Possible link between Earth’s rotation rate and oxygenation

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The rise of free oxygen (O₂) in the Earth’s atmosphere and oceans enabled the evolution of aerobic life. Oxygenic photosynthesis (OP) in microbial mats was a substantial source of O₂ for the Great Oxidation Event (GOE) ~2.4 billion years ago (Ga), during the stable low-O₂ conditions that followed and for the Neoproterozoic Oxidation Event (NOE) ~600 Ma (ref. 1). The biological4,5, tectonic3 and geochemical6,7 mechanisms that determined this stepwise pattern of oxygenation are still debated. Here we explore a previously unconsidered link between Earth’s oxygenation pattern and rotation rate, which decelerated over geological time due to Earth’s rotation period is 24 hours at present, but may have been as low as 6 hours at ages older than 4 Ga (refs 8,9,10). Thus, daylength could plausibly have influenced Earth’s oxygenation, particularly around key oxidation events, and thus enhanced the diel organic carbon (C(org)) burial.

We developed a modelled understanding of this interaction and first explored the implications for the export fluxes of the photosynthetic product O₂. Our modelling framework11 formulates benthic ecosystems as diffusive–reactive systems with OP, anoxygenic photosynthesis (AP), aerobic respiration (R_aer), sulfate reduction (anaerobic respiration (R_so)) and abiotic sulfide oxidation (SOX) (Extended Data Fig. 1 and Supplementary Video 1). Starting with a simple in silico mat with only OP and R_aer, simulations with the same rate of GPP showed that longer days yield higher export fluxes, that is, an increase in O₂ escape to the overlying water (Fig. 1a,b). The mechanism behind this relationship is apparent in the duration between the maxima of gross O₂ production and the net production rate, equivalent to diel C(org) burial, is the result of this GPP and the rate of C(org) consumption. As opposed to GPP, the net production of benthic ecosystems is expected to be influenced by changes in the illumination dynamics. In such systems, rates of net productivity are not only shaped by the instantaneous photon flux, but also by fluxes of metabolic substrates and products, which are governed by molecular diffusion. Thus, import, export and accumulation of metabolites should be sensitive to daylength due to the interaction between illumination dynamics and diffusive mass transfer.

We then investigated the remarkable similarity between the timing and pattern of increase in atmospheric O₂, (pO₂ as a fraction of the present atmospheric level (PAL)) and daylength. We found that increases in daylength could plausibly have influenced Earth’s photosynthesis, particularly around key oxidation events, and thus helped to pave the way for the evolution of plants and animals of the modern world.

Longer days increase net benthic O₂ export fluxes

Earth’s rotation period is 24 hours at present, but may have been as low as 6 hours at ages older than 4 Ga (refs 8,9,10). Thus, daylength (that is, one rotational or diel period) and the illumination period may have increased more than threefold since the evolutionary origin of photosynthesis. This implies that the dynamics of illumination (rate of increase and decrease) within the diel period changed substantially. The rate of gross photosynthetic production (GPP) is governed by the instantaneous photon flux, irrespective of illumination dynamics and daylength. The net production rate, equivalent to diel C(org) burial, is the result of this GPP and the rate of C(org) consumption. As opposed to GPP, the net production of benthic ecosystems is expected to be influenced by changes in the illumination dynamics. In such systems, rates of net productivity are not only shaped by the instantaneous photon flux, but also by fluxes of metabolic substrates and products, which are governed by molecular diffusion. Thus, import, export and accumulation of metabolites should be sensitive to daylength due to the interaction between illumination dynamics and diffusive mass transfer.

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Corg that escapes Raero and thus decreases remineralization efficiency (Fig. 1b). Consequently, daylength interacts with the net productivity of benthic systems, which relates to the short-term (that is, diel) Corg excess, and possibly the long-term Corg burial rate, a crucial determinant for the state of global \( pO_2 \) (refs 1,14). Overall, although GPP rates are unaffected by changes in daylength, Corg burial is modulated through the physics of molecular diffusion.

Daylength increases \( O_2 \) export more than reductant export

A more realistic scenario includes \( R_{anaero} \) as an additional sink of Corg, which we implemented in the form of sulfate reduction. Conceptually, sulfate and sulfide, the substrate and product, respectively, can be exchanged with any other redox couple, such as Fe(III)/Fe(II). We focus on the sulfur cycle because of the early evolutionary onset of sulfate reduction15 and because sulfide was transiently abundant in Precambrian coastal habitats16. We first chose a mat scenario with the \( R_{anaero} \) rate fixed to a constant value, to isolate the effect of daylength on diffusion-driven dynamics of sulfide export (Fig. 1c). Like \( O_2 \) fluxes, the reductant export fluxes are shaped by molecular diffusion and rates of production and consumption within the mat (\( R_{anaero} \) and SOX). The latter is an additional sink of \( O_2 \) and is thus competitive with Raero. Consequently, the Corg that escapes both anaerobic and aerobic remineralization can be represented as the difference between the \( O_2 \) and \( H_2S \) export fluxes (Fig. 1c,d and Extended Data Fig. 1). As both fluxes increase with daylength, the rates of SOX decrease. Owing to this moderating

Fig. 1 | Modelled temporal evolution of gross \( O_2 \) production, \( O_2 \) and \( H_2S \) export, and diel averages for Corg respiration and burial compared for 12 h versus 24 h daylengths. a, Depth-integrated gross \( O_2 \) production (\( \int O_{2, \text{OP}} \), grey fill) in a pure \( O_2 \) system (\( \text{OP no } \) \( H_2S \)) under a water column with 25 µM \( O_2 \) (\( pO_2 = 0.1 \)) is identical for the two daylengths with the time of day viewed as a fraction of the diel period. However, the diel fraction during which export is tempered by mass transfer, illustrated by the duration between the maxima of photosynthesis (black dotted line) and export (blue and orange dotted lines), is sensitive to daylength. b, As longer days export more \( O_2 \), less \( O_2 \) is available for aerobic respiration (\( \int R_{aero} \)) in the mat, and therefore the burial of Corg increases with daylength. c, In the presence of anaerobic respiration by sulfur-reducing bacteria, both \( O_2 \) and \( H_2S \) export fluxes are modulated by daylength, even though the gross photosynthesis and sulfide production by anaerobic respiration are independent of the illumination dynamics in this simulation (‘\( \text{OP SRB constant} \’)). d, The diel Corg burial flux is defined here as the photosynthetically produced Corg that escapes both aerobic and anaerobic respiration (\( \int O_{2, \text{OP}} - \int R_{aero} - \int R_{anaero} \)) and equals the difference between the export budgets of \( O_2 \) and \( H_2S \) (shown in Corg equivalents). The decrease of \( \int R_{aero} \) compared with the diel budget in b is due to abiotic sulfide oxidation (SOX), an alternative sink of \( O_2 \). As \( \int R_{anaero} \) is set to be constant, the overall effect remains: mats export more \( O_2 \) and retain more Corg in longer days.
Fig. 2 | Daylength dependence of benthic diel O₂ export and C_{org} burial fluxes under various metabolic and boundary conditions. The effect of daylength is explored for mats with different metabolic repertoires across a range of O₂ boundary conditions (0–1 μmol h⁻¹ m⁻²) (Extended Data Figs. 3 and 5). a, O₂ export fluxes consistently increase across all the metabolic scenarios and boundary conditions. Measured O₂ export from cyanobacterial mats with chemosynthetic competition (‘MIS empirical’) provides empirical confirmation of the dependency of fluxes on daylength. b, Owing to the O₂ export flux modulation, the diel C_{org} burial also consistently increases with daylength despite the counteracting effect of an increasing H₂S export for scenarios with R_{anaero} (Fig. 1). Fluxes are shown relative to the values of each scenario at 18 h, which corresponds to daylength before the GOE. Metabolic scenarios explored were: purely aerobic systems with only OP and no R_{anaero} (‘OP no H₂S’), systems with constant R_{anaero} that is not affected by changing diel illumination dynamics (‘OP SRB constant’), systems with metabolically complex R_{anaero} that responds to local changes in O₂ and sulfide, which are governed by illumination dynamics (‘OP SRB’), and mat systems with both AP and OP (‘OP SRB + AP’). Systems with sulfide-inhibited OP exhibited a steepness of daylength dependency out of scale, and are shown in Extended Data Fig. 8. For the R_{anaero} scenario with a modest inhibition by O₂ and H₂S (‘OP SRB’), we additionally explored a wide range of plausible GPP levels (‘OP SRB net production’). Notably, the effect of variations in GPP on burial is less pronounced than that on O₂ export.

effect of SOX, R_{anaero} is less sensitive to daylength than it is in a reductant-free scenario. The effect of an increased O₂ export on the diel C_{org} burial rate is therefore counteracted, but not overwhelmed, by concomitant increases in H₂S export (Fig. 1d). To further explore if the increase of diel C_{org} burial is maintained when R_{anaero} is affected by local solute dynamics, we implemented sulfate-reducing bacteria (SRB) that are inhibited by O₂ and H₂S, as observed in modern mats17–19. Across a range of inhibition strengths, diel C_{org} burial consistently increases with daylength (Fig. 2 and Extended Data Fig. 3).

Given that the Earth’s redox landscape changed along with daylength through geological time, we studied the sensitivity of daylength-driven diel C_{org} burial to reductant and O₂ availability in the water column. Diel O₂ export and C_{org} burial fluxes increased with daylength across all O₂ boundary conditions (Fig. 2). Increasing O₂ in the water column had a strong enhancing effect on R_{anaero} and negative effect on O₂ export fluxes. For the diel C_{org} burial rate, determined by both R_{anaero} and R_{anaero} the effect of O₂ levels in the water column was variable (Extended Data Fig. 3). Depending on the inhibition strength of O₂ on R_{anaero}, C_{org} burial either increases or decreases with the O₂ boundary conditions. Given that R_{anaero} is O₂ sensitive, the negative impact of pO₂ is overwhelmed by the positive effect of daylength enhancing diel benthic C_{org} burial over Earth’s history.

To explore the interactions between reductant availability and C_{org} burial with daylength, we also included AP using H₂S as an electron donor that competes with OP for the contribution to GPP based on mat-intrinsic reductant and light levels20 (Extended Data Fig. 4). With AP present in mats, the fraction of the day that exports O₂ is reduced for shorter daylengths because of the time required for AP to deplete the local sulfide concentration below the thresholds that allow OP to occur (Extended Data Fig. 5). Although the total GPP (AP + OP) is unaffected by daylength, the fraction of the day during which O₂ is produced decreases markedly with daylength. Concomitantly, R_{anaero} decreases with daylength due to the increasing inhibition by O₂. Although counterintuitive, R_{anaero} decreases with daylength because SOX becomes more competitive for O₂ due to the increasing fractions of the day with O₂ production. Consequently, across a range of sulfide and O₂ levels in the overlying water, we found that the C_{org} burial of systems with AP is more steeply modulated by daylength compared with that for communities with only OP (Fig. 2). Interestingly, the dependency of the diel C_{org} burial on the reductant boundary condition was negligible compared to that on daylength. Therefore, the metabolic repertoire, rather than the water column redox conditions, shapes the response of benthic systems to daylength in terms of diel C_{org} burial.

Overall, we show that the net productivity, that is, the short-term C_{org} burial of benthic ecosystems, and thus a crucial determinant of the source strength for global pO₂, can increase with daylength over Earth’s age without assuming a decrease in the global O₂ sink strength or an increase in GPP. However, the range of global GPP probably varied substantially, for example, due to new evolutionary avenues of primary production21, redox and phosphate oscillations related to weathering during the ‘boring billion’ years, continental reconfiguration22, long-term changes in insolation23 or even daylength-related changes in ocean circulation and nutrient supply by upwelling24. We therefore evaluated the sensitivity of daylength-driven increases in benthic O₂ export to the rates of GPP. As expected, O₂ export displays a steep dependency on GPP, but daylength-driven changes in C_{org} burial are substantially less sensitive to GPP (Fig. 2). This implies that the areal coverage of benthic habitats rather than the evolution of GPP by the inhabitants is of greatest relevance for daylength-driven effects.

Empirical verification of the daylength effect
To reify the concept of export fluxes being modulated by daylength, we measured rates of photosynthesis and O₂ export in cyanobacterial mats from the Middle Island Sinkhole (MIS), an extant analogue of Proterozoic mats under low-O₂ conditions25. Net O₂ production consistently occurred only after extended exposure time to light (Fig. 3a). White sulfur-oxidizing bacteria (SOB) atop the mat during night and morning reduced the light availability for photosynthesis26. The cyanobacteria exclusively performed AP, and thereby...
depleted the sulfide underneath the SOB layer (Fig. 3b,c). The sudden onset of O2 production during the phase of high light in the early afternoon (Fig. 3d) coincided with the downward migration of the light-reflecting white SOB, which was probably induced by depletion of sulfide by cyanobacterial AP (Extended Data Fig. 6a). This migration was triggered only after an additional lag of 1–8 hours after sulfide depletion, depending on the O2 and sulfide levels in the overlying water (Extended Data Fig. 6b). The ensuing exposure of cyanobacteria to a higher photon flux at the mat surface resulted in high rates of OP and AP and the onset of net O2 export. As the vertical structure of the mat persisted during subsequent lower light intensities, rates of both OP and AP remained high (Fig. 3e).
The chemosynthetic SOB modulated the locally availability of light for cyanobacteria and caused delayed O₂ production, which implies a strong effect of daylength on the net O₂ export from mats that host competitive photosynthetic and chemosynthetic communities. We assessed this prediction by measuring the net O₂ production in these mats during different daylengths simulated in the laboratory under low O₂ conditions (Figs. 2a and 3f, and Extended Data Fig. 7). For daylengths of <12 hours, no O₂ was produced and the mats were a net sink for O₂. For a daylength of 16 hours (that is, late Archean) and longer, a net diel O₂ export occurred, with 21 hour (late Proterozoic) and 24 hour daylengths exporting two and three times, respectively, more O₂ than 16 hour one.

Although similar competitive effects have been observed in other extant mat systems²⁶, the applicability of these analogues to Precambrian mats is uncertain. However, several other mechanisms also result in a delayed O₂ production due to a dramatic variation of the redox conditions in microbial mats within diel timescales. Some microbial groups are equipped with mechanisms to regulate or delay the onset of certain metabolic processes²⁶,²⁷,²⁹. Similar to the MIS mat, the implementation of a delayed recovery of OP after exposure to sulfide²⁷ in our modelled mat showed that GPP and C₉₂ decreased sharply with decreasing daylength (Extended Data Fig. 8). Overall, the combined effect of mass transfer limitation, metabolic regulation and whole-community interactions in living microbial mats strengthens the dependency of O₂ export and C₉₂ burial on increasing daylength (Fig. 2).

The regulation of C₉₂ burial by daylength and by the corresponding diel O₂ dynamics is conceptually consistent with empirical observations in modern sediments, in which the long-term burial efficiency decreases with the exposure time to O₂ (ref. ³³). As longer days export more O₂, the ratio between R₉₂ and Rₐe decreases (Extended Data Fig. 3), the average diel O₂ penetration depth decreases (Extended Data Fig. 2b) and the non-photosynthetic layers of mats are exposed to O₂ for a shorter fraction of the day (Extended Data Fig. 2c). This suggests that daylength also promotes long-term C₉₂ burial independent of the effect of daylength on the dynamic response of respiratory processes with specific metabolic traits. Additionally, mat accretion rates must be accounted for because they shape the residence time of C₉₂ in the oxic zone. Modern mats reach stunning accretion rates (for example, 0.1–5 mm yr⁻¹), similar to estimates from ancient microbialites (0.5–15 mm yr⁻¹). Given that longer days decreased the diel local O₂ availability and enhanced the burial efficiency, the accretion rate would have increased, thereby possibly establishing a positive feedback effect on long-term burial. This is because both regulatory factors result in shorter exposure times of benthic C₉₂ to O₂, but on different timescales. Thus, the daylength effect on net productivity and long-term burial could possibly be more pronounced for growing mats than for our modelled mats with a stagnant biomass.
Spinning down to oxygenation

The fundamental effect of changing planetary rotation rate on benthic export fluxes would have applied for most of Earth's photosynthetic history until the end of the 'matworld'\(^{32}\). Quantitative assessment requires parameterizing global benthic \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial along with Earth's rotation rate, which decreased over Earth's history as inferred from geological proxies\(^{33,34}\) and models\(^{35,36}\). A precise reconstruction of the rotation rate is currently beyond reach owing to uncertainties in the strengths of tidal friction, which includes effects from oceanic\(^{37,38}\), atmospheric\(^{39,40}\) and solid Earth tides\(^{41}\). Although there is no consensus on the exact pattern, the rate of oceanic tidal dissipation normalized to the strength of the astronomical forcing must have been lower than modern rates for long stretches of Earth's history because the current rate implies an Earth–Moon collision at \(~1.5\) Ga, for which there is no evidence\(^{42}\). Recent models that consider the effect of changes in the continental configuration on tidal dissipation rates suggest that Earth's rotational deceleration was lowest in the mid-Proterozoic\(^{35}\). Another long-standing hypothesis even predicts a period with a stable rotation rate in the Proterozoic due to a resonant atmospheric thermal tide\(^{43,44}\). The dissipation of oceanic and solid Earth tides cause rotational deceleration that is counteracted by atmospheric thermal tides, which depend on daylength\(^{41}\). This hypothesized period of stability and the subsequent marked increase in daylength coincide with the boring billion years of \(O_2\) stasis and the NOE, respectively. The remarkable correlation between the patterns of Earth's oxygenation and rotation rate (Fig. 4) invites a quantitative evaluation of the potential mechanistic link between daylength and oxygenation.

We extended our estimates of diel benthic \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial to global scales over Earth's history. Considerations of \(C_{\text{org}}\) fluxes on planetary and geological scales require several uncertain assumptions, and thus our estimates represent a possible range of the effect of rotation rate on \(pO_2\). To quantitatively implement Earth's rotational deceleration, we used a recent model\(^{45}\), which predicts deceleration before \(2.2\) Ga followed by resonant stability during the mid-Proterozoic until \(~650\) Ma, and subsequent return to deceleration towards the modern \(24\) h daylength. To model the quasi-steady-state evolution of global \(pO_2\), we considered that daylength-driven changes in global \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial and solute export fluxes interacted with sinks of \(O_2\) beyond the benthic domain, namely, atmospheric reduction by metabolism- and volcanism-derived gases and erosional weathering (Extended Data Fig. 1). As the relative contributions of benthic and pelagic to total marine \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial are highly uncertain\(^{46-48}\), we expressed the benthic term as a fraction of total marine burial, assumed to be at modern levels. Beyond the marine realm, we considered the possible effect of terrestrial mats in the Precambrian\(^{49}\). As we expect long-term burial rates to be substantially lower than the diel \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial\(^{50}\), we implemented a weathering-based negative feedback effect between \(pO_2\) and terrestrial burial, and implicitly on long-term, \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial (Extended Data Figs 1 and 9). This analysis showed that daylength-driven changes in \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial could account for the offset between pre- and post-GOE \(O_2\) levels without having to assume any changes in atmospheric reductant fluxes or GPP (Fig. 4b). Mat scenarios with no net \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial in the pre-GOE Archean (18 h daylength) support 50% of the global marine \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial in the mid-Proterozoic (21 h daylength), but only occupy 3.7% of the modern oceanic area (see Methods). For the modern continental arrangement, this mat coverage is comfortably less than the neritic zone (7.5%)\(^{41}\), the primary habitat for benthic photosynthesis. The daylength effect implies an increase up to \(~0.28\) \(pO_2\) at around 0.55 Ga (Fig. 4b), consistent with an early NOE and a later Palaeozoic oxidation event (POE), possibly connected to the Great Ordovician Biodiversity Event, at \(~0.4\) Ga (refs \(^{40}\)).

We suggest that changes in daylength rebalance remineralization. Positive carbon isotope excursions associated with oxygenation events are interpreted as signals of increased \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial, caused by increasing GPP or decreasing remineralization efficiency\(^{49-51}\). How these parameters imprint on the isotope record in the case of microbial mats is uncertain due to mass transfer limitation of dissolved inorganic carbon supply and the resultant negligible isotope fractionation observed in modern mats\(^{49-51}\). Yet, the daylength-driven enhancement of \(O_2\) export and \(C_{\text{org}}\) burial is consistent with proxies for weathering and total organic carbon contents in the record (Extended Data Fig. 9). Despite the predicted increase in weathering, we have not included the response of phosphorus fluxes to increasing \(pO_2\). Increased weathering would have further boosted the global primary production\(^{52}\)—but probably only transiently as a pulse, followed by a return to the previous quasi-steady state \(pO_2\) (refs \(^{45}\)) for a given daylength. Although nutrient supply and the corresponding GPP determine the absolute range of \(pO_2\) levels, daylength effects on benthic burial could have shaped the overall oxygenation pattern before the POE (Fig. 4b).

Overall, we show that increasing daylength is a monotonic driver of net productivity pervasive across all ranges of metabolic parameters (Fig. 2). Relatively abrupt changes in daylength, as caused by escape or entry into resonance locking, could therefore be among the triggers for the global oxidation events. In this respect, our proposed mechanism is similar to that of other abrupt events that cause imbalances in the global \(pO_2\) budget, such as plate tectonics (including supercontinent formation)\(^{10,37-40}\) or new prospects for productivity in the oceans and on land\(^{40,46}\). As Earth's rotation rate, governed by planetary physics, does not share any assumptions with these geological or biological triggers, the daylength effect operates in parallel to these other Earth-bound mechanisms. Even if we assume a more gradual decrease in rotation rate, our study clearly suggests that net productivity would have increased. Previous studies show that gradual changes in sources and sinks of \(O_2\) can cause relatively abrupt shifts in \(pO_2\), such as those due to \(H_2\) escape, insolation, continental phosphorus supply, continental growth or volcanic reductant input\(^{43,45,47,48}\). The exact magnitude of the daylength effect remains uncertain as it relies on several assumptions, particularly the relationship between diel and long-term burial efficiency and the detailed pattern of rotational deceleration. Further, we have not considered the effects of changes in the limiting factors of gross productivity, such as phosphorus, insolation or strength of \(O_2\) sinks, other than daylength-related increases in terrestrial \(C_{\text{org}}\) weathering. Yet, the peculiarity of daylength-driven increases in benthic net productivity is that no such changes are required to produce substantial changes in \(pO_2\). Thus, the dynamics of the Earth–Moon system possibly had major impacts on global \(O_2\) levels during critical turning points of Earth's biogeochemical evolution towards a profusely oxic world.

Online content

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**Methods**

**Modelling microbenthic O₂ export.** We explored how microbial processes and export fluxes of their metabolic substrates and products from ancient benthic photosynthetic ecosystems were influenced by daylength, environmental conditions and various regulatory mechanisms of photosynthetic production and respiration using an in silico microbenthic model. Model scenarios were constructed and simulated using MicroBenthos software. MicroBenthos model definitions and parameters for the described scenarios are provided with this article. The software and usage instructions are available at https://microbenthos.readthedocs.io.

The modelling framework is an adaptation of de Wit et al. Briefly, benthic systems are constructed as a diffusive–reactive system in a 1D computational domain, with discrete cells used to represent the spatial distribution of the state and parameter variables. While the study by de Wit et al. focused on biomass growth running over long simulation times, our interest was to study the dynamics of process rates and state variables over diel timescales. Therefore, we set a fixed biomass for the microbial groups, added a water subdomain on top of the sediment as a diffusive boundary layer and ran simulations until a diel steady state was reached (5 days). Our model domain used 5 µm cells, with an 8 mm sedimentary subdomain and 1 mm diffusive boundary layer of water on top. O₂ and sulfide concentrations were the state variables that we solved for. Photosynthetically active radiation (PAR) was expressed as a percent of the maximum intensity at the diel zenith, and followed a cosinusoidal pattern similar to that of diel insolation dynamics.

\[ R_{\text{ana}} \text{ and SOX were formulated to occur throughout the sediment. Microbial groups (cyanobacteria and SRB) were represented as biomass distributions in the sediment subdomain, and biomass-dependent metabolism kinetics were expressed as multiplications of the response functions of salient environmental and state variables. Coupled partial differential equations of the state variables (O₂ and H₂S) as multiplications of the response functions of salient environmental and state variables were solved with finite-volume numerical approximations.\]

Our in silico mat allowed us to explore how diffusive mass transfer shapes the interplay between illumination dynamics, gross production and consumption rates, and diel O₂ export. The effect of daylength was studied by varying the period of the illumination from 12 h to 24 h, the range of estimated daylengths over Earth’s history after the earliest estimates for the origin of OP. We report the calculated average diel net export and process rates in units of mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ because the hour is the largest temporal unit unaffected by changes in the Earth’s rotation and thus allows for comparison across daylengths.

First, we explored the simplest case of O₂ production, which is with light availability. Two microbial processes were considered: OP performed by cyanobacteria and Ranaero. The parameters for the biotic reactions were re-expressed as biomass-specific maximum yield (Q_{\text{OP}}). A fundamental assumption is that the photosynthesis rate is strictly correlated to the instantaneous photon flux:

\[ \text{OP} = Q_{\text{max}} \times \text{biomass} \times \text{sat} (\text{PAR}, K_{\text{PAR}}), \]

where sat is a Michaelis–Menten function with \( K_{\text{PAR}} = 15\% \) and the cyanobacterial biomass with a log-normal distribution with a peak value of 12 mg cm⁻² at 0.5 mm depth (Supplementary Video 1). The only source of O₂ is OP, and the sinks are aerobic (sedimentary) respiration (R_{\text{ana}}). For the production and consumption rates of \( C_{\text{ana}} \) we assumed a stoichiometry of:

\[ \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{O}_2 + \text{CH}_4\text{O} \]

with respect to O₂ cycling rates, where \( \text{CH}_4\text{O} \) refers to one \( C_{\text{ana}} \) equivalent. Assuming that \( C_{\text{ana}} \) is predominantly particulate, with negligible diffusional transport, diel \( C_{\text{ana}} \) burial was thus calculated as:

\[ C_{\text{ana}} \text{ buried} = \int \text{OP} - \int R_{\text{ana}}, \]

where \( \text{OP} \) and \( R_{\text{ana}} \) are the diel depth-integrated rates of O₂ production and consumption and are equivalent to \( C_{\text{ana}} \) production and consumption according to equation (2). Thus, diel burial can also be represented through the export flux of O₂ at the top and bottom interfaces of the sedimentary domain:

\[ C_{\text{ana}} \text{ buried} = \text{O}_2 \text{ export} = \int \text{OP} - \int R_{\text{ana}}, \]

which allowed us to assess the dynamic steady state of the diel model when the average diel depth-integrated rates equaled the export fluxes.

To calibrate the Q_{\text{OP}} productivity for unitless PAR intensities, we determined the \( Q_{\text{OP}} \) that caused a maximum O₂ export that corresponded to the median maximal flux from illuminated benthic photosynthetic systems. A \( Q_{\text{OP}} \) of 4.0022 mmol g⁻¹ h⁻¹ produced the target export flux of 5.76 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ under a sedimentary respiration load of 0.1 mM h⁻¹. Note that by calibrating the productivity to the maximum diel illumination, the model represents a ‘mean solar day’ of a given Earth year. This allowed us to disentangle the effect of daylength from geological-scale changes in the insolation intensity, such as in the ‘Tain young Sun’ paradigm reviewed thoroughly by Feulner, or changes in the solar spectrum related to atmospheric composition.

Next, we explored the effect of R_{\text{ana}} on the daylength dependence of the process rates and export fluxes. We used the example of sulphate reduction performed by SRB with a log-normal biomass distribution with a peak value of 2 mg cm⁻² (Supplementary Video 1). The R_{\text{ana}} rate was either defined as a constant rate process for the scenario ‘OP SRB constant’ as:

\[ R_{\text{ana}} = Q_{\text{max}} \times \text{biomass} \times \text{sat} (\text{PAR}, K_{\text{PAR}}) \times \text{inhibition} (\text{H}_2\text{S}, K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}}) \]

where inhibition is a function of the local \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \) and \( \text{O}_2 \) concentration (x) of the form:

\[ K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \times \frac{\text{H}_2\text{S} \times \text{O}_2 \times \text{sat} (\text{PAR}, K_{\text{PAR}})}{2 \times K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \times \text{H}_2\text{S} \times \text{O}_2 \times \text{sat} (\text{PAR}, K_{\text{PAR}})} \times \text{sat} (\text{PAR}, K_{\text{PAR}}), \]

where x = \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \) and 0 when x > \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \). Inhibition factors chosen for both scenarios with \( \text{O}_2 \) and \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \)-sensitive SRB (‘OP SRB’ and ‘OP SRB inhibited’) were 3 mM for \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \), 0.5 mM for \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \) and 1 µm for \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \). \( K_{\text{H}_2\text{S}} \) was 0.8 for the scenarios with a moderate inhibition, ‘OP SRB’, and 0.3 mM for the scenario with a strong inhibition, ‘OP SRB inhibited’.

SOX was formulated as:

\[ \text{SOX} = k \times \text{O}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{S}, \]

where k = 3511 mmol m⁻³ h⁻¹ (ref. 6). For \( R_{\text{ana}} \), we assumed the stoichiometry:

\[ \text{SO}_4^{2-} + 2 \text{CH}_3\text{O} \rightarrow \text{H}_2\text{O} + 2 \text{CO}_2 + 2 \text{H}_2\text{O}, \]

and therefore calculated diel burial as:

\[ C_{\text{ana}} \text{ buried} = \text{O}_2 \text{ export} = \int \text{O}_2 \text{ export} - \int \text{R}_{\text{ana}}. \]

This illustrates that the control of diel burial is related to the export of \( \text{O}_2 \) and the reduced product of \( \text{R}_{\text{ana}} \) (such as \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \)), as the former is an equivalent source and the latter an equivalent sink of \( C_{\text{ana}} \) within the mat. This means that an increase in \( \text{O}_2 \) export would not result in an increase of burial if \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \) export increased proportionally in terms of \( C_{\text{ana}} \) equivalents.

To calibrate the productivity for SRB scenarios, we determined values of \( Q_{\text{SRB}} \) for OP and SRB, which yielded the target maximum export flux of 5.76 mmol m⁻² h⁻¹ at 24 h under 250 µM \( \text{O}_2 \) boundary conditions and negligible burial fluxes at 18 h under anoxic boundary conditions, which is, in pre-GOE conditions (see Supplementary Data 1 for model parameters).

We tested the sensitivity of diel burial to \( \text{O}_2 \) concentration in the water column (0–250 µM) for all three SRB scenarios. For the least \( \text{O}_2 \)-sensitive scenario (‘OP SRB’), we also tested sensitivity of burial to gross productivity by varying the maximal photosynthetic yield \( Q_{\text{OP}} \) over the range 0.5–10 mmol g⁻¹ h⁻¹. Note that the variation in \( Q_{\text{OP}} \) can be considered equivalent to variations in other factors that influence gross production, such as nutrient supply and irradiance levels.

We then explored the effect of AP and reductant supply to the mat. Reductants that served as electron donors for AP were available in Precambrian phototrophic habitats, and supported diverse forms of photosynthesis even after the GOE and the evolution of OP. Although the extent and ecological niches of AP and OP over Earth’s history remain unclear, AP and OP probably co-existed, with spatially and temporally variable partitioning of the total GPP between them. Analogous to modern systems, the partitioning probably depended on the limiting factors of both metabolisms, such as light and nutrients, with AP additionally limited by electron donor supply, and on the onset of novel evolutionary avenues or geochemical transitions that facilitated shifts in the outcome of competition.

We implemented this concept by adapting the ‘OP SRB’ scenario to include metabolic flexibility in the modelled photosynthetic community, analogous to cyanobacteria that can partition harvested light energy towards OP and sulfide-driven AP (Extended Data Fig. 4). Transitions between photosynthetic modes are based on the local sulfide and light availability with the rate of OP limited by the rate of AP66. In this ‘OP SRB + AP’ scenario, the modelled cyanobacteria produced O₂ according to:
The metabolic behavior is such that OP occurs only below $H_{Sthr}$, which is light dependent. Below this threshold level, the harvested light energy is partitioned towards AP and OP, with a higher affinity for AP. Above the threshold, only OP occurs and OP is suppressed. The resulting metabolic response is that the sum of OP and AP follows the form of equation (1), whereas $R_{\text{ana}}$, $R_{\text{aro}}$, SOX and other processes work as in previous scenarios. The interplay of illumination, mat processes and the resultant depth-resolved dynamics of O$_2$ and H$_2$S under this scenario can be seen in the Supplementary Video 1. Assuming sulfite as the product of AP according to:

$$H_2S + 2CO_2 + H_2O \rightarrow SO_4^{2-} + 2CH_2O,$$

(16)

diel burial in this scenario was calculated as

$$C_{\text{org}} \text{ buried} = f \text{ OP} + f \text{ AP} - f \text{ R_{\text{ana}}} - 2 \times f \text{ R_{\text{aro}}} - \frac{d(pO_2)}{dt} = pB + mB - vR - \left(0.95 \times 1B + uB\right) \times \text{P}_{O_2}^{0.5},$$

(18)

which provides the steady state $pO_2$ as:

$$pO_2 = \left(pB + mB - vR + 0.95 \times 1B + uB\right) \times \text{P}_{O_2}^{0.5},$$

(19)

where $pB$ is the global burial flux associated with marine pelagic production, $mB$ is the global burial flux, $vR$ is the flux of volcanic detritus, $1B$ is the burial flux by terrestrial mats, and $uB$ is an aggregate flux term that captures uplift forcing, the global $C_{\text{org}}$ reservoir and a weathering constant$^{19}$.

Changes in any of the global fluxes would therefore result in new steady state $pO_2$. For the total marine burial (pelagic pB and coastal benthic mB–1B) we assumed modern values throughout the Precambrian$^{20}$. Beyond the marine realm, we considered that changes in the possible existence of terrestrial mats would have further boosted global GPP and $C_{\text{org}}$ burial, but would have also been more susceptible to weathering (1B in Extended Data Fig. 1). For these terrestrial mats, we assumed the same regulation mechanisms of export fluxes as those for coastal benthic mats and considered that AP might have been driven by reductant supplied from $R_{\text{ana}}$, but we did not explore the effects of external reductant availability for terrestrial mats. Using our diel model output for $t_B$ at 21 h daylength and for 5% continental coverage, we then calculated $vR$ for the two $pO_2$ levels assuming the values for $uB$ from Daines et al.$^{19}$.

The Earth rotation rate model$^{21}$ predicts monotonic deceleration before 2.7 billion years, followed by a stable daylength of 21 h due to the atmospheric thermal tide resonance until ~650 Ma, with a subsequent increase towards the modern 24 h daylength$^{22}$. Starting at 21 h at 2 Gyr, we estimated the effect of the daylength-driven change in the $C_{\text{org}}$ burial from benthic and terrestrial mats, the output of our diel model, on $pO_2$ levels both backwards and forwards in time. The modulation of $pO_2$ naturally depends on the steepness of the dependence of mat $C_{\text{org}}$ burial on daylength (Fig. 2). However, we limited our analysis to the effect of fluxes with metabolic regulation from the moderately daylength-sensitive scenarios ‘OP SRB’ and ‘OP SRB+AP’. Scenarios with a steeper dependency of burial on daylength yielded oscillations of $pO_2$ beyond PAL even due to the minimal variations in daylength within the resonant-locked phase in the mid-Proterozoic$^{23}$ and therefore had to be excluded from analysis of $pO_2$ evolution. We additionally included negative feedback effects of increasing $pO_2$ on the mat $C_{\text{org}}$ burial by dynamically adjusting the O$_2$ boundary conditions in each time step according to the $pO_2$ calculated from the previous step. To then calculate the quasi-steady-state $pO_2$ level based on changes in the benthic and terrestrial burial, the actual coverage and thus partitioning between the pelagic and benthic burial to have been considered. Reliable estimates for this partitioning are lacking. The presence of pelagic cyanobacteria has persisted since 1.1 Ga (ref.$^{24}$). Yet, cyanobacteria in the palaontological record are primarily benthic, with sparse evidence for pelagic forms$^{25,26}$. Hypotheses for the limited pelagic productivity during the Proterozoic range from an inaccessible, toxic or damaging photic zone to late evolution of a planktonic lifestyle$^{27,28}$. Alternately, burial of the $C_{\text{org}}$ produced by pelagic cyanobacteria might have been hindered by the small cell sizes, low sinking rates and resultant efficient remineralization within the water column$^{29}$. The preservation of $C_{\text{org}}$ by benthic microbial mats is as uncertain, especially when eroded—on land or in the oceans. In our calculations we considered the terrestrial erosional weathering explicitly (1B in Extended Data Fig. 1), which introduces a strong negative feedback effect on $pO_2$. This implicitly describes a substantial loss in translation of the diel $C_{\text{org}}$ to long-term burial that we, however, did not explicitly account for. For marine benthic mats we argue that a more direct link between the diel and long-term burial of $C_{\text{org}}$ is plausible given that mats can reach substantial thicknesses when undisturbed (for example, in Solar Lake the thickness is >1 m) (ref.$^{30}$) and that mats have a similar remineralization fate as pelagic $C_{\text{org}}$ export when eroded. To address these uncertainties, we considered benthic burial as between 20 and 50% of the total marine burial at 21 h daylength. Note that this partitioning must shift during our simulations over Earth history because benthic (and terrestrial) burial is daylength dependent, whereas we took an ‘all is constant’ approach for pelagic burial and the fraction of weathered diel $C_{\text{org}}$, as we expected a negligible effect of molecular diffusion and thus daylength on these fluxes.

Data availability
The datasets generated and analysed are available at https://doi.org/10.17617/3.66, and in the supplementary files with this paper. Source data are provided with this paper.
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Author contributions

J.M.K., B.K.A. and G.J.D. conceptualized the work. The methodology was provided by J.M.K. and A.C., validation by J.M.K. and A.C., formal analysis by J.M.K. and A.C., investigation by J.M.K., resources by G.J.D., data curation by J.M.K. and A.C., original draft manuscript preparation by J.M.K., A.C. and G.J.D., draft review and editing by J.M.K., A.C., B.K.A., B.A.B. and G.J.D., visualization by J.M.K. and A.C., supervision by G.J.D. and funding acquisition by J.M.K., B.A.B. and G.J.D.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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Extended Data Fig. 1 | Schematic of the global sinks and sources of O₂ with net release vs uptake of reductant by mats. The daylength-driven changes in C_{org} burial from benthic or terrestrial mats (mB; flux arrows not to scale) cause quasi steady-state transitions of global atmospheric pO₂. Offsets in pO₂ between such steady states are conceptualized here as aO. The diel mat processes (inset box) produce C_{org} burial fluxes (mB), which along with burial from the pelagic domain (pB) comprise the global O₂ source. Both O₂ (mO) and reductant (mR) export from mats are controlled by the interaction between mass transfer and mat-intrinsic process rates (oxygenic photosynthesis, OP; anoxygenic photosynthesis, AP; aerobic respiration, Raero; sulfate reduction, Ranaero; aerobic H₂S oxidation, SOX), and hence are sensitive to daylength changes. For the global O₂ sinks, we considered that some of the surplus O₂ released from the terrestrial or marine realm was consumed directly in the atmosphere (atmR) by volcanism- and metamorphism-derived gases (vR)\(^6\). Surplus reductant released from mats (mR in (a)) will increase atmR. Surplus reductant consumed by mats (mR in (b)) will decrease atmR, and add to source strength mB. Thus, mat C_{org} burial mB is the sum of O₂ export mO and reductant import mR, and also sensitive to daylength. Note that volcanic reductant fluxes (vR) are equal to pelagic C_{org} burial (pB) and the equivalent pelagic O₂ export (pO) to illustrate that reductant uptake by mats influence the global availability of reductant. This influences the consumed fraction of pO by atmR. As a result, mB is equal to wO, that is the O₂ that escapes reduction by atmR. The sink for wO is erosional weathering (WEATH), and the emergent pO₂ for a reference weathering level is (wO/ (0.95 x TB + uB))\(^{7,8}\), which implicitly describes the size of the global C_{org} reservoir; uplift forcing and a weathering constant, was chosen based on a mid-Proterozoic pO₂ of 0.01 or 0.1 and was set constant over Earth age. To account for the direct erosion of terrestrial mats, WEATH was set to interact with 95% of terrestrial C_{org} burial rates (TB; a fraction of total mat burial mB). While this makes WEATH also sensitive to daylength and produces a buffering effect through increased weathering strength, atmospheric oxygenation aO still increases with daylength (Fig. 4).
Extended Data Fig. 2 | Daylength-dependency of oxygen penetration depth, downward O$_2$ flux, and diel fraction with oxic conditions below the photic zone in various benthic mat scenarios. The total mat depth is 8 mm. a, Similar to the O$_2$ export flux across the upper mat interface, the downward flux is modulated by daylength. Given the proximity of the mat to the bottom substrate, such as pyrite, which is prone to abiotic oxidation reactions, this downward O$_2$ flux would increase pyrite weathering and sulfate release$^{13}$. b, Despite the increase in fluxes, the diel oxygen penetration depth, measured as the depth which is exposed to at least 1µM O$_2$, decreases with daylength. c, Similarly, the fraction of a day, during which deep zones of the mat (here 7 mm) are exposed to > 1µM O$_2$ decreases with increasing daylength. Together, the factors in b & c represent a decrease of exposure time of deep C$_{org}$ to O$_2$, and are likely to have boosted burial efficiency with increasing daylength.
Extended Data Fig. 3 | Daylength-dependency of mat processes and export fluxes explored for three scenarios with differently adapted sulfate reducers. One scenario included anaerobic respiration that is not affected by changes in the O₂ concentrations within the mat (OP SRB constant), i.e, with constant anaerobic respiration across daylengths. The other two scenarios (OP SRB and OP SRB inhibited) implement, with variable inhibition degree, O₂- and H₂S-sensitivity of anaerobic respiration rates. As increasing O₂ in the water column ([O₂]ₕ) would have accompanied daylength increases over Earth's history, we explored daylength-dependent activity rates and export fluxes for O₂ boundary conditions 0 μM and 25 μM (pO₂ = 0 and 0.1 PAL). a, O₂ export consistently increases with daylength. b, Consequently, Rₐₑᵣₒ decreases. In the scenario with Rₐₑᵣₒ set constant, Rₐₑᵣₒ is strongly enhanced under higher O₂ level in the water column. c, Cₗᵋₑᵣₒ burial, which is shaped by GPP, Rₐₑᵣₒ, Rₐₑᵣₒ, and diffusional mass transfer also increases with daylength. The increase of [O₂]ₕ reduces burial for the scenario with constant Rₐₑᵣₒ due to the increase in Rₐₑᵣₒ. Negative burial fluxes arise because model parameters were tuned such that burial approaches zero at 18 h (pre-GOE) for [O₂]ₕ of 0 μM. d, H₂S export consistently increases with daylength. This implies that H₂S export partially counteracts the effect of increased O₂ export on burial compared to a purely aerobic scenario (Fig. 1). e, For O₂-inhibited SRB, increasing water column O₂ reduces anaerobic respiration rates. Consequently, Cₗᵋₑᵣₒ burial consistently increases with daylength but remains approximately independent of [O₂]ₕ in the scenario with moderate inhibition (OP SRB) and increases with [O₂]ₕ in the scenario with strong inhibition (OP SRB inhibited). f, The ratio between respiratory processes Rₐₑᵣₒ and Rₐₑᵣₒ decreases across scenarios and boundary conditions, indicating a rebalancing of remineralization activity due to daylength change. Empirical long-term Cₗᵋₑᵣₒ burial rates are negatively correlated with this ratio and the exposure time of Cₗᵋₑᵣₒ to O₂ (see Extended data figure 2).
Extended Data Fig. 4 | Rates of cyanobacterial OP and AP depend on sulfide concentration and irradiance. (Irradiance as percent of zenith value) For conversion of CO$_2$ fixation rates into rates of photosynthetic O$_2$ production and sulfide consumption, we assumed that OP follows $2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{O}_2 + \text{C}_{\text{org}}$ and AP follows $\text{H}_2\text{S} + 2\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow \text{SO}_4^{2-} + 2\text{C}_{\text{org}}$ respectively. Partitioning between OP (green lines) and AP (blue lines) in these cyanobacteria is regulated through light-dependent sulfide threshold levels$^{20}$. Below the threshold level, OP and AP occur in concert such that their combined rate (OP + AP) is conserved. Above the threshold level, only AP occurs representing a higher affinity for AP. This type of partitioning represents a metabolic competition between OP and AP within the cyanobacteria. Notably, based on local light levels, AP would have to occur at a sufficiently high rate to deplete the local sulfide concentration below the threshold for OP to occur and produce O$_2$. 

![Graph showing rates of cyanobacterial OP and AP depending on sulfide concentration and irradiance.](image-url)
Extended Data Fig. 5 | Modeled temporal evolution of mat processes and export fluxes over 12 vs 24 h daylengths and daylength-dependency of their diel averages explored for mat with AP. a & b. Based on partitioning regulation between AP (dotted fill) and OP (Extended data figure 4), AP first has to consume local sulfide (dotted line), after which OP occurs at its maximum light-dependent rate. Total photosynthesis ($\int P_{\text{AP+OP}}$, grey fill) remains independent of daylength. c. The overall effect of daylength is that longer days export more O$_2$ and bury more C$_{org}$. Note that the negative burial flux at 12 h arises because model parameters were tuned such that burial at 21 h is comparable to the scenario without AP (OP SRB in Extended data figure 3). d-k. As both reductant and O$_2$ exposure of the mat have varied temporally and spatially, we explored the sensitivity of daylength-dependent changes in mat processes and fluxes across various $[\text{H}_2\text{S}]_{\text{top}}$ and $[\text{O}_2]_{\text{top}}$ boundary conditions. Burial increases with increasing $[\text{H}_2\text{S}]_{\text{top}}$ and decreases with $[\text{O}_2]_{\text{top}}$. Yet, the effect of water column redox is negligible compared to the effect of daylength.
Extended Data Fig. 6 | Dependency of the lag duration of SOB migration in MIS mats on irradiance and water column concentrations of O₂ and H₂S.

a, Net OP was calculated based on O₂ microsensor depth profiling at three light intensities in one MIS mat sample. Mat-forming large sulfur oxidizing bacteria (SOB) are known to respond to light and migrate downwards upon sunrise⁸¹, while cyanobacteria are expected to migrate upwards⁸². However, similar to observations in the Frasassi Sulfidic Springs²⁶,⁸³, MIS-SOB shade cyanobacteria and inhibit OP and showed no direct photophobic response. Instead, simultaneous depth profiling with an H₂S microsensor showed that migration only occurred if sulfide in the SOB layer was entirely depleted, such as after a sufficient duration of AP activity. Incident irradiance levels of 59 and 82 µmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹ were sufficiently high to allow for entire depletion of sulfide (solid and dashed lines in a) by AP in the cyanobacterial layer and to thereby limit sulfide supply to the SOB layer at the mat surface. The migration lag (~2.5 hours) after depletion of sulfide is indicated by the gray shaded area. Note that the duration of the lag is independent of light intensity. Light intensity of 51 µmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹ was insufficient for sulfide depletion (dotted lines) and consequently migration did not occur. Thus, even though light had no direct effect on migration behavior, sufficient light intensity to sustain high rates of AP was necessary to deplete sulfide in order to trigger migration.

b, The duration of the lag phase was monitored using an O₂ and H₂S microsensor under diverse water column conditions in two distinct mat samples. Irradiance during measurements was 73 and 103 µmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹ in mat 1 and mat 2, respectively. Data result from continuous profiling and involve an uncertainty of ~15-20 min due to the acquisition time of the profiles. Error bars and values in parenthesis in the legend represent the standard deviation of O₂ and H₂S concentration, respectively, averaged over three depths and 5-32 timepoints during the time series experiment (n=15-96 dependent on delay duration). Considering that increased sulfide supply from the water column extended the migration lag, migration might be induced via electron donor starvation of the SOB.
Extended Data Fig. 7 | Microsensor depth profiles of O₂ over simulated daylengths (12–52 h). a–e, Dynamics of O₂ export flux (solid lines) were calculated from the concentration depth profiles (color-coded maps) and used to estimate the diel period average (text in panel). Compiled export fluxes are shown in Fig. 3f. Light intensity during measurements is indicated by the top bar in µmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹. Total sulfide concentration in the water column was <1 µM. Results highlight the substantial dependency of O₂ export on daylength in MIS mats.
Extended Data Fig. 8 | Simulations of benthic systems with activity delay mechanisms. a-b, For sulfide-inhibited OP as observed in cyanobacteria isolated from Little Salt Spring, that only activate OP with a fixed delay of 30 min after local depletion of sulfide by AP\(^+\), the temporal evolution over a 12 h and 24 h diel period illustrates that this no-photosynthesis-phase between sulfide being depleted below 1 \(\mu\)M and OP being activated completely suppresses OP in days shorter than 20 h (panel e). The penalty on O\(_2\) export is high enough that cyanobacterial mats, despite the potential for OP, remain net sinks of O\(_2\) during illuminated periods. c, The delay introduces a steep dependency of diel export fluxes and burial on daylength. Note that negative burial fluxes arise because model parameters were tuned such that burial at 21 h is comparable to the scenario without AP (OP SRB in Extended data figure 2) and the AP scenario without delay (Extended data figure 5). d-k, The penalty of the lag on induction of OP is only overcome during longer days and in the presence of O\(_2\) in the water column ([O\(_2\)]\(_{\text{top}}\)). Mats can only net accumulate C\(_{\text{org}}\) if OP is active. As the fraction of day during which OP can occur is strongly dependent on daylength, this scenario exhibits the steepest dependency of burial on daylength compared to all other scenarios.
Extended Data Fig. 9 | Weathering and $C_{org}$ burial rates over time and corresponding examples for proxies in the geological record. Values for the total organic carbon (TOC) content in organic-rich sediments, the normalized seawater $^{87}$Sr/$^{86}$Sr, and the average $\delta^{34}S$ of sulfate were adapted from Och et al. with permission from Elsevier. Increases in the latter two parameters indicate enhanced weathering fluxes. All rates were derived from our modeled scenario that include aerobic and anaerobic respiration and exclusive oxygenic photosynthesis. Shaded areas represent the range of rates dependent on 1.5–3.7% modern oceanic coverage by benthic coastal mats (corresponding to 20–50% of global marine $C_{org}$ burial during the mid-Proterozoic) and a continental coverage of 5% by terrestrial mats. Changes in global coastal benthic and terrestrial $C_{org}$ burial fluxes are driven by changes in daylength and are shaped by feedback effects of increasing $pO_2$ (Fig. 4) on aerobic respiration. Pelagic burial, atmospheric reduction by volcanism- and metamorphism-derived gases and weathering were parameterized for a reference $pO_2$ of 0.1 in the mid-Proterozoic. The rate of atmospheric reduction was assumed to be constant and determined by the flux of reduced gases. In contrast, the rate of erosional weathering increases with daylength as it depends on $pO_2$ and $C_{org}$ burial by terrestrial mats.