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1 Running title: Aggregate pores and stability

2 **Pore system characteristics of soil aggregates and their relevance to aggregate stability**

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29 **Abstract**

30 Aggregates are the structural units of soils, and the physical stability is considered to be a
31 keystone parameter of soil quality. However, little is known about the evolution of the pore
32 system in aggregates and its importance in defining aggregate stability. In this paper, we
33 investigated the pore system and stability of three dominant macroaggregate sizes (1-2, 2-5 5-
34 10 mm) obtained from a fine sand-loamy Chernozem under three distinct land uses (arable,
35 grassland and forest). We used non-invasive X-ray microtomography (XMT) in combination
36 with pore network extraction to characterise PSD (pore size distribution) of aggregates and
37 their potential changes upon continued submergence in water. We showed that smaller
38 aggregates (1-2mm) have significantly higher total X-ray resolvable porosity than the
39 medium (2-5 mm) and large (5-10 mm) aggregates. Also, using imaging tools, we
40 demonstrated for the first time, that the pore system of stable aggregates from grassland and
41 forest does not undergo significant changes upon continued submergence in water. It can be
42 hypothesised that a physically stable pore structure allows the storage and transmission of
43 water without a structural collapse, thereby contributing to aggregate stability. We found
44 statistically significant positive correlations between different pore groups (closed pores,
45 water holding pores and air space spores) and water stability of aggregates from all three land
46 uses suggesting that pore system characteristics play a significant role in aggregate stability.
47 Our results suggest that PSD is an important factor that determines the stability of soil
48 aggregates.

49 **Keywords:** Imaging, Land Use, Aggregates, Pore network, Porosity, Tortuosity

50 **Highlights**

- 51 • The main aim is to establish links between aggregate pore system characteristics and
52 stability.

- 53 • We analysed pore systems of macroaggregates from different land use using X-ray
54 microtomography.
- 55 • There were no significant changes in the pore system in stable aggregates upon
56 submergence.
- 57 • A stable pore system in aggregates is crucial for aggregate stability in water.
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62 **1.0 Introduction**

63 Soil structure is a keystone indicator of soil quality, function and health (Kibblewhite et al.,
64 2008). The stability of soil structure reflects the ability of soil to support soil flora and fauna
65 through provision of void space as habitat, and the storage and transfer of water, gas and
66 nutrients in soils (Utomo and Dexter, 1982; Amézketa, 1999; Bronick & Lal, 2005; Rabot et
67 al., 2018; Banwart et al., 2012). In general, soil structure refers to the three-dimensional
68 arrangement of soil voids within and between aggregates of primary soil particles whereby
69 aggregates can be viewed as the structural units of soils. The development of aggregates is
70 explained by the aggregate hierarchy model proposed by Tisdall & Oades (1982). Based on
71 this conceptual model aggregates are sequentially formed through the action of organic
72 (transient, temporary or persistent) binding agents leading to the formation of
73 microaggregates (20-250 μm) and then to macroaggregates ($>250 \mu\text{m}$). It was also suggested
74 that microaggregates could also be formed within macroaggregates due to the action of roots
75 and microbiota (Oades, 1984) and aggregates also provide physical protection of organic
76 carbon (Six et al., 2004).

77 Pores within aggregates (intraaggregate pores) can also be regarded as microsites for storage
78 of air, water, nutrients and microbes which create localised pore-scale biogeochemical cycles.
79 In unsaturated soils, all pores between 0.2 and 30 μm retain water except the blocked pores
80 with entrapped air (i.e. between -10 kPa and -1.5MPa matric potentials) and pores greater
81 than 30 μm in diameter typically filled with air (Dexter, 1988). Dexter (1988) also proposed
82 the porosity exclusion principle, which states that each hierarchical order excludes the pores
83 between the particles of the next higher order. Although this has not been verified
84 experimentally, the theory suggested that smaller aggregates would have a denser packing (or
85 lesser pore space) compared to larger aggregates. However, Lipiec et al. (2007) provided
86 additional insights into the pore space within aggregate beds. In their investigation, they

87 evaluated individual aggregate beds made of <0.25, 0.25-0.5, 0.5-1, 1-3, 3-5, and 5-10 mm
88 sized aggregates for water retention and pore size distribution (PSD) and found that aggregate
89 beds <1 mm exhibited bi-modal PSD associated with textural and structural domains whereas
90 aggregate beds >1 mm produced tri-modal PSD due to the additional macropore domain.

91 Non-destructive imaging tools such as X-ray microtomography (XMT) provide an alternative
92 method to study PSD aggregates at a few micrometres resolution. For instance, Peth et al.
93 (2008) used a high resolution (3.2-5.4 μm) XMT to image ~ 5 mm diameter aggregates from
94 different land use (grass and conventionally-tilled). Based on the image analysis carried out
95 using a small region of interest from near the centre of the aggregate, they found that the total
96 porosities were higher for the conventionally-tilled (CT) aggregate (15.7%) compared with
97 the grassland aggregate (11.1%). They also found higher relative proportions of smaller pores
98 are observed in the former compared with the latter. Kravchenko et al (2011) reported that
99 the aggregates under natural succession had more large pores (>97.5 μm) and small pores
100 (<15 μm) than conventionally-tilled aggregates; whereas the medium size pores (37.5-97.5
101 μm) dominated in conventionally-tilled aggregates (Wang et al., 2012). A study by Zhou et al
102 (2016) compared different fertiliser treatments on aggregate (3-5 mm) porosity in paddy soils
103 using XMT and they found that total porosity of aggregates was higher when no fertiliser was
104 applied in comparison to both fertiliser treatment (inorganic fertiliser with or without organic
105 manure). Recently, (Bacq-Labreuil et al. 2018) showed the effect of land use (vegetation) on
106 aggregates using XMT, and they found the total pore volume was influenced by vegetation as
107 follows: grassland> arable> fallow.

108 According to Peth et al. (2008), further studies are required to link PSD with other soil
109 properties, and there has been some progress in this direction; for example, Bailey et al.
110 (2013) used imaging to understand the relationship between the porosity of 14 grassland
111 aggregates of different sizes (0.250-0.425, 0.425-0.841, 0.841-1.0 mm) and microbial

112 community composition and found no correlation between them. Similarly, the relationship
113 between the aggregate PSD and stability was investigated by a few researchers. Soil structure
114 stability is classically described by the mass distribution by particle size class of water stable
115 aggregates (WSA as %) present in a soil sample. Note that several organic and inorganic
116 binding agents contribute to the development of WSA (Tisdall & Oades, 1982; Amézketa,
117 1999; Bronick & Lal, 2005; Dal Ferro et al., 2012; Regelink et al., 2015; Rabot et al., 2018).
118 Papadopoulos et al. (2009) examined 5 mm sized aggregates using XMT and found that
119 aggregate porosity was not linked to stability; however, the authors reported that pore
120 morphology might influence the stability of aggregates and the potential for slaking (i.e. the
121 breakdown of macro-aggregates to microaggregates and primary textural units). However,
122 using 1-2 mm sized aggregates Dal Ferro et al. (2012) established that aggregate stabilisation
123 was strongly linked to the porosity.

124 If an aggregate is considered water stable, it must withstand the decrease in inter-particle
125 cohesive forces within the aggregate imparted by wetting without a structural collapse
126 through slaking, clay swelling or clay dispersion (Dexter, 1988). Conceptually, the presence
127 of a stable macropore domain (including cracks and elongated pores) within aggregates may
128 prevent trapping of air or build-up of air pressure in pores due to the entry of water. These
129 stable pores may play an important role in transmitting water without disrupting the structure
130 of aggregates and therefore could contribute to the stability of the aggregates (Lipiec et al.,
131 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2009). In other words, in a stable water aggregate, the macropore
132 domain may remain stable when it is subjected to wetting, thus contributing to the stability.
133 However, this concept requires experimental validation. Therefore, in this paper, we would
134 like to test three important hypotheses, which are linked to pore system development in
135 macroaggregates and their linkages to aggregate stability as below:

- 136 (1) The total XMT resolvable pore space in macroaggregates will increase with an
137 increase in the size of the aggregates according to the porosity exclusion principle.
- 138 (2) Aggregates from less disturbed land use (e.g. grassland and forest) will have greater
139 total porosity dominated by macropores compared to disturbed land use (e.g. arable).
- 140 (3) Stable aggregates will have a pore system that is resilient to changes during wetting.

141 The specific objectives are:

- 142 1. Describe XMT resolvable PSD in three different macroaggregate sizes (1-2; 2-5 and
143 5-10 mm) obtained from three different land uses (arable, grassland and forest) using
144 XMT;
- 145 2. Examine the stability of aggregates during rigorous wetting regimes;
- 146 3. Evaluate the XMT resolvable PSD changes in stable aggregates before and after
147 wetting

148 **2.0 Methods**

149 **2.1 Site description and sampling**

150 The samples were obtained from locations in the National Park Donau-Auen, which were
151 developed on fine river sediments of the Danube River and part of the FM-CZO. The mean
152 annual temperature in the area is about 9°C and mean annual precipitation ~550 mm with
153 potential evapotranspiration of ~570 mm (Blaud et al., 2018). The soil is a fine sandy-loamy
154 Haplic Chernozem (Mollic Fluvisols as per WRB) soils that are ~350 years old (Lair et al.,
155 2009). Three contrasting land uses (arable, grassland and forest) were selected for soil
156 sampling. The bulk soils characteristics at the time of sampling are given in Table 1, and

157 more information about the site can be found in other references (Banwart et al., 2012;
158 Regelink et al., 2015; Rousseva et al., 2017; van Leeuwen et al., 2017).
159 Aggregate sampling was carried in summer 2011 under dry soil conditions (pF 3.8 - 4.0)
160 which enabled sieving and collection of aggregates in the field. Three sample locations were
161 chosen as replicates within 30 m radius under each land use. The top 5 cm of the soil profile
162 was scraped off to remove the surface leaf litter, earthworm castings and surface feeding
163 roots in grassland and forest. The soil beneath (5-10cm) was then loosened using a spade and
164 passed through a stack of sterilised sieves to collect different aggregate size classes (<0.25,
165 0.25-0.50, 1-2, 2-5 and 5-10mm) for various experiments including microbial diversity
166 studies (e.g. Blaud et al., 2018). The soil aggregates were stored in plastic beakers and kept
167 dry in the dark and cold room conditions (4°C) for subsequent use. However, for this study,
168 we used three dominant macroaggregate sizes which were 1-2, 2-5 and 5-10mm (see Table 1
169 for particle size distribution) which will be denoted by S (small), M (medium) and L (large),
170 respectively, in this manuscript.

171 **2.2 Experiments**

172 The experiment included imaging of dry sieved aggregates collected from the field, followed
173 using three wetting and drying cycles on major aggregate size fractions (S, M and L). Based
174 on the water stability tests, we tested the effect of submergence on aggregates PSD through
175 imaging as described below.

176 **2.2.1 Microstructure measurements using XMT**

177 Sixty-nine aggregates were scanned representing each size class (7 from S; 8 from M and L)
178 from the three land uses. We used Skyscan 1172 XMT scanner available at the SKELETAL
179 lab at the University of Sheffield with an effective pixel size of 10µm for L size and 5 µm for
180 S and M size aggregates to achieve maximum resolution for a given aggregate size (See

181 Suppl. Material 1 for image acquisition settings) for this scanner. Individual aggregates were
182 scanned by securely placing in them in Styrofoam (which does not appear in X-ray images)
183 before fixing on the tomography stage to obtain 3D images of aggregates.

184 **2.2.2 Aggregate stability using three wetting and drying cycles (WDC)**

185 This experiment aimed to measure the amount of water stable macroaggregates (WSA) from
186 S, M and L of each land use. The initial macroaggregate WSA (%) was measured using
187 standard wet sieving procedure (method 1) with multiple sieves that were sequential (<0.25,
188 0.25-0.50, 1-2, 2-5 and 5-10mm) (Elliott, 1986). However, for the WDC experiment, a single
189 0.25mm sieve (method 2) was used to allow a simple and straightforward separation of water
190 stable macro and microaggregates as both methods showed a strong positive and significant
191 correlation (correlation coefficient= 0.99, not shown). Note that the sand content of the
192 aggregates was checked using ultrasound stability tests (data not shown) before the wet
193 sieving experiments to verify the need for sand correction. It was found that large sand (630-
194 2000 μ m) and medium sand fractions (200-630 μ m) were negligible, and ~95% of sand
195 particles were made of fine sand (63-200 μ m). Based on this, the sand correction procedure
196 was not followed for macroaggregates fractionation (>250 μ m).

197 Exposing aggregates to varying degrees of wetting and drying cycles (WDC) provided a
198 better understanding of the structural resilience of aggregates; however, there is no consensus
199 on number or duration of WDCs (Rabot *et al.*, 2018). Two WDCs were considered for S, M
200 and L sized aggregates from all land use: (1) a short WDC with 2 hours of submergence
201 followed by 22 hours drying at 25-35°C in a laboratory (i.e. 24 hours per cycle); and (2) a
202 long WDC, in which the aggregates were submerged for 24 hours followed by 24 hours
203 drying (i.e. 48 hours per cycle). The short cycle was repeated four or nine times whereas the

204 long cycle was repeated for four times only. Three replicates per treatment were used. We
205 performed WSA analysis using method 2, as outlined earlier.

206 To investigate changes in soil aggregates due to processes such as slaking or expansion of
207 clay, we performed additional imaging of individual aggregates after 24-hour continuous
208 submergence in water to induce slaking. It was assumed that 24 hours were sufficient to fully
209 saturate all pore spaces in aggregates and the water pressure on the pore walls could induce
210 pore system instability and slaking. We used only a subset of three M, and L aggregates each
211 from grassland and forest. In this experiment, selected aggregates were individually placed
212 gently in a sterilised 50 ml beakers, and deionised water was added (~25 ml) along the side of
213 the beakers until the aggregate to be completely submerged. The arable soil aggregates slaked
214 and disintegrated rapidly within seconds after adding water; hence, they could not be
215 included in this investigation. The samples were left for 24 hours in the laboratory conditions
216 with a parafilm lid to prevent evaporation. After this, we syphoned the water out carefully
217 without disturbing the aggregate, and any remaining water was left to dry naturally for
218 approximately two days before imaging. Due to the fewer number of samples and better
219 hardware availability, these aggregate images were processed at the original scanning
220 resolution (5 and 10 μm for M and L) to study the PSD in detail.

221 **2.3 Image processing and pore network extraction.**

222 The working resolution was set at 20 μm for L and 10 μm for S and M due to a large number
223 of samples and optimum hardware and software (Avizo 9.0.1) performance. All previously
224 reported studies used a region of interest (ROI) while quantifying pore system in aggregates.
225 While this is useful, it only will represent part of an aggregate, and the distribution of pores
226 cannot be assumed spatially uniform throughout in an aggregate. Hence, we developed a new
227 protocol for quantifying the total porosity in a given aggregate volume as described in

228 Supplementary Material 1, largely based on methods described in our previous publication
229 (Menon et al., 2015). In general, the processing steps included image cropping using ImageJ
230 to 8-bit JPEG files to reduce the computational burden of processing images in 3D using
231 Avizo. The pores present after segmentation provided a total porosity of the image in 3D. For
232 the segmentation, the solid particles were isolated using an image thresholding algorithm that
233 uses a specified discrete attenuation value above which all pixels are considered as solid
234 particles. To extract different types of pores from an image, a series of morphological filters
235 were used as described in the Suppl. Material 1.

236 Based on our analysis, the porosity of each aggregate is presented, which is the proportion of
237 total pores to the total volume of the aggregate. Further, we grouped the pores broadly into
238 closed (or isolated air pockets in the structure), pores $<50\mu\text{m}$ (water holding) and $>50\mu\text{m}$ (air
239 space) to the total pore volume are also presented. Also, effective porosity (%) is presented,
240 which is the proportion of the combined water holding and the air space to the total pore
241 volume of each aggregate. Please note that the amount of resolvable pores in each category
242 will depend on the resolution of the images.

243 The pore space can be segmented into its structural elements, including pores and throats
244 (Dong & Blunt, 2007). Throats are the bottlenecks between each pair of connecting pores
245 (Blunt, 2001). This simplified model allows us to simulate complicated processes in porous
246 media within a computationally efficient framework. Thanks to their applicability and
247 facilitated by computed tomography images, pore networks have been employed to model
248 various porous material processes (Blunt, 2001; Valvatne et al., 2005; Dong & Blunt, 2007;
249 Joekar-Niasar et al., 2008; Andrew et al., 2014). Inevitably, the applicability of such
250 replicates of porous space is highly dependent on the porous media segmentation method
251 used for pore network extraction. Thus, a more realistic network extraction requires less

252 number of simplifications which will increase the accuracy by pore network modelling
253 (Rabbani & Babaei, 2019).

254 Recently, watershed segmentation algorithm has been employed for pore network extraction
255 from porous material images with complex geometries (Sheppard et al., 2004; Wildenschild
256 & Sheppard, 2013; Rabbani et al., 2014, 2017b; Gostick, 2017; Rabbani & Salehi, 2017)
257 which was used in this study (see Suppl. Material 1). This method utilises the geographical
258 concept of watersheds to divide the pore-space of the porous material images into distinct
259 pores and throats which could form an interconnected network of nodes and links (Rabbani et
260 al., 2016, 2017a). Using the pore networks constructed, it will be possible to measure several
261 properties of porous material (such as pore connectivity, pore radii, throat lengths and
262 tortuosity) that provide quantified insights towards the changes of soil morphology when the
263 aggregates are soaked in water. In this approach, it was assumed that throats are interfaces
264 which connect adjacent pores, and they take up negligible volumes compared to pores
265 (Rabbani & Babaei, 2019). To find the pore connectivity, which is the number of neighbour
266 pore bodies connected to a single pore body, we scanned the segmented pore space image
267 with a $3 \times 3 \times 3$ sliding window. Each pore-body is labelled with a unique code, and from the
268 codes of each neighbourhood voxels, the connectivity matrix (i.e. 1 for connected and 0 for
269 no connection between pores) can be derived for an $N \times N$ matrix (N is the number of pores).
270 A sample of extracted pore network image from aggregate from this study is provided in
271 Suppl. Material 1.

272 Based on the definition of porous media tortuosity (Matyka et al., 2008), all path lengths are
273 averaged and divided by the geometrical distance between the input and outlet set of pores.
274 For defining inlet and outlet pores in the x-direction, we followed an ad hoc procedure. In x-
275 direction, 5% of the pores with their first element of centre coordinates (positions along x-
276 axis) smaller than the rest of pores are considered as inlet pores. Similarly, 5% of the pores

277 with the first element of centre coordinates larger than the rest of the pores are considered as
278 outlet pores. The same procedure was repeated for y and z directions. Knowing the positions
279 of inlet and outlet pores, we can find the shortest pathways in the network that connect these
280 pore bodies in each direction, thereby allowing to estimate directional tortuosity of networks
281 by dividing the shortest path to the geometrical distance (Matyka et al., 2008).

282 **2.4 Statistical analysis**

283 All the statistical analyses were performed using R version 3.4.0 (R Foundation for Statistical
284 Computing). The Post hoc Duncan test and the bootstrap correlations were performed using
285 the “DescTools” and “boot” packages, respectively.

286 For the first and second experiment, the differences in pore characteristics due to land use and
287 soil fractions was assessed by analysis of variance (ANOVA) coupled with Post Hoc Duncan
288 test, with land use and soil fractions as factors. When the normality and or homoscedasticity
289 of variances were not met, log transformation was applied. For the second experiment, the
290 effect of WDC on WSA (%) was assessed by ANOVA test.

291 The effect of wetting on pores and pore network characteristics was investigated using paired
292 Student’s t-Test (as the same aggregate was measured before and after wetting). Spearman
293 correlation and linear regression between WSA and pores characteristics including the three
294 sizes of aggregates were performed for all or each land use. Due to the difference in the
295 number of replicates between WSA ($n = 3$) and pores characteristics ($n = 8$), we used
296 bootstrapping (a statistical procedure that resamples a single dataset to create thousands of
297 simulated samples to derive sample statistics) on the correlations (5000 bootstrap replicates).

298

299 3. Results

300 3.1 PSD of Aggregates

301 The image processing protocols followed in the study allowed visualisation and distribution
302 of different types of pores (closed, water holding and air space) within individual aggregates.
303 In Figure 1 (a-c), we present cross-sectional views of representative aggregates with different
304 types of pores (closed, water holding and air space pores) obtained from different land uses.
305 Overall, effective porosity followed the same trend as total porosity, and the effective
306 porosity was slightly smaller (1-2 %) than the total porosity as shown in Fig. 2 as it
307 represented the percentage of pores occupied by water and air and does not include closed
308 pore space. It was found that the total and effective porosities were significantly ($P = < 0.05$)
309 affected by land use and aggregate sizes. Total aggregates porosity, in particular from M and
310 L aggregates from the forest, was significantly higher (~4%) than the other two land uses.
311 The data also showed that both total and effective porosities of S were greater than those
312 compared to M and L and, were not influenced by the land use. In contrast to the total
313 porosity, the effective porosity of S, M and L were not significantly different for grassland.
314 Further portioning of total pore volume to percentages of closed, water and air holding pores,
315 showed closed pores tend to increase with the increase in aggregate size under arable land use
316 whereas the opposite trend was found in grassland and forest. Notably, for the S size class,
317 the percentage of closed pores was significantly higher in grassland and forest than in arable
318 land (uppercase letters, Fig. 3).

319 On the other hand, closed pore space in the L aggregates from the forest was significantly
320 lower than for the other land uses. Although there were no significant differences in the
321 distribution of water holding pore volumes between land uses for any specific aggregate size
322 class, in all cases, the proportion of water holding pores decreased with increasing aggregates

323 size (lowercase letters Fig. 3). However, the proportion of air space pores showed an opposite
324 trend to the water holding pores between aggregates size, with an increasing proportion of air
325 space pores with increasing aggregate size (lowercase letters, Fig. 3). Significant differences
326 in air space pore volume between all aggregate sizes were found for forest and grassland. The
327 air space pores also showed little difference between land uses; only the L size class was
328 significantly higher in forest land use compared to arable (uppercase letters, Fig. 3).

329 **3.2 Water stability of aggregates**

330 Overall, the land use had the strongest effect on WSA, with grassland showing the highest
331 proportion (~90%), followed by forest (~80%), while arable land showed low WSA (~20%)
332 (upper case italic in Fig. 4). It appears from the data that the stability of aggregates tends to
333 increase with aggregate size. The increase in WDCs number had a significant impact on
334 arable and forest aggregates, however, the stability of grassland aggregates did not change
335 significantly (lowercase letters in Fig. 4). The number or cycles had a stronger effect than the
336 duration of the wetting. In the arable, WSA after nine short WDCs was significantly lower
337 than with four short or long WDCs regardless of the macroaggregates size. For the forest,
338 each size of macroaggregate was affected slightly differently by WDCs, with 1-2 mm
339 showing the lowest WSA proportion after nine long WDCs, while for 2-5 mm it was after
340 four long WDCs.

341 **3.3 Effect of submergence on PSD**

342 To demonstrate the resilience and stability of pore systems, PSD was examined before and
343 after 24-hour submergence in water for two size groups of aggregates from grassland and
344 forest. In general, the wetting for 24 hours in water of aggregates sizes 2-5 mm and 5-10 mm,
345 did not significantly change the proportion of porosity, effective porosity, closed pores, water
346 holding pores and air space pores in both grassland and forest aggregates (Fig. 5, 6).

347 Furthermore, this data was further split into different pore size groups (<30, 30-100 and >100
348 μm) for M and L aggregates (Fig. 7). The proportion of these pore size groups did not show
349 any significant changes after 24 hours of wetting treatment (Fig. 7) for either M and L
350 aggregates from both grassland and forest. The M aggregates were significantly dominated
351 by 30-100 μm pores size, representing between 60-80 % of total pore space for grassland and
352 forest (lowercase letter, Fig. 7) whereas pores > 100 μm dominated in L aggregates indicating
353 a substantial macropore domain.

354 When we examined the changes in pore size, throat size, throat length, pore connectivity and
355 tortuosity in x, y and z directions (Table 2) it was evident that no statistically significant
356 changes occurred as a result of submergence, although the data showed that M samples had
357 experienced more change compared to L from grassland and forest. Overall, for both sets of
358 aggregate sizes, the changes of pore size, throat size and throat length remained below 10%.

359 Based on the PSD and WSA data obtained from these macroaggregates, we examined the
360 relationship between stability (WSA%) and the pore space in aggregates using bootstrapped
361 correlation (Spearman rank correlation, bootstrapped) and linear regression (Table 3 a & b).
362 The analysis was performed on the data from all land uses as well as for each land use (Table
363 3a). The regression (linear) could be performed only for arable land use as the data from
364 other land uses were not normally distributed (Table 3b). Values from these tables suggest
365 that there is a significant positive correlation between aggregate stability and three different
366 pore classes (closed, water and air holding) from individual land uses. When all data were
367 pooled, this was also true except for water holding pores. The data also showed significant
368 negative correlations between both porosity and effective porosity with stability for all land
369 use combined and also for arable and grassland individually. The regression analysis revealed
370 that for aggregates from arable soils, the pore system characteristics were significantly and
371 linearly related to WSA as shown in Table 3b.

372 4. Discussion

373 We acknowledge the fact that not all soil pores can be resolvable due to XMT resolution used
374 in this study. Also, it must be noted that we scanned and processed L aggregates with a
375 different resolution, which was mainly due to the technical limitation of the scanner we used.
376 Using a lower resolution (20 μ m) may have underestimated of porosities in L aggregates.
377 Therefore results must be interpreted carefully while comparing different sizes of aggregates
378 because S & M were processed at the same resolution (10 μ m). Nevertheless, this difference
379 does not pose an issue while comparing different land-use types for each aggregate size class.
380 It may be noted that some previous works suggested that changing the resolution had minimal
381 impact on total porosity as previously shown by De- Ville (2017, p 170) & De-Ville et al.
382 (2018a).

383 Despite a recent increase in articles using imaging to study soil structure, there are only a
384 handful of studies that focussed on aggregates. These studies include observation of 4-6.0
385 mm diameter aggregates at 14.6 μ m resolution (Kravchenko et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012;
386 Ananyeva et al., 2013), 1-3 mm aggregates at 4.4 μ m (Nunan et al., 2006), ~5 mm diameter
387 aggregates with 3.2-5.4 μ m resolution (Peth et al., 2008) and multiple aggregate sizes (0.25-
388 0.425, 0.425-0.841, and 841-1.0 mm with 1 μ m resolution (Bailey et al., 2013). This current
389 study, by comparison, draws on a relatively larger sample size (69 aggregates) covering three
390 land uses with 7-8 replicates from each group. Whereas most of the previous studies looked
391 at the influence of tillage (conventional vs grassland/natural succession) on the aggregate
392 structure (Peth et al., 2008; Kravchenko et al., 2011; Ananyeva et al., 2013) while Bailey et
393 al. (2013) focussed their study only on grassland. A recent high resolution (1.51 μ m) XMT
394 imaging study demonstrated that the total pore volume in aggregates (between 0.71 -2 mm)
395 was highest in grassland, followed by arable and fallow, demonstrating the impact of land use
396 (Bacq-Labreuil et al. 2018). The main difference is while processing the images, we used a

397 complete aggregate volume rather than a region of interest (ROI) approach used in all
398 previous studies. The problem of the ROI is it is user-defined (size, volume, position etc.) and
399 it is most useful for materials with a relatively homogeneous structure, which is not the case
400 for soil aggregates.

401 As Dexter (1988) proposed, each hierarchical order of aggregate excludes the pores between
402 the particles of the next higher order. According to this hypothesis, the total porosity of
403 aggregates will increase with an increase in size. Our data presented from three
404 macroaggregates sizes suggest an opposite statistically-significant trend, especially for the
405 arable land and grassland aggregate sizes S and M which were processed at the same
406 resolution). Also, data from a previous study (Bailey et al., 2013), which used sub-millimetre
407 sized aggregates (250-425; 425-841 and 841-1000 μm) did not reveal any particular trend
408 between total pore volume (%) and aggregate size either. However, porosity obtained from
409 these aggregates was much higher (17.2-54.9%) than we observed in our study (<10%) which
410 is consistent with our results, which suggest that porosity may be likely to increase as the
411 aggregate size decreases.

412 The characterisation of pore space also differed between studies. For instance, <15, 15-60 and
413 >60 μm pore size classifications were used to compare tillage systems in some studies
414 (Kravchenko et al., 2011) whereas others used a simple histogram of pore volume
415 distribution (Bailey et al., 2002; Peth et al., 2008). We have used three simple categories
416 (closed, water holding and air spaces) of pores based on their potential role in water and air
417 flow through the aggregates. The amount of resolvable pores in each category will depend on
418 the image resolution. Closed pores or “blocked” pores (Dexter, 1988) which contain trapped
419 air which will have no or limited contribution to the transport processes considered with our
420 results show that such pores occupied approximately one-third of the total pore space
421 available in aggregates. Hence, this pore volume was excluded for the calculation of effective

422 porosity, explaining why it was always lower than the total porosity. The observed pattern
423 suggests that in soils under arable land use, the closed pores increased with aggregate size
424 contrasting with grassland and forest. The reasons for this pattern is likely due to the
425 compaction from farm machinery because compaction leads to fragmentation of pores (i.e.
426 macropores will be changed to micropores) as demonstrated by Menon et al. (2015).

427 In our recent investigations (De-Ville et al., 2017, 2018) 50 μm threshold was used to
428 calculate water holding pores using XMT images based on the hypothesis proposed by Getter
429 et al. (2007) to improve retention performance of green roofs substrates. Small and medium-
430 sized aggregates in this study, for across the land uses contributed substantially (~30%) to the
431 water storage compared to the large aggregates (~40%). The opposite was true for air space
432 pores, which are critical for biota and drainage characteristics of the soils. Across the land
433 uses, we could see an increasing trend in air pore volume with the size of aggregate, whereas
434 the opposite was found for water holding pores. This is in agreement with the results from
435 Lipiec et al. (2007) in which they showed the existence of a more complex PSD and a
436 macropore domain in aggregates larger than >1 mm (Lipiec et al., 2007).

437 The breakdown of aggregates was explained by earlier studies (Yoder, 1936; Hénin S, 1938;
438 Dexter, 1988) through air-trapping and breakdown (slaking) as a result of the entry of water
439 into aggregates and it depends on the rate of wetting and water repellent properties of the
440 aggregates (Chenu et al., 2000; Cosentino et al., 2006; Bartoli et al., 2016). A meaningful
441 comparison of different wetting and drying cycles with previous studies is not very useful
442 here due to inconsistencies in the methods used to characterised the soil structure (Rabot et
443 al., 2018). Despite this, the impact on the WSA mass fraction of differently sized aggregates
444 by different WDCs suggested that it can impact the stability of arable and forest soil
445 aggregates compared to grassland aggregates, presumably due to higher SOC (Table 1)
446 compared to the other land uses. This experiment also revealed that the stability increased

447 with the size (except for grassland) and land use, regardless of the WDCs. Usually smaller
448 aggregates are supposed to be denser and stronger as proposed by earlier studies (Kemper &
449 Rosenau, 1984; Dexter, 1988; Elliott & Coleman, 1988; Oades, 1993; Fernández et al., 2010)
450 and it is possible that the stability of the large aggregates is influenced by other factors such
451 as Fe oxides and silt content, besides soil organic carbon (Regelink et al., 2015).

452 The relatively higher stability of grassland and forest aggregates motivated us further to the
453 development of the third hypothesis on the stability of the pore system. Although some subtle
454 changes in pore properties could be observed, in general, there was no statistically significant
455 difference in total, and effective porosities and different pore groups obtained from M and L
456 aggregates of forest and grassland suggested structurally resilient pore system in these
457 aggregates. The only exception is the water holding pore space of forest L aggregates. This
458 was not surprising because in our WDC experiment, we found some small decrease in the
459 stability of that forest aggregates compared to grassland aggregates. It is also important to
460 note that pore size, throat size and throat length are basic parameters and pore connectivity
461 and tortuosity are higher level parameters. Logically, the slight changes in basic parameters
462 could accumulate and lead to a more significant deviation in the higher level properties. For
463 example, a single additional throat between a cluster of pores could lead to an increase in
464 pore connectivity of all the cluster pores. That could be the reason behind the relatively
465 greater changes observed for connectivity and tortuosity.

466 The data and the correlations from this study demonstrate that the pore system in stable
467 aggregates undergoes relatively small and insignificant changes when submerged in water
468 and may, therefore, explain aggregate stability. We hypothesise that the pore networks in
469 stable aggregates act as conduits for transmission of fluids through without trapping the air
470 and thereby suppressing the build-up of air pressure inside an aggregate preventing it from
471 slaking, as previously proposed (Lipiec et al., 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2009; Dal Ferro et

472 al., 2012). However, it is important to further investigate the underlying mechanisms
473 contributing to the stability of the pores in aggregates. Several biotic (organic matter, soil
474 fauna, roots, microbes) and abiotic factors (particle size distribution, clay minerals,
475 exchangeable cations and sesquioxides) influence aggregate stability (Tisdall & Oades, 1982;
476 Le Bissonnais, 1996; Amézqueta, 1999; Chenu et al., 2000; Márquez et al., 2004; Bronick &
477 Lal, 2005; Abiven et al., 2009; Regelink et al., 2015). Among this, soil organic matter is most
478 influenced by the land use and hence, can be a highly influential factor in determining the
479 aggregate stability (Yvan et al., 2012). One of such possibilities is the increased carbon
480 accumulation in these pores, as shown by Ananyeva et al. (2011). In their study, they found
481 that larger pores (100 μ m) are associated with higher carbon accumulation. Therefore, it can
482 be further hypothesised that the organic carbon accumulated in larger pores provides
483 enhanced stability to the pore walls and prevent them from collapse when submerged.

484 **5. Conclusions**

485 The main aim of this paper was to establish links between aggregate pore system
486 characteristics and aggregate stability. We described PSD, and their stability of three different
487 macroaggregate sizes (1-2; 2-5 and 5-10 mm) obtained from three different land uses (arable,
488 grassland and forest). To explain the stability of aggregates, we evaluated the PSD and pore
489 network changes in water stable aggregates before and after wetting. Our results show that
490 smaller (1-2mm) aggregates have a greater degree of X-ray resolvable porosity compared to
491 2-5 mm or 5-10 mm sized aggregates. We found a significant influence of land use on PSD
492 and water stability, in particular, grassland and forest aggregates were more stable than the
493 arable aggregates. Using data derived from X-ray microtomography images, we
494 demonstrated that the pore system of stable aggregates does not undergo significant changes
495 upon continued submergence in water, indicating that a stable pore system is crucial for
496 aggregate stability. The stability of aggregates has been recognised as a keystone factor

497 (Abiven *et al.*, 2009) for soil fertility and physical resilience to external forces such as wind
498 or water; thus, this paper provides a new mechanistic understanding of WSA as an
499 appropriate indicator for soil quality and health.

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689

690 **Figures Captions**

691 **Fig. 1.** (a-c). Example cross sectional view of (5-10 mm) aggregates from different land uses
692 with different types of pores obtained by processing X-ray microtomography images (a.
693 Arable, b. Grassland and c. Forest).

694 **Fig. 2.** Porosity and effective porosity (%) of soil aggregates sizes 1-2 (S), 2-5 (M) and 5-10
695 (L) mm from arable, forest and grassland soils. Mean and standard error are shown ($n = 8$,
696 except for 1 – 2 mm where $n = 7$). Different lowercase letters (a, b or c) show significant (P
697 < 0.05) differences between soil aggregates sizes for a specific land use. Different uppercase
698 letters (A, B or C) show significant ($P < 0.05$) differences between land use for a specific
699 soil aggregate size.

700 **Fig. 3.** Distribution of water holding, closed, and air space pores (%) of the total pore space
701 of soil aggregates sizes 1-2 (S), 2-5 (M) and 5-10 (L) mm from arable, forest and grassland
702 soils. Mean and standard error are shown ($n = 8$, except for 1 – 2 mm where $n = 7$). Different
703 lowercase letters (a, b or c) show significant ($P < 0.05$) differences between soil aggregates
704 sizes for a specific land use. Different uppercase letters (A, B or C) show significant ($P <$
705 0.05) differences between land use for a specific soil aggregate size.

706 **Fig. 4.** Distribution of water stable aggregates (%) of soil aggregates sizes 1-2 (S), 2-5 (M)
707 and 5-10 (L) mm from arable, grassland and forest soils under 4 short, 4 long and 9 short
708 wetting and drying cycles (WDCs). Mean and standard error are shown ($n = 3$). Different
709 minuscule letters show significant ($P < 0.05$) differences between WDCs for a specific soil
710 aggregate size and soil. Different capital letters show significant ($P < 0.05$) differences
711 between soil aggregate sizes for a specific soil and WDC. Different italic capital letters show
712 significant ($P < 0.05$) differences between soils for a specific soil aggregate size and WDC.

713 The minuscule and non-italic capital letters were not shown for grassland because no
714 significant differences were found.

715 **Fig. 5.** Porosity and effective porosity (%) of soil aggregates size a) 2-5 (M) & b) 5-10 (L)
716 mm from grassland and forest soils before and after 24h wetting in water. Mean and standard
717 error are shown (n = 3). ** indicate significant (P <0.01) difference between before and after
718 wetting.

719 **Fig. 6.** Distribution of water holding, closed, and air space pores of soil aggregates size a) 2-
720 5mm & b) 5-10 mm from forest and grassland soils before and after wetting 24h in water.
721 Mean and standard error are shown (n = 3). *** indicate significant difference

722 **Fig. 7.** Distribution of pore sizes (%) < 30 μm , 30-100 μm and > 100 μm in aggregates 2-5
723 mm and 5-10 mm from forest and grassland soils before and after wetting 24h in water. Mean
724 and standard error are shown (n = 3). Different lowercase letters (a, b or c) show significant
725 (P < 0.05) differences between soil pore size for a specific aggregates size, wetting state and
726 land use. Different uppercase letters (A, B or C) show significant (P < 0.05) differences
727 between land use for a specific soil aggregate size, pore size and wetting state. No significant
728 (P > 0.05) difference was found before and after wetting.

Table 1. Soil characteristics and soil aggregate size distribution of bulk soil samples on a dry mass basis at the time of sampling. Mean value \pm one standard deviation ($n = 3$) are shown.

	Arable	Grassland	Forest
Location	48°09'N, 16°41'E	48°11'N, 16°44'E	48°08'N, 16°39'E
Water content (%)	11.3 \pm 0.26	12.0 \pm 0.26	17.1 \pm 0.69
Soil pH (H ₂ O)	7.7 \pm 0.14	7.4 \pm 0.09	7.4 \pm 0.17
Organic C (%)	2.4 \pm 0.36	5.0 \pm 0.60	3.8 \pm 0.28
Total N (%)	0.13 \pm 0.01	0.33 \pm 0.04	0.25 \pm 0.02
C _{org} /N	18.1 \pm 1.83	15.0 \pm 0.52	15.1 \pm 1.02
CaCO ₃ (%)	19.0 \pm 1.90	21.1 \pm 1.41	20.4 \pm 0.62
Sand, 63-2000 μ m (%)	32.7	8.2	22.5
Silt, 2-63 μ m (%)	43.8	63.0	51.2
Clay, < 2 μ m (%)	23.5	28.8	26.3
Soil Dry Aggregate Distribution (%)			
> 10 mm	37.3 \pm 9.1	7.9 \pm 2.4	11.9 \pm 4.4
5.0 - 10.0 mm	14.6 \pm 2.4	21.5 \pm 2.0	18.3 \pm 2.7
2.0 - 5.0 mm	20.5 \pm 4.0	37.8 \pm 3.6	31.2 \pm 2.2
1.0 - 2.0 mm	11.8 \pm 2.4	14.5 \pm 0.5	23.1 \pm 8.4
0.5 - 1.0 mm	6.4 \pm 3.5	5.2 \pm 0.4	5.9 \pm 1.7
0.25 - 0.5 mm	7.1 \pm 4.6	6.9 \pm 0.1	7.5 \pm 2.7
< 0.25 mm	1.9 \pm 1.3	6.1 \pm 0.7	2.0 \pm 0.8

Table 2. Changes in pore network characteristics in grassland and forest 2-5 (M) and 5-10 (L) mm aggregates after 24 hours submergence.

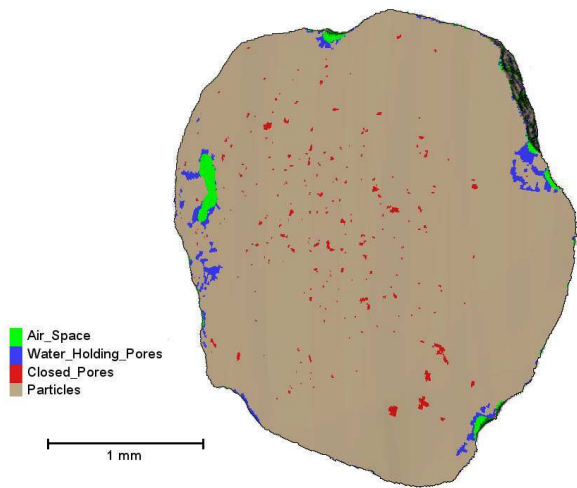
	Grassland Aggregates				Forest Aggregates			
	M (n=3)		L (n=3)		M (n=3)		L (n=3)	
	Before Wetting	After Wetting	Before Wetting	After Wetting	Before Wetting	After Wetting	Before Wetting	After Wetting
Pore Radius (μm)	48.59 \pm 2.84	45.44 \pm 1.91	95.74 \pm 1.75	96.3 \pm 1.73	46.14 \pm 1.04	44.80 \pm 1.54	94.91 \pm 3.39	94.62 \pm 2.85
Pore throat radius (μm)	16.99 \pm 1.17	19.23 \pm 2.71	36.41 \pm 1.38	34.54 \pm 1.56	17.33 \pm 0.32	18.55 \pm 1.25	37.01 \pm 2.96	36.16 \pm 3.31
Pore throat length(μm)	200.12 \pm 37.02	212.36 \pm 29.12	428.24 \pm 35.26	419.89 \pm 24.12	161.79 \pm 4.46	170.99 \pm 10.28	363.21 \pm 20.20	346.08 \pm 4.00
Average pore connectivity	7.29 \pm 0.61	3.18 \pm 0.47	4.17 \pm 0.31	5.02 \pm 1.11	7.47 \pm 0.68	5.07 \pm 2.33	5.19 \pm 0.49	6.07 \pm 0.63
Tortuosity (x)	1.39 \pm 0.09	1.78 \pm 0.25	1.59 \pm 0.01	1.45 \pm 0.10	1.32 \pm 0.09	1.58 \pm 0.30	1.73 \pm 0.17	1.51 \pm 0.04
Tortuosity (y)	1.33 \pm 0.04	2.18 \pm 0.57	1.63 \pm 0.08	1.61 \pm 0.09	1.35 \pm 0.12	1.63 \pm 0.32	1.45 \pm 0.02	1.46 \pm 0.13
Tortuosity (z)	1.44 \pm 0.06	2.07 \pm 0.50	1.50 \pm 0.08	1.61 \pm 0.11	1.36 \pm 0.04	1.50 \pm 0.20	1.41 \pm 0.03	1.41 \pm 0.08

Table 3 (a) Bootstrap statistics of Spearman correlation coefficient between WSA method 1 and pores characteristics. Significant correlation are shown in bold ($P < 0.001$).

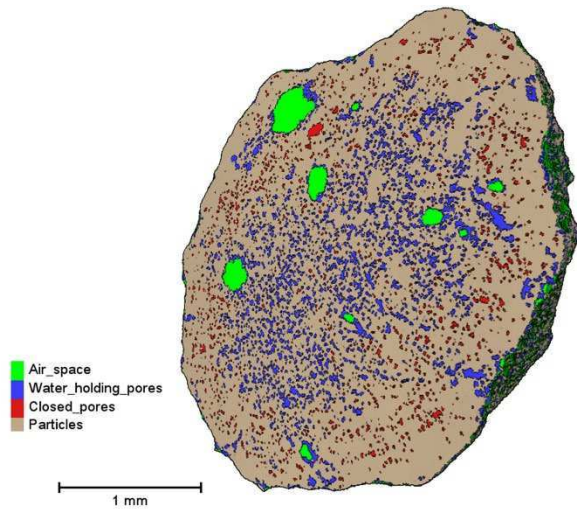
Landuse	Bootstrap statistics	Porosity	Effective porosity	Closed pores	Water holding pores	Air space pores
All LU	Original value	-0.25	-0.24	0.29	0.10	0.23
	bias	0.0031	0.0011	0.0005	-0.0004	-0.0013
	Std error	0.080	0.076	0.076	0.073	0.070
	95% Conf Int	-0.40; -0.09	-0.38; 0.08	0.13; 0.43	-0.04; 0.25	0.08; 0.36
Arable	Original value	-0.51	-0.51	0.77	0.65	0.75
	bias	0.0079	0.0073	-0.0089	-0.010	-0.0098
	Std error	0.110	0.113	0.070	0.090	0.074
	95% Conf Int	-0.69; -0.25	-0.69; -0.24	0.59; 0.87	0.43; 0.79	0.56; 0.86
Grassland	Original value	-0.46	-0.35	0.74	0.61	0.78
	bias	0.0032	0.0032	-0.0060	-0.0077	-0.0066
	Std error	0.105	0.116	0.060	0.079	0.055
	95% Conf Int	-0.64; -0.22	-0.56; -0.09	0.59; 0.83	0.44; 0.75	0.63; 0.86
Forest	Original value	-0.07	0.08	0.90	0.88	0.90
	bias	-0.0017	-0.0002	-0.0082	-0.0091	-0.0090
	Std error	0.157	0.160	0.023	0.029	0.022
	95% Conf Int	-0.36; 0.25	-0.24; 0.39	0.86; 0.94	0.82; 0.93	0.86; 0.94

Table 3 (b). Bootstrap statistics of linear regression r^2 between WSA method 1 and pores characteristics. Significant correlation are shown in bold ($P < 0.001$).

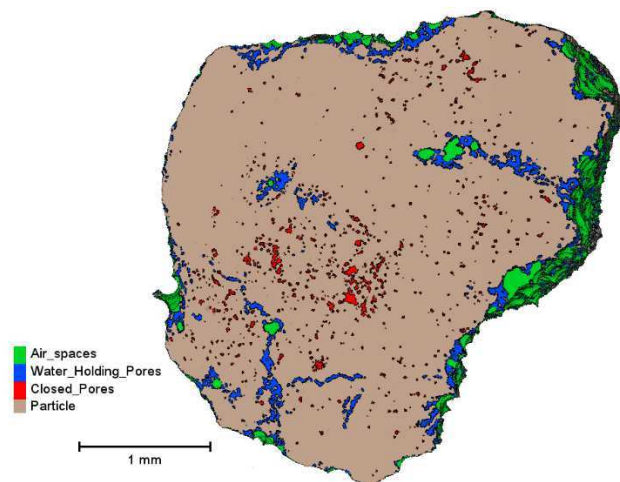
	Bootstrap statistics	Porosity	Effective porosity	Closed pores	Water holding pores	Air space pores
Arable	Original value	0.36	0.36	0.15	0.60	0.39
	bias	0.0015	0.0016	0.012	-0.0019	0.0057
	Std error	0.088	0.088	0.086	0.080	0.112
	95% Conf Int	0.18; 0.52	0.18; 0.53	0.02; 0.34	0.42; 0.74	0.16; 0.60



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 1.

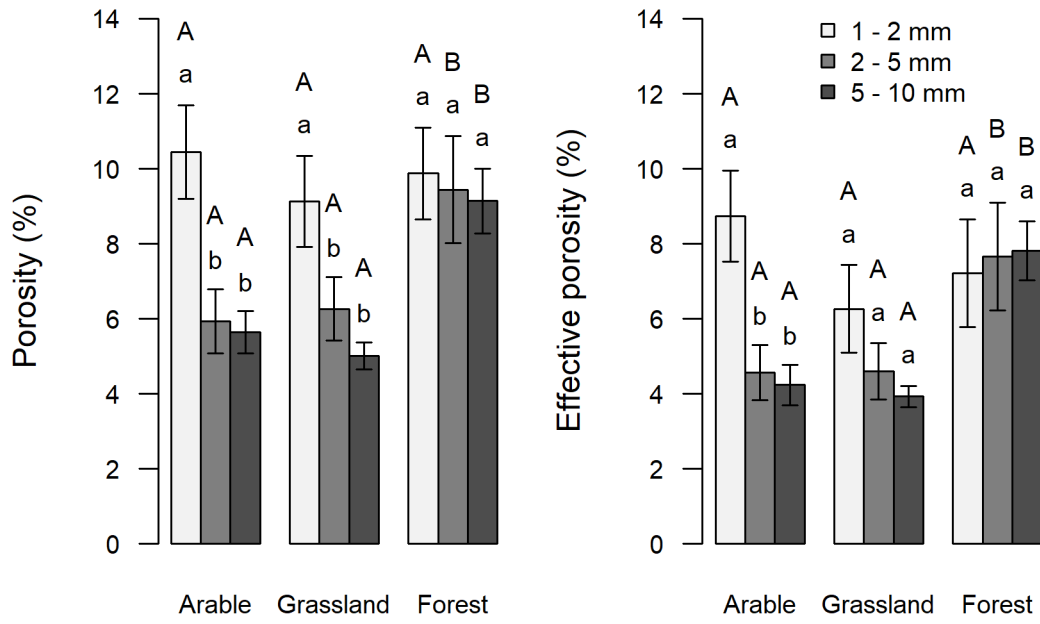


Fig. 2.

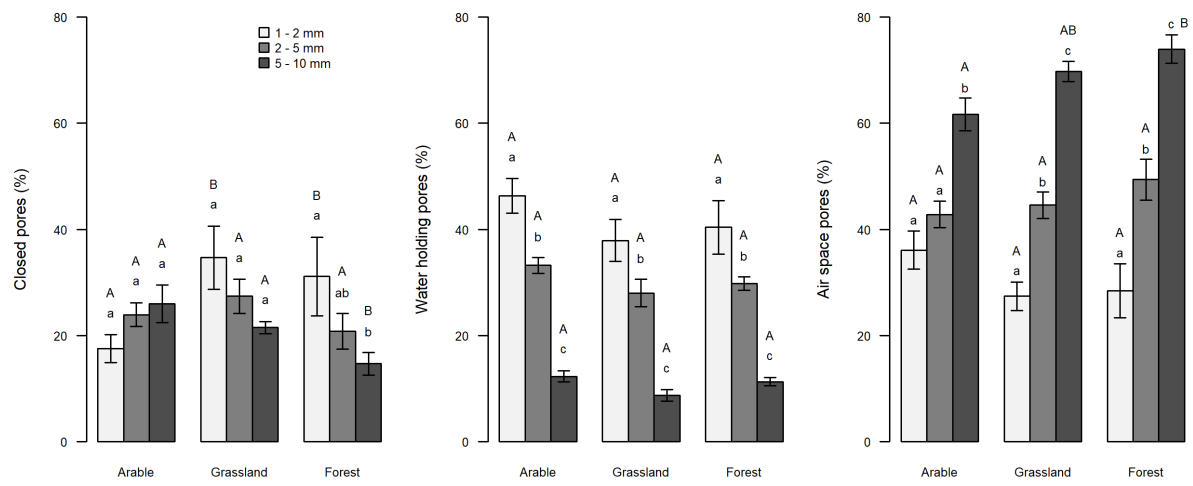


Fig. 3.

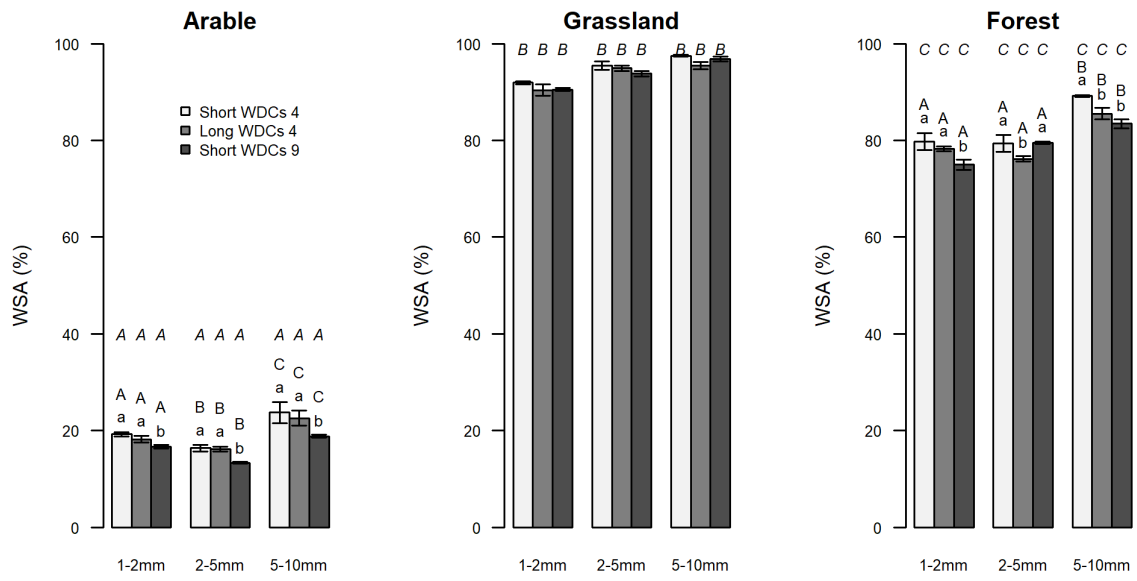


Fig. 4.

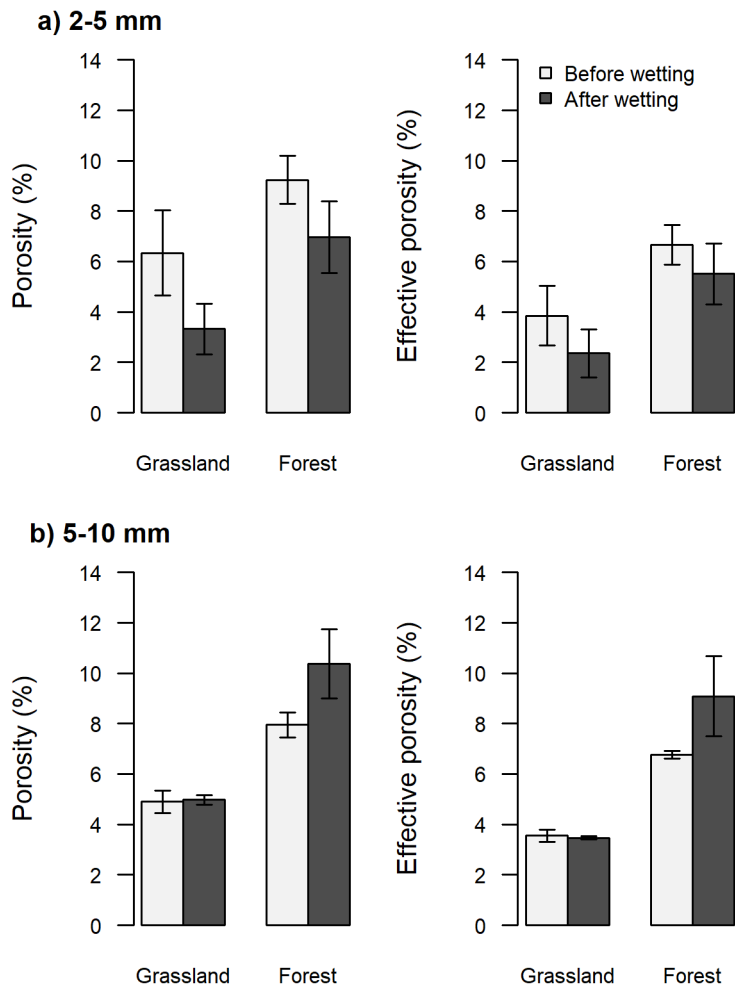


Fig. 5.

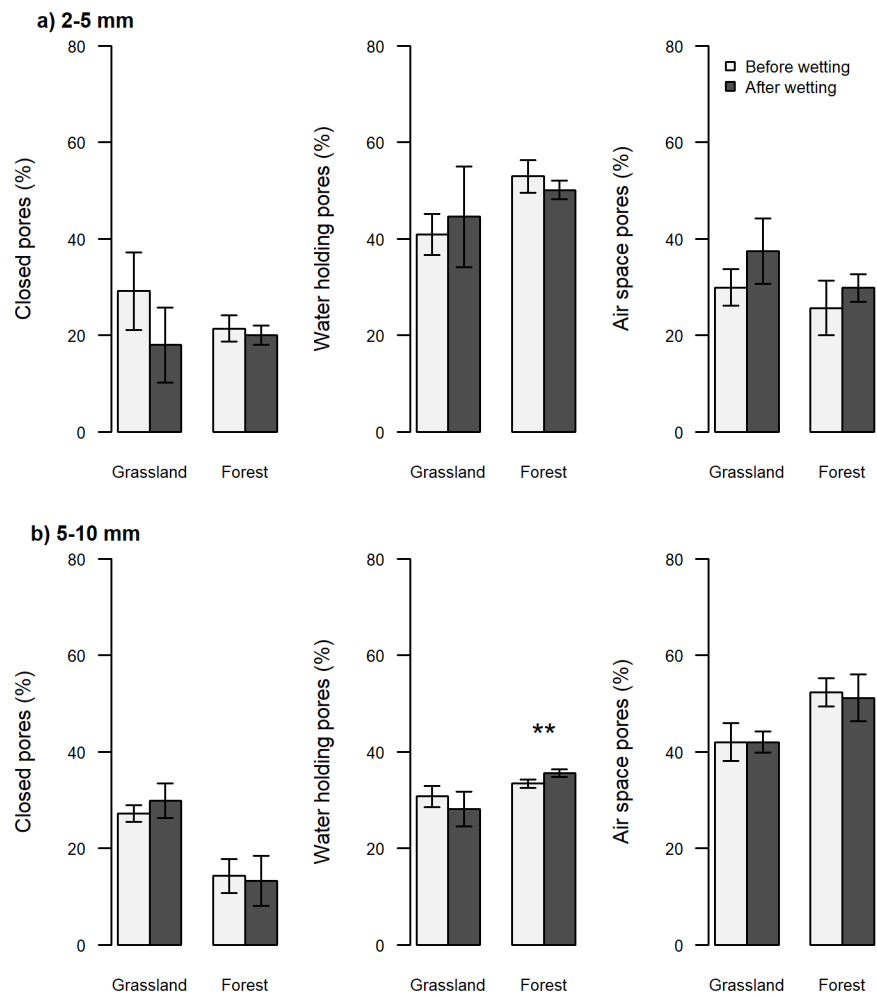


Fig. 6.

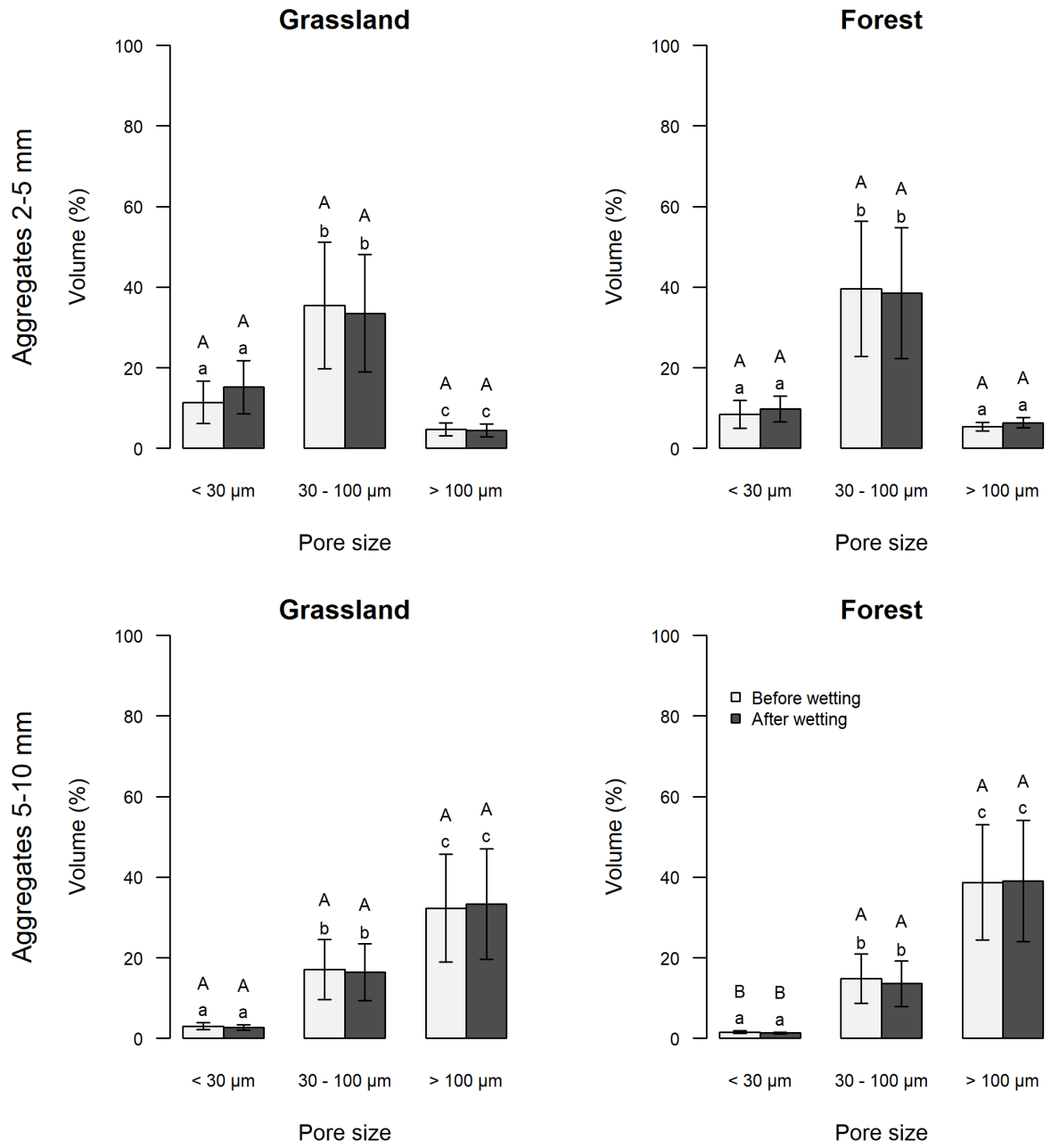


Fig. 7.

Supplementary Material 1 for image processing and pore network extraction

1. Image acquisition settings

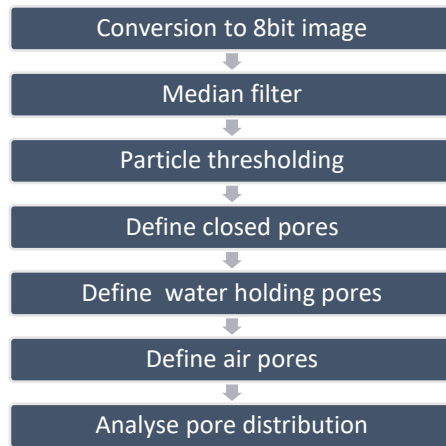
Beam hardening and partial volume effects can reduce the quality of the images. In order to avoid the beam hardening effect, metal filters are used in the micro-CT scanner to pre-harden the beam. Also, in order to reduce the partial volume effect, the rotation steps are selected to be as low as 0.700 degree. Other imaging settings are included in Table A.1.

Table A.1. Imaging settings used to scan aggregates of different sizes in this study

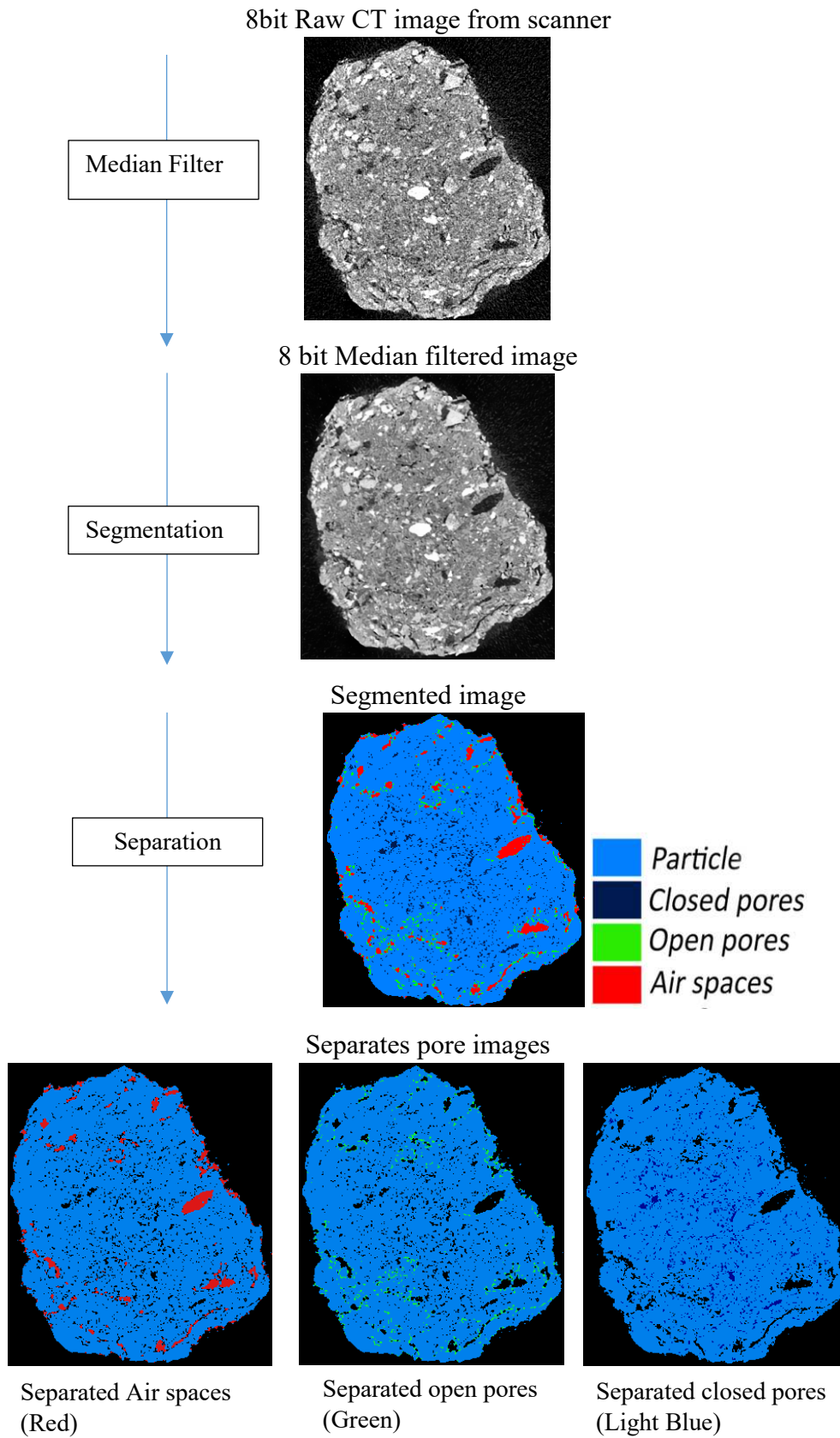
Image acquisition settings	Aggregate size (mm)	
	1-2 or 2-5	5-10
Source voltage (kV)	49	70
Source current (uA)	200	141
Camera pixels	1048 x 2000	
Imager rotation	0.32	
Pixel size	5.01	10.02
Object to source (mm)	46.755	93.465
Camera to source (mm)	214.136	
Al Filter 0.5 mm	Yes	
Image format	TIFF	
Exposure (ms)	295 or 590	
Rotation step (deg)	0.700	
360 rotation	Yes	
Median filter	On	
Flat field correction	On	
Geometrical correction	On	
Scanning trajectory	Round	

2. Image processing steps (Performed using Avizo 9.0.1)

Initially, 16bit Grayscale raw images obtained from the several different CT scans carried out were converted to 8bit images to reduce the computational requirements for processing. The resultant greyscale images obtained were then filtered using a 3D median filter (Avizo 9.0.1) with a neighbourhood of 6 and 1 iteration to reduce image noise. Next, a global thresholding algorithm based on the histogram of the greyscale image was applied to delineate soil mineral particles (higher attenuation values) from their corresponding background (lower attenuation values). Afterwards, to define the **closed pores** within aggregates, a 3D fill holes algorithm with a neighbourhood of 6 was applied which sealed off the isolated pores, these delineated pores were then delineated by subtracting the result from the defined particle mask. To define the **water holding pores**, a ball closing algorithm with a diameter of 50 μm (equivalent number of pixels) was used to seal off all pores connected to the surface with a diameter smaller than 50 μm . The resultant output mask was then subtracted from the particle mask with the defined closed pores being removed leaving only the required sized pores delineated. Lastly, to define the **air pores**, the particle mask was closed using a disc closing algorithm with a kernel size large enough to fully seal all the large and small internal pores (around 2.5% of the particle length). The disc instead of the ball was used as it reduced aggregate surface space inclusions by about 20%. The air pores were then delineated by subtracting particles, closed and water holding pores from the output mask leaving the air spaces. The steps followed for the above-described process are summarised in Supp. Figure 1 & 2 below.



Supp. Fig. 1. Steps involved in image processing of aggregates



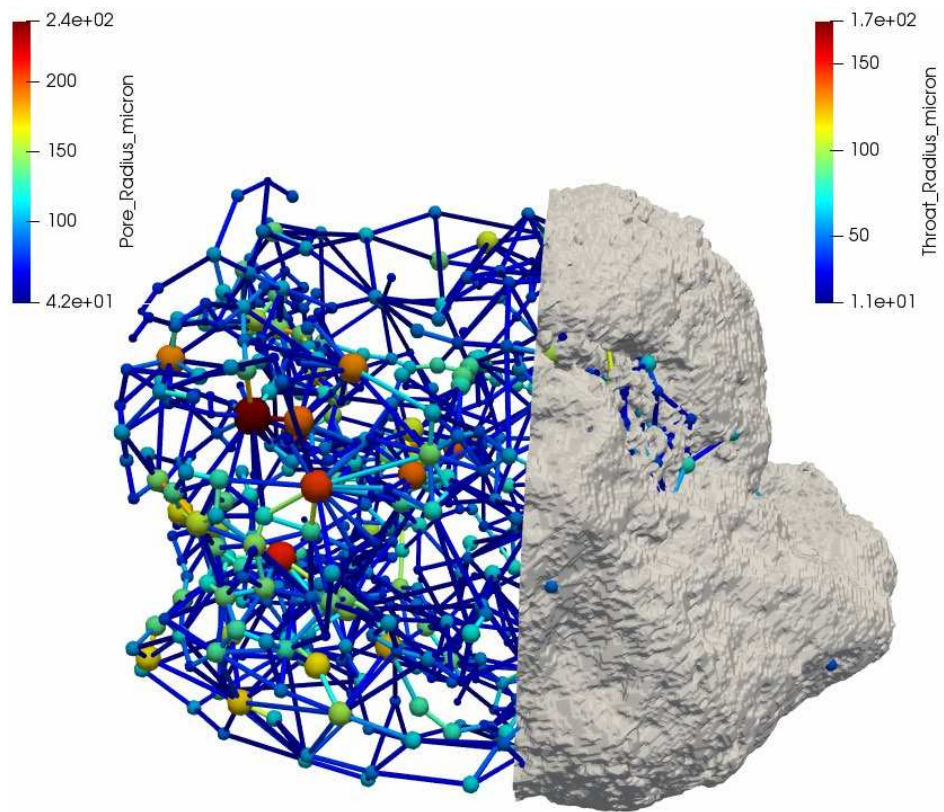
Supp. Fig. 2. Visualisation of major steps involved in image processing of aggregates

3. Pore Network Extraction steps

Binarised images of soil aggregates were analysed to extract the pore network model using watershed segmentation algorithm. We used an in-house code to define what part of the network is composed of pore-bodies and how they are connected to each other by pore-throats. In this approach, initially, we performed distance transform on 3-D binarised images and applied Gaussian filtering to avoid over-segmentation of the porous media. Then watershed transform was applied on the images that create several growing nuclei at the centre of the pores in which distance value is locally maximized. These nuclei keep growing based on the distance values until they touch a nucleus from the neighbouring pore. Then the touching voxels were recorded as pore-throats. The process continued until the whole volume of the void space be filled with the growing nuclei. Then, we subtracted the pore-throat voxels from the void geometry and applied morphological labelling to address each detected pore which was by then isolated from its neighbours. In the next step, with a $3 \times 3 \times 3$ sliding window we browsed the whole labelled geometry to find and label the connections between each pair of pores as pore-throats. Finally, we measured the size of each pore-throat and thus, the network was fully extracted. See suppl. Figure 3 illustrates the steps in the described workflow and example pore network extracted is given in Suppl. Figure 4.



Suppl. Figure 3. Pore network extraction process using watershed segmentation algorithm



Suppl. Figure 4. Inside view of pore and throat sizes of an grassland aggregate (5-10 mm) based on the extracted pore network.