Neogene–Quaternary paleoenvironments and kerogen assessment of the NDO B-1 well, offshore Nile Delta, Egypt, Eastern Mediterranean: palynological evidence

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ABSTRACT:

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Palynofacies and palynological investigations conducted on the Neogene–Quaternary succession from the NDO B-1 well, located in the offshore Nile Delta, Egypt, in the Eastern Mediterranean, suggest generally shallow marine (neritic) conditions. These environments are manifested by the overall palynofacies composition and the occurrence of dinoflagellate cysts (e.g., *Spiniferites* spp., *Lingulodinium* spp., *Hystrichokolpoma* spp., *Homotryblium* spp. and *Selenopemphix* spp.). Neritic environments are suggested for the lower and middle Miocene Sidi Salim, and the Pliocene to Pleistocene upper Kafr El Sheikh, El Wastani and Mit Ghamr formations, while shallower, coastal to inner neritic settings were interpreted for the late Miocene (Qawasim and Rosetta formations) and early Pliocene (Abu Madi and lower Kafr El Sheikh formations). Anoxic conditions existed during the deposition of the studied well succession, which can be seen from the occurrence of imprints of pyrite crystals and some types of oxygen-sensitive dinoflagellate cysts. The palynofacies fluctuated repeatedly between Amorphous Organic Matter (AOM)-dominated and phytoclast-dominated intervals, of kerogen types II and III, respectively. The spore coloration index (SCI) of indigenous thin-walled palynomorphs confirms thermally mature sediments, generative of dry gas and wet gas/condensates. Reworking during the deposition of the upper Sidi Salim, Qawasim and Rosetta formations is inferred from the occurrence of Cretaceous dinoflagellate cysts and pollen.

Key words: Palynofacies; Palynomorphs; Kerogen; Offshore Egypt.

INTRODUCTION

The Nile Delta covers an area of about 22,000 km2 and is one of the best-known deltas in the world. It contains a thick sedimentary succession covering the basement rocks and is considered a portion of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, i.e., the last remnants of Neotethys (see Aksu *et al.* 2005 and references therein). The Nile Delta has recently become an important petroleum (gas and condensate) producing province in Egypt, mainly from reservoirs located in Miocene and Pliocene rocks. The Abu Madi, Qawasim and Kafr El Sheikh formations contain the major hydrocarbon producing rock units in the area (e.g., El Nady and Harb 2010; Nabawy *et al.* 2023). Extensive palynological research conducted in the Nile Delta area has been focused mainly on the biostratigraphy, paleoecology and source-rock evaluation of the Neogene subsurface deposits in the region. Due to age constraints, the siliciclastics across the Messinian/Zanclean transition were assigned to different rock units (i.e., Qawasim and Abu

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Text-fig. 1. Geographic map showing the location of the NDO B-1 well, offshore Nile Delta, Egypt.

Madi formations, see Rizzini *et al.* 1978 and E.G.P.C. 1994). The Abu Madi Fm. was recently described as bounded at the base and top by erosional and drowning unconformities, respectively. It was interpreted to record the progressive drowning of an incised valley, created by a sea-level drop in the late Messinian (Metwalli *et al.* 2023).

Recently, palynofacies investigations in Egypt were integrated with other palynological studies (e.g., El Diasty *et al.* 2019; Deaf *et al.* 2020; El Atfy 2021; Mahmoud and Khalaf 2023; Saleh *et al.* 2024). As a result, insights into the sedimentary (paleo)environments and source rock potential of the palynological organic matter (POM) have been made on an easier and cheaper basis. The present work focuses on the paleoenvironmental reconstruction of the Neogene–Quaternary sediments, penetrated by the NDO B-1 well located in the offshore Nile Delta (Text-fig. 1), carried out by investigating the total palynofacies categories. Palynomorphs, such as pollen, spores, freshwater algae and dinoflagellate cysts played an important role in this context. Emphasis was placed on the environmental significance of the

total palynofacies in recognizing paleoenvironments and redox conditions of the host sediments. The work was also extended to evaluate the potential of the investigated rock units as hydrocarbon sources. This was achieved by studying the colors of thin-walled palynomorphs to infer their degree of thermal maturity, by applying the spore coloration index (SCI) on a visual basis (e.g., Pearson 1984; Traverse 2007). The established color ranges were also used to confirm reworking from older rock units.

GEOLOGICAL SETTING

Shallow marine Jurassic carbonates are the oldest rocks in the Nile Delta Basin; they are overlain by Lower Cretaceous strata. During the Late Cretaceous, the Nile Delta area was part of the Tethys Ocean. Thin Upper Cretaceous to Eocene rocks are recorded due to the impact of the Syrian Arc folding. Thermal subsidence during the Paleogene contributed to the accumulation of clastic successions in the Nile Delta (e.g., Leila *et al.* 2023). Tectonics in the Nile Delta played a crucial role in the formation of many paleo-highs and lows, which influenced the facies distribution. Continuous subsidence along the hinge zone caused thickening of the Neogene sediments in the North Nile Delta Basin (Sestini 1995). The deltaic sequence of the Nile Delta consists of two clastic successions, separated by an unconformity surface related to the Messinian Salinity Crisis (MSC) event, as mentioned in Shalaby and Sarhan (2023). The pre-Messinian sediments exhibit throughout evidence of contraction deformation (e.g., Hamouda and El-Gharabawy 2019), while the post-Messinian strata reflect a typical deltaic environment (e.g., Sarhan *et al.* 2014). However, the paleoenvironmental interpretation, based mainly on paleontological and sedimentological data, of the Neogene–Quaternary succession in the Nile Delta area remains controversial. Based on well data (stratigraphy, sedimentology, paleontology and seismic record), Rizzini *et al.* (1978) suggested an outer shelf deep marine environment for the Sidi Salim Fm. (Neogene–Quaternary). This was confirmed recently in onshore areas by planktonic foraminifera and calcareous nannoplankton (El-Kahawy *et al.* 2022). The Qawasim and Rosetta formations were interpreted as deposited under restricted (lagoonal) (El-Kahawy *et al.* 2022), fluvio-deltaic (Rizzini *et al.* 1978) or prodelta/delta front (Leila *et al.* 2019) environments. Rizzini *et al.* (1978) stated that a Lower Pliocene sandy formation (i.e., Abu Madi Fm.) lies on a fairly pronounced erosional surface, which followed the accumulation of the Qawasim and Rosetta formations. The environment of the Abu Madi Fm. was interpreted as littoral to outer neritic (Shebl *et al.* 2019), continental to marginal marine (estuarine) (Leila *et al.* 2019) or restricted marine (lagoonal) (El-Kahawy *et al.* 2022). The Kafr El Sheikh Fm. represents a return to an open marine, middle/outer neritic to upper bathyal setting (Rizzini *et al.* 1978; Zaghloul *et al.* 2001; El-Kahawy *et al.* 2022). Saleh *et al.* (2024) proposed an alternative paleoenvironmental interpretation for this rock unit based on data from the NDO B-1 well (see Table 1). They stated that the hydrocarbon source-rock potential of the Neogene deposits in the Nile Delta area requires more emphasis on the degree of dilution of the organic matter by the Nile River influx.

LITHOSTRATIGRAPHY

The Neogene–Quaternary rock succession in the NDO B-1 well is subdivided according to information presented in N.C.G.S. (1976), Rizzini *et al.* (1978), E.G.P.C. (1994) and Makled *et al.* (2017) (Text-figs 2

and 3). The relatively uniform Neogene–Quaternary succession of the Nile Delta starts with pelitic (Middle–Upper Miocene) deposits representing a deep sea or outer neritic environment (Sidi Salim Fm.), which terminates abruptly in the Messinian with the deposition of a fluvio-deltaic series (Qawasim Fm.) and evaporites (Rosetta Fm.). A Lower Pliocene sandy basal rock unit (Abu Madi Fm.) lies on an erosional surface, followed by a shale unit representing opensea type sediments (Kafr El Sheikh Fm.). Independent dating of these rock units in the NDO B-1 well, based on planktonic foraminifera (Ouda and Obaidala 1995; Makled *et al.* 2017) and calcareous nannoplankton (Mandur and Makled 2016) is available.

The Sidi Salim Fm. (Middle–Upper Miocene; Langhian to Tortonian) is composed of clays with few intervals of dolomitic marls, sandstone and siltstone interbeds (about 448 m thick in its type section, Sidi Salim-1 well). The base is not recognizable in the center of the delta and the formation top is traced below the thick sandy and conglomeratic beds of the overlying Qawasim Fm.

The Qawasim Fm. (Upper Miocene; Messinian) consists of sand pebbles, sandstones and conglomerates with a sandy matrix interbedded with clay layers. The type section of this unit is in the Qawasim-1 well (932 m thick). These thick sandy and conglomeratic beds have a lenticular shape and exhibit slump structures. Fauna is scarce but the sandstones are rich in plant remains.

The Rosetta Fm. (Upper Miocene; Messinian) (~ 39 m thick) is composed of anhydrite layers interbedded with thin clay beds, which are barren of fossils. In the southern parts of the Nile Delta area the formation is missing. In the north, the formation ends at the levels where Lower Pliocene marine clays appear.

The Abu Madi Fm. (Lower Pliocene; Zanclean) consists of thick layers (321 m in the type section) of sand and clay interbeds. Conglomerates are more frequent in the basal parts of the formation. Foraminifera are frequent in the clay intervals and are typical of the Lower Pliocene of the Mediterranean Sea (Cita 1973). The base of the formation lacks fauna and the lower sands show large-scale cross-bedding, with bioturbation frequent in the clays.

The Kafr El Sheikh Fm. (Pliocene; Zanclean to Piacenzian) consists of clay and sand interbeds, up to 1457 m thick and extends laterally over the whole delta area. Its top is easily recognizable from the overlying El Wastani Fm. The great sand influx causes the accumulation of littoral fauna, with *Ammonia* spp. and *Elphidium* spp. The formation was accumulated in a neritic to basinal setting.

Text-fig. 2. Stratigraphy of the Nile Delta area. A – Neogene–Quaternary stratigraphic column, indicating average thicknesses and environmental trends of the examined formations (after Rizzini *et al.* 1978). B – Generalized lithostratigraphic column of the Jurassic–Quaternary interval (after E.G.P.C. 1994).

The El Wastani Fm. (Lower Pleistocene; Gelasian) is made up of 122 m thick sands interbedded with thin clays, soft and sandy, which become thinner toward the top of the formation. This unit is transitional between the shelf facies of the underlying Kafr El Sheikh Fm. and the coastal/continental sands of the overlying Mit Ghamr Fm. It shows large progradational foresets and may also contain deltaic deposits.

The Mit Ghamr Fm. (Lower Pleistocene; Gelasian to Calabrian), consists of 462 m interbedded sands and clays in the type section. The sands are quartzose, medium to coarse-grained. The pebbles consist of quartzite, chert and dolomite. Some peat horizons also occur. The formation represents a filling of the basin by coastal sands or deposits from Nile flooding. The formation represents the terminal unit of the Pliocene/Pleistocene cycle within the Nile Delta.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This work deals with the Neogene–Quaternary succession of the NDO B-1 well, drilled at the intersection of 32º05ʹ57ʹʹ N and 30º53ʹ16ʹʹ E, located in the offshore Nile Delta (eastern Mediterranean), Egypt, drilled by ESSO in 1975. Fifty-three ditch samples (Text-fig. 3) were digested by HCl (35%) and HF (40%) following the standard palynological processing techniques (e.g., Traverse 2007) to remove carbonates and silicates, respectively. Residues were sieved through a 15 µm mesh. Oxidizing agents and/or excessive ultrasonic treatments were avoided during the original preparation. Part of the digested residue was treated by ultrasonic vibration for a few seconds to eliminate AOM and concentrate the palynomorphs. Permanent slides were prepared using glycerin jelly as a mounting medium for light micros-

Text-fig. 3. Chrono- and lithostratigraphy of the Neogene–Quaternary succession of the investigated NDO B-1 well and location of the studied samples. Original composite log by E.S.S.O. (1975); chronostratigraphy (marked with a yellow dot) after Makled and Mandur (2016) and Mandur and Makled (2016) for calcareous nannoplankton, and Makled *et al.* (2017) for planktonic foraminifera. MSC marks the Messinian Salinity Crisis interval.

copy. Slides were examined using a Leica DM LB2 light microscope equipped with a Leica DFC 280 digital camera at the Department of Geology, Assiut University (Egypt). Examples of dinoflagellate cysts, pollen grains and other palynological matter are shown in Text-figs 4–6.

Two datasets were prepared in order to express the relative abundances of the palynofacies categories (500 particles per sample) and palynomorphs (at least 200 palynomorphs per sample), except of samples nos. 5 and 15 where palynomorphs were sparce. Usually, three to four slides from each productive sample were prepared to account for palynomorphs and palynodebris. The palynological marine index (PMI) (Helenes *et al.* 1998) was calculated from the total recovered palynomorph content, using the formula PMI = $(Rm/Rt + 1)$ 100, where Rm refers to the species richness of marine palynomorphs (dinoflagellate cysts and microforaminiferal linings) and Rt refers to the richness of terrestrial palynomorphs (pollen, spores and freshwater algae). The marine/ continental (M/C) ratio was calculated as the number of marine categories (dinoflagellate cysts + microforaminiferal linings) divided by the sum of total palynomorphs ×100. We also calculated the ratio of sensitive dinoflagellate cysts by dividing the number of sensitive cysts by the total number of dinoflagellate cysts ×100. The sensitivity of present-day representatives in modern seas to excess oxygen during their accumulation in bottom sediments was documented by Zonneveld *et al.* (2007). Moreover, the *Pediastrum*/marine ratio was calculated as the number of *Pediastrum* spp. divided by the sum of *Pediastrum* spp. and dinoflagellate cysts + microforaminiferal linings (modified after Adeonipekun *et al.* 2023, excluding *Botryococcus* spp. which is absent here). Palynomorph and palynofacies data were presented on a set of ternary diagrams to infer the paleoenvironmental conditions of palynomorphs (Federova 1977; Duringer and Doubinger 1985; Traverse 1988), palynofacies (Tyson 1993, 1995), kerogen types (Cornford 1979) and hydrocarbon potential (Dow 1982), along with other graphic presentations. The colors of thin-walled palynomorphs were applied to infer the degree of thermal maturity and reworking of the investigated sediments using the standard color chart adapted after Pearson (1984) and Traverse (2007).

RESULTS

Palynofacies

The palynofacies categories fluctuate throughout the studied succession and were dominated by phytoclasts and AOM (see Text-figs 6 and 7; Appendix 1). Phytoclasts were the main constituents of the palynofacies, more than 50% of the total kerogen in most of the succession. Their acme was seen in samples nos. 8 (80.4%, Sidi Salim Fm.), 14 (82.5%, Qawasim Fm.), 27 (87.1%, Abu Madi Fm.), 32 (84.3%, Kafr El Sheikh

Text-fig. 4. Terrestrial palynomorphs of the NDO B-1 well. A – *Polypodiacoisporites simplex* Sah, 1967 *sensu* Eisawi and Schrank, 2008; 53h, 856 m, 29.7/107.6; B, G – cf. *Annulispora* sp.; B – 36b, 2133 m, 37/111.1; G – 16b, 3078 m, 41.4/109.7; C – *Deltoidospora* sp.; 28b, 2590 m, 34.1/99.2; D – *Laevigatosporites* sp. (monolete spore); 48c, 1249 m, 46/110; E – *Lycopodiumsporites* sp.; 22b, 2987 m, 36.1/106.3; F – Ornamented (echinate-verrucate) spore, 51a, 1075 m, 38.4/107.5; H, J – Poaceae (Gramineae); H – 30d, 2499 m, 41.3/109; J – 25b, 2919 m, 46.6/100.2; I – Bisaccate pollen; 1k, 3797 m, 34.6/99.6; K – Poaceae [*Graminidites annulatus* (Van der Hammen) Potonié, 1960]; 30b, 2499 m, 48.4/100; L – ?*Murospora* sp. (?reworked); 9c, 3340 m, 25/105.9; M – *Afropollis jardinus* (Brenner) Doyle, Jardiné and Doerenkamp, 1982 (reworked); 20k, 3041 m, 44.8/110.9. Slide numbers (equivalent to sample numbers), depths (in meters) and microscope co-ordinates are given for every illustrated specimen. Scale bar = 20μ m.

Text-fig. 5. Dinoflagellate cysts of the NDO B-1 well. A – *Hystrichokolpoma* sp.; 51a, 1075 m, 50.5/101.5; B – *Spiniferites* sp.; 2g, 3779 m, 44.2/109.3; C, E – Spiniferate cysts (*Spiniferites/Achomosphaera* Group); C – 49d, 1194 m, 52.7/104.9, E – 39d, 1859 m, 39.1/101; D – cf. *Hystrichokolpoma* sp.; 51c, 1075 m, 33.2/102.4; F – cf. *Polysphareridium zoharyi* (Rossignol) Bujak, Downie, Eaton and Williams, 1980; 2i, 3779 m, 48.2/106.9; G – *Selenopemphix nephroides* (Benedek) Benedek and Sarjeant, 1981; 4d, 3572 m, 39/101; H – *Selenopemphix quanta* (Bradford) Matsuoka, 1985; 14c, 3090 m, 44.6/110.1; I – *Lingulodinium machaerophorum* (Deflandre and Cookson) Wall, 1967; 40a, 1792 m, 36/114.8; J – *Impagidinium patulum* (Wall) Stover and Evitt, 1978; 48a, 1249 m, 38.3/104.4; K – *Cerodinium granulostriatum* (Jain and Millepied) Lentin and Williams, 1987 (reworked); 9d, 3340 m, 48.1/96. Slide numbers (equivalent to sample numbers), depths (in meters) and microscope co-ordinates are given for every illustrated specimen. Scale bar = 20 μ m.

Text-fig. 6. Freshwater algae (A–C), phytoclasts (D, E), pollen (F), Microforaminifera (G) and palynofacies (H, I) of the NDO B-1 well. A, B – *Pediastrum* spp.; A – 49a, 1194 m, 42.3/107.4, B – 44c, 1456 m, 40/103.7, note imprints of pyrite crystals; C – *Ovoidites parvus* (Cookson and Dettmann) Nakoman, 1966; 51c, 1075 m, 52.8/103; D, E – Phytoclasts; D – cuticular sheet, 42a, 1706 m; E – semi-translucent brown wood, 42a, 1706 m; F – Pollen grain showing dark brown aggregate (?Ubisch-like) bodies; 40a, 1792 m, 48.6/101.1; G – Trochospiral microforaminiferal lining; 49b, 1194 m, 30.3/99.8; H – AOM-dominated palynofacies; Sidi Salim Fm., 3, 3675 m; I – Phytoclast-dominated palynofacies; Rosetta Fm., 21, 3035 m. Slide numbers (equivalent to sample numbers), depths (in meters) and microscope co-ordinates are given for every illustrated specimen. Scale bar = $20 \mu m$, unless otherwise indicated.

Text-fig. 7. Relative percentage frequency of the main palynofacies categories (palynomorphs, phytoclasts and AOM), selected terrestrial palynomorph groups and the calculated PMI and M/C ratios for the NDO B-1 well. For additional symbols see Text-fig. 3.

Fm.) and 50 (80.9%, Mit Ghamr Fm.). Phytoclasts are visibly less abundant in a few horizons (e.g., 27.9%, sample no. 7, Sidi Salim Fm.). AOM is represented in all samples in appreciable amounts, up to 68.8% of total palynofacies in sample no. 7, where phytoclasts decline (Text-fig. 7). The smallest percentages occur in sample no. 14, (15.8%, Sidi Salim Fm.). Palynomorphs were generally rare (maximum 3.3%, sample no. 7, Sidi Salim Fm.). Pyrite crystals are imprinted over different palynomorph walls in the majority of samples; their abundance was tentatively described as either present or absent.

Palynomorphs

Terrestrial palynomorphs (Text-fig. 4) dominate the palynomorph content, as can be reflected from the low values of the calculated M/C ratio (Textfig. 7). Spores and pollen were the essential components (up to 94% of total palynomorphs, sample no. 32, depth 2438 m). Spores reach up to 38% of total palynomorphs (sample no. 46, depth 1371 m). Pollen grains were notably abundant (up to 82.5% of total palynomorphs, sample no. 40, depth 1792 m) and were dominated by trilete ferns, with the monolete varieties as minor constituents. Poaceae dominate the pollen association and occur in the majority of samples with percentages up to 20.5% of total palynomorphs (sample no. 51, depth 1075 m), but their abundance declines to 4.2% (sample no. 2, depth 3779 m). Freshwater algae were also important contributors to the NDO B-1 well palynomorphs. At several horizons they reach up to 66.4% of total palynomorphs (sample no. 2, depth 3779 m). Dinoflagellate cysts (Text-fig. 5), along with subordinate microforaminiferal linings, were not as abundant as the pollen and spores. They reach an acme in a single horizon (81.6% of total palynomorphs, sample no. 40, depth 1792 m). Their abundance sometimes declines to 0.5% (sample no. 32, depth 2438 m). The PMI values generally range from 100.5 (sample no. 32, depth 914 m) to 140.7 (sample no. 4, depth 3572 m); an increased value of the index (393.9) was documented at the depth of 1792 m (sample no. 40, near the top of the Kafr El Sheikh Fm.). The M/C ratio was generally low to moderate (0.5 to 28.9), with the exception of a single acme event (74.6) recorded in sample no. 40, corresponding to the highest PMI value.

PALEOENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

Tyson (1993, 1995) suggested a potential AOMphytoclast-palynomorph (APP) ternary plot to pick out the differences in relative proximity to terrestrial organic matter sources, kerogen transport and

Text-fig. 8. Ternary plots showing the palynologic composition of samples from the NDO B-1 well. A – Microplankton-spore-pollen (MSP) palynomorph diagram (after Federova 1977; Duringer and Doubinger 1985; Traverse 1988); B – AOM-phytoclast-palynomorph kerogen (APP) diagram, based on relative numeric frequencies of main palynofacies components (after Tyson 1993, 1995).

redox states of the sedimentary environments. For the NDO B-1 well, shelfal to basinal environments were inferred from the data plotted on this diagram (Text-fig. 8A). Most samples enter the fields VI and II, which reflects transition from a proximal suboxicanoxic shelf, with a high AOM content due to reducing conditions, to a marginal dysoxic-anoxic basin, with a diluted AOM content by phytoclasts. Phytoclasts are suggestive of close proximity of, or re-deposition from, fluvio-deltaic sources of the terrestrial organic matter, resulting in dilution of the other palynofacies components, especially palynomorphs. The more distal AOM-dominated suboxic-anoxic basinal settings can be seen in a few horizons of the Sidi Salim and Kafr El Sheikh formations, where samples at these levels enter field IX on the plot (Text-fig. 8A). Higher percentages of AOM may suggest either reducing environments, with a high preservation of autochthonous organic matter, or sedimentation far from active sources of terrestrial matter (Tyson 1995).

Anoxia can be manifested by the occurrence of pyrite in most of the investigated intervals. Roncaglia and Kuijpers (2006) mentioned that pyrite is absent in oxic to dysoxic redox conditions. Pyrite is less common in anoxic fresh to brackish non-marine and hypersaline environments (cf. Batten 1996). In consistence with the pyrite occurrences, oxygen-sensitive dinoflagellate cysts [*Echinidinium* spp., *Lejeunecysta* spp., *Selenopemphix nephroides* (Benedek) Benedek and Sarjeant, 1981, and *Selenopemphix quanta*

(Bradford) Matsuoka, 1985] occur in the majority of the samples. This may confirm the existence of anoxic conditions (Zonneveld *et al.* 1997, 2001, 2007). The associated higher percentage frequencies of opaques (oxidized wood and other phytoclasts) in some horizons (Table 1) implies that they might have oxidized during transport and before being transported to the basin. However, at some levels, where pyrite crystals are absent, sensitive dinoflagellate cysts still occur abundantly (e.g., samples nos. 47 to 50, depths 1286–1149 m). In the Mit Ghamr Fm., the low content of such sensitive cysts observed herein conforms to the open marine (distal) settings described by Saleh *et al.* (2024) for the same rock unit, in spite of their interpreted high oxic conditions. Sample no. 2 (depth 3779 m), with plenty of *Selenopemphix* spp. and the moderately sensitive *Spiniferites* spp., is also not consistent with these high oxic states.

Palynofacial and palynological analyses of the examined material suggest, for the majority of the sampling levels, shallow marine (neritic) conditions (Textfigs 7 and 8B). This is indicated by high amounts of terrestrial organic matter that could have been transported to the site of deposition, especially if the latter was influenced by high influx of freshwater river supply. The occurrence of *Spiniferites* spp. in the whole investigated succession (e.g., Text-fig. 5B), along with *Homotryblium* spp. and *Hystrichokolpoma* spp. (Text-fig. 5A, D) are indicative of a typical shelf environment (e.g., Dale 1983; Mahmoud 1998; Carvalho

				2017)	Previous inferred environment						Present work (NDO B-1 borehole)				
Sample no.	Depth _(m)	Depth (ft)	Formation	ಕ ē Stage (after Makeled	(2024) Well NDO B-1 Saleh et al.	(2022) onshore Nile Delta El-Kahawy et al.	onshore Nile Delta Leila et al. (2018)	Qar'a fields, Nile Delta (2019) Shebl et al.	Zaghloul et al. (2001) northern Nile Delta	Rizzini et al. (1978) Nile Delta	after Tyson 1993, 1995) redox and environment	% of total dinoflagellate cysts) sensitive dinoflagellate cysts	pyrite presence/absence of	Main dinoflagellate cyst types	Interpreted environment (based on dinoflagellate cysts)
53 52	856 1030	2810 3380	Mit Ghamr	Calabrian							P	59.7 65.0	present	Common to abundant, mainly Spiniferites, Selenopemphix and Lingulodinium Common, mainly Spiniferites	Open marine (neritic)
51 50	1075 1149	3530 3770									М	44.6			
49 48	1194 1249	3920 4100			(high oxic) Distal						P M				
47 46	1286 1371	4220 4500			DO								absent		
45 44	1432 1456	4700 4780			DH						P	58.0			
43 42	1554 1706	5100 5600	W	Gn	DO									Common to abundant,	
41	1770	5810	Sheikh 画 Kafr Abu Madi	Piazenzian							M			mainly Spiniferites,	
40 39	1792 1862	5880 6110			(high oxic) Distal	Middle to outer neritic to upper bathyal					P M	25.1		Selenopemphix and Lingulodinium	
38 37	1889 1981	6200 6500									P				
36 35	2133 2194	7000 7200		Zanclean	PD						M				
34	2255	7400			DO				Neritic to basinal	Open sea sediments	P				
33 32	2375 2438	7795 8000			DH						D	counted dinoflagellate cysts)			
31 30	2468 2499	8100 8200			DO						М		present	Rare to common, mainly Spiniferites	
29	2560	8400			PS						P				
28 27	2590 2679	8500 8790			DO						D М				Marine (coastal to inner neritic) Open marine (neritic)
26 25	2804 2919	9200 9580				Restricted (lagoonal)	marginal marine Continental to (estuarine)	Littoral to outer neritic			P			Rare, mainly Spiniferites and Lingulodinium	
24	2926	9600													
23 22	2956 2987	9700 9800									М P				
21 20	3035 3041	9960 9980	Rosetta awasim σ	Messinian	Proximal (dysoxic)		lelta front rodelta പ đ			Fluvio-deltaic	М			Rare to common, mainly Spiniferites	
19 18	3048 3066	10000 10060									P		absent		
17	3072	10080													
16 15	3078 3084	10100 10120									М	Not calculated (less than 50			
14 13	3090 3096	10140 10160											esent 듄		
12	3102	10180									P				
11 10	3200 3297	10500 10820	Salim Sidi	Tortonian	Distal (oxic)	Middle to outer neritic					D	18.6	absent present absent	Common to abundant. mainly Spiniferites, Selenopemphix and Lingulodinium	
9 8	3340 3413	10960 11200									P M				
7 6	3432 3444	11260 11300								Deep sea or outer shelf	D P	21.4			
5	3541	11620									M		present		
4 3	3572 3675	11720 12060		Serra- vallian							P D	47.1			
2 1	3779 3797	12400 12460		Ln							P D	42.0 32.3			
		D = distal suboxic-anoxic basin PS = proximal (suboxic)				PD = proximal (dysoxic)	$P =$ proximal suboxic-anoxic shelf		$DO = distal (oxic)$		M = marginal dysoxic-anoxic basin $DH = distal$ (high oxic)			$Gn = Gela$ sian Ln = Langhian W = El Wastani Formation	
							Strong evidence of reworking						No information/data		

Table 1. List of sample numbers and depths (in m and ft) of the investigated NDO B-1 well succession, indicating current and previous paleoenvironmental determinations in the well and in other onshore-offshore localities of the Nile Delta area. The calculated M/C ratio, the ratio of sensitive to total dinoflagellate cysts and the PMI values are also shown. Brief descriptions of the dinoflagellate cyst types in the succession and a description of pyrite presence/absence are given.

et al. 2016). Brinkhuis (1994) considered that the distribution patterns of *Homotryblium* spp. indicate restricted marine to open marine inner neritic settings. *Spiniferites* spp. has high relative abundances in high productivity areas such as areas influenced by river discharge, but may also occur in oligotrophic sites (see Zonneveld *et al.* 2013). Production of peridinioid cysts *Selenopemphix quanta*, together with gonyaulacoid cysts *Lingulodinium machaerophorum* (Deflandre and Cookson) Wall, 1967 (Textfig. 5I) and *Spiniferites* spp*.* (Text-fig. 5B, C and E) increases with the increasing nutrient/trace element availability near river plumes (Zonneveld *et al.* 2009). *Lingulodinium machaerophorum* is restricted to coastal regions and in the vicinity of continental margins; its normal (non-reduced) process lengths in the present samples can be observed in relationship to normal marine salinity (Mertens *et al.* 2009; Zonneveld *et al.* 2009, 2013). Representatives of *Selenopemphix* spp. are restricted to coastal sites. High abundances of *S. quanta* (Text-fig. 5H) occur in eutrophic regions where river discharge waters are present. *S. quanta* can also be transported in large amounts from the shelf into deeper basins (Zonneveld and Brummer 2000), where the upper waters may be either fully-marine or with reduced salinities; its highest relative abundances occur in regions where bottom waters are anoxic to oxic (Zonneveld *et al*. 2013). On the other hand, *S. nephroides* has not been observed in river plume areas; its high relative abundances are observed in mesotrophic-eutrophic environments where bottom waters may be oxic to anoxic (Zonneveld *et al*. 2013). This heterotrophic/autotrophic (phototrophic) dinoflagellate cyst ratio is an excellent proxy for paleoceanographic studies in neritic sequences; its low values may reflect neritic conditions with weak deltaic influence (Matthiessen and Brenner 1996). Although the calculated M/C ratio values in the whole succession are relatively low, their vertical relative variations can provide insights into proximal/distal trends, since this ratio increases from nearshore to offshore environments (e.g., Pellaton and Gorin 2005; Carvalho *et al.* 2013, 2016). In the present case the lowest values of the M/C ratio were documented in the Qawasim, Rosetta, Abu Madi and in the lower Kafr El Sheikh formations (Text-fig. 7), suggesting a regressive trend (coastal to inner neritic environment) for the late Tortonian–early Zanclean interval. The estimated PMI values cannot reflect this vertical environmental development. These shallow marine conditions are reflected by plotting the palynomorph data on the ternary plots of Federova (1977), Duringer and Doubinger (1985) and Traverse

(1988), using microplankton-spores-pollen (MSP) as the end-members. Details of the environmental significance of the M/C ratio and PMI are discussed in the following section. For details of current data and previous paleoenvironmental establishments see Table 1.

Poaceae (Gramineae) pollen in the investigated samples possesses variable pollen sizes and is difficult to use alone as a proxy for reconstructing past vegetation and climate (Wei *et al.* 2023), although it is abundant in the fossil records and often used as a paleoclimatic indicator. Unfortunately, there are also problems associated with the morphological similarities across the Poaceae family, which prevent full use of their ecologic preferences. Usually, there are difficulties in visually differentiating between different species of this pollen type (Katsi *et al.* 2024). However, the dominance of Poaceae pollen (Effiom *et al.* 2024) in our samples can be used as evidence of grassy woodlands. A common interpretation is to link the increase in the Poaceae pollen abundance with increasing regional aridity. Poaceae distribution is influenced by various factors, such as the proportion, for example, of the size of local marshes (Bush 2002).

SEQUENCE STRATIGRAPHIC PALYNOMORPH INDICATORS

The chlorococcalean green algae *Pediastrum* spp. (Chlorophyceae), which is frequently and abundantly recorded in the present samples, is indicative of fresh-brackish water lakes, ponds and lagoons and along shores, where water is rich in nutrients; its abundant occurrence indicates a strong influx of freshwater to the depositional environment (Tappan 1980; Batten 1996), since salinity determines its presence/absence (Xiang *et al.* 2021). Adeonipekun *et al.* (2023) have found that the ratio of *Botryoccus*/ *Pediastrum*/marine elements is of sequence stratigraphic significance; high proportions were found within lowstand system tracts (LST). According to Helenes *et al.* (1998), the maximum flooding surfaces (MFS) will be usually near the maximum PMI values. However, the patterns of the vertical change in PMI and M/C ratios do not show obvious transgressive/regressive trends. In turn, the calculated PMI values (between 100.5, sample no. 32, depth 914 m to 140.7, sample no. 4, depth 3572 m), seem to reflect an open marine origin of the studied sequence. The palynomorph content documented in sample no. 40 (393.9, depth 1792 m), equivalent to a high M/C ratio (74.6%), indicates a distinct event that stands

out from the monotonous palynomorph record. This indicates a rise in the sea level that may correspond to an MFS near the top of the Kafr El Sheikh Fm. Two sequence boundaries (SB) can also be inferred (samples nos. 18, depth 3066 m, basal Rosetta Fm. and 29, depth 2560 m, near the base of the Kafr El Sheikh Fm.), where the highest values of this ratio (97.1 and 98.3, respectively) were observed. However, Helenes *et al.* (1998) distinguished stratigraphic sequences on the basis of calculated PMI values, lithological characteristics and the expression of the wireline logs.

THE MESSINIAN–ZANCLEAN TRANSITION IN THE NDO B-1 WELL

Makled *et al.* (2017, p. 478) defined the base of the Non-distinctive zone (NDZ) in depth interval 3017– 3124 m of the NDO B-1 well. This zone represents the interval of time occupied by the Messinian regression event in the Mediterranean area, dated at 5.96–5.332 Ma (Lourens *et al.* 2004). Strata representing this interval in the nearby areas are composed of thin evaporites (Rosetta Fm.) underlain by siliciclastics (Qawasim Fm.), which are the expression of the MSC event. Due to the lack of precise dating within this NDZ in the well (samples nos. 12 to 21, depth interval 3102–3035 m), the recognition of the exact MSC stage(s) is not possible. However, the occurrence of siliciclastics and evaporites most probably favors MSC stage 3 (see Andreetto *et al.* 2021, fig. 1a). Fluvial discharge influence, which characterizes Substage 3.2 'Lago-Mare', can be interpreted by the occurrence of a high percentage of freshwater algae (>24% of total palynomorphs, sample no. 16, depth 3066 m) and land-derived spores (>24% of total palynomorphs, depth 3041 m). The inferred marine (coastal to inner neritic) setting of this interval seems to favor the deep non-desiccated basin hypothesis in the Mediterranean during the MSC (e.g., Roveri *et al.* 2014; Krijgsman *et al*. 2018). These marine conditions during the Messinian fit with the scenario that the Zanclean flooding was effective prior to the Zanclean GSSP (DeCelles and Cavazza 1995; Cavazza and DeCelles 1998). The Zanclean base in the studied succession is well-dated by planktonic foraminifera (Makled *et al*. 2017) and calcareous nannoplankton (Makled and Mandur 2016; Mandur and Makled 2016). In the light of the discovery of vast Messinian terrestrial (riverine) deposits (Madof *et al.* 2019; Menashe River, in the nearby Levant Basin), equivalent sediments in the NDO B-1 well succession (i.e., Qawasim Formation) might have been eroded

due to the formation of the well-known widespread regional unconformity (see Shalaby and Sarhan 2023) in the Nile Delta area during the late Messinian. In this case the deep desiccated basin hypothesis (e.g., Hsü *et al.* 1973; Lofi *et al.* 2008; Madof *et al.* 2019) is strongly suggested. For detailed explanation of the controversy concerning the MSC events the reader is kindly referred to Andreetto *et al.* (2021) and discussions/references therein. Pilade *et al.* (2024) recently referred to an example of strong paleoenvironmental change that occurred in the Mediterranean Basin across the Miocene–Pliocene boundary (5.33 Ma) and noted that the paleoenvironmental setting during the Lago-Mare phase of the MSC is still uncertain due to the controversial fossil record of freshwater to brackish and marine assemblages. These authors suggested two scenarios of this strong environmental change, occurring as either a catastrophic/sudden (freshwater to marine) or gradual (brackish to marine) sea level rise. Current data shows that the advent of the Zanclean Stage seems to have been gradual, from coastal/inner neritic to normal open marine (inner to outer neritic) settings.

KEROGEN TYPES AND VISUAL THERMAL MATURATION ASSESSMENT

The content of total organic matter (expressed as total organic carbon, TOC, in wt. %) is important for any given rock unit to produce hydrocarbons. For example, the TOC values of the mudstones and shales in the Qingshankou Fm. of North China (0.21– 3.86 wt. %) were considered good source rocks of hydrocarbons (Zhu *et al.* 2023). In a nearby location (Baltim-1 well, about 50 km southeast of the studied well), the measured TOC values range between 0.27– 1.18 wt. % in the Sidi Salim, Qawasim and Kafr El Sheikh formations (Saleh *et al.* 2024). Therefore the TOC wt. % content of the investigated sediments can be considered as suitable for producing hydrocarbons.

Visual assessment of the thermal maturity, based on colors of thin-walled spores and pollen, is established in the field of source-rock evaluation and in recognizing the reworking history of the host sediments. Different categories of POM have a potential in producing hydrocarbons and in the resultant hydrocarbon types. AOM is a significant kerogen source of hydrocarbons types I and II, oil-prone source material, whereas phytoclasts make up the bulk composition of kerogen types III and IV, gasprone to inert source material (e.g., Thompson and Dembicki 1986; Tyson 1995; Batten 1996; Gonçalves

Text-fig. 9. Kerogen types and visual thermal maturation assessment for the analyzed Neogene–Quaternary interval of the NDO B-1 well. A – Spore Color Index (SCI) of thin-walled palynomorphs (mainly trilete spores and partly Poaceae) and their corresponding organic thermal maturity (after Pearson 1984 and Traverse 2007); B – Variable color variations reflected by the encountered Poaceae pollen; C – Ternary Vitrinite / Huminite-Inertinite-Liptinite plot of kerogen types based on major organic components (modified after Cornford 1979); D – Ternary Liptinite-Vitrinite-Inertinite (LVI) kerogen plot (after Dow 1982), with fields indicating predicted hydrocarbon source potential. For additional symbols see Text-fig. 3.

et al. 2015). Suitable reducing conditions are among the favorable conditions for the generation and preservation of organic matter (Wang *et al.* 2024).

The thin-walled palynomorphs, which were usually used to assess SCI, exhibit colors ranging from 1 to 8 (Text-fig. 9A), using the standard color chart adapted after Pearson (1984) and Traverse (2007). Poaceae pollen in this work (Text-fig. 9B) exhibits variable color ranges ($SCI = 1-6$) and possesses also thin walls, which can enable their effective use in this context. It is suggested that the wide ranges are equivalent to variable maturation states of different geologic ages. We believe that their co-occurrence in the same bed(s) may infer reworked (SCI = $7-8$), indigenous ($SCI = 5-6$, the main assemblage) and caved $(SCI = 1-4)$ palynomorphs. Darker palynomorphs are

considered as reworked ones, as can be confirmed by the colors seen in older (Cretaceous) dinoflagellate cysts [e.g., *Cerodinium granulostriatum* (Jain and Millepied) Lentin and Williams, 1987] and pollen [e.g., *Afropollis jardinus* (Brenner) Doyle, Jardiné and Doerenkamp, 1982]. Taxonomically, these palynofossils are easily recognizable from the Neogene– Quaternary associations. The degree of how this reworking may have influenced our assemblages remains enigmatic. Plotting the Neogene–Quaternary samples from the NDO B-1 well succession on the ternary diagram of Cornford (1979) reflects types II and III kerogen (Text-fig. 9C). Exceptionally, the Qawasim and Rosetta formations reveal only type III kerogen. According to Tyson (1995), types II and III are oil- and gas-prone, respectively. However, on the ternary plot of Dow (1982) (Text-fig. 9D), samples show only dry gas or wet gas/condensates. In the light of the above-mentioned discussions, the succession is considered thermally mature and capable of producing hydrocarbons.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the palynomorph and palynofacies analyses of the Neogene to Quaternary succession from the NDO B-1 well, drilled in the offshore Nile Delta (Egypt), open marine (neritic) environments were inferred for the Sidi Salim, upper Kafr El Sheikh, El Wastani and Mit Ghamr formations. Relatively shallower environments (coastal to inner neritic) were interpreted for the Qawasim, Rosetta and the lower Kafr El Sheikh formations. The nature and composition of the total POM reflects open marine (neritic) environmental conditions during deposition of the majority of the investigated sediments. This marine setup is documented by the occurrence of dinoflagellate cysts, along with microforaminiferal linings, across the whole investigated succession. The occurrence of pyrite, imprinted on several palynomorphs, and sensitive to moderately sensitive dinoflagellate cysts to oxygen degradation (*Selenopemphix* and *Spiniferites*, respectively) supports a reducing state. The highest value of the PMI, equivalent to the highest M/C ratio, indicates a significant rise in sea level (i.e. the development of MFS) near the top of Kafr El Sheikh Fm. The generalized lower values of the M/C ratio may be attributed to the large influx of the Nile River, in which marine phytoplankton was diluted by the land-derived spores/pollen and freshwater algae. In this case, the low abundance of dinoflagellate cysts can hardly be applied to track the relative sea level changes. Our palynofacies and palynological findings do not confirm the previously inferred distal environments at the top of the Abu Madi Fm., or the high oxic states at some levels of the Kafr El Sheikh, El Wastani and Mit Ghamr formations. The vertical development of environment, from neritic, coastal/inner neritic to neritic, suggests that the advent of Zanclean Stage (basal Abu Madi Fm.) witnessed gradual, non-drastic restoration of normal marine conditions. The absence of the MSC stages 1 and 2 and the occurrence of a widespread Messinian/Zanclean unconformity may suggest a near-desiccated Mediterranean Sea during the Messinian time. From a sequence stratigraphic point of view, an MFS near the top of the Kafr El Sheikh Fm. is also suggested. Moreover, the highest values of *Pediastrum* (high *Pediatrum*/marine elements ratio) may reflect two sequence boundaries at the base of Rosetta Fm. and near the base of the Kafr El Sheikh Fm. The investigated organic matter is mature and generative of dry gas and wet gas/condensates. Reworked Cretaceous dinoflagellate cysts (e.g., *Cerodinium granulostriatum*) and pollen grains (e.g., *Afropollis jardinus*) were seen in the upper Sidi Salim, Qawasim and Rosetta formations. Reworking can be confirmed by the presence of older and relatively darker palynomorphs, which are distinctive from indigenous palynomorphs.

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Appendix 1

List of the counted palynofacies categories from the NDO B-1 well used in this study.

Appendix 2

List of the counted palynomorph groups from the NDO B-1 well used in this study (samples with poor recovery were ignored).

