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Article

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The nitrogen isotopic composition of sedimentary rocks ($\delta^{15}N$) can trace redox-dependent biological pathways and early Earth oxygenation[1,2]. However, there is no substantial change in the sedimentary $\delta^{15}N$ record across the Great Oxidation Event about 2.45 billion years ago (Ga)[3], a prominent redox change. This argues for a temporal decoupling between the emergence of the first oxygen-based oxidative pathways of the nitrogen cycle and the accumulation of atmospheric oxygen after 2.45 Ga (ref. 3). The transition between both states shows strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values (10–50‰) in rocks deposited between 2.8 Ga and 2.6 Ga, but their origin and spatial extent remain uncertain[4,5]. Here we report strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values (>30‰) in the 2.68-Gyr-old shallow to deep marine sedimentary deposit of the Serra Sul Formation[6], Amazonian Craton, Brazil. Our findings are best explained by regionally variable extents of ammonium oxidation to N_2 or N_2O tied to a cryptic oxygen cycle, implying that oxygenic photosynthesis was operating at 2.7 Ga. Molecular oxygen production probably shifted the redox potential so that an intermediate N cycle based on ammonium oxidation developed before nitrate accumulation in surface waters. We propose to name this period, when strongly positive nitrogen isotopic compositions are superimposed on the usual range of Precambrian $\delta^{15}N$ values, the Nitrogen Isotope Event. We suggest that it marks the earliest steps of the biogeochemical reorganizations that led to the Great Oxidation Event.

Nitrogen is an essential nutrient for the biosphere, exerting a strong control on biological productivity through the availability of its 'fixed' bioavailable forms, including ammonium (NH_4^+), nitrite (NO_2^-) and nitrate (NO_3^-), which can all be readily uptaken by primary producers. The nitrogen isotope composition ($\delta^{15}N = [(^{15}N/^{14}N)_{sample}/(^{15}N/^{14}N)_{standard}] - 1$, for which the standard is N_2 in air) of these nitrogen forms is controlled by microbially mediated metabolic reactions, most of them sensitive to the redox state of the water column. When assimilated, N species transfer their isotope signature to the organic matter, which can subsequently be preserved in sedimentary rocks[7]. Nitrogen isotopes in the sedimentary record thus represent an ideal tool for investigating the joint temporal evolution of surface environments oxidation and primary productivity.

Despite being largely present in the atmosphere as gaseous N_2 ($\delta^{15}N = 0‰$), nitrogen in this form can only be assimilated by diazotrophs, nitrogenase-bearing prokaryotes capable of biological N_2 fixation. Fractionation imparted by biological N_2 fixation with classical Mo-based nitrogenase ranges from −2 to +2‰, whereas alternative nitrogenases using Fe or V as cofactors can impart negative fractionation as large as −8‰ (ref. 8). The mineralization of organic matter derived from diazotrophic activity in the water column or in sediments, namely ammonification[9], provides most of the bioavailable nitrogen to the biosphere as ammonium (NH_4^+) without substantial isotope fractionation[10]. In anoxic conditions, ammonium released during organic matter mineralization is rapidly and quantitatively assimilated into biomass. Hence, even if ammonium assimilation preferentially incorporates ^{14}N, its fractionation is rarely expressed in the sedimentary record. In oxic conditions, ammonium can be either assimilated or nitrified to nitrite and nitrate, enriching residual ammonium by up to +35‰ (ref. 11). In modern environments, in which oxygen levels are in excess, ammonium is oxidized quantitatively, preventing the fractionation associated with ammonium oxidation from being expressed. Nitrite and nitrate are in turn assimilated by photosynthetic organisms or biologically reduced, either through denitrification or anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox) in dysoxic and anoxic conditions[9,12]. Denitrification and anammox are the main oceanic sinks of fixed nitrogen, releasing N_2O or N_2 back to the atmosphere. Both of these sinks impart a large nitrogen isotope fractionation of around +30‰ (ref. 9), leaving behind ^{15}N-enriched residual nitrate that can be uptaken by primary producers and subsequently transferred to the sediments. In modern environments, and by extension any sediment deposited under oxic conditions, $\delta^{15}N$ values around +5‰ are interpreted to reflect the balance between N_2 fixation inputs and denitrification/anammox outputs from the water column and surface sediments.

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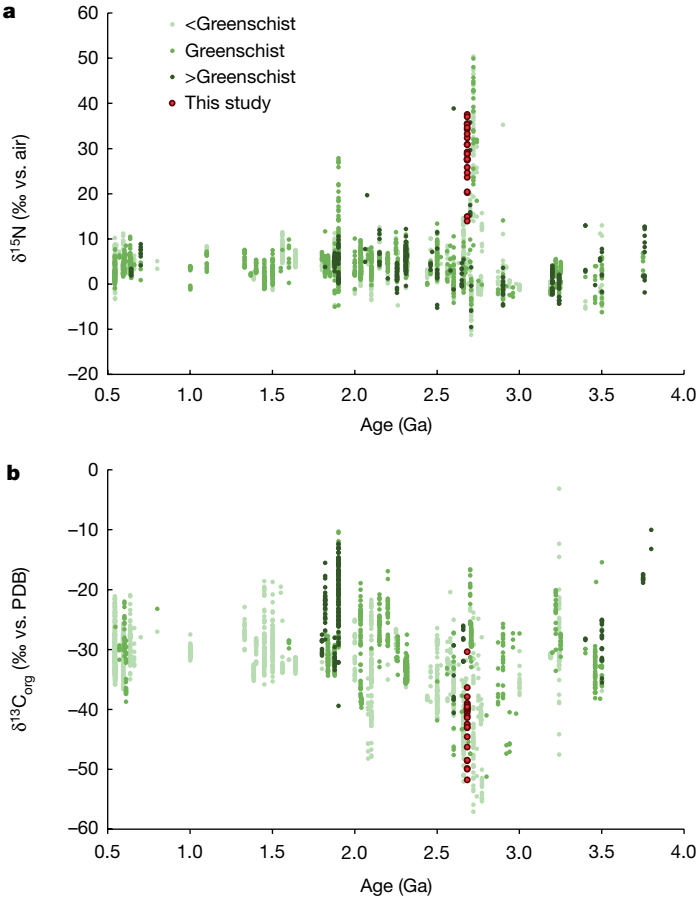

Fig. 1 | Compilation of paired Precambrian sedimentary $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ data, including all lithologies. a, $\delta^{15}N$ data. **b**, $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ data. The different colours represent the various metamorphic grades (lower than greenschist (light green), greenschist (medium green), higher than greenschist (dark green) facies). The studied samples are represented by red dots. They experienced only limited metamorphic conditions, not higher than greenschist facies. PDB, PeeDee Belemnite.

A unique Neoarchaean $\delta^{15}N$ record

The secular evolution of sedimentary $\delta^{15}N$ values shifts from a mode of +2‰ between 3.8 and 2.8 Ga in the Archaean to a mode of +5‰ between 2.5 and 1.8 Ga (ref. 1). On the basis of this framework, and assuming that (1) atmospheric N_2 isotope composition ($\delta^{15}N_{N2}$ = 0‰) has remained stable since the Palaeoarchaean[13,14] and (2) N_2 assimilation through biological nitrogen fixation provides the fixed-nitrogen source needed to sustain biomass production since at least 3.2 Ga (refs. 2,15), this evolution has mostly been attributed to a substantial change in the nitrogen biogeochemical cycle. From being ammonium-dominated in the essentially anoxic Archaean oceans and lakes, including in their surface waters, the N biogeochemical cycle would have evolved to nitrate-dominated after 2.5 Ga in transiently oxic surface waters[1,2,16–20]. Intriguingly, there is no marked change in the sedimentary $\delta^{15}N$ record across the Great Oxidation Event (GOE) (for example, ref. 3; Fig. 1a), which is widely considered as the most prominent redox change in Earth history. This argues for a temporal decoupling between the emergence of the first oxygen-based oxidative pathway of the biogeochemical nitrogen cycle and the accumulation of free oxygen in the atmosphere after 2.45 Ga.

The transition between both states, occurring at the end of the Archaean, shows strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values (between +10 and +50‰; Fig. 1a) recorded in sedimentary rocks deposited between 2.8 and 2.6 Ga in at least five different locations[4,5,21–24] (Supplementary Table 1). They have been interpreted in various ways (Supplementary Table 1), including: (1) metamorphic alteration of the original isotopic signature[21]; (2) a ^{15}N-enriched atmospheric reservoir derived from chondrite-like material[22,23]; (3) the onset of an oxidative pathway in the nitrogen cycle, arguing for the presence of cryptic oxygen in an otherwise anoxic ocean, before the oxygenation of the atmosphere[4]; and, more recently, (4) NH_3 degassing from alkaline waters of restricted lacustrine environments[5,24]. The last hypothesis has gained momentum because the most positive $\delta^{15}N$ values reported so far are associated with extreme negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values[25] (Fig. 1b) and stem from the Tumbiana Formation in the Pilbara Craton, now firmly demonstrated to have been deposited in an alkaline lake[26]. Yet it implies that the relative synchronicity of these positive $\delta^{15}N$ values and their occurrence right at the transition between the two $\delta^{15}N$ distribution modes would have happened incidentally.

Here we take the opportunity of the discovery of a new occurrence of extreme $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values from the Serra Sul Formation, Amazonian Craton, Brazil, deposited between 2,684 ± 10 million years ago (Ma) and 2,627 ± 11 Ma (refs. 6,27,28), to reassess the importance of these positive $\delta^{15}N$ values. This Neoarchaean formation is representative of a marine shelf system with a sedimentary sequence ranging from shallow to deep-water environments with slope instabilities and debris flow[6] (Supplementary Table 1). Two drill cores intercepting the Serra Sul Formation, GT13 and GT16 (Supplementary Table 1 and Extended Data Fig. 1), were studied. They show polygenic and flat-pebble conglomerates interbedded with fine-grained siliciclastic sediments[6], indicating the presence of sediments from both shallow and deep-water environments, respectively (Fig. 2, Supplementary Table 1 and Extended Data Fig. 1).

Organic carbon and nitrogen concentrations and isotopic compositions for the two studied drill cores are reported in Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2. For both drill cores, $\delta^{15}N$ values are markedly positive, from +13.9 to +37.5‰, with mean values of +32.9 ± 3.4‰ (n = 11) and +24.6 ± 6.0‰ (n = 13) for GT13 and GT16, respectively. $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values are ^{13}C-depleted, ranging from −30.4 to −51.8‰, with comparable mean values (−40.0 ± 1.2‰ for GT13 and −44.1 ± 6.1‰ for GT16). Overall, carbon and nitrogen concentrations and isotopic compositions seem relatively homogeneous throughout drill core GT13, compared with the more scattered signal in drill core GT16. No variations were observed with respect to lithological features or facies changes (Fig. 2).

Defining a Nitrogen Isotope Event (NIE)

Overall, despite different geological settings, depositional environments and palaeogeography, this new occurrence of a paired $\delta^{15}N$–$\delta^{13}C_{org}$ excursion recorded in the Amazonian Craton is within the range of that reported in the Pilbara Craton, suggesting that these extremely positive $\delta^{15}N$ values are inherent to the 2.8–2.6-Ga time interval. Notably, because these extreme values coexist with less extreme values (Fig. 1; that is, $\delta^{15}N$ from −1 to +6‰ (ref. 1)) in other Neoarchaean basins at sub-greenschist facies, regional controls must be at play. This extreme range of $\delta^{15}N$ values seems to be unique in the geological record and we propose to single it out as the NIE.

To investigate the nature of this NIE, we can first focus on the interpretation of the extremely positive $\delta^{15}N$ values, starting with the reassessment of previously proposed hypotheses. The hypothesis of a ^{15}N-enriched atmospheric reservoir derived from chondrite-like material[22,23] can be ruled out because (1) such a contribution from ^{15}N-enriched extraterrestrial material should be observed well before 2.8 Ga (Fig. 1) and (2) the abundance of $\delta^{15}N$ extreme values should decrease with time, in contrast to the unique sharp peak recorded between 2.8 and 2.6 Ga (Fig. 1). Furthermore, although micrometeorites have been reported in the Tumbiana Formation[29], there is no evidence for contribution of extraterrestrial material within the Serra Sul Formation.

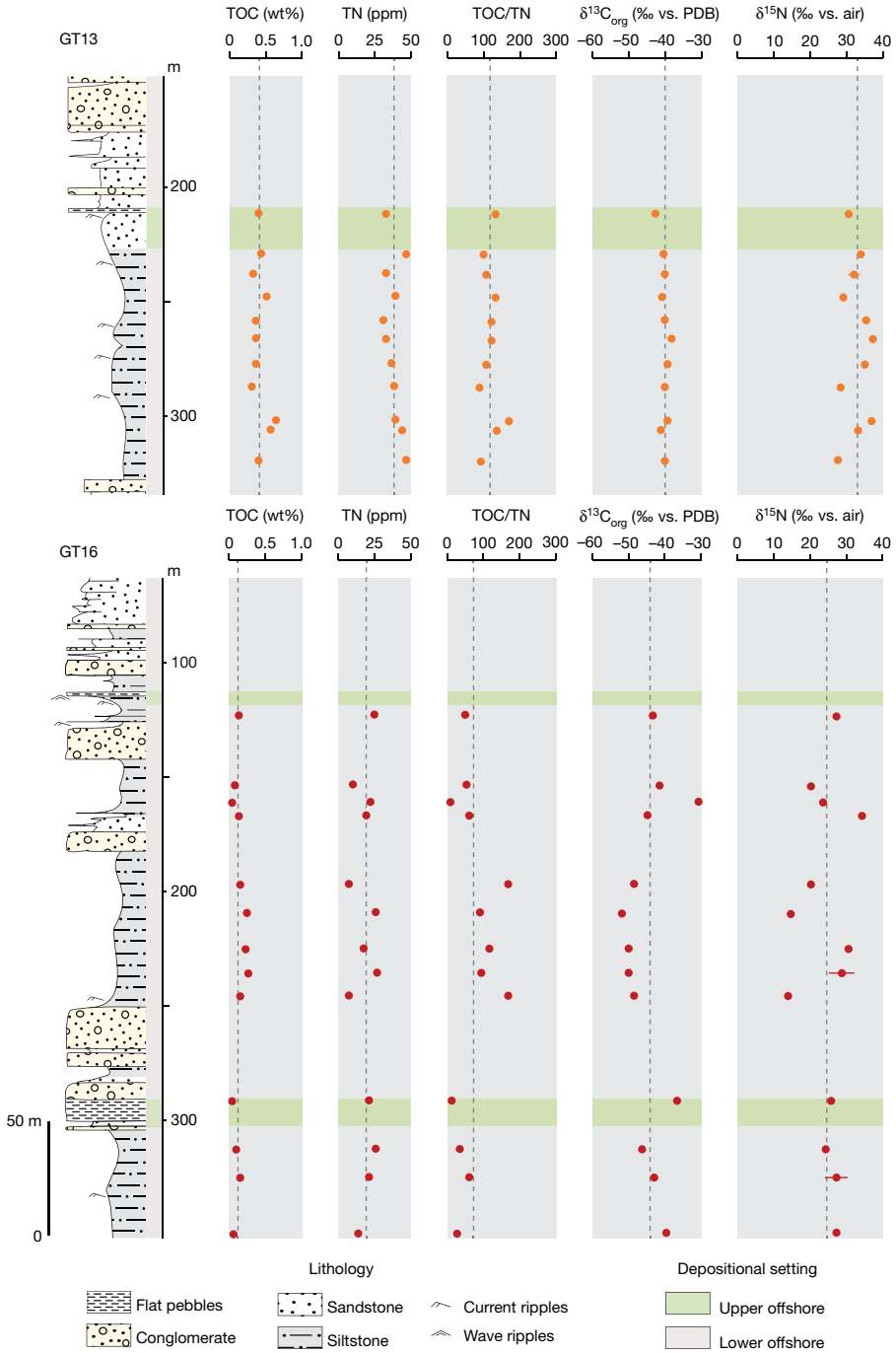

Fig. 2 | Carbon and nitrogen geochemical and isotopic profiles for drill cores GT13 and GT16. Stratigraphic logs simplified from ref. 6. Dotted lines correspond to mean values. Error bars for $\delta^{15}N$ measurements represent standard deviation.

Several lines of evidence can also be used to rule out metamorphic alteration as the mechanism responsible for extreme $\delta^{15}N$ values, at least in the Serra Sul Formation. Indeed, known diagenetic, metamorphic or hydrothermal processes rarely enrich sedimentary nitrogen in ^{15}N to an extent of more than 10‰ (refs. 1,30), whereas $\delta^{15}N$ values in the Serra Sul Formation range from +14 to +38‰. Moreover, metamorphism in the Serra Sul Formation does not exceed the greenschist facies (Supplementary Table 1), implying a negligible impact of post-depositional processes on the studied samples[31,32]. Last but not least, no correlations were observed between total N content (TN) and $\delta^{15}N$ ($R^2 < 0.14$), total organic carbon content (TOC)/TN ratios and $\delta^{15}N$ ($R^2 < 0.20$) or $\delta^{15}N$ and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ ($R^2 < 0.26$) (Extended Data Fig. 2).

Finally, the hypothesis of positive ammonium $\delta^{15}N$ values resulting from NH_3 degassing at high pH (refs. 5,24) proposed as an explanation for extreme $\delta^{15}N$ values in the 2.72-Ga Tumbiana Formation does not hold for the Serra Sul Formation, unless the ocean also had a high pH at the time. Indeed, at pH > 9.2, NH_4^+ dissociates to NH_3, which can degas to the atmosphere with a strong isotope fractionation (+45‰ at 23 °C (ref. 33)). When assimilated, the residual ^{15}N-enriched NH_4^+ transfers its signature to the organic matter, which can subsequently be preserved in sedimentary rocks. Although such strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values have never been recorded in modern alkaline environments, this hypothesis is well suited for the Tumbiana Formation, which was deposited in a restricted lacustrine setting with a substratum made of alkaline rocks[26]. The abiotic loss of nitrogen from the water column caused

Table 1 | Data featuring drill core ID, sample depth, total organic carbon (TOC), total nitrogen (TN), TOC/TN ratio, $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ and $\delta^{15}N_{bulk}$ for all samples analysed along the GT13 and GT16 drill cores

Drill core	Depth (m)	TOC (wt%, whole rock)	s.d.	Nb repl.	TN (ppm, whole rock)	s.d.	Nb repl.	TOC/TN	$\delta^{13}C_{org}$ (‰ vs. PDB)	s.d.	Nb repl.	$\delta^{15}N_{bulk}$ (‰ vs. air)	s.d.	Nb repl.
GT13	211.45	0.42	0.108	2	32	5	2	132	−42.5	0.23	2	30.9	0.4	2
GT13	229.27	0.45	0.009	2	46		1	97	−40.2	0.05	2	34.2		1
GT13	237.735	0.34	0.006	2	32	2	2	107	−40.0	0.05	2	32.3	1.6	2
GT13	247.82	0.52	0.025	2	39		1	133	−40.5	0.23	2	29.2		1
GT13	258.165	0.38	0.013	2	31		1	121	−40.0	0.07	2	35.5		1
GT13	266.32	0.38	0.010	2	32		1	119	−37.9	0.08	2	37.5		1
GT13	277.175	0.38	0.015	2	36		1	106	−39.0	0.04	2	35.3		1
GT13	287.305	0.33	0.004	2	38		1	88	−40.0	0.18	2	28.7		1
GT13	301.81	0.65	0.015	2	39		1	167	−39.3	0.19	2	37.0		1
GT13	306.175	0.58	0.001	2	43	1	2	135	−41.1	0.07	2	33.2	0.1	2
GT13	319.46	0.42	0.009	2	46		1	92	−39.8	0.08	2	27.7		1
GT16	122.05	0.13		1	25		1	51	−43.1		1	27.4		1
GT16	152.775	0.06	0.003	2	11	1	2	54	−41.4	0.21	2	20.2	0.4	2
GT16	159.885	0.02	0.002	2	23		1	8	−30.4	0.08	2	23.6		1
GT16	166.05	0.12	0.000	2	20		1	61	−44.6	0.01	2	34.6		1
GT16	195.97	0.13	0.002	2	8		1	166	−48.6	0.07	2	20.4		1
GT16	208.61	0.24	0.001	2	26		1	91	−51.8	0.03	2	14.9		1
GT16	224.11	0.21	0.002	2	18		1	115	−49.9	0.52	2	30.8		1
GT16	234.725	0.25	0.024	2	27	3	2	94	−50.0	1.73	2	28.8	3.5	2
GT16	244.845	0.13	0.002	2	8		1	167	−48.5	0.21	2	13.9		1
GT16	290.835	0.03	0.000	2	22		1	14	−36.4	0.48	2	25.8		1
GT16	312.005	0.09	0.001	2	26		1	35	−46.3	0.09	2	24.6		1
GT16	324.595	0.14	0.010	2	22	4	2	62	−43.0	0.67	2	27.5	3.1	2
GT16	348.805	0.04	0.007	2	14		1	27	−39.6	0.54	2	27.6		1

Standard deviation (s.d.) and number of replicates (Nb repl.) are given for all parameters.

by ammonia degassing also provides a consistent explanation for the low TN and high TOC/TN ratio of sediments from this formation[5]. However, samples from the Serra Sul Formation analysed here show neither a strong TN depletion compared with other Neoarchaean sedimentary rocks nor any evidence of being deposited under a highly alkaline water column. They are representative of shallow to deep marine depositional environments, with neither evaporitic facies nor carbonates (Supplementary Table 1). If we assume that the ocean pH at the time was lower than 9.2 (ref. 34), NH_3 degassing cannot solely account for the extremely positive $\delta^{15}N$ values of the Serra Sul Formation.

Accordingly, none of these hypotheses can explain the NIE. The only one left to explore is a change in the biological nitrogen cycle, which is shown from today's sedimentary record[35] and probably also in the Precambrian[1] to be regionally controlled.

A transitional state in the N cycle

Only a few metabolic pathways of the N biogeochemical cycle can lead to a ^{15}N enrichment of fixed-nitrogen species. N_2 fixation with classic Fe–Mo nitrogenase does not impart any notable fractionation[9] and Fe–Fe or Fe–V alternative nitrogenases generate organic matter with a negative $\delta^{15}N$ (ref. 8). Ammonification has a negligible impact on the $\delta^{15}N$ (ref. 9). Partial biological assimilation of NH_4^+ can enrich organic matter in ^{14}N ($\varepsilon \approx -4$ to -27‰ (ref. 36)) if the pool of ammonium is progressively distilled but not quantitatively consumed[37]. However, the expected distribution of $\delta^{15}N$ values following partial assimilation alone should be centred around 0‰, showing both the upwelled ^{15}N-depleted and the sinking ^{15}N-enriched pools of ammonium. This mechanism has been proposed to explain a single set of Neoarchaean $\delta^{15}N$ values[38], yet the two complementary fractions have never been recovered from the same study site. Our reported $\delta^{15}N$ data from the Serra Sul Formation are centred around +28‰, with no negative values (Fig. 2). Therefore, they are inconsistent with the distillation of an NH_4^+ reservoir by a simple assimilation process. None of the above-mentioned pathways can produce the extremely positive $\delta^{15}N$ values recorded in the Serra Sul Formation. An oxidative pathway that strongly fractionates N isotopes must therefore have been at play.

The strongly fractionating metabolism commonly considered for the moderately positive $\delta^{15}N$ values recorded from 2.5 Ga onwards is non-quantitative denitrification[16,17,19,20], which—in the modern ocean—occurs in dysoxic parts of the water column. It requires both nitrification and a large and consistently oxic surface water layer in which nitrate can accumulate. In this case, it is the isotope composition of the enriched residual nitrate that is expressed and recorded in the sediments. Although denitrification can induce isotope fractionation by as much as 30‰ in nitrate-replete conditions[39], the observed range of $\delta^{15}N$ values should be substantially smaller, as it depends on the isotope mass balance between N_2 fixation and denitrification in oxygen minimum zones or sediments. As an example, in the modern ocean in which nitrate is stable both in the photic zone and in deeper waters, and thus not fully denitrified, $\delta^{15}N$ values only reach up to +15‰ in oxygen minimum zones[9,35,39].

For both drill-core samples of the Serra Sul Formation, ammonium is expected to be the dominant fixed-nitrogen species[40]. We thus propose a scenario in which the mechanism responsible for the positive $\delta^{15}N$ values is ammonium oxidation to N_2, N_2O or NO_2^-, tied to

a cryptic oxygen cycle. Ammonium oxidation isotope fractionation can reach up to +55‰ when ammonium is co-oxidized with methane by methanotrophs[41] and up to +38‰ when ammonium is oxidized by ammonium-oxidizing bacteria and archaea[42]. Notably, as for denitrification, the isotope expression of this oxidative pathway requires ammonium oxidation to be non-quantitative.

In the anoxic ocean of the early Neoarchaean, ammonium oxidation can only take place in the photic zone in which photosynthesis occurs and generates the electrochemical potential necessary to oxidize ammonium. In this photic zone, ammonium oxidation must be in competition with ammonium assimilation, because photosynthetizers require N for their growth. From there, several cases can be proposed. If photosynthesis barely generates the necessary oxidants for ammonium oxidation, then ammonium is essentially assimilated by photosynthetizers and, depending on its rate of assimilation, its ^{15}N enrichment will be low to null. ^{15}N depletion can even happen, which may explain the slightly negative $\delta^{15}N$ values reported during the NIE[38]. If photosynthesis generates enough oxidants to oxidize much of the ammonium before it can be assimilated, ^{15}N enrichments will also be low or null, as N would be supplied by N_2 fixation. As a result, a nitrogen cycle comprising the different pathways of ammonium oxidation to gaseous N species continuously escaping the system can generate all the range of $\delta^{15}N$ values reported during the NIE, from mildly negative to extremely positive, depending on regional controls on primary productivity and ammonium supply.

In summary, similar to nitrate-dominated environments in which $\delta^{15}N_{NO3-}$ values are regionally controlled (ranging from 0 to 15‰) and depend on the mass and isotope balance between N sources (N_2 fixation and nitrate supply) and N sinks (denitrification in the water column, in the sediments and nitrate assimilation), in an ammonium-dominated environment, the $\delta^{15}N_{NH4}$ values would depend on the mass and isotope balance between N_2 fixation, ammonium supply, ammonium oxidation and ammonium assimilation. The extreme range of $\delta^{15}N$ values recorded in the Tumbiana Formation is even better explained by ammonia degassing occurring alongside ammonium oxidation, which together could drive $\delta^{15}N$ values up to +50‰.

From the NIE to the GOE

For such a transitional state to occur during the Neoarchaean, photosynthesis must have been generating oxidants able to oxidize ammonium into volatile gaseous species. Most metabolic pathways oxidizing ammonium need O_2. Even canonical anammox requires the presence of nitrite, which cannot be produced without O_2 (ref. 43). In a fully anoxic world, in the absence of oxygenic photosynthesis, only the Feammox reaction has been suggested as a biological mechanism associated with ammonium oxidation[44]. However, this pathway has been substantiated for iron-rich depositional environments and associated with only slightly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values[44].

Dioxygen is therefore necessary to account for ammonium oxidation during the NIE. The preservation of a sulfur-mass-independent fractionation signal in both the Serra Sul and Tumbiana sediments[45,46] indicates, however, that free O_2 was not accumulating in the ocean and atmosphere at that time. Free O_2 must have been present at a low level but in sufficient amounts to fuel ammonium oxidation. Indeed, in modern nitrite-rich anoxic marine zones, ammonium oxidation occurs at nanomolar oxygen concentrations, compatible with anoxic surrounding waters[47]. The overall low levels of O_2 would also prevent the accumulation of nitrate if any was formed, which would have been quantitatively converted into N_2 or N_2O.

This intermediate state of the N cycle would have ended progressively as O_2 supply in the photic zone surpassed ammonium supply. With increasing O_2 concentrations, ammonium oxidation would have proceeded up to nitrate production in dysoxic surface-water masses. As their size grew, these dysoxic surface-water masses became connected and extended deeper than the photic zone. Nitrate was able to accumulate, turning the N cycle into a new steady state in which denitrification and anammox became the main drivers of the $\delta^{15}N$ sedimentary record.

We conclude that the extreme range of nitrogen isotope signatures recorded in the 2.8–2.6-Ga time interval reflect micro-aerobic conditions prone to the emergence of ammonium oxidation. The NIE would thus mark the emergence of biological oxidative nitrogen cycling in surface oceans transitioning from fully anoxic to coexisting anoxic and dysoxic water masses and might underline one of the very first steps of the GOE.

Online content

Any methods, additional references, Nature Portfolio reporting summaries, source data, extended data, supplementary information, acknowledgements, peer review information; details of author contributions and competing interests; and statements of data and code availability are available at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07842-x.

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Methods

Sampling

Twenty-four samples were chosen along the two studied drill cores (11 samples for drill core GT13 and 13 samples for drill core GT16) according to their organic matter content (TOC > 0.02% in the digestion residue), which mostly reflects their potential in containing enough nitrogen for analysis.

Chemical treatment before C and N analyses

Samples were first crushed into powder using a ring and puck mill to obtain sample powder smaller than 60 μm. Carbonate-free residues were obtained by mixing sample powders with 6 N HCl for two successive digestion steps: first at room temperature for 24 h and then at 80 °C for 4 h. Samples were then rinsed with deionized distilled water to a neutral pH and oven-dried at 40 °C for 48 h.

C isotopic analyses

The decarbonated residues were poured into tin capsules (50 to 80 mg of powder) and weighted using a Sartorius M2P ultra-balance before TOC and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ measurements were performed using a Thermo Fisher Scientific FlashSmart Elemental Analyser, coupled to a Thermo Fisher Scientific DELTA V Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometer (EA-IRMS) by means of a ConFlo IV interface. Certified USGS40 ($\delta^{13}C_{org}$ = −26.39‰, TOC = 40.82 wt%) and caffeine IAEA-600 ($\delta^{13}C_{org}$ = −27.77‰, TOC = 49.48 wt%) reference materials were used for the calibration. TOC contents are expressed in dry weight percentage (wt%) of the non-decarbonated bulk powder and isotope results are reported in delta notation relative to Vienna PDB. Each measurement session included three to four standards measurements at the beginning and at the end, as well as one standard measurement every 12 samples. The mean $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ precision for standards is better than 0.35‰ and the mean accuracy better than 0.28‰. Each sample was duplicated. The mean external reproducibility (2σ), based on sample replicate analyses and including powder resampling and reprocessing through chemical treatment, is ±0.012 wt% for the TOC content and ±0.26‰ for the $\delta^{13}C_{org}$.

N isotopic analyses

As all samples contain less than 50 ppm N, the EA-IRMS method applied for carbon analyses is not sensitive enough for reliable bulk nitrogen isotopic analyses[1,48]. Samples were therefore analysed at Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris using the 'classical sealed-tube combustion method', as described in refs. 1,49. In brief, N_2 was produced offline through sealed-tube Dumas combustion and cryogenically purified in a vacuum line. Up to 400 mg of decarbonated residual powder was put into a quartz tube with CuO and Cu wires, purified beforehand at 900 °C for 2 h in a muffle furnace to prevent contamination. Samples were degassed for 12 h at 150 °C under vacuum to remove adsorbed atmospheric N_2 and organics. Quartz tubes were then sealed directly under vacuum and combusted in a muffle furnace at 950 °C for 6 h under oxidizing conditions by oxygen liberated from the CuO wires and then cooled at 600 °C for 2 h, allowing residual oxygen to combine with cupric oxide and nitrous oxide to be reduced by copper, and finally cooled to ambient temperature[50]. The extraction yield for this protocol is 100% for both organic and mineral nitrogen[51], including ammonium in minerals such as phyllosilicates. The content of each quartz tube was released in the vacuum line with a tube cracker, in which CO_2 and H_2O were trapped cryogenically to avoid any subsequent isobaric interferences. The purified incondensable N_2 gas was concentrated into a calibrated volume for quantification using a Toepler pump (Hg manometer). Standard analytical procedures for nitrogen usually include CaO in the reagents to trap gaseous CO_2 and H_2O from the samples[50]. Given that the addition of CaO notably contributes to analytical blanks[51], we performed a few tests that show that the addition of CaO does not yield substantial $\delta^{15}N$ differences. Samples were consequently analysed without the addition of CaO. Purified N_2 was analysed by dual-inlet mass spectrometry using a Thermo Finnigan DELTAPlus XP isotope ratio mass spectrometer. Possible air contamination and isobaric interferences (owing to CO) were monitored by scanning of m/z 12 (C from CO_2, CO, CH_4 or organic compounds), 18 (H_2O), 30 ($C^{18}O$), 32 (O_2), 40 (atmospheric Ar) and 44 (CO_2). Analytical blanks for the entire procedure are <0.02 micromoles N, which represents a mean of 7% of the gas (17% of the gas for the smallest sample and less than 3% for more concentrated samples). TN and $\delta^{15}N$ values have been individually corrected from the blank contribution, using the reference blank value of $\delta^{15}N$ = −3.7‰ (ref. 51). On average, blank-corrected $\delta^{15}N$ values are 2.3‰ higher than their raw counterparts (from 1.2 to 3.9‰ higher). External $\delta^{15}N$ reproducibility ranged between 0.1 and 3.5‰, with a mean of 1.5 ± 1.5‰ (n = 6). Samples that were replicated are reported in Table 1. International standards were used in a previous study to calibrate both the elemental analyser method and the sealed-tube combustion method[52]: it showed that the results obtained using the EA-IRMS method compared well with those obtained using the sealed-tube method presented here. Accuracy was monitored by measuring certified materials IAEA-N1 (+0.4 ± 0.2‰) and IAEA-N2 (+20.3 ± 0.2‰) and Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris internal standard MS#5 (+14.9 ± 0.5‰)[52]. Also, samples from the Buck Reef Chert Formation[44], showing known TN and $\delta^{15}N$ values that strongly differ from the Serra Sul samples, were measured throughout all measurement sessions as internal quality standards.

Geological context of the Serra Sul and Tumbiana formations

Here we present a short description of the geological context of the Serra Sul Formation, Amazonian Craton (Extended Data Fig. 3a), and point out the main similarities and differences with the Tumbiana Formation, Pilbara Craton, in which similar strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values have been reported[5,46]. The age of the Serra Sul Formation is constrained between 2,684 ± 10 Ma (U–Pb on detrital zircon[6]) and 2,627 ± 11 Ma (Re–Os dating on molybdenite[28]; Extended Data Fig. 4). This indicates that the Serra Sul Formation is slightly younger than the Tumbiana Formation, which was deposited around 2,724 ± 5 Ma (U–Pb on volcanic zircon)[53] to ≤2,715 ± 6 Ma (U–Pb on detrital zircon)[54]. Notably, palaeomagnetic investigations indicate that at about 2.75 Ga, the Carajás Basin was located at a low latitude (3.4 ± 8.5°)[32], whereas the Hamersley Basin in which the Tumbiana Formation deposited was located at high to mid palaeolatitude (between 51.5 ± 7.0° and 32.1 ± 5.7°)[55]. Both the Serra Sul[6,31,56] and the Tumbiana[57] formations experienced low-grade (≤300 °C) greenschist facies metamorphism.

The Serra Sul Formation was deposited in the Carajás Basin, southeast Amazonian Craton (Extended Data Fig. 3a,b). The basement of the basin comprises various Mesoarchaean to Neoarchaean rocks[58] capped by a 4–6-km-thick basaltic series of the approximately 2.75 Gyr old Parauapebas Large Igneous Province[27]. Soon after the main magmatic pulse of the Parauapebas Large Igneous Province, infilling of the rift initiated with the deposition of iron formations of the Carajás Formation (Extended Data Fig. 4). These iron formations are characterized by strong positive Eu anomalies indicating the influence of high-temperature hydrothermal fluids in seawater[59], absence of Ce anomalies arguing for ambient reducing conditions during deposition[59] and occurrence of positive La and Y anomalies[59] typical of chemical sediments deposited in oceanic settings[60]. Also, Fe and C isotope data indicate that deposition of the iron formations was mediated by anoxygenic photosynthetic organisms[59]. The transition from the Carajás to Serra Sul formations is marked by several iron-formation layers up to 10 m thick, grading upward into detrital terrigenous sedimentary rocks, including sandstones, siltstones, conglomerates and flat-pebble conglomerates[6,61–65]. The presence of banded iron formations at the base of the Serra Sul Formation[61] indicates marine environments and the different sedimentary features of this formation point towards subaqueous environments ranging from shallow to deep-water settings influenced by slope instability and gravity flow processes[6,62,63].

The Serra Sul Formation does not preserve evidence of contemporaneous volcanic activity[6].

These lithologies and environments contrast with those of the Tumbiana Formation, which comprises mainly stromatolitic and fenestrate carbonates, calcareous sandstones, various volcanic and volcaniclastic rocks, including tuffs, lapillis and tuffaceous sandstones, and other detrital facies, including conglomerates and flat-pebble conglomerates[5,26,46,57,66]. In contrast to the Serra Sul Formation, the presence of tuffs and lapillis argues for active volcanic activity during the deposition of the Tumbiana Formation[66]. Various sedimentary structures such as desiccation cracks point to shallow subaqueous environments subjected to frequent emersion[26,66]. Geochemical characteristics of chemical sedimentary rocks of the Tumbiana Formation, such as nearly chondritic Y/Ho and the absence of positive Y anomaly, point to lacustrine subaqueous environments[26,66], and strongly positive $\delta^{15}N$ values have been suggested to evidence alkaline waters[5].

Studied drill cores

Samples were collected from two diamond-drilled cores separated by about 1.75 km from each other and intersecting the Serra Sul Formation in the east of the Carajás Basin (Extended Data Fig. 3c). These drill cores (GT-41-FURO-13 and GT-41-FURO-16) have been selected owing to their low metamorphic and hydrothermal overprints, with only rare occurrences of quartz-chlorite-bearing micro-veins. Both drill cores, thereafter named GT13 and GT16, exhibit similar lithologies and sedimentary facies, but no attempt was made to correlate them, so that their relative stratigraphic positions remain unconstrained. A detailed description of sedimentary facies is presented in ref. 6 and summarized below.

The most common facies association comprises polymictic conglomerates interbedded with sandstones and siltstones with various sedimentary features attesting an overall excellent preservation state (Extended Data Fig. 1). This facies association is interpreted to represent the deep-water environment, in which conglomerates and coarse sandstones were deposited by subaqueous mass flow, cohesive debris flow or hyper-concentrated density flow[67–72].

The other facies association identified consists of sandstone, siltstone and flat-pebble conglomerates made up of intraclastic granules to pebbles (Extended Data Fig. 1). Flat-pebble conglomerates are interpreted to result from the failure and subsequent reworking of compacted to loosely consolidated shoreface deposits[73]. The limited transport by mass movement of shoreface deposits and occurrence of wave ripples in sandstones and siltstones suggest relatively shallow water environments (shoreface to upper offshore).

Preservation of the primary N isotope signature

As post-depositional modifications of sedimentary $\delta^{15}N$ can occur during diagenesis and metamorphism, it is essential to evaluate the effects of such processes. It seems unlikely that organic matter remineralization during diagenesis markedly affected the Serra Sul Formation $\delta^{15}N$ record because early diagenesis under anoxic conditions does not seem to shift organic matter $\delta^{15}N$ values by more than 1‰ (ref. 74) and the measured values range from +10 to +35‰.

The Serra Sul Formation has undergone metamorphism in the greenschist facies[6]. Although an increase in $\delta^{15}N$ and a decrease in TN is usually seen during prograde metamorphism[75–78], studies on coal series show that nitrogen loss from organic matter during anthracitization is not associated with substantial $\delta^{15}N$ increase[79–81]. The absence of covariation between $\delta^{15}N$ and TOC/TN ratio in the Serra Sul Formation argues against a strong modification of $\delta^{15}N$ values owing to metamorphic N loss (Extended Data Fig. 2). Moreover, maximum isotopic enrichments documented for greenschist facies metamorphism are less than 2‰ (refs. 78,82), which is small compared with the reported range of measured $\delta^{15}N$ in the Serra Sul Formation (between +10 and +35‰). Secondary modification of $\delta^{15}N$ values can also occur during metasomatic ammonium addition through hydrothermal recycling, which tends to decrease the TOC/TN ratio and either increase or decrease the $\delta^{15}N$, depending on the isotopic signature of recycled sediments[30,83]. The relative constancy of TOC/TN ratio along the core argues against any heterogeneous secondary overprint of the nitrogen record, either by metamorphism or by metasomatism. Finally, the absence of notable $\delta^{15}N$ differences between facies also argues against a metamorphic or metasomatic modification, as samples of different lithologies would react differently to thermal alteration.

Data availability

All data are available in the main text or the supplementary materials, and at https://doi.org/10.25666/DATAUBFC-2024-06-27.

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Additional information

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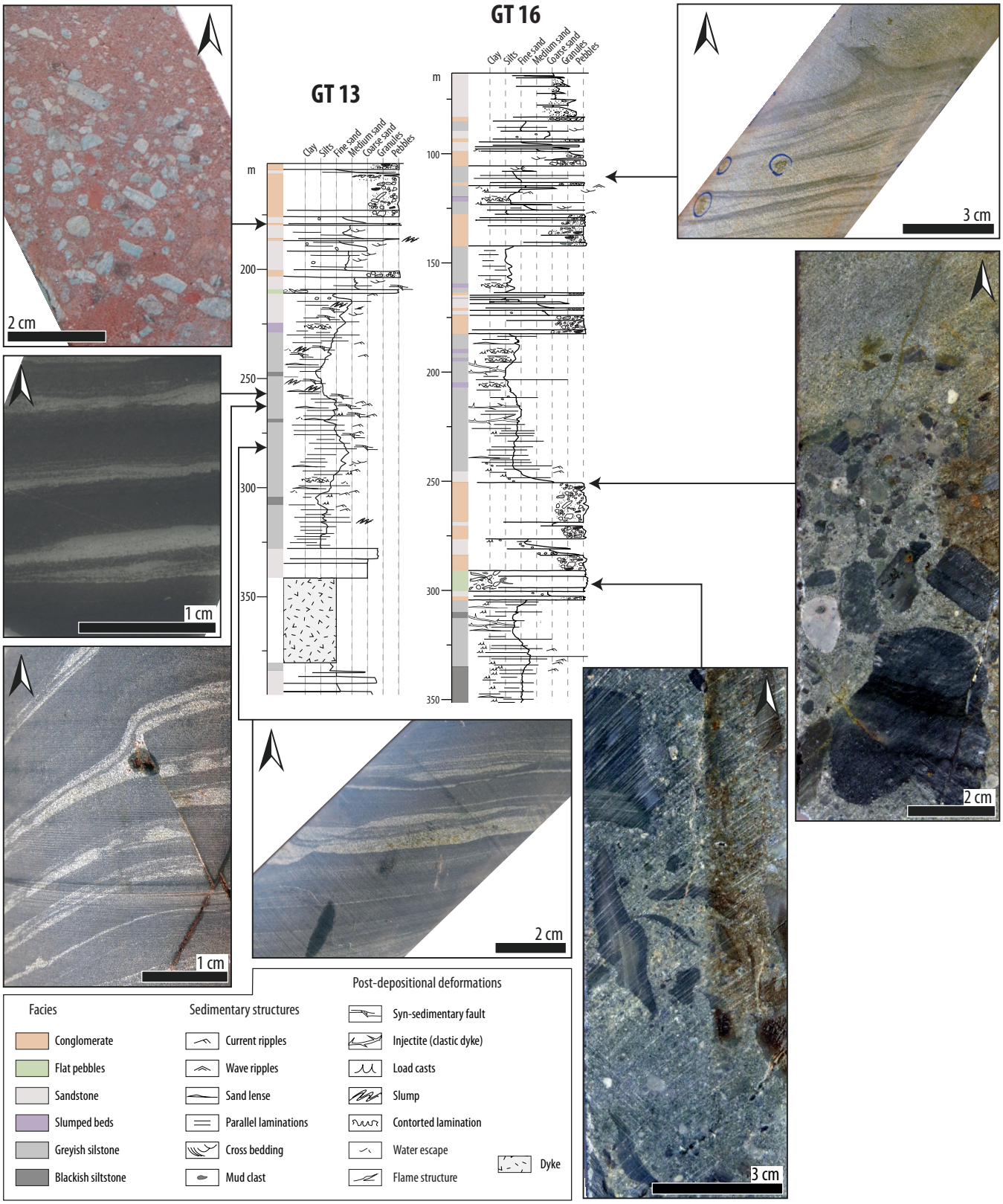
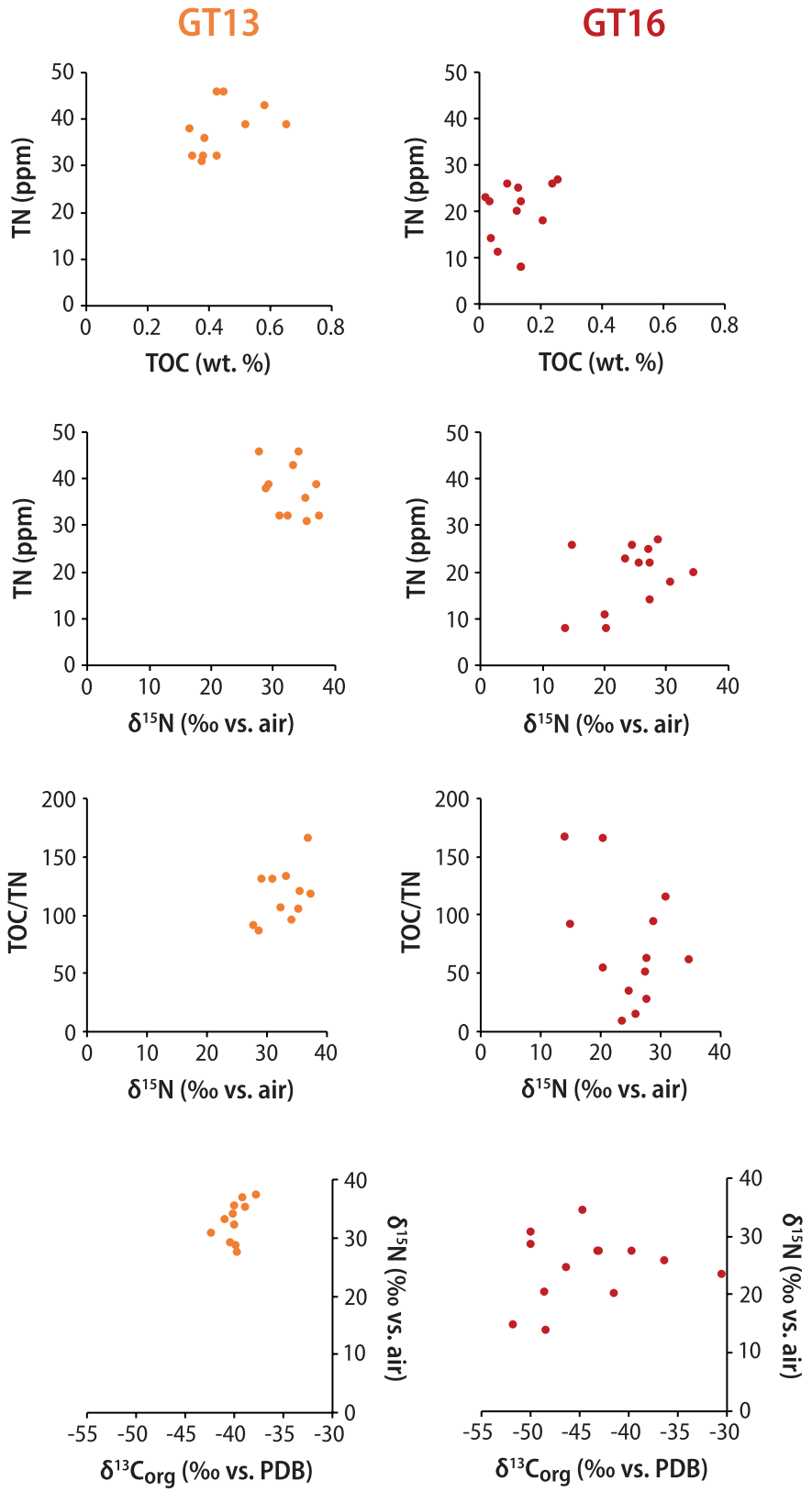
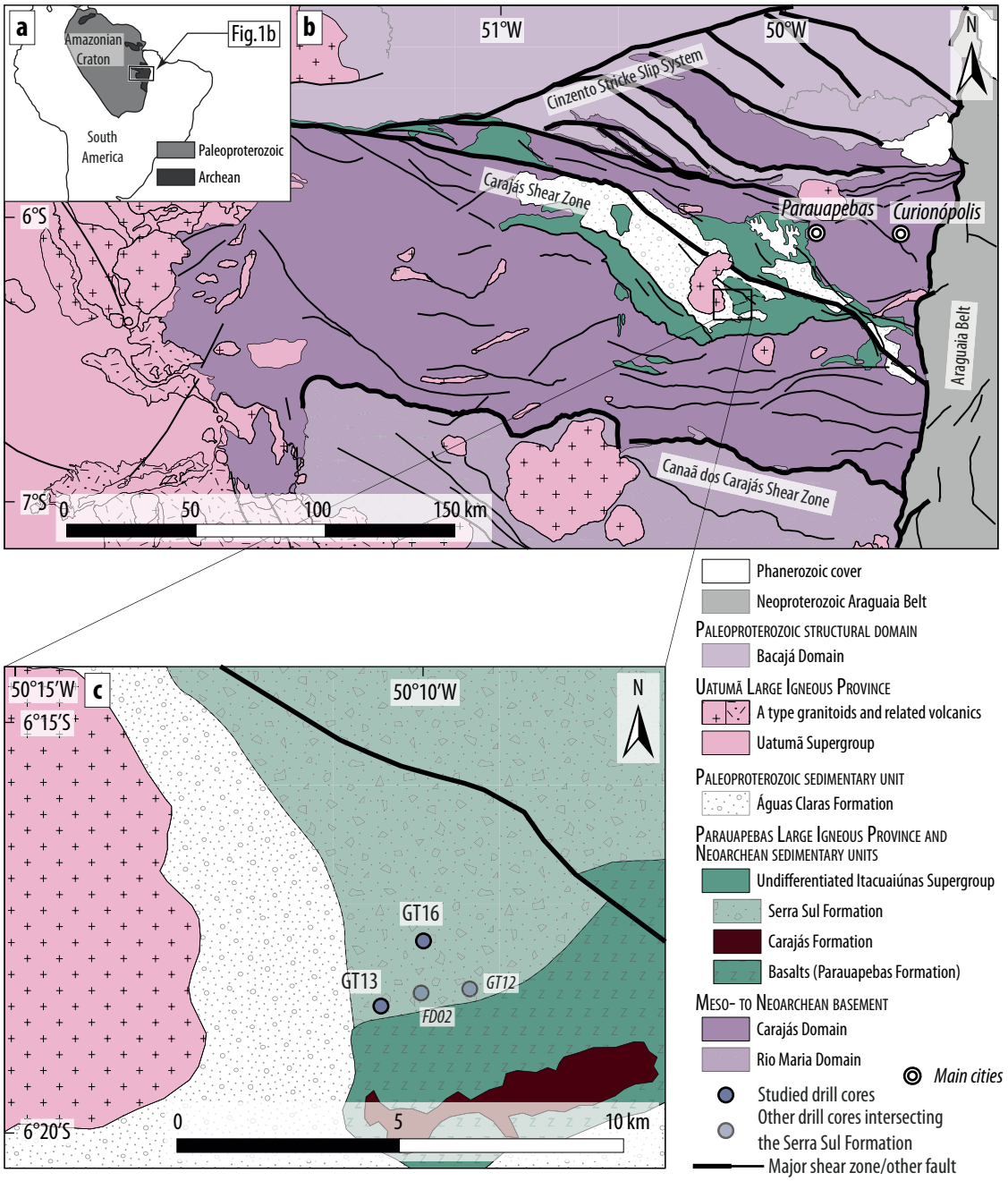


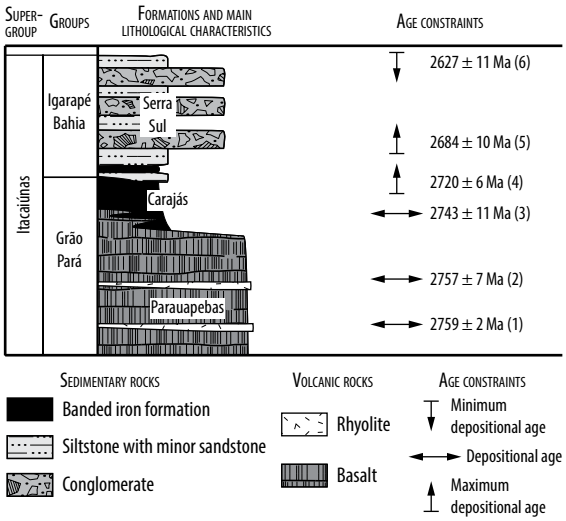
Extended Data Fig. 1 | Sedimentological logs of the drill cores GT13 and GT16 with photographs of the main facies and sedimentary structures. Arrows point to the stratigraphic top. Top left, conglomerate with oriented clasts and sandy matrix; middle left, alternations of siltstone and fine sandstone; bottom left and middle, syn-sedimentary, centimetric-scale faults within fine sandstone to siltstone. Top right, sandstone with wave ripples, framboidal pyrite (blue circles) and load casts; middle right, normally graded conglomerate with rounded quartz pebbles and sub-angular sedimentary clasts, grading to coarse sandstone; bottom right, flat-pebble conglomerate comprising elongated and deformed intraformational clasts.



Extended Data Fig. 2 | Cross-plots for drill cores GT13 (orange) and GT16 (red). TOC (wt%) versus TN (ppm); $\delta^{15}N$ (‰ versus air) versus TN (ppm); $\delta^{15}N$ (‰ versus air) versus TOC/TN ratio and $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ (‰ versus PDB) versus $\delta^{15}N$ (‰ versus air).



Extended Data Fig. 3 | Maps illustrating the location of the Carajás Basin. a, Main tectonic elements of South America[84]. **b**, Geological map of the Carajás Basin[85]. **c**, Location of the drill cores.



Extended Data Fig. 4 | Main sedimentary units of the Carajás Basin and age constraints. 1: ref. 86; 2,3: ref. 87; 4: ref. 88; 5: ref. 6; 6: ref. 28.

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