

3D analysis of the soil porous architecture under long term contrasting management systems by X-ray Computed Tomography

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2 **term contrasting management systems by X-ray**
3 **Computed Tomography**

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12
13 **ABSTRACT**

14 The development of adequate soil structure is important for achieving good physical
15 status, which influences the sustainability of agricultural areas. Different management
16 systems lead to the development of a wide range of soil pore network characteristics.
17 The objective of this research was to analyze the effect of three contrasting tillage
18 systems (zero-tillage, ZT; reduced tillage, RT; conventional tillage, CT) in the soil
19 porous system of an Oxisol. Samples were collected from the surface layer (0-10 cm).
20 An area under secondary forest (F) was also assessed to provide an undisturbed
21 reference. X-ray Computed Tomography (μ CT) scanning of undisturbed soil samples
22 and image analysis were employed for analysis of the pore network. The soil under ZT

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23 had the smallest porosity in comparison to the other management systems. The
24 conventionally tilled soil had the largest porosity and the most connected pores. One
25 large connected pore was responsible for around 90% of the porosity of the resolvable
26 pores (>35 μm) studied for all the management systems. Pores of elongated shapes,
27 which enhance water movement through the soil, were the most frequent pores in
28 terms of shape.

29 *Keywords:* Minimum tillage; Zero-tillage; Conventional tillage; Morphological properties;
30 X-ray microtomography; Soil structure.

31 **1. INTRODUCTION**

32 The use of tillage has been employed for centuries to improve soil structure for
33 enhanced crop development. However, the choice of tillage systems can have a
34 significant impact on a soil health and quality. Sustainable farming systems greatly
35 depend on soil quality (Bünemann et al., 2018). Soil tillage provokes substantial
36 changes in several soil physical properties such as total porosity, bulk density, water
37 retention and infiltration, penetration resistance, pore size distribution, connectivity and
38 tortuosity (Imhoff et al., 2010; Daraghmeh et al., 2009; Blanco-Canqui et al., 2004;
39 Katsvairo et al., 2002).

40 In Brazil the adoption of minimum tillage systems such as reduced (RT) and
41 zero tillage (ZT) is common. The total Brazilian area used in crop production is around
42 66 million hectares and there are over 31 million hectares under ZT (FEBRAPDP,
43 2013). Conventional tillage (CT) is characterized by the disruption of the top soil due to
44 ploughing and harrowing operations employed to turn over and loosen the soil. As a
45 result of these operations, macropores are created and pore continuity is disrupted,
46 which directly affect the water movement (e.g. hydraulic conductivity and infiltration)
47 and retention (Blanco-Canqui et al., 2017; Ogunwole et al., 2015; Cássaro et al., 2011;
48 Imhoff et al., 2010). Minimum tillage systems such as RT and ZT do not usually lead to

49 drastic soil structure changes. These systems, known as conservation techniques,
50 have been utilized as a means of reducing tillage and field costs as well as for
51 conserving soil structure due to reduced disturbance (Aziz et al., 2013; Cavalieri et al.,
52 2009). The residues of the previous crop are left intact and the absence of harrowing in
53 ZT and RT can increase soil organic carbon and aggregate stability, reduce CO₂
54 emissions and moderate fluxes of water, air and heat through the soil (Aziz et al., 2013;
55 Daraghmeh et al., 2009; Zibilske and Bradford, 2007).

56 The fluxes of water and air, organic matter decomposition, plant-available water
57 and soil resistance to erosion are directly linked to the architecture of the soil porous
58 system. Mesopores and macropores play an important role in these processes (Imhoff
59 et al., 2010; Fuentes et al., 2004; Cameira et al., 2003). In CT, the soil porous system
60 is affected by operations such as ploughing and harrowing, which can increase porosity
61 and loosen soil (Mangalassery et al., 2014). This operation allows good root growth
62 and air exchange, while the exposition of the soil to rain in tropical regions can
63 sometimes lead to erosion (Alvarez et al., 2009). On the other hand, the activity of
64 earthworms and root decay help to create channels and burrows under RT and ZT,
65 which facilitate drainage and gaseous diffusion (Soto-Gómez et al., 2018; Carducci et
66 al., 2017; Pires et al., 2017; Pierret et al., 2002).

67 Based on the important functions that mesopores and macropores fulfill for a
68 healthy soil, techniques to image and measure key properties such as X-ray Computed
69 Tomography (μ CT) are very important (Tseng et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018; Ferreira
70 et al., 2018; Pagenkemper et al., 2014). The spatial distribution of pores can be non-
71 destructively imaged at high resolutions and in three dimensions (3D) by μ CT (e.g.
72 Galdos et al. 2018; Helliwell et al., 2013; Peth et al., 2008). μ CT has been previously
73 applied with success to study the size, shape, number, connectivity, degree of
74 anisotropy, macropore thickness, fractal dimension and tortuosity of the soil porous
75 system (Wang et al., 2016; Dal Ferro et al., 2014; Garbout et al., 2013; Vogel, 1997).

76 This provides vital information to characterize the physical structure of the porous
77 system, which allows a better understanding of key processes (i.e. mass and energy
78 transport, nutrient cycling, root development) within the soil (Hillel, 2004).

79 Previous studies on evaluating the influence of tillage systems at the μm scale
80 in 3D in tropical soils are still scarce. In Brazil, one of the largest food and agricultural
81 producers of the world, previous studies have characterized the soil porous system at
82 μm to measure the porosity and pore size distribution of Brazilian Oxisols (Vaz et al.,
83 2011), assessed the effect of tillage systems on the percentage of macropores
84 (Beraldo et al., 2014) and explored the spatial and morphological configuration of the
85 pore space of Oxisols under CT (Carducci et al., 2017, 2014). Other studies have
86 determined the influence of ZT on the pore size and shape distribution of macropores
87 (Passoni et al., 2015), tested the capacity of soil recovering under different
88 management strategies (Marchini et al., 2015) and measured the impact of ZT and CT
89 on the pore size and shape distribution and water retention (Pires et al., 2017). Recent
90 work has analyzed the soil structure utilizing the geometrical parameters of the soil
91 porous system (Tseng et al., 2018), considered the influence of liming on the structure
92 of aggregates under ZT (Ferreira et al., 2018) and revealed the structural development
93 associated with long term (>30 years) ZT (Galdos et al., 2018).

94 The objective of this particular research was to apply the X-ray Computed
95 Tomography technique to evaluate, in 3D and at the μm scale, the morphological
96 properties of an Oxisol under contrasting soil management systems. Experimental
97 areas under long term zero-tillage and reduced and conventional tillage systems were
98 investigated. Samples were collected at the soil surface layer (0-10 cm).

99 **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

100 The experimental field plots of this study were located in Ponta Grossa, in a
101 humid mesothermal Cfb-subtropical region in southern Brazil (25°09'S, 50°09'W, 875 m

102 above sea level) (Cássaro et al., 2011). The soil was an Oxisol (Rhodic Hapludox) with
103 clay texture according to USDA soil taxonomy (Soil Survey Staff, 2013). The
104 experimental areas have long gentle slopes ranging from 2 to 7%. The Oxisol evolved
105 from the clastic sediments of the Devonian period characterized by a mixture of Ponta
106 Grossa shale (MINEROPAR, 2013). Deep and very structured profiles are found in the
107 experimental site characterized by high porosities and good internal drainage (Sá et al.,
108 2015).

109 Three tillage systems were compared in this study (conventional tillage – CT,
110 reduced tillage – RT and zero-tillage – ZT). An area under secondary forest (F) was
111 utilized as baseline to assess the management-induced changes in soil structure,
112 which is located close to (\approx 200 m far) the experimental field plots. Some of the key
113 characteristics of the soil (0-10 cm depth) from the experimental areas are shown in
114 Table 1.

115 The experimental plots studied here have areas of c. 1.0 ha (ZT) and c. 0.6 ha
116 (CT and RT), respectively. The tillage systems had been employed in the areas for
117 over 35 years at the time of sampling. The experimental areas of CT, RT and ZT were
118 initiated in 1981 after conversion of part of secondary forest to pasture-land (Sá et al.,
119 2015). Under CT, the soil was submitted to discing at 25 cm depth followed by 10 cm
120 harrowing twice a year after summer and winter harvest. For the area under RT, the
121 soil was prepared through the use of a chisel cultivator at 25 cm depth followed by a 10
122 cm narrow disking, causing minimum soil disturbance, and the crop residues were
123 maintained at the soil surface. The area under ZT was not submitted to soil
124 disturbance. In these areas, crop rotation was performed, with cover crops [oats
125 (*Avena strigosa*) or vetch (*Vicia sativa*)] or wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) in winter and
126 corn (*Zea mays*) or soybean (*Glycine max*) in summer (Table 2). The operations of soil
127 and crop management, sowing and harvest, were made with commercial tillage
128 machines (e.g. tractor). The traffic in the ZT area was restricted to sowing equipment

129 with a cutting disc for sowing the summer and winter crops. Each experimental area
130 (ZT, CT and RT) was submitted to 8-9 soil interventions through the year (clearing,
131 planting seed and soil preparation operations) using tractors around four tonnes in
132 weight.

133 Soil samples were taken from the 0-10 cm layer after corn harvest in April 2017.
134 For CT, sampling occurred almost six months after ploughing and harrowing
135 operations, which allowed the sampling of natural reconsolidated structures. ZT, RT
136 and F samples were also taken at the same sampling time. Core samples of 91 cm³
137 (5.0 cm high and 4.8 cm inner diameter) were collected in steel cylinders with an
138 Uhland core sampler (Folegatti et al., 2001). Three samples of each tillage system and
139 forest (3 samples × 4 systems) were collected for the macroporosity and microporosity
140 analyses and other five samples (5 samples × 4 systems) for the μ CT analysis (Table
141 1). After sampling, the samples were wrapped in plastic foil and transported to the
142 laboratory. The soil excess outside the steel cylinders was carefully trimmed off and top
143 and bottom surfaces of the sample were made flat to ensure that the soil volume was
144 equal to the internal volume of the cylinder. This procedure was carried out with the
145 help of a palette knife.

146 Samples were collected very carefully, in order not to introduce soil compaction
147 during extraction and handling of the steel cylinders. To minimize damages in the soil
148 structure due to the force required for collection, samples were taken some days after a
149 high intensity rainfall event with the soil near its plastic limit. For organic carbon (3
150 samples × 4 systems) and texture (3 samples × 4 systems) measurements, disturbed
151 soil samples were collected at three different points. Soil organic carbon was
152 determined by the Walkley-Black method and texture by the hydrometer method (Gee
153 and Or, 2002; Nelson and Sommers, 1982).

154 The soil samples were carefully extracted from the steel cylinders before the
155 μ CT scans. Prior to the scanning, the samples were coated with paraffin wax for

156 transport to the United Kingdom. Each soil sample was scanned using a GE v|tome|x m
157 X-ray μ CT scanner (GE Measurement & Control Solutions, Wunstorf, Germany) at the
158 Hounsfield Facility (The University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington Campus, U.K.).
159 The voltage, current and integration time adopted for the image acquisition process
160 were 180 kV, 160 μ A and 250 ms. A 0.1 mm Cu-filter was used to minimize beam-
161 hardening effects. A total of 2520 projections were obtained per sample with a pixel
162 resolution of 35 μ m. Therefore, it was not possible to quantify pores below the
163 resolution mentioned.

164 The radiographs of each scan were reconstructed in 32 bit format in order to
165 avoid compression of the greyscale histogram. After reconstruction the images were
166 imported into Volumetric Graphics (VG) StudioMAX® 2.0 and cropped (i.e. resized) to
167 a cubic shape with 30.1 \times 30.1 \times 30.1 mm³ (860 \times 860 \times 860 pixels). The image
168 cropping was carried c. 10 mm away from the borders of the samples to avoid possible
169 artifacts on the edge of the soil core samples that may have arisen from sampling or
170 transport.

171 The original grey-level μ CT images were processed using ImageJ 1.42 software
172 (Rasband, 2007). A *3D median* filter with radius of 2 voxels was applied to reduce
173 noise in the images. Subsequently, an *unsharp mask* with standard deviation of 1 voxel
174 and weight of 0.8 was applied to emphasize edges. The segmentation process was
175 based on the nonparametric and unsupervised Otsu method of thresholding (Otsu,
176 1979). The *remove outlier* tool with radius of 0.75 was applied in the images after
177 segmentation. The images were also visually inspected to verify the quality of the
178 segmentation procedure. This resulted in a binary image, in which pores and solids
179 were respectively represented by white and black pixels.

180 For the 3D structure analysis, soil pores were classified according to their shape
181 and size distribution. For the shape classification, parameters known as major,
182 intermediate and minor axes of the ellipsoids that represent each pore were

183 determined by using 3D measuring techniques (Borges et al., 2018; Pires et al., 2017).
184 These parameters were measured by using the *Particle Analyser* tool in the ImageJ.
185 The soil pores were classified according to Zingg (1935) based on the relations of the
186 intermediate by the major (Int./Maj.) and of the minor by the intermediate (Min./Int.)
187 axes. Equant (EQ), Prolate (PR), Oblate (OB) and Triaxial (TR) shaped pores were
188 analyzed (Ferreira et al., 2018; Pires et al., 2017) (Table 3). When one of the axes of a
189 specific pore could not be determined, this pore was not classified (unclassified pore)
190 according to its shape. These pores are generally associated with enhanced
191 complexity of individual pores, which means that a geometrical shape cannot be fitted
192 for them.

193 3D porosity was determined for all pores >8 voxels and the total number of pore
194 voxels within the region of interest. Isolated pores smaller than 9 voxels were removed
195 from the porous fraction of the images in the quantitative analyses to avoid
196 misclassification from unresolved voxels (Jefferies et al., 2014). The total number of
197 isolated pores within the region of interest was utilized for the 3D pore size distribution
198 based on the volume of pores (0.0004-0.01, 0.01-0.1, 0.1-10 and >10 mm³) (Ferreira et
199 al., 2018; Pires et al., 2017).

200 The network tortuosity and connectivity of the pores were calculated using
201 Osteoimage software (Roque et al., 2009). Tortuosity was determined through the
202 geodesic reconstruction algorithm implemented by Roque et al. (2012). The pore
203 network degree of connectivity was estimated by the Euler-Poincare Characteristic
204 (EPC). EPC is a topological property of geometric objects and one of the Minkowski
205 functions used for describing the connectivity of spatial structures (Katuwal et al.,
206 2015). This parameter for a 3D structure is related to the number of isolated parts
207 minus the connectivity of an object (Thurston, 1997). To estimate the EPC, a stack of
208 serial sections called dissectors (Sterio, 1984) is used. In our study 859 dissectors were
209 analyzed for each sample. EPC by the volume of dissectors (EPC_v) was then

210 calculated for each sample after the images had been previously submitted to the
211 Purify procedure in Bone J plugin (Toriwaki and Yonekura, 2002; Odgaard and
212 Gundersen, 1993). For EPC_v a positive value indicates a poorly connected structure
213 while a negative value suggests a more connected structure (Vogel and Kretzschmar,
214 1996). The Euler number was also utilized to evaluate the connectivity of the main pore
215 network (i.e. the largest pore). The degree of anisotropy, which gives the preferred
216 orientation of pores, was determined in 3D by using the BoneJ plugin (Doube et al.,
217 2010).

218 Differences in the soil morphological parameters due to the treatments were
219 evaluated by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Tukey's HSD post
220 hoc tests. Results were classified as statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Parameters such
221 as the mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variations were also measured for
222 each soil physical property analyzed. Pearson correlations among each pair of
223 variables were measured for some of the morphological properties. The statistical
224 analysis was carried out using PAST software (Hammer et al., 2001).

225 **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

226 Representative 3D images of the soil porous system from the different
227 management systems are presented in Fig. 1. The undisturbed samples collected at
228 the surface layer for the contrasting tillage systems possessed a main pore network
229 composed of connected pores. The 3D images show that the soil under CT seemed to
230 have a high proportion of small connected pores in relation to F, ZT and RT (Fig. 1).
231 The numerous pores observed for the soil under CT suggest this management system
232 was characterized by higher soil porosity than the other treatments. Larger soil pores
233 were observed for the soil under F, ZT and RT, which may be an indication of biological
234 activity. The existence of biopores in areas under forest or conservation management
235 systems is usually associated with the action of earthworms and root penetration (Peth
236 et al., 2008). Normally these biopores tend to be vertically oriented, continuous and

237 round shaped (Pagenkemper et al., 2015). Earthworm activity in the soil modifies its
238 structure and can affect the transport and exchange processes such as preferential
239 flows and lateral water movement (Rogasik et al., 2014).

240 Porosities calculated from binary images were higher for CT compared with the
241 other management systems (Fig. 2a). Porosity was c. 2.3 times higher for CT than ZT.
242 Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were observed for ZT in relation to the other
243 management systems. The number of pores was significantly different between CT, F
244 and ZT (Fig. 2b). The soil under ZT had the highest number of pores followed by F, RT
245 and CT. The number of disconnected pores was c. 1.5 times higher for ZT than CT.

246 The lowest porosity observed for ZT maybe associated with a “zero-tillage pan”,
247 which can happen in areas under long term ZT as previously observed in the South of
248 Brazil down to 20 cm soil depth (Mazurana et al., 2017; da Silva et al., 2009; Klein and
249 Libardi, 2002). According to Reichert et al. (2007), soil compaction in ZT can occur
250 mainly when this practice is utilized for long periods due to machinery traffic, low soil
251 mobilization and natural soil arrangement. One of the consequences of this
252 densification is the reduction of macroporosity and the increase in microporosity (da
253 Silva et al., 2016; Mangalassery et al., 2014). Similar findings for areas under ZT close
254 to the experimental plots studied were observed by Borges et al. (2018) and Pires et al.
255 (2017) for samples collected in different periods of time. Normally, for soils under ZT it
256 is expected that the traffic effects can be compensated by the creation of macropores
257 originating from the fauna activity, high organic content and root development, but this
258 was not observed in this study. Similar results were recorded by Blanco-Canqui et al.
259 (2017) and Soracco et al. (2012).

260 The large porosity observed under CT is probably associated with the soil
261 loosening and disturbance, which favours the formation of macropores at the surface
262 layer (Jabro et al., 2009). Conventional management can cause an increase in the
263 volume of pores, permeability and air flow, which is related to the harrowing and

264 ploughing operations (Rossetti et al., 2013). For the soil under RT, the porosity can be
265 explained by reduced soil disturbance combined with the incorporation of residues from
266 previous crops for this management (Cunha et al., 2015). In terms of porosity, this
267 management presents the most similar results to the reference area (F).

268 The smallest number of pores was for the soil under CT, which was unexpected
269 (Fig. 2b). The aggregate breakdown induced by harrowing and ploughing operations
270 normally increases the number of pores due to the loosening effect of conventional
271 management systems. Several previous studies have demonstrated that systems with
272 ploughing are characterized by looser soil structures (Dal Ferro et al., 2014; Garbout et
273 al., 2013; Munkholm et al., 2012; Munkholm and Hansen, 2012). Borges et al. (2018)
274 and Pires et al. (2017) also observed a larger number of pores for the soil under CT
275 than ZT for the same experimental area. A possible explanation for the smaller number
276 of pores observed under CT in the current study could be the soil resettling, which is
277 induced by the local wetting and drying cycles, caused by rainfall and dry periods and
278 biological activity including root growth (Daraghmeah et al., 2009).

279 The contrasting management systems did not demonstrate significant
280 differences in the degree of anisotropy though it was highest in RT, followed by ZT and
281 CT, whereas F had the smallest value (Fig. 2c). This parameter was c. 1.7 times higher
282 for RT than F. The results of degree of anisotropy obtained in this study are in line with
283 those presented by Dal Ferro et al. (2014). These authors obtained values of 0.21 (CT)
284 and 0.25 (ZT) for samples from the topsoil (0-10 cm). However, there was no pattern
285 between the results of degree of anisotropy and porosity among the different
286 management approaches. Strong linear positive and negative correlations were
287 observed for RT ($r=0.63$), and ZT ($r=-0.60$) and F ($r=-0.86$) between these two
288 parameters, which shows that the soil under ZT presented similarities with F. The
289 smallest degree of anisotropy obtained for F indicates a more isotropic porous system,
290 which means that pores are not oriented in particular directions and there are

291 similarities in the pore orientation in the different directions analyzed (Hernández
292 Zubeldia et al., 2016). Therefore, this kind of porous system does not present a
293 tendency for preferential flows but is expected that the water can infiltrate and also
294 redistribute into the soil in all directions in similar conditions as per Darcy's Law. Tseng
295 et al. (2018) also observed small values for the degree of anisotropy for a native forest
296 area in comparison to degraded or recovering pasture land. The degree of anisotropy
297 data indicated that all management systems had a good physical condition as far as
298 water infiltration is concerned. For comparison, Tseng et al. (2018) observed values of
299 0.64 for an area of degraded soil and Garbout et al. (2013) of 0.37 for a direct drilling
300 management system.

301 The pore connectivity measured by the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic
302 was lowest for CT followed by RT, F and ZT (Fig. 2d). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$)
303 of this parameter were observed only between CT and ZT. For these two management
304 systems the increase in pore connectivity was also followed by the increase in the
305 degree of anisotropy (strong linear positive correlations: $r = 0.74$ for CT and $r = 0.60$ for
306 ZT) of the soil porous system, which indicates slight differences in the spatial
307 characteristics of the pores in some specific direction in the images (Tseng et al.,
308 2018). The same tendency of the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic was found
309 for the pore connectivity (Euler number) of the largest pore ($CT < RT < F < ZT$), which was
310 c. 2.8 times smaller for CT than ZT (Fig. 2e). Surprisingly, the highest pore connectivity
311 was observed for the soil under CT. We expected that the breakdown of aggregates
312 should decrease the pore connectivity due to soil loosening as observed by Dal Ferro
313 et al. (2014). However, as the samples were collected months after ploughing and
314 harrowing operations, the reorganization of the soil particles and aggregates, as
315 function of the corn root system and weather conditions, may favour the connectivity of
316 the pores under CT (Strudley et al., 2008). Muñoz-Ortega et al. (2015) observed that

317 soils under tilled areas can present structures similar to natural conditions, which can
318 lead to highly connected porous systems.

319 From a visual inspection of the 3D images (Fig. 1), we observed that all the
320 management systems presented a main, highly connected pore network. The results of
321 the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic and Euler number indicate that the soils
322 with the largest porosity had the best pore connectivity, which can be associated with
323 the junction of few large pores with many tunnels or a high amount of small connected
324 pores (Vogel, 1997). Although, there was no clear relation between overall porosity and
325 soil pore connectivity (results not shown), which indicates that probably other physical
326 properties have a greater influence on the pore connectivity than the porosity. In the
327 case of ZT and RT, it was expected that the pore connectivity was mainly associated
328 with the biological activity, root decay and low or nonexistent soil disturbance (Aziz et
329 al., 2013; Daraghmeh et al., 2009; Zibilske and Bradford, 2007). Continuous pores can
330 be produced by crack formation, earthworm activity or retention of crop residues
331 maintained after harvesting on the soil surface, which act as physical barriers making
332 the soil less susceptible to erosion or the pressure of agricultural machine traffic under
333 crop residue harvest (Imhoff et al., 2010). In the case of RT, the soil cutting induced by
334 chiseling preserves cracks and channels between aggregates, which creates inter-
335 connected pores with large volumes (Peña-Sancho et al., 2017). Despite low porosity
336 observed for ZT, pore connectivity was positively influenced by the organic matter
337 content at the soil surface, which may have compensated the negative influence of
338 macroporosity reduction (Franzluebbers et al., 2011). Martins et al. (2011), working at
339 the same experimental area of our study, found differences of around 42% in the
340 carbon content at the topsoil between CT and ZT after 27 years of management.

341 The results obtained here for porosity and pore connectivity are extremely
342 valuable due to the importance of the mesopores and macropores for water infiltration
343 and retention. Changes in the soil porous system induced by tillage can present

344 significant modifications in the hydraulic properties of the soil as pointed out by Alvarez
345 et al. (2009), Daraghmeh et al. (2008) and Buczko et al. (2006). The importance of soil
346 structure to conserve the quality and the health of the soil, reduce net CO₂ emissions,
347 and increase organic carbon pools is another vital aspect for the micrometric
348 characterization of this porous system; conventional and conservational management
349 systems play an important role in all of these processes (Zibilske and Bradford, 2007).

350 The soil pore system tortuosity was calculated for different directions (x,y,z),
351 and an average tortuosity was obtained considering the three directions together (Fig.
352 3). The calculation of tortuosity for different directions is related to the influence of this
353 parameter for the movement of water and air through the soil. This movement occurs in
354 all directions across the soil, and changes in the soil porous system in one direction
355 certainly have the possibility of inducing preferential flows in the soil profile. Significant
356 differences ($p < 0.05$) in the average τ was observed between CT and F, and ZT (Fig.
357 3a). The lowest average tortuosity was measured for ZT, followed by RT, CT and F.
358 Porosity and average tortuosity were strongly correlated only for F ($r=0.78$) and ZT
359 ($r=0.77$), which indicates an increase in pore complexity with an increase in porosity for
360 these two cases. The presence of crop residues in decomposition in ZT and soil fauna
361 in F can help to explain these results (Franzluebbers et al., 2011).

362 The tortuosity in the x- and y-directions was the highest in F, followed by CT
363 and RT, then ZT (Figs. 3b,c). Significant differences were found only between F and ZT
364 for both tortuosity directions. Porosity and x- and y-direction tortuosities were strongly
365 correlated for all the management systems ($r=0.86$ for CT; $r=0.93$ for RT; $r=0.88$ for ZT
366 – x-direction tortuosity and $r=0.87$ for CT; $r=0.78$ for RT; $r=0.93$ for ZT – y-direction
367 tortuosity) and F ($r=0.90$ – x-direction tortuosity and $r=0.83$ – y-direction tortuosity). In
368 general, the results of x- and y-direction and average tortuosities had the same
369 tendency among management systems. The tortuosity in the z-direction was not
370 characterized by significant differences between F, CT and RT, whereas ZT was

371 different from F (Fig. 3d). The highest z-direction tortuosity was observed for F,
372 followed by RT, CT and ZT. The average tortuosity as well as that in the x-, y- and z-
373 directions was c. 1.1 times higher for F than ZT. Porosity was strongly correlated to z-
374 direction tortuosity only for F ($r=0.86$) and weakly correlated for CT ($r=0.17$), which was
375 probably associated with the soil loosening and disturbance in the last case (Munkholm
376 et al., 2012; Munkholm and Hansen, 2012).

377 The lowest average tortuosity was in the ZT soil indicating that pores are more
378 aligned for this management. The same results were found for the tortuosity in the
379 different directions. Usually, more aligned pores can sometimes be associated with a
380 better interconnected network of more continuous flow channels (Peth et al., 2008).
381 However, the better alignment of the pores for ZT did not result in a better pore
382 connectivity as observed by the weak linear negative correlation between average
383 tortuosity and volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic ($r=-0.22$). This means that the
384 more aligned and continuous pores possibly were not interconnected with other pore
385 networks. Tortuosity is mainly related to the degree of complexity of the sinuous porous
386 path (Pagenkemper et al., 2014; Rezanezhad et al., 2010). Despite the better
387 connectivity measured for CT compared to the other management systems, this
388 connectivity is probably associated with the junction of small pores as observed in the
389 3D images (Muñoz-Ortega et al., 2015; Vogel, 1997). Therefore, the highest tortuosity
390 observed for CT in comparison to ZT is possibly related to a higher number of
391 connected small pores. Similar findings were found by Borges et al. (2018) and Peth et
392 al. (2008). The highest tortuosity was measured for the soil under F, which can be
393 associated with the complexity of the soil porous system due to biological activity, soil
394 fauna (insects), roots, a greater amount of residues (tree leaves) maintained at the soil
395 surface and the absence of tillage (Blanco-Canqui and Lal, 2007).

396 The tortuosity of pores in the z-direction directly corresponds to the variation in
397 soil structure associated with soil depth. The more aligned pores in this direction can

398 be associated with wider and more continuous flow channels, which can improve the
399 water infiltration in this direction. The effective transport of fluids through the pore
400 networks is not only dependent on their continuity but also on their tortuosity (Peth et
401 al., 2008). The similarities in the values of tortuosity for the different directions indicate
402 that the pore complexity follows a similar pattern in all directions analyzed. However,
403 average tortuosity was strongly negatively correlated to the degree of anisotropy for CT
404 ($r=-0.90$), ZT ($r=-0.72$) and F ($r=-0.66$), which means that the presence of more
405 tortuous pores does not necessarily affect the distribution of pores.

406 In general, the tortuosity data described well aligned pores for all the
407 management systems studied. This result is important because the tortuosity is
408 associated with the hydraulic conductivity. This parameter indicates increased
409 resistance to flow, which means high tortuosity can negatively affect the capacity of soil
410 to water transport (Rezanezhad et al., 2010).

411 The pore morphology characterized by the shape of pores is similar to the other
412 parameters studied in that it directly affects the movement of water, air and the
413 development of roots through the soil. Changes in the shape of pores due to
414 management will influence the water retention and the amount of water available to
415 plants. The highest contribution of equant (e.g. equant spheroid) shaped pores to the
416 total porosity was observed for F, followed by RT, CT and ZT (Fig. 4a). The proportion
417 of equant shaped pores was c. 1.3 times higher for F than ZT. Significant differences
418 ($p<0.05$) were identified between F, ZT and CT. For prolate (e.g. prolate spheroid / rod)
419 shaped pores (Fig. 4b), the highest contribution to porosity was found for RT, followed
420 by F, ZT and CT. The proportion of prolate shaped pores was c. 1.1 times higher for
421 RT than CT. No significant differences were recorded between management systems
422 for this type of pore shape. The highest contribution of oblate (e.g. oblate spheroid /
423 discoid) shaped pores to porosity was measured for F, followed by CT, RT and ZT (Fig.
424 4c). The proportion of oblate shaped pores was c. 1.3 times higher for CT than ZT.

425 Similar to the results of prolate shaped pores, no significant differences were observed
426 between the different management systems. The highest contribution to porosity was
427 verified for pores of triaxial (e.g. blade) shape (Fig. 4d). The following sequence among
428 management systems was found for triaxial shaped pores: $F < RT < CT < ZT$; and the
429 proportion of them was c.1.1 times higher for ZT than F. Significant differences were
430 observed between F, ZT and CT.

431 The presence of slightly to very flat/elongated (e.g. prolate, oblate and triaxial)
432 pores was greatly influenced by different soil management systems. The presence of
433 earthworms and insects, mainly at the soil surface, will contribute to the appearance of
434 elongated pores (Jarvis et al., 2017; Pagenkemper et al., 2015; Rogasik et al., 2014).
435 According to Pagliai et al. (2004), elongated continuous pores affect plant growth by
436 easing root penetration and increasing the transmission and storage of water and
437 gases. The smallest proportion of platy and equant shaped pores is an indication of a
438 good soil structure (Pagliai et al., 2004; Bouma et al., 1977). The largest proportion of
439 slightly to moderately flat/elongated pores is indicative of soil quality, since they are
440 generally related to the biological activity of living organisms and roots (biopores)
441 (Carducci et al., 2014; Lima et al., 2005). The Euler number showed moderate ($r=0.52$
442 for ZT) to strong ($r=0.76$ for CT and $r=0.84$ for RT) positive correlations in relation to
443 the contribution of triaxial shaped pores to porosity, which means that the largest
444 presence of these type of pores can positively contribute to water infiltration. However,
445 samples of F had only weak correlation ($r=0.17$) between these two morphological
446 properties, which can be associated with the increased complexity of the porous
447 system. We observed that the average tortuosity was strongly correlated ($r=0.67$) to the
448 triaxial shaped pores contribution to the porosity for F. In conventional management,
449 the presence of elongated pores is usually associated with planar shaped pores
450 surrounding or separating aggregates or clods (Pagliai, 1994). The recovery of soil
451 structure, which occurs in soils managed under conventional management systems

452 after months of ploughing and harrowing operation procedures, can also be identified
453 by an increase in the proportion of elongated pores (Zhao et al., 2017). The largest
454 amount of equant shaped pores in F can also be related to the biologic activity. This
455 pore type also plays an important role in the transport and retention of water, since
456 water can infiltrate very quickly in tubular pores (Yang et al., 2018). A strong positive
457 correlation ($r=0.61$) was found between the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic
458 and the contribution of equant shaped pores to porosity for F, which highlights the
459 importance of this type of pore in native or secondary forests.

460 A large portion of the pores were not classified in terms of shape. The
461 contribution of unclassified pores to porosity was around 60% for F and RT, 66% for ZT
462 and 63% for CT, respectively. Moderate to strong positive correlations were found
463 between the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic and the contribution of
464 unclassified pores for all the management systems ($r=0.58$ for ZT, $r=0.91$ for CT and
465 $r=0.85$ for RT) and F ($r=0.56$). As unclassified pores were responsible for a
466 considerable part of the porosity, their contribution to pore connectivity is important and
467 suggests the samples analyzed are characterized by good structural quality.
468 Unclassified pores are also an indicative of the complexity of the soil porous system.
469 The well connected pore structures observed in the 3D images give an idea of the
470 complexity of the soil porous system (Fig. 1). Similar results of a high contribution of
471 complex pores to the overall porosity have also been previously measured for Brazilian
472 soils (Ferreira et al., 2018; Borges et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2018; Pires et al., 2017;
473 Passoni et al., 2015).

474 The small pores (from 0.0004 to 10 mm^3) made only a small contribution to
475 overall porosity. The highest contribution to porosity for 0.0004 to 0.01 mm^3 pores was
476 observed in ZT, followed by F, RT and CT. Significant differences ($p<0.05$) were
477 recorded between management systems for this pore size interval (Fig. 5a). Porosity
478 displayed strong negative correlations to the interval of pore volumes between 0.0004

479 and 0.01 mm³ for F (r=-0.79), CT (r=-0.94) and RT (r=-0.99). For the pore sizes of 0.01
480 to 0.1 mm³ (Fig. 5b), significant differences were observed between ZT and the other
481 management systems. Porosity also displayed strongly negative correlations to the
482 interval of pore volumes between 0.01 and 0.1 mm³ for F (r=-0.90), CT (r=-0.92) and
483 RT (r=-0.89). For the last two size intervals of pores, the increase in porosity was
484 followed by a decrease in the contribution of small pores, which highlights the great
485 contribution of large pores to the overall soil porous system of F, CT and RT studied.
486 The correlation between porosity and the two previous pore size intervals analyzed
487 was moderate to weak for ZT (r=-0.41 for 0.0004 to 0.01 mm³ and r=-0.29 for 0.01 to
488 0.1 mm³). This result shows that the variation in porosity was not greatly influenced by
489 changes in the distribution of small pore sizes for this management.

490 The highest contribution to porosity for 0.1 to 10 mm³ pores was observed for
491 ZT, followed by F, RT and CT (Fig. 5c). Similar to the results observed for the 0.01 to
492 0.1 mm³, significant differences were found only between ZT and the other
493 management systems. For the largest pores (>10 mm³), the greatest contribution to
494 porosity occurred for CT, followed by RT, F and ZT. The soil under ZT presented
495 significant differences in comparison to the other management systems (Fig. 5d). The
496 proportion of different pore volume intervals to porosity was c. 3.5 (0.0004 to 0.01
497 mm³), c. 4.3 (0.01 to 0.1 mm³) and c. 4.0 (0.1 to 10 mm³) times higher for ZT than CT
498 and c. 1.1 times higher for CT than ZT for the largest pore sizes (>10 mm³) studied.

499 We observed that in general the samples with high porosities were also
500 characterized by a large contribution of the biggest pores (>10 mm³) to the porosity,
501 which was corroborated by the strong positive correlations obtained for F (r=0.82), CT
502 (r=0.93) and RT (r=0.94) between these two soil physical properties. This is an
503 indication of highly connected pore networks supported by the moderate to strong
504 negative correlations between the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic and the

505 contribution of pores $>10 \text{ mm}^3$ to porosity for ZT ($r=-0.73$), CT ($r=-0.81$) and RT ($r=-$
506 0.50) of the soil samples analyzed.

507 In terms of pore size distribution, the contribution of pores $<10 \text{ mm}^3$ to porosity
508 was around 4% for F, 8% for ZT, 2% for CT and 3% for RT. This indicates that a large
509 part of the porosity is composed of large inter-aggregate pores as observed by Costa
510 et al. (2018). Ferreira et al. (2018) recently showed that $>90\%$ of porosity for a soil
511 under ZT consisted of a main pore network as observed in our study. This type of pore
512 system is related to soil structural development and it is indicative of structures that
513 function well for water infiltration (Bullock and Thomasson, 1979). Borges et al. (2018)
514 and Pires et al. (2017) obtained similar results for the same experimental area.
515 Cássaro et al. (2011), in another work in the same site, identified a great concentration
516 of large pores under ZT and CT management systems. The greatest contribution of
517 unclassified pores to porosity is also indication of the presence of a main pore network
518 composed by large pores (Costa et al., 2018; Jefferies et al., 2014). Garbout et al.
519 (2013) determined that the volume of connected pores constituted 91% and 85% for
520 drilling and ploughing areas, which indicates the great contribution of a main pore
521 network to the overall porosity. Dal Ferro et al. (2014) also observed a contribution of
522 around 70% of macropores to porosity, which would contribute to water infiltration and
523 potentially reduce erosion (Imhoff et al., 2010).

524 **CONCLUSIONS**

525 We analyzed the structure of samples of an Oxisol under different management
526 systems using X-ray Computed Tomography. The qualitative results obtained through
527 3D visual image analysis showed that the soils under all the management systems
528 (zero-tillage, conventional tillage and reduced tillage) and forest are generally
529 composed of a large main pore network which is highly connected. The pore
530 connectivity results demonstrated that even for ZT, which was characterized by a lower
531 comparable mesoporosity and macroporosity, the soil porous system has a strongly

532 connected pore network compared to the forest. We attribute this lower porosity for ZT
533 to a possible development of a zero-tillage pan. However, the results of pore
534 connectivity, degree of anisotropy and tortuosity show that the soil structure under ZT
535 was not negatively affected by the reduction in its porosity. The smallest average
536 tortuosity and the largest contribution of triaxial shaped pores found for ZT can help to
537 explain the pore connectivity results. A moderate positive correlation was also
538 measured between the volumetric Euler-Poincaré Characteristic and the unclassified
539 pores for ZT similar to the results of F. As a great part of the porosity was comprised of
540 unclassified pores for all the management systems and forest, these pores present an
541 important contribution to the overall pore connectivity. The largest proportion of
542 elongated shaped pores also demonstrated that all the management systems
543 examined had positive effects in the quality of the soil porous system. Similar to the 3D
544 image visualizations, the largest contribution to porosity was due to the presence of a
545 main pore network, which means the porous system was well connected in all the
546 management systems. The results of this study provided a detailed characterization of
547 the soil porous system at the micrometric scale. This type of information is extremely
548 important due to the relevance of mesopores and macropores in the transport of mass
549 and energy through the soil. We can conclude that each of the management systems
550 studied here presented positive indications of soil quality, which is surprising given their
551 differences in operation and extremely important from an environmental and
552 agricultural points of view.

553 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

554 LFP would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Brazilian National
555 Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Coordination for
556 the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes) through the Grants
557 303726/2015-6 (Productivity in Research) and 88881.119578/2016-01 (Visiting

558 Scholar). We acknowledge the helpful laboratory and computational work from Dr.
559 Brian Atkinson.

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Figure Captions

Fig. 1. 3D reconstruction of selected soil cores (≈ 5.0 cm high and ≈ 4.8 cm inner diameter) and pore spaces for the different management systems studied. The soil sample images were reconstructed with a resolution of $35 \mu\text{m}$.

Fig. 2. Morphological properties of the soil porous system of a Brazilian Rhodic Hapludox submitted to different management systems (F: secondary forest; ZT: zero-tillage; CT: conventional tillage; RT: reduced tillage). (a) Porosity (P). (b) Number of pores (NP). (c) Degree of anisotropy (DA). (d) Volumetric Euler-Poincare Characteristic (EPC_v). (e) Euler Number (EN) of the largest pore.

Fig. 3. Tortuosity of the soil porous system of a Brazilian Rhodic Hapludox submitted to different management systems (F: secondary forest; ZT: zero-tillage; CT: conventional tillage; RT: reduced tillage). (a) Average tortuosity (τ). (b) Tortuosity in the x direction (τ_x). (c) Tortuosity in the y direction (τ_y). (d) Tortuosity in the z direction (τ_z).

Fig. 4. Contribution of the different pore shapes to porosity for the Brazilian Rhodic Hapludox submitted to different management systems (F: secondary forest; ZT: zero-tillage; CT: conventional tillage; RT: reduced tillage). (a) Pores of equant (EQ) shape. (b) Pores of prolate (PR) shape. (c) Pores of oblate (OB) shape. (d) Pores of triaxial (TR) shape.

Fig. 5. Contribution of different sizes of pores to the volume of pores (VP) for the Brazilian Rhodic Hapludox submitted to different management systems (F: secondary

forest; ZT: zero-tillage; CT: conventional tillage; RT: reduced tillage). (a) Volume of pores between 0.0004 to 0.01 mm³. (b) Volume of pores between 0.01 to 0.1 mm³. (c) Volume of pores between 0.1 to 10 mm³. (d) Volume of pores >10 mm³.

Table 1. Texture (clay, silt, sand), macroporosity (Ma), microporosity (Mi) and organic carbon (OC) for the experimental areas under zero-tillage (ZT), conventional tillage (CT), reduced tillage (RT) and secondary forest (F) studied.

Property/ System	Clay	Silt (g kg ⁻¹)	Sand	Ma (cm ³ cm ⁻³)	Mi (cm ³ cm ⁻³)	OC (g kg ⁻¹)
ZT	530	300	170	0.10	0.43	55.8
CT	610	220	170	0.19	0.37	31.7
RT	580	260	160	0.15	0.39	41.0
F	590	340	70	0.14	0.38	80.7

Ma: macroporosity; Mi: microporosity; OC: organic carbon. Mi was determined in undisturbed samples submitted at -6 kPa in an Eijkelkamp® suction table. The OC of the secondary forest was extracted from the work of Sá et al. (2015) for the surface layer (0-10 cm).

Table 2. Culture rotations per year for the experimental areas under zero-tillage (ZT), conventional tillage (CT) and reduced tillage (RT) studied.

Year	Management system and crop sequence	
	CT and RT	ZT
1981-1990	W/S	C/O/S - W/S/L - C/O/S - W/S/L - C/O/S - W/S
1990-1995	O/S - O/C - W/S - O/S - L/C	Similar to CT and RT
1995-2000	O/S - W/S - O+V/C - O/S - W/C	Similar to CT and RT
2000-2009	O/S - O/C - W/S - O+V/S - O/C - O/S - O/C - O/S - O/C - V/S	Similar to CT and RT
2009-2017	O/C	Similar to CT and RT

S: soybean (*Glycine max*); W: wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.); O: oat or black oat (*Avena strigosa*); C: corn (*Zea mays* L.); V: vetch (*Vicia sativa*); L: Lupine (*Lupinus spp.*). The information presented in the table were adapted from Sá et al. (2015) and Martins et al. (2011)

Table 3. Indices utilized for the classification of pores in terms of shape.

Axes ratio	Shape			
	Equant (EQ)	Prolate (PR)	Oblate (OB)	Triaxial (TR)
Int./Maj.	≥2/3	<2/3	≥2/3	<2/3
Min./Int.	≥2/3	≥2/3	<2/3	<2/3

Int.: intermediate axis; Maj.: major axis; Min.: minor axis

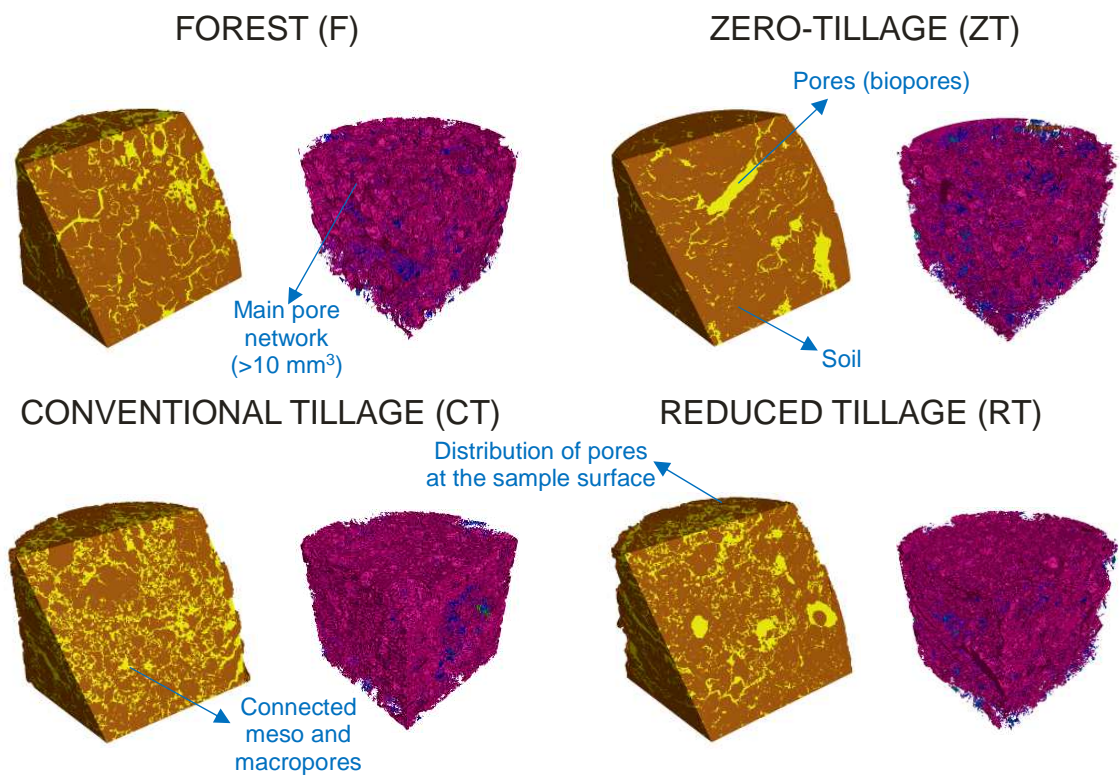


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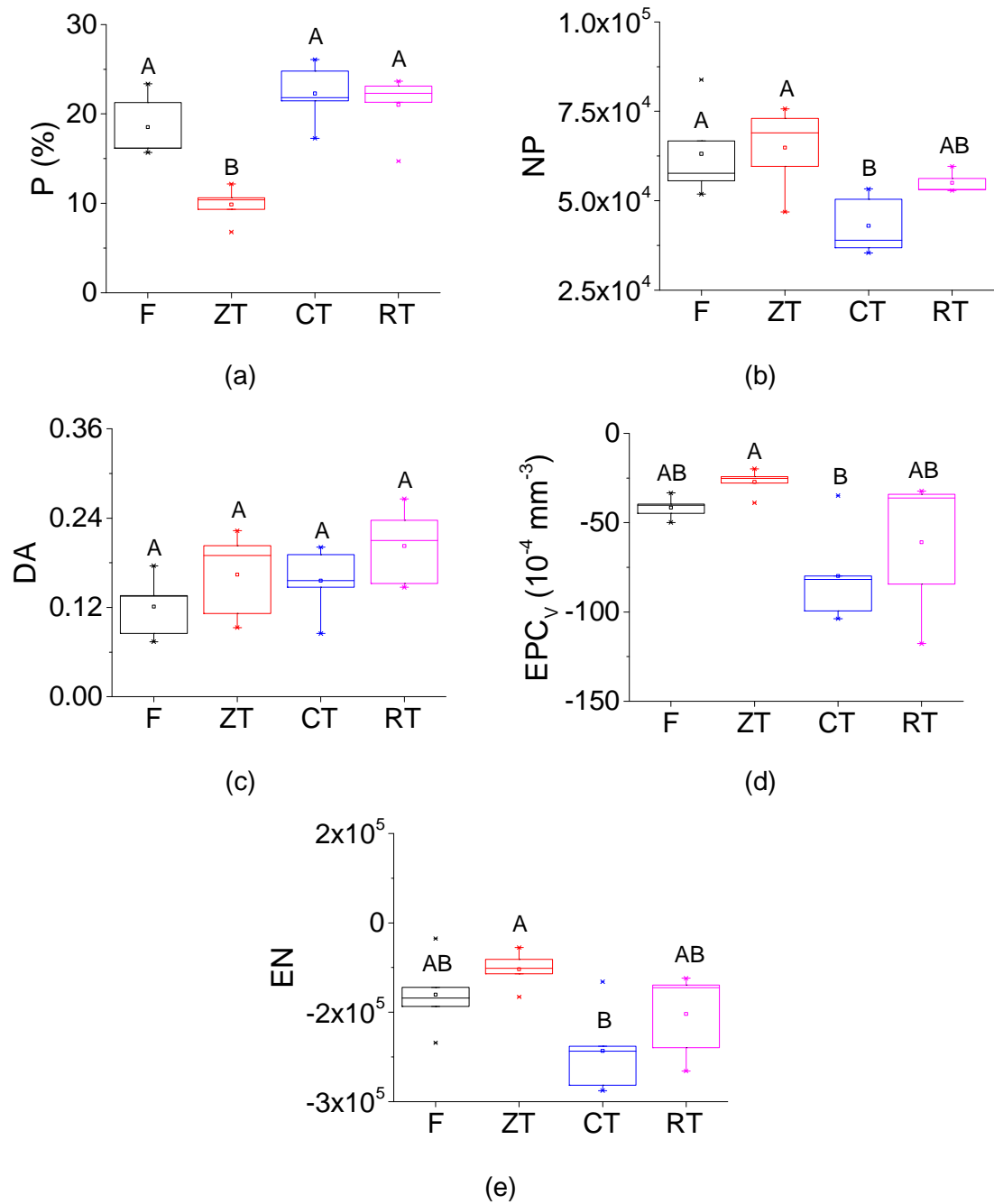


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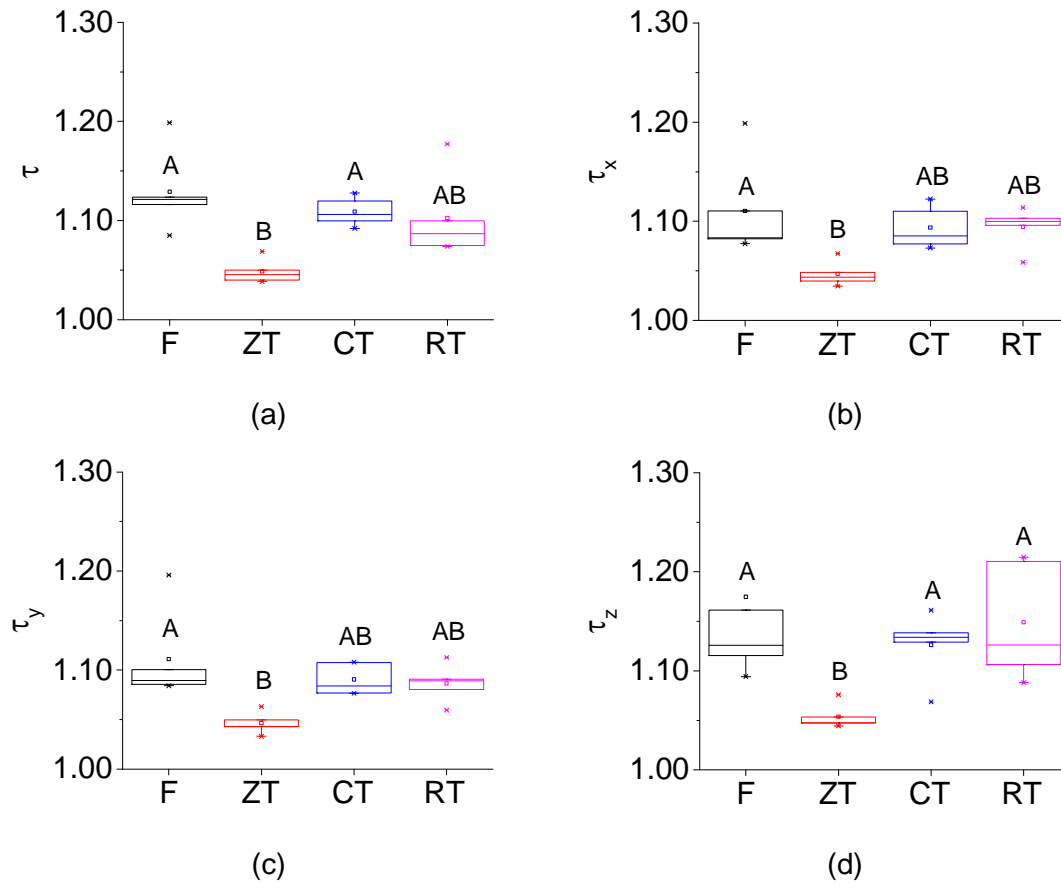


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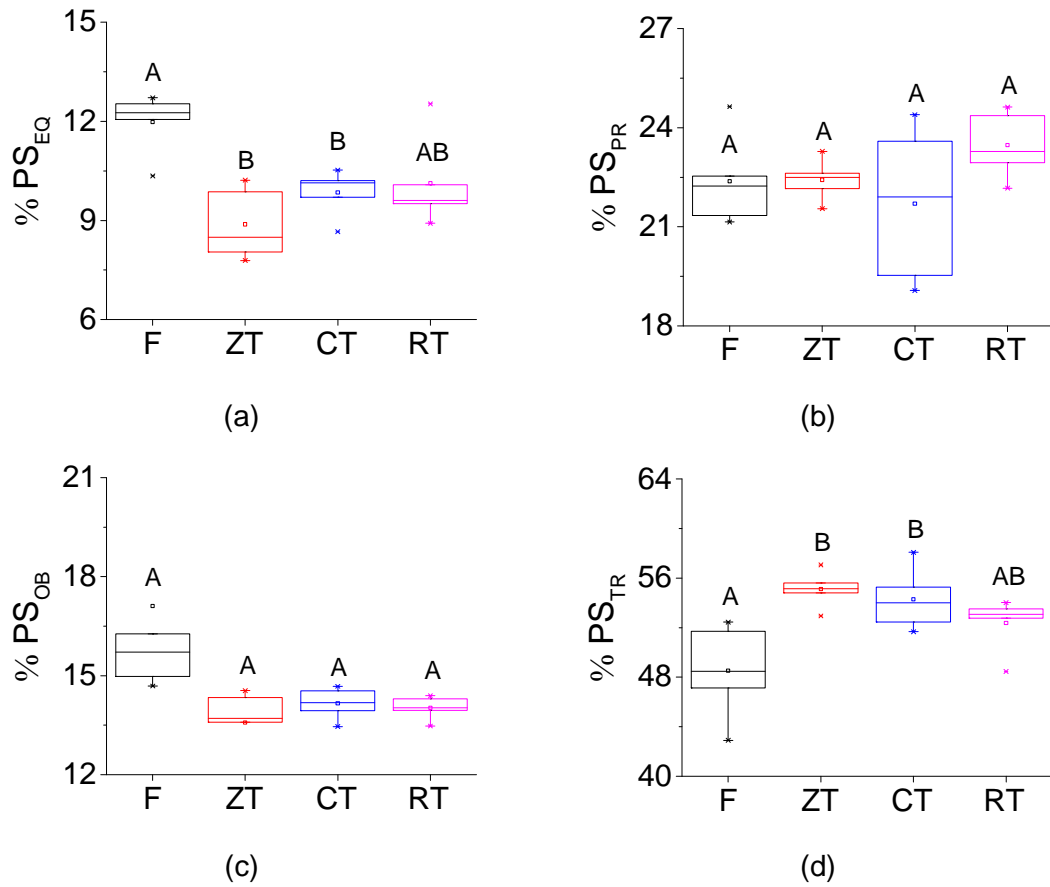


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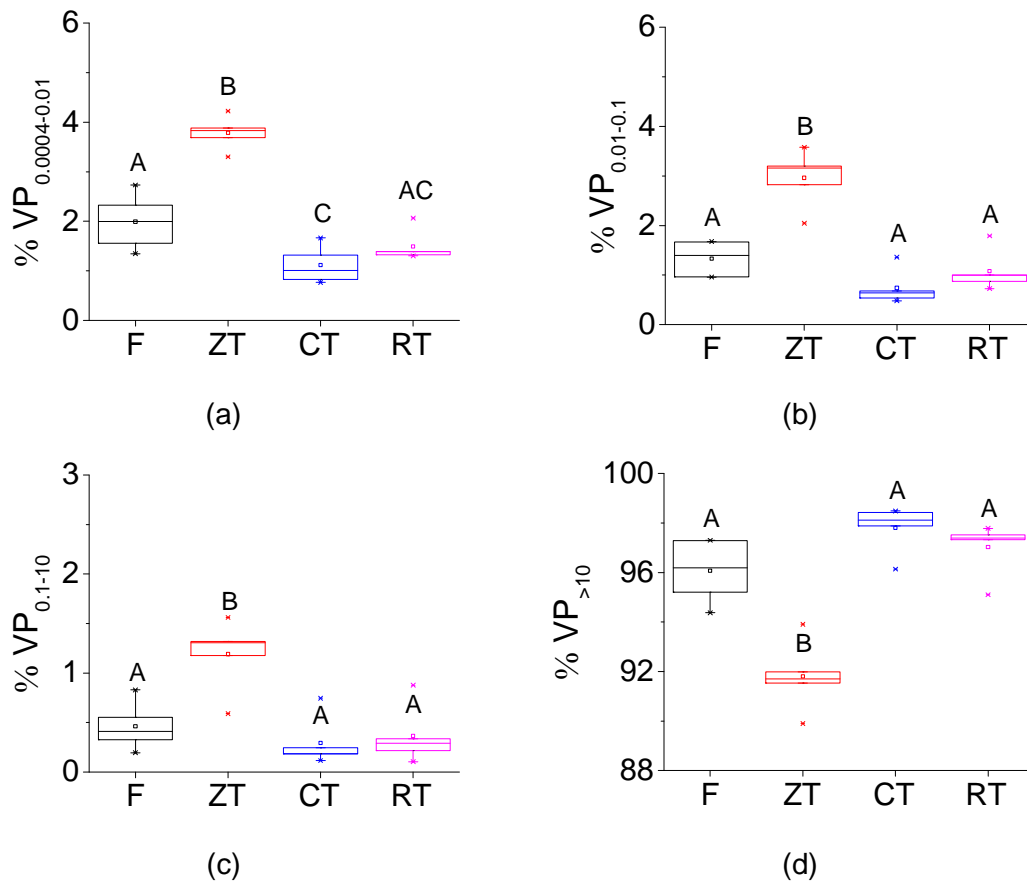


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