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Integrated stratigraphy and paleoceanographic evolution of the pre-evaporitic phase of the Messinian salinity crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean as recorded in the Tokhni section (Cyprus island)

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Abstract

An integrated micropaleontologic, magnetostratigraphic and cyclostratigraphic investigation of the Tokhni composite section (Southern Cyprus Island, Eastern Mediterranean) refines the previously published age model and paleoenvironmental interpretation particularly concerning its uppermost pre-Messinian Salinity Crisis interval

(pre-MS), between 6.46 and 5.97 Ma. This section is characterized by a precession-paced alternation of red shales and limestones, which correlate with insolation maxima and minima on the basis of their $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ signatures and calcareous nannofossil assemblages. The planktonic foraminifer and magnetostratigraphic events permit the tuning of the sedimentary cycles to the 65°N summer insolation curve and to the Mediterranean pre-evaporitic reference sections.

The upper bathyal sedimentary succession of the Tokhni composite section records paleoceanographic changes at 6.4 and 6.1 Ma, indicating increasingly stressed conditions both at the sea floor and in the water column. Compared to the Western Mediterranean pre-MS successions, we observe less severe sea floor anoxic conditions at times of insolation maxima and higher salinity surface and bottom waters at times of insolation minima. Moreover, from 6.1 Ma to the MS onset we observe a progressively increase of continental-derived waters, which was likely caused by a tectonic pulse.

The MS onset at 5.97 Ma is marked by the deposition of clastic carbonates rather than primary evaporitic facies and is approximated by the last recovery of foraminifera, the abundance peaks of *Helicosphaera carteri* and *Umbilicosphaera rotula* and the decrease of the $^{87/86}\text{Sr}$. The MS onset is recorded two cycles below the Messinian Erosional Surface (MES, 5.60 Ma) and the overlying clastic evaporites, suggesting a hiatus of approximately 350 kyr.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Messinian, calcareous nannofossils, foraminifera, integrated stratigraphy, paleoenvironment.

1. Introduction

The pre-evaporitic phase of the Messinian salinity crisis (MS) was characterized by marked paleoceanographic changes culminating in the deposition of huge volume of

55 evaporites in the shallow and deep/intermediate settings of the Mediterranean basin
 56 during stage 1 (from 5.971 Ma; Manzi et al. 2013) and stage 2 (from 5.60 Ma; Roveri et al.
 57 2009), respectively. The major steps of this paleoceanographic evolution occurred at 7.16,
 58 6.7, 6.4 - 6.29 and 6.1 - 6.0 Ma (see Kouwenhoven et al. 2006, with references therein).
 59 Each of these steps was conducive to increasingly stressing conditions both at the sea
 60 floor and in the water column, as documented by the progressive increase of oligotypic
 61 calcareous plankton and benthic foraminifer assemblages. The first two steps were related
 62 to the tectonic narrowing and/or closure of the Atlantic connections in the Rifian corridors
 63 (Krijgsman et al. 1999a and b, Krijgsman and Langereis 2000), which caused the slowing
 64 or stopping of the Mediterranean deep circulation. However, Blanc-Valleron et al. (2002)
 65 noted that these paleoceanographic steps roughly follow the 400 kyr eccentricity cycle,
 66 and Kouwenhoven et al. (2006) also suggested a relation between the increasing
 67 restriction of the deep circulation and this orbital parameter. In addition, the restricted
 68 connections with the Atlantic from 7.16 Ma increased the sensitivity of the Mediterranean
 69 basin to record the precession-controlled climatic changes resulting in a more regular
 70 formation of sapropels at times of precession minima (Sierro et al. 2003).
 71 In the deep- and intermediate-water successions, such as at Monte del Casino (northern
 72 Apennines, Italy) and Pissouri (southern Cyprus) sections, respectively (Kouwenhoven et
 73 al. 2003; Kouwenhoven et al. 2006), the step at 7.16 Ma was characterized by the
 74 disappearance of oxyphilic benthic foraminifera and the increase of taxa tolerating low
 75 oxygen levels and raised salinity (Van der Zwaan 1982, Kouwenhoven et al. 1999). As
 76 seen in the Gibliscemi-Falconara sections (Sicily), the central Mediterranean was more
 77 severely affected by the reduced deep-water circulation, marked by a temporarily
 78 disappearance of benthic foraminifera (Kouwenhoven et al. 2003). Moreover, diatomite
 79 beds started to deposit in the Mediterranean between 7.16 and 6.7 Ma (Pestrea et al.
 80 2002), indicating a significant availability of silica at times of enhanced eutrophication,

81 likely connected to upwelling episodes during insolation minima (Sierro et al. 2003, Flores
82 et al. 2005).

83 Beginning at 6.7 Ma (second step), not only the benthic foraminifera show an abundance
84 increase of stress tolerant taxa (indicating low oxygen and/or raised salinity bottom
85 conditions) and are absent in sapropel (Sierro et al. 2003, Kouwenhoven et al. 2006), but
86 also the calcareous plankton assemblages are characterized by reduced diversity and
87 abundance (Sierro et al. 2003). Moreover, an increased response to the insolation
88 fluctuations is highlighted by the dominance of cold/eutrophic calcareous plankton taxa at
89 times of insolation minima and warm/oligotrophic taxa at times of insolation maxima
90 (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Sierro et al. 2003, Flores et al. 2005). It is worth noting that
91 changes in calcareous plankton assemblages from 6.7 Ma equally affected both deep and
92 shallow successions.

93 From 6.4 Ma the Plankton/Benthos ratio shows abrupt fluctuations, with values ranging
94 from 100% to near 0%, indicating the occurrence of a-benthic foraminiferal layers due to
95 anoxic conditions during insolation maxima and of strongly reduced/a-planktonic layers
96 (insolation minima) (Sierro et al. 2003). In the superficial waters, the presence of oligotypic
97 assemblages dominated by *Turborotalia quinqueloba* and *T. multiloba* (up to 80%) during
98 insolation minima are usually related to increased salinity corresponding to very arid
99 climatic phases (Sierro et al. 2003, Kouwenhoven et al. 2006).

100 The final step at 6.1 - 6.0 Ma certifies the gradual final decrease of calcareous microfossils,
101 whose disappearance approximates the MSC onset at 5.971 Ma (Manzi et al. 2007, Lozar
102 et al. 2010, Manzi et al. 2011, Manzi et al. 2013).

103 The eastern Mediterranean pre-evaporitic (pre-MSC) micropaleontologic record has been
104 mainly studied onshore of Cyprus and Crete (Van der Zwaan, 1982, Triantaphyllou et al.
105 1999, Kouwenhoven et al. 2006, Drinia et al. 2007, Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009). On the
106 southern part of the Cyprus Island, an integrated stratigraphy was obtained for the Tokhni

107 and Pissouri sections (Krijgsman et al. 2002, Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009), located in the
108 Psematismenos and the Pissouri basins (Fig. 1), respectively. These two sections were
109 correlated with the Perales reference section (Sorbas basin) for the western
110 Mediterranean (Sierro et al. 2001) by means of biomagnetostratigraphic and
111 cyclostratigraphic constraints. Overall, the paleoceanographic evolution observed in the
112 Cyprus basin is similar to that envisaged in the western Mediterranean, although the pre-
113 MSC sedimentary successions differ for the scarce presence or absence of sapropels and
114 for the occurrence of chaotic/carbonate deposits (“barre jaune”) just below the lowermost
115 gypsum bed (Kouwenhoven et al. 2006, Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009). Moreover, the
116 identification of MSC onset in these sections has been debated. According to Krijgsman et
117 al. (2002) and Kouwenhoven et al. (2006) it is represented by the lowermost gypsum bed
118 in the Pissouri section. Differently, according to Orszag-Sperber et al. (2009), it coincides
119 in the Tokhni section with the basal stromatolitic bed of the “barre jaune” and,
120 consequently, the deposition of the lowermost gypsum bed is delayed by 60 kyrs. Both
121 these interpretations have been questioned by Manzi et al. (2016) based on
122 sedimentologic and stratigraphic evidences. These authors stated that on Cyprus the
123 Primary Lower Gypsum (PLG, Roveri et al. 2009) of the 1st stage of the MSC are lacking,
124 whereas the gypsum deposits are clastic facies floored by an angular unconformity likely
125 corresponding to the Messinian erosional surface (MES). Thus, the gypsum unit of the
126 Tokhni section has been ascribed to the stage 2 of the MSC (Roveri et al. 2009).
127 Consequently, Manzi et al. (2016) suggested that MSC onset is best approximated by the
128 last occurrence of foraminifera, identified within the interval corresponding to the “barre
129 jaune” of Orszag-Sperber et al. (2009).

130 Here, we present a reinvestigation of the upper part of the Tokhni section producing an
131 updated calcareous plankton biostratigraphy and cyclostratigraphy, validated by new
132 magnetostratigraphic data. The micropaleontologic and isotopic data, supported by the

133 new age model and integrated with the stratigraphic and sedimentologic evidences as
134 presented in Manzi et al. (2016), allowed the reconstruction of the paleoenvironmental and
135 paleoceanographic evolutions in the Psematismenos basin during the pre-MSC and their
136 comparison with those of the central and western Mediterranean successions.

137

138 2. Geological setting and section

139 The Tokhni composite section is exposed in the badlands 1 km southwest from the village
140 of Tokhni (southern Cyprus Island), located at the southeast termination of the Troodos
141 Massif, in the Psematismenos basin (Fig.1). The composite section combines 4 sub-
142 sections (To-0, To-1, To-2 and To-3; Fig. 2; Manzi et al. 2016), and comprises the upper
143 part of the Pakhna Formation (Bagnall 1960, Gass 1960, Pantazis 1967), and the
144 evaporites of the Kalavastos Formation. Here we follow the subdivision of the Pakhna
145 Formation into four sub-units (from the bottom, PK-A₁, PK-A₂, PK-A₃ and PK-B) as
146 proposed by Manzi et al. (2016) (Fig. 2).

147 1) Sub-unit PK-A₁ – It consists of m-thick alternation of darker and lighter homogeneous
148 blue marls. Orszag-Sperber et al. (2009) recognized the Tortonian-Messinian boundary in
149 the upper part of this sub-unit on the basis of the first occurrence of the planktonic
150 foraminifer *Globorotalia miotumida*.

151 2) Sub-unit PK-A₂ – It is characterized by a lithologic cyclic stacking pattern formed by an
152 alternation of prominent marls and reddish shales.

153 3) Sub-unit PK-A₃ – It is mainly characterized by a cyclic alternation of reddish shales and
154 whitish micritic limestones, and its base is marked by a 80 cm-thick whitish limestone bed.
155 However, from ca. 15 m above the base of this sub-unit, marl layers and/or slightly
156 prominent pink diatomitic layers are associated with or replace the whitish limestone within
157 the basic cycle. Diatomites are particularly common in the upper part of this sub-unit and
158 within the upper PK-B sub-unit (see below). The micritic limestone layers, in particular the

159 lowermost one, are laterally continuous and easily detectable in the field, and were used
160 as key-beds in the reconstruction of the composite section (Fig. 2). These layers are made
161 up of a mixture of clay and coccoliths cemented by micron-sized calcite crystals (Manzi et
162 al. 2016). Another useful key-bed observed in the upper part of this sub-unit is a thin
163 conglomerate layer (thickness 25-40 cm), showing an erosive base. This layer is entirely
164 made up of limestone-derived pebbles floating in a bioclastic packstone matrix; the latter
165 contains planktonic and benthic foraminifera, siliceous sponge spicules, echinoid spines
166 and fragments of coralline algae. Sparse silt-size terrigenous grains are also present.

167 4) Sub-unit PK-B - This uppermost sub-unit has been recognized only in the southern
168 subsections To-2 and To-3. It is characterized by the presence of 3 limestone beds
169 (indicated as A, B and C) showing different characteristics with respect to the limestones
170 of sub-unit PK-A₃ and intercalated by reddish shales and pink diatomites. These limestone
171 beds belong to the “barre jaune” described in the Tokhni section by Orszag-Sperber et al.
172 (2009), who interpreted them as precession-controlled stromatolites suggesting periodical
173 shallowing and drying up of the basin. Differently, Manzi et al. (2016) did not recognize
174 evidences of shallowing or drying up. According to these authors the lower part of the
175 limestone A is a finely laminated microbialite and contains cavities possibly indicating the
176 displacive growth of sub-millimetric gypsum crystals, successively replaced by micrite. The
177 upper part of limestone A shows penecontemporaneous reworking of the microbialite by
178 subaqueous gravity flows. The two uppermost limestone layers (B and C) show completely
179 different characteristics and internal organization. They are made up of coarse-grained
180 clastic sediments, grainstone and rudstone likely deriving from the dismantlement of a
181 penecontemporaneous carbonate platform forming in the Tokhni area (Robertson et al.
182 1995).

183 The boundary between the Pakhna and the Kalavasos formations is sharp and discordant.
184 In fact, as described in Manzi et al. (2016), the uppermost part of the Pakhna Formation

185 shows from south to north: i) the disappearance of the PKB sub-unit; ii) a progressive
186 truncation of the PK-A₃ sub-unit (Fig. 2); iii) a steeper inclination of the base of the
187 evaporites of Kalavasos Formation with respect to the Pakhna Formation. Accordingly, the
188 base of the Kalavasos Formation is an angular unconformity and coincides with the
189 Messinian erosional surface (MES); indeed, these evaporites are clastic and belong to the
190 Resedimented Lower Gypsum (RLG, Roveri et al. 2009) unit deposited during stage 2,
191 rather than representing the Primary Lower Gypsum (PLG of Roveri et al. 2009) of stage 1,
192 as previously argued by Orszag-Sperber et al. (2009). In the present study we focus on
193 the upper part of the Tokhni composite section, corresponding to sub-units PK-A₃ and PK-
194 B.

195

196 3. Material and Methods

197 3.1. Magnetostratigraphy

198 A total of 16 samples were collected in the subsection To-1 (10 - 31.5 m interval of the
199 composite section; Fig. 2), mainly from the limestone beds, due to the pervasive fracture of
200 the shales and lamination of the diatomites. Samples were thermally demagnetized in an
201 ASC electric oven at the Alpine Laboratory of Paleomagnetism (Alp, Peveragno, Italy)
202 and were initially heated at 100°C and then up to 340-450°C, by successive increasing
203 steps of 30°C. At each step we measured the remanent magnetization in a 2G-Enterprises
204 DC SQUIDS cryogenic magnetometer, and the magnetic susceptibility to check for thermal
205 alteration of the magnetic mineralogy. The NRM data were processed with the Remasoft
206 software (Chadima and Hrouda 2006), which computed the principal component analysis
207 of the linear vector (Kirschvink 1980) picked from orthogonal projection demagnetization
208 diagrams (Zijderveld 1967) to obtain the characteristic remanent magnetization (ChRM).

209

210 3.2. Foraminifera

211 The 87 samples collected from subsections To-1, To-2 and To-3 (Fig. 2) were dried and
212 then soaked in diluted H₂O₂ for a few days; successively, they were washed using a 63 µm
213 mesh, dried again and sieved to obtain the study fraction (> 125 µm). The planktonic
214 foraminifer record of the Tokhni section is biased by several problems: a) reworking of
215 Eocene to middle Miocene specimens (see also Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009) is present in
216 the PK-A₂ and lower part of PK-A₃ sub-units, up to 7 m of the composite section and it
217 gradually decreases upward; b) in the 0-28 m interval the foraminifer abundance is highly
218 variable and roughly decreases from the bottom to the top; in particular, the most
219 prominent limestones starting from 11.5 m are barren of both benthic and planktonic
220 foraminifera; c) inorganic particles (terrigenous grains, un-disaggregated sediment, etc.)
221 represent a large portion of the washed residues; d) preservation is generally poor. For
222 these reasons qualitative observations were performed on the samples collected from PK-
223 A₂ and lower part of PK-A₃ sub-units. A semi-quantitative analysis of selected taxa was
224 carried out on 48 out of 60 samples collected from PK-A₃ and PK-B sub-units (from 7 m
225 upward of the Tokhni composite section, see Fig. 2), avoiding samples barren in
226 foraminifera (limestones) and samples characterized by very diluted foraminiferal content
227 and/or very poor preservation. Among planktonic foraminifera, all the *Globigerina*,
228 *Globigerinoides* and *Globigerinita* species were respectively clustered as genera; however,
229 *Globigerina bulloides* is largely predominant within the *Globigerina* gr., and *Globigerinita*
230 *glutinata* within the *Globigerinita* gr. Sinistrally and dextrally coiled *Neogloboquadrina*
231 *acostaensis* were counted separately. Bolivinids, buliminds and elphidiids were considered
232 as generic groups among benthic foraminifera. A group of taxa showing low abundances
233 and including *Hanzawaia boueana*, *Cancris oblungus*, *Valvulineria complanata*, *Rosalina*
234 *globularis* and *Ammonia* sp. were lumped together as “inner shelf taxa”. Each selected
235 taxon was picked and counted at maximum in 9 fields (out of 45) of a standard picking tray
236 if not exceeding 30 specimens. The total abundance of planktonic and benthic foraminifera

237 and the abundance of the selected taxa were then normalized to one field and plotted
238 against the stratigraphic height. We also calculated the P/B ratio as $P/(P+B)/100$, where P
239 and B represent the total number of planktonic foraminifera and benthic foraminifera per
240 field, respectively.

241

242 3.3. Calcareous nannofossils

243 Calcareous nannofossil assemblages from 60 out of 87 samples collected in the Tokhni
244 composite section within PK-A₃ and PK-B sub-units (8 - 36.5 m; Figs. 2, and 5) were
245 studied in smear slides with a microscope at 1250X under cross polarized light microscope.
246 Slide preparation was kept simple using standard techniques in order to retain the original
247 composition of the sediment (Bown and Young 1998). Only the uppermost samples in the
248 studied interval were barren of calcareous nannofossils. Quantitative analyses were
249 carried out by counting at least 500 specimens per sample and relative abundances are
250 expressed in % of the total assemblage. Abundance percentages of significant taxa were
251 plotted against their stratigraphic level. Frequencies of very rare and biostratigraphically
252 significant genera (*Amaurolithus*, *Discoaster*) were estimated by counting the number of
253 specimens in 500 fields of view, corresponding to an area of 11.250 mm². Abundances of
254 these taxa are expressed in n/mm². *Discoaster* spp. were identified at the species level,
255 nevertheless, due to the very low abundance of *D. surculus*, we lumped *D. surculus* and *D.*
256 *variabilis* into the *Discoaster variabilis* group.

257

258 3.4. Isotopic geochemistry

259 3.4.1. Oxygen and Carbon stable isotopes

260 Stable oxygen and carbon isotope composition of 79 bulk samples were measured in the
261 Geochemistry Laboratory of the Physical and Earth Science Department of the University
262 of Parma. The isotopic composition of calcite samples (originating from micritic crystals,

foraminifera and calcareous nannofossils) was obtained from the reaction of the powdered carbonate with 100% H₃PO₄ “in vacuo” and under controlled temperature (25°C). The isotopic composition of CO₂ samples was measured on a Finnigan Delta S mass spectrometer against a CO₂ standard gas obtained by the reaction at 25°C of very pure Carrara marble powder with 100% phosphoric acid. The standard deviation of these measurements was systematically equal to or lower than ±0.15 ‰ (1σ). The CO₂ standard from the Carrara marble used in our laboratory is periodically calibrated against NBS-19. Its isotopic composition is -2.43 ‰ (δ¹⁸O vs. VPDB) and +2.45 ‰ (δ¹³C vs. VPDB).

271

3.4.2. Strontium isotopes

Samples were collected from every prominent limestone bed from 10 m upwards of the composite section and ⁸⁷Sr/⁸⁶Sr isotope analyses were carried out at SUERC (Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre, East Kilbride, Scotland). Samples were leached in 1M ammonium acetate prior to acid digestion with HNO₃. Sr was separated using Eichrom Sr Spec resin. Matrix elements were eluted in 8M HNO₃ and 3M HNO₃ before elution of Sr in 0.01M HNO₃. Total procedure blank for Sr samples prepared using this method was <200 pg. In preparation for mass spectrometry, Sr samples were loaded onto single Re filaments with a Ta-activator. Sr samples were analyzed with a VG Sector 54-30 multiple collector mass spectrometer. A ⁸⁸Sr intensity of 1V (1 x 10⁻¹¹ A) ± 10% was maintained. ⁸⁷Sr/⁸⁶Sr ratio was corrected for mass fractionation using ⁸⁶Sr/⁸⁸Sr = 0.1194 and an exponential law. The mass spectrometer was operated in the peak-jumping mode with data collected as 15 blocks of 10 ratios, which gives an internal uncertainty of <0.000020 (2 S.E.). For this instrument NIST SRM 987 gave 0.710249 ± 0.000008 (1 S.D., n = 17) during the course of this study. The 2 standard error internal precision on individual analyses was between 0.000014 and 0.000020 for 2σ.

288

|

289 4. Results

290 4.1. Magnetostratigraphy

291 The thermal demagnetization paths show that between the NRM and 180°C a normally
292 oriented, low temperature component is generally demagnetized. Between 180° and 340°
293 - 560°C a second component can be isolated, displaying both normal and reversed
294 polarities and thus interpreted as the characteristic component (ChRM). However, at 340°
295 C the specimens collected between 10 and 19 m still retain 10-20% of the initial NRM, and
296 a further increase of temperature usually results in randomly oriented direction and/or a
297 remanence increase. This fact indicates that a potential third component with higher
298 coercitivity also could be present, but not detected in our samples, due to the formation of
299 authigenic magnetic minerals with increasing temperature above 340°C. In the lower half
300 of the sampled subsection, To13b is the only sample showing a certain reversed ChRM
301 orientation (Fig. 3a, c). Samples To11 and To13a display reversed inclination, but the
302 declination is respectively east and west oriented (Fig. 3 b). Samples To12 and To10 were
303 discarded because the signal was too weak. In the upper part of the sampled subsection,
304 the demagnetization paths of samples To01, To05 - To08 show the presence of a more
305 stable normal ChRM isolated in a larger temperature range, between 180° and 460° -
306 560°C (Fig. 3a). Summarizing, a reversed magnetozone is pinpointed between 11 and 12
307 m; however, its top is not well defined as sample To11, which tentatively represents the
308 uppermost reversed polarity level, is included in an interval of poorly defined polarities,
309 between 12 and 21 m. A normal magnetozone is identified from 21 and 31.5 m.

310

311 4.2. Planktonic foraminifera

312 In sub-unit PK-A₂ and in the lower part of sub-unit PK-A₃, up to 7 m from the base of the
313 composite section (Fig. 2), preservation varies from poor to moderate and deformation
314 and/or incrustation commonly prevents the classification of foraminifera at the species

315 level. Inorganic grains (mainly terrigenous particles and un-disaggregated marly sediment)
 316 are often abundant and regardless of the lithology can be prevalent on the fossil remains.
 317 Foraminifera are usually more abundant in the marls than in the reddish shales, and
 318 planktonic foraminifera are generally more common than the benthic. A common feature is
 319 the presence of reworked Eocene to middle Miocene taxa, probably derived from the
 320 erosion of the uplifted carbonate formations (Lefkara and Pakhna formations) widespread
 321 on the Island of Cyprus (Robertson et al. 1995). In this interval, *Globigerinoides* spp. and
 322 *Orbulina universa* are generally the most common taxa, among the planktonic foraminifera,
 323 followed by neogloboquadrinids (mainly sinistrally coiled), *Globigerinita glutinata* and
 324 *Globigerina bulloides*.
 325 Semi-quantitative analyses, performed from 7 m of the composite section upward (Fig. 4),
 326 indicate that the abundance pattern of foraminifera is characterized by the occurrence of
 327 successive peaks, mainly observed in the reddish shales, and that from 11.5 m upward
 328 almost all the prominent limestones are devoid of foraminifera (except at 14.6 m, where *O.*
 329 *universa* occurs). Abundance of planktonic foraminifera first drops above 22 m, where
 330 peaks are less prominent and then, just above the conglomerate bed at 31 m, where
 331 foraminifera become scattered (Fig. 4). As shown by the P/B ratio, planktonic are generally
 332 much more abundant than benthic foraminifera in the interval from 7 to 15.5 m; upward,
 333 the ratio fluctuates with no evident relationship with lithology.
 334 From 7 m upward, planktonic foraminifer assemblages are more oligotypic with respect to
 335 the lower part of sub-unit PK-A₃. The genus *Turborotalita* is rather common, even though
 336 discontinuously distributed (Fig. 4). *T. quinqueloba* prevalently occurs in the shales, but it
 337 is also present in the thin limestone bed at 10 m and in the marl at 23 m. It also shows few
 338 prominent abundance peaks, reaching up to 100 specimens/field in a monospecific
 339 assemblage at 10 m and at 26.5 m. *T. multiloba* first occurs (FO) at 10.2 m and is
 340 characterized by a very scattered distribution and generally low abundance in the shales,

341 while it is quite common (up to 20-30 specimens/field) only in the limestone layer at 10.2 m
342 and in a marly level at 23.25 m (abundance influx, Ai). *T. multiloba* last occurs (LO) at 31
343 m, just above the conglomerate (Fig. 4).

344 The *Globigerinita* gr. is relatively common between 8 and 21 m (Fig. 4), attaining
345 abundance maxima at 16 and 21 m; upward, it is very scattered and it disappears above
346 the conglomerate layer at 31m.

347 The distribution range of the *Globigerina* gr. is similar to that of the *Globigerinita* gr. (Fig.
348 4); however, it is only abundant in the shale at 9 m and, differently from the latter, it
349 disappears at about 34.5 m, just above the lowermost limestone bed of sub-unit PK-B, i.e.
350 at the stratigraphic level of the last recovery of planktonic foraminifera.

351 *Neogloboquadrina acostaensis* is usually rare (< 5 specimens/field) except at 25.5 m (35
352 specimens/field). The Last regular influx of sinistrally coiled individuals (Lri of Sierro et al.
353 2001) is recognized at 12.6 m, while at 13.5 m dextrally and sinistrally coiled specimens
354 occur equally (Fig. 4). Dextrally coiled *N. acostaensis* prevails from 15.25 m (first abundant
355 occurrence, FAO, of Sierro et al. 2001) and is quite regularly present up to 19.5 m. This
356 taxon is more scattered upwards, vanishing at about 33.5 m, just below the base of sub-
357 unit PK-B (Fig. 4).

358 *Globigerinoides* spp. is subordinated, showing few minor peaks (<20 specimens/field)
359 between 11 and 20 m and disappear above 25.5 m (Fig. 4). *O. universa* is irregularly
360 distributed along the composite section and is abundant only between 13 and 14.5 m
361 (where it is also common in a prominent limestone layer). *Globorotalia scitula* is present
362 with rare individuals at 29.7 m (Gs influx in Fig. 4). It is worth observing that the topmost
363 planktonic foraminifer assemblage is represented by *O. universa*, *N. acostaensis* and
364 *Globigerina* gr. and the last recovery of planktonic foraminifera (LRp) occurs at 34.5 m.

365

366 4.3 Benthic foraminifera

367 In sub-unit PK-A₂ and the lower part of sub-unit PK-A₃ up to 7 m of the composite section,
368 the presence of benthic foraminifera is generally subordinate to planktonic ones and
369 mainly represented by *Elphidium* spp, *Neoconorbina orbicularis*, *Rosalina globularis*,
370 *Valvulineria complanata*, *Melonis* sp., *Gyroidinoides* sp., *Cibicides* spp., *Cibicidoides* spp.,
371 *Bolivina* gr. (mainly *B. spathulata* and *B. dilatata*), *Bulimina* gr. (mainly *B. aculeata*, *B.*
372 *echinata* and *B. elongata*), *Hanzawaia boueana*, *Cancris oblungus* and *Uvigerina*
373 *bononiensis*.

374 From 9 m of the Tokhni composite section upward, the benthic assemblages become
375 prevalently dominated by the *Bolivina* gr. (mainly *B. dilatata* and *B. spathulata*), which is
376 particularly abundant in the 15.5 - 28 m interval, where it peaks in the shales in
377 correspondence to the P/B minima (Fig. 4). Benthic foraminifera are absent in the
378 limestone beds from 11 m upward, and scattered or absent in some shale levels. A
379 marked abundance decrease is observed from 28.5 m up to 35.2 m, where the last
380 recovery of benthic foraminifera (LRb), represented by the *Bolivina* gr., is recorded. In the
381 benthic abundance peaks, the *Bolivina* gr. is commonly associated with subordinated
382 buliminids, *Elphidium* spp. and with the inner shelf taxa group (*H. boueana*, *C. oblungus*, *V.*
383 *complanata*, *R. globularis* and, rarely, *Ammonia* sp.). These generally subordinated taxa
384 represent major components of the assemblages just in two samples, at 18 and 25 m (Fig.
385 4).

386

387 4.4. Calcareous nannofossils

388 Calcareous nannofossil assemblages in the upper part of sub-unit PK-A₃ and sub-unit PK-
389 B, from 7 m up to the top of the composite section, show moderate to poor preservation. In
390 general, preservation within the micritic limestone layers is poorer than in the shale
391 intervals. Calcareous nannofossils are common to abundant along the section but
392 decrease in abundance at 28.3 m and at 34 m (Fig. 5); however they are still present up to

393 the uppermost sample at 36.5 m. Reworking of calcareous nannofossils from sediments as
394 old as Early Cretaceous occurs sporadically and mainly in the reddish shales of each cycle.
395 However, abundance of reworked specimens is very low and does not hinder the
396 quantitative analysis of the assemblages. Diatoms were also detected in the smear slides
397 prepared for calcareous nannofossil analyses and occur, with discontinuous abundances,
398 from 12.2 m upward; remarkably, limestones were devoid of diatoms (R. Jordan, pers.
399 comm., 2014).

400 Major component of the fossil assemblages along the entire section are Reticulofenestrids
401 (*Reticulofenestra minuta*, *R. haqii*, *R. pseudoumbilicus*, which represent up to 80% of the
402 total assemblage), together with *Sphenolithus abies* (up to 80%), *Calcidiscus leptoporus*
403 (up to 70%) and *U. jafari* (up to 45%) (Fig. 5). *R. minuta* is present in both the limestones
404 and in the middle/upper part of the shales; however, in the latter it retains the abundance
405 maxima. Differently, *S. abies* is virtually absent in the limestones and generally shows
406 greater abundance in the lower part of the shales. The greater abundance of *Cd.*
407 *leptoporus* occurs in the limestone layers up to 29.25 m; above this level its abundance
408 drops to less than 5% and it is replaced by *Reticulofenestra antarctica* within the
409 limestones up to 32.5 m. *U. jafari* is prevalently present with abundance peaks in the
410 limestones up to 31 m, where it disappears.

411 *U. rotula* is a minor component (with peak close to 18%) of the assemblage up to 34 m,
412 but it reaches 90% in the abundance peak (Ap) between limestones A and B of PK-B sub-
413 unit (35 m) (Fig. 5). *Helicosphaera carteri* shows low abundances up to 26 m, reaching
414 15% of the total assemblage at 34.5 m. *Discoaster* spp. occurs from the bottom of the
415 section and the *Discoaster variabilis* gr. (< 5%) is quite regularly present in three intervals:
416 10 - 12 m, 18 - 21 m and 25.5 - 29.5 m. It is prevalent in the shales, but it also occurs in
417 the lower part of the limestones at 11.5 m and at 26 m. *Braarudosphaera bigelowii* shows

418 an abundance peak (130 n/mm²) at 25.8 m (Fig. 5), being otherwise absent below and
419 above this layer.

420 The biostratigraphically useful taxa *Amaurolithus delicatus* and *A. primus* are generally
421 very rare and shows very scattered occurrences.

422

423 4.4. Isotopic geochemistry ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$, $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$)

424 Oxygen isotope values (Fig. 6) range from -4.57‰ to 2.49‰ (PDB), showing a cyclic
425 stacking pattern with heavier values in the limestones and lighter values in the reddish
426 shales and pink diatomites. The heaviest values are observed in the limestones below 9
427 m; a shift towards more depleted values is recorded between 9 and 18.5 m, both in the
428 limestones and in the shales. From 18.5 up to 34 m (base of sub-unit PK-B) positive and
429 negative values of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ quite regularly match with the limestones and shales, respectively,
430 however, relative maxima close to zero are documented between 26.5 and 28.5 m. At 34
431 m a sudden drop towards the most negative values of the succession is observed; minima
432 occur in the grey and pink shales, while the uppermost three carbonates show values
433 close to zero. Carbon isotope values are prevalently negative, ranging from -3.19‰ to -
434 0.5‰ (PDB), without any evident relationship with lithology (Fig. 6). Just one positive peak
435 at 0.51‰ was measured in the lowermost limestone of the sub-unit PK-B. However, a
436 covariance is observed in the long-term trends between the oxygen and the carbon
437 curves: an increase from the bottom to 4.5 m is followed by an overall decrease down to a
438 minimum at 16 m. Upward an increasing trend is recorded up to 22 m, where a relative
439 maximum of -0.74‰ occurs. Further up, values range between -2 to -1‰ and are
440 punctuated by a positive peak corresponding to the laminated portion of the lowermost
441 carbonate of sub-unit PK-B. As the lowermost carbonate of sub-unit PK-B is laminated, we
442 measured the isotope ratios for two white and brown consecutive laminae. Remarkably,
443 the isotopic signatures of these two laminae are different, as we obtained $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$

444 values of -1.31‰ and -0.58‰ for the white and of 0.17 ‰ and 0.51 ‰ for the brown
445 lamina, respectively.

446 The $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ isotopic ratio is generally slightly greater than that of the oceanic mean
447 values (Mc Arthur et al. 2001) in sub-unit PK-A₃ (Fig. 6), except for samples at 20.25, 24.5
448 and 32.5 m. Conversely, in sub-unit PK-B the isotopic ratio gradually decreases below the
449 oceanic values, showing two minima in the clastic limestones B and C.

450

451 5. Discussion

452 5.1. Biomagnetostratigraphy

453 In terms of planktonic foraminiferal biostratigraphy, the FO of *T. multiloba* (dated at 6.415
454 Ma in the Perales section by Sierro et al. 2001) at 10.2 m, the Lri of *N. acostaensis* with
455 predominant sinistral coiling (6.378 Ma; Sierro et al. 2001) at 12.6 m, the FAO of dextrally
456 coiled *N. acostaensis* (6.339 Ma; Sierro et al. 2001) at 15.25 m allow us to assign the
457 middle and upper part of PK-A₃ sub-unit to the Messinian biozones MMi13b and MMi13c
458 of Iaccarino et al. (2007). The MMi13b/MMi13c subzonal boundary is defined by the coiling
459 change of *N. acostaensis* between 12.6 and 15.25 m. The succession of these events also
460 indicates that discontinuous reversed polarity samples recorded between 11 and 12 m and
461 at 17 m are referable to the C3An.1r sub-chron (Sierro et al. 2001). In the upper part of the
462 composite section, the influx of *G. scitula* (29.7 m) and the LO of *T. multiloba* (31 m) occur
463 within a normal polarity magnetozone. The same succession of events is observed in the
464 Perales section, where they occur within sub-chron C3An.1n and are respectively dated at
465 6.102 and 6.04 Ma (Sierro et al. 2001). Thus, the influx of *G. scitula* at 29.7 m can be
466 correlated to its 2nd influx recognized in the Perales section (Sierro et al. 2001) and the
467 normal magnetozone between 22 and 31.5 m is correlated to sub-chron C3An.1n. The LR
468 of planktonic and benthic foraminifera between limestones A and B in the sub-unit PK-B
469 marks the base of the Non-Distinctive Zone (NDZ) of Iaccarino et al. (2007) and are

470 considered as a good approximation of the MSC onset. In fact, the LR of planktonic (LRp)
471 and benthic (LRb) foraminifera ($> 125 \mu\text{m}$) have been recognized in the penultimate cycle
472 (Perales, Falconara, Legnagnone) and in the last cycle of the pre-MSC unit (Perales,
473 Legnagnone), respectively (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Gennari et al. 2013, Manzi et al.
474 2011, 2013, Sierro et al. 2003). In the Pollenzo section the LRp and the LRb ($>125\mu\text{m}$)
475 have been recognized in the 1st and 2nd PLG cycles, respectively (Violanti et al. 2013), but
476 a strong decrease in the foraminiferal abundance marks the onset of the MSC.

477 Regarding calcareous nannofossils, the occurrence of *A. delicatus* and *A. primus* from the
478 bottom of the composite section, albeit scattered, indicates the presence of the MNN11b/c
479 biozones (Raffi et al. 2003). In addition, recently, calcareous nannofossil bioevents have
480 been identified associated with the onset of the MSC in the Northern Apennine (Manzi et
481 al. 2007, Dela Pierre et al. 2011, Violanti et al. 2013). For instance, , a sharp abundance
482 peak of *S. abies*, associated with abundant *H. carteri* and shortly followed by an
483 abundance peak of *U. rotula* close to 60% of the assemblage, is reported in the Pollenzo
484 section (NW Italy) in the sediments deposited during the first Primary Lower Gypsum
485 (PLG) cycle (Lozar et al. 2010 and this volume, Violanti et al. 2013). Remarkably, both at
486 Pollenzo and in the Fanantello borehole (Northern Apennine, Italy; Manzi et al. 2007), *S.*
487 *abies* shows low abundances all over the section, with a noticeable 60% abundance peak
488 at the base of the first PLG equivalent cycle. In the Tokhni section, on the contrary, this *S.*
489 *abies* peak is not unambiguously detectable since this taxon is abundant and regularly
490 occurs in all the shales. However, the occurrence of the sharp increase in abundance of
491 both *H. carteri* and *U. rotula* at 34.5 and 35 m respectively, close to the LR of planktonic
492 and benthic foraminifera, shows their reliability to approximate the onset of the MSC.

493

494 5.2. Cyclostratigraphy

495 The Tokhni section presents a well-defined cyclic lithologic stacking pattern. The cycles of
496 sub-unit PK-A₃ are generally made up of reddish shales and prominent whitish limestones.
497 However, while the shaley hemicycle is a constant feature of the sedimentary cycles along
498 all the composite section, limestones can be associated with or replaced by marls and/or
499 pink diatomites. In the sub-unit PK-B the recognition of sedimentary cycles is complicated
500 by the clastic nature of the limestones A (upper part), B and C. This suggests that they
501 should not be considered equivalent to the limestones of the sub-unit PK-A₃ (see Manzi et
502 al. 2016). On the whole, in the Tokhni composite section from 7 m up to the base of the
503 gypsum deposits, we identified 25 cycles (Fig. 7); the thickness of these cycles is rather
504 variable and ranges from 0.5 m (cycle 21) up to 2 m (e.g., cycles 2 and 8). The occurrence
505 of 16 cycles in a time interval of 340 kyr (between the FO of *T. multiloba* and the 2nd influx
506 of *G. scitula*) implies an average duration of 21 kyr for each cycle, suggesting a
507 relationship with precession, as previously observed by Orszag-Sperber et al. (2009)
508 Because of the absence of sapropels and the scarcity of diatomites, the sedimentary
509 cycles at Tokhni are more similar to those of the Pissouri section described as an
510 alternation of carbonates (insolation minima) and marls (insolation maxima) (Krijgsman et
511 al. 2002) than to other pre-MSC cycles. In particular, they differ from a) the tripartite cycles
512 of the Falconara and Gavdos sections (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Perez-Folgado et al.
513 2003), where sapropels and marls, intercalated by diatomites are tied to insolation maxima
514 and minima, respectively; b) the quadripartite cycles of Sorbas basin, where the sapropel
515 is correlated to insolation maxima and followed by lower marl, diatomite and upper marl
516 (insolation minima) (Sierro et al. 2001, 2003).

517 The cyclicity at Tokhni is also emphasized by fluctuations of the oxygen isotope values
518 and of the abundance of several calcareous nannofossil taxa. In fact, heavier $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values
519 are associated with limestones and marls, indicating more arid and/or colder conditions,
520 while lighter values are recorded in shales and diatomites, pointing to more humid and/or

521 warmer conditions (Fig. 6). These oscillations were also observed in the bulk sample
522 stable isotope record of Falconara section (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002), where the heavier
523 and lighter values respectively correspond to marls/diatomites (insolation minima) and to
524 sapropels (insolation maxima) (see also Hilgen and Krijgsman 1999). Regarding
525 calcareous nannofossils, shales are characterized by the occurrence of *S. abies*, and *R.*
526 *minuta*, (dominant in the lower/middle and upper part of the layer, respectively), both
527 sporadically associated with less abundant *D. variabilis* gr (<5%). This assemblage is
528 strikingly similar to that observed in the sapropels of the Sorbas basin (Flores et al. 2005).
529 Thus, the calcareous nannofossil assemblages and the lighter $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values suggest the
530 correlation between the reddish shales of the Tokhni composite section and insolation
531 maxima (Fig. 7).

532 *Cd. leptoporus* and *U. jafari* are the main components of the calcareous nannofossil
533 assemblage in the limestones and marls up to 29.5 m and their co-occurrence was also
534 observed in the upper marls of the Sorbas basin, correlated with insolation minima (Sierro
535 et al. 2003, Flores et al. 2005). Thus, the occurrence of these two taxa and the heavier
536 $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ suggest the correlation between the limestones of the Tokhni composite section and
537 insolation minima.

538

539 5.3. Age model

540 To reconstruct the age model for the Tokhni composite section the
541 biomagnetostratigraphic framework has been used for the correlation to the astronomically
542 calibrated Messinian reference sections of Pollenzo, Perales and Falconara (Fig. 7). The
543 calcareous plankton events have been used as tie points and the sedimentary cycles have
544 been correlated to the 65°N summer insolation curve (Laskar et al. 2004), on the basis of
545 the phase relation above exposed (Fig. 7). The resulting age model fits well with the 100
546 kyr eccentricity cycle, reflected in the intervals of low and high amplitude variations of the

547 summer insolation curve, corresponding to eccentricity minima and eccentricity maxima,
548 respectively. In particular, the thick limestone of cycle 3 corresponds to the high amplitude
549 insolation cycle at ca. 6.4 Ma; the thick cycles 8, 9 and 10 well correlate with the cluster of
550 high amplitude insolation cycles centred at 6.3 Ma; the prominent limestones of cycle 13
551 and 14 well fit with the high amplitude insolation cycle at 6.2 Ma. Indeed, eccentricity
552 minima (6.36, 6.14, 5.97 Ma) can be identified in the sedimentary record for the absence
553 of prominent limestones, replaced by thin marls or pink diatomites (cycles 5, 15-16 and 23;
554 Fig. 7). Moreover, the oxygen isotope curve also displays overall lighter values and
555 smoother oscillations in both the 6.36 and 6.14 Ma eccentricity minima. The sedimentary
556 response to the 100 kyr eccentricity cycle is a good constraint for the proposed age model;
557 however, an additional tie point could be represented by the influx of *T. multiloba* in the 15
558 - 29.5 m interval, where the C3An.1r/C3An.1n reversal is poorly constrained and standard
559 bioevents are lacking (Fig. 7). This bioevent occurs at the base of the sub-chron C3An.1n,
560 five precessional cycles above the FAO of dextrally coiled *N. acostaensis* and six cycles
561 below the 2nd influx of *G. scitula*. In the same stratigraphic position, in the Perales and
562 Falconara successions (Sierro et al. 2001, Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002) *T. multiloba* show a
563 very prominent influx (up to 100% of the assemblage), which marks a paracme end dated
564 at 6.21 Ma, based on its occurrence in the upper part of cycle UA23 of Sierro et al. (2001).
565 In the upper part of the composite section, the relative position of the LO of *T. multiloba*
566 with respect to the 2nd influx of *G. scitula* (within sub-chron C3An.1n) indicates that an
567 erosion of ca. 2 sedimentary cycles is associated with the base of the conglomerate at
568 30.5 m (Fig. 7). In fact, at Tokhni, these events are recorded in two consecutive
569 sedimentary cycles, i.e. below and above the conglomerate, while in the Perales section
570 they are separated by three insolation minima (Sierro et al. 2001).
571 The proposed age model indicates that the onset of the MSC at 5.971 Ma (Manzi et al.
572 2013) occurs between the two lowermost limestones of the sub-unit PK-B (Manzi et al.

2016), ca. 4 precessional cycles above the LO of *T. multiloba* and well approximated by the LR of benthic and planktonic foraminifera and by the abundance peaks of *U. rotula* and *H. carteri*. In this interval the sedimentary cyclicity is poorly defined by the thin alternation of shales and diatomites due to the concomitant eccentricity minima. Moreover, the identification of the MSC onset at ca. one precessional cycle below the MES (5.60 Ma, Krijgsman et al. 1999a) implies a hiatus of ca. 350 kyr, due to the erosion of most of the sediments associated with Stage 1 of the MSC.

580

581 5.4. Paleoenvironmental reconstruction

582 5.4.1. Interval 1: pre 6.4 Ma

In the lower part of the section, prior to 6.4 Ma, benthic foraminifer assemblages are similar to those recorded in the 7.16 - 6.4 Ma interval of the Pissouri section (Kouwenhoven et al. 2006). They include genera typically representative of an inner shelf to upper bathyal habitats (Murray 2006). The presence of inner shelf genera, such as *Elphidium*, *Neoconorbina*, *Rosalina* and *Ammonia*, as well as of older foraminifera, is interpreted as due to downslope transport, a process commonly observed in the pre-MSC successions of Crete and Cyprus (Van der Zwaan 1982, Kouwenhoven et al. 2006).. Thus, the diversified benthic foraminifer assemblages and the common occurrence of ostracods indicate an upper bathyal paleoenvironment and the prevalence of an oxygenated sea floor (Boomer and Eisenhauer 2002). Still, the relative high abundances of the *Bolivina* and *Bulimina* groups at some levels point to episodes of enhanced nutrient availability and lower oxygen levels (Jorissen 1987, Kahio 1994). The prevalence of *Globigerinoides* spp. and *O. universa* in the planktonic assemblages of the basal portion of the Tokhni composite section suggests overall warm and oligotrophic conditions in the upper water column (Fig. 8). The occurrence of *T. quinqueloba*, *T. multiloba* and of *G. bulloides* from

598 cycle 2 (6.44 Ma) upwards documents the establishment of more eutrophic conditions
599 (Sierro et al. 2003).

600

601 5.4.2. Interval 2: 6.4 - 6.1 Ma

602 From 6.4 Ma, the shales are characterized by the dominance of the opportunistic *Bolivina*
603 (mainly *B. spathulata* and *B. dilatata*) and, subordinately, *Bulimina* groups (mainly *B.*
604 *echinata* and *B. aculeata*), which co-occur with inner shelf benthic foraminifera and with
605 abundant sponge spicules (Fig. 8), both considered the result of downslope transport. The
606 autochthonous fauna indicates bottom waters characterized by high organic matter supply,
607 low oxygen levels and, according to Kouwenhoven et al. (2006), also by increased salinity.
608 The disappearance of ostracods also points to substantial oxygen decrease at the sea
609 bottom, whereas the abundance of sponge spicules either reveals increased availability or
610 optimal preservation of silica. These changes occurred synchronously in the adjacent
611 Pissouri basin and we infer that they are related to the establishment of stressed condition
612 at the sea floor (Kouwenhoven et al., 2006), rather than a shallowing upward trend (see
613 also Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009).

614 This interval in the Mediterranean is usually characterized by increased oscillations of the
615 P/B ratio (0 - 100%) indicating the establishment of precession-paced anoxic bottom water
616 conditions (insolation maxima) and stressed surface waters (hypertrophic/high salinity)
617 during insolation minima (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Sierro et al. 2003; Kouwenhoven et al.
618 2006). At Tokhni, as well, we observe an increased response to the insolation index, which
619 involves marked micropaleontologic differences between the shales (insolation maxima)
620 and the limestones (insolation minima). However, a clear relation between assemblage
621 composition and lithology is only shown by calcareous nannofossils, as foraminifera are
622 generally only present in the shales and do not show a regular distribution pattern.

623 The shaley hemicycles record the association of the aforementioned opportunistic benthic
 624 foraminifera with *S. abies*, *D. variabilis* gr., *R. minuta* and with lighter $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values. In the
 625 Atlantic Ocean Pliocene record and in the Messinian sapropels of the Sorbas basin,
 626 *Discoaster* spp. and *S. abies* positively respond to low nutrient availability in the lower
 627 photic zone (LPZ) and to warm sea surface temperatures (Gibbs et al. 2004a, Flores et al.
 628 2005). *R. minuta* is an opportunistic taxon tolerating wide ecological changes and
 629 blooming in nutrient-rich surface waters (Aubry 1992, Flores et al. 1995); in particular, the
 630 increase of small sized *Reticulofenestra* has been correlated with increased riverine input
 631 in the Caribbean Pliocene record (Kameo 2002) and, associated with a decrease of
 632 *Discoaster*, has been related to meso- to eutrophic condition in the Late Miocene Pacific
 633 record (Imai et al. 2015). In the lower/middle part of the Tokhni shales the occurrence of *R.*
 634 *minuta* associated with dominant *S. abies* and rare specimens of the *D. variabilis* gr.
 635 suggests that at times of insolation maxima *R. minuta* could thrive in the upper photic zone,
 636 where high nutrient levels were mainly provided through increased continental runoff,
 637 which also favoured the stratification of the water column. More oligotrophic condition
 638 prevailed in the LPZ favouring the proliferation of *S. abies* and, to a minor extent, of *D.*
 639 *variabilis* gr. In the upper part of the shales, *R. minuta* becomes dominant (40-60%),
 640 generally following a drop in abundance of *S. abies*. Similar to the Sorbas basin (Flores et
 641 al. 2005), this could indicate increasing nutrient availability in the surface layer immediately
 642 after the insolation maxima, when the transition to a more arid condition, typically
 643 established during insolation minima, favoured the onset of deep/intermediate water
 644 ventilation.

645 Therefore, by analogy with the formation of the Late Miocene and Plio-Pleistocene
 646 sapropels (Nijenhuis et al. 1996), we argue that continental runoff increased during
 647 insolation maxima, triggering the stratification of the water column and raising nutrient and
 648 silica levels. The oxygen consumption at the sea floor was favoured by the elevated

649 organic matter levels supplied directly from the continent and from the primary productivity
 650 in the photic zone (Fig. 8). The combination of these processes favoured the formation of
 651 dysoxic or anoxic bottom waters, as indicated by abundance peaks of the *Bolivina* and
 652 *Bulimina* groups and levels with scarce or absent benthic foraminifera. Differently, benthic
 653 foraminifera are completely absent in sapropels deposited after 6.4 Ma in the Western
 654 Mediterranean Perales section, indicating the establishment of more permanent sea floor
 655 anoxia in response to a stronger density stratification of the water column at times of
 656 insolation maxima (Sierro et al. 2003).

657 In the marls and limestones of this interval *Cd. leptoporus* occurs with *U. jafari*, while,
 658 remarkably, foraminifera are generally absent. The possibility that dissolution had altered
 659 the micropaleontologic record of the limestones is regarded as unlikely, since the co-
 660 occurrence of the very resistant *Cd. leptoporus* (McIntyre and McIntyre 1971, Dittert et al.
 661 1999, Ziveri et al. 2007) with the very delicate *U. jafari* (Gibbs et al. 2004b), recorded in
 662 abundances higher than 30%, is taken as indication of minor diagenetic effects on the
 663 assemblage.

664 Extant *Cd. leptoporus* has broad ecological preferences and opportunistic behaviour
 665 (Renaud et al. 2002, Boeckel et al. 2006, Baumann et al. 2016). In fact, it is related to
 666 warm/temperate waters with higher nutrient input to the upper photic zone and a shallower
 667 nutricline, possibly driven by effective mixing due to upwelling (Ziveri et al. 2004, Ausin et
 668 al. 2015). *Cd. leptoporus* is abundant and associated with small placoliths (i.e. small
 669 Reticulofenestrids) in the basal homogeneous marls of each cycle of the pre-MSC Serra
 670 Pirciata and Torrente Vaccarizzo sections (Caltanissetta Basin, Sicily; Bellanca et al.
 671 2002), where it co-occurs with *T. quinqueloba* and *N. acostaensis*, indicating cooler and
 672 eutrophic waters. At Sorbas, *U. jafari* can be abundant in the upper marls (insolation
 673 minima) and is inferred to tolerate high salinity (Flores et al. 2005).

674 The presence of these taxa together with the heavier $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values suggest that during
 675 insolation minima the higher evaporation rate increased the sea surface salinity, favouring
 676 the mixing of the water mass, the formation of deep/intermediate waters and triggering
 677 eutrophic conditions in the upper part of the water column. This mechanism is similar to
 678 that allowing the formation of the Levantine Intermediate (and Deep) Water, which, at
 679 present, originates in winter in the Cyprus-Rhodes Area and resides between 150 and 600
 680 m in the Eastern Mediterranean (Rohling et al. 2015). Notably, the absence of *U. jafari* and
 681 the lighter $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ in the intervals correlated to eccentricity minima (cycles 6-7, 11 and 15-17)
 682 could indicate that the lowered seasonality decreased the formation rate of highly saline
 683 superficial waters. Note, however, that the relatively lighter $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ maxima measured in the
 684 limestones of these intervals may be also related to the abundance of *Cd. leptoporus* in
 685 these layers, as this species is known to calcify at negative disequilibrium with the original
 686 sea water (Dudley and Nelson, 1989, Ziveri et al. 2003, Hermoso et al. 2014).
 687 The absence of benthic and planktonic foraminifera in almost all limestones of this interval
 688 represents a peculiarity of the Tokhni section with respect to the Mediterranean pre-MSC
 689 successions. In the adjacent Pissouri basin a-planktonic layers occur; however, their origin
 690 and relation with the insolation index remains unclear (Kouwenhoven et al. 2006). In the
 691 coeval portion of the Sorbas basin planktonic foraminifera solely can be absent or strongly
 692 reduced during insolation minima, while benthic foraminifera show abundance maxima
 693 (Sierro et al. 2003). The authors speculated that the absence of planktonic foraminifera
 694 could be explained by the highly eutrophic, relatively toxic waters supplied to the photic
 695 zone during phase of intense mixing. This explanation could hold true for the Tokhni
 696 limestones; however the higher abundances of *U. jafari* and the heavier $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values also
 697 suggest that highly saline waters formed in the superficial layer could have prevented the
 698 proliferation of planktonic foraminifera. The advection of the newly formed highly saline
 699 waters to the sea floor, could have created unfit conditions for benthic foraminifera, too.

700

701 5.4.3. Interval 3: 6.1 - MSC onset

702 After 6.1 Ma planktonic and benthic foraminifera show a drop in abundance also in the
703 shales, indicating increasingly stressed environmental conditions. However, the benthic
704 assemblage composition remains the same and, together with the presence of shelf to
705 bathyal cuspidariids bivalves in the sub-unit PK-B (Manzi et al. 2016), indicates that no
706 remarkable paleodepth variation occurred in the proximity of the MSC onset, similarly to
707 the Pissouri basin (Kouwenhoven et al. 2006). Conversely, calcareous nannofossil
708 assemblages record important variations (Fig. 8). The *D. variabilis* group, *P. japonica*, *U.*
709 *jafari*, and *Cd. leptoporus* vanish, while *R. antarctica*, *H. carteri* and *U. rotula* show a
710 remarkable abundance increase.

711 In this interval, the shales are still characterized by *S. abies* and *R. minuta* but not *D.*
712 *variabilis* gr. This assemblage could suggest a shallower nutricline (being *Discoaster* spp.
713 adapted to the lower photic zone, like the extant *Florisphaera profunda*; Flores et al. 2005,
714 Stoll et al. 2007) and a moderate nutrient availability. Strong changes in sea surface
715 salinity are also envisaged, since *S. abies* has been reported to be common to abundant
716 between the gypsum beds of Stage 3 of Roveri et al. (2009), suggesting that it could be an
717 euryhaline taxon (Polemi basin, Cyprus; Wade and Bown 2006). The continuous cyclic
718 abundance of *S. abies* after 6.1 Ma confirms that the latter taxon shares only some
719 ecological preferences with *D. variabilis* gr.

720 *Cd. leptoporus* and *U. jafari* are replaced in the limestone beds by *R. antarctica*, a
721 *Reticulofenestra* species characterized by closed central area. Such Reticulofenestrids are
722 also documented by Krhovský et al. (1992) from diatom-rich Oligocene sediments from the
723 Czech Republic (Uherčice Fm. and Dynow Marlstone), where they co-occur with fresh to
724 brackish water diatom species *Melosira* (*Aulacosira*) indicating that this taxon and its
725 relatives could flourish in eutrophic environments with brackish to normal marine salinity.

726 In the topmost samples (across and above the MSC onset) planktonic foraminifera are
727 nearly absent and calcareous nannofossils assemblages become increasingly dominated
728 by *S. abies*, *R. minuta*, *U. rotula*, and to a lesser extent *H. carteri*. *H. carteri* is a meso- to
729 eutrophic taxon (Ziveri et al. 2004), reported from eutrophic, hyposaline waters (Giraudeau
730 1992, Flores et al. 1997) and estuarine environments (Cachão et al. 2002). This taxon
731 commonly occurs in the clays of the Upper Gypsum unit of Stage 3 of the Polemi basin
732 together with *Umbilicosphaera* specimens that were interpreted as high salinity taxa
733 (Wade and Bown 2006). In the Tokhni section high abundances of *U. rotula* occur both
734 together and just above the *H. carteri* abundance peak, suggesting on the contrary that
735 *Umbilicosphaera* spp. could be euryhaline and thrive in abnormal salinity waters. As for *R.*
736 *minuta*, small Reticulofenestrids are also particularly abundant in the sediments deposited
737 at the beginning of the MSC in the Piedmont Basin, testifying their tolerance to stressed
738 (Lozar et al. 2010, Violanti et al. 2013) and nearshore environments (Perch-Nielsen 1985),
739 characterized by eutrophic surface waters and variable salinity. The association of *U.*
740 *rotula* and *R. minuta* with *H. carteri*, the distinct negative $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values and the decline of the
741 $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratio (Fig. 8), which indicates a marked decreased influence of oceanic-derived
742 waters, typical of the Stage 1 deposits (Roveri et al. 2014), suggest a preference of these
743 taxa for lowered salinity. All this evidence indicates that the deposition of the conglomerate,
744 coeval to the 6.1 Ma Mediterranean paleoceanographic step, marked an increasing
745 riverine influence, both during insolation minima and maxima, reaching an acme at the
746 MSC onset. The conglomerate is coeval to the slurry bed deposited in the Pissouri basin
747 (Krijgsman et al. 2002, Manzi et al. 2016) and to a similar layer observed in the Fanantello
748 borehole, which marks an increase of the terrigenous input into the Northern Apennine
749 foredeep. Slope instability is also recorded in the Piedmont basin just below the LO of *T.*
750 *multiloba* (Lozar et al. 2010, Violanti et al. 2013). These evidences suggest that a tectonic

751 impulse, likely affecting the Eastern and Northern Mediterranean, could have contributed
752 to trigger the paleoceanographic changes observed at ca. 6.1 Ma.

753

754 5.5. Paleohydrologic implication for the *Braarudosphaera bigelowii* peak

755 *Braarudosphaera bigelowii* has a very scattered but continuous occurrence along the
756 geological record since the Early Cretaceous and shows sporadic blooms as that recorded
757 at 26 m (up to 130 n/mm²) in the Tokhni composite section (Fig. 5). It has often been
758 related to neritic environments (Bown et al. 2005, Bartol et al. 2008), to nutrient enrichment
759 and/or low salinity waters, and is generally absent in oceanic settings (Peleo-Alampay et al.
760 1999, Kelly et al. 2003, Bartol et al. 2008). The affinity of *B. bigelowii* for hypohaline waters
761 is well illustrated by its presence in the Black Sea, where surface waters have an average
762 salinity of 17‰ to 18‰, and by its absence in the high-salinity waters of the Red Sea
763 (Bukry 1974). This episodic occurrence suggests a sporadic and transient supply of
764 fresher waters, either from enhanced runoff or from the connection with a brackish/fresh
765 water body. The stratigraphic position of this abundance peak, three cycles below the 2nd
766 influx of *G. scitula*, dated at 6.102 Ma (correlated to cycle UA27 in the Abad composite,
767 Sierro et al. 2001), suggests that these low salinity waters could have been sourced from
768 the paleo-Black sea, during the transient connection of the two basin approximating the
769 Meotian/Pontian boundary (Grothe et al. 2014, Vasiliev et al. 2015).

770

771 6. Conclusions

772 The Tokhni composite section (Psematismenos basin, southern Cyprus Island) is
773 characterized by the precession-paced alternation of red shales (precession
774 minima/insolation maxima) and limestones (precession maxima/insolation minima). The
775 phase relation between sedimentary cycles and precession cycles is based on cyclic
776 variations of calcareous nannofossil taxa and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values. The planktonic foraminifer and

777 magnetostratigraphic events set the tuning of the sedimentary cycles to the 65°N summer
778 insolation curve and to the Mediterranean pre-evaporitic reference sections (Sierro et al.
779 2001, Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Violanti et al. 2013) from 6.46 Ma up to the Messinian
780 Salinity Crisis onset at 5.97 Ma. As previously observed in other pre-MSC successions,
781 the onset of the crisis is approximated by: 1) the last recovery of planktonic and benthic
782 foraminifera (Manzi et al. 2007, Manzi et al. 2011, Violanti et al. 2013), 2) the peaks of *U.*
783 *rotula* and *H. carteri* (Lozar et al. 2010, Violanti et al. 2013) and 3) an increase of the fresh
784 water input (based on $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ values; Flecker et al. 2002, Roveri et al. 2014). These
785 events are recorded within an interval characterized by microbialitic and clastic carbonates
786 (included in the “barre jaune” of Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009), a few meters below the
787 clastic evaporites of the Kalavasos fm. (Manzi et al. 2016). This supports the interpretation
788 that the evaporites of Tokhni do not represent the MSC beginning (Manzi et al. 2016), but
789 instead the Stage 2 of Roveri et al. (2009), deposited after 5.60 Ma above the Messinian
790 Erosional Surface.

791 The estimated paleodepth reconstructed for the Psematismenos basin is upper bathyal
792 and did not significantly change from ca. 6.5 Ma up to the MSC onset. Remarkable
793 paleoceanographic changes are documented at ca. 6.4 and 6.1 Ma, coeval to the
794 uppermost major steps of the pre-MSC phase, and interpreted as increasingly stressed
795 surface and bottom water conditions (Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002, Sierro et al. 2003,
796 Kouwenhoven et al. 2006). It is hypothesized that from 6.4 Ma the increased runoff
797 favoured the stratification of the water column and enhanced nutrients levels in bottom and
798 surface waters at times of insolation maxima. Compared to the Western Mediterranean,
799 we observe a less severe oxygen reduction at the sea floor during insolation maxima,
800 probably caused by the episodic formation of intermediate/deep waters. During insolation
801 minima, excess evaporation in surface waters stimulated a vigorous mixing and we
802 speculate that the absence of benthic and planktonic foraminifera was due to the elevated

803 salinity. This indicates more extreme stressed conditions than in the Sorbas basin, where
804 planktonic foraminifera solely are generally reduced in abundance (Sierro et al. 2003).
805 After the deposition of the conglomerate at ca. 6.1 Ma, possibly related to a tectonic pulse,
806 micropaleontologic assemblages were reduced in abundance and diversity in response to
807 enhanced riverine influence. However, we note that a detectable decrease of the
808 connection with the global ocean can be argued based on the reduction of the $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$
809 values at the MSC onset.

810

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821

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1148 Figure captions

1149 Fig. 1 - A) Generalized geological map of the central and eastern Mediterranean and B) of
1150 the south-western portion of the Cyprus Island with the indication of the position of the
1151 Tokhni (Orszag-Sperber et al. 2009, Manzi et al. 2016, this study) and Pissouri (Krijgsman
1152 et al. 2002, Kouwenhoven et al. 2006) sections.

1153

1154 Fig. 2 - Lithological log of the four sub-sections outcropping near the Tokhni village. The
1155 dip and the inclination of the strata in the Pakhna and Kalavassos Formations are shown in
1156 order to highlight the presence of an unconformity related to the Messinian Erosional
1157 Surface (MES). The base of the Tokhni composite section (BTCS) is indicated with an
1158 arrow in sub-section To-1. The black bar next to sub-sections To-1, 2 and 3 shows the
1159 interval sampled for the quantitative calcareous nannofossil analysis and semi-quantitative
1160 foraminifer analysis.

1161

1162 Fig. 3 - Magnetostratigraphy of sub-section To-1. A) Plots of the inclination and declination
1163 of the characteristic remanent magnetization (ChRM). B) Stereoplot of the tilt corrected
1164 ChRM directions; the relative statistical values are reported for the normal and reverse
1165 samples in the upper and lower box, respectively. C) Stereoplots, Zijdeveld and
1166 demagnetization (M/M_{max}) diagrams relative to the thermal demagnetization paths for three
1167 selected samples.

1168

1169 Fig. 4 - Plots of the abundance (n° of specimens/field) of the planktonic and benthic
1170 foraminifer taxa considered in this study, total abundance of planktonic and benthic
1171 foraminifera (black and grey line respectively) and P/B ratio (%). The abundances of
1172 sinistrally and dextrally coiled *N. acostaensis* are plotted with increasing values from left to
1173 right (black line) at the bottom of the plot and from right to left (grey line) at the top of the

1174 plot, respectively. The asterisks indicate samples not considered for semi-quantitative
1175 analyses.

1176

1177 Fig. 5 - Plots of the total abundance of calcareous nannofossil (n/mm²) and relative
1178 abundances (%) of the taxa considered in this study. Note that *B. bigelowii* is only plotted
1179 as n/mm² and the *D. variabilis* gr. is plotted as n/mm² and % because of their scattered
1180 occurrences along the section.

1181

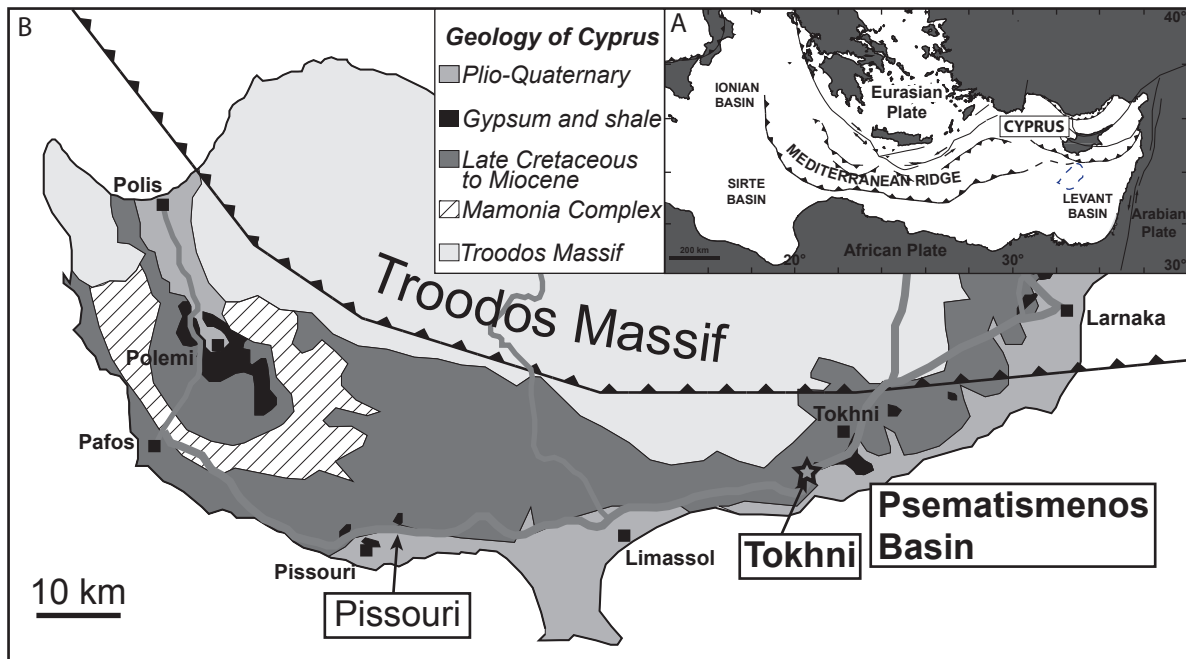
1182 Fig. 6 - Plots of the bulk Oxygen and Carbon isotopic values (both measured in shales and
1183 limestones) and of the bulk Sr isotopic ratio (only measured in limestones) of the Tokhni
1184 composite section.

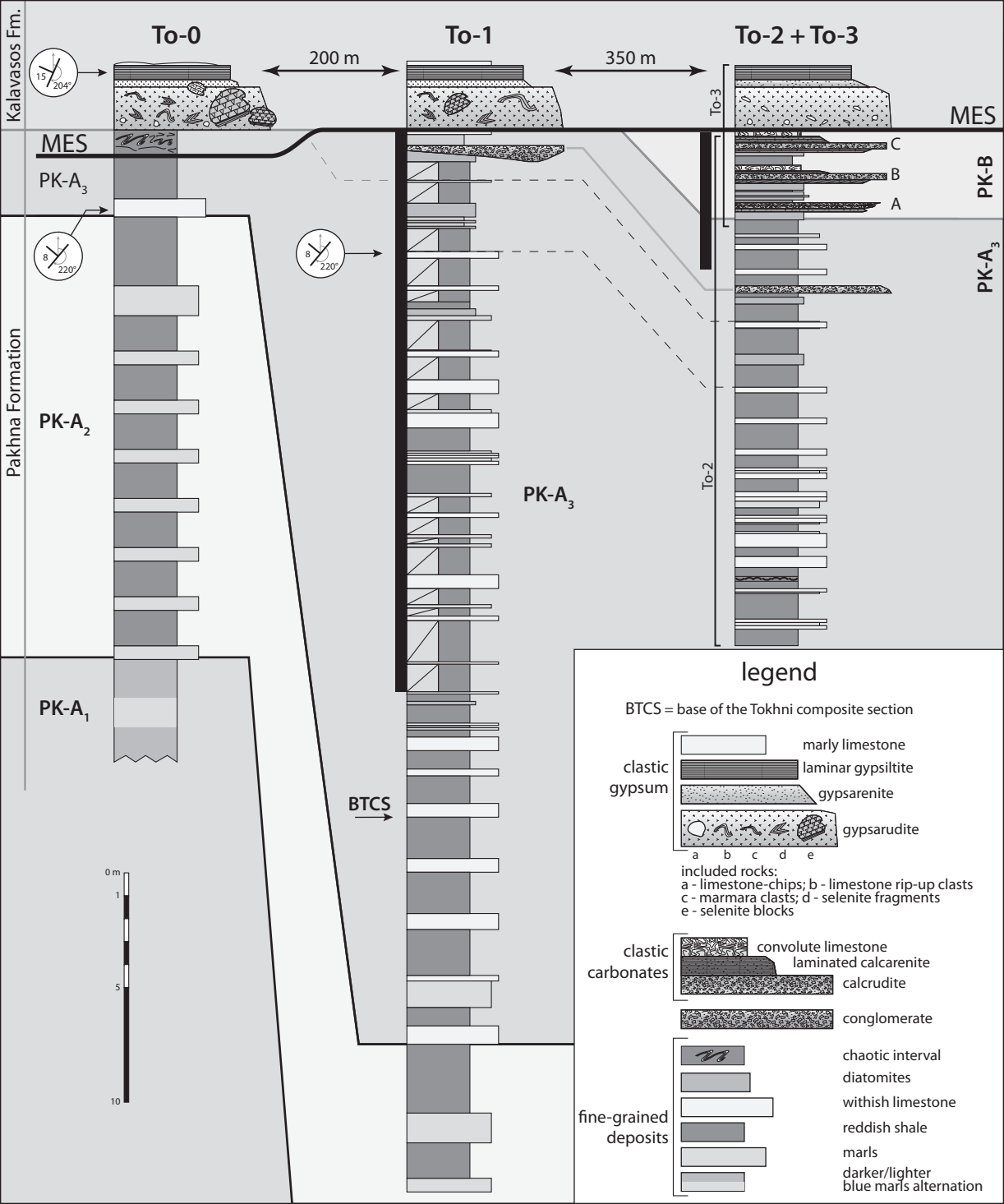
1185

1186 Fig. 7 - Biomagnetostratigraphic and cyclostratigraphic correlation of the Tokhni composite
1187 section to the Pollenzo (Lozar et al. 2010, Violanti et al. 2013), Perales (modified after
1188 Sierro et al. 2001 and Manzi et al. 2013) and Falconara (modified after Hilgen and
1189 Krijgsman 1999, Blanc-Valleron et al. 2002 and Manzi et al. 2011) sections. The
1190 successions are tuned to the 65°N summer insolation curve (Laskar et al. 2004).
1191 Planktonic foraminifer events are indicated by numbers following the codification of Sierro
1192 et al. (2001) (a letter is added for new bioevents): 12) first occurrence (FO) of *T. multiloba*;
1193 13) Last regular influx (Lri) of *N. acostaensis* sinistral coiling; 14) first abundant occurrence
1194 (FAO) of *N. acostaensis* dextral coiling; 15) 1st influx of *G. scitula*; 15a) abundance influx of
1195 *T. multiloba*; 16) 1st influx of *N. acostaensis* sinistral coiling; 17) 2nd influx of *G. scitula*; 18)
1196 2nd influx of *N. acostaensis* sinistral coiling; 18a) last occurrence (LO) of *T. multiloba*; 19p)
1197 last recovery (LR) of planktonic foraminifera ; 19b) last recovery (LR) of benthic
1198 foraminifera. Calcareous nannofossil events (Violanti et al., 2013): a) *H. carteri* peak; b) *U.*
1199 *rotula* peak. On the left side of the figure, the boundaries between the pre-MSC stage,

1200 stage 1 and 2 of Roveri et al. (2009) and the MSC chronology are indicated. Note that a
1201 hiatus of ca. 350 kyr is present between stage 1 and 2 due to the erosion associated with
1202 the Messinian erosional surface (MES).

1203
1204 Fig. 8 - Summary of the paleoenvironmental changes recognized in the Tokhni composite
1205 section. The paleoenvironmental interpretation of the chronologically unconstrained
1206 lowermost 11 m of the section relies upon qualitative observations on foraminifera. The
1207 black star beside the insolation curve indicates the position of the influx of *B. bigelowii*,
1208 suggesting a transient connection with the paleo-Black sea. On the right side of the figure,
1209 the boundaries between the pre-MSC stage, stage 1 and 2 of Roveri et al. (2009) and the
1210 MSC chronology are indicated. Note that a hiatus of ca. 350 kyr is present between stage
1211 1 and 2 due to the erosion associated with the Messinian erosional surface (MES).





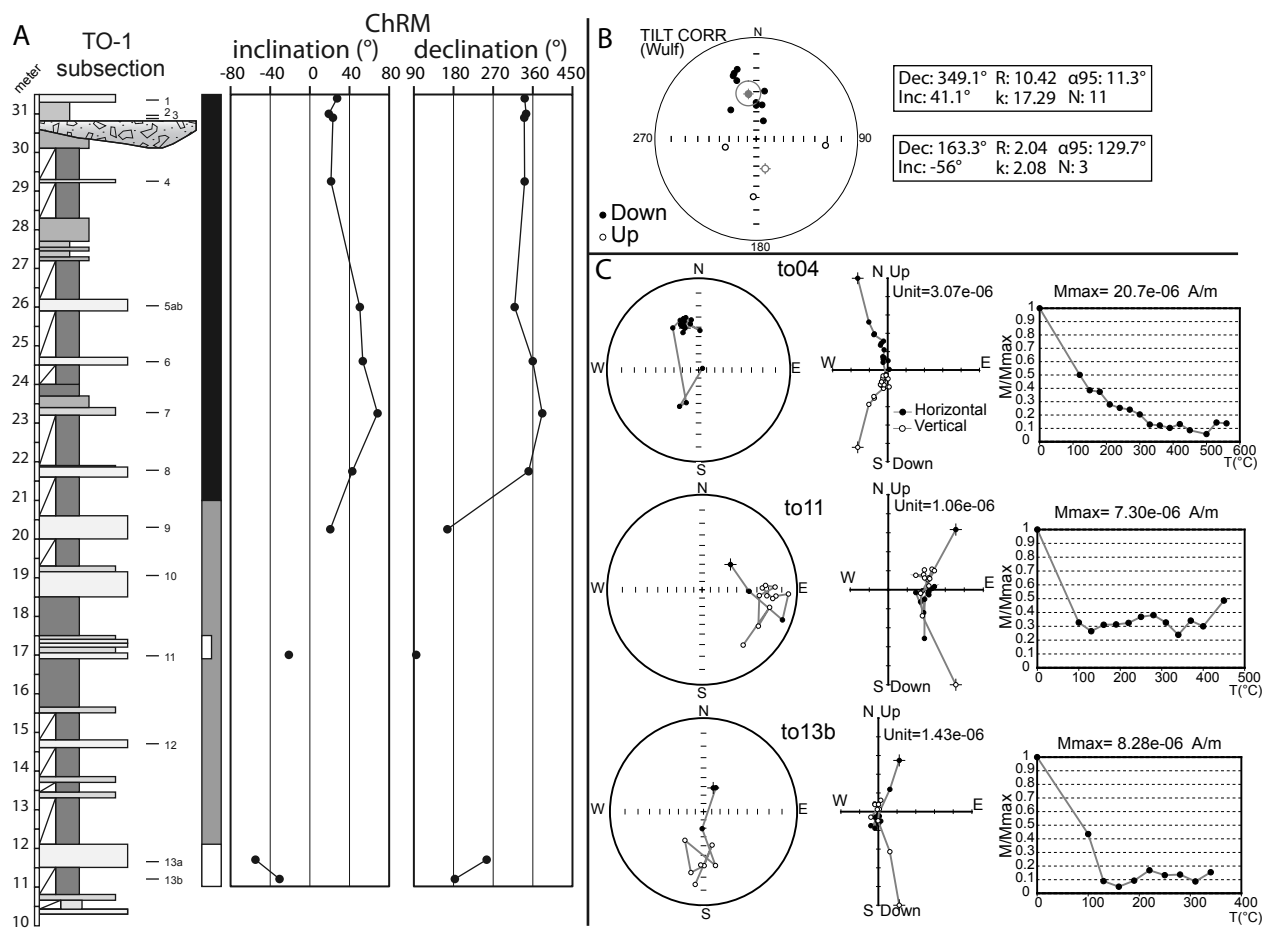


Figure 3

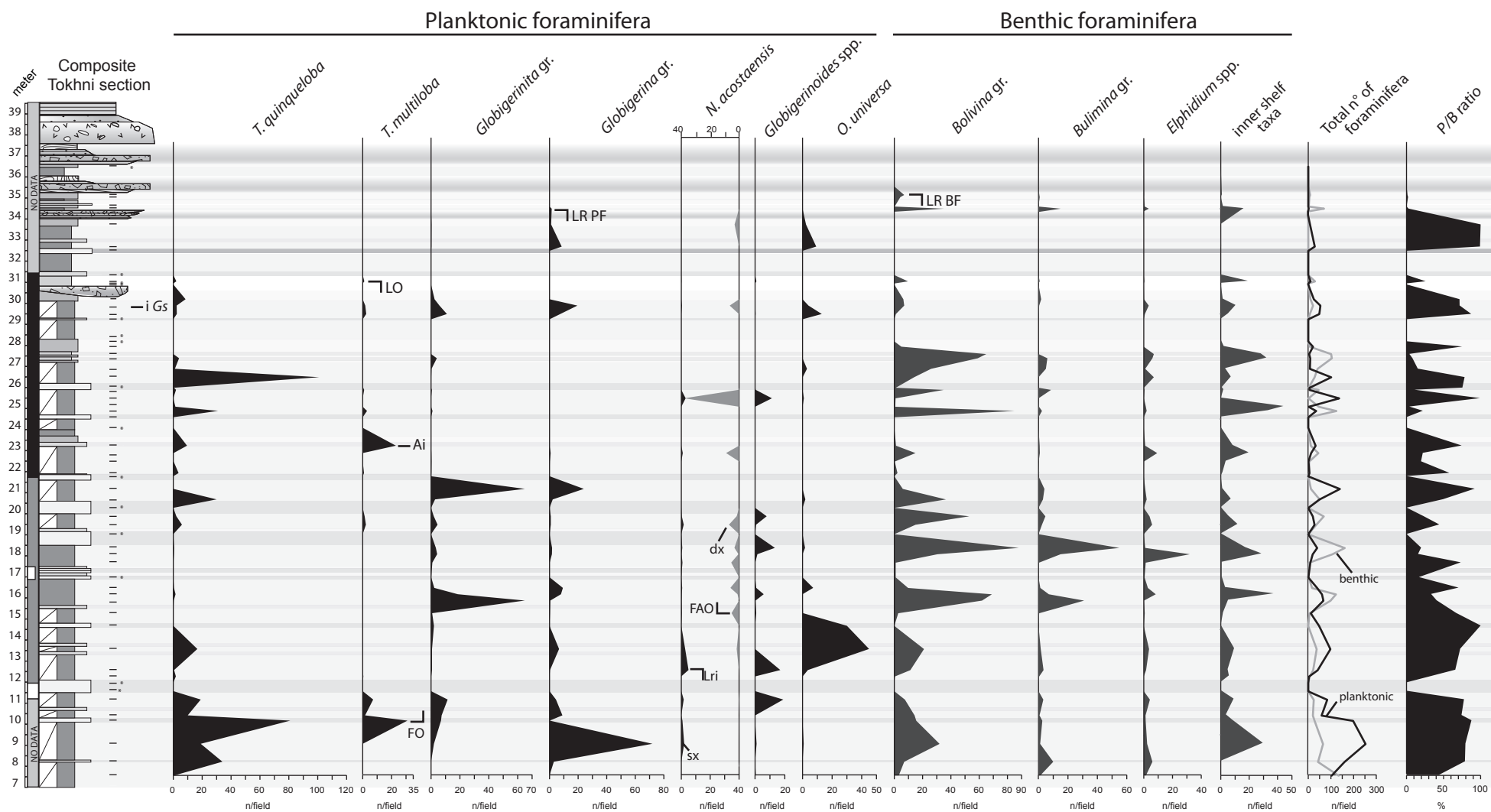


Figure 4

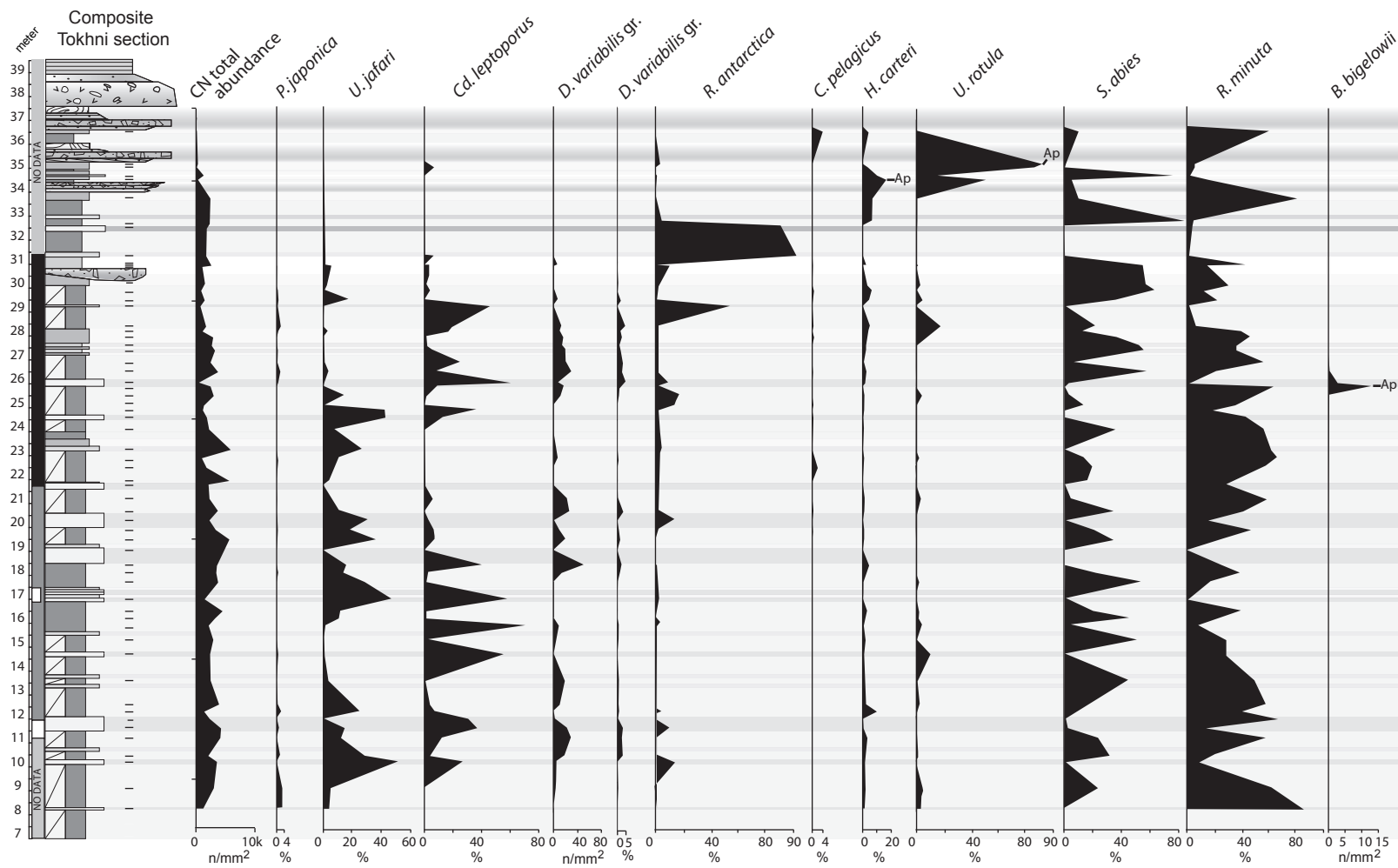


Figure 5

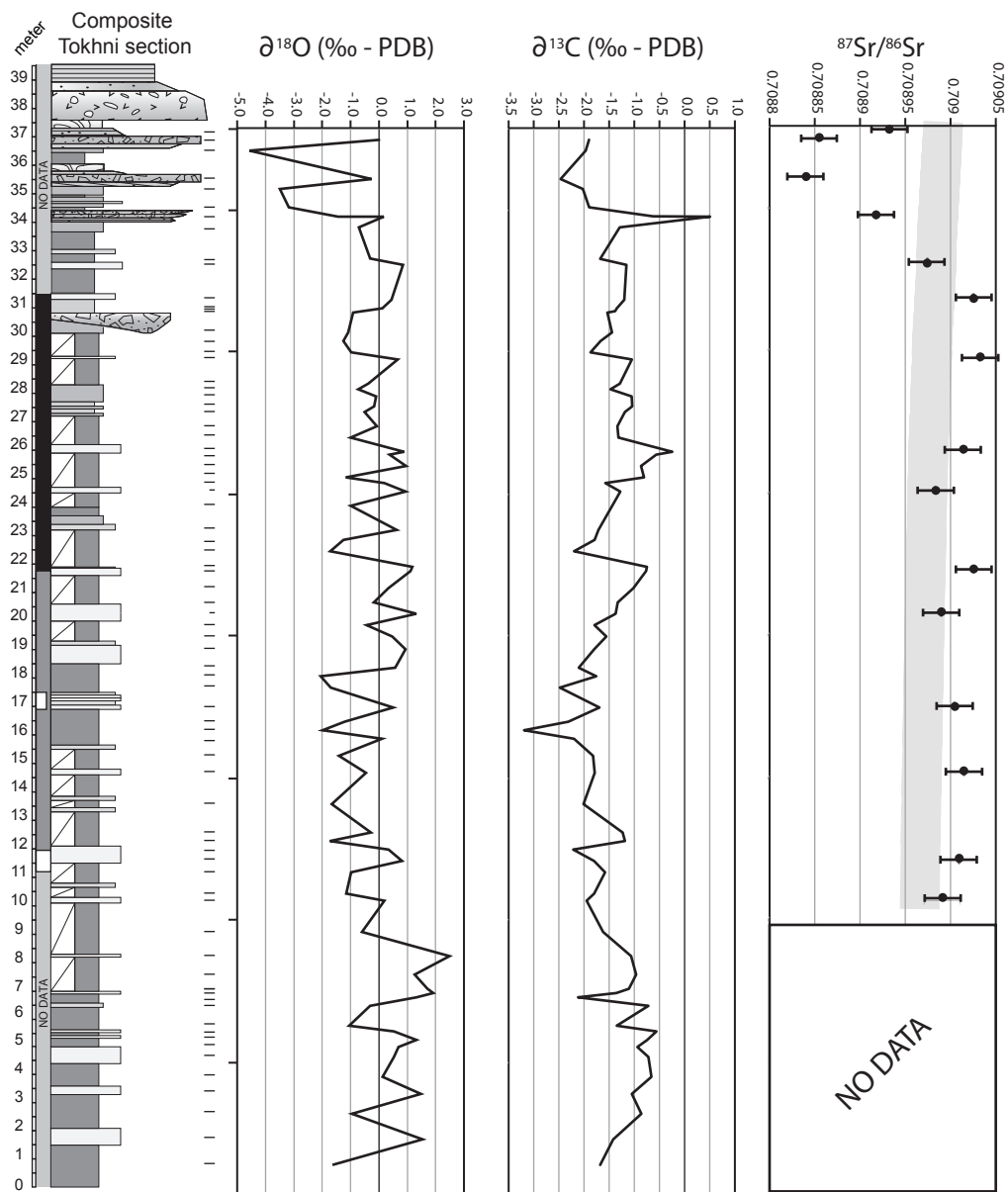
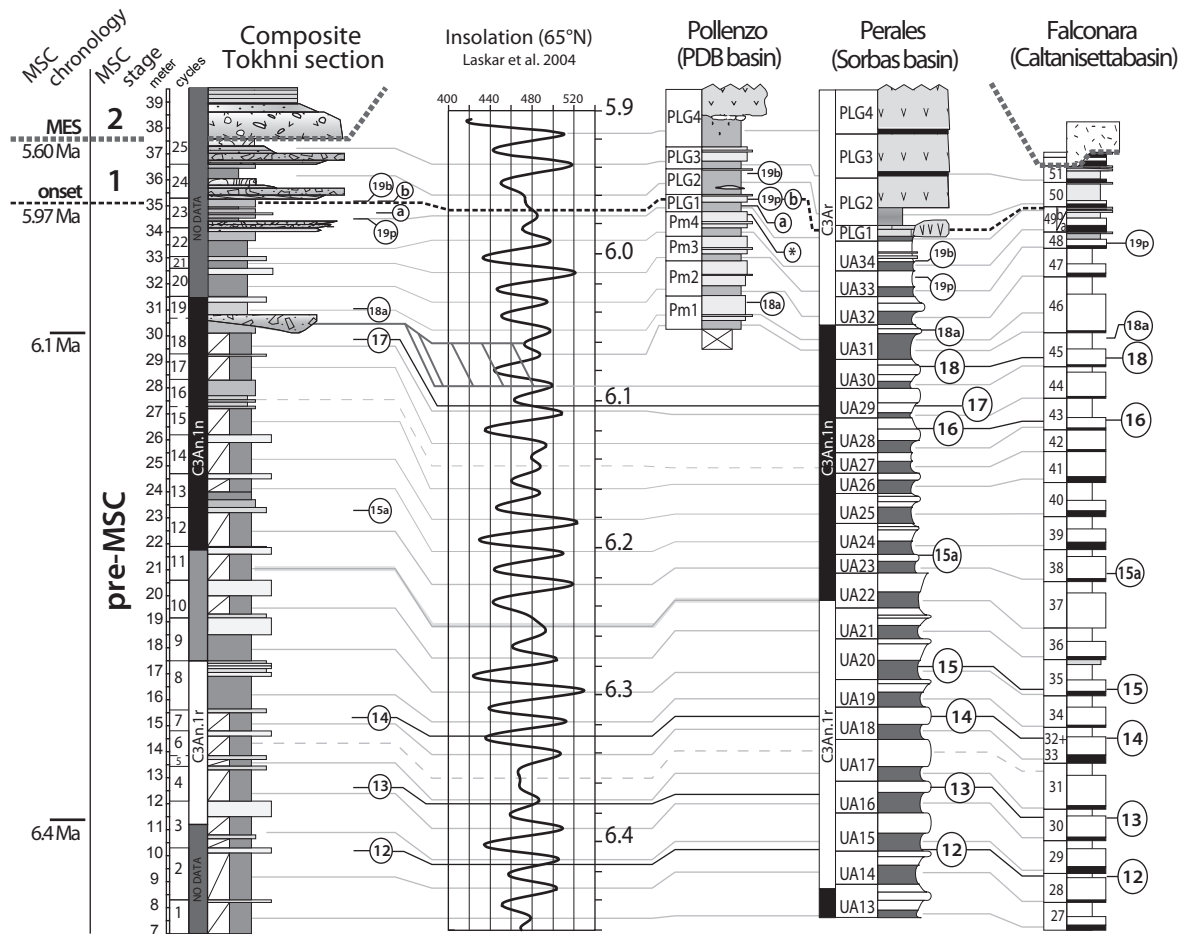


Figure 6



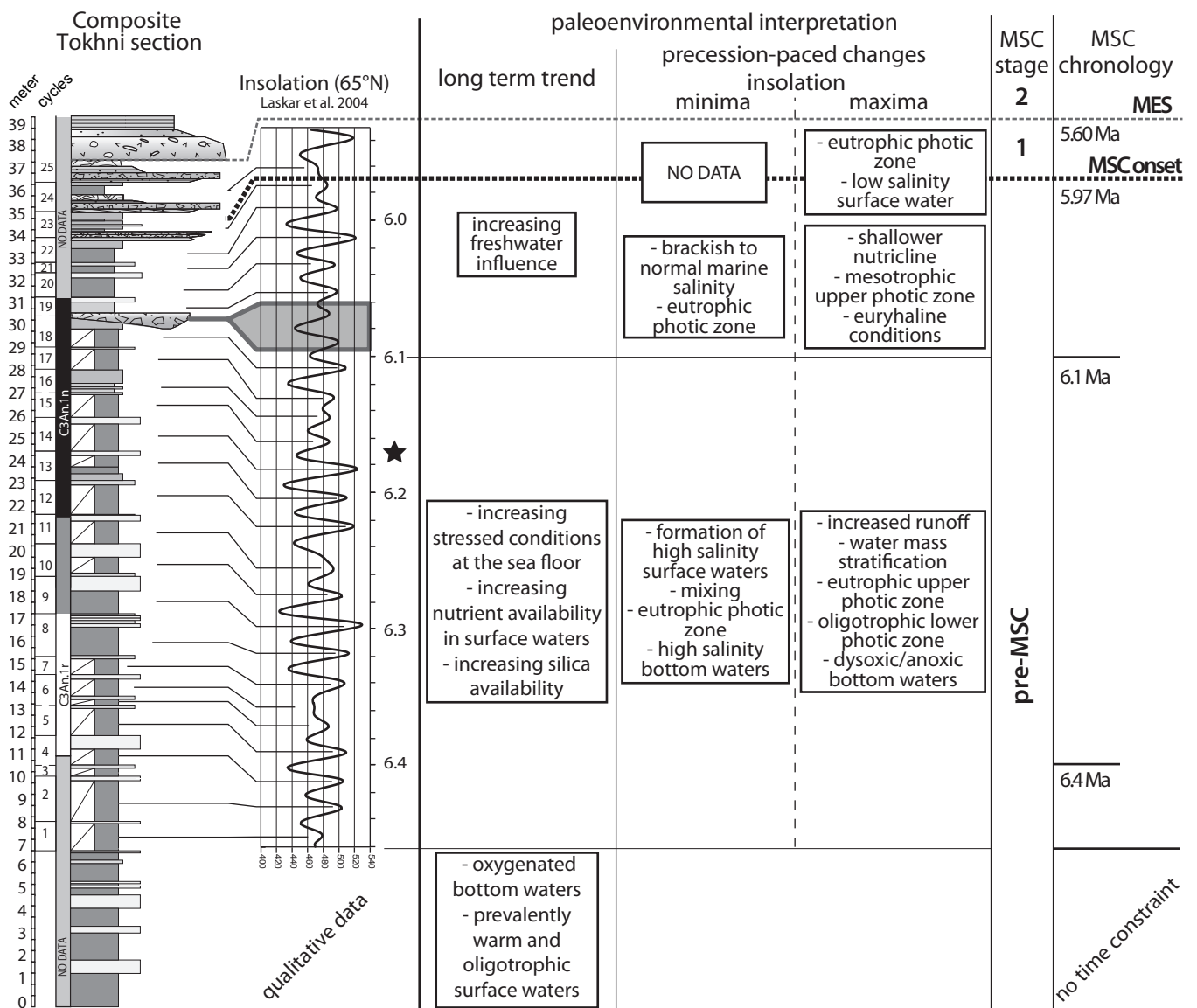


Figure 8