System-level effects of CO_2 and RuBisCO concentration on carbon isotope fractionation

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ABSTRACT

Carbon isotope biosignatures preserved in the Precambrian geologic record are primarily interpreted to reflect ancient cyanobacterial carbon fixation catalyzed by Form I RuBisCO enzymes. The average range of isotopic biosignatures generally follows that produced by extant cyanobacteria. However, this observation is difficult to reconcile with several environmental (e.g., temperature, pH, and CO_2 concentrations), molecular and physiological factors that likely would have differed during the Precambrian and can produce fractionation variability in contemporary organisms that meets or exceeds that observed in the geologic record. To test a range of genetic and environmental factors that may have impacted ancient carbon isotope biosignatures, we engineered a mutant strain of the model cyanobacterium *Synechococcus elongatus* PCC 7942 that overexpresses RuBisCO and characterized the resultant physiological and isotope fractionation effects. We specifically investigated how both increased atmospheric CO_2 concentrations and RuBisCO regulation influence cell growth, oxygen evolution rate, and carbon isotope fractionation in cyanobacteria. We found that >2% CO_2 increases the growth rate of wild-type and mutant strains, and that the pool of active RuBisCO enzyme increases with increased expression. At elevated CO_2, carbon isotope discrimination (ε_p) is increased by ~8‰, whereas RuBisCO overexpression does not significantly affect isotopic discrimination at all tested CO_2 concentrations. Our results show that understanding the environmental factors that impact RuBisCO regulation, physiology, and evolution is crucial for reconciling microbially driven carbon isotope fractionation with the geologic record of organic and inorganic carbon isotope signatures.

42 **IMPORTANCE**

43 Carbon isotope biosignatures preserved in the geologic record are interpreted to reflect the long-
44 term evolution of microbial carbon fixation and provide the earliest evidence of life on Earth.
45 RuBisCO enzymes, distinctive and early-evolved catalysts that fix atmospheric CO_2, have likely
46 been responsible for the bulk of primary productivity through Earth history. Thus, a comprehensive
47 understanding of the molecular, physiological, environmental, and evolutionary factors that
48 influence the isotopic discrimination of cyanobacteria that utilize RuBisCO is essential for the
49 interpretation of ancient isotopic biosignatures. For example, the vastly different atmospheric CO_2
50 levels that characterized the Precambrian may have influenced the expression and regulation of
51 the ancient RuBisCO protein complex. These observations underscore the need to consider how a
52 broader range of environmental conditions and subcellular processes may have shaped isotopic
53 discrimination over geologic time. In this study, we establish a cyanobacterial metabolic-
54 engineering strategy that can test such hypotheses and offer insights into the biogeochemical
55 record of life.

56

INTRODUCTION

The conserved microbial metabolic pathways that drive global biogeochemistry emerged on Earth billions of years ago, the evolution of which has both shaped and been shaped by large-scale environmental transitions (Falkowski, Fenchel, & Delong, 2008; Knoll, Bergmann, & Strauss, 2016; Lyons, Fike, & Zerkle, 2015). These microbial processes have left distinct signatures that evidence biological activity billions of years in the past. Of these, the oldest and most extensive signature of biological activity on Earth is the deviation in stable carbon isotopic compositions ($^{13}C/^{12}C$, expressed as $\delta^{13}C$) between preserved inorganic and organic carbon, interpreted to reflect the isotopic discrimination of ancient biological carbon fixation (Des Marais, 2001; Krissansen-Totton, Buick, & Catling, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2020; Schidlowski, 2001). These deviations are primarily shaped by enzymes that preferentially assimilate the lighter ^{12}C isotope from inorganic carbon sources. Carbon biosignatures preserved in the geologic record therefore reflect the long-term evolution of these enzyme-mediated processes and their hosts' physiologies.

The RuBisCO enzyme (ribulose 1,5-bisphosphate (RuBP) carboxylase/oxygenase) catalyzes the reduction of inorganic CO_2 as the initial step of carbon assimilation into organic biomass via the Calvin-Benson-Bassham (CBB) cycle (Erb & Zarzycki, 2018; Nisbet et al., 2007; Tcherkez, Farquhar, & Andrews, 2006). RuBisCO is one of the most abundant proteins on Earth (Bar-On & Milo, 2019; Ellis, 1979; Raven, 2013), and its presence in photoautotrophic organisms, including early-evolved cyanobacteria, suggests that this enzyme has played a significant role in primary production for much of Earth history (Hamilton, Bryant, & Macalady, 2016; Schirrmeister, Sanchez-Baracaldo, & Wacey, 2016; Schopf, 2011). Thus, the isotopic fractionation behavior of RuBisCO is also thought to have primarily constrained Precambrian carbon isotope signatures

preserved in the geologic record (Garcia, Cavanaugh, & Kacar, 2021; Schidlowski, 1988). Though there exist multiple forms of RuBisCO, the known range of Form I RuBisCO isotopic fraction ($\varepsilon \approx$ 20-30‰) (R. D. Guy, Fogel, & Berry, 1993; Scott et al., 2007; von Caemmerer, Tazoe, Evans, & Whitney, 2014) — the form utilized by extant cyanobacteria and responsible for the bulk of modern primary production (Field, 1998) — is largely consistent with the ~25‰ mean deviation between preserved inorganic and organic carbon isotopic compositions across geologic time (Des Marais, 2001; Garcia et al., 2021; Havig, Hamilton, Bachan, & Kump, 2017; Krissansen-Totton et al., 2015; Lloyd et al., 2020; Schidlowski, 2001).

RuBisCO primarily shapes the generation of distinct carbon isotopic biosignatures associated with CBB-utilizing organisms. Nonetheless the carbon isotopic composition of bulk photoautotrophic biomass often deviates from values obtained for purified RuBisCO. This discrepancy might be attributable to several intracellular physiological and metabolic features that additionally shift the isotopic composition of organism biomass. These include the activation of carbon-concentrating mechanisms such as the partitioning of RuBisCO into carboxysomes (Hurley, Wing, Jasper, Hill, & Cameron, 2021; Laws, Popp, Cassar, & Tanimoto, 2002; Price, Badger, Woodger, & Long, 2008; Raven, Cockell, & De La Rocha, 2008), the diffusive transport of CO_2 (Hayes, 1993; Rau, Riebesell, & Wolf-Gladrow, 1996), and intermediary carbon-fixing steps (Eungrasamee, Miao, Incharoensakdi, Lindblad, & Jantaro, 2019; H. I. Guy & Evans, 1996; Hayes, 1993; Rothschild & DesMarais, 1989). Further, studies show that photosynthetic carbon isotope discrimination (ε_p) may vary due to environmental factors and cellular physiological responses, including temperature (Deleens, Treichel, & O'Leary, 1985; Wong & Sackett, 1978), pH (Hinga, Arthur, Pilson, & Whitaker, 1994; Roeske & O'Leary, 1984), growth rate (Bidigare et al., 1997; Laws, Bidigare, &

103 Popp, 1997), and CO_2 concentration (Eichner, Thoms, Kranz, & Rost, 2015; Freeman & Hayes,
104 1992; Hinga et al., 1994; Hurley et al., 2021; Schubert & Jahren, 2012; Wilkes, Lee, McClelland,
105 Rickaby, & Pearson, 2018). These variations indicate a compelling need to comprehensively
106 characterize both internal and external factors that can affect isotope fractionation, though the
107 study of each tend to be siloed in biological and geobiological fields, respectively.
108
109 An aspect of photoautotrophic isotopic discrimination that has not been thoroughly investigated is
110 how variable RuBisCO expression can influence host organism growth parameters and the isotopic
111 composition of assimilated biomass. RuBisCO expression has been shown to be CO_2-sensitive
112 (Gesch et al., 2003; Onizuka et al., 2002; Sengupta, Sunder, Sohoni, & Wangikar, 2019). This
113 observation is particularly important, considering that atmospheric CO_2 concentrations exceeded
114 present day levels by more than an order of magnitude for much of Earth history (between ~0.001
115 and 0.1 bar CO_2 through the Precambrian (Catling & Zahnle, 2020)) and that the RuBisCO
116 catalytic efficiency itself is sensitive to the atmospheric CO_2/O_2 levels (Erb & Zarzycki, 2018;
117 Kacar, Hanson-Smith, Adam, & Boekelheide, 2017; Poudel et al., 2020; Riebesell, Revill,
118 Holdsworth, & Volkman, 2000; Schubert & Jahren, 2012; Scott et al., 2007; Tcherkez et al., 2006;
119 Wilkes et al., 2018). Thus, interpretation of the carbon isotope record should take into account the
120 coupled influence of CO_2 concentration and RuBisCO expression in generating isotopic
121 biosignatures and shaping ancient primary productivity.
122
123 To investigate the interplay between RuBisCO expression and CO_2 concentrations on
124 cyanobacterial fitness and carbon isotopic discrimination, we generated a genetic system to
125 manipulate the expression levels of RuBisCO in the model organism *Synechococcus elongatus*

126 PCC 7942 (hereafter *S. elongatus*). *S. elongatus* is a naturally competent obligate photoautotroph
127 that utilizes Form I RuBisCO to fix carbon (Bonfil et al., 1998; Gabay, Lieman-Hurwitz, Hassidim,
128 Ronen-Tarazi, & Kaplan, 1998; Maeda, Price, Badger, Enomoto, & Omata, 2000; Omata, Gohta,
129 Takahashi, Harano, & Maeda, 2001; Taton et al., 2020; Tchernov et al., 2001). Specifically, we
130 engineered the *S. elongatus* genome with an additional copy of the RuBisCO operon in a
131 chromosomal neutral site to overexpress RuBisCO and permit genetic manipulation of the
132 RuBisCO operon for future studies. We confirmed proper assembly of the overexpressed RuBisCO
133 complex and its catalytic activity in the engineered strain. Then, to assess whether physiological
134 and subcellular parameters and varying CO_2 concentrations modulate carbon isotopic
135 discrimination in cyanobacteria, we determined growth rate, photosynthetic oxygen evolution rate,
136 and $^{13}C/^{12}C$ discrimination of the engineered strain in comparison to wild-type *S. elongatus*. Our
137 results suggest that increased CO_2 concentrations result in significantly faster growth in
138 cyanobacteria and increase the magnitude of isotopic discrimination. On the other hand, we show
139 that changing cellular RuBisCO levels do not significantly alter carbon isotope discrimination.
140

141 **RESULTS**

142 **A second copy of the *rbc* operon results in increased amount of active RuBisCO**

143 The RuBisCO Form I enzyme in *S. elongatus* is encoded by an operon that includes a CO_2-
144 sensitive promoter region (Sengupta et al., 2019) as well as the structural *rbcL* (large subunit) and
145 *rbcS* (small subunit) genes (Vijayan, Jain, & O'Shea, 2011). We designed *S. elongatus* strain Syn02
146 that harbors the native *rbc* operon and a second copy inserted in the chromosome neutral site 2
147 (NS2), a site that permits genetic modification without additional indirect phenotypic impact
148 (Andersson et al., 2000; Clerico, Ditty, & Golden, 2007) (**Fig. 1**). Syn02 was contructed by

149 transforming wild-type (WT) *S. elongatus* with plasmid pSyn02 carrying the *rbc* operon and
150 homologous regions directing recombination at NS2 (**Table 1**). Additionally, we generated a
151 control strain Syn01 whereby RuBisCO is provided solely by an engineered *rbc* operon at its NS2
152 site.
153
154 We evaluated whether the additional copy of the *rbc* operon in strain Syn02 resulted in RuBisCO
155 overexpression by quantifying transcription of the *rbcL* and *purK* (located downstream of *rbcL* in
156 the operon) genes by quantitative reverse-transcription PCR (RT-qPCR). Transcripts were
157 quantified and normalized to those of *secA* and *ppc* reference genes (Hood, Higgins, Flamholz,
158 Nichols, & Savage, 2016; Luo et al., 2019; Szekeres, Sicora, Dragoş, & Drugă, 2014). We found
159 that the level of *rbcL* transcript in Syn02 increased by at least 2-fold relative to WT across all
160 tested CO_2 concentrations and growth phases, and as high as ~14-fold in air ($p < 0.01$; **Fig. 2A,**
161 **Fig. S1A**). In addition, we found that *rbcL* expression increased by >5-fold at elevated CO_2
162 concentrations relative to ambient air ($p < 0.001$; **Fig. 2B, Fig. S1B).** Expression of *purK* in Syn02
163 increased by >2-fold at 2% and 5% CO_2 relative to WT, but decreased by ~0.5-fold in air (**Fig.**
164 **S1C**).
165
166 To determine *rbcL* overexpression at the protein-level, we quantified RbcL protein from crude cell
167 lysates by Western blot using rabbit anti-RbcL antibody (see **Materials and Methods**). In
168 agreement with RuBisCO overexpression indicated by the RT-qPCR results, densitometric
169 analyses revealed a mean ~2 to 4-fold increase of RbcL protein in Syn02 relative to WT across all
170 tested CO_2 concentrations ($p < 0.01$; **Fig. 2C**). Finally, we confirmed proper assembly of the large
171 (L) and small (S) subunits into the RuBisCO L_8S_8 complex in Syn02 as well as the Syn01 control

172 strain by native protein electrophoresis and detection by anti-RbcL antibody. We found a ~3-fold
173 increase in assembled RuBisCO protein for Syn02 and ~2-fold increase for Syn01 relative to WT
174 for cultures grown in 2% CO_2 (**Fig. 2D**).
175
176 Finally, we tested whether or not RuBisCO overexpression in Syn02 resulted in an increased
177 amount of active RuBisCO by determining the total carboxylase activity of cell lysates. Enzyme
178 activity was evaluated by an *in vitro* spectrophotometric coupled-enzyme assay that links
179 carboxylase activity to NADH oxidation, reported as the RuBP consumption rate normalized to
180 total soluble protein content (Kubien, Brown, & Kane, 2011). We measured a mean ~0.8-fold (p
181 < 0.01) increase in Syn02 lysate RuBisCO activity relative to WT (**Fig. 2E**). No significant
182 difference in activity was detected between Syn01 and WT cultures.
183
184 **RuBisCO overexpression does not strongly influence growth rate or photosynthetic activity**
185 We cultured WT and Syn02 *S. elongatus* strains in order to determine the influence of Syn02
186 RuBisCO overexpression on growth rate. Cultures were continuously sparged with ambient air, as
187 well as 2% and 5% CO_2, with daily optical density measurements at 750 nm (OD_{750}) as described
188 in **Materials and Methods**. WT and Syn02 both exhibited ~2.5-fold faster growth rates under 2%
189 and 5% CO_2 compared to ambient air ($p < 0.001$; **Fig. 2A; Table 2**). Syn02 exhibited a slight
190 ~0.1-fold increase in growth rate in ambient air relative to WT ($p < 0.05$). No difference in growth
191 rate was observed between the two strains under 2% and 5% CO_2. The carrying capacity
192 (maximum cell density measured at OD_{750} across the total growth period) for cultures varied
193 between different atmospheric conditions, with a maximum carrying capacity of $OD_{750} \approx 8.4$
194 reached under 2% CO_2. No significant difference in carrying capacity was found between WT and

195 Syn02 cultures grown under the same atmospheric conditions. To determine the degree to which
196 sparging impacted growth, we repeated the growth experiments without sparging. Minimal
197 differences were again observed between WT and Syn02 across different CO_2 concentrations
198 (**Table S1**).
199
200 To further test for differences in photosynthetic activities between the WT and Syn02 strains, we
201 measured their oxygen evolution rates. After brief incubation in the dark, culture samples were
202 exposed to saturated light in an oxygen electrode chamber to detect increased levels of molecular
203 oxygen. Oxygen evolution rates were normalized to chlorophyll *a* concentrations, following
204 Zavrel et al. (Zavrel, Sinetova, & Červený, 2015). We did not observe a significant difference in
205 mean oxygen evolution rate between WT and Syn02 (342 ± 26 $O_2 \cdot h^{-1} \cdot \mu g^{-1}$ chlorophyll *a* and 362
206 ± 26 $O_2 \cdot h^{-1} \cdot \mu g^{-1}$ chlorophyll *a,* respectively) (**Table 2**).
207
208 **CO_2 concentration impacts *S. elongatus* $^{13}C/^{12}C$ fractionation**
209 We tested both the influence of RuBisCO overexpression and CO_2 concentration on the magnitude
210 of $^{13}C/^{12}C$ isotopic discrimination in *S. elongatus,* which was assessed by measuring the $^{13}C/^{12}C$
211 composition of biomass ($\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$). The isotopic discrimination associated with photosynthetic
212 CO_2 fixation (ε_p) was then calculated from measured $\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$ and a reference $\delta^{13}C_{CO2}$ value (8.4
213 ‰; (Keeling et al., 2017)), as described in **Materials and Methods**. We observed that increased
214 CO_2 concentration increases the magnitude of *S. elongatus* $^{13}C/^{12}C$ discrimination. Mean ε_p values
215 for *S. elongatus* strains grown in ambient air were ~10‰ (**Fig. 4A**). At 2% and 5% CO_2, ε_p values
216 were ~7-9‰ greater than those for cultures grown in air, with mean values ranging between ~17‰
217 to 20‰ ($p < 0.001$). Mean ε_p values were similar for WT and Syn02 strains most tested CO_2

218 conditions, with the exception of 5% CO2, where a significant but slight difference in ε_p values
219 was detected (18.95‰ and 18.62‰ for WT and Syn02, respectively; $p < 0.01$). These results
220 demonstrate that RuBisCO overexpression in Syn02 does not strongly impact cyanobacterial
221 $^{13}C/^{12}C$ discrimination.
222
223 **DISCUSSION**
224 In this study, we developed an integrative approach to investigate the coupled impact of CO_2 levels
225 and RuBisCO expression on cyanobacterial growth, fitness and carbon isotope discrimination. We
226 tested whether the overexpression of RuBisCO influences *S. elongatus* growth, physiology and
227 carbon isotope fractionation at different CO_2 atmosphere concentrations by generating an
228 engineered *S. elongatus* strain Syn02 that harbors a second copy of the *rbc* operon at NS2.
229
230 Our transcriptional analyses indicate that *S. elongatus* strain Syn02 overexpresses RuBisCO
231 relative to WT at all tested CO_2 concentrations (ambient air, 2%, and 5% CO_2) (**Fig. 2A, Fig. 2C**).
232 In addition, we found that *rbcL* transcript levels increase for all strains at elevated CO_2 levels
233 relative to air (**Fig. 2B**). This result is in agreement with a previous study reporting a regulatory
234 element in the *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 *rbcL* operon that regulates the expression of RbcL with
235 increasing CO_2 (Sengupta et al., 2019). We found that the magnitude of increased *rbcL*
236 transcription between Syn02 and WT was lower at elevated CO_2 (**Fig. 2A**). For example, in air,
237 *rbcL* transcript levels in Syn02 were ~14-fold greater than in WT, but in 2% CO_2, only a ~2-fold
238 increase was observed. These results indicate that, whereas RuBisCO expression is impacted by
239 CO_2 concentration, other physiological factors such as the translation efficiency or expression of

other ancillary crucial proteins may ~~may~~ be limiting RuBisCO expression and dampen the effects of an additional copy of the *rbc* operon in Syn02.

Protein-level analyses indicate that increased *rbc* transcription in Syn02 relative to WT does result in increased cellular RuBisCO concentration. The magnitude of this increase is relatively constant (~2-3 fold) across different CO_2 concentrations (**Fig. 2C**). These results are supported by a ~2-fold increase in assembled RuBisCO L_8S_8 protein in Syn02 relative to WT (**Fig. 3A**). However, the ~0.8-fold increase in carboxylase activity of Syn02 cell lysate relative to that of WT was not directly proportional to the increase in protein amount observed by Western blot analyses, suggesting that not all overexpressed RuBisCO was catalytically active (**Fig. 3B**). Previous studies showed overexpression of RuBisCO in cyanobacteria generally produces an increased pool of active carboxylase (Atsumi, Higashide, & Liao, 2009; Iwaki et al., 2006; Lechno-Yossef et al., 2020; Liang & Lindblad, 2017). However, it is possible that not all overexpressed RuBisCO may be properly assembled, e.g., due to limited chaperonin GroEL/ES, which is known to be involved in RuBisCO folding (Hayer-Hartl, 2017; Liu et al., 2010). Altogether, our findings suggest that additional physiological constraints may be limiting RuBisCO expression beyond transcription. The exact mechanism of the regulation we observed in our experiments await further characterization.

Various culture conditions including pH, temperature, CO_2 concentration, and light intensity may substantially affect the growth characteristics of cyanobacteria, and thus have the potential to influence isotopic discrimination (Kuan, Duff, Posarac, & Bi, 2015; Rillema, MacCready, & Vecchiarelli, 2020; Ungerer, Lin, Chen, & Pakrasi, 2018; Yu et al., 2015). The influence of genetic

263 factors, including the regulation of RuBisCO expression on cyanobacterial fitness, is less well
264 known. Previous studies targeting the correlation between RuBisCO overexpression and fitness in
265 cyanobacteria have yielded mixed results. For instance, faster growth rates and oxygen evolution
266 rates were observed for an engineered *Synechocystis* PCC 6803 strain that overexpresses RuBisCO
267 (Liang & Lindblad, 2017), as well as in *S. elongatus* upon co-overexpression of its
268 phosphoribulokinase (Kanno, Carroll, & Atsumi, 2017). However, in *Synechococcus* sp. PCC
269 7002, the overexpression of RuBisCO did not alter growth rate (De Porcellinis et al., 2018). The
270 impact of RuBisCO upregulation on cyanobacterial growth appears to be species/strain-specific.
271 Our data shows that RuBisCO overexpression in *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 strain Syn02 results in a
272 minor increase in growth rate in ambient air relative to WT, and no significant difference was
273 observed at elevated CO_2 levels, nor for oxygen evolution rates. Under ambient environmental
274 conditions, RuBisCO has a relatively high baseline level of expression in cyanobacteria (V.
275 Vijayan, I. H. Jain, & E. K. O'Shea, 2011), perhaps explaining why increased expression does not
276 significantly improve fitness. Our results indicate that further study is needed to fully understand
277 the coupled interaction of different environmental conditions and genetic backgrounds in
278 determining cyanobacterial fitness.
279
280 Another important aspect to consider is the degree to which genetic regulation and background
281 may impact system-level isotope fractionation in cyanobacteria. Understanding the connection
282 between genetics and biogeochemistry, though often overlooked, can augment interpretation of
283 isotopic biosignatures in deep time. We measured the carbon isotopic composition of
284 cyanobacterial biomass ($\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$) and photosynthetic carbon isotopic discrimination (ε_p) in WT
285 and Syn02 cultured under a range of CO_2 concentrations. The increased expression and activity of

286 RuBisCO in Syn02 apparently neither changed the availability of carbon isotopes in the enzyme's
287 vicinity nor altered the performance of other cellular modules contributing to carbon isotope
288 discrimination. $\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$ and ε_p values were comparable for WT and Syn02 grown at all tested
289 CO_2 concentrations (**Fig. 4**).
290
291 Our results show that at both 2% and 5% CO_2, ε_p values were increased by ~7-9‰ for WT and
292 Syn02 strains relative to air. Theoretically, under high CO_2 concentrations, the intrinsic kinetic
293 isotope effect of RuBisCO is expressed and maximizes ε_p (Bidigare et al., 1997; Hayes, 1993;
294 Schubert & Jahren, 2012; Wilkes et al., 2018). Under these conditions, other cellular modules,
295 such as carbon concentrating mechanisms capable of discriminating carbon isotopes, produce
296 negligible impact on net carbon discrimination at the organismal level (Hurley et al., 2021; Laws
297 et al., 2002). The positive relationship between CO_2 concentration and carbon isotope fractionation
298 has been observed empirically for a variety of autotrophs (Freeman & Hayes, 1992; Hinga et al.,
299 1994; Schubert & Jahren, 2012; Wilkes et al., 2018), including for cyanobacteria in particular
300 (Eichner et al., 2015; Hurley et al., 2021). Other studies showed that photoautotrophs that grew
301 under a lower pH, and thus a higher proportion of CO_2, also exhibited higher carbon fractionation
302 (Mizutani & Wada, 1982; Roeske & O'Leary, 1984; Wang, Yeager, & Lu, 2016; Yoshioka, 1997).
303 The ε_p values observed under high inorganic carbon availability fall within the range of 17-20‰
304 (**Fig. 4B**), which follows the range known for Form I RuBisCO (R. D. Guy et al., 1993; McNevin,
305 Badger, Kane, & Farquhar, 2006; Scott et al., 2007).
306
307 Based on the data generated here, we speculate that, in addition to environmental factors such as
308 CO_2 concentrations, RuBisCO variation at the gene and enzymatic level, rather than its

overexpression and regulation, may be a more significant determinant of the isotopic composition of produced biosignatures. Less well-characterized RuBisCO forms (i.e., Forms IC, ID, and II) that are found in proteobacteria and marine phytoplankton can exhibit significantly smaller fractionation factors than that observed for forms associated with land plants and cyanobacteria (Boller, Thomas, Cavanaugh, & Scott, 2011; Robinson et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2019). The full diversity of RuBisCO isotopic fractionation requires further study~~,~~. Our results underscore that the integration of synthetic biology, metabolic engineering and geochemistry can offer new insights into the study and interpretation of biogeochemical reservoirs at the global scale. Further work needs to be performed to elucidate how the intracellular factors impact metabolisms responsible for carbon isotope fractionation under ancient transitions in environmental conditions. A deeper understanding of the impact of the RuBisCO regulation and the environmental factors on the resulting organismal behavior is essential to establish the extent to which the RuBisCO isotope fractionation properties can be correlated with evidence for biological activity in the Earth's deep past.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cyanobacterial growth and maintenance

S. elongatus PCC 7942 strains were cultured in BG-11 medium (Rippka, Deruelles, Waterbury, Herdman, & Stanier, 1979) as liquid cultures or on agar plates (1.5% (w/v) agar and 1 mM $Na_2S_2O_3 \cdot 5H_2O$). For recombinant strains, liquid and solid media were supplemented with appropriate antibiotics: 2 $\mu g \cdot ml^{-1}$ Spectinomycin (Sp) plus 2 $\mu g \cdot ml^{-1}$ Streptomycin (Sm), 5 $\mu g \cdot ml^{-1}$ Kanamycin (Km). The cyanobacterial growth was measured at optical density at 750 nm (OD_{750}).

The strains were archived at -80 °C in 15% (v/v) glycerol. The 2-ml vials were rapidly thawed and inoculated in liquid BG-11 (supplemented with antibiotics as needed). Cultures were shaken at 120 rpm at 30 °C under continuous low illumination of 45 µmol photon$\cdot m^{-2} \cdot s^{-1}$, and ambient air, until they reached an OD_{750} between 0.4 and 0.6. These cultures were then used to inoculate fresh cultures that were grown using similar conditions but under moderate illumination of 80 µmol photon$\cdot m^{-2} \cdot s^{-1}$ and sparged at selected CO_2 concentrations (ambient air, 2%, or 5% CO_2; cultures were also grown without sparging to assess differences in growth rate; **Table S1**). When cultures reached an OD_{750} of ~7 to 7.5, they were sampled for subsequent experiments as described below (cultures were also sampled at an earlier OD_{750} of 0.5-1.5 for additional RT-qPCR experiments, see below; **Fig. S1**).

354 **Genetic engineering of cyanobacteria**

355 A recombinant strain~~s~~ of *S. elongatus* was constructed by natural transformation using standard
356 protocols (Clerico et al., 2007) and the plasmids and methods described below (**Table 1**) . To
357 construct the plasmid pSyn02, pAM4937 was digested with *Swa*I to release the *ccdB* toxic gene
358 and produce a plasmid backbone that contains the pBR322 *E. coli* origin of replication, the base
359 of mobilization site for conjugal transfer, the *aph1* gene conferring kanamycin resistance, and
360 sequences for homologous recombination into *S. elongatus* chromosome at NS2. The *rbc* operon
361 was amplified from *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 gDNA with primers F01 and R01 (**Table S2**)
362 containing 20-nucleotide sequences that overlap with pAM4937 backbone. The resulting DNA
363 fragments were assembled using the GeneArt™ Seamless Cloning and Assembly Kit (Invitrogen,
364 Cat. No. A13288). pSyn02 was used to insert the *rbc* operon into NS2 of the wild type genome in
365 the strain PCC 7942 through homologous recombination to create the strain of *S. elongatus*, Syn02,
366 carrying two copies of the *rbc* operon. Plasmid pSyn-01 was constructed by using two primer pairs
367 F02/R02 and F03/R03 (**Table S2**), 1) to amplify a fragment of pAM4951 that contains the *E. coli*
368 origin of replication and the site for conjugal transfer, and 2) to amplify the *aadA* gene conferring
369 spectinomycin/streptomycin resistance. Native *rbc* operon flanking sequences were amplified
370 from the *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 gDNA with the primer pairs F04/R04 and F05/R05 (**Table S2**)
371 containing 20-nucleotide sequences that overlap with the pAM4951 fragments.

372

373 Transformation was carried out after growing the WT strain in liquid culture at 30 °C with shaking
374 (120 rpm) and a light intensity of 80 μmol photon·m^{-2}·s^{-1} until an OD_{750} ~0.7. The cells were
375 prepared for transformation according to the protocol by Clerico et al. (2007) and plated on BG-
376 11 agar containing the appropriate antibiotic(s) for recovery. Subsequently, the colonies were

377 picked using sterile pipette tips, patched onto BG-11 agar containing the appropriate antibiotic(s),
378 and further incubated to ensure complete chromosome segregation (i.e., incorporation of the *trans*-
379 gene into all chromosomes). The patched transformants were screened using colony PCR using
380 the primers F06/R06 and F07/R07 and the genotypes of the engineered strains were confirmed by
381 Sanger sequencing using the primers F08/R08 **(Fig. S2, Table S2**)
382
383 **Extraction of total RNA and proteins**
384 Cultures were collected during the exponential growth phase. Cells were pelleted by centrifugation
385 at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room temperature and resuspended in 10 mL of TE buffer (10 mM Tris,
386 pH 8.0, 1 mM EDTA). To prepare the crude cell lysate, 8 mL of the cell suspension were pelleted
387 by centrifugation at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room temperature, resuspended in 500 µL of hot (pre-
388 warmed to 95 °C) TE buffer supplemented with 1% (w/v) SDS and incubated at 95 °C for 10 min.
389 Then, the mixture was sonicated at 40% amplitude for 3 × 10 sec with 10 sec intervals, and the
390 cell debris centrifuged at 17,000 × g for 10 min at room temperature. The supernatant was collected
391 and stored at -80 °C. Total RNA was extracted from the remaining 2 mL of the cell suspension
392 using the RNeasy® Protect Bacteria Mini Kit (QIAGEN, Cat. No. 74524) following the
393 manufacturer instructions.
394
395 **Analysis of *rbc* operon expression by RT-qPCR**
396 Total RNA was quantified with the NanoDrop spectrophotometer and 1 µg of RNA was treated
397 with the amplification grade deoxyribonuclease I (Invitrogen, Cat. No. 18068-015). 10 µL of
398 DNase I-treated RNA was then used in reverse transcription (RT) performed with the
399 SuperScript™ IV First-Strand Synthesis System (Invitrogen, Cat. No. 18091050). The four pairs

400 of qPCR primers (listed in **Table S2**) were designed with Primer3Plus
401 (http://www.bioinformatics.nl/cgi-bin/primer3plus/primer3plus.cgi). Both reference genes have
402 previously been shown to be stably expressed under diverse conditions in *S. elongatus* (Luo et al.,
403 2019). The quality of cDNA and primer specificity was assessed by PCR using cDNA templates
404 (RT positive reactions), RT negative controls, and the qPCR primers. The analysis of gene
405 expression levels was performed in the real-time thermal cycler qTOWER^3 G (Analytik Jena AG),
406 equipped with the software qPCRsoft, using the cycles: 50 °C/2 min, 95 °C/2 min, 40 × (95 °C/15
407 sec, 60 °C/1 min). The relative expression of the *rbc* operon genes (*rbcL* and *purK*) was calculated
408 as the average fold change normalized to reference genes using the delta-delta Ct method. The
409 experiment was carried out using three biological replicates and three technical replicates.
410

411 **Analysis of RbcL protein by Western blot**

412 Total protein concentration in the crude cell lysates was measured using the Pierce™ BCA Protein
413 Assay Kit (Thermo Scientific, Cat. No. 23225). The lysates were loaded in the amount of 5 µg of
414 total protein in Laemmli sample buffer onto a 6% (v/v) polyacrylamide stacking gel. Proteins were
415 electrophoresed in a 12% polyacrylamide resolving gel in TGS buffer and blotted in transfer buffer
416 onto a PVDF membrane. Total protein load in each sample was visualized by Revert™ 700 Total
417 Protein Stain (LI-COR Biosciences, Cat. No. 926-11011) and used for the RbcL signal
418 normalization. Detection of RbcL was performed by overnight incubation of the membrane at 4
419 °C with rabbit anti-RbcL antibody (Agrisera, Cat. No. AS03 037), 1:5000 in TBST with 5% non-
420 fat milk, followed by one-hour incubation at room temperature with IRDye® 800CW goat anti-
421 rabbit IgG secondary antibody (LI-COR Biosciences, Cat. No. 926-32211), 1:20,000 in Intercept®
422 (TBS) blocking buffer (LI-COR Biosciences, Cat. No. 927-60001) with 0.1% (v/v) Tween-20 and

423 0.01% (w/v) SDS. Both the total protein load and the amount of RbcL in each sample were
424 documented with Odyssey® Fc Imaging System (LI-COR Biosciences, Cat. No. 2800-03) at the
425 near-infrared detection mode. The images were acquired using Image Studio™ software. The
426 densitometric analysis of RbcL signal intensity, normalized to total protein load, was performed
427 with Quantity One® software (Bio-Rad) for six biological replicates. The amount of RbcL
428 produced by each replicate of the Syn02 strain culture was compared to the averaged level of RbcL
429 in the WT PCC 7942 replicate cultures and expressed as the averaged percent of RbcL synthesized
430 by the WT strain.
431
432 **Assembly of RuBisCO subunits**
433 Assembly of the RuBisCO large and small subunits into a hexadecameric complex in each strain
434 was evaluated by native gel electrophoresis and immunodetection of the RuBisCO complexes.
435 Samples were collected during the exponential growh phase. Cells were pelleted by centrifugation
436 at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room temperature and resuspended in 400 µL of native lysis buffer (50
437 mM Tris, pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 10% (v/v) glycerol) supplemented with 5 mM
438 DTT, 100 µg/mL lysozyme from chicken egg white, and 1% (v/v) Halt™ Protease Inhibitor
439 Cocktail (Thermo Scientific, Cat. No. 78430). The cell suspensions were incubated at 30 °C for
440 15 min and subjected to five consecutive freeze-thaw cycles (10 min at -80 °C followed by 5 min
441 at 30 °C), then were sonicated on ice for 3 minutes at 30% amplitude (2-sec on/off intervals),
442 centrifuged at 17,000 × g for 15 min at 4 °C. The concentration of total soluble proteins in the
443 lysates was determined with Pierce™ BCA Protein Assay Kit. The lysates were adjusted to 5 µg
444 of total soluble proteins in native sample buffer and then loaded onto a 4-20% Mini-PROTEAN®
445 TGX™ Precast Protein Gel (Bio-Rad, Cat. No. 4561094). Protein electrophoreses were performed

446 in TG buffer (60 mM Tris, 192 mM glycine) at 100 V for 4 h at 4 °C and blotted in transfer buffer
447 (48 mM Tris, pH 9.2, 39 mM glycine, 0.04% (w/v) SDS) onto a nitrocellulose membrane. After
448 three 10-min washes in wash buffer (48 mM Tris, pH 9.2, 39 mM glycine, 20% (v/v) methanol),
449 total protein load in each sample was visualized by Revert™ 700 Total Protein Stain and used for
450 the normalization of RuBisCO complex quantity. Immunodetection of the RuBisCO complex was
451 performed with the same primary and secondary antibodies that were used to analyze the level of
452 RbcL, as described above.
453
454 **Catalytic activity of RuBisCO**
455 The activity of RuBisCO in cyanobacterial lysates was measured using a spectrophotometric
456 coupled-enzyme assay that links this activity with the rate of NADH oxidation (Kubien et al.,
457 2011). The cyanobacterial strains were cultured, collected, and pelleted as described above. The
458 pellets were resuspended in 1 mL of ice-cold lysis buffer (50 mM EPPS, 1 mM EDTA, 2 mM
459 DTT, pH 8.0) and transferred into 2 mL screw-capped tubes with Lysing Matrix B (MP
460 Biomedical) for lysis by bead beating using FastPrep-24™ 5G bead beater (MP Biomedical) with
461 4 m/sec for 10 sec, followed by 2-min incubation on ice, repeated six times. The cell lysates were
462 transferred to new Eppendorf tubes to remove the beads and unbroken cells and to pellet the
463 thylakoid membrane by centrifugation at 10,000 × g for 1 min and at 20,000 × g for 30 min at 4
464 °C, sequentially. The resulting clear supernatants containing cytosolic soluble proteins, including
465 phycobiliproteins and RuBisCO, were used to determine protein concentration by Pierce™ BCA
466 Protein Assay Kit and to measure RuBisCO activity by employing an assay adapted from Kubien
467 et al. (2011). The assay buffer (100 mM HEPES, 25 mM $MgCl_2$, 1 mM EDTA, pH 7.6) was used
468 considering the high Michaelis constant for CO_2 (K_C) for cyanobacterial RuBisCO. 20 µL of cell

469 lysates were preincubated in the assay mix (with 5 mM $NaHCO_3$) at 25 °C for activation before
470 initiating the reaction by adding synthesized ribulose 1,5-bisphosphate (RuBP) according to Kane
471 et al. (Kane, Wilkin, Portis, & John Andrews, 1998). The absorbance at 340 nm was monitored
472 using the Synergy H1 plate reader (BioTek). RuBisCO activity was reported as RuBP consumption
473 rate normalized to total soluble protein content. The assay was performed for three biological
474 replicates.
475
476 **Cyanobacterial growth measurements**
477 OD_{750} values were plotted as a function of time and analyzed in R with the Growthcurver package.
478 Growth curve data was fitted to the standard form of the logistic equation to calculate growth
479 parameters including growth rate, doubling time, and carrying capacity (Sprouffske & Wagner,
480 2016). Each strain was grown in triplicate for every condition.
481
482 **Photosynthetic oxygen evolution rate**
483 *S. elongatus* strain photosynthetic activity was assayed using a Clark-type oxygen electrode
484 chamber to measure the level of molecular oxygen produced in cyanobacterial cultures. Cells were
485 grown in 50 mL of BG-11 at 30 °C, illumination of 80 μmol photon·m^{-2}·s^{-1}, shaking at 120 rpm,
486 in ambient air, and with culture sparging. The samples were collected from triplicate cultures
487 during the exponential growth phase, pelleted by centrifugation at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room
488 temperature, and resuspended in fresh BG-11 to an OD_{750} of ~1.0. Concentration of chlorophyll *a*
489 (for normalization) was measured following the protocol by Zavrel et al. (Zavrel et al., 2015). The
490 remaining suspension was incubated in the dark for 20 min with gentle agitation. Samples from
491 each suspension, prepared in three technical replicates, were analyzed in an oxygen electrode

chamber under saturated light, using the Oxygraph+ System (Hansatech Instruments) equipped with the OxyTrace+ software. Oxygen evolution rate was monitored for 10 min and expressed as nanomoles of molecular oxygen evolved per hour per microgram of chlorophyll *a*.

Carbon isotope fractionation in bulk cyanobacterial biomass

The bacteria were pelleted by centrifugation at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room temperature, washed in 10 mL of 10 mM NaCl. The bacteria were resuspended in 1 mL of 10 mM NaCl and transferred to Eppendorf tubes. After centrifugation at 4,700 × g for 10 min at room temperature, the supernatants were completely removed, the pellets were dried in opened tubes in a laboratory oven at 50 °C for 2 days, and the resultant dried biomass samples were transferred into tin capsules.

The carbon isotope composition of bulk biomass ($\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$) samples was determined at the UC Davis Stable Isotope Facility. $\delta^{13}C_{biomass}$ was analyzed using a PDZ Europa ANCA-GSL elemental analyzer interfaced to a PDZ Europa 20-20 isotope ratio mass spectrometer (Sercon Ltd.). The carbon isotopic composition values were reported relative to the Vienna PeeDee Belemnite standard (V-PDB):

$$\delta^{13}C_{sample} = \left(\frac{^{13}C / ^{12}C_{sample}}{^{13}C / ^{12}C_{V-PDB}} - 1 \right) \times 1000$$

The carbon isotope fractionation associated with photosynthetic CO_2 fixation (ε_p) was calculated relative to a reference $\delta^{13}C_{CO2}$ value (-8.4‰; (Keeling et al., 2017)) according to Freeman and Hayes (1992):

$$\varepsilon_p = \frac{\delta^{13}C_{CO_2} - \delta^{13}C_{biomass}}{1 + \delta^{13}C_{biomass} / 1000}$$

514

515 **Statistical analyses**

516 Results for experimental analyses were presented as the mean and the sample standard deviation
517 (SD) values of at least three independent experiments. Statistical significance was analyzed swith
518 the two-tailed *t*-test. The unpaired sample *t*-test assuming equal variances was used to compare the
519 values obtained for different cyanobacterial strains and the paired sample *t*-test was used to
520 compare the values for the same strain at different experimental conditions.

521

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795 **TABLES**

796 **Table 1. Strains and plasmids used in this study.**

Strain or plasmid	Description/Genotype	Antibiotic resistance	Source/Reference
WT	Wild-type strain of *S. elongatus* PCC 7942	-	Susan S. Golden (UC San Diego)
pAM4937	Expression vector for *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 neutral site 2 (NS2)	Km	(Taton et al., 2014)
pSyn02	pAM4937 carrying the *rbc* operon including *rbcL*, *rbcS*, *purK,* and flanking sequences from *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 (CP000100: 1479071-1484283)	Km	This study
Syn02	*S. elongatus* PCC 7942 carrying a second copy of the *rbc* operon and flanking sequences at NS2: NS2::*aphI-rbcL-rbcS-purK*- Synpcc7942_1429-Synpcc7942_1430	Km	This study
pAM4951	Expression vector for *S. elongatus* PCC 7942 neutral site 1 (NS1)	Sp+Sm	(Taton et al., 2014)
pSyn01	Plasmid to replace *S. elongatus'* native *rbc* operon (CP000100: 1479070-	Sp+Sm	This study

	1482595) with a Sp/Sm resistance gene: Δ(*rbcL-rbcS-purK)*::*aadA*.		
Syn01	*S. elongatus* strain Syn02 with the native *rbc* operon removed: Syn02 and and Δ(*rbcL-rbcS-purK)*::*aadA*.	Km, Sp+Sm	This study

800 **Table 2. Growth parameters and oxygen evolution rates of *S. elongatus* strains under varying**

801 **CO_2 concentrations**[a].

Strain	Atmosphere	Growth rate (h^{-1})	Carrying capacity (OD_{750})	Oxygen evolution rate nmol ($O_2 \cdot h^{-1} \cdot \mu g^{-1}$ chlorophyll *a)*
WT	Air	0.017 ± 0.001	6.79 ± 0.70	342 ± 26
	2% CO_2	0.043 ± 0.002	8.43 ± 0.53	-
	5% CO_2	0.047 ± 0.005	5.35 ± 0.28	-
Syn02	Air	0.020 ± 0.001*	7.63 ± 0.54	362 ± 26
	2% CO_2	0.046 ± 0.001	8.28 ± 0.22	-
	5% CO_2	0.040 ± 0.001	5.44 ± 0.36	-

802 [a]Values are means of three biological replicates ± 1 SD. Asterisks indicate *t*-test result from

803 comparison with WT for the same atmospheric condition, * – $p < 0.05$.

804

805 **FIGURES**

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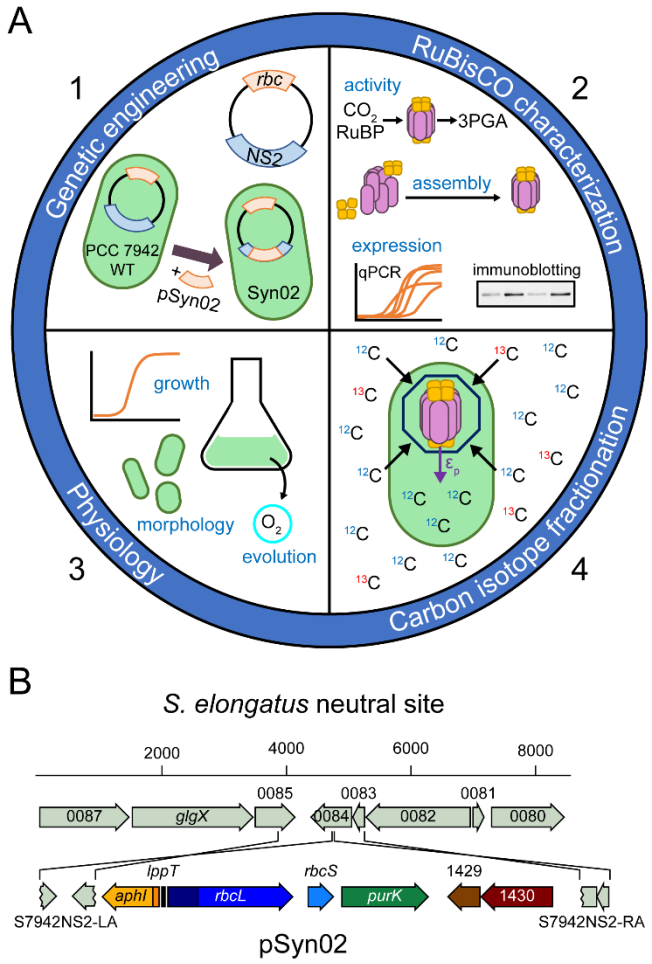

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808 **Figure 1. Experimental strategy. A – Overall methodology.** <u>**1)** Genetic engineering</u>: An
809 additional copy of the *rbc* operon was inserted at the chromosomal NS2 site of *S. elongatus* PCC
810 7942 to create the Syn02 strain. **2)** <u>RuBisCO characterization</u> was carried out by investigating (a)
811 catalytic activity, (b) assembly into a hexadecameric complex, and (c) expression at both the
812 transcript and protein levels. **3)** <u>Physiology:</u> *S. elongatus* WT and Syn02 strains were evaluated by
813 monitoring microbial growth characteristics, morphology, and rate of photosynthetic oxygen
814 evolution. **4**<u>) Carbon isotope fractionation:</u> The impact of RuBisCO overexpression on biomass
815 $\delta^{13}C$ and ε_p under varying CO_2 concentrations was assessed. **B – Map of the genetic insert in *S.***

816 ***elongatus* strain Syn02**. Plasmid pSyn02 was used to insert the *rbc* operon and the *aph1* gene
817 conferring kanamycin resistance in PCC 7942 WT NS2 to generate the Syn02 strain. Crosslines
818 indicate homologous recombination sites and scale bars show DNA fragment sizes (in bp).
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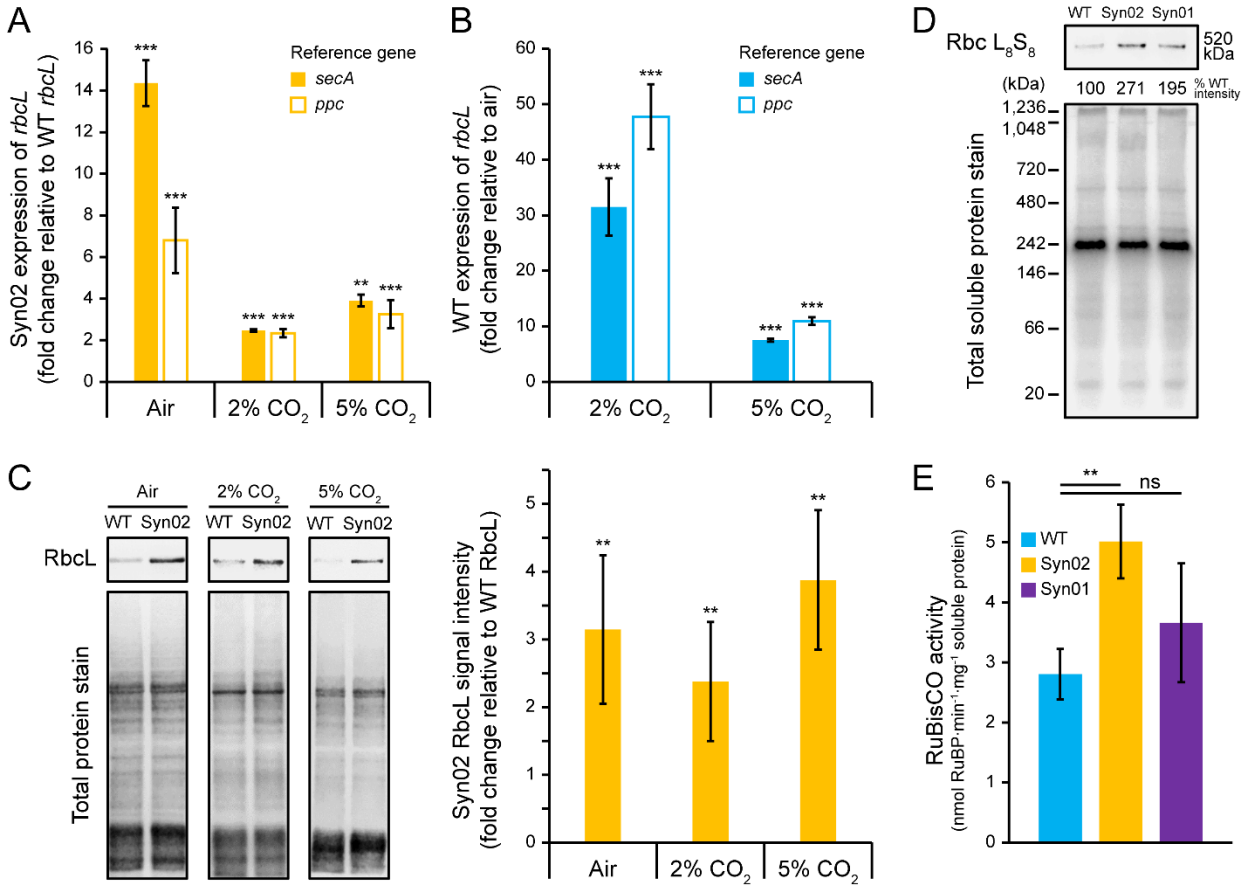

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823 **Figure 2. RuBisCO expression, assembly, and activity in *S.* elongatus strains under varying**
824 **CO_2 concentrations. A – Expression of Syn02 *rbcL* relative to WT *rbcL*.** Asterisks indicate *t*-
825 test results compared to WT *rbcL* expression at the same growth condition. **B – Expression of**
826 **WT *rbcL* at 2-5% CO_2 relative to ambient air.** Asterisks indicate *t*-test results compared to
827 WT *rbcL* expression in air. **A-B –** Expression data was measured by RT-qPCR, normalized to
828 reference genes *secA* and *ppc*. Columns represent mean fold expression for three biological
829 replicates. **C – Immunodetection of RbcL.** (*left*) Western blot showing RbcL protein detected
830 by anti-RuBisCO antibody and total protein stain from crude cell lysates. (*right*) RbcL
831 percentage signal intensities were normalized to that for the total soluble protein load. Columns
832 represent mean RbcL intensities for six biological replicates, relative to mean values for WT

833 cultures at the same growth condition. Asterisks indicate *t*-test results compared to WT RbcL. **D**

834 **– Immunodetection of assembled RuBisCO.** Western blot showing the proper assembly of

835 RbcL and RbcS into the L_8S_8 hexadecameric complex L_8S_8 (520 kDa), detected by anti-RbcL

836 antibody. Rbc L_8S_8 percentage signal intensity was normalized to that for the total soluble

837 protein load, and is shown relative to WT. **E – Lysate RuBisCO activity.** Activity was

838 measured by the RuBP consumption rate, normalized to total soluble protein content of cell

839 lysate. Columns represent the mean activity of three biological replicates. **A-C, E –** Asterisks

840 indicate *t*-test results for pairwise comparison indicated by horizontal line. Error bars on all

841 graphs indicate 1 SD. ns – not significant; ** – $p < 0.01$; *** – $p < 0.001$.

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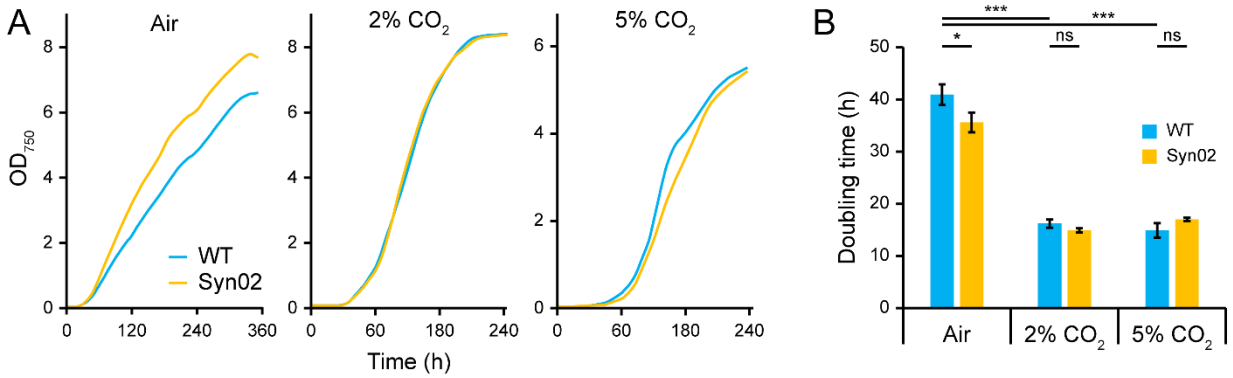

844

845 **Figure 3. Growth of *S. elongatus* strains. A – Growth profiles.** Cultures of each strain were

846 maintained in ambient air or under 2% or 5% CO_2. Smoothed profiles were generated from mean

847 optical density (measured at 750 nm, OD_{750}) values for three replicate cultures per growth

848 condition. **B – Doubling times.** Columns represent the mean doubling time of three replicates.

849 Error bars on all graphs indicate 1 SD, and asterisks indicate *t*-test results for pairwise comparisons

850 indicated by horizontal lines. ns – not significant; * – $p < 0.05$; *** – $p < 0.001$.

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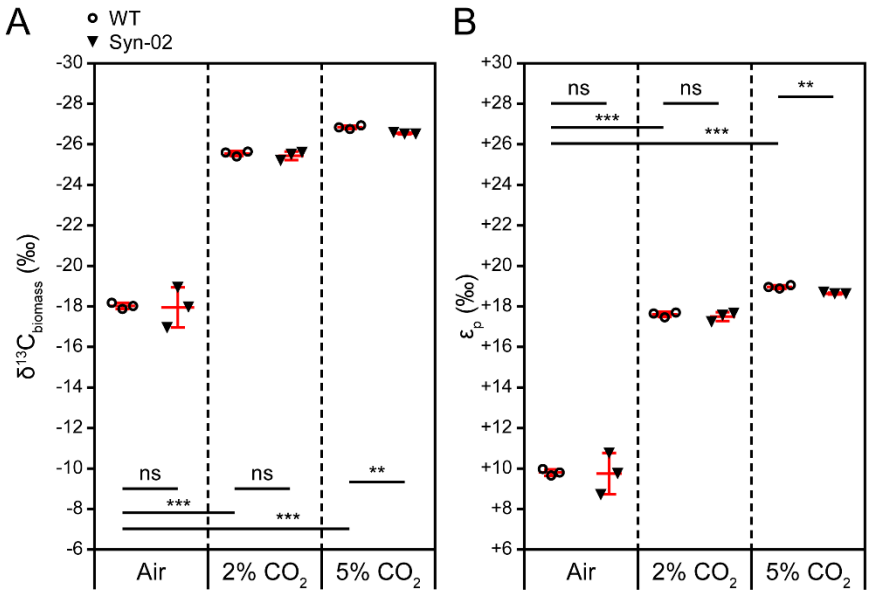

Figure 4. $^{13}C/^{12}C$ discrimination of *S. elongatus* strains under varying CO_2 concentrations. A – Biomass $\delta^{13}C$. Reported $\delta^{13}C$ values are relative to the Vienna PeeDee Belemnite standard (V-PDB). **B – $^{13}C/^{12}C$ discrimination associated with photosynthetic CO_2 fixation (ε_p).** ε_p values are calculated relative to a reference value, $\delta^{13}C_{CO2}$ = -8.4‰ (Keeling et al., 2017) (see **Materials and Methods** for calculation). **A-B –** Mean (middle horizontal bars) and 1 SD (vertical error bars) are shown in red. Asterisks indicate *t*-test results for pairwise comparisons indicated by horizontal lines. ns – not significant; ** – $p < 0.01$; *** – $p < 0.001$.