Fatty acid biomarkers as indicators of organic matter origin and processes in recent turbidites: the case of the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan

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Abstract

The Congo River is connected to its submarine canyon and supplies large quantities of terrestrial organic carbon via powerful turbiditic currents down to the Congo deep-sea fan. We investigated sediment cores from the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan (~ 750 km offshore, ~ 5000 m water depth), in order to assess the value of fatty acid biomarkers as indicators of organic matter origin and processes affecting its distribution and preservation in recent turbidites.

Sediments from the Congo deep-sea fan are enriched in fatty acids compared to the surrounding abyssal plains and their composition closely resembles that of sediments recovered in the Congo River. Long chain fatty acid (LCFA) biomarkers in conjunction with the branched vs isoprenoid tetraether index (BIT) show that organic matter mostly originates from soil erosion and continental higher plants. This material has undergone limited reprocessing during transit certainly due to tight interactions with mineral particles and rapid transfer. The presence of phytoplankton biomarkers at the entrance of the terminal lobe area highlights that, albeit limited, inputs of fresh organic matter can reach the lobe complex.

Relating fatty acid profiles to a suite of geochemical proxies enable to show that (1) organic matter degradation is mostly limited to the oxic layer, and (2) fine soil-derived particles and the coarser higher plant detritus display distinct depositional dynamics. Finally, LCFA are remarkably well preserved under anoxic conditions at different time scales, in recent turbidites deposited during the last century and those deposited several thousand years ago.

Keywords

Congo deep-sea fan; terminal lobe complex; turbidite deposition; fatty acid biomarkers; soil derived-organic matter; degradation; preservation

1. Introduction

What happens to terrestrial organic matter (OM) in the deep ocean is still an open question because of our limited knowledge of the biogeochemical transformations which occur during transport and after deposition on abyssal plains (Hedges et al., 1997; Benner, 2004; Burdige, 2005; Blair and Aller, 2012; Bianchi et al., 2014). The fate of terrestrially-derived OM depends on many factors, among which its sources and inherent properties, physical protection mechanisms shielding labile components from microbial degradation, or aging processes occurring on the continental shelf and beyond (Mayer et al., 2004; Ding and Sun, 2005; Wakeham and Canuel, 2006; Dai et al., 2009; Bao et al., 2019). The depositional setting itself and the surrounding physicochemical conditions also constrain the fate of the deposited OM (Sun and Wakeham, 1994; Hedges and Keil, 1995; Hoefs et al., 2002; Wakeham and Canuel, 2006). Disentangling the contribution of all these factors on the cycling of OM in deep basins is thus challenging, as each environment is unique. Due to the diversity of sources and complexity of the processes involved, combining bulk geochemical proxies and molecular markers is often necessary to get accurate insights into the origins of sedimentary OM and its diagenetic evolution (Prahl et al., 1997; Shi et al., 2001; Weijers et al., 2009). Ancient turbidites from the Madeira Abyssal Plain have provided geochemists with a natural laboratory to study the effects of long-term oxygen exposure (ca. 8000 years or more, Buckley and Cranston, 1988) on terrestrial OM preservation and lipid biomarker records (Prahl et al., 1997; Hoefs et al., 2002; Huguet et al., 2008). They found that up to 80% of the OM initially deposited was degraded in the oxic layer of the turbidites and that re-exposure to oxygen severally impacted the lipid biomarker content and composition. However, the drivers of OM degradation and the extent of lipid biomarker alteration in recent turbiditic deposits, as those observed in active submarine canyons remain largely unknown.

The Congo deep-sea fan is an ideal context to study the processes affecting the fate of recent inputs of terrestrial OM in the deep-sea. The Congo River is the 2nd largest exporter of terrestrial organic carbon (OC) to the world's ocean and delivers 14.4 Tg of OC per year to the equatorial Atlantic Ocean, of which 2 Tg are particulate organic carbon (POC) (Coynel et al., 2005). The submarine canyon of the Congo River extends across the entire continental shelf directly into the estuary, maintaining a constant connection between the African continent and a deep-sea channel-levee-lobe

system (Heezen et al., 1964; Fig. 1). Long-lasting turbidity currents are frequently generated in the canyon and enable the rapid export of sediments along the meandering active channel downslope to the terminal lobe complex located ~ 750 km from the African coast at a depth of ~ 5000 m (Fig. 1, Savoye et al., 2009; Babonneau et al., 2010; Azpiroz-Zabala et al., 2017). This non-steady state depositional pattern characterised by high sedimentation rates and rapid burying is a key driver of the preservation of terrestrial organic carbon, because it tends to limit the exposure of the POC to oxygen in the water column (Hedges and Keil, 1995). Hence, in this remarkable depositional context, the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan represents the main present-day depocenter for the POC delivered by the Congo River (Stetten et al., 2015; Baudin et al., 2017a) and is a major carbon sink in the equatorial Atlantic Ocean (Rabouille et al., 2019; Baudin et al., 2020). The suspended OM delivered by the Congo River is mainly composed of soil-derived mineral-associated OM and to a lesser extent of recently fixed rainforest vegetation and plant debris (Spencer et al., 2012). Terrestrial OM is regarded as being relatively refractory, owing to the presence of lignocellulosic polymers in terrestrial plants, the formation of complex geomacromolecules during humification and the tight association of soil OM with the mineral matrix (Hedges and Oades, 1997). Therefore, the terrestrial OM transferred by turbidity currents to the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan should have a high potential for preservation. However, the suspended sediment exported by the Congo River is characterised by higher loads of functionalised lipids (fatty acids and alcohols) relative to alkanes (Hemingway et al., 2016). Since fatty acids and alcohols degrade faster than bulk OC and alkanes, their prevalence in the suspended sediments indicates they are sourced from local surface soils with limited exposure to diagenesis prior export (Hemingway et al., 2016). This also means that a pool of reactive OM is delivered by the Congo River to the Atlantic Ocean.

The current study focuses on fatty acids, a versatile class of lipid biomarkers commonly used to trace the sources and evolution of riverine OM in the land-ocean continuum (Bianchi and Canuel, 2011). Owing to the generally assumed sensitivity of fatty acids to diagenesis and degradation, these biomarkers are also ideal proxies to explore processes participating in OM alteration during transit and after deposition in the deep-sea fan. Using fatty acid biomarkers, their isotopic composition and the branched versus isoprenoid tetraether (BIT) index, a proxy of fluvially exported soil OM (Hopmans et

al., 2004; Weijers et al., 2009), this study complements parallel investigations undertaken in the same area (Stetten et al., 2015; Baudin et al., 2017a, 2017b; Schnyder et al., 2017; Pruski et al., 2017 and Méjanelle et al., 2017) and aims to provide new insights into (1) the origins, (2) source to sink transformations and (3) post-depositional processes affecting the OM in the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan.

To this aim, we first identified the most likely biological sources of fatty acids in seven sediment cores collected in the terminal lobe complex. We then compared these records to terrestrial and marine end-members (sediments from the Congo River and marine suspended OM) in order to highlight compositional changes occurring during transit. We finally related fatty acid distribution and downcore evolution to the geochemical proxies reported here and in earlier studies (Table 1). This multiproxy approach enables to address the general question: "Are fatty acids good indicators of OM sources and processes in recent turbidites?".

2. Material and methods

2.1. Environmental setting: The Congo deep-sea fan and the terminal lobe area

Marine productivity off the mouth of the Congo River ranges from 50 $gC.m^{-2}\ y^{-1}$ to ~450 $gC.m^{-2}\ y^{-1}$ (Berger, 1989; Wenzhöfer and Glud, 2002). This marine productivity is sustained by strong coastal upwellings on either side of the Congo River estuary (Schneider et al., 1994; Schefuß et al., 2004) and by the river plume, which persists 800 km from the coast (Van Bennekom and Berger, 1984). Dissolved OM (< 0.7 µm) and a high proportion of fine POM (< 63 µm) are mainly exported through this turbid plume (Cadée, 1984) where they are widely recycled by microbial processes and extensive photo-degradation (Spencer et al., 2009), while the remaining (fine and coarse) POM is mainly exported by the Congo River canyon (Cadée, 1984).

The Congo deep-sea fan extends nearly 1000 km off the African coast and covers an estimated area of 330 000 km^2 (Savoye et al., 2000). It is considered as one of the major deposition centre in the South Atlantic Ocean with 5.4 10^{13} t of OC accumulated since 34 Ma (Baudin et al., 2010). Turbidity currents triggered in the Congo canyon are funnelled in the unique and meandering active channel whose present-day length is 1 135 km, and ultimately reach the terminal lobe complex (Fig. 1a;

Babonneau et al., 2010).

The terminal lobe complex, which covers 2500 km^2 (less than 1% of the total area of the Congo deep-sea fan) (Rabouille et al., 2017) was explored during the Congolobe cruise (Rabouille, 2011). Five sites (A, F, C, B and E) corresponding to distinct geomorphological features were selected for the present study (Fig. 1b). Three sites are located along the active channel (A, F and C) (Fig. 1b, Rabouille et al., 2017). Site A is located at the entry of the lobe complex and presents a well-pronounced channel-levee structure compared to site F, which is located 40 km downstream. Site C is located at the end of the feeding channel and represents the ultimate sink for turbidity currents. This site collects the dilute upper part of the turbidity current (Dennielou et al., 2017) and in the rest of this paper, is referred to as the terminal depocenter. Short-lived radionuclide activities (^{137}Cs and $^{210}Pb_{xs}$) in sediment cores from these three sites revealed that huge amounts of sediments have been deposited in the last century (0.5 $cm.y^{-1}$ to 12 $cm.y^{-1}$ Stetten et al., 2015; Rabouille et al., 2017). Site B is located ~15 km north east of the active channel and remains exposed to turbidity current overflow (Bonnel, 2005; Dennielou et al., 2017). In contrast, site E is located ~40 km northward site B in an older lobe complex and is completely disconnected from the active system since at least the Holocene as shown by the absence of caesium in sediments sampled at this site and by the dominant marine geochemical signature in the top ten centimetres (Stetten et al., 2015; Schnyder et al., 2017). This site has not been exposed to turbidity currents for ca. 4 000 years (Picot et al., 2016, 2019), and will thus be considered as abandoned.

2.2. Sampling

Seven sediment cores corresponding to 42 samples of sediments from the terminal lobe complex were analysed in this study (Fig. 1). Sampling took place in December 2011-January 2012 during the Congolobe oceanographic campaign (Rabouille, 2011). Short sediment cores were collected using a MUC 8/100 multicorer (Oktopus GmbH) and were rapidly sliced into 11 layers (0–0.5 cm; 0.5–1 cm; 1–2 cm; 2–3 cm; 3–5 cm; 5–7 cm; 7–10 cm; 10–13 cm; 13–16 cm; 16–19 cm; 19–22 cm). The layers were carefully homogenised, placed in Falcon tubes, and stored at –80 °C until analysis.

Five samples of suspended POM from the surface waters overlaying the study area were also

collected by filtering 10 L of seawater on pre-combusted glass fibre filters (45 mm Whatman GF/F). Our sampling was completed with 6 samples from the Malebo Pool floodplain wetlands near Kinshasa (donated by H. Talbot and R. Spencer). Organic matter from the Malebo Pool is considered as a good reference for the terrestrial OM exported by the Congo River as limited compositional changes occur between this site and the head of the estuary (Spencer et al., 2012). The samples were collected from two distinct depths (surface: 0–5 cm and subsurface: 5–15 cm) at 3 sites encompassing permanently flooded sediment, sediment inundated during high discharge months only and sediment from above the seasonal high water point (Talbot et al., 2014). These samples will be referred in the text as permanently submerged, recently exposed and floodplain sediments.

2.3. Contextual geochemical and sedimentological properties

Bulk geochemical and sedimentological data for sediments from the distal lobe complex have been published previously: grain size, elemental composition and bulk stable carbon and nitrogen isotope values in Stetten et al. (2015), Rock-Eval signatures in Baudin et al. (2017b) and total hydrolysable amino acid composition in Pruski et al. (2017) for 34 of the 42 samples. Analyses reported here and in previous studies were performed on aliquots of the same samples.

Briefly, sediment grain size was assessed using a Malvern Mastersizer 2000 laser diffraction particle size analyser following treatment of wet sediments with HCl to remove carbonate. Total organic carbon content was measured on dried sediments using a high temperature combustion method (LECO IR 212 with an induction furnace HF-100, LECO Corporation) with correction for inorganic carbon content measured by carbonate-bomb and/or a pyrolytic method (Baudin et al., 2015). Pyrolytic analyses were carried out using a Rock-Eval 6 Turbo device, operating in a mode devoted to recent sediments (Baudin et al., 2015). Among the parameters delivered by Rock-Eval analysis, the oxygen index (OI) provides insights on the amount of oxygen relative to the amount of OC present in a sample and was selected for this study as a proxy of the oxidation state of the OM. Subsamples of freeze-dried sediments were pre-treated with 1N HCl to remove carbonates prior stable isotope analysis. C/N molar ratios, and stable isotope compositions of carbon and nitrogen were determined by on-line combustion of the decarbonated sediments on a Carlo Erba NC 2500 instrument connected to

an Isoprime isotope ratio mass spectrometer (Stetten et al., 2015). Total hydrolysable amino acids (THAA) were extracted from freeze-dried sediments by acid hydrolysis (hot 6N HCl, 24 h, 110°C). After neutralisation with NaOH 6N, carbamates were produced from amino acids by alkylation with propyl-chloroformate in the presence of *n*-propanol and pyridine (Dettmer et al., 2012). Carbamates were recovered by liquid-liquid partition using iso-octane, purified and analysed on a gas chromatograph (CLARUS 580) fitted with a flame ionization detector (Perkin Elmer). The obtained mole percentages were used to calculate the degradation index (DI), which synthesises subtle changes in the amino acid composition linked with diagenesis into a univariate variable indicative of OM degradation state (Dauwe et al., 1999). As arginine does not produce stable carbamates, this amino acid was omitted from the DI calculation. In Dauwe's initial dataset, the DI varied from −2.2 for extensively degraded sediments to +1.5 for fresh algae, but more extreme values have been reported (Unger et al., 2005).

2.4. Lipid biomarker analysis

2.4.1. GDGT analysis and BIT index determination

Extractions for the glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraether (GDGT) lipids were performed on the surface (0–1 cm layer) and deeper (19–22 cm) intervals of each core from the lobe complex according to the protocol described in Coffinet et al. (2014). Since limited amounts of surface sediments were available, freeze-dried sediments from the two first horizons were pooled before extraction (0.5g of the 0–0.5 cm layer and 0.5g of the 0.5–1 cm layer), whereas 1g of the 19–22 cm layer was weighted. GDGT analysis was performed by high performance liquid chromatography-atmospheric pressure chemical ionization mass spectrometry (HPLC-ACPI-MS), with a Shimadzu LC-MS 2020. During elution, the proportion of hexane and isopropanol was modified by time steps in the conditions described in Coffinet et al. (2014). The injection volume was 10 µL. Semi-quantification of GDGTs was performed by comparing the integrated signal of the respective compound with the signal of a C_{46} synthesized internal standard (Huguet et al., 2006) assuming their response factors to be identical. The branched vs isoprenoid tetraether (BIT) index, a proxy for fluvial input of soils, was calculated according to the equation proposed by Hopmans et al. (2004):

$$\mathrm{BIT} = \frac{(\mathrm{I} + \mathrm{II} + \mathrm{III})}{(\mathrm{I} + \mathrm{II} + \mathrm{III} + \mathrm{IV})}$$

where I, II, III are branched GDGT and IV is crenarchaeol (refer to Hopmans et al. (2004) for the GDGT structures). Triplicate injections of three samples indicated that the analytical error for the BIT was 0.01.

2.4.2. Fatty acid extraction and analysis

Fatty acid analyses were performed on the 11 layers of the cores from the site C channel and from the abandoned site E, on the surface, sub-surface, mid-layer and deeper horizons of all the other cores (0–0.5 cm; 0.5–1 cm; 5–7 cm and 19–22 cm) as well as on the marine and terrestrial references. Aliquots of freeze-dried material (~1.5 g) were treated with a solution of methanol, sulphuric acid and chloroform (at 90 °C for 90 min) in the presence of an internal standard (nonadecanoic acid: $C_{19:0}$) and an antioxidant (butyl-hydroxytoluene, Christie, 1993). This direct acid transesterification protocol enables in one single step to extract the lipids, release the fatty acids and produce simultaneously the corresponding methyl esters (see Bourgeois et al., 2011 for the detailed procedure). Fatty acid methyl esters (FAME) were dissolved in 50 µL of hexane prior to their analysis by gas chromatography and mass spectrometry (GC-MS; GC Varian 3900 coupled to a Saturn 2100T ion trap detector). FAME were separated on a capillary ZB wax column (30 m×0.25 mm ID, 0.25 µm thickness; Phenomenex) using helium at 1 mL min^{-1} and a specific temperature gradient (Bourgeois et al., 2011). The MS system was operated with electron impact ionization at 70 eV in full scan mode (scanning m/z 40–650 in a 1 s cycle). Based on the total ion chromatograms (TIC), FAME were identified by comparing their retention times with those of commercial FAME standards (Qualmix Fish Synthetic, Ladoran Fine Chemicals, INTERCHIM, France; Supelco 37, PUFA No. 1 and No. 3, SUPELCO France) and matching the mass spectra with the NIST library. The quantifier ion of each analyte was extracted from the TIC and used for quantitation. External calibration curves then obtained from a series of dilutions of a quantitative standard mixture (Supelco 37) supplemented with 4 fatty acids ($C_{19:0}$, $C_{26:0}$, $C_{28:0}$ and $C_{30:0}$) and used to determine fatty acid concentrations. Repeatability of the analysis,

determined by comparing relative standard deviations of 41 fatty acids in six different preparations of our standard solution, ranged from 1.0 to 5.4% with a mean value of 2.4%. Fatty acid concentrations initially expressed in µg per gram dry weight ($\mu g.g^{-1}$ dw) were normalised to the OC content of the respective sample (stated as $mg.g^{-1}$ OC).

Five fatty acid subgroups were defined for the study: short-chain saturated fatty acids (SCFA; $C_{14:0}$ – $C_{23:0}$), long chain saturated fatty acids (LCFA; $C_{24:0}$ – $C_{30:0}$), monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA; $C_{16:1\omega7}$, $C_{18:1\omega9\ cis}$, $C_{18:1\omega7}$, $C_{20:1\omega9}$), polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA; $C_{18:2\omega6\ cis}$, $C_{20:4\omega6}$, $C_{20:5\omega3}$, $C_{22:6\omega3}$), and bacterial fatty acids (BAFA; $C_{15:0}$, $C_{17:0}$, $iC_{14:0}$, $iC_{15:0}$, $aiC_{15:0}$, $iC_{16:0}$, $iC_{17:0}$, 3-OH-C_{12}, 3-OH-C_{14}). Source assignment of individual fatty acid was based on the literature (Table 1). Compound specific stable isotope analysis of fatty acids in sediments was further performed at the Center for Applied Isotope Studies (University of Georgia) to confirm their provenance (see Supplementary Methods for detailed procedures).

The unsaturation index (UI), average chain length ($ACL_{16–30}$) and carbon preference index (CPI) of the fatty acids were calculated from the following formula (Claustre et al., 1992; Wiesenberg et al., 2010; Angst et al., 2016):

$UI = \sum(z_{n:x} \times x)$ where z_n is the relative amount of the fatty acids with n carbon atoms and x is the number of unsaturation

$ACL_{16-30} = \sum(z_n \times n) / \sum z_n$ where z_n is the relative amount of the fatty acids with n carbon atoms and n was 16 to 30 carbon atoms

$CPI = 0.5 \times \left[\frac{\sum C_{12-30}^{even}}{\sum C_{11-29}^{odd}} + \frac{\sum C_{12-30}^{even}}{\sum C_{13-31}^{odd}}\right]$; CPI was calculated for the entire, lower- and higher-, molecular weight ranges.

2.5. Statistical analyses and data treatment

Statistical analyses were performed using R software (3.6.3). Due to the non-normal distribution of most of the variables, non-parametric statistical analyses were used to examine relationships between variables (Spearman non-parametric test, ρ). p-values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Unconstrained multivariate analyses were performed to explore relationships among sediment samples and to determine whether fatty acid profiles were related to the other biogeochemical parameters. Sediment samples were associated with respect to their fatty acid profiles using hierarchical agglomerative clustering with the Bray-Curtis dissimilarity index and Ward's minimum variance linkage method. The agnes function of package "cluster" was used for clustering (Maechler et al., 2019) and the Bray-Curtis distances were square-rooted before applying Ward's algorithm. Variations in fatty acid distribution between sampling sites and sediment depths were visualised using non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) based on a Bray-Curtis dissimilarity distance matrix (function metaMDS of package "vegan", Oksanen et al., 2016) as described by Wakeham et al. (2012). The resulting ordination plot displays samples defined by sites and sediment depth, and fatty acid distribution. The function envfit ("vegan" package) was used to overlay environmental factors (biogeochemical parameters) on the nMDS ordination and find significant correlations. Environmental factors were fitted in the ordination plot as vectors, whereby the arrow indicates the direction of the increasing gradient of the environmental variable and the length of the arrow is proportional to the correlation coefficient between the variable and the nMDS ordination. Fatty acid data were square root transformed prior to analysis to down-weight the contribution of very dominant fatty acids, while absolute numbers were used for all other variables.

3. Results

3.1. Contextual geochemical and sedimentological properties

Despite being collected in different morpho-sedimentary settings, the bulk properties of sediments from the recent lobe complex (sites A, F, C and B) were similar (Table 2). They were characterised by high OC contents (2.2% – 4.1%), highly negative $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values around –26.5‰, $\delta^{15}N$ values ranging between 4.6 and 5.9, and high C/N ratios (14.0 – 22.5). In these sediments, OI values ranged from 244 to 324 mg $CO_2.g^{-1}$ TOC, which indicates variable degrees of oxidation of the OM. The DI generally exhibited slightly negative values in the oxic surface layers with a trend for higher values with depth, indicative of a lower degradation state. Sediments were composed of silt (70–79%) and clay (12–28%) with a minor and variable proportion of coarser material (0–16%).

290 The geochemical properties of sediments from the abandoned site (site E) enable to identify two
291 distinct intervals. The top seven centimetres were characterised by low OC contents (0.7 – 0.9%),
292 lower C/N ratios (11.0 – 11.7), higher $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values (–23.9 to –22.8‰), higher OI values (up to 609
293 mg $CO_2.g^{-1}$ OC) and lower DI values (around –1) indicative of a more advanced stage of degradation.
294 In contrast, sediments in the deeper layers (7–22 cm) have increasing OC contents (from 1.2 to 2.8%),
295 higher C/N ratios (12.3 – 15.9), lower $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values (below –24.1‰), lower OI values (less than 270
296 mg $CO_2.g^{-1}$ TOC) and higher DI values (–0.52 to +0.24). The changes of the geochemical properties
297 across the sediment core are consistent with a major shift in the sources of the OM incorporated in the
298 sediments, from degraded hemipelagic inputs on the top layers to less degraded terrestrial OM in
299 deeper layers (Stetten et al., 2015).
300
301 *3.2. GDGT-based proxy*

302 GDGT analyses were performed on two sediment layers (0–1 cm and 19–22 cm). Relative
303 abundances of GDGTs and concentrations in isoprenoid and branched GDGTs are reported in Table
304 Sx. Branched GDGTs were more abundant than isoprenoid GDGTs, especially crenarchaeol, in almost
305 all sediments, resulting in high BIT index values (> 0.7). In the present-day active lobe complex, BIT
306 values displayed a narrow range (0.75 to 0.84) with lower values in surface sediments than in deeper
307 ones (Table x). One lower value (0.48), explained by the low abundance of branched GDGTs vs.
308 crenarchaeol, was obtained for the surface sediment at the abandoned site E, but the deeper layer had a
309 BIT value of 0.76, similar to those measured in sediments from the active lobe complex.
310
311 *3.3. Fatty acid composition and concentration in the terrestrial and marine references*
312 The fatty acid composition of Congo River sediments collected on land and marine suspended
313 POM recovered above the terminal lobe complex is presented in Fig. 2 (see Supplementary Table S3
314 for the detailed composition of the terrestrial and marine references). At the Malebo Pool, the recently
315 exposed sediments were enriched in OC by a twofold factor in comparison to recently exposed and
316 floodplain sediments, but OC-normalised fatty acid concentrations were similar and ranged in the

upper horizon between 7.1 mg.g^{-1} OC for the recently exposed sediments and 9.1 mg.g^{-1} OC for the floodplain (Fig. 3). The fatty acid composition of the river sediments was characterised by high contributions of saturated fatty acids (SAFA: 55.6 to 70.7%) with the dominance of $C_{16:0}$, medium contributions of bacterial fatty acids (BAFA: 16.8 to 26.9%), and lower contributions of monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA: 9.5 to 15.2%) and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA: 0.5 to 8.4%) (Fig. 2). Among the SAFA, long chain fatty acids (LCFA) accounted for 16.4 to 28.9% of all fatty acids with the preponderance of $C_{24:0}$. MUFA $C_{18:1\omega9cis}$ and PUFA $C_{18:2\omega6cis}$ were abundant in river sediments, particularly in the surface layer from the floodplain with contributions of these two fatty acids reaching 9.8 and 8.1%, respectively (Supplementary Table S2).

Fatty acid concentrations of suspended POM ranged from 7.8 µg.L^{-1} at site B to 94.2 µg.L^{-1} at site A (Supplementary Table S3). Surface waters were characterised by the predominance of SAFA (47.1 to 66.7%), in particular $C_{16:0}$ and $C_{18:0}$ (Fig. 2). The suspended POM also contained MUFA (12.2 to 17.9%) and PUFA (9.2 to 30.5%), and small amounts of BAFA (3.3 to 5.3%). The surface water at site A stood out from the other samples because its fatty acid concentration was one order of magnitude higher. In addition, this sample was enriched in PUFA (32.4%), with $C_{22:6\omega3}$ accounting for 21.8% of all fatty acids (Supplementary Table S3).

3.4. Fatty acid composition of sediments from the terminal lobe complex

Sediments from the lobe complex contained approximately 1.5 times less fatty acids than the wetland sediments collected at the Malebo Pool with concentrations ranging from 3.3 to 6.0 mg.g^{-1} OC (Table 4). Their fatty acid composition closely resembled that in the river sediments. SAFA were the most abundant fatty acids (60.7 to 84.5%) and were dominated by $C_{16:0}$ (13.9 to 27.4%) and LCFA (13.9% in the surface layer at site E to 40.9% in the middle layer at site B) with a strong predominance of $C_{24:0}$ (5.2 to 26.8% of all fatty acids). BAFA were present in all sediment samples (11.7 to 25.6%) with a tendency to be higher in the surface horizons. 3-OH-C_{14} and iso$C_{15:0}$ were the most abundant bacterial fatty acids and were more abundant in the surface sediments. MUFA ranged from 1.2% at the abandoned site E (surface layer) to 13.7% in the channel at site C (mid layer). They were dominated

by $C_{16:1\omega7}$, $C_{18:1\omega9cis}$ and $C_{18:1\omega7}$, while $C_{20:1\omega9}$ was present in very small amounts (< 0.4%). A trend to lower MUFA contributions in the surface layers was observed in all the cores except for the one collected in the channel at site A.

PUFA contributions to the sediments were consistently low. However, in the surface sediments collected at the entry of the terminal lobe complex (the channel at site A), the PUFA contribution reached 2.7%, reflected by a higher degree of unsaturation (UI= 23.2, Table 4) than in other samples. $C_{20:5\omega3}$ and $C_{22:6\omega3}$ were the predominant PUFA in these surface sediments, whereas $C_{18:2\omega6cis}$ was present in smaller amounts.

The CPI was comprised between 8.4 and 17.5 with lower values at site E, and a trend for higher values with increasing depth. The $ACL_{16–30}$ varied between 19.1 and 22.2.

Fig. 4 shows the downcore distribution of the fatty acids in sediments from the present-day depocenter (the channel at site C) and the abandoned lobe (site E). LCFA made a substantial contribution to the fatty acid pool at both sites. The contribution of LCFA increased from 14 to 40% with sediment depth in the abandoned lobe (site E), while it accounted for an average of 25% in the channel at site C with higher contributions in deeper layers (>16 cm in depth). The contribution of BAFA in the channel at site C remained relatively constant throughout the core (~20%), whereas it decreased by half (from 25 to 12%) in sediments sampled at site E. At both sites, the contribution of MUFA was remarkably lower in the surface sediment than in the deeper layers with a transition that corresponded to the limit of the oxygen penetration depth (1.47 cm at site C and 6.65 cm at site E; Pozzato et al., 2017). Only trace amounts of PUFA were found at site E, while their contribution reached 4% at site C.

$\delta^{13}C$ values of bulk OM was fairly constant in the channel at site C, whereas terrestrial phytoclasts varied from 25 to 88%. In contrast, $\delta^{13}C$ values of bulk OM decreased progressively with increasing depth at site E (from –23.1 to –26.9‰), while terrestrial phytoclasts increased (7 to 84%).

3.5. Clustering and relationships with contextual geochemical and sedimentological parameters

The results of the cluster analysis based on fatty acid composition are shown in Fig. 5. The 42 samples corresponding to 7 sites and several sediment horizons (4 to 11 depending of the site) were

clustered into four clusters (Fig. 5A). The seven first centimetres of the core collected at site E formed a single cluster (cluster 4), whereas deeper sediments from this core were grouped with most of the surface sediments from the cores collected in the active lobe (cluster 1). The interval 1 to 16 cm of the core collected in the channel at site C formed another cluster (cluster 2). The last cluster grouped the deeper layers (16–19 and 19–22 cm), the intermediary layer (5–7 cm) and most surface samples (0–0.5 and 0.5–1 cm) from site A (cluster 3). These 4 clusters displayed distinct fatty acid profiles (Fig. 5B)

As sediments from site E accounted for most of the dissimilarity within the dataset, this site was omitted in the following analyses. The remaining sediment samples were clustered in three clusters with the same partition as observed with the whole dataset (see supplementary material for HCA results on sediments from the active lobe). The non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) ordination analysis shows the relationships between sediment samples, fatty acid biomarkers and sediment properties defined by grain size, OC content and several proxies of OM origin and quality (Fig. 6). Almost all environmental variables had low p values (<0.05), indicating highly significant fitted vectors with the exception of sand, OI and $\delta^{15}N$. The highest goodness-of-fit statistics were observed with UI (r^2 0.89), followed by CPI (r^2 0.78), ACL (r^2 0.63), $\delta^{13}C$ (r^2 0.59) and then DI (r^2 0.47) (Table 5).

4. Discussion

4.1. Sources of fatty acids in the terminal lobe complex

Fluxes of fatty acids from the surficial ocean to the abyssal plains are usually limited due to the efficient and rapid degradation of these labile components during transit through the water column (Wakeham et al., 1997a). Hence, most deep-sea sediments are characterised by low fatty acid contents and benthic communities are food limited (Svetashev, 2022; Wakeham et al., 1997b). Fatty acid concentrations in sediments from the Congo deep-sea fan are much higher (between 3.8 and 5.4 $mg.g^{-1}$ OC) than the standard background values measured in abyssal plains in the Atlantic Ocean (between 0.02 to 1.04 $mg.g^{-1}$ OC; Van Vleet and Quinn, 1979; Santos et al., 1994). These values are high, even in comparison with coastal sediments unaffected by turbidity currents north of the mouth of the Congo River where fatty acid yields do not exceed 0.96 $mg.g^{-1}$ OC (Schefuß et al., 2001). Thereby, while

deep-sea communities usually only benefit from pulse inputs of labile OM deriving from seasonal and rare planktonic blooms, turbidity flows feed the terminal lobe complex area with a more persistent (one turbidite every 6–17 years; Dennielou et al., 2017) source of labile components such as functionalised lipids and amino acids (this study and Pruski et al., 2017).

4.1.1. Tracing inputs from the Congo River using glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraethers and fatty acid biomarkers

The suspended OM delivered by the Congo River is mainly composed of soil-derived mineral associated OM and to a lesser extent of well-preserved plant detritus (Spencer et al., 2012). Knowing that (i) fine soil particulate OM (< 63 µm) accounts for more than 80% of the total particulate load of the Congo River at Kinshasa (Spencer et al., 2012) and that (ii) most of this material is rapidly channelled by turbidity currents to the recent lobe complex (Savoye et al., 2009; Babonneau et al., 2010), soil-derived OM is expected to be a major source of OM in the lobe complex. Using carbon isotopic values in a two source mixing model, Stetten et al. (2015) previously estimated that the relative proportion of terrestrial OM ranges from 70 to 80% in sediments from the active lobe complex

Two proxies of terrestrial OM were used in the present study: (i) the branched vs isoprenoid tetraether (BIT) index whose use is based on the initial assumption that branched GDGTs are mainly produced by bacteria in soils, while crenarchaeol is specific for non-extremophilic, aquatic *Thaumarchaeota* (Hopmans et al., 2004) and (ii) LCFA deriving from the epicuticular waxes of higher plants (Eglinton and Hamilton, 1967).

The BIT index was originally introduced as a proxy for the fluvial export of terrestrial OM (Hopmans et al. 2004), but was later shown to trace specifically soil OM (Huguet et al., 2007). BIT index values in suspended particulate matter from the Congo River are close to the hypothetical terrestrial end member value of 1 (mean value: 0.98, Weijers, 2017) and decrease in the surface sediments with increasing distance to the estuary, reflecting the fluvial transport of soil OM (Hopmans et al., 2004). It should be noted that over the past decades, the *in situ* production of branched GDGTs in marine sediments from different settings has been confirmed, which complicates somehow the interpretation of GDGT-based proxies (Sinninghe Damsté, 2016). Branched GDGTs were indeed

found in distal marine surface sediments from the Atlantic Ocean, albeit in low amount and BIT index values were close to the marine end member value of 0 showing that marine production of branched GDGTs had a limited influence on the BIT index (0.01-0.07, Weijers et al., 2014). Here, BIT values were high (>0.75, Table 3) in the active lobe area, confirming that soil OM is efficiently exported through the Congo submarine canyon and represents the main source of OM.. The significant negative correlation between $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ and the BIT index (Spearman rank correlation, $\rho = -0.69$, p-value<0.05) further confirms that the BIT index is a good proxy to trace soil inputs in the channel-levee system of the Congo River deep-sea fan, as previously observed in this region (Weijers et al., 2009).

Even though our results suggest that soil is the principal source of OM in the actual lobe complex, this is not the only source of OM in the Congo River, as coarse particles deriving from recent vegetation inputs are also exported (Spencer et al., 2012). Schnyder et al. (2017) highlighted the outstanding good preservation of terrestrial phytoclasts, cuticle particles and wood fragments, which often dominated palynofacies assemblages. Likewise, plant macrodetritus were often observed in our samples (Stetten, personal observation). Hemingway et al. (2016) showed that lipid biomarkers make it possible to get a better picture of the nature of the OM exported by the Congo River and that different classes of lipids reflect different source signals in the watershed, such as BIT index for soil OM, and plant wax lipids for terrestrial plant inputs. Functionalised lipids (LCFA and alcohols) from plant waxes derive predominantly from a recently reworked local source, whereas *n*-alkanes include a broader watershed signal and have undergone more intense diagenesis (Hemingway et al., 2016). As such, the latter are found in relatively low amounts in the material exported by the river and subsequently in sediment records from the Congo submarine canyon (e.g. alkane concentrations are 1 – 2 orders of magnitude lower than those of fatty acids or alcohols Treignier et al., 2006; Hemingway et al., 2016; Méjanelle et al., 2017). In the Black Sea, LCFA have been successfully used to trace the dilution of the material delivered by the Danube River with autochthonous OM (Saliot et al., 2002). Sediments from the Malebo Pool consist in a mixture of mineral particles and plant debris, and consequently contain high proportions of LCFA (16.4–28.9% of all fatty acids, Fig. 2). For comparison, the contribution of these higher plant biomarkers is 16% in the Amazon River floodplain (Mortillaro et al., 2011). Their concentration in sediments from the active lobe was high (0.6 to 2.5

456 mg.g^{-1} OC), but consistent with values for the suspended sediments collected in the Congo River (0.97
457 ± 0.34 mg.g^{-1} OC, recalculated from Hemingway et al., 2016). LCFA are thus exported along with the
458 sediments down to the Congo deep-sea fan where they accumulate in concentrations that are high even
459 when compared to continental margins. This reflects the efficient export and burial of the OM derived
460 from terrestrial plants in the Congo watershed. Nevertheless, LCFA were heterogeneously distributed
461 even across a given core (e.g. Fig. 4a) and did not behave like most bulk geochemical proxies in the
462 study area (Stetten et al., 2015). In the Rhône prodelta (France) and the Englebright Lake (California),
463 the contribution of LCFA was higher in sediment layers that recorded flood events and were
464 associated with higher inputs of macrodetritus (Pondell and Canuel, 2020; Pruski et al., 2021). In good
465 agreement with the hypothesis that the relative abundance of LCFA varies with the proportion of OM
466 deriving from plants, palynofacies observations confirm that higher plant remains are heterogeneously
467 distributed in the lobe sediments (Schnyder et al., 2017).
468 Due to their ubiquitous synthesis by different groups of organisms, the contribution of the other
469 subgroups of fatty acids (SCFA, BAFA, MUFA) are not indicative of OM provenance, but their
470 isotopic values may provide some clues. Generally, lipids such as fatty acids are depleted in ^{13}C by
471 around 4‰ relative to total OM (Hayes et al., 1990). As C3 land plants have a $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ value of ~27.5‰
472 (Hedges et al., 1986; Meyers, 1997), $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ values of around –31.5‰ would be expected for C3 plant-
473 derived lipids. The light isotopic signature of most fatty acids in the lobe sediments is consistent with a
474 predominantly terrestrial origin for these compounds (90% of values ranged between –33.5 and –
475 26.6‰, Supplementary Table S3).
476
477 *4.1.2. Can we identify marine OM inputs in the terminal lobe complex?*
478 The Congo deep-sea fan is located ~ 5 km below a productive oceanic region characterised by a
479 shallow thermocline, an oceanic upwelling and a river plume, which supply nutrients (Berger, 1989;
480 Schneider et al., 1994). Schefuß et al. (2004) recorded the highest contributions of biomarkers deriving
481 from marine sources in sediments collected about 150–200 km offshore the Congo River mouth. Two
482 PUFA, the dinoflagellate biomarker $C_{22:6\omega3}$ and the diatom biomarker $C_{20:5\omega3}$, were found in the surface
483 sediments at the entry of the recent lobe complex (site A channel) despite the depth of 4764 m (Table

4). The presence of labile compounds, even in small amounts, is unexpected considering that most marine OM that reaches this region is considered to be heavily degraded (Treignier et al., 2006; Stetten et al., 2015). These results demonstrate that biomarkers deriving from fresh phytoplankton can reach the recent lobe complex. Taking into account the rapid degradation of the POM produced in the euphotic layer during settling (Lee et al., 2004), it seems unlikely that the overlying pelagic production could explain the occurrence of phytoplankton PUFA at the entry of the recent lobe complex (site A). A plausible scenario is that marine POM deposited in the active channel upstream has been caught by turbidity currents and rapidly delivered to the recent lobe complex. A closer look at the fatty acid composition provides further arguments supporting this hypothesis (Table 4). $C_{18:1\omega7}$ and $C_{16:1\omega7}$, which are found in many phytoplankton groups including diatoms and dinoflagellates (Volkman et al., 1989; Mansour et al., 1999), were more abundant in sediments collected along the active channel than at site E and their contributions were significantly correlated with the PUFA content in the sediments (Spearman rank correlation, $\rho = 0.81$ and 0.92 for $C_{16:1\omega7}$ and $C_{18:1\omega7}$, p-value <0.01). Moreover, $C_{16:1\omega7}$ in the surface sediments at site F had a $\delta^{13}C$ signature (–21.3‰, Supplementary Table S2) consistent with an algal origin (Canuel et al., 1997). This observation, however, does not hold when considering the isotopic value of $C_{18:1\omega7}$ and $C_{16:1\omega7}$ in the other samples, whose $\delta^{13}C$ values ranged between –33‰ and –26‰ (Supplementary Table S2). These lower values point to a terrestrial origin, while the less negative values point to a mixture of marine and terrestrial OM (Shi et al., 2001). Since these MUFA are also found in bacteria (Parrish, 2013), their presence in the sediments could also at least partly account for the heterotrophic bacteria that break down terrestrial and marine OM (Teece et al., 1999; Wang et al., 2008), and their isotopic values would in this case reflect the source of decomposed OM.

Despite the wide array of lipid biomarkers analysed (Méjanelle et al., 2017 and the present study), no specific marker of marine OM was found in appreciable amounts in the lobe sediments, likely due to their degradation in the water column and the strong dilution of any signal by the turbidity inputs. Overall, fatty acid patterns suggest that fluxes of marine POM are rather limited and that their composition is extensively modified before settling on the seafloor. In good agreement with this, (1) bulk $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ signature (~ –26.5‰), Rock-Eval pyrolysis analysis and palynofacies observations revealed that marine OM represents at most 30% in these sediments, is highly degraded, and is present

as amorphous material (Stetten et al., 2015; Schnyder et al., 2017; Baudin et al., 2017b).

4.1.3. Transformation of the source signal during transport

The challenge to assess sink to source transformations lies in the difficulty to constrain the original source signatures and the limited knowledge on the many factors that control the chemical composition of the exported OM. The Malebo Pool is recognised as a good sampling location for Congo suspended solids because no major tributary enters the river between Kinshasa and the head of the estuary (~350km downstream), and POM composition remains fairly constant from this point to the mouth of the river (Spencer et al., 2012). Soil-OM from the Congo watershed is deposited in the Malebo Pool wetlands and later exported to the Atlantic Ocean with some local production (Talbot et al., 2014; Spencer-Jones et al., 2015). Sediments from the Malebo Pool displayed OC-normalised concentrations in fatty acids similar to that of river suspended POM (Hemingway et al., 2016) confirming that they are representative of the terrestrial OM exported by the Congo River. The relative enrichment in LCFA is consistent with the integration of the local C3-vegetation signal. Low contribution of unsaturated homologues in permanently submerged and recently exposed sediments are indicative of degraded OM. The different proxies of OM alteration used here and in previous studies agree with this observation and suggest pre-aging of the OM within the watershed prior export to the Congo shelf and deep-sea fan (UI, amino acid based indices DI an RI, Rock-Eval OI and HI, palynofacies, Baudin et al., 2017b; Pruski et al., 2017; Schnyder et al., 2017).

Sediments in the active lobe area had a fatty acid composition that closely matches that of the permanently submerged and recently exposed sediments from the Malebo Pool in terms of proportion of major components highlighting the remarkably good preservation of the terrestrial source signal in spite of the distance covered. Fatty acids are considered as relatively labile lipid biomarkers and undergo rapid degradation in the ocean. However, the degradation rate of each fatty acid depends on many factors including its chemical structure, the phase with which it is associated, and the exposure time to O_2 (Bianchi and Canuel, 2011). If the fatty acids exported by the Congo River undergo extensive degradation during their transport, one would expect a marked decrease of the OC-normalised concentrations from the source to the terminal depocenter (site C). This was not the case,

either suggesting that fatty acids are degraded at the same rate as total OC or that OM remineralisation is low. Furthermore, sediments from the lobe complex and those from the Malebo Pool had similar fatty acid profiles and comparable values of microbial degradation indices (UI, CPI and $ACL_{16–30}$), showing limited reprocessing during the 1135 km-length transit to the terminal lobe area. This lack of apparent reactivity may be attributed to the nature of the POM exported by the river, which is mostly associated to soils (Spencer et al., 2012). Fatty acids deriving from both plant materials and microorganisms are vulnerable to decomposition by microbial decomposers, but interactions with mineral surfaces and occlusion in soil aggregates may stabilize and protect them from degradation (Salmon et al., 2000; Lützow et al., 2006; Wakeham et al., 2009). Leaf plant waxes were shown to have a particularly high affinity for the inorganic matrix, higher than that of other plant markers such as lignin phenols (Feng et al., 2013). The interaction of leaf fatty acids with organo-mineral aggregates may limit their degradation and allow the export of pre-aged, but yet reactive, pools of OC.

The dynamic of sediment transfer in the Congo turbiditic system is another factor which may contribute to the preservation of fatty acids. Sediment transfer is non-linear with phases of deposition and erosion all along the canyon and the channel, but OM burial is always prevalent (Talling et al., 2022). The speed at which turbidity currents export the terrigenous particles to the terminal lobe area limits the exposure time to O_2 and allows the preservation of recent plant remains in the sediments with limited alteration of their structural lipid content (Schnyder et al., 2017, Talling et al., 2022).

4.2. Processes affecting fatty acid preservation

Fatty acid profiles were used to explore post-depositional processes involved with the preservation of these compounds in recent turbidites. To this aim, groups of samples with similar fatty acid composition were determined (Fig. 5) and related to the geochemical proxies determined concurrently from the same cores (Fig. 6). The sediment samples were partitioned into four distinct clusters, each characterised by different biomarker composition, geochemical properties and grain size distribution, providing clues on the factors affecting OM distribution and preservation in the distal reach of the Congo turbiditic system.

568 *4.2.1. Post-depositional oxic degradation*

569 When a turbidite settles in the deep ocean, oxygen from the overlying surface water diffuses in the
570 deposit until equilibrium is reached. This controls the evolution of the redox conditions and the extent
571 of oxic degradation (Wilson et al., 1985). Consequently, turbidites have been considered as an
572 interesting in situ model for the study of long term oxic degradation (de Lange, 1998; Hoefs et al.,
573 2002; Huguet et al., 2008), but this approach has not been applied to recent turbidite deposits, such as
574 those in the Congo terminal lobe complex where oxygen diffusion into the surface of the turbidite is
575 restricted to the first centimetre (Pozzato et al., 2017).

576 The nMDS ordination of the samples from the active lobe area confirms that surface sediments
577 (layers 0–0.5 and 0.5–1 cm in cluster 1) had a fatty acid composition distinct from that of the deeper
578 layers (Fig. 6). Higher BAFA contributions in the surface sediments are consistent with an enhanced
579 bacterial degradation near the benthic boundary layer where more electron acceptors are present,
580 especially O_2 (Emerson and Hedges, 2006), whereas lower contributions of MUFA and PUFA show
581 the preferential degradation of unsaturated compounds, which are more labile. These sediments were
582 also characterised by lower OC contents, consistent with increased degradation in oxic conditions, as
583 well as lower values of our amino acid and fatty acid-based proxies of OM quality (UI and DI)
584 indicative of a more advanced alteration of the OM. $\delta^{13}C$ values of bulk OC were also higher in the
585 surface sediments a trend also observed for many fatty acids (Supplementary Table S2). Diagenesis
586 might explain this positive isotopic shift and could be explained by the selective degradation of ^{13}C
587 depleted components, such as lipids (Sun et al., 2004; Pan et al., 2014). Sun et al. (2004) further
588 postulated that ^{13}C enrichment of fatty acids during decomposition could be attributed to the dissimilar
589 distribution of ^{13}C between carbon sites and the dominant decarboxylation pathway, which removes
590 the isotopically lighter carboxyl group, leading to higher $\delta^{13}C$ of the residual fatty acids. Surface
591 sediments collected at the entry of the terminal lobe complex (site A) were not clustered with the other
592 upper layers due to a higher contribution of PUFA. Nevertheless, there are also evidences of oxic
593 degradation at this site with (i) a decrease of the OC content by about one fourth between the non-
594 oxidised and the oxidised layers and (ii) lower values of the degradation index (DI) at the surface.

595 The particulate OM resuspended during turbidity events is strongly remineralised before settling on
596 the seafloor (Vangriesheim et al., 2009). The efficient degradation of the material resuspended by
597 turbidity currents and deposited in the fluffy layer was previously demonstrated in the Congo canyon-
598 levee system using alcohol biomarkers (Treignier et al., 2006). A decrease of 62% of the total *n*-
599 alcohols was observed between the material in suspension collected during the turbidite event and 9
600 months later in the surface sediment. To assess the extent of post-depositional degradation on fatty
601 acid concentration in the terminal lobe complex, we calculated preservation factors in a similar way as
602 described by Hoefs et al. (2002) (Table 6). The extent of degradation observed here for fatty acid
603 biomarkers was lower than in the study of Treignier et al. (2006), but only accounts for the oxic
604 degradation taking place in the first upper oxic layer after deposition of the turbidite, as no information
605 on the composition of the material in suspension during the last turbidite event was available. SCFA
606 decreased by 3 to 33% between the non-oxidised (3–5 cm) and the oxidised (0–0.5 cm) layers with
607 strong differences between individual fatty acids. Preservation factors for $C_{14:0}$ were constantly above
608 100%, suggesting post-depositional production of this compound in the oxic layer. MUFA and PUFA
609 were more extensively degraded than SCFA (>40%) apart in the channel at site A, which received
610 additional inputs of phytoplankton biomarkers. The level of alteration of the different fatty acid
611 subgroups followed their known level of resistance to oxidation, with higher plant biomarkers being
612 the less prone to degradation (Wakeham et al., 1997a). Preservation factors for most bacterial
613 biomarkers are higher than 100%, suggesting in situ production of these compounds by aerobic
614 heterotrophs. By contrast, preservation factors above 100% for certain LCFA biomarkers might be
615 indicative of plant detritus heterogeneous distribution (see section 4.2.2).
616 Oxic degradation appears as the principal process affecting fatty acid preservation in the terminal
617 lobe area, but is strictly restricted to the uppermost sediment layer (~ first centimeter), consistent with
618 the depth of oxygen penetration, which never exceeded 1.8 cm (Pozzato et al., 2017). In relict
619 turbidites from the Madeira abyssal plain, dissolved oxygen has been diffusing in sediments for
620 thousands of years, which explains the presence of a marked oxygen front separating OM-depleted
621 surface sediments and OM-well preserved deep sediments (Cowie et al., 1995; Prahl et al., 1997; de
622 Lange, 1998). In these deposits, 80% of the organic carbon and 50% of the nitrogen originally present

623 in the sediment have been degraded under oxic conditions (de Lange, 1998). By contrast, in the recent
624 lobe complex, even if mineralisation rates are exceptional for this depth (Rabouille et al., 2009), OM
625 loss remains limited to the surface sediments and burial clearly outweighs remineralisation processes:
626 ~ 12 to 35% of the OC initially deposited in the upper oxic layer is degraded.
627
628 *4.2.2. Deposition dynamics and lateral sorting*
629 A remarkable feature of the Congo turbidite system is the homogenous composition and
630 distribution of the OM in the channel-levee area and in the terminal lobe complex at different scales,
631 from the single turbiditic event to the entire lobe area (Baudin et al., 2010, 2017b; Stetten et al., 2015).
632 This apparent homogeneity may be explained by the predominant export of fine-grained particles by
633 the Congo River, which limits hydrodynamic sorting by the turbidity currents as well as by post-
634 depositional sediment reworking (Stetten et al., 2015; Baudin et al., 2017b). Multivariate analyses of
635 the fatty acid profiles nonetheless revealed site-differences in the distribution of terrestrial biomarkers,
636 which were related to subtle changes in sediment grain size: the layers 1 to 16 cm of the core collected
637 in the channel of site C were grouped in cluster 2, while the 16–22 cm layers were grouped in cluster 3
638 with the 5–7 and 19–22 cm layers of the other sites. High contributions of terrestrial plant biomarkers
639 (LCFA) and CPI values along with higher C/N ratios and a slightly coarser granulometry in cluster 3
640 are indicative of the preservation of plant detritus. In contrast, lower contributions of LCFA in
641 conjunction with lower ACL values and a higher proportion of clay in cluster 2 point to higher inputs
642 of soil-derived OM in the channel at site C.
643 The density/buoyancy sorting of particles that occurs along the active channel-levee system
644 (Schnyder et al., 2017) may explain the lower proportion of plant debris observed in the main
645 depositional area (channel at site C). Site C, located at the end of the feeding channel, is the terminal
646 depocenter of materials transported by the Congo canyon system (Babonneau et al., 2010; Dennielou
647 et al., 2017). Thus, this site mostly accumulates fine particles from soils, as plant debris form low
648 density aggregates that can be sorted upstream (Remusat et al., 2012; Cotrufo et al., 2015). High UI,
649 DI and OC content associated to these sediments further show the limited diagenetic changes
650 occurring in these anaerobic sediments and underline the good preservation of the OM in the terminal

depocenter. A mechanism often proposed to explain OM preservation is its strong association with the mineral matrix (Huguet et al., 2008). As stated earlier, OM is mainly associated with fine silty-clay minerals in the lobe sediments (Stetten et al., 2015). The labile compounds can be adsorbed on mesopores present on the surface of these small particles (Mayer, 1994), which protects the intrinsically labile OM from microbial enzymes (Wakeham and Canuel, 2006). The increased contribution of soils and the exceptionally high accumulation rates (up to 12 $cm.y^{-1}$ at site C; Stetten et al., 2015; Rabouille et al., 2017) very likely account for the higher preservation potential in the terminal depocenter. Besides, physical disturbance is certainly lower due to the loss of confinement, which limits sediment re-exposure to oxygen.

4.2.3. Past and actual influence of turbidity currents on the abandoned lobe

The terminal lobe complex of the Congo turbidite system has been formed by the successive progradation of the turbidite deposits. Site E corresponds to an older lobe, which got disconnected after the bifurcation to the south of the active channel between 4000 to 6000 years ago (Picot et al., 2016). Despite this, sediments in the active and abandoned lobes still share some common features. A high OC content compared to the surrounding abyssal plains of the equatorial Atlantic Ocean (Baudin et al., 2017a) and the presence of LCFA along with a BIT value ranging between 0.48 and 0.76 show the past and actual influence of the Congo channel-levee system on the abandoned lobe. Fig. 4b illustrates the changes in the proportion of land derived OM proxies (e.g. proportions of LCFA and terrestrial phytoclasts), reflecting the progressive shift from terrestrial inputs supplied by ancient turbidite events to the present-day hemipelagic sedimentation. The first 7 centimetres of this core formed a distinct cluster characterised by the absence of PUFA, lower MUFA content and higher contributions of SCFA (Fig. 5, cluster 4). These sediments are of marine origin as evidenced by their $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ signature, which was significantly higher than the mean $\delta^{13}C_{org}$ of all the samples (Stetten et al., 2015). The hypothesis of the hemipelagic origin of OM in the topmost layers of site E is strengthened by the higher $\delta^{13}C$ values of the fatty acids (Supplementary Table S2). This hemipelagic ooze consists in the sedimentation of marine particles with the admixture of terrigenous material originating from the dispersion and settling of the upper turbid plume of the turbidites deposited ~40 km to the south

679 and/or from the pelagic snow. These inputs explain the presence of terrestrial biomarkers in the
680 surface sediments of the abandoned site (this study and Méjanelle et al., 2017) as well as the
681 occurrence of terrestrial amorphous OM and plant debris (Stetten et al., 2015; Schnyder et al., 2017).
682 Higher OI and lower DI are furthermore associated with these layers, indicative of a strongly oxidised
683 OM (Table 1). This is consistent with the high penetration depth of oxygen (~6 cm on Fig. 4b, Pozzato
684 et al., 2017) and the low sedimentation rate at this site (Rabouille et al., 2017), which provide
685 favourable conditions for the intensive oxidation of the hemipelagic deposit.
686 Below a depth of 7 cm, sediments from the abandoned site displayed a fatty acid composition
687 similar to that of the surface sediments from the active lobe (cluster 1, Fig. 5), suggesting that they
688 correspond to ancient turbidite deposits. The clustering of these sediments with the oxic layers from
689 the active lobe shows that the OM has been subjected to some degradation, but the persistence of fatty
690 acids in these ancient turbidites over millennia is nonetheless remarkable. As already mentioned,
691 LCFA are associated to soil aggregates, mineral particles or plant remains consisting of relatively
692 recalcitrant substances such as lignin or cellulose and may thus be protected from microbial
693 degradation (Wakeham and Canuel, 2006). Such a good preservation of the fatty acid record suggests
694 the progressive burial of the older turbidite deposit under the predominantly hemipelagic
695 sedimentation without any significant reworking or redistribution of the sediments on the abyssal plain
696 over the past few millennia.
697
698 **5. Conclusion**
699 Sediment cores from the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan were investigated to
700 assess the potential of fatty acids as biomarkers of OM origin and processes affecting the composition
701 of the terrestrial material transported by turbidity currents during transit in the channel-levee system
702 and after deposition in the distal depositional area. Fatty acid profiles were interpreted in light of a
703 combination of selected geochemical proxies. Fig. 7 summarises the major outcomes from this study.
704 The close similarity of the molecular composition of sediments from the active lobe with that of
705 samples collected on land at the Malebo Pool suggests that (i) POM delivered by the Congo River is
706 primarily composed of soil-OM deriving from C3 plants, (ii) OM is subjected to limited recycling

during transit, and (iii) mixing of riverine inputs with material from the surrounding Angola margin is low. Yet, the unexpected occurrence of undegraded phytoplankton biomarkers at the entrance of the terminal lobe highlights that pelagic inputs deposited upstream in the active channel may be rapidly exported by turbidity currents. Site B located 10 km to the north of the active channel is characterised by lower sedimentation rates (0.3–0.4 $cm.y^{-1}$; Rabouille et al., 2017) and only receives material overflowing the levees of the feeding channel. This material is coarser but similar in composition to that deposited in the rest of the active lobe. In the abandoned lobe, located 40 km away from the active channel, the hemipelagic oozes still contain non negligible amounts of terrestrial biomarkers originating from the dispersion and settling of the particles suspended in the upper plume of the turbidity currents or in the surface plume, but these inputs are too low to influence the benthic communities (Olu et al., 2017).

LCFA were used to trace inputs from the Congo River at different time scales, from the turbidites recently deposited in the present-day active lobe to the millennial deposition in the remote abandoned lobe. Although changes in the composition of the material delivered by the Congo River cannot be ruled out, the good preservation of the LCFA in the ancient turbidites suggests a conservative behaviour.

The fatty acid data were combined with those of several geochemical proxies to gain more accurate insights into the processes affecting fatty acid distribution and preservation in the lobe complex. The preferential degradation of unsaturated fatty acids was reflected by the unsaturation index, while changes in the amino acid composition due to early diagenesis were apparent through the DI. Since about half of the total nitrogen is associated to proteinaceous material in lobe sediments (Pruski et al., 2017), DI values can be considered as representative of bulk OM biochemical alteration. This shows that even though fatty acids only represent ~0.5% of total OC, the extent of PUFA/MUFA oxidation can be used as an OM degradation proxy. However, while compositional changes in amino acid distribution are mostly due to diagenesis, fatty acid profiles are dependent both on OM sources and degradation processes and cannot be summed up in a univariate index. Detailed information can be obtained from the refined interpretation of fatty acid fingerprints, combined with the use of multivariate statistical tools. In the present study, such an approach revealed the different mobilisation

735 pathways for the OM associated to fine soil-derived particles and the coarser plant detritus, likely
736 related with the density/buoyancy sorting taking place in the turbidity currents and the resulting
737 selective delivery. Quantitative estimates of both the soil and plant terrestrial inputs in the Congo lobe
738 complex are still lacking, but the combination of fatty acid and glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraether
739 biomarkers offers promising perspectives to better deconvolute the soil-derived OM and the plant
740 debris signals.

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Captions

Fig. 1. (A) General bathymetric map showing the Congo deep-sea fan with its active channel, and (B) a EM12 Backscatter sonar image of the terminal part of the Congo deep-sea fan with location of the sampling sites: A, F, C and B are located in the recent lobe complex; E is located in an abandoned lobe complex. The orange box in A indicates the study area and the red box the location of the Malebo Pool at Kinshasa, whereas the dotted orange line in B shows the limit of the terminal lobe complex. Coordinates of sampling sites are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

Fig. 2: Fatty acid composition of Congo River sediments collected on land (Malebo Pool) and marine suspended POM recovered in surface waters above the terminal lobe complex. Results are expressed in percent of total fatty acids (N= 6 for Congo River sediments and 5 for suspended POM). The bold line represents median value, the box is the mid-spread (including the first and third quartiles), and the whiskers are the minimum and maximum values. Data beyond the end of the whiskers are outliers.

Fig. 3. OC-normalised fatty acid concentrations, cumulative biomarker contributions, and OC content (%) in the surface sediments from the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan (layer 0–0.5 cm) and on land at the Malebo Pool (layer 0–5 cm).

Fig. 4. Downcore evolution of bulk $\delta^{13}C$, fatty acid subgroup contributions and proportion of terrestrial phytoclasts in the sediment cores collected in (A) the channel at site C and (B) the abandoned site E. Values were plotted at the mid depth of the layer (11 layers for fatty acids and $\delta^{13}C$ values, 9 for palynofacies counts). Long chain fatty acids= LCFA, polyunsaturated fatty acids= PUFA, bacterial fatty acids= BAFA and monounsaturated fatty acids= MUFA. Palynofacies data are from Schnyder et al. (2017). The yellow area indicates the oxygen penetration depth (OPD), (Pozzato et al., 2017). Note the similar vertical distribution of LCFA and terrestrial phytoclasts at site E.

Fig. 5: Fatty acid-based hierarchical cluster analysis of sediments from the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan (A) and average composition of the 4 clusters (B). Bray-Curtis dissimilarity index and Ward's minimum variance linkage method were used for clustering. Average composition for each cluster is expressed as percentages of total fatty acids. Code for sediment samples is: AL (site A levee), AC (site A channel), CL (site C levee), CC (site C channel), B (site B), F (site F), and E (site E) followed by sediment layers from 0 for surface layer (0–0.5 cm) to 10 for the deepest sediment layer (19–22 cm).

Fig. 6: Non-metric multidimensional scaling (nMDS) ordination plot assessing the relationship between sites, sampling depths, fatty acid biomarkers, and sediment properties in the terminal lobe area of the Congo deep-sea fan (stress = 0.116). Code for sediment samples is: AL (site A levee), AC (site A channel), CL (site C levee), CC (site C channel), B (site B), and F (site F) followed by sediment layers from 0 for surface layer (0–0.5 cm) to 10 for the deepest sediment layer (19–22 cm).

The distance between samples indicates similarity of the fatty acid composition, i.e., the closer, the more similar. Environmental factors were fitted in the ordination plot as vectors, whereby the arrow indicates the direction of the increasing gradient of the environmental variable and the length of the arrow is proportional to the correlation coefficient between the variable and the nMDS ordination.

Fig. 7. Conceptual scheme summarising the principal outcomes of this study. Processes affecting marine and terrestrial organic matter during transit and after deposition in the terminal lobe area of the Congo deep-sea fan are presented. The blue box presents the different depositional scenarios in the recent and abandoned lobe complexes.

1186 Table 1. Principal descriptors used in this study with their interpretation.

Descriptors	Feature	Main diagnostic information	References
C/N	Source/Quality	Marine derived OM (6-9), Soil derived OM (8-20) and higher plants (>20)	1-3
$\delta^{13}C$	Source	POM Gulf of Guinea (–21‰), POM Congo River (–26.7 ± 0.4‰), Savannah soils (–26‰), C3 vascular plant from the Angola (–28.0 ± 1.8‰) and C4 vegetation (–13.6‰)	4-7
DI	Quality	Diagenetic alteration of OM with DI values ranging from −2.2 extensively degraded sediments to 1.5 for fresh algae	8
OI	Quality	Oxygen content of the OM	9
BIT index	Source	Proxie of soil OM with values of 0.91 ± 0.14 for Congo soils and 0.04 for marine OM	10–11
Fatty acids			
SCFA	Source	Mixed origin, but shorter chains predominate in phytoplankton	12–13
LCFA	Source	Terrestrial higher plants, macrodetritus	14
PUFA: 18:2ω6 and 18:3ω3	Source	Terrestrial higher plants (>2.5%)	16–17
PUFA: all except 18:2ω6 and 18:3ω3	Source/Quality	Phytoplankton with $C_{20:5\omega3}$ specific of diatoms and $C_{22:6\omega3}$ specific of dinoflagellates	12,18
MUFA	Source	Mixed origin with $C_{16:1\omega7}$ common in diatoms and bacteria and $C_{18:1\omega7}$ abundant in bacteria	12–13
BAFA	Source	Bacterial sources: Includes odd saturated ($C_{15:0}$, $C_{17:0}$), branched (iC_{15}, iC_{17} , $aiC_{15,}$ aiC_{17}), and ß-hydroxylated fatty acids	13
UI	Quality	OM degradation (<70 old detrital matter)	19
CPI	Source/Quality	Expected to decrease with ongoing degradation (in soils <10 degraded OM)	20
ACL	Source/Quality	Expected to increase with ongoing degradation, higher in plant tissues than in microorganisms or aquatic plants	21–22

1187

1188 1: Moloney and Field (1991), 2: Hedges and Oades (1997), 3: Meyers (1997), 4: Badewien et al. (2015), 5: Delègue et al. (2001), 6: Fischer et al. (1998), 7: Powers

and Schlesinger (2002), 8: Dauwe et al. (1999), 9: Espitalié et al. (1985), 10: Weijers et al. (2006), 11: Schouten et al. (2013), 12: Dunstan et al. (1994), 13: Bianchi and Canuel (2011), 14: Eglinton and Hamilton (1967), 15: Volkman et al. (1989), 16: Budge et al. (2001), 17: Pruski et al. (2015), 18: Volkman et al. (1998), 19: Claustre et al. (1992), 20: Angst et al. (2016), 21: Wiesenberg et al. (2010), 22: Wang and Liu (2012).

Table 2: Geochemical and sedimentological properties of the sediments from the terminal lobe complex of the Congo deep-sea fan. Organic carbon (OC), C/N (molar ratio), isotopic value of stable carbon ($\delta^{13}C$), isotopic value of stable nitrogen ($\delta^{15}N$), oxygen index (OI), Dauwe's degradation index (DI), and percentages of clay, silt and sand. The mean, lowest and highest values measured for each core are given. N=4, except for C channel and E abandoned where N= 11. Data are from Stetten et al. (2015), except for OI (Baudin et al., 2017b) and DI (Pruski et al., 2017).

Site	**OC %**			**C/N molar**			**$\delta^{13}C$ ‰**			**$\delta^{15}N$ ‰**			**OI mg CO_2/g OC**		
	mean	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**
A channel	**3.0**	2.7	3.7	**16.9**	15.3	18.2	**-26.5**	-26.8	-26.1	**5.4**	4.7	6.2	**280.5**	269	295
A levee	**3.0**	2.7	3.5	**16.6**	14.5	19.9	**-26.2**	-26.7	-25.7	**5.5**	4.6	5.9	**301.8**	262	324
F levee	**2.8**	2.4	3.4	**15.7**	14.0	16.7	**-25.9**	-26.3	-25.2	**5.4**	5.2	5.6	**288.3**	278	305
C channel	**3.8**	3.2	4.1	**15.6**	14.7	17.1	**-26.9**	-27.1	-26.5	**5.3**	4.7	5.8	**275.0**	258	292
C levee	**2.9**	2.2	3.4	**15.0**	13.9	15.8	**-26.4**	-26.6	-26.1	**4.9**	4.7	5.0	**304.3**	276	323
B	**2.6**	2.2	2.9	**17.4**	14.1	22.5	**-25.9**	-26.4	-25.3	**5.3**	4.8	5.9	**265.0**	244	295
E abandoned 0-7cm	**0.8**	0.7	0.9	**11.4**	11.0	11.7	**-23.2**	-23.9	-22.8	**7.8**	7.1	8.2	**499.7**	447	609
E abandoned 7-22cm	**1.9**	1.2	2.8	**14.0**	12.3	15.9	**-25.4**	-26.9	-24.1	**6.4**	6.3	6.6	**231.0**	200	270

DI			Clay %			Silt %			Sand %		
mean	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**	**mean**	**min**	**max**
-0.2	-0.42	-0.08	**19.4**	14.8	22.4	**75.6**	73.2	77.9	**4.8**	2.5	7.3
-0.1	-0.40	0.18	**17.0**	12.5	20.1	**73.7**	70.2	77.1	**9.4**	4.5	15.6
-0.2	-0.32	0.15	**20.1**	15.5	22.0	**75.7**	73.8	78.1	**4.3**	0.8	8.3
0.1	-0.41	0.61	**23.0**	20.0	26.0	**71.2**	69.2	73.5	**5.6**	2.1	10.4
-0.1	-0.36	0.22	**26.6**	25.4	28.1	**72.4**	70.7	74.2	**0.9**	0.3	2.7
16.5	-0.39	0.15	**76.3**	14.8	18.9	**7.1**	74.5	78.5	**-0.1**	5.7	9.0
-1.1	-1.39	-0.87	**24.4**	17.7	30.9	**71.7**	68.2	74.2	**3.6**	0.9	8.8
-0.1	-0.52	0.24	**26.6**	23.9	31.1	**71.1**	67.3	73.8	**2.3**	1.6	2.7

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Table 3: BIT index values calculated for surface and deep horizons of sediments sampled from the terminal lobe complex. 0–1 cm layers were obtained by pooling the 0–0.5 cm and 0.5–1 cm horizons.

	Present-day active lobe complex						Northern lobe complex
Sediment layer	**A channel**	**A levee**	**F levee**	**C channel**	**C levee**	**B**	**E abandoned**
0-1 cm	0.75	0.76	0.76	0.83	0.81	0.78	0.48
19-22 cm	0.84	0.84	0.83	0.84	0.84	0.82	0.76

1211 Table 4: Fatty acid composition and concentrations in sediments from the terminal lobe complex of the
1212 Congo deep-sea fan. Data are expressed as percentages of total fatty acid concentrations, and concentrations
1213 are in $\mu g.g^{-1}$ dw and $\mu g.g^{-1}$ OC. Minor compounds (<1%) are not included. Fatty acids are grouped in five
1214 categories: short chain saturated fatty acids (SCFA), long chain saturated fatty acids (LCFA),
1215 monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA), polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and bacterial fatty acids (BAFA).
1216 UI: unsaturation index, CPI: carbon preference index, $ACL_{16–30}$: average chain length calculated for saturated
1217 fatty acids in the range C_{16}–C_{30}, nd: not determined.
1218

Site	A levee				A channel				F levee			
Horizon (cm)	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**
$C_{14:0}$	6.1	5.5	3.9	3.8	5.6	5.4	4.1	3.7	5.9	5.0	5.3	4.8
$C_{16:0}$	17.3	16.2	14.9	16.1	16.3	15.4	17.9	15.3	16.4	15.5	18.7	17.7
$C_{18:0}$	5.5	5.7	4.4	5.6	5.2	5.2	5.8	5.2	5.4	5.3	6.7	6.0
$C_{20:0}$	3.4	3.9	3.8	4.7	3.4	3.4	4.4	3.9	3.7	4.1	4.8	4.3
$C_{21:0}$	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.5
$C_{22:0}$	5.5	6.2	4.9	8.1	5.1	5.4	7.2	6.9	6.3	6.6	7.6	7.1
$C_{23:0}$	1.2	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.8	1.5
ΣSCFA	**41.4**	**42.2**	**35.7**	**42.3**	**39.5**	**38.8**	**43.4**	**38.7**	**42.3**	**41.3**	**47.9**	**44.2**
$C_{24:0}$	8.5	9.9	7.8	15.4	7.9	8.8	12.0	12.8	10.1	11.0	11.4	12.3
$C_{26:0}$	7.5	8.2	21.2	10.2	6.5	7.5	8.3	9.5	9.0	9.8	6.2	9.9
$C_{28:0}$	6.7	8.5	2.9	6.3	6.5	7.4	5.8	7.3	9.3	9.3	6.4	7.0
$C_{30:0}$	5.7	7.2	7.5	3.7	5.5	6.4	6.1	8.7	8.1	8.6	5.3	5.7
ΣLCFA	**28.4**	**33.8**	**39.4**	**35.5**	**26.4**	**30.0**	**32.3**	**38.4**	**36.6**	**38.7**	**29.3**	**34.9**
$C_{16:1\omega7}$	3.2	1.7	2.1	2.1	4.4	3.2	3.1	2.6	1.2	1.3	3.3	2.2
$C_{18:1\omega9\ cis}$	1.6	0.7	2.7	3.6	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.8	0.7	0.5	1.6	2.5
$C_{18:1\omega7}$	2.8	1.2	3.4	2.5	4.3	3.1	3.7	2.7	0.4	0.5	2.8	2.2
$C_{20:1\omega9}$	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2
ΣMUFA	**7.7**	**3.6**	**8.6**	**8.6**	**11.7**	**9.2**	**9.7**	**8.5**	**2.3**	**2.3**	**7.9**	**7.1**
$C_{18:2\omega6\ cis}$	0.2	0.0	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.4
$C_{20:4\omega6}$	0.5	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1
$C_{20:5\omega3}$	0.7	0.1	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2
$C_{22:6\omega3}$	0.7	0.0	nd	nd	1.0	0.8	nd	nd	0.0	0.0	nd	nd
ΣPUFA	**2.1**	**0.1**	**1.7**	**1.6**	**2.9**	**2.4**	**1.5**	**1.3**	**0.0**	**0.0**	**0.6**	**0.7**
$C_{15:0}$	1.7	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.0	1.6	1.5	1.3	1.1
$C_{17:0}$	1.4	1.3	1.1	1.0	1.4	1.3	1.1	1.0	1.6	1.3	1.2	1.0
3-OH-C_{12}	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.6	0.9	1.0	0.3	0.5	1.0	0.9	0.4	0.3
3-OH-C_{14}	5.1	5.8	3.3	3.1	5.0	5.1	1.9	3.5	4.9	5.0	1.9	2.3
i $C_{14:0}$	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.8	1.2	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.1
i $C_{15:0}$	4.4	4.3	3.3	2.6	4.2	4.1	3.3	2.7	3.6	3.4	3.3	3.0
ai $C_{15:0}$	2.2	2.0	1.7	0.6	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.4	2.1	1.8	2.0	1.6
i $C_{16:0}$	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.2	1.6	1.7	1.3	1.1	1.7	1.5	1.4	1.2
i $C_{17:0}$	1.7	1.6	1.3	1.1	1.6	1.7	1.3	1.0	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.3
ΣBAFA	**20.4**	**20.3**	**14.6**	**12.0**	**19.5**	**19.5**	**13.1**	**13.1**	**18.9**	**17.7**	**14.3**	**13.0**
Tot FAs ($\mu g.g^{-1}dw$)	133.7	133.6	173.3	115.3	135.5	145.4	128.3	149.4	129.4	130.7	116.9	137.3
Tot FAs ($mg.g^{-1}OC$)	5.0	4.8	4.9	3.7	5.1	5.4	3.5	5.0	5.2	5.5	3.7	4.1
UI	17.9	4.1	14.1	12.9	25.6	20.9	15.0	12.7	2.7	2.4	10.0	9.2
CPI	13.4	13.5	16.1	17.5	13.1	13.2	15.8	17.5	13.3	13.7	13.6	16.7
$ACL_{(16–30)}$	22.0	22.5	22.9	22.1	22.0	22.4	22.0	22.8	22.7	22.9	21.7	22.2

C levee				C channel				B				E abandoned			
0-0.5	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**	**0-0.5**	**0.5-1**	**5-7**	**19-22**
6.2	5.6	4.3	5.7	6.1	5.7	5.4	4.4	6.4	6.0	3.7	5.1	10.5	11.0	8.4	4.8
17.4	17.3	16.2	19.9	18.4	18.1	23.1	19.7	18.4	18.5	13.9	19.3	25.6	29.2	18.3	16.4
6.8	7.3	5.5	6.9	6.5	7.0	5.9	5.2	5.9	6.3	4.7	7.1	7.1	8.4	6.9	7.1
4.3	4.3	4.0	4.8	4.7	4.9	3.7	3.6	4.3	4.6	3.9	5.9	3.2	3.1	3.6	4.8
0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	1.0	0.6
6.4	6.5	6.5	6.9	7.0	7.9	5.0	5.1	7.1	7.3	6.1	7.5	5.0	5.0	5.7	9.3
1.6	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.8	1.1	1.3	1.7	1.8	1.4	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.8	1.9
47.3	**47.2**	**40.6**	**48.7**	**47.8**	**48.8**	**47.1**	**42.1**	**46.5**	**47.9**	**36.2**	**49.7**	**58.3**	**60.2**	**48.2**	**45.8**
9.1	9.7	11.8	11.5	9.7	11.2	5.2	11.9	10.9	10.8	26.8	11.1	5.9	5.5	8.3	13.4
6.4	6.7	8.5	7.7	7.2	7.1	4.1	5.7	8.4	8.2	6.9	6.8	4.9	5.0	7.8	11.5
5.6	6.0	6.7	4.1	5.4	4.9	3.6	4.9	6.6	6.3	4.3	4.4	2.5	2.4	6.6	9.4
4.3	3.2	5.7	4.3	3.6	3.9	3.1	4.1	4.6	3.5	2.9	2.9	1.8	0.0	6.8	5.2
25.4	**25.6**	**32.7**	**27.7**	**26.0**	**27.1**	**15.9**	**26.6**	**30.5**	**28.8**	**40.9**	**25.2**	**15.1**	**12.8**	**29.6**	**39.5**
1.8	1.8	3.3	3.1	1.8	1.2	4.3	3.4	1.2	1.2	2.5	2.7	1.1	1.2	1.4	0.8
1.0	1.3	2.5	1.5	1.3	0.8	4.2	3.4	0.6	0.5	2.8	3.1	0.1	0.0	nd	1.5
1.5	1.8	3.8	2.2	1.3	1.0	5.0	4.0	0.6	0.5	2.6	2.3	0.0	0.0	nd	0.5
0.0	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.0	nd	nd
4.3	**4.9**	**10.0**	**7.0**	**4.4**	**3.1**	**13.7**	**10.9**	**2.4**	**2.3**	**8.2**	**8.4**	**1.2**	**1.2**	**1.4**	**2.8**
0.1	0.1	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.0	1.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.5	0.0	0.0	nd	0.2
0.1	0.1	0.3	nd	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.2	nd	0.0	0.0	nd	nd
0.3	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.6	0.4	0.0	0.0	nd	nd	0.0	0.0	nd	nd
0.2	0.1	nd	nd	0.0	0.0	nd	nd	0.0	0.0	0.5	nd	0.0	0.0	nd	nd
0.8	**0.6**	**1.6**	**0.5**	**0.3**	**0.0**	**1.9**	**1.6**	**0.0**	**0.0**	**1.5**	**0.5**	**0.0**	**0.0**	**0.0**	**0.2**
1.7	1.6	1.1	1.6	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.7	1.6	1.0	1.4	2.2	2.8	2.0	1.1
2.4	2.3	1.1	1.4	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.0	1.3	3.8	1.6	1.7	1.1
1.1	1.2	0.6	0.3	1.2	1.1	0.8	0.8	1.1	1.0	0.6	0.4	0.8	0.0	nd	nd
6.0	6.4	3.9	1.4	6.4	6.5	5.2	4.5	5.9	5.8	2.7	3.2	5.7	5.9	6.3	4.0
1.1	1.1	1.0	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.6	1.5	0.9	1.1	0.8	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.5	0.9
4.0	3.8	3.3	4.4	4.0	4.1	4.6	4.0	4.0	4.1	2.6	3.1	4.3	5.3	3.7	2.0
2.0	1.8	1.6	2.1	1.9	1.8	2.3	2.0	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.5	3.9	4.9	3.5	1.0
1.8	1.8	1.3	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.8	1.1	1.4	2.3	2.9	1.4	1.1
1.9	1.7	1.3	1.9	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.9	1.1	1.4	1.3	1.1	0.8	0.4
22.3	**21.7**	**15.2**	**16.1**	**21.5**	**21.0**	**21.3**	**18.8**	**20.6**	**21.1**	**13.1**	**16.1**	**25.5**	**25.8**	**20.9**	**11.7**
121.0	140.2	143.3	126.7	133.5	133.0	191.2	210.6	109.1	102.5	168.3	95.5	56.1	38.5	36.8	93.1
5.6	5.3	4.3	3.7	4.1	3.6	5.1	5.3	5.0	4.2	6.0	3.3	6.2	4.4	4.9	3.3
8.0	7.7	15.5	8.5	5.9	3.1	20.0	15.9	2.4	2.3	14.5	9.9	1.2	1.2	1.4	3.1
9.9	10.2	15.3	12.9	11.8	12.1	12.3	13.7	12.8	11.9	17.3	13.5	8.4	10.7	10.2	16.7
21.5	21.4	22.2	21.3	21.4	21.5	20.2	21.4	21.8	21.6	22.3	21.1	19.7	19.1	22.0	22.4

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Table 5: Environmental fitting significance and correlation with nMDS axes of the main geochemical properties. Significant variables are indicated in bold, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.001.

Parameter	nMDS1	nMDS2	r2	p value	
UI	0.98	0.22	0.89	0.001	***
CPI	-0.15	0.99	0.78	0.001	***
ACL	-0.59	0.81	0.63	0.001	***
$\delta^{13}C$	-0.98	-0.19	0.59	0.001	***
DI	0.96	0.27	0.47	0.001	***
OC	1	0.02	0.42	0.001	***
C/N	0.13	0.99	0.4	0.002	**
Silt	-0.62	0.78	0.24	0.019	*
Clay	0.55	-0.84	0.19	0.047	*
$\delta^{15}N$	-0.33	-0.94	0.17	0.073	
OI	-0.31	0.95	0.11	0.199	
Sand	-0.32	0.95	0.03	0.675	

Table 6. Preservation factors (Pf in %) for fatty acids in turbidites from the terminal lobe area of the Congo deep-sea fan. Values are mean for the specific compound class and, between brackets, minimal and maximal Pf within the compound class.

	SCFA	LCFA	MUFA	PUFA*	BAFA
Site A channel	95.1 (73.9-144.0)	86.6 (69.7-118.6)	126.1 (104.5-151.5)	210.8	157.3 (124.9-331.5)
Site A levee	75.9 (54.7-101.5)	75.6 (49.8-150.6)	60.4 (38.7-99.2)	78.8	90.8 (70.0-102.9)
Site C channel	70.2 (55.8-98.1)	114.0 (82.2-131.0)	22.6 (18.5-28.5)	10.4	72.1 (53.8-105.1)
Site C levee	95.8 (83.8-124.1)	66.5 (63.6-71.1)	38.4 (33.4-46.6)	42.7	126.0 (94.1-192.4)
Site F	96.6 (85.4-121.8)	137.8 (98.2-167.5)	32.6 (16.8-46.5)	0.0	145.1 (74.8-292.3)
Site B	66.6 (56.2-89.5)	75.5 (61.7-84.2)	15.4 (10.2-25.5)	0.0	80.8 (55.5-113.4)

Preservation factors were calculated according to Hoefs et al. (2002), but only considered the first unoxidised layer (3–5 cm), as the layer 19–22 cm tended to be coarser which affected the OM content.

$Pf = \frac{[C_{0-0.5cm}]}{[C_{3-5cm}]} \times 100$ where Pf: preservation factor and [C]: concentration of specific biomarker in $\mu g.g^{-1}$ dry sediments.

Pf below 100% are signs of oxic degradation, whereas values above 100% are indicative of a post-depositional enrichment.

* Due to low concentrations Pf were calculated on the sum of all PUFA.