

1           **Technical note: Methionine, a precursor of methane in living plants**

2           Katharina Lenhart<sup>1,2,3\*</sup> Frederik Althoff<sup>1,2</sup>, Markus Greule<sup>1,2</sup> and Frank Keppler<sup>1,2\*</sup>

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4           <sup>1</sup> Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, Hahn-Meitner-Weg 1, 55128 Mainz, Germany.

5           <sup>2</sup> Institute of Earth Sciences, University Heidelberg, Im Neuenheimer Feld 234-236,  
6           69120 Heidelberg, Germany.

7           <sup>3</sup> Department of Plant Ecology (IFZ), Heinrich-Buff-Ring 26-32, 35320 Gießen, Germany

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9           \* Authors for correspondence:

10          Katharina Lenhart, Tel: +49 641 99 35326, Email: [katharina.lenhart@mpic.de](mailto:katharina.lenhart@mpic.de)

11          Frank Keppler, Tel: +49 6221 546009, Email: [frank.keppler@mpic.de](mailto:frank.keppler@mpic.de)

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## 16 INTRODUCTION

17 The observation that plants produce methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) under aerobic conditions has  
18 caused considerable controversy amongst the scientific community (Keppler et al.,  
19 2006;Dueck et al., 2007;Evans, 2007;Beerling et al., 2008;Kirschbaum and Walcroft,  
20 2008;McLeod et al., 2008;Vigano et al., 2008;Wang et al., 2008;Nisbet et al., 2009;Bloom  
21 et al., 2010, Covey et al. 2012, Zhang et al. 2014). Despite much scepticism a number of  
22 recent studies provide support for the phenomenon not only for living plants but also  
23 for dead plant matter (Keppler et al., 2009;Qaderi and Reid, 2011;Bruhn et al.,  
24 2012;Wang et al., 2013).

25 Non-microbial CH<sub>4</sub> release has been shown to occur under ultraviolet (UV) irradiation  
26 and elevated temperatures from dry and detached fresh plant material (McLeod et al.,  
27 2008;Vigano et al., 2008;Bruhn et al., 2009). Pectin has been considered a source of CH<sub>4</sub>  
28 production primarily because of its high degree of methylation (Keppler et al.,  
29 2008;Bruhn et al., 2009;Messenger et al., 2009). A reaction of reactive oxygen species  
30 (ROS) with pectic polysaccharides was suggested as a possible route to CH<sub>4</sub> formation  
31 under UV radiation (Messenger et al., 2009). From plant matter CH<sub>4</sub> can be derived from  
32 other structural components as shown with commercially purified lignin and cellulose  
33 (Vigano et al., 2008), leaf surface waxes (Bruhn et al., 2014), and even from ascorbic acid  
34 under highly oxidative conditions (Althoff et al., 2010). For further information on CH<sub>4</sub>  
35 formation, from dry and fresh detached plant matter and specific plant structural  
36 compounds, the reader should refer to the recent reviews of Bruhn *et al.* (2012) and  
37 Wang et al. (2013).

38 Stable isotope analysis has been employed to demonstrate that living plants release CH<sub>4</sub>  
39 at rates ranging from 0.16 to 12 ng g<sup>-1</sup> dry weight (DW) h<sup>-1</sup> (Brüggemann et al.,  
40 2009;Wishkerman et al., 2011). Isotope labelling studies involving young poplars grown  
41 in a <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere (Brüggemann et al., 2009) together with several plants cell  
42 culture experiments with <sup>13</sup>C-labelled sucrose (Wishkerman et al., 2011) confirmed that  
43 CH<sub>4</sub> is produced in plants per se and not by their associated micro-organisms. Here it  
44 was suggested that CH<sub>4</sub> formation was the result of abiotic stress factors to which the  
45 plant had been exposed, an idea supported by findings of two other recent studies  
46 (Qaderi and Reid, 2009, 2011). Although these results would support the contention that  
47 living plants release CH<sub>4</sub>, the mechanism of its formation and its precursors still remain  
48 unknown.

49 A first step towards delineating the formation pathway was recently undertaken by  
50 Wishkerman et al. (2011) who investigated the influence of the toxin sodium azide  
51 (NaN<sub>3</sub>) on cell cultures such as tobacco, sugar beet and grape vine. As sodium azide is  
52 known to disrupt electron transport flow at the cytochrome c oxidase (complex IV) in  
53 plant mitochondria, findings of the study suggested that disturbance of the electron  
54 transport chain (ETC) cause CH<sub>4</sub> formation in plant cells. Thus CH<sub>4</sub> formation in living  
55 plants may be an integral part of cellular responses to changes in oxidative status  
56 present in all eukaryotes. It has been hypothesized that compounds such as  
57 phosphatidylcholine or methionine (Met) might be carbon precursors of CH<sub>4</sub> in both  
58 animal and plant cells particularly when under stress conditions (Wishkerman et al.,  
59 2011;Bruhn et al., 2012)

60 Furthermore, very recently a chemical reaction showing that CH<sub>4</sub> can be readily formed  
61 from organosulfur compounds under oxidative conditions, ambient atmospheric  
62 pressure and temperature has been suggested (Althoff et al., 2014). In the first step of  
63 the reaction, methyl sulfides are oxidised to the corresponding sulfoxides. Then, in the  
64 next step, demethylation of the sulfoxide via homolytic bond cleavage leads to methyl  
65 radical formation and finally to CH<sub>4</sub>. In the same study tobacco plants (*Nicotiana*  
66 *tabacum*) grown under sterile conditions were supplemented with positionally labelled  
67 Met, where only the methyl group (-S-CH<sub>3</sub>) was enriched with <sup>13</sup>C atoms. These  
68 experiments provided the first evidence that the thio-methyl group of Met is a parent  
69 compound of CH<sub>4</sub> in tobacco plants. The potential role of methionine and its oxidation  
70 product methionine sulfoxide (MSO) in CH<sub>4</sub> biosynthesis in living plants was also  
71 suggested by Bruhn *et al.* (2012). Additionally methionine has been shown to be  
72 involved in CH<sub>4</sub> formation in saprotrophic fungi (Lenhart et al., 2012).

73 In this study we investigated methionine, an amino acid that plays a major role in trans  
74 methylation reactions, as a precursor of CH<sub>4</sub> biosynthesis in living plants under dark  
75 conditions. We employed *Lavandula angustifolia* which was previously shown to  
76 produce significant amounts of CH<sub>4</sub> both under normal and stress conditions such as  
77 physical wounding and anoxia (Wang et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011b; Wang et al., 2011a).  
78 We made use of stable isotope techniques and <sup>13</sup>C-positionally labelled methionine to  
79 verify *in vivo* formation and identify the carbon atom precursor of CH<sub>4</sub>.

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## 82 MATERIAL & METHODS

### 83 Cultivation of plants

84 Commercially available *L. angustifolia* plants grown to approximately 20-25 cm were  
85 purchased for the initial experiment (consecutive treatment experiment). Plants used in the  
86 second experiment (parallel treatment experiment) were grown in a greenhouse until a  
87 height of 20 cm was reached. Trace gas measurements were carried out at  $22 \pm 2$  °C and  
88 100 % humidity under dark conditions.

89

### 90 Supplementation of *L. angustifolia* with $^{13}\text{C}$ -methionine

91 *L. angustifolia* plants were removed from pots and the soil washed from the roots. For  
92 incubation, each plant was placed inside a 2.5 l flask (Weck®, Hanau, Germany)  
93 containing 50 ml distilled H<sub>2</sub>O and then sealed with a lid held in place with a rubber  
94 band. To facilitate headspace sampling each lid had a central hole fitted with a silicone  
95 stopper. In the  $^{13}\text{C}$ -Met labelled flasks the distilled water was supplemented with 0.4 mM  
96  $^{13}\text{C}$ -Met. We used a positionally labelled Met where only the methyl group ( $-\text{S}-\text{CH}_3$ ) was  
97 enriched with  $^{13}\text{C}$  atoms. After sealing, measurements of headspace CH<sub>4</sub> concentrations  
98 and  $^{13}\text{C}$ -CH<sub>4</sub> signatures were conducted over a four day period. Different incubation  
99 periods and measurement intervals were necessary to correspond with the available  
100 schedule times for use of the isotope measurement system. For isotope measurements  
101 the incubation flask was directly connected to the IRMS system.

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103

104 **Physical stressing of plants**

105 Detached leaves of *L. angustifolia* have previously been shown to release significant  
106 amounts of CH<sub>4</sub> both under normal and stress conditions, such as physical wounding by  
107 cutting (Wang et al., 2011b). However, stressing of plants by cutting is a time-consuming  
108 process and a rapid, stress-induced increase in CH<sub>4</sub> emissions might occur during this  
109 process and before the flasks were sealed. Therefore, physical stress in our study was  
110 performed by gently compressing individual leaves of each plant between fingertips for  
111 a short time period (one to two seconds). This procedure took approximately one  
112 minute for each plant, i.e. until the majority of the leaf surface area was injured.

113

114 **Analytical procedures**

115 Gas samples were analysed within 24 h on a gas chromatograph (Shimadzu GC-14B,  
116 Kyoto, Japan) with a flame ionization detector (CH<sub>4</sub>) and an electron capture detector  
117 (N<sub>2</sub>O, CO<sub>2</sub>) operated at 230 and 320 °C with N<sub>2</sub> as carrier gas (25 ml min<sup>-1</sup>) (Kammann  
118 et al., 2009;Kammann et al., 2012). The GC column (PorapakQ, Fa. Millipore,  
119 Schwallbach, mesh 80/100) was 3.2 m long and 1/8 inch in diameter. The length of the  
120 precolumn was 0.8 m. The GC gas flow scheme and automated sampling was that of  
121 Mosier and Mack (1980) and Loftfield et al. (1997), and peak area integration was  
122 undertaken with the Software PeakSimple, version 2.66. The s.d. of the mean of six  
123 atmospheric air standard samples was below 1.0%, 0.5%, and 0.2% for CO<sub>2</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>O, and  
124 CH<sub>4</sub>, respectively.

125

126 **Continuous flow isotope ratio mass spectrometry (IRMS) for measurement of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$**   
127 **values of  $\text{CH}_4$**

128 Headspace gas from the flasks was transferred to an evacuated sample loop (40 mL).  
129 Interfering compounds were separated by GC and  $\text{CH}_4$  trapped on Hayesep D. The  
130 sample was then transferred to the IRMS system (ThermoFinnigan Delta<sup>plus</sup> XL, Thermo  
131 Finnigan, Bremen, Germany) via an open split. The reference gas was carbon dioxide of  
132 high purity (carbon dioxide 4.5, Messer Griesheim, Frankfurt, Germany) with a known  
133  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  value of -23.64 ‰ (V-PDB). All  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values were normalized relative to V-PDB  
134 (Vienna Pee Dee Belemnite) using a  $\text{CH}_4$  standard. Samples were routinely analysed  
135 three times ( $n = 3$ ) and the average standard deviations of the GC/C/IRMS  
136 measurements were in the range of 0.1 to 0.3 ‰.

137 All  $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$  -isotope ratios are expressed in the conventional  $\delta$  notation in per mil versus  
138 V-PDB, [‰] using the following equation (Eq. 1):

139 
$$\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{V-PDB}} = \left( \frac{(^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C})_{\text{sample}}}{(^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C})_{\text{standard}}} \right) - 1. \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

140

141 **Statistics**

142 For the evaluation of results from experiments with *L. angustifolia* plants we utilised the  
143 software package SPSS Version 20. In the initial experiment a paired sample *t*-test was  
144 used to compare the rates of  $\text{CH}_4$  production between consecutive treatments “non-  
145 stressed” and “stressed” on the same plants (Levene-Test was 0.394 after log  
146 transformation of data). For the purposes of brevity from this point forward this  
147 experiment will be referred to as the consecutive treatment experiment. The second  
148 experiment where simultaneously different samples were used to compare between

149 “non-stressed” and “stressed” treatments is referred to as the parallel treatment  
150 experiment. The CH<sub>4</sub> and δ<sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub> emission ratio between stressed and non-stressed  
151 plants (Tab. 1) was calculated by using the mean value of the samples 9-11 as reference  
152 for the non-stressed plants.

153 Data from experiment 2 and differences between experiments 1 and 2 were analysed by  
154 an independent samples t-test. Differences between results are given as significant (p <  
155 0.05) or highly significant (p < 0.001).

156 In the case where no significant differences occurred between the control (no stress  
157 applied or Met added) and the treatment where only Met was added, CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates  
158 and CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub> ratios were pooled in order to calculate the mean values.

159

## 160 **RESULTS**

### 161 ***L. angustifolia* supplemented with –S–CH<sub>3</sub> positionally labelled Met and the effect** 162 **of physical stress**

163 We investigated CH<sub>4</sub> emissions of *L. angustifolia* supplemented with <sup>13</sup>C-positionally  
164 labelled Met (<sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met; only the methyl group –S–CH<sub>3</sub> was enriched with <sup>13</sup>C atoms).  
165 under stressed and non-stressed conditions. The incubations were carried out in total  
166 darkness in order to exclude possible light effects and to measure the gross respiration  
167 of plants. The effect of physical stress was investigated in parallel experiments where in  
168 each case three different individual plants were placed under “stressed” and “non-  
169 stressed” conditions. Additionally, an experiment was performed where CH<sub>4</sub> emissions  
170 were first measured on intact plants, and then after physical stress was applied to these  
171 plants, CH<sub>4</sub> emissions were again measured.



172

173 The CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates of non-stressed *L. angustifolia* plants ranged from 0.06 to 0.57 ng  
174 CH<sub>4</sub> g<sup>-1</sup> DW h<sup>-1</sup>, with a mean value of 0.33 ± 0.16 ng CH<sub>4</sub> g<sup>-1</sup> DW h<sup>-1</sup> (Table 1).

175 Physical stress enhanced CH<sub>4</sub> emissions by a factor of 5.7 up to a mean CH<sub>4</sub> emission rate  
176 of 1.7 ± 0.57 ng g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> (n = 8). The effect of physical stress was significant both for plants  
177 undergoing consecutive treatment (paired t-test with *p* = 0.002, n = 5) and those in the  
178 parallel treatment experiment (independent samples t-test with *p* = 0.005). Addition of  
179 Met did not affect the CH<sub>4</sub> production of non-stressed plants (Tab. 1, comparison of  
180 flasks 6-8 vs. 9-11; *p* = 0.632, n = 3).

181

182 *L. angustifolia* (n = 2) supplemented with <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met showed a strong response in the  
183 isotope signal with δ<sup>13</sup>C(CH<sub>4</sub>). After addition of <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met to the roots (n = 2) δ<sup>13</sup>C(CH<sub>4</sub>)  
184 values increased from -47 at time 0 to 29 and 97 ‰ after 20 h in non-stressed (Fig. 1d)  
185 and stressed plants (Fig. 1f), respectively, whereas in the control samples (n = 3) only a  
186 marginal change (± 1 ‰) was noted (Fig. 1b). Mean changes in Δ<sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub> signature were  
187 0.39 ± 0.16 ‰ g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> for the non-stressed plants. After stressing, a strong response in the  
188 mixing ratio of CH<sub>4</sub> occurred (Fig. 1), reaching a Δ<sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub> up to 0.64 ± 0.30 ‰ g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> (Tab.  
189 1). The <sup>13</sup>C signature increase in headspace-CH<sub>4</sub> over time (Fig. 1d, f) clearly shows that  
190 the methyl group of Met is a precursor of CH<sub>4</sub> in plants under both non-stressed and  
191 stressed conditions.

192

193 For non-stressed and stressed plants, 0.008 and 0.009 % of <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met molecules were  
194 on average daily converted to CH<sub>4</sub> assuming that all <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met was taken up by the  
195 plant.

196 The ratio of CH<sub>4</sub> emissions (5.7) and  $\Delta^{13}\text{CH}_4 \text{ h}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$  (1.9) between stressed and non-  
197 stressed plants (Tab. 1) indicated a higher effect of physical stress on CH<sub>4</sub> formation  
198 than on the changes in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}(\text{CH}_4)$  values.

199

## 200 **Respiration**

201 During incubation of *L. angustifolia*, changes in the CO<sub>2</sub> mixing ratio were also  
202 monitored. Since the incubation was conducted in the dark no CO<sub>2</sub> uptake took place and  
203 thus changes in the mixing ratio only reflect the plants respiration. Respiration was on  
204 average for non-stressed and stressed plants  $0.36 \pm 0.14$  and  $0.50 \pm 0.16 \text{ mg CO}_2 \text{ g}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ ,  
205 respectively.

206 The CO<sub>2</sub> production by respiration reflects metabolic activity of the plants, and to relate  
207 CH<sub>4</sub> production to metabolic activity we related CH<sub>4</sub> formation to respiration by  
208 calculating the CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub> ratio [mol:mol x 10<sup>6</sup>] separately for each sample. Figure 2 shows  
209 the CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> production rates and the respective CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub>-ratio, which was  $2.0 \pm 1.1$   
210 for the non-stressed plants (n = 6) and  $8.5 \pm 1.8$  for the plants where physical stress was  
211 applied (n = 3). Thus, physical damage resulted in a 4-fold increase in the CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub> ratio  
212 ( $p = 0.004$ ). Supplementation of plants with Met did not affect the CH<sub>4</sub> or CO<sub>2</sub> emission  
213 rates ( $p > 0.1$ ).

214

215

## 216 **DISCUSSION**

### 217 **Effects of physical stress on CH<sub>4</sub> production**

218 Methane emission rates of  $0.33 \pm 0.16$  and  $1.71 \pm 0.57$  ng g<sup>-1</sup> DW h<sup>-1</sup> were observed for *L.*  
219 *angustifolia* under non-stressed and physically stressed conditions, respectively. The  
220 upper range (under physical stress) here is still considerably lower (one to two orders  
221 of magnitude) than the range of CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates from intact living plants (12 to 370  
222 ng g<sup>-1</sup> DW h<sup>-1</sup>) reported by Keppler et al. (2006) and those reported from crop species  
223 under environmental stress (Qaderi & Reid, 2009; Qaderi & Reid, 2011).

224 Without the application of physical stress the calculated emission rates were  
225 considerably lower (factor of three) with maximum values reaching  $0.57$  ng CH<sub>4</sub> g<sup>-1</sup> DW  
226 h<sup>-1</sup> and are similar to those reported in previous studies employing stable carbon  
227 isotope labelling tools (Bruggemann *et al.*, 2009; Wishkerman *et al.*, 2011). The very low  
228 values reported here again highlight the benefit of using stable isotope tools as it would  
229 be very difficult to clearly monitor aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> formation in non-stressed living plants  
230 without their employment. This might also include the sensitive optical online methods  
231 employed in several studies (Dueck *et al.*, 2007; Beerling *et al.*, 2008). However, these  
232 spectroscopic methods might be able to measure CH<sub>4</sub> formation in plants under  
233 particular stress conditions.

234 Earlier studies (Wang *et al.*, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2011a; Wang *et al.*, 2011b) already  
235 revealed a significant increase in CH<sub>4</sub> emissions after physical injury and suggested  
236 reactive oxygen species (ROS) to be involved in the cleavage of methyl groups from  
237 pectin and/or lignin (Wang *et al.*, 2011b; Keppler *et al.*, 2008; McLeod *et al.*, 2008;  
238 Messenger *et al.*, 2009). Our finding of close to a 4-fold increase in CH<sub>4</sub> emissions after

239 application of physical stress is within the range of the values reported by Wang et al.  
240 (2011b) where the CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates of *L. angustifolia* were 0.42 ±0.05 and 6.32 ±0.69  
241 ng g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup> for intact leaves and after wounding, respectively. In that study observations of  
242 CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates of intact plants (0.4 ng g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>) and after wounding (0.7 ng g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>) for  
243 56 plant species were reported. The discrepancy in the physical stress-induced response  
244 in CH<sub>4</sub> emissions of *L. angustifolia* might be due to an exceptionally high response of this  
245 species when compared to other species tested by Wang et al. (2011b). Differences in  
246 the stress-response between samples (ratio between stressed and non-stressed plants  
247 was in a range of 3.3 to 11.2) in this study might be due to a different degree of injury  
248 during the compression of the individual leaves of each plant.

249

#### 250 **CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub>-ratio**

251 Based on the CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> emission rates the calculated CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub> ratio [mol:mol x 10<sup>6</sup>] of  
252 intact plants was 2.0 ±1.1 (n = 6), i.e. per mol CO<sub>2</sub> 2.0 μmol CH<sub>4</sub> was released by the  
253 plants.

254 This is close to the ratios observed for saprotrophic fungi including *Pleurotus sapidus*,  
255 *Stereum sanguinolentum*, *Panaerochaete chrysosporium* where the CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub>-ratio was 3.5  
256 ±1.92 mol:mol x 10<sup>6</sup> or 1.15 ±0.70 ng:mg (Lenhart et al., 2012) and cryptogams  
257 including, mosses and , lichens (n =31) with a ratio of 2.58 ±2.60 mol:mol x 10<sup>6</sup> or 0.94  
258 ±0.95 ng:mg (Lenhart et al., submitted). The CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub>-ratio of *L. angustifolia* tends to be  
259 lower, but, as indicated by the standard deviation, this difference is probably not  
260 significant.

261 The physical stress-induced increase in the CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub> ratio (factor 4) of up to 8.5 ±1.8 was  
262 caused by a significant increase in CH<sub>4</sub> emissions accompanied only by a small increase  
263 in respiration. The overall stress-induced increase in respiration of *L. angustifolia*  
264 compared to non-stressed plants was 40 % (n.s., *p* > 0.3), which is similar to that  
265 observed by Wang et al. (2009) who reported a 50 % increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for  
266 plants physically wounded by cutting compared to those left uncut. The CH<sub>4</sub>:CO<sub>2</sub>-ratio  
267 might be a useful tool to relate CH<sub>4</sub> emissions to metabolic activity in the dark and to  
268 compare CH<sub>4</sub> emission rates of different species obtained under different conditions.

269

#### 270 **Methionine as a precursor of CH<sub>4</sub> in plants**

271 Based on the addition of <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met and stable carbon isotope measurements it was  
272 possible to clearly monitor <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub> formation in *L. angustifolia*. The increase in the δ<sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub>  
273 signature of CH<sub>4</sub> released by the plants after supplementation with <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met (Fig. 1,  
274 Tab. 1) is a strong indicator that the methyl thiol group of Met is a CH<sub>4</sub> precursor during  
275 metabolic processes. When plants were physically stressed, there was not only an  
276 increase in CH<sub>4</sub> release but also an increase in its <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>4</sub> signature (Fig. 1, Tab. 1).

277 It is important to note that our data cannot be used to conclude that the methionine *per*  
278 *se* is a direct precursor of CH<sub>4</sub> in plants. Indeed, since most methionine resides in  
279 proteins it is much more likely to be the source of CH<sub>4</sub> production after oxidation by ROS  
280 as suggested by Bruhn *et al.* (2012). These workers based their hypothesis on the  
281 finding that dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) could act as a hydroxyl radical scavenger in cells  
282 and produces CH<sub>4</sub> via a radical mechanism (Repine *et al.*, 1981). They argued that when

283 the amino acid methionine is oxidized the first oxidized product is methionine sulfoxide,  
284 where the side chain is similar to DMSO. Therefore methionine sulfoxide might also be a  
285 precursor of CH<sub>4</sub> biosynthesis. The concentration of the free amino acid in normal plant  
286 tissues is <100 μM (Inaba *et al.*, 1994), while that found in protein is two to three orders  
287 of magnitude higher (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). Methionine residues are known to be prone to  
288 oxidation by H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (Levine *et al.*, 1996; Moller *et al.*, 2007) to form methionine sulfoxide.  
289 Based on the calculations of Bruhn *et al.* (2012) it would only require a conversion rate  
290 and release of less than one CH<sub>4</sub> molecule per hour for every 1000 protein methionine  
291 sulfoxide to explain a release rate of 10 ng CH<sub>4</sub> g<sup>-1</sup> DW h<sup>-1</sup> by intact plant tissues. These  
292 considerations are strongly supported by findings reported in a recent chemical study  
293 (Althoff *et al.* 2014) which suggest that under oxidative conditions demethylation of  
294 sulfoxides might lead to CH<sub>4</sub>. In that study methyl groups of organosulfur compounds  
295 were shown to be efficiently converted to CH<sub>4</sub> when using iron(II/III), hydrogen  
296 peroxide and ascorbic acid as reagents. It is thought that methyl sulfides are first  
297 oxidised to the corresponding sulfoxides and demethylation of the sulfoxide via  
298 homolytic bond cleavage leads to methyl radical formation and then to CH<sub>4</sub>.

299 However, in our study we focused on the identification of the precursor compound of  
300 CH<sub>4</sub> in living plants and the location of the carbon atom within the precursor molecule.  
301 Thus additional investigations and measurements concerning the formation of ROS,  
302 distinguishing between free methionine and that in protein, as well as the possibility of  
303 methionine residue oxidation to Met-SO will need to be undertaken.

304 Next to methionine, several other organic compounds with methyl- or methoxyl groups  
305 were already identified to serve as a substrate for CH<sub>4</sub> formation in plants (McLeod *et al.*,

306 2008;Vigano et al., 2008;Bruhn et al., 2009, Keppler et al., 2008, Messenger et al., 2009).  
307 Thus, in our experiment besides Met also other organic compounds such as pectin, lignin  
308 or choline might serve as further methyl-group donors for CH<sub>4</sub> formation. A detailed  
309 discussion on potential plant precursors of CH<sub>4</sub> was recently provided by Wang et al.  
310 (2013).

311

## 312 **Conclusions and Outlook**

313 Our study is an important step in deciphering the precursor compounds involved in CH<sub>4</sub>  
314 biosynthesis in living plants. The employment of <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-Met clearly showed that the  
315 sulphur bonded carbon atom of the methyl group in methionine was transferred to CH<sub>4</sub>  
316 in *L. angustifolia*. Knowledge of the precursor compound and identification of the carbon  
317 atom involved is a first step towards elucidating the pathway of its formation. An  
318 understanding of the mechanisms of CH<sub>4</sub> formation in living plants may reveal if the  
319 process has a more general physiological role. Further experiments where other stress  
320 factors in combination with <sup>13</sup>CH<sub>3</sub>-methionine are investigated should provide further  
321 insight into the pathways involved in CH<sub>4</sub> formation.

322 Although it has been argued that plants may not produce CH<sub>4</sub> as an end-product or by-  
323 product of their metabolism (Nisbet et al., 2009), our results would strongly indicate  
324 that plants do contain a mechanism for CH<sub>4</sub> production. The stress-induced increase in  
325 CH<sub>4</sub> emissions together with studies on sterile plants (Wishkerman *et al.*, 2011) or  
326 cryptogamic covers supplemented with diverse inhibitors (Lenhart *et al.*, submitted), do  
327 not support the hypothesis of a noteworthy contribution of *Archaea* to plant-derived

328 CH<sub>4</sub>-formation in this study. However, we did not scan for methanogenic Archaea in the  
329 wooden parts of lavender plants to exclude Archaeal-derived CH<sub>4</sub> formation as  
330 postulated by Covey et al. (2012). Furthermore, it is considered that organosulfur  
331 compounds might play an important role in the formation of CH<sub>4</sub> in living plants  
332 particularly when under stress conditions.

333

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339



340 **Figure legends**

341 **Figure 1:** Mixing ratios (a, c, e) and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values (b, d, f) of  $\text{CH}_4$  produced by *L.*  
342 *angustifolia* (n = 3) in the control flasks (a, b) without addition of methionine or physical  
343 stress, supplemented with  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled Met without physical stress (c, d), and  
344 supplemented with  $^{13}\text{C}$ -labelled Met and the application of physical stress (e, f). Different  
345 symbols mark the replicates per treatment.

346

347 **Figure 2:** (a) Methane and  $\text{CO}_2$  emissions of *L. angustifolia* supplemented with  $^{13}\text{C}$ -  
348 labelled Met under non-stressed conditions and after application of physical stress, and  
349 (b)  $\text{CH}_4$  to  $\text{CO}_2$  emission ratio. Control plants were not supplemented with Met or  
350 exposed to physical stress.

351

352

353 **Table 1:** Rates of formation and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  signature increase of  $\text{CH}_4$  released during  
 354 incubation of *L. angustifolia* plants before and after physical stress. Samples 1-5 were  
 355 measured in experiment 1 (consecutive treatment experiment, measurements at day 1,  
 356 non-stressed and 2, stressed), samples 6-14 in experiment 2 (parallel treatment  
 357 experiment). The difference in the  $\text{CH}_4$  rate increase between the treatments “non-  
 358 stressed” and “stressed” was significant ( $p = 0.003$  and  $p = 0.005$  for *Exp. 1* and *Exp. 2*,  
 359 *respectively*). \*supplemented with  $^{13}\text{C}$ -Met

Sample	$\text{CH}_4$ [ $\text{ng g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ ]			$\Delta^{13}\text{CH}_4$ [ $\text{‰ g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ ]		
	non-stressed	stressed	Ratio stressed/non-stressed	non-stressed	stressed	Ratio stressed/non-stressed
1	0.52	1.70	3.3	-	-	
2	0.57	1.87	3.3	-	-	
3	0.43	2.41	5.6	-	-	
4*	0.31	1.21	3.9	0.27	0.39	1.4
5*	0.18	1.67	9.1	0.11	0.34	3.2
6	0.37	-		-	-	
7	0.39	-		-	-	
8	0.14	-		-	-	
9*	0.24	-		0.36	-	
10*	0.06	-		0.43	-	
11*	0.40	-		0.79	-	
12*	-	1.26	5.4	-	0.78	1.5
13*	-	0.98	4.2	-	0.63	1.2
14*	-	2.61	11.2	-	1.07	2.0
<b>Mean</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>1.71</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>0.39</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>1.86</b>
<b>±sd</b>	<b>±0.16</b>	<b>±0.57</b>	<b>±2.9</b>	<b>±0.25</b>	<b>±0.30</b>	<b>±0.81</b>

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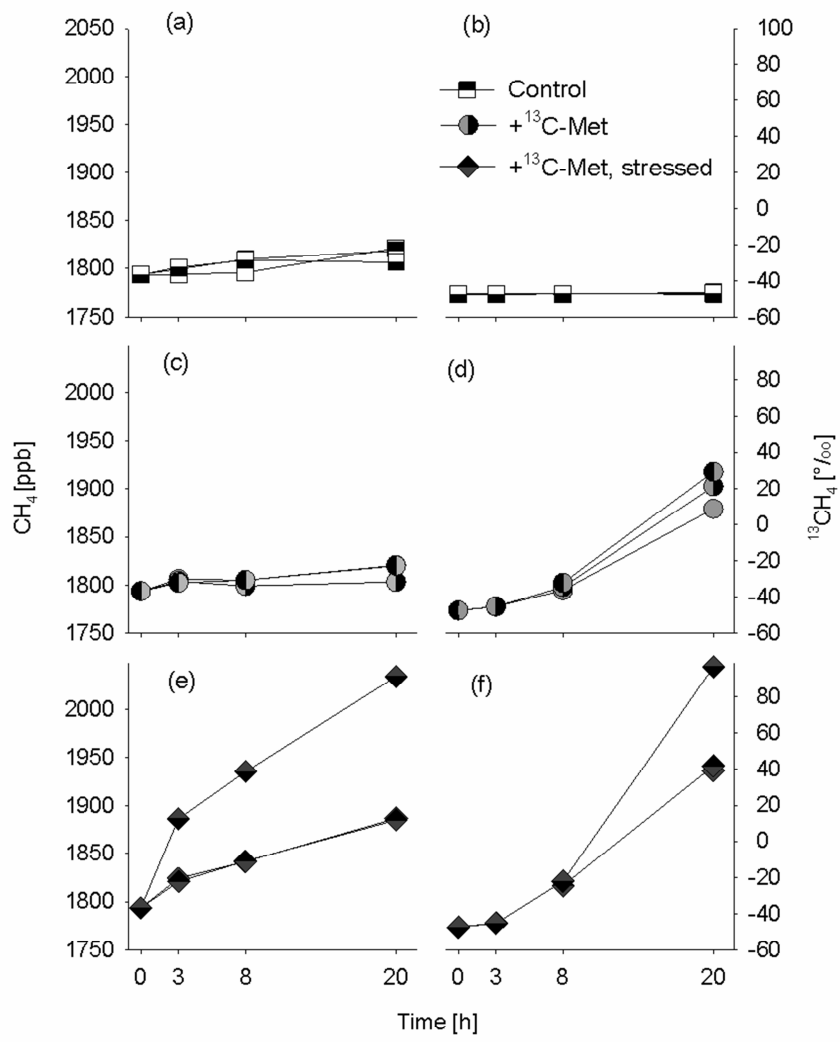
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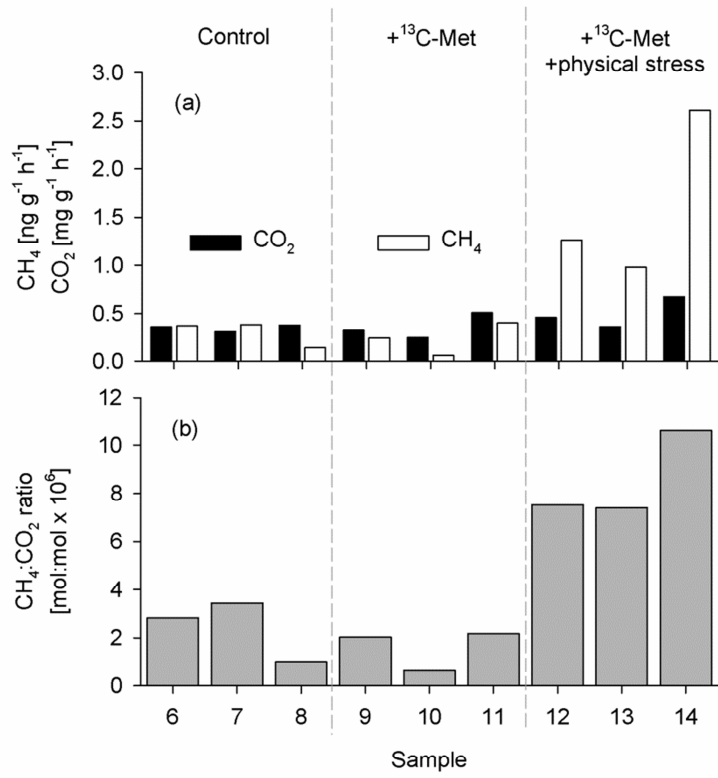
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464 Figure 1



465

466 Figure2