piRNAclusterDB 2.0 - update and expansion of the piRNA cluster database

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ABSTRACT

PIWI-interacting RNAs (piRNAs) and their partnering PIWI proteins defend the animal germline against transposable elements and play a crucial role in fertility. Numerous studies in the past have uncovered many additional functions of the piRNA pathway, including gene regulation, anti-viral defense, and somatic transposon repression. Further, comparative analyses across phylogenetic groups showed that the PIWI/piRNA system evolves rapidly and exhibits great evolutionary plasticity. However, the presence of so-called piRNA clusters as the major source of piRNAs is common to nearly all metazoan species. These genomic piRNA-producing loci are highly divergent across taxa and critically influence piRNA populations in different evolutionary lineages. We launched the initial version of the piRNA cluster database to facilitate research on regulation and evolution of piRNA-producing loci across tissues und species. In recent years the amount of small RNA sequencing data that was generated and the abundance of species that were studied has grown rapidly. To keep up with this recent progress, we have released a major update for the piRNA cluster database (https://www.smallrnagroup.uni-mainz.de/piRNAclusterDB), expanding it from 12 to a total of 51 species with hundreds of new datasets, and revised its overall structure to enable easy navigation through this large amount of data.

INTRODUCTION

PIWI proteins and piRNAs represent a mainly metazoan system for the regulation of a range of target sequences (1-4), including transposable elements (5,6), protein-coding genes (7-11) and long non-coding RNAs (12). These targets can be regulated transcriptionally (13), as well as post-transcriptionally (6,14) and are recognized through sequence complementarity by piRNAs, which guide their associated PIWI proteins to their destination. While in vertebrates the PIWI/piRNA pathway is mostly restricted to the germline, in invertebrate groups such as arthropods and mollusks, piRNAs are in addition ubiquitously found in somatic tissues (15,16). Moreover, PIWI proteins and piRNAs were identified in somatic stem cells of sponges and cnidarians (17,18).

In general, piRNA-producing loci, called piRNA clusters, are considered to lie at the very center of the PIWI pathway (6). These loci are transcribed from one or from both DNA strands into large precursor RNAs, which in turn are processed into 23-31 nucleotide (nt) mature piRNAs as they are loaded onto PIWI proteins. Further, the ping pong amplification cycle, which acts during post-transcriptional silencing, additionally contributes to piRNA biogenesis (6,14). In a typical metazoan genome, up to a few hundred piRNA clusters can be identified, ranging in their size between a few thousand base pairs (kb) to more than 100 kb. Though these regions make up overall only small portions of a genome with 0.1 to 5%, they produce the vast majority of piRNAs. In *Drosophila*, over 90% of all sequenced germline piRNAs can be derived from these genomic loci (19). Similarly, in mammals, up to 95% of pachytene piRNAs are produced from clusters, while still more than 55% of pre-pachytene piRNAs can be attributed to these distinct loci (5). Generally, piRNA clusters are more or less dispersed in the genome, though they do not occupy similar regions in different phylogenetic groups. In flies, piRNA precursors stem from mostly pericentric heterochromatic loci (6), whereas in mammals, (pachytene) piRNA-producing loci are euchromatic A-MYB promoter-dependent RNA polymerase II transcription units (20).

In all species studied so far, piRNA clusters evolve rapidly, appearing and disappearing rather quickly on evolutionary time scales and evolving neutrally on the sequence level (21-23). Therefore, each species has a unique set of piRNA clusters with varying numbers of homologous clusters shared between lineages. Noteworthily, it has also been shown that piRNA clusters are highly divergent within species, such as observed in human (24). Additionally, in those clades in which somatic piRNAs are common, piRNA clusters show distinct expression levels in different tissues (19,16), similar to the differential activity at various developmental stages that is observed more broadly (5,13,25,26).

The first release of the piRNA cluster database (27), which was launched to as a central resource for piRNA cluster research, comprised more than 100 Sequence Read Archive (SRA) datasets from 12 species. Noteworthily, while extensive analysis showed that many piRNA databases are contaminated with non-coding RNA (ncRNA) fragments, especially when concerning somatic tissues, the piRNA cluster database stands out with a remarkably low amount of such contaminations (28), due to our stringent criteria for piRNA definition and piRNA cluster identification (29). Further, while different databases for piRNA sequences are maintained (30-32), it is to date still the only database that is dedicated specifically to piRNA clusters. In recent years, the amount of small RNA sequencing data has drastically increased, while our understanding of the piRNA pathway and the expression of piRNAs has grown continuously. In order to incorporate this progress into the piRNA cluster database, we have now released a major update, which includes more than 350 SRA datasets from 51 species, comprising more than 15,000 piRNA clusters in total. This set of species contains mollusks, arthropods, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. We further significantly improved our small RNA transcriptome analysis, which now includes an extensive set of non-coding RNAs, and we provide bibliographic information, as well as easy access to reference data used in our analysis.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS Dataset search and initial processing

We systematically searched the NCBI sequence read archive (SRA) (33) for candidate small RNA sequencing datasets from a range of different tissue samples from metazoan species for which a reference genome is available. The raw sequence reads were first subjected to processing with unitas version 1.7.5 (34), including adapter trimming and low-complexity read filtering (Figure 1). The clean reads were then mapped with bowtie (35) to the corresponding reference genome, which was obtained from the NCBI Genome resource (36).

The mapped reads were annotated using unitas with reference datasets for coding sequences and non-coding RNAs, such as microRNAs, tRNAs, rRNAs and long non-coding RNAs. To determine the presence of piRNA-like reads, we examined the length distribution, rates of uridine at position 1 (1U) and adenine at position 10 (10A), as well as the rate of 10 nt 5' read overlaps, known as ping-pong signature, of those reads that did not match to annotated ncRNAs in the previous step. The first threshold that was applied is a minimum share of piRNA-sized (23-31 nt) reads of 20%, while the largest peak was required to be within the piRNA size range. Additionally, since piRNAs typically show a high degree of sequence diversity with a considerable amount of unique sequence reads compared to other small RNA (sRNA) classes, a threshold for a minimum of 10% of unique reads within all piRNA-sized reads was employed. Finally, a 1U or 10A rate of at least 35% and a ping-pong signature with a significant (p<0.05) z-score of more than 1.65 (37) were required to pass our filter.

Genome mapping and piRNA cluster prediction

In preparation for the identification of piRNA clusters, we removed all previously annotated reads, as well as all reads that do not fall into the piRNA size range of 23-31 nt from the initial map file. A resulting map file with uniquely-mapping filtered reads without seed mismatches, produced by bowtie (35), and the corresponding genome was then used, along with an available repeatmasker annotation and a GFF gene set that were obtained from the NCBI Genome resource, to predict piRNA clusters with proTRAC version 2.4.4 (29). We applied a minimum cluster size of 5 kb and a minimum rate of 1U or 10A of 50%. Further, we used a sliding window size of 5 kb with an increment of 1kb and defined a p-value of 0.01 for minimum number of normalized read counts per kb. To ensure similar cluster prediction power in all species, no assumptions on strand directionality were made (option: -clstrand 0). Finally, resulting piRNA cluster loci with a distance smaller than 10kb were merged. However, if no piRNA clusters could be identified the dataset was discarded.

Overall, 358 SRA datasets from 51 species passed all filters and could be used for successful piRNA cluster prediction, totaling in 15,857 piRNA-producing loci with a median of 250 per species. The total number of unique clustered piRNA sequences amounts to nearly 88 million with a median of more than 1.1 million reads per species. All custom Perl scripts used in the data processing are available at GitHub (https://github.com/d-gebert/piRNAclusterDB).

HOW TO ACCESS THE DATA

Database structure and dataset access

We completely redesigned the overall structure of the piRNA cluster database in order to accommodate to the vast number of datasets and species that we added in this major update. The primary entry point of the interface is the species selector, which is represented as an interactive phylogenetic tree (Figure 2A) on the one hand and as a tabular list on the other hand with additional information on taxonomy, number of piRNA clusters and total amount of clustered piRNA sequences (Figure 2B). The table also provides links to the corresponding genome assembly data that were used in our analysis, including genome, gene set (GFF) and repeatmasker file. A graphical representation of the locations of piRNA clusters on chromosomes is linked to the number of piRNA clusters in each species. Further, files on piRNA cluster coordinates (GTF), sequence (FASTA), and differential piRNA expression in reads per million (RPM) for each dataset, as well as pooled clustered piRNA reads are available for download. In addition to that, we provide a comprehensive list of all publications that are associated with small RNA (sRNA) datasets of the database, including PubMed IDs and direct links (Figure 2C).

Cluster browser

Once a species of interest is selected, the user can browse piRNA-producing loci along all datasets from the chosen species in the cluster browser section (Figure 3). The available loci are provided in a list with selectable piRNA cluster IDs (Figure 3A), which contains additional information on location, size and reads per million. The cluster view incorporates tracks for gene and repeat annotation alongside of piRNA read coverage in rpm for plus and minus strands, which all can be individually inspected to receive further information, for example on gene or transposon name and repeat class, as well as exact rpm per position (Figure 3B). Finally, each SRA dataset can be individually selected and deselected to produce a customized view of piRNA cluster expression across different datasets, tissues, or developmental stages.

SRA dataset section

The third section of the database presents detailed analyses of processed, filtered, mapped, and annotated sRNA reads for each SRA dataset from a selected species, which were generated by unitas (34). SRA datasets are selectable from a list that includes information on the tissue of origin, number of reads and PubMed ID of the associated publication (Figure 4A). For each of the annotated RNA types, such as miRNA, rRNA, tRNA-derived sRNA, IncRNA, mRNA and more, a table offers read counts, as well as links for the download of reads in FASTA format and info files with length distribution and positional nucleotide composition (Figure 4B). The fraction that most likely represents or contains to a large part piRNAs can be accessed under the type "unknown", as these sequences could not be annotated as any other known sRNA. Moreover, graphical output on read composition, length distribution, positional nucleotide composition and ping-pong signature are provided for total sRNA reads and piRNA reads, which gives an accessible insight into the sRNA make-up of each SRA dataset and the contribution of piRNAs to the total pool of reads.

DISCUSSION

Unsurprisingly, the first species in which piRNAs and piRNA clusters were identified and characterized were mice (*Mus musculus*) (1-4) and flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) (6,14). Subsequent studies focused on other model organisms (38) and eventually extended towards non-model organisms, especially in recent years, including hitherto less well-studied taxa (17,18,25,26,15,16). Besides, many

sRNA studies, e.g. in which miRNAs are the main focus, produced readily available piRNA fractions that were not yet examined.

This has created both the necessity and opportunity to considerably expand and restructure the piRNA cluster database to open up further potential for piRNA research. It is now clear that the PIWI pathway and piRNA-producing loci in particular evolve rapidly, leading to greatly different sets of clusters across taxa (21-23). The vast number of species included in this substantial update of the piRNA cluster database will enable evolutionary studies on an unprecedented scale, including previously less studied phylogenetic groups. In the past, studies in non-model organisms regularly yielded unexpected and novel insights into different aspects of the piRNA pathway (18,25,15,16).

Despite the considerable progress that has been achieved in recent years, many aspects especially concerning the evolution of piRNA clusters are still not fully understood. It has yet to be determined how exactly piRNA clusters initially emerge and what drives their genesis, their maintenance across evolutionary times and their demise. Furthermore, intriguing differences between phylogenetic groups, such as flies and mammals, regarding transposon enrichment or genomic location are likewise still not elucidated. For instance, it is conceivable that the very nature and origin of the transposon-rich, heterochromatic and pericentromeric piRNA clusters of *Drosophila* (6) are inherently different from those of mammalian clusters, which are more dispersed in the genome and less enriched for transposon sequences (5). Similarly, clusters of recently identified somatic piRNAs in non-vertebrates (15,16) remain to be thoroughly studied, to detect putative functions that might be different from those in gonads. Finally, differences in piRNA biology of male and female germline have not yet been widely studied but have so far yielded important insights (39). We believe that these outlined areas of research will greatly benefit from the resources that this update of the piRNA cluster database provides.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Felipe Karam Teixeira and the Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) for the support (CDA-00032/2018) during the completion of this database update. We gratefully acknowledge the GenEvo RTG funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – GRK2526/1 – Projectnr. 407023052 enabling the conception of this research project.

FUNDING

Walter Benjamin Fellowship (GE 3407/1-1) of the German Research Foundation DFG (to D.G.). Funding for open access charge: DFG Research Training Group (RTG) "GenEvo - Gene Regulation in Evolution: From Molecular to Extended Phenotypes" (GRK 2526/1, Projectnr. 407023052).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

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FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Processing and analysis pipeline for SRA dataset analysis and piRNA cluster prediction. The highlighted final results are accessible through the piRNA cluster database.

Figure 2. Top section and primary entry point of the piRNA cluster database. (A) Interactive phylogenetic tree, comprising the 51 species that are included in the database. (B) Complete tabular species list with quantitative information on piRNAs and piRNA clusters and associated download links, as well as links to the assemblies used in the analysis. (C) List of publications underlying the SRA datasets with PubMed IDs.

Figure 3. Cluster browser section of the piRNA cluster database. (A) List of all piRNA cluster loci of the selected species with coordinates, size, and maximum rpm. (B) Browser with gene and repeat annotation tracks and piRNA clusters read coverage. Track elements are selectable for additional information.

Figure 4. SRA dataset section of the piRNA cluster database. (A) List of SRA datasets of the selected species with information on tissue, data size, read count and PubMed ID. (B) Annotation of SRA datasets with download links for each RNA class and graphical output of analysis on read composition, positional nucleotide frequencies, length distribution and ping-pong signature (sense/antisense 5' overlap lengths).





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Species (click to select)	Common name	Phylum	Class	Order	Assembly	piRNA clusters	Clustered piRNAs	
Monodelphis domestica	Gray short-tailed opossum	Chordata	Mammalia	Didelphimorphia	MonDom5	135 .fas .gtf .rpm	157410	
Mus musculus	House mouse	Chordata	Mammalia	Rodentia	GRCm38.p6	939 .fas .gtf .rpm	4522284	
Musca domestica	Housefly	Arthropoda	Insecta	Diptera	Musca_domestica-2.0.2	107 .fas .gtf .rpm	627281 479204	
Nicrophorus vespilloides	Herbst's burying beetle	Arthropoda	Insecta	Coleoptera	Nicve_v1.0	174 .fas .gtf .rpm		
Oncopeltus fasciatus	Large milkweed bug	Arthropoda	Insecta	Hemiptera	Ofas 2.0	119 .fas .gtf .rpm	1286320	
Ornithorhynchus anatinus	Platypus	Chordata	Mammalia	Monotremata	Ornithorhynchus_anatinus_5.0.1	101 .fas .gtf .rpm	65741	
Oryctolagus cuniculus	European rabbit	Chordata	Mammalia	Lagomorpha	OryCun2.0	451 .fas .gtf .rpm	1290642	
 Oryzias latipes 	Japanese rice fish	Chordata	Actinopterygii	Beloniformes	ASM223467v1	168 .fas .gtf .rpm	1070683	
Oryzias melastigma	Blue-eyed rice fish	Chordata	Actinopterygii	Beloniformes	ASM292280v2	258 .fas .gtf .rpm	1833580	
Pararge aegeria	Speckled wood	Arthropoda	Insecta	Lepidoptera	ilParAcgt1.1	149 .fas .gtf .rpm	379954	

PUBLICATIONS

C Show 5 v entries Search: Oryzias latipes
Species PubMed ID Authors Title (click to select SRA datasets) Gay S. Bugeon J. Bouchareb A. Henry L. Delanaye C. Legaei F. Mondrich J. Cam A, Siegel A, Bobe J, Thermes V Journal Bibliographics PLoS Genet 2018 14:e1007593 30199527 Oryzias latipes Lai KP, Li JW, Wang SY, Chiu JM, Tse A, Lau K, Lok S, Au DW, Tse WK, Wong CK, Chan TF, Kong RY, Wu RS the ma and o 2015 16:135 25765076 BMC Genomics Oryzias melastigma

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Ola	t-0009	Oryzias latipes	16	3584050	3632000	47951	12842		1	T.	- 1				desiles the day of			SKR/416106
Ola	t-0010	Oryzias latipes	3	7430510	7474972	44463	4223	SPP7416163	1.000									SRR7416168
Ola	it-0011	Oryzias latipes	1	33408858	33453019	44162	3876	embryo (8-cell)	i dula i anti-		alle shinking and	dd J	Mar a secondar	باللاب بناير		SRR7416169 🖬		
Ola	t-0012	Oryzias latipes	3	1722598	1758938	36341	4275		10	the state	alah lih.				يري بالله الدر المتناكر والكار	a the state		
Ola	t-0013	Oryzias latipes	18	25090456	25123434	32979	8272		1 m Li	LIL								
Ola	t-0014	Oryzias latipes	1	37580999	37612800	31802	2854		혀백님			1 11 11 11 11						
Ola	a-0015	Oryzias latipes	11	24079213	24110821	31609	9502		Τι III	10.1	1	 ninni 				P		
Ola	a-0016	Oryzias latipes	12	14252055	14282759	30705	6352		Stables hat the state		- I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I		terior and the state of the sta		1444 11			
Ola	t-0017	Oryzias latipes	21	2112042	2141978	29937	2260				19 C			1	danks bird.			
Ola	t-0018	Oryzias latipes	3	2800005	2828971	28967	7133	SRR7416164 embryo (1-cell)	1.000				1	4.1	and the second se			
Ola	a-0019	Oryzias latipes	7	27865016	27893824	28809	2382			الا الالالالال	10.1	ير فالعد معام ال	the later.	111				
Ola	t-0020	Oryzias latipes	13	28995281	29023575	28295	2355					يليد الأعالة بالبرينية. بالكار	1. A 11 (11) -	- 194				
Ola	t-0021	Oryzias latipes	3	35861599	35889529	27931	2502			dia .	LLD.							
Ola	t-0022	Oryzias latipes	10	23437004	23464923	27920	4943		©1	1000 - 11	1 1 1 1 1							
Ola	t-0023	Oryzias latipes	3	7492016	7517865	25850	2275		Thu In	11 F	1.1.1					4 9 8 8 9 9 F		
Ola	t-0024	Oryzias latipes	13	4716002	4741708	25707	22959		10		1.0	1 11 1		116	add of the second se		- day h	
Ola	t-0025	Oryzias latipes	3	2994763	3019967	25205	2363		1 1	1	- 1				desired that a			
Ola	a-0026	Oryzias latipes	18	8841066	8865850	24785	2043	SRR7416166	1,000									
Ola	t-0027	Oryzias latipes	18	16102999	16126992	23994	1692	embryo (stage 39)				 Infational 	data -	al. In	- in	Lu		
Ola	t-0028	Oryzias latipes	18	185067	206197	21131	3755		10	here a	-defender-		' [''	111	للازر فكأراهم ومعرجا والعالمات	d a cliberdik		
Ola	1-0029	Oryzias latipes	19	7131283	7151853	20571	14987											
Ola	a-0030	Oryzias latipes	10	23220558	23240921	20364	2197		en	di bar'			11 II					
Ola	t-0031	Oryzias latipes	3	1770045	1790359	20315	2550											
Ola	t-0032	Oryzias latipes	14	18171026	18191015	19990	1840		10	1	1			T		r Mich of .	TITT	
Showing	1 to 50 of 1	68 entries	Previ	ous 1	2	3 4	Next								I to red			
								SRR7416168	1,000				1			1 144		
								Locks						1			(h)	

А						В	SR	A DA'	FASI	ET S	ECTION D	
Show 20 Y	 entries 		Search	Oryzias	latipes	DECONTRACTOR	N FOR	-	T.C.T	a cor		
Species	Tissue	ID (click to show info)	Size [Mb]	Reads	PubMed ID	INFORMATIC	IN FOR	SKA DA	UASE	TSRK	Total sRNAs unknown (piRNAs)	
Oryzias latipes	ovary	SRR7416169	504	8298060	30199527	class/subclass miRNA	reads 104907	rpm 13361	fasta	info ±	read composition	positional nucleotide composition
Oryzias latipes	testis	SRR7416168	367	5718125	30199527	miRNA:oryzias latipes miRNA:other	75632 29275	9633 3729	* *	* *	unknown	1
Oryzias latipes	egg	SRR7416161	723	11205365	30199527	rRNA genomic rRNA	181077 177171	23062 22565	*	*	(piRNAs) protein	
Oryzias latipes	embryo (1- cell)	SRR7416164 🔶	496	7558158	30199527	Mt rRNA tRNA	3905	497 478	÷	÷	coding rRNA	0.5
Oryzias latipes	embryo (8- cell)	SRR7416163	481	6351845	30199527	StR-halves StRFs	0	0	n.a. n.a.	n.a. n.a.	miRNA Other	G G
Oryzias latipes	embryo (stage 15-	SRR7416158	419	4723399	30199527	3'tR-halves 3'tRFs 2'CCA (PEr	0	0	n.a. n.a.	n.a. n.a.	92%	
Oryzias latipes	embryo (stage 31- 32)	SRR7416160	371	6578967	30199527	tRF-1 tRNA-leader misc-tRFs	0	0	n.a. n.a. n.a.	n.a. n.a. n.a.		Position P
Oryzias latipes	embryo (stage 31- 36)	SRR7416159	456	8462769	30199527	Mt tRNA 5'tR-halves 5'tRFs	3754 215 1215	478 27 155	+ +	+ +	length distribution	ping-pong signature
Oryzias latipes	embryo (stage 39)	SRR7416166	354	6388584	30199527	3'tR-halves 3'tRFs 2'CCA+PEr	48	6 0	4.	4. na.	1,500,000	10M
Showing 1	to 9 of 9 entric	es (filtered from 358 total d	entries)	Previous	1 Next	tRF-1 tRNA-leader misc-tRFs scaRNA sRNA tibozyme snoRNA protein coding misc RNA snRNA unknown (piRNAs)	1655 58 375 42 250 14 2866 304920 4814 1345 6954169	211 7 48 5 32 2 365 38835 613 171 885695	P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P P	4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4) 4)	1,000,000 500,000 1 6 18 20 22 24 26 28 30 32 34 36 17 19 21 22 25 27 29 31 33 35	554 0