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Data-model comparison reveals key environmental changes leading to Cenomanian-Turonian Oceanic Anoxic Event 2

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The middle Cretaceous (Cenomanian–Turonian) was a period characterized by major environmental changes, including elevated sea-floor spreading rates, enhanced volcanism, high atmospheric CO₂ levels, warming terrestrial and marine temperatures, and the peak eustatic highstand of the Mesozoic. Two well-known perturbations in the global carbon cycle, that are recognized in various depositional settings, mark this interval—the Cenomanian-Turonian Oceanic Anoxic Event 2 (OAE2) and the Mid-Cenomanian Event (MCE). Although studies of OAE2 during the past two decades have arrived at consensus that the Caribbean Large Igneous Province (LIP) likely played a key role in triggering OAE2, the details of environmental developments during the Mid-Late Cenomanian leading up to this event, arguably the most significant biogeochemical perturbation of the Late Cretaceous, have only recently been the focus of investigations. This study employs a simple box model, based on previous studies of mid-Cretaceous climate, tectonism, and sea-level change, to test plausible environmental scenarios to explain the behavior of the Middle Cenomanian to Early Turonian carbon cycle. A compilation of published $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ datasets of carbonates and organic carbon is used to constrain the timing and magnitude of key excursions in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ curves as tiepoints for the carbon cycle isotope-mass balance calculation. The model experiments based on our hypotheses successfully reproduce two distinctive features observed in the Mid-Late Cenomanian $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ curves - 1) decoupling of $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{carb}}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{org}}$ reflecting increasing carbon isotope fractionation in response to steadily rising pCO₂, driven by enhanced volcanic degassing of mantle-derived CO₂, which likely preceded the presumed peak volcanism of the Caribbean LIP; and 2) a long-lived, secondary positive $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion that documents enhanced organic carbon burial in shallow shelf areas, which expanded during global sea-level rise and highstand. Our results demonstrate a plausible combination of environmental forcings that pre-conditioned the mid-Cretaceous ocean-atmosphere system for a massive

perturbation, the Cenomania-Turonian OAE2.

Key words: Box model, MCE, OAE2, carbon cycle