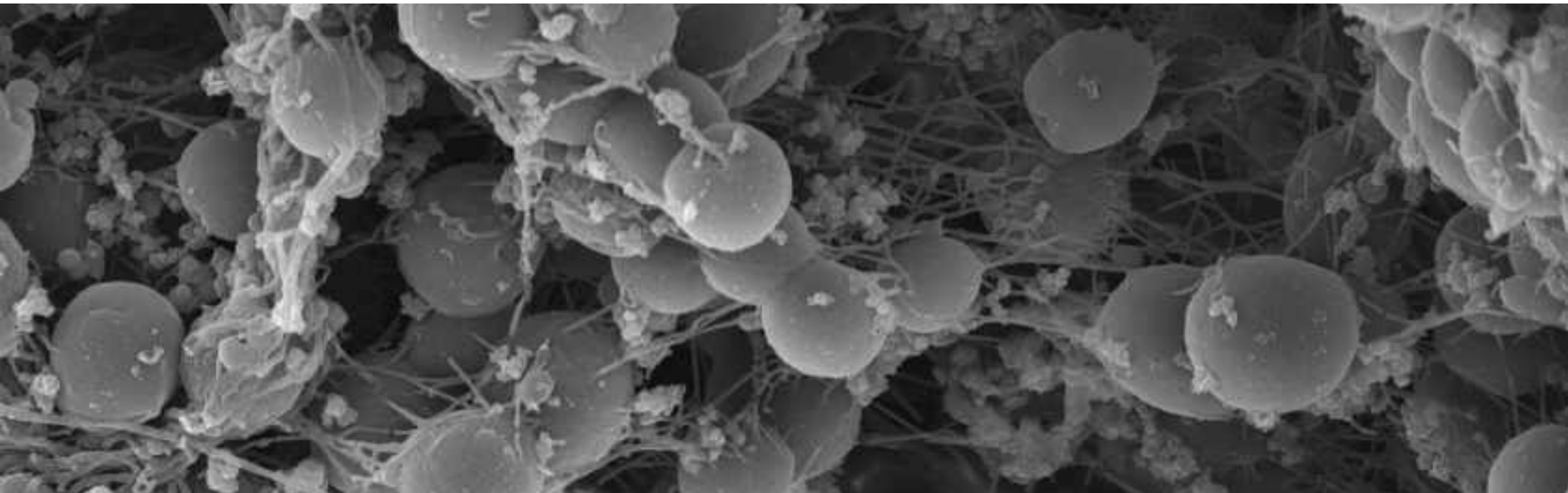




DEVELOPING 3D POLYMER NANOSTRUCTURED FABRIC AS A SOIL-LIKE MODEL FOR STUDYING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MICROORGANISMS AND SOIL STRUCTURE

Fabrizio De Cesare^{1,3}, Elena Di Mattia², and Antonella Macagnano^{1,3}

¹University of Tuscia, Department for Innovation in Biological, Agro-food and Forest Systems (DIBAF), Viterbo, Italy (decesare@unitus.it)

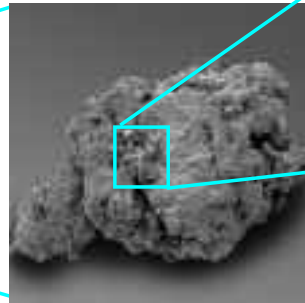
²University of Tuscia, Department of Agriculture and Forest Sciences (DAFNE), Viterbo, Italy

³National Research Council (CNR), Institute of Atmospheric Pollution Research IIA), Monterotondo (RM), Italy

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1. THE CONTEXT: Impact of soil structure and microhabitat on soil biota

MINERAL AND ORGANIC COMPONENTS



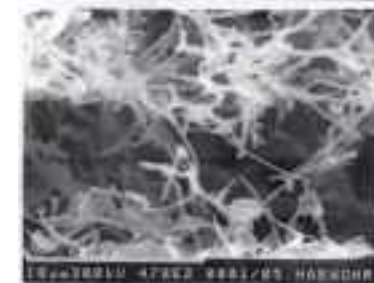
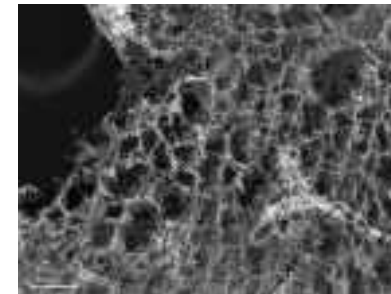
Macroaggregates



Soil particles

Source: T. Eickhorst & R. Tippkoetter.
Micropedology–The hidden world of soils.
University of Bremen, Germany (<http://www.microped.uni-bremen.de>). All rights reserved

Fulvic and humic acids showing tubular and membrane structures and honeycomb-like aggregations



Source: Kim H. Tan (2014) Humic Matter in Soil and Environment. CRC Press. All rights reserved

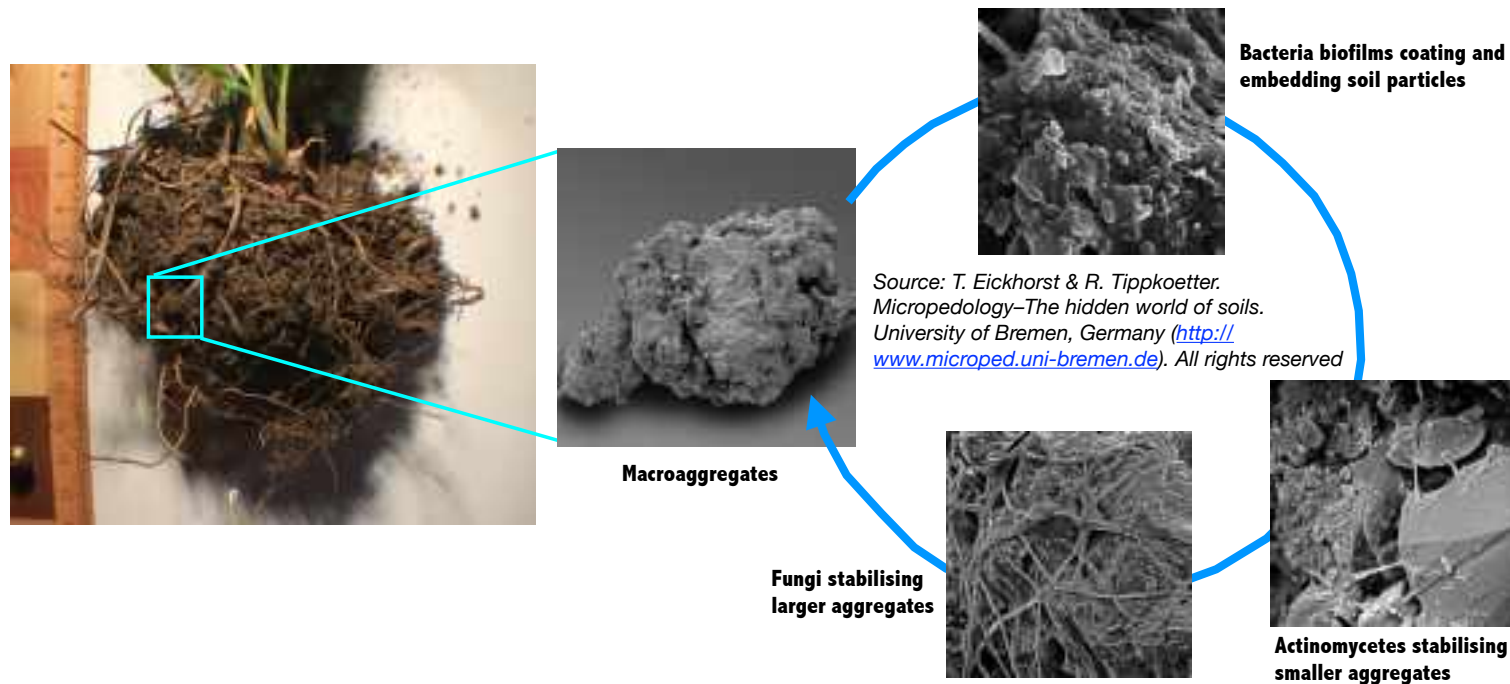
- Soil structure is the organisation of soil particles in aggregates with increasing hierarchical levels, from nano- to macro-architectures. Several processes and the functioning of the entire soil ecosystem fundamentally depends on soil structure. Soil is also a very heterogeneous and complex matrix to study because of several components with different nature (mineral, organic and biological), physics and chemistry comprising it.
- Its study often involves techniques that profoundly alter its natural composition or destroy its original 3D arrangement, including the pore distribution and organisation, which is crucial in preserving a suitable habitat for soil ecology and functioning.



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2. THE CONTEXT: Impact of soil biota on soil structure and microhabitat

MINERAL AND BIOLOGICAL COMPONENTS



Microbial life has been discovered in the last decades to exist in biofilms, 3D spatial organisations of microbial communities adhering to solid surfaces. In these well-organised assemblages of one or more different microbial species, extracellular polymeric substances (EPS) play remarkable functions for microorganisms in biofilms and facilitate aggregation of soil particles.



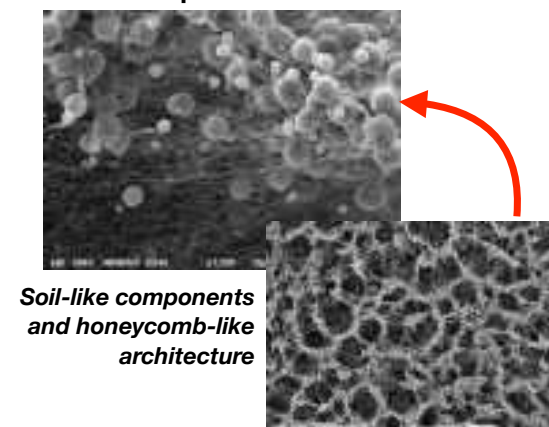
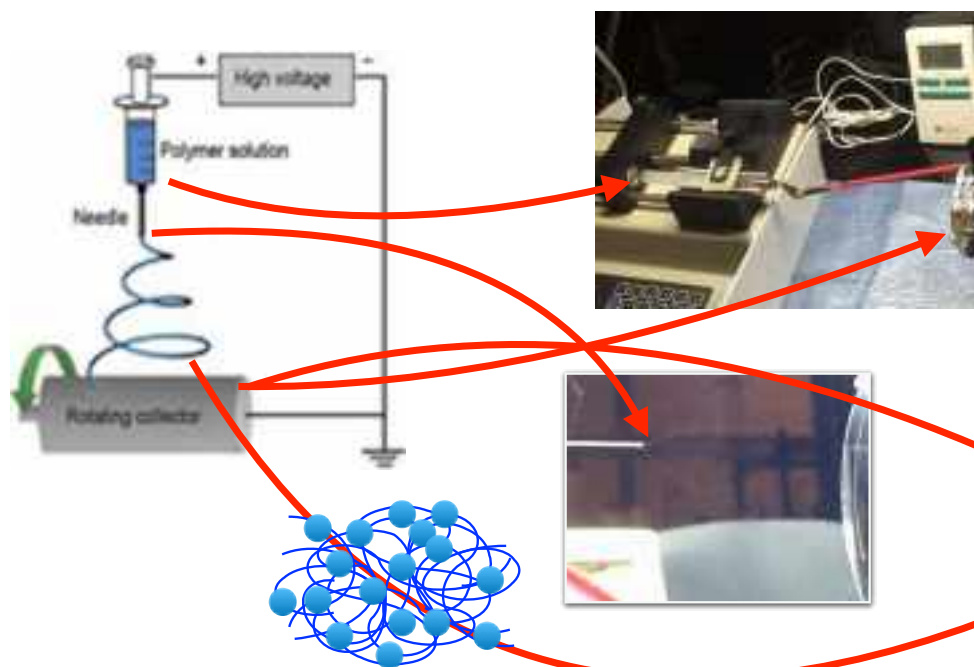
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3. AIM: Development of a 3D polymer nanostructured fabric mimicking the soil architecture as a model substrate for studying the soil-microbe microhabitat at micro- and nanoscale

As a model system, a self-standing 3D biodegradable polymer nanostructured scaffolds (NS) composed of a mixture of nano- to microfibrils and microbeads mimicking the fibrous materials and particles comprising the main morphological types of soil (i.e. organic matter and mineral particles) and the relative spatial architecture and porosity at the micro- and nanoscale were created by electrospinning.

Electrospinning is a nanotechnology producing 2D and 3D nano- and microfibrillar scaffolds from polymer solutions under an electric field.

Here, the resulting NS were characterised by considerable porosity and extensive surface area.

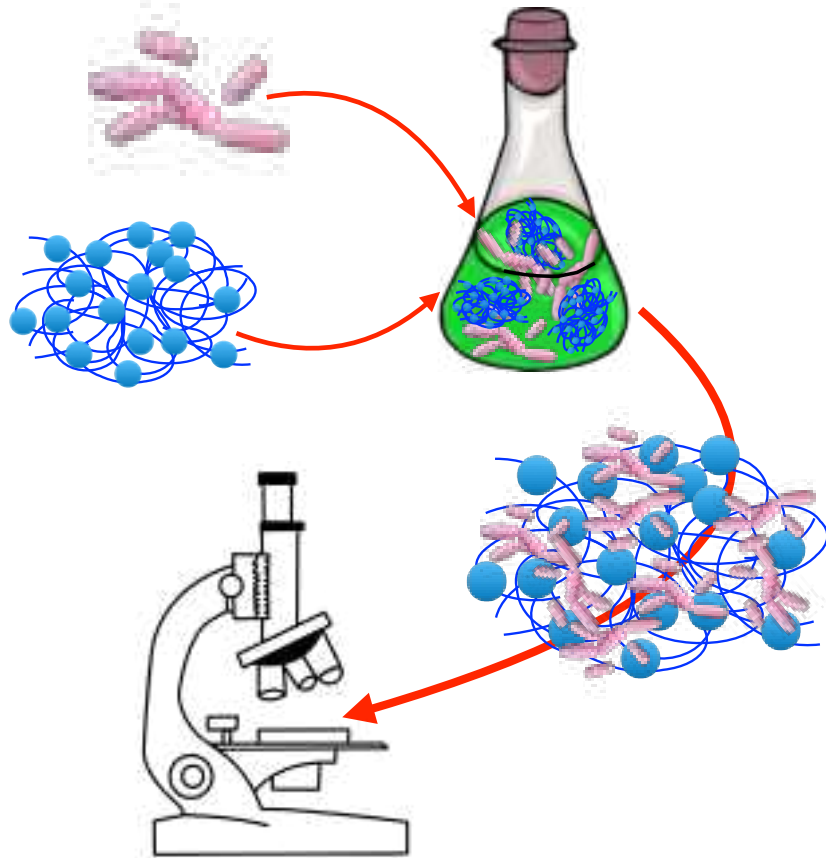


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4. MATERIALS and METHODS to study the interactions between microbes and soil components in a simulated soil-like architecture



A PGPR species was employed as a model microbial type to test the capacity of similar NS of supporting microbial growth until biofilm development.

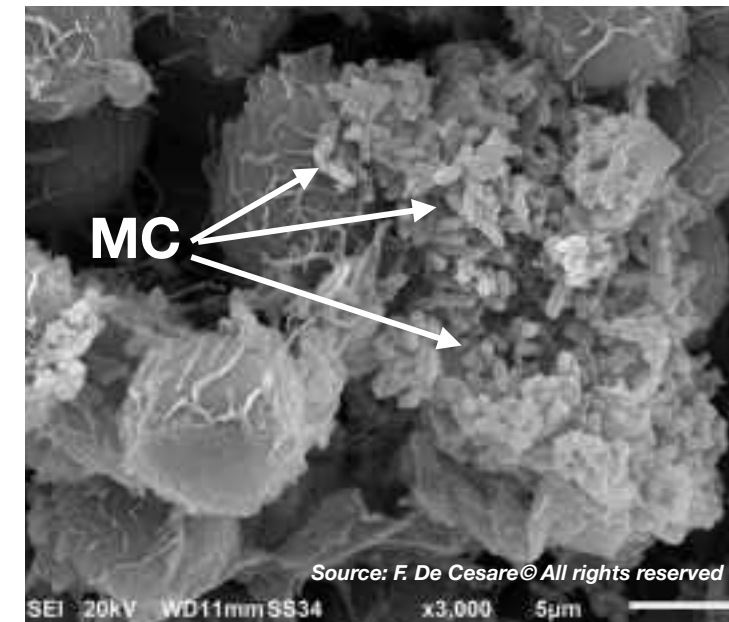
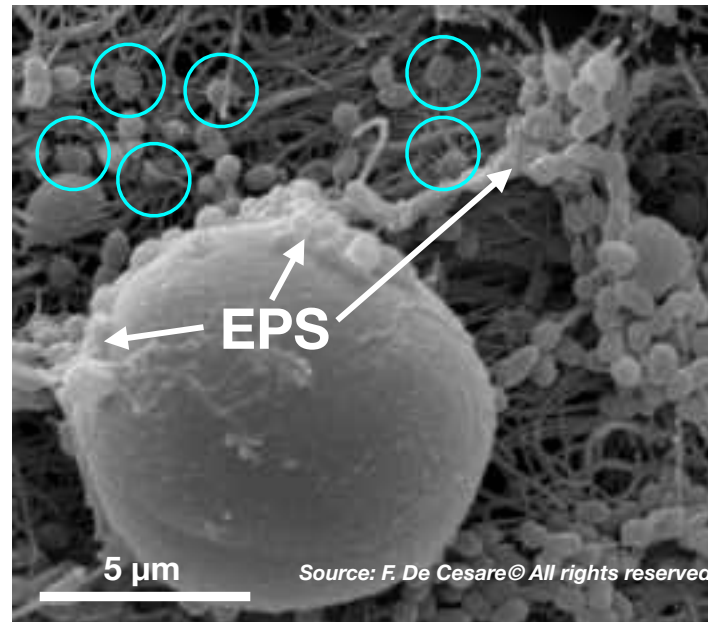
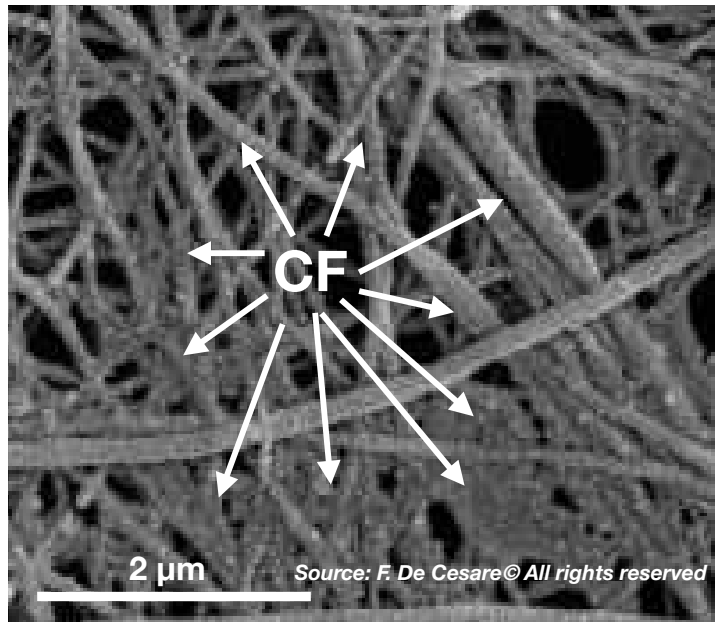
Incubation was performed under stirring to stimulate only stable interactions between microorganisms and the various morphological types of the NS, and also to assess the stability of the NS mimicking the soil aggregates for future applications.

Combination of imaging techniques such as optical, SEM and TEM microscopy were used to shed some light into the nexus between microorganisms and soil structure and the reciprocal influence and in particular to observe “in situ” associations of microbes with mineral and organic materials at nano- and microscale and the consequent effects on porosity usually destroyed under investigations.



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5. RESULTS: Insights on the impact of soil microhabitat on soil biota and vice-versa



The typical phases of conditioning film (CF) release, initial and stable adhesion mediated by appendages (*rings*) and EPS release, and micro- and macrocolony (MC) formation until a mature biofilm development were observed. Morphological modifications of bacteria and the involvement of other components in the mentioned stages were also detected. The bacterial growth rate, the overall respiratory activity and its spatial distribution throughout the NS were recorded.



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6. CONCLUSIONS & OUTLOOKS

STRATEGY

Creation of a 3D NS framework mimicking the soil structure architecture based on soil component morphology to provide a more “natural” environment for microorganisms (e.g. bacteria).

OUTCOMES

Studying of microbial community organisations where microbes can develop more “natural” attitudes and physiological traits, hence reliably reproducing the spatial and temporal dynamics of microbial populations in specific soil contexts like hotspots typical of the rhizosphere, which is of central importance for the entire soil ecosystem functioning, or specific treatments.

BENEFITS

These 3D NS can also provide the opportunity of zooming in microbial lifestyle, from the dynamics of interactions with organic matter and particle surfaces to their spatial distribution and colony formation, and link biological processes in particular conditions to specific physical and chemical features of soil and vice-versa by observing microbes at work at different scales (from mm down to nm).

POTENTIALS

Such 3D NS could be used to develop functional products for several applications, from agriculture to environment, industry until medicine, where certain microbial species playing distinct functions can be hired and hosted.



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HOT ARTICLES

