RNA-primed complementary-sense DNA synthesis of the
geminivirus African cassava mosaic virus

Keith Saunders, Andrew Lucy and John Stanley
Department of Virus Research, John Innes Institute, John Innes Centre for Plant Science Research, Colney Lane, Norwich NR4 7UH, UK

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ABSTRACT
The plant DNA virus African cassava mosaic virus (ACMV) is believed to replicate by a rolling circle mechanism. To investigate complementary-sense DNA (lagging strand) synthesis, we have analysed the heterogenous form of complementary-sense DNA (H3 DNA) from infected Nicotiana benthamiana by two-dimensional agarose gel electrophoresis and blot hybridisation. The presence of an RNA moiety is demonstrated by comparison of results for nucleic acids resolved on neutral/alkaline and neutral/formamide gels, suggesting that complementary-sense DNA synthesis on the virus-sense single-stranded DNA template is preceded by the synthesis of an RNA primer. Hybridisation with probes to specific parts of ACMV DNA A genome indicates that synthesis of the putative RNA primer initiates between nucleotides 2581–221, a region that includes intergenic sequences that have been implicated in geminivirus DNA replication and the control of gene expression.

INTRODUCTION
The genome of the geminivirus African cassava mosaic virus (ACMV), a plant virus with a restricted dicotyledonous host range, comprises two single-stranded (ss) DNA components (DNAs A and B) of a similar size encapsidated in twinned quasi-isometric particles [1,2]. Extracts of ACMV-infected Nicotiana benthamiana contain monomeric, concatemeric and subgenomic forms of both ssDNA and supercoiled, open-circular and linear double-stranded (ds) DNA [3]. In addition, we have identified and characterised a complex population of virus-specific heterogenous DNA forms by chromatography on BND-cellulose and blot hybridisation of samples resolved by two-dimensional neutral/alkaline and neutral/formamide agarose gels and detected by blot hybridisation as described [4]. Our results are consistent with rolling circle replication for ACMV DNA and represent the first direct evidence for such a mechanism in eukaryotes. Studies on the replicational release of the monopartite geminivirus beet curly top virus (BCTV) from tandem repeat sequences support this idea [5].

The initial event following infection and uncoating of the virion DNA is presumed to be the host-directed synthesis of complementary-sense DNA on the ssDNA template to produce a transcriptionally active intermediate (see Figure 5). The inability to detect complementary-sense DNA (lagging strand) synthesis associated with newly synthesised virus-sense ssDNA, generated by rolling circle replication, suggested the latter to be an obligate intermediate of replication [4]. It is likely that complementary-sense DNA synthesis on this replicative intermediate proceeds by a similar mechanism to that on ssDNA following uncoating. The encapsidated viral DNA of geminiviruses that infect monocotyledonous plants is predominantly single-stranded but is associated with a complementary-sense DNA fragment of approximately 80 nucleotides containing 5' terminal ribonucleotides [6–9]. The ability to synthesise full-length dsDNA in vitro using viral DNA extracted from purified virus particles suggested that the fragment might serve as a primer for at least the first round of DNA synthesis in vivo. We have been unable to detect an analogous fragment associated with ACMV particles [3], suggesting that primer synthesis occurs immediately after uncoating in infected cells.

On the basis of electrophoretic mobility on neutral/alkaline agarose gels, we have identified subgenomic-sized DNAs (heterogenous DNA H3) as intermediates in complementary-sense DNA synthesis [4]. In the present study we investigate complementary-sense DNA synthesis by comparing viral DNA forms that have been fractionated on neutral/alkaline and neutral/formamide agarose gels and detected by blot hybridisation using probes to specific regions of the genome.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Virus source and propagation
ACMV was derived from infectious clones (pJS092 and pJS094) of a Kenyan isolate [2] and propagated in N. benthamiana as described [4]. Virus was held and manipulated under MAFF licence numbers PHF 1185A/68(21) and PHF 1185B/17(111) under the Plant Pests (Great Britain) Order 1980.

Analysis of virus-specific nucleic acids
Total nucleic acids were isolated from systemically infected leaves as described [4]. Nucleic acids were resolved by 1.2% or 1.4% two-dimensional (neutral/alkaline) agarose gel electrophoresis and blot hybridisation on Hybond N (Amersham International) membranes [4]. Nucleic acids resolved by two-dimensional neutral/formamide agarose gels were either untreated (control) or digested with a combination of ribonuclease A (50μg/ml) and ribonuclease T1.
(100U/ml) (Boehringer) by incubation in 50mM Tris-HCl, 5mM MgCl₂ (pH 7.9) at 37°C for 2 hours. Nucleic acids were recovered by phenol-chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation prior to electrophoresis. The first dimension of two-dimensional (neutral/formamide) agarose gel electrophoresis was carried out using 1.2% gels containing 40mM Tris-acetate, 20mM sodium acetate, 2mM EDTA (pH 7.5), electrophoresed at 1.25V/cm for 24 hours. The gel strip was incubated in a 50% (v:v) solution of formamide in 20mM MOPS, 8mM sodium acetate, 1mM EDTA (pH 7.0) for 15 minutes at 65°C. Following equilibration, melted 1.2% agarose in formamide-containing buffer was poured around the first dimension strip. Electrophoresis was continued for 24 hours at 1.25V/cm at 90° orientation to the first dimension and nucleic acids were blotted onto Hybond N membrane without prior treatment of the gel.

Strand-specific probes

Complementary-sense nucleic acid was detected with RNA probes to ACMV produced by run-off transcription from the T7 promoter of pBS(−) (Stratagene). The probes are summarised in Figure 1. ACMV nucleotide numbering throughout is according to [1]. Clone pAL001, containing the DNA A-specific fragment DraI(221)−SphiI(2581) [4], was linearised with SphiI (probe A), HincII (probe C) and EcoRV (probe D). Clones pAL006 and pAL008 are derivatives of pAL001 in which the DNA A-specific fragments DraI(221)−EcoRI(1938) for pAL006 and DraI(221)−Clai(2403) for pAL008 have been removed. Probes B and F were generated by run-off transcription of pAL006 and pAL008 respectively, following linearisation with SphiI. Clone pAL002 was constructed by subcloning the DNA A fragment SphiI(2581)−DraI(221) from pCLV1.3A [9] into pBS(−) (probe E) digested with SphiI and SmaI. Probe E was generated by run-off transcription from the T3 promoter following linearisation of pAL002 with Kpnl (located within the polylinker, downstream of the ACMV insert).

Isolation of heterogenous DNA

Following neutral/alkaline two-dimensional agarose gel electrophoresis and ethidium bromide staining to locate the positions of the predominant viral DNA forms, the region of the gel containing the H3 DNA was excised and the DNA purified using a Prep-a-Gene kit (Bio-Rad). The 5' end of the DNA was labelled using [γ-³²P]ATP (111 TBq/mmol; NEN) and polynucleotide kinase (Gibco BRL) and the size of the DNA was estimated on a 1.2% alkaline agarose gel against ³²P-labelled pJS092 (full-length DNA A clone) digested with MluI and ³²P-labelled kilobase DNA markers (Gibco BRL).

RESULTS

Detection of complementary-sense H3 DNA

Previous analysis of DNA A from ACMV-infected N. benthamiana by BND-cellulose chromatography, two-dimensional (neutral/alkaline) electrophoresis and blot hybridisation revealed the presence of a number of different heterogenous DNA forms [4]. In particular, when a strand-specific probe corresponding to nucleotides 221−2581 (Figure 1, probe A) was used, a heterogenous form of complementary-sense DNA was identified (H3 DNA). The electrophoretic mobility of H3 DNA was dependent upon its association with its circular template during the first dimension from which it was denatured in the second dimension. To identify the part of the genome involved in the initiation of complementary-sense DNA synthesis we hybridised similar blots with probes for specific regions of complementary-sense DNA A (Figure 1). Using probe B, corresponding to nucleotides 1938−2581, the heterogenous DNA forms HI, H2 and H3 and the major dsDNA forms consisting of open-circular, linear and supercoiled DNAs were detected (Figure 2A). These DNAs were identified and characterised previously [4] with the use of probe A. On both occasions, the probes specific to complementary-sense DNA also detected ssDNA, although in reduced amounts compared with probes specific for virus-sense DNA. The pattern of DNA forms detected by probe B, in particular complementary-sense H3 DNA, was very similar to that detected by probe A. When blots were hybridised with a probe specific for complementary-sense nucleotides 221−1247 (Figure 1, probe C), most of the DNA forms that were previously detected by probe B were visualised (Figure 2B). To maximise detection of ssDNA forms the sample was resolved on a 1.4% gel and the DNA was subjected to milder depurination in situ, resulting in a reduction in the supercoiled DNA signal in Figure 2B. However, unlike probe B, probe C did not hybridise to the low molecular weight forms of H3 DNA. Using a probe specific to complementary-sense nucleotides 221−464 (Figure 1, probe D) the pattern of hybridisation was similar except that only the highest molecular weight forms of H3 DNA were detected (Figure 2C). A prominent signal (labelled X in Figure 2) is present within the H3 DNA following hybridisation with each probe, suggesting that a discrete DNA form is generated during the synthesis of full-length complementary-sense DNA.

The results show that progressively smaller H3 DNA forms are detected using probes D, C and B. In addition, a similar pattern of hybridisation to probe B was seen when probe F encompassing nucleotides 2403−2581 was used (data not shown). These results strongly suggest that the origin of complementary-sense DNA synthesis is located between nucleotides 2403 and 221. To investigate this idea we selected a probe specific to complementary-sense nucleotides 2581−221 (Figure 1, probe E).
Unexpectedly, only high molecular weight forms of H3 DNA were detected with this probe (Figure 3A), reminiscent of the hybridisation pattern produced using probe D.

**Complementary-sense H3 DNA forms in neutral/formamide gels**

All previous analyses had been accomplished by resolving viral DNAs on two-dimensional neutral/alkaline agarose gels. Under these conditions any RNA species associated with the replicative intermediates would be degraded during electrophoresis in the second dimension. In order to preserve RNA species we fractionated the nucleic acids in the second dimension using denaturing conditions that are frequently used to resolve RNA. When probe E was hybridised to blots of nucleic acids that had been pretreated with ribonuclease (Figure 3B) the predominant forms of H3 DNA were high molecular weight. The reduced level of supercoiled DNA detected by probe E was due to the fact that the gel was neither depurinated nor treated with alkali prior to northern transfer and consequently the binding efficiency of this species to Hybond N was reduced. The hybridisation pattern of probe E to nucleic acids that had not been pretreated with ribonuclease was similar except that low molecular weight H3 DNA forms were additionally detected (Figure 3C). Comparison of the over-exposed autoradiographs (insets of Figures 3B and 3C) clearly shows the low molecular weight forms of H3 DNA associated with the untreated sample. The ability of probe E to detect low molecular weight forms of H3 DNA only when samples have not been subjected to alkaline conditions or ribonuclease digestion suggests that the nucleic acids which hybridise to the probe (nucleotides 2581 - 221) are predominantly RNA. The extremely faint signal associated with the treated sample maybe attributed either to incomplete ribonuclease
digestion or weak hybridisation to a small fragment of complementary-sense DNA located immediately downstream of the primer.

Size estimation of H3 DNA
H3 DNA isolated from a neutral/alkaline two-dimensional agarose gel was 5'end-labelled with $^{32}$P and electrophoresed on an alkaline agarose gel together with size markers (Figure 4). The prominent form of H3 DNA, labelled X, was smaller than DNA A (2779 nucleotides), ranging from approximately 1600 to 2000 nucleotides in length. On a longer exposure, DNA with a higher molecular weight than that of X could be detected (data not shown).

DISCUSSION
The identification of the region of the genome involved in ACMV complementary-sense DNA synthesis was made possible by the resolution of the virus-specific nucleic acids by two-dimensional agarose gel electrophoresis and detection of complementary-sense H3 DNA with strand-specific probes corresponding to defined regions of the genome. Comparison of hybridisation patterns of nucleic acids fractionated under conditions that either preserve or degrade RNA suggests that complementary-sense DNA synthesis commences with the synthesis of RNA which acts as a primer. Probes B and F (nucleotides 1938–2581) but not probe E (nucleotides 2581–221) detected low molecular weight forms of H3 DNA under alkaline conditions, suggesting that complementary-sense DNA synthesis starts somewhere within nucleotides 1938–2581. Probes A (nucleotides 221–2581), C (nucleotides 221–1247) and D (nucleotides 221–464) show a progressive decrease in ability to detect low molecular weight forms consistent with this idea. However, after fractionation of nucleic acids under denaturing conditions that do not degrade RNA, probe E additionally detected low molecular weight forms of H3 DNA, indicating that the RNA moiety maps to this region of the genome. The reduction of the probe E hybridisation signal following treatment of the nucleic acids with ribonuclease supports this conclusion.

Following the uncoating of the virion ssDNA, the first step in DNA replication is the synthesis of a second strand on the ssDNA template leading to the production of a transcriptionally active dsDNA form (Figure 5). This process must be achieved entirely by host-encoded proteins since deproteinised geminivirus ssDNA is infectious [11–13]. In this respect, the replication of ACMV complementary-sense DNA resembles minus strand replication of Escherichia coli bacteriophages [14–16] and lagging strand synthesis of Staphylococcus aureus plasmids [17] on ssDNA rolling circle intermediates, processes that are initiated by host-encoded RNA polymerases. Our study shows that synthesis of RNA on the ACMV ssDNA template commences in a region of the genome encompassing intergenic sequences and including the common region [1]. The common region is a sequence of near identity present in both genomic components that plays a central role in bidirectional gene expression [18]. The common region (or its equivalent in monopartite viruses) is retained in all naturally-occurring subgenomic forms of ACMV [3] and the closely related virus tomato golden mosaic (TGMV) [19], and in the monopartite geminivirus BCTV [20,21], implying that it contains cis-acting elements essential for viral DNA synthesis. Within this region is a nonanucleotide sequence, TAATATTAC (nucleotides 146–154 in ACMV), located within
the loop of a putative hairpin-loop structure, that is conserved in all geminiviruses. The nonanucleotide was suggested to play a role in DNA replication because of its homology with a cis-acting element that participates in rolling circle replication of bacteriophage DNA [23]. Indeed, nicking within the ACMV origin of replication prior to virus-sense strand displacement was invoked to explain the recombination hot-spot that occurs between nucleotides 152 and 155 [23]. It is possible that the hairpin-loop structure serves to cause local destabilisation within the dsDNA, an effect that is believed to play an important role in rolling circle replication of bacterial plasmids [24]. Protein AC1, the only ACMV-encoded protein essential for viral DNA replication [25], might contribute to the unwinding process or function by nicking the dsDNA. Recently, it has been shown that TGMV protein AL1 (the homologue of ACMV AC1) binds to the left side of the common region [26], although the binding site does not include the conserved nonanucleotide. Cis-acting elements that participate in the production of the RNA primer and the initiation of DNA synthesis remain to be investigated, but our data are consistent with the idea that primer synthesis initiates within the common region and it is possible that the hairpin-loop structure plays a role in the initiation of complementary-sense DNA synthesis. In this respect, it is interesting to note that sequences involved in the conversion of ssDNA to dsDNA in bacteriophages and bacterial plasmids that replicate via single-stranded intermediates are located within regions of strong secondary structure [27].

Primed by the nascent RNA, complementary-sense DNA synthesis will proceed on the circular ssDNA template until the 5' end of the RNA primer is reached (Figure 5). At this point, displacement of the RNA primer will be necessary to allow DNA synthesis to continue to completion, to produce dsDNA on closure of the termini of the newly synthesised strand. Virus-sense ssDNA will be produced from the dsDNA by rolling circle replication [4] and the de novo synthesised ssDNA will once again serve as a template for complementary-sense strand synthesis as described here. The accumulation of a prominent DNA form (labelled x in Figure 2) within the H3 DNA population might result from the slowing of DNA synthesis during displacement of the RNA primer. If this is the case, the size of the DNA suggests that the primer could be at least 700 nucleotides in length. Alternatively, the hairpin-loop structure within the common region might present a temporary barrier to DNA synthesis. Without a method suitable for the isolation of the non-denatured double-stranded form containing the heterogenous H3 nucleic acid, we have not yet been able to characterise the RNA/DNA hybrid and so determine the exact length of the RNA primer and the point at which DNA synthesis is initiated.

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REFERENCES