Nitrogen isotope evidence for water mass denitrification during the early Toarcian (Jurassic) oceanic anoxic event

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Abstract. Bulk sedimentary nitrogen isotope (δ15Ntot) data have been generated from Lower Jurassic black, carbon-rich shales in the British Isles and northern Italy deposited during the early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event. A pronounced positive δ15Ntot excursion through the exaratum Subzone of the falciferum Zone (defined by characteristic ammonites in the British Isles) broadly correlates with a relative maximum in weight percent total organic carbon and, in some sections, with a negative δ13Corg excursion. Upwelling of a deoxygenated water mass that had undergone partial denitrification is the likely explanation for relative enrichment of δ15Ntot and parallels may be drawn with Quaternary sediments of the Arabian Sea, Gulf of California, and northwest Mexican margin. The development of Early Toarcian suboxic water masses and consequent partial denitrification is attributed to increases in organic productivity. Approximately coincident phenomena include the following: a relative climatic optimum, realignment of major oceanic current systems, and a possible release of methane gas hydrates from continental margin sediments early in the history of the oceanic anoxic event.

1. Introduction

The early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event [Jenkyns, 1988] was registered by the global distribution of organic carbon-rich black shales across a range of environments covering the deep ocean, Tethyan continental margins, and shelf seas (Figure 1). The event itself is commonly interpreted as being triggered by a climatic optimum affecting weathering patterns, fluvial fluxes, and upwelling intensity. This latter phenomenon led to relatively high availability of certain nutrients and consequent enhanced productivity of organic-walled and siliceous plankton in near-surface waters [Jenkyns, 1999]. In terms of detailed biostratigraphic data [Riegraf et al., 1984; Howarth, 1992] and chemostratigraphic data (total organic carbon (TOC), δ13Corg, δ13C carb, δ15Ntot, and 87Sr/86Sr) [Küspert, 1982; Baudin et al., 1990; Hollander et al., 1991; Jones et al., 1994; Jenkyns and Clayton, 1997; Schmid-Röhl et al., 1999; Hesselbo et al., 2000; McArthur et al., 2000; Jones and Jenkyns, 2001; Röhl et al., 2001], sections in northern Europe have been studied in the greatest detail, particularly in England (Jet Rock), Germany (Posidonienschiefer), and France (Schistes Carton). Exactly coeval organic-rich facies, generally with lower values of organic carbon (TOC), δ13C, δ13C carb, and δ15Ntot, are, however, developed in many parts of southern (Tethyan) Europe [Jenkyns, 1988].

Biomarker studies indicate that the organic matter in all these lower Toarcian black shales is dominantly marine in origin, deriving from algal and bacterial sources [Farrimond et al., 1989, 1994; Hollander et al., 1991; Schouten et al., 2000]. During the time of deposition of these characteristic facies, major changes in carbon isotope ratios took place in the entire shallow ocean-atmosphere system, and both negative and positive shifts in δ13C values of carbonates and marine and terrestrial organic matter have been recognized [Jenkyns and Clayton, 1986, 1997; Hesselbo et al., 2000].

Here we present bulk sedimentary nitrogen isotope data from lower Toarcian, typically millimeter-laminated organic-rich black shales (Jet Rock and coeval facies; exaratum Subzone of the falciferum Zone, as defined by ammonite occurrences) deposited in three separate basins (Wessex Basin, Cardigan Bay Basin, and Cleveland Basin) (Figure 2) in the British Isles representing part of the north European epicontinental or epeiric seaway. In addition, we present data from coeval black shales from a pelagic basin (Belluno Trough) from the Southern Alps of Italy (Figure 2). Detailed descriptions of the chemostratigraphic and biostratigraphic context of these three British sections are given by Jenkyns and Clayton [1997], and the general Lower Jurassic geology of these basins, in terms of structural framework and lithostratigraphy, is elucidated by Hesselbo and Jenkyns [1995, 1998]. The context of coeval Toarcian black shales from the Southern Alps, part of the Tethyan region of central and southern Europe where the depositional setting was a rifted continental margin and sedimentation was essentially pelagic, is discussed by Bernoulli and Jenkyns [1974], Jenkyns and Clayton [1986], and Jenkyns [1985, 1988]. Details of available biomarker and some organic geochemical data deriving from the Toarcian of the Belluno Trough are given by Jenkyns et al. [1985] and Farrimond et al. [1988, 1989, 1994], respectively; sedimentology and inorganic geochemistry are discussed by Claps et al. [1995] and Bellanca et al. [1999].

2. Material and Methods

Bulk sediment samples were powdered, and ~80 mg were decarbonated using 3 M HCl for 8 hours at ambient temperature. Samples were then rinsed with deionized water, centrifuged, rinsed again until neutrality was reached, and then dried in an oven at 60°C. Samples of ~20 mg were then weighed out into 8 × 6 mm tin foil cups and placed in an Europa Scientific Limited CN biological sample converter connected to a 20-20 stable-isotope gas-ratio mass spectrometer. Carbon and nitrogen isotope ratios were measured against a laboratory nylon standard (δ13C = −26.1 ± 0.2‰ and δ15N = −2.2 ± 0.2‰ with n = 24) and expressed relative to Peeedee belemnite (PDB) and atmos-
pheric nitrogen (air N\textsubscript{2}). Weight percent TOC values were determined using a Strohlein Coulomat 702 (details are given by Jenkyns [1988]).

3. Chemostratigraphy of Lower Toarcian Black Shales in Britain

3.1. Wessex Basin

The section through the lower Toarcian interval from the Wessex Basin derives from core material from the Winterborne Kingston borehole, Dorset, England (Figure 2). The lithologies present include gray, greenish-black mudstones, locally pyritic, and with included limestone nodules, and there is a distinct level of finely laminated black shales where TOC values rise to 4 wt \%. Sample spacing varied according to core length but was generally in the range of one sample every 50 cm. Relevant chemostratigraphic profiles (TOC, $\delta^{15}$N\textsubscript{tot}, $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{org}, and $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{carb}) through the lower Toarcian are illustrated in Figure 3. The biostratigraphy of the tenuicostatum-falciferum Zone is poorly defined because key ammonites were not obtained, but the chemostratigraphic data indicate that the level of laminated black shales pertain to the exaratum Subzone.

3.2. Cardigan Bay Basin

The section through Lower Toarcian black shales from the Cardigan Bay Basin derives from core material from the Mochras Farm borehole, Gwynedd, Wales (Figure 2). Sample spacing varied according to core length but was generally in the range of one sample every 50 cm. Relevant chemostratigraphic profiles (TOC, $\delta^{15}$N\textsubscript{tot}, $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{org}, and $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{carb}) through the lower Toarcian are illustrated in Figure 3. The biostratigraphy of the tenuicostatum-falciferum Zone is poorly defined because key ammonites were not obtained, but the chemostratigraphic data indicate that the level of laminated black shales pertain to the exaratum Subzone.

4. Chemostratigraphy of Lower Toarcian Black Shales in North Italy (Belluno Trough)

The analyzed section through Lower Toarcian black shales from the Belluno Trough, Southern Alps, derives from core material from Dogna, near Longarone, north Italy (Figure 2). Sample spacing varied according to core length but was generally in the range of one sample every 10 cm. The ammonite biostratigraphy of this section dates the organic-rich interval (TOC values in the range 1–5\%) as likely lower falciferum Zone [Jenkyns et al., 1985] and approximately every 20 cm below this unit. Relevant chemostratigraphic profiles (TOC, $\delta^{15}$N\textsubscript{tot}, $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{org}, and $\delta^{13}$C\textsubscript{belemnite}) through the Lower Toarcian are illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 1. Paleogeographic map of the Toarcian (~185 Ma) based on Jenkyns [1988] and references therein, showing localities with organic carbon-rich black shales. Additional data points are from Baudin et al. [1990], Soussi et al. [1990], Dulai et al. [1992], Howarth [1992], Nikitenko and Shurygin [1992], Bucefalo Palliani and Mattioli [1994], Murphy et al. [1995], Parisi et al. [1996], Jiménez et al. [1996], Hori [1997] and Vetò et al. [1997]. Most localities are dated as tenuicostatum-falciferum Zone.
from Yorkshire, northeast England, where the ammonite zonation is well defined (Figure 5). The lithologies present in this Italian section are a little different from those in northern Europe in that the millimeter-laminated organic-rich brown shales are regularly interbedded with beds of manganese limestones, a feature found in many coeval pelagic facies in central Europe [Jenkyns et al., 1991]. Relevant chemostratigraphic profiles (TOC, δ¹⁵Ntot, δ¹³Corg, and δ¹²Ccarb) through the lower Toarcian of northern Italy are illustrated in Figure 6.

5. Early Toarcian Nitrogen Isotope Excursion

Because thermal maturity has a negligible effect on δ¹⁵N and clay minerals typically acquire their δ¹⁵N signature from associated organic matter during diageneric [Rau et al., 1987; Schidlitz, 1991], the isotopic signatures documented from lower Toarcian organic-rich shales are believed primarily to reflect the original composition of the organic matter. Although the isotopic composition of modern settling organic matter is known to change, resulting in either an increase or decrease in δ¹⁵N with water depth, evidence from recent organic-rich sediments suggests that nitrogen isotope ratios of sedimentary organic matter are generally little different from those of sinking particles, and these reflect the isotopic characteristics of ambient waters modified by fractionation effects as the nitrogen passes through different trophic levels of the planktonic biota [Haug et al., 1998; Holmes et al., 1999; Altabet et al., 1999a, 1999b].

All four Lower Jurassic sections show broadly similar profiles, namely a rise in δ¹⁵Ntot values from a background typically in the range of −2‰ to −1‰ beginning in the uppermost tenuicostatum Zone (Figures 3–6). Maximum δ¹⁵Ntot values in the British sections vary from about +1.5‰ at Winterborne Kingston through about +2‰ at Hawsker Bottoms to about +2.5‰ at Mochras Farm and are registered in the lower part of the falciferum Zone (probably lower exaratum Subzone) in all three sections. Peak δ¹⁵Ntot values of about +4‰ are similarly recorded in the lower exaratum Subzone of the Italian section at Dogna. Relatively high δ¹⁵Ntot values are present in the upper semicelatum Subzone of the tenuicostatum Zone at the Hawsker Bottoms section, but this feature is not readily identifiable elsewhere. By the middepth of the exaratum Subzone, δ¹⁵Ntot values have everywhere decreased to background levels.

There is a clear relationship with other chemostratigraphic parameters. In all four sections the positive nitrogen isotope excursion occurs in sediments that are generally relatively rich in TOC. There is also some degree of correlation between the positive nitrogen isotope excursion and a negative excursion in δ¹³Corg and δ¹²Ccarb: This relationship is seen clearly in the sections from Winterborne Kingston and Mochras, but the higher-resolution studies at Hawsker Bottoms and Dogna show the negative shift in δ¹³Corg leading the positive shift in δ¹⁵Ntot. The exact relationship between TOC and δ¹⁵Ntot is such that the rise to relatively higher nitrogen isotope ratios precedes the major rise in organic carbon values in Winterborne Kingston and Mochras; whereas the two parameters are more closely in phase at Hawsker Bottoms and Dogna. These associations indicate that values of δ¹⁵Ntot are not simply tied to the content of organic matter in the sediment because TOC values are rather variable in the different sections. It might be argued that changing stratigraphic values of δ¹⁵Ntot relate to changes in the relative abundance of different organic compounds or different terrigenous fractions with different isotopic ratios. Although these possibilities cannot be totally ruled out, the similarity in the stratigraphic patterns of δ¹⁵Ntot across Europe during this period of Jurassic time leads us to favor a paleoceano- graphic interpretation in the context of the early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event.

The mechanisms for enrichment of a water mass in δ¹⁵N relative to δ¹⁴N have been clarified through oceanographic studies in modern oceans and on modern sediments [e.g., Calvert et al., 1992; Altabet and Francois, 1994; Altabet et al., 1995; Holmes et al., 1997, 1998; Brandes et al., 1998; Naqvi et al., 1998]. In a given water mass, nitrate utilization will selectively withdraw the lighter nitrogen isotope into planktonic organic matter. This process will go hand in hand with progressive depletion of the nitrate pool [Miyake and Wada, 1967; Wada and Hattori, 1976; Farrell et al., 1995]. The effect of these processes is to produce nitrate-poor waters that are typically characterized by higher δ¹⁵N values than nitrate-rich waters.

Alternatively, in an oxygen-depleted or suboxic water mass, bacterial denitrification (reduction of nitrate to gaseous nitrogen) takes place through the following steps:

\[ \text{NO}_3^- \rightarrow \text{NO}_2^- \rightarrow \text{NO} \rightarrow \text{N}_2 \text{O} \rightarrow \text{N}_2 \]

In this reaction series, δ¹⁴N-rich nitrate is preferentially employed as an oxidizing agent for falling organic matter, again leading to relative enrichment of δ¹⁵N in the residual nitrate pool [Richards, 1965; Cline and Kaplan, 1975; Liu and Kaplan, 1989; Naqvi et al., 1998]. Because the gaseous product, elemental dinitrogen, is largely transferred to the atmosphere, this process causes loss of oceanic nitrate [Codispoti, 1995]. Theoretically, if denitrification were total, as in the euxinic layers of the Black Sea, there should be negligible residual nitrate left to cause relative enrichment of the water mass in δ¹⁵N [Fry et al., 1991; Sachs and Repeta, 1999].
Hence a positive $^{15}$N anomaly formed under these conditions implies partial denitrification or a supply of fresh nitrate into the suboxic zone at a rate greater than its removal. These two oceanographic models indicate that the positive $\delta^{15}$N$_{\text{tot}}$ excursion in the exaratum Subzone could be registering (1) the isotopic signature of a water mass that became progressively nitrate depleted because plankton productivity extracted NO$_3^-$ faster than it was replenished either from below or laterally or (2) the isotopic signature of a water mass that had undergone partial denitrification. In the latter case, nutrient supply from the zone of denitrification into the photic zone by upwelling would have been required to transfer the $^{15}$N-enriched waters to levels where they could be utilized by organic-walled plankton [cf. Saino and Hattori, 1987]. Under such conditions the processes of upwelling with attendant increase in productivity and settling biogenic particle flux, and generation of an intensified oxygen minimum zone with associated partial denitrification, could have been consequential phenomena, as suggested for the Arabian Sea at the present time [Altabet et al., 1995]. Whether or not high rates of organic carbon flux correlate with relatively high values of $\delta^{15}$N in zones of denitrification varies according to oceanographic conditions and the structure of the phytoplankton community. In the Arabian Sea, zones of higher organic carbon fluxes are associated with relatively lower $\delta^{15}$N values (Figures 3–6) are taken as the prime chemostratigraphic index, this suggests at first sight that both must record a time of enhanced productivity, at least of organic-walled plankton. As noted in section 5, such a relationship (high TOC and high $\delta^{15}$N$_{\text{tot}}$) is the opposite of what is generally observed today under normal oxic conditions because depletion of the nitrate pool is the dominant effect, and withdrawal of this nutrient suppresses productivity. A possible illustration of these processes in ancient deposits is shown by the correlation between Quaternary Mediterranean sapropels and relatively light nitrogen isotope ratios in the contained organic matter when compared with enclosing organic-poor sediments [Calvert et al., 1992; Milder et al., 1999; cf. Sachs and Repeta, 1999]. A similar relationship is also seen in alternating organic-rich and organic-poor sediments from the Cretaceous Atlantic and the Devonian-Carboniferous of North America [Rau et al., 1987; Calvert et al., 1996; Caplan and Bustin, 1998].

Admittedly, direct measure of productivity and/or flux rates of organic carbon is not necessarily given by weight percent TOC because this quantity is affected by variable preservation and dilution by other constituents, primarily clay minerals and carbonate in the case of the lower Toarcian. There is, however, no correlation between weight percent TOC and weight percent CaCO$_3$ and/or weight percent clay (derived as 100 – (wt % CaCO$_3$ + wt % organic matter)) in the exaratum Subzone in any of the four sections examined (data from the U. K. sections are shown in Figure 3). This is discussed in more detail in section 6. A significant difference between productivity-related $\delta^{15}$N enrichment and denitrification is that the former results in depletion of virtually all nutrients utilized by phytoplankton, whereas denitrification depletes the water mass only of nitrate.

6. Relation Between TOC and $\delta^{15}$N$_{\text{tot}}$

If relatively elevated values of TOC in the lower exaratum Subzone of the Toarcian (which here roughly correlate with relatively high $\delta^{15}$N$_{\text{tot}}$ values) (Figures 3–6) are taken as the prime chemostratigraphic index, this suggests at first sight that both must record a time of enhanced productivity, at least of organic-walled plankton.

Figure 3. Chemostratigraphic data (total organic carbon (TOC), $\delta^{15}$N$_{\text{tot}}$, $\delta^{13}$C$_{\text{org}}$, and $\delta^{13}$C$_{\text{carb}}$) for Winterborne Kingston Borehole, England. Ammonite zonal boundaries in the tenuicostatum-falciferum Zone interval are poorly constrained. Ammonite biostratigraphy is after Ivory-Cook [1982]. TOC and $\delta^{13}$C$_{\text{carb}}$ data are from Jenkyns and Clayton [1997]. Abbreviations are as follows: marg, margaritatus Zone; spin, spinatum Zone (Pliensbachian); tenui, tenuicostatum Zone; v, variabilis Zone (Toarcian).
condensed the section, the smaller the paleoflux of preserved organic matter for a constant value of TOC. However, strontium isotope data from belemnites in Yorkshire sections (Cleveland Basin) suggest that, if anything, condensation is more extreme in the upper *exaratum* Subzone, where values of $^{87}$Sr/$^{86}$Sr rise extremely steeply, than it is in the more organic-rich lower *exaratum* Subzone [McArthur et al., 2000]. Furthermore, the regional development of carbon-rich Toarcian black shales of identical age across northern and southern Europe, coupled with a local relative abundance of radiolarians, implies an increase in the productivity of siliceous and organic-walled microfossils during the early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event [Vetò et al., 1997; Ebli et al., 1998; Jenkyns, 1999]. Relatively high Ba/Rb ratios in Italian black shales from the Bellunu Trough (essentially the same section illustrated in Figure 6) equally suggest heightened biological productivity [Bellanca et al., 1999; cf. Dymond et al., 1992].

These relationships suggest that the early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event was productivity related and that we need to explain high flux and high burial rate of organic-walled plankton accompanied by relatively heavy nitrogen isotope values. The difference in absolute values of TOC compared with rather similar $^{15}$N values in all four sections probably reflects not only differences in primary productivity across the region but also differences in water depth, affecting transit times of suspended organic matter through the water column, and sedimentary rate.

Quaternary sediment cores with coincident high TOC concentrations and relatively elevated $^{15}$N values are known from the northwestern continental slope south of the Gulf of California [Ganeshram et al., 1995], the Peru margin [Ganeshram et al., 2000], and the northern Arabian Sea [Reichart et al., 1998], where they are attributed to intense upwelling of $^{15}$N-enriched nitrate from the underlying suboxic zones of denitrification. Thus in these locales the conditions that favored accumulation of organic matter (enhanced productivity and/or enhanced preservation [Demaison and Moore, 1980]) also allowed transmission of a denitrification signature into the sedimentary record. Similar relationships are recorded from Quaternary cores within the Gulf of California itself where laminated opal-rich sediments are relatively enriched in $^{15}$N [Pride et al., 1999] and in the Santa Barbara Basin where sediments with relatively high $^{15}$N values are laminated and those with relatively low $^{15}$N values are bioturbated [Emmer and Thunell, 2000].

7. Relation Between $^{15}$N$_{tot}$ and $^{13}$C

The stratigraphical evolution of carbon isotope signatures of organic matter and carbonate through the *teniuscostatum* and *falciferum* Zones are not necessarily very helpful in resolving key paleoceanographic parameters controlling nitrogen isotope ratios. The negative excursion in $^{13}$C$_{org}$ and $^{13}$C$_{carb}$ was originally interpreted by Küspert [1982] as being related to vigorous recycling of waters rich in oxidized organic matter, an interpretation largely endorsed by Seiden et al. [1996], Schouten et al. [2000], and Röhl et al. [2001]. However, the recognition by Hesselbo et al. [2000] that this excursion is equally registered in terrestrial higher-plant material indicates that the isotopic disturbance was not related to local oceanographic phenomena, but rather it recorded the behavior of the entire exchangeable carbon reservoir. The negative carbon isotope excursion interrupts a much longer lasting positive excursion, in $^{13}$C$_{carb}$ that extended over the *teniuscostatum* and *falciferum* Zones (particularly well displayed in the Mochras profile, Figure 4). This positive carbon isotope excursion has been conventionally interpreted as being related to excess burial of marine organic carbon during the oceanic anoxic event [Jenkyns and Clayton, 1986; Jenkyns, 1988].

The stratigraphical association of the negative $^{13}$C excursion with the positive $^{15}$N$_{tot}$ excursion (Figures 3–6) led us initially to interpret the $^{15}$N$_{tot}$ signatures in terms of local upwelling of a deoxygenated water mass that carried the isotopic imprint of both oxidation of organic matter and denitrification [Gröcke and Jenkyns, 1999].
Because the whole of the ocean-atmosphere system was apparently influenced by the negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ excursion, this line of argumentation would only be tenable if the reservoir of upwelled deoxygenated waters were of oceanic dimensions. Such, for example, has been suggested as an explanation for the negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ excursion around the Permo-Triassic boundary [Knoll et al., 1996]. However, detailed study of a range of Toarcian isotopic profiles containing both marine organic carbon and terrestrially derived wood led Hesselbo et al. [2000], rather, to relate this negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ excursion to dissociation, release, and oxidation of methane from gas hydrates along continental margins during a period of global warmth, realignment of major oceanic water masses, and regional extensional activity. If this view is correct, the association of the negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ excursion with the positive $\delta^{15}N_{tot}$ excursion is not necessarily genetically significant, unless large-scale oxidation of methane in the water column promoted anoxic conditions. However, all the illustrated sections show that $\delta^{15}N_{tot}$ values increased before the most negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values were attained, so the phenomena of methane release to the water column (somewhere) and denitrification in the European epicontinental and marginal seas may have overlapped in time.

8. Favored Model for Nitrogen Isotope Excursions

The correlation of high $\delta^{15}N_{tot}$ with low values of TOC in lower Toarcian black shales is interpreted as the chemostratigraphic signature of partial denitrification and upwelling, by reference to the geochemistry of Quaternary sediments from the Arabian Sea and eastern Pacific margin [Ganeshram et al., 1995, 2000; Reichart et al., 1998]: In both cases the magnitude of the positive excursions (2–4‰) is similar. Comparison between the TOC and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ profiles (Figures 3–6) suggests that the impact of partial denitrification was locally (Mochras and Winterborne Kingston) felt in near-surface waters before the major increase in burial and preservation rate of organic carbon. Such relationships are consistent with upwelling-related phenomena: Chemostratigraphic signals in the water mass will not necessarily exactly match those recorded in the sediments, particularly in the case of total organic carbon whose values are controlled by several variables [Demaison and Moore, 1980; Pedersen and Calvert, 1990]. Hence denitrification must have preceded sulfate reduction.

Figure 5. Chemostratigraphic data (TOC, $\delta^{15}N_{tot}$, $\delta^{13}C_{org}$, and $\delta^{13}C_{belemnite}$) for Hawsker Bottoms, England. Ammonite biostratigraphy is after Howarth [1962, 1992]. TOC and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ data are from Jenkyns and Clayton [1977] and Hesselbo et al. [2000]. Values for $\delta^{13}C_{belemnite}$ (screened for diagenesis by rejection of all belemnite calcite with Fe values >150 ppm, as suggested by Jones et al. [1994]) are from McArthur et al. [2000]. The abbreviation falc is falciferum Subzone (Toarcian).
The evidence for sulfide-rich waters in the photic zone of the early Toarcian seaway comes from the presence of isorenieratane (derived from anoxicogenic phototrophic sulfur bacteria [Schouten et al., 2000]) in the Jet Rock and German correlatives. In a number of Italian sections through Toarcian black shales, including an example from the Belluno Trough, there is also evidence from porphyrins and other biomarkers for the former presence of green sulfur bacteria, indicating photic zone euxinic conditions [Turner, 1998]. The local presence of small (<10 μm) pyrite frambooids in laminated carbon-rich shales from the Belluno Trough also likely testifies to euxinic conditions in the water column [Bellanca et al., 2000; cf., Wilkin et al., 1996]. Thus paleoceanographic conditions may have alternated between dysoxic and euxinic.

It is probable that denitrification and subsequent sulfate reduction was largely a function of enhanced productivity, with oxidation of planktonic organic matter causing extreme oxygen depletion. For the nitrogen isotope signature of denitrification to be encoded in the sedimentary record would have required upwelling into the photic zone of a 15N-rich water mass whose residual nitrate could be utilized by organic-walled plankton. In order for the nitrogen isotope signature of denitrification to be sustained for a considerable length of time (duration of the planktonic biota. Biotic changes across the exaratum Subzone in northern and southern Europe involve a relative increase, within the organic-walled plankton, of prasinophyte green algae at the expense of dinoflagellates and acritarchs [Loh et al., 1986; Bucéfalo Palliani and Riding, 1999]. Although such changes have been interpreted as being related to reduced salinity, a change in nutrient balance is an equally attractive explanation, particularly as prasinophytes are apparently able to use reduced nitrate (nitrite and ammonium) more efficiently than other algal groups [Cochlan and Harrison, 1991; Prauss, 1996]. In the eastern tropical Pacific and elsewhere, relatively nitrite-rich levels, formed by nitrate reduction, have been identified in zones of denitrification [Cline and Kaplan, 1975; Codispoti and Christensen, 1985; Liu and Kaplan, 1989]; ammonium can also be produced in anoxic water masses but is generally low in this area because of rapid assimilation by bacteria [Lipschultz et al., 1990].

9. Mesozoic Versus Quaternary Nitrogen Isotope Ratios

Available nitrogen isotope data on Jurassic and Cretaceous black shales dominated by marine organic matter record 15N values typically between −2.5 and 4‰, generally lower than those of most Quaternary sediments (δ15N typically 0–12‰). Cretaceous examples include the Toolebuc Formation from the Eromanga Basin, Queensland, Australia, of early late Albian age [Bralower et al., 1993], whose δ15N values lies in the range −0.5 to −2.5‰ [Rigby and Bauss, 1986], Cenomanian–Turonian black shales from the South Atlantic (δ15N = −1.0 to −2.7‰) analyzed by Rau et al. [1987], and coeval material from the Bonarelli Level from the Marche-Umbrian Apennines in Italy (δ15N = −2.0 to −0.6‰).
analyzed by Ohkouchi et al. [1997]. These examples reflect the sedimentary record of Cretaceous oceanic anoxic events, similar in kind to that of the early Toarcian [Jenkyns, 1999]. Nitrogen isotope data on the Kimmeridge Clay (Upper Jurassic) from southern England shows δ15N values typically in the range ~2 to 2‰ [Sælen et al., 2000].

These relatively 15N depleted values, typically lower than those found in adjacent organic-lean sediments, have been taken to suggest that atmospheric nitrogen fixers, such as cyanobacteria, have played a major role in the development of certain Mesozoic organic-rich deposits [Rigby and Bates, 1986; Rau et al., 1987; Ohkouchi et al., 1997; Sælen et al., 2000]. Organisms that can utilize the superabundant atmospheric dinitrogen when dissolved nitrate is scarce relative to phosphate will have a competitive advantage [Haug et al., 1998; Tyrrell, 1999], and their δ15N signatures approximate that of atmospheric nitrogen [Wada and Hattori, 1976; Saino and Hattori, 1987; Capone et al., 1997; Karl et al., 1997]. Blooms of nitrogen-fixing cyanobacteria have been recorded from the Arabian Sea at times when the nitrate abundance in near-surface waters is extremely low [Capone et al., 1998]. Hence the values of δ15N in lower Toarcian black shales (δ15N typically between ~2 and 4‰) could record a significant admixture of planktonic cyanobacterial matter; such has been suggested for the Jet Rock of Yorkshire by Sælen et al. [2000].

The problem resides, however, in the fact that the δ15N values in sediments above and below the lower Toarcian black shales are low relative to those generally found today, and there is no evidence for particularly high productivity which might have caused nitrate depletion sufficient to encourage invasion of atmospheric nitrogen fixers into the environment at these times. Quite the reverse is true, in fact, because the TOC values are low relative to the black shales themselves. In this context the early Toarcian nitrogen isotope excursions are best viewed as operating from a δ15N baseline of about ~1‰. Although typical δ15N values of present-day deep oceanic oxygenated waters are ~5–6‰ [Wada et al., 1975; Liu and Kaplan, 1989], values in the Mediterranean are close to ~1‰ because of a lack of significant denitrification and low levels of nitrate utilization [Sachs and Repeta, 1999]. This oligotrophic basin perhaps offers the best paleoceanographic model for conditions before and after the early Toarcian oceanic anoxic event in the north European epicontinental seaway and Tethyan continental margin. During the event itself, particularly when denitrification had gone to completion and waters were locally euxinic, nitrogen-fixing cyanobacteria may have added to the planktonic population; such a phenomenon would have reduced, to some degree, the dominant signal (increased values of δ15N) of high productivity, upwelling, generation of suboxic water masses, and partial denitrification.

10. Conclusions

Data from lower Toarcian sections in northern and central Europe, from both epicontinental and pelagic facies, indicate a broad correlation between relatively elevated values of both total organic carbon (weight percent TOC) and δ15N. This key association suggests that regional upwelling, high productivity, and expansion of the oxygen-minimum layer, likely triggered by a climatic optimum, were responsible for promoting partial denitrification in the water column and transferring this chemostratigraphic signature into planktonic organic matter and subsequently
References


Bucelafal Palliani, R., and E. Mattioli, Enrichment in organic matter within the Early Toarcian marine anoxic event (Figure 7).

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