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Review of

Palaeobotany & Palynology

Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology 146 (2007) 265-276

A filamentous cyanobacterium showing structured colonial growth from the Early Devonian Rhynie chert

Michael Krings a,b,*, Hans Kerp c, Hagen Hass c, Thomas N. Taylor b, Nora Dotzler a

^a Bayerische Staatssammlung für Paläontologie und Geologie und GeoBio-Center Lau, Richard-Wagner-Straße 10, 80333 Munich, Germany Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, and Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7534, USA

Received 23 February 2007; received in revised form 8 May 2007; accepted 8 May 2007 Available online 17 May 2007

Abstract

This paper describes a new aquatic filamentous-colonial fossil cyanobacterium from the Early Devonian Rhynie chert that grows on sediment and submerged plant parts. It is associated with the formation of microbial mats, and occurs in structured colonies, in which the individual filaments are aligned more or less parallel into flat, irregular stands, or united radially into hemispherical aggregates; it may also form elongate, fan-shaped tufts. Individual filaments are $\sim 3~\mu m$ in diameter, and consist of uniseriate trichomes composed of barrel-shaped cells enveloped in a thin but distinct sheath. Heterocysts and akinetes have not been observed, which suggests that the cyanobacterium belongs to the cyanobacterial subsection III (Oscillatoriales). This is the first account for sessile, structured colonial growth in cyanobacteria from the Rhynie chert.

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Keywords: colonial growth; Croftalania venusta nov. gen. et sp; cyanobacteria; filament; microbial mat; Rhynie chert; subsection III (Oscillatoriales)

1. Introduction

Cyanobacteria are critical constituents of many marine, brackish and freshwater ecosystems, not only in producing oxygen, but also in serving as one of the primary producers of organic matter at the base of the food chain (e.g., Whitton and Potts, 2000a). They also may play an important role in the nitrogen cycle by converting inert atmospheric N₂ into a metabolically accessible form such as nitrate or ammonia (Newton and Orme-Johnson, 1980). Cyanobacteria are

E-mail address: m.krings@lrz.uni-muenchen.de (M. Krings).

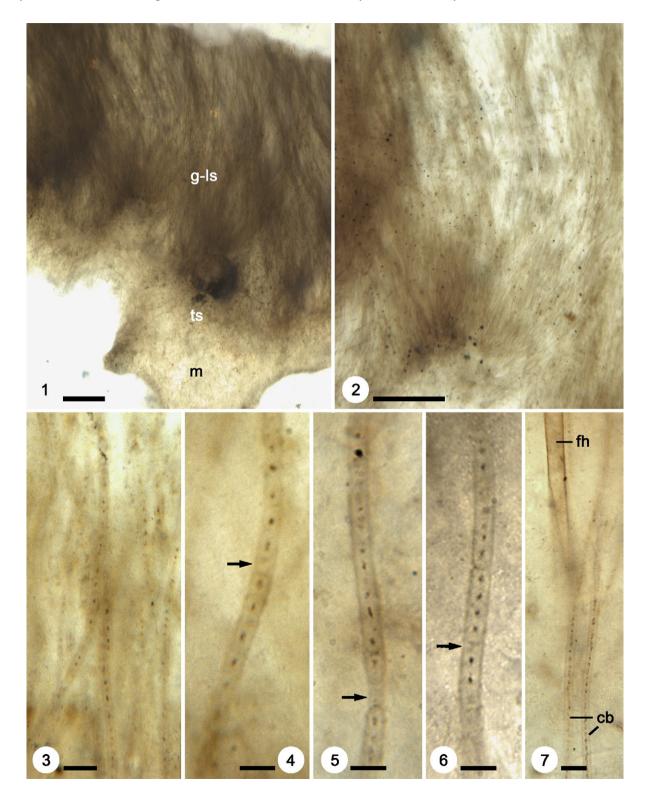
regarded as one of the most successful groups of prokaryotic organisms in Earth history based on a fossil record that is among the oldest for any group of organisms (Golubic and Seong-Joo, 1999). Geochemical evidence from the Precambrian indicates that cyanobacteria were responsible for the transition in the Earth's atmosphere from its primordial, anaerobic state to its current, aerobic condition (Giovannoni et al., 1988; Tomitani et al., 2006).

Despite the extensive fossil record of cyanobacteria, documentation of these organisms from non-marine paleoenvironments is rare. The earliest putative fossils believed to represent cyanobacteria from a strictly continental biota come from the Early Silurian Passage Creek in Virginia, U.S.A. (Tomescu et al., 2006). Although such reports may be important in tracing the earliest

^c Forschungsstelle für Paläobotanik am Geologisch-Paläontologischen Institut, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Hindenburgplatz 57, 48143 Münster, Germany

^{*} Corresponding author. Bayerische Staatssammlung für Paläontologie und Geologie und GeoBio-Center^{LMU}, Richard-Wagner-Straße 10, 80333 Munich, Germany.

appearance of various cyanobacterial lineages in nonmarine environments, and support the hypothesis that cyanobacteria were among the earliest colonizers of continents (cf. Knoll, 1985), they do not provide an accurate account of the diversity of cyanobacterial life in early non-marine ecosystems.



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