

**Short title:** Automated peripheral nerve analysis

1

1 **A simple and robust method for automating analysis of naïve and regenerating peripheral**  
2 **nerves**

3 **Short title:** Automated peripheral nerve histomorphometry

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6 Alison L. Wong, MD, MSE,<sup>a</sup> Nicholas Hricz, BS,<sup>a</sup> Harsha Malapati, BS,<sup>a</sup> Nicholas von  
7 Guionneau, MBBS,<sup>a</sup> Michael Wong, MD,<sup>b</sup> Thomas Harris, MBBS,<sup>a</sup> Mathieu Boudreau, PhD,<sup>c</sup>  
8 Julien Cohen-Adad, PhD,<sup>c</sup> Sami Tuffaha, MD<sup>a</sup>

9

10 a. Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Johns Hopkins University  
11 Baltimore, MD, USA

12

13 b. Dalhousie University Faculty of Medicine, Department of Anesthesia, Pain Management &  
14 Perioperative Medicine  
15 Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 2Y9

16

17 c. NeuroPoly Lab, Institute of Biomedical Engineering, Polytechnique Montreal  
18 Montreal, QC, Canada H3T 1J4

19

20

21 **Corresponding Author:**

22 Dr. Alison Wong

23 Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery

24 Johns Hopkins University - Ross Research Building

25 720 Rutland Ave, Room 749A

26 Baltimore, MD, USA 21205

27 Tel: (410) 502-5475

28 Fax: (410) 955-9308

29 Email: [alison.wong@dal.ca](mailto:alison.wong@dal.ca)

30

31 **Abstract**

32 **Background**

33 Manual axon histomorphometry (AH) is time- and resource-intensive, which has inspired many  
34 attempts at automation. However, there has been little investigation on implementation of  
35 automated programs for widespread use. Ideally such a program should be able to perform AH  
36 across imaging modalities and nerve states. AxonDeepSeg (ADS) is an open source deep  
37 learning program that has previously been validated in electron microscopy. We evaluated the  
38 robustness of ADS for peripheral nerve axonal histomorphometry in light micrographs prepared  
39 using two different methods.

40

41 **Methods**

42 Axon histomorphometry using ADS and manual analysis (gold-standard) was performed on  
43 light micrographs of naïve or regenerating rat median nerve cross-sections prepared with either  
44 toluidine-resin or osmium-paraffin embedding protocols. The parameters of interest included  
45 axon count, axon diameter, myelin thickness, and g-ratio.

46

47 **Results**

48 Manual and automatic ADS axon counts demonstrated good agreement in naïve nerves and  
49 moderate agreement on regenerating nerves. There were small but consistent differences in  
50 measured axon diameter, myelin thickness and g-ratio; however, absolute differences were  
51 small. Both methods appropriately identified differences between naïve and regenerating  
52 nerves. ADS was faster than manual axon analysis.

53

54 **Conclusions**

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55 Without any algorithm retraining, ADS was able to appropriately identify critical differences  
56 between naïve and regenerating nerves and work with different sample preparation methods of  
57 peripheral nerve light micrographs. While there were differences between absolute values  
58 between manual and ADS, ADS performed consistently and required much less time. ADS is  
59 an accessible and robust tool for AH that can provide consistent analysis across protocols and  
60 nerve states.

61

62 **Key words:** axon histomorphometry; machine learning; peripheral nervous system; outcome  
63 measure; histology

64

65 **Introduction**

66 Axon histomorphometry (AH) is the most commonly used outcome measure in peripheral nerve  
67 research. It involves axon quantification and measurement of axonal micro-structure  
68 parameters on nerve cross-sections [1,2]. Manual measurements has traditionally been the  
69 gold-standard for AH, but this approach is both time- and resource-intensive and has known  
70 limitations related to differing sample preparation protocols and inter-rater reliability [1,2].

71  
72 These widely recognized limitations of manual AH have inspired many tools to achieve some  
73 degree of automation [3–5]. A major obstacle to full automation using traditional programming  
74 methods is the difficulty of achieving axonal segmentation; that is, the process by which the  
75 boundaries of the myelin sheath surrounding individual axons are defined so that each axon  
76 can be measured separately [3,6,7] To illustrate the challenge of axonal segmentation, axons in  
77 undamaged nerves reside in close proximity with myelin sheaths tending to abut each other; in  
78 comparison, debris is frequently observed in regenerating nerves that can be mislabeled as an  
79 axon. These and other nuances need to be carefully defined to improve axonal segmentation,  
80 but manual correction is still required due to frequent errors that can affect downstream  
81 calculations and substantially reduce measurement accuracy.

82  
83 Machine learning has the potential to address the barriers to automating AH. Unlike the rigid  
84 design and inflexibility of traditional programs, machine learning algorithms iteratively create a  
85 set of rules by training on a large dataset [7,8]. Deep learning, also known as computer vision,  
86 is a subset of machine learning that can use convolutional neural networks, where each  
87 network hierarchically defines specific features of images and does not require structured  
88 numerical input data [9,10]. Various programs have leveraged deep learning for nerve analysis,

89 but their generalizability has not been investigated for implementation outside of the research  
90 groups in which they were developed [4–7,10–12].

91

92 AxonDeepSeg (ADS) is a novel deep learning program for fully-automated AH originally  
93 developed using both scanning- and transmission-electron micrographs of the brain and spinal  
94 cord [7]. The purpose of the present study was to validate the performance of ADS “out-of-the-  
95 box” in peripheral nerve light micrographs to determine if it can be implemented reliably  
96 without retraining the program for light microscopy. Given the robustness of its deep learning  
97 algorithm, we hypothesized that ADS could perform AH on light micrographs of peripheral  
98 nerves across different tissue preparation protocols and nerve states. To test this hypothesis,  
99 we performed a validation study using adult rat median nerve preparations, comparing ADS to  
100 the gold-standard of manual axon quantification and critical parameter measurements.

101

## 102 **Materials and Methods**

### 103 *Animals*

104 This study was carried out in accordance with National Institutes of Health recommendations in  
105 the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. The protocol was approved by the  
106 Johns Hopkins University Animal Care and Use Committee (Protocol number: RA18M74). All  
107 surgery was performed under isoflurane anesthesia with pre- and post-procedure  
108 subcutaneous buprenorphine analgesia. We used four adult male Lewis rats (Envigo, Frederick,  
109 MD), 12 to 24 weeks old and weighing 300 to 400 g. Two animals had no intervention prior to  
110 median nerve harvest. The other two underwent cut and repair of the proximal aspect of the  
111 median nerve at the level of the pectoralis and were sacrificed 16 weeks later. There were no  
112 specific exclusion criteria and no animals were excluded from the analysis.

113

114 *Tissue harvest*

115 The rats were anesthetized with isoflurane prior to exposure of the heart for cardiac perfusion.  
116 Each rat was perfused through the left ventricle with 200 mL of phosphate buffered saline  
117 (PBS) followed by 200 mL of 4% paraformaldehyde (Sigma Aldrich, St Louis, MO) in PBS.  
118 Unilateral median nerves were exposed through a volar approach and dissected free of  
119 surrounding tissue under a dissection microscope. To compare embedding protocols, in the  
120 two naïve rats, 10 mm samples of each nerve were collected at the mid-humerus level. These  
121 were further cut into two 5 mm samples, each of which was allocated to one of two processing  
122 protocols: osmium-paraffin or toluidine-resin. For the regenerating samples, the median nerve  
123 was harvested at the level of the mid-forearm and nerve was processed in osmium-paraffin  
124 only.

125

126 *Toluidine blue with resin embedding*

127 One 5 mm sample from each naïve nerve was fixed for 48 hours at 4° C in a solution of 2%  
128 glutaraldehyde (16216, EMS), 3% paraformaldehyde (15754-S, EMS) and 0.1 M Sorensen's  
129 phosphate buffer pH 7.2 solution. Specimens were post-fixed in 2% osmium tetroxide,  
130 dehydrated in ascending alcohol series (starting at 50%) and embedded in Araldite® 502 resin  
131 (Polyscience). Semi-thin (1 µm) tissue sections were cut on an Ultracut E microtome (Reichert  
132 Inc, Buffalo, NY) and stained with 1% Toluidine blue.

133

134 *Osmium tetroxide staining only with paraffin embedding*

135 This protocol is based on a previously published staining and embedding procedure with all  
136 steps carried out at 4° C [13]. One 5 mm sample from each nerve was fixed in a 4%  
137 paraformaldehyde in PBS solution for 2 hours. Samples were then placed in two serial washes  
138 of PBS solution with gentle agitation for 30 seconds each prior to being submerged for 2 hours

139 in 2% osmium solution (RT 19172, EMS). Thereafter, the washing step was repeated, and  
140 samples were stored in 0.2% glycine (Sigma) in PBS solution until embedding. Samples were  
141 processed by graded ethanol dehydration (starting at 30%), cleared with Pro-Par (Anatech Ltd)  
142 and infiltrated with paraffin. After processing, samples were embedded in paraffin, then cut  
143 with a microtome into 7  $\mu\text{m}$  thick sections.

144

#### 145 *Imaging*

146 Two representative slices of naïve median nerve (one from each animal) were chosen from  
147 each of the two staining/embedding protocols (toluidine-resin, osmium-paraffin), and two  
148 representative slices of regenerating nerve (one from each animal) in osmium-paraffin were  
149 chosen. Microscopy was performed using a Zeiss Axioplan 2 (Carl Zeiss Microscopy LLC,  
150 White Plains, NY) with a 100x oil lens (numerical aperture 1.30) and digital images were  
151 captured using a Jenoptik ProgRes C5 camera (Jupiter, FL) mounted to the microscope. At this  
152 magnification, a single nerve slice produced 12 to 17 micrograph segments.

153

#### 154 *Manual analysis*

155 For manual analysis, the 12 to 17 non-overlapping micrograph segments for each nerve slice  
156 were analyzed individually by a blinded assessor. These micrograph segments (.tiff files,  
157 2580x1944 pixels, 15 MB) were imported into ImageJ (FIJI Package, version 2.0, NIH,  
158 Bethesda, MD) and, per stereological principles, at the center of each micrograph segment we  
159 sampled a box measuring either 25x25  $\mu\text{m}$  (625  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ; naïve nerves) or 40x40  $\mu\text{m}$  (1600  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ;  
160 regenerating nerves) (Fig.1)[14]. This method created non-overlapping sample areas across the  
161 entire nerve. Axons touching the top and right borders of the box were included in the  
162 measurements while those touching the bottom and left borders were not [1]. The larger  
163 sampling area was used for regenerating nerves due to their lower axon density. If the sampled

164 area was at an edge, and axons only covered a portion of the area, a multiplication factor was  
165 applied to ensure that the counts were comparable across all samples from the same nerve.  
166 Thresholding to create a black and white image was performed manually so that small axons  
167 were captured while simultaneously trying to avoid artificially thickening myelin sheaths. For  
168 fibers where myelin touched, lines were drawn between them so that they would be individually  
169 segmented. Counting was performed manually and then axon diameter and myelin thickness  
170 were individually measured using the “minferet” command. G-ratio (axon diameter divided by  
171 fiber diameter) was calculated from these values.

172

173 **Fig 1. Nerve slices at 10x magnification demonstrating number of micrographs and stereology**  
174 **sample.**

175 (A) Representative naïve nerve (osmium-paraffin protocol). Grey boxes represent individual  
176 micrographs, while the clear square in the middle represents the stereologic sampled area of  
177 25x25  $\mu\text{m}$  box (625  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ) used for naïve samples. Axons touching the top and right borders of  
178 the box were included in the measurements while those touching the bottom and left borders  
179 were not. (B) Representative regenerating nerve (osmium-paraffin protocol), demonstrating  
180 stereologic sampling with larger 40x40  $\mu\text{m}$  box (1600  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ), given decreased axon density.

181

182 *Automated analysis*

183 AxonDeepSeg (ADS) is an open source program created using the Python coding language,  
184 and its development has been previously described [7]. In brief, deep learning models were  
185 trained from a dataset containing transmission electron micrographs with different acquisition  
186 resolutions in order to increase variability and improve generalization. All samples were from  
187 the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) of mice, rats, and humans. The pipeline of  
188 ADS development consisted of four steps: data preparation, learning, evaluation, and

189 prediction. Ground truth labeling for segmentation was created using the image processing  
190 software GIMP (<https://www.gimp.org/>) and was cross-checked by at least two researchers.  
191 The deep learning architecture is based on the U-net, which combined a contracting path with  
192 traditional convolutions and then an expanding path with up-convolutions. This allowed for  
193 prediction of 3 classes: axon, myelin, and background. To avoid border effects during  
194 prediction, inference is run on a larger sample square but only calculates within a smaller  
195 square, then iterates over the entire image by shifting this sample square.

196

197 For our study, the same .tiff images used in the manual analysis were imported into ADS  
198 (version 2.1, with FSLEyes extension) and the resolution was entered (0.05 micrometer per  
199 pixel). The transmission electron microscopy pre-set was chosen because it has dark myelin  
200 and lighter axons, similar to light microscopy. Segmentation was performed automatically.  
201 Though manual correction is easily performed in the graphic user interface of ADS, to assess  
202 the accuracy of the automatic segmentation we refrained from correction beyond removal of  
203 segmented connective tissue (Fig.2). ADS then computed axon measurements for the entire  
204 micrograph and created a .csv file of each axon, its coordinates, and its respective  
205 measurements. To match the stereology sampling used in manual analysis, only axons within  
206 the same coordinates as in the manual analysis were included in our results.

207

208 **Fig 2. Representative screen shots showing user interface of AxonDeepSeg (ADS).**

209 (A) .tiff images were imported individually into the program, resolution was defined, and  
210 transmission electron microscopy was chosen as it produces dark myelin and lighter axons, as  
211 in light microscopy. Segmentation was then performed automatically, creating different layers  
212 for the axons and myelin. (B) Minimal manual correction was performed to remove objects  
213 mislabeled as axons. Histomorphometric measurements and axon count were then calculated

214 by pressing the “Compute morphometrics” button, and a .csv file with these values was  
215 generated and segmented images were saved. (A) and (B) are micrographs of naïve nerves  
216 prepared in toluidine-resin protocol. (C) Micrograph of naïve nerve, osmium-paraffin protocol.  
217 (D) Micrograph of regenerating nerve, osmium-paraffin protocol.

218

### 219 *Statistical analysis*

220 Data analyses were conducted using R (R Core Team, 3.6.1). Descriptive statistics were  
221 calculated for axon count, myelin thickness, and g-ratio. The primary outcome of comparability  
222 of axon counts was evaluated using Bland-Altman plots and intraclass correlation (ICC). The  
223 Bland-Altman plots show the difference between each value obtained from ADS and manual  
224 measurement, plotted against the mean of each measurement pair [15]; 95% of differences are  
225 expected to be contained within 1.96 standard deviations of the mean difference (i.e., the  
226 “limits of agreement”), otherwise fixed measurement bias must be ruled out. Secondary  
227 outcomes of myelin thickness, axon diameter, and g-ratio were compared using two-sample t-  
228 tests and Cohen’s d for effect size. A *P*-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.  
229 Cohen’s d effect size magnitudes were defined as: negligible (< 0.2), small (< 0.5), medium (<  
230 0.8), and large (> 0.8).

231

### 232 **Results**

233 The average time for ADS to segment a 15 MB tiff file measuring 2580x1944 pixels was 20  
234 seconds (2018 MacBook Pro, 3.1 GHz Intel Core i5, 8 GB 2133 MHz LPDDR3 RAM), with an  
235 additional minute for minimal manual correction and 1 second for measurement output.  
236 Average time to import the same image into ImageJ, perform manual thresholding, counting  
237 and measurement for a single micrograph was 5 minutes. In total there were 27 micrographs of  
238 the two toluidine-resin naïve nerves (12 and 15), 27 micrographs of the two osmium-paraffin

239 naïve nerves (13 and 14), and 33 micrographs of the two osmium-paraffin regenerating nerves  
240 (16 and 17).

241

242 *Axon count*

243 Average axon count in the 25x25  $\mu\text{m}$  sample areas of the 27 toluidine-resin micrographs for the  
244 two naïve nerves was  $12.31 \pm 4.12$  when counted manually and  $11.79 \pm 3.8$  (mean  $\pm$  standard  
245 deviation) in the ADS output (Fig.3A). Bland-Altman showed limits of agreement ranging from -  
246 5 to 5 and the ICC was 0.76 ( $P < 0.001$ ; Fig.4A).

247

248 **Fig 3. Number of axons in the sampled area.**

249 (A) Naïve nerves prepared with the toluidine-resin protocol, the mean number of axons in the

250  $625 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area for the 27 micrographs. (B) Naïve nerves prepared with the osmium-

251 paraffin protocol, the mean number of axons in the  $625 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area for the 27

252 micrographs. (C) Regenerating nerves prepared with the osmium-paraffin protocol, the mean

253 number of axons in the  $1600 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area for the 33 micrographs. Boxes are 1 interquartile

254 range (IQR), whiskers  $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ .

255

256 **Fig 4. Bland-Altman plots of ADS and manual axon counts.**

257 (A) In naïve nerves prepared with the toluidine-resin protocol, the limits of agreement between

258 ADS and manual counts in the  $625 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area in each micrograph ranged from -5 to 5.

259 (B) In naïve nerves prepared with the osmium-paraffin protocol, the limits of agreement

260 between ADS and manual counts in the  $625 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area ranged from -6 to 6. (C) In

261 regenerating nerves prepared with the osmium-paraffin protocol, the limits of agreement

262 between ADS and manual counts in the  $1600 \mu\text{m}^2$  sample area ranged from -2 to 12.

263

264 Axon count in the same sized sample area for the 27 micrographs osmium-paraffin protocol  
265 naïve nerves was  $13.72 \pm 5.19$  when counted manually, and was  $13.72 \pm 5.78$  in the ADS  
266 output (Fig.3B). Bland-Altman comparison showed good agreement between the counts, with  
267 limits of agreement ranging from -6 to 6. ICC was 0.84 ( $P < 0.001$ ), indicating good to excellent  
268 agreement (Fig.4B). In the regenerating nerves, the average axon count per  $40 \times 40 \mu\text{m}$  sample  
269 area was  $15.96 \pm 7.48$  when counted manually and  $11.09 \pm 5.74$  in the ADS output (Fig.3C).  
270 Bland-Altman limits of agreement were -2 to 12 and the ICC was 0.56 ( $P < 0.001$ ; Fig.4C).

271

### 272 *Measurements*

273 In the naïve nerve toluidine-resin protocol samples, there was a small difference in measured  
274 axon diameters, with larger measurements in ADS compared to manual ( $3.67 \pm 1.92$  vs.  $3.06 \pm$   
275  $1.71$ ,  $t = 4.19$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.34$ ; Fig.5A). Myelin was thicker in the ADS compared to manual  
276 measuring ( $1.16 \pm 0.52$  vs.  $1.06 \pm 0.46$ ,  $t = 2.63$ ,  $P = 0.0089$ ;  $d = 0.21$ ; Fig.6A). Thus g-ratio was  
277 larger in ADS ( $0.59 \pm 0.12$  vs.  $0.57 \pm 0.11$ ,  $t = -2.22$ ,  $P = 0.027$ ;  $d = 0.18$ ; Fig.7A).

278

### 279 **Fig 5. Comparison of axon diameters measured by ADS or manually.**

280 (A-C) Naïve nerves, toluidine-resin protocol; (A) Mean axon diameters for all micrographs for  
281 both nerves; (B) Mean axon diameters in each micrograph for nerve one; (C) Mean axon  
282 diameters in each micrograph for nerve two. (D-F) Naïve nerves, osmium-resin protocol; (D)  
283 Mean axon diameters for all micrographs for both nerves; (E) Mean axon diameters in each  
284 micrograph for nerve one; (F) Mean axon diameters in each micrograph for nerve two. (G-I)  
285 Regenerating nerves, osmium-paraffin protocol; (G) Mean axon diameters for all micrographs  
286 for both nerves; (H) Mean axon diameters in each micrograph for nerve one; (I) Mean axon  
287 diameters in each micrograph for nerve two. Asterisk (\*) = significant ( $P < 0.05$  by two-sample  
288 t-test). Boxes are 1 interquartile range (IQR), whiskers  $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ .

289

290 **Fig 6. Comparison of myelin thickness measured by ADS or manually.**

291 (A-C) Naïve nerves, toluidine-resin protocol; (A) Mean myelin thickness for all micrographs for  
292 both nerves; (B) Mean myelin thickness in each micrograph for nerve one; (C) Mean myelin  
293 thickness in each micrograph for nerve two. (D-F) Naïve nerves, osmium-resin protocol; (D)  
294 Mean myelin thickness for all micrographs for both nerves; (E) Mean myelin thickness in each  
295 micrograph for nerve one; (F) Mean myelin thickness in each micrograph for nerve two. (G-I)  
296 Regenerating nerves, osmium-paraffin protocol; (G) Mean myelin thickness for all micrographs  
297 for both nerves; (H) Mean myelin thickness in each micrograph for nerve one; (I) Mean myelin  
298 thickness in each micrograph for nerve two. Asterisk (\*) = significant ( $P < 0.05$  by two-sample t-  
299 test). Boxes are 1 interquartile range (IQR), whiskers  $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ .

300

301 **Fig 7. Comparison of g-ratio measured by ADS or manually.**

302 (A) Naïve nerves, toluidine-resin protocol, mean g-ratio for all micrographs for both nerves. (B)  
303 Naïve nerves, osmium-paraffin protocol, mean g-ratio for all micrographs for both nerves. (C)  
304 Regenerating nerves, osmium-paraffin protocol, mean g-ratio for all micrographs for both  
305 nerves. Asterisk (\*) = significant ( $P < 0.05$  by two-sample t-test). Boxes are 1 interquartile range  
306 (IQR), whiskers  $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ .

307

308 In naïve nerve osmium-paraffin protocol samples, there was no difference in measured axon  
309 diameter measured by ADS or manually ( $2.45 \pm 1.16$  vs.  $2.47 \pm 1.13$ ,  $t = -0.29$ ,  $P = 0.78$ ;  
310 Fig.5B). Myelin was measured as thicker in ADS compared to manual measurements ( $1.54 \pm$   
311  $0.45$  vs.  $1.35 \pm 0.54$ ,  $t = 4.86$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.38$ ; Fig.6B), and this difference was consistent  
312 across micrographs. In turn, ADS had a smaller g-ratio, defined as axon diameter divided by  
313 fiber diameter ( $0.425 \pm 0.10$  vs.  $0.474 \pm 0.10$ ,  $t = -6.28$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.49$ ; Fig.7B).

314  
315 In regenerating nerves (osmium-paraffin protocol), axon diameters were notably smaller than in  
316 the naïve nerves in both ADS (regenerating vs. naïve:  $1.84 \pm 1.00$  vs.  $2.45 \pm 1.16$ ,  $t = 7.13$ ,  $P <$   
317  $0.001$ ,  $d = 0.56$ ) and manual measurements ( $1.27 \pm 0.87$  vs.  $2.47 \pm 1.13$ ,  $t = 16.3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $d =$   
318  $1.23$ ). ADS measured axon diameter as larger compared to manual measurements ( $1.84 \pm 1.00$   
319 vs.  $1.27 \pm 0.87$ ,  $t = 8.46$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.62$ ; Fig.5C). Unlike in naïve samples, ADS measured  
320 myelin thickness as less than manual measuring ( $0.86 \pm 0.30$  vs.  $1.06 \pm 0.32$ ,  $t = -8.56$ ,  $P <$   
321  $0.001$ ;  $d = -0.60$ ; Fig.6C). This created a significantly larger calculated g-ratio in the ADS data  
322 ( $0.50 \pm 0.16$  vs.  $0.39 \pm 0.14$ ,  $t = 13.8$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ;  $d = 1.0$ ; Fig.7C).

323

## 324 Discussion

325 We aimed to validate the use of the newly developed deep learning program AxonDeepSeg  
326 (ADS) for automated axon histomorphometry (AH) and found that even without algorithm  
327 retraining, ADS was able to appropriately identify critical differences between naïve and  
328 regenerating nerves and work in different sample preparation methods. AH is one of the most  
329 important measures in peripheral nerve research, yet it is a time- and resource-intensive task,  
330 which limits its accessibility as an outcome measure. While there has been a boom in  
331 programs created for AH, none of these have been validated for use outside of the specific  
332 protocols for which they were developed and therefore widespread implementation has been  
333 poor.

334

335 The ADS deep learning algorithm was originally trained and validated using electron  
336 micrographs, but given the increased accessibility of light microscopy, we tested its  
337 application in light micrographs of peripheral nerves [7]. We found that ADS was able to  
338 perform near automatic AH of peripheral nerve light micrographs with results that correlated

339 well to manual analysis but was much faster. Axon quantification in naïve nerves in both  
340 sample preparation protocols showed very good agreement with good interclass correlation  
341 between the manual and ADS counts. In regenerating nerves, the agreement was moderate,  
342 with ADS consistently counting fewer axons. Correlation could have been further improved by  
343 using the segmentation manual correction feature prior to calculating measurements.

344

345 One of the key differences between ADS and manual axon quantification is that ADS counted  
346 and measured every axon within a micrograph. With our manual analysis we used a stereologic  
347 sampling approach where only axons within a 25x25  $\mu\text{m}$  (naïve) or 40x40  $\mu\text{m}$  (regenerating) box  
348 at the center of each micrograph segment was counted, resulting in 12-17 sampled areas for  
349 each nerve. This approach is widely used in AH, in order to expedite time-consuming manual  
350 measurements (REF). Using a stereologic sampling approach, however, increases the risk of  
351 sampling error and bias as a difference in that small sample area can get compounded, leading  
352 to a significant difference in the number of total axons. For our comparisons we specifically  
353 analyzed only the ADS output for the same coordinates as in our manual analysis; however,  
354 ADS can evaluate the entirety of each micrograph rapidly which negates the need for  
355 stereologic sampling. It therefore does not need to be limited by local variation in axon density,  
356 and can avoid the error and bias propagation inherent in extrapolating from a stereologic  
357 approach.

358

359 Axon diameter, myelin thickness, and g-ratio are important AH parameters as they differentiate  
360 subpopulations of axons and can be used for evaluating changes following denervation and  
361 reinnervation [16]. ADS was able to appropriately identify differences in axon diameter, myelin  
362 thickness and g-ratio between naïve and regenerating nerves. Though there were small  
363 differences between ADS and manual measurements, they were in a consistent direction. With

364 our large dataset, this resulted in statistically significant differences even though the absolute  
365 differences were small. The absolute values of these parameters are known to differ between  
366 research labs due to differences in staining and imaging protocols [5,6], and the judgment of  
367 the individual raters doing the segmentations. Therefore, consistency within studies is most  
368 important, and ADS was able to provide reliable measurements with comparable variability as  
369 manual analysis.

370

371 A known limitation of all machine learning programs is that accuracy and robustness are  
372 dependent on the images used to develop the model, what is known as the “ground truth”.  
373 This presents a problem for AH since as previously discussed, micrographs can vary  
374 depending on nerve state and sample processing. Re-training an algorithm model can provide  
375 more accurate results, at the cost of having to re-train a model, which is time consuming,  
376 requires expertise, and still lacks generalizability.

377

378 Besides leveraging deep learning, ADS has a number of advantages over other programs that  
379 have been developed for axon histomorphometry [5–7,17]. ADS is open source and freely  
380 available for download from GitHub (<https://github.com/neuropoly/axondeepseg>). It was  
381 developed using Python, a commonly used programming language, and remains under  
382 continuous active development more than 2 years after its initial release. It has a graphical user  
383 interface and does not require advanced programming knowledge to use. Our results  
384 demonstrate that the current ADS algorithm is very robust across multiple nerve states and  
385 sample processing protocols.

386

387 Deep learning and computer vision programs are an important step forward in the analysis of  
388 outcomes measures in nerve research. The speed and reliability of these methods promise to

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389 be substantially improved over traditional manual measurement. Our work shows that in its  
390 current iteration, ADS is an accessible and robust tool for peripheral nerve AH across multiple  
391 image preparation modalities without retraining.

392

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395 **References**

396

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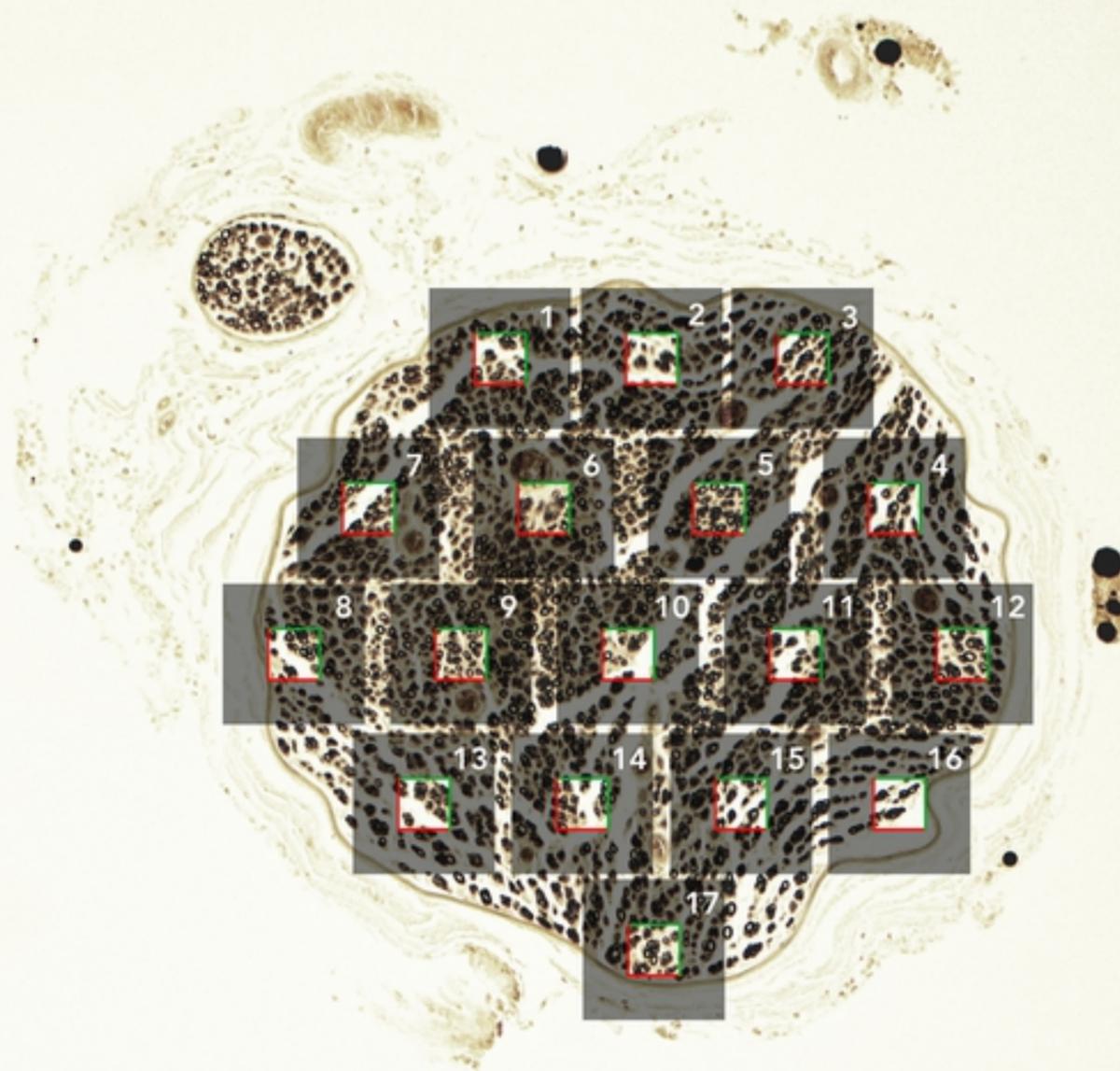
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**A**

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1000.00 μm

**B**

100.00 μm

**Fig.1**

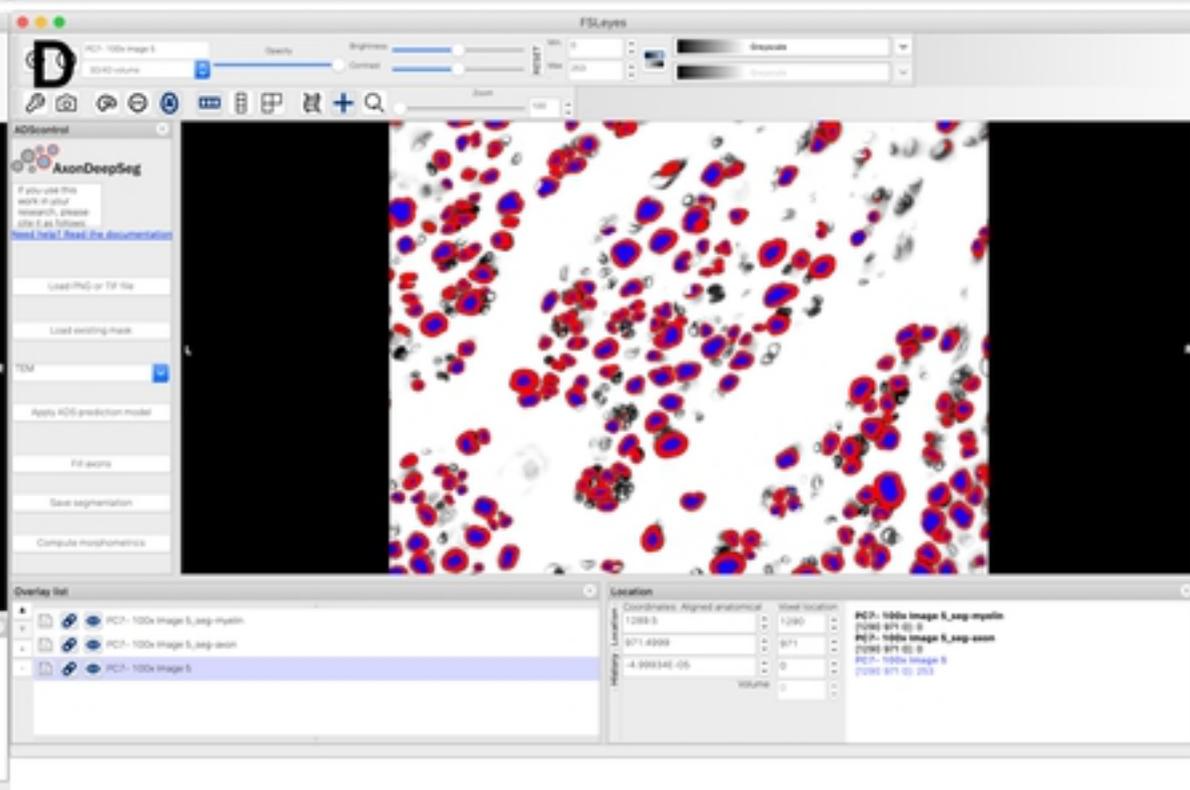
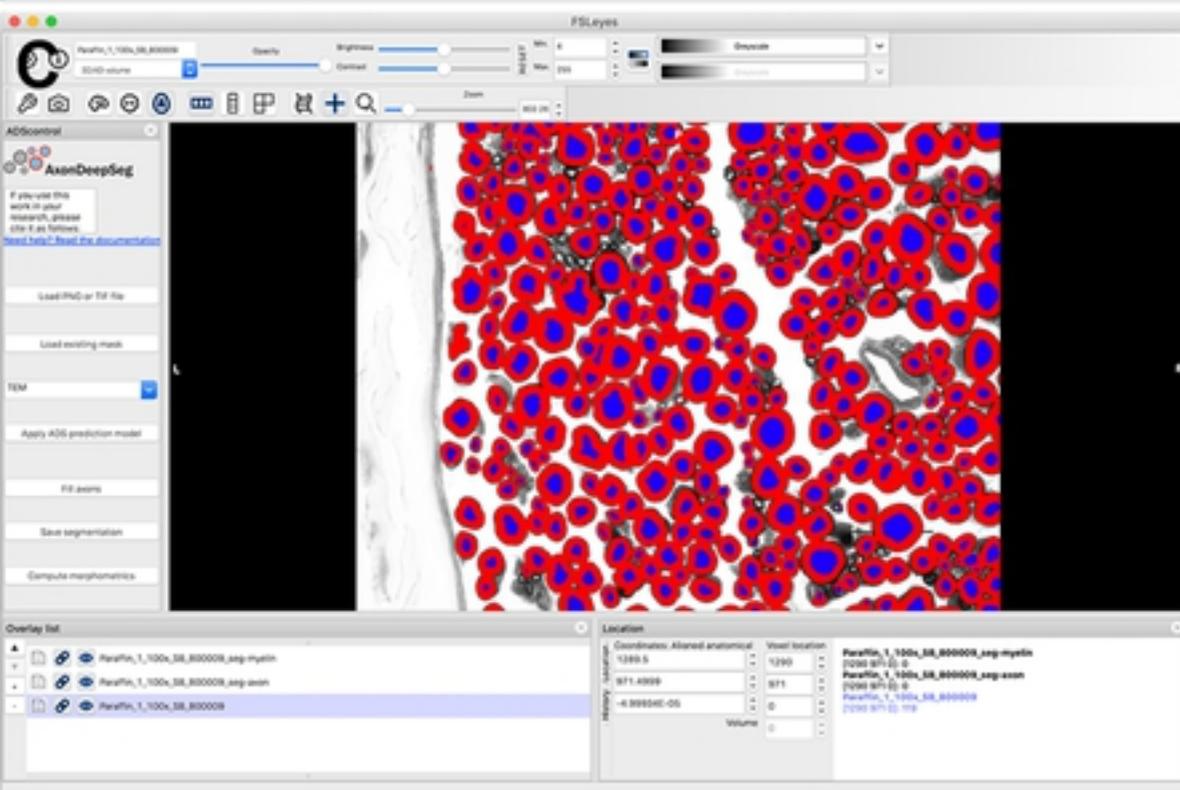
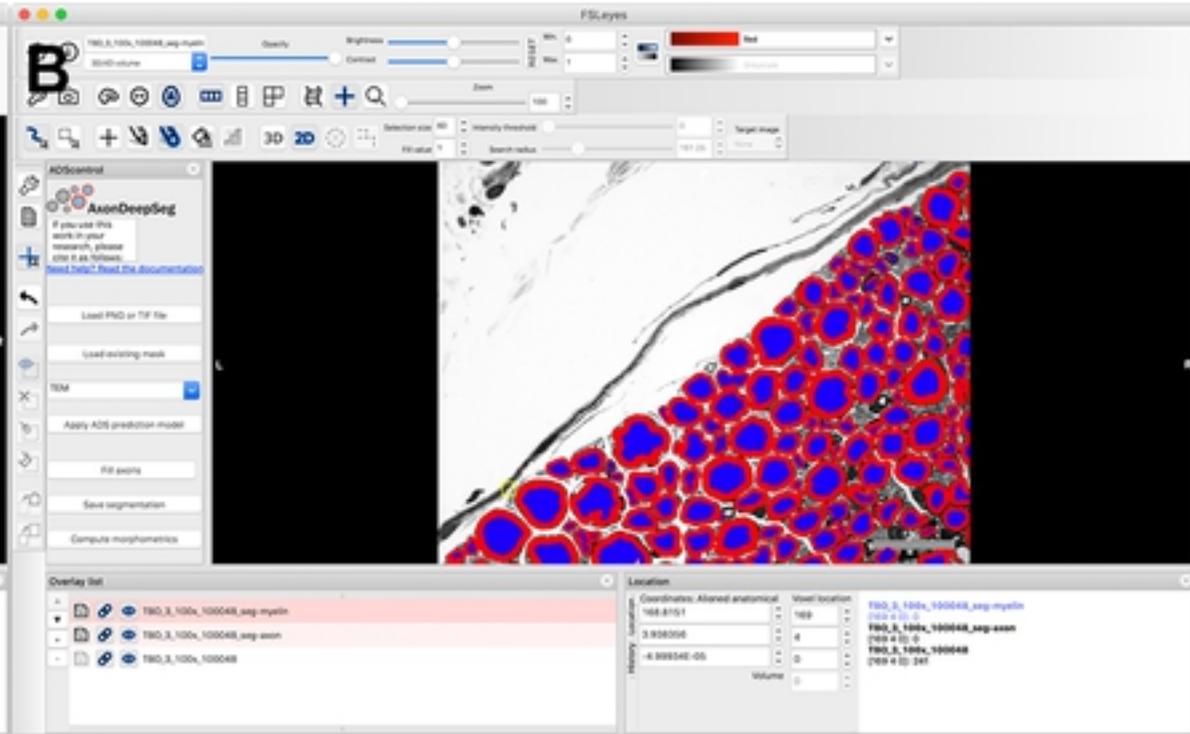
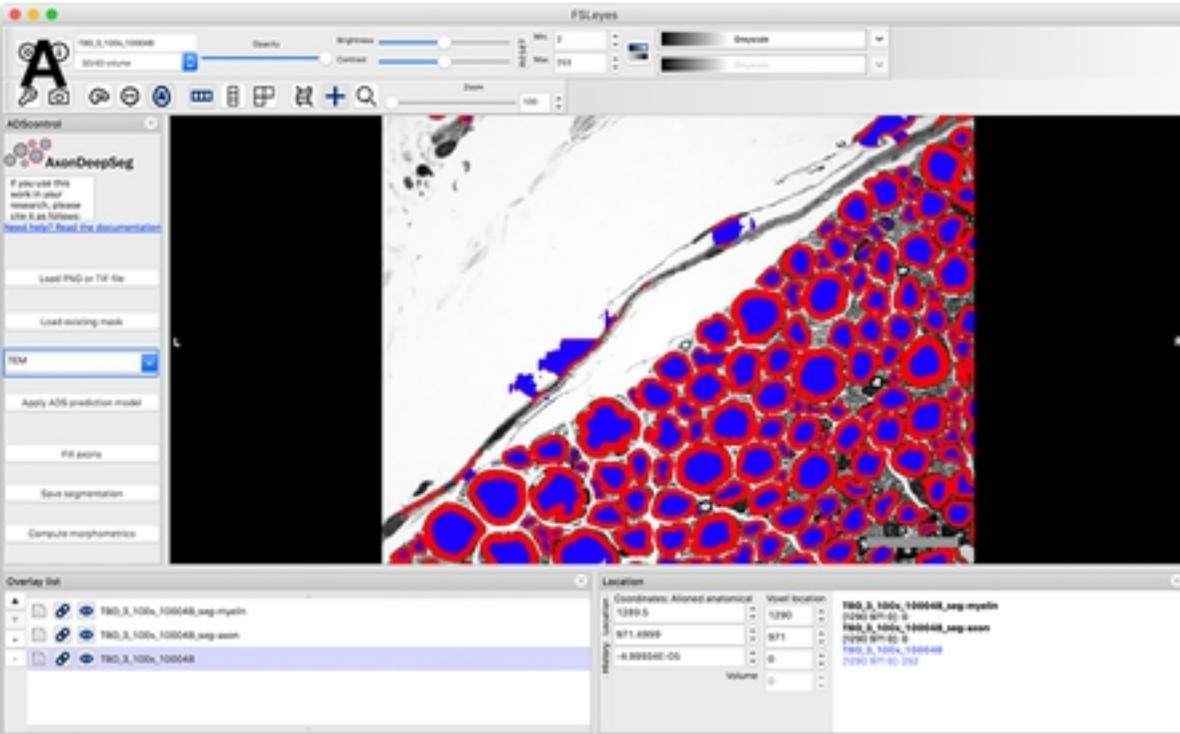


Fig.2

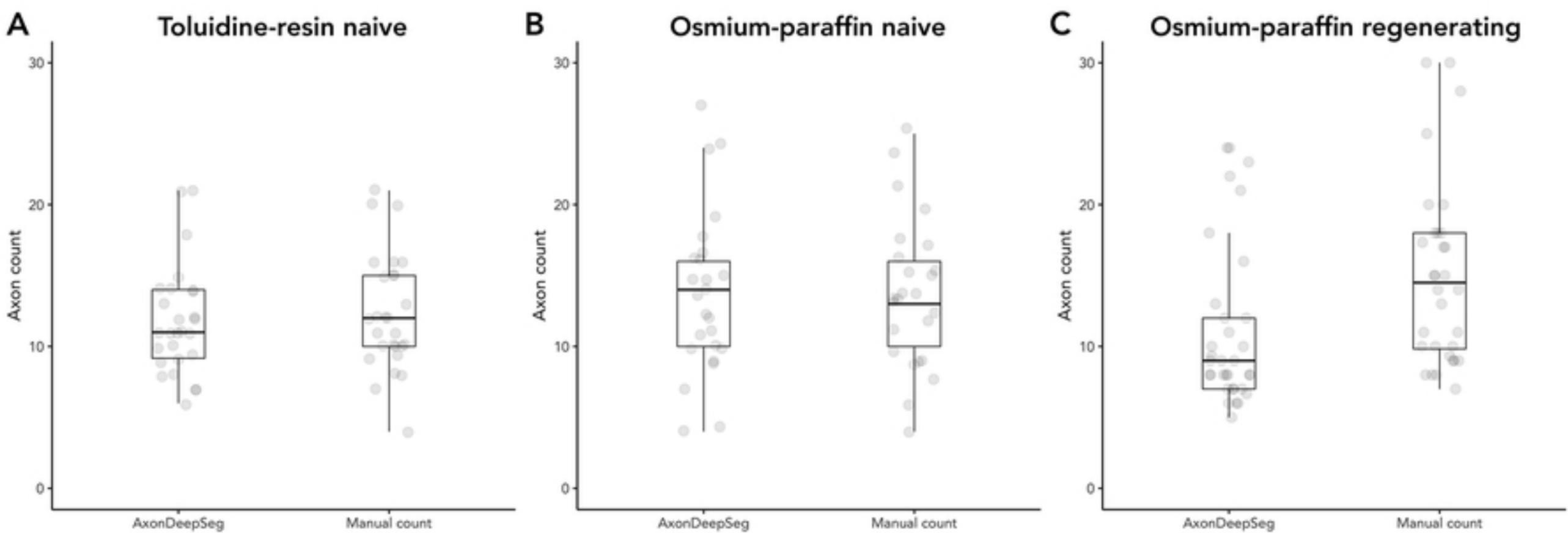


Fig.3

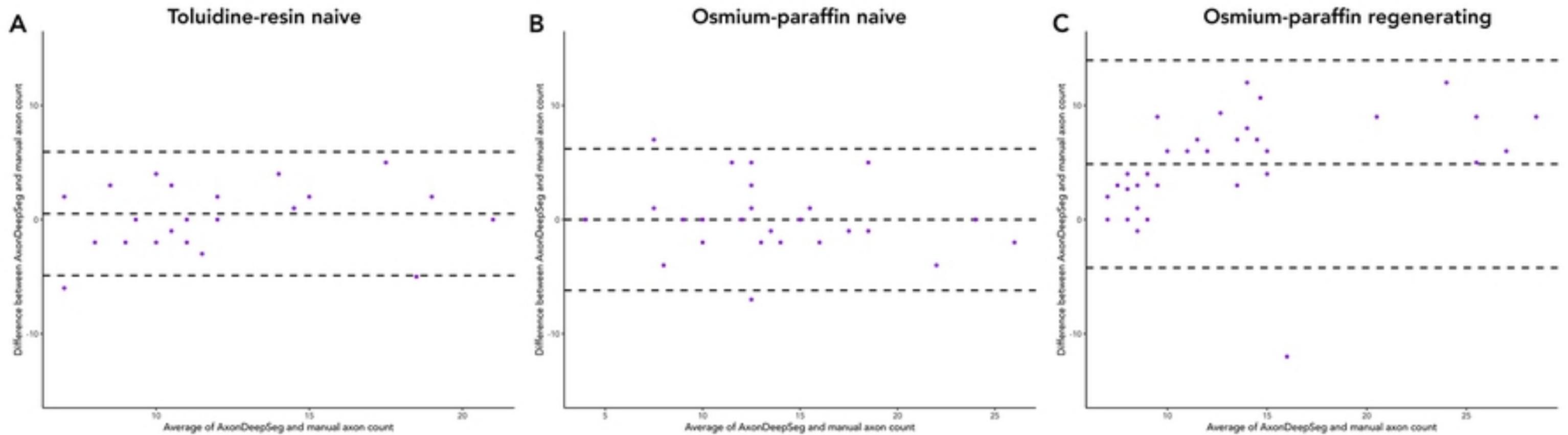
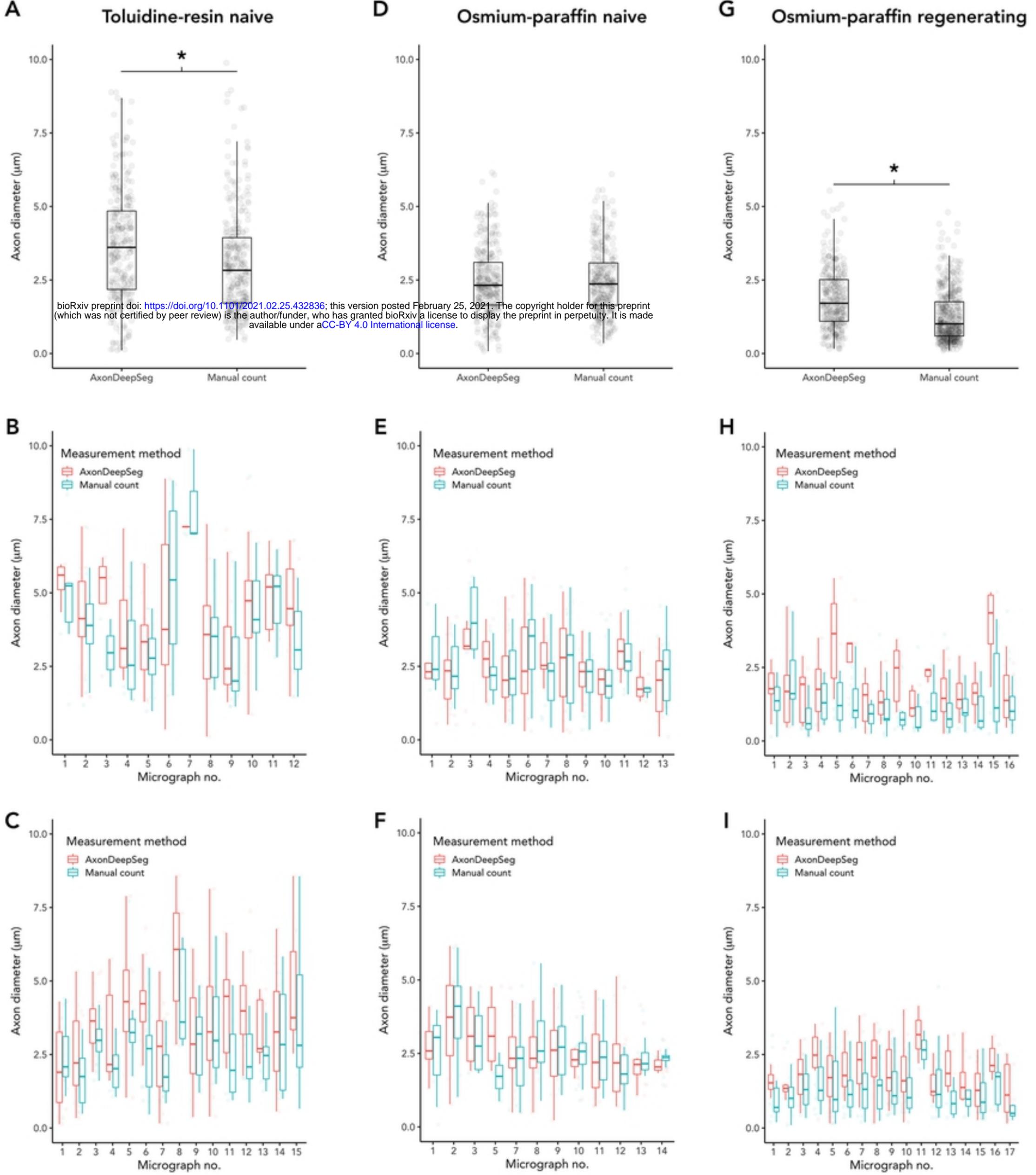


Fig.4



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Fig.5

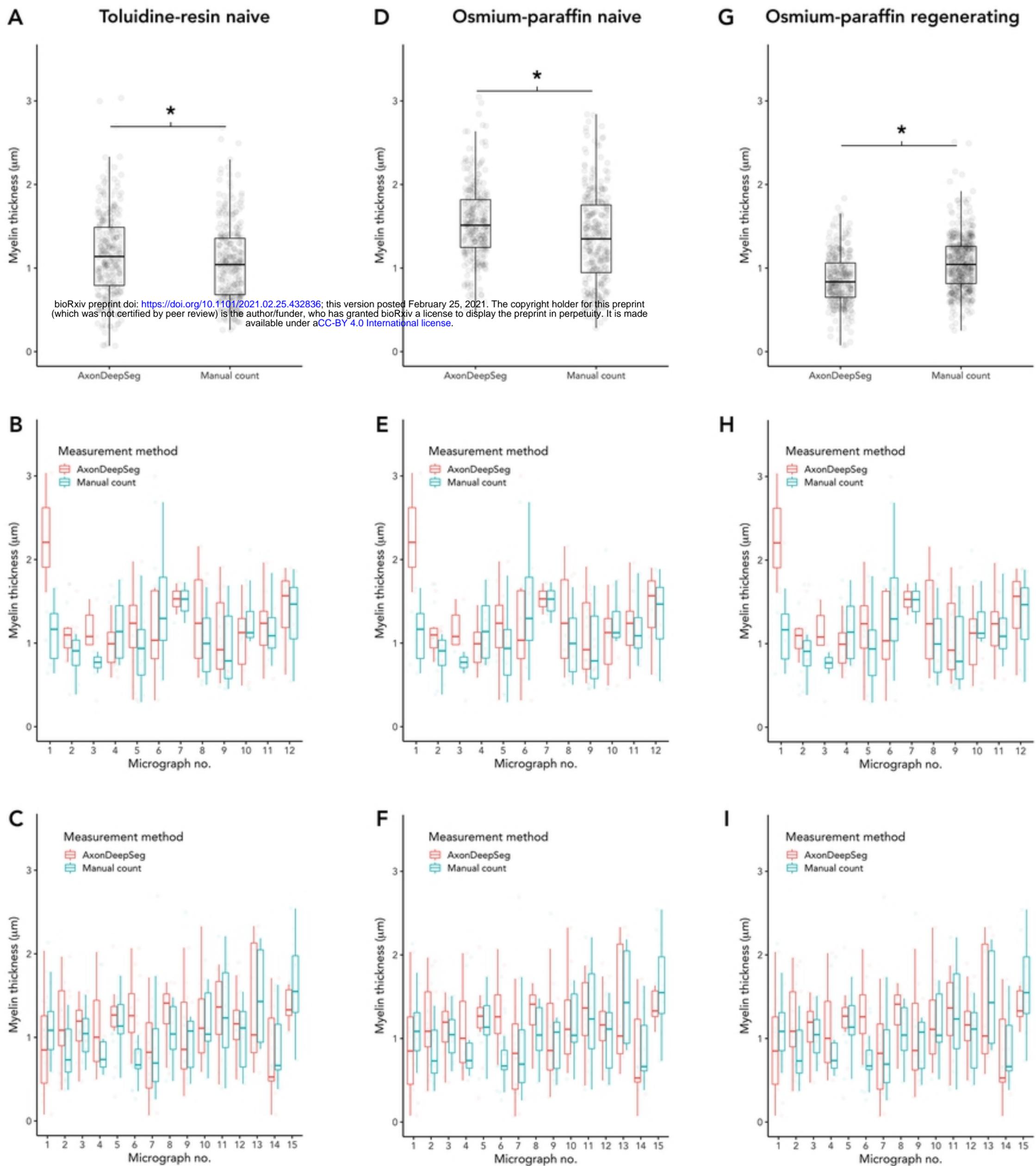


Fig.6

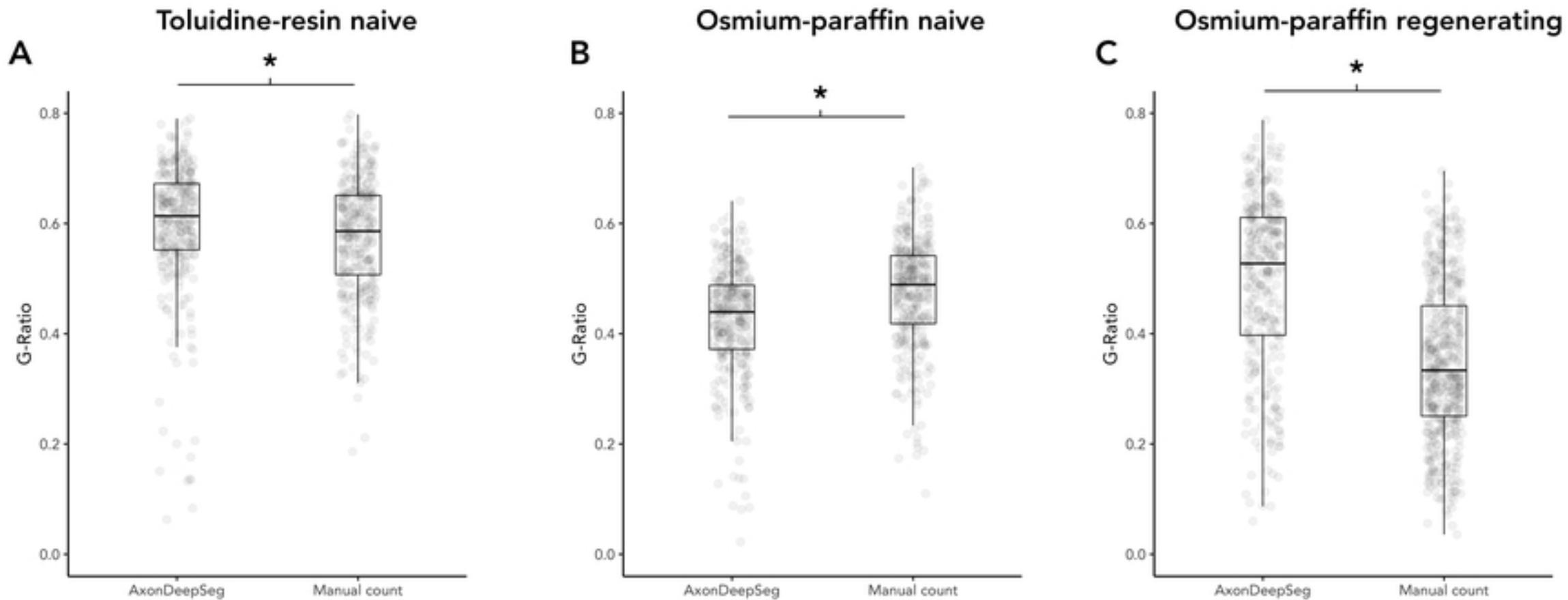


Fig.7