and valley networks is produced by a system of nonlinear partial differential equations serving as a minimalist landscape evolution model describing the interplay between soil creep, runoff erosion, and tectonic uplift. We identify the critical conditions for the transition from a smooth to a channelized topography by means of a linear stability analysis and highlight striking similarities with fluid dynamic turbulence. The results shed light on the physical mechanisms responsible for observed landscape self-organization. The formation of regular pre-fractal networks reveals the tendency of the system to evolve towards optimal configurations typical of non-equilibrium complex systems.

Author contributions: S.B. and A.P. designed research, discussed results, and wrote the paper. S.B. and M.H. performed the numerical simulations, while S.B., C.C., and A.P. performed the linear stability analysis. All the authors reviewed and edited the final version of the manuscript.

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¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: aporpora@princeton.edu

38 **creep, runoff erosion, and tectonic uplift.** The nonlocal character of the equations makes the boundary conditions extremely important. On regular (i.e., square and rectangular) domains, simulations reveal a sequence of channel instabilities reminiscent of the laminar-to-turbulent transition (22–24). The explicit mathematical structure makes it possible to perform a linear stability analysis of the coupled PDE system to identify the critical conditions for the first channel-forming instability. The subsequent branching sequence towards smaller and smaller valleys until soil creep becomes dominant is similar to the turbulent cascade with large scale vortices leading to smaller ones until viscous dissipation. The formation of networks of ridges and valleys, brought about by the regular boundary conditions, also reveals the tendency of the system to develop configurations suggestive of optimization principles (11) typical of non-equilibrium thermodynamics and complex systems (16, 25–32). Our analysis is different from recent interesting contributions on groundwater-dominated landscapes (33, 34), where branching and valley evolution is initiated at seepage points in the landscape.

58 Landscape evolution in detachment-limited conditions

59 The time evolution of the surface elevation $z(x, y, t)$ is described by the sediment continuity equation (17, 18, 35, 36)

$$61 \quad \frac{\partial z}{\partial t} = U - \nabla \cdot \mathbf{f} = U - \nabla \cdot (\mathbf{f}_d + \mathbf{f}_c), \quad [1]$$

62 where t is time, U is the uplift rate, and \mathbf{f} is the total volumetric sediment flux, given by the sum of fluxes related to runoff erosion/channelized flow (\mathbf{f}_c) and soil creep processes (\mathbf{f}_d). The soil creep flux is assumed to be proportional to the topographic gradient (37, 38), hence $\mathbf{f}_d = -D\nabla z$, D being a diffusion coefficient (here assumed to be constant in space and time). In the so-called detachment-limited (DL) conditions (6, 18, 39) it is assumed that all eroded material is transported outside the model domain, so that no sediment redeposition occurs. Under these conditions, the runoff erosion term is approximated as a sink term given by (18) $\nabla \cdot \mathbf{f}_c \approx K'_a |\nabla z|^n q^m$, where K'_a is a coefficient, q is the discharge per unit width of contour line, and m and n are model parameters. As a result, Eq. (1) becomes

$$76 \quad \frac{\partial z}{\partial t} = D\nabla^2 z - K'_a q^m |\nabla z|^n + U. \quad [2]$$

77 Thus the soil creep flux results in a diffusion term which tends to smooth the surface, while the runoff erosion component is a sink term which excavates the topography as a function of local slope and specific water flux.

81 The surface water flux q is linked to the continuity equation

$$82 \quad \frac{\partial h}{\partial t} = R - \nabla \cdot (q\mathbf{n}) \quad [3]$$

83 where h is the water height, \mathbf{n} the direction of the flow, and R the rainfall rate effectively contributing to runoff production. Eq. (3) can be simplified assuming steady-state conditions with constant, representative rainfall rate, R_0 , and (as in previous works (40)) constant speed of water flow v_0 in the direction opposite to the landscape gradient (i.e., $\mathbf{n} = -\nabla z/|\nabla z|$). In such conditions, it can be shown (21) that the water height, h , and the specific water flux, q , are both proportional to the specific contributing area, a , i.e. $h = q/v_0 = aR_0/v_0$. As a

92 result, the system of Eqs. (3) - (2) reduces to an equation for the specific catchment area a (21),

$$94 \quad -\nabla \cdot \left(a \frac{\nabla z}{|\nabla z|} \right) = 1, \quad [4]$$

95 coupled to the landscape evolution equation

$$96 \quad \frac{\partial z}{\partial t} = D\nabla^2 z - K_a a^m |\nabla z|^n + U, \quad [5]$$

97 with an adjusted erosion constant K_a to account for the proportionality between a and q .

98 It is important to observe that the specific drainage area a has units of length and is related to the drainage area A as $a = \lim_{w \rightarrow 0} A/w$; it is thus defined per unit width of contour line w (21). Most landscape evolution models (e.g., 9, 18, 41, 42) use the total drainage area A in Eq. (5) instead of a , with several notable implications. The value of A is generally evaluated using numerical flow-routing algorithms (e.g., D8, D ∞ (43)) which provide grid-dependent values of A . To correct for this, the drainage area A is often modified to account for the channel width (18, 41), but this results in approximations with arbitrary parameters. Conversely, the use of a avoids grid-dependence of the resulting topography. Moreover, re-casting the problem in terms of a consistent coupled system of PDEs makes it possible to analyze theoretically the landscape evolution process. As detailed below (see Methods), an analytic solution for the steady state hillslope profile can be derived (44) and then used as a basic state for a linear stability analysis to identify the critical conditions for the first channel formation and the characteristic valley spacing.

108 It is useful to non-dimensionalize the system of Eqs. (4) and (5) to quantify the relative impact of soil creep, runoff erosion, and uplift on the landscape morphology. Using a typical length scale of the domain, l , and the parameters of Eqs. (4) and (5), the following dimensionless quantities can be introduced: $\hat{t} = \frac{tD}{l^2}$, $\hat{x} = \frac{x}{l}$, $\hat{y} = \frac{y}{l}$, $\hat{z} = \frac{zD}{Ul^2}$, and $\hat{a} = \frac{a}{l}$. With these quantities, Eq. (5) becomes

$$125 \quad \frac{\partial \hat{z}}{\partial \hat{t}} = \hat{\nabla}^2 \hat{z} - \mathcal{C}_{\mathcal{I}} \hat{a}^m |\hat{\nabla} \hat{z}|^n + 1 \quad [6]$$

126 where

$$127 \quad \mathcal{C}_{\mathcal{I}} = \frac{K_a l^{m+n}}{D^n U^{1-n}}. \quad [7]$$

128 As we will see later, this index describes the tendency to form channels in a way which is reminiscent of the global Reynolds number (defined as the ratio of inertial to viscous forces) in fluid mechanics, as well as of the ratio of flow permeabilities used in constructal theory (45). A similar quantity based on a local length scale (i.e., the mean elevation of the emerging topographic profile) was used in Perron et al. (18). The definition of $\mathcal{C}_{\mathcal{I}}$ as a function of global variables based on system parameters (e.g., uplift rate U) and boundary conditions allows us to directly infer system behavior. For example, when the slope exponent n is equal to 1, the relative proportion of runoff erosion and soil creep can be seen to be independent of the uplift rate; however, if $n > 1$ the uplift acts to increase the runoff erosion component, while for $n < 1$ it enhances the diffusive component of the system. As we will see, this results in different drainage-network patterns as a function of uplift rates.

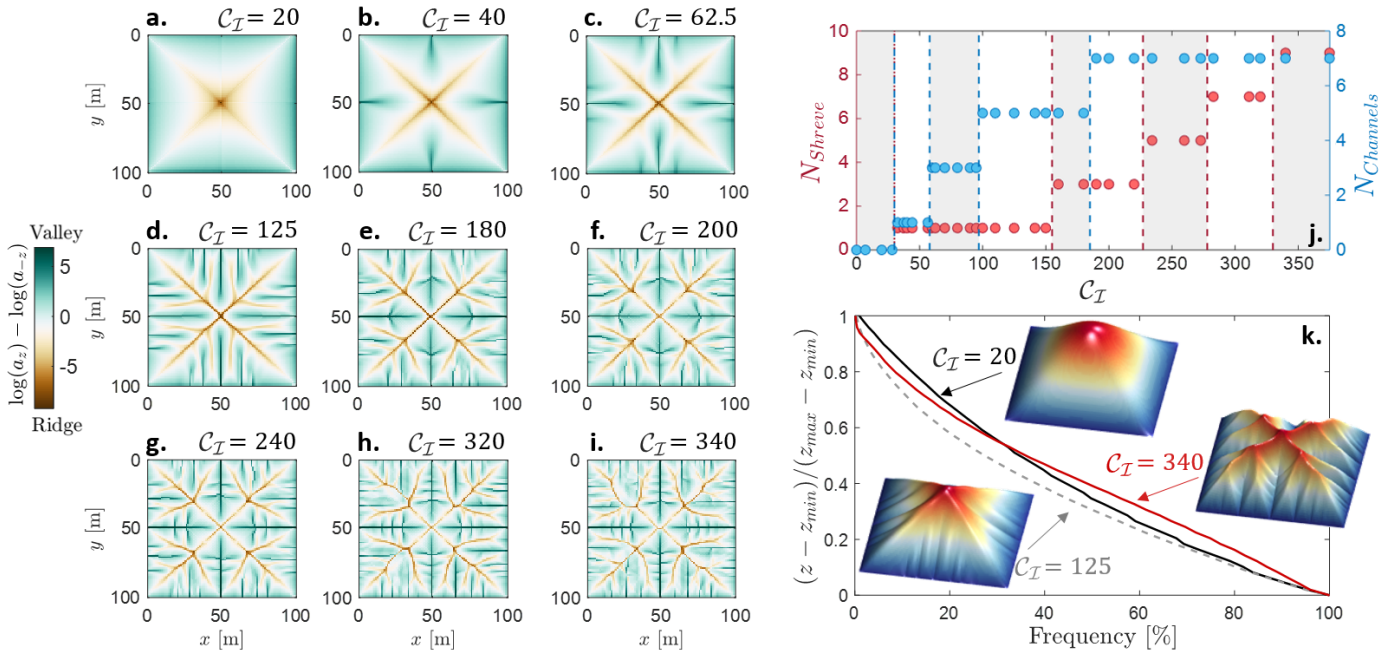


Fig. 2. Channelization cascade. Simulation results obtained for $m = 0.5$ and $n = 1$. (a-i) Ridge and valley patterns obtained for C_I values equal to 20, 40, 62.5, 125, 180, 200, 240, 320, and 340: brown corresponds to ridges and green to valleys. To better highlight the ridge and valley structure we show here the difference between the specific drainage area a and the specific dispersal area a_{-z} (i.e., the value of a computed over the flipped topography - see ref. 20). (j) Highest Shreve order (red) and number of main channels on each domain side (blue) for different values of the dimensionless parameter C_I . Based on the number of channels and the Shreve order nine regimes can be identified with distinctively different ridge/valley patterns (shown in panels a-i). (k) Normalized hypsometric curves obtained for $C_I = 20$ (solid black), 125 (dashed gray), and 340 (solid red): when no secondary branching is observed (i.e., $C_I \lesssim 155$) the hypsometric curve is concave, while after the first secondary branching is formed it undergoes a transition to a shape concave for higher elevations and convex at low elevations. Insets in panel k show 3d plots of the steady state topographies for the three cases, the color code represents surface elevation (red = high, blue = low).

Results

Organized ridge and valley patterns. Simulation results obtained by numerically solving Eqs. (4)-(5) over square domains with $m = 0.5$ and $n = 1$ (see Methods for details) are shown in Fig. 2. The emerging ridge/valley patterns are classified in terms of Shreve order (used here as a measure of branching complexity - see ref. 3), and number of channels formed on each side of the domain. As can be seen from Eq. (7), for $n = 1$ the dimensionless parameter C_I is independent of the uplift rate, so that the spatial patterns of Fig. 2 are only a function of the relative proportions of the soil creep and runoff erosion components. For low C_I values (i.e., $\lesssim 30$) no channels are formed and the topography evolves to a smooth surface dominated by diffusive soil creep (Fig. 2a). As the runoff erosion coefficient is increased the system progressively develops one, three, and five channels on each side of the square domain for $30 \lesssim C_I \lesssim 58$, $58 \lesssim C_I \lesssim 97$, and $97 \lesssim C_I \lesssim 155$, respectively (Fig. 2b-d). When C_I is increased above ≈ 155 the central channels develop secondary branches, with the main central channel becoming of Shreve order three (Fig. 2e). As C_I is further increased seven channels can be observed originating on each side of the domain, and the main central channel further branches (Fig. 2f-i) becoming of order nine for the highest C_I used for this configuration.

As the resulting landscape changes from a smooth topography to a progressively more dissected one, the shape of the hypsometric curve varies from concave (i.e., slope decreases along the horizontal axis) to one with a convex portion for low elevations (Fig. 2k). In particular, channel formation (with no secondary branching) causes the hypsometric curve

to progressively lower as a result of the lower altitudes observed in the topography, while maintaining a concave profile. As secondary branches develop, the hypsometric curve shifts to a concave/convex one, with the convex portion at lower altitudes becoming more evident as C_I increases (see red line for $C_I = 340$ in Fig. 2k).

The striking regularity of the drainage and ridge patterns induced by the simple geometry of the domain is reminiscent of regular pre-fractal structures (e.g., Peano basin (8, 9, 46-48)) and is indicative of the fundamental role of boundary conditions due to the highly non-local control introduced by the drainage area term. The introduction of noise and irregular boundaries quickly breaks the regularity of the patterns (see results from numerical simulations obtained over progressively more irregular boundaries in the SI Appendix, Fig. S10). The ridge and valley networks of Fig. 2 highly resemble Fig. 5 in ref. 31, where optimized tree-shaped flow paths were constructed to connect one point to many points uniformly distributed over an area. We further highlight similarities with the patterns obtained in ref. 30 by means of an erosion model where the global flow resistance is minimized.

Effect of runoff erosion laws. The effect of different runoff erosion laws has been discussed in the literature (42) also in relation to climate, vegetation cover, and soil properties (49, 50). Their role was analyzed here by changing the values of the exponents n and m , as shown in Fig. 3.

When the value of n is different from unity, the resulting ridge/valley patterns depend on the uplift rate U , as per Eq. (7). When n is increased the system displays channelization and secondary branching for higher values of C_I (i.e.,

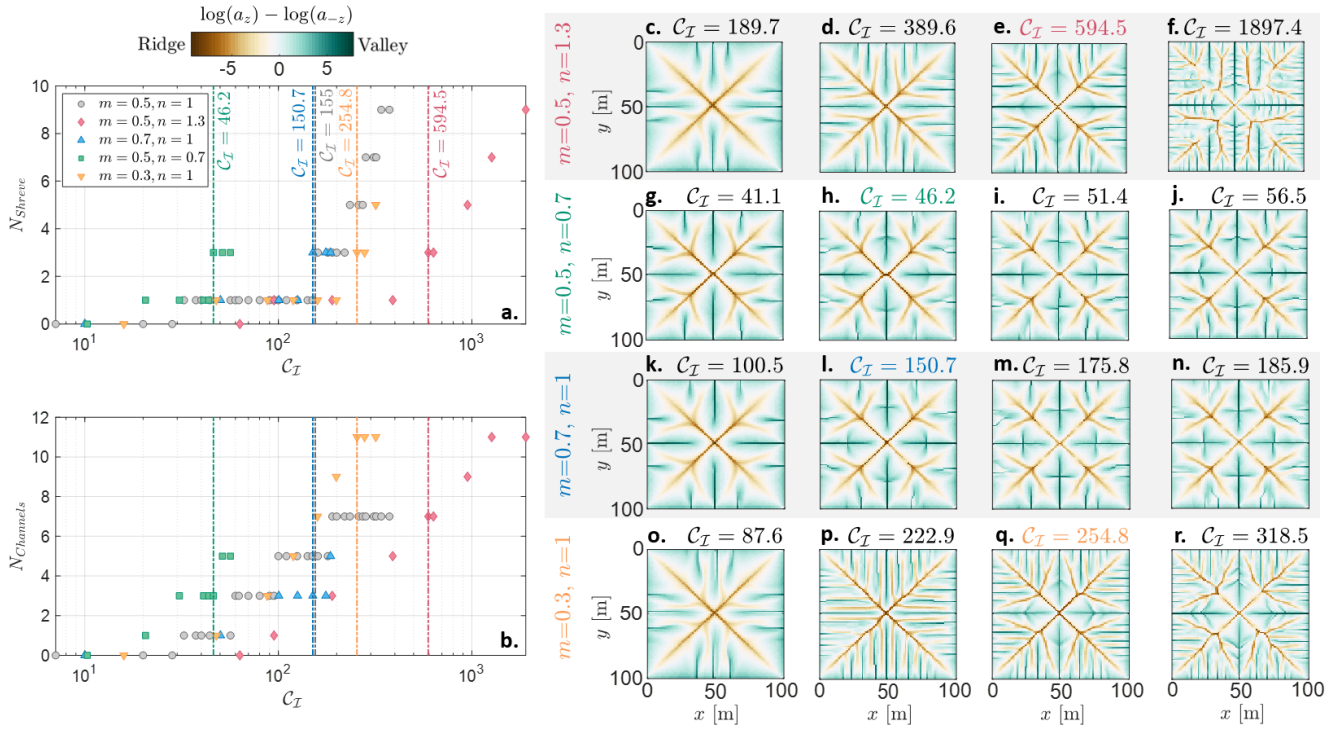


Fig. 3. Effect of runoff erosion laws. Simulation results obtained for different values of the slope and runoff exponents (i.e., n and m): (a) maximum Shreve order and (b) number of channels on each domain side as a function of C_I . Colored dash-dotted lines mark the C_I values at which the first secondary branching is observed for each set of m and n values, and the corresponding ridge/valley patterns are highlighted in panels c-r. (c-r) Examples of two-dimensional ridge (brown) and valley (green) patterns for scenarios with (c-f) increased slope exponent ($n = 1.3$, $m = 0.5$, and $C_I = 189.7, 389.6, 594.5, 1897.4$), (g-j) decreased slope exponent ($n = 0.7$, $m = 0.5$, and $C_I = 41.1, 46.2, 51.4, 56.6$), (k-n) increased water flux exponent ($n = 1$, $m = 0.7$, and $C_I = 100.5, 150.7, 175.8, 185.9$), and (o-r) decreased water flux exponent ($n = 1$, $m = 0.3$, and $C_I = 87.6, 222.9, 254.8, 318.5$).

points are shifted to the right in Fig. 3a,b), with a more dissected planar geometry characterized by narrower valleys and smaller junction angles (Fig. 3c-f). A decrease in n leads to smoother geometries with wider valleys and the first secondary branching developing when only three channels per each side of the domain are present (see Fig. 3g-j). This results in a hypsometric curve with a more pronounced basal (i.e., at low altitudes) convexity for $n > 1$, as a consequence of the progressively more dissected topography (see SI Appendix, Fig. S2).

As m is increased (Fig. 3k-n) the system develops secondary branching when only three channels are present on each side of the domain, with the formation of less numerous but wider valleys with higher junction angles, and a reduced basal convexity in the hypsometric curve (see SI Appendix, Fig. S2). Conversely, a decrease in m results in a more dissected landscape, with narrower valleys (Fig. 3o-r) and a more pronounced transition of the hypsometric curve to a convex shape for low altitudes (see SI Appendix, Fig. S2).

Wide rectangular domains. To assess boundary-condition effects on branching patterns we also considered very wide rectangular domains (C_I is constructed using the distance between the longest sides). Besides numerical investigation, in this case an analytical solution is possible for the unchanneled case (for $m = 1$ and $n = 1$, see Methods), around which we also performed a linear stability analysis. In our analogy with turbulent flows, the case of wide rectangular domains corresponds to the flow of viscous fluids between parallel plates (23, 24).

Results from the linear stability analysis are shown in Fig. 4. A critical value $C_{I,c} \approx 37$ for the first channel instability is identified, corresponding to a characteristic valley spacing λ_c of approximately 42 m, in line with observations (an analysis of five landscapes in the continental US from ref. 51 provides values of valley spacing ranging between approximately 30 and 300 m). As C_I further increases (i.e., runoff erosion increases with respect to diffusion) the predicted valley spacing is reduced (see Fig. 4c), with the formation of progressively narrower valleys. Results from the linear stability analysis are in line with predictions from numerical experiments conducted over large rectangular domains, where the first channel instability occurs at $C_{I,c} \approx 32$ with a valley spacing $\lambda_c \approx 33$ m. Analogously to the Orr-Sommerfeld problem for plane Poiseuille flow, the system here presents a Type I linear instability (52). Insight on the role of the m and n exponents on the critical channelization index $C_{I,c}$ and related valley spacing was obtained from numerical experiments. As shown in the SI Appendix (Fig. S9), as the water flow exponent m decreases, the value of C_I at which the first channel forming instability occurs increases and the valley spacing decreases. This is in agreement with results obtained over square domains (Fig. 3) where a decrease in the value of m resulted in a more dissected landscape with narrower valleys.

The numerical simulations confirm the results of the linear stability analysis and are in agreement with those of ref. 18. Fig. 5 compares the drainage patterns obtained as a function of C_I for rectangular domains of size 100 m by 500 m. As for the square domain, for small C_I values the soil creep component dominates resulting in an unchanneled smooth topography

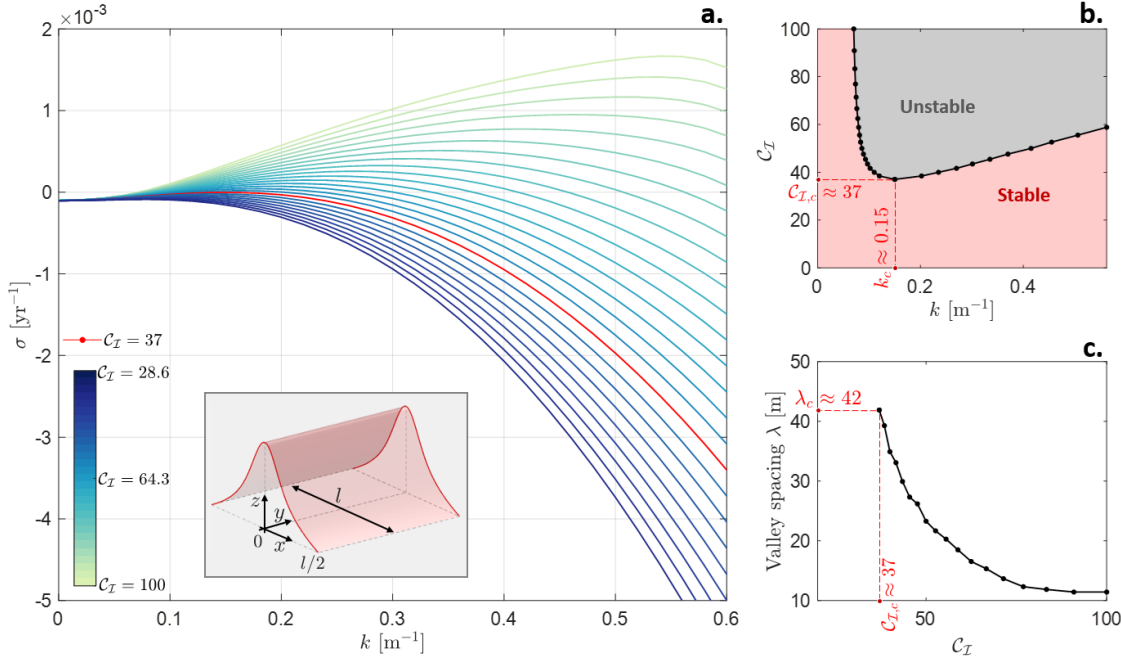


Fig. 4. Linear stability analysis. (a) Growth rate σ as a function of wavenumber k for different values of the dimensionless number C_I , (b) marginal stability curve (the solid line marks the instability of the basic state to channel initiation), and (c) characteristic valley spacing λ as a function of the dimensionless number C_I . The linear stability analysis predicts a critical value $C_{I,c} \approx 37$ for the first channel instability (with valley spacing $\lambda_c \approx 42$ m). The inset in panel (a) shows the geometry assumed as a basic state for the linear stability analysis and for the derivation of the theoretical hillslope profiles (see also Methods).

264 (Fig. 5a). After the first channelization, valleys tend to
 265 narrow as C_I increases until the first secondary branching
 266 occurs (Fig. 5b,c). Further increasing the runoff erosion
 267 component provides progressively more dissected landscapes
 268 with the emergence of secondary branching (Fig. 5d-f). As
 269 in turbulent flows larger Reynolds numbers produce smaller
 270 and smaller vortices, here increasing C_I leads to finer and finer
 271 branching (the resolution of which becomes quickly prohibitive
 272 from a computational standpoint).

273 The mean elevation profiles, computed as average elevation
 274 values along the x axis and neglecting the terminal parts of
 275 the domain to avoid boundary effects, are shown in Fig. 5g-l.
 276 As the topography becomes progressively more dissected with
 277 increasing C_I , the mean elevation profile tends to become more
 278 uniform (Fig. 5g-l). Such a behavior of the mean elevation
 279 profiles for increasing C_I is similar to the flattening of turbulent
 280 mean velocity profiles with increasing Reynolds number (24).

281 The transition from a smooth to a channelized topography
 282 with increasing C_I is reflected in the behavior of the quantity
 283 $DS_*/Ul = f(C_I, m)$, which describes the ratio of the outgoing
 284 diffusive flux and the incoming uplift sediment flux at the hill-
 285 slope base, S_* being the slope of the mean elevation profile at
 286 the hillslope base (see Methods for details). Fig. 5p shows the
 287 relationship between DS_*/Ul and C_I obtained from numerical
 288 simulations for $n = 1$ and different values of the exponent m .
 289 For small C_I values the numerical results match the analytic
 290 relationship for the smooth surface (Eq. (11)) and deviate
 291 from it at $C_{I,c} \approx 32$ where the first channel-forming instability
 292 occurs. Continuing our analogy with turbulence, the behavior
 293 of DS_*/Ul as a function of C_I closely resembles that of the
 294 friction factor with increasing Reynolds number (see Methods
 295 as well as figure 7.3 in ref. 53).

296 The effect of boundary conditions on the spatial regularity
 297 of ridge and valley patterns becomes especially apparent when
 298 comparing simulations with different aspect ratios. As can be
 299 seen in Fig. 5m-o, when the domain size is slightly changed,
 300 the spatial organization of ridges and valleys is modified (see,

e.g., the more regular pattern obtained for $\beta = 4.6$ compared to
 $\beta = 5.1$), while the mean elevation profiles remain practically
 invariant (see SI Appendix, Fig. S8). This suggests that
 some optimal domain length is needed to accommodate the
 formation of regular ridge and valley patterns (this is also
 evident from an analysis of cross-sections along the longer
 sides of the domain, see Figs. S3-S7 in the SI Appendix). This
 results in the formation of dislocation defects, as highlighted
 in the example of Fig. 5m-o, as it is typical in nonlinear
 pattern-forming PDEs (52).

Discussion and conclusions

A succession of increasingly complex networks of ridges and
 valleys was produced by a system of nonlinear PDEs serving
 as a minimalist model for landscape evolution in detachment-
 limited conditions. The sequence of instabilities is reminiscent
 of the subsequent bifurcations in fluid dynamic instabilities
 (23, 24, 52) and is captured by a dimensionless number (C_I)
 accounting for the relative importance of runoff erosion, soil
 creep, and uplift in relation to the typical domain size. Tan-
 talizing analogies with fluid turbulence, and in general with
 other driven non-equilibrium systems in which a hierarchical
 pattern develops toward finer scales, can also be observed in
 the competition between runoff erosion and soil creep (which
 resembles the competition between viscous and inertial forces),
 the reduction of the minimum branching scale with C_I , and
 the flattening of the mean hypsometric curves as the channel-
 ization is increased.

Characteristic spatial configurations were shown to emerge
 over both square and rectangular domains from the trade-
 off between diffusion and erosion. The striking regularity
 of the ridge and valley networks, with the characteristics
 of regular pre-fractals (e.g., the Peano basin (8, 46-48)), is
 quickly lost as effects of noise and irregular boundaries are
 introduced (see SI Appendix, Fig. S10). The shape of the
 hypsometric curve depends on the level of channelization and

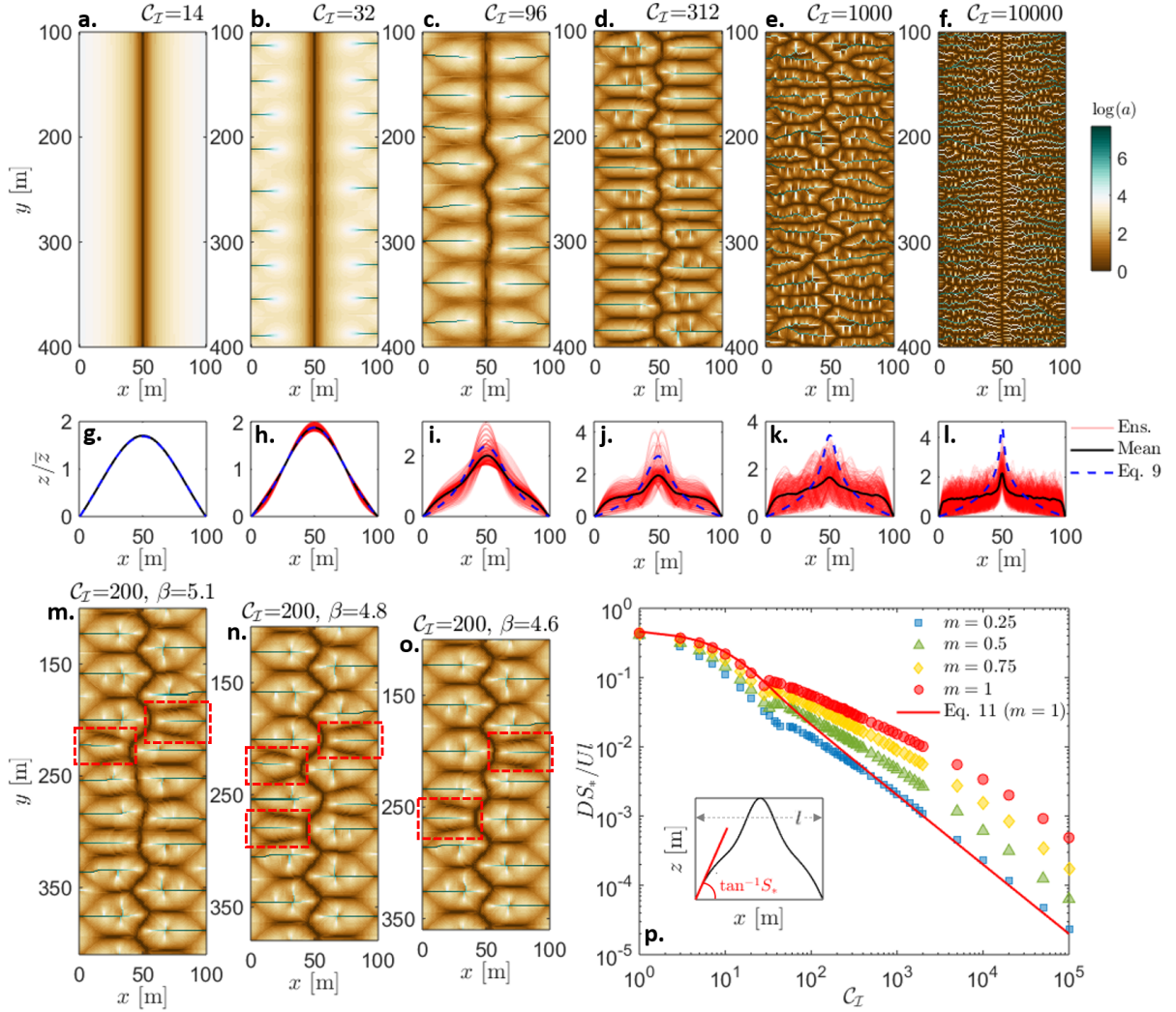


Fig. 5. Rectangular domains. Ridge/valley networks obtained for $m = n = 1$ over rectangular domains with (a-f) $\beta = 5$ ($C_T = 14, 32, 96, 312, 1000,$ and 10000), (m) $\beta = 5.1$ ($C_T = 200$), (n) $\beta = 4.8$ ($C_T = 200$), and (o) $\beta = 4.6$ ($C_T = 200$). β is a shape factor defined as the ratio between the two horizontal length scales l_y and l_x , namely $\beta = l_y/l_x$. Examples of dislocation defects are shown by the red dashed rectangles in panels m-o. (g-l) Normalized elevation profiles along the x axis for the six simulations of panels a-f: black lines are the mean elevation profiles, red lines show the ensemble of all the profiles along x , blue dashed lines are analytical elevation profiles for the unchanneled case – Eq. (9). Mean elevation profiles along the x axis were computed as average values of the elevation profiles neglecting the extremal parts (100 m length) of the domain. (p) Slope of the mean elevation profile S_* as a function of C_T for simulations with $n = 1$ and $m = 0.25, 0.5, 0.75,$ and 1 . The solid red line represents the analytical solution for $m = 1$ (Eq. (11)) for the unchanneled case. The schematic in the inset shows the definition of S_* and l used in the vertical axis of the chart.

336 branching (54) and thus on the dominant erosional mechanisms
 337 acting on the landscape (i.e., interplay between runoff erosion,
 338 soil creep, and uplift) and the various landscape properties
 339 affecting diffusion and erosion coefficients, such as soil type,
 340 vegetation cover, and climate. When diffusion dominates,
 341 hypsometric curves display a less pronounced basal convexity
 342 (54). A systematic analysis of real topographies in terms of
 343 statistics of hypsometry, branching angles, and characteristic
 344 spacing would help infer values of C_T and the non-linearity
 345 exponents m and n of natural landscapes, and possibly link
 346 them to the abiotic and biotic properties of the landscape
 347 under consideration.

348 It will also be interesting to explore the differences in tran-
 349 sient dynamics between the hypsometry of juvenile and old
 350 landscapes. It is likely that, during the early stages of the
 351 basin development when the drainage network is formed, the
 352 hypsometric curve presents a more pronounced basal convexity

(2) regardless of the value of C_T , progressively transitioning
 toward its quasi-equilibrium form during the “relaxation phase”
 (55). Such slow relaxations (e.g., Fig. 5), often towards slightly
 irregular configurations rather than perfectly regular networks,
 are reminiscent of the presence of defects in crystals and the
 amorphous configurations originating in glass transition (56).

Materials and Methods

Analytical solutions for $m = n = 1$. To derive one-dimensional
 steady state solutions of the coupled PDE system (Eqs. (4)-(5)) we
 consider a symmetric hillslope of length l in the x -direction,
 with divide at $x = 0$ (see inset in Fig. 4a). Assuming a fixed
 elevation $z = 0$ at $x = \pm l/2$, the steady steady solution of the
 coupled system

366 of Eqs. (4) and (5) for $m = n = 1$ reads (44)

$$367 \quad a_0 = |x| \quad [8]$$

$$368 \quad z_0 = \frac{U}{2D} \left[\left(\frac{l}{2} \right)^2 \mathcal{H} \left(1, 1; \frac{3}{2}, 2; -\frac{K_a \left(\frac{l}{2} \right)^2}{D} \right) \right. \\ 369 \quad \left. - x^2 \mathcal{H} \left(1, 1; \frac{3}{2}, 2; -\frac{K_a x^2}{D} \right) \right] \quad [9]$$

370 where subscript 0 denotes the basic steady state, and $\mathcal{H}(\cdot, \cdot; \cdot, \cdot; \cdot)$ is
371 the generalized hypergeometric function (57). In these conditions,
372 the local slope $S_0 = dz_0/dx$ can also be derived analytically as (44)

$$373 \quad S_0 = \frac{\sqrt{2UD} \left(\frac{\sqrt{K_a x}}{\sqrt{2D}} \right)}{\sqrt{DK_a}} \quad [10]$$

374 where $\mathcal{D}(\cdot)$ is the Dawson's integral (57).

375 **Linear stability analysis.** We studied the stability of the basic state
376 (Eqs. (8)-(9)) to perturbations \tilde{a} and \tilde{z} in the y -direction. Boundary
377 conditions are zero sediment and specific drainage area at the
378 hilltop ($\tilde{a} = d\tilde{z}/dx = 0$ at $x = 0$) and fixed elevation at the domain
379 boundary ($\tilde{z} = 0$ at $x = l/2$). We use normal mode analysis
380 and write perturbations in the classical form $\tilde{a} = \phi(x)e^{iky+\sigma t}$ and
381 $\tilde{z} = \psi(x)e^{iky+\sigma t}$ (plus complex conjugate), where k and σ are the
382 wavenumber and the growth rate of the perturbations, respectively.
383 The perturbed system can be re-cast in terms of a third order
384 non-constant coefficient differential eigenvalue problem of the form
385 $\gamma_1(x)\phi''''(x) + \gamma_2(x)\phi'''(x) + \gamma_3(x)\phi''(x) + \gamma_4(x)\phi'(x) = \sigma\gamma_5(x)\phi'(x)$.
386 Solutions to the stability problem are obtained by means of a spectral
387 Galerkin technique with numerical quadrature (58, 59). Among the
388 discrete set of eigenvalues obtained, we tracked the behavior of the
389 least stable (i.e., with largest real part). The stability analysis was
390 performed here for unitary exponents m and n due to the availability
391 of an analytical form of the basic state. Numerical results for a
392 wider range of m and n values are reported in the SI Appendix (Fig.
393 S9).

394 **Numerical simulations.** Numerical simulations were performed using
395 forward differences in time and centered difference approximations
396 for the spatial derivatives, considering regular square grids of lateral
397 dimension l , as well as on rectangular domains with shape factor
398 β , defined as the ratio between the domain dimensions in the y
399 and x direction (i.e., $\beta = l_y/l_x$). Specifically, in the simulations
400 over rectangular domains we fixed the length in the x direction (i.e.,
401 $l_x = 100$ m), and varied only the length l_y in the y direction. The
402 total drainage area A was computed at each grid point with the $D\infty$
403 algorithm, while a was then approximated as $A/\Delta x$ (43, 60), with
404 Δx the grid size. Simulations were run assuming $\Delta x = 1$ m (addi-
405 tional numerical experiments, shown in the SI Appendix (Fig. S1),
406 were performed for different grid sizes to validate the independence
407 of the resulting patterns on the grid resolution). Convex profiles
408 were used as initial condition. Over wide rectangular domains for
409 $C_T \geq 320$ a white noise with standard deviation equal to 10^{-6} m
410 was also added in the initial condition. A sensitivity analysis was
411 conducted over square domains (not shown) to make sure that the
412 resulting spatial organization of ridges and valleys at steady state
413 was robust to the choice of initial conditions. We considered a wide
414 range of C_T values (from 10^0 to 10^5) constructed by using literature
415 values of the system parameters, which are generally estimated in
416 terms of time-averaged values from experimental hillslope shapes
417 (61) or high resolution topographies (18, 19).

418 **Dimensional analysis of the channelization transition.** We proceed
419 similarly to the analysis of turbulence transition in pipes and chan-
420 nels. There the relationship between the friction factor ξ and the
421 Reynolds number Re can be obtained by first relating the wall
422 shear stress $\tau = \mu \bar{u}/dx^*|_{x^*=0}$, where \bar{u} is the streamwise mean
423 velocity profile and x^* is the distance from the wall, to its governing
424 quantities as $\tau = \Xi(V, L, \mu, \rho, \epsilon)$, where ρ is the density, μ the vis-
425 cosity, V the mean velocity, L the characteristic lateral dimension,
426 and ϵ the roughness height. The Pi-Theorem then may be used to
427 express the head loss per unit length (g is gravitational acceleration)
428 as $S_h = \frac{4\tau}{\rho g L} = \frac{V^2}{2gL} \xi \left(Re, \frac{\epsilon}{L} \right)$, see ref. 62. Analogously, here we

429 can relate the slope of the mean elevation profile at the hillslope
430 base $S_* = d\bar{z}/dx|_{x=l/2}$ to the parameters and characteristics of the
431 landscape evolution model as $S_* = \Phi(D, K_a, m, U, l)$ (we consider
432 here $n = 1$). Choosing l , U , and D as dimensionally independent
433 variables, the Pi-Theorem yields $DS_*/Ul = \varphi(C_T, m)$, where the
434 quantity DS_* quantifies the diffusive outgoing sediment flux per
435 unit width (along the x -axis) at the boundary, while the term Ul
436 represents the incoming sediment flux by tectonic uplift per unit
437 width. Such a functional relationship can be analytically derived
438 for the unchanneled case when $m = 1$ from Eq. (10) as

$$439 \quad \frac{DS_*}{Ul} = \left(\frac{C_T}{2} \right)^{-1/2} \mathcal{D} \left[\left(\frac{C_T}{8} \right)^{1/2} \right]. \quad [11]$$

440 In the numerical simulations, S_* was computed as the slope of the
441 linear fit to the mean elevation profile in the first 3 meters at the
442 hillslope base (see inset in Fig. 5p).

443 **Data and code availability.** 1-meter resolution LiDAR data for Cal-
444 houn and Gabilan Mesa can be downloaded from the OpenTopog-
445 raphy facility (<https://opentopography.org>). The code used for the
446 numerical simulations is described in ref. 63 and available on GitHub
447 (<https://github.com/ShashankAnand1996/LEM>).

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