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Anaerobic mineralization of marine sediment organic matter: Rates and the role of anaerobic processes in the oceanic carbon economy

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Aerobic and anaerobic mineralization of organic material in marine sediment microcosms

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ABSTRACT: Fluxes of total CO₂, O₂, NO₃⁻+NO₂⁻, NH₄⁺, DON (dissolved organic nitrogen) and HS⁻ were measured across the interface of a coastal bay sediment for 43 d. The seawater overlying the defaunated sediment cores was changed continuously. Two treatments were employed: oxygenated overlying water (OX-cores) and anoxic water (AN-cores). Fluxes were measured before and after addition of an organic substrate, and loss of POM (particulate organic matter) was measured at the end of the experiment. Loss of POC (particulate organic carbon) from the sediment was the same under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. However, the highest efflux of CO₂ was measured in the OX-cores, and the highest efflux of DOC occurred in the AN-cores before and after addition of fresh substrate. Similarly, loss of PON (particulate organic nitrogen) from the sediment was the same in the 2 treatments, but the highest fluxes of NH₄⁺ and DON were measured in the AN-cores. Our conclusion is that degradation of POM is the same under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions, but that mineralization of organic molecules is less effective under anaerobic conditions. Before substrate addition there was an influx of NO₃⁻ in both OX- and AN-cores, and the estimated nitrification rate in the OX-cores was 1 to 2 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹. The estimated denitrification rate contributed 3 to 6 % to total carbon respiration. After addition of the substrate, fluxes of all constituents increased. The estimated denitrification rate constituted < 3 % of total respiration. There was a large efflux of HS⁻ in AN-cores. During the experimental period, the losses of original POC and PON were calculated to be 2.6 and 4.0 %, respectively. Relative to the initial values, the pore water constituents increased with incubation, and the integrated AN/OX ratios for NH₄⁺, DON and total CO₂ were 1.2, 1.5 and 1.6, respectively, after 43 d.

INTRODUCTION

Aerobic oxidation of organic matter in marine sediments is generally accepted to be the most important form of respiration in most situations (Sørensen et al. 1979, Jørgensen & Sørensen 1985, Jørgensen & Revsbech 1989). Recent investigations, however, have questioned this assumption (e.g. Henrichs & Reeburgh 1987, Kristensen & Blackburn 1987, Mackin & Swider 1989). Aerobic respiration takes place in the oxic surface layer and is followed by nitrate reduction and sulfate reduction. In coastal marine sediments, however, the oxic zone often is only a few millimeters thick (Revsbech et al. 1980), and anaerobic respiration becomes dominant. Furthermore, much of the oxygen uptake is used to reoxidate the products of anaerobic respiration (H₂S, NH₄⁺, CH₄) at the oxic/anoxic interface (Jørgensen 1983a,b). Hågrave & Phillips (1981) proposed that this could account for 50 % of overall oxygen uptake, but the proportion obviously depends on the system and can approach 100 % (Blackburn et al. 1988).

Very little is known about the changes in rates of organic degradation that occur when sediment becomes anoxic. In this investigation, the relative significance of aerobic and anaerobic respiration processes is investigated, using perfused sediment microcosms.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site and sampling. Undisturbed sediment cores were collected from a station in Aarhus Bight, Denmark. At this locality ('Stn 16'), various aspects of sediment nitrogen cycling (Jensen et al. 1988, 1990, Lomstein et al. 1990), sulfate reduction (L. Moeslund & B. B. Jørgensen pers. comm.) and oxygen fluxes (H. Rasmussen & B. B. Jørgensen pers. comm.) have recently been investigated. The cores were collected in...
The initial porosity and LOI are shown in Table 1. Nishio et al. (1983). The experiment was run in the dark. Solid phase and pore water constituents in the in- and outflowing water (e.g. from the flow rate, sediment area and concentration of mineralizable organic matter. However, some aerobic bacteria and meiofauna may have been killed by this treatment, which might have increased the decay of animals during the experiment. Cores were defaunated to prevent death and decay of animals during the experiment. Cores were sealed with rubber stoppers, resulting in anoxic conditions after 24 h. The macrofauna migrated to the surface of the sediment, where they were easily removed. After 4 d of anoxia, oxic conditions were reintroduced. Flux measurements. The water above the flow cores (260 to 280 ml) had a turnover time of ca 4 h. Water samples from in- and outflowing water were analysed for DIN, DON, total CO₂ (TCO₂) and O₂. Concentrations of NH₄⁺ and NO₃⁻ in the samples were determined by the standard autoanalyser methods of Solorzano (1969) and Armstrong et al. (1967). DON was measured using a modified method described by Koroleff (1976). TCO₂ was analysed potentiometrically by Gran-titration (Talling 1973), O₂ concentration was measured using a modified method described by Strickland & Parsons (1972) and HS⁻ was measured by the method of Cline (1969). Concentrations of NO₃⁻ and NH₄⁺ in the water reservoir were 4.5 and 2.5 μM respectively. After 7 d, the system had approached steady state (with respect to O₂ and CO₂ fluxes). On Day 20, a comminuted suspension of the macroalga Chondrus crispus was added to each core in an amount corresponding to 1.80 mol C m⁻² and 0.32 mol N m⁻².

RESULTS

Visual observations

Initially the sediment was light brown and oxidized in the upper 2 to 3 cm. Below this zone the sediment was dark grey. In the AN-cores, the surface sediment turned darker. After the addition of substrate (Day 20), a discrete black band at the surface (1 to 6 mm) was observed in all cores.

Solid phase and pore water

The initial porosity and LOI are shown in Table 1. The integrated loss of LOI for all cores during the
Table 1. Initial (Day 0) values of sediment porosity, organic content (LOI), carbon and nitrogen content of LOI, and the C/N molar ratio. Standard deviations were in the range of 6 to 22%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth (cm)</th>
<th>Porosity (ml cm⁻³)</th>
<th>LOI (% of dry weight)</th>
<th>Organic C (% of dry weight)</th>
<th>Organic N (% of dry weight)</th>
<th>C/N molar ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>9.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>11.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>11.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>10.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>12.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experimental period was 3 to 4%. The initial values for POC and PON were 2.67 and 0.25% respectively (Table 1); of this, 2.6 and 4% (~2.6 and 0.31 mol m⁻²) was lost during the 43 d incubation period. The loss, however, was not significantly different between OX- and AN-core treatments.

At the end of the experiment, pore waters were analysed for TCO₂, NO₃⁻, NO₂⁻, NH₄⁺, and DON. Profiles of TCO₂ are shown in Fig. 2. The integrated AN/OX CO₂ ratio (0 to 8 cm depth) was 1.6. NO₃⁻ + NO₂⁻ was detected only in the upper centimeter and at negligible concentrations (<1 µM). Relative to the initial value, NH₄⁺ concentration in OX- and AN-cores increased by a factor of 1.5 and 2.0 respectively (Fig. 3A). A considerable difference was seen in exch.-NH₄⁺ between OX- and AN-cores (Fig. 3A). The integrated AN/OX exch.-NH₄⁺ ratio (0 to 8 cm depth) was 2.0. DON profiles are shown in Fig. 3B; the difference between OX- and AN-cores was significant (AN/OX = 1.5). The ratios of initial/final DON concentrations were 1.1 and 0.7 for OX- and AN-cores, respectively. DON constituted a variable part (56 to 73%) of dissolved nitrogen in the pore water.

**Initial fluxes (Days 0 to 20)**

Oxygen consumption stabilized between Days 7 and 20, at 63 ± 1.7 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ in the 4 cores (Fig. 4A). TCO₂ flux across the sediment-water interface was similar on Day 7 (52 ± 2.7 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹) (Fig. 4B). After the AN-core incubation was initiated, TCO₂ efflux gradually declined and remained at 55% of the

![Fig. 2](image-url) Final porewater concentration of total CO₂ (TCO₂) plotted against depth for the 2 incubation types: (○) aerobic and (●) anaerobic (SD = ± 0.3 to 1.6)

![Fig. 3](image-url) (A) Concentrations of (—) pore water NH₄⁺ and (— — — —) exchangeable NH₄⁺ in (○) aerobic and (●) anaerobic cores. (○ — ○) Represents the initial concentrations (SD = ± 15 to 35). (B) Concentrations of pore water dissolved organic nitrogen (DON); symbols as in (A)
initial efflux. Low HS\(^-\) efflux was detected in the AN-cores (Fig. 4C). For NH\(_4^+\), an influx of \(0.76 \pm 0.05\) mmol m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) was measured from Days 0 to 7 (Fig. 5A). After the onset of the AN-core incubation, a shift toward efflux of NH\(_4^+\) was observed (Days 8 to 20). After an initial efflux, a NO\(_3^-\) influx of ca 1.0 \(\pm 0.18\) mmol m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) in both OX- and AN-cores occurred (Fig. 5B). DON flux was unstable (Fig. 5C). The initial efflux increased significantly after the AN-core incubation was initiated. Mean efflux rates were 0.85 \(\pm 0.70\) and 2.2 \(\pm 1.50\) mmol m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) in OX- and AN-cores, respectively.

![Graphs](image)

**Fig. 4.** O\(_2\), TCO\(_2\) and HS\(^-\) fluxes over time, in 2 treatments: (\(\bullet\)) aerobic, (\(\bullet\)) anaerobic. On Day 7, AN-incubation was initiated, and organic substrate was added on Day 20. (A) O\(_2\) uptake by sediment (SD = \(\pm 6.4\) to 12.3). (B) Efflux of total CO\(_2\) in the 2 core types (SD \(\pm 5.1\) to 16.8). (C) Efflux of HS\(^-\) here is converted to O\(_2\) equivalents (2 O\(_2\) molecules are needed to oxidize 1 HS\(^-\) molecule) (SD = \(\pm 0\) to 4.8)

**Fig. 5.** NH\(_4^+\), NO\(_3^-\) and DON fluxes over time, in 2 treatments: (\(\bullet\)) aerobic, (\(\bullet\)) anaerobic. On Day 7, AN-incubation was initiated, and organic substrate was added on Day 20. SD = (A) \(\pm 0.2\) to 1.1, (B) \(\pm 0\) to 0.4, (C) \(\pm 0.6\) to 3.8

**Fluxes after substrate addition (Days 21 to 43)**

Fluxes of O\(_2\) and TCO\(_2\) increased immediately after the addition of organic matter. The fluxes reached a maximum of 86 \(\pm 12\), 123 \(\pm 14\) and 104 \(\pm 12\) mmol m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\) for O\(_2\), CO\(_2\) (OX) and CO\(_2\) (AN), respectively. These rates were 1.3-, 2.4- and 3.2-fold greater than the rates before substrate addition. The fluxes gradually declined and at the end of experiment finally reached levels 1.2-, 1.6- and 1.8-fold greater than the original steady-state values (Days 8 to 20) (Fig. 4A, B). After a few days' lag period, HS\(^-\) efflux increased dramatically (Fig. 4C); the flux reached a maximum of 34 \(\pm 11\) mmol
higher in AN- than in OX-cores (Fig. 3A). Part of this difference may be explained by a cessation of nitrification in AN-cores (O$_2$-free), which also may be partly responsible for the increased NH$_4^+$ efflux on Days 7 to 20. DON concentration in AN-cores was significantly higher than in OX-cores. In contrast, Enoksson (1987) found a decreased DON concentration in anoxic incubations and explained this as a result of low proteolytic activity. In other experiments, we have also observed increased DON concentrations under anoxic conditions (Hansen & Blackburn unpubl.). This increase might be due to products from increased fermentation in the absence of O$_2$, or from a more effective aerobic degradation of DON in the OX-cores. The DON fraction from the water was consumed by the sediment (Fig. 5B). The substrate addition resulted in a large pulse of DON efflux in the overlying water (max. rate 13.6 ± 4.8 and 15.3 ± 4.0 in OX and AN; Fig. 5C). Subsequently, DON fluxes gradually declined.

The integrated fluxes of TCO$_2$ during the 43 d experimental period were 2.2 and 1.4 mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$ in OX- and AN-cores, respectively. This corresponded to 83 and 54 % of the POC lost from the sediment. The integrated N fluxes (NH$_4^+$ + DON) from sediment were 91 and 163 mmol m$^{-2}$ in OX- and AN-cores, respectively, and corresponded to only 29 and 52 % of the PON loss.

**DISCUSSION**

The overall loss of POC and PON from the 2 replicate cores was identical. Thus, the difference in observed carbon and nitrogen flux could be due to fermentation products lost as DOM and to denitrification products (N gases). The integrated flux estimates were made from fluxes before organic-matter addition. N flux values are given here with some reservations, however, due to the large variations in DON fluxes. The remaining N loss in OX-cores could be explained by a coupled nitrification-denitrification rate of 5.1 mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$. In comparison, Jensen et al. (1988) found at the same locality that the in situ denitrification rate did not exceed 1 mmol m$^{-2}$ d$^{-1}$, measured over a year. However, S. Seitzinger (pers. comm.) has shown by another procedure that the acetylene method used by Jensen et al. (1988) might considerably underestimate the rate. Moreover, Blackburn & Henriksen (1983) and Seitzinger et al. (1984) showed that 7 and 35 %, respectively, of NH$_4^+$ production is nitrified and subsequently denitrified in similar coastal sediments. Thus, the calculated denitrification rate may be an underestimate. The mean C/N molar ratio of detritus which disappeared from the sediment was 8.5. The DON efflux also represents a transport of carbon, and the molar ratio 8.5 used in the measured DON fluxes gives an integrated quantity of organic carbon (DOC efflux) that equals the difference between POC lost from the sediment and the measured TCO$_2$ flux.

**Pore water chemistry**

At the end of the experiment, sediment concentrations of dissolved and exch.-NH$_4^+$ were significantly higher in AN- than in OX-cores (Fig. 3A). Part of this difference may be explained by a cessation of nitrification in AN-cores (O$_2$-free), which also may be partly responsible for the increased NH$_4^+$ efflux on Days 7 to 20. DON concentration in AN-cores was significantly higher than in OX-cores. In contrast, Enoksson (1987) found a decreased DON concentration in anoxic incubations and explained this as a result of low proteolytic activity. In other experiments, we have also observed increased DON concentrations under anoxic conditions (Hansen & Blackburn unpubl.). This increase might be due to products from increased fermentation in the absence of O$_2$, or from a more effective aerobic degradation of DON in the OX-cores. The DON fraction from the water was consumed by the sediment (Fig. 5B). The substrate addition resulted in a large pulse of DON efflux in the overlying water (max. rate 13.6 ± 4.8 and 15.3 ± 4.0 in OX and AN; Fig. 5C). Subsequently, DON fluxes gradually declined.

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Jerrgensen (1983), Nishio et al. (1983) and &

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total respiration. Because of the aerobic heterotrophic &

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1, which was due to increased >

B. B. Jsrgensen pers. comm.). During this &

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sponded to only 30 &

sulfate reduction is assumed to account for 90 % of &

total anaerobic respiration (Jorgensen 1983b), and the &

flux would theoretically be about 25 mmol m⁻² d⁻¹ (in O₂ equivalents) in the present experiment. Due to the coloration of the surface sedi-

miment (light brown, indicating presence of ferric ox-

hydroxides), the reason for the low HS⁻ efflux is assumed to be FeS precipitation. The reaction between reactive iron and sulfide is rapid, and the concentration of reactive Fe is high at the present locality (> 2.4 mol m⁻²; B. Thamdrup pers. comm.).

The occurrence of an initial net flux of NH₄⁺ from water to sediment indicates that the NH₄⁺ flux to the &

of the anaerobic respiration; this &

water was reduced to 20 FM, and the potential O₂ flux to the sediment was limited by diffusion through the benthic boundary layer (Hall et al. 1989, Gundersen &

Jorgensen 1990). Under these conditions (i.e. at 20 μM O₂ in overlying water), the ratio of aerobic:anaerobic respiration was 20:80. Theoretically, the entire oxygen consumption could have been used for HS⁻ reoxidation (Jorgensen & Revsbech 1989), and this may occur at the low O₂ concentration.

The flux of TC0₂ increased dramatically after substrate addition – 144 and 271 % in OX- and AN-cores, respectively; this difference between OX- and AN-cores remained almost constant. The increase in TC0₂ efflux was relatively larger in AN-cores, which indicated a high potential activity by the anaerobic bacteria when suitable substrate was available. The large sulfide efflux (Fig 4C) indicated a stimulation of sulfate-reducing bacteria. However, HS⁻ efflux corresponded to only 30 % of the anaerobic respiration; this must have been due to FeS precipitation. In situ similar precipitation has been observed after sedimentation of a spring phytoplankton bloom (Jensen et al. 1990, L. Moeslund & B. B. Jorgensen pers. comm.). During this period, the RQ was > 1, which was due to increased anaerobic respiration coupled with low O₂ concentration.

All NO₃⁻ for denitrification came from the overlying water, and denitrification accounted for less than 3% of total respiration. Because of the aerobic heterotrophic competition for O₂, nitrification might have been eliminated in the OX-cores, and therefore the denitrification
rate was possibly the same in AN-cores (Blackburn 1990, Jensen et al. 1990).

NH₄⁺ efflux showed an immediate large increase in response to the supply of fresh organic material (Fig. 5A). The efflux rate gradually declined and reached a steady state at the end of the experiment. The difference in NH₄⁺ efflux between OX- and AN-cores was larger than might be expected from nitrification in the OX-cores. The lowered redox potential (Eₕ) in AN-cores could be a reason for the relatively larger NH₄⁺ efflux, due to dissolution of organic colloids or Fe³⁺-NH₄⁺ complexes at low Eₕ (Balzer 1984). Furthermore, gross NH₄⁺ mineralization could have been underestimated as a consequence of assimilation of NH₄⁺ into an increased bacterial biomass (Garber 1984).

Substrate addition resulted in a significant increase in DON efflux (Fig. 5C), as also shown by Enoksson (1987). An increase in sediment DON could have been due to a rate of production which was greater than the rate of DON degradation. Garber (1984) showed that 9% of an organic supply was immediately released by hydrolysis. The DON fluxes gradually declined towards the end of the experiment, when the substrate became more refractory. The ratio of DON flux for AN-cores vs OX-cores was 2, again indicating that DON accumulation increased under anoxic conditions. Possibly DON was not mineralized so rapidly under anoxic conditions.

**Decomposition of added substrate**

As a consequence of changes effected by the fresh substrate, it is possible to estimate both the rate of decomposition and lability of the substrate. The quantity of added substrate corresponded to 1.8 mol C m⁻² and 0.32 mol N m⁻². The integrated excess of TCO₂ flux in OX-categories corresponded to 58% of the added substrate, and the increase in DOC (calculated from DON) represented 17% of the added substrate. The respective values for TCO₂ and DOC in the 2 AN-cores were 46 and 30%. With respect to nitrogen, 35 and 53% were lost from the substrate in OX- and AN-cores, respectively (DON + DIN flux). The C/N ratio in the mineralized substrate was surprisingly high (18.5 in OX and 11.4 in AN); this is not in agreement with earlier reports that N-containing material is mineralized preferentially (e.g. Lancelot & Billen 1985, Kristensen & Blackburn 1987). In fact, there was a significant build-up of exch.-NH₄⁺ in the sediment; this discrepancy could have been due to bacterial assimilation of NH₄⁺ (Garber 1984). The DON fluxes corresponded to 49 and 57% of total N-flux in OX- and AN-cores respectively. These rates suggest that the 'half-life' for organic carbon and nitrogen of the substrate is on the order of 2 and 3–4 wk respectively. These values agree with both in situ and experimental decomposition rates for algal detritus in other experiments (Graf et al. 1983, Garber 1984, Enoksson 1987).

Based on the carbon fluxes, it is calculated that the substrate contained a labile fraction (33%) and a fraction with a lower decay constant (30%), with the remaining being refractory. These ratios differ from the 50:25:25% composition observed by Lancelot & Billen (1985).

In the present experiment, mineralization of the algae (CO₂ flux) was apparently the same under oxic and anoxic conditions. In contrast, Westrich & Berner (1984) found increased decomposition in the presence of O₂. The decomposition of DON was probably faster under oxic conditions in the present experiment. Foree & MacCarty (1970) found decay rates of algae to be equal under oxic and anoxic conditions.

**CONCLUSION**

The most significant conclusion from this experiment is that mineralization of organic material (losses of POC and PON) was the same under anaerobic and aerobic conditions. The rate of anaerobic degradation has long been known (Aller 1980, Berner 1980, Santschi et al. 1990), but only recently has it been established that sulfate reduction is a very efficient process (Henrichs & Reeburgh 1987, Canfield 1989, Mackin & Swider 1989). The present results indicate, however, that there may be very significant differences between aerobic and anaerobic degradation of DOC. Under both conditions there was quite a high flux of DON (and by inference DOC) from the sediment before the addition of fresh substrate. Total carbon fluxes (2.6 mol m⁻²) were equal in OX- and AN-cores. Of this, DOC represented ca 17 and 46% respectively: there was a higher flux of DOC under anoxic conditions. Similarly, after the addition of substrate, total carbon fluxes were 1.35 mol m⁻² from the OX- and AN-cores, of which DOC represented ca 23 and 39% respectively. Our tentative conclusion is that hydrolysis of POM may be the same with or without oxygen, but that mineralization of dissolved organic molecules may be less efficient under anoxic conditions. This is partially confirmed by the higher concentration of DON in the pore water of AN-cores at the end of the experiment.

There are few experimental data available from other investigations to confirm or contradict this hypothesis of similar rates of hydrolysis of particulate material and dissimilar rates of mineralization of dissolved molecules. However, in a similar type of exper-
iment, CO₂ production was found to be slightly higher under anoxic conditions (Kristensen & Blackburn 1987).

**LITERATURE CITED**


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