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Wang, H., Chen, X., Zhou, M., Wang, L., Chen, T., & Shaw, C. (2016). Molecular Characterization of Three Novel Phospholipase A2 Proteins from the Venom of *Atheris chlorechis*, *Atheris nitschei* and *Atheris squamigera*. *Toxins*, 8(6), [168]. DOI: 10.3390/toxins8060168

**Published in:**  
Toxins

**Document Version:**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Article

# Molecular Characterization of Three Novel Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> Proteins from the Venom of *Atheris chlorechis*, *Atheris nitschei* and *Atheris squamigera*

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Academic Editor: Bryan Grieg Fry

Received: 24 February 2016; Accepted: 20 May 2016; Published: 1 June 2016

**Abstract:** Secretory phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (sPLA<sub>2</sub>) is known as a major component of snake venoms and displays higher-order catalytic hydrolysis functions as well as a wide range of pathological effects. *Atheris* is not a notoriously dangerous genus of snakes although there are some reports of fatal cases after envenomation due to the effects of coagulation disturbances and hemorrhaging. Molecular characterization of *Atheris* venom enzymes is incomplete and there are only a few reports in the literature. Here, we report, for the first time, the cloning and characterization of three novel cDNAs encoding phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> precursors (one each) from the venoms of the Western bush viper (*Atheris chlorechis*), the Great Lakes bush viper (*Atheris nitschei*) and the Variable bush viper (*Atheris squamigera*), using a “shotgun cloning” strategy. Open-reading frames of respective cloned cDNAs contained putative 16 residue signal peptides and mature proteins composed of 121 to 123 amino acid residues. Alignment of mature protein sequences revealed high degrees of structural conservation and identity with Group II venom PLA<sub>2</sub> proteins from other taxa within the Viperidae. Reverse-phase High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) profiles of these three snake venoms were obtained separately and chromatographic fractions were assessed for phospholipase activity using an egg yolk suspension assay. The molecular masses of mature proteins were all identified as approximately 14 kDa. Mass spectrometric analyses of the fractionated oligopeptides arising from tryptic digestion of intact venom proteins, was performed for further structural characterization.

**Keywords:** snake venom; phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>; molecular cloning; *Atheris*; mass spectrometry

## 1. Introduction

As major components of snake venoms, proteins of the secretory phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (sPLA<sub>2</sub>) family have been structurally-defined, characterized and their catalytic mechanisms have been elucidated [1]. Traditionally, these snake venom enzymes have been divided into two main groups, Group I (GI) and Group II (GII), used to distinguish between molecules based on their amino acid sequences, disulfide-bridging patterns, unique functional loops and extension amino acids [2]. Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> catalyzes the hydrolysis of the sn-2 fatty acyl bond of phospholipids in a calcium-dependent manner [3]. A broad range of physiological molecules, such as long-chain fatty acid phospholipids, short-chain fatty

acid-containing oxidized phospholipids and platelet-activating factors, act as the natural substrates of phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> [4]. The higher-order catalytic hydrolysis functions of these snake enzymes play a central role in lipid metabolism of numerous cells and tissues, contributing to prey digestion. In addition, much is known about the wide variety of pathological effects exhibited by the snake venom phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>s including their neurotoxicity, myotoxicity, cytotoxicity, anticoagulant effects, cardiotoxicity, hypotension induction, platelet aggregation/inhibition and anti-bacterial activities [5–10], which in many cases, are fundamental to the toxicity of snake venoms [11,12].

Of the 400 species of snakes in Africa, bush vipers (*Atheris*, Viperidae) are not considered to be highly-dangerous in terms of the numbers of documented bites and deaths. This may in part be due to their arboreal behavior and their distribution in often inhospitable habitats [13]. A full envenomation by *Atheris* is likely to be fatal, however, due to the injection of a large quantity of toxic venom through their long and sharp fangs [14]. Envenomations involving *Atheris* vipers are clinically-characterized by coagulation disturbances and hemorrhage, local pain, edema, bleeding and a prolongation of coagulation time and non-clotting blood [15,16]. Some victims develop acute renal failure and hypertension [17,18]. However, studies on characterization of venom enzymes to explain these sequelae, are scarce and are incomplete [19]. In fact, even superficial reports on the components of whole venoms are equally rare. Thus, hunting for and describing the toxic polypeptides and/or proteins in *Atheris* venoms became a focus of our interest. Novel disintegrins had been isolated and identified in a previous study [20], and in this work, cloning of precursor-encoding cDNAs and characterization of the mature phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> proteins from *Atheris chlorechis* (*A. chlorechis*), *Atheris nitschei* (*A. nitschei*) and *Atheris squamigera* (*A. squamigera*) venoms, were carried out in an attempt to explain the toxic effects of the venom of *Atheris* snakes in more depth.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. cDNAs Encoding PLA<sub>2</sub> Precursors and Bioinformatic Analyses

A single novel unique full-length phospholipase-encoding precursor was cloned from each of the venom-derived libraries of *A. chlorechis*, *A. nitschei* and *A. squamigera* and each encoded a single copy of PLA<sub>2</sub> (Figure 1). Here, the first genomic sequences for the three cDNAs encoding phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> precursors from *Atheris* bush viper venoms, are reported and were named PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C., PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S., respectively. These data have been deposited in the Genbank Nucleotide Sequence Database under the accession codes, KP11968, KP119683 and KP119684, respectively. The open-reading frame amino acid sequences of these proteins exhibited a similar structural pattern: all contained a putative 16-residue signal peptide sequence and a mature protein sequence consisting of 123 residues for *A. nitschei*, 121 residues for *A. chlorechis* and 122 residues for *A. squamigera*. All contained a conserved Histidine/Aspartic acid dyad-motif and a cysteine-rich sequence that defines the PLA<sub>2</sub> hydrolytic function.

Comparison of these three precursors, established by deduction from cloned cDNA, is shown in the alignment in Figure 2. They exhibit a remarkable degree of identity: the signal peptides differ by only one residue, with the mature proteins showing high similarity especially in the features of the catalytic network and the primary metal binding site. Except for PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N., with two additional cysteine residues, the positions of the 12 cysteines are homologous in the three precursors, meaning that this uniform character of disulfide bridging pattern should lead to similar crystal structures of those three PLA<sub>2</sub>s.

M R T L W I V A V W L M G V

1 CTAGTGATTA TGAGGACTCT CTGGATAGTG GCCGTGTGGC TGATGGGGCT  
 GATCACTAAT ACTCCTGAGA GACCTATCAC CGGCACACCG ACTACCCGCA  
E G H L E Q F G N M I D H V S G R

51 CGAAGGGCAC CTTGAACAAT TCGGAAACAT GATCGATCAC GTATCGGGGA  
 GCTTCCCGTG GAACTTGTTA AGCCTTTGTA CTAGCTAGTG CATAGCCCCT  
S F W L Y V S Y G C Y C G W G G

101 GAAGCTTTTG GCTCTACGTC TCTTACGGAT GCTACTGCGG CTGGGGGGGC  
 CTTCGAAAAA CGAGATGCAG AGAATGCCTA CGATGACGCC GACCCCCCG  
S G K P Q D D T N R C C F V H D C

151 TCAGGCAAGC CACAGGACGA CACAAACCGC TGCTGCTTCG TGCACGACTG  
 AGTCCGTTTC GTGTCCTGCT GTGTTTGGCG ACGACGAAGC ACGTGCTGAC  
C Y G K M G T Y D T K W T S Y N Y

201 CTGCTACGGG AAAATGGGAA CGTACGACAC CAAATGGACC TCCTACAACT  
 GACGATGCC TTTTACCCTT GCATGCTGTG GTTTACCTGG AGGATGTTGA  
E F Q N G D I I C G D K N P R K

251 ACGAATTTCA GAACGGGGAT ATCATCTGTG GAGACAAAAA CCCACGCAAG  
 TGCTTAAAGT CTTGCCCTA TAGTAGACAC CTCTGTTTTT GGTGCGGTT  
K E L C E C D R V A A I C F G N N

301 AAGGAGCTTT GCGAGTGTGA CAGGGTTGCG GCAATCTGCT TTGGAAATAA  
 TTCTCGAAA CGCTCACACT GTCCCAACGC CGTTAGACGA AACCTTTATT  
R N T Y N S K Y F A Y S S T N C M

351 TAGGAATACG TACAAC TAAATATTTTGC CTAATCATCC ACTAATTGCA  
 ATCCTTATGC ATGTTGAGTT TTATAAACG GATGAGTAGG TGATTAACGT  
E E T E Q C \*

401 TGGAGGAGAC AGAGCAATGC TAAGTCTCTG CAGGACGGGA AAAACCCCTC  
 ACCTCCTCTG TCTCGTTACG ATTCAGAGAC GTCTGCGCT TTTTGGGGAG

451 CAATTACACA ATTGTGGTTG TGTTACTCTA TTATTCTGAA TGCAAAACTG  
 GTTAATGTGT TAACACCAAC ACAATGAGAT AATAAGACTT ACGTTTTGAC

501 AGCAATAAAT AGGTGCCAAC TCTGCACAAA AAAAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAA  
 TCGTTATTTA TCCACGGTTG AGACGTGTTT TTTTTTTTTT TTTTTTTTTT

(a)

M R T L W I V A V W L M G

1 CACTAGTGAA AATGAGGACT CTCTGGATAG TGGCCGTGTG GCTGATGGGC  
 GTGATCACTT TTAATCCTGA GAGACCTATC ACCGGCACAC CGACTACCCG  
V E G N L F Q F G S M I K K K T G

51 GTCGAAGGGA ACCTTTTCCA ATTCGGGAGT ATGATCAAAA AAAAGACGGG  
 CAGCTTCCCT TGGAAAAGGT TAAGCCCTCA TACTAGTTTT TTTTCTGCC  
K N A I M N Y S A Y G C Y C G W G

101 GAAAAATGCT ATTATGAACT ACAGTGCTTA CGGATGCTAC TGCGGCTGGG  
 CTTTTTACGA TAATACTTGA TGTACGAAAT GCCTACGATG ACGCCGACCC  
G Q G K P Q D A T D R C C F V H

151 GGGGGCAAGG CAAGCCACAG GACGCCACCG ACCGCTGCTG TTTCTGATAC  
 CCCCCTTCC GTTCGGGTGTC CTGCGGTGGC TGGCGACGAC AAAGCATGTA  
D C C Y G E V V N G C K P K T S I

201 GACTGCTGTT ACGGGGAAGT GGTGAACGGC TGCAAACCCA AAACGTCCAT  
 CTGACGACAA TGCCCCCTCA CCACTTGCCG ACGTTTGGGT TTTGACGGTA  
Y T Y S Y Q G E D I V C G D K D P

251 TTATACCTAC AGCTATCAGG GCGAGGATAT CGTCTGTGGA GACAAGGACC  
 AATATGGATG TCGATAGTCC CGCTCCTATA GCAGACACCT CTGTTCTCTG  
C K K K V C E C D W F S A T C F

301 CATGCAAGAA AAAGGTTTGT GAGTGTGACT GGTTCCTCGGC AACCTGCTTT  
 GTACGTTCTT TTTCCAAACA CTCACACTGA CCAAGAGCCG TTGGACGAAA  
G E N V N T Y N D N Y R W Y P S K

351 GGAGAGAATG TGAATACATA CAACGATAAC TATAGGTGGT ACCCATCCAA  
 CCTCTCTTAC ACTTATGTAT GTTGCTATTG ATATCCACCA TGGGTAGGTT  
N C K E E S E Q C \*

401 AAATTGCAAG GAGGAGTCAG AGCAATGCTA ATTCTCCTCA GGACGGGAAA  
 TTTAACGTTT CTCCTCAGTC TCGTTACGAT TAAGAGGAGT CCTGCCCTTT

451 AACCCCTCCA ATTACACAAT TGTGGTTGTG TCATTCTGAA TGCAATACTG  
 TTGGGGAGGT TAATGTGTTA ACACCAACAC AGTAAGACTT ACGTTATGAC

501 AGCAATAAAC AGGTGCCAGC TCTGCACAAA AAAAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAA  
 TCGTTATTTG TCCACGGTTC AGACGTGTTT TTTTTTTTTT TTTTTTTTTT

(b)

Figure 1. Cont.

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          M R T L W I V A L W L M G V
1  AGTGGCCGCT ATGAGGACTC TCTGGATAGT GCCCCTGTGG CTGATGGGGC
   TCACCGGCGA TACTCCTGAG AGACCTATCA CCGGGACACC GACTACCCGC
   E G N L F Q F R N M I H K K T G
51  TCGAAGGGAA CCTTTTCCAA TTCCGAAACA TGATCCACAA AAAGACGGGG
   AGCTTCCCTT GGAAAAGGTT AAGCCTTGT ACTAGGTGTT TTTCTGCCCC
   K N A V M N Y S A Y G C Y C G W G
101 AAAAAATGCTG TTATGAACTA CAGTGCTTAC GGATGCTACT GCGGCTGGGG
   TTTTACGAC AATACTTGAT GTCACGAATG CCTACGATGA CGCCGACCCC
   G Q G K P Q D A T D R C C F V H D
151 GGGGCAAGGC AAGCCACAGG ACGCCACCGA CCGCTGCTGT TTCGTACATG
   CCCCCTCCG TTCGGTGTCC TCGGTGGCT GCGCAGCACA AAGCATGTAC
   C C Y G R V N G R D P K M S L Y
201 ACTGCTGTTA CGGGAGAGTG AACGGCCGCG ACCCCAAAAT GTCCTTATAC
   TGACGACAAAT GCCCTCTCAC TTGCCGCGCG TGGGTTTTA CAGGAATATG
   T Y A F Q G E D I V C G D T D P S
251 ACCTACGCGT TTCAGGGCGA GGATATCGTC TGTGGAGACA CGGACCCCTC
   TGGATGCCGA AAGTCCCGCT CCTATAGCAG ACACCTCTGT GCCTGGGGAG
   L K E L C E C D R V A A I C L G E
301 CCTGAAGGAA CTTTGTGAGT GTGACAGGGT TCGGCAATC TGCTTAGGGG
   GGACTTCCCT GAAACACTCA CACTGTCCCA ACGCCGTTAG ACGAATCCCC
   N V S T Y N N N Y W L Y S S K K
351 AGAATGTGAG TACATAAAC AATAACTATT GTTTGTACTC ATCCAAAAAA
   TCTTACACTC ATGTATGTTG TTATTGATAA CCAACATGAG TAGGTTTTTT
   C Q E E S E Q C *
401 TGCCAGGAGG AGTCAGAGCA ATGCTAAGTC TAATCAGACG GAAAAACCCC
   ACGGTCCCTCC TCAGTCTCGT TACGATTGAG ATTAGTCTGC CCTTTGGGG
451 TCATTACACA GTGTGGTGTG TATCTATCAT CTGATGCATA CTGAGCATAA
   AGTAATGTGT CACACCACAC ATAGATAGTA GACTACGTAT GACTCGTATT
501 CAGTGCAGCT CTGCCACAAA AAAAAAAAAA
   GTCACGTCGA GACGGTGTTT TTTTTTTTTT

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(c)

**Figure 1.** Nucleotide and translated amino acid sequences of the three Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (PLA<sub>2</sub>) precursors: (a) PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C. from *A. chlorechis*; (b) PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. from *A. nitschei*; and (c) PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. from *A. squamigera*. The putative signal sequences are double-underlined, the mature proteins are single-underlined and stop codons are indicated by asterisks. Polyadenylation sites are underlined.

		←Signal peptide→	1		35
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.C.	(1)	MRTLWIVAVWLMGVEGHLEQFGNMI	DHVSGR-SFWLYVSYGCG	CGWGGSG	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.N.	(1)	MRTLWIVAVWLMGVEGNLFQFGSMI	KKKTGKNAIMNYSAYGCG	CGWGGQG	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.S.	(1)	MRTLWIVAVLWLMGVEGNLFQFRNMI	HKKTGKNAV MNYSAYGCG	CGWGGQG	
			36		84
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.C.	(50)	KPQDDTNRCCFVHDCCYGKMG-TYD	TKWTSYNYEFQNGDII	CGDKNPRKK	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.N.	(51)	KPQDATDRCCFVHDCCYGEVNVNCC	KPKTSIYTYSYQGEDIV	CGDKDCKK	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.S.	(51)	KPQDATDRCCFVHDCCYGRVN-GR	DPKMSLYTYAFQGEDIV	CGDTPSLK	
			85		123
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.C.	(99)	EICCCORVAATCFGNRNTYNSKY	FAYSSINCMEE	TEQC	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.N.	(101)	KVCFCDWFSATCFGENVNTYNDNYR	WYPKNCKEE	SEQC	
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.S.	(100)	EICCCORVAATCLGENVSTYNNNY	WLYSSKCKDEE	SEQC	

**Figure 2.** Alignment of phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> proteins from the venoms of *A. chlorechis*, PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C.; *A. nitschei*, PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N.; and *A. squamigera*, PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. Identical amino acid residues are shaded gray. Putative signal peptides are marked and positionally-conserved cysteines in all of the proteins are outlined in red boxes, with the two additional cysteine residues outlined by blue boxes. The numbering of amino acid residues is indicated above the first sequence, and gaps are shown as dashes.

The open-reading frames of the three PLA<sub>2</sub> proteins were employed in Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) searches using the National Center for Biotechnological Information (NCBI) on-line portal. The results indicated that they had a relatively high identity with Group II



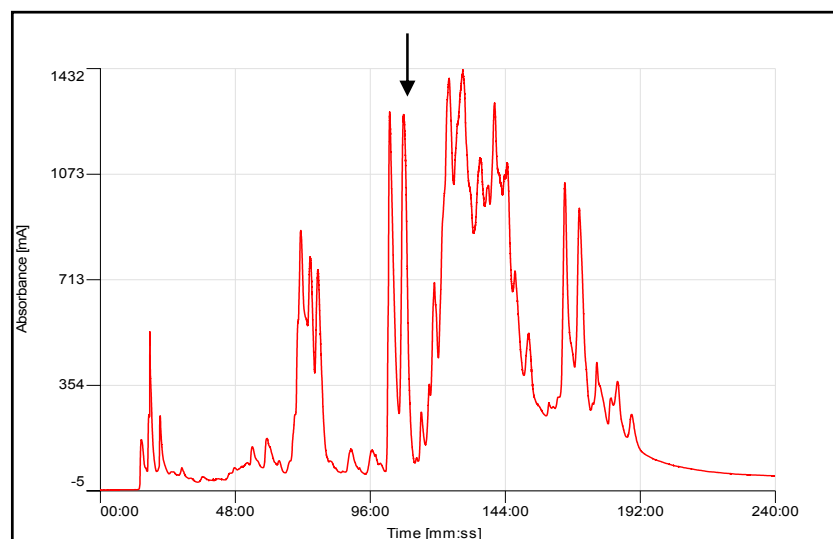
phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>s from Viperidae snake venoms (Table 1, Figure 2). These studies revealed some very interesting characteristics of the three novel enzymes: PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S., which both possessed 12 cysteines, showed a disparate alignment map. PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. showed some unexpected identities with PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. that has 14 cysteines, and they were both obviously most similar to the phospholipases A<sub>2</sub> classified as Group IIA—the majority cluster. However, PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C. is nearly identical to phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> AAR06850.1 from *Bitis gabonica* [21], which falls within the extraordinary Group IIB PLA<sub>2</sub>s that lack one disulfide-bridge conserved in the Group IIA as mentioned in the work of Six *et al.* [2].

**Table 1.** Comparison of the results of similarity searches by use of the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) tool on the Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (PLA<sub>2</sub>) precursor sequences obtained from the venoms of *A. chlorechis* (PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C.), *A. nitschei* (PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N.), and *A. squamigera* (PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S.). The accession numbers shown here are unique identifiers of the recorded protein sequences archived in Genbank.

Protein	Accession Number	Organism	Identities	Group
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.C.	AAR06850.1	<i>Bitis gabonica</i>	96%	GIIB
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.N.	AAK49823.1	<i>Echis coloratus</i>	71%	GIIA
	ACQ57801.1	<i>Macrovipera lebetina</i>	71%	GIIA
PLA <sub>2</sub> -A.S.	AAK49822	<i>Echis coloratus</i>	73%	GIIA
	ACQ57801.1	<i>Macrovipera lebetina</i>	72%	GIIA

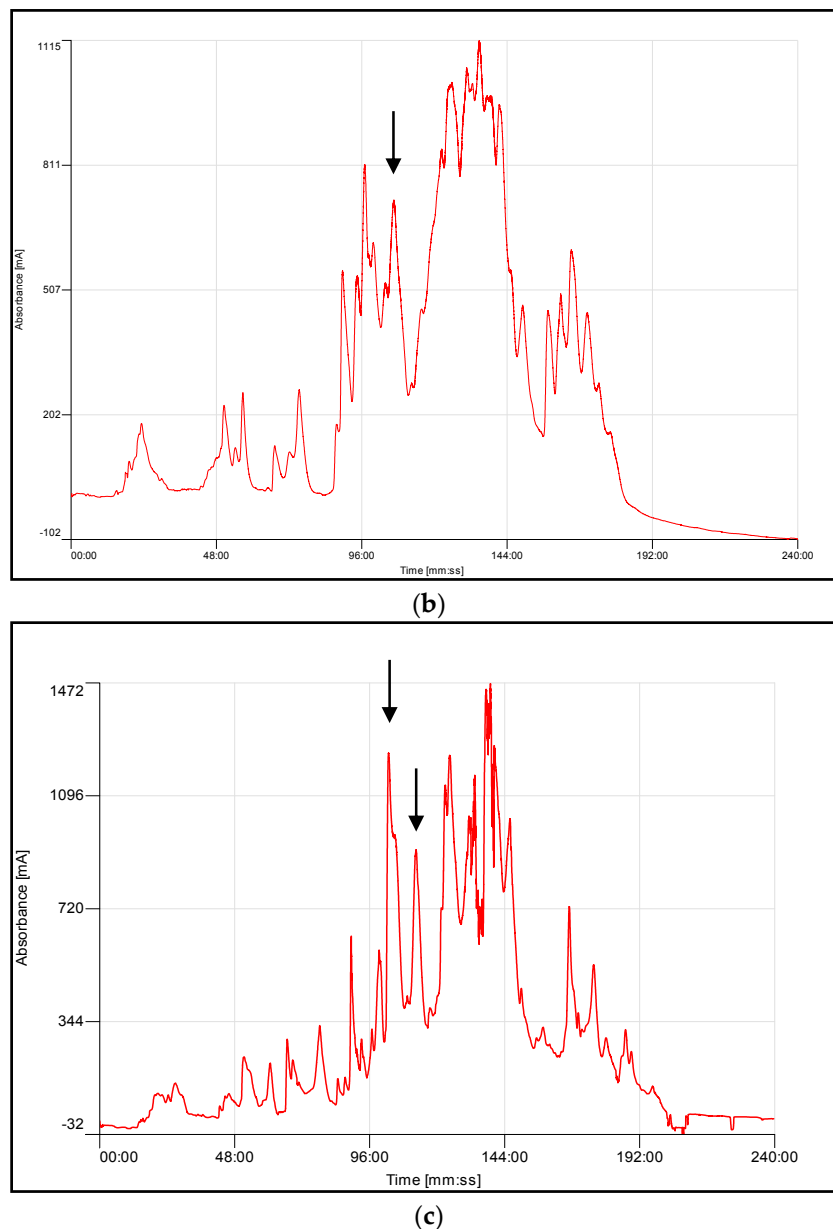
## 2.2. Identification and Structural Analysis of PLA<sub>2</sub> Proteins

A large range of components was successfully resolved following reverse phase High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) fractionation of the crude lyophilized venoms from *A. chlorechis*, *A. nitschei* and *A. squamigera*. Initial PLA<sub>2</sub> activity screening of eluted HPLC fractions was performed separately by agarose/egg yolk suspension plates (Supplementary materials Figure S1, Table S1). A number of fractions were identified as possessing phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> activity and were displayed as isolated peaks in each chromatogram (Figure 3).



(a)

Figure 3. Cont.



**Figure 3.** Region of reverse phase High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) profiles of venoms from (a) *A. chlorechis*; (b) *A. nitschei*; and (c) *A. squamigera*, indicating (arrow) elution position/retention times of PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C., PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S., respectively.

The molecular masses of each protein were determined by Matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization-Time of Flight (MALDI-TOF) mass spectrometry and single major ions with  $m/z$  ratios around 14 KDa were resolved which are in accordance with data from the cDNA-deduced amino acid sequences. The primary structures were subsequently unequivocally confirmed by Liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry (LC/MS/MS) fragmentation sequencing (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Assignment of the Liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry (LC/MS/MS) identified *Atheris* venom protein fragments (*A. chlorechis*, *A. nitschei* and *A. squamigera*) from fractions shown in Figure 3.

Species	Retention Time (min)	Average Mass Observation	Average Mass Calculation	MS/MS-Derived Sequence
<i>A. chlorechis</i>	103–104	13,960.5 Da	13,964 Da	HLEQFGNMIDHVSGR CCFVHDCCYGK MGTYDTK ELCECDR VAaicFGNNR NTYNSK
	106–109	13,975 Da	13,979 Da	NLFQFGSMIK NAIMNYSAYGCYCGWGGQKQDATDR DKDPCK VNTYNDNYR WYPSK
<i>A. squamigera</i>	105–107	13,840 Da	13,841 Da	NLFQFR NMIHK NAVMNYSAYGCYCGWGGQKQDATDR
	113		13,847 Da	NLFQFR CCFVHDCCYGR ELCECDR CQESEQC

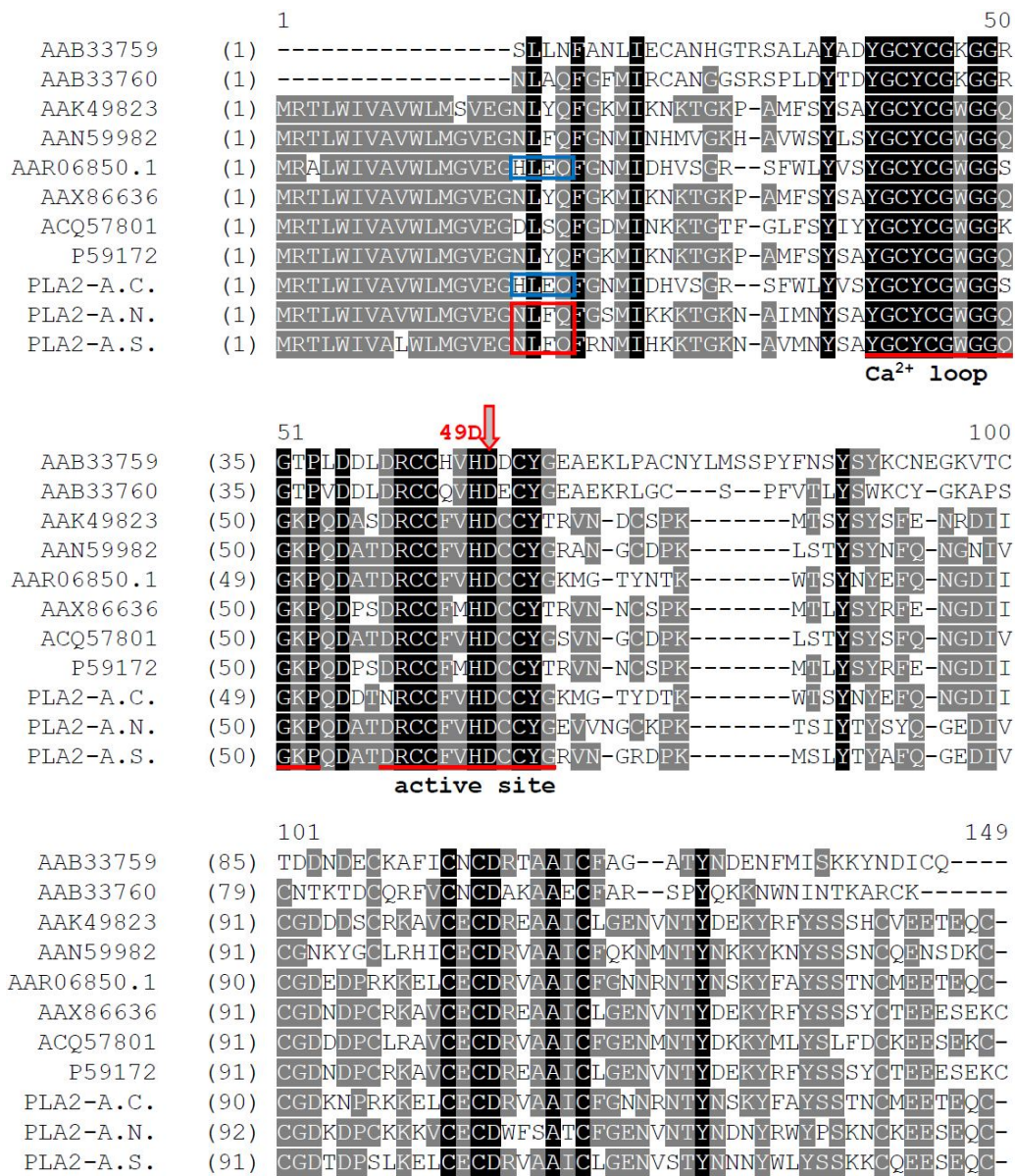
### 3. Discussion

Whole venoms from *A. chlorechis*, *A. nitschei* and *A. squamigera* were subjected to reverse phase HPLC fractionation, followed by mass spectrometric analysis of each fraction, resulting in consistent identification of PLA<sub>2</sub> proteins with the predicted masses of mature proteins deduced from cDNA-encoded precursors. It can be seen from Figure 3 that active PLA<sub>2</sub> fractions from *A. squamigera* venom seems to contain more than one component. However, as shown in Table 2, the spectrum of the peaks at 106 and 113 min differed by only six mass units from the theoretical molecular mass of 13841 Da. The discrepant masses of these two peaks probably could be accounted for by several amino-acid substitutions in the sequences of related isoenzymes which often occur in surface exposed residues which play a key role in recognition of target proteins [22]. Although the spectrum of *A. squamigera* exhibited the probable existence of PLA<sub>2</sub> enzyme isoforms in the venom, the tiny mass difference of the two peaks indicated a very low possibility. Therefore, we suppose it could just be due to slight differences in hydrophobic properties or the isoelectric points of the two subunits constituting the PLA<sub>2</sub> homodimer (related to the elutropic theory of reverse-phase chromatography); even external conditions, such as room temperature, stability of ionization, *etc.*, could also be responsible. However, as a consequence of intrinsic molecular diversity, single snake venom can contain up to 16 discrete PLA<sub>2</sub> homologs with phospholipase activity [23], we cannot affirm that the precursors obtained by molecular cloning in our study represent the only PLA<sub>2</sub> proteins occurring in these snake venoms.

Comparative sequence analyses have revealed a high conservation of functionally important domains and disulfide bonding patterns among the different groups of phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>s. This can be seen clearly by our alignment of Groups I and II PLA<sub>2</sub>s from Genbank and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C., PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S., from our original experimental data, as shown in Figure 4. The sequence identity as well as the BLAST data shown in Table 1 proves our hypothesis on the relationship of PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C., PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. share the same N-terminal sequence NLFQ-, show higher similarity in functional amino-acid sequence and both belong to Group IIA. In contrast, PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C. has a different N-terminal amino acid sequence, HLEQ-, to the previous two PLA<sub>2</sub>s and was identical to AAR 06850.1—the PLA<sub>2</sub> from Gaboon viper venom [21], which was identified as a Group IIB PLA<sub>2</sub>. Structural comparisons provide a basis for speculation as to the novel phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> protein metal binding sites, disulfide-bond assignments and residues participating in the catalytic site. These three novel phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>s share, in common with the other PLA<sub>2</sub>s, the Ca<sup>2+</sup> binding loop, active site, and pivotal amino-acid residues such as the His 48/Asp 49 core and calcium-binding assistants, Tyr 28, Gly 30 and Gly 32 (shown in Figure 4). Many of the similar pre-determinations of former newly-discovered PLA<sub>2</sub>s, derived from such homologies, have been confirmed by enzyme activity assays and by X-ray crystallographic analysis. It is thus justifiable to consider the relationships



between primary structures and enzyme properties of these three PLA<sub>2</sub>s and the effects of their key structural frameworks as well as the location and types of residues involved in activity or toxicity.



**Figure 4.** Alignments of PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C., PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N., and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. structures and the selected PLA<sub>2</sub>s from the Genbank database. Identical residues are shaded with black and conserved residues with gray. The functional regions are underlined and the highly-conserved active center is exhibited using an arrow. The number of amino acids is illustrated above the first sequence, and the accession numbers of each protein at the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) Genbank is marked at the front of the array. The N-terminal sequences of PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.N. and PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.S. are indicated by a red box; PLA<sub>2</sub>-A.C. and the similar PLA<sub>2</sub> AAR06850.1 are indicated by a blue box.

Little is known about the toxicity of enzymes from venoms of the *Atheris* genus, although the coagulation disturbances, hemorrhaging, acute renal failure and hypertension following snakebite, can all be fatal. Our group has characterized the disintegrin proteins in a previous study [20] and these could explain the platelet aggregation inhibition and blood clotting blocking toxicity of the *Atheris* venoms. It would thus be interesting to predict pharmacological effects and look for the experimental evidence for the involvement of these novel phospholipase A<sub>2</sub>s. As direct experimental proof is not

yet available, it is not possible to predict the properties of these proteins at the moment, and thus the question remains open.

## 4. Experimental

### 4.1. Materials

Lyophilized venoms from the Western bush viper (*A. chlorechis*), the Great Lakes bush viper (*A. nitschei*) and the Variable bush viper (*A. squamigera*), were obtained from a commercial source (Latoxan, Valence, France).

### 4.2. Molecular Cloning of the Phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> Precursor-Encoding cDNAs

Five milligrams of each venom sample were separately dissolved in 1 mL of lysis/binding buffer (DynaL Biotech, Wirral, UK); the polyadenylated mRNA was extracted by oligo-dT Dynabeads (DynaL Biotech, Wirral, UK) and was isolated as described by the manufacturer. A SMART<sup>TM</sup> Rapid Amplification of cDNA ends (RACE) cDNA Amplification kit (BD Clontech, Basingstoke, UK) was then employed. Both 5'- and 3' cDNA ends were synthesized using SMART (Switching Mechanism At 5' end of RNA Transcription) cDNA synthesis technology. The reaction was performed by using a nested universal primer (NUP) and a sense primer (S1: 5'-ATGAGGACTCTCTGGATAGTGGCCG-3') that was designed to be complementary to a highly-conserved domain of the 5'-untranslated region of previously-characterized phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> cDNAs from related snake species (Accession Nos.: GU012263, AY430405, DQ288157, AM114013 and DQ295886). The DNA fragments of expected size were purified and inserted into the pGEM-T vector system (Promega, Southampton, UK). Plasmid DNAs selected after transformation by *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) cells, were amplified and then purified by use of a Rapid HiYield<sup>TM</sup> Gel/PCR DNA Extraction Kit (RBC Bioscience, Duren, Germany). Sequences of the products were obtained use of an automated 3730 capillary DNA sequencer (Applied Biosystems, Warrington, UK).

### 4.3. Chromatographic Fractionation and Activity Determination

Fractionation of components of all three snake venoms was achieved by gradient reverse-phase HPLC (Cecil CE 4200 Adept, Cambridge, UK), using a Phenomenex C<sub>5</sub> (300 A, 250 × 10 mm) column. Five milligram samples from each venom were separately reconstituted in 0.05% (*v/v*) trifluoroacetic acid (TFA)/water, injected onto the column and eluted with a linear gradient formed from 0.05/99.5 (*v/v*) TFA/water to 0.05/19.95/80.0 (*v/v/v*) TFA/water/acetonitrile, by increasing the percentage of the latter buffer gradually over 240 min at a flow rate of 1 mL/min. The fractions were collected at minute intervals and samples (200 µL) were removed from each fraction in triplicate, concentrated and stored at 4 °C prior to functional studies.

The determination of phospholipase A<sub>2</sub> (PLA<sub>2</sub>) activity in fractions was achieved by use of agarose/egg yolk suspension plates containing phosphatidylcholine as substrate. A 20% portion of HPLC fractions from each of the snake venoms were concentrated and reconstituted in 0.1% Albumin from bovine serum/phosphate buffer saline (BSA/PBS). The plates were prepared with 4% egg yolk emulsion (Oxoid, Basingstoke, UK) in agarose solution in the presence of calcium, punched with 8 wells per plate and each well was loaded with 10 µL sample. The diameters of cleared egg yolk zones after the 20 h incubation (37 °C) were measured to locate the fractions that possessed PLA<sub>2</sub> activity.

### 4.4. Identification and Structural Investigations

Reverse phase High Performance Liquid Chromatography (RP-HPLC) fractions possessing PLA<sub>2</sub> activity were subjected to matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization, time-of-flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS) on a linear time-of-flight Voyager DE mass spectrometer (PerSeptive Biosystems, Warrington, UK) in positive detection mode using α-cyano-4-hydroxycinnamic acid as the matrix.

Internal mass calibration of the instrument with known standards established the accuracy of mass determination as  $\pm 0.1\%$ . Those fractions with masses of approximately 14 kDa coincident with those deduced from cloned cDNAs were digested using trypsin and the resultant tryptic peptides were subjected to primary structural analysis by use of an LCQ Fleet electrospray ion-trap mass spectrometer (Thermo, Cheshire, UK).

#### 4.5. Ethical Statement

Venoms used in this study were obtained non-invasively from captive snakes.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following are available online at [www.mdpi.com/2072-6651/8/6/168/s1](http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6651/8/6/168/s1), Figure S1: Dose response curve of diameter of PLA<sub>2</sub> clearance zones against log<sub>10</sub> enzyme concentration of the standard PLA<sub>2</sub> from honey bee venom. Linear regression analysis was employed, and the regression equation ( $Y = 0.7039X - 0.34$ ) was obtained to analyse the equivalent PLA<sub>2</sub> content of sample venoms. The clearance zones of samples in the agarose/egg yolk suspension plate assay were used to estimate content of PLA<sub>2</sub>s in sample venom fractions. The results are summarised in Table S1. Table S1: Clearance zones and corresponding estimated quantities of PLA<sub>2</sub> in sample venoms from *A. chlorechis*, *A. nitschei* and *A. squamigera*.

**Acknowledgments:** This project was supported by the National Science Foundation, China (Grant No. 81402842) and the Natural Science Foundation of Fujian Province, China (Grant No. 2015J05162).

**Author Contributions:** He Wang, Xiaole Chen and Mei Zhou conceived and designed the experiments; He Wang performed the experiments. He Wang and Chris Shaw analyzed the data. Tianbao Chen and Lei Wang contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools. He Wang wrote the manuscript. Chris Shaw and Xiaole Chen revised the manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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