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Technical Note: Silica stable isotopes and silicification in a carnivorous sponge *Asbestopluma* sp.

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The stable isotope composition of benthic sponge spicule silica is a potential source of palaeoceanographic information about past deep seawater chemistry. The silicon isotopic composition of spicules has been shown to relate to the silicic acid concentration of ambient water, although existing calibrations do exhibit a degree of scatter in the relationship. Less is known about how the oxygen isotope composition of sponge spicule silica relates to environmental conditions during growth. Here, we investigate the biological vital effects on silica silicon and oxygen isotope composition in a carnivorous sponge, *Asbestopluma* sp., from the Southern Ocean. We find significant variations in silicon and oxygen isotopic composition within the specimen that appear related to unusual spicule silicification. The largest variation in both isotope systems was associated to the differential distribution of an unconventional, hypersilicified spicule type (desma) along the sponge body. The absence of an internal canal in the desmas suggests an unconventional silicification pattern leading to an unusually heavy isotopic signature. Additional internal variability derives from a systematic offset between the peripheral skeleton of the body having systematically a higher isotopic composition than the internal skeleton. A simplified silicon isotope fractionation model, in which desmas were excluded, suggests that the lack of a system for seawater pumping in carnivorous sponges favours a low replenishment of dissolved silicon within the internal tissues, causing kinetic fractionation during silicification that impacts the isotopic signature of the internal skeleton. Analysis of multiple spicules should be carried out to “average out” any artefacts in order to produce more robust downcore measurements.

1 Introduction

Sponges (*Porifera*) are sessile filter-feeding animals. Their body plan has evolutionarily been shaped to optimize the feeding function, evolving an architectural design that, in general, is shared by the four major sponge lineages (*Demospongiae*, *Hexactinellida*,

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Homosclerophorida, and *Calcareae*). The anatomical archetype of a sponge is a vase-shaped or oblate body crossed by a system of aquiferous canals that communicate to the outside at both ends, and through which a current of environmental water flows, transporting bacteria and dissolved compounds that nourish the sponge, oxygen and waste products. The histological archetype of a sponge consists of two epithelial layers of flattened cells (pinacocytes), an external layer that forms the wall of the body, and an internal layer that forms the wall of the aquiferous canals. Between the epithelium of the canals and the external epithelium, there is a mesenchyme-like zone that is rich in collagen and is populated by different groups of mobile amoeboid cells. The spicules (i.e. siliceous or calcareous skeletal pieces that give structural support to these often soft-bodied organisms) are also produced and assembled together by cells (i.e. sclerocytes) in the mesenchyme-like zone. The aquiferous canals include chamber-shaped expansions, in which the walls are coated not by pinacocytes but with pseudocylindrical cells possessing a flagellum surrounded by a collar of microvilli at the distal pole. These cells, called choanocytes, phagocytose plankton from the water passing through the chambers; they are the most distinctive feature of the phylum *Porifera*.

However, a possibly polyphyletic group of demosponges, currently mainly classed in the family *Cladorhizidae* (Order *Poecilosclerida*), have evolved a carnivorous habit (Vacelet, 2006), thought to be an adaptation to the nutrient-poor environments in which they inhabit, where a “sit-and-wait” predatory strategy is beneficial because of the low energy expenditure between rare feeding opportunities (Vacelet, 2007). Carnivorous sponges are usually associated with low nutrient mid basin areas of the deep-sea (the deepest recorded at 8840 m) but a few are found around 100 m depth in high latitudes and some species have also been found in shallow sublittoral and littoral caves in the Mediterranean, where they are thought to have colonised from deep-water populations (Aguilar et al., 2011; Bakran et al., 2007; Chevaldonné et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2012; Riesgo et al., 2007; Thomassen and Cladorhizid, 2009; Vacelet, 2006, 2007). These carnivorous sponges show not only an unusual internal body organization lacking choanocytes and aquiferous canals, but also a convergence towards characteris-

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tic morphological adaptations including an upright stalked body, with branches, and feather-like or balloon-like lateral expansions to enhance encounter rates with prey. Carnivorous sponges have developed either rhizoid-like or bulbous bases for holding their erect bodies on muddy and hard substrates respectively (Vacelet, 2007).

5 The family *Cladorhizidae*, despite being relatively small (7 genera, 140 spp.; *Porifera* World Database, September 2014), has a moderate diversity of spicules. In these sponges, the silica spicules are needed not only to provide skeletal support to the body, but also to capture prey. Their relatively small bodies (rarely taller than 10 cm) usually have an internal, central skeletal core (axial skeleton) made by a bundle of
10 highly-packed needle-like spicules, typically shorter than 700 μm each, and with one or both ends being pointed (i.e., monactinal or diactinal megascleres). From this axial skeleton radiating spicule tracts diverge (extra-axial skeleton) to core either the branches or any of the other types of lateral processes occurring in the body, depending on the genera and species. In addition to this main supportive skeleton, there are
15 thousands of smaller (< 100 μm ; microscleres) hook-like spicules, being either simple hooks (sigmata) or tooth-bearing hooks (chelae). These are scattered through the internal mesenchyme-like tissue and, more importantly, also at the external epithelia, where they project part of their hooking structure out of the body to capture small crustaceans that may contact the external sponge surface. Some of these sponge species
20 have additional microscleric spicules to reinforce the skeleton, but very few carnivorous species – and in only the genera *Asbestopluma* (Family *Cladorhizidae*), *Euchelipluma* (Family *Guitarridae*) and *Esperiopsis* (Family *Esperiopsidae*) – have been described having hypersilicified spicules (called desmata). Desmata are usually confined to the basal body region, probably to strengthen the area through which the sponge attaches
25 to the substrate (Vacelet, 2007).

The silicon isotope ($\delta^{30}\text{Si}$) and oxygen isotope ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) composition of biogenic silica including that of sponges has been used to infer modern nutrient cycling, past nutrient supply and utilization, and hydrological cycling (De La Rocha, 2006; Leng et al., 2009). Both silicon and oxygen are present in three stable isotopes: ^{28}Si (92.22 %),

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^{29}Si (4.68 %) and ^{30}Si (3.08 %); and ^{16}O (~ 99.7 %), ^{17}O (~ 0.04 %) and ^{18}O (~ 0.2 %) respectively (<http://www.nndc.bnl.gov/chart/>). The per mille silicon isotopic composition is expressed relative to the NIST standard, NBS 28, according to Eq. (1), and similarly the oxygen isotopic composition is expressed relative to VSMOW, according to Eq. (2):

$$\left(\frac{(^{30}\text{Si}/^{28}\text{Si})_{\text{sample}}}{(^{30}\text{Si}/^{28}\text{Si})_{\text{NBS28}}} - 1 \right) \cdot 1000 \quad (1)$$

$$\left(\frac{(^{18}\text{O}/^{16}\text{O})_{\text{sample}}}{(^{18}\text{O}/^{16}\text{O})_{\text{VSMOW}}} - 1 \right) \cdot 1000 \quad (2)$$

Recent work has shown that the $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ composition of a wide range of deep-sea sponges from different ocean basins appears to reflect the availability of dissolved silicon (silicic acid $[\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4]$) during growth, with minimal impact from temperature, pH and (to date, and on few studies) no systematic species-dependent fractionation (Hendry and Robinson, 2012; Wille et al., 2010). With sponge spicules ubiquitous in sediments throughout the ocean and with degradation occurring at rates that are an orders of magnitude slower than those for diatoms and other siliceous organisms, (Maldonado et al., 2005, 2012), there is significant potential for spicules to be used as a proxy for past ocean conditions. Whilst a number of papers have explored the use of $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ in sponges (e.g., Ellwood et al., 2010; Hendry et al., 2014), there is still scatter in the calibration of the $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ - $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ relationship, with the sources of variability poorly understood. Likewise, little is known about the $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ signature of sponge silica, although it appears to be impacted by biological factors (Matteuzzo et al., 2013) that cause systematic offsets when compared to diatom silica $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ (Snelling et al., 2014). Because carnivorous sponges lack the aquiferous system that conventionally transports ambient seawater into the sponge body and because the isotopic signal of their silica spicules has never been assessed before, it is compelling to examine whether silicon fractionation values in carnivorous sponges differ from those measured in the more

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conventional, filter-feeding sponges. As carnivorous sponges are typically constrained to bathyal habitats (Vacelet, 2007), their skeletons may turn into a good tool to infer traits of deep regional water masses. The recent collection of a new species of desma-bearing cladorhizid to be formally described in the genus *Asbestopluma* (Goodwin et al., 2014) has provided an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ compositions of its silica spicules.

2 Methods

2.1 Specimen

Specimen DH19-2 (*Asbestopluma* sp.) was recovered by Hein Dredge from Burdwood Bank (1500–1530 m water depth, 54°45' S, 62°16' W) in the Atlantic Sector of the Southern Ocean from the R/V *Nathaniel B. Palmer* in 2011 (National Science Foundation NBP1103). The specimen was photographed and dried for transportation. Ambient potential temperature, salinity, and $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ concentrations are estimated as 2.5–3°C, 34.5, and 60 μM , respectively (from on-board measurements and literature data, www.eWOCE.org).

The specimen has an upright, moderately branching form (Fig. 1). The basal body portion contains internally interlocked desmas (Fig. 2a and b), externally surrounded by layer of microscleric acanthotylostrongyles (Fig. 2b) and scarce sigmas. It is worth noting that the abundance of desmas decreases significantly from the basal body portion to the branch tips and that the acanthotylostrongyles occur exclusively at basal portion of the sponge. Further up the axis, the stem is cored by large smooth monoactines (styles), with smaller styles and diactines with rounded ends (anisostrongyles) outside this core, sigmas and chelae microscleres are also present (Fig. 2c). Desmas become less frequent with increasing distance from the base, so that at the growth tips, there are only styles, sigma and chelae.

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2.2 Sample preparation

Five sponge tissue samples (A to E) were taken along the body length of the specimen, that is, at increasing distance from the attachment point, covering from the base to the branch tip (Fig. 1). Samples were cleaned for organic matter by heating in 30 % hydrogen peroxide for at least an hour and rinsing thoroughly in deionised water at least three times. At this stage, for each tissue sample, two skeletal subsamples were obtained from: (1) the spicules of the axial skeleton (axial or “internal” samples), and (2) the spicules of the radiating skeleton and the external epithelium (extra-axial or “external” samples). The subsamples were then heated in trace metal grade concentrated nitric acid for at least an hour, and rinsed thoroughly in 18 M Ω cm Milli-Q water at least three times. Standards and samples were prepared by alkaline fusion with sodium hydroxide pellets, acidified with ultra-clean nitric acid (Optima), and purified using cation exchange resin (Georg et al., 2006).

2.3 Silicon isotope analysis

The samples were analysed for silicon isotope ratios ($^{29}\text{Si}/^{28}\text{Si}$, $^{30}\text{Si}/^{28}\text{Si}$) using a Thermo Neptune Multi-Collector Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometer (MC-ICP-MS) at Bristol University (Bristol Isotope Group). The isotope ratios were measured using 20 cycles per block. Machine blanks were monitored, and were < 1 % of the signal on ^{28}Si . Mass bias and matrix effects were corrected using standard-sample bracketing, and internal Mg-doping (Cardinal et al., 2003; Hendry and Robinson, 2012). Silicon and magnesium intensities were matched within 10 % (typically < 5 %). The results are reported as $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ values relative to the standard NBS28 (RM8546). Analysis of “diatomite” during the study yielded a mean $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ value of -1.25% (± 0.18 2SD, $n = 70$); “big-batch” yielded a mean $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ value of -10.67% (± 0.08 2SD, $n = 3$) (Reynolds et al., 2007). Repeat analyses of sponge standard LMG08 (Hendry and Robinson, 2012) during each run were used to assess long-term external reproducibility, and yielded a mean $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ value of -3.41% over 6 months

spicules were externally cleaned from organic remains, before rinsing three times in milli-Q water. The slip bearing the cleaned, fractured spicules mounted onto an SEM aluminium stub and coated by gold sputtering for further observation of fracture planes and axial canals using a HITACHI TM300 Scanning Electron Microscope.

2.6 Results and discussion

The average $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ value for the cladorhizid DH19-2 was -0.37‰ , but values ranged from -1.35 to $+0.59\text{‰}$, with an overall range of 1.94‰ (Table 1; Fig. 3). Since previous studies have found no discernible variation within an individual (Hendry et al., 2010, 2011), this is an unprecedented variability within a single specimen, and represents approximately 40 % of the total range of isotope values for existing calibrations ($\sim 5\text{‰}$) (Hendry and Robinson, 2012). The average $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ value for DH19-2 was $+37.7\text{‰}$, but ranged from $+36.7$ to $+38.7\text{‰}$ (Table 1; Fig. 4), giving a range of 2‰ . This compares to an entire range of $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{water}}$ of less than 0.8‰ and potential temperature variations of $\sim 5^\circ\text{C}$ across the Drake Passage (Meredith et al., 1999). This variation within an individual represents nearly half of the 5‰ variations found in a downcore sponge spicule $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ record from Pliocene sediments (Snelling et al., 2014). There is also a positive correlation between $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ($r = 0.88$, $p = 0.001$, $n = 10$).

The large variation in both isotope systems within the studied individual also appears to be related to a differential distribution of the spicule types along the sponge body (i.e., distance from sponge base), and also to differences in the abundance of given spicule types between the internal (axial) and external (extra-axial) body regions. The external basal skeleton (i.e., mostly acanthotylostrongyles) has the most isotopically light (negative) composition, both for $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$, and a $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ composition that lies close to the existing $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ - $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ calibration curve (Fig. 5). The internal basal skeleton (i.e., mostly desmas) has a very isotopically heavy (positive) signature compared to that of the external spicules.

The desmas of this carnivorous sponge have an unusual formation mechanism compared to other megascleric demosponge spicules. Nearly all types of megascleric

spicule, including most desmas, show an internal or “axial” canal (Fig. 6a). This canal originally harbours a filament of the enzymatic protein silicatein (Shimizu et al., 1998), responsible for initiating the polymerization of biogenic silica, the growth of which starts intracellularly through an enzymatically-guided polycondensation of dissolved silicon.

5 The term “desmas” represents a large variety of phylogenetically unrelated spicule morphologies, which only share the feature of being massive, relative irregular skeletal pieces produced by hypersilicification, and may or may not possess an axial canal. How and where the hypersilicification of desmas is achieved remains poorly understood. In all cases described to date, the desmas in carnivorous sponges are anaxial or lack axial canals (Fig. 6b). The absence of an axial canal indicates that their silicification does not involve an initial intracellular, enzyme-guide silica polymerization. Consequently, these anaxial desmas must grow via a mechanism different from that taking place in other demosponge spicules, which may account for their distinctive silicon and oxygen isotopic composition. This idea is in agreement with previous findings indicating that some cellular mechanisms for spicule silicification may have evolved independently in different sponge lineages (Maldonado and Riesgo, 2007). The level at which the secondary hypersilicification step of desmas could also contribute, if any, to their isotopic signal remains unknown, and further study into the potential differences in the isotopic signal between desmas with and without axial canals is required.

20 The decreasing abundance of desmas with increasing distance from the sponge base is at least one of the plausible factors responsible for the within-sponge variation in isotopic compositions observed in this study. We suggest that the likely extracellular silicification of these desmas could result in kinetic fractionation for both $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ and $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$. It should also be noted that the external basal spicules (i.e., the acanthotylstrongyles), although forming the “best fit” to the existing $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ -Si(OH)₄ calibration, are still outside of analytical error of the calibration curve, and this offset could be explained by some desma contamination (Fig. 2b).

25 Further up the axis away from the base, the extra-axial styles have a higher isotopic composition for both $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$, moving further away from the existing $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ -

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Si(OH)₄ calibration curve (Fig. 5), and then lower again towards the growing tip. This does not reflect contamination from microscleres (i.e., sigmas and chelae), as individually picked and cleaned styles are within analytical uncertainty ($\pm 0.15\%$) of the bulk measurement (see white box on Fig. 3). Although the internal styles also become isotopically enriched, the difference between the internal and external spicule $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ declines up the axis, most likely because of a decline in the number of desmas. This isotopic trend is less clear in the $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ values, suggesting desmas cause a smaller bias in oxygen isotope systematics than for silicon.

There are also two alternative, but probably less plausible explanations, for the large intra-individual isotopic variation along the body axis. One is that this sponge grows extremely slowly (over centuries) in the deep-sea environment. If so, it could be that during the first decades of its life, what is now the basal body portion was exposed to a water mass with temperature and silicic acid concentration different from present, progressively changing overtime towards the current values and impacting accordingly the isotopic signal during sponge growth. A second possibility is that this sponge grows very rapidly. If so, the basal portion could have been formed during an episodic input of seawater with abnormal silicic acid concentration and temperature, compared to the ambient conditions during the subsequent growth. Because virtually nothing is known about the longevity and growth rate of these sponges, these ideas remain mere speculation.

Could the heavy isotope bias be a consequence of the absence of an aquiferous system in the carnivorous sponge? Given that the aquiferous system usually allows the circulation of ambient seawater throughout the body, the loss of this system could result in internal silicon and oxygen isotope fractionation as the isotopes in the aqueous component becomes progressively heavier due to precipitation of silica in a closed system. This process would explain not only the offset between the external and internal spicules but also the trends along the length of the sponge stem. Again, nothing is known about how the dissolved silicon molecules are transported into the body by these sponges or about the average replenishment rate for dissolved silicon within the

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internal tissues. Nevertheless, if a simplified silicon isotope fractionation model is formulated, ignoring the impact of desmas and assuming a variable silicon isotopic fractionation during sponge growth according to the core top spicule calibration of Hendry and Robinson (2012), we can examine the impact of an isotopically closed system on changes in spicule composition with cellular silicon utilisation (Fig. 7). This simplified model suggests that relatively small degrees of cellular silicon utilisation (less than 30 %) could result in the heavier $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ signatures observed up the axis of the *Asbestopluma* sp. specimen. A higher rate of dissolved silicon replenishment and a faster sponge growth rate could explain the return to lighter isotopic compositions at the growing tips.

3 Summary and conclusions

This first study of within-sponge differential fractionation has a number of implications for biomineralisation and the use of isotope proxies for reconstructing past nutrient conditions.

1. Internal non-equilibrium fractionation of silicon isotopes in sponges can occur, depending on silicic acid replenishment rates in the internal tissues, which could explain some of the scatter in the $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ - $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4$ calibration plot (Hendry and Robinson, 2012). Internal fractionation also impacts sponge $\delta^{18}\text{O}$, but less severely. The anaxial desmas of this and probably other carnivorous sponges appear to have a different mode of silicification causing an unusual isotopic signature in their biogenic silica.
2. A large number of spicules should be picked for palaeoclimate work to “average” out variations caused by kinetic fractionation in Cladorhizid sponges, which cannot be readily distinguished using light microscopy.
3. Desmas are morphologically distinct, and should not be combined with other spicule types in proxy measurements for palaeoclimate applications until further

studies have been completed to assess the level at which these spicules result in isotopic bias.

4. Whether axial and anaxial desmas can provide an independent complementary proxy to corroborated trends inferred from the “conventional” silica spicules is a possibility that needs to be explored in future studies.

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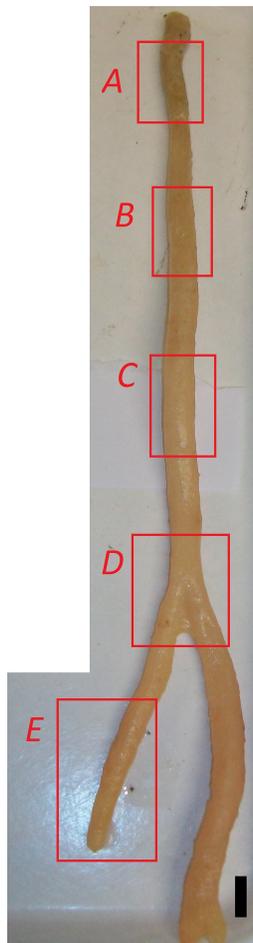


Figure 1. Specimen DH19-2, *Asbestopluma* sp. Scale bar shows 1 cm. Red boxes show sub-sampling sections A–E.

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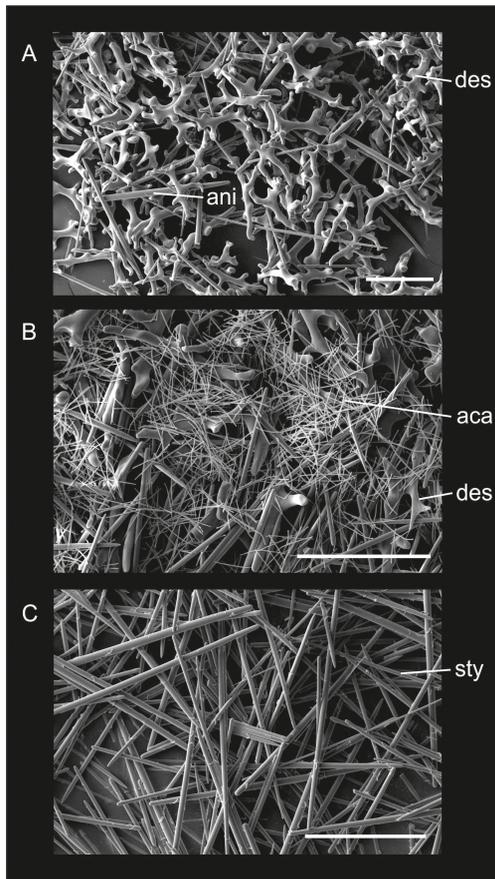


Figure 2. Scanning electron microscope images of subsamples from DH19-2 *Asbestopluma* sp. **(a)** internal framework section A, near the base; **(b)** external section A, near the base; **(c)** internal section E, the growing tip abbreviations: des = desma, ani = anisostrogyles, aca = acanthotylostrongyles, sty = styles.

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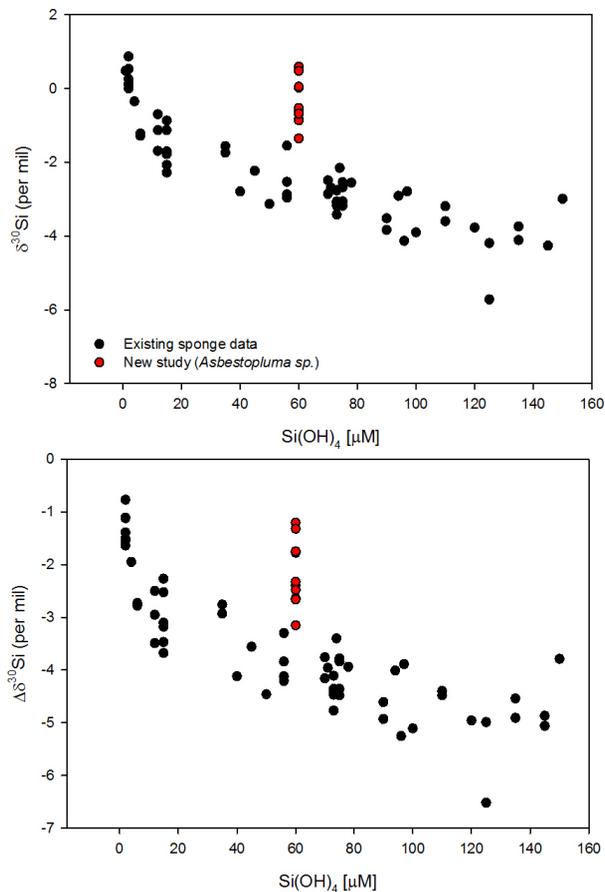


Figure 5. Comparison of $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ and $\Delta\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ ($= \delta^{30}\text{Si}_{\text{sponge}} - \delta^{30}\text{Si}_{\text{seawater}}$) results from DH19-2 *Asbestopium* sp. (red symbols) and existing calibration (black symbols). Data from Hendry et al. (2010); Hendry and Robinson (2012) and Wille et al. (2010).

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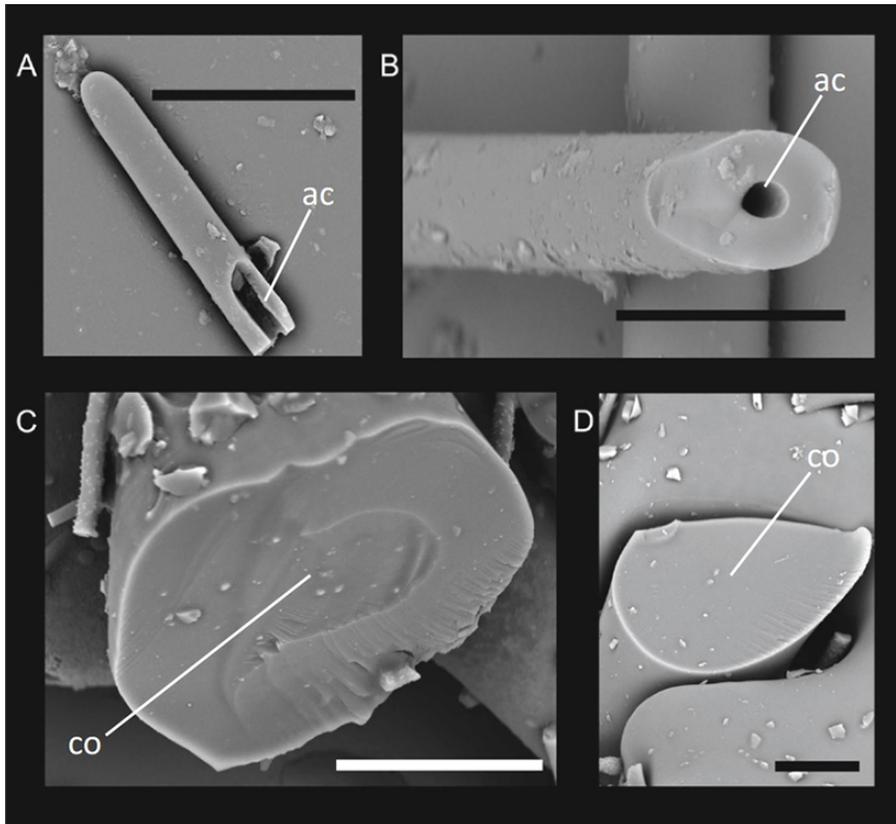


Figure 6. Scanning electron microscope images of fracture plane of *Asbestopluma* sp. spicules. (a and b) Megasclerite styles showing the internal axial canal (ac) (scale bar 30 μ m). (c and d) Core area (co) of anaxial desmas of the cladorhizid DH19-2 showing the absence of axial canal (scale bar 20 μ m).

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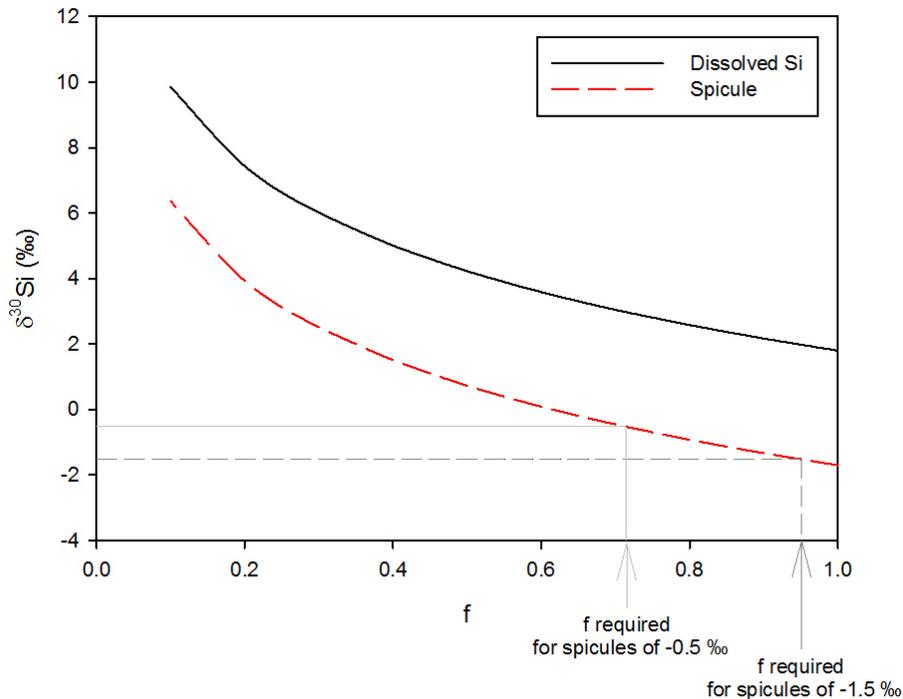


Figure 7. Sponge fractionation model for internal Si in an isotopically closed system. We assume a variable fractionation factor ϵ' that approximates $\Delta\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ from the core top spicule calibration curve of Hendry and Robinson (2012): $\Delta\delta^{30}\text{Si} = -6.54 + (270/(53 + [\text{Si}(\text{OH})_4]))$. The internal dissolved Si will fractionate according to: $\delta^{30}\text{Si}(\text{OH})_{4\text{internal}} = \delta^{30}\text{Si}(\text{OH})_{4\text{initial}} + \epsilon' \cdot \ln(f)$. Where f is the fraction of dissolved Si left available internally. The $\delta^{30}\text{Si}$ of the spicules that form from this silicon depleted fluid is then given by: $\delta^{30}\text{Si} = \delta^{30}\text{Si}(\text{OH})_{4\text{internal}} + \epsilon'$.