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MM5 derived ZWDs compared to observational results from VLBI, GPS and WVR

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Abstract

Modelled values of zenith wet delay (ZWD) from the non-hydrostatic numerical weather prediction (NWP) model MM5 are compared to estimated values retrieved from observations by geodetic very long baseline interferometry (VLBI), global positioning system (GPS) receivers, and water vapour radiometers (WVRs). In addition, sparse radiosonde (RS) data are used to augment the available data sets. The comparison is done for three stations of the European geodetic VLBI network for six observing sessions during the year 1999. The stations (Madrid, Onsala, and Wettzell) were primarily chosen to have the maximum number of collocated measuring techniques. In general, the time series for the different techniques show a good agreement. The correlation values between the techniques amount to 75–95%. The RMS differences of MM5 with respect to the other techniques obtain values of ± 1.3 – 1.6 cm. The bias between MM5 and VLBI lies at about 1.0 cm, the bias between MM5 and GPS varies in the range of 0.0–0.6 cm and appears to be station dependent. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction and motivation

A crucial parameter in numerical weather prediction (NWP) models is the atmospheric humidity content. A good knowledge of the temporal and spatial distribution of the atmospheric water vapour together with the corresponding error information has a noticeable impact on the quality of the prediction results (e.g., Yang et al., 1999). Until recently the primary source for the determination of the distribution of the water vapour in the atmosphere has been radiosondes (RSs). Having the advantage of providing vertical profiles of water vapour, RS have the drawback of being launched only sparsely in time and space, i.e. once or twice a day with the launch sites some hundred kilometers apart. While NWP models have increased their horizontal and vertical resolution over the past decade, the number of observational sites for RS and ground meteorological

data has stayed almost the same. This shortcoming may be cured or at least alleviated by the inclusion of additional water vapour measurements from independent techniques in order to be assimilated into the NWP models (e.g., De Ponte and Zou, 2001). For improving the spatial coverage and providing a continuous monitoring of the atmospheric humidity, geodetic space techniques present themselves these days. Due to the favourable spatial distribution of stations, the low operational costs and near-real-time availability, the global positioning system (GPS) constitutes the obvious choice for improving NWP models. While very long baseline interferometry (VLBI) does not provide the temporal or spatial density of GPS, its accuracy and the distribution of its antennas over a wide range of climates makes it a potential additional source of important climate data (Niell et al., 2001). Nonetheless, as the geodetic space techniques only provide integrated water vapour values (instead of profiles), they will not replace RS observations but rather augment them.

In order to evaluate the claims for accuracy and precision by each of the techniques, campaigns with collocated instruments are needed (Niell et al., 2001). Numerous studies have been carried out to determine

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the accuracy of VLBI, GPS, WVR, and RS derived tropospheric parameters by intercomparing the different techniques among themselves and by comparing them, mainly GPS, to NWP models: e.g. (Behrend et al., 2000; Cucurull and Vandenberghe, 1999; Cucurull et al., 2000; Gradinarsky et al., 2000a,b; Haase et al., 2001; Niell et al., 2001; Pacione et al., 2001; Yang et al., 1999). The comparisons made using VLBI data (Behrend et al., 2000; Niell et al., 2001) are restricted to campaign style of data with 1–4 d of continuous VLBI observations restricted to a selected single station. Here we present a comparison between all of the aforementioned techniques for six disconnected days of VLBI observations for the arbitrarily chosen year 1999. With a session roughly every second month the observational data cover an annual cycle. For the same stations and times numerical simulations of the meteorological situation using the non-hydrostatic fifth-generation Mesoscale Model (MM5) were conducted.

2. Description and analysis of the observational data

Since 1990 the European geodetic VLBI community performs geodetic VLBI observations with the fixed-station VLBI-sites in Europe on a regular basis. While the main objective is the determination of crustal motion in Europe (Haas et al., 2000), the analysis of the observed VLBI data gives also results for atmospheric parameters at the respective stations. Several of the European geodetic VLBI network stations employ, aside from VLBI, also other geodetic space as well as remote sensing techniques. At the stations Madrid, Onsala and Wettzell facilities for VLBI, GPS, WVR, and RS are collocated at the same site, i.e. they are all within 100 m with the exception of the RS that are 40–80 km away. Fig. 1 depicts the geographic distribution of the stations, and Table 1 provides some general station information. The climatological situations of the investigated sites cover a range from a semi-arid continental (Madrid) over a temperate continental (Wettzell) to a temperate marine regime (Onsala).

For the three stations (Fig. 1) zenith wet delay (ZWD) values are derived from the various techniques for specific days of the arbitrarily chosen year 1999. We do not analyse the error sources that occur due to the conversion from the original observations to the com-

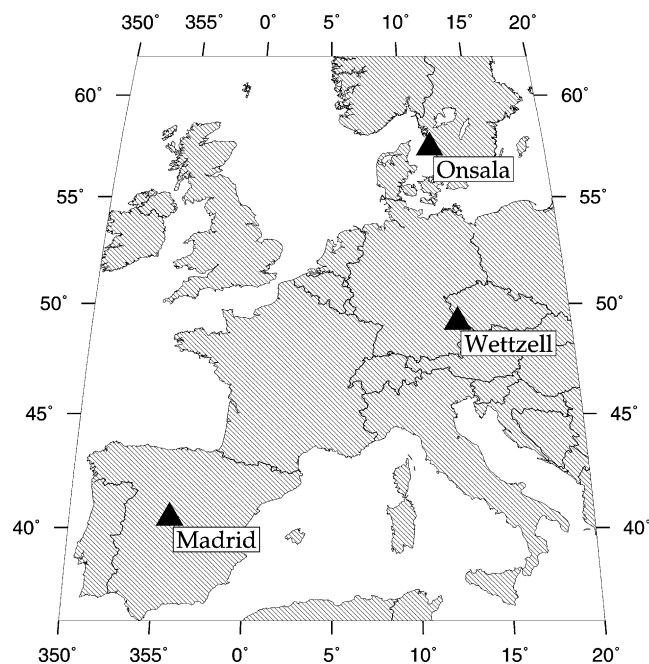


Fig. 1. Three sites of the European geodetic VLBI network with the collocated measurement techniques VLBI, GPS, WVR, and RS.

mon parameter ZWD. An exhaustive compilation of the errors involved can, for instance, be found in Niell et al. (2001). This implies that we neglect assumptions underlying the different conversion procedures and, thus, possible biases for each technique. We implicitly assume, therefore, that the sum of the conversion errors is negligible.

2.1. Space geodetic observations

In the year 1999 six geodetic VLBI experiments of the EUROPE series were observed (see Table 2). The experiments of this observing program are spread more or less homogeneously over the entire year with an experiment every second month. The experiments start at 1200 h UT and last for 24 h.

The VLBI data were analysed using the SOLVE software package (Ma et al., 1990). Atmospheric parameters for the VLBI stations involved were estimated as piecewise linear functions with an interval length of 90 min for the ZWD and horizontal gradient parameters. Constraints corresponding to a random walk variance of 100 mm²/h for the ZWD and 1.0 mm²/h for

Table 1

Station characteristics of the chosen sites (geodetic latitude φ , geodetic longitude λ , ellipsoidal height h , distance d to the nearest sea, and climatological regime)

Station	φ (°)	λ (°)	h (m)	d (km)	Climate
Madrid	40.4	-4.2	850	600	Semi-arid, continental
Onsala	57.4	11.9	25	0.5	Temperate, marine
Wettzell	49.2	12.9	550	400	Temperate, continental

Table 2
VLBI sessions of the EUROPE series for the year 1999

Session	Observation time	Days of year (doy)
EU-47	01-FEB 1200–02-FEB 1200	032.5–033.5
EU-48	26-APR 1200–26-APR 1200	116.5–117.5
EU-49	28-JUN 1200–29-JUN 1200	179.5–180.5
EU-50	16-AUG 1200–17-AUG 1200	228.5–229.5
EU-51	11-OCT 1200–12-OCT 1200	284.5–285.5
EU-52	13-DEC 1200–14-DEC 1200	349.5–348.5

the horizontal gradients were applied. These constraints were found by Gradinarsky et al. (2000a,b) to be reasonable from comparisons of an extensive VLBI, GPS and WVR data set observed at the Onsala Space Observatory.

The IVS (International VLBI Service for Geodesy and Astrometry) network stations Madrid, Onsala and Wettzell are also IGS (International GPS Service for Geodynamics) network stations performing permanent GPS observations. The data observed with the collocated GPS-antennas and receivers were analysed using the GIPSY software package (Webb and Zumberge, 1993) applying the precise point positioning method (Zumberge et al., 1997). For the Kalman filter analysis again random walk variance constraints of $100 \text{ mm}^2/\text{h}$ for the ZWD and $1.0 \text{ mm}^2/\text{h}$ for the horizontal gradients were used. The interval length for the update of the Kalman filter was adapted to the interval length chosen for the VLBI data analysis. For both, the VLBI and the GPS data analysis, the Niell mapping functions (Niell, 1996) were applied.

2.2. Radiometric and radiosonde observations

The three sites are equipped with continuously observing collocated water vapour radiometers (WVRs). Three different instrument types are employed: a JPL type D2 (Madrid), a Chalmers type Astrid (Onsala), and an ETHZ type White (Wettzell). The radiometers perform continuous and repeating sky scanning observations at different elevation and azimuth angles. Each sky-scan takes about 12–15 min. Different analysis software packages corresponding to the individual instruments were applied to analyse the WVR observations and the ZWD parameters were determined for the same interval length as from the VLBI and GPS observations. For instrument maintenance reasons and due to rainy weather it was not possible to observe all of the six sessions for all three stations.

RSs are launched not directly at the stations but at dedicated launching sites, usually airports, twice a day. For Madrid the closest launch site is the Barajas airport at about 40 km distance, for Onsala it is the Landvetter airport at about 38 km, and for Wettzell the RS launch site chosen is at Kümmersbruck some 80 km away. In Landvetter there were four launches a day during the

investigation period; the two other stations just had one launch per day.

3. Numerical weather prediction modelling

For the same stations and days a numerical simulation using the non-hydrostatic fifth-generation Mesoscale Model (MM5) was performed. MM5 was developed at Penn State University (PSU) and the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) (see e.g. Dudhia et al., 2001). We set up four (two-way nested) domains with resolutions of 27, 9, 3, and 1 km. For the used 31×31 grid this translates into domain sizes of about 850, 300, 100, and 30 km side length. The smallest domain was centered approximately at each site. The initial and boundary conditions were updated every six hours with information obtained from the $0.5^\circ \times 0.5^\circ$ ECMWF model. The resolution of the topography and land-use data bases for each domain were: $5'$, $1'$, $1'$, and $30''$. High vertical resolution was prescribed in the atmospheric boundary layer (ABL) with 27 levels of around 100 m grid spacing.

The soil parameterizations used have differences with regard to the drag, heat and moisture coefficients, and in the degree to which roughness length depends on surface wind speed. Soil temperature was predicted at six different levels by means of the diffusion equation. The model surface properties (albedo, roughness length, moisture availability and heat capacity) are specified according to the 24 USGS land-use categories, which are then reduced to one of the 13 land-use MM5 categories and a summer–winter season.

The same physical descriptions are prescribed for all simulations. We have calculated the boundary layer processes using the Medium Range Forecast scheme based on Troen and Mahrt (1986); a Kain-Fritsch scheme has been used for the cumulus parameterizations and a simple ice model for the explicit moisture schemes.

4. Results and comparisons

The 24 h ZWD time series resulting from the analyses described in Sections 2 and 3 are depicted in Figs. 2–4. For the sake of visualisation and comparison of the time series we do not show error bars in these figures. The simulation results from MM5 have a precision of 2 mm for precipitable water (PW) (Cucurull and Vandenberghe, 1999) corresponding to a precision of 15 mm for the ZWD (Behrend et al., 2000). The ZWD values obtained from GPS and VLBI have formal errors in the order of 5 and 4–8 mm, respectively. Results from WVR can be expected to have a precision of 2 mm plus 5% of the measurement and results from RS of 5% of the mea-

220 surement (Niell et al., 2001). These error values are used
221 in the statistical analysis.

222 In general, there exists a good agreement between the
223 simulations from MM5 and the results of the different
224 observational techniques. The deviations are usually
225 contained in the margins given by the formal errors of
226 the involved techniques. Making the crude classification
227 into summer and winter seasons, one notices the low
228 moisture values for the winter sessions (EU-47, EU-48,
229 EU-52), whereas the summer sessions (EU-49, EU-50,
230 EU-51) show a higher moisture content. Only the sta-
231 tion Madrid (Fig. 2) has high moisture values also
232 during one of the winter experiments (EU-52).

233 There are basically two occasions in which the ZWD
234 estimation differences exceed the formal error margins
235 significantly. One is connected with instrumental re-
236 spectively data analysis problems: the ZWD time series
237 of the WVR of Wettzell fluctuates quite strongly (see
238 e.g. day of year 229 in Fig. 4). Probably observations
239 that are contaminated by rainfall events and thick
240 clouds have not been removed correctly in the data ed-
241 iting process. Still, the complete removal of such ob-
242 servations is a prerequisite to obtain a clean data set
243 (Gradinarsky et al., 2000a,b).

244 The other occasion is with the winter experiments
245 EU-47 (day of year 33) and EU-52 (day of year 348) at
246 the station Onsala (see Fig. 3). Here the MM5 derived
247 ZWDs do not coincide with the measurement tech-
248 niques: on day of year 33 MM5 describes a peak for

249 midnight, which is not seen with the measurement
250 techniques, and on day of year 348 the MM5 simulation
251 shows a similar divergence for the second half of the
252 observation session. In both cases MM5 tends to over-
253 estimate the ZWD values, i.e. it overestimates the water
254 vapour content in the atmosphere. Still, comparisons of
255 NWP model with GPS derived ZWD values over a
256 longer time span (more than one year) have shown that
257 such occurrences are not uncommon (e.g., Haase et al.,
258 2001). Yang et al. (1999) found discrepancies of up to 5
259 mm PW (3 cm ZWD) for a comparison between GPS
260 and the NWP model HIRLAM from 20 stations in
261 Scandinavia over a time period of 4 months.

262 The synoptic weather situation during the two ob-
263 servation sessions could provide – in this special case – a
264 possible explanation for the divergence of the MM5
265 derived ZWDs from the measured time series. In both
266 cases a winter frontal system moves from the Atlantic
267 towards Scandinavia bringing cold and wet air into the
268 domain. The mesoscale model reproduces the synoptic
269 situation reasonably well. However, since MM5 does
270 not predict precipitation for the Swedish west coast, the
271 humidity influx reflects itself in an overall increase of the
272 water vapour content as simulated by the model. The
273 measurement techniques, on the other hand, observe
274 only the local moisture content of the atmosphere which
275 might differ from the regional results. Therefore, it is
276 possible that the introduction of another model pa-
277 rameterization reduces the deviations significantly.

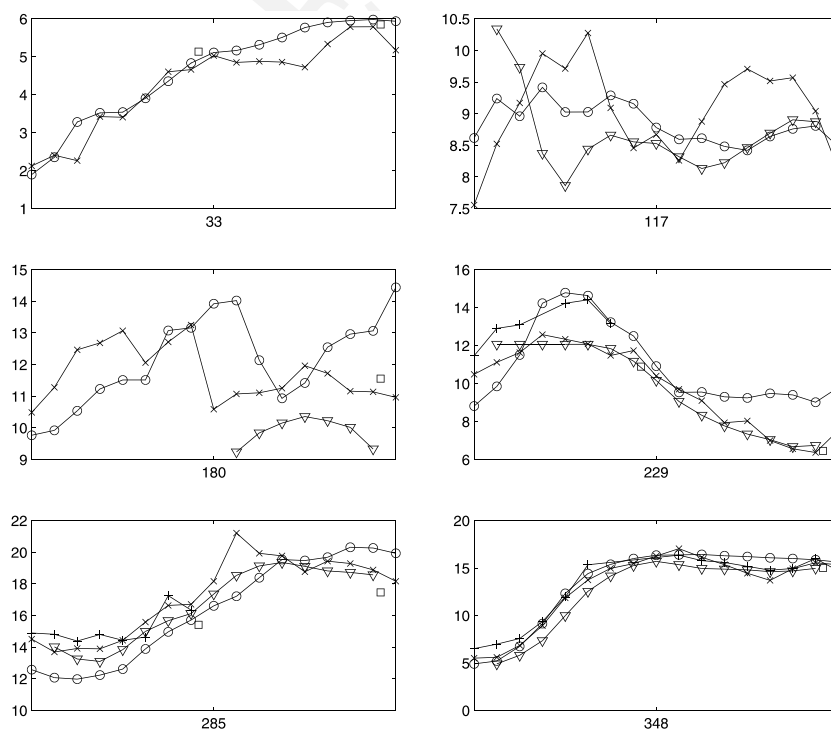


Fig. 2. Time series of ZWD for the station Madrid. Shown are: MM5 (○), VLBI (▽), GPS (×), WVR (+) and RS (□). The x-axis covers 24 hours centered around midnight of the respective day of year in 1999, the y-axis is in units (cm).

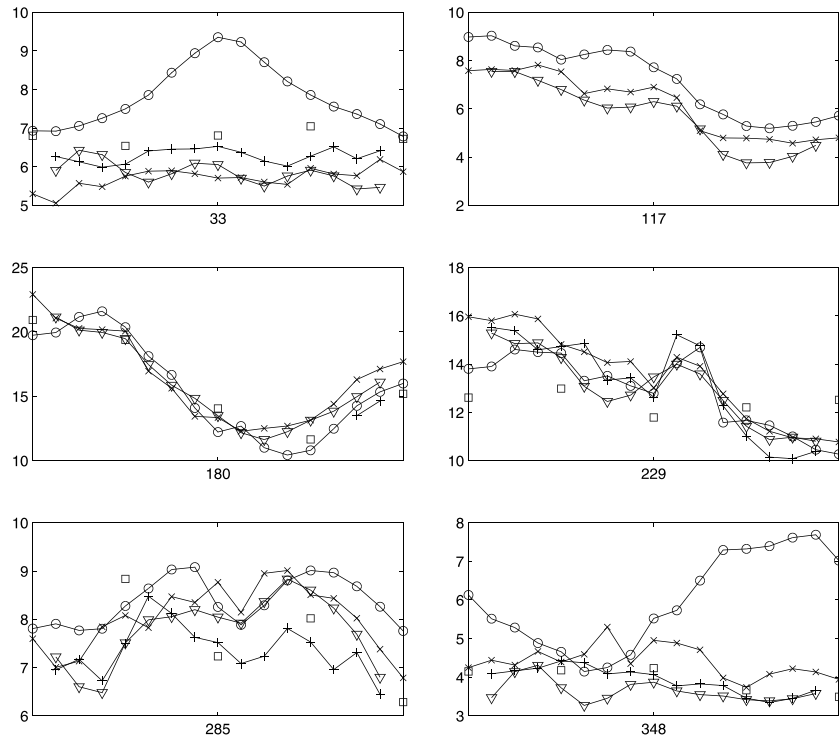


Fig. 3. Time series of ZWD for the station Onsala. Shown are: MM5 (\circ), VLBI (∇), GPS (\times), WVR ($+$) and RS (\square). The x -axis covers 24 hours centered around midnight of the respective day of year in 1999, the y -axis is in units (cm).

278 However, since the RS data are usually assimilated into
279 the ECMWF data, MM5 should reproduce the RS de-
280 rived ZWD values quite closely. As this is not the case, it

cannot be excluded that for EU-47 and EU-52 the cor- 281
responding ECMWF weather fields do not contain the 282
RS data for Landvetter. 283

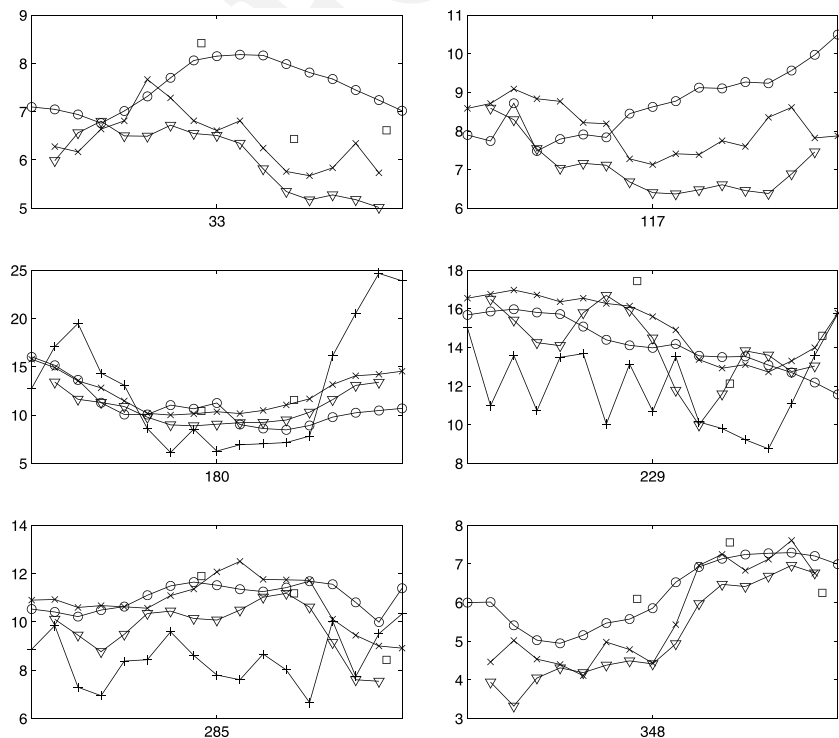


Fig. 4. Time series of ZWD for the station Wettzell. Shown are: MM5 (\circ), VLBI (∇), GPS (\times), WVR ($+$) and RS (\square). The x -axis covers 24 hours centered around midnight of the respective day of year in 1999, the y -axis is in units (cm).

Table 3

Statistical parameters for the independently derived ZWD values

Meth. 1	Meth. 2	# Points	Bias (cm)	RMS diff. (cm)	Corr. (%)
VLBI	GOS	255	−0.75	±0.96	81.1
	WVR	146	−0.18	±2.28	83.6
	WVR*	86	−0.39	±0.87	98.0
	MM5	255	−1.03	±1.43	91.1
GPS	WVR	211	0.68	±3.02	75.8
	WVR*	90	0.04	±0.94	97.7
	MM5	302	−0.27	±1.43	75.3
WVR	MM5	158	−0.52	±2.85	78.4
WVR*	MM5	90	−0.53	±1.56	94.1

The bias value is taken in the sense Meth. 1 minus Meth. 2. Given are the combined values of all three stations. WVR* excludes the Wettzell data.

284 The results of a statistical analysis are summarised in
 285 Tables 3 and 4 and are depicted in the scatter plot of
 286 Fig. 5. WVR represents the water vapour radiometer
 287 data of all three stations, whereas WVR* has the
 288 Wettzell data excluded. The smallest scatter and, thus,
 289 the best agreement is obtained with VLBI vs. GPS,
 290 WVR* vs. VLBI, and WVR* vs. GPS. GPS vs. MM5
 291 and VLBI vs. MM5 have a similar scatter that is slightly
 292 larger than the VLBI vs. GPS; WVR vs. MM5 has an
 293 unrealistic scatter due to the inclusion of the Wettzell
 294 data.

295 The overall comparison (Table 3) gives correlation
 296 values between 75% and 95%. Lowest correlation values
 297 are obtained in comparisons with WVR data (Wettzell
 298 included) and, surprisingly, for the comparison GPS vs.
 299 MM5. The highest correlations are found for WVR* vs.

VLBI, WVR* vs. GPS, and VLBI vs. MM5. The RMS
 difference values of VLBI vs. MM5 and GPS vs. MM5
 amount to 14.3 mm confirming the accuracy values gi-
 ven above. For GPS and WVR the biases appear to be
 station dependent respectively instrument dependent
 (see also Table 4). VLBI and MM5 seem to be inde-
 pendent of the conditions at the station; thus an aver-
 aging over the three stations is permissible. This gives an
 overall bias between VLBI and MM5 of
 $ZWD(VLBI - MM5) = -1.0 \pm 1.4$ cm.

The bias for GPS vs. MM5 takes values of 0.0, −0.2,
 and −0.6 cm (Table 4). The RMS differences, however,
 take values of ±1.4–1.6 cm indicating that the precision
 of the GPS data is consistent whereas the accuracy has a
 dependence on the station and observational conditions.
 The slightly larger scatter for Madrid hints at a minor

Table 4

Stationwise statistical parameters for the independently derived ZWD values

Meth. 1	Meth. 2	# Points	Bias (cm)	RMS diff. (cm)	Corr. (%)
<i>Madrid</i>					
VLBI	GPS	75	−0.99	±1.37	91.9
	WVR	24	−1.18	±0.79	90.8
	MM5	75	−1.14	±1.61	91.2
GPS	WVR	28	−0.66	±0.82	74.8
	MM5	102	−0.20	±1.32	88.2
WVR	MM5	28	0.76	±1.35	90.4
<i>Onsala</i>					
VLBI	GPS	90	−0.39	±0.57	90.8
	WVR	62	−0.08	±0.69	95.4
	MM5	90	−1.03	±1.34	94.3
GPS	WVR	62	0.35	±0.81	86.8
	MM5	102	−0.60	±1.47	85.2
WVR	RS	39	0.46	±1.25	90.8
	MM5	62	−1.11	±1.27	90.3
<i>Wettzell</i>					
VLBI	GPS	90	−0.90	±0.74	85.9
	WVR	60	0.12	±3.38	52.4
	MM5	90	−0.94	±1.35	85.2
GPS	WVR	121	1.15	±3.84	74.8
	MM5	98	0.01	±1.43	88.8
WVR	MM5	68	−0.52	±3.95	39.3

The bias value is taken in the sense Meth. 1 minus Meth. 2.

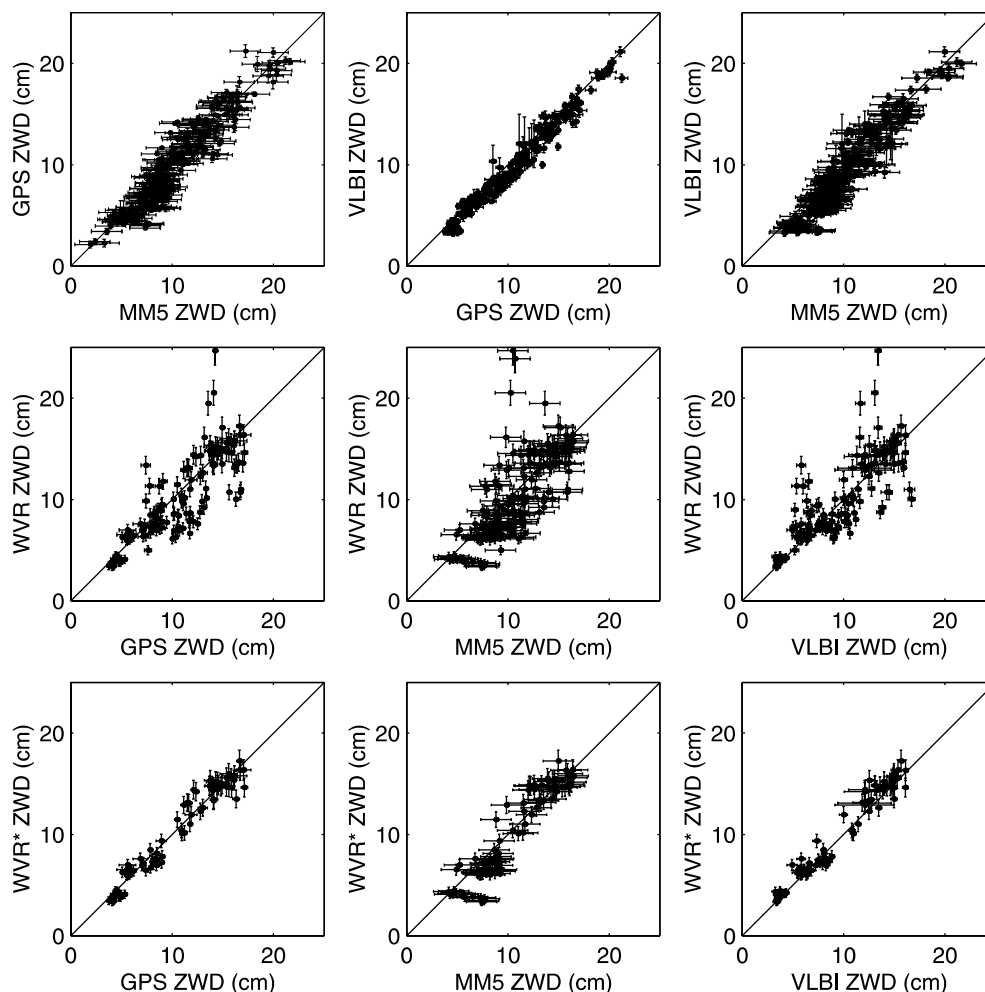


Fig. 5. Scatter plots for pairs of techniques. Top row: GPS vs. MM5 (left), VLBI vs. GPS (center), VLBI vs. MM5 (right). Middle row: WVR vs. GPS (left), WVR vs. MM5 (center), WVR vs. VLBI (right). Bottom row: WVR* vs. GPS (left), WVR* vs. MM5 (center), WVR* vs. VLBI (right). WVR* excludes the Wettzell data.

316 problem of the GPS data at this station in the year 1999.
317 A similar finding holds true for the WVR vs. MM5
318 comparison. Thus, for assimilating GPS data into NWP
319 models station dependent biases need to be determined
320 and accounted for.

321 5. Conclusions and outlook

322 We compared ZWDs simulated from MM5 with
323 values retrieved from VLBI, GPS, WVR, and RS for
324 three stations of the European geodetic VLBI network
325 where the different techniques are collocated. In general
326 we find good agreement between the different and in-
327 dependent techniques with correlation coefficients in the
328 range of 75–95%. Best agreement in terms of RMS dif-
329 ference, bias, and correlation is found between VLBI
330 and GPS. This was to be expected as both techniques
331 share common error sources. When the WVR data for
332 Wettzell are being excluded in the comparisons (WVR*)

data set), the agreement with the other three techniques
is at least as good as between VLBI and GPS. It has to
be kept in mind, however, that the amount of compar-
ison data is reduced significantly by excluding Wettzell
and that the exclusion implies some degree of arbitrar-
iness. In contrast to GPS, VLBI does not show a de-
pendence on the conditions at the station, at least for the
three VLBI stations used in our study, probably mainly
due to the absence of multipath effects and the lesser
near-field scattering in the vicinity of the VLBI anten-
nas. Thus, for assimilating GPS data into NWP models
it is necessary to determine the station dependent bias
value, whereas VLBI furnishes absolute ZWD values
that is biased for the entire system, but not for a single
station. Still, this needs to be confirmed by the analysis
of larger data sets. The bias between VLBI and MM5
derived from three stations and six observational ses-
sions spread over the year 1999 amounts to -1 cm
(VLBI–MM5). Due to this feature VLBI appears to be a

highly useful ground truth calibration technique for climate studies and NWP models.

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