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Phytoplankton community structure in relation to vertical stratification along a north-south gradient in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean

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Abstract

Climate change is affecting the hydrodynamics of the world’s oceans. How these changes will influence the productivity, distribution and abundance of phytoplankton communities is an urgent research question. Here we provide a unique high-resolution mesoscale description of the phytoplankton community composition in relation to vertical mixing conditions and other key physicochemical parameters along a meridional section of the Northeast Atlantic Ocean. Phytoplankton, assessed by a combination of flow cytometry and pigment fingerprinting (HPLC-CHEMTAX), and physicochemical data were collected from the top 250 m water column during the spring of 2011 and summer of 2009. Multivariate analysis identified water column stratification (based on 100 m depth-integrated Brunt–Väisälä frequency N²) as one of the key drivers for the distribution and separation of different phytoplankton taxa and size classes. Our results demonstrate that increased stratification (1) broadened the geographic range of Prochlorococcus as oligotrophic areas expanded northward, (2) increased the contribution of picoeukaryotic phytoplankton to total autotrophic organic carbon (< 20 μm), and (3) decreased the abundances of diatoms and cryptophytes. We discuss the implications of our findings for the classification of phytoplankton functional types in biogeochemical and ecological ocean models. As phytoplankton taxonomic composition and size affects productivity, biogeochemical cycling, ocean carbon storage and marine food web dynamics, the results provide essential information for models aimed at predicting future states of the ocean.
limited by depletion of the nutrients in the surface layer. As a consequence of increases in sea surface temperature (SST) and resultant increases in vertical stratification, oligotrophic areas (i.e., defined as areas below 0.07 mg Chl m$^{-3}$) of the North Atlantic subtropical gyre are estimated to be expanding at a rate of up to 4.3% yr$^{-1}$ (Polovina et al. 2008).

Projected alterations to stratification and vertical mixing have the potential to affect phytoplankton species composition (Huisman et al. 2004), productivity (Gregg et al. 2003; Behrenfeld et al. 2006; Polovina et al. 2008), size structure (Li 2002; Daufresne et al. 2009; Hilligsoe et al. 2011), nutritional value (Mitra and Flynn 2005; van de Waal et al. 2010), abundance (Richardson and Schoeman 2004) and spatial distribution (Doney et al. 2012; van de Poll et al. 2013). Consequently, affecting the functioning and biogeochemistry of pelagic and benthic ecosystems, and altering their capacity for carbon sequestration (Beaugrand 2009; Hoegh-Guldberg and Bruno 2010). Understanding the ecological and physiological mechanisms controlling changes in phytoplankton community structure across gradients of vertical stability is therefore vital to assessing the response of marine systems to global climate change.

The North Atlantic Ocean is key to global climate and ocean circulation, due to North Atlantic deep water formation, accounting for 20% of the net ocean uptake of CO$_2$ (Deser and Blackmon 1993; Dawson and Spannagle 2008). The Northeast Atlantic Ocean provides a meridional gradient in stratification, with permanent stratification in the subtropics and seasonal stratification in the temperature zones (Talley et al. 2011; Jurado et al. 2012a). To assess potential alterations in phytoplankton community structure of the North Atlantic due to future changes in vertical stratification, a firm baseline is required that accurately describes the status quo. Yet, even for the relatively well-investigated North Atlantic, comprehensive descriptions of phytoplankton community structure in relation to vertical stratification patterns at the ocean basin scale are scarce (Partensky et al. 1996; Tarran et al. 2006; Bouman et al. 2011). Here we investigate how phytoplankton abundance, size and community composition are related to vertical stratification along a latitudinal gradient in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean during spring and summer. Comparison between two seasons with different vertical density distributions offers an unique opportunity to study how phytoplankton dynamics change as stratification develops. The results presented here provide an important baseline to study the effect of future climate change on marine ecosystems in the North Atlantic.

**Methods**

**Study area and sampling procedure**

During two research cruises, STRATIPHYT I taking place in the summer (July–August) of 2009 and STRATIPHYT II in spring (April–May) of 2011, samples were collected over a transect traversing a North-South stratification gradient in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 1) on board of the R/V *Pelagia*. During each cruise, 32 stations (separated by approximately 100 km) were sampled over the course of a month in the area located between 29°N and 63°N, which spans from the Canary Islands to Iceland. Water samples were collected in the top 250 m from at least 10 separate depths using 24 plastic samplers (General Oceanics type Go-Flow, 10 liter) during STRATIPHYT I and Teflon samplers (NIOZ design Pristine Bottles, 27 L) during STRATIPHYT II. Samplers were mounted on an ultra-clean (trace-metal free) system consisting of a fully titanium sampler frame equipped with CTD (Seabird 9+; standard conductivity, temperature, and pressure sensors) and auxiliary sensors for chlorophyll autofluorescence (Chelsea Aquatracka Mk III), light transmission (Wet-Labs C-star) and photosynthetic active radiation (PAR; Satlantic). Data from the chlorophyll autofluorescence sensor were calibrated against HPLC data according to van de Poll et al. (2013) to determine total chlorophyll $a$ (Chl $a$) for this study. Samples were taken inside a 6 m Clean Container from each depth for inorganic nutrients (5 mL), flow cytometry (10 mL), and phytoplankton pigments (10 L).

**Physicochemical data**

Temperature eddy diffusivity ($K_T$) data, referred to here as the vertical mixing coefficient, were derived from...
temperature and conductivity microstructure profiles measured using the commercial microstructure profiler Self-Contained Autonomous Microprofiler (SCAMP) (Stevens et al. 1999). A detailed description of SCAMP methodology and data for both STRATIPHYT cruises have been described by Jurado et al. (2012a,b). The SCAMP was deployed at fewer stations (i.e., 17 and 14 in spring and summer, respectively) and to lower depths (up to 100 m) than the remainder of the data (23 stations and up to 250 m depth) in this study. To correct for this deficiency, data were interpolated using the spatial kriging function “krig” executed in R using the “fields” package (Furrer et al. 2012). Interpolated $K_I$ values were bounded below by the minimum value measured for each of the two cruise datasets; the upper values were left unbounded. This resulted in estimated $K_I$ values which preserved the qualitative pattern and range of values previously reported (Jurado et al. 2012a,b), i.e., continuous stratification during the summer STRATIPHYT I cruise and two distinct zones of mixing during the spring STRATIPHYT II cruise; stratification in the south and deep strong mixing in the north. SCAMP data were also used to quantify the strength of background stratification according to the square of the Brunt–Väisälä frequency: $N^2 = \frac{g}{\rho} \left( \frac{\partial \rho}{\partial z} \right)$ where $z$ is depth measured positively downward (m), $\rho$ is the density of water (kg m$^{-3}$) and $g$ is the gravitational acceleration (9.8 m s$^{-2}$) (Houry et al. 1987; Jurado et al. 2012a,b). The Brunt–Väisälä frequency represents the angular velocity (i.e., the rate) at which a small perturbation of the stratification will re-equilibrate. Hence, it is a simple measure of the stability of the vertical stratification. $N^2$ values were depth averaged over the top 100 m of the water column and classified based on the following criteria: $N^2 < 2 \times 10^{-5}$ rad$^2$ s$^{-2}$ for non-stratified, $2 \times 10^{-5} < N^2 < 5 \times 10^{-5}$ rad$^2$ s$^{-2}$ for weakly stratified and $N^2 > 5 \times 10^{-5}$ rad$^2$ s$^{-2}$ for strongly stratified. In addition, the depth of the mixed layer ($Z_m$) was determined as the depth at which the temperature difference with respect to the surface was 0.5°C (Levitus et al. 2000; Jurado et al. 2012b). As shown by Brainerd and Gregg (1995), this definition of the mixed layer provides an estimate of the depth through which surface waters have been mixed in recent days. On the few occasions where SCAMP data were not available $Z_m$ was determined from CTD data. Station mean temperature profiles obtained from SCAMP and CTD measurements were compared and found to have a good correlation.

Discrete water samples for dissolved inorganic phosphate (PO$_4$), ammonium (NH$_4$), nitrate (NO$_3$), and nitrite (NO$_2$) were gently filtered through 0.2 μm pore size polysulphone Acrodisk filters (32 mm, Pall), after which samples were stored at −20°C until analysis. Dissolved inorganic nutrients were analyzed onboard using a Bran+Luebbe Quattro AutoAnalyzer for dissolved orthophosphate (Murphy and Riley 1962), inorganic nitrogen (nitrate + nitrite: NO$_3$) (Grasshoff 1983) and ammonium (Koroleff 1969; Helder and De Vries 1979). Detection limits ranged between the two cruises from 0.06-0.10 μM for NO$_3$, 0.010-0.028 μM for PO$_4$ and 0.05-0.09 μM for NH$_4$.

**Phytoplankton data**

Phytoplankton consisting of photoautotrophic prokaryotic cyanobacteria and eukaryotic algae <20 μm were enumerated on fresh samples using a Becton-Dickinson FACSCalibur flow cytometer (FCM) equipped with an air-cooled Argon laser with an excitation wavelength of 488 nm (15 mW). Samples were measured for 10 min using a high flow rate with the discriminator set on red chlorophyll autofluorescence. Phytoplankton populations were distinguished using bivariate scatter plots of autofluorescent properties (orange autofluorescence from phycocerythrin for the cyanobacteria *Synechococcus* spp. and red autofluorescence from Chl *a* for photoautotrophs) against side scatter. The obtained list-mode files were analyzed using the freeware CYTOWIN (Vaulot 1989).

Regularly throughout the cruise transect, size-fractionation was performed to provide average cell size for the different phytoplankton subpopulations. Specifically, a whole water sample (10 mL) was size-fractionated by sequential gravity filtration through 8 μm, 5 μm, 3 μm, 2 μm, 1 μm, 0.8 μm, and 0.4 μm pore-size polycarbonate filters. Each fraction was then analyzed using FCM as described above. The equivalent spherical diameter for each population was determined as the size displayed by the median (50%) number of cells retained for that cluster. In total nine different phytoplankton populations were distinguished, consisting of six eukaryotic and three cyanobacterial populations, i.e., *Synechococcus* spp. (average size range between the two cruises of 0.9-1.0 μm), *Prochlorococcus* high light population (HL; 0.6 μm) and *Prochlorococcus* low light population (LL; 0.7-0.8 μm). The photosynthetic eukaryotic populations consisted of two pico-sized groups, i.e., Pico I (1.0-1.4 μm) and Pico II (1.5-2.0 μm), and four nano-sized groups, i.e., Nano I (3-4 μm), Nano II (6-8 μm), Nano III (8-9 μm), and Nano IV (9 μm). To estimate the contribution of the different phytoplankton groups to carbon biomass, carbon-conversion factors were applied to FCM cell counts. Specifically, cell counts were transformed assuming spherical diameters equivalent to the average cell size determined from size-fractionation and applying conversion factors of 237 fg C μm$^{-3}$ (Worden et al. 2004) and 196.5 fg C μm$^{-3}$ for pico- and nano-sized plankton (Garrison et al. 2000), respectively.

Phytoplankton taxonomic composition was determined by pigment analysis of 10 L GF/F filtered samples (47 mm, Whatman; flash frozen and stored at ~80°C until analysis) using HPLC as described by Hooker et al. (2009). In short, filters were freeze-dried (48 h) and pigments extracted using 5 mL 90% acetone (v/v, 48 h, 4°C, darkness) and separated using a HPLC (Waters 2695 separation module, 996 photodiode array detector) equipped with a Zorbax Eclipse
XDB-C8 3.5 μm column (Agilent Technologies). Peak identification was based on retention time and diode array spectroscopy. Pigments standards (DHI LAB products) were used for quantification of chlorophyll a, chlorophyll a2, chlorophyll b, chlorophyll c2, chlorophyll c3, peridinin, 19-butanoyloxyfucoxanthin, 19-hexanoyloxyfucoxanthin, fucoxanthin, neoxanthin, prasinoxanthin, alloxanthin, and zeaxanthin. The sum of Chl a and divinyl Chl a was used as indicator for algal biomass as these pigments are universal in algae and Prochlorococcus. Specific marker pigments were used to reveal the presence of taxonomically distinct pigment signatures using CHEMTAX (version 195; Mackey et al. 1996) software, thereby estimating the concentration of each taxonomic group relative to Chl a. CHEMTAX was run separately for oligotrophic and non-oligotrophic stations and for spring and summer samples. Oligotrophic areas defined by nutrient (i.e., NO3 less than 0.13 μM and PO4 less than 0.03 μM; van de Poll et al. 2013) or by Chl a concentrations (< 0.07 mg Chl m⁻³), delineating regions south of 40°N and 45°N as oligotrophic for the spring and summer, respectively. CHEMTAX was run with 500 iterations, with all elements varied (100% for Chl a and divinyl Chl a and 500% for the other pigments). Initial pigment ratios in the iterations were based on van de Poll et al. (2013), where high-light initial pigment ratios were implemented for surface samples (0-50 m) of oligotrophic stations and low-light initial pigment ratios for subsurface samples (> 50 m) of oligotrophic and all non-oligotrophic samples. To compare to taxonomic composition data provided by CHEMTAX, the percent contribution of different FCM distinguished groups to total carbon biomass (< 20 μm) was also determined. Likewise, Chl a and CHEMTAX taxonomic composition were used to determine the group-specific Chl a concentrations.

To provide additional taxonomic information, seawater samples were also fixed for occasional microscopic analysis. Specifically, 150 mL of seawater was fixed in Lugol’s iodine solution (1% final concentration) supplemented with formaldehyde and stored at 4°C until analysis. Samples were processed according to the Utermöhl method (Edler and Elbrächter 2010). Briefly, 10-50 mL of fixed sample was aliquoted into a settling chamber and after a 48 h settling time, phytoplankton species composition was determined alone or two meridians at 40X and 200X magnification using an Olympus IMT-2 inverted microscope.

Statistical analysis
Measured quantities included in the multivariate analysis were: the vertical mixing coefficient, N², temperature, salinity, density, PO4, NH4, NO2, and NO3. The ratio of nitrogen to phosphorus (N : P) was also included and calculated as the ratio of total dissolved inorganic nitrogen (i.e., NO2 + NO3 + NH4) to PO4. In addition, several variables were included as factors (i.e., single value per station/sample) to better discriminate how environmental conditions relate to phytoplankton abundance and taxonomic composition. These included depth layer, euphotic depth, stratification level, mixed layer depth, the ratio of mixed layer depth to the euphotic depth and nutrient flux of NO3, NO2, and PO4 into both the mixed layer and euphotic zone. The depth of each sample was classified as either within the mixed layer (Zm) or below mixed layer depth (bZm). Euphotic depth (Zeu), calculated based on the light attenuation coefficient (Kd), was defined as the depth at which irradiance was 0.1% of the surface value (Moore and Chisholm 1999) to account for the dominance and vertical distribution (down to 200 m) of Prochlorococcus. The ratio of the mixed layer depth to the euphotic depth (Zm/Zeu) was used as an index of light availability in the mixed layer. Thus, if mixed layer depth exceeds the euphotic depth (i.e., Zm/Zeu > 1.0), phytoplankton cells are more likely to be exposed to light limited conditions. Finally, the nutrient flux at a depth z* was defined as φ(z*) = -Kd(z)(dN/dz)|z=z* and calculated based on measured vertical profiles of the vertical mixing coefficient (Kd) and individual nutrients (N) of PO4, NO2, and NO3. The nutrient fluxes were determined at the depths Zeu and Zm, and coded according to the depth and nutrient being considered, e.g., ZeuPO4 represents the PO4 flux into the euphotic zone.

A multivariate statistical analysis was performed using the R statistical software (R Development Core Team 2012) supplemented by vegan (Oksanen et al. 2013). Data exploration was carried out following the protocol described in Zuur et al. (2010). Because CHEMTAX pigment data and FCM abundance data occasionally did not coincide, each dataset was analyzed separately to maximize the size of the data matrices. In addition, depth profiles of N² were restricted to depths less than 100 m due to the limitations of the SCAMP. Consequently, N² was incorporated into the analysis as the factor stratification level according to Fig. 2. FCM phytoplankton carbon (C) data, N : P, NH4, and all nutrient fluxes were log (x + 1) transformed and vertical mixing coefficient and Zm/Zeu were log transformed to reduce the effect of outliers. To identify and remove collinearity, variance inflation factors (VIF) were calculated using the R function corvif written by Zuur et al. (2009). Sequentially, explanatory variables with the largest VIF were removed until all variables resulting in VIF < 10. Two exceptions were the removal of NO3 instead of PO4 (Pearson correlation: r = 0.99, p < 0.001) and the removal of ZeuNO2 instead of ZeuPO4 (Pearson correlation: r = 0.96; p < 0.001). Any residual collinearity was identified and removed based on correlation pair plots and boxplots of variables across factor levels. At this stage, the vertical mixing coefficient was excluded due to collinearity with stratification level and depth layer. The final selection resulted in 12 explanatory variables: Salinity, PO4, NH4, NO2, Zeu, Zm/Zeu, N : P, ZeuPO4, ZmPO4, ZeuNO2, stratification level and depth level. Initial scatter plots of response variables and covariates did not show a strong non-linear pattern and therefore redundancy analysis (RDA) (Legendre
and Legendre 1998) was chosen over canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) to model the response of phytoplankton carbon data (i.e., FCM phytoplankton size fractionated C) and taxonomic community composition as a function of selected explanatory variables. In all cases, RDA was performed on a correlation matrix (i.e., all phytoplankton groups equally important) and used species conditional scaling to better determine the relationship between phytoplankton variables and environmental covariates. Subsequent to RDA, a forward selection procedure was applied to select only those explanatory variables that contributed significantly to the RDA model, while removing non-significant terms. Significance was assessed by a permutation test, using the multivariate pseudo-F-value as the test statistic (Zuur et al. 2009). A total of 9999 permutations were used to estimate p-values associated with the Pseudo-F statistic. Variance partitioning was applied to the final RDA model to estimate how much of the variation in the data was explained by stratification and how much by other factors.

More specifically, multivariate analysis of phytoplankton C biomass (from FCM counts) was performed on eight different phytoplankton groups in a total of 315 samples from various depths within the upper 200 m of 23 stations along the cruise track (i.e., 166 and 149 samples in summer and spring, respectively). Forward selection and permutation tests revealed that 9 of the 12 explanatory variables significantly (p < 0.05) contributed to the model (Table 1). Consequently, NO2, Zm/Zeu, and ZmNO2 (Pseudo-F = 1.7, 1.6, and 1.7; p = 0.13, 0.16 and 0.13, respectively) were removed. When phytoplankton C biomass data were expressed as group-specific percentage of total C forward selection and step-wise permutation tests showed that all 12 of the explanatory variables now significantly (p < 0.05) contributed to the model (Table 1).

Analysis of the CHEMTAX pigment data was based on eight different taxonomic groups and total Chl a from 188 samples obtained from various depths within the upper 200 m water column of 23 stations (i.e., 93 and 95 samples in summer and spring, respectively). Forward selection and step-wise permutation tests revealed that 10 of the 12 selected variables significantly contributed to the RDA model (Table 1). Subsequently, ZmPO4 and ZmNO2 (Pseudo-F = 2.4, and 1.8; p = 0.06 and 0.13, respectively) were removed. When expressed as group-specific percentage of total Chl a, eight variables significantly contributed to the RDA model (Table 1). Initial analysis resulted in the removal of ZeuPO4 and ZmNO2 (Pseudo-F = 2.1 and 1.6; p = 0.06 and 0.13, respectively) and subsequent analysis resulted in the further removal of N : P and ZmPO4 (Pseudo-F = 2.2 and 1.7; p = 0.05 and 0.13, respectively). When interpreting RDA correlation triplots, line lengths of the arrows representing the covariates signify their correlation with the axis (RDA1 horizontal axis and RDA2 vertical axis). For response variables, line lengths represent how well they are represented within

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PO4*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*PO4 = PO4; Pearson: r = 0.99, p < 0.001.
†Salinity = NO3; Pearson: r = 0.99, p < 0.001.

Temperature; Pearson: r = 0.87, p < 0.001.
the surface waters ranging from 22.8°C between 30°N and 33°N to 13.0°C between 60°N and 63°N. A prominent thermocline (i.e., rapid decrease in temperature from surface mixed layer to cold deep water) persisted over the latitudinal range of the cruise. Salinity demonstrated similar latitudinal trends as temperature for both seasons; however, vertical depth gradients were only apparent in the south during the summer (Fig. 3B,F). Resultant from the vertical and latitudinal gradients in temperature and salinity, seawater density exhibited strong gradients with depth and geographical location (Fig. 3C,G). During the summer, extrapolated vertical mixing coefficients (Kv) were low (10⁻³ m² s⁻¹) in the surface waters of southern stations indicating weak vertical mixing, while at the northern stations strong vertical mixing extended down to 100 m, indicating a well-mixed water column as a result of strong wind prior to our arrival (Jurado et al. 2012a). Vertical mixing was on average one order of magnitude lower in the summer and showed a sharp decline (from 10⁻⁵ to 10⁻¹ m² s⁻¹) toward the bottom of the mixed layer (Fig. 3D). Around 33°N, vertical mixing in the mixed layer stabilized around 10⁻³ m² s⁻¹ (i.e., log₁₀(Kv) ≈ -3) until 59°N, where values in the upper 20 m declined by an order of magnitude to 10⁻⁵ m² s⁻¹.

Nitrate (NO₃) and phosphate (PO₄) were highly depleted (below detection limit) in the mixed layer up to 40°N in the spring and 45°N in summer. A steep nutricline for NO₃ and PO₄ was observed in the stratified regions during both seasons (Fig. 4A, E and B, F, respectively). In the north (58°N–63°N) spring surface concentrations averaged 11.5 μM NO₃ and 0.8 μM PO₄, whereas lower average concentrations were observed during summer, i.e., 1.2 μM and 0.14 μM for NO₃ and PO₄, respectively. In the spring, nitrite (NO₂) concentration was maximal at the base of the nutricline (around 0.4 μM), which also corresponded closely with Zₑv. In the summer, NO₃ concentrations were typically below the detection limit south of 49°N, with the highest concentration (0.8 μM) around 60 m just north of 50°. Ammonium concentrations in spring were typically below detection limit except between 41°N and 55°N, and in summer north of 49°N. Overall N : P ratio in the Zₑv in the spring averaged 8.8 ± 6.5 south and 15.4 ± 1.2 north of 45°N and averaged 10.6 ± 9.4 in summer.

**Phytoplankton data**

**Spring**

In the spring, pico-sized photoautotrophs dominated the total phytoplankton enumerated by FCM (on average 97%) (Fig. 5). Total phytoplankton abundance was highest in the south and declined toward the north, corresponding to strong vertical mixing and deep mixing depths (Fig. 3). South of 35°N, Prochlorococcus populations were the numerically dominant phytoplankton groups (Fig. 5B, C). North of 35°N, phytoplankton became confined to the surface mixed layer and the abundance of eukaryotic phytoplankton increased. Nano I–IV maxima occurred between 35°N and

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**Fig. 2.** Brunt–Väisälä frequency (N²) values averaged over the upper 100 m depth for the summer 2009 (red) and spring 2011 (blue) STRATPHYT cruises and used to classification the level of stratification based on the following criteria: N² < 2 × 10⁻⁵ rad² s⁻² non-stratified, 2 × 10⁻⁵ < N² < 5 × 10⁻⁵ rad² s⁻² weakly stratified and N² > 5 × 10⁻⁵ rad² s⁻² strongly stratified.

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**Results**

**Physicochemical data**

During the spring, the southern half of the cruise transect (29°N–46°N; stations 0-17) was classified as weakly stratified with 2 × 10⁻⁵ < N² < 5 × 10⁻⁵ rad² s⁻² (Fig. 2) and Zₑv of 8.9 m in the spring averaged 8.8 ± 6.5 south and 15.4 ± 1.2 north of 45°N and averaged 10.6 ± 9.4 in summer.
50°N, which corresponded with a peak in Chl a (Fig. 5G). The Chl a depth profile showed clearly the deep mixing of phytoplankton north of 50°N (Z_m = 225-311 m). At the northernmost stations, calm weather conditions prior to measurements allowed the water column to become more stabilized, reducing mixing depths to < 200 m, and permitting abundances of Pico I and II, and Nano III to once again increase in the surface layer.

Oligotrophic areas as defined by nutrient concentrations (i.e., NO_3 ≤ 0.13 μM and PO_4 ≤ 0.03 μM; van de Poll et al. 2013) or Chl a concentrations (< 0.07 mg Chl m^-2) extended to 40°N. Phytoplankton pigment analysis showed that the deep chlorophyll maximum (DCM) of the most oligotrophic region (28-35°N) was largely comprised of Prochlorococcus, prasinophytes, pelagophytes and Synechococcus (25%, 20%, 16%, and 10%, respectively; Fig. 6). The surface (0-
A peak in Chl a between 40°N and 50°N (Fig. 6G) was largely made up by haptophytes (53%; Fig. 6D), diatoms (13%; Fig. 6H) and prasinophytes (12%; Fig. 6C). North of 50°N, haptophytes and diatoms dominated until 58°N where cryptophytes became one of the major groups with an average 22% of total (as compared to 19% for haptophytes and diatoms, Fig. 6). Microscopic analysis showed that diatoms of northern stations consisted mainly of large Bacteriastrum sp. (> 1.0 × 10³ cells L⁻¹), with pennates (i.e., Nitzschia longissima) and small Chaetoceros spp. in lower numbers. Haptophytes consisted of cf. Emiliania huxleyi as well as Phaeocystis-like cells. The diatom composition at southern stations consisted of the small Pseudonitzschia cf. delicatissima, and short Leptocylindrus mediterraneus chains.

Depth-integrated (0-250 m) cellular C from FCM phytoplankton counts (< 20 μm diameter) ranged between 1.2 g C
Fig. 5. ODV plots of the abundance (mL⁻¹) of total phytoplankton < 20 μm (A), photosynthetic picoprykaryotes (B–D), picoeukaryotes (E and F), HPLC calibrated Chl α autofluorescence (mg m⁻²) and nanoeukaryote abundance determined by flow cytometry during the spring STRATIPHYTE cruise. Black dots indicate measurement points. Yellow dots illustrate Z_m; the absence of yellow points between 50°N and 60°N is due to Z_m deeper than maximal sampling depth. During the spring, Nano IV was not detected.
m$^{-2}$ and 1.7 g C m$^{-2}$ at the southern oligotrophic stations (Fig. 7A). Pico-sized phytoplankton (pico-prokaryotes and eukaryotes) comprised the largest percentage (57-92%) of the algal C biomass of this region (Fig. 7B). Of the cyanobacteria, both *Synechococcus* and *Prochlorococcus* LL had an equal contribution to algal biomass of (on average) 24% with a much lower contribution from *Prochlorococcus* HL of 8.5%. Depth-integrated algal C was maximum around 46°N at 7.4 g C m$^{-2}$ and ranged between 1.01 g C m$^{-2}$ and 2.57 g C m$^{-2}$ in the non-stratified regions of the north (> 50°N; Fig. 7A). Nanoeukaryotes (Nano I–IV) were responsible for the greatest proportion of total algal biomass in the northern half of the transect, comprising between 74% and 92% (Fig. 7B). S-N differences in the contribution of Pico I and II to groupspecific C were not present and Pico II made up the largest percentage (on average 69%) over the entire latitudinal range. Nano I comprised all of the nanoeukaryotic phytoplankton C until 42°N, while in non-stratified stations (> 50°N) groups II and III were responsible for the majority of cellular C (53-82%).

Depth-integrated Chl $a$ concentration varied between 36 mg Chl $a$ m$^{-2}$ and 66 mg Chl $a$ m$^{-2}$ in southern oligotrophic region (< 40°N) (Fig. 7A). The taxonomic composition of depth integrated Chl $a$ in this region was primarily comprised of haptophytes (37%), pelagophytes (18%), prasinophytes (17%) and *Prochlorococcus* (14%) (Fig. 7C). North of 40°, depth-integrated Chl $a$ ranged between 62 mg m$^{-2}$ and 155 mg m$^{-2}$, with an average concentration of 94 mg m$^{-2}$. Haptophytes (40%), diatoms (19% up to 50% at station 55) and cryptophytes (12%) were important contributors to total Chl $a$ of mesotrophic regions. Similar to depth integrated carbon, Chl $a$ demonstrated a peak in concentrations at
in the southern most region (31°N–33°N), with the HL population dominating the upper 0-55 m surface waters (92%; Fig. 8B) and the LL population being more abundant at the DCM (93%; Fig. 8C). The DCM shallowed with latitude, giving over to a surface maximum north of 45°N. This also marked the upper boundary of oligotrophic areas, which occurred 5° north compared to the spring. When the base of the \( Z_m \) was situated above the nutricline, picoeukaryotic photoautotrophs became maximal in the surface waters and *Prochlorococcus* disappeared. The cyanobacteria *Synechococcus* spp. showed highest abundances in the north (\(7.0 \pm 0.4 \times 10^4 \text{ mL}^{-1}\); Fig 8D) numerically dominating the photosynthetic community <20 \( \mu \text{m} \) (making up 74% of the total counts). The abundance of the picoeukaryotic phytoplankton increased north of 38°N with Pico II being more dominant in the northern half of the transect (Fig. 8E,F). Chl \( a \) and cell size increased towards the north (Fig. 8G–K). Although nanoeukaryotic phytoplankton abundance was relatively low, their larger cell size contributed substantially to Chl \( a \) autofluorescence (Fig. 8G). The abundance of the different nanoeukaryotic phytoplankton groups was inversely related to cell size, whereby the largest sized Nano III and IV were the least abundant and found only in the surface waters of the most northern stations (Fig. 8K).

Phytoplankton pigment analysis (Fig. 9) indicated that northern surface populations were largely made up by haptophytes (around 48%), followed by prasinophytes (16%), pellagophytes (12%), and dinoflagellates (12%). *Synechococcus*, cryptophytes and diatoms also had pigment concentration maxima in these regions (>60°N), but contributed very little to the total community composition (<5%) (Fig. 9). In the strongly stratified southern stations (30°N–45°N), haptophytes remained a principal component of the algal community based on Chl \( a \) (average 24%; Fig. 9D) with *Prochlorococcus*, prasinophytes, pellagophytes and *Synechococcus* contributing 23%, 17%, 12%, and 12%, respectively (Fig. 9A–D). Microscopic analysis revealed that diatoms of the northern stations consisted of pennates with *Nitzschia longissima* and *Pseudonitzschia cf. delicatissima* as main representatives. The haptophyte *Phaeocystis* increased towards the north reaching maximum cell numbers at 58°N of around 2 \( \times 10^4 \) cells mL\(^{-1}\). In contrast to spring, *Phaeocystis* was primarily found in colonial form with colony bladders often colonized by other phytoplankton species as well as heterotrophs (i.e., dinoflagellates, ciliates).

Integrated over depth (0-250 m), cellular C from FCM counts were twofold to fourfold lower in the summer compared to spring and ranged between 0.33 g C m\(^{-2}\) and 2.53 g C m\(^{-2}\) (Fig. 10), with the lowest values (max. 0.81 g C m\(^{-2}\)) in the oligotrophic south (<45°N). Pico-sized phytoplankton dominated (70-97%) the south, with cyanobacteria contributing an average of 19%, 29%, and 8% for *Prochlorococcus* HL, *Prochlorococcus* LL and *Synechococcus*, respectively. As latitude increased nanoeukaryotes (Nano I–IV) became

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**Fig. 7.** Depth-integrated total phytoplankton carbon (< 20 \( \mu \text{m} \)) determined from flow cytometry (closed squares) and depth-integrated total Chl \( a \) determined from HPLC calibrated Chl \( a \) autofluorescence (open circles) (A), the percent composition of depth-integrated (0-250 m) total carbon (< 20 \( \mu \text{m} \)) (B), and taxonomic composition of depth-integrated (0-250 m) total Chl \( a \) determined by HPLC pigment analysis using CHEMTAX identification (C) during the spring.

46°N reaching concentrations of 121 mg m\(^{-2}\) (Fig. 7A). The relaxation of the vertical mixing in the northern most stations reduced the contribution of diatoms again to 13%.

**Summer**

Similar to spring, pico-sized phytoplankton dominated, i.e., 95% of the total phytoplankton enumerated by FCM (Fig. 8). In contrast to spring, however, phytoplankton abundances were lower in the surface layer (0-25 m). South of 45°N, total abundance was maximal (1.6 \( \pm 0.4 \times 10^7 \) cells mL\(^{-1}\)) below the \( Z_m \) and tapered off toward the depth of the nutricline, which is characteristic for a deep-chlorophyll maximum (DCM). The prokaryote *Prochlorococcus* was the most abundant member of the phytoplankton community
Fig. 8. ODV plots of the abundance (mL$^{-1}$) of total phytoplankton < 20 μm (A), photosynthetic picoprykaryotes (B–D), picoeukaryotes (E and F), HPLC calibrated Chl a autofluorescence (mg m$^{-3}$) and nanoeukaryote abundance determined by flow cytometry during the summer STRATPHYT cruise. Black dots indicate measurement points. Yellow dots illustrate $Z_m$. 

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responsible for the greatest proportion of total carbon biomass (with *Synechococcus* and picoeukaryotic phytoplankton sharing the residual 15-40%). Depth-integrated Chl *a* biomass was also twofold lower in summer compared to spring, varying between 17 mg Chl *a* m^{-2} and 27 mg Chl *a* m^{-2} in oligotrophic regions (Fig. 10A), with *Prochlorococcus*, haptophytes and prasinophytes as the principal contributors (24%, 24%, and 18%, respectively). Moving north, the importance of haptophytes increased (Fig. 10C). Similar to that of total organic C, the highest values for total Chl *a* were found north of 55°N with maximum values of around 43 mg Chl *a* m^{-2} (Fig. 10A).

**Statistical analysis**

Redundancy analysis (RDA) was used to investigate relationships between the phytoplankton community composition (red lines) and the environmental variables (blue lines in Fig. 11). Lines in the RDA triplots pointing in the same direction are positively correlated, while lines pointing in opposite directions are negatively correlated. In addition, the triplots show how stratification and depth level (symbols) are associated with the community composition and environmental variables. We note that the RDA does not show NO₃ and temperature as environmental variables, because PO₄ was collinear with NO₃ (Pearson correlation: \( r = 0.99, p < 0.001 \)) and salinity was collinear with temperature (\( r = 0.87, p < 0.001 \)). In Fig. 11A, the phytoplankton community composition is quantified in terms of carbon based on FCM analysis. The eigenvalues (obtained from model output) revealed that the first two axes of this RDA triplot explained 27% and 12% of the variation in the dataset. The main environmental variables contributing to the formation of the
When the phytoplankton was quantified as percentage distribution of total C, multivariate analysis showed that the first two axes of the RDA explain approximately 16% and 10% of the variation in the data, respectively (Fig. 11B). The most influential variables to the formation of the first axis were again PO\(_4\) and salinity, while the second axis was mainly influenced by depth layer, \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\) NO\(_2\) and stratification level. Prochlorococcus, Synechococcus and picoeukaryotic phytoplankton had high contributions to total C at high salinity/temperature, low nutrient environments and were differentiated by higher contributions of Prochlorococcus HL, and Synechococcus in the \(Z_m\). Nano I–IV on the other hand showed higher contributions to total C in relatively lower temperature, higher nutrient environments. A higher proportion of Nano I cellular C was associated with \(Z_{eu}\) environments with higher N : P ratios, while Nano II and III were associated with \(Z_{eu}\) environments with high \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\).

When the community composition was based on pigment analysis and expressed in terms of Chl \(a\), the first two axes of the RDA explained 29% and 13% of the variation (Fig. 11C). The first axis was mainly influenced by \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\) and inversely by salinity. The second axis was mainly formed by PO\(_4\) and stratification. Prochlorococcus-specific Chl \(a\) was associated with strongly stratified waters with high temperature/salinity, low nutrients and low \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\). Conversely, cryptophytes and diatoms were related to relatively colder, non-stratified waters with high availability of nutrients and high \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\). Total Chl \(a\) and the remaining taxonomic groups were moderately coupled to warmer stratified waters with shallow \(Z_{eu}\).

When the community composition was based on the percentage distribution of the Chl \(a\) concentration, the first two axes of the RDA explained 24% and 15% of the variation in the data (Fig. 11D). The first axis was mainly influenced by salinity (negative correlation) and PO\(_4\), and the second axis by depth layer and \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\). Diatoms and cryptophytes were related to non-stratified waters with relaxed nutrient limiting conditions and a higher \(Z_m/Z_{eu}\) ratio. Conversely, an increased contribution of dinoflagellates were associated with \(Z_{eu}\) of stations with stronger stratification and fewer nutrients. Consistent with phytoplankton C analysis, the contribution of Prochlorococcus was associated with high temperature/salinity and low nutrient environments. However, one notable difference was the high correlation of Synechococcus with Prochlorococcus, which is absent from FCM measurements. Finally, prasinophytes, haptophytes and pelagophytes were related to \(Z_{eu}\) of stations characterized by lower temperatures/salinites, higher nutrients and shallower \(Z_{eu}\).

Overall, environmental data explained 47%, 37%, 52%, and 56% of the total variation in phytoplankton group-specific C, %C, Chl \(a\) and %Chl \(a\), respectively (Table 2). As ecological data are general quite noisy and consequently can never be expected to yield a high value of \(R^2\) (Legendre and
Legendre 1998), these values provide confidence that the major patterns within the data have been captured by the RDA model. Variance partitioning demonstrated that stratification level alone explained 4-8% of the variation (Table 2). Therefore, inclusion of Brunt–Väisälä frequency (N²) as an index of stratification increased the variation explained by the environmental data. Running the models without considering nutrient flux into the surface waters demonstrated nearly equivalent R², demonstrating equal coverage by both models. However, in the case of size composition data, inclusion of nutrient flux reduced the explained variation partitioned to stratification level (from 7.4% to 4.1%).

**Discussion**

**Comparing CHEMTAX and FCM**

FCM provides detailed information about abundance and size structure of the phytoplankton community. In contrast, pigment analysis with CHEMTAX provides information regarding taxonomic composition including larger-sized algae that are typically missed by FCM, but lacks information regarding cell abundances and is unable to differentiate size differences within taxonomic groups (Uitz et al. 2006, 2008). These differences between CHEMTAX and FCM analysis became apparent when comparing depth-integrated Chl a

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**Fig. 11.** Redundancy Analysis (RDA) correlation triplots of phytoplankton community composition (in red) in relation to environmental variables (in blue). The community composition is quantified in terms of (A) phytoplankton carbon (cell size < 20 μm) and (B) percentual distribution of phytoplankton carbon, both calculated from the FCM counts, (C) Chl a concentration and (D) percentual distribution of the Chl a concentration, both calculated from the pigment analysis using CHEMTAX. Data represented in figures are compiled from both the summer and spring STRATIPHYT cruises. Symbols illustrate from what stratification and depth level the samples originated from; filled according to depth layer (open = mixed layer and closed = below mixed layer) and colored according to stratification level (green = strongly stratified, red = weakly stratified, and black = non-stratified stations). Environmental variables: \( Z_{eu} \) = euphotic zone depth, \( \frac{N}{P} \) = ratio of DIN to PO₄, \( \frac{Z_m}{Z_{eu}} \) = ratio of mixed layer depth to euphotic zone depth, \( Z_mPO_4 \) = PO₄ flux into the mixed layer, \( Z_mNO_2 \) = NO₂ flux into the mixed layer, and \( Z_m^*PO_4 \) = \( Z_{eu}^*PO_4 \) & \( Z_m^*PO_4 \), which are labeled together to improve readability as arrows overlay one another. PO₄ is collinear with NO₃ (Pearson correlation: \( r = 0.99 \), \( p < 0.001 \)) and salinity is collinear with temperature (\( r = 0.9 \), \( p < 0.001 \)). Biological variables: Prochl HL, Prochlorococcus high-light; Prochl LL, Prochlorococcus low-light; Syn, Synechococcus; Pico, picoeukaryotes; Nano, nanoeukaryotes; Dino, dinoflagellates; Hapto, haptophytes; Prasino, prasinophytes; Crypto, cryptophytes; Pelago, pelagophytes.
(obtained from pigment analysis) and total phytoplankton C (obtained by FCM) across the two seasons. While the results of both methods were tightly coupled during the summer (when small-sized phytoplankton dominated), they deviated from each other in the spring where there was a higher contribution of larger-sized phytoplankton taxa north of 40\textdegree N. Using a fixed carbon : chlorophyll ratio of 50 (Brown et al. 1999), carbon determined from pigments and FCM counts were in good agreement during the summer and within oligotrophic regions during the spring. However, Chl a carbon concentrations were up to fivefold higher during the spring in the well-mixed high latitude regions, which coincided with a higher presence of larger diatoms species as seen from both CHEMTAX and microscopy observations. In spite of methodological differences between FCM and pigment analysis, combining the two methods permitted us to examine how changes in vertical stratification affected both the size structure and taxonomic composition of phytoplankton communities, and provided additional information regarding the potential taxonomic groups comprising different phytoplankton size classes. Based on our results, we recommend that future studies combine FCM and CHEMTAX analysis, and use size-fractionation for both FCM and HPLC samples. This would provide useful information regarding the size composition of taxa as well as of numerically abundant groups, and may improve taxonomic identification of FCM groups.

Although phytoplankton pigment analysis confirmed the general spatial distributions of the prokaryotic phytoplankton, there were some notable discrepancies compared to FCM. Pigments specific for Prochlorococcus were low for near-surface samples despite their high numerical abundance determined by FCM. This indicates either a low cellular concentration of this pigment in the HL population or could indicate a reduced retention of small cells during filtration. The smaller average cell diameter of Prochlorococcus HL in this study (i.e., 0.6 \textmu m) compared to the LL population (i.e., 0.7-0.8 \textmu m) does support the latter. Photoacclimation related changes are most strongly observed in photoprotective pigments (e.g., diadinoxanthin, diatoxanthin and violaxanthin, antheraxanthin and zeaxanthin) and subsequently these pigments show steep vertical gradients within the water column. As a result, photoprotective pigments are to be avoided when using CHEMTAX analysis when alternative pigments are available. In addition, photoacclimation can alter cellular pigment concentrations. Pigments specific for Prochlorococcus (e.g., divinyl Chl a) have been shown to be reduced by 37-50\% in high-light acclimated cells of Prochlorococcus HL ecotype eMED45 (Partensky et al. 1993). In addition, a 12-fold difference in cellular divinyl Chl a concentrations has been reported for field populations of Prochlorococcus (Partensky et al. 1999b). This suggests that the variability in carbon to Chl a ratios of this species may be a main cause for the discrepancy between flow cytometry derived carbon data and pigment based data from CHEMTAX found for oligotrophic stations. Pigment and FCM based detection of Synechococcus also revealed inconsistencies. Detection of Synechococcus based on zeaxanthin indicated a higher signature in the DCM regions compared to detection based on phycocerythrin fluorescence as determined by FCM. Phycocerythrin has higher specificity than zeaxanthin and is most likely a better indicator for this genus, however, it is not soluble in acetone, excluding its utility in CHEMTAX due to the pigment extraction method. The use of two separate pigments for the identification of this taxa does not appear to permit a direct comparison between these two methods.

**Phytoplankton distributions in relation to vertical stratification**

Pico-sized phytoplankton, and particularly cyanobacteria, dominated the total phytoplankton abundance and biomass (< 20 \textmu m) of the stratified southern region, consistent with evidence for the importance of this size class for the production in warm, low nutrient waters (Partensky et al. 1996; Maranon et al. 2000; Perez et al. 2006; Uitz et al. 2006). Prochlorococcus was the main photosynthetic prokaryotic group, with the northern edge of its distributions closely matching...
oligotrophic boundaries (varying from 42°N to 48°N between spring and summer). The contribution to total biomass (i.e., 32% and 48% in spring and summer, respectively) and geographic distribution of Prochlorococcus are both in the upper range of those reported in the literature (i.e., 21-43% and typically found 40°S-45°N; Johnson et al. 2006; Whitton and Potts 2012). The northern edge of the distribution of Prochlorococcus coincided closely with a reduction in temperature, supporting evidence that temperature acts as a critical factor regulating the distribution of this genus (Johnson et al. 2006; Zinser et al. 2007; Flombaum et al. 2013). The ubiquity and numerical dominance of Prochlorococcus within stratified oligotrophic waters of the world’s oceans is thought to be a consequence of both genetic streamlining (and subsequent reduction in cell size), and diversity in genomic evolution within the genus facilitating a range of niche partitioning (Partensky and Garczarek 2010). Coherent with this hypothesis, FCM distinguished two distinct populations of Prochlorococcus (Johnson et al. 2006; Zinser et al. 2007) that dominated at different depths and latitudes. Prochlorococcus HLII dominated over Synechococcus twofold under conditions of strong stratification, which was reversed under weak stratification. The prevalence of Prochlorococcus LL changed very little between the two seasons, which is consistent with a study revealing a shift from cyanobacteria with a small genome (i.e., Prochlorococcus LLII) to those with a larger genome (i.e., Prochlorococcus LL and Synechococcus) with increased vertical mixing in the upper 10 m water column (Bouman et al. 2011). The dominance of Synechococcus over Prochlorococcus following deep winter mixing is often attributed to the inability of Prochlorococcus to utilize the increased nitrate concentrations (Whitton and Potts 2012). Our results suggest that future alterations in stratification will also play a role in governing phylogeography within the unicellular cyanobacterial populations.

The geographical distribution of Synechococcus extended further northwards than that of Prochlorococcus, illustrating the broader temperature range of Synechococcus (Moore et al. 1995; Partensky et al. 1999a; Pelouquin et al. 2013). Recently, it was suggested that the ability of Synechococcus spp. to regulate photochemistry over a range of temperatures through temperature dependent association of phycobilisome (PBS) to the different photosystems may explain the larger geographic range of this group relative to Prochlorococcus spp., which lack PBS (Mackey et al. 2013). However, we also provide evidence that nutrients are important in regulating the abundance of Synechococcus. Synechococcus demonstrated lowest abundances in oligotrophic regions and abundances were maximal where the nutricline was the shallowest. In addition, the contribution of Synechococcus to total C was higher in the spring (up to 43% compared to 25% in the summer). The success of this genus under high nutrient concentrations is in line with maximal abundances observed in the highly productive upwelling regions where concentrations can be up to a magnitude higher than in oceanic regions (Morel 1997; Whitton and Potts 2012).

The predominance of pico-sized cells in the oligotrophic regions is often attributed to a competitive advantage over larger phytoplankton in low nutrient environments afforded by the lower nutrient requirements, small diffusion boundary layers and large surface area per unit volume of small cell size (Raven 1986; Chisholm 1992; Finkel et al. 2010). This is consistent with our finding of nutrients as an important agent for phytoplankton size structure. Aside from pico-prokaryotic autotrophs, eukaryotic haptophytes (ranging 23-36% between summer and spring), prasinophytes (17-19%) and pelagophytes (13-18%) substantially contributed to depth integrated Chl-a concentration within the oligotrophic regions. This concurs with evidence from literature that these groups are important components of picoeukaryotic phytoplankton communities, and can represent up to 35% of total picoeukaryotic cells (Guillou et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2009; Jardillier et al. 2010). As even tiny haptophytes may produce organic plate scales this genus may play a significant role in the biological pump of stratified areas (Liu et al. 2009).

Vertical stratification affects the phytoplankton dynamics by regulating the availability of light and nutrients to phytoplankton in the ocean (Behrenfeld et al. 2006; Huismann et al. 2006; Hoegh-Guldberg and Bruno 2010). Our results demonstrate that incorporating an index for stratification, such as Brunt–Väisälä frequency (N^2), can improve the explained variation in phytoplankton data, both in terms of cell size and taxonomic composition. The underlying reason is probably that this stratification index captures the impact of stratification on various physicochemical processes, such as the flux of nutrients into the euphotic zone. Our finding that the inclusion of nutrient flux into the surface waters reduces the variation explained by stratification level, without improving the overall coverage of the model, tends to support this hypothesis.

In general, phytoplankton biomass and primary production (van de Poll et al. 2013) were highest where the nutricline was the shallowest, suggesting a strong coupling between the nutricline, the rate of nutrient supply to the euphotic zone and the photosynthetic performance of phytoplankton in the North Atlantic Ocean (Behrenfeld et al. 2006). The depth of the nutricline was closely tied to the shift in dominance of key phytoplankton genera and size classes. Besides the switch in the dominant cyanobacterial group from Prochlorococcus in waters with a deep nutricline to Synechococcus in waters with a shallow nutricline, a switch from picoeukaryotic to nanoeukaryotic phytoplankton as the principal contributors to C biomass <20 µm was also apparent during both seasons. Nutricline depth is thought to reflect nutrient supply into the upper mixed layer and when implemented as a proxy for water column stability has successfully explained basin-scale changes in the relative
contribution of diatoms and coccolithophores to total phytoplankton biomass (Cermeno et al. 2008). We found that the maximum group-specific Chl a concentrations for prasinophytes, haptophytes, phototrophic dinoflagellates and to some extent pelagophytes (summer) coincided with the shallowing of the nutricline. The association of phototrophic dinoflagellates and pelagophytes with higher nutrient concentrations is not surprising considering their relatively large cell size (Irigoin et al. 2004; Edwards et al. 2012). Dinoflagellates, however, were most prevalent during the summer in the north, which agrees with their tendency to favor warmer waters, with shallower Zm, higher mean irradiance and reduced vertical mixing (Irwin et al. 2012). Although the current study estimated phytoplankton contribution based on taxon-specific pigments, the mixotrophic capacity of some phytoplankton species cannot be excluded. Haptophytes, prasinophytes, cryptophytes, and dinoflagellates have all been shown to contain mixotrophic representatives (Mckie-Krisberg and Sanders 2014; Unrein et al. 2014). Such nutritional flexibility would provide a competitive advantage under low light and low (inorganic) nutrient regimes.

During the spring the water column north of 53°N remained non-stratified, which resulted in the vertical uniformity of temperature, salinity, density and nutrients in the upper 200 m. This is consistent with observations of high latitude regions of the Atlantic remaining well mixed in the upper 200 m between December and April (van Aken 2000). Deep mixing and high turbulence in the north (> 50°N) during the spring dispersed cells to depths greater than 200 m, reducing phytoplankton abundance and phytoplankton pigment concentrations. However, when integrated over the sampled water column, these northern stations demonstrated the highest Chl a concentrations per m² indicating high phytoplankton C biomass in these regions, despite being dispersed over hundreds of meters. Chl a concentrations specific for diatoms and cryptophytes were greatest in these homogeneously mixed waters. The association of these taxa with higher macronutrient concentrations is consistent with their lower half-saturation constants for nutrient uptake and nutrient-limited growth (Litchman et al. 2006; Irwin et al. 2012).

Modeling the phytoplankton composition of future oceans

The current study provides a high-resolution mesoscale description of physical, chemical, and biological (phytoplankton community composition and size) characteristics in the upper 200 m water column along a stratification gradient in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean during two periods of stratification. The multivariate approach identified ocean stratification as one of the key drivers for the distribution and separation of different phytoplankton taxa and size classes. Here we elaborate on key features of our results pertinent to biogeochemical and ecological modeling studies of the present and future oceans.

Models can improve our understanding and prediction of climate-induced changes in plankton community composition, primary production and associated biogeochemical cycles. During recent years, interesting model approaches have been developed in which a broad spectrum of phytoplankton “species” with different growth parameters and different responses to light and nutrients become self-organized into distinct biogeo graphical communities across the global ocean (e.g., Follows et al. 2007). The predictions of these models critically depend on questions as to which traits best differentiate phytoplankton functional groups and which environmental variables regulate primary production and community structure (Behrenfeld et al. 2006; Irwin et al. 2012). In this sense, predictions of how the ocean ecosystem will respond to climate change are still limited by a lack of information regarding which taxonomic groups are essential and what environmental controls determine the distribution and succession of these taxonomic groups (Falkowski et al. 2000; Litchman et al. 2006; Finkel et al. 2010).

The classification of phytoplankton functional types (PFT) is dependent on the scientific question to be addressed by the model (Claustre 1994; Falkowski et al. 1998; Le Quéré et al. 2005). For biogeochemical models based on functional taxa, PFT should, for example (1) play a specific biogeochemical role, (2) be defined by distinct set of physiological, environmental or nutritional requirements which regulate biomass and productivity, and (3) be of quantitative importance in some regions of the ocean (Le Quéré et al. 2005). Based on this definition, we can classify our phytoplankton groups into several PFTs. Picocyanobacteria and picoeukaryotic phytoplankton were highest in abundance and showed largest contributions to phytoplankton biomass in stratified waters (N² > 2 \times 10⁻³ \text{ rad}² \text{s}⁻²). The picocyanobacteria PFT could be distinguished by a higher association with warm temperatures and high water clarity (deep Z_w), and conversely, the picoeukaryote PFT by a higher association with nutrient flux into the surface layers (Z_{mNO₂} and Z_{euPO₄}). Furthermore, our results indicate that in addition to temperature and light (as recently reported by Flombaum et al. 2013) incorporation of the N : P ratio and vertical turbulence structure of the water column will be useful to distinguish between the niches of the different picocyanobacterial populations (Prochlorococcus HL, Prochlorococcus LL and Synechococcus). Another main PFT, the diatoms, were distinguished by their association with the surface layers of non-stratified waters (N² < 2 \times 10⁻³ \text{ rad}² \text{s}⁻²), colder water temperatures, higher nutrient concentrations and higher potential for light limitation. There is some evidence for successional shifts in dominance between diatoms and cryptophytes (Moline et al. 2004; Mendes et al. 2013) and several studies have reported selective grazing by different zooplankton species on either diatoms or cryptophytes (Cottenec et al. 2001; Haberman
et al. 2003; Liu et al. 2010), which may advocate for an additional PFT for cryptophytes. If warranted, our analysis suggests that this cryptophyte PFT can be distinguished from diatoms by the closer association of cryptophytes with high \( Z_{\text{ru}}/Z_{\text{eu}} \) and conversely of diatoms with high \( Z_{\text{ru}} \).

Some models combine autotrophic dinoflagellates, prasinophytes, pelagophytes, and haptophytes together into one or more “mixed phytoplankton” PFT due to their lack of a distinguishable biochemical role or absence of bloom formation (Le Quéré et al. 2005). In our data, these taxa were distinguished from other phytoplankton by their high contribution to total Chl \( a \) in the DCM of the stratified waters. However, dinoflagellates were associated to waters with a shallow \( Z_{\text{ru}} \), whereas the haptophytes and prasinophytes showed a higher association with \( NH_4 \) and NO\(_2\). This is consistent with observations that haptophytes contain several species (e.g., Phaeocystis spp., Emiliania huxleyi) that have relatively high \( NH_4 \) uptake rates (Tungaraza et al. 2003) and can develop dense blooms in N-rich parts of the global ocean (Schoemann et al. 2005; Lacroix et al. 2007). In addition, haptophytes have the ability to produce organic or calcium carbonate plates (Not et al. 2012) and may thereby directly contribute to the biological pump (with obvious contributions by calcifying coccolithophores). Mixotrophy, although not exclusive to this taxa (McKie-Krisberg and Sanders 2014; Unrein et al. 2014), toxicity and bioluminescence can be distinct traits of relevance to dinoflagellates. Hence, dinoflagellates, prasinophytes, and haptophytes play different ecological roles (Not et al. 2012) and our data show that they can be discriminated as separate PFTs.

Taxonomic groups often contain different size classes, which may provide more information than PFT discrimination based on taxonomic affiliation alone. Cell size is an important feature to consider from an ecological point of view, as it affects numerous functional characteristics of phytoplankton (Litchman et al. 2007). Important advances have therefore been made by models that predict phytoplankton community composition from the size structure of the constituent species (Armstrong 1994; Baird and Suthers 2007; Ward et al. 2012). This matches our data, where we find clear differences in the biogeographical distributions of picocyanobacteria (0.6-1 \( \mu \text{m} \)), picoeukaryotic phytoplankton (1-2 \( \mu \text{m} \)), small nanoeukaryotic phytoplankton (Nanoplankton I; 6-8 \( \mu \text{m} \)) and larger nanoeukaryotes (Nano II \\& III; 8-9 \( \mu \text{m} \)). However, our results also show that phytoplankton groups of similar size (such as the different picocyanobacterial groups) may still respond very differently to the environmental conditions. Hence, size structure alone is not sufficient to describe community structure, and other physiological traits (e.g., pigment composition, nutrient preferences, motility) need to be considered as well.

Our results indicate that in addition to the classic environmental factors temperature, nutrients and light, incorporation of the vertical turbulence structure of the water column is likely to improve existing models. In our statistical analysis, vertical mixing was described by two parameters, the Brunt–Väisälä frequency \( N^2 \) and mixing depth \( Z_{mv} \), which improved differentiation between the different PFT. In mathematical models vertical mixing is usually described by partial differential equations for the transport of heat, solutes and phytoplankton cells. Indeed, models and field experiments have shown that changes in vertical turbulent mixing can have dramatic impacts on the species composition of phytoplankton communities (Huisman et al. 2004; Jäger et al. 2008; Ryabov et al. 2010). However, numerical simulation of vertical mixing processes at a sufficiently high resolution to capture the vertical redistribution of phytoplankton species is computationally quite demanding (Huisman and Sommeijer 2002; Pham Thi et al. 2005), and computational power is one of the main limiting factors for their application in ecosystem models of the global ocean. Yet, vertical mixing processes provide a vital link between changes in the global climate, thermal stratification of the water column, nutrient fluxes and the growth, spatial distribution and species composition of phytoplankton communities (Follows and Dutkiewicz 2001; Jöhnk et al. 2008; Dutkiewicz et al. 2013). Hence, our results stress the need for an improved description of the vertical turbulence structure in global ocean models if we want to capture this vital link.

Conclusions

While we are confident that the major trends within our data were captured by the RDA models, not all of the variation in the distribution of phytoplankton over the Northeast Atlantic could be explained. The remaining variation could be an indication for the importance of loss factors to structuring phytoplankton communities. Loss factors including viral lysis and grazing can be substantial enough to counterbalance growth of natural phytoplankton communities (K. D. A. Mojica, unpubl.) (Behrenfeld and Boss 2014). As the fate of photosynthetically fixed carbon is essential for ecosystem efficiency and the functioning of the biological pump, more information is needed to understand how climate-induced changes in stratification will alter these loss processes.

Our results support the prediction that future increases in temperature will expand the geographic range of Prochlorococcus as oligotrophic areas continue to expand northward (Polovina et al. 2008; Flombaum et al. 2013). Furthermore, the data indicate that the increased contribution of Prochlorococcus to C biomass will occur at the expense of Synechococcus spp., leading to alterations in phylogeography within the unicellular cyanobacterial populations. Besides alterations to picocyanobacteria populations, future increases in (summer) stratification will likely increase the contribution of haptophytes, prasinophytes and pelagophytes in the northern region of the North Atlantic relative to cryptophytes and diatoms.
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