Dear Dr. Treude, 16 April 2020

Thank you very much for allowing us to re-revise our paper "**Cryptic role of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle: A study from Arabian Sea sediments**". We have again overhauled the text, put in new analyses, and added fresh perspectives and discussions for the data. While doing so we have accommodated each and every suggestion that we had received from the three reviewers. Please find our answers to all the comments in the Authors' Response files, and changes to the text shown in the Track Changes File of the manuscript.

Over the revisions, the content, as well as importance, of this paper has been streamlined to the microbiological data revealing tetrathionate as a key intermediate of the sulfur cycle, and identification of the potential biochemical pathways involved the formation and transformation of tetrathionate *in situ*. So we thought that the title warrants a modification to reflect this: "**Cryptic roles of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle of marine sediments: Microbial drivers and indicators**".

We believe you would find this overhauled manuscript scientifically robust and technically sound enough to merit publication in *Biogeosciences*.

Yours, with regards

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Authors' Response to Anonymous Referee #1

Referee's Comment: This is a new submission of a revised version of a manuscript that I had reviewed earlier. The overall quality of the manuscript is much improved now, the figures are clear and the additional figures are helpful. In addition, the writing is much improved, except in section 4.2 which somewhat stands out from the rest and needs an overhaul (see details in the annotated PDF attached).

The research is interesting and addresses sulfur species species, which are up to date only rarely considered in the complex cycling of sulfur in marine sediments and aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the latter. Experiments and methods are well described and appropriate. Results are also presented in an appropriate fashion.

Authors' Response: We thank the Reviewer for appreciating the extensive upgrading that we had rendered to this work (in the form of new data as well as discussions) under the previous revision. We also agree that a refurbished Section 4.2 would add to the overall quality of the scientific narrative, so have now incorporated the editorial suggestions that you provided through the annotated PDF file of the manuscript.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: All the edits suggested in your annotated PDF (including those for Section 4.2) of the manuscript have been incorporated in the re-revised text (lines 90-93, 127-131, 373, 552-553, 562-563, 646-669, 693-694, 729-752, and 772-810 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: However, I still have a problem with the discussion of the results and outcomes. The new discussions section is rather short and in large parts is rather a result presentation than a discussion. For example, lines 648-661 is fully descriptive and would fit to the results section rather than the discussion. I am missing a clear streamlined story that elaborated the meaning of the results in the context global or local sulfur cycling and a clear presentation of what we actually learned from these results and experiments. I suggest rewriting the discussion and streamlining towards the relevant findings. In its current form, it is still not clear. In this context, a conclusion section that presents the outcome in a short and to the point manner would be very helpful to not leave the reader alone with figuring out what the major outcomes are. Section 4.3 is closest to a conclusive section and could be part of a conclusion.

Authors' Response: We agree that the entire "Discussions" section still warranted another round of full-fledged overhaul, both structural and material; so in the latest re-revised manuscript we have not only edited and restructured the "Discussions" text as per your suggestions but also put in new information in perspectives of the current data. As for Section 4.3, we have now completely refurbished it as the new "Conclusions" sub-section (lines 812-893 of the Track Changes file), with fresh inputs and citations. Furthermore, lines 648-661 of the previous manuscript have been sent to the "Results" section (lines 600-601 and 647-669 of the Track Changes file), mostly under the new sub-section, numbered 3.6 and titled "Correspondence between genomic sequences of the tetrathionate-metabolizing isolates and metatranscriptomic sequences from their habitat".

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: As stated in the above response.

Referee's Comment: I have attached an annotated PDF with comments and editorial suggestions. I think that with a major rework of the discussion section focusing on streamlining and explaining what the experimental result may teach, and together with a conclusion section, is needed before the paper can be published.

Authors' Response: We highly value your additional effort to put editorial suggestions directly into an annotated PDF, and so have now incorporated all its contents in letter and spirit.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: We have now completely refurbished the Discussion section (i) by focusing on the central takeaway from all the experimental results (lines 704-729 of the Track Changes file), and (ii) by providing a new "Conclusions" sub-section (lines 812-893 of the Track Changes file) that thoroughly upgrades the previous Section 4.3.

Authors' Response to Anonymous Referee #2

Referee's Comment: The study assesses the role of microbial populations in the sulfur cycle of sediments from the Indian Ocean OMZ and, in particular, the role of tetrathionate as a potentially cryptic intermediate in the inorganic sulfur cycle. The study brings together geochemical measurements of pore water concentrations of sulfur compounds, rates and concentrations of sulfur metabolism in sediment slurry incubations, isolation, phenotypic characterisation and genome sequencing of tetrathionate metabolising bacteria as wellas metagenomics, and transcriptomics of sediment microbial communities.

Authors' Response: We thank the Reviewer for appreciating the phenomenon unearthed in this study.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: Not applicable.

Referee's Comment: The key conclusions are that sediments of the Indian Ocean oxygen minimum zone are inhabited throughout the depth profile by bacteria that are able to metabolise tetrathionate in different ways (oxidation of thiosulfate to TT, reduction of TT to thiosulfate, oxidation of TT to sulfate). This is supported by abundance data based on annotation of metagenomic reads, assembly and functional annotation of metagenomes, as well as mapping of metagenome reads onto genome sequences of TT-metabolising bacteria isolated from the sediments. Furthermore, RNA sequencing of one depth horizon shows that some of these TT-metabolising bacteria appear actively transcribing genes of TT-metabolism in situ. While the diversity analysis of the sediments supports the presence of various bacteria implicated in TT metabolism, it is a pity that no 16S rRNA amplicon-based diversity analysis was carried out, since direct taxonomic annotationof reads is a relatively crude methodology. However, the key conclusions with regard to the potential role of the identified bacterial groups implicated in TT metabolism are supported even if the some of the taxonomic annotation may potentially be over simplified and crude.

Authors' Response: We thank the Reviewer again for endorsing that the diverse lines of culture-dependent and culture-independent data supported the presence and potential roles of the various bacteria implicated in tetrathionate metabolism.

As for the absence of 16S rRNA amplicon-based diversity analyses, we had already pointed out that such data for the SSK42 cores, including SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, have been published at length in our previous paper Fernandes et al., 2018, Enhanced carbon-sulfur cycling in the sediments of Arabian Sea oxygen minimum zone center (*Sci. Rep.* **8:** 8665). In the current paper Mandal et al., the genera which were identified in the various sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 via taxonomic classification of protein-coding metagenomic reads were not only corroborated via manual scrutiny of the amplified 16S rRNA gene sequence-based diversity data of Fernandes et al. (2018) but also by searching the individual metagenomic sequence datasets against the 16S rRNA gene sequence database of the Ribosomal Database Project (using BlastN with minimum alignment length 50 bp, minimum identity cut-off 90% and maximum e-value cut-off $1e^{-5}$). These points were already mentioned in the previously revised version of this manuscript.

With respect to the Reviewer's reservations regarding direct taxonomic annotation of metagenomic reads (as being over simplified and crude), we are convinced that this approach is not fraught with major uncertainty in the present case because closely related organisms' genomes are available in the database and the parameters used in this paper to classify reads using the Best Hit Classification algorithm [BlastX search with minimum 45 nucleotides (15 amino acids) alignment and ≥60% identity, and maximum *e*-value allowed $1e^{-5}$] are stringent enough to

assign taxonomic affiliation to homologs of metabolically diverse genes, irrespective of their intrinsic levels of conservation, in a reliable manner up to the genus level. This stringency level of search parameters is considered optimum across the literature because it neither exaggerates diversity not fails to resolve taxonomies for most categories of genes.

Furthermore, to add robustness to our inferences regarding the widespread distribution of tetrathionate-metabolizing bacteria across SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, we have subsequently carried out whole genome sequencing and annotation for the three tetrathionate-forming isolates, the two tetrathionate-oxidizing isolates, and the lone tetrathionate-reducing isolate. Following this, we have mapped the available metagenomic sequence data from the 25 distinct sample-sites of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 separately onto each of the *de novo* sequenced genomes: remarkably, in those analyses (lines 629-645 of the Track Changes), significant percentages of the metagenomic read-sets were found to match sequences from the individual genomes, thereby giving a clear picture of the relative abundances of the tetrathionate-metabolizing strains in each of the 25 distinct sediment-samples.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: The above explanations, reinforced with two new citations, can be found in lines 318-324 and 1203-1208 of the Track Changes file.

Referee's Comment: The work addresses an aspect of sediment sulfur cycle that has not been widely studied and therefore breaks new ground in demonstrating that TT cycling in such sediments is likely to be a significant but overlooked process, despite not presenting in situ rates of TT metabolism (all rates are based on long slurry incubations and are thus demonstrating potential).

Authors' Response: We agree that determination of *in situ* rates of tetrathionate formation, oxidation and reduction would have added to the robustness of the study and would attempt the same when fresh sampling is conducted again in this area. This said, we are thankful to the reviewer for appreciating the overall adequacy of the current data in demonstrating the potential roles of tetrathionate metabolisms in marine sedimentary sulfur cycle.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: Not applicable.

Referee's Comment: The metatranscriptome data have been presented in more detail in this revised version. However, for Table S25 for instance, a relative expression based on mapping onto reference genomes is but a crude estimate/proxy for showing the involvement or in situ activity of these genes in the sediment. I would suggest to report mapping rates for housekeeping genes alongside those of sulfur metabolism and to report the taxonomic affiliation of those sulfur cycling genes identified in the assembled metatranscriptome as well.

Authors' Response: We agree and have now reported the mapping rates for representative house-keeping genes (namely those involved in transcription, translation, DNA replication, ABC-type membrane transport, phosphotransferase system, bacterial secretion systems and cell cycle) alongside those already there for sulfur-metabolism-related genes (please see the updated form of the previous Table S25, which is now numbered as S24, and new texts in lines 647-669 of the Track Changes file).

Taxonomic affiliations of the sulfur cycling genes identified in the assembled metatranscriptome were already given in Table S20.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: The previous Table S25 (which is now numbered as S24) has now been upgraded by incorporating the mapping rates for a number of housekeeping genes

alongside those already there for the sulfur-metabolism-related genes. Text for all these results can be seen in the new sub-section 3.6, titled as “Correspondence between genomic sequences of the tetrathionate-metabolizing isolates and metatranscriptomic sequences from their habitat” (lines 647-669 of the Track Changes file). Notably, mapping results for the sulfur-metabolism-related genes were previously placed under the “Discussions” sub-section 4.1 (i.e., lines 648-661 of the previous manuscript); their current relocation to sub-section 3.6 is also consistent with Comment number 2 of Reviewer 1.

Specific comments

Referee’s Comment: The manuscript is complex due to the large number of analyses carried out, with a plethora of acronyms which makes it difficult to follow in some sections. I would suggest that any effort to make it more readable and digestible would be well expended. As itis currently, it is difficult to read and follow.

Authors’ Response: We agree that the manuscript is complex due to the large number of distinct analyses carried out, so have now appended a separate key for all the acronyms and tried to use full-forms in the text itself wherever the same did not hamper reading of the sentence. Overall, we have again overhauled the entire text by fragmenting complex sentences into simple ones, removing extraneous details, and making the language lucid.

Authors’ Changes in Manuscript: As mentioned in the above response.

Referee’s Comment: A schematic overview of relevant pathways of TT metabolism would be beneficial for context and should be presented in the introduction.

Authors’ Response: This suggestion was already there in the previous round of peer review so during that revision we had already added an overview of tetrathionate-metabolism pathways in the Introduction (this included all the enzymes and genes which are known to be instrumental in the formation and transformation of tetrathionate). A schematic illustration of these pathways, in the context of the present data, was also given as Figure 6.

Authors’ Changes in Manuscript: In the current re-revised manuscript, however, we have discussed a number of previously-missed information on the potential abiotic mechanisms of tetrathionate transformation (please see the overhauled “Discussions” sub-section 4.3, i.e. line number 822-882 of the Track change version of the manuscript).

Referee’s Comment: Were abiotic control incubations carried out with slurries (poisoned, autoclaved) that would account for chemical conversion of thiosulfate, tetrathionate and sulfate? If so, how high were chemical conversion rates?

Authors’ Response: We apologize for forgetting to include these control data in the previous manuscript amidst the complex web of results and arguments. Abiotic control incubations involving autoclaved sediment-samples were always carried out alongside the slurry incubation experiments and abiotic chemical-conversion rates for thiosulfate to tetrathionate, tetrathionate to sulfate and tetrathionate to thiosulfate/sulfide, for all the sediment-samples were found to be negligible.

Authors’ Changes in Manuscript: We have now mentioned the above points in the current re-revised manuscript (please see lines 553-554, 569-570 and 615-617 of the Track Change file).

Authors' Response to Anonymous Referee #3

Referee's Comment: Mandal and co-authors correctly point out tetrathionate, although seldom detected, may be an important intermediate in sulfur cycling in marine sediments. This is especially born out by the number of organisms that carry enzymes capable of reducing, oxidizing or even disproportionating tetrathionate. To examine potential tetrathionate sampling in marine sediments, the authors examined sulfur speciation in two long gravity cores, performed sediment slurry experiments, enriched tetrathionate reducingorganisms, and performed an extensive metagenomic analysis on the two cores.
My expertise does not lie in the field of metagenomic analysis, so I will limit my comments to the sulfur analyses and experimental set-ups.

Authors' Response: We thank the Reviewer for appreciating the overall objective and importance of the study. As for the details, following multiple reviewers' suggestions received previously, the entire set of results and discussions has now been streamlined in such a way as to be based, almost exclusively, on microbiological and omics data; so relative unawareness about these approaches may constraint specific appraisals.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: Not applicable.

Referee's Comment: The authors took care to avoid oxidation artefacts by blowing inert dinitrogen gas over the cores and sample tubes. Was this done in a laminar flow hood? My experience is that blowing dinitrogen gas over samples in an open environment tends to entrain oxygen from the air and actually increases the flux of oxygen to surfaces. If the samples are taken out quickly and placed into vials containing inert atmospheres, this may not be much of a problem. However, the thiosulfate/sulfide data presented in Figure 3 shows that thiosulfate concentrations track those of sulfide with a 1:100 ratio. Could this be simply oxidation during sample handling?

Authors' Response: We thank the Reviewer for sharing important experiences with us. As for the present study, the existing Methods section already stated that samples were taken out immediately after cutting open only small C-halves of the PVC core-liners and placed into vials containing inert atmosphere, so O_2-contamnation of samples was bare minimum (moreover, had O_2-contamnation been significant we would not have detected the depth-trends for sulfide and methane in the different SSK42 cores; please see our previous paper Fernandes et al., 2018, *Sci Rep*: **8**, 8665).

Sulfide is a potent source of thiosulfate in all marine sediments (Jørgensen, 1990). Sulfide, when present in sediment-cores, can abiotically reduce tetrathionate to thiosulfate and elemental sulfur (Rowe et al., 2015). Sulfide can also be produced alongside thiosulfate on account of microbial tetrathionate reduction (Barrett and Clark, 1987; Price-Carter et al., 2001). Depth-trends of sulfide concentration, therefore, are expected to show certain degree of correlations with trends of thiosulfate concentration. Moreover, the pore-water thiosulfate concentrations detected in SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 were well within the range reported from physicochemically similar sediment horizons across the global ocean; for instance, Black sea sediments have 0-5.2 µM thiosulfate (Zopfi et al., 2004), Kysing Fjord (Denmark) sediments have <1-10 µM (Troelsen and Jorgensen., 1982).

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: These points have now been discussed more explicitly in this re-revised manuscript (please see lines 687-689 and 780-788 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: The method for determining tetrathionate is highly unspecific. The thiocyanate resulting from the cyanolysis will include zerovalent sulfur contained not only in tetrathionate and polythionates, but also zerovalent sulfur contained in polysulfides and colloidal sulfur (See for instance Kamyshny et al., 2009, Geostandards and Geoanalytical Research, or Kamyshny, 2010, Marine Chemistry). The thiocyanate analysis is also problematic in saline solutions. There are far more compound specific methods for determining thiocyanate and tetrathionate (See for instance, Rong et al., 2005, Chromatographia; Bak et al., 1993, FEMS Microbiology Ecology).

Authors' Response: We agree that there are other specific methods available for quantifying tetrathionate and other polythionates. But the method described by Kelly and Wood (1994: Synthesis and determination of thiosulfate and polythionates. *Methods in Enzymology* **243**, 475-501) is also a time-tested, sensitive and reliable method. Several seminal research papers on microbial sulfur-chemolithotrophy, including many from our group (Alam et al., 2013, *Applied and Environemntal Microbiology*: 79, 4455–4464; Pyne et al., 2018, *Molecular Microbiology*: 109, 169-191), have used this method to quantify tetrathionate reproducibly and precisely, within culture media containing high amount of total dissolved solids and mixtures of sulfur species such as thiosulfate, polysulfides, sulfur and sulfate.

We also agree that in Cyanolytic Method, thiosulfate as well as polythionates react with cyanide to form thiocyanate, which is subsequently measured spectrophotometrically as ferric thiocyanate after reacting with ferric nitrate. Notably, however, differences in the reactivity of the thionates with cyanide enable their discrimination and quantitative characterization within mixtures of such compounds. For instance, trithionate is stable at high pH and reacts with cyanide only at elevated temperatures; thiosulfate reacts with cyanide at room temperature, albeit only in the presence of copper(II) catalyst; in contrast, the higher polythionates ($S_nO_6^{2-}$, where n = 4 or more) react rapidly with cyanide at room temperature to form SCN^-, $S_2O_3^{2-}$, SO_4^{2-} and HCN. Furthermore, in the current context it is noteworthy that the importance of this paper lies in the multiple lines of evidences provided by culture-independent and culture-dependent microbiological data to point out the role of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle. So, if subsequent geochemical explorations of these Arabian Sea sediment horizons indeed reveal the presence of tetrathionate in the pore-waters then it will only reinforce the possibilities already pointed out in this paper based on the process-detection power of molecular microbiological tools.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: The aforesaid points have now been briefly discussed in the re-revised manuscript (lines 166-171 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: In the slurry experiments, the authors used thioglycolate to reduce the media. Thioglycolate is a thiolic reducing agent that will reduce disulfide bonds. Did the authors test this on tetrathionate? I suspect that it may also react with zero valent sulfur in colloidal sulfur, polysulfides and polythionates to release thiosulfate.

Authors' Response: Sodium thioglycolate was used as an O_2 scavenger only for the anaerobic RVTr medium. During RVTr preparation, inside a Whitley H35 Hypoxystation preset to 0% partial pressure of O_2, pre-weighed amount of potassium tetrathionate salt was first dissolved in a premeasured volume of anoxic deionized water (degassed for several hours inside the H35 Hypoxystation till the resazurine indicator added in the water became colorless). The anoxic tetrathionate solution was then added via filter-sterilization to a separate pre-autoclaved solution that contained the rest of the RVTr components in an appropriate volume and had cooled down to room temperature within the Hypoxystation. Thioglycolate that was there in the second solution had already reacted irreversibly, during autoclaving, with the dissolved O_2 present in the mixed-salts solution to form dithiodiglycolate. Post-autoclave cooling of this second solution within the Hypoxystation, therefore, did not breakdown the S-S bonds of dithiodiglycolate to regenerate the SH^--containing thioglycolate for a second round of action on the incoming tetrathionate solution. The one-time usability of thioglycolate (as a reducing agent) in the present set-up, is further evidenced by the following common laboratory experience: media solutions already rendered anoxic via autoclaving with thioglycolate get contaminated with dissolving O_2 upon the slightest exposure to air (this is reflected in the stable regeneration of red color by resazurine indicator added to the media) because the thioglycolate already converted to dithiodiglycolate cannot reduce infiltrating O_2 once again. Moreover, in this context, it is further reassuring that at neutral pH, thiol-group-containing reducing agents do not attack tetrathionate under non-enzymatic (abiological) conditions (Pyne et al. *Molecular Microbiology*: **109**, 169–191).

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: That tetrathionate was added separately, via filter sterilization, to a pre-autoclaved solution containing rest of the components of the RVTr medium was already mentioned in the previous manuscript. Anyway, in the latest re-revised manuscript, we have now clarified the procedure more elaborately (including the points mentioned above) to remove any doubt that may be there (lines 350-368 of the Track Changes file).

We have also mentioned the following two points to prove that there was no possibility of thioglycolate attacking the tetrathionate of the RVTr medium.

- Zero hour reading for all the slurry incubation sets in RVTr medium showed the intact presence of the 10 mM tetrathionate originally supplied in the medium.
- Abiotic control incubations involving autoclaved sediment-samples showed that the 10 mM tetrathionate originally supplied to the RVTr medium was almost intact after seven days of incubation.

We had forgotten to include these routine, but potentially critical, negative data in the previous manuscript, so have now added them in this re-revised manuscript (lines 365-368 and 615-617 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: While the genomic approach may be adequate to describe the distribution of potential organisms involved in S cycling, given the non-specificity of the analytical methods employed, I am afraid that the authors cannot draw any conclusions at all about the sulfur intermediate oxidation state cycling in the cores or in the experiments.

Authors' Response: We agree that concentrations and isotopic ratios of the various chemical constituents of sedimentary solid-phases and pore-fluids have long been central to the deciphering of *in situ* biogeochemical pathways. Significant information on the carbon-sulfur-iron cycles of modern marine and lacustrine sediments have been generated in this way; currently, however, there is an increasing consensus that several questions in biogeochemistry - such as those concerning sulfur compounds oxidation/disproportionation, relative importance of simple fatty acids catabolism and anaerobic methane oxidation in sedimentary sulfate reduction, and biogeochemical processes within sulfate-methane transition zones - cannot be answered from preserved geochemical records alone. In recent times a lot of advancement has taken place in our overall understanding of carbon-sulfur cycling in marine systems by virtue of data obtained from metagenomic, metatranscriptomic, and *in situ* as well as *in vitro* geomicrobiological experiments. Forensic-level detection power of these approaches in unearthing such cryptic biogeochemical processes that do not get manifested, or leave their imprints, as detectable geological records, have been demonstrated in a number of recent papers that revealed such microbial community functions using meta-omics approaches which would have been considered improbable based on geochemical manifestations alone. *Canfield* et al., 2010, *Science*: **330**, 1375-1378 (A Cryptic Sulfur Cycle in Oxygen-Minimum-Zone Waters off the Chilean Coast) and Garcia-Robledo et al., 2017, *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*: **114**, 8319-8324 (Cryptic oxygen cycling in anoxic marine zones) are only a few examples to mention in this regard.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: This key issue has now been discussed in the sub- section 4.1 of the re-revised manuscript (please see lines 706-726 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: The experiments also lead to rates of tetrathionate reduction and oxidation that are spectacularly high (nearly a thousand fold greater than rates that one would expect for sulfate reduction in these deep sediments). Also something is wrong with the units in Figure 3 (umol/L*day*g?)

Authors' Response: The sole objective of the slurry incubation experiments was to check whether the tetrathionate-metabolizing bacteria were alive *in situ* (their active state in the sedimentary habitat was subsequently corroborated by pure-culture isolations and metatranscriptome analysis). The *in vitro* rates of tetrathionate formation, oxidation and reduction obtained in these experiments under specific media and culture conditions are not expected to have any correspondence with the actual rates of such processes potentially operating *in situ*. This could be explained as follows. When a natural sample is incubated in selective culture media certain specific microbial species present in the sample often outgrow all metabolic competitors by virtue of higher substrate affinity and culture-condition suitability. Consequently, the growth/substrate-utilization phenotype(s) manifested by such enriched consortia are actually contributed to by the selected few rather than the entire community of metabolic equivalents present in the sample (Roy et al., 2016).

As for Figure 3, there is nothing wrong in the unit (μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$) used to express the *in vitro* rates of the different tetrathionate-metabolizing processes. Since the individual panels of the figure involve different transformations between different sulfur species (having different valencies of sulfur) - for instance, conversion from thiosulfate to tetrathionate, tetrathionate to sulfate, and tetrathionate to thiosulfate/sulfide - for all the individual slurry incubation experiments, the substrate quantities depleted from the spent media have been expressed in equivalence of sulfur atom concentrations.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: The above explanations have now been more explicitly spelt out in this re-revised manuscript (please see lines 571-577 of the Track Changes file).

Referee's Comment: Finally, the authors have missed key earlier work on this topic that addresses specifically the distribution and cycling of tetrathionate, thiosulfate and sulfite in marine sediments: Bak et al., 1993; and in particular Zopfi et al., 2004, Distribution and fate of sulfur intermediates – sulfite, thiosulfate, tetrathionate and elemental sulfur – in marine sediments. Geol Soc America Sp. Paper 379, and more recently, Findlay, A. J., & Kamyshny, A. (2017) Turnover Rates of Intermediate Sulfur Species (Sx2-, S0, S2O32-, S4O62-, SO32-) in Anoxic Freshwater and Sediments. Frontiers in Microbiology, 8. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2017.02551

Authors' Response: We agree that these are important works in the context of distribution and cycling of intermediate sulfur species in diverse environments, including marine sediments, so have included them in our re-revised Discussion section, in proper perspective of the current findings.

These papers, based on data from geochemical experiments and preserved records, have revealed the occurrence and complex transformations of intermediate sulfur species, including tetrathionate, in diverse aquatic ecosystems, but none involved microbiological indicators for the role of tetrathionate as a key junction of sulfur cycling in marine sediments. In that context, importance of the present exploration of Arabian Sea sediments lies in its use of microbiological data to reveal tetrathionate as a key intermediate of the sulfur cycle, and identifying the potential biochemical pathways involved its formation and transformation *in situ*.

Bak et al. (1993) had measured tetrathionate, trithionate and thiosulfate in diverse natural samples, while Zopfi et al. (2004) used different techniques of analytical geochemistry to track the fates and turnover times of sulfur cycle intermediates in non-sulfidic sediments of the Black Sea and North Sea. While the latter paper revealed the presence of tetrathionate in the sediments and delineated potential pathways for its transformation *in situ*, no microbiological corroboration of their findings was carried out. Findlay and Kamyshny (2017) has envisaged the potential fates and transformation rates of intermediate sulfur species in lacustrine water-columns and sediments by introducing and tracking ^{35}S-labeled sulfur compounds in the samples. In this context, our explorations based on the Arabian Sea sediments is unique in using microbiological findings to reveal tetrathionate as a key intermediate of the sulfur cycle, and identifying the potential biochemical pathways for its formation and transformation *in situ*.

In this context it is further noteworthy that both Zopfi et al. (2004), and Findlay and Kamyshny (2017), detected tetrathionate in non-sulfidic ecosystems, whereas the sediment horizons explored in the present study contained high concentrations of sulfide, which can readily react with tetrathionate to form thiosulfate, and elemental sulfur or polysulfides (Podgorsek and Imhoff, 1999; Schippers et al., 1999; Schippers and Jørgensen, 2001; Zopfi et al., 2004). This said, if future geochemical explorations of these territories, using more sensitive analytical techniques, reveal the presence of tetrathionate in the pore-waters, then such finding would not violate, but rather reinforce, our microbiology-based forecast of the key role of tetrathionate metabolisms in the sedimentary sulfur cycle.

Authors' Changes in Manuscript: The above mentioned points have now been included in the upgraded "Conclusion" sub-section (numbered as 4.3, under the "Discussions" section) of the re-revised manuscript (please see lines 820-893 of the Track Changes file).

Cryptic roles of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle of marine sediments: Microbial drivers and indicators~~A study from Arabian Sea sediments~~

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Running Title: Tetrathionate metabolism in marine sediments

Key words: sulfur cycle, marine sediments, Arabian Sea, tetrathionate, tetrathionate metabolism, metaomics in biogeochemistry

Abstract

To explore the potential role of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle of marine sediments, population ecology of microorganisms capable of metabolizing this polythionate was revealed at 15-30 cm resolution along two, ~3-m-long, cores collected from 530 and 580 meters below the sea level, off India's west coast, within the oxygen minimum zone (OMZ) of the Arabian Sea. Metagenome analysis along the two sediment-cores revealed widespread occurrence of genes involved in microbial formation, oxidation, and reduction of tetrathionate; high diversity and relative-abundance was also detected for bacteria that are known to render these metabolisms *in vitro*. Results of slurry-incubation of the sediment-samples in thiosulfate- or tetrathionate-containing microbial growth media, data obtained via pure-culture isolation, and finally metatranscriptome analyses, corroborated the *in situ* functionality of tetrathionate-forming, oxidizing, and reducing microorganisms. Geochemical analyses revealed the presence of up to 11.1 µM thiosulfate along the two cores, except a few sample-sites near the sediment-surface. Thiosulfate oxidation by chemolithotrophic bacteria prevalent *in situ* is the apparent source of tetrathionate in this ecosystem. However, potential abiotic origin of the polythionate can neither be ruled out nor confirmed from the geochemical information currently available for this territory. Tetrathionate, in turn, can be either oxidized to sulfate (via oxidation by the chemolithotrophs present) or reduced back to thiosulfate (via respiration by native bacteria). Up to 2.01 mM sulfide present in the sediment-cores may also reduce tetrathionate abiotically to thiosulfate and elemental sulfur. As tetrathionate was not detected *in situ*, high microbiological and geochemical reactivity of this polythionate was hypothesized to be instrumental in its cryptic status as a central sulfur cycle intermediate.

1 Introduction

Phylogenetically diverse microorganisms oxidize or reduce different sulfur species to meet their bioenergetic requirements, and in doing so play profound roles in biogeochemical sulfur cycling in nature (Baumgartner et al., 2006; Ghosh and Dam, 2009; Wasmund et al., 2017). Within the

marine realm, microbial processes of sulfur cycle are central to benthic biogeochemistry as they are linked to the *in situ* transformations, sequestrations, and fluxes of carbon, nitrogen and iron. There have been extensive studies of benthic/sedimentary sulfur cycle across the global ocean (Jørgensen, 1990; Jørgensen and Bak 1991; Rudnicki et al., 2001; Tostevin et al., 2014), and focus has typically been on geomicrobial transformations of the two end-members sulfate and sulfide (Holmkvist et al., 2011; Jørgensen et al., 2019), and also thiosulfate which constitutes a key junction in the network of sulfur species transformation in marine sediments (Jørgensen, 1990; Jørgensen and Bak, 1991; Thamdrup et al., 1994). However, tetrathionate or other polythionates are rarely investigated for their potential role(s) in marine sedimentary sulfur cycle, presumably because these sulfur species are not abundant in these environments.

Overall paucity of polythionates in natural environments is largely attributable to their high reactivity under biotic (Kanao et al., 2007; Ghosh and Dam, 2009; Boden et al., 2010; Pyne et al., 2017, 2018) as well as abiotic (Schippers et al., 1999; Schippers and Jørgensen, 2001) conditions. Cryptic nature of these sulfur species notwithstanding, several bacteria capable of producing and/or utilizing tetrathionate for bioenergetic purposes have been isolated from different terrestrial and aquatic (both fresh-water and marine) habitats (Kaprálek, 1972; Oltmann and Stouthamer, 1975; Barrett and Clark, 1987; Price-Carter et al., 2001; Sorokin, 2003; Ghosh et al., 2005; Ghosh and Roy, 2006, 2007). At the same time, several enzymes catalyzing redox reactions involving tetrathionate have been characterized in taxonomically diverse microorganisms. For instance, thiosulfate dehydrogenase (TsdA), widespread in photo- or chemolithotrophic bacteria, is attributed to the formation of tetrathionate from thiosulfate (Hensen et al., 2006; Denkmann et al., 2012; Brito et al., 2015, Pyne et al., 2018; Rameez et al., 2019). In several other archaeal and bacterial chemolithotrophs, thiosulfate to tetrathionate conversion is mediated by thiosulfate:quinone oxidoreductase (TQO or DoxDA; see Muller et al., 2004; Rzhepishevska et al., 2007; Quatrini et al., 2009; Kikumoto et al., 2013). Chemolithotrophic oxidation of tetrathionate to sulfate, on the other hand, is rendered either (i) by the pyrroloquinoline quinone (PQQ)-binding tetrathionate hydrolase (TetH), as described in *Acidithiobacillus* species (De Jong et al.,1997; Kanao et al., 2007; Rzhepishevska et al., 2007; van Zyl et al., 2008; Kanao et al., 2013), or (ii) via coupling with glutathione (to form glutathione:sulfodisulfane and sulfite) by the action of another PQQ-binding protein called thiol dehydrotransferase (ThdT), followed by the oxidation of glutathione:sulfodisulfane via iterative actions of sulfate thiol esterase (SoxB) and *c*-type cytochrome containing sulfur dehydrogenase (SoxCD), as reported in *Advenella kashmirensis* (Pyne et al., 2017, 2018). On the reductive half, typical tetrathionate-reducing bacteria such as *Salmonella*, *Citrobacter* and *Proteus* transform tetrathionate to thiosulfate by tetrathionate reductase (TtrABC) followed by the conversion of

thiosulfate to sulfide by thiosulfate reductase (PhsAB and PsrA) (Oltmann et al., 1975; Barrett and Clark, 1987; Hensel et al., 1999; Stoffels et al., 2011).

Here we use approaches of molecular microbiology to investigate the potential involvement of tetrathionate metabolism in the sulfur cycle of sediments underlying the perennial oxygen minimum zone (OMZ) of the Arabian Sea, off the west coast of India. Community structures and functions of tetrathionate-forming, oxidizing, and reducing, microorganisms were revealed by metagenome analyses and slurry incubation experiments along two ~3-m-long sediment-cores collected from 530 and 580 meters below the sea level (mbsl), at sites having the GPS coordinates 16°50.03' N, 71°59.50' E and 16°49.88' N, 71°58.55' E respectively; ~~pore-water~~sediment-samples were also analyzed for the presence of tetrathionate and thiosulfate in their pore-waters ~~chemistry was analyzed using ion chromatography~~. *In situ* activity of tetrathionate-metabolizers was tested by pure-culture isolation and metatranscriptome analysis for the deepest sample-site, within the sulfate-methane transition zone, of one of the two cores. Correspondence was also explored between the *de novo* sequenced genomes of the isolates and the metatranscriptome or the metagenomes sequenced. The microbial ecology delineated in this way was considered in the context of the *in situ* geochemistry to infer implications for the sedimentary sulfur cycle.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study site and, sample collection and storage

During a comprehensive exploration of the sediment biogeochemistry of eastern Arabian Sea OMZ (ASOMZ), onboard RV Sindhu Sankalp (SSK42), a number of gravity cores were collected from water-depths spanning 225 and 1275 mbsl, covering the entire thickness of the eastern ASOMZ (Fernandes et al., 2018). Of these, SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, on which the present study is based, were collected from 580 mbsl (16°49.88' N, 71°58.55' E) and 530 mbsl (16°50.03' N, 71°59.50' E) water-depths respectively (Fernandes et al., 2018), i.e. the approximate center of the vertical expanse of the ASOMZ off the west coast of India. Both the cores were ~3-m-long and 12 cm in diameter; their onboard sampling was carried out at 15 to 30 cm intervals, as described previously, under constant shower of high-purity N_2 to minimize exposure of the native microflora to aerial O_2 and avoid aerial oxidation of the H_2S, Fe^{2+} and other reduced chemicals present in the sediments (Fernandes et al., 2018).

In order to protect the sediment-samples from aerial oxidation only one ~30-cm-long C-shaped part of PVC core-liner was removed at a time, as shown in Fig. S1. The 30 cm length exposed at a time for sampling was constantly and closely showered with high-purity N_2 emitted from multiple nozzles fitted to multiple nitrogen-generators. Immediately after the C-shaped longitudinal part of the PVC core-liner was cut open, top one cm of the exposed surface was

scraped off along the core-circumference, using sterile scalpels, to eliminate potential contaminations from the core-liners' inner-surfaces and/or sea-waters through which the cores had passed (Fernandes et al., 2018). Subsequently, to sample a particular sediment-depth of the core for microbiological studies, an approximately 5-mm-thick sediment-slice (spanning equally on either side of the core-height marking) was scooped out with a sterile scalpel and put into a sterile polypropylene bottle. For every sediment-depth, two such sample-replicates or slices were collected for duplicate metagenome (plus other metaomics) analyses (these were designated as sample-replicates 1 and 2, see Tables S1 and S2); a third replicate was taken for all culture-dependent studies. The head-space of every sample-containing bottle was flushed with high-pure N_2~~,~~; subsequently, ~~following which it~~ the bottles were~~was~~ sealed with Parafilm (Bemis Company Inc., Neenah, USA) and stored frozen or cool~~placed immediately under refrigeration~~. Sample-replicates meant for culture-independent and culture-dependent studies were stored at −20°C and 4°C respectively. From the laboratory onboard SSK42, *en route* to ~~that at~~ Bose Institute, and over subsequent preservation of samples, these temperatures were maintained ~~all along~~.

For onboard extraction of pore-waters, samples from a particular sediment-depth were taken out by inserting sterile 50 ml cut~~-~~-off syringes deep inside the core cross-section, multiple times along the circumference on the exposed 'C half'. The samples were immediately collected in sterile 50 ml centrifuge tubes. All these operations were carried out under focused streams of high-pure N_2. The tubes were centrifuged at 4700 × g for 15 minutes at 4°C, and the supernatants collected were syringe-filtered through 0.22 µm cellulose acetate membranes. Aliquots for different chemical analyses were dispensed to individual glass vials containing sodium azide that arrests microbial activity; only the vials meant for precipitating dissolved sulfide (ΣHS^-) from the aliquots [in the form of cadmium sulfide (CdS)] contained cadmium nitrate [$Cd(NO_3)_2$] instead of sodium azide. All the vials were crimp sealed immediately after N_2 flushing, and stored at 4°C until further analysis.

2.2 Analytical method

Sulfide and sulfate concentrations in the pore-water samples were determined and reported previously by Fernandes et al., (2018). Concentration of dissolved thiosulfate in the pore-water samples was determined by ion chromatography using an Eco IC (Metrohm AG, Herisau, Switzerland) equipped with a conductivity detector (Metrohm, IC detector 1.850.9010). Chemical suppression was used for this purpose, while separation was carried using a Metrosep A Supp5 - 250/4.0 anion exchange column (Metrohm AG). A mixed solution of 1.0 mM sodium ~~hydrogen~~ bicarbonate and 3.2 mM sodium carbonate was used as the eluent; 100 mM sulfuric acid was used as the regenerant; flow rate was 0.7 mL min^{-1}, and injection volume 100 µL. Prior to analysis, pore-water samples were diluted 1000-fold with de-ionized water (Siemens, < 0.06 µS)

and passed through 0.22 µm hydrophilic polyvinylidene fluoride membrane filters (Merck Life Science Private Limited, Bengaluru, India). Analytical grade thiosulfate IC Standard (Sigma Aldrich, St. Louis, USA) was used to prepare the calibration curve for quantification of this anion. Three different concentrations of thiosulfate, 0.5 µM, 5 µM and 20 µM, were measured for the construction of calibration curve by plotting peak height against concentration. Based on triplicate analyses of the standards, deviations from actual concentrations were found to be less than 2.5%.

Concentration of tetrathionate in the pore-water samples was measured by cyanolytic method (Kelly and Wood, 1994), where tetrathionate reacts with cyanide to form thiocyanate according to the reaction $S_4O_6^{2-} + 3CN^- + H_2O \leftrightarrow SCN^- + S_2O_3^{2-} + SO_4^{2-} + 2HCN$, and the thiocyanate ($SCN^-$) formed is quantified spectrophotometrically ~~in terms of~~ from the absorbance of ferric thiocyanate ($\varepsilon = 5030\ M^{-1}\ cm^{-1}$, $\lambda = 460$ nm), which is formed by reacting the thiocyanate ion with ferric nitrate. Differences in the reactivity of thionates with cyanide enable their discrimination and quantitative characterization within mixtures of such compounds. For instance, trithionate is stable at high pH and reacts with cyanide only at elevated temperatures; thiosulfate reacts with cyanide at room temperature, albeit only in the presence of copper(II) catalyst; in contrast, the higher polythionates ($S_nO_6^{2-}$, where n = 4 or more) react rapidly with cyanide at room temperature to form SCN^-, $S_2O_3^{2-}$, SO_4^{2-} and HCN. In the present experiments, ~~E~~each reaction was carried out at a final volume of 5 ml. 0.1 ml of the pore-water sample was added to 0.8 ml of cyanolytic buffer (a mixture of 50 ml of 0.2 M NaH_2PO_4 and 39 ml of 0.2 M NaOH; pH 7.4) and the volume was made up to 2.0 ml. The mixture was then chilled on ice for 20 minutes and 1 ml of 0.1 M chilled potassium cyanide was added and mixed rapidly and incubated on ice for another 20 minutes. Finally, 0.6 ml of ferric nitrate reagent [30.3 g $Fe(NO_3)_3.9H_2O$ in 21.7 ml of 72% perchloric acid, made up to 50 ml with distilled water] was added with continuous agitation and allowed to warm to room temperature until the white precipitate (if any) re-dissolved. Volume was made up to 5 ml and optical density of the colour due to ferric thiocyanate was measured ~~at 460 nm by~~ on a spectrophotometer. The standard curve used for tetrathionate estimation was prepared using different concentrations (0.1, 0.5 1.0, 5.0 and 10.0 µM) of analytical grade tetrathionate (Sigma Aldrich, St. Louis, USA). Based on triplicate analyses of these standards, deviations from actual concentrations were less than 5%.

2.3 Extraction of total DNA/RNA from sediment-samples/pure-culture isolates

Total community DNA was extracted from the sediment-samples using PowerSoil DNA Isolation Kit (MoBio, Carlsbad, USA), as per the manufacturer's protocol. Microgram-level of DNA was obtained from each batch of preparatory reaction that started with 0.5 g sediment-sample. Genomic DNA of pure culture isolates was extracted using HiPurA Bacterial Genomic DNA

Purification Kit (Himedia Laboratories, Mumbai, India), following manufacturer's instructions. Quality of metagenomic/genomic DNA samples was checked by electrophoresis and considered to be of high quality when no degradation signs were apparent. DNA quantity was determined using Qubit dsDNA HS Assay Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, USA).

Total community RNA was extracted from the sediment-sample collected from 275 centimeters below the sea-floor (cmbsf) of SSK42/6, using RNA PowerSoil Total RNA Isolation Kit (MoBio), as per manufacturer's protocol. Nanogram-level total RNA was obtained after pooling the products of 15 individual preparatory reactions, each carried out using 2 g sediment-sample. All the individual RNA preparations were subjected to DNase digestion by RNase free DNase I (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and purified using RNeasy MinElute Cleanup Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany); their concentrations were measured using Quant-iT RiboGreen RNA Assay Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Integrity of RNA (RIN) within the individual preparations was determined on a TapeStation RNA ScreenTape electrophoretic system (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, USA) and only high-quality preparations having RIN value > 7.0 were added to the RNA pool that were subsequently used for sequencing library construction.

2.4 Metagenome (total community DNA) / genome sequencing

The duplicate set of total community DNA (metagenomes) extracted for each sediment-depth explored along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 were shotgun sequenced individually on an Ion Proton sequencing platform (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using 200 nucleotide read-chemistry, as described previously (Ghosh et al., 2015). Complete lists of sedimentary communities investigated along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6are given in Tables S1 and S2 respectively, together with the accession numbers of the metagenomic sequence datasets.

1 µg DNA from each metagenome-sample was taken for deep shotgun sequencing by the Ion Proton platform using 200 bp read chemistry on a PI V2 Chip. Sequencing libraries were constructed using Ion Plus Fragment Library Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific), following the manufacturer's Ion Plus gDNA Library Preparation User Guide. The Proton library was generated using 1 µg of genomic DNA which was fragmented to approximately 200 base pairs by the Covaris S2 system (Covaris, Inc., Woburn, USA) and purified with 1.8X Agencourt Ampure XP Beads (Beckman Coulter, Brea, USA). Fragmentation was followed by end-repair, blunt-end ligation of the Ion Xpress Barcode and Ion P1 adaptors, and nick translation.

Post-ligation, size selection was done using E-Gel Size-Select 2% Agarose gels (Thermo Fisher Scientific) with 300 bp target size. Final PCR was performed using platinum PCR SuperMix High Fidelity and Library Amplification Primer Mix (Thermo Fisher Scientific), for 5 cycles of amplification. The resulting library was purified using 1.2X AMPure XP reagent (Beckman Coulter) and the concentration determined with Qubit dsDNA HS Assay Kit (Thermo

Fisher Scientific); size distribution was done with Agilent 2100 Bioanalyzer high-sensitivity DNA kit (Agilent Technologies). Libraries were pooled in equimolar concentrations and used for template preparation.

Library templates for sequencing were prepared using OneTouch 2 protocols and reagents (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Library fragments were clonally amplified onto ion sphere particles (ISPs) through emulsion PCR and then enriched for template-positive ISPs. Proton emulsion PCR reactions utilized the Ion PI Template OT2 200 Kit v3 (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Following recovery, enrichment was completed by selectively binding the ISPs containing amplified library fragments to streptavidin coated magnetic beads, removing empty ISPs through washing steps, and denaturing the library strands to allow for collection of the template-positive ISPs. For all reactions, these steps were accomplished using the ES module of the Ion OneTouch 2. The selected ISPs were loaded on PI V2 Chip and sequenced with the Ion PI 200 Sequencing Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using the 500 flow (125 cycle) run format.

Whole genomes of isolated bacterial strains were sequenced on an Ion S5 platform (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using 400 nucleotide read-chemistry on a 530 or 520 Chip. Libraries were constructed by the Ion Xpress Plus Fragment library kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using 100 ng genomic DNA from each isolate. In this procedure genomic DNA samples were fragmented using Ion Shear Plus Reagents (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The fragmented libraries were purified using 1.8X Agencourt Ampure XP Beads (Beckman Coulter), and subjected to barcode-adapter ligation and nick repair. Adapter-ligated and nick-repaired libraries were purified again by 1X Agencourt Ampure XP Beads (Beckman Coulter).

Size selection of the libraries was done using E-Gel Size-Select 2% Agarose gels (Thermo Fisher Scientific) with 480 bp target size. Final PCR was performed using platinum SuperMix High Fidelity PCR system and Library Amplification Primer Mix (both from Thermo Fisher Scientific), for 8 cycles of amplification. The resulting libraries were purified using 1x Agencourt AMPure XP reagent (Beckman Coulter). Concentrations of the purified libraries were determined with Qubit dsDNA HS Assay Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Libraries were then pooled in equimolar concentrations and used for template preparation.

The library template to be used for sequencing was prepared using Ion OneTouch 2 reagents (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Library fragments were clonally amplified onto ion sphere particles (ISPs) through emulsion PCR and then enriched for template-positive ISPs. Following emulsion PCR, enrichment was completed by selectively binding the ISP-containing amplified library fragments to streptavidin-coated magnetic beads, removing empty ISPs through washing steps, and denaturing the library strands to allow for collection of the template-positive ISPs using the Ion OneTouch ES instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The selected ISPs were

loaded on a 530 or 520 Chip and sequencing was performed with the Ion S5 Sequencing Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using the 850-flow run format.

2.5 Metatranscriptome (community mRNA) sequencing

The pooled total RNA preparations were selectively converted to a library of template molecules using TruSeq Stranded mRNA and Total RNA kit (Illumina Inc., San Diego, USA). Depletion of rRNAs was carried out using the Ribo-Zero Gold system (Illumina Inc.), which is an integral part of the kit used for preparing the library. The rRNA-depleted RNA pool, which was expected to contain only the total mRNA, was fragmented into small pieces using divalent cations under elevated temperature. The cleaved RNA fragments were copied into first strand cDNAs using reverse transcriptase and random primers. This was followed by second strand cDNA synthesis using DNA Polymerase I and RNase H. cDNA fragments were then subjected to end-repair, addition of single 'A' bases, adaptor ligation, purification and enrichment with PCR to create the final library, which was sequenced on a HiSeq4000 platform (Illumina Inc.) using paired end, 2 × 150 nucleotide, sequencing by synthesis read-chemistry with dual indexing workflows. Furthermore, in order to extract and eliminate any rRNA read that may have remained in the raw metatranscriptomic sequence dataset, the 26,579,343 read-pairs available in all were mapped onto SILVA large subunit as well as small subunit rRNA gene sequence database (Quast et al., 2012), using the short read aligner Bowtie2 v.2.3.4.3 (Langmead and Salzberg, 2012) in default local (sensitive) alignment mode. This identified ~0.3% reads as ascribable to rRNAs, thereby leaving 26,496,769 read-pairs in the final dataset used for downstream analyses.

2.6 *De novo* assembly and annotation of genomes/metagenomes/metatranscriptome

High quality reads (Phred score cut-off 20) from the duplicate metagenomic sequence datasets available for each sediment-community were co-assembled using Megahit v1.2.x (Li et al., 2015) with the kmer lengths of 21, 29, 39, 59, 79, 99, 119 and 141. Contigs of > 100 bp length were searched using MetaGeneMark (Zhu et al., 2010) for genes encoding peptides having lengths of > 30 amino acids. For the genomes of pure-culture isolates, high quality reads (Phred score cut-off 20) were assembled using SPAdes 3.13.0 (Nurk et al., 2013), with kmer lengths of 21, 33, 55, 77, 99 and 127, and minimum coverage cut-off 35X. The whole genome sequences were deposited to the GenBank and annotated using Prokaryotic Genome Annotation Pipeline (PGAP located at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genome/annotation_prok/) of National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), Bethesda, MD, USA. Total metagenomic or metatranscriptomic reads available for the different sediment-communities were mapped onto the individual genome sequences or the manually-curated gene-catalogs obtained from the individual genomes, using Bowtie2 v.2.3.4.3 (Langmead and Salzberg, 2012) in default local (sensitive)

alignment mode. The rRNA-sequence-free metatranscriptomic dataset was assembled using the python script rnaspades.py, available within SPAdes 3.13.0 (Nurk et al., 2013), with default parameters. Genes encoding continuous stretches of minimum 30 amino acids were predicted in contigs longer than 100 bp using Prodigal v2.6.3 (Hyatt et al., 2010).

Gene-catalogs obtained after *de novo* assembly of the individual metagenomes, or the solitary metatranscriptome, were functionally annotated by searching against EggNOG v5.0 database (http://eggnog5.embl.de/download/eggnog_5.0/) with EggNOG-mapper (Huerta-Cepas et al., 2016) (http://beta-eggnogdb.embl.de/#/app/emapper) using HMMER algorithms. Putative protein sequence catalogs obtained for the individual genomes via PGAP annotation were re-annotated by searching against EggNOG v5.0 database with EggNOG-mapper using HMMER algorithm. Genes encoding proteins involved in tetrathionate formation, oxidation and reduction were identified within the annotated genomes by their orthology numbers designated in *Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes* (KEGG; Kanehisa et al., 2016).

2.7 Direct taxonomic annotation of raw metagenomic reads

Raw reads from the duplicate metagenomic sequence datasets of each sediment-community were directly annotated for their taxonomic affiliation by searching the datasets individually against the NCBI non-redundant (*nr*) protein sequence database, using Organism Abundance tool of MG-RAST 3.6 (Meyer et al., 2008). The two independent values obtained in this way for the relative abundances of genera within a community were averaged and used for comparisons between communities; percentage allocation of reads over various genera was taken as a direct measure of the relative abundance (prevalence) of those genera within the community (Tringe et al., 2005; Ghosh et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2020). Within MG-RAST, sequences were trimmed to contain no more than 5 successive bases with ~~p~~Phred quality score < 15. To classify reads using Organism Abundance tool, Best Hit Classification algorithm was followed, reporting only those BlastX search results which had minimum 45 nucleotides (15 amino acids) alignment, ≥ 60% identity, and *e*-value ≤ $1e^{-5}$; these cut-offs are stringent enough for genus-level classification of homologs of metabolically diverse genes, irrespective of their intrinsic levels of conservation.

2.8 Slurry culture experiments

Ability of the different sedimentary microbial communities to form tetrathionate (from thiosulfate), oxidize tetrathionate (to sulfate) or reduce tetrathionate (to thiosulfate and/or sulfide) was tested via slurry incubation in culture media supplemented with thiosulfate or tetrathionate. For each experiment testing the formation or oxidation of tetrathionate, 10% (w/v) sediment-sample was suspended in artificial sea water (ASW) supplemented with thiosulfate (T) or tetrathionate (Tr), i.e. ASWT or ASWTr broth medium (Alam et al., 2013), respectively; the culture flask was

incubated aerobically at 15°C on a rotary shaker (150 rpm). For each anaerobic experiment testing tetrathionate reduction, 10% (w/v) sediment-sample was suspended in tetrathionate-supplemented Rappaport Vassiliadis (RVTr) medium (Vassiliadis, 1983) that was already made O_2-free by addition of sodium thioglycolate. Addition of sediment-samples to sterile O_2-free RVTr media (contained in a screw-capped bottles) and subsequent incubation of the culture bottles were all carried out inside a Whitley H35 Hypoxystation (Don Whitley Scientific, West Yorkshire, UK) preset at 75% humidity, 15°C temperature and 0% partial pressure of O_2, using the gas mixture N_2:H_2:CO_2 = 80:10:10 (v/v/v).

The ASWT or ASWTr medium (both having pH 7.5) contained ASW supplemented with $Na_2S_2O_3.5H_2O$ (10 mM) or $K_2S_4O_6$ (5 mM) respectively (the two sulfur compounds were added to the media separately after filter-sterilization) (Alam et al., 2013). ASW contained the following L^{-1} distilled water: 25.1 g NaCl, 1 g $(NH_4)_2SO_4$, 1.5 g $MgSO_4$, $7H_2O$, 0.3 g $CaCl_2.2H_2O$, 0.2 g $NaHCO_3$, 2.4 g Tris, 1 mL trace element solution and 0.5 g K_2HPO_4 (added after autoclaving separately). 1 L trace element solution (pH 6.0), in turn, contained 50 g EDTA, 22 g $ZnSO_4.7H_2O$, 5.06 g $MnCl_2$, 4.99 g $FeSO_4$, 1.1 g $(NH_4)_6$ $MoO_{26}.4H_2O$, 1.57 g $CuSO_4$ and 1.61 g $CoCl_2.6H_2O$. RVTr medium (pH 5.4) contained the following L^{-1} of distilled water: 4.5 g soya peptone, 8.0 g NaCl, 0.4 g K_2HPO_4, 0.6 g KH_2PO_4, 29.0 g $MnCl_2$, 0.036 g Malachite green, 10 mM $K_2S_4O_6$ ~~(added separately after filter sterilization),~~ and 0.5 g sodium thioglycolate (used as an O_2 scavenger) and 0.1 mg resazurin (added to indicate the presence of any dissolved O_2).

During RVTr preparation, inside a Whitley H35 Hypoxystation preset to 0% partial pressure of O_2, pre-weighed amount of potassium tetrathionate salt was first dissolved in a premeasured volume of anoxic, deionized water (degassed for several hours inside the H35 Hypoxystation till the resazurine indicator added in the water became colorless). This anoxic tetrathionate solution was then added via filter-sterilization to a separate pre-autoclaved solution that contained the rest of the RVTr components in an appropriate volume and had cooled down to room temperature within the Hypoxystation. Thioglycolate that was there in the second solution had already reacted irreversibly, during autoclaving, with the dissolved O_2 present in the mixed-salts solution to form dithiodiglycolate. Post-autoclave cooling of this second solution within the Hypoxystation, therefore, did not breakdown the S-S bonds of dithiodiglycolate to regenerate the SH^--containing thioglycolate, so there was no possibility of thioglycolate attacking the incoming tetrathionate solution. Moreover, at neutral pH, thiol-group-containing reducing agents do not attack tetrathionate under non-enzymatic (abiotic) conditions (Pyne et al., 2018); and **z**ero hour reading for all the slurry incubation sets in RVTr medium showed the intact presence of the 10 mM tetrathionate originally supplied in the medium, while abiotic control incubations involving autoclaved sediment-samples showed that the 10 mM tetrathionate supplied to the RVTr medium was intact after prolonged incubation.

Concentrations of the various redox species of sulfur were estimated in the slurry cultures at every 6 hr interval of incubation. End-point (final) concentrations of the different sulfur species in a given medium were recorded when no further changes were detected in their concentrations over three consecutive estimations; rate of a particular sulfur species conversion was calculated by dividing the concentration of the ~~mM S~~ substrate (in mM S) ~~finally~~ transformed eventually (this was always in equivalence with the mM S product generated) by the time taken to reach that final concentration. Concentrations of thiosulfate, tetrathionate and sulfate in the media were measured by iodometric titration, cyanolysis and gravimetric sulfate precipitation method respectively at different time intervals (Alam et al., 2013). Possible presence of dissolved sulfides was checked by precipitating as CdS by the addition of 2 M $Cd(NO_3)_2$, followed by spectroscopic estimation as described previously (Cline, 1969).

2.9 Enrichment, isolation and characterization of bacterial strains

Isolation of sulfur chemolithotrophs from the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 was carried out in mineral salt-thiosulfate-yeast extract (MSTY), ASWT and ASWTY media. While the ASWTY (pH 7.5) medium was an yeast extract (500 mg L^{-1}) supplemented derivative of ASWT, MSTY (pH 7.0) contained modified basal and mineral salts (MS) solution supplemented with 20 mM $Na_2S_2O_3.5H_2O$ and 500 mg L^{-1} yeast extract (Ghosh and Roy, 2006). MS, in turn, contained the following L^{-1} distilled water: 1 g NH_4Cl, 4 g K_2HPO_4, 1.5 g KH_2PO_4, 0.5 g $MgSO_4.7H_2O$ and 5.0 mL trace metals solution (Vishniac and Santer, 1957). Three portions of the 275-cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 were added (5% w/v) individually to MSTY, ASWT and ASWTY and broths, and incubated aerobically at 15°C until phenol red indicator present in the media turned yellow (apparently due to production of sulfuric acid from thiosulfate). Post yellowing, individual enrichment slurries were kept undisturbed for 1 h to allow sediment particles to settle down; 10 mL cell suspension from each flask was then centrifuged at 6000 *g* for 10 min and the pellet re-suspended in 1 mL of the corresponding medium, serially diluted, and spread onto agar plates of the corresponding medium, and incubated at 15°C. Morphologically distinct colonies were picked up and dilution-streaked until all colonies in individual plates looked similar; representative colonies from such pure-culture plates were taken as strains and maintained in their respective isolation-medium. Only *Methylophaga*, though isolated in ASWT, was maintained in ASW supplemented with 0.3% (v/v) methanol (ASWM; this medium had a pH of 7.5) because its growth in ASWT waned after six straight sub-cultures. Chemolithotrophic abilities of the new isolates to oxidize thiosulfate to tetrathionate and/or tetrathionate to sulfate were tested in MSTY, MSTrY, ASWT, ASWTr, ASWTY, ASWTrY, ASWTM and ASWTrM media. MSTrY (pH 7.0) contained MS solution supplemented with 10 mM $K_2S_4O_6$ and 500 mg L^{-1} yeast extract. ASWTrY (pH 7.5) was an yeast extract (500 mg L^{-1}) supplemented derivative of ASWTr. ASWTM (pH 7.5)

and ASWTrM (pH 7.5) were thiosulfate (10 mM $Na_2S_2O_3.5H_2O$) and tetrathionate (10 mM $K_2S_4O_6$) supplemented variant of ASWM respectively. Concentrations of dissolved thiosulfate, tetrathionate and sulfate in the spent culture media were measured as described above.

Tetrathionate-reducing bacterial strains were isolated from the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 in RVTr medium (Vassiliadis, 1983) under strictly anaerobic condition. 2.5 g sediment-sample was added to 45 mL RVTr broth that was contained, and already autoclaved, in a screw-capped bottle. Sediment addition to the medium, and subsequent incubation of the screw-capped bottles at 15°C for one month, were all carried out inside the Whitley H35 Hypoxystation preset to zero O_2 as stated above. After one month, still inside the Hypoxystation, 1 mL of the sediment- RVTr slurry was serially diluted and spread onto RVTr agar plates and incubated at 15°C. After growth appeared in the RVTr agar plates they were taken out of the Hypoxystation; biomasses were serially dilution streaked on to fresh plates and incubated aerobically until all colonies in the individual plates looked similar. Representative colonies from such pure-culture plates were taken and maintained aerobically in Luria broth medium. Tetrathionate-reducing abilities of the new isolates were tested by growing them for 30 days in RVTr broth, inside the H35 Hypoxystation. Concentrations of dissolved thiosulfate, tetrathionate and sulfide in the RVTr cultures were measured by the methods mentioned above.

Genomic DNA extracted from the individual isolates was used as template for PCR amplification of 16S rRNA genes with the Bacteria-specific universal primer-pair 27f and 1492r (Gerhardt, 1994). 16S rRNA gene sequences were determined from the PCR products using a 3500xL Genetic Analyzer automated DNA sequencer (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The 16S rRNA gene sequence of each strain was compared against sequences available in the GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ databases, using BLASTN; strains were finally classified down to the lowest identifiable taxonomic category on the basis of their 16S rRNA gene sequence similarities with the closest, validly-published species having standing in nomenclature (http://www.bacterio.net/; see also Euzéby, 1997; Parte, 2013).

3 Results

3.1 Tetrathionate-forming/oxidizing/reducing microorganisms and genes corresponding to such processes are abundant along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6

The duplicate metagenomic sequence datasets obtained for each of the 25 distinct sediment-samples explored along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 were co-assembled and annotated individually. 23 out of the 25 contig-collections obtained in this way were found to contain genes for tetrathionate formation (Table S3), while all 25 encompassed genes for tetrathionate oxidation (Table S4). Furthermore, 24 out of the 25 contig-collections contained genes for tetrathionate reduction (Table S5). The tetrathionate formation-related genes identified included those

encoding for the different subunits of the thiosulfate dehydrogenases TsdA (Denkmann et al., 2012; Pyne et al., 2018) and DoxDA (Quatrini et al., 2009), which catalyze the oxidation of thiosulfate to tetrathionate in taxonomically diverse bacteria and archaea. While the genes identified for tetrathionate oxidation encoded the sulfate thiol esterase SoxB and the sulfur dehydrogenase SoxC (Lahiri et al., 2006; Pyne et al., 2018), those detected for tetrathionate reduction encoded subunits of tetrathionate (TtrABC) and thiosulfate reductases (PhsAB and PsrA) (Barrett and Clark, 1987; Stoffels et al., 2011).

Concurrent with the above findings, direct taxonomic annotation of the raw (unassembled) metagenomic sequence datasets revealed that considerable proportions of the reads obtained from the individual sediment-depths of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 were ascribable to bacterial genera whose members are known to render tetrathionate formation, oxidation or reduction. In that way, 1.3-4.36% and 3-7.8% of metagenomic reads obtained from the individual sample-sites of SSK42/5 (Fig. 1A) and SSK42/6 (Fig. 1B) were ascribable to the genera *Pseudomonas* and *Halomonas*, majority of marine strains of which are known to form tetrathionate from the oxidation of thiosulfate under aerobic or anaerobic condition (Tuttle, 1980; Mason and Kelly 1988; Sorokin et al., 1999; 2003). 0.1-1.5 and 0.4-6.4% of metagenomic reads obtained from the individual sample-sites of SSK42/5 (Fig. 1A) and SSK42/6 (Fig. 1B) were ascribable to the genera *Acidithiobacillus*, *Halothiobacillus* and *Thiomicrospira*, all members of which oxidize tetrathionate chemolithotrophically (Hedrich and Johnson, 2013; Watsuji et al., 2016; Boden et al., 2017). 0.1-0.3 and 0.2-0.4% of metagenomic reads obtained from the individual sample-sites of SSK42/5 (Fig. 1A) and SSK42/6 (Fig. 1B) were ascribable to the genera *Citrobacter*, *Proteus* and *Salmonella*, all members of which respire by reducing tetrathionate to thiosulfate and/or sulfide (Kaprálek, 1972; Barrett and Clark, 1987; Price-Carter et al., 2001; Stoffels et al., 2011).

3.2 Synchronized population-fluctuation of different tetrathionate-metabolizing types, along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6

Analyses based on the direct taxonomic annotation of the unassembled metagenomic data from discrete sediment-depths of SSK42/5 revealed that the relative abundances of reads ascribed to the genera of tetrathionate-forming, oxidizing, and reducing bacteria fluctuate synchronously along the sediment-surface to core-bottom trajectory (Fig. 1A). Corroboratively, pair-wise Pearson correlation coefficients (CC) as well as Spearman rank correlation coefficients (RCC) between the prevalence of the three metabolic-types are also significantly high in SSK42/5 (Fig. 1A; Table S6), which indicate the existence of strong syntrophic interdependence between the three tetrathionate-metabolizing types in this sediment-horizon. Relative abundances of metagenomic reads ascribed to the genera of tetrathionate-forming, oxidizing, and reducing bacteria also fluctuate more or less synchronously along SSK42/6, excepting the region between

250 and 275 cmbsf (Fig. 1B), which is the sulfate-methane transition zone (SMTZ) of this sediment-horizon (notably, SMTZ in SSK42/5 laid below the 280 cmbsf sediment-depth explored in this core; see Fernandes et al., 2018 for the methane profiles of all the SSK42 cores). While lack of synchrony in the lower end of SSK42/6 apparently resulted in the lower correlation values obtained for this core (Table S7) as compared to those obtained for SSK42/5, it seems quite plausible that the changes in geochemistry and community architecture associated with the shallowing of SMTZ in SSK42/6 impacted the population ecology of tetrathionate-metabolizing microorganisms in this region. Sedimentation rate, age-depth profile and other geochemical features of the two cores separated by a distance of only one kilometer are otherwise largely comparable (Bhattacharya et al., 2019). Consistent prevalence of reads ascribed to the thiosulfate-to-tetrathionate-converting bacterial genera *Halomonas* and *Pseudomonas* in the metagenomes extracted from the different sample-sites of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 (Figs. 1A and 1B) indicated that tetrathionate could be bioavailable in the chemical milieu of these sediment-horizons (notably, pure-culture strains belonging to these two genera were also isolated from the 275 cmbsf sample of SSK42/6; see section 3.3 below, and also Fig. 2). Apart from these two, several such genera were also found to be well represented in the metagenomes of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, some members of which are known to produce tetrathionate as a free intermediate during the oxidation of thiosulfate to sulfate and release the same to the extra-cellular milieu (Tables S8 and S9). These organisms, affiliated to the genera *Acidithiobacillus*, *Advenella*, *Halothiobacillus*, *Paracoccus*, *Pusillimonas* and *Thiomicrospira*, can well increase tetrathionate availability in the ASOMZ sediments, even as they themselves are potential users of the tetrathionate produced (Ghosh et al., 2005; Hedrich and Johnson, 2013; Watsuji et al., 2016; Boden et al., 2017; Rameez et al., 2019). Tables S8 and S9 show the percentages of metagenomic reads that were found to be ascribed to these genera in the different sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively.

Tetrathionate can be oxidized *in situ* as a potential energy and electron source by members of the obligately chemolithotrophic genera *Acidithiobacillus*, *Halothiobacillus* and *Thiomicrospira* that were detected via direct taxonomic annotation of the unassembled metagenomic data (Figs. 1A and 1B) and/or isolated as pure cultures from the 275 cmbsf sample of SSK42/6 (Fig. 2). In addition, several such genera were detected (via direct annotation of metagenomic reads) along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, some chemolithotrophic members of which are known to oxidize tetrathionate to sulfate. These organisms, affiliated to the genera *Advenella*, *Bosea*, *Burkholderia*, *Campylobacter*, *Hydrogenovibrio*, *Pandoraea, Pusillimonas, Pseudaminobacter, Sulfurivirga*, *Thiohalorhabdus,* and *Thiobacillus* may contribute to further tetrathionate depletion from the sediments (Tables S10 and S11 show the relevant references,

and the metagenomic read percentages ascribed to these genera along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively).

Tetrathionate in the ASOMZ sediments can also be utilized as a respiratory substrate by bacteria such as *Citrobacter*, *Proteus* and *Salmonella,* which were detected by direct annotation of metagenomic reads (Figs. 1A and 1B) and all members of which are known to reduce tetrathionate. In addition, strains of *Enterobacter* such as those isolated as pure cultures from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6 (Fig. 2H) can add to the *in situ* reduction of tetrathionate to thiosulfate or sulfide. Furthermore, several such genera were also detected along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 (via direct annotation of metagenomic reads), some members of which are known to respire via reduction of tetrathionate in the absence of O_2; these included *Alteromonas, Alcaligenes, Desulfotomaculum, Desulfovibrio, Edwardsiella, Morganella, Pasteurella, Providencia, Serratia* and *Shewanella* (Tables S12 and S13 show the relevant references, and the metagenomic read percentages ascribed to these genera along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively).

3.3 The tetrathionate-forming/oxidizing microorganisms of the ASOMZ sediments are alive and active *in situ*

Aerobic slurry incubation of the sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 in thiosulfate-containing artificial sea water (ASWT) medium resulted in either the formation of tetrathionate with no further oxidation of this polythionate, or the formation of tetrathionate followed by oxidation of the latter to sulfate, or no transformation at all. These findings, in conjunction with the results of pure culture isolation, illustrated that the sulfur-chemolithotrophic microorganisms present in these sediment-horizons are alive *in situ* and possess distinct pathways for oxidizing thiosulfate. For SSK42/5, ASWT-incubation of the 0, 15, 90 and 160 cmbsf samples resulted in the formation of tetrathionate as the sole and final product of thiosulfate oxidation, which happened *in vitro* at a rate of 6.45-17.72 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3A, Table S14). In contrast, ASWT-incubation of the 45, 60 and 295 cmbsf samples of SSK42/5 resulted in the initial formation of tetrathionate from thiosulfate at a rate of 1.11-6.45 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (notably, no sulfate was produced during this period of incubation); subsequently, the accumulated tetrathionate was converted to sulfate at a rate of 5.86-13.75 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3A, Table S15). Microbial communities present in the remaining five sediment-samples of SSK42/5 did not convert any thiosulfate out of the 20 mM S supplied (in the ASWT medium) to any higher oxidation state of sulfur. For SSK42/6, ASWT-incubation of the 120, 175 and 275 cmbsf samples resulted in the formation of tetrathionate as the sole and final product of thiosulfate oxidation, which happened *in vitro* at a rate of 17.2-29.71 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3B, Table S16). In contrast, ASWT-incubation of the 2, 30 and 45 cmbsf samples of SSK42/6 resulted in the initial formation of tetrathionate from thiosulfate at a rate of 21.05-33.68

μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (notably, no sulfate was produced during this period of incubation); subsequently, the accumulated tetrathionate was converted to sulfate at a rate of 24-54 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3B, Table S17). Microbial communities of the remaining seven sediment-samples of SSK42/6 did not transform any part of the thiosulfate supplied to any higher oxidation state of sulfur. This could be due to low number of metabolically active chemolithotrophic cells present in these samples. Notably, control incubation sets involving autoclaved sediment-samples in ASWT showed no change in the thiosulfate concentration of the medium.

Slurry incubation of a number of sediment-samples from SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 in ASWTr medium resulted in the oxidation of tetrathionate to sulfate. These data, together with the results of pure-culture isolation, indicated that the tetrathionate-oxidizing sulfur-chemolithotrophs present in the different sediment-samples were alive *in situ*. Of the individual microbial communities present in the different sediment-samples of SSK42/5, those from 0, 15, 45, 90, 120, 160 and 295 cmbsf oxidized tetrathionate at a rate of 2.5-23.5 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3C, Table S18). Slurry incubation of samples from the remaining five sediment-depths of SSK42/5 did not result in any oxidation of tetrathionate, plausibly due to low number of metabolically active chemolithotrophic cells present in these samples. For SSK42/6, ASWTr-incubation of the 2, 30, 45, 60, 75 and 90 cmbsf sediment-samples resulted in the oxidation of tetrathionate to sulfate at an identical rate (approximately 140 μmol S day^{-1} g^{-1} sediment). While ASWTr-incubation of the samples from 120, 135, 160 and 175 cmbsf resulted in tetrathionate oxidation at a common rate of approximately 40 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$, the same for the 220, 250 and 275 cmbsf samples led to tetrathionate oxidation at a rate of approximately 75 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Fig. 3D, Table S19). Control incubations involving autoclaved sediment-samples in ASWTr showed no oxidation of tetrathionate.

The *in vitro* rates of tetrathionate formation, oxidation and reduction obtained in the slurry incubations under specific media and culture conditions are expected to have little or no correspondence with the potential *in situ* rates of such processes. Rather, objective of these experiments was to check whether tetrathionate-metabolizing bacteria identified in this sediment system via culture-independent microbiological techniques were alive *in situ* (potential active state of the tetrathionate-metabolizers was subsequently corroborated by pure-culture isolations and metatranscriptome analysis). In the slurry incubations ~~above experiments~~ it was peculiar~~remarkable~~ to observe that the individual communities present within the sediment-depths spanning 2-90 cmbsf, 120-175 cmbsf or 220-275 cmbsf of SSK42/6 exhibited mutually identical rates of tetrathionate oxidation *in vitro*, despite having dissimilar composition/abundance of chemolithotrophic taxa. This could be explained as follows. When a natural sample is incubated in selective culture media (such as ASWTr) certain specific microbial species present in the sample often outgrow all metabolic competitors by virtue of higher substrate affinity and

culture-condition suitability. Consequently, the growth/substrate-utilization phenotype(s) manifested by such enriched consortia are actually contributed to by the selected few rather than the entire community of metabolic equivalents present in the sample (Roy et al., 2016). In the light of this issue it seems plausible that distinct sets of chemolithotrophs more adept to growth in ASWTr medium are present across the sediment-samples within the 2-90 cmbsf, 120-175 cmbsf or 220-275 cmbsf zones, and it was only their characteristic rates of tetrathionate oxidation which were manifested as the *in vitro* tetrathionate oxidation rates of the individual communities.

Whatever may be the actual tetrathionate formation/oxidation rates of the sedimentary communities, *in vitro* or *in situ*, growths in the slurry culture experiments illustrated that tetrathionate-forming and oxidizing bacteria detected along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 are alive *in situ*. In order to further verify whether these metabolic-types were metabolically active in their native habitat, whole metatranscriptome of the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 was sequenced, and the paired end reads assembled into contigs. The gene-catalog obtained via annotation of the assembled contigs was found to encompass homologs of thiosulfate dehydrogenase (*tsdA*), which is involved in the conversion of thiosulfate to tetrathionate, and sulfate thiol esterase (*soxB*) and sulfur dehydrogenase (*soxC*), involved in tetrathionate oxidation (taxonomically, these homologs were ascribed to species of *Gramella*, *Halothiobacillus* and *Marinobacter*; see Table S20). Furthermore, from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6, 15 such bacterial strains were isolated (Table 1) that could form tetrathionate from thiosulfate and/or oxidize tetrathionate to sulfate (Fig. 2). 16S rRNA gene sequence-based taxonomic identification of the isolates clustered them under six species-level entities belonging to six distinct genera. The isolates belonging to the genera *Halomonas*, *Methylophaga*, *Pseudomonas* and *Stenotrophomonas* oxidized thiosulfate only up to tetrathionate; those belonging to *Pusillimonas* not only formed tetrathionate from thiosulfate but also oxidized tetrathionate to sulfate; the *Halothiobacillus* isolates did not form tetrathionate from thiosulfate but oxidized both thiosulfate and tetrathionate directly to sulfate (Table 1). Tetrathionate-forming and/or oxidizing phenotypes of one representative strain each from the six species-level clusters are shown in Fig. 2.

3.4 Active tetrathionate-reducing microorganisms in ASOMZ sediment

During anaerobic slurry incubation in RVTr medium, microbial communities of all the sediment-samples explored in SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 reduced tetrathionate to thiosulfate and/or sulfide at a rate of 0.5-1.5 μmol S day^{-1} g $sediment^{-1}$ (Figs. 3E and 3F, Tables S21 and S22); control sets involving autoclaved sediment-samples exhibited no depletion of tetrathionate from the RVTr media. Notably, no tetrathionate reductase (*ttrABC*) or thiosulfate reductase (*phsAB* or *psrA*) was detected in the gene-catalog obtained via assembly and annotation of the metatranscriptomic data from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6; but, the same catalog did contain many genes having highest

sequence identities with functionally diverse genes belonging to the typical tetrathionate-reducer *Salmonella*. Furthermore, anaerobic enrichment of the 275 cmbsf sediment-samples of SSK42/6, followed by isolation of pure cultures, in RVTr medium yielded four tetrathionate-reducing strains that reduced 30-32 mM S tetrathionate into equivalent amount of thiosulfate over 72 h anaerobic incubation in RVTr medium (Fig. 2H shows the tetrathionate-reduction kinetics of the representative strain RVSM5a). 16S rRNA gene sequence-based taxonomic identification of the four isolates clustered them under a single species-level entity belonging to the genus *Enterobacter* (Table 1).

3.5 The tetrathionate-metabolizing bacteria isolated from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6 are widespread across SSK42/5 and SSK42/6

Whole genome sequencing and annotation was carried out for the three tetrathionate-forming isolates *Halomonas* sp. MCC 3301, *Methylophaga* sp. MTCC 12599 and *Pseudomonas bauzanensis* MTCC 12600; the two tetrathionate-oxidizing isolates *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A, and *Pusillimonas ginsengisoli* MTCC12558; and the tetrathionate-reducing isolate *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a (see Table 1 and Table S23 for GenBank accession numbers and general features of the genomes respectively). When metagenomic sequence data from the 25 distinct sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 were mapped separately onto each of these six genomes, significant percentages of the metagenomic read-sets were found to match sequences from the individual genomes (Figs. 4 and 5, Table S23). In SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, 0.01-0.3% and 0.02-19.05% metagenomic reads from the individual sediment-samples mapped onto the different genomes respectively. Expectedly, prevalence of reads matching sequences from the new isolates was relatively higher for the metagenomes of SSK42/6 (Fig. 5); and within this core it was highest for 275 cmbsf, i.e. the sample-site from where all the strains were isolated (Table S23). These data corroborated the significant prevalence of the tetrathionate-metabolizing bacterial strains across the sediment-horizons of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6.

3.6 Correspondence between genomic sequences of the tetrathionate-metabolizing isolates and metatranscriptomic sequences from their habitat

In order to check whether the newly isolated bacterial strains were metabolically active and growing in their natural habitat, the rRNA-sequence-free metatranscriptomic sequence dataset (i.e., all paired end mRNA reads) of the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 was mapped onto a number of tetrathionate-metabolizing and house-keeping genes of the individual strains. In this way, the metatranscriptomic sequence dataset was found to encompass reads matching the *tsdA* genes of the thiosulfate-to-tetrathionate-converting isolates *Halomonas* sp. MCC 3301 and *Pseudomonas bauzanensis* MTCC 12600, and the *soxB* and *soxC* genes of the tetrathionate-

oxidizing isolates *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A and *Pusillimonas ginsengisoli* MTCC 12558 (Table S24). In this context it is noteworthy that the annotated draft genome of the tetrathionate-forming isolate *Methylophaga* sp. MTCC 12599 did not contain any *tsdA* gene while that of the tetrathionate-reducing isolate *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a contained no *ttrABC* and *phsABC* genes; these could be attributable to either the incompleteness of the two genomes or the presence of novel thiosulfate-to-tetrathionate-converting and tetrathionate-reducing genes in the two bacteria respectively. On the other hand, mapping of the metatranscriptomic sequence dataset onto the individual isolates' gene-catalogs concerning core metabolisms such as (a) genetic information processing (transcription, translation, DNA replication and repair); (b) environmental information processing (ABC transporters, phosphotransferase system and bacterial secretion system) and (iii) cell growth and division (cell cycle), resulted in the concordant matching of up to 1.1 % read-pairs with the different catalogs. Table S24 shows the numbers of metatranscriptomic read-pairs that matched concordantly with some representatives of these house-keeping genes of the six isolates.

3.~~6~~7 Thiosulfate as the key source of tetrathionate in ASOMZ sediments

Findings of the present culture-independent and culture-dependent investigations showed that microbe-mediated oxidation of thiosulfate to tetrathionate (by members of the bacterial genera included under group A in Fig. 6) could be a major metabolic process in the sulfur cycle of ASOMZ sediments. While genes for the metabolic conversion of thiosulfate to tetrathionate were present across the two cores, so were live microorganisms which could accomplish this process. Furthermore, metatranscriptomic data highlighted the potentially functional (metabolically active) state of thiosulfate-to-tetrathionate-converting bacteria *in situ*. Tetrathionate formed in this way can have a number of fates: it can either be converted to sulfate (via chemolithotrophic oxidation by members of the genera included under Group B in Fig. 6) or reduced to thiosulfate and/or sulfide (by members of the genera included in Group C of Fig. 6). Whilst culture-independent as well as culture-dependent data supported the feasibility of these metabolic processes *in situ*, copious hydrogen sulfide present in the pore-waters (Fernandes et al., 2018; also see Figs. 3G and 3H, Table S2~~4~~5) can potentially reduce tetrathionate to thiosulfate and elemental sulfur abiotically (Rowe et al., 2015). Corroborative to these possibilities, ion chromatographic analyses revealed up to 11.1 µM thiosulfate in the pore-waters of all the sulfide-containing sample-sites of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 (Figs. 3G and 3H, Table S2~~4~~5).~~;~~ These thiosulfate concentration values are consistent with those reported from a number of physicochemically similar sediment-horizons across the global ocean (Troelsen and Jorgensen, 1982; Zopfi et al., 2004). ~~t~~Tandem absence of sulfide and thiosulfate in the upper 15 cmbsf of SSK42/6 could be due to potentially high rates of chemolithotrophic conversion of sulfide/thiosulfate to sulfate *in situ*~~)~~. Tetrathionate, remarkably,

was not found to exist freely in the pore-waters of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6; this is apparently attributable to the fact that its build-up to measurable quantities [1 µM for the methods used in this as well as previous studies (Podgorsek and Imhoff, 1999)] ~~is generally~~ could be debarred in natural environments due to high reactivity under the mediation of microbes (Kanao et al., 2007; Ghosh and Dam, 2009; Boden et al., 2010; Pyne et al., 2017, 2018) as well as naturally-occurring chemical substances such as sulfide (Roy and Trudinger, 1970; Podgorsek and Imhoff, 1999; Schippers et al., 1999; Schippers and Jørgensen, 2001; Zopfi et al., 2004). From that perspective, the geomicrobiological information unearthed in this study illustrates the power of metaomics in discovering such cryptic interfaces between the chemosphere and the biosphere that are almost impossible to decipher from geochemical records alone.

4 Discussions

4.1 Structure-function of the sedimentary microbiome in relation to tetrathionate metabolism

Concentrations and isotopic ratios of the various chemical constituents of sedimentary solid-phases and pore-fluids had long remained central to the deciphering of *in situ* biogeochemical pathways. Significant information on the carbon-sulfur cycles of modern as well as ancient, marine and lacustrine sediments have been generated in this way. Currently, however, there is an increasing consensus that several questions in biogeochemistry - such as those concerning sulfur compounds oxidation/disproportionation, relative importance of simple fatty acids catabolism and anaerobic methane oxidation in sedimentary sulfate reduction, and biogeochemical processes within sulfate-methane transition zones - cannot be answered from preserved geochemical records alone. In recent times a lot of advancement has taken place in our overall understanding of carbon-sulfur cycling in marine systems by virtue of data obtained from metagenomic, metatranscriptomic, and *in situ* as well as *in vitro* geomicrobiological experiments. Forensic-level detection power of these approaches in unearthing such cryptic biogeochemical processes that do not get manifested, or leave their imprints, as detectable geological records, have been demonstrated in a number of recent papers (e.g., Canfield et al., 2010; Garcia-Robledo et al., 2017; Bhattacharya et al., 2019), which revealed such microbial community functions using metaomics approaches that were almost impossible to detect via geochemical analyses. So far as the present study is concerned, ~~M~~metagenome analysis along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 revealed tetrathionate-metabolizing potentials in bacterial communities present at different depths of the sediment-horizons where tetrathionate is not detectable easily. At the same time, metatranscriptome analysis for the deepest sediment-sample of SSK42/6 indicated that these tetrathionate-metabolizing communities are potentially active *in situ.* Albeit cryptic biogeochemical roles of tetrathionate in the sedimentary sulfur cycle were revealed here

in the context of an oxygen minimum zone, there was no apparent reason to presume that the phenomena were unfeasible in other territories of the marine realm. ~~For instance, the thiosulfate to tetrathionate conversion-related gene *tsdA* was found to be present in the metagenomes analyzed from all but two of the 25 sample-sites explored along the two cores (Table S3). At the same time, the metatranscriptomic sequence dataset encompassed reads matching the *tsdA* genes of the thiosulfate-to-tetrathionate-converting isolates *Halomonas* sp. MCC 3301 and *Pseudomonas bauzanensis* MTCC 12600 (Table S25). Furthermore, *tsdA* homologs belonging to species of *Gramella* and *Marinobacter* were detected in the assembled metatranscriptome (Table S20). The tetrathionate-oxidation-related genes *soxB* and *soxC* were found to be present in the metagenomes of all the sample-sites explored along the two cores (Table S4), while the metatranscriptomic dataset encompassed reads matching the *soxB* and *soxC* genes of the tetrathionate-oxidizing isolates *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A and *Pusillimonas ginsengisoli* MTCC 12558, according to mapping experiments (Table S25). *soxB* and *soxC* homologs belonging to species of *Gramella*, *Halothiobacillus* and *Marinobacter* were also detected in the assembled metatranscriptome (Table S20). While the tetrathionate-reduction-related genes *ttrABC*, *phsABC* and/or *psrA* were found to be present in the metagenomes of 24 out of 25 sample-sites (Table S5), no known tetrathionate-reduction-related gene was detected in the assembled and annotated metatranscriptome of the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6. In this context it is further noteworthy that the genome of the tetrathionate-reducing isolate *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a was found to be lacking the *ttrABC* and *phsABC* genes, thereby indicating the presence of potentially novel genetic diversities for tetrathionate reduction. This said, genes other than *ttrABC* and *phsABC* ascribed to the typically tetrathionate-reducing genus *Salmonella* were detected in the assembled and annotated metatranscriptome (data not shown). So far as~~Regarding the feasibility of the three tetrathionate-metabolizing processes in the highly-sulfidic sediments of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 (Fernandes et al., 2018) ~~is concerned,~~ it is noteworthy that tetrathionate reduction is a mode of anaerobic respiration (Barrett and Clark, 1987; Hensel et al., 1999; Price-Carter et al., 2001), while thiosulfate to tetrathionate conversion by the action of *tsdA*-encoded thiosulfate dehydrogenase occurs under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions (Sorokin et al., 1999). However, most of the sulfur chemolithotrophic bacteria known thus far, including some of those which form tetrathionate from thiosulfate and/or oxidize tetrathionate to sulfate, use O_2 as the terminal electron acceptor (Ghosh and Dam, 2009; Wasmund et al., 2017; Patwardhan et al., 2018). Albeit it is peculiar that such microorganisms could be alive and active in these apparently O_2 scarce sediment-horizons, aerobic respiration-related genes such as *aa*$_3$-/*cbb*$_3$-type cytochrome-*c* oxidases (*coxABCD* / *ccoNOPQ*) and cytochrome-*bd* ubiquinol oxidase (*cydABX* / *appX*) are abundant in the metagenomes of all the sample-sites explored in SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 (Bhattacharya et al., 2019). Furthermore, when the metatranscriptomic sequence

dataset obtained for the 275 cmbsf sediment-sample of SSK42/6 was assembled and annotated, the resultant contigs were found to encompass several homologs corresponding to genes for aerobic respiration by *aa*$_3$-type and *cbb*$_3$-type cytochrome-*c* oxidases and cytochrome-*bd* ubiquinol oxidase (Table S26), together with those for other O_2-requiring (oxidase enzyme catalyzed) biochemical reactions (Table S27). These data, together with the isolation of obligately aerobic strains from this sedimentary ecosystem, indicated that O_2 source(s) supportive of aerobic metabolic processes are likely to be present *in situ* (Bhattacharya et al., 2019).

4.2 Trends of thiosulfate/sulfide concentration and prevalence of tetrathionate-metabolizing bacteria, along the sediment-cores,~~geomicrobial parameters down the sediment-depths corroborated~~ implicate tetrathionate as a key intermediate of the sulfur cycle~~ functions centered on tetrathionate~~

Along both the sediment-cores, SSK42/5 and SSK42/6, ~~prevalence~~relative abundance of tetrathionate-forming, oxidizing, as well as reducing bacteria increased with ~~sediment-~~depth (Figs. 1A and 1B). This could be attributable to the corresponding overall ~~down-depth~~ increase in the concentration of thiosulfate (Figs. 3G and 3H), which ~~is potentially~~plausibly is the key source of biogenic tetrathionate in the sediment. Sulfide concentration also increased with depth, ~~C~~consistent with the ~~trend of down-depth~~ increase ~~in~~of thiosulfate concentration~~, along both the cores, increase was recorded in the concentrations of sulfide~~ (Figs. 3G and 3H). Sulfide~~, which~~ is not only a potential direct source of thiosulfate in marine sediments (Jørgensen, 1990) but can also be a product of microbial tetrathionate reduction (Barrett and Clark, 1987; Price-Carter et al., 2001). Furthermore, sulfide, when present in sediment-cores, can chemically (abiotically) reduce tetrathionate to thiosulfate and elemental sulfur (Roy and Trudinger, 1970; Rowe et al., 2015). In view of these dependencies, depth-trends of sulfide concentration are expected to show a certain degree of correlation with trends of thiosulfate concentration.

~~On the other hand,~~ In both the sediment-cores, ~~down-depth decreases in sulfate concentration in tandem with increases in the~~ relative abundance of tetrathionate-oxidizing bacteria increased with depth even as sulfate concentration decreased along the same trajectory (Figs. 1A, 1B, 3G and 3H). This indicated that the amounts of sulfate produced from potential tetrathionate oxidation at individual sediment-depths ~~quantities and rates of *in situ* sulfate production from potential tetrathionate oxidation~~ were far less than the amounts of sulfate that were reduced to sulfide *in situ*~~overall pore-water sulfate concentrations and rates of sulfate reduction respectively~~. Furthermore, in this context, it is noteworthy that in neither of the two cores, rates of *in vitro* tetrathionate formation or tetrathionate oxidation (in slurry culture experiments) exhibited any parity with the trends of fluctuation observed for the relative abundance of tetrathionate-forming or oxidizing bacteria (Figs. 1A, 1B, 3A-3D). This could be

reflective of the fact that the substrate-utilization rates manifested in the slurry incubation experiments actually resulted from the activities of the few chemolithotrophic species/strains that were potentially enriched in the specific media used in these experiments and not that of the whole community present *in situ*. In contrast, however, ~~the~~ rate of *in vitro* tetrathionate reduction along both the sediment-cores exhibited overall parity with the trends of fluctuation observed for the relative abundance of tetrathionate-reducing bacteria (both parameters showing overall increase~~s~~ with sediment-depth~~in the sediment-surface to core-bottom trajectories~~; Figs. 1A, 1B, 3E and 3F). This ~~could be~~ suggests ~~reflective of the fact~~ that ~~the~~ tetrathionate reduction rates observed~~manifested~~ in the slurry incubation~~s experiments resulted from the activities~~ were attributable~~ of most of~~ to all the tetrathionate-reducing species/strains present *in situ*, which in turn indicates ~~the~~ a general ability of ~~all~~ tetrathionate-reducers to grow in RVTr medium.

4.3 ~~Tetrathionate, and sulfur cycling in global marine sediments~~Conclusion

Sulfur cycling is a crucial component of sediment biogeochemistry within the marine realm. Apart from controlling *in situ* sulfide-sulfate balance, microbe-mediated processes of the sulfur cycle work in conjunction with those of the carbon and nitrogen cycles to remineralize organic matter sequestered in the sea-bed, and also influence metal deposition/mobilization. Tetrathionate is rarely investigated as a central intermediate of sulfur cycling in marine sediments, even though thiosulfate is long known to be a central biogeochemical junction of sedimentary sulfur cycling across the global ocean (Jørgensen, 1990; Jørgensen and Bak, 1991; Thamdrup et al., 1994). ~~Thus far, only o~~One study, based on the top few centimeters of Baltic Sea sediments, ~~has~~ reported microbial production of tetrathionate and highlighted its ~~the~~ role ~~of tetrathionate~~ in the sulfur cycle (Podgorsek and Imhoff, 1999). In that study, sediments collected from coastal locations, off Hiddensee (Germany), thiosulfate and tetrathionate were undetectable in the 7-8 mM sulfate- and 4-20 µM sulfide-containing native pore-water samples tested along a 6 cmbsf sediment profile [detection limits for thiosulfate and tetrathionate, in the methods employed by Podgorsek and Imhoff (1999), were 0.5 and 1.0 µM, respectively]. But when an approximately 15 m^2 area of the same Baltic Sea location was covered with a plastic sheet for 5 months to artificially construct a stable anoxic condition, up to 5 µM tetrathionate was found to accumulate within the 6 cmbsf sediment profile explored, concomitant with the build-up of 80-280 µM thiosulfate and 320-1200 µM sulfide, and depletion of sulfate to a concentration of 0.4 mM within the first 4 cmbsf. In the above findings of Podgorsek and Imhoff (1999) it is peculiar that tetrathionate was absent in the native Baltic Sea (off Hiddensee coast) sediment-samples containing 4-20 µM sulfide, but accumulated to a concentration of 5 µM under induced anoxia involving 320-1200 µM sulfide. Concurrently, in the other Baltic Sea study-site (Gotland Basin) explored by Podgorsek and Imhoff (1999), tetrathionate accumulation of up to 5 nmol cm^{-3}

sediment was recorded, during a period of annual anoxia, concomitant with increased concentrations of sulfide, elemental sulfur and thiosulfate. To explain these data Podgorsek and Imhoff (1999) invoked the cyclic sequence of reactions that was proposed and demonstrated previously (Roy and Trudinger, 1970; Hansen, 1974; Sorokin et al., 1996) and which involved bacterial oxidation of thiosulfate to tetrathionate on one hand and chemical reaction between sulfide and tetrathionate, forming elemental sulfur and thiosulfate, on the other. While it was added that accumulation of tetrathionate to high concentrations is debarred in euxinic marine environments owing to its high chemical reactivity with sulfide, and that even low concentrations of thiosulfate and tetrathionate, acting as a catalytic couple, were sufficient to promote large-scale net oxidation of sulfide to elemental sulfur (Podgorsek and Imhoff, 1999), questions remained as to how tetrathionate accumulation in the Baltic Sea sediments occurred only amidst heightened sulfide build-up. Findings of the current study apparently fill-in this gap of the modular tetrathionate cycle by highlighting the centrality of microbial tetrathionate-depletion mechanisms in keeping the tetrathionate pool cryptic (below easily-detectable quantities).

A number of other studies, based on geochemical experiments and preserved records, have also revealed the occurrence, and complex transformations, of tetrathionate and other intermediate sulfur species in ecologically diverse (but mostly non-sulfidic) environments, including marine sediments; however, none elucidated the microbiological drivers and/or indicators underlying the status of tetrathionate as a key junction of the sulfur cycle. Bak et al. (1993) measured tetrathionate, trithionate and thiosulfate in diverse natural samples, while Zopfi et al. (2004) used different techniques of analytical geochemistry to track the fates and turnover times of sulfur cycle intermediates in sediments of the Black Sea and North Sea. While the latter paper revealed the presence of tetrathionate in the sediments and delineated potential pathways for its transformation *in situ*, no microbiological corroboration of their findings was carried out. Findlay and Kamyshny (2017) has envisaged the potential fates and transformation rates of intermediate sulfur species in lacustrine water-columns and sediments by introducing and tracking ^{35}S-labeled sulfur compounds in the samples. Furthermore, both Zopfi et al. (2004) and Findlay and Kamyshny (2017), in concurrence with previous reports (Schippers and Jørgensen, 2001), envisaged *in situ* oxidation of pyrite (FeS_2) by MnO_2 as an abiotic source of tetrathionate in the sediments. Such microbes-independent processes are also not improbable in the marine sediments explored in this study as (i) Fe (9232-17234 ppm), Mn (71-172 ppm) and pyrite (0.05-1.09 wt %) were all detected in the solid phase of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 samples; (ii) genes for Mn(II) to Mn(IV) oxidation were identified in the assembled metagenomes of all the sediment-samples explored; (iii) sequences corresponding to manganese oxidase (*cotA*) and other accessory proteins involved in Mn(II) to Mn(IV) oxidation were there in the assembled metatranscriptome analyzed; and (iv) high percentage of reads ascribed to MnO-depositing

bacteria such as *Aeromonas*, *Citrobacter*, *Enterobacter Gallionella*, *Hyphomicrobium Leptothrix* and *Proteus* (that reduce Mn^{+4} to Mn^{+2} for anaerobic respiration; Ghiorse, 1984), and MnO-to-MnO_2-converting bacteria such as *Arthrobacter*, *Oceanospirillum* and *Vibrio* (Tebo et al., 2005; Sujith and Bharathi, 2011), were detected in all the metagenomes sequenced (data not shown). Notably, however, manganese concentrations detected in the sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 are orders of magnitude lower than the threshold [> 0.2% (w/w)] reported previously for FeS_2 dissolution (Schippers and Jørgensen, 2001), so to confirm MnO_2-FeS_2 interaction as a potent source of tetrathionate in these sediment-horizons, future studies of geochemistry yielding fine-resolution depth-trends for pyrite and MnO_2 contents of the sediments are necessary alongside comprehensive data for pore-water metal ions concentrations and pyrite-specific (tracer) slurry incubations. This said, importance and uniqueness of ~~T~~the present exploration of ~~the~~ Arabian Sea sediments rest in its use of microbiological data to ~~sediments underlying the approximate-center (530-580 mbsl) of the ~200-1200 mbsl vertical-expanse of the Arabian Sea OMZ~~ reveal~~ed~~ tetrathionate as a key ~~potent~~ intermediate of the ~~*in situ*~~ sulfur cycle, and identify~~ing~~~~ied~~ the potential biochemical pathways involved its ~~microbial mechanisms that are plausibly involved in the~~ formation and transformation *in situ*~~of this polythionate~~. ~~Albeit the cryptic biogeochemical roles of tetrathionate in the sulfur cycle were revealed here in the context of an oxygen minimum zone, there were no observable reasons to assume that such processes do not have their equivalents in other geomicrobiologically-distinct sediment-horizons of the marine realm.~~ Further appreciation of the scope and significance of this molecular and classical microbiology-based forecast remains subject to further biogeochemical substantiation, which among other things should explore the real time presence of tetrathionate in the system.

Supplementary material

Supplemental material for this article may be found with the digital version of this manuscript.

Data availability

All nucleotide sequence data have been deposited in NCBI Sequence Read Archive (SRA) or GenBank under the BioProject accession number PRJNA309469: (i) the whole metagenome shotgun sequence datasets have the Run accession numbers SRR3646127 through SRR3646132, SRR3646144, SRR3646145, SRR3646147, SRR3646148, SRR3646150 through SRR3646153, SRR3646155 through SRR3646158, SRR3646160 through SRR3646165, and (ii) the metatranscriptome sequence dataset has the Run accession number SRR7991972. (iii) the whole genome sequences have the GenBank accession numbers SWAW01000000, SSXS01000000, RAPG00000000.1., SSXT01000000, SWAV01000000 and VTPT00000000.

Code availability. All data analysis codes used in this study are in the published domain, and have been appropriately cited in the text.

Author contributions

W.G. conceived the study, designed the experiments, interpreted the results and wrote the paper ~~in conjunction with S.M~~. S.M. anchored the whole microbiological work, performed the experiments, analyzed the data and contributed substantially to the writing of the paper. A.M led the entire SSK42 mission and all geochemical investigations therein. S.B., T.M., M.J.R. and C.R. performed microbiological experiments and data analysis. S.F. and A.P. performed geochemical experiments. All authors read and vetted the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Financial support for conducting the microbiological studies was provided by given by Bose Institute via internal faculty grants and Earth System Science Organization, Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), Government of India (GoI) via grant number MoES/36/00IS/Extra/19/2013. We thank the Director CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography for facilitating the geochemical studies and the research cruise SSK42 for acquisition of sediment cores. MoES (GAP2303) also funded the research cruise. All the support received from the CSIR-NIO Ship Cell members and the crew members of SSK42 is gratefully acknowledged. S.B. received fellowship from Bose Institute. SM got fellowship from Department of Science and Technology, GoI. MJR and C.R. got fellowship from University Grants Commission, GoI. S.F. received fellowships from Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, GoI.

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Legend of figures

Figure 1. ~~**Scatter plots showing the down-depth variations in the prevalence**~~**Relative abundance of the ~~key~~ tetrathionate-metaboli~~c-types, or the pair-wise associations between the prevalence of the metabolic-types~~zing bacterial groups plotted pair-wise against each other or against sediment-depth, along (~~1~~A) SSK42/5 and (~~1~~B) SSK42/6.** ~~Parameters considered include sediment-depth (in cmbsf), and~~Relative abundances are expressed as the percentages of metagenomic reads matching protein-coding genomic sequences from the genera of tetrathionate-forming (*Pseudomonas* and *Halomonas*), tetrathionate-oxidizing (*Acidithiobacillus*, *Halothiobacillus* and *Thiomicrospira*) and tetrathionate-reducing (*Citrobacter*, *Proteus* and *Salmonella*) bacteria. Presence of these genera in the various sediment-samples of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 was corroborated via manual scrutiny of the amplified 16S rRNA gene sequence-based diversity data reported previously for these cores (Fernandes et al., 2018) as well as by searching the individual metagenomic sequence datasets against the 16S rRNA gene sequence database of the Ribosomal Database Project (using BlastN with minimum alignment length 50 bp, minimum identity cut-off 90% and maximum e-value cut-off $1e^{-5}$). Plots corroborated by Pearson correlation coefficient (CC) and/or Spearman rank correlation coefficient (RCC) values ≥ + 0.8 with $P < 0.05$ are shown in blue. Whereas none of the plots were corroborated by negative CC or RCC values numerically ≥ 0.8 with $P < 0.05$, those corroborated by positive/negative CC and/or RCC values numerically ≤ 0.8 are shown in black, irrespective of whether P is < 0.05. All CC and RCC values pertaining to the above plots are given in Table S6 and Table S7 respectively.

Figure 2. Metabolic transformations of thiosulfate and/or tetrathionate by representative strains of the various species-level entities isolated from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6. (**A** through **D**) thiosulfate to tetrathionate conversion by *Halomonas* sp. 15WGF, *Methylophaga* sp. SBPC3, *Pseudomonas* sp. SBBB and *Stenotrophomonas* sp. SBPC3 respectively. (**E** and **F**) oxidation of thiosulfate to sulfate via tetrathionate, and oxidation of tetrathionate to sulfate, by *Pusillimonas*

sp. SBSA respectively. (**G**) oxidation of tetrathionate to sulfate by *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A. (**H**) reduction of tetrathionate to thiosulfate by *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a. —●—, —▲— and —▼— indicate the concentrations of sulfur (mM S) present in the medium at a given time-point of incubation in the form of thiosulfate, sulfate and tetrathionate respectively. —■— denotes the pH of a culture at a given time-point of incubation.

Figure 3. Rates of transformation of thiosulfate and/or tetrathionate in slurry incubations, and ~~down-depth~~ concentrations of different sulfur species, along the two sediment-cores. (**A** and **B**) *in vitro* rates of tetrathionate formation and its downstream oxidation (if any) in ASWT medium, for the different sedimentary communities of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively. (**C** and **D**) *in vitro* rates of tetrathionate oxidation in ASWTr medium, for the different sedimentary communities of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively. (**E** and **F**) *in vitro* rates of tetrathionate reduction in RVTr medium, for the different sedimentary communities of SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively. (**G** and **H**) concentrations of sulfur species measured along SSK42/5 and SSK42/6 respectively. In **A** through **F**, brown, violet and green circles represent tetrathionate formation, oxidation and reduction rates respectively. In **G** and **H**, orange, light blue and purple circles represent the concentrations of sulfide, thiosulfate and sulfate respectively (sulfide and sulfate data taken from Fernandes et al., 2018).

Figure 4. Bubble plot showing the percentages of metagenomic reads from individual sediment-samples of SSK42/5 that matched genomic sequences of the six tetrathionate-metabolizing bacterial isolates: (Ent) *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a, (*Hlm*) *Halomonas* sp. MCC 3301, (*Htb*) *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A, (*Mtp*) *Methylophaga* sp. MTCC 12599, (*Psb*) *Pseudomonas bauzanensis* MTCC 12600, and (*Psg*) *Pusillimonas ginsengisoli* MTCC12558. Scales for sediment-depth (plotted in y-axis) and percentage of metagenomic reads from a given depth matching genomic sequences of an isolate (represented by bubble size) are both linear; the individual isolates are placed along the x-axis.

Figure 5. Bubble plot showing the percentages of metagenomic reads from individual sediment-samples of SSK42/6 that matched genomic sequences of the six tetrathionate-metabolizing bacterial isolates: (Ent) *Enterobacter* sp. RVSM5a, (*Hlm*) *Halomonas* sp. MCC 3301, (*Htb*) *Halothiobacillus* sp. SB14A, (*Mtp*) *Methylophaga* sp. MTCC 12599, (*Psb*) *Pseudomonas bauzanensis* MTCC 12600, and (*Psg*) *Pusillimonas ginsengisoli* MTCC12558. Scales for sediment-depth (plotted in y-axis) and percentage of metagenomic reads from a given depth matching genomic sequences of an isolate (represented by bubble size) are both linear; the individual isolates are placed along the x-axis.

Figure 6. Schematic diagram showing the network of biotic and abiotic process that are ~~potentially~~ apparently involved in the formation and transformation of tetrathionate in the Arabian Sea sediments explored in this study.

Table 1. Bacteria isolated from 275 cmbsf of SSK42/6, and their tetrathionate-metabolizing properties.

	Bacteria isolated in ASWT		**Bacteria isolated in ASWTY**	**Bacteria isolated in MSTY**			**Bacteria isolated in RVTr**
Identification up to lowest taxonomic level possible	*Halothiobacillus* sp.	*Methylophaga* sp.	*Halomonas* sp.	*Pseudomonas* sp.	*Stenotrophomonas* sp.	*Pusillimonas ginsengisoli*	*Enterobacter* sp.
Total number of strains isolated for the species-level cluster	6	2	2	2	1	2	4
Name of the representative strain	SB14A	SB9B = MTCC12599	15WGF = MCC3301	SBBB = MTCC12600	SBPC3	SBSA = MTCC12558	RVSM5a
16S rRNA gene sequence accession number of the representative strain	LN999387	LN999390	LT607031	LN999396	LN999400	LN999398	MH593841
Tetrathionate-metabolizing phenotype (medium in which phenotype was tested)	(i) Tetrathionate to sulfate (ASWTr)	(i) Thiosulfate to tetrathionate (ASWTM)	(i) Thiosulfate to tetrathionate (ASWTY)	(i) Thiosulfate to tetrathionate (MSTY)	(i) Thiosulfate to tetrathionate (MSTY)	(i) Thiosulfate to tetrathionate (MSTY) (ii) Tetrathionate to sulfate (MSTrY)	(i) Tetrathionate to thiosulfate (RVTr)
NCBI accession number for whole genome sequence	SWAW01000000	SSXS01000000	SSXT01000000	SWAV01000000	-	RAPG00000000	VTPT00000000