

1 **Cultivation of *Scenedesmus acuminatus* in different liquid digestates from anaerobic**
2 **digestion of pulp and paper industry biosludge**

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9 **Abstract:**

10 Different undiluted liquid digestates from mesophilic and thermophilic anaerobic digesters
11 of pulp and paper industry biosludge with and without thermal pretreatment were
12 characterized and utilized for cultivating *Scenedesmus acuminatus*. Higher *S. acuminatus*
13 biomass yields were obtained in thermophilic digestates (without and with pretreatment
14 prior to anaerobic digestion (AD): 10.2 ± 2.2 and 10.8 ± 1.2 g L⁻¹, respectively) than in
15 pretreated mesophilic digestates (7.8 ± 0.3 g L⁻¹), likely due to differences in concentration
16 of sulfate, iron, and/or other minor nutrients. *S. acuminatus* removed over 97.4% of
17 ammonium and 99.9% of phosphate and sulfate from the digestates. Color (74–80%) and
18 soluble COD (29–39%) of the digestates were partially removed. Different AD processes
19 resulted in different methane yields (18–126 L CH₄ kg⁻¹ VS), digestate compositions, and
20 microalgal yields. These findings emphasize the importance of optimizing each processing
21 step in wood-based biorefineries and provide information for pulp and paper industry
22 development for enhancing value generation.

23

24 **Keywords:** wastewater treatment; pulp and paper industry; digestate characteristics;
25 microalgal growth; nutrient recovery

26 **1 Introduction**

27 Due to environmental pollution and climate change, the European Union has promoted a
28 binding goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% in each member country
29 by 2030 compared to 1990, including a 27% share of renewable energy for the EU
30 (European Council, 2014). With the rapid growth of and heavy dependence on fossil fuels
31 in Asia (Lee et al., 2017) as well as in other regions (e.g., North America, Latin America,
32 and Africa) (Tan et al., 2017), a series of policies and legislations to encourage a low-
33 carbon economy and green growth should be implemented. Biomass, which refers to all
34 organic material originating from plants (e.g., algae, trees, and crops), can be converted into
35 biofuels and energy carriers and is therefore a major renewable energy feedstock
36 (McKendry, 2002). Compared with terrestrial plants, microalgae have great potential as a
37 sustainable bioenergy feedstock due to, e.g., higher growth rates, no requirements for arable
38 land, and the potential of wastewater treatment to recover nutrients (Guldhe et al., 2017).

39 However, before microalgae can be commercially utilized in low-value products such as
40 energy and fuels (Arenas et al., 2017), higher biomass yields need to be generated to make
41 the process more economically feasible. Since wastewater can provide the water and
42 nutrients for the microalgae, many studies have been carried out to cultivate microalgae in
43 different kinds of wastewaters, including municipal, agricultural, and industrial wastewater
44 (Lv et al., 2017; Guldhe et al., 2017; Kinnunen and Rintala, 2016). Microalgal cultivation

45 in anaerobic digestion (AD) effluents, as a specific waste stream, has shown significant
46 potential for biorefinery applications due to efficient nutrient removal and accumulation of
47 high-value products (e.g., astaxanthin, carotenoids, and omega-3 fatty acids) in microalgal
48 biomass (Polishchuk et al., 2015; Xia and Murphy, 2016). The integration of AD effluents
49 from pulp and paper industry biosludge and microalgal cultivation (hereafter referred to as
50 integrated AD&MC system) has been studied to produce biomass and recover nutrients
51 from wastewater (Kinnunen and Rintala, 2016; Polishchuk et al., 2015). The results of our
52 previous study (Tao et al., 2017) indicated the possibility of high-yield microalgal biomass
53 production and efficient nutrient removal when *Scenedesmus acuminatus* was cultivated in
54 liquid digestates from the AD of pulp and paper industry biosludge.

55 The pulp and paper industry is a water- and energy-intensive biomass-refining industry that
56 typically treats its wastewaters in aerobic systems, which generate a large amount of
57 primary sludge and biosludge. The AD of the generated sludge has gained increasing
58 attention within the pulp and paper industry due to, e.g., methane production as a renewable
59 energy (Kinnunen et al., 2015; Veluchamy and Kalamdhad, 2017) and the possibility for
60 nutrient recovery. Thermal pretreatment prior to AD is one of the main approaches used to
61 enhance methane production from pulp and paper industry biosludge (Kamali et al., 2016;
62 Kinnunen et al., 2015). To understand the effect of thermal pretreatment temperatures
63 (80 °C, 105 °C, 121 °C, and 134 °C) on the potential for methane production from
64 biosludge in the pulp and paper industry, Kinnunen et al. (2015) carried out methane
65 potential batch assays at 35 °C. They reported that methane production was increased by
66 39–140% compared to untreated biosludge with increasing pretreatment temperatures,
67 except for methane production from biosludge treated at the lowest temperature, 80 °C,

68 which was lower than that obtained from untreated biosludge. However, although increased
69 pretreatment temperatures increased methane production, costs and energy consumption
70 increased as well (Kinnunen et al., 2015). To our knowledge, the first full-scale AD plant
71 integrated with a pulp mill for digesting pulp mill sludge is currently being planned in
72 Finland (Liikanen, 2016).

73 Previous studies have shown that biosludge with different treatments (pretreatment and
74 AD) can result in different methane production yields and digestate compositions (Asunis,
75 2015; Kinnunen et al., 2015). To optimize an integrated AD&MC system for maximum
76 bioenergy (methane and microalgal biomass) production, it is important to study each
77 component and thus provide an overview of the AD&MC system itself. The aim of this
78 work was to study *S. acuminatus* cultivation in various types of liquid digestates from the
79 AD of pulp and paper industry biosludge, which to our knowledge has not been studied
80 before. The objective was to provide scientifically and practically relevant information to
81 pulp and paper industry biorefineries that consider implementing AD of biosludge and
82 microalgal cultivation in the resulting liquid digestate. The following research questions
83 were addressed: (1) How do different AD conditions change the composition of the
84 digestates and in turn affect the growth of *S. acuminatus*? (2) Can *S. acuminatus* grow in
85 and simultaneously remove nutrients from undiluted digestates from pulp and paper mill
86 biosludge? The microalga *S. acuminatus* was chosen due to its high growth rate and ability
87 to grow in various types of waste streams (Adamsson, 2000; Tao et al., 2017).

88 **2 Materials and Methods**

89 2.1 Microalgal strain and liquid digestates

90 *Scenedesmus acuminatus* (SAG 38.81) was obtained as a culture suspension from the SAG
91 Culture Collection of Algae at the University of Göttingen, Germany. The stock culture
92 was maintained in 100 mL of modified N-8 medium (Praveenkumar et al., 2014) in a 250-
93 mL Erlenmeyer flask on an orbital shaker (150 rpm) and continuously illuminated using
94 fluorescent lamps (Osram L 18W/965 Biolux, Germany) at a light intensity of 40 μmol
95 $\text{photos m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$. Since there was no growth of *S. acuminatus* in the modified N-8 medium
96 with an initial pH of 6.5, the pH was adjusted to 8.0 by adding 5 M NaOH. Based on a
97 previous study by Xu et al. (2015), 8.0 is an optimal initial pH for the cultivation of
98 *Scenedesmus* sp.

99 Four types of digestates characterized in this study were collected from anaerobic, semi-
100 continuously fed, completely stirred tank reactors (5 L liquid volume) treating biosludge
101 from a pulp and paper industry wastewater treatment plant (Asunis, 2015). Three different
102 pulp and paper mill biosludge digestates used in the microalgal cultivation experiments of
103 the present study were anaerobically digested at 55 °C (thermophilic digestate, T),
104 anaerobically digested at 55 °C after thermal pretreatment at 121 °C for 10 min (pre-treated
105 thermophilic digestate, Tp), and anaerobically digested at 35 °C after thermal pretreatment
106 at 121 °C for 10 min (pre-treated mesophilic digestate, Mp). The fourth pulp and paper mill
107 biosludge digestate referred to in this paper was anaerobically digested at 35 °C
108 (mesophilic digestate, M) (Asunis, 2015) and utilized for the cultivation of *S. acuminatus* in
109 our previous study (Tao et al., 2017). The digestates were centrifuged at 5200 rpm for 4
110 min, and the supernatant was filtered through a glass fiber filter (Whatman GF/A, UK).

111 After filtration, the liquid digestates (Fig. S1 in the Supplementary Material) were stored at
112 4 °C before being used.

113 The microalgal growth results with the mesophilic digestate (M) are not directly
114 comparable to the three digestates used for microalgal cultivation in the present study
115 because, in our previous study, *S. acuminatus* was grown in 1.5-times diluted mesophilic
116 digestate M (Tao et al., 2017), whereas in this study *S. acuminatus* was cultivated in
117 undiluted digestates. Therefore, growth yields of *S. acuminatus* in digestate M were not
118 compared to the microalgal cultivation results obtained in this study. However, the
119 composition of the digestate M was provided in order to show more clearly how the
120 digestate characteristics change depending on the AD temperature and presence or absence
121 of a pretreatment step.

122 2.2 Photobioreactors

123 *S. acuminatus* was grown separately in the three different digestates (digestate refers to
124 liquid, filtered digestate) for 21 days in photobioreactors (four replicates with each
125 digestate), which consisted of a 1-L glass bottle (Pyrex) sealed with a plastic cap, with two
126 tubes penetrating the cap serving as the gas inlet and outlet. Air with 5% CO₂ (v/v) at a
127 flow rate of 0.105 L min⁻¹ was sparged from the bottom by a glass distribution tube
128 (porosity 0, ø 22 mm, Duran Group, Germany). The photobioreactors were continuously
129 illuminated using white fluorescent lamps (Osram L 18W/965 De Luxe Cool Daylight,
130 Germany) with a light intensity of 240 μmol photos m⁻² s⁻¹ (Xu et al., 2015) from two sides
131 of the reactors. *S. acuminatus* was inoculated to the photobioreactors to provide an initial
132 optical density (OD₆₈₀) of 0.2. The initial total culture volume in the reactors was 600 mL.

133 The temperature of the reactors was maintained at 22 ± 2 °C. Water evaporated during the
134 cultivation due to the constant sparging, and therefore distilled water was added to
135 compensate for the evaporated water volume (marked with lines on the photobioreactors)
136 each time before taking samples for analyses.

137 2.3 Analytical methods

138 The culture pH was measured using a WTW 330 pH meter (WTW, Germany) with a
139 Slimtrode electrode (Hamilton, Germany). The light intensity was controlled by measuring
140 the average value of six sites on two sides of the photobioreactors' outer surface by a MQ-
141 200 quantum meter (Apogee, USA).

142 Volatile suspended solids (VSS) were measured by filtering 10–15 mL of culture solution
143 through a glass fiber filter (Whatman GF/A) to assess microalgal biomass production. Each
144 filter containing the suspended solids was dried at 105 °C overnight, then weighed and
145 burned in a 550 °C muffle furnace for 2 h before being weighed again. VSS was determined
146 gravimetrically as the difference between the filters after treatment at these two
147 temperatures. The supernatant after VSS filtration was used in the analysis of digestate
148 color (OD_{680}) and turbidity, soluble chemical oxygen demand (soluble COD), soluble
149 biochemical oxygen demand (BOD_{7s}), dissolved organic carbon (DOC), dissolved
150 inorganic carbon (DIC), and nutrient (N, P, S) concentrations. The OD was measured at a
151 wavelength of 680 nm using a Shimadzu UV-1700 Pharmaspec spectrophotometer after
152 proper dilution with distilled water to give absorbance values between 0.2–0.7. Turbidity
153 was measured with a TN-100/T-100 turbidimeter. OD_{680} was also measured from non-
154 filtrated samples to assess microalgal biomass production (OD_{m680}).

155 The growth rates were calculated using the following equation:

$$156 \quad \mu = \frac{\ln(X_t/X_0)}{t - t_0} \quad (1)$$

157 where X_0 is the concentration of biomass measured as VSS (g L^{-1}) at initial time (t_0) and X_t
158 is the concentration of biomass at a specific time (t).

159 Soluble COD was determined using a dichromate method according to the Finnish Standard
160 SFS 5504. The determination of $\text{BOD}_{7\text{S}}$ was achieved with a WTW OxiTop
161 Control/OxiTop measuring system. DOC and DIC were measured with a total organic
162 carbon analyzer (Shimadzu Model TOC-5000) with an ASI-5000 autosampler. $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$ was
163 measured with an ion-selective electrode (Thermo Scientific Orion ISE meter). The
164 nutrients' (ammonium, phosphate, and sulfate) removal rate was calculated as $\text{NRR} = (C_0 -$
165 $C_t) t^{-1}$, where C_0 is the nutrient concentration on day 0, and C_t is the nutrient concentration
166 after decreasing to below 0.1 mg L^{-1} , which represents $> 99.9\%$ nutrient removal. NO_3^- ,
167 NO_2^- , PO_4^{3-} , and SO_4^{2-} were measured using an ICS-1600 ion chromatograph (Dionex,
168 USA) with an AS-DV autosampler, Ion-Pac AS4A-SC anion exchange column, and ASRS-
169 300 suppressor (2 mm). The system was operated in isocratic mode using an eluent
170 containing $1.9 \text{ mM Na}_2\text{CO}_3$ and 1.7 mM NaHCO_3 , and an eluent flow rate of 1 mL min^{-1} .

171 **3 Results and Discussion**

172 **3.1 Characteristics of the liquid digestates**

173 The four pulp and paper industry biosludge digestates originating from digesters operating
174 at different temperatures to treat biosludge with and without thermal pretreatment had

175 different characteristics (Table 1). The initial pH of all the digestates was above 8.0, and the
176 buffering capacity was good because the pH remained relatively stable in all cultivations
177 despite efficient ammonium utilization, the uptake of which usually decreases culture pH,
178 as shown by, e.g., Goldman and Brewer (1980). The OD_{680} of the thermophilic digestates
179 were higher than those of the mesophilic digestates. In addition, the OD_{680} of the
180 digestates indicated that pretreatment leads to increased color, as their OD_{680} were slightly
181 higher than those without pretreatment. Digestate Tp showed the darkest color (OD_{680} :
182 0.63 ± 0.08 ; turbidity: 320 NTU) of all the digestates. However, the OD_{680} of digestate T
183 (0.59 ± 0.06) was higher than that of Mp (0.35 ± 0.01), while its turbidity (280 NTU) was
184 lower than that of Mp (290 NTU). The correlation between OD_{680} and turbidity is unclear,
185 likely due to the different wavelengths used in the two measurements. Substances in the
186 liquid digestates responsible for their color may include clay, silt, finely divided inorganic
187 and organic matter, soluble-colored organic compounds, plankton, and other microscopic
188 organisms (Wang et al., 2010). The turbidity of liquid digestates may vary, ranging from,
189 e.g., 2960 to 51400 NTU in the liquid fraction of mainly manure digestates from 11 full-
190 scale co-digestion plants (Akhiar et al., 2017). The turbidities of our samples were much
191 lower than those in Akhiar et al. (2017), likely due to different sampling methods. In the
192 study of Akhiar et al. (2017) the liquid fractions of the digestates were separated from the
193 solids either by screw press, centrifugation or vibrating screen, whereas in this study
194 digestates were centrifuged and then filtered through glass fiber filters with a nominal pore
195 size of 1.6 μm . The dark color of the medium, which results in poor light penetration, is one
196 of the issues that could reduce microalgal growth (Wang et al., 2010; Xia and Murphy,
197 2016). For example, in a study by Wang et al. (2010) where *Chlorella* sp. were cultivated in

198 a liquid fraction (filtered through glass microfiber filters with pore size of 1.5 μm) of
199 anaerobically digested dairy manure (turbidity: 1800–1900 NTU) with different dilutions
200 (10-, 15-, 20-, and 25-times) for 21 days, the inverse correlation between turbidity and
201 specific algal growth rates ($R^2 = 0.982$) indicated that high turbidity may limit algal growth.
202 However, dilution for the benefit of microalgal growth increases total wastewater treatment
203 volume and might actually reduce microalgal growth due to a reduction in nutrients and
204 trace element concentrations.

205 The thermophilic digestates (T and Tp) had on average 65 mg L^{-1} higher ammonium
206 concentrations compared with the mesophilic digestates (M and Mp). In addition, the
207 pretreatment also led to increased ammonium concentration in the digestate especially in
208 the case of thermophilic digestion. The digestate Tp had on average 100 mg L^{-1} higher
209 ammonium concentration than digestate T (Table 1). Ammonium was available in all the
210 digestates as a nitrogen source for microalgal growth, while nitrate and nitrite
211 concentrations were below 1.0 mg L^{-1} . The sulfate-S concentration in digestate Mp was
212 much lower than corresponding concentrations in the other three digestates (Table 1). The
213 total phosphorus content was similar (27–30 mg L^{-1}) in all the digestates, and
214 approximately 50% of the phosphorus existed in the form of phosphate — except in
215 digestate M, where the phosphate share was slightly higher (64.3%). Xin et al. (2010) have
216 reported an optimal N/P ratio (mass per mass) for *Scenedesmus* sp. LX1 growth to range
217 between 5 and 8, while *Scenedesmus* sp. in the study of Rhee (1978) required an N/P ratio
218 of approximately 13.5 to grow without limitations by either nutrient. The optimal ratio is
219 also species-specific. The N/P ratios of the digestates in this study ranged from 12 to 18
220 (Table 1) and were thus somewhat higher than the reported values. However, no extra

221 phosphate was added to the digestates since it did not help with microalgal biomass
222 production or ammonium removal in the digestates of sewage sludge in our previous study
223 (Tao et al., 2017).

224 A phenomenon similar to that with ammonium was observed with soluble COD values of
225 the different digestates. The thermophilic digestates had higher soluble COD values than
226 the mesophilic digestates; and when the digestates produced at the same digestion
227 temperature were compared, those generated with pretreatment resulted in higher soluble
228 COD values than those without pretreatment (Table 1). The BOD_{7s}/soluble COD ratios
229 were lower than 1:20 in the measured digestates (T, Tp, and Mp), which means that most of
230 the organic material left in the liquid digestates after anaerobic digestion was not easily
231 biodegradable. The DIC concentration (520–690 mg L⁻¹) of each digestate was higher than
232 the corresponding DOC concentration (150–540 mg L⁻¹).

233 3.2 Cultivation of *S. acuminatus* in the liquid digestates

234 3.2.1 Microalgal biomass production

235 Microalgal biomass production as indicated by VSS in the three studied digestates (T, Tp,
236 and Mp) was as shown in Fig. 1. The ODM₆₈₀ and VSS had a positive correlate in each
237 digestate (T: R² = 0.96; Tp: R² = 0.96; Mp: R² = 0.97). The final microalgal biomass
238 concentration after 21 days of batch cultivation was higher with both thermophilic
239 digestates (T, Tp: 10.2±2.2–10.8±1.2 g L⁻¹) than the concentration obtained with the
240 mesophilic digestate (Mp: 7.8±0.3 g L⁻¹). Despite the relatively high initial ammonium
241 concentrations (380–480 mg L⁻¹) in all cultures, no clear lag phase was observed in
242 microalgal growth. The biomass concentration started to stabilize on day 15–18. *S.*

243 *acuminatus* in digestate Tp initially grew more slowly than in digestates T and Mp, likely
244 due to its higher initial ammonium concentration potentially inhibiting or slowing down
245 photosynthesis (Abeliovich and Azov, 1976) as well as poorer light penetration (due to the
246 darker color of the digestate). Before day 9, the *S. acuminatus* biomass concentration in
247 digestate T (6.0 g-VSS L⁻¹ at day 9) was the highest, followed by *S. acuminatus* in digestate
248 Mp (4.9 g-VSS L⁻¹ at day 9) and Tp (4.4 g-VSS L⁻¹ at day 9). After day 9 and day 15, the
249 VSS concentration in digestate Tp exceeded that in digestates Mp and T, respectively. The
250 highest specific growth rates for all digestates were obtained during different periods (Table
251 2). These values are relatively high, as previous studies have reported growth rates ranging
252 from 0.41 to 1.06 day⁻¹ (Diniz et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2010).

253 The results of this study show that liquid digestates from pulp and paper wastewater
254 treatment plant biosludge digestion can support high microalgal biomass yields and thus
255 confirm the results of our previous study (Tao et al., 2017). In addition, in this study high
256 microalgal biomass concentrations were obtained in the liquid digestates without dilution.
257 To our knowledge, this has not been reported before. The light path in this study was not
258 optimized, but it was shown that the color of the digestates was not a problem in the simple
259 cultivation systems used. Thus, the microalgae should also grow well in more optimized
260 short-path photobioreactors without dilution of the digestate. Bacteria were observed in the
261 cultures, which was expected since the digestates were not sterilized in this study. Thus, the
262 measured VSS values did include some bacteria associated with the microalgae. However,
263 majority of the biomass was likely microalgae. For example, Hulatt and Thomas (2010)
264 found an increased number of bacteria during 30-day microalgal cultivation, but reported
265 that less than 1% of carbon of the total biomass comprised of bacteria.

266 The influence from pulp and paper mill digestates on microalgal growth is also species-
267 specific. For example, Kinnunen and Rintala (2016) previously reported that the highest
268 biomass concentration (less than 0.2 g-VSS L⁻¹) was obtained with *Scenedesmus* sp.
269 originating from Lake Pyhäjärvi (Tampere, Finland) in 4-times diluted liquid digestate from
270 pulp and paper industry biosludge AD after optimizing the dilution. Although the biosludge
271 used in Kinnunen and Rintala (2016) and in this study were from the same pulp and paper
272 mill, the different characteristics of the digestates (likely due to changes in, e.g., wood
273 source, pulp mill operation parameters, and seasons) and microalgal strains clearly affected
274 the obtainable biomass quantity.

275 **3.2.2 Nutrient removal from liquid digestates**

276 *S. acuminatus* removed nutrients efficiently from the digestates (Fig. 2). The ammonium
277 concentration decreased from an initial 380–480 mg L⁻¹ to less than 0.2–10 mg L⁻¹. The
278 ammonium removal efficiency in the thermophilic digestates was over 99.9%, which was
279 slightly higher than that obtained in the mesophilic digestate (97.4%). The pH fluctuated
280 between 7.8 and 8.4 (Fig. S2 in Supplementary Material) and showed a decreasing trend
281 likely due to ammonium uptake, which is known to reduce pH (Goldman and Brewer,
282 1980). The overall ammonium removal rates during the 21-day cultivation period were
283 similar in all cultures (T: 18.3 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹; Tp: 23.3 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹; and Mp: 17.8 mg L⁻¹
284 day⁻¹). However, a clear change in the ammonium removal rate was seen in all digestates
285 after day 7, likely due to exhaustion of phosphate and sulfate (Fig. 2). Ammonium removal
286 rates before and after day 7 were 43.1 and 5.9 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹, 34.5 and 17.7 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹,
287 and 26.0 and 13.8 mg L⁻¹ day⁻¹ for digestate T, Tp, and Mp, respectively. This finding
288 indicates that the exhaustion of phosphate and sulfate from the cultures could slow

289 ammonium uptake as previously shown also by Xin et al. (2010). Several ammonium
290 transformations (e.g., algal uptake, ammonia evaporation, bacterial growth, and
291 nitrification) can occur in algae–bacteria consortium systems (González-Fernández et al.,
292 2011). According to the average temperature (22 °C) and observed pH range (7.8–8.4), the
293 theoretical fraction of unionized ammonia in all cultivations was 2.8%–10.3% (the equation
294 used for calculation shown in Tao et al., 2017). In addition, only low levels of nitrate and
295 nitrite ($< 3 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$) were found in all cultivations. These data suggest that ammonium
296 stripping and nitrification may have occurred, but that the main portion of the removed
297 ammonium from the digestates was used for microbial growth.

298 Sulfate concentration increased in all cultures from day 0 to day 2 (Fig. 2c). The resulting
299 sulfate likely originated from other sulfur compounds present in the digestates. During
300 anaerobic digestion, sulfate can be converted to sulfide by sulfate-reducing bacteria, and
301 result in the presence of H_2S and HS^- in the liquid phase (Cirne et al., 2008). H_2S and HS^-
302 could be converted into sulfate during cultivation via chemical and biological reactions in
303 the cultures supplied with air (Chen and Morris, 1972). Additionally, microalgae are
304 capable of releasing enzymes that can split inorganic sulfur from organic compounds and
305 make the sulfur available for algal growth (Giordano and Raven, 2014; Kertesz, 2000).
306 After the initial increase, however, sulfate was completely removed by day 7-9. Phosphate
307 removal, on the other hand, started immediately and phosphate was completely removed by
308 day 7 in all cultures. The overall phosphate and sulfate removal rates were 2.28 and 2.39
309 $\text{mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$, 1.63 and 1.68 $\text{mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$, and 2.13 and 0.45 $\text{mg L}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$ for digestates T,
310 Tp, and Mp, respectively. The removal rates of both phosphate and sulfate in digestate T
311 were the highest among all digestates. Phosphorus was likely removed from the digestates

312 through adsorption on the microalgal surface, intracellular uptake, and precipitation (Cai et
313 al., 2013). In the present study, VSS continued to increase even though phosphate was no
314 longer detected from the liquid digestates after day 7, which indicates that initial
315 phosphorus level in the digestates was high enough to support microalgal growth.

316 Based on the results of this study, Initial sulfate concentrations in liquid digestates could
317 affect ammonium removal efficiency and microalgal biomass production. This hypothesis
318 is supported by the fact that the cultivations in digestates T and Tp had similar initial sulfate
319 concentrations (15–17 mg L⁻¹) that enabled over 99.9% ammonium removal and similar
320 microalgal biomass production, while the different initial sulfate concentrations in
321 digestates T and Mp (17 vs. 3 mg L⁻¹), which had similar initial ammonium concentrations,
322 resulted in different ammonium removal efficiencies and algal biomass yield. Biological
323 nitrogen (N) uptake is catalyzed during photosynthesis by nitrogenase, which contains
324 iron–sulfur clusters (Zheng and Dean, 1994). A shortage of either sulfur or iron can, thus,
325 decrease the microalgal growth rate (Kumaresan et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2008). Sulfate is a
326 primary sulfur source for microalgae in aquatic environments, but the effect of sulfate
327 concentration on microalgal growth has not been widely studied. Mera et al. (2016)
328 reported that the growth of microalga *Chlamydomonas moewusii* was quite similar at
329 sodium sulfate concentrations of 0.1–3 mM (SO₄²⁻-S: 3.2–96 mg L⁻¹), but microalgal
330 biomass yields were lower at higher and lower sodium sulfate concentrations. In a study by
331 Lv et al. (2017), similar *Chlorococcum* sp. growth at SO₄²⁻-S levels from 6–90.3 mg L⁻¹
332 was obtained, but was much lower at 0 mg L⁻¹ sulfate. Due to the small number of related
333 studies, the effect of sulfate and combined effect of iron and sulfate on microalgal growth
334 should be further studied in the future. However, it should be also noted that other

335 micronutrients and trace elements that were not measured in this study could have caused
336 some differences in microalgal growth.

337

338 **3.2.3 Soluble COD, DOC, DIC, and color changes**

339 In this study, microalgal cultivation removed soluble COD and DIC to a certain extent; 29–
340 39% removal and 47–57% removal, respectively (Fig. 3a, d). DOC acted somewhat
341 contradictory to soluble COD, as the DOC level increased in the mesophilic digestate (Fig.
342 3c). Soluble COD removal efficiency from the thermophilic digestates (38% and 39%) was
343 higher than that from the mesophilic digestate (29%). The total removed dissolved carbon
344 ($<1 \text{ g L}^{-1}$) from the digestates was lower than the total carbon present in the biomass (3.9–
345 5.4 g L^{-1}), when assuming that approximately 50% of the total produced biomass is carbon
346 (Chisti, 2008). Hence, the cultivation was mixotrophic as both organic and inorganic
347 carbon was utilized, but mainly photoautotrophic as CO_2 was the main carbon source used
348 for microalgal growth.

349 COD represents the concentration of chemical oxidizer needed to oxidize all the oxidizable
350 organic or inorganic materials in wastewater, and DOC is used to reflect the dissolved
351 organic carbon content of a sample. In most microalgal studies, either DOC or COD has
352 been measured during microalgal cultivation (Eloka-Eboka et al., 2017; Guldhe et al., 2017;
353 Wang et al., 2010), yet the correlation between COD and DOC in microalgal cultures
354 remains unclear. For example, Marjakangas et al. (2015) reported an increase in both
355 soluble COD and DOC concentrations, likely due to a stress caused by an initial pH
356 decrease after *C. vulgaris* CY5 was mixotrophically cultivated in anaerobically treated
357 piggery wastewater. Thus, it seems that changes in COD and DOC depend on growth

358 conditions. In our study, organic carbon release from photosynthetic microalgal cells might
359 explain the observed increase in DOC during the cultivations in mesophilic digestate. The
360 decrease in soluble COD suggests that organic materials from the digestates were
361 consumed during cultivation and that the amount of consumed materials was higher than
362 the organic carbon released by the microalgae during normal photosynthetic growth. Some
363 studies have reported relatively high COD removal efficiencies (75–80%) from liquid
364 digestates integrated with microalgal cultivation (Yan and Zheng, 2014; Yang et al., 2015).
365 Soluble COD in this study was not easily biodegradable and was not therefore fully
366 removed. Further removal of soluble COD would be possible with non-biological
367 treatments, e.g., chemical oxidation, if deemed necessary. However, further soluble COD
368 removal would probably not be needed as the COD load (both low flow and COD
369 concentration) from algae treatment reject waters would be minimal compared to the
370 effluent COD load from the activated sludge plant the sludges originates, which may be up
371 to tens of tons COD per day (e.g., Regional State Administrative Agency of Eastern
372 Finland, 2016). Furthermore, in practice the effluent from algae treatment could be
373 circulated to the beginning of the activated sludge process, as is typically done with
374 dewatering reject waters after AD in municipal wastewater treatment plants.

375 The OD_{680} of the digestates were measured after removing the microalgae to demonstrate
376 their color change during cultivation (Fig. 3b). The OD_{680} values in all digestates
377 decreased until day 9 but remained stable afterward. At the end of the batch cultivations,
378 the color removal efficiencies in T, Tp, and Mp were 80%, 74%, and 79%, respectively.
379 The mechanism of color removal is not clear based on the results of this study. However,
380 Graham and Wilcox (2000) suggested that lignin (one cause of color) could be converted

381 into other non-colored materials by microalgal metabolism. Tarlan et al. (2002) also
382 reported that the main mechanism of color removal from pulping effluents with a mixed
383 culture of microalgae was metabolic conversion of colored molecules to non-colored
384 molecules rather than adsorption. Thus, the possible reason for the lower removal
385 efficiency of COD (29–39%) than color (74–80%) in this study was that the colored
386 organic molecules were converted into non-colored organic molecules.

387

388 **3.2.4 Integration of methane production and microalgal cultivation in the digestate**

389 To evaluate the different integrated AD&MC systems, the performance of each processing
390 step is shown in an overview (treatment methods of biosludge, microalgal cultivation
391 conditions, and bioenergy production) (Table 2). During the 21-day cultivation,
392 approximately 35% more microalgal biomass (as VSS) was obtained in the thermophilic
393 digestates than in the mesophilic digestate. This is a promising discovery, as methane
394 production in thermophilic digestion with pretreatment was higher than that obtained in the
395 corresponding mesophilic process; likewise, methane production in thermophilic digestion
396 without pretreatment was also higher than that obtained in mesophilic digestion without
397 pretreatment (Table 2). This finding indicates that the highest methane production and
398 microalgal biomass yields can be obtained in the same integrated AD&MC system.

399 The effect of sludge pretreatment before digestion on microalgal cultivation is not,
400 however, fully clear based on the results of this study. Asunis (2015) reported that thermal
401 pretreatment increased the methane yield by 100% in thermophilic AD, while the increase
402 was 460% in mesophilic AD. The difference caused by pretreatment prior to thermophilic
403 digestion on microalgal biomass production in the digestate was not significant. Although

404 maximum methane and microalgal biomass production were obtained with the same
405 process (thermophilic AD with pretreatment), other factors should be considered, including
406 the cost and energy burden of thermal pretreatment.

407 **4 Conclusions**

408 The cultivation of *Scenedesmus acuminatus* was successful in different undiluted digestates
409 from pulp and paper industry biosludge treated at different AD conditions (mesophilic vs.
410 thermophilic, with and without thermal pretreatment). *S. acuminatus* grew well (7.8–10.8 g
411 L⁻¹) and removed nutrients efficiently (over 97%) from all the digestates. Color (74–80%)
412 and soluble COD (29–39%) were partially removed. The digestates from the thermophilic
413 process with pretreatment generated the highest microalgal biomass concentrations, which
414 is a promising discovery for pulp and paper industry algae-based biorefinery applications as
415 maximum methane production was also obtained at the same conditions.

416

417 **Acknowledgments:** This work was supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie European
418 Joint Doctorate (EJD) in Advanced Biological Waste-To-Energy Technologies (ABWET)
419 funded from Horizon 2020 [grant number 643071]. We would like to thank Viljami
420 Kinnunen and Ramasamy Praveenkumar for their suggestions about the experimental set-
421 up. We would also like to thank Tarja Ylijoki-Kaiste for her help in the laboratory.

422

423

424 **Appendix A. Supplementary data**

425 **Figure S1.** The photos of liquid digestates from the pulp and paper wastewater treatment
426 plant biosludge, anaerobically treated under thermophilic conditions (55 °C) without
427 pretreatment (T), with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp), and under mesophilic
428 conditions (35 °C) with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp) before (day 0) and after
429 cultivation (day 21).

430 **Figure S2.** pH evolution during the cultivation of *Scenedesmus acuminatus* in the liquid
431 digestates from the pulp and paper wastewater treatment plant biosludge, anaerobically
432 treated under thermophilic conditions (55 °C) without pretreatment (T), with pretreatment
433 (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp), and under mesophilic conditions (35 °C) with pretreatment
434 (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp).

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558 **Figure Captions**

559 **Fig. 1.** Biomass concentration as volatile suspended solids (VSS) during the cultivation of
560 *Scenedesmus acuminatus* in the liquid digestates from the pulp and paper wastewater
561 treatment plant biosludge, anaerobically treated under thermophilic conditions (55 °C)
562 without pretreatment (T), with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp), and under mesophilic
563 conditions (35 °C) with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp).

564 **Fig. 2.** The soluble ammonium-N (a), phosphate-P (b), and sulfate-S concentrations (c)
565 during the cultivation of *Scenedesmus acuminatus* in the digestates from the pulp and paper
566 wastewater treatment plant biosludge, anaerobically treated under thermophilic conditions
567 (55 °C) without pretreatment (T), with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp), and under
568 mesophilic conditions (35 °C) with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp). The nitrate and
569 nitrite concentrations are not shown since they remained below 3 mg L⁻¹ in all cultures.

570 **Fig. 3.** Soluble COD concentration and removal efficiency (a), ODD₆₈₀ of the cultivation
571 medium (b), DOC concentration (c), and DIC concentration (d) during the cultivation of
572 *Scenedesmus acuminatus* in the digestates from the pulp and paper wastewater treatment
573 plant biosludge, anaerobically treated under thermophilic conditions (55 °C) without
574 pretreatment (T), with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp), and under mesophilic
575 conditions (35 °C) with pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp).

576 **Tables**

577 **Table 1** Composition of the liquid digestates from the anaerobic digestion of the pulp and paper industry
 578 biosludge produced under thermophilic conditions without pretreatment (T) and with pretreatment
 579 (121 °C) for 10 min (Tp) and under mesophilic conditions without pretreatment (M) and with
 580 pretreatment (121 °C) for 10 min (Mp).

	T	Tp	M ^{a)}	Mp
pH	8.2	8.3	8.5	8.3
Alkalinity (mg L ⁻¹ CaCO ₃)	2700	3100	n.a. ^{b)}	2600
ODd ₆₈₀	0.59 ± 0.06	0.63 ± 0.08	0.34 ± 0.01	0.35 ± 0.01
Turbidity (NTU)	280	320	n.a.	290
NH ₄ ⁺ -N (mg L ⁻¹)	380 ± 20	480 ± 20	350 ± 50	380 ± 15
NO ₃ ⁻ (mg L ⁻¹)	<1.0	<1.0	<1.0	<1.0
NO ₂ ⁻ (mg L ⁻¹)	<1.0	<1.0	<1.0	<1.0
TP ^{a)} (mg L ⁻¹)	33 ± 3	27 ± 1	28 ± 1	33 ± 2
PO ₄ ³⁻ -P (mg L ⁻¹)	16 ± 3	15 ± 3	18 ± 1	15 ± 1
N:P ^{c)}	12.1 ± 2.3	17.6 ± 1.5	12.5 ± 2.0	11.6 ± 1.0
SO ₄ ²⁻ -S ^{a)} (mg L ⁻¹)	17 ± 1.0	15 ± 0.1	17 ± 0.9	3 ± 0.1
Soluble COD (mg L ⁻¹)	1200 ± 130	2000 ± 130	910 ± 30	1170 ± 10
BOD _{7S} ^{a)} (mg L ⁻¹)	110 ± 5	60 ± 100	n.a.	60 ± 5
BOD _{7S} /soluble COD ^{a)}	0.09 ± 0.04	0.03 ± 0.77	n.a.	0.05 ± 0.50
DOC (mg L ⁻¹)	300 ± 4	540 ± 110	370 ± 40	150 ± 0
DIC (mg L ⁻¹)	570 ± 10	690 ± 46	520 ± 5	680 ± 47 ^{a)}

581 a) The values with ± sign include standard errors ($n = 2$)

582 b) n.a. = data not available

583 c) N:P (mass per mass): N refers to NH₄⁺-N and P refers to TP

584

585 **Table 2** Integrated processes of anaerobic digestion of pulp and paper industry biosludge and
 586 *Scenedesmus acuminatus* cultivation in the undiluted liquid digestates from the anaerobic digestion of the
 587 biosludge

	Pretreatment	AD temperature (°C)	Cultivation duration (d)	Methane yield (L CH ₄ kg ⁻¹ VS)	Highest obtained biomass concentration (g-VSS L ⁻¹)	Highest specific growth rate (d ⁻¹)
M	No	35	14	18 ^{a)}	8.8 ± 0.8 ^{b)}	0.99 ^{b)} (day 4–7)
Mp	Yes	35	21	101 ^{a)}	7.8 ± 0.3	0.75 (day 7–9)
T	No	55	21	63 ^{a)}	10.2 ± 2.2	0.88 (day 4–7)
Tp	Yes	55	21	126 ^{a)}	10.8 ± 1.2	1.02 (day 9–12)

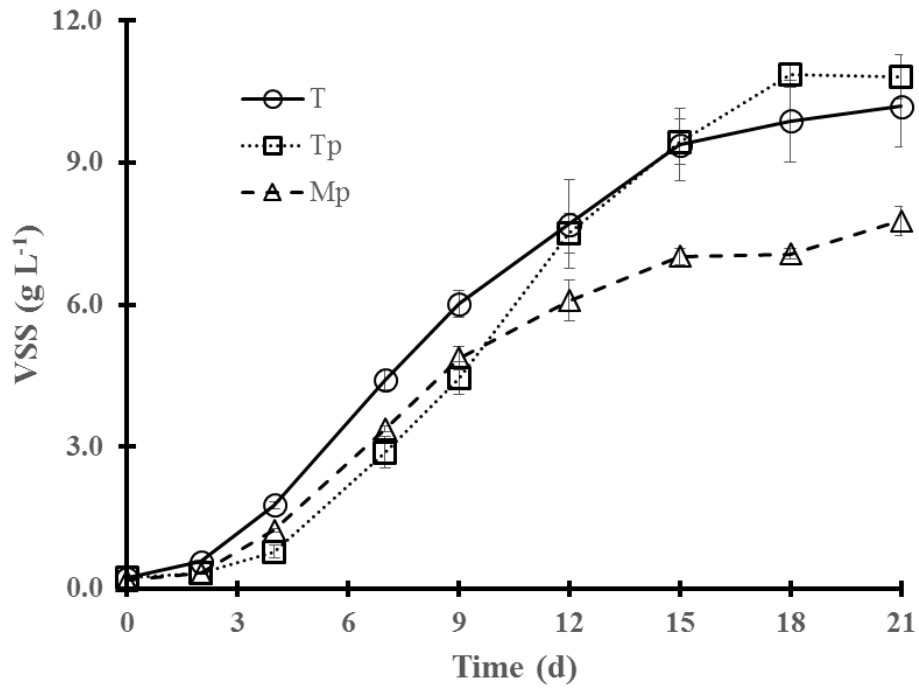
588 a) data originated from Asunis (2015)

589 b) microalgae were cultivated in 1.5-times diluted digestate (Tao et al., 2017)

590

591 **Figures**

592 **Fig. 1**



593

594

