A new perspective on the δ¹³C signal preserved in speleothems using LC-IRMS analysis of bulk organic matter and compound specific stable isotope analysis.

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Abstract

The analysis of δ^{13}C in speleothem calcite is established as a palaeoenvironmental proxy, but records can often be complex to interpret due to multiple controls on the signal. Here we present a novel palaeoenvironmental application of non-purgeable organic carbon (NPOC) δ^{13}C analysis and compound-specific isotope analysis (CSIA) to speleothems, and compare the resultant signals to a conventional calcite δ^{13}C record. By accessing the carbon pool held in molecular organic matter, we are able for the first time to produce stable isotope records complementary to the CO₂-derived signal from the speleothem calcite, and begin to identify separate ecological and climatic controls. In this sample from north-west Scotland, the calcite δ^{13}C record and the NPOC δ^{13}C both show fluctuations at a period of increasing wetness and change from birch woodland to more open peatland, the NPOC signal having a strong correlation with biomarkers for vegetation change. We interpret an inverse correlation between the NPOC and CO₂ δ^{13}C signals as primarily driven by changes in soil conditions impacting upon microbial activity, with decreased activity leading to a reduction in δ^{13}C enrichment of the residual organic matter (the NPOC fraction), and an increase in δ^{13}C in the CO₂ pool (calcite) due to a decrease in respired δ^{12}C. This opens the way for the application of parallel analyses to distinguish between soil conditions and vegetation parameters as the primary control on a record, and highlights the advantage of combining both inorganic and organic geochemical techniques in the palaeoenvironmental interpretation of stable carbon isotopic records.

Keywords

Speleothem; organic carbon; δ^{13}C; LC-IRMS; vegetation; soil
1. Introduction

The analysis of stable isotopes in speleothem calcite is a well-established technique in Quaternary research, with oxygen isotopes ($\delta^{18}O$) particularly widely used to investigate past climate systems (for reviews see McDermott, 2004; Lachniet, 2009). However, carbon stable isotopes ($\delta^{13}C$) are also of interest (e.g. Dorale et al., 1992; Genty et al. 2003, 2006), but are less well understood due to the complexity of the controls on the system. In an ideal closed system, speleothem carbon will be sourced 50% from the dissolved bedrock, and 50% from soil CO$_2$. However, studies of $^{14}C$ in modern speleothem samples have indicated that the carbon in speleothem carbonate is actually predominantly sourced (80-90%) from soil CO$_2$ (Genty & Massault, 1999; Genty et al., 2001; Griffiths et al. 2012; Hua et al. 2012). The soil CO$_2$ signal is in turn influenced by atmospheric CO$_2$ composition, and processed via vegetation input and microbial respiration. Changes in the $\delta^{13}C$ of stalagmite calcite have frequently been interpreted as changes in the overlying vegetation regime between C3 and C4 plants (e.g. Dorale et al., 1998; Denniston et al., 2001). However, whilst this interpretation is highly appropriate for some sites, regions and timescales, significant fluctuations in $\delta^{13}C$ have also been observed at sites where there is no evidence for major changes in the ratio of C4 to C3 plants, and where the known climatic parameters make such changes unlikely (Baker et al., 1997; Hellstrom et al., 1998; Genty et al., 2003; 2006).

Furthermore, a study of an Ethiopian stalagmite known to have grown during a switch in overlying vegetation from predominantly C3 arboreal scrub to predominantly C4 crops showed that, although the change in vegetation was detected in the stalagmite lipid record, it was not clearly marked in the calcite $\delta^{13}C$ signal, which was time lagged and smoothed (Blyth et al., 2007). Consequently, the other factors controlling carbon isotope values need equal consideration.

In the soil, beyond the initial vegetation input, the CO$_2$ signal will also be affected by the degree of microbial activity, the mixing of different organic-matter pools, temperature-dependent fractionation of the organic carbon used in microbial respiration, and the degradation state of the
organic matter involved (Benner et al., 1987; Andrews et al., 2000; Biasi et al., 2005), as well as the residence time within the soil. Microbial activity is considered especially important, with microbes preferentially using and therefore respiring \(^{12}\text{C}\). Genty et al. (2003, 2006) proposed that increased microbial activity and increased vegetation cover result in a decrease in \(\delta^{13}\text{C}\) in the soil CO\(_2\) pool and, consequently, in speleothems. Vegetation cover and microbial activity clearly link back to climate, especially temperature and rainfall, potentially making \(\delta^{13}\text{C}\) a sensitive climatic indicator.

Further modification of the \(\delta^{13}\text{C}\) signal can occur during transport of carbon to the stalagmite, as residence time of the water in the aquifer may also affect the isotopic composition as varying degrees of further processing of organic matter and calcite precipitation occur en route to the cave. These factors can also be largely controlled by climate, including changes in rainfall, and climatically driven fluctuations in biogenic activity and turnover (Genty et al., 2003; 2006). For example, where periods of low rainfall cause a reduction of aquifer recharge, and a resultant dewatering of the fractures above a cavern, this can cause degassing of CO\(_2\) from pore waters and the precipitation of calcite along the surface of fractures, a process termed ‘prior calcite precipitation’ (Fairchild et al. 2000). Although calcite precipitation causes preferential loss of \(^{13}\text{C}\) from the source waters to the solid phase, this is more than offset by preferential loss of \(^{12}\text{C}\) from the source waters through CO\(_2\) degassing (Dulinski & Rosanski 1990). Thus, an interval of decreased rainfall can result in higher speleothem \(\delta^{13}\text{C}\) values. Lastly, even after transport to the cave, kinetic fractionation during calcite precipitation due to rapid degassing of the drip water can also be an issue (Fantidis & Enhalt, 1970; Hendy, 1971; Wiedner et al., 2008).

This wide range of potential controls and complicating factors can make it very difficult to interpret changes in \(\delta^{13}\text{C}\) in speleothem calcite in a palaeoenvironmental context. Some factors, such as kinetic fractionation, affect more than one proxy and so can be tested by looking for covarying chemical signals (e.g. the Hendy test, which looks at the variation in carbon and oxygen isotopes along a lamina). However, other factors, especially those affecting the parent soil CO\(_2\) signal, such as vegetation type or changes in microbial activity, are extremely difficult to disentangle,
especially where comparative proxies or contextual information about environmental change are not present. Therefore, extending the types of $\delta^{13}C$ records we can recover, and particularly increasing the detail at which we can investigate different carbon and organic matter pools, is essential to gaining a better understanding of palaeoenvironmental signals in speleothems. Traditional $\delta^{13}C$ analysis only accesses one carbon pool in speleothems – that released as carbon dioxide on dissolution of the calcite with acid, i.e. that derived from CO$_2$ dissolved in the drip-water. However, a second pool exists, consisting of carbon contained in organic molecules entrapped within the calcite, which has not previously been the subject of isotopic analysis in speleothems. It can be assumed to have two main sources: molecules derived from the soil and molecules derived from *in situ* cave organisms (Blyth et al., 2008). The soil component will in turn consist of plant material, microbial material, and degradation products. The isotopic composition of this organic matter can be analysed in two ways: via analysis of the bulk organic matter, or via compound specific isotope analysis (CSIA).

CSIA permits measurement of the isotopic composition of particular molecule groups. It is a rapidly expanding technique, which is used in a wide range of research fields including palaeoenvironmental research, forensics (e.g. Benson et al., 2006 and references therein), and pollution chemistry (e.g. Thullner et al., 2012), amongst others. In the palaeoenvironmental context, CSIA of $\delta^{13}C$ is generally used to assess the sources of organic matter within a record e.g. C3 vs. C4 plants; terrestrial vs. aquatic input (e.g. Talbot & Johannessen, 1992; Brincat et al., 2000; Volkman et al., 2008), with increasing work focusing at a species-specific level (e.g. Jacob et al., 2008; Brader et al., 2010). A major limitation in the application of CSIA to contexts such as stalagmites is the sample sizes required, with the lower limit of detection requiring 5 ng of carbon per injection for each compound of interest measured. For n-alkanes (which are saturated hydrocarbon chains) in the range of C$_{23}$ – C$_{33}$, carbon forms approximately 85% of the molecular weight. An absolute minimum requirement of 5 ng of carbon therefore requires around 6 ng of compound. Data collected for previous studies (Blyth et al., 2006; 2007; 2011) indicates that for the C$_{31}$ n-alkane the abundance
ranges from 2 – 80 ng / g calcite. Taking into account the need to run multiple analyses per sample to recover reliable isotopic data, the potential for sample loss during initial extraction and clean-up, the need for prior GC-MS injection to check cleanliness of the sample, and the fact that working at the lowest limit of detection in itself increases the error of the technique, it is clear that not all stalagmite samples are likely to be amenable to the approach, and large, multi-gram calcite samples will be required. This may significantly reduce the viable temporal resolution of a time series.

Isotopic measurements on bulk organic matter preserved in speleothems offer the opportunity to gain an organic-derived signal at a much higher temporal resolution, as reliable measurements can be made via liquid chromatography – isotope-ratio mass spectrometry (LC-IRMS) on samples of as little as 100 mg of calcite (Blyth et al., 2013). This utilises LC-IRMS in flow-injection mode (i.e. without a chromatography column) to analyse non-purgeable organic carbon (NPOC, Albéric, 2011) in a liquid sample, and has the advantage that samples can be run directly from an acid digest without substantial wet-chemistry preparation. Bulk isotopic measurements have routinely been made on organic matter in other geochemical contexts, such as lakes, cave sediments, oceanic sediments, and peats and soils (e.g. Schelske & Hodell, 1995; Ménot & Burns 2001), but have not been widely made on speleothems due to the difficulty of removing the carbonate whilst neither contaminating nor biasing the remaining carbon isotope signal. The LC-IRMS technique resolves this problem, but is not without its own issues, in that what is measured is, in reality, not total NPOC, but the acid-soluble fraction, as acidic solutions will cause precipitation of some organic molecules, especially the humic acids. However, the existence of the technique nonetheless opens up a new field of study in stable carbon isotope records in stalagmites.

Here we present an integrated carbon isotope data set from a 2000-year-old stalagmite from Assynt in Scotland. The sample has previously been analysed for lipid biomarker content and has a known environmental and climatic history (Blyth et al., 2011). This makes it an ideal test sample for investigating the controls on and relationships between the various carbon isotope signals.
2. Methods and materials

2.1 Site and sample

The stalagmite sample, Tral-1, is a small (75 mm tip to base) strongly laminated specimen collected from Lower Traligill Cave in Assynt, north-west Scotland in 2003. It has previously been dated by U-Th disequilibrium dating (Blyth et al., 2011), with a basal age of 2200 years. The region has a mean annual air temperature of 7.2 °C and a maritime climate, with annual precipitation of >1900 mm (Baker et al., 1999). The area directly around the cave is overlain by thin mineral soils, supporting Calluna and grasses, while the valley upstream is primarily covered by peatland dominated by Calluna, Erica and Cyperaceae, with discontinuous areas of Sphagnum cover (Charman et al., 2001). Peat-core analysis indicates that this vegetation regime has persisted in the area for at least the last 3 ka, although prior to 1 ka, birch woodland was an additional major ecosystem component (Charman et al., 2001). It is believed that the land directly above the cave suffered slope collapse and soil / peat loss during the Little Ice Age around 300 years ago, which is reflected in the very top of the stalagmite as multiple hiatuses, and limited calcite deposition (Blyth et al., 2011).

2.2 Extraction method for NPOC and analysis by LC-IRMS

Samples for bulk NPOC δ¹³C analysis were drilled manually with a fixed drill in a continuous series at intervals of 5 mm, providing samples of approximately 400 mg of calcite. Prior to drilling the surface of the stalagmite was rinsed with solvent cleaned 3M hydrochloric acid to remove external contamination. Calcite powder samples of 100 – 200 mg were digested in 3 M phosphoric acid at a concentration of 1 ml acid / 100 mg powder. Phosphoric acid was used rather than hydrochloric
(which is conventionally used in stalagmite digestion, e.g. Blyth et al., 2006) because the halides in the hydrochloric acid were found to interfere with the action of the oxidant in the LC-MS run, resulting in unreliable isotopic data (Alberic 2011; Blyth et al., 2013). After complete digestion of the calcite, aliquots of samples were transferred to 1.8 ml autosampler vials and dissolved carbon dioxide was removed under vacuum in a rotary vacuum concentrator. Tests showed that vacuum treatment of one hour removed DIC to below the limit of detection, without affecting the organic isotope signal. After vacuum treatment, samples were sealed with caps, and transferred to the LC-IRMS instrument for analysis.

Stable-isotope analysis was carried out using a Thermo Scientific LC-IRMS (consisting of an Accela autosampler and Accela 600 pump attached to a Delta V plus isotope ratio mass spectrometer via an LC-Isolink). Reagents and mobile phase were made with MilliQ water, degassed under vacuum and sonication for 1 hour and afterwards constantly sparged with helium. The analytical method is described in Blyth et al. (2013). In brief, analysis was made in flow-injection mode using a mobile phase of dilute sulphuric acid pH 4.0-4.2 (100 μl of 1:50 H₂SO₄ in 1 L of MilliQ water) running at a flow rate of 300 μl min⁻¹ maintained at 20 °C using the column oven. For each run 20 μl of sample was injected using the autosampler, and oxidation of the organic carbon was achieved using a catalyst of 1.28 M H₃PO₄ (flow rate 20 μl min⁻¹) and oxidant of 0.13 M Na₂S₂O₈ (flow rate 20 μl min⁻¹). The oxidation reactor in the LC-Isolink was maintained at 99.9 °C. Run time was 5 minutes with measurements made relative to the second of two 20 s reference-gas pulses at the start of the run; three more reference-gas pulses were used after the analyte peak had appeared to check for drift over the run. The reference gas is calibrated to a δ¹³C value of -22.92‰ VPDB using USGS-41 Glutamic acid +37.626‰ VPDB as an international standard. As this is an enriched standard chosen due to necessity of availability, and not ideal for calibrating natural samples, a series of commercial amino acid standards (Sigma Aldrich) were also analysed. These in house standards had an isotopic range of -7.6‰ to -31.6‰, bracketing the reference gas and the expected stalagmite values, and had previously had their isotopic values confirmed on an elemental analyser.
These gave satisfactory results, confirming that the USGS-41 calibration is robust. Between analytical runs phosphoric acid blanks were measured to help clean the sample loop and reduce sample carry over, as well as prevent calcium phosphate build up in the in-line filters. Needle flushing was performed with a non-degassed mobile phase solution. Previous method development work (Blyth et al., 2013) has shown the LC-IRMS technique to have acceptable precision of around +/- 0.2‰ across a linearity range of 1000 – 9000 mV, equating to an organic carbon abundance of 4 – 23 µg per sample.

2.3. δ¹³C calcite

Samples for δ¹³C analysis of calcite were drilled in a continuous series using a micromilling lathe employing the method described by Drysdale et al. (2007). The stalagmite section was first routed to produce a ledge ~2.5 mm thick and ~3.5 mm deep. The ledge was sampled at consecutive 100 µm increments using a milling bit. Due to the highly visible, parallel-tabular banding pattern of the stalagmite, sampling uncertainty is unlikely to exceed ± 100 µm from the nominal centre point of each sampling increment.

The stable isotopic composition of the calcite powders was determined on ~0.8 mg samples using a GV Instruments GV2003 continuous-flow isotope-ratio mass spectrometer at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Powders were acidified at 70 °C using 105% phosphoric acid and isotope measurements made on the CO₂ evolved from the reaction. Sample results were converted to the conventional 'delta' notation on the Vienna Pee Dee Belemnite scale using an internal standard of Carrara Marble (NEW-1) previously calibrated to NBS-19.

2.4 Compound specific isotope analysis
Compound-specific isotope analysis was carried out on the previously analysed lipid samples reported in Blyth et al. (2011). To recover clean \( n \)-alkane fractions, the total lipid extract was placed on a silica gel column and the non-polar fraction recovered by elution with hexane. Samples suspended in hexane were manually injected into a Finnigan Trace GC, coupled to a Thermo Finnigan MAT 253 isotope-ratio mass spectrometer at The Open University, UK. GC oven temperature was held for 1 min at 50 °C and then programmed at 5 °C min\(^{-1} \) to 310 °C, the final temperature was held for 9 min. The isotopes were measured relative to a NIST standard. \( C_{25}, C_{27}, C_{29} \), and \( C_{31} \) \( n \)-alkanes were measured. Analytical variability established via repeat injections of a \( C_{19} \) \( n \)-alkane standard.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Results

The \( \delta^{13}C \) results from the NPOC preserved in Tral-1 show an acceptable precision with eleven of the 15 samples having an SD across three analyses of 0.1 – 0.4‰ (Fig. 1.). The remaining four samples have SDs of 0.7, 0.7, 0.8, and 1‰. These levels of precision are not ideal, but are acceptable in low abundance samples. Peak amplitudes for m/z 44 in Tral-1 were around 1000 mV. The overall isotopic range in the sequence is 6.4‰ (-20.1 to -26.5‰). The \( \delta^{13}C \) analyses of the stalagmite calcite show an overall isotopic range of 4.5‰ (-8 to -12.5‰). The analytical precision of the technique was 0.05‰.

For the compound specific isotope analyses, the errors were harder to establish, as subsamples from the main body of the stalagmite were found to contain alkane abundances near the measurement limits for the technique, which meant each sample could only be injected once, without repeats. The analytical precision was established by repeat injection of a \( C_{19} \) \( n \)-alkane standard, which gave a repeatability of 0.15‰. An approximated error for the samples was provided by running five analytical repeats on the subsample from the top few mm of the stalagmite, which
was much richer in organics than the other samples. This gave a range of standard deviations across
the four compounds of interest of 0.2 – 0.6‰. In the time-series the compound-specific carbon
isotopes vary from -29.8‰ to -34.4‰, which is within the expected range for n-alkanes derived from
C3 vegetation (Rieley et al., 1991; Collister et al., 1994; Bi et al., 2005). There is systematic depletion
of isotopic values with increasing carbon chain length, a characteristic that has been widely noted in
n-alkanes from other environmental contexts, and relates to isotopic fractionation in the plant tissue
during compound synthesis (e.g. Rieley et al., 1991; Spooner et al., 1994; Brincat et al., 2000).
Within each carbon chain, the time-series range is 2.5‰ for C25, 27, 29 and 1.8‰ for C31. This is a
noticeably smaller variation than that seen in either the NPOC or calcite. Figure 2 shows the CSIA
data for the sample, and it can be seen that the signals for the four compounds only partially covary.
When linear regression is performed, it is found that C25 (the dominant lipid peak in most of the sub-
samples) stands out, with no real correlation with C27 and C29 (r² = 0.22, and 0.11 respectively), and a
moderate correlation with C31 (r² = 0.58). C27 and C29 superficially correlate strongly together (r² =
0.73), but this is actually driven by a single data point. The differences may be due to natural
environmental differences in the source of the different compounds; in vegetation terms, in
temperate environments, C25 is a known major component of peat derived signals, while C31 is more
commonly associated with grasses, and C27 and C29 with trees, although microbial processing can
interfere with this simple association, especially at lower chain lengths (Rieley et al., 1991b;
Marseille et al., 1999; Pancost et al., 2002; Blyth et al., 2007). Alternatively, there may be analytical
artefacts present, resulting from the low sample size and lack of repeat injections. Therefore, whilst
we consider the CSIA signal interesting, and worthy of further investigation in speleothems either
richer in organics or able to provide larger calcite samples, at this stage, we feel it should not be
over-interpreted.

3.2 Changes through time
Figure 3 shows the variation in three isotopic signals along the length of the stalagmite (calcite, NPOC and C25 n-alkane), in addition to the results of the C27/C31 n-alkane biomarker ratio (previously taken as a vegetation proxy in this stalagmite by Blyth et al. (2011)). The first point to note is that there is broad covariance in all the signals in terms of when changes occur, with all the signals showing a change around 1000 years ago. However, the magnitude and direction of the change varies between the records. In particular, the NPOC and calcite records are inversely correlated, with the NPOC record decreasing (becoming more negative, or less enriched with 13C) after 1000 years, while the calcite record increases (becomes more positive, or relatively more enriched with 13C). The magnitude of change is also much greater and more marked in the NPOC record. To investigate the strength of these apparent relationships, we carried out linear regression between the signal curves for the calcite, NPOC, and vegetation biomarker signals. The CSIA signal was excluded due to the concerns about reliability outlined in section 3.1. We also excluded points from the top of the stalagmite, above the major hiatus at approximately 300 years (area represented by a grey box on Fig. 3). This is because the calcite in this portion contains multiple hiatuses and associated crusts, as well as detrital flood events, and therefore it is not directly comparable in formation, organic content or fabric to the bulk of the stalagmite, which has formed without any discernible hiatuses via normal drip deposition. Fig. 4 shows the results of the linear regression. The NPOC and calcite isotopic signals show a moderate inverse correlation ($r^2 = 0.57$, $p < 0.005$), while the NPOC signal and calcite signals show clear relationships with the C27/C31 n-alkane ratio ($r^2 = 0.73$, $p < 0.05$; $r^2 = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$).

Previous palaeoenvironmental interpretations of data from this stalagmite have noted that at around 1000 years ago there was a decrease of birch woodland in the area, as demonstrated by two independent records – peat-core data (Charman et al., 2001) and the lipid biomarker record in this stalagmite (Blyth et al., 2011). In the latter case there is a marked change in the C27/C31 n-alkane record in favour of C31, indicating a decrease in tree cover in favour of herbaceous vegetation. The synchronisation of the changes in the isotope records reported here (at around 1000
years ago) with each other and the previous lipid biomarker records indicates that the isotope
signals are recording genuine environmental responses. The time interval following this change and
covered by the more negative isotopic signal in the NPOC record (around 1000 – 300 years ago) also
includes the periods of highest rainfall for the area during the last 2 ka (Proctor et al., 2000, 2002;
Trouet et al., 2009), which are characterised in the broader lipid record by a substantial increase in
soil and plant derived organic matter (Blyth et al., 2011). This was hypothesised to be the result of
increased throughput of soil organic matter due to increased drip flow to the stalagmite, an
argument supported by a decreased calcite growth rate (due to decreased soil respiration of CO₂
resulting from soil water saturation).

If the changes in the isotopic records were being driven by the vegetation change alone, we
might expect both CO₂ and NPOC records to move in the same direction, becoming more or less
enriched in response to isotopic changes in the plants, which are transmitted by root respiration and
plant material input. However, in reality, we see an inverse relationship between the calcite δ₁³C
and the NPOC signal, which we suggest is dominantly driven by changes in the soil conditions,
occurring in parallel to, but not necessarily controlled by, the vegetation change. The calcite signal is
recording the dissolved CO₂, which is predominantly controlled by soil respiration, consisting of a
vegetation signal, significantly modified by microbial activity. It is known that soil microbes
selectively use and therefore respire ¹²C, meaning that at times of increased microbial activity the
CO₂ pool will be relatively depleted in δ₁³C (due to the increased ¹²C input), and in times of
decreased activity, it will be relatively ¹³C enriched (due to the reduction in respired ¹²C).
Conversely, increased microbial activity leads to the ¹³C enrichment of residual organic matter (such
as that contained in the NPOC fraction) due to the preferential use of ¹²C, and decreased microbial
activity will lead to a more negative δ₁³C, due to the cessation of this enrichment. Thus, it is clear
that when soil microbial activity changes significantly and forms the dominant control on the
isotopic signal, we would expect the CO₂ and NPOC pools to react in opposite directions. In Tral-1
we see the inverse movement of the two signals commencing with a period of increased soil
wetness and increased peat formation, which by restricting oxygen in the soil is likely to have led to a decrease in microbial activity.

3.3. Implications for the use of speleothem $\delta^{13}$C in palaeoenvironmental research

We suggest that the use of parallel calcite CO$_2$ and NPOC analyses has significant potential utility in improving our understanding of the controls on speleothem $\delta^{13}$C signals, with an inverse signal correlation being a potential proxy for soil microbial activity as the dominant control. However, a number of issues remain requiring future investigation. Firstly, although one mechanism may form the predominant control on the isotopic record, it is highly unlikely that there will ever be only one single influence on the signal. For example, in the case of Tral-1, there is clearly a vegetation change occurring at the same time, and whilst the inverse relationship of the signals suggests this is not dominating the record, it will have an effect. We suggest that, analytical issues permitting, the best approach to establishing the extent of the vegetation-derived isotopic change is to interrogate the CSIA signal for selected plant-derived compounds. It has been noted that, in the case of Tral-1, the magnitude of isotopic change within each of the measured $n$-alkanes is smaller than that seen in either the CO$_2$ or NPOC records. This indicates that the isotopic change within the vegetation is modest, presumably because it is a change within different types of C3 vegetation, and not a significant contributor to the isotopic changes in the soil.

More complex to distinguish is the degree of microbial activity at the time of formation vs. the age of the carbon pools being transmitted to the speleothem, as a longer time exposed to moderate microbial activity might be expected to have the same effect on both $\delta^{13}$C signals as a shorter time exposed to a more intense activity. In Tral-1, we know from lipid and stalagmite growth evidence that the increase in surface wetness was accompanied by an increase in drip-flow to the stalagmite and in fresh organic matter input. Therefore, it seems possible that there are two mechanisms (decreased microbial activity in the soil, and decreased exposure to microbial activity...
due to faster through-flow) acting to move the microbial modification of the isotopic signal in the
same direction. The change in the type of organic matter input towards fresher (i.e. less $^{13}$C
enriched) material may explain why the magnitude of the isotopic change is greater in the NPOC
signal compared to the CO$_2$ signal.

Another issue is using the isotopic signal and the hypothesised control to identify climatic
changes. Reduction of microbial activity in the soil may occur as a result of various climatic
parameters, including decreased temperature, increased soil moisture leading to soil saturation, or
conversely, excessive soil dryness. Extremes of climate can be ruled out by stalagmite growth, as
excessively dry or cold weather will retard stalagmite formation by preventing sufficient water flow,
but more moderate changes may lead to similar results. In the case of Tral-1, we can clearly identify
the climatic mechanism by combining the carbon isotope data with other records, and we suggest
that this is where a multi-proxy approach to extrapolating climatic records from stalagmites is the
optimal approach, using each signal to mutually inform the interpretation of the others, and so
provide the most in-depth environmental picture possible.

4. Conclusion

This study clearly shows that multiple stable carbon isotope records are preserved in
speleothems, and reflect different aspects of the soil carbon pools. This is the first time-series
application of NPOC isotopic measurements and CSIA in speleothems, and demonstrates that
useable, environmentally coherent signals can be recovered. CSIA in speleothems shows future
potential, with the C$_{25}$ $n$-alkane record here showing a modest response to known climate and
vegetation change; however, issues around sample size and analytical repeatability need to be
resolved before the approach can be considered robust. Isotopic analysis of the NPOC appears a
highly successful technique, accessing a complementary data set to traditional calcite stable isotope
analysis, and significantly expanding the information we can recover from speleothem stable
isotopes, with the inverse correlation between the two records being a potential marker for microbial control of the signal. The research area would now benefit from further work investigating in more detail the link between the NPOC isotopic signal and the precise types of organic matter present, and the combined response of the $\delta^{13}$C signals to environmental controls in other climatic and ecological contexts. Nonetheless, this integrated study clearly demonstrates the advantages of combining organic and inorganic geochemistry when interpreting climate records in general, and carbon isotopes in particular, in speleothems.

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Figure 1. δ13C data for the NPOC samples. Error bars are ±1 SD on 3 repeats.

Figure 2. Graph showing the change in the δ13C composition of individual n-alkanes through the stalagmite.

Figure 3. Time-series graph showing the changes in the calcite, NPOC and C25 n-alkane δ13C signals, and the C27/C31 n-alkane biomarker ratio through time. Dates (yrs BP) and environmental interpretation are taken from Blyth et al. (2011). The grey area on the left is the area of the stalagmite above the major hiatus at approximately 300 yrs, where the calcite fabric is affected by multiple hiatuses, and detrital flood events.

Figure 4. Scatter plots showing the linear regressions for; a) the NPOC and calcite δ13C signals; b) NPOC δ13C against the C27/C31 lipid biomarker ratio; c) calcite δ13C against the C27/C31 lipid biomarker ratio.
Figure 2

Plot showing the variation of δ13C with mm from the tip of a stalagmite for different n-alkanes:
- C25 n-alkane
- C27 n-alkane
- C29 n-alkane
- C31 n-alkane

The graph indicates a decrease in δ13C values as the distance from the tip increases for all n-alkanes, with C31 n-alkane showing the most significant decrease.
Figure 3

Mm from tip of stalagmite

δ¹³C

C₂₇/C₃₁ n-alkane ratio

-10.0
-5.0
0.0
5.0
10.0
15.0
20.0
25.0
30.0
35.0

13C NPOC

13C Calcite

13C C₂₅ n-alkane

C₂₇/C₃₁ n-alkane

Increasing wetness

Peat dominated, complete loss of birch after 1 ka

Mixed birch and peat

Birch woodland dominated

Mixed birch and peat

328±16 yrs
822±54 yrs
1027±35 yrs
1226±26 yrs
1294±23 yrs
2022±42 yrs

Mixed birch and peat
Figure 4

(a) 

\[ R^2 = 0.57 \]

(b) 

\[ R^2 = 0.73 \]

(c) 

\[ R^2 = 0.7002 \]