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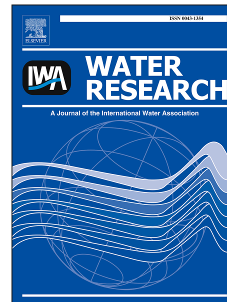

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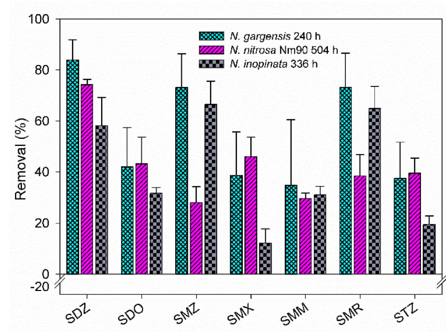

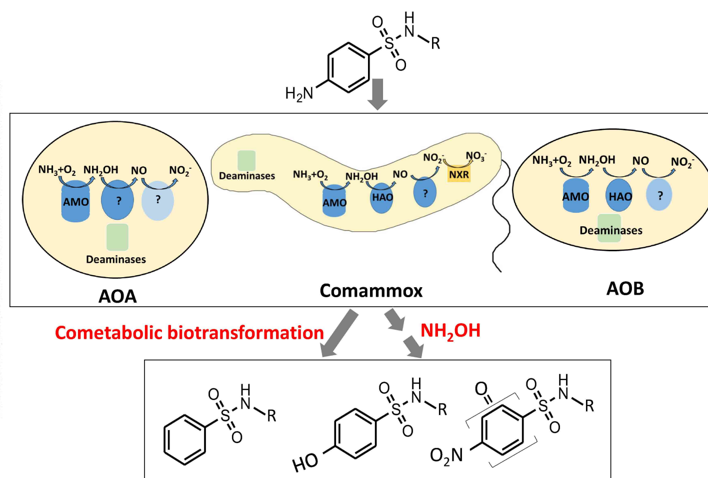

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Cometabolic biotransformation and microbial-mediated abiotic transformation of sulfonamides by three ammonia oxidizers

Li-Jun Zhou[1, 2], Ping Han[2, 3, 4, *], Yaochun Yu[5], Baozhan Wang[2, 6], Yujie Men[5, 7], Michael Wagner[2, 8, 9], Qinglong L. Wu[1, 10, *]

[1] State Key Laboratory of Lake Science and Environment, Nanjing Institute of Geography and Limnology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Nanjing, 210008, China

[2] Centre for Microbiology and Environmental Systems Science, Division of Microbial Ecology, University of Vienna, Althanstrasse 14, 1090, Vienna, Austria

[3] State Key Laboratory of Estuarine and Coastal Research, East China Normal University, 500 Dongchuan Road, Shanghai 200241, China

[4] School of Geographic Sciences, East China Normal University, 500 Dongchuan Road, Shanghai 200241, China

[5] Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

[6] Institute of Soil Science, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Nanjing, China

[7] Institute for Genomic Biology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

[8] The Comammox Research Platform of the University of Vienna, Austria

[9] Department of Biotechnology, Chemistry and Bioscience, Aalborg University, Denmark

[10] Sino-Danish Center for Science and Education, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

*** Corresponding Author**

Qinglong L. Wu, Phone: +86 25 86882107 Email address: qlwu@niglas.ac.cn;

Ping Han, Phone: +86 21 54341229. Email address: phan@geo.ecnu.edu.cn

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24 **Abstract**

25 The abilities of three phylogenetically distant ammonia oxidizers, *Nitrososphaera gargensis*, an
26 ammonia-oxidizing archaeon (AOA); *Nitrosomomas nitrosa* Nm90, an ammonia-oxidizing
27 bacterium (AOB); and *Nitrospira inopinata*, the only complete ammonia oxidizer (comammox)
28 available as a pure culture, to biotransform seven sulfonamides (SAs) were investigated. The
29 removals and protein-normalized biotransformation rate constants indicated that the AOA strain
30 *N. gargensis* exhibited the highest SA biotransformation rates, followed by *N. inopinata* and *N.*
31 *nitrosa* Nm90. The transformation products (TPs) of sulfadiazine (SDZ), sulfamethazine (SMZ)
32 and sulfamethoxazole (SMX) and the biotransformation mechanisms were evaluated. Based on
33 the analysis of the TP formulas and approximate structures, it was found that during
34 biotransformation, i) the AOA strain carried out SA deamination, hydroxylation, and nitration;
35 ii) the AOB strain mainly performed SA deamination; and iii) the comammox isolate
36 participated only in deamination reactions. It is proposed that deamination was catalyzed by
37 deaminases while hydroxylation and nitration were mediated by nonspecific activities of the
38 ammonia monooxygenase (AMO). Additionally, it was demonstrated that among the three
39 ammonia oxidizers, only AOB contributed to the formation of pterin-SA conjugates. The
40 biotransformation of SDZ, SMZ and SMX occurred only when ammonia oxidation was active,
41 suggesting a cometabolic transformation mechanism. Interestingly, SAs could also be
42 transformed by hydroxylamine, an intermediate of ammonia oxidation, suggesting that in
43 addition to enzymatic conversions, a microbially induced abiotic mechanism contributes to SA
44 transformation during ammonia oxidation. Overall, using experiments with pure cultures, this
45 study provides important insights into the roles played by ammonia oxidizers in SA
46 biotransformation.

47 **Keywords:** biotransformation, sulfonamides, ammonia oxidizers, cometabolism, abiotic
48 transformation.

49

50 ## 1. Introduction

51 Sulfonamide antibiotics are frequently used for the treatment of bacterial diseases of humans and
52 animals (Sukul and Spiteller, 2006). In recent years, increasing concerns have arisen about SAs
53 in aquatic systems due to their potential adverse effects on ecosystems and public health (Baran
54 et al., 2011; Kummerer, 2009). SAs are ubiquitous in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems due to
55 their widespread application, incomplete removal by wastewater treatment, and stability under
56 typical environmental conditions (Chen and Xie, 2018). The concentrations of SAs in aquatic
57 environments range from a few nanograms to several hundred micrograms per liter in
58 groundwater, surface water, and wastewater (Gao et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2016; Zhou et al.,
59 2013a; Zhou et al., 2013b). Feedlots and municipal wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) are
60 the major sinks and main points of discharge of SAs into the environment, because sewage
61 processing at such facilities was originally designed to lower the oxygen demand and to remove
62 N and P, but not to decrease the concentrations of antibiotics (Zhou et al., 2013a; Zhou et al.,
63 2013b). These antibiotic residues in the environment can affect the growth of aquatic organisms
64 (Garcia-Galan et al., 2009; Park and Choi, 2008), alter the structure and function of microbial
65 communities (Proia et al., 2013; Roose-Amsaleg et al., 2013; Underwood et al., 2011; Yan et al.,
66 2013), and promote the development of antibiotic resistance (Martinez, 2009; Zhu et al., 2017).
67 A systematic and mechanistic understanding of the fate of SAs during wastewater treatment and
68 in the receiving environments is needed to help assess the environmental persistence and

69 ecotoxicity of SAs and their TPs, which can guide the establishment of appropriate remediation
70 strategies or environmental regulations.

71 Biotransformation plays a major role in the fate of SAs in WWTPs, feedlot wastewater, and
72 soil (Alvarino et al., 2016; Chen and Xie, 2018; Muller et al., 2013; Xing et al., 2018; Zhou et
73 al., 2013b). A number of studies have demonstrated significant associations between SA
74 biotransformation and nitrification (Kassotaki et al., 2016; Men et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2016).
75 Enhanced biotransformation of SAs was observed as greater ammonia oxidation activities were
76 reached in nitrifying activated sludge (NAS) (Xu et al., 2016). Consistently, the
77 biotransformation of SMX in NAS was completely suppressed when nitrification was inhibited
78 by addition of allylthiourea (ATU) (Kassotaki et al., 2016). In the nitrification process, ammonia
79 oxidizers oxidizing ammonia to nitrite, and nitrite-oxidizing bacteria (NOB) converting nitrite to
80 nitrate, are indispensable players. A previous study revealed that a NOB strain of the genus
81 *Nitrobacter* was unable to biotransform a number of emerging organic contaminants (Yu et al.,
82 2018), including asulam and the SA sulfathiazole (STZ). Therefore, it is less likely that NOB can
83 biotransform SAs, although other nitrite oxidizers than *Nitrobacter* dominate most wastewater
84 treatment plants (Gruber-Dorninger et al., 2015; Lücker et al., 2015). It was further demonstrated
85 that ammonia monooxygenase (AMO) of ammonia-oxidizing microorganisms (AOMs)
86 cometabolically biotransformed asulam and two pharmaceuticals (Men et al., 2016; Xu et al.,
87 2016). However, most SA biotransformation studies have focused on enriched cultures of
88 bacterial ammonia oxidizers or nitrifying sludge from WWTPs (Peng et al., 2017), and the
89 mechanisms and pathways of SA biotransformation by different groups of AOMs in isolation
90 have rarely been investigated.

91 SAs have an aromatic amine group, which is an antimicrobially active moiety. In a previous
92 study, 4-nitro-SMX has been detected in WWTP effluents and surface waters at levels one order
93 of magnitude lower than those of their parent compounds (Osorio et al., 2016), suggesting the
94 oxidation of aromatic amines. Given that all aerobic ammonia oxidizers rely on a substrate
95 promiscuous AMO, which can oxidize not only ammonia, but also some other organic
96 compounds (Hooper et al., 1997; Roh et al., 2009), it was hypothesized that AMO might
97 contribute to the oxidation of aromatic amines in SAs.

98 In municipal WWTPs, AOMs are dominated by AOB (Mussmann et al., 2011), but *amoA*-
99 encoding archaea (AEA) have also been reported to occur (Li et al., 2016; Pornkulwat et al.,
100 2018; Sauder et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2009). Furthermore, complete ammonia oxidizers
101 (comammox; (Daims et al., 2015)) encoding the enzymatic repertoire to completely oxidize
102 ammonia to nitrate have been detected in WWTPs using molecular tools (Chao et al., 2016;
103 Daims et al., 2015; Pjevac et al., 2017). AOA, AOB and comammox all possess AMOs (albeit
104 from different evolutionary enzyme lineages), which converts ammonia into hydroxylamine by
105 adding O_2 (Daims et al., 2015; Hooper et al., 1997; Prosser and Nicol, 2012). On the other hand
106 these ammonia oxidizers differ in important physiological traits (He et al., 2012; Kits et al.,
107 2017; Martens-Habbena et al., 2009). For example, some but not all members of the AOA as
108 well as the comammox microbe *N. inopinata* have very high substrate affinities, while AOB
109 generally have much higher mean apparent half-saturation constant values for ammonia ($K_{m(app)}$)
110 (Kits et al., 2017). Given the relatively low concentrations of SAs and other micropollutants in
111 most systems, these differences may be important for the biotransformation kinetics of SAs by
112 AOB, AOA and comammox. Furthermore, these ammonia oxidizer groups differ in their
113 enzymatic repertoire – while AOB and comammox encode a homologous hydroxylamine

114 dehydrogenase converting hydroxylamine to NO (Caranto and Lancaster, 2017; Daims et al.,
115 2015), the hydroxylamine converting enzyme in AOA has not yet been recognized (Vajrala et
116 al., 2013). In addition, comammox species possess the enzyme nitrite oxidoreductase and can
117 thus in addition to AOA and AOB oxidize nitrite to nitrate (Daims et al., 2015). These
118 differences in their biochemistry may also result in different abilities in terms of biotransforming
119 SAs.

120 The goals of this study were: (i) using a pure culture representative of each group to
121 investigate the abilities of AOA, AOB and comammox to biotransform seven SAs and (ii) to at
122 least partly elucidate the transformation mechanisms and pathways by TP analysis. For this
123 purpose, the biotransformation rates of seven SAs by the three selected pure cultures were
124 determined and compared. Furthermore, the abiotic transformation of SAs by the ammonia
125 oxidation intermediates hydroxylamine and NO were investigated.

126

127 **2. Material and methods**

128 **2.1. Micropollutant selection.** The seven SAs sulfadiazine (SDZ), sulfamethazine (SMZ), SMX,
129 sulfadoxine (SDO), sulfamerazine (SMR), sulfamonomethoxine (SMM), and STZ were selected
130 based on their high detection frequencies in natural environments and WWTPs (Gao et al., 2012;
131 Zhou et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2013a; Zhou et al., 2013b). The selected SAs were purchased from
132 Dr. Ehrenstorfer GmbH (Augsburg, Germany) and Toronto Research Chemicals (Toronto,
133 Canada). Stock solutions of each reference compound were prepared in methanol (1 g/L), and
134 stored at -20 °C until use. A mixture of standards (each SA at 100 mg/L) was prepared via

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135 appropriate dilution of the stock solutions in methanol. Detailed information on the target
136 compounds is presented in Table S1 in the supplementary material.

137 **2.2. Cultivation of Comammox and AOMs.** One representative strain from each AOM group
138 was included: *Nitrososphaera gargensis*, an AOA, isolated from an outflow of a hot spring
139 (Hatzenpichler et al., 2008); *Nitrosomonas nitrosa* Nm90, an AOB strain, isolated from WWTPs
140 (Koops et al., 1991); and *Nitrospira inopinata* (the only available comammox pure culture),
141 isolated from a pipe under the flow of hot water (56 °C, pH 7.5) raised from a 1,200 m deep oil
142 exploration well (Daims et al., 2015). The comammox strain, *N. inopinata*, was cultivated in a
143 modified basal medium (Daims et al., 2015) with 4 g/L $CaCO_3$ to buffer the pH at ~ 8.0. The
144 culture was incubated at 42 °C in the dark without shaking, and 2 mM NH_4Cl were added as
145 growth substrate every 12 days. The AOA strain, *N. gargensis*, was cultivated in the same
146 modified basal medium (Daims et al., 2015) with 4 g/L $CaCO_3$ to buffer the pH at ~ 8.0. The
147 culture was incubated at 46 °C in the dark without shaking, and 2 mM NH_4Cl were added as
148 growth substrate every 6 days. The AOB strain, *N. nitrosa* Nm90, was obtained from the AOB
149 strain collection of the University of Hamburg (Germany) and incubated at 37 °C in the dark
150 with shaking at 80 rpm using the same basal medium with 4 g/L $CaCO_3$ amended with 2 mM
151 NH_4Cl every week. The purity of the three AOMs was checked at the beginning of the
152 experiments. The purity of the AOA was confirmed by a negative PCR result obtained using
153 universal bacterial 16S rRNA gene primers (Men et al., 2016). The purity of the AOB strain and
154 comammox were confirmed by the lack of detection of contaminating 16S rRNA gene sequences
155 in 16S rRNA gene amplicon sequencing experiments (Men et al., 2016).

156 **2.3. Biotransformation by Comammox and AOMs.** The target pollutant biotransformation
157 capabilities of comammox and AOMs were investigated using batch cultures. Pre-grown

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158 biomass was harvested by centrifugation at 8,000 × *g* at 10 °C for 30 min and resuspended in
159 fresh medium to remove residual nitrite and to concentrate the biomass by approximately 2-3
160 times, resulting in an ammonia turnover rate of the concentrated biomass of ~ 1 mM/d for AOA
161 and AOB and ~ 0.3 mM/d for comammox. To avoid potential inhibitory effects of methanol in
162 the mixed target pollutant sock solutions (100 mg/L for each compound) on the cultures, 6 µL of
163 mixed SAs stock solution (for a starting concentration of 20 µg/L for each pollutant) was first
164 added into empty sterile bottles. After the organic solvents were evaporated, 30 mL of
165 thoroughly mixed concentrated culture containing 2 mM NH_4Cl was inoculated into 100 mL
166 glass bottles wrapped with tinfoil to maintain a dark environment for all tested AOM. The bottles
167 were loosely capped and shaken at 80 rpm for ~ 20 min to re-dissolve the target compounds.
168 NH_4Cl was added to bring the concentration to 2 mM when it decreased below 1 mM.
169 These bottles were incubated at the optimal growth temperatures for the tested comammox
170 (42 °C), AOA (46 °C) and AOB (37 °C). A first set of samples (~ 0.7 mL) was taken after
171 biomass addition. Then the samples (~ 0.7 mL) were centrifuged at 13,000 rpm at 4 °C for 10
172 min. Approximately 0.3 mL of each supernatant was transferred into 2 mL amber glass vials and
173 stored at 4 °C in the dark until liquid chromatography tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS)
174 analysis of the target compounds and their TPs. The remaining supernatant was transferred into a
175 1.5 mL microcentrifuge tube, and these tubes were stored at 4 °C for ammonia and nitrite
176 measurements. The cell pellets were stored at -20 °C for total protein measurement. Subsequent
177 samples were taken in the same way at 16, 24, 48, 72, 96, and 144 h, and 7, 10, and 14 d.
178 Abiotic control experiments to examine the hydrolysis of SAs, and the sorption potential of
179 the target pollutants to the medium matrix containing $CaCO_3$ precipitates were set up with fresh
180 medium containing either 8 or 0 g/L $CaCO_3$. Samples were taken at 0, 1 and 21 d (beginning,

181 middle and end-time points of the experiments). In addition, control experiments with heat-
182 inactivated biomass were set up in the same way as the biotransformation reactors. For this
183 purpose, the biomass was autoclaved twice at 121 °C and 103 kPa for 20 min. Next, 2 mM
184 ammonium and 6 mM nitrite were added into the abiotic and heat-inactivated control samples to
185 mimic the same N levels in the biological samples, and to investigate the possible abiotic SAs
186 transformation in the presence of ammonium and nitrite. Samples were taken at the same time
187 points during the same incubation period as for the biotransformation reactors. Furthermore, for
188 all pure cultures positive controls demonstrating active ammonia oxidation without added target
189 pollutants were also set up. All experiments were performed in triplicate.

190 **2.4. Metabolic or Cometabolic Biotransformation.** Whether the target SAs were metabolically
191 utilized by the comammox and AOMs (*N. gargensis* and *N. nitrosa* Nm90) was tested separately
192 using the same setup, but with a minimal NH_4-N concentration (0.2 mM, without reamendment)
193 as the nitrogen source only (denoted "Lo_NH_4-N") and 100 µg/L SAs. Batch cultures amended
194 with high NH_4-N (2 mM, with reamendment) and 100 µg/L sulfonamide compound (each) were
195 used as positive controls (denoted "Hi_NH_4-N"). Samples were taken over a time course of 14 d.

196 **2.5. Analytical Methods for SAs.** SAs were analyzed by liquid chromatography coupled to a
197 high-resolution quadrupole orbitrap mass spectrometry (LC-HRMS/MS) (Q Exactive, Thermo
198 Fisher Scientific). For LC analysis, 50 µL of sample was loaded onto a C_{18} Atlantis-T_3 column (3
199 µm particle size, 3.0 × 150 mm, Waters) and eluted at a flow rate of 350 µL/min with nanopure
200 water (A) and acetonitrile (B) (both amended with 0.1% formic acid) in the following gradient:
201 5% B: 0 - 1 min, 5% - 100% B: 1 - 8min, 100% B: 8 - 20 min, and 5% B: 20 - 26 min. The
202 compounds were measured in full scan mode on HRMS at a resolution of 70,000 at m/z 200 and
203 a scan range of m/z 50 - 750 in a positive/negative switching mode.

204 **2.6. Estimation of Kinetic Parameters for the SA Biotransformation.** Given that the growth
205 substrate, ammonium, was unlimited, the cometabolic reductant and competition models of
206 biotransformation could theoretically be simplified to a first-order model (Men et al., 2016). To
207 quantitatively compare the biotransformation activities among the biological samples, the
208 observed biotransformation rate constants normalized to the total protein were corrected for
209 sorption and abiotic processes with the help of the control experiments. The median value
210 calculated from the fitting procedure was used as the estimated k_{bio}, with the 5% and 95%
211 percentile values representing the estimation uncertainty. Given the lag phase for AOB during
212 the start of the incubation period and the removal plateau for the AOA and the comammox, the
213 time points during those periods were neglected, and only the time points that showed 1st-order
214 kinetics pattern according to the biotransformation curves were included (Figures S1-S3).

215 $$\frac{dS_c}{dt} = -f_{aq}(k_{bio}X + k_a) \times S_c \qquad (1)$$

216 $$f_{aq} = \frac{S_c}{S_{ct}} \quad (2)$$

217 $$K_d = \frac{1-f_{aq}}{f_{aq}X} \quad (3)$$

218 where S_c is the aqueous concentration of the compound, f_{aq} is the dissolved compound fraction,
219 k_{bio} is the total protein concentration-normalized biotransformation rate constant, X is the total
220 protein concentration, k_a is the abiotic transformation rate, S_{ct} is the total concentration of the
221 compound, and K_d is the sorption coefficient.

222 **2.7. Cell Extraction for Measurement of the Intracellular SA Concentration.** The cell
223 extraction procedure was adopted from a previous study (Yu et al., 2018) with slight
224 modification. Briefly, internal standards were spiked into cell pellets collected from 10 mL of
225 culture (at a final concentration of 4 μg/L for each standard), followed by the addition of 2 mL of

226 lysis solvent containing methanol (0.5% formic acid): nanopure water (0.1% w/w EDTA), 50: 50
227 (v/v). The cells were disrupted by ultrasonication at 50 °C for 15 min, and centrifuged at 10,000
228 × *g* for 10 min. The supernatant was collected in a glass vial. This procedure was repeated twice
229 for a better recovery. Finally, ~ 6 mL supernatant was evaporated to dryness under a gentle steam
230 of dinitrogen gas at 40 °C. The analytes were redissolved in 0.5 mL of filter-sterilized fresh
231 medium without $CaCO_3$, and these solutions were then centrifuged at 10,000 × *g* at 4 °C for 10
232 min. The supernatant was collected for LC-HRMS measurement of SAs and their TPs.
233

234 **2.9. TP Identification.** Suspect screening was used to identify potential TPs (TPs) formed
235 during micropollutant biotransformation by the comammox and AOMs. The screening was
236 performed by TraceFinder 4.1 EFS software (Thermo Scientific). Suspect lists of potential SA
237 TPs were compiled using a self-written, automated metabolite mass prediction script, which took
238 into account a variety of known redox and hydrolysis reactions, as well as conjugation reactions
239 (Men et al., 2016). Additionally, previously reported TPs and mass shifts of typical
240 biotransformation reactions were considered, including pterin-SAs (SDZ, SMZ and SMX), PtO-
241 SAs (SDZ, SMZ and SMX), N4-formyl-SAs (SDZ, SMZ and SMX), N4-acetyl-SAs (SDZ, SMZ
242 and SMX), 3-amino-5-methylisoxazole, 2-amino-4,6-dimethylpyrimidine, AcOH-SAs (SDZ,
243 SMZ and SMX), 7,8-dihydropterin-SA (SDZ, SMZ and SMX), SA+O, pterin-O-SAs (SDZ,
244 SMZ and SMX), pterin+H_2O-SA (SDZ, SMZ and SMX), and dihydropterin-SAs (SDZ, SMZ
245 and SMX) (Achermann et al., 2018). Those compounds with isotope patterns that matched the
246 predicted isotopic patterns at >70% and with a concentration that increased over the time course
247 were subjected to further elucidation (Men et al., 2016).

248 Nontarget screening was further carried out to find possible TPs. TP candidates were selected
249 based on the following criteria: (1) intensity above a set threshold with reasonable peak shape;
250 (2) presence in the target pollutant-added samples and absence in target pollutant-added samples
251 and heat-inactivated controls; (3) TP-like time-series pattern (i.e., trend of increasing or of
252 increasing and then decreasing over the time course of the experiment); and (4) a reasonable
253 chemical formula derived from the exact mass of [M+H] and isotopic pattern. Parent compounds
254 and TPs might have different ionization efficiencies on LC-HRMS, but according to other
255 studies such difference could be no larger than 3:1 (Gulde et al., 2016). As the reference
256 compounds for SA TP candidates were not commercially available, to perform a relative
257 comparison, it is reasonable to assume that the TPs and the parent compound had the same
258 ionization efficiency, so that TPs compounds were semi-quantified using calibration curves of
259 the corresponding parent compounds (Men et al., 2016).

260 **2.10. Ammonium, Nitrite and Nitrate Measurements.** Ammonium (NH_4^++NH_3) was
261 measured by the colorimetric method (Kandeler and Gerber, 1988). Standards were prepared in
262 the medium and ranged from 100 to 2000 µM NH_4Cl. Nitrite was measured by photometry with
263 the sulfanilamide N-(1-naphthyl)ethylenediamine dihydrochloride (NED) reagent method, and
264 nitrate was reduced to nitrite by vanadium chloride and measured as NO_x by the Griess assay
265 (Miranda et al., 2001). Standards were prepared in the medium and ranged from 100 to 2000 µM
266 NO_x and from 100 to 1000 µM nitrite.

267 **2.11. Total Protein Measurement.** Cell growth was measured on the basis of total protein
268 determinations. Total protein was measured using the Pierce BCA Protein Assay Kit (Thermo
269 Scientific, Regensburg, Germany) according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

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271 **3. Results and Discussion**

272 **3.1. Micropollutant biotransformation by the AOA, AOB and comammox strains.** First,
273 sorption of the target SAs to $CaCO_3$ precipitates and dead cells, as well as hydrolysis of the SAs
274 in autoclaved medium was investigated. No significant sorption (< 10% removal) was observed.
275 Depending on the compound, 0-35% of the added SAs was abiotically removed during an
276 incubation time of 504 h (Figures S1-S3).

277 Next, the SA biotransformation capabilities of the tested AOA, AOB and comammox strains
278 were examined (Figure 1 and Figures S1-S3). Compared to the control with heat-inactivated
279 biomass, significant removal from 37.4% to 83.9% (end time point, two-tailed *t* test, $p<0.05$) of
280 all SAs except SMM was recorded for the AOA *N. gargensis* (after an incubation for 240 h). For
281 the AOB strain *N. nitrosa* Nm90, biotransformation was observed for all SAs with removals
282 ranging from 27.9% to 74.2% (after an incubation for 504 h). For *N. inopinata*, significant
283 removals from 31% to 66.5% (end time point, two tailed *t* test, $p<0.05$) of SDZ, SDO, SMZ,
284 SMM and SMR (after an incubation for 336 h) were observed, while removals of SMX and STZ
285 were less than 20%. The protein-normalized biotransformation rates of SAs by the three
286 ammonia oxidizers are presented in Figure 2 and Table S2. The AOA *N. gargensis* exhibited
287 high protein-normalized biotransformation rate constants (k_{bio}) greater than 0.01 L/(mg total
288 protein • d) for three SAs (SDZ, SMZ and SMR), and the comammox strains showed k_{bio} > 0.01
289 L/(mg total protein • d) for SMZ and SMR; however, for the AOB strain, only k_{bio} of SDZ was
290 above 0.01 L/(mg total protein • d) (Figure 2 and Table S2). The removals and protein-
291 normalized biotransformation rate constants indicate that the AOA *N. gargensis* exhibited the
292 best SA biotransformation performance, followed by the comammox strain and the AOB strain.

293 In addition, the SA removals were compared at the time when the same amount of ammonia
294 was oxidized by the respective pure cultures (i.e., 144 h for the AOA and AOB strains and 336 h
295 for the comammox strain to oxidize ~ 5-6 mM ammonia) (Figure 1A). After having oxidized the
296 same amount of ammonia, the comammox strain *N. inopinata* (336 h) showed similar removals
297 as the AOA strain (114 h) for all actively biotransformed SAs, except for SMX and STZ (Figure
298 1A and Figures S1-S3). In contrast, no removal was observed for these SAs by the AOB strain at
299 144 h. However, after an extended incubation time of up to 504 h, the removal of the SAs by the
300 AOB strain gradually increased (Figure 1B and Figure S2). These results indicate a lag period in
301 SA biotransformation by the AOB strain. In contrast, the biotransformation of SAs by the AOA
302 and comammox strains were relatively higher at the beginning of the experiments, and became
303 slower later during the incubation (Figure S1). The different k_{bio} and biotransformation processes
304 of SAs by AOA, AOB and comammox might be due to their physiological characteristics, such
305 as differences in substrate affinity of the AMO. The AMOs of AOA and comammox strains are
306 reported to have a greater affinity for NH_3 than AOB (He et al., 2012; Kits et al., 2017; Martens-
307 Habbena et al., 2009), which might result in a greater affinity for SAs and higher
308 biotransformation rates at low SA concentrations if SA biotransformation is actually carried out
309 by the AMOs. The AOA *N. gargensis* has greater substrate affinity than some AOB (e.g.,
310 *Nitrosomonas europaea*) but less substrate affinity than the comammox *N. inopinata* (Kits et al.,
311 2017). Although comammox has greater affinity for ammonia than the AOA *N. gargensis* (Kits
312 et al., 2017), the comammox treatments had low NO_2^-+NO_3^- formation rates (Table S2), which
313 suggested low cell growth rate and low protein abundance and might have resulted in lower SA
314 biotransformation rates than AOA.

315 **3.2. TP identification and possible biotransformation mechanisms.** To identify TPs of three
316 biotransformed SAs (i.e., SDZ, SMZ and SMX), suspect screening was first carried out (Figure
317 3). For SDZ, one TP candidate was formed by all three AOMs, with an exact mass of [M+H] at
318 236.0482 (designated "TP236"). It has a formula of $C_{10}H_9O_2S$ (-NH from SDZ), likely a
319 deamination product. Although the k_{bio} of SDZ by the AOB strain was smaller than that by the
320 AOA and comammox strains, the abundance of TP236 in the AOB biotransformation samples
321 was five times higher than that in the AOA and comammox biotransformation samples. This
322 suggests that some other TPs might be present in the AOA and the comammox biotransformation
323 samples, which were not included in the suspect list and thus not detected.

324 For SMZ, four TP candidates were detected during SMZ biotransformation by both the AOA
325 and AOB. A TP candidate found in all the incubations has an exact mass of [M+H] at 264.0801
326 (designated "TP264") and a formula of $C_{12}H_{13}N_3O_2S$ (-NH from SMZ). Two other possible
327 candidates were found at low abundance: one with an exact mass of [M+H] at 280.0750
328 (designated "TP280") and a formula of $C_{12}H_{13}N_3O_3S$ (-NH, +O from SMZ), and one with an
329 exact mass of [M+H] at 325.0601 (designated "TP325") and a formula of $C_{12}H_{12}N_4O_5S$ (-2H,
330 +3O from SMZ). It is proposed that TP264 is a deamination product, TP280 is likely formed by
331 the oxidation of the amine group of SAs to a hydroxyl group (-OH), and TP325 likely originated
332 from the hydroxylation of the aromatic ring plus the oxidation of the amine group into a nitro
333 group. However, the structure of TP262 (exact mass of [M+H] at 262.0645) that was observed at
334 a considerable abundance in all AOM-incubations remained unclear.

335 Three SMX TP candidates (TP237, TP239 and TP300) were detected in the AOA and AOB
336 biotransformation treatments, with exact masses of [M+H] at 237.0328, 239.0476 and 300.0271,
337 respectively. TP239 has a formula of $C_{10}H_9O_2S$ (-NH from SMX), likely a deamination product.

338 TP300 has a formula of $C_{10}H_9N_3O_6S$ (- 2H, + 2O, + O from SMX), and likely contains a nitro
339 group from oxidation of the amine group, as well as a -OH group added on the aromatic ring.
340 However, it is difficult to hypothesize approximate structures for TP237. SMX cannot be
341 biotransformed by the tested comammox strain, thus, no TPs of this compound were detected.

342 According to the TP formulas and tentative structures, it was hypothesized that the SDZ
343 biotransformation pathway involves deamination, and that the SMZ and SMX biotransformation
344 pathways involve deamination, hydroxylation, and nitration. The abundance of TP236 and
345 TP264 in the samples of the AOA and comammox biotransformation of SDZ and SMZ,
346 respectively, were one order of magnitude lower than that in the respective AOB
347 biotransformation samples (Figure 3). Furthermore, the abundance of SDZ and SMZ decreased
348 with increasing TP abundance in the AOB biotransformation samples (Figure 3). In the AOA
349 biotransformation treatment of SDZ and SMZ, the abundance of SDZ and SMZ initially
350 decreased, but the abundance of TP236 and TP264 did not increase. This suggests that in
351 addition to deamination, other biotranformation pathways might be involved in the AOA and
352 comammox catalyzed biotransformation of SDZ and SMZ.

353 A previous study showed pterin-SAs conjugates and related secondary products as the
354 major products during SA biotransformation by a nitrifying activated sludge community in
355 laboratory batch experiments (Achermann et al., 2018). SAs inhibit the proliferation of bacteria
356 by acting as competitive inhibitors of *p*-aminobenzoic acid in the folic acid metabolism cycle
357 (Sukul and Spiteller, 2006) by forming pterin-SA with a pteridine. However, in the present study,
358 pterin-SAs were detected only in the incubation experiments with the AOB strain and with low
359 abundance (0.1%-0.6% of the removed parent compound abundance). Despite the rather low
360 ionization efficiencies of pterin-SAs (10% relative to that of the parent SAs) (Achermann et al.,

361 2018), less than 0.6% of the removed parent compound abundance represents a very small
362 portion of all identified TPs. N4-formyl-SMX was also detected in the AOB treatment in even
363 lower abundance than pterin-SMX. N4-formyl-SMX can be formed from pterin-conjugates by a
364 series of hydrolysis, oxidation, and decarboxylation reactions (Achermann et al., 2018). N4-
365 acetyl-SMX was also detected in the AOB treatment at low abundance. N4-acetyl-SMX, the
366 pig/human metabolite of SMX, is formed by N-acetylation (Mengelers et al., 1997).

367 Intracellular SAs and potential TPs were also analyzed based on the same analysis criteria,
368 but none were detected, suggesting no active uptake of SAs or TPs by the living cells. The sum
369 of peak areas of all the identified TPs was much lower than that of SA removed. The incomplete
370 mass balance is probably due to: (1) the uncertainty inherent in the semiquantitative approach
371 using peak areas given the difference in ionization efficiency for the parent compound and the
372 TPs, and (2) the presence of potential TPs undetectable by the current LC-HRMS method.

373 SAs are biotransformed mainly by N-glucuronidation, N-acetylation, N-deamination, and
374 hydroxylation in humans and other mammals (Sukul and Spiteller, 2006). In the present study,
375 the three ammonia oxidizer strains formed mainly desamino-SAs, hydroxyl-SAs and nitro-SAs
376 as TPs. The TPs 4-nitro-SMX, desamino-SMX and N-acetyl-SMX formed during SMX
377 degradation in an enriched culture of AOB represented up to 32% of the parent compound, with
378 4-nitro-SMX as the most abundant TP (Kassotaki et al., 2016). 4-Nitro SMX and desamino-SMX
379 were detected in WWTP effluents and surface waters at levels one order of magnitude lower than
380 those of their parent compounds (Osorio et al., 2016). Deamination might be catalyzed by
381 deaminases, which are encoded in the genomes of the AOA *N. gargensis*, the AOB *N. nitrosa*
382 Nm90 and the comammox *N. inopinata*. In addition, AMO might play a key role in the
383 formation of hydroxyl-SA, and nitro-SA via the possible intermediate NHOH-SA. AMOs in

384 ammonia oxidizers are responsible for ammonia oxidation to hydroxylamine (Daims et al., 2015;
385 Hooper et al., 1997; Kozlowski et al., 2016), which might be involved in a further hydroxylation
386 reaction catalyzed by AMOs after the deamination. It is also proposed that, under the action of
387 AMOs, the amine of SAs underwent hydroxylation by reacting with the intermediate
388 hydroxylamine; and then, nitration might occur under the action of Cu "P460" or other
389 hydroxylamine converting enzymes in AOA and hydroxylamine dehydrogenase (HAO) in AOB
390 and comammox strains, which can convert hydroxylamine into NO (Caranto and Lancaster,
391 2017; Carini et al., 2018; Daims et al., 2015; Kozlowski et al., 2016). Clearly, further research is
392 needed to confirm the contribution of deaminases and AMOs to the biotransformation of SAs by
393 ammonia oxidizers.

394

395 **3.3. Cometabolic Biotransformation of SAs.** To determine whether SA biotransformation by
396 the three different ammonia oxidizers was metabolic or cometabolic, SA biotransformation by
397 the AOA *N. gargensis*, AOB *N. nitrosa* Nm90, and comammox *N. inopinata* grown with
398 minimal ammonia (Lo_NH_4-N) were compared to that grown with unlimited ammonia by re-
399 adding ammonium back to 2 mM once it was below 1 mM (Hi_NH_4-N) (Figure 4). Three
400 biotransformed SAs (i.e., SMZ, SDZ and SMX) were added individually to each strain. In the
401 Hi_NH_4-N controls of *N. gargensis*, *N. nitrosa* Nm90, and *N. inopinata*, SAs were continuously
402 biotransformed as sufficient ammonium was supplied. Again AOA showed the best SA
403 biotransformation abilities among the tested ammonia oxidizers followed by comammox and the
404 AOB (Figure 4 A, C & E). SMZ was more efficiently removed than SDZ, while SMX was the
405 most recalcitrant of the three compounds (Figure 4 A, C & E). In the SA-added Lo_NH_4-N
406 cultures, no significant SA removal was observed (Figure 4 B, D & F), except for the *N.*

407 *gargensis* culture, where the biotransformation of SDZ and SMZ ceased after 24 h when the
408 remaining low level ammonia was depleted and no more nitrite was formed. This is probably
409 caused by the relatively lower biotransformation capabilities of AOB and comammox strains
410 than AOA. These results suggest that SA biotransformation was dependent on active ammonia
411 oxidation, and these SAs were biotransformed via cometabolism (Figure 5). Based on TPs
412 analysis and cometabolic experiments, potential transformation mechanisms and pathways of
413 SAs by the three ammonia oxidizers were proposed (Figure 5). SAs can be biotransformed by
414 ammonia oxidizers via cometabolism; deamination might be catalyzed by deaminases while
415 hydroxylation and nitration are proposed to be mediated by nonspecific activities of the ammonia
416 monooxygenase (AMO).

417

418 **3.4. Abiotic MP transformation by the ammonia oxidation intermediate NH_2OH.** A
419 previous study by us revealed that abiotic transformation by AMO-mediated formation of
420 hydroxylamine (NH_2OH) represents another pathway for asulam transformation by an AOB
421 strain (Yu et al., 2018). As all of the three investigated AOM strains in this study can produce the
422 intermediates hydroxylamine (NH_2OH) and NO (Kits et al., 2019; Kozlowski et al., 2016), it was
423 tested whether SAs can also abiotically react with the ammonia oxidation intermediates
424 hydroxylamine and NO. Abiotic SA transformation experiments after the addition of NH_2OH at
425 concentrations occurring in AOB batch cultures were conducted (Figure S4). It was also tested
426 whether SAs can be transformed by NO, which is an ammonia oxidation intermediate of AOM.
427 Seven SAs were exposed to hydroxylamine and NO, separately. All SAs were transformed
428 abiotically by NH_2OH, whereas no SAs were transformed by NO (Figure 5).

429 The TPs identified from SDZ and SMZ biotransformation were not detected in NH_2OH-
430 treated abiotic transformation, suggesting different pathways for biological and abiotic
431 transformation of these two SAs. For SMX, two TPs (TP239 and TP300) were detected in both
432 biological and NH_2OH abiotic transformation, although their abundance was much lower during
433 the abiotic transformation by NH_2OH. In previous studies, it was shown that SAs can abiotically
434 react with NO_2^- at acid conditions, and that TP patterns are dependent on the pH; for example,
435 SDZ could be transformed into desNH$_2$SDZ when calves or rats consumed a diet high in nitrite
436 (Woolley and Sigel, 1982). At pH values below the acid dissociation constant of nitrous acid
437 (pKa ~ 3.2 3.4), the formation of desamino-SMX was observed; while TP 4-nitro-SMX was
438 detected when the solution was neutralized (pH 7-7.4) (Noedler et al., 2012). Aromatic amines
439 can react with NO_2^- to form a diazonium salt under acidic conditions, but they cannot react under
440 neutral or basic conditions. Depending on the reaction conditions, the diazonium cation
441 disintegrates via the cleavage of elementary nitrogen and substitutes its diazo-group with a NO_2-
442 group, hydrogen or OH-group. However, NO and aromatic amines cannot react to form
443 diazonium cations in natural environments. Hydroxylamine is not stable and easy to decompose
444 ($2NH_2OH \rightarrow NH_3+HNO+H_2O$) (Izato et al., 2017); it is possible that hydroxylamine reacted with
445 aromatic amines (e.g., SAs) via nitroxyl (HNO) to form diazonium cations. The medium in this
446 study was at pH 8, where the diazonium cation disintegrates via the cleavage of elementary
447 nitrogen and substitutes its diazo-group with a NO_2-group or OH-group. That is probably why
448 none desNH$_2$-SDZ was detected in the hydroxylamine treatment.

449 Most of WWTPs effluents, surface waters and sediments, and soil are at neutral pH
450 condition, and NO_2^- less likely reacts with pollutants containing aromatic amines in these
451 environments. However, in acidic soil with a pH of 4 - 5, NO_2^- has the potential to react with

452 pollutants containing aromatic amines. In addition, the ammonia oxidation intermediate
453 hydroxylamine can transform pollutants containing aromatic amines extracellularly, as well.

454

455 **3.5. Environmental Relevance and Implications.**

456 SAs have been proven to undergo microbially mediated biotransformation in nitrifying
457 WWTPs (Muller et al., 2013; Osorio et al., 2016) and in soil (Brienza et al., 2017). AOA, AOB,
458 and comammox are prevalent in many environments such as WWTPs, soil, and surface waters
459 (Chao et al., 2016; Daims et al., 2015; Pjevac et al., 2017; Prosser and Nicol, 2012). In this
460 study, the AOA *N. gargensis*, AOB *N. nitrosa* Nm90, and comammox *N. inopinata* were shown
461 to biotransform SAs to different extents. In particular, the AOA strain showed high
462 biotransformation rates. The main reaction between SAs and AOMs mainly occurred at the
463 aromatic amine, suggesting that other pollutants with aromatic amines likely have the potential to
464 be biotransformed by AOMs, as well.

465 The amino group of SAs is an antimicrobially active moiety that, if replaced, might change
466 the antimicrobial effect. In this study, it was observed that the biotransformation of SAs by
467 ammonia oxidizers mainly occurred on the amino group on the para position, and desNH$_2$-SAs,
468 NO$_2$-SAs and OH-SAs are important TPs of ammonia oxidizers produced via biotic or abiotic
469 reaction. In acute toxicity assays, NO$_2$- SMX and 4-OH-SMX were found to inhibit the growth
470 of *Vibro fishcheri* to a greater extent than the parent compound, SMX (Majewsky et al., 2014;
471 Osorio et al., 2016). In addition to its toxicity, NO$_2$-SMX has the potential to convert back to
472 SMX in anoxic environments in the absence of nitrate as an electron acceptor (Noedler et al.,
473 2012). Pterin-SA conjugates were reported to have appreciable antibacterial activity, but this

474 activity was ten times weaker than that of their corresponding parent SAs (Zhao et al., 2016).
475 Moreover, synergistic effects were observed for a mixture of SMX and trimethoprim in algae
476 (Yang et al., 2008). TPs might also have synergistic effects with other pharmaceuticals. So far,
477 only two target organisms *V. fishcheri* (bacteria) and *Daphnia magna* (crustacean) were used to
478 test the acute toxicity of the TPs of SAs. Further studies on acute and chronic toxicity of the
479 formed TPs should be carried out to obtain a comprehensive risk assessment of SAs in the
480 environment.

481

482 **4. Conclusions**

483 In summary, this study represents an important step toward filling in the knowledge gaps on
484 SA biotransformation by ammonia oxidizers. Firstly, the biotransformation of SAs by pure
485 AOA, AOB and comammox cultures revealed new biotransformation pathways for SAs.
486 Secondly, indications for TP formation by (i) deamination, (ii) hydroxylation on the aromatic
487 ring, (iii) oxidation of the amine group of SAs to a hydroxyl group (-OH), and (iv) oxidation of
488 the amine group into nitro group were obtained. Thirdly, experimental data suggest that SA
489 biotransformation by ammonia oxidizers occurred via cometabolim. Finally, the intermediate
490 hydroxylamine has the potential to abiotically transform SAs.

491

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702 **Captions**

703 **Figure 1.** Removal of seven SAs biotransformed by *N. gargensis* (AOA), *N. nitrosa* Nm 90
704 (AOB), and *N. inopinata* (comammox) (n=3). Removal (%) = (C_0-Ct)/C_0×100%. C_t represents
705 the concentrations of SAs at time T, C_0 represents the concentrations of SAs at the starting time.
706 A) Removal at 144 h for the AOA and AOB strains and 336 h for comammox strain. B)
707 Removal at 240 h for the AOA strain, 504 h for the AOB strain, and 336 h for the comammox
708 strain. SDZ, sulfadiazine; SMZ, sulfamethazine; SMX, sulfamethoxazole; SDO, sulfadoxine;
709 SMR, sulfamerazine; SMM, sulfamonomethoxine; STZ, sulfathiazole.

710

711 **Figure 2.** First-order biotransformation rate constants (k_{bio}) of SAs by *N. gargensis*, *N. nitrosa*
712 Nm90 and *N. inopinata*. SDZ, sulfadiazine; SMZ, sulfamethazine; SMX, sulfamethoxazole;
713 SDO, sulfadoxine; SMR, sulfamerazine; SMM, sulfamonomethoxine; STZ, sulfathiazole.

714

715 **Figure 3.** Comparison of SDZ (Figure 3 A, B and C), SMZ (Figure 3 D, E, and F), and SMX
716 (Figure 3 G and H) biotransformation by *N. gargensis, N. nitrosa* Nm90*, and N. inopinata*,
717 respectively. The y axis plots the peak abundance of SAs and their TPs in LC- HRMS/MS, mean
718 ± SD (n=3). Note: different panels have different scales. SDZ, sulfadiazine; SMZ,
719 sulfamethazine; SMX, sulfamethoxazole. TP236, desamino-SDZ; TP264, desamino-SMZ;
720 TP280, HO-SMZ; TP325, likely from the hydroxylation of the aromatic ring plus the oxidation
721 of the amine group into nitro group; TP239, desamino-SMX; TP300, likely contains a nitro

722 group from oxidation of the amine group, as well as a -OH group added on the aromatic ring; the
723 structure of TP262 and TP237 remains unclear.

724

725 **Figure 4.** Comparison of SDZ, SMZ, and SMX biotransformation by *N. gargensis, N. nitrosa*
726 Nm90*, and N. inopinata* between Hi_NH4-N (left) and Lo_NH4-N (right). C_t represents the
727 concentrations of SAs at time T, C_0 represents the concentrations of SAs at the starting time. The
728 y axis plots the ratios of the SA concentration at time T0 and T, mean ± SD (n=3). SDZ,
729 sulfadiazine; SMZ, sulfamethazine; SMX, sulfamethoxazole. For all experiments the SAs were
730 added individually to each culture. All experiments were performed in triplicate.

731

732 **Figure 5.** The potential transformation mechanisms and pathways of sulfonamides by the three
733 ammonia oxidizers strains. AOA, ammonia-oxidizing archaea; comammox, the complete
734 ammonia oxidizer; AOB, ammonia-oxidizing bacteria; AMO, ammonia monooxygenase; HAO,
735 hydroxylamine dehydrogenase; NXR, nitrite oxidoreductase. For AOA, only one of several
736 different published metabolic models for ammonia oxidation is depicted here (Carini et al.,
737 2018).

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Figure 1.

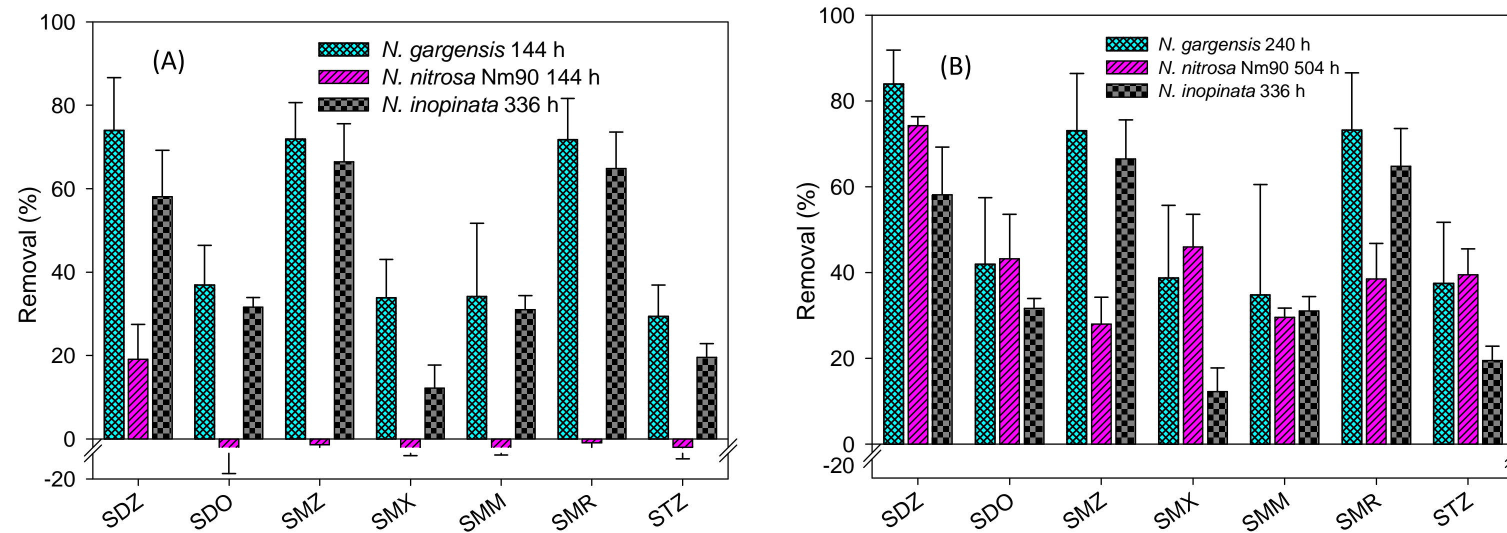

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Figure 2

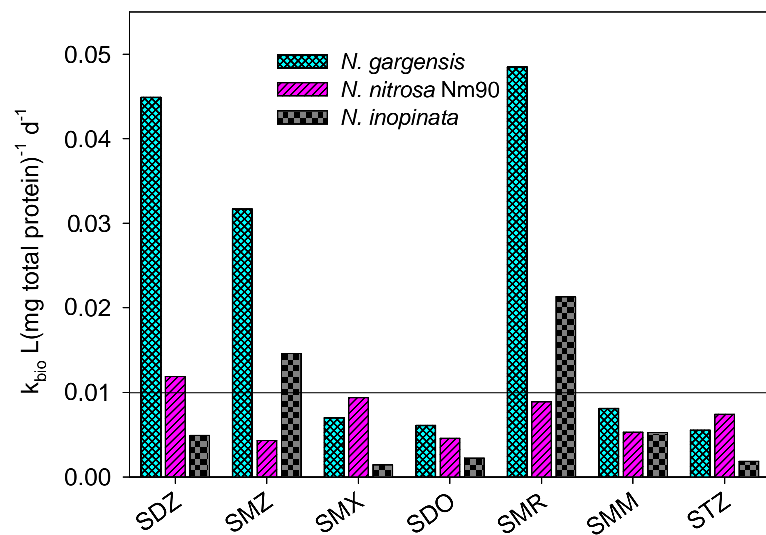

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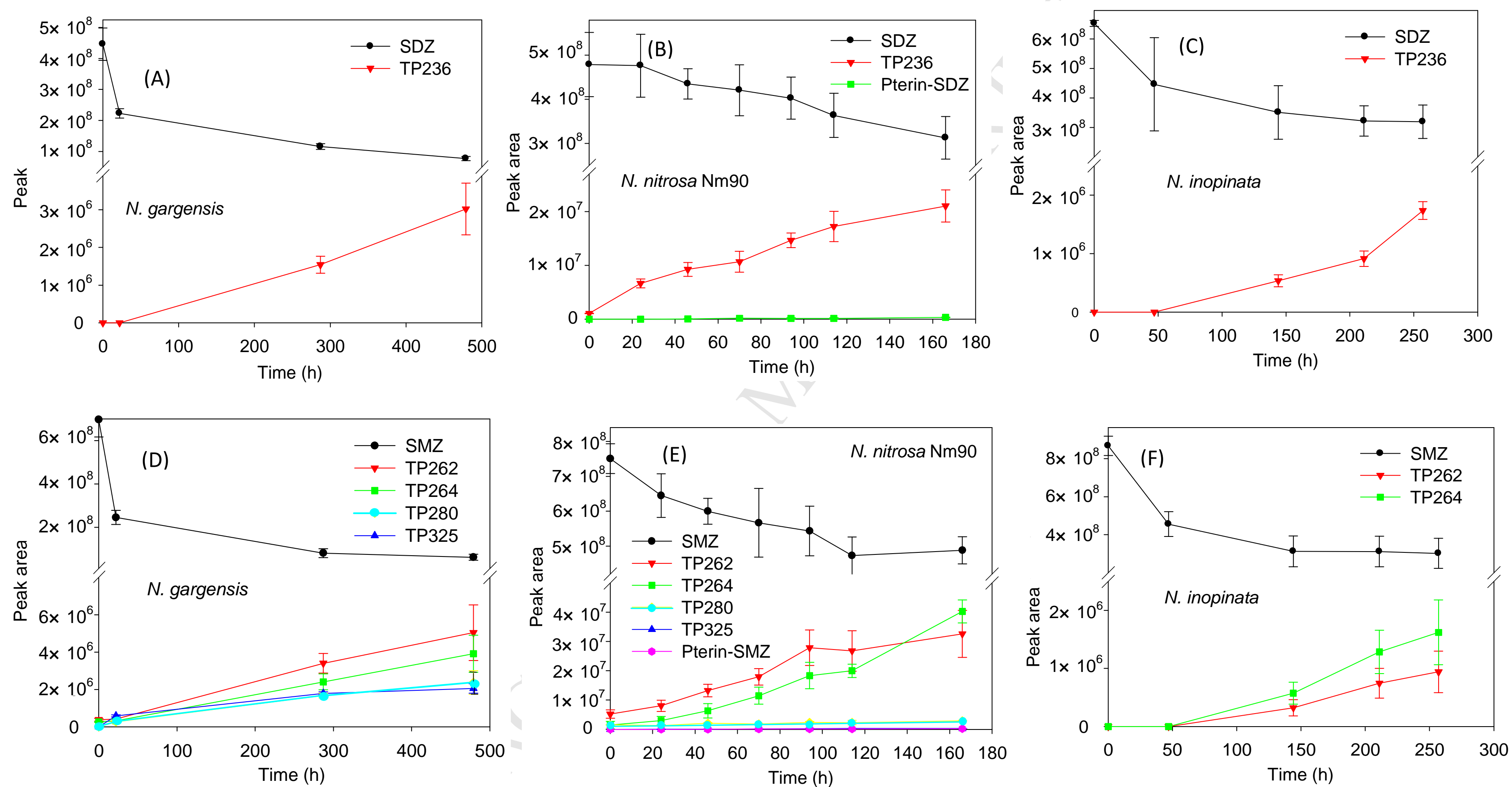
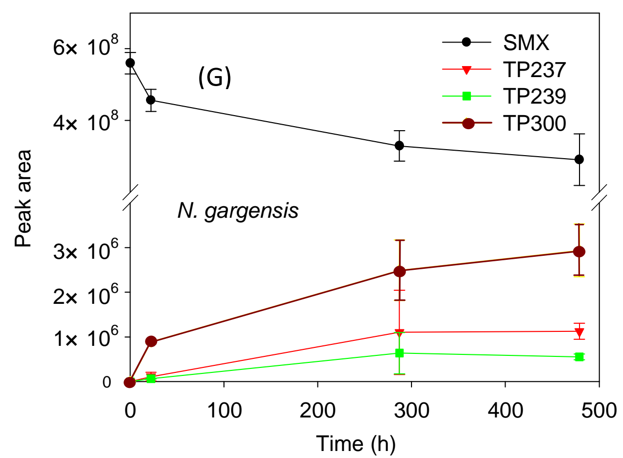
Figure 3.





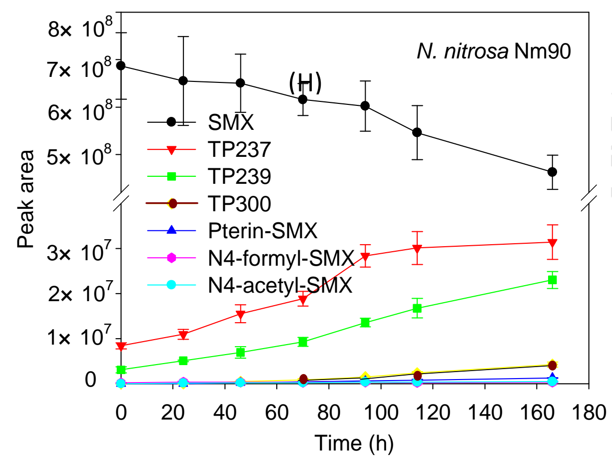


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Figure 4.

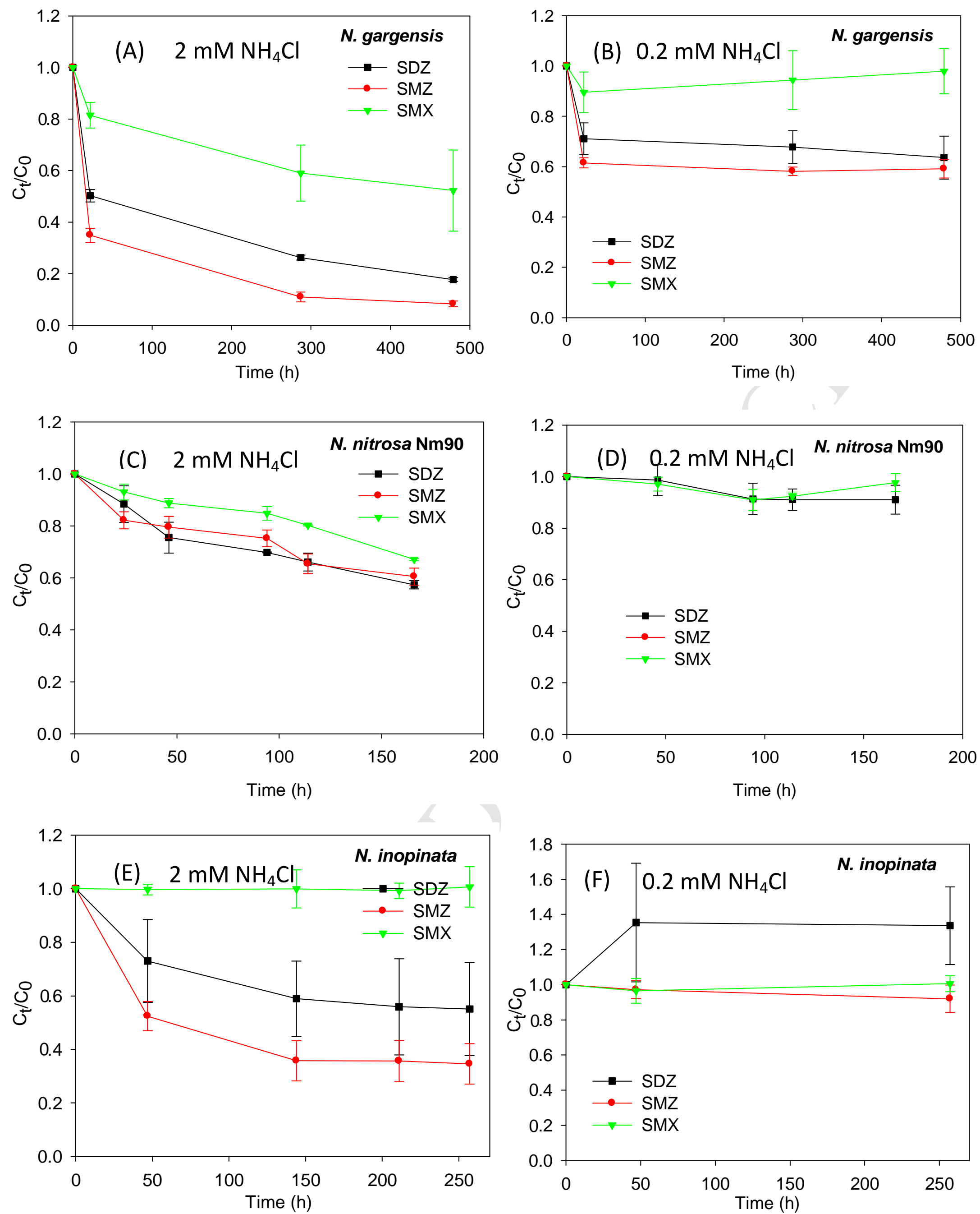
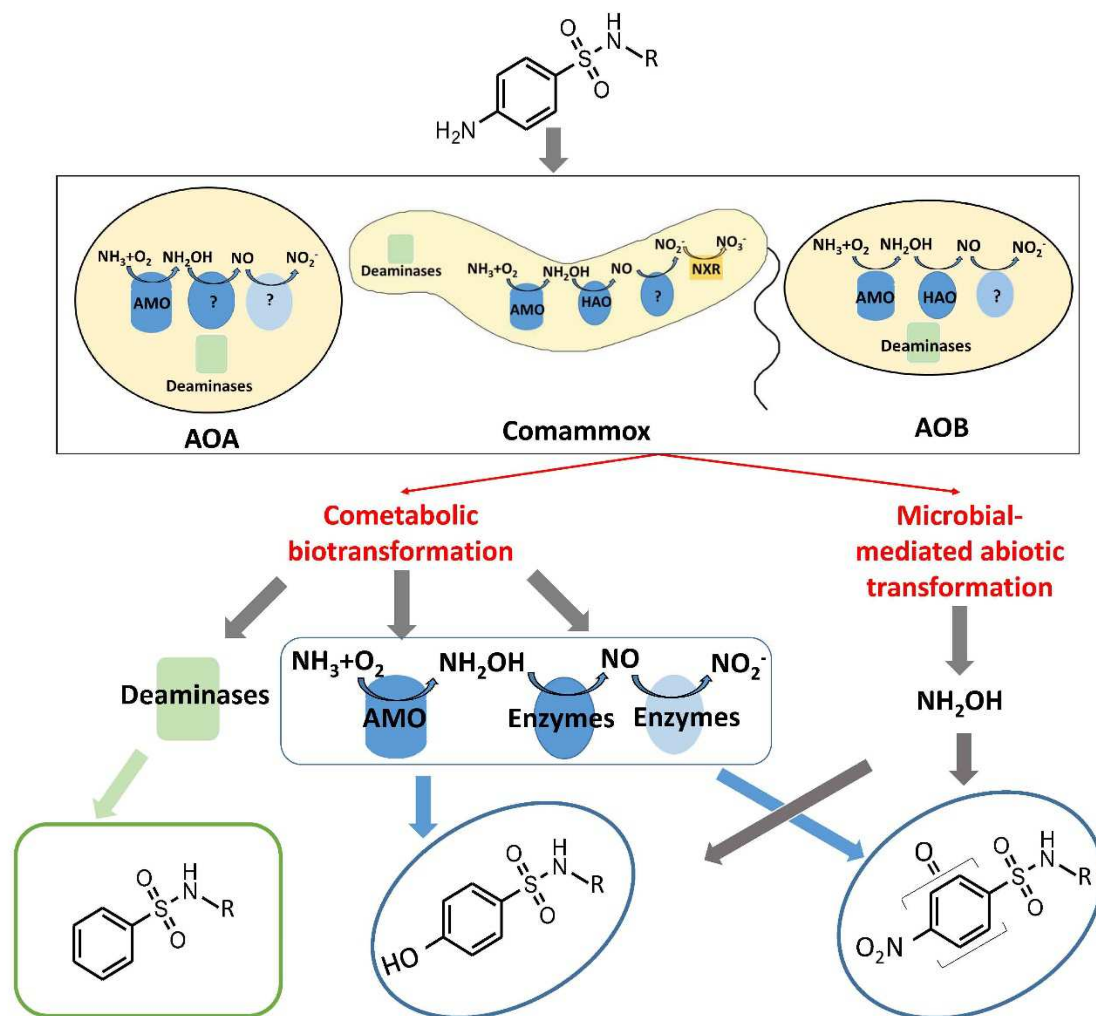


Figure 5.



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Highlights

1. Three groups of AOMs including AOA, AOB and comammox are able to biotransform SAs.

2. The AOA strain exhibited the best SA removals, followed by the comammox and the AOB.

3. Deamination, hydroxylation and nitration are main reactions of SDZ, SMZ and SMX.

4. SAs were biotransformed by AOMs via cometabolism.

5. SAs were transformed by hydroxylamine, an intermediate of ammonia oxidation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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