Nano-porous pyrite and organic matter in 3.5-billion-year-old stromatolites record primordial life

Baumgartner Raphael J. ¹, Van Kranendonk Martin J. ¹, Wacey David ², Fiorentini Marco L. ³,
Saunders Martin ², Caruso Stefano ³, Pages Anaïs ⁴, Homann Martin ⁵, Guagliardo Paul ³

¹ Univ New South Wales, Sch Biol Earth & Environm Sci, Australian Ctr Astrobiol, Kensington, NSW 2052, Australia.

² Univ Western Australia, Ctr Microscopy Characterizat & Anal, Perth, WA 6009, Australia.

³ Univ Western Australia, Sch Earth Sci, Ctr Explorat Targeting, Perth, WA 6009, Australia.

⁴ Commonwealth Sci & Ind Res Org, Mineral Resources, Kensington, WA 6151, Australia.

⁵ CNRS, UMR6538, European Inst Marine Studies, Lab Geosci Ocean, Technopole Brest Iroise, F-29280 Plouzané, France.

Abstract :

Stromatolites of the similar to 3.5 billion-year-old Dresser Formation (Pilbara Craton, Western Australia) are considered to be some of Earth's earliest convincing evidence of life. However, uniquely biogenic interpretations based on surface outcrops are precluded by weathering, which has altered primary mineralogy and inhibited the preservation of microbial remains. Here, we report on exceptionally preserved, strongly sulfidized stromatolites obtained by diamond drilling from below the weathering profile. These stromatolites lie within undeformed hydrothermal-sedimentary strata and show textural features that are indicative of biogenic origins, including upward-broadening and/or upward-branching digitate forms, wavy to wrinkly laminae, and finely laminated columns that show a thickening of laminae over flexure crests. High-resolution textural, mineralogical, and chemical analysis reveals that the stromatolites are dominated by petrographically earliest, nano-porous pyrite that contains thermally mature, N-bearing organic matter (OM). This nano-porous pyrite is consistent with a formation via sulfidization of an originally OM-dominated matrix. Evidence for its relationship with microbial communities are entombed OM strands and filaments, whose microtexture and chemistry are consistent with an origin as mineralized biofilm remains, and carbon isotope data of extracted OM ($\delta C-13(OM) = -29.6$ parts per thousand ± 0.3 parts per thousand VPDB [Vienna Peedee belemnite]), which lie within the range of biological matter. Collectively, our findings provide exceptional evidence for the biogenicity of some of Earth's oldest stromatolites through preservation of OM, including microbial remains, by sulfidization.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the oldest, best-preserved stromatolites of probable biogenic origin are from the ca. 3481 ± 2 Ma North Pole Chert Member of the Dresser Formation, Pilbara Craton, Western Australia (Walter et al., 1980; Buick et al., 1981; Groves et al., 1981; Schopf et al., 2006; Van Kranendonk, 2006, 2011; Van Kranendonk et al., 2008). This hydrothermal-sedimentary unit, which has experienced only low-grade metamorphism (prehnite-pumpellyite to low-est greenschist facies conditions; Dunlop and Buick, 1981; Terabayashi et al., 2003; Van Kranendonk and Pirajno, 2004), hosts stromatolites that are interbedded with metasedimentary rocks displaying primary textures such as ripple marks, desiccation cracks, and aragonite crystal splays now altered to secondary phases. These characteristics, together with the presence of hydrothermal chert-barite and geyselite, indicate a shallow marine to subaerial depositional environment that was influenced by hydrothermal activity (Walter et al., 1980; Groves et al., 1981; Buick et al., 1981; Buick and Dunlop, 1990; Van Kranendonk, 2006, 2011; Van Kranendonk et al., 2008; Djokic et al., 2017; Otálora et al., 2018).

These studies interpreted a biogenic origin for the stromatolites on basis of (1) their geological and stratigraphical context, (2) their morphological expression, including the presence of wrinkly laminations, and (3) their relation to sedimentary bedding. Biologically mediated origins are indirectly supported by carbon isotope data of rare OM occurrences (Ueno et al., 2001; Morag et al., 2016), and sulfur isotopic analyses of barite-pyrite assemblages elsewhere in the Dresser Formation (Shen et al., 2001, 2009; Ueno et al., 2008). Previous studies, however, have failed to uncover microbial remains and diagnostically biogenic microfossils, and a biogenic interpretation of the stromatolites has been controversial because of studies showing abiogenic formation of stromatolite-like textures (e.g., Grotzinger and Rothman, 1996; McLoughlin et al., 2008).

Here, we present the results from a detailed microanalytical examination of exceptionally preserved, strongly sulfidized Dresser Formation stromatolites sampled from a drill core from below the effects of surface weathering. We used a multi-technique analytical approach comprising (1) scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) combined with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) analysis; (2) Raman spectroscopy analysis; (3) ion mapping by nano-

scale secondary ion mass spectrometry (NanoSIMS); and (4) stable carbon isotope analysis of extracted OM. Our results reveal that the Dresser Formation stromatolites are dominantly composed of frameworks of nanoporous pyrite that contains widespread inclusions of N-bearing OM, as well as OM strands and filaments that closely resemble remnants of biofilms.

SAMPLE MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample materials were obtained from a drill core collected in 2004 from the North Pole Chert Member of the Dresser Formation (Fig. DR1 in the GSA Data Repository¹). Details on the geology and stratigraphy of the drill core (PDP2b; GPS coordinates 75°22'46"N, 76°56'26"E), as well as the spatial correlation of the contained stromatolite structures to their equivalents at the surface, are reported by Van Kranendonk et al. (2008). For this study, two slices of stromatolites were cut and placed into two polished thin sections (sample S1; Fig. 1A; Fig. DR2a), and into one polished epoxy mount and one thin section (sample S2; Figs. DR2b and DR2c). The remaining sample materials were subjected to bulk rock organic carbon isotope analysis. The mineralogy and chemistry of sulfides within the stromatolites have been examined by SEM and EDS analysis. This work was done both prior to, and after, nitric acid treatment, which dissolves sulfide phases and exposes OM. Prior to nitric acid etching, ion maps of $^{16}\text{O}^-$, $^{12}\text{C}^-$, $^{26}\text{CN}^-$, and $^{58}\text{Ni}^+$ were obtained using NanoSIMS analysis. In addition, wafers of sulfide were prepared using focused ion beam milling, and thereafter subjected to STEM analysis. Raman spectroscopy analysis of OM was carried out on unetched and etched sample surfaces. See the Data Repository for full method details.

RESULTS

Stromatolite Textures and Micro-Mineralogy of Sulfide

The stromatolites occur within centimeters-thick, planar chert-dolomite horizons that are flanked by layers of coarsely crystalline, hydrothermal barite (Fig. 1; Fig. DR2). The stromatolites are composed dominantly of sulfide, together with dolomite and chert. In sample S1, columnar stromatolites consist of upward-broadening and/or upward-branching digitate structures that are overlain by centimeter-size caps of submillimeter scale, wavy to undulating and wrinkly, laminae that occasionally span individual columns (Fig. 1; Fig. DR2a). The stromatolites are cut by barite veins that are barren in sulfides (Fig. 1A; Fig. DR2a). Sample S2, which lacks digitate structures, is composed of laterally continuous to discontinuous, wavy laminae, and irregular to finely laminated columns (Figs. DR2b–DR2d).

The stromatolites dominantly consist of pyrite, but also contain subordinate sphalerite, millerite, and galena. High-resolution SEM and STEM analysis revealed three main pyrite generations (Figs. 2A–2C; Fig. DR3). The earliest generation of irregular nanoporous pyrite (Py1) comprises anhedral to rounded pyrite grains, usually <0.1–1 μm in diameter. Interestingly,

nano-scale porosity is also present in associated sphalerite, millerite, and galena (Figs. DR3d–DR3f, and DR4a). Zoned nanoporous pyrite (Py2) typically mantles Py1. It exhibits concentric banding defined by nano-scale porosity, and shows pseudo-grain boundaries lined by void trails. The assemblages of Py1 and Py2, which are overgrown by non-porous, massive pyrite (Py3), form distinctly vertical, upward-broadening and/or upward-branching patterns within the digitate structures (Fig. 2D), but a more irregular framework within the layered stromatolites (Fig. 2E).

Organic Matter in Sulfide

NanoSIMS ion mapping and Raman spectroscopy analysis indicate that Py1 and Py2 are enriched in Ni and host thermally mature, N-bearing OM (CN_{org} in NanoSIMS analysis; Fig. 3; Fig. DR4). This OM is interpreted to reside in the nano-pores and void spaces of Py1 and Py2. The relative heights and shapes of disorder-induced 'D' ($\sim 1315 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) and order-induced 'G' ($\sim 1600 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) Raman bands of the OM are consistent with literature data of thermally mature Archean OM elsewhere in the Dresser Formation (Harris et al., 2015). This characteristic precludes an origin of OM in the stromatolites from post-metamorphic contamination. The bulk OM extracted from a millimeter-thick volume cut from sample S2 yields 0.3% total organic carbon (TOC) with a $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{OM}}$ value of $-29.6 \pm 0.3\text{‰}$ (VPDB [Vienna Pee Dee belemnite]). This value, which is within the range of previous data from the Dresser Formation (OM in bedded chert with -33.6‰ to -25.7‰ $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{OM}}$; Morag et al., 2016), is typical of biomass derived from microorganisms, although similar values have also been reported from abiotic OM synthesis (McCollom and Seewald, 2006). Nitric acid etching revealed that the OM within pyrite mostly occurs as irregular masses that are speckled by barite and calcite grains (Figs. DR5a and DR5b). It also forms complexly twisted, rope-like filaments that are usually <1 μm in diameter, as well as occasionally sinusoidal, axially arranged, partially calcified strands that reach lengths of up to $\sim 20 \mu\text{m}$ (Fig. 4; Figs. DR5c–DR5d, DR6, and DR7). These OM filaments and strands are clearly embedded within Py1 and pass across grain boundaries of Py2 (Figs. 4A and 4B; Fig. DR5c and DR5d). The intimate association of these OM structures with pyrite, in addition to Raman Spectroscopy signatures that are equivalent to OM in unetched sulfide (Figs. 3E and 3F), indicate that the strands and filaments are autochthonous, and that they have not been altered substantially through nitric acid etching.

DISCUSSION

The undeformed and weakly metamorphosed Dresser Formation stromatolites examined in this study meet many of the textural criteria for stromatolite biogenicity (e.g., Buick et al., 1981; Walter, 1983; Awramik and Grey, 2005): they are syndepositional structures; they have grown perpendicular to bedding as finely laminated columns and as branching digitate structures; they exhibit wavy to wrinkly laminae, including laminae that thicken over crestal regions, and laminae at column margins that show near vertical inclination, as is consistent with them representing the remains of cohesive microbial mats (Fig. 1A). However, the stromatolites lack diagnostic evidence for trapped clastic grains, or syn-sedimentary deformational features requiring coherence mediated by flexible microbial mats (e.g., Grotzinger and Knoll, 1999; Allwood et al., 2009). In spite of such ambiguities, which have led to mistrust of textural biosignatures (e.g., Lowe, 1994; Neveu et al., 2018), our study demonstrates that the Dresser Formation stromatolites are composed of putative biomarker assemblages; i.e., petrographically earliest, organic matter-rich nanoporous pyrite that hosts probable microbial remains.

In general, the formation of OM-rich nanoporous pyrite, which forms the bulk of the stromatolites studied here, requires the presence of abundant OM during sulfidization. For example, it is known from OM-rich shales (Cui et al., 2018), pyritized microfossils (Wacey et al., 2014), and biologically precipitated pyrite framboids, where it is represented by pyritized exopolymeric substance (EPS) mantling pyrite grains (Wacey et al., 2015). Crucially, the EPS of biofilms provides the conditions required for Fe and S saturation, and establishes confined growth spaces that control the formation of rounded grains (MacLean et al., 2008; Wacey et al., 2015). Whereas regularly structured, equigranular, framboidal pyrite is not observed in this study, we note the presence of anhedral to rounded nano-scale pyrite grains embedded within, or mantled by, OM-rich nanoporous pyrite (Figs. 2B and 2C). Hence, Py1 within the stromatolites could have formed as early as during microbial growth, through sulfidization of EPS or degrading biomass. In contrast, Py2 and Py3 may relate to later episodes of hydrothermal influence, which is consistent with late-stage barite veins cutting across the stromatolites (Fig. 1A; Fig. DR2a).

Early-stage sulfidization of microbial biomass is supported by the presence of coherent OM strands and filaments within Py1 and Py2 (Fig. 4; Figs. DR5c, DR5d, and DR7). Their textural diversity and viscoelastic properties, as ascertained from complex twisting and bundling, are similar to the rheological characteristics of EPS in biofilms. Whereas crudely reminiscent features have been produced in abiotic laboratory experiments (e.g., Cosmidis and Templeton, 2016), several differences distinguish them from the OM structures described here: (1) smaller diameters, in the range of few tens of nanometers; (2) more rigidity and less flexibility, expressed by filaments up to tens of microns in length without significant flexure or sinuosity; (3) the absence of complex twisting, bundling, and internal striation. In addition, the OM strands and filaments are not only carbonized and pyritized, but also calcified. This characteristic, plus the fact that calcite is only present in the stromatolites where there is OM, is consistent with calcification of EPS in biofilms, where negative charging of cellular matter attracts Ca^{2+} to stimulate calcite precipitation (Riding, 2000). Collectively, the abundance, texture, and chemistry of the OM, in addition to enrichments of N—a crucial requisite for functional groups of biomolecules—and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ that overlaps the array of biotic origin, strongly suggests that it represents the remains of biofilms. Indeed, the axial and twisted arrangement of some laterally continuous, sinusoidal, finely striated OM strands is reminiscent of EPS sheaths wrapped around filamentous bacteria, which break, unfurl, fray at the edges, and collapse into flattened elongate strands upon degradation (compare Figures 4B and 4C and Fig. DR7 with Planavsky et al. [2009, their figure 6], and Spracht et al. [2001, their figure 14]). Irrespective of this detailed interpretation, the preservation of these delicate OM structures indicates rapid entombment by sulfidization as early as during stromatolite construction. It remains to be determined whether the precipitation of pyrite was mediated by metabolic reactions, such as microbial sulfate reduction producing H_2S , evidence for which has been reported from pyrite elsewhere in the Dresser Formation (Shen et al., 2001, 2009; Ueno et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

Our detailed study of strongly sulfidized stromatolites within hydrothermal–sedimentary strata of the ~3.5 Ga Dresser Formation demonstrates that they are dominated by frameworks of nanoporous pyrite enriched in thermally mature OM, indicating rapid and early sulfidization of an original OM-rich matrix. The presence of coherent OM strands and filaments entombed within this nanoporous pyrite, and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values that lie within the range of biological OM, are consistent with an origin from microbial communities, thus providing compelling evidence for the biologically mediated formation of the Dresser Formation stromatolites.

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Figure 1. Photomicrograph and scanning electron microscope (SEM) images of sulfidized Dresser Formation (Pilbara Craton, Western Australia) stromatolites. (A) Photomicrograph of stromatolites in chert-dolomite of sample S1. Stromatolite textures range from upward-broadening and/or upward-branching digitate structures (white arrows), to wavy and wrinkly laminae that are occasionally arranged in a columnar fashion (red arrow); see also Fig. DR2a (see footnote 1). The inset shows a schematic drawing of stromatolite lamination. Note the steep (near vertical) inclination of some laminae at the margins of stromatolite columns, as well as the thickening of laminae at flexure crests (red arrows). (B) Backscattered electron (BSE) image of stromatolites in chert-dolomite of sample S1 (see imaging location in Fig. DR2a). Stromatolite textures range from wavy and wrinkly laminae (white lines), to upward-broadening and/or upward-branching digitate structures (white arrows); compare with A. Mineralogy is gauged from brightness differences and supported by EDS analysis: white—barite; light gray—sulfide (mainly pyrite $\pm$ sphalerite); dark gray—quartz and dolomite.

Figure 2. Pyrite textures in the Dresser Formation (Pilbara Craton, Western Australia) stromatolites. (A) Backscattered electron (BSE) image of representative pyrite assemblages, ranging from irregular (Py1) to zoned (Py2) nanoporous pyrite, to later overgrowths of non-porous, massive pyrite (Py3). Fine-scale zonation within Py2 is indicated (red arrows). Note the grains of dolomite (Do) and sphalerite (Sp) that are associated with Py1 and Py2. See the nanoscale secondary ion mass spectrometry (NanoSIMS) ion maps of $^{58}\text{Ni}^+$, $^{16}\text{O}^-$, $^{12}\text{C}^-$ and $^{26}\text{CN}^-$ (Figs. 3A–3D). Asterisks indicate the locations of Raman spectroscopy analyses (Figs. 3E and 3F). (B) Image of irregular nano-porous pyrite (Py1), hosting anhedral to rounded pyrite grains (red arrows). (C) Dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) image of a rounded pyrite grain that is mantled by nanoporous pyrite (see the imaging location in Fig. DR3b [see footnote 1]). (D, E) Image of digitate stromatolites and a sulfidized stromatolite layer (see imaging locations in Figure 1B, and in Figure DR2c). The distributions of Py1 – Py2 assemblages are outlined in red. Black arrows in D indicate the putative growth orientation of vertical, locally upward-branching and/or upward-broadening patterns of Py1 and Py2.

Figure 3. Nanoscale secondary ion mass spectrometry (NanoSIMS) ion maps and Raman spectroscopy analyses of organic matter (OM) in pyrite of the Dresser Formation (Pilbara Craton, Western Australia) stromatolites. (A–D) Ion maps of $^{58}\text{Ni}^+$, $^{16}\text{O}^-$, $^{12}\text{C}^-$ and $^{26}\text{CN}^-$ in pyrite (see the analysis locations in Fig. 2A). The asterisks indicate the locations of Raman spectroscopy analyses in E–F. (E) Raman spectra of non-porous, massive pyrite, and OM-rich nano-porous pyrite (1 and 2, respectively; see the analysis locations in D, and a calcified OM strand (3; see the analysis location in Fig. 4B). Analysis 3 was done on finely striated OM away from discernible calcite grains. In analyses 2 and 3, the high intensity of the disorder-induced ‘D1’ ($\sim 1315 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) band relative to the order-induced ‘G’ ($\sim 1600 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) band indicates that the OM exhibits a high degree of structural disorder. (F) Deconvolution of spectrum 2 in E, indicating overlaps of D1 ($\sim 1316 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) and G ($\sim 1585 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) with disorder-induced ‘D2’ ($\sim 1606 \text{ cm}^{-1}$), ‘D3’ ($\sim 1460 \text{ cm}^{-1}$), and ‘D4’ ($\sim 1184 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) bands. The cumulative fit is indicated by red dashed line. Cal—Raman band of calcite; Py—Raman bands of pyrite; Py1—irregular nano-porous pyrite; Py2—zoned nano-porous pyrite; Py3—non-porous, massive pyrite; Sp—sphalerite.

Figure 4. Organic matter strands and filaments in pyrite of the Dresser Formation (Pilbara Craton, Western Australia) stromatolites. (A) Back-scattered electron (BSE) image of a branched organic matter (OM) strand that is embedded in nano-porous pyrite (red arrow). (B,C) Coherent OM strands that traverse pyrite pseudo-grain boundaries (red arrows in B). Note the axial arrangement and the striated texture of the OM strands (white arrow in C). Partial calcification of OM is indicated by intimately associated calcite grains (Cal). In addition, Raman spectroscopy analysis of OM (asterisk in B) away from discernible calcite grains shows calcite bands (Fig. 3E), and energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) analysis (asterisk in C) shows subtle enrichments of Ca and O (see Fig. DR6a [see footnote 1]). These observations indicate that the OM strands are partially replaced by nanoscopic calcite, whose small particle size may be not readily discernible and distinguishable in BSE imagery. See for these strands the Raman spectroscopy map of OM in Figure. DR7. (D) Twisted filament bundle (red arrow) containing barite (Brt) and quartz or calcite grains (white arrow). See the EDS analyses of this filament bundle in Fig. DR6b. All images in this figure panel were acquired on nitric acid-etched surfaces.

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