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STRUCTURE, GROWTH AND REGENERATION
IN THE ASTROCOENIID SCLERACTINIAN
CORAL, ACROPORA FORMOSA

Thesis submitted by
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in August, 1982

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
the Department of Botany at
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ABSTRACT

Acropora formosa Oken, 1815, a fast growing member of the coral genus which dominates regions of dense coral growth throughout the Great Barrier Reef Province and in most reefs of the Indo-Pacific region has been studied with respect to its structure, functional morphology and histology.

The three dimensional lattice structure of the corallites which make up the openly branched colony is described. Aspects of the growth of the corallum including the manner of radial extension and the position of the growth points for longitudinal extension (the "trabecular tines") are investigated.

The anatomy and histology of the polyp is described, with particular reference to the relationship between the tissue and the skeleton, the structure of the mesenterial filaments, and the organisation of the musculature. An account is also given of the histochemistry of the gland cells. An attempt is made to relate these observations to various aspects of behaviour of the polyp and the possible evolutionary origins of the genus.

Diel expansion and contraction of the polyp is studied and the cellular mechanisms which effect such changes are analysed. The tissues over the trabecular tines are shown to interconvert between two distinct conformations depending upon the state of expansion of the polyp. Evidence is presented that re-orientation of the cells of the inner body wall at night creates a space into which the trabecular tines extend.

The pattern of cell division is studied by observing the incorporation of tritiated thymidine using autoradiographic techniques. A diel rhythm of DNA synthesis, and hence cell division, is demonstrated. This rhythm varies in magnitude on a seasonal basis. The significance of these observations in relation to skeletal growth is discussed. It is concluded that cell division keeps pace with skeletal growth, allowing extension in the trabecular tines to be fully accommodated. Maintenance of coral branches in darkness results in the disappearance of the diel pattern of DNA synthesis.

Infiltration of the characteristic, white tipped branch ends of A. formosa by zooxanthellae is studied and evaluated in terms of its effect on calcium carbonate deposition, and its possible significance to the nutritional balance of the colony. It is proposed that browning is part of a mechanism by which the metabolic resources of the colony are rationalised in response to changes in prevailing environmental conditions.

Histological studies have been made of the pattern of events involved in tissue repair and regeneration in severed branches. It is reported that the gastrodermis initiates the resealing of the tissues and contributes to the reformation of the epidermis before restoration of the mesoglea. The calicoblastic layer is the last to be repaired. The removal of cellular debris from repairing tissue is effected by amoebocytes, whilst the differentiation of interstitial cells at the wound edge appears to be responsible for the re-appearance of non-epithelial cell types in the reformed epidermis. The presence of zooxanthellae in the outer body wall immediately adjacent to the damaged tissue enhances the rate of repair.

Regeneration of axial and radial corallites after severance of a branch tip occurs very rapidly. A detailed description of regeneration, both of the tissues and the skeleton, is supplied, and the possible role of products of zooxanthellae photosynthesis discussed. The response to local infections of the cut surface by filamentous algae is also described.

To Rachel

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page No.</u>
Title page	i
Statement of Access	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xix
Statement of Sources	xx
Acknowledgements	xxi
1. Introduction	1
2. Materials and methods	
2.1 Collection and maintenance of specimens	7
2.2 Preparation and examination of skeletal material	8
2.3 Tissue preparation	8
2.3.1 Fixation	8
2.3.2 Decalcification	8
2.3.3 Embedding	9
2.3.4 Sectioning	9
2.3.5 Staining	10
2.3.5.1 Histological stains	10
2.3.5.2 Histochemical stains	12
2.4 DNA synthesis	13
2.4.1 5-bromodeoxyuridine incorporation	14
2.4.2 ³ H-thymidine incorporation	15
2.4.2.1 Scintillation counting	18
2.4.2.2 Autoradiography	18
3. The skeleton of <u>A. formosa</u>	
3.1 Introduction and terminology	23
3.1.1 Skeletal morphology of the Scleractinia	23
3.1.2 Previous studies of the skeleton of <u>Acropora</u>	27
3.2 The skeletal morphology of branch tips of <u>A. formosa</u>	30

TABLE OF CONTENTS (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>	
3.2.1	General morphology	30
3.2.2	Formation of radial corallites	32
3.2.3	Response of branch tips to obstruction or damage	32
3.3	Consideration of skeletal structure in <u>A. formosa</u>	40
4.	The polyp of <u>A. formosa</u>	
4.1	Introduction and terminology	42
4.2	The polyp in relation to the skeleton	50
4.3	Histology	51
4.3.1	Inner body wall	54
4.3.2	Outer body wall	54
4.3.3	Junction of the inner and outer body walls	55
4.3.4	Oral disc	57
4.3.5	Tentacles	58
4.3.6	Stomodeum	61
4.3.7	Mesenteries and mesenterial filaments	61
4.4	Histochemistry	66
4.5	Discussion	98
4.5.1	Anatomy	98
4.5.2	Tissue Structure	100
	4.5.2.1 Epithelial cells	100
	4.5.2.2 Interstitial cells	101
	4.5.2.3 Nematocysts	102
	4.5.2.4 Amoebocytes	103
	4.5.2.5 Gonads	105
	4.5.2.6 Gland cells	107
4.5.3	Diel expansion and contraction rhythms	113
	4.5.3.1 Cellular mechanisms of expansion and contraction	114
	4.5.3.2 Functional significance of expansion and contraction	121
4.5.4	Structure and function in the mesenterial filaments	126

TABLE OF CONTENTS (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
5. DNA synthesis in <u>A. formosa</u>	
5.1 Introduction	130
5.2 Studies with the 5-bromodeoxyuridine/ Hoescht 33258 technique	134
5.3 Measurement of uptake of ³ H-thymidine by scintillation counting	135
5.4 Measurement of incorporation of ³ H-thymidine by autoradiography	137
5.4.1 Diel patterns of ³ H-thymidine incorporation	138
5.4.2 Effect of maintenance in light and darkness on diel patterns of ³ H-thymidine incorporation	142
5.5 Discussion	148
6. Comparison of white and brown branch tips of <u>A. formosa</u>	
6.1 Introduction	154
6.2 Results of examination of white and brown tips	155
6.2.1 Position of white and brown tips and behaviour of polyps	155
6.2.2 Distribution of zooxanthellae in white and brown tips	155
6.2.3 Skeletal differences between white and brown tips	156
6.3 Intermediate patterns of distribution of zooxanthellae	158
6.4 Induction of browning	159
6.5 Discussion	165
7. Repair and regeneration in <u>A. formosa</u>	
7.1 Introduction	170
7.2 Repair	173
7.2.1 Experimental procedures	173
7.2.2 General observations	173
7.2.3 Histological observations	176

TABLE OF CONTENTS (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
7.3 Regeneration	179
7.3.1 Experimental procedures	179
7.3.2 External appearance of regenerating branch ends	179
7.3.3 Histological observations	181
7.3.4 Microscopic appearance of the skeleton	181
7.4 Response to colonisation of severed branches by filamentous algae	182
7.5 Discussion	198
7.5.1 Cell division and differentiation during repair	198
7.5.2 Exchange of cells between layers during repair	198
7.5.3 Contribution of different tissue layers and cell types to repair	199
7.5.4 Regeneration of severed branches	205
7.5.5 Response to colonisation of damaged surfaces by filamentous algae	206
Summary and Conclusions	208
References	213
Appendix A: Statistical analyses of results of autoradiographic studies of ³ H-thymidine incorporation into branch tips of <u>A. formosa</u>	237

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page No.</u>
1. Evolutionary pattern of the scleractinian sub-orders and families (reproduced from Wells, 1956, pF363)	4
2. Map of Cleveland Bay area and position of Nelly Bay collecting site	21
3. Growth form of <u>A. formosa</u> routinely collected from Nelly Bay for experimental work	22
4. Decalcified <u>A. formosa</u> tip embedded in an agar block	22
5. Experimental apparatus	22
6. Scanning electron micrograph of a lightly calcified, white tipped <u>A. formosa</u> branch tip (a) end on view of axial corallite, (b) oblique view of same branch	35
7. Longitudinal view of the tip region of the skeleton of an <u>A. formosa</u> branch with part of the axial corallite broken away to reveal internal structure	37
8. Recolonisation of dead branches in the basal region of an <u>A. formosa</u> colony	37
9. Pad of coenenchyme developed in response to obstruction after 3 weeks	38
10. The growth of coenenchyme six days after tissue damage by abrasion	38
11. Coenenchyme growth along the edge of a broken off branch end, 1½ months after fracture	38
12. Generation of new axial corallites in a re-oriented branch (a) Initial condition, (b) After three months	39
13. Longitudinal section through a white tipped branch end of <u>A. formosa</u>	68
14. Transverse section of a branch tip of <u>A. formosa</u> at the level of the second circle of radial corallites	69
15. Portions of the inner body wall	70
16. Nematocysts in the calicoblastic epidermis around a trabecular column near a branch tip	70

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
17. The outer body wall during daylight	70
18. The outer body wall at night	71
19. MSB stain of the outer body wall	72
20. Alcian blue-PAS stain of the inner and outer body walls	72
21. Toluidine blue stain of outer body wall	72
22. Tissue in contracted state around the site of a trabecular tine	73
23. Tissue in the expanded state around the site of a trabecular tine	73
24. Rupture of tissue in the contracted state	74
25. Rupture of tissue in the expanded state	74
26. Conformation of tissues over the trabecular tines of white tipped branch ends of <u>A. formosa</u> fixed at 2 hourly intervals over a period of 24 hours	75
27. Diagrammatic representation of the conformation of tissues found over the trabecular tines (a) expanded, (b) contracted	76
28. Tip region of a white tipped branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> in late afternoon (5 p.m.)	77
29. Tip region of a white tipped branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> in early morning (1.30 a.m.)	77
30. Dissection of decalcified tip of <u>A. formosa</u> with retracted tentacles	77
31. Longitudinal section through a tentacle tip	78
32. Longitudinal sections through an expanded oral disc and tentacles (a) The section passes through the edge of the oral disc, the bases of 5 tentacles and 2 trabecular tines, (b) Section through the edge of the oral disc, (c) Section through the back wall of the centre tentacle, (d) Enlargement from (b) of point of contact of mesenterial exten- sions with oral disc	79

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
33. Transverse section through the basal region of a slightly retracted tentacle	80
34. Transverse section through the mid-region of a moderately retracted tentacle	80
35. Longitudinal section through one wall of a fully extended tentacle	81
36. Longitudinal section of tentacle undergoing initial stages of retraction	81
37. Longitudinal section of buckling in the circular musculature of the gastrodermis of a retracting tentacle	81
38. Longitudinal section of an advanced state of buckling in a retracting tentacle	81
39. Diagrammatic representation of buckling in a retracting tentacle of <u>A. formosa</u> (a) Epidermal buckling, (b) Gastrodermal buckling	83
40. Longitudinal section through part of a partially retracted tentacle	85
41. Longitudinal section of a completely retracted tentacle	85
42. Oblique longitudinal section through a highly retracted tentacle	85
43. Oblique transverse section through a highly retracted tentacle	86
44. Transverse section of a radial polyp at the level of the oral disc	87
45. Transverse section of a radial polyp at the level of the stomodeum	87
46. Transverse section of a complete and an incomplete mesentery	87
47. Transverse section of a radial polyp at the base of the stomodeum	88

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
48. Transverse section through part of the stomodeum of a radial polyp	89
49. Longitudinal section through the cnidoglandular band of a type I mesenterial filament	89
50. Longitudinal section through the cnidoglandular band of a type I mesenterial filament	89
51. Transverse section through a type I mesenterial filament in the upper part of a polyp	89
52. Transverse section of two type I and a pair of type II mesenterial filaments	91
53. Longitudinal section of a type I mesenterial filament	91
54. Longitudinal section of a type II mesenterial filament	91
55. Alcian blue-PAS stain of a type I mesenterial filament	93
56. Alcian blue-PAS stain of a type II mesenterial filament	93
57. Liisberg's stain of a type I mesenterial filament	93
58. Spirocyst in a lateral lobe of a type I mesenterial filament	94
59. Zooxanthellae in an oblique section of a lateral lobe of a type I mesenterial filament	94
60. Zooxanthellae in the process of extrusion from the ingestion-excretion region of the lateral lobes of a type I mesenterial filament	94
61. Zooxanthellae on the membranous portion of a type I mesenterial filament	94
62. Bolus of material for extrusion in coelenteron of an axial polyp	95
63. Longitudinal section through an hermaphroditic radial polyp taken in mid-October	95
64. Comparison of mature and immature testes (a) Mature, (b) Immature	95

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
65. Developing oocyte on a type I mesenterial filament	95
66. Serial sections through type II mesenterial filaments extruded through the outer body wall (a-d)	97
67. Longitudinal section of a white tipped branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> treated with the BrdU/Hoescht 33258 technique - 4 a.m. sample	146
68. Longitudinal section of a white tipped branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> treated with the BrdU/Hoescht 33258 technique - 4 p.m. sample	146
69. Uptake of ³ H-thymidine into white tipped branch ends of <u>A. formosa</u> (1 hour incubation) at different times over a 24 hour period.	136
70. Autoradiograph of a longitudinal section through the outer body wall over the extreme tip of an axial polyp following exposure of the intact tip to ³ H-thymidine	147
71. Masking of silver grains by mucus deposition in an autoradiograph of a longitudinal section of the outer body wall proximal to a branch tip	147
72. Mitotic cells in an axial polyp at the distal edge of the outer body wall epidermis	147
73. Autoradiographic measurement of ³ H-thymidine incorporation into white tipped branch ends of <u>A. formosa</u> (1 hour incubation) at different times over a 24 hour period at various times of the year	139
74. Mean percent labelled cells in grouped samples of white tipped branch ends of <u>A. formosa</u> following incubation with ³ H-thymidine	141
75. Autoradiographic measurement of ³ H-thymidine incorporation into branch ends of colonies of <u>A. formosa</u> (one hour incubation) at different times over a 24 hour period following maintenance of the colony in continuous darkness	143

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
76. Mean percent labelled cells in grouped samples of branch ends of colonies of <u>A. formosa</u> incubated with ^3H -thymidine following maintenance in either natural illumination or continuous darkness	145
77. White tipped branch of <u>A. formosa</u> fixed with buffered sea water formalin	160
78. Longitudinal section through the axial corallite of a white tipped branch of <u>A. formosa</u> stained with Liisberg's stain	160
79. Brown tipped branch of <u>A. formosa</u> fixed with buffered sea water formalin	160
80. Longitudinal section through the axial corallite of a brown tipped branch of <u>A. formosa</u> stained with Liisberg's stain	161
81. Skeleton of a branch tip of <u>A. formosa</u> recently infiltrated by zooxanthellae (for comparison with Figure 6a). (a) End on view, (b) Oblique view	162
82. Detail of a trabecular tine (from Figure 6a) in a white tip	163
83. Detail of trabecular tines (from Figure 81a) in a brown tip	163
84. Detail of a broken trabecular tine (from Figure 81a) showing stereome deposition	164
85. Brown tipped branches of <u>A. formosa</u> showing daytime expansion	164
86. White axial polyp of <u>A. formosa</u> with brown tentacles showing daytime expansion	164
87. Skeletal compression in white tipped branches of <u>A. formosa</u> after prolonged maintenance in an aquarium	164
88. Longitudinal section from near the centre of a severed branch of <u>A. formosa</u> immediately after removal of the tip	183
89. Longitudinal section from near the centre of a severed branch of <u>A. formosa</u> , 3 hours after removal of the tip	183

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
90. Longitudinal section from near the centre of a severed branch of <u>A. formosa</u> , 31 hours after removal of the tip	183
91. Gastrodermal cells in repairing epidermis 13 hours after removal of tip	184
92. Nematocysts in repairing gastrodermis 15 hours after removal of the tip	184
93. Nematocysts in repaired gastrodermis 38 hours after removal of the tip	184
94. Mucus secretion over a severed branch end 13 hours after removal of the tip	185
95. Extrusion of type II mesenterial filaments from a severed branch end 11 hours after removal of the tip	185
96. Detail of mucus exuded from a branch end 6 hours after removal of the tip	186
97. Different stages in the progress of repair between the trabecular columns of successive synapticulothecal rings 27 hours after removal of the tip	186
98. Gastrodermal cells sealing the coelenteron 13 hours after removal of the tip	186
99. Epidermal cells from the wound edge migrating across the wound surface 13 hours after removal of the tip	186
100. State of repair of the tissues over the coelenteron 21 hours after removal of the tip	187
101. State of repair of the tissue over the coelenteron 27 hours after removal of the tip	187
102. State of repair of the tissues over the coelenteron 34 hours after removal of the tip	187
103. State of repair of the tissues over the site of a trabecular column 27 hours after removal of the tip	188

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
104. State of repair of the tissues over the site of a trabecular column 31 hours after removal of the tip	188
105. State of repair of the tissues over the site of a trabecular column 34 hours after the removal of the tip	188
106. Acidophilic granules and granule containing vacuoles in repairing tissue 27 hours after removal of the tip	189
107. A mesogleal amoebocyte in repairing tissue 31 hours after removal of the tip	189
108. Lateral lobes of a type I mesenterial filament near the repairing surface 31 hours after removal of the tip	189
109. State of repair of outer body wall 34 hours after removal of the tip	190
110. State of repair of the outer body wall 38 hours after removal of the tip	190
111. Differentiating interstitial cells in the pre-wound epidermis 31 hours after removal of the tip	190
112. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 18 days regeneration. (a) Macroscopic view, (b) Longitudinal section through the axial polyp	191
113. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 26 days regeneration. (a) Macroscopic view, (b) Oblique longitudinal section through the axial polyp	192
114. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 46 days regeneration. (a) Macroscopic view, (b) Longitudinal section through the axial polyp	193
115. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 84 days regeneration	193
116. Skeleton of a branch of <u>A. formosa</u> after 8 days regeneration. (a) Low power, (b) High power	194

LIST OF FIGURES (contd)

	<u>Page No.</u>
117. Skeleton of a branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 26 days regeneration	195
118. Skeleton of a branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> after 46 days regeneration	195
119. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> 7 days after colonisation by filamentous algae	196
120. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> 23 days after colonisation by filamentous algae	196
121. Broken branch end of <u>A. formosa</u> 40 days after colonisation by filamentous algae	196

LIST OF TABLES

	<u>Page No.</u>
1. Initiation of new branches in a reoriented branch tip of <u>A. formosa</u>	34
2. Morphology and histochemistry of the glandular cell types in the polyps of <u>A. formosa</u>	52
3. Distribution of non-epithelial cell types in the polyps of <u>A. formosa</u>	53
4. Summary of the major results of histochemical studies of gland cells in corals compared with the writer's findings with <u>A. formosa</u>	108
5. Time course of the repair process in branches of <u>A. formosa</u> severed 25mm from the tip	175
6. Rate of extension of the axial corallite and development of radial corallites in a regenerating tip of <u>A. formosa</u>	180

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

S. D. Meek

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