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# Ancient siderites reveal hot and humid super-greenhouse climate

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**Earth's climate is warming as the rise in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> (*p*CO<sub>2</sub>) contributes to increased radiative forcing. State-of-the-art models calculate a wide range in Earth's climate sensitivities due to increasing *p*CO<sub>2</sub>, and, in particular, the mechanisms responsible for amplification of high latitude temperatures remain highly debated. The geological record provides a means to evaluate the consequences of high radiative forcing on Earth's climate. Here we present clumped (*A*<sub>47</sub>) and oxygen ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ) isotope data from latest Paleocene/earliest Eocene (LPEE; 57-55 million years ago) pedogenic siderites, a time when *p*CO<sub>2</sub> peaked between 1400 and 4000 ppm. Continental mean annual temperature reached 41 °C in the equatorial tropics, and summer temperatures reached 23 °C in the Arctic. Reconstruction of the oxygen isotopic composition of precipitation reveal that the hot LPEE climate was characterized by a globally averaged increase in specific humidity with a corresponding increase in the average residence time of atmospheric moisture and a decrease in the subtropical-to-polar specific humidity gradient compared to the present-day. Pedogenic siderite data from other ancient super-greenhouse periods support the evidence that with higher global mean**

29 **temperatures and a decreased meridional temperature gradient the increase in specific**  
30 **humidity is subject to polar amplification.**

31 Continued anthropogenic emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> may increase Earth's radiative forcing to levels  
32 that were last encountered during the early Eocene Epoch (56-48 Ma ago)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, by  
33 investigating early Eocene paleoclimate records, we can evaluate the potential consequences  
34 of high radiative forcing on Earth's climate. The latest Paleocene/earliest Eocene is often  
35 studied as an analogue to ongoing climate change, as it involved a similar transient rise in  
36 *p*CO<sub>2</sub> (ref. <sup>2</sup>) and had a paleogeography similar to the present-day (Fig. S1). During the LPEE,  
37 Earth was effectively ice-free<sup>3,4</sup>, with sea surface temperatures (SST) markedly warmer than  
38 present, with estimates ranging from 25 to 45 °C in the tropics<sup>5</sup> and from 10 to 23 °C in the  
39 polar latitudes<sup>6,7</sup> (Fig. 1B). Continental temperature records are even more uncertain,  
40 quantitative estimates of paleotropical temperatures are sparse (Fig. 1A), and there are only  
41 very few and uncertain temperature reconstructions from high latitudes<sup>8,9</sup>. Thus the limited  
42 number and spatial coverage of existing paleotemperature records inhibit their predictive  
43 power for the near-future<sup>10</sup>. Quantitative continental temperature reconstructions are needed  
44 to critically evaluate the SST record, and to progress understanding of temperature  
45 distributions in a super-greenhouse climate. Reconstructions can also provide constraints on  
46 how elevated *p*CO<sub>2</sub> results in larger temperature rises at high latitudes relative to the tropics,  
47 or polar amplification of temperature<sup>11</sup>. For example, the poleward migration of storm-tracks  
48 during the LPEE has been proposed to have delivered more precipitation and latent heat to the  
49 Arctic<sup>12</sup>. However, the source of the high-latitude precipitation is not clear, and state-of-the-  
50 art model simulations are not conclusive on the physical mechanisms responsible for this  
51 fundamental change in the hydrological cycle<sup>13</sup>.

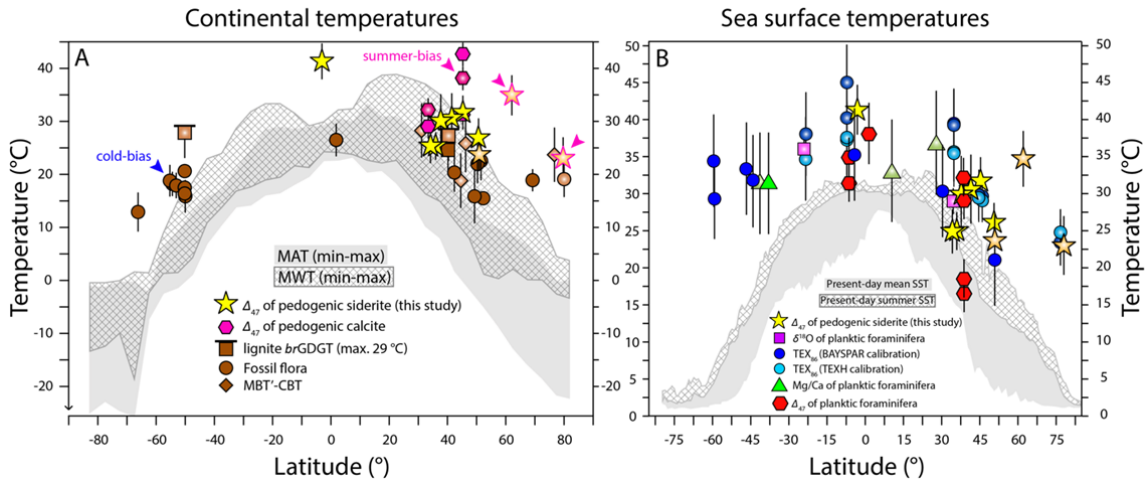
52 Here, we use the clumped isotope composition (*A*<sub>47</sub>; see supplement) of pedogenic siderite  
53 spherules to construct a quantitative record of continental temperatures during the LPEE at  
54 sites that range from the equator to the Arctic. We expand this record with the first siderite-  
55 based meridional reconstruction of continental oxygen isotopes in precipitation during the  
56 LPEE ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{precipitation}}$ ; see supplement) to advance our understanding of the dynamics of the  
57 hydrological cycle under high radiative forcing. We collected siderites from thirteen paleosols  
58 that formed in freshwater wetlands (Fig. S17; Fig. 2), which developed in low elevation  
59 settings (<200 m.a.s.l.)<sup>14</sup> that became warmer and wetter during the LPEE. Locations,  
60 paleosols and siderites are described in detail in White *et al.* (2017) and in the supplement

61 (Fig. 2). All uncertainties in our reconstructions are reported at  $2\sigma$ , or the 95% confidence  
62 level.

63 We find that  $\Delta_{47}$ -based siderite temperatures decrease from  $41 \pm 6.2$  °C in equatorial  
64 Colombia (3 °S), to  $23\text{-}32 \pm 8.2$  °C in the temperate zones of North America and Europe (34  
65 to 51 °N), to  $35 \pm 10.6$  °C in southern Alaska (62 °N) and to  $23 \pm 7.9$  °C in arctic Siberia (78  
66 °N, Fig. 1). Depending on the latitude, pedogenic siderite formed at temperatures between the  
67 mean annual air temperature (MAT) and the mean air temperature of the warmest months  
68 (MWT) at the soil surface<sup>15</sup>. The exact temperature depends on the seasonal fluctuations in air  
69 temperature at the soil surface and the depth of siderite formation<sup>15,16</sup>(Fig. S15). The  
70 temperature from Colombia represents MAT because during the LPEE the studied paleosol  
71 was located just below the equator where seasonal temperature fluctuations are low at any  
72 depth and because the vegetation cover in wetlands prevents any incident solar radiation from  
73 warming soil temperatures above air temperatures<sup>15</sup>. Our equatorial MAT reconstruction of  
74  $41 \pm 6$  °C may imply that most of the tropical C3-dominated forest biome, which persisted  
75 during the LPEE<sup>17</sup>, would have conducted photosynthesis beyond their present-day  
76 photosynthetic optima<sup>18</sup>.

77 Although our tropical temperature reconstruction likely represents MAT, siderites from  
78 temperate and high latitudes may show a bias toward the warmest months<sup>15</sup> because siderite  
79 precipitation is controlled by microbial iron reduction, which can proceed at faster rates when  
80 soil temperatures are higher<sup>19</sup>. However, none of our temperatures are entirely biased towards  
81 the MWT as all siderite spherules were retrieved from kaolinite-rich horizons that likely  
82 formed deeper than 100 cm in the subsurface during pedogenesis (see supplement), where  
83 seasonal temperature variability is damped<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, seasonality in the continental  
84 interior of the US and arctic Siberia may have been reduced during the LPEE compared to the  
85 present-day<sup>4,8,20,21</sup>, noting that some recent studies of super-greenhouse climates suggest  
86 seasonality in mid-continent settings was similar to the present-day<sup>22-24</sup>. Even if we assume  
87 present-day seasonality during the LPEE, our records in the temperate latitudes should be  
88 representative of MAT. For instance, the siderite from Alberhill, California (36 °N), formed at  
89 least one meter below the A-horizon, or lignite (Fig. S3), where modeling shows that most of  
90 the seasonal temperature variability – below 10 °C – is removed (Fig. S15). Nevertheless, the  
91 southern Alaskan and Siberian temperatures may still be slightly biased towards the MWT –  
92 despite a formation depth of 100 cm and possibly reduced LPEE seasonality – considering  
93 that present-day seasonal temperature variations exceed 10 °C at these latitudes. Thus, we

94 consider that the temperatures presented here are representative of MAT from the tropics to  
 95 temperate latitudes (0-51 °N/S), and they may have a measurable summer-bias – up to about 4  
 96 °C at a soil depth of 100 cm – at higher latitudes.



97

98 *Figure 1:* Temperature reconstructions during the latest Paleocene/ earliest Eocene. A)  
 99 Compilation of LPEE continental temperature records at low elevation (below 200 m.a.s.l.,  
 100 with the exception of the pedogenic calcite data from the Bighorn Basin that represent a  
 101 greater paleo-altitude) compared to the present-day maximum longitudinal temperature range  
 102 for both MAT and MWT using the Worldclim 2 dataset at low elevation (see supplement and  
 103 supplemental references). We use symbols with radial infill for PETM mean SSTs, as the PETM  
 104 represents the upper limit of LPEE warmth. Although some pedogenic calcite-based  $\Delta_{47}$   
 105 temperatures are from >200 m.a.s.l., we included them to allow for a direct comparison to our  
 106 siderite-based  $\Delta_{47}$  temperatures at the same paleo-latitudes. Several records show a cold-bias  
 107 in comparison to the siderite-based temperatures and the *brGDGT*-based temperatures in the  
 108 temperate latitudes. Pink symbols are summer-biased (see text). Reconstructions are plotted  
 109 with  $1\sigma$  uncertainties at the LPEE paleo-latitudes ( $\pm 2^\circ$ ). We refer to the supplement for a  
 110 direct comparison of LPEE siderite temperatures and present-day temperatures (Fig. S12), and  
 111 a compilation of LPEE temperatures from all elevations (Fig. S13). B) LPEE sea surface and  
 112 siderite-based continental temperature reconstructions are directly compared to address the  
 113 long-standing disagreement between both proxy records (see text). Sea surface temperature  
 114 records represent 57-50 Ma and symbols with radial fills represent PETM records. All  
 115 reconstructions are plotted with  $1\sigma$  uncertainties. Both SST and continental records are best  
 116 compared to the mean annual temperatures (grey) in the tropical and temperate latitudes, and  
 117 to the warmest month temperatures (square pattern) in the high latitudes.

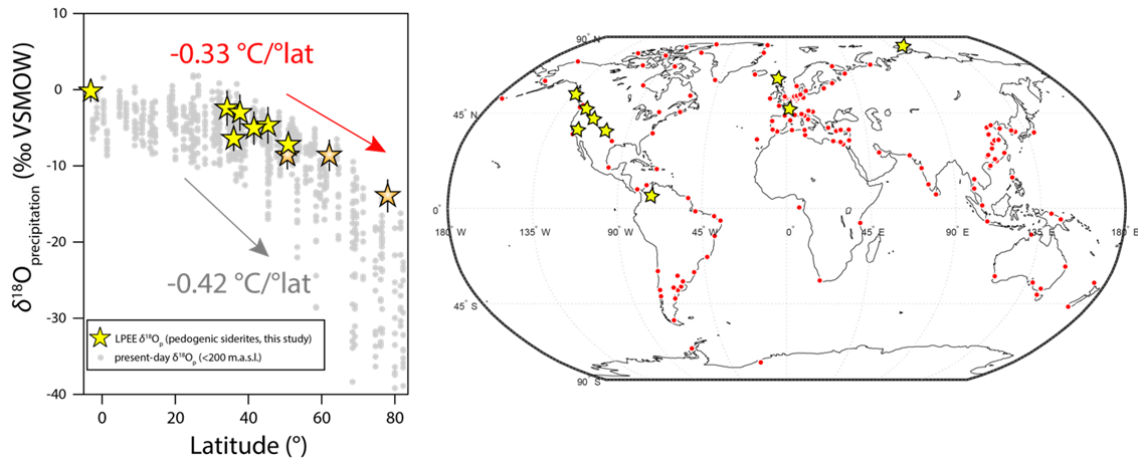
118 Our new continental temperature record shows that the LPEE was exceptionally hot with  
119 MAT being 6-24 °C warmer near the equator – significantly warmer than previously  
120 considered<sup>9,25</sup> – and MWT being 8-44 °C warmer in southern Alaska and 11-34 °C warmer in  
121 arctic Siberia, compared to the present-day range of mean annual and summer temperatures  
122 (Fig. S12). Our sample set consists of siderites formed during the latest Paleocene (57-56  
123 Ma), Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM, 56 Ma) and earliest Eocene (56-55 Ma,  
124 Fig. 1A), which may explain some variability in the temperature record. For instance, the  
125 extremely high temperature in southern Alaska records the PETM, which represents the upper  
126 limit of LPEE warmth. The PETM summer temperature in southern Alaska is  $21 \pm 11$  °C  
127 warmer than the present-day summer temperature if we consider the present-day longitude  
128 and paleo-latitude (Fig. S12). In turn, our LPEE temperature reconstructions in the temperate  
129 zone (23 to 32 °C between 34 and 51 °N) are 0-25 °C warmer than the present-day  
130 temperatures (Fig. S12).

131 Our results support a cold-bias in some leaf physiognomic paleotemperatures<sup>9</sup> (Fig. S13)  
132 which could be related to the use of an empirical calibration that is not directly applicable to  
133 deep-time. We emphasize that the apparent cold-bias in leaf physiognomy in previous  
134 compilations<sup>6</sup> partially disappears when the paleo-elevation of the sites used for the  
135 reconstructions are considered (Fig. S13). Our record is in good agreement with the lignite  
136 *br*GDGT-based temperatures. As lignites probably represent a shallower soil depth than the  
137 siderite-bearing horizons (Fig. S15), the agreement between both records may suggest that  
138 seasonality in the temperate latitudes was reduced during the LPEE. Both temperature  
139 reconstructions could represent a lower limit on continental temperatures during the LPEE as  
140 they are from land surfaces that became wetter during the LPEE, which experience less  
141 warming than those that have become drier, as observed under the present-day rise in  
142 temperature<sup>26,27</sup>. Our siderite-based temperatures indicate that pedogenic calcite formation  
143 temperatures are summer-biased and perhaps affected by incident solar heating<sup>28</sup>. Last, our  
144 LPEE continental temperatures are very similar to LPEE SST reconstructions (Fig. 1B),  
145 resolving the long-standing disagreement between the two climate archives in the tropics and  
146 the mid-to-high Northern Hemisphere (NH) latitudes<sup>9,29</sup>.

147 By combining the  $\Delta_{47}$ -based temperatures with the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of the siderites we can reconstruct the  
148  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of the groundwater in which they formed. All siderites presented in this study formed in  
149 waterlogged soils in which the seasonal variations in the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of percolating rainwater would  
150 have been dampened (see supplement). Therefore, we consider that the reconstructed

151 groundwater  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  records the mean  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of precipitation ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$ ) at the site<sup>15</sup>. The  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  record  
 152 (Fig. 2) confirms the robustness of our continental temperature record. The linear decrease in  
 153 LPEE  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  from the equator to the high NH latitudes (Fig. 2) supports the notion that the  
 154 siderites integrate a paleoclimatic signal that represents an averaged, maybe even regional  
 155 temperature and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  signal, and is not biased towards local conditions. Furthermore, the  
 156 reduced poleward depletion in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  confirms that the meridional temperature gradient was  
 157 much reduced in the LPEE compared to the present-day.

158



159

160 *Figure 2:* Siderite-based LPEE  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  reconstructions and modern GNIP  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  data (grey and  
 161 red dots) for locations <200 m.a.s.l. from -3 to 80 °N and present-day and LPEE temperature  
 162 gradients (see text). We use symbols with radial infill for PETM records, as the PETM  
 163 represents the upper limit of LPEE warmth.

164 We can quantify the meridional temperature gradient using the decrease in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  from the  
 165 equator to the Arctic, which – unlike the high latitude siderite formation paleotemperatures –  
 166 have no seasonal bias (see supplement). In the modern climate,  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  declines from the  
 167 tropics toward the poles as air masses cool during transport poleward, reducing specific  
 168 humidity, and preferentially removing  $^{18}\text{O}$  from the atmospheric vapor reservoir. In the LPEE,  
 169 the difference between the tropical  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  of  $0.6 \pm 0.4$  ‰ and the polar  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  of  $-12.9 \pm 1.6$  ‰  
 170 is  $13.5 \pm 1.8$  ‰. This translates into a difference in continental atmospheric  
 171 paleotemperatures, between 3 °S and 78 °N – of  $26 \pm 3$  °C, assuming a slope of 0.52 ‰ per  
 172 °C for the relationship between  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  and atmospheric temperature<sup>30</sup>. We assume that this  
 173 *global slope* is constant through time because both LGM<sup>31</sup> and early Eocene<sup>32</sup> isotope-enabled  
 174 global circulation models (GCMs) predict little change in this relationship. This slope can be

175 used to calculate ancient temperature gradients when the respective  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  reconstructions  
176 have a large latitude spread and are not biased by local or seasonal rainfall<sup>33</sup>. The  
177 reconstructed gradient of  $-26 \pm 3 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  or  $-0.33 \pm 0.03 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}/^\circ\text{lat}$  agrees with the clumped isotope  
178 temperatures (Fig. 1A), supporting a summer-bias in the southern Alaskan and Arctic  
179 temperature reconstructions. It also agrees with the early Eocene sea surface temperature  
180 gradient of  $-21 \pm 4 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{34}$ , again strengthening the agreement between our new continental  
181 climate reconstruction and existing ocean archives. Our reconstruction of the continental  
182 temperature gradient ( $-0.33 \pm 0.03 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}/^\circ\text{lat}$ ) is greater than previously considered<sup>6,29,35</sup>, and on  
183 the high side of the estimated sea surface temperature gradient<sup>34</sup>. However, it still confirms  
184 that the poles warmed significantly more than the tropics during the LPEE, considering that  
185 the present-day temperature gradient is  $-0.42 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}/^\circ\text{lat}$  (Fig. 2).

186 Further, our  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  record improves our understanding of the atmospheric hydrological cycle  
187 during the LPEE. Globally elevated  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  (Fig. 3A) – corrected for the ice volume effect (see  
188 supplement) – indicates a decrease in the rainout of precipitable water, which leads to an  
189 increase in the residence time of moisture in the atmosphere<sup>36</sup> compared to the present-day.  
190 This change is driven by an increase in atmospheric specific humidity that is greater than the  
191 increase in global precipitation. Atmospheric vapor content increases at approximately the  
192 rate determined by the Clausius-Clapeyron relationship ( $\sim 7.5\%/K$ ), whereas the increase in  
193 global mean precipitation is limited by energetic constraints to be substantially less  
194 ( $\sim 2\%/K$ )<sup>37</sup>. Because the atmospheric reservoir of water vapor is larger in a super-greenhouse  
195 climate, the removal of moisture from the atmosphere by precipitation will have a smaller  
196 effect on the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of precipitation than the same process today. This increase in specific  
197 humidity relative to precipitation results in an increase in the residence time of atmospheric  
198 moisture; today,  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  is positively correlated with moisture residence time<sup>36,38</sup>, suggesting  
199 that the globally elevated LPEE  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  reflects this increase in residence time. Our geological  
200 evidence for globally elevated  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  in a super-greenhouse climate is new and supports a  
201 number of numerical modeling studies that find a dominant role for specific humidity and  
202 moisture residence time in determining the oxygen isotope composition of precipitation (refs.  
203 <sup>38–43</sup>).

204 There is, in addition, spatial structure in the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  data that yields further insights into the  
205 atmospheric hydrological cycle in a super-greenhouse climate. In the modern climate, from  
206 approximately  $10^\circ$  to  $40^\circ\text{N/S}$  evaporation is greater than precipitation ( $E > P$ ), and this zone



207 supplies moisture to both the tropics and the poles, where  $P > E$ . The datapoints outside this  
208 zone (equatorward of  $10^\circ$  and poleward of  $40^\circ$ ) show the greatest enrichment in  $^{18}\text{O}$  compared  
209 to today (Fig. 3A). Although we recognize that we only have one point in the tropics, we posit  
210 that this bimodal enrichment in  $^{18}\text{O}$  at the equator and at the poles, with a relatively muted  
211 enrichment in the subtropics, results from latitudinal variations in net distillation in a super-  
212 greenhouse climate.

213 The observed increase in LPEE tropical  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  may seem counter-intuitive, as fully coupled  
214 and intermediate complexity models under high radiative forcing robustly predict a larger  
215 increase in precipitation over evaporation (*i.e.*,  $\Delta P > \Delta E$ ) in the tropics<sup>37,44</sup>. Present-day tropical  
216  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  values are frequently linked to the “amount effect”, whereby greater precipitation  
217 results in a decrease in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$ , as  $^{18}\text{O}$  is removed faster than it can be re-supplied by  
218 evaporation or advection<sup>43</sup>. In the tropics the amount effect is expected to be greater during  
219 the LPEE due to a decrease in the frequency of precipitation events coupled to an increased  
220 intensity of each event<sup>45</sup>. Alternatively, we suggest that the observed higher LPEE tropical  
221  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  is linked to an increase in specific humidity and average atmospheric moisture  
222 residence time. These increases result in reduced net moisture distillation and in an increase in  
223  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  even with higher precipitation amounts. Such an effect has been observed in modern  
224 tropical precipitation during strong La Nina events<sup>38</sup>. Though speculative, we suggest that  
225 specific humidity increases overwhelm precipitation increases (and the associated amount  
226 effect) in the tropics because of the large increase in tropical temperatures ( $\Delta T > 10^\circ$ ) and also  
227 because of an increase in latent heat transport from the subtropics to the equator under high  
228 radiative forcing. The latter is postulated by intermediate complexity models for super-  
229 greenhouse climates<sup>37,44</sup>. Alternatively, the high  $\Delta\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  in equatorial Colombia could also  
230 reflect a regional decrease in P-E, despite a zonal-mean tropical increase in P-E, which would  
231 result in positive  $\Delta\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  due to a regional decrease in net distillation. Zonal variations in  
232 tropical P-E are large and changes in regional P-E may occur due to other processes such as  
233 changes in large-scale circulation and convection patterns<sup>46</sup>. More latitudinally resolved data  
234 are necessary to resolve these questions.

235

236 The increase in  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  in high latitudes – the largest in our dataset – is reflective of a global  
237 increase in specific humidity and reduced net poleward distillation of  $^{18}\text{O}$ . Polar amplification  
238 of the warming results in a greater increase of specific humidity than of precipitation as it  
239 substantially reduces air mass cooling and net rainout during poleward moisture transport<sup>12,32</sup>.

240 We suggest two possible mechanisms for this large increase in polar specific humidity: (1) An  
241 increase in latent heat transport from the subtropics, as postulated by some models (ref. <sup>13,37</sup>),  
242 or (2) high polar LPEE  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  could result from the initiation of local to regional deep  
243 convection under high radiative forcing<sup>47</sup> that also increases specific humidity more than  
244 precipitation. Though our dataset cannot distinguish between these mechanisms, in either  
245 case, the high, polar  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  results from greater global specific humidity and a reduced  
246 subtropical-to-pole gradient in specific humidity compared to the present-day.

247

248 Continental  $\Delta\delta\text{D}_p$  reconstructions generally show more negative values (Fig. 3A) compared to  
249 our record of  $\Delta\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  (see supplement for a discussion). However,  $\delta\text{D}_p$  records associated with  
250 rising sea surface and continental temperatures within the LPEE may support the causality  
251 between high radiative forcing and high global specific humidity. Although changes in  
252 vegetation within the LPEE in both Colombia and Tanzania may have changed the effective  
253 hydrogen isotope fractionation in plants<sup>17,48</sup> and thus affected both  $\delta\text{D}_p$  reconstructions (Fig.  
254 3A), the increase in tropical  $\delta\text{D}_p$  in Tanzania at 18 °S within the LPEE (ref. <sup>48</sup>) is consistent  
255 with increased specific humidity and atmospheric moisture residence time. The high LPEE  
256  $\Delta\delta\text{D}_p$  and increase in  $\Delta\delta\text{D}_p$  within the LPEE in the Arctic at 80 °N (ref. <sup>12</sup>) are consistent with  
257 a decrease of the subtropical-to-pole specific humidity gradient.

258 We note that there are a number of further processes that may exert additional controls on  
259  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  that may be both location- and climate state-dependent<sup>41-43,49</sup>. For example, state-shifts  
260 in stratocumulus clouds under high radiative forcing may alter cloud liquid droplet sizes  
261 thereby affecting  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  during hydrometeor descent<sup>50,51</sup>. Isotope-enabled climate simulations  
262 with improved cloud parameterizations<sup>52</sup> will prove instrumental to further evaluate the  
263 implications of our  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  reconstruction with regards to the hydrological cycle in a super-  
264 greenhouse climate. Nevertheless, the observed coherent changes in the latitudinal gradient of  
265  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  (Fig. 2, 3A) suggests that planetary-scale changes, provide the first-order control on  
266  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$ .

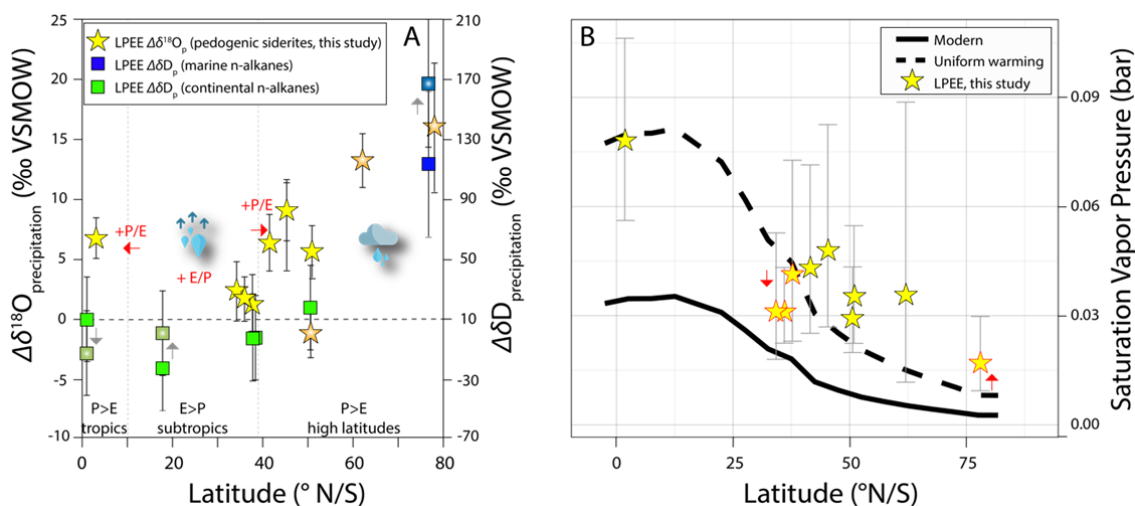
267 We cannot directly estimate specific humidity from our  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  data. However, we can use our  
268 siderite-based atmospheric temperature reconstructions to calculate saturation vapor pressures  
269 from equator-to-pole and use them as a proxy for specific humidity. To do so, we assume that  
270 specific humidity should increase according to Clausius-Clapeyron. We calculate the expected  
271 saturation vapor pressure using our temperature estimates and the August-Roche-Magnus

272 equation<sup>53</sup> (Fig. 3B) and compare it to a calculation of saturation vapor pressure  
 273 corresponding to an uniform warming of 15 °C from present-day temperatures (dashed line).  
 274 This calculation shows the largest increase at the tropics and the smallest at the poles,  
 275 following the exponential nature of the Clausius-Clapeyron relationship<sup>37</sup>. Our estimates of  
 276 polar LPEE saturation vapor pressures are consistently greater than those expected from a  
 277 uniform 15° warming, whereas the three subtropical datapoints are either equivalent to or  
 278 lower. The greater increase at the poles shows that polar amplification of the warming results  
 279 in a decrease of the specific humidity gradient between the subtropics and the poles.  
 280 Quantifying the precise contribution of this decreased gradient either from enhanced poleward  
 281 latent heat transfer, changes in moisture source regions and/or transport path<sup>54</sup> and local cloud  
 282 feedbacks is not possible. However, we note that the robust, predicted increase in E-P in the  
 283 subtropics and P-E at high latitudes<sup>36,37,44</sup> in models is suggestive of greater latent heat  
 284 transport from the subtropics compared to the present-day<sup>55</sup>.

285

286 The robustness of the observed LPEE patterns, can be evaluated by comparison with similar  
 287 records from older super-greenhouse climates such as the late Permian/ early Triassic (~252  
 288 Mya) and Albian/ Cenomanian (~100 Mya) (Fig. S16) for which similar records are available.  
 289 Although there is some variability in the data and the clumped isotope temperatures are  
 290 missing, there is a striking similarity between tropical and polar oxygen isotope records from  
 291 the three time periods. We propose that similar hot tropics and polar amplification may have  
 292 existed in these time periods even though the paleogeography was very different from the  
 293 present-day.

294



295

296 *Figure 3: A) Siderite-based  $\Delta\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  and previous LPEE  $\Delta\delta\text{D}_p$  reconstructions at low elevation*  
297 *(see text and supplement). Both records can be compared directly as the scales are designed to*  
298 *represent the meteoric water line ( $\delta\text{D}_p = 8*\delta^{18}\text{O}_p + 10$ ). We use symbols with radial infill for*  
299 *PETM records, as the PETM represents the upper limit of LPEE warmth. We calculate  $\Delta\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$*   
300 *and  $\Delta\delta\text{D}_p$  by subtracting the present-day  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  or  $\delta\text{D}_p$  at the site from the paleo-reconstruction*  
301 *after correction for the ice volume effect (see supplement). Globally,  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  is more positive*  
302 *during the LPEE due to a relatively larger increase in specific humidity compared to*  
303 *precipitation and the associated increase in the residence time of atmospheric moisture (see*  
304 *text). Tropical  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  may increase additionally due to an increase in the equatorward transport*  
305 *of water vapor (see text). High latitude  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  (and  $\delta\text{D}_p$ ) may increase additionally due to a*  
306 *reduced subtropical-to-polar specific humidity gradient (see text). B) Saturation vapor*  
307 *pressure today (solid line), with a  $15^\circ$  uniform warming (dashed line), and estimated LPEE*  
308 *saturation vapor pressure using the siderite clumped temperatures in Figure 1 (stars). Error*  
309 *bars are min/max estimates using min/max estimates of LPEE temperature and temperature*  
310 *gradient. Red arrows and outlined star symbols depict the lower subtropical vapor pressures*  
311 *and higher polar vapor pressures relative to the uniform warming scenario.*

312 The resolution and precision of the presented continental temperature and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  dataset  
313 provide a unique opportunity to further improve climate simulations under high radiative  
314 forcing. It is encouraging that the latest global simulation of early Eocene climate that  
315 incorporate improved parameterizations of cloud microphysical processes and the shortwave  
316 cloud feedback<sup>50</sup> is in good agreement with our continental temperature reconstructions. Our  
317 datasets cannot resolve the relative contribution of different climate feedbacks (e.g. surface  
318 albedo, cloud, lapse rate, Planck, water vapor) and the role of meridional heat transport in  
319 realizing a high global average temperature and low meridional temperature gradient during  
320 the LPEE. Nevertheless, our data does provide the opportunity to test GCMs against a  
321 measure of climate that reflects the hydrological cycle: precipitation  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ . The ability to  
322 simultaneously reproduce both super-greenhouse temperature and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  records would further  
323 strengthen confidence in the models<sup>52</sup> and better constrain the mechanisms behind polar  
324 amplification in a warm, ice-free world.

325 It remains uncertain if the ongoing rapid increase in  $p\text{CO}_2$  will give rise to a climate state  
326 similar to that of the LPEE<sup>10</sup>. Slow Earth system feedbacks (e.g. vegetation and ice cover)  
327 likely played a major role in maintaining warm conditions during the LPEE, and the strength  
328 of fast feedbacks (e.g. cloud condensation) may depend strongly on the background climate

329 state (e.g. radiative forcing, vegetation and ice cover)<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, our coupled continental  
330 temperature and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_p$  reconstructions across the entire latitudinal range of the Northern  
331 Hemisphere provide a unique opportunity to evaluate changes in Earth's climate and  
332 atmospheric hydrological cycle under high  $p\text{CO}_2$  conditions<sup>10</sup>. Our records show an  
333 exceptionally hot climate with hot tropics and subtropics that enabled humid and warm  
334 climates in the polar latitudes. This was probably true for the entire early Eocene and previous  
335 super-greenhouse climates with different geographical configurations. At the current rate of  
336 fossil-fuel combustion, the high radiative forcing that led to such a climate state multiple  
337 times in Earth's history, could be reached again in the foreseeable future<sup>56</sup>.

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### 349 Author contributions

350 TW and SMB designed the study. JD wrote the manuscript. JD, AFB and SMB developed the  
351 method for siderite analysis and JD and AFB performed the measurements. SRP provided the  
352 Faroese sample. TW provided most of the other samples. All authors contributed to  
353 discussions and editing of the final manuscript.

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