Sub-Permil Interlaboratory Consistency for Solution-Based Boron Isotope Analyses on Marine Carbonates

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Boron isotopes in marine carbonates are increasingly used to reconstruct seawater pH and atmospheric pCO2 through Earth’s history. While isotope ratio measurements from individual laboratories are often of high quality, it is important that records generated in different laboratories can equally be compared. Within this Boron Isotope Intercomparison Project (BIIP), we characterised the boron isotopic composition (commonly expressed in δ11B) of two marine carbonates: Geological Survey of Japan carbonate reference materials JCp-1 (coral Porites) and JCt-1 (giant clam Tridacna gigas).

Our study has three foci: (a) to assess the extent to which oxidative pre-treatment, aimed at removing organic material from carbonate, can influence the resulting δ11B; (b) to determine to what degree the chosen analytical approach may affect the resultant δ11B; and (c) to provide well-constrained consensus δ11B values for JCp-1 and JCt-1. The resultant robust mean and associated robust standard deviation (s*) for un-oxidised JCp-1 is 24.36 ± 0.45‰ (2s*), compared with 24.25 ± 0.22‰ (2s*) for the same oxidised material. For un-oxidised JCt-1, respective compositions are 16.39 ± 0.60‰ (2s*; un-oxidised) and 16.24 ± 0.38‰ (2s*; oxidised). The consistency between laboratories is generally better if carbonate powders were oxidatively cleaned prior to purification and measurement.

Keywords: mass spectrometry, Geological Survey of Japan, boron isotopes, carbonate reference materials, interlaboratory experiment.

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The boron isotope system is a non-traditional light stable isotope system with only two isotopes, $^{10}$B and $^{11}$B. The boron isotope ratio of any substrate is usually presented relative to an isotope reference material distributed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology in delta notation:

$$\delta^{11}\text{B}_{\text{NIST SRM 951}} = \frac{^{11}\text{B}_{\text{sample}}}{^{11}\text{B}_{\text{NIST SRM 951}}} - 1$$

where NIST SRM 951 (or NIST SRM 951a) represents a boric acid isotopic reference material powder. NIST SRM 951 and NIST SRM 951a are essentially isotopically identical with a certified $^{10}$B/$^{11}$B of 0.2473 ± 0.0002. In recent decades, boron isotope ratios measured in biogenic carbonates have emerged as a valuable tool to determine past seawater pH, a key variable to reconstruct atmospheric CO$_2$ concentrations and other marine carbonate system parameters (Vengosh et al. 1991, Hemming and Hanson 1992). Boron isotope ratios in marine carbonates can be used as a pH indicator because of several key characteristics. First, boron behaves conservatively in seawater with a residence time of ~1.4 Ma (Lemarchand et al. 2000) and a resultant homogenous bulk seawater $^{11}$B of 39.6 ± 0.04‰ (Foster and Pogge von Strandmann 2010). Boron in seawater occurs as two aqueous species, boric acid (B(OH)$_3$) and borate ion (B(OH)$_4^-$) (Dickson 1990). The relative abundance of each species is pH-dependent (Vengosh et al. 1991, Hemming and Hanson 1992), resulting in the increasing proportion of borate ion under increasing pH conditions. Importantly, the $^{11}$B of borate ion is isotopically depleted compared with boric acid as a function of equilibrium isotope fractionation between the two species (Zeebe 2005, Klochko et al. 2006). The ratio of borate ion to boric acid increases significantly in the pH range of modern and palaeo-seawater (ca. 7.7–8.3 on the total pH scale). Since most marine calcifiers only incorporate borate ion into biogenic carbonates, it follows that their boron isotopic ratio provides direct information on ambient seawater (Vengosh et al. 1991, Hemming and Hanson 1992) or internal calcifying fluid pH (Rollion-Bard and Chaussidon 2003, Allison and Finch 2010, McCulloch et al. 2012). While commonly applied to foraminifera (Hönisch and Hemming 2005, Foster 2008, Rae et al. 2011), in recent years the pH sensitivity of the boron isotope system has been explored in a variety of marine biogenic carbonates, including brachiopods (Leuvey et al. 2002, Penman et al. 2013, Junkova et al. 2019), corals (Hönisch et al. 2004, Reynaud et al. 2004, Wall et al. 2016, Cornwall and Comeau 2017, Wu et al. 2018), molluscs (Heinemann et al. 2012) and coralline algae (Cornwall et al. 2017, Donald et al. 2017, Anagnostou et al. 2019).

The first investigations into the pH-dependent fractionation of $^{11}$B/$^{10}$B during incorporation into CaCO$_3$ were published in the late 1980s (e.g., Balz et al. 1986, Oi et al. 1991). However, for many years significant offsets between individual laboratories (on the order of 2–11‰) permitted only limited comparability of $\delta^{11}$B data between institutions (e.g., Aggarwal et al. 2009). This disagreement is not surprising since boron is a contamination-prone light stable isotope system that requires clean reagents and careful sample handling during purification and analysis, as well as a boron-free air handling system (e.g., Rosner and Romer 2005). The latest study comparing the reproducibility condition of measurement of boron isotopic data reported good agreement for solutions of dilute boric acids and seawater samples, yet also revealed elevated interlaboratory isotopic offsets for identical carbonate sample materials on the order of up to ~1.5‰ (2σ) (Foster et al. 2013). Only four laboratories participated in that study, and since then, considerably more research groups have begun publishing carbonate-derived boron isotope data. For this reason, we present a timely update on the interlaboratory comparability of boron isotope data in commonly used marine carbonate reference materials.

Besides comparing different sample handling and mass spectrometric approaches, a further sample preparation step in the measurement procedure was tested within the frame of BLIF. We assessed the impact of oxidative cleaning techniques on biogenic carbonates, such as those frequently performed for other geochemical analyses (Boyle 1981, Barker and Greaves 2003). We present boron isotope results generated in ten individual laboratories, which reveal an unprecedented level of consistency of carbonate $\delta^{11}$B results between laboratories. Given the comparison of cleaned and uncleaned material, we also identify potential pitfalls during the processing of carbonate samples for boron isotopic approaches that potentially compromise the high level of analytical agreement that is emerging between laboratories.

**Materials**

Two powdered and homogenised biogenic carbonates originally produced by the Geological Survey of Japan were analysed in ten different laboratories for our boron isotope interlaboratory comparison study (Table 1). The first carbonate used is JCp-1, a modern Porites sp. coral colony sampled 2 m below mean sea level on the north-east coast of Ishigaki Island, Ryuku Islands, Japan (24°33N, 124°28E).
124°20'E). JCp-1 is entirely aragonitic, and all surfaces of the corals in contact with the biological tissue were removed prior to processing (Okai et al. 2002). As outlined in the original publication, crushed coral material was washed with deionised water and dried prior to further grinding and homogenisation. The grain size fraction < 250 mm of JCp-1 material was sieved and distributed by the Geological Survey of Japan.

The second reference material used was also prepared by the Geological Survey of Japan (Inoue et al. 2004). Reference material JCt-1 is derived from a fossil mid-Holocene giant clam Tridacna gigas sampled near Kume Island, Japan (26°N, 126°E), in the central Ryukyu Islands, Japan. It is also entirely aragonitic. Further details on powder preparation of JC-1 were not provided in Inoue et al. (2004).

None of the powders were bleached prior to packing (Hathorne et al. 2013). Previously published trace elemental ratios presented by Hathorne et al. (2013) are reported for comparison in Table 1. Notably, Sr, Mg, Ba, B and Li have higher ratios relative to Ca in JCp-1, while JCp-1 has approximately fifty times higher U/Ca than JCt-1. At higher ratios relative to Ca in JCp-1, while JCp-1 has not been provided, but they remain common reference materials in many laboratories (e.g., Farmer and Hönisch 2016, Lazareth et al. 2016, Raddatz et al. 2016, Stewart and Anagnostou 2019). Efforts are ongoing to find suitable replacements, and two isotope standard solutions artificially produced with carbonate matrices (NIST RM 8301 (coral) and NIST RM 8301 (foram)) will soon become available as consistency reference materials for boron isotopic and trace metal isotope studies (Stewart et al. 2020).

### Analytical and mass spectrometric approaches

Nine out of the ten laboratories participating in this study used an MC-ICP-MS-based approach to determine the $^{6}\text{Li}$B of the JCp-1 and JCt-1 reference materials; one used N-TIMS. With the exception of the N-TIMS approach, for which boron was not separated from the aragonitic matrix, elemental purification was carried out in all laboratories (Table 2). In eight laboratories, boron was purified using Amberlite™ IRA743 exchange resin on microcolumns (Gonfiantini et al. 2003, Foster 2008, Aggarwal et al. 2009, Paris et al. 2010, Louvat and Bouchez 2011, Rae et al. 2011, Voinot et al. 2013, McCulloch et al. 2014, Roux et al. 2015) or using a batch method (Douville et al. 2010, Wu et al. 2018), and one laboratory employed the sublimation technique for boron purification (Wang et al. 2010). The boron total procedural blank ranged from below 8 pg to about 3000 pg between laboratories (Table 2). Sample ionisation during N-TIMS spectrometric measurement is achieved via heating of Re-metal filaments in a high-vacuum source chamber. For the MC-ICP-MS approaches, sample introduction was achieved using either: (a) a quartz spray chamber (Gonfiantini et al. 2003, Aggarwal et al. 2009, Douville et al. 2010, Wang et al. 2010, Voinot et al. 2013, McCulloch et al. 2014), (b) a PFA spray chamber (Foster 2008, Rae et al. 2011), or (c) direct injection (d-DIHEN) (Paris et al. 2010, Louvat et al. 2011, Louvat et al. 2014). Some of the laboratories used ammonia introduced via a second gas inlet into the spray chamber as an additional gas to aid washout between individual measurements (e.g.,

| Table 1. | Selected previously published geochemical data from JCp-1 and JCt-1 |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | JCp-1            | 2s                      | JCt-1            | 2s                      | Reference                          |
| CaO (%) m/m | 53.30           | 0.28                    | 54.66           | 0.16                    | Okai et al. (2004)                  |
| LOI (%) m/m | 44.36           | n.d.                    | 44.27           | n.d.                    | Okai et al. (2004)                  |
| Sr/Ca (mmol mol⁻¹) | 8.838           | 0.042                   | 1.680           | 0.026                   | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |
| Mg/Ca (mmol mol⁻¹) | 4.199           | 0.065                   | 1.289           | 0.045                   | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |
| U/Ca (mmol mol⁻¹) | 1192            | 0.045                   | 22.71           | 2.40                    | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |
| Ba/Ca (mmol mol⁻¹) | 7.465           | 0.655                   | 4.348           | 0.280                   | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |
| B/Ca (mmol mol⁻¹) | 459.6           | 22.7                    | 191.0           | 9.3                     | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |
| U/Ca (µmol mol⁻¹) | 6.185           | 0.107                   | 4.076           | 0.503                   | Hathorne et al. (2013)             |

Robust means and robust std deviations reported below for previously un-oxidised sample powders.
| Mass spectrometry | Purification method | Oxidative reagent used | Exposure time to oxidative reagent | Temperature used during oxidative treatment | Sample introduction | Reference | Total procedural blank |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| MC-N-TIMS         | None                | \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \text{ buffered in 0.1 mol l}^{-1} \text{NaOH-1\%} \) (JCt-1) or 50% (JCp-1) | 10 min (JCt-1), 2 x 30 min (JCp-1) | 80 °C | Ionisation from filament | Foster et al. (2013) | ~ 10 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Sublimation         | 6–14% NaClO           | 24 h                              | 25 °C | Quartz spray chamber | Wang et al. (2010) | < 8 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | 10% \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) | 8 min                            | 25 °C | Micro-cyclonic quartz spray chamber | Douville et al. (2010) | ~ 500 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | 10% \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) buffered to pH 9 with \( \text{NH}_4\text{OH} \) | 1 h | 25 °C | Direct injection (d-DIHEN) | Louvat et al. (2011), Louvat et al. (2014), Paris et al. (2010) | ~ 150 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | Buffered 1% \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) | 15 min (i.e., 3 x 5 min with ultrasonic treatment in between) | 80 °C | PFA Scott spray chamber | Foster (2008), Rao et al. (2011, 2018) | ~ 92 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | n.a.                  | n.a                              | n.a | Mini-cyclonic quartz spray chamber | Gorfratini et al. (2003), Aggarwal et al. (2009) | ~ 500 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | NaClO, 5% Cl          | 15 h                             | 21 °C | Mini-cyclonic quartz spray chamber | Foster (2008), Vionnet et al. (2013) | ~ 300 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | Buffered 1% \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) | 15 min (i.e., 3 x 5 min with ultrasonic treatment in between) | 80 °C | PFA Scott spray chamber | Foster (2008), Rao et al. (2011) | ~ 28 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | Buffered 1% \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) | 15 min (i.e., 3 x 5 min with ultrasonic treatment in between) | 80 °C | PFA Scott spray chamber | Foster (2008), Rao et al. (2011) | ~ 240 pg |
| MC-ICP-MS         | Separation by ion exchange | NaClO                  | 15 min                            | 25 °C | Quartz spray chamber | McCulloch et al. (2014) | ~ 500 pg |
Foster 2008). None of the laboratories in this study used hydrofluoric acid to aid boron washout, although recent studies have shown this to be an effective alternative to an ammonia add gas (Misra et al. 2014, Rae et al. 2018). All laboratories used an (isotope-) calibrator-sample bracketing technique to derive δ11B. Except for the MC-ICP-MS method with direct injection as introduction system, on-peak zeros were subtracted from respective ion beams in all MC-ICP-MS-based approaches. This approach is necessary because of the typically poor washout of boron compared with other isotope systems and the relatively small signal sizes, requiring tight control over memory effects during sample introduction.

**BiP interlaboratory comparison routine protocol**

In contrast to an earlier interlaboratory comparison study (Gonfiantini et al. 2003), participating laboratories were required to have a demonstrable record of producing δ11B high-quality data. Every participating laboratory was sent 2 g of powder of each of the two reference materials. A minimum of six test portions of each reference material, weighing at least 5 mg each, were analysed in each laboratory. Three of the six test portions were processed without any oxidative cleaning, and the other three underwent oxidative cleaning using either NaClO or H2O2 in dilute NH4OH (Table 2). Each laboratory reported 2–10 results for each test portion digest, either as individual filament analyses (e.g., N-TIMS) or simply as repeat measurements of the same powder preparation (e.g., MC-ICP-MS). The key aim of our study was to assess consistencies and potential discrepancies between techniques with particular focus on analytical problems that could be improved in future studies. Therefore, the reported δ11B data were compiled and statistically analysed by the first author, while the origin of each data set was kept anonymous as much as feasible.

**Statistical data treatment**

First, the average δ11B value of each laboratory for the four individual sample sets (presenting either previously oxidised or un-oxidised JCp-1 or JCt-1 boron isotope results) was determined. This provides a total of ten independent laboratory mean δ11B values for un-oxidised JCp-1 and nine mean δ11B values for oxidised JCp-1 (Table 3). For JC-1 reference material powders, nine δ11B means from both un-oxidised and oxidised powders were reported (Table 4). Subsequently, the robust mean and associated robust standard deviation were calculated for each of the four data sets. To do so, we followed the ISO 13528:2015 data treatment procedure for normally distributed data sets as outlined in approach 2 of Smižinavá and Zbiřal (2009). The procedure of deriving the robust mean and robust standard deviation is iterative, and the statistical analysis is repeated until no change in the calculated robust mean X* and its robust standard deviation s* is observed. The approach is outlined below.

An initial robust average X* is calculated from the median of each laboratory’s mean δ11B (hence n being either 9 or 10). The associated initial robust standard deviation (representing the median absolute deviation, MAD) s* is derived by multiplying the median of all laboratories’ offsets from X* from the interlaboratory median by 1.483. Calculation of s* = 1.483 x MAD is a robust scaling factor applied in statistical applications for normally distributed data sets following the argument that the median absolute deviation covers 50% (between 1/4 and 3/4) of the standard normal cumulative distribution function (see 13528:2015(E) 2015). Next, a δ value is calculated via multiplication of the initial robust standard deviation with a factor 1.5. Then, (X* - δ) and (X* + δ) are calculated. If any laboratory’s mean δ11B falls below (X* - δ), the actual laboratory mean δ11B is replaced with (X* - δ). If any laboratory’s δ11B mean falls above (X* + δ), the actual laboratory mean δ11B is replaced with (X* + δ). Laboratory mean δ11B values larger than (X* - δ) and smaller than (X* + δ) are kept, representing the vast majority of δ11B values presented here. This exercise led to exclusion of the following mean δ11B values: un-oxidised JCp-1 powders from laboratories 1 and 4 (laboratory numbers refer to corresponding numbers shown in Figures 1 and 2), un-oxidised JCt-1 powders from laboratories 1, 4 and 10, oxidised JCp-1 powders from laboratories 1 and 6, and oxidised JCt-1 powders from laboratories 6 and 10. For all four data sets (i.e., un-oxidised and oxidised JCp-1 and JCt-1), an updated X* and s* was then calculated and the above screening procedure repeated, resulting in no further exclusion of data. The resultant robust means and robust standard deviations discussed in the text and shown in Table 5, and in Figures 1–4 have been derived in this manner. We reiterate that the robust standard deviation is calculated using only the mean δ11B per laboratory for each of the four data sets. As a measure of the integrity of reported mean δ11B from each laboratory, we used a z-score:

\[
z = \frac{(x_i - X^*)}{s^*}
\]

in which x represents the individual laboratory average δ11B, X* the robust mean, and s* the robust standard deviation. An absolute z-score below or equal to 2 is considered to be acceptable, absolute z-score values between 2 and 3 are of likely questionable quality, or in the case of laboratory 10 reflect on a carbonate-specific constant offset between N-TIMS and MC-ICP-MS (see also Foster et al. 2013). A z-score value beyond 3 suggests that results are outside the satisfactory range. Given...
that $s^*$ is used for determining the z-score for each laboratory mean, this approach may systematically exclude certain laboratory results as outliers (i.e., those with most distinct $\delta^{11}B$ relative to $X^*$. However, given the distribution of our data sets, those mean laboratory $\delta^{11}B$ that fell beyond a z-score of 3 are relatively clear cases of questionable quality (Figures 1 and 2).

**Results**

Throughout Figures 1–3, the order of laboratories is kept the same in the respective panels, chosen so that Figure 1a displays $\delta^{11}B$ in increasing order, hence does not simply follow the order of laboratories shown in Tables 3 and 4. Range bars plotted in Figures 1a, b and 2a, b represent the reproducibility precision expressed as 2s of the three replicate analyses carried out in each laboratory. While a 2s derived from a population of three data points cannot provide an accurate 95% confidence limit, it becomes apparent from the individual reported $\delta^{11}B$ that range bars shown in this manner provide a reasonable insight into the intermediate precision of each laboratory (see Figures 1 and 2, and Tables 3 and 4). Range bars in Figure 3 display the provided 2s intermediate precision for each individually measured
aliquot, which take into account the variable number of replications performed in each laboratory ($n = 2–10$; see Tables 3 and 4). The calculated robust means are shown as grey lines and the robust standard deviations $2s^*$ plotted as a shaded area in Figures 1a, b and 2a, b. The calculated $z$-score for each data point is shown in panels c and d. Laboratory means plotting within a $z$-score of $-2$ to $2$ plot within the shaded area in panels of Figures 1c, d and 2c, d. The $z$-score threshold with an absolute value of 3 is marked with a dotted line on Figures 1 and 2.

We note that the few obvious outliers (identified via $|z| > 3$) in our interlaboratory comparison were all shifted towards lower reported $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ (Figures 1 and 2). Laboratory 4 only reported $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ for un-oxidised JCp-1 and JCt-1 reference material powders, and submitted ratios fall outside the $z$-score reliability threshold. Laboratory 6 provided results for oxidised standard $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ for both JCp-1 and JCt-1 that also fail this data screening criterion. Although $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ from laboratory 6 for oxidised reference materials can be flagged as outliers, the un-oxidised mean $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ for both reference materials of laboratory 6 agrees well within the range of $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ reported from the majority of other laboratories.

The various mass spectrometry approaches (i.e., N-TIMS vs. ICP-MS) did not lead to any clear isotopic shift between reported $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ for JCp-1 yet potentially slightly higher $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ for JCt-1 for N-TIMS (Figures 1–3, Tables 3 and 4) (cf. Farmer et al. 2016). The choice of sample introduction system (i.e., quartz vs. PFA spray chamber, or alternatively direct injection) and purification method for the nine MC-ICP-MS-based data sets also did not lead to resolvable differences in results (Figure 3).
The results after ion exchange purification or using the sublimation technique both led to $\delta^{11}$B with $z$-scores close to zero (not shown). Some laboratories reported elevated boron blank levels; however, these did not result in clearly distinct final $\delta^{11}$B values (not shown).

Overall, the resultant robust mean and associated robust standard deviation for un-oxidised JCp-1 is 24.36 ± 0.45‰ ($2\sigma$), compared with 24.25 ± 0.22‰ ($2\sigma$) for the same material subjected to oxidative cleaning (Figure 4). For un-oxidised JCt-1, respective compositions are 16.39 ± 0.60‰ ($2\sigma$) and 16.24 ± 0.38‰ ($2\sigma$) for oxidised material. Hence, the robust means of cleaned and uncleaned powders are within error (for both reference material powders), but with the oxidised results only marginally lower than the un-oxidised material. A two-sided Student’s t-test comparing laboratory means screened for outliers during the robust mean and robust standard deviation assessment; see methods above) provides a $p$-value of 0.12 for comparison of oxidised and un-oxidised JCp-1, and 0.17 for comparison of oxidised and un-oxidised JCt-1, confirming the populations are not different at 95% level of confidence. The difference in the mean values for the two reference materials in the respective laboratories (i.e., $\Delta \delta^{11}$B = mean $\delta^{11}$B$_{JCp-1}$ - mean $\delta^{11}$B$_{JCt-1}$) is 7.98‰ for un-oxidised and 8.01‰ for oxidised reference materials.

Figure 3. Effect of sample ionisation/introduction system used, displaying results from three repeat samples per laboratory and cleaning protocol followed (cf. Tables 3 and 4 for data). Shown is the offset in measured individual $\delta^{11}$B (three results per laboratory) from the respective interlaboratory robust mean. Symbols group data produced using (i) a quartz or (ii) PFA spray chamber, (iii) direct sample injection into the plasma or (iv) thermal sample ionisation. Shaded area corresponds to the $\delta^{11}$B measurement precision range enclosed by the double robust standard deviation $2\sigma$ (see text for Discussion). Note that the $y$-axis scales of panel (a) and (c) (JCp-1 un-oxidised/oxidised), as well as those for panels (b) and (d) (JCt-1 un-oxidised/oxidised), have been matched to allow better comparison between data sets. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
This difference in reference material $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ caused by cleaning is hence identical (within measurement precision) and suggests lack of preferential $^{11}\text{B}$ or $^{10}\text{B}$ removal for both reference materials.

In order to set the above reported robust means and robust standard deviations for JCp-1 and JCt-1 in context with alternative data handling approaches, we also report the results of two simpler statistical approaches: In the first alternative, we calculated the median of each data set ($n = 4$) using the respective individual mean of the $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ results of individual laboratories for each approach (un-oxidised or oxidised) and material (JCp-1 or JCt-1) ($n = 9$ or 10). While the resultant median for each data set is either very close or even identical to the robust mean, the resultant mean average deviation (not to be mistaken with the median average deviation, MAD) is significantly smaller than our calculated robust standard deviation $2s^*$. The effect is most drastic for un-oxidised JCt-1 (Table 5). Repeating this exercise in a second alternative data treatment approach, now considering every replicate result for each of the four data sets again ($n = 27$ or 30) provides comparable median $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ values and slightly more expanded mean average deviations. Given that these mean average deviations are very close to or below the reported intermediate precision ($2s$) of individual laboratory results (see Tables 2 and 3), these mean average deviations are deemed unrealistically small, not reflecting realistic $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ discrepancies.
| Lab ID | Replicate type/number | Replicate mean $\delta^{11}$B | 2s | n(1) | Amount used (mg) | Lab mean $\delta^{11}$B | Laboratory 2s (n = 3) | z-score | Offset from robust mean | Δ$\delta^{11}$B (oxidised–un-oxidised) |
|--------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----|------|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.63                         | 0.08| 3    | 2.37            | 24.71                    | 0.24                   | 1.55    | 0.35                   | 17.8                                         |
| A      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.66                         | 0.11| 3    | 1.83            | 24.71                    | 0.24                   | 1.55    | 0.35                   | 21.6                                         |
| A      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.85                         | 0.18| 3    | 2.03            | 24.71                    | 0.24                   | 1.55    | 0.35                   | 17.6                                         |
| B      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.45                         | 0.04| 3    | 0.96            | 24.39                    | 0.12                   | 0.12    | 0.00                   | 5.00                                         |
| B      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.34                         | 0.06| 3    | 7.2             | 24.39                    | 0.12                   | 0.12    | 0.00                   | 6.40                                         |
| B      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.37                         | 0.09| 3    | 5.0             | 24.39                    | 0.12                   | 0.12    | 0.00                   | 7.80                                         |
| C      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.12                         | 0.26| 3    | 6.2             | 24.09                    | 0.11                   | -1.21   | -0.02                  | 6.14                                         |
| C      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.03                         | 0.26| 3    | 6.5             | 24.09                    | 0.11                   | -1.21   | -0.02                  | 7.28                                         |
| C      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.12                         | 0.15| 3    | 6.2             | 24.09                    | 0.11                   | -1.21   | -0.02                  | 6.40                                         |
| D      | Un-oxidised A         | 22.49                         | 0.13| 3    | 200             | 22.57                    | 0.15                   | -0.79   | -0.18                  | -7.92                                         |
| D      | Un-oxidised B         | 22.57                         | 0.56| 3    | 200             | 22.57                    | 0.15                   | -0.79   | -0.18                  | -1.80                                         |
| D      | Un-oxidised C         | 22.64                         | 0.40| 3    | 200             | 22.57                    | 0.15                   | -0.79   | -0.18                  | -0.51                                         |
| E      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.28                         | 0.11| 5    | 99              | 24.32                    | 0.08                   | -0.18   | 0.04                   | 0.02                                         |
| E      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.32                         | 0.16| 5    | 102             | 24.32                    | 0.08                   | -0.18   | 0.04                   | 0.02                                         |
| E      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.36                         | 0.19| 5    | 103             | 24.32                    | 0.08                   | -0.18   | 0.04                   | 0.02                                         |
| F      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.72                         | 0.26| 4    | 50              | 24.56                    | 0.31                   | 0.88    | 0.20                   | 97.0                                         |
| F      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.57                         | 0.17| 4    | 50              | 24.56                    | 0.31                   | 0.88    | 0.20                   | 50.0                                         |
| F      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.41                         | 0.16| 4    | 50              | 24.56                    | 0.31                   | 0.88    | 0.20                   | 50.0                                         |
| G      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.31                         | 0.20| 2    | 10              | 24.36                    | 0.15                   | -0.01   | 0.00                   | 10.0                                         |
| G      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.32                         | 0.20| 2    | 10              | 24.36                    | 0.15                   | -0.01   | 0.00                   | 10.0                                         |
| G      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.45                         | 0.20| 2    | 10              | 24.36                    | 0.15                   | -0.01   | 0.00                   | 10.0                                         |
| H      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.46                         | 0.12| 4    | 102             | 24.46                    | 0.18                   | -0.42   | 0.10                   | 10.1                                         |
| H      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.37                         | 0.16| 4    | 119             | 24.46                    | 0.18                   | -0.42   | 0.10                   | 9.70                                         |
| H      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.55                         | 0.12| 4    | 124             | 24.46                    | 0.18                   | -0.42   | 0.10                   | 9.55                                         |
| I      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.48                         | 0.11| 3    | 10              | 24.49                    | 0.07                   | 0.50    | 0.13                   | 10.0                                         |
| I      | Un-oxidised B         | 24.46                         | 0.07| 4    | 10              | 24.49                    | 0.07                   | 0.50    | 0.13                   | 10.0                                         |
| I      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.53                         | 0.06| 4    | 10              | 24.49                    | 0.07                   | 0.50    | 0.13                   | 10.0                                         |
| J      | Un-oxidised A         | 24.10                         | 0.27| 10   | 5.1             | 24.21                    | 1.04                   | 0.68    | -0.15                  | 2.49                                         |
| J      | Un-oxidised B         | 23.73                         | 0.25| 8    | 5.5             | 24.21                    | 1.04                   | 0.68    | -0.15                  | 3.33                                         |
| J      | Un-oxidised C         | 24.76                         | 0.19| 9    | 6.0             | 24.21                    | 1.04                   | 0.68    | -0.15                  | 3.49                                         |
## Table 4

**JCt-1 reference material results (un-oxidised and oxidised)**

| Lab ID | Replicate type/number | Lab mean $\delta^{11}$B | Replicate mean | Amount used (mg) | $z$-score | Offset from robust mean | $\Delta \delta^{11}$B (oxidised-un-oxidised) |
|--------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| A      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.33                    | 0.12           | 3 15.1           | 16.35     | 0.63                   | -0.14                                      |
| A      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.04                    | 0.09           | 3 13.7           | 16.35     | 0.63                   | -0.14                                      |
| A      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.67                    | n.d.           |                  |           |                        |                                            |
| B      | Un-oxidised A         | n.d.                     |                |                  |           |                        |                                            |
| B      | Un-oxidised B         | n.d.                     |                |                  |           |                        |                                            |
| B      | Un-oxidised C         | n.d.                     |                |                  |           |                        |                                            |
| C      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.28                    | 0.17           | 3 6.50           | 16.12     | 0.37                   | -0.90                                      |
| C      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.16                    | 0.45           | 3 6.34           | 16.12     | 0.37                   | -0.90                                      |
| C      | Un-oxidised C         | 15.92                    | 0.06           | 3 6.76           |           |                        |                                            |
| D      | Un-oxidised A         | 15.43                    | 0.25           | 3 200            |           |                        |                                            |
| D      | Un-oxidised B         | 15.34                    | 0.48           | 3 200            |           |                        |                                            |
| D      | Un-oxidised C         | 15.20                    | 0.13           | 3 200            |           |                        |                                            |
| E      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.29                    | 0.17           | 5 201            |           |                        |                                            |
| E      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.31                    | 0.05           | 5 200            |           |                        |                                            |
| F      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.11                    | 0.26           | 4 50             |           |                        |                                            |
| F      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.12                    | 0.23           | 4 50             | 16.18     | 0.23                   | -0.70                                      |
| F      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.31                    | 0.18           | 4 50             |           |                        |                                            |
| G      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.60                    | 0.20           | 2 20             |           |                        |                                            |
| G      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.51                    | 0.20           | 2 20             | 16.47     | 0.32                   | -0.27                                      |
| G      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.29                    | 0.00           | 2 20             |           |                        |                                            |
| H      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.53                    | 0.21           | 4 10.17          |           |                        |                                            |
| H      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.55                    | 0.29           | 4 12.78          | 16.56     | 0.06                   | 0.57                                       |
| H      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.59                    | 0.28           | 4 12.52          |           |                        |                                            |
| I      | Un-oxidised A         | 16.44                    | 0.06           | 4 10             |           |                        |                                            |
| I      | Un-oxidised B         | 16.37                    | 0.12           | 4 10             | 16.41     | 0.08                   | 0.10                                       |
| I      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.44                    | 0.15           | 3 10             |           |                        |                                            |
| J      | Un-oxidised A         | 17.26                    | 0.31           | 10 7.17          |           |                        |                                            |
| J      | Un-oxidised B         | 17.06                    | 0.19           | 10 6.21          | 16.89     | 0.96                   | 1.70                                       |
| J      | Un-oxidised C         | 16.35                    | 0.20           | 10 5.29          |           |                        |                                            |
between individual laboratories, while the robust standard deviation better illustrates the scatter in the data sets (Figure 4). Table 5 summarises the various statistic results, and Table 6 provides a list of the laboratories that submitted data.

**Discussion**

Overall, the agreement in $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ values reported here is very encouraging. Our BIIP data set demonstrates that differences between the individual laboratories taking part in this study are orders of magnitude smaller than in earlier interlaboratory comparison efforts (Gonfiantini et al. 2003, Aggarwal et al. 2009, Foster et al. 2013). The slightly expanded robust standard deviation for JCt-1 ($2\sigma$ of 0.60‰ for un-oxidised vs. 0.38‰ for oxidised powders) compared with the respective robust standard deviation for JCp-1 (0.45‰, un-oxidised vs. 0.22‰ for oxidised materials) is likely attributable to lower B/Ca in JCt-1 (~191 µmol mol$^{-1}$) compared with JCp-1 (~460 µmol mol$^{-1}$) (Hathorne et al. 2013), resulting in less favourable boron to matrix ratios. Besides the lower B content of JCt-1, several participating laboratories also reported that processing of this biogenic carbonate was not straightforward, particularly if samples were not oxidatively cleaned before elemental purification. Loading of un-oxidised JCt-1 solution onto the ion exchange columns in one laboratory even led to column blockages and resin needing to be discarded. The ionisation of un-oxidised JCt-1 equally posed significant challenges during N-TIMS measurement: since N-TIMS measures the $^{11}\text{BO}_{2}^{−}/^{10}\text{BO}_{2}^{−}$ ($m/z = 43$ relative to $m/z = 42$) ratio, organic matter (CNO) is known to interfere on $m/z$ 42 (Hemming and Hanson 1994) and therefore may explain the larger data variance in the measurement results in un-oxidised samples measured via N-TIMS.

Although detailed information on the behaviour of the two reference material powders during micro-sublimation purification is not available, results presented from the laboratory using this approach indicate slightly elevated measurement precisions for JCt-1 if no prior oxidative cleaning was performed ($2\sigma$ of 0.37‰ for un-oxidised vs. 0.05‰ for oxidised reference materials). The purpose of exposing carbonates to an oxidative reagent is to remove carbonate-hosted organics (Boyle and Keigwin 1985). The observation that results are more reproducible for powder aliquots that underwent oxidative cleaning suggests that inconsistent results may at least in part be caused by organics present in the coral and giant clam carbonate matrix (Cuif and Dauphin 2005, Yoshimura et al. 2014). The observed improvement could either be controlled by removal of organically bound boron with a distinct isotopic signature during oxidative treatment, leading to more reproducible $\delta^{11}\text{B}$. Alternatively, since the oxidative treatment of biogenic carbonates often decreases the viscosity of the dissolved sample solution, this lowered viscosity should aid sample handling during elemental purification. Stewart et al. (2016) reported substantially lowered B/Ca for oxidised powders of JCp-1 (cleaned B/Ca of 325 ± 2 µmol mol$^{-1}$ vs. uncleaned B/Ca of 438 ± 2 µmol mol$^{-1}$; % RSD), suggesting removal of ~26% boron during oxidative cleaning. At least some of the boron lost during oxidative purification.

### Table 5.

**Summary for JCp-1 and JCt-1 reference materials of intercalibration routine**

| Reference Material | $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ Non-oxidised | $\delta^{11}\text{B}$ Oxidised | Median of Laboratory Averages (Mean Average Deviation) | Median of Individual Results (Mean Average Deviation) |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| JCp-1 non-oxidised  | 24.36 0.45 10                      | 24.25 0.22 9                  | 24.37 0.31 10                                           | 24.22 0.12 27                                |
| JCp-1 oxidised     | 24.37 0.34 30                      | 24.25 0.22 9                  | 24.37 0.34 30                                           | 24.22 0.12 27                                |
|JCt-1 non-oxidised  | 16.39 0.60 9                       | 16.24 0.38 9                  | 16.35 0.26 9                                            | 16.25 0.28 27                                |
|JCt-1 oxidised     | 16.33 0.30 27                      | 16.24 0.38 9                  | 16.33 0.30 27                                           | 16.25 0.28 27                                |
treatment was likely of organic origin. However, although deemed possible, whether the organic fraction indeed yields a different isotopic composition compared with the carbonate fraction remains to be shown.

Oxidative treatment leads to better data agreement between various laboratories, yet our results suggest that aggressive bleaching (here using NaClO) of carbonate powders prior to analysis may result in undesired effects. While the $\delta^{11}B$ for un-oxidised reference materials provided by laboratory 6 are in excellent agreement with the other data sets ($z$-scores of 0.88 for JCp-1 and -0.7 for JCt-1; see Tables 3 and 4), their reported oxidised $\delta^{11}B$ were identified as outliers. On the other hand, although the systematic shift in reported $\delta^{11}B$ for oxidatively cleaned materials from laboratory 6 points towards the oxidative treatment in causing this effect, the oxidative cleaning protocol pursued by laboratory 6 did not deviate substantially from that used in other laboratories, using NaClO at room temperature (Table 2). Hence the issue whether oxidative treatment indeed may cause fractionation of carbonate-hosted $\delta^{11}B$ cannot be resolved with the available data.

Nevertheless, since oxidative cleaning improves the behaviour of boron on chromatographic resins and leads to better agreement of the measurement results between the majority of laboratories, we recommend including this step (ie, short exposure to buffered H$_2$O$_2$ or NaClO) for boron isotope analysis of biogenic carbonates.

Conclusions

Two biogenic marine carbonate reference materials from the Geological Survey of Japan (JCp-1 and JCt-1) were analysed for their boron isotopic ratio in ten laboratories with a documented record of prior boron isotope analyses. Compiled results reveal an encouragingly good agreement of the laboratory means between laboratories that is close to commonly reported in-house intermediate precisions. Since the vast majority of research groups participating in this study employed inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometric approaches, the analytical assessment is somewhat biased towards these MC-ICP-MS approaches. Nevertheless, several general key conclusions can be drawn that also apply to thermal ionisation mass spectrometric approaches.

More consistent boron isotope results are obtained if carbonate materials were exposed to moderate oxidative treatment prior to sample dissolution. While utmost care in sample handling for boron isotopic studies is always required, the analytical approach taken for extracting boron from the carbonate matrix, as well as the sample introduction system used for MC-ICP-MS approaches, does not lead to resolvable isotope offsets. Following the oxidative cleaning approach, reported $\delta^{11}B$ for JCt-1 agrees to within ± 0.38‰, and ± 0.22‰ for JCp-1 (2s).

Given that future research efforts will tend to focus on smaller test portion sizes and/or carbonates with low B/Ca ratios, one of the most pressing prerequisites for generating accurate $\delta^{11}B$ will be sustained or improved boron total procedural blank levels. The increased use of $10^{12}$ Ω (Anagnostou et al. 2019, Junkova et al. 2019) or even $10^{13}$ Ω resistors (Lloyd and Sadekov 2018) should equally help in generating boron isotopic data that are comparable between different laboratories even for small test portions of a few nanograms of boron. Finally, we note that despite the increasing levels of interlaboratory consistency, boron isotope measurements remain challenging, even for those laboratories that have been making these measurements for many years. However, our study highlights that with care and commitment, it is possible to achieve a very encouraging level of consistency within the community.

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Table 6.
List of laboratories that submitted results to the BIIP study

| I | Isotope Geochemistry Laboratory, Department of Earth Sciences, National Cheng Kung University, No 1 University Road, 701 Tainan, Taiwan |
| II | ILSCE/IPSL, CEA-CNRS-UVSQ-UPSACLAY, Gif-sur-Yvette 91191, France |
| III | Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris, Sorbonne Paris Cité, Université Paris-Diderot, UMR CNRS 7154, 1 rue Jussieu, 75238 Paris Cedex 05, France |
| IV | School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of St Andrews, North Street, St Andrews, UK |
| V | Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences and Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University 61 Route 9W Palisades, NY 10964, U.S.A. |
| VI | ALS Scandinavia AB, Aurorum 10, SE-97775 Luleå, Sweden |
| VII | Laboratoire d’Hydrologie et de Géochimie de Strasbourg, EOST, Université de Strasbourg et CNRS, 1 rue Blessig, 67084 Strasbourg, France |
| VIII | School of Ocean and Earth Science, University of Southampton, National Oceanography Centre, Southampton, European Way, Southampton SO14 3ZH, UK |
| IX | Geological and Planetary Sciences, Caltech, 1200 E California Blvd, Pasadena, California, 91125, U.S.A. |
| XI | ARC Centre for Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and School of Earth and Environment, The University of Western Australia, Crawley 6009, Australia |

Note that the order of laboratories here does not correspond to the order of laboratory numbers in Tables 3 and 4, as well as Figures 1–3.
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Data availability statement

All data presented and discussed in this study are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

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