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Effect of Co-solutes on Template-directed Nonenzymatic Copying of RNA

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Introduction: The transition from chemistry to biology resulting in the origin of life still remains an unsolved mystery. A widely accepted hypothesis of the 'RNA world' [1] presumes that RNA played a key role during the emergence and evolution of early life on Earth by acting both as a genetic material, and a replicase that could self-propagate this genetic information. Accurate replication of the encoded information would have played a key role in formation of efficient RNA catalyst. It has been previously shown that the addition of incorrect nucleotides during nonenzymatic replication stalls the process [2]. Furthermore, this initial misincorporation also leads to a cascade of mismatches [3], giving selective advantage to the accurately replicating nucleic acids. However, these studies were carried out without accounting for the presence of any 'background molecules' in the reaction mixture. This chemically simple reaction milieu is not prebiotically realistic as the prebiotic soup would have been a heterogenous solution containing a mixture of many different molecules. Presence of co-solutes and molecular crowding agents is known to affect the kinetics of many contemporary biochemical reaction [4,5]. Hence, it becomes important to analyze the effect of presence of co-solutes on prebiotically relevant nonenzymatic reactions.

Results: In this study, we report the effect of presence of Poly Ethylene Glycol (PEG) and double chain surfactant lipid as co-solutes on nonenzymatic template-directed RNA primer extension reactions using 5'-imidazolides as monomers. It was observed that the rate of primer extension decreased in reactions involving a 'matched' addition of a purine across the cognate template base, in presence of co-solutes.(Fig. 1). We envisage that the diffusion of the potentially stacked purine monomers is possibly reduced in the presence of co-solutes, thus resulting in a decreased rate of extension of the primer. Efforts are ongoing to dissect the underlying cause of this phenomenon using pertinent biophysical techniques.

Furthermore, we also observed that reactions involving the addition of a mismatched monomer across the non-cognate template base, were not notably affected (Fig. 1), resulting in elevated frequency of misincorporations against 'C' and 'U' template bases (Fig. 2). The mutation rate in the presence of co-solutes was found to be higher than what is observed under control reaction conditions. It, therefore, is critical to consider the heterogeneity of the prebiotic soup while studying pertinent enzyme-free reactions. Our results suggest direct implications for efficient replication of functional nucleic acid sequences in a complex prebiotic milieu.

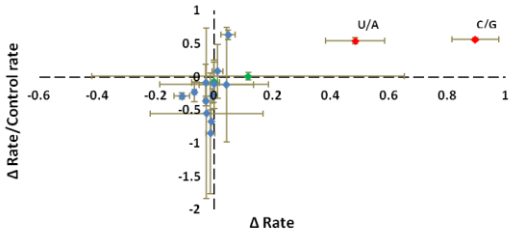

Figure 1- The 'Δ Rate' (rate of control reaction minus the rate of reaction in presence of both the co-solutes) is significantly different from zero for addition of 'G across C' (point C/G) and addition of 'A across U' (point U/A)

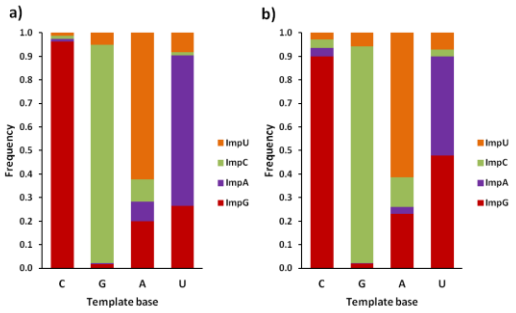

Figure 2 - Incorporation frequencies for addition of cognate and non-cognate bases. a) In the absence of any co-solutes. b) In the presence of lipid and PEG as co-solutes

References:

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