

# Microaerobic steroid biosynthesis and the molecular fossil record of Archean life

Jacob R. Waldbauer<sup>a,1,2</sup>, Dianne K. Newman<sup>b,c,d,3</sup>, and Roger E. Summons<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Joint Program in Chemical Oceanography, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Cambridge, MA 02139;

<sup>b</sup>Howard Hughes Medical Institute and <sup>c</sup>Department of Biology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139; and <sup>d</sup>Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139

Edited by John M. Hayes, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Berkeley, CA, and approved July 5, 2011 (received for review March 19, 2011)

The power of molecular oxygen to drive many crucial biogeochemical processes, from cellular respiration to rock weathering, makes reconstructing the history of its production and accumulation a first-order question for understanding Earth's evolution. Among the various geochemical proxies for the presence of O<sub>2</sub> in the environment, molecular fossils offer a unique record of O<sub>2</sub> where it was first produced and consumed by biology: in sunlit aquatic habitats. As steroid biosynthesis requires molecular oxygen, fossil steranes have been used to draw inferences about aerobiosis in the early Precambrian. However, better quantitative constraints on the O<sub>2</sub> requirement of this biochemistry would clarify the implications of these molecular fossils for environmental conditions at the time of their production. Here we demonstrate that steroid biosynthesis is a microaerobic process, enabled by dissolved O<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the nanomolar range. We present evidence that microaerobic marine environments (where steroid biosynthesis was possible) could have been widespread and persistent for long periods of time prior to the earliest geologic and isotopic evidence for atmospheric O<sub>2</sub>. In the late Archean, molecular oxygen likely cycled as a biogenic trace gas, much as compounds such as dimethylsulfide do today.

biomarker | photosynthesis | sterols | hypoxia | ocean

Oxygenic photosynthesis, in which water is split to provide reducing equivalents for carbon fixation, is the source of nearly all molecular oxygen on Earth. In developing the ability to produce O<sub>2</sub>, life introduced a powerful chemical agent into the earth system and accelerated the biogenic oxidation of the surface environment. This biochemistry was apparently invented exactly once, by an ancestor of the cyanobacteria, but the specifics of how and when oxygenic photosynthesis came to be remain the subject of active investigation and debate (1–4).

The geologic record provides a minimum age for oxygenic photosynthesis. An ensemble of geological and geochemical evidence for atmospheric oxygenation, which has come to be known as the “Great Oxidation Event” (GOE), points to the period *ca.* 2.32–2.45 Ga as the time when O<sub>2</sub> became a persistent and geochemically significant component of the atmosphere, and prior to which atmospheric oxygen was less than 1 ppmv (4–9). Thus 2.32 Ga stands as a minimum age by which oxygenic photosynthesis must have arisen. Recently, geochemical evidence has been presented for the transient or localized presence of O<sub>2</sub> as much as 300 million years before the GOE (9–14), which suggests that the evolutionary origin of oxygenic photosynthesis may have significantly predated 2.32 Ga. This geologic record has given rise to divergent interpretations of the relative timing of the origin of oxygenic photosynthesis and the oxygenation of the atmosphere: Either (i) the GOE records both the evolutionary origin of oxygenic photosynthesis and resultant rapid atmospheric oxygenation, and apparent indicators of earlier O<sub>2</sub> production have been erroneously interpreted (15, 16), or (ii) the origin of oxygenic photosynthesis predates the GOE by at least several hundred million years, with the time gap between the two events reflecting the variety of geochemical sinks and buffers that had to be overcome before O<sub>2</sub> could accumulate in the atmosphere (17, 18).

Models of Archean atmospheric evolution have shown how a biogenic O<sub>2</sub> flux to the atmosphere could have persisted for hundreds of millions of years without causing oxygenation to an extent that would “trip” the geologic and geochemical proxies whose signals appear at or near the GOE (19–22). So long as the O<sub>2</sub> is accompanied by sufficient inputs of appropriate reductants (such as methane), atmospheric consumption of O<sub>2</sub> is rapid and there is no particular threshold value of the biogenic O<sub>2</sub> flux that forces the atmosphere to become oxygenated. The history of O<sub>2</sub> accumulation in the atmosphere is thus sensitive to variation over time in the balance between sources (oxygenic photosynthesis) and sinks (volcanic and biogenic reduced gases) of oxidizing power to the atmosphere.

The geologic and geochemical proxies that have most clearly defined the GOE are sensitive to the involvement of O<sub>2</sub> in weathering processes, sedimentation, and/or atmospheric chemistry and so reflect this net balance between O<sub>2</sub> sources and sinks. These proxies include occurrences of oxidized paleosols, detrital redox-sensitive minerals, and the mass-independent fractionation of S isotopes, as well as indices of the mobility, speciation, and/or isotopic fractionation of redox-sensitive metals (7–13, 23, 24). For signals to be recorded through these processes, molecular oxygen must have already accumulated in the atmosphere to some extent and persisted there for a geologically significant period of time. These geologic and geochemical proxies are hence somewhat removed—separated by considerations of transport and source–sink balances—from the biology of O<sub>2</sub> production.

## Molecular Fossils and Oxygen Constraints

Hydrocarbon molecular fossils (biomarkers) have provided some of the earliest and most direct evidence for the biological production and utilization of molecular oxygen (25–30). Molecular fossils deriving from microbial membrane lipids have been found in sedimentary deposits dating as far back as 400 million years before the GOE, including in samples with the strictest contamination controls (30). Although the challenges involved in their analysis and interpretation are considerable (31, 32), authigenic molecular fossils from Archean sedimentary rocks provide a unique record of O<sub>2</sub> where it was first produced, accumulated, and utilized: sunlit aquatic ecosystems. As diagenetically altered yet still-identifiable biochemicals, biomarkers offer a proxy for O<sub>2</sub> cycling that is intimately tied to biological activity. Here our goal is to refine the inferences concerning environmental oxygenation that can be made from steranes, which are molecular fossils of

Author contributions: J.R.W., D.K.N., and R.E.S. designed research; J.R.W. performed research; J.R.W. and R.E.S. analyzed data; and J.R.W., D.K.N., and R.E.S. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

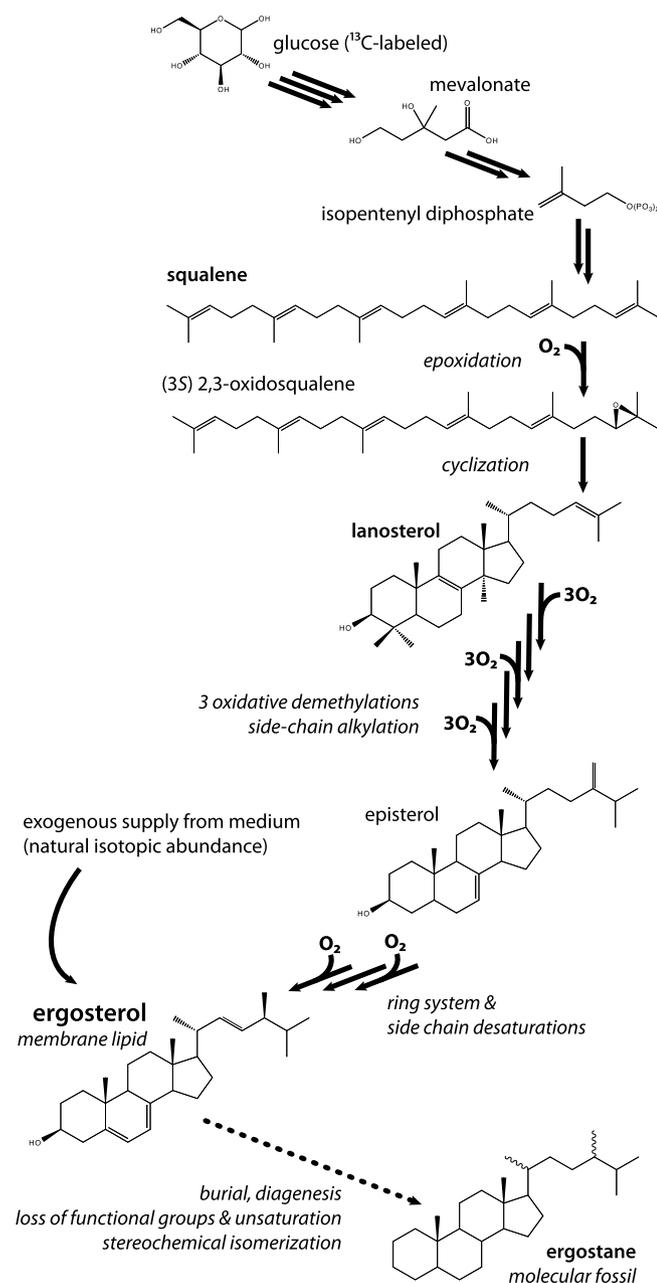
<sup>1</sup>Present address: Department of the Geophysical Sciences, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637.

<sup>2</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: jwald@uchicago.edu.

<sup>3</sup>Present address: Divisions of Biology and Geological and Planetary Sciences, California Institute of Technology and Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Pasadena, CA 91125.

steroids and have been detected in sedimentary rocks as old as 2.72 Ga.

Fossilized steroids have been especially significant as proxies for oxygenation, because their biosynthesis specifically requires molecular oxygen (Fig. 1). There are at least four steps in the biosynthesis of steroids that require O<sub>2</sub>. The first O<sub>2</sub>-dependent step is also the first committed step in steroid synthesis: the epoxidation of the linear isoprenoid squalene to produce 2,3-oxidosqualene. The enzyme that cyclizes oxidosqualene to form the characteristic steroidal 6,6,6,5-ring structure cannot act on squalene, but requires squalene (3*S*) 2,3-epoxide (33, 34).



**Fig. 1.** A summary of the steroid biosynthetic pathway in yeast, showing the flow of carbon from glucose to ergosterol. The first oxygen-requiring step is the epoxidation of squalene; subsequently, O<sub>2</sub> is also required for the removal of three methyl groups from the steroid ring system and the introduction of two unsaturations in order to produce the functional membrane lipid. In these experiments, cells can either synthesize steroids de novo (and hence become labeled with <sup>13</sup>C) or take up unlabeled ergosterol from the medium. Ultimately, steroid lipids may be incorporated into sedimentary organic matter and, after diagenetic alteration, observed as sterane molecular fossils.

Subsequently, to produce the 4,14-desmethyl steroids that make up the vast majority of both membrane lipids and molecular fossils, nine more molecules of O<sub>2</sub> are necessary to effect three oxidative demethylation reactions. The synthesis of some steroids (e.g., cholesterol and ergosterol) requires yet more O<sub>2</sub> to introduce unsaturations into the carbon skeleton. These postcyclization modifications involve the chemically challenging activation of unreactive C-H bonds, in which O<sub>2</sub> plays an important role (35). Furthermore, these principal steps in steroid biosynthesis are conserved across some of the deepest phylogenetic divisions in the eukaryotic domain, suggesting that a version of the O<sub>2</sub>-dependent pathway was present in the last common ancestral lineage of all extant eukaryotes (34, 36). Although a hypothetical anaerobic route to steroids has been discussed (37), there is no evidence that such a pathway exists today or did so in the past, and operation of the aerobic steroid biosynthesis pathway remains the most plausible explanation for the presence of fossil steranes in the geologic record (34).

The presence of steranes in late Archean rocks implies that some molecular oxygen was available in marine environments that produced the organic matter preserved in those sediments, but the implied degree of environmental oxygenation remains unclear. In order to leave a fossil record, O<sub>2</sub> levels must have been sufficient for steroid biosynthesis. To date, constraints on the concentration of dissolved O<sub>2</sub> that enables steroid biosynthesis are limited to three reports: Jahnke and Klein (38) reported an apparent oxygen *K<sub>m</sub>* (half-saturation content) for yeast squalene epoxidase of 4.3 μM, and Rogers and Stewart reported apparent O<sub>2</sub> *K<sub>m</sub>* values for cellular ergosterol contents in yeast of 0.5 μM (39) and “0.3 μM or less” (40). These reports, although suggestive of de novo steroid production, have not clearly documented the operation of the complete biosynthetic pathway under microaerobic conditions (here used to designate the range from approximately 1 nM to 1 μM dissolved O<sub>2</sub>), which is a key link to interpretation of the molecular fossil record. The experiments presented here seek to establish whether steroid biosynthesis can proceed at such low dissolved O<sub>2</sub> concentrations, and thereby to more quantitatively assess consistency between the molecular fossil record and other geochemical proxies for oxygenation and models of atmospheric evolution.

To directly assay the O<sub>2</sub> requirements of steroid biosynthesis, we adopted an isotopic labeling strategy. Yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) was chosen as a test organism because it is a facultatively anaerobic eukaryote, able to grow at any O<sub>2</sub> concentration in an appropriate medium. Although *S. cerevisiae* is likely only distantly related to, and certainly incompletely representative of, eukaryotic life of the late Archean, the antiquity and conservation of the core of steroid biosynthesis across the eukaryotic domain make it a useful model. Yeast cells were grown in a defined minimal medium containing <sup>13</sup>C-glucose (99 atom%) and unlabeled ergosterol (i.e., sterol with <sup>13</sup>C at the natural abundance of 1.1%). Because O<sub>2</sub> is essential for steroid biosynthesis, the cells are obligately auxotrophic for steroids under anaerobic conditions and take up the supplied (unlabeled) ergosterol. When O<sub>2</sub> is supplied to the culture, however, steroids can be made de novo from carbon substrates and thereby acquire the <sup>13</sup>C label from glucose. We grew cells at three different dissolved O<sub>2</sub> concentrations: 6.5 μM, 0.6 μM, and 7 nM, as well as anaerobically (<0.7 nM); O<sub>2</sub> levels were controlled by bubbling with defined gas mixtures (5,030 ± 100, 473.0 ± 9.5, 5.32 ± 0.27, and <0.5 ppmv O<sub>2</sub> in N<sub>2</sub>, respectively). By analyzing the cellular lipids using mass spectrometry, we could examine the incorporation of <sup>13</sup>C into specific compounds, including steroids, at the various O<sub>2</sub> levels.

## Results

**The Oxygen Requirements of Steroid Biosynthesis.** The incorporation of the <sup>13</sup>C label from glucose produces a distinct shift in the appearance of lipid mass spectra (Fig. 2). Compounds that carry







**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** We are grateful to Alexa Price-Whelan and Paula Welander for guidance with anaerobic culturing techniques, to Lars Dietrich for assistance with microelectrode measurements, and to Maureen Coleman for comments, discussion, and help with model visualization. We also acknowledge helpful comments by Lee Kump and two anonymous reviewers that improved the manuscript. This work was supported by grants from the

National Aeronautics and Space Administration Astrobiology Institute and the Agouron Institute (to R.E.S. and D.K.N.), by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), and by an Office of Naval Research National Defense Science and Engineering Graduate Fellowship and an National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship (to J.R.W.). D.K.N. is an HHMI Investigator.

- Xiong J (2006) Photosynthesis: What color was its origin? *Genome Biol* 7:245.
- Allen JF, Martin W (2007) Evolutionary biology: Out of thin air. *Nature* 445:610–612.
- Allen JP, Williams JC (2011) The evolutionary pathway from anoxygenic to oxygenic photosynthesis examined by comparison of the properties of photosystem II and bacterial reaction centers. *Photosyn Res* 107:59–69.
- Buick R (2008) When did oxygenic photosynthesis evolve? *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 363:2731–2743.
- Rye R, Holland H (1998) Paleosols and the evolution of atmospheric oxygen; a critical review. *Am J Sci* 298:621–672.
- Pavlov AA, Kasting JF (2002) Mass-independent fractionation of sulfur isotopes in Archean sediments: Strong evidence for an anoxic Archean atmosphere. *Astrobiology* 2:27–41.
- Catling DC, Claire MW (2005) How Earth's atmosphere evolved to an oxic state: A status report. *Earth Planet Sci Lett* 237:1–20.
- Sessions AL, Doughty DM, Welander PV, Summons RE, Newman DK (2009) The continuing puzzle of the great oxidation event. *Curr Biol* 19:R567–R574.
- Farquhar JF, Zerkle AL, Bekker A (2011) Geological constraints on the origin of oxygenic photosynthesis. *Photosyn Res* 107:11–36.
- Anbar AD, et al. (2007) A whiff of oxygen before the great oxidation event? *Science* 317:1903–1906.
- Garvin J, Buick R, Anbar AD, Arnold GL, Kaufman AJ (2009) Isotopic evidence for an aerobic nitrogen cycle in the latest Archean. *Science* 323:1045–1048.
- Frei R, Gaucher C, Poulton SW, Canfield DE (2009) Fluctuations in Precambrian atmospheric oxygenation recorded by chromium isotopes. *Nature* 461:250–253.
- Duan Y, et al. (2010) Molybdenum isotope evidence for mild environmental oxygenation before the Great Oxidation Event. *Geochim Cosmochim Acta* 74:6655–6668.
- Kendall B, et al. (2010) Pervasive oxygenation along late Archaean ocean margins. *Nature Geosci* 3:647–652.
- Kopp RE, Kirschvink JL, Hilburn IA, Nash CZ (2005) The Paleoproterozoic snowball Earth: A climate disaster triggered by the evolution of oxygenic photosynthesis. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 102:11131–11136.
- Kirschvink JL, Kopp RE (2008) Palaeoproterozoic ice houses and the evolution of oxygen-mediating enzymes: the case for a late origin of photosystem II. *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 363:2755–2765.
- Hayes JM (1983) *Earth's Earliest Biosphere: Its Origin and Evolution*, ed JW Schopf (Princeton Univ Press, Princeton, NJ), pp 291–301.
- Hayes JM (1994) *Early Life on Earth: Nobel Symposium, No. 84*, ed S Bengtson (Columbia Univ Press, New York), pp 220–236.
- Claire MW, Catling DC, Zahnle KJ (2006) Biogeochemical modelling of the rise in atmospheric oxygen. *Geobiology* 4:239–269.
- Goldblatt C, Lenton TM, Watson AJ (2006) Bistability of atmospheric oxygen and the Great Oxidation. *Nature* 443:683–686.
- Pavlov AA, Brown LL, Kasting JF (2001) UV shielding of NH<sub>3</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> by organic hazes in the Archean atmosphere. *J Geophys Res* 106:23267–23287.
- Zahnle K, Claire M, Catling D (2006) The loss of mass-independent fractionation in sulfur due to a Palaeoproterozoic collapse of atmospheric methane. *Geobiology* 4:271–283.
- Coogan L (2009) Did natural reactors form as a consequence of the emergence of oxygenic photosynthesis during the Archean? *GSA Today* 19:4–10.
- Reinhard CT, Raiswell R, Scott C, Anbar AD, Lyons TW (2009) a late Archean sulfidic sea stimulated by early oxidative weathering of the continents. *Science* 326:713–716.
- Brocks JJ, Logan GA, Buick R, Summons RE (1999) Archean molecular fossils and the early rise of eukaryotes. *Science* 285:1033–1036.
- Brocks JJ, Buick R, Summons RE, Logan GA (2003) A reconstruction of Archean biological diversity based on molecular fossils from the 2.78 to 2.45 billion-year-old Mount Bruce Supergroup, Hamersley Basin, Western Australia. *Geochim Cosmochim Acta* 67:4321–4335.
- Dutkiewicz A, Volk H, George SC, Ridley J, Buick R (2006) Biomarkers from Huronian oil-bearing fluid inclusions: An uncontaminated record of life before the Great Oxidation Event. *Geology* 34:437.
- George SC, Volk H, Dutkiewicz A, Ridley J, Buick R (2008) Preservation of hydrocarbons and biomarkers in oil trapped inside fluid inclusions for >2 billion years. *Geochim Cosmochim Acta* 72:844–870.
- Eigenbrode JL, Freeman KH, Summons RE (2008) Methylhopane biomarker hydrocarbons in Hamersley Province sediments provide evidence for Neoproterozoic aerobicity. *Earth Planet Sci Lett* 273:323–331.
- Waldbauer JR, Sherman LS, Sumner DY, Summons RE (2009) Late Archean molecular fossils from the Transvaal Supergroup record the antiquity of microbial diversity and aerobicity. *Precambrian Res* 169:28–47.
- Sherman LS, Waldbauer JR, Summons RE (2007) Improved methods for isolating and validating indigenous biomarkers in Precambrian rocks. *Org Geochem* 38:1987–2000.
- Rasmussen B, Fletcher IR, Brocks JJ, Kilburn MR (2008) Reassessing the first appearance of eukaryotes and cyanobacteria. *Nature* 455:1101–1104.
- Dean PDG, Ortiz de Montellano PR, Bloch K, Corey EJ (1967) A soluble 2,3-oxidosqualene sterol cyclase. *J Biol Chem* 242:3014–3015.
- Summons RE, Bradley AS, Jahnke LL, Waldbauer JR (2006) Steroids, triterpenoids and molecular oxygen. *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 361:951–968.
- Rittle J, Green MT (2010) Cytochrome P450 compound I: Capture, characterization, and C-H bond activation kinetics. *Science* 330:933–937.
- Desmond E, Gribaldo S (2009) Phylogenomics of sterol synthesis: Insights into the origin, evolution, and diversity of a key eukaryotic feature. *Genome Biol Evol* 1:364–381.
- Raymond J, Blankenship RE (2004) Biosynthetic pathways, gene replacement and the antiquity of life. *Geobiology* 2:199–203.
- Jahnke L, Klein HP (1983) Oxygen requirements for formation and activity of the squalene epoxidase in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. *J Bacteriol* 155:488–492.
- Rogers PJ, Stewart PR (1973) Respiratory development in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* grown at controlled oxygen tension. *J Bacteriol* 115:88–97.
- Rogers PJ, Stewart PR (1973) Mitochondrial and peroxisomal contributions to the energy metabolism of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* in continuous culture. *J Gen Microbiol* 79:205–217.
- Brooks CJW, Horning ES, Young JS (1968) Characterization of sterols by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry of the trimethylsilyl ethers. *Lipids* 3:391–402.
- Jahnke L, Klein HP (1979) Oxygen as a factor in eukaryote evolution: Some effects of low levels of oxygen on *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. *Orig Life* 9:329–334.
- Volkman CM, Klein HP (1983) Stabilization of the yeast desaturase system by low levels of oxygen. *Orig Life* 13:57–59.
- Stolper D, Revsbech NP, Canfield DE (2010) Aerobic growth at nanomolar oxygen concentrations. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 107:18755–18760.
- Glover DM, Frew NM, McCue SJ (2007) Air-sea gas transfer velocity estimates from the Jason-1 and TOPEX altimeters: Prospects for a long-term global time series. *J Marine Syst* 66:173–181.
- Herman EK, Kump LR (2005) Biogeochemistry of microbial mats under Precambrian environmental conditions: A modelling study. *Geobiology* 3:77–92.
- Galea AM, Brown AJ (2009) Special relationship between sterols and oxygen: Were sterols an adaptation to aerobic life? *Free Radical Biol Med* 47:880–889.
- Brown AJ, Galea AM (2010) Cholesterol as an evolutionary response to living with oxygen. *Evolution* 64:2179–2183.
- Rosenfeld E, Beauvoit B, Blondin B, Salmon J-M (2003) Oxygen consumption by anaerobic *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* under enological conditions: Effect on fermentation kinetics. *Appl Environ Microbiol* 69:113–121.
- Esteban GF, Finlay BJ, Clarke KJ (2009) Sequestered organelles sustain aerobic microbial life in anoxic environments. *Environ Microbiol* 11:544–550.
- Kettle AJ, et al. (1999) A global database of sea surface dimethylsulfide (DMS) measurements and a procedure to predict sea surface DMS as a function of latitude, longitude, and month. *Global Biogeochem Cycles* 13:399–444.
- Kloster S, et al. (2007) Response of dimethylsulfide (DMS) in the ocean and atmosphere to global warming. *J Geophys Res* 112:G03005.
- Haqq-Misra J, Kasting J, Lee S (2011) Availability of O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> on pre-photosynthetic earth. *Astrobiology* 11:293–302.
- Bligh EG, Dyer WJ (1959) A rapid method of total lipid extraction and purification. *Can J Physiol Pharmacol* 37:911–917.
- Revsbech NP, et al. (2009) Determination of ultra-low oxygen concentrations in oxygen minimum zones by the STOX sensor. *Limnol Oceanogr Methods* 7:371–381.