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The molecular basis of fertilisation in coral
Acropora and its role in speciation

Thesis submitted by

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at James Cook University

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Abstract

To shed light on diversification of the genus *Acropora* (Scleractinia, Cnidaria), one of the most widespread, abundant, and species-rich genera of hard corals (113–180 species), I searched for fertilisation-related genes in a model coral, *Acropora millepora*, and examined variations in these genes among *Acropora* species. First, by focusing on the ADAM–integrin interaction, which is involved in sperm–egg binding and membrane fusion in mammals, 15 ADAM–integrin interactions related to candidate genes obtained from an expressed sequence tag (EST) database of *A. millepora* were screened using hierarchical strategies (gene structures, gene expression patterns, fertilisation inhibition experiments). However, no evidence was found that these genes, other than integrin *betacn1*, are involved in *Acropora* fertilisation. To identify fast-evolving genes from *Acropora* species as fertilisation candidates, I then performed direct comparative sequence analysis with EST datasets from two acroporid species: *A. millepora* and *A. palmata* from the Caribbean Sea. Comparison of selected 849 independent genes from the *A. palmata* EST database (4,017 ESTs) to 10,232 ESTs from *A. millepora* resulted in the identification of 513 putative homologues. Within 163 homologous pairs in which dN and dS were examined, 93 homologous pairs had dN/dS ratios significantly <1, which suggests that these genes are under selection pressure associated with functional constraints. Six independent genes showed dN/dS ratios >1, and two of these had a significant deviation from one, suggesting that they are fast-evolving genes. It was unclear whether these fast-evolving genes are involved in fertilisation. Finally,

variations of integrin betacn1, which is involved in coral fertilisation, were compared among some *Acropora* species. Interestingly, comparison of integrin betacn1 sequences demonstrated that there are some mutations around the DxSxS motif, and two combinations of eight different clones showed significant possibilities of positive selection. However, it is unclear whether these variations are related to *Acropora* speciation. The next step is to characterise proteins making molecular complexes with integrin betacn1 or fast-evolving genes, and to compare these amino acid sequences among *Acropora* species.

Table of Contents

Statement of Access

Statement of Sources

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1. General introduction.....	1
1.1. Reproductive systems of corals.....	1
1.2. The molecular basis of fertilisation in mammals.....	2
1.3. The molecular basis of fertilisation in marine invertebrates.....	5
1.4. The molecular basis of fertilisation in corals.....	6
1.5. Fast evolving genes in fertilisation.....	7
1.6. Role of fertilisation-related genes in the <i>Acropora</i> speciation process.....	8
1.7. Aim of this study.....	9
Chapter 2. Structures of the ADAM–integrin interaction-related genes (ADAM, integrin, tetraspanin) of <i>Acropora millepora</i>	11
2.1. Introduction.....	11
2.2. Materials and Methods.....	11
>Cloning of ADAM–integrin interaction-related genes from <i>Acropora millepora</i>	11

>cDNA library screening.....	12
>Homology, conserved domain searches, and SOSUI analysis.....	12
>Alignment and phylogenetic analysis.....	13
2.3. Results and Discussion.....	13
>Gene structures of AmADAM1-6.....	13
>Gene structure of AmIntegrin alpha1, alpha2, and beta2.....	15
>Gene structures of AmTetraspanin1-5.....	16
Chapter 3. Gene expression pattern of ADAM–integrin interaction-related genes of <i>Acropora millepora</i>	20
3.1. Introduction.....	20
3.2. Materials and Methods.....	21
>Sample collection and RNA extraction.....	21
>RT-PCR analysis	21
>Western blotting.....	22
>Whole mount in situ hybridisation and immunostaining.....	23
3.3. Results.....	24
3.4. Discussion.....	24
Chapter 4. Preparation of fusion proteins and antibodies, and fertilisation inhibition experiments.....	27
4.1. Introduction.....	27
4.2. Materials and Methods.....	28
>Creation of constructs containing DxD/NxD/NxxxD motifs of AmIntegrin alpha1.....	28

>Creation of constructs containing the EC2 domain of AmTetraspanin1 and 4....	28
>Expression of GST fusion proteins.....	29
>Antibody production.....	30
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using antiserum against the AmItga1-GST fusion protein.....	30
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using AmTetraspanin1-GST fusion protein.	31
>Fertilisation experiments to estimate optimal fertilisation period.....	31
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using fusion proteins (AmTetraspanin1 and 4-GST) with <i>Acropora digitifera</i>	32
4.3. Results.....	32
>Protein expression and antibody production.....	32
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using antiserum against AmItga1-GST protein.....	33
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using AmTetraspanin1-GST fusion protein.	33
>Fertilisation experiments to estimate the optimal fertilisation period.....	33
>Fertilisation inhibition experiments using fusion proteins (AmTet1 and 4-GST) with <i>Acropora digitifera</i>	34
4.4. Discussion.....	34
>Involvement of integrin in coral fertilisation.....	34
>The role of tetraspanins in coral fertilisation.....	35
>Possible overestimation of fertilisation rates in coral cross-fertilisation experiments.....	36

Chapter 5. Identification of fast-evolving genes in the scleractinian coral <i>Acropora</i> using comparative EST analysis.....	38
5.1. Introduction.....	38
5.2. Materials and Methods.....	39
>Selection of EST sequences and BLAST analysis.....	39
>Selection analysis.....	39
5.3. Results and Discussion.....	40
Chapter 6. Comparison of integrin betacn1 among <i>Acropora</i> species.....	43
6.1. Introduction.....	43
6.2. Materials and Methods.....	43
>DNA extraction, cloning, and sequencing procedures.....	43
>Alignment and selection analysis.....	44
6.3. Results and Discussion.....	45
Chapter 7. General discussion.....	47
7.1. Are ADAM–integrin interactions involved in coral fertilisation?.....	47
7.2. Is it possible to find fast-evolving genes as candidates for fertilisation?.....	47
7.3. Are fertilisation-related genes involved in <i>Acropora</i> speciation?.....	48
References	

List of Tables

Table 1.1. List of fertilization related molecules.

Table 2.1. List of 15 target genes.

Table 2.2. The position of TM and EC regions of AmTetraspanins.

Table 5.1. Amino acid similarity and E value of ESTs between *Acropora palmata* and *A. millepora*, *Hydra magnipapillata*, and *Nematostella vectensis*.

Table 5.2. Positive selection candidates of *Acropora*.

Table 6.1. Above diagonal: dN/dS ratio. Below diagonal: p value of the level of significance of positive selection.

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Schematic view of main steps in fertilisation.

Figure 1.2. Schematic view of the ADAM–integrin interaction in mammals.

Figure 2.1. (A) and (B) Schematic representation of ADAM and ADAM-TS, respectively. (C) Results of the NCBI conserved domain search of AmADAMs.

Figure 2.2. Multiple sequence alignment of *Acropora millepora* integrin alpha1 (AmItga1), with representative integrin alpha amino acid sequences from fly (ItgaPS2, accession no. P12080), human (ItgaV, accession no. Q6QAF3), nematode (ItgaPat2, accession no. P34446), jellyfish (PcItga, accession no. Q9GSF4), and mouse (MmItga9, accession no. Q91YD5).

Fig. 2.3. Multiple sequence alignment of *Acropora millepora* integrin beta2 (AmItgb2) with representative integrin beta amino acid sequences from jellyfish (PcItgb, accession no. Q9GSF3), coral (ItgbCn1, accession no. AF005356-1), human (HsItgb1, accession no. Q8WUM6), sea urchin (SpItgbG, accession no. P92163; SpItgbL, accession no. O76727), and sponge (ItgbPo1, accession no. O18482).

Figure 2.4. Alignment of amino acid sequences of AmTetraspanins. Some conserved

motifs are indicated by an asterisk, *, below the block.

Figure. 2.5. Phylogenetic tree of AmTetraspanins in relation to other tetraspanins.

Figure 3.1. Expression of integrin betacn1 (lane 1), AmIntegrin alpha1 (lane 2), AmTetraspanin1 (lane 3), AmTetraspanin2 (lane 4), and AmTetraspanin4 (lane 5) in unfertilised eggs of *Acropora millepora*.

Figure 3.2. Expression of AmADAM3 and integrin betacn1 in a seasonal adult colony of *Acropora millepora*.

Figure 3.3. Expression of AmTetraspanin1 (A) and AmTetraspanin4 (B) in unfertilised eggs of *Acropora millepora*. (C) corresponds to the treatment with a sense primer.

Figure 4.1. Expression of GST fusion proteins of AmIntegrin alpha1 (AmItga1-GST), AmTetraspanin1 (AmTet1-GST), and AmTetraspanin4 (AmTet4-GST).

Figure 4.2. Fertilisation rates (%) of *Acropora millepora* eggs treated with different doses of antiserum against AmItga1-GST protein.

Figure 4.3. Fertilisation rates (%) of *Acropora millepora* eggs treated with AmTet1-GST fusion protein.

Figure 4.4. Fertilisation rates (%) of *Acropora digitifera* eggs washed each time after addition of sperm.

Figure 4.5. Fertilisation rates (%) of *Acropora digitifera* eggs treated with AmTet1-GST and AmTet4-GST fusion proteins.

Figure 5.1. Distribution of the number of amino acid similarities in 450 *Acropora millepora*–*A. palmata* homologous pairs.

Figure 5.2. Number of nonsynonymous substitutions per nonsynonymous site (dN) plotted against the number of synonymous substitutions per synonymous site (dS) in 163 *Acropora millepora*–*A. palmata* putative homologous pairs.

Figure. 6.1. Comparison of the sixth exon amino acid sequences of integrin betacn1 among *Acropora* species. Ad: *A. digitifera*; Af: *A. formosa*; Al: *A. latistella*; Am: *A. millepora*; Ap: *A. palmata*; At: *A. tenuis*; Av: *A. valida*.