Variation in the *AvrSr35* gene determines *Sr35* resistance against wheat stem rust race Ug99

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Puccinia graminis f. sp. tritici (Pgt) causes wheat stem rust, a devastating fungal disease. The *Sr35* resistance gene confers immunity against this pathogen’s most virulent races, including Ug99. We used comparative whole-genome sequencing of chemically mutagenized and natural *Pgt* isolates to identify a fungal gene named *AvrSr35* that is required for *Sr35* avirulence. The *AvrSr35* gene encodes a secreted protein capable of interacting with *Sr35* and triggering the immune response. We show that the origin of *Pgt* isolates virulent on *Sr35* is associated with the nonfunctionalization of the *AvrSr35* gene by the insertion of a mobile element. The discovery of *AvrSr35* provides a new tool for *Pgt* surveillance, identification of host susceptibility targets, and characterization of the molecular determinants of immunity in wheat.

The emergence of new virulent races of pathogens that can overcome the resistance of existing crop cultivars poses a threat to global food security. A prime example is the outbreak of wheat stem rust in Africa that was caused by a broadly virulent *Puccinia graminis* f. sp. tritici (Pgt) race, Ug99, detected in Uganda in 1999 (1). Ug99 was virulent on most of the wheat varieties grown in Europe, Asia, and the United States, prompting research into the discovery of *Pgt*-effective resistance genes. Since the discovery of Ug99, *Pgt* surveillance identified new Ug99-derived strains virulent against additional wheat resistance genes (2).

Plant resistance genes (*R*) defend against an invading pathogen by detecting the corresponding pathogen avirulence factors (*Avr*), which are often secreted effector proteins. *R* genes encode receptors that trigger an immune response upon perception of pathogen *Avr* factors. This response results in localized cell death at the site of infection [hypersensitive response (HR)] (3–5). A pathogen lacking an *Avr* gene renders the corresponding plant *R* gene ineffective. Here, we identified the fungal *Avr* gene recognized by the Ug99-effective wheat stem rust resistance gene *Sr35* (6) and investigated the origin of *Sr35*-virulent fungal isolates.

Using confocal microscopy of *Pgt*-infected leaf tissues from resistant (*Sr35*) and susceptible (*Sr35*) wheat lines, we demonstrated that *Sr35* triggers a resistance response at the early stages of infection (Fig. 1) (7). In wheat line U6169 (*Sr35*+), the development of fungal infection hypoxia stopped even before the formation of a haustorium, the structure with which the fungus extracts nutrients from its host plant. This early immune response is consistent with the lack of pronounced HR symptoms in *Triticum monococcum* accession G2919 used to identify the *Sr35* gene (6) and suggested early expression of a fungal gene recognized by *Sr35*. To identify this *Avr* gene, we mutagenized the spores of the *Pgt* race RKQPC (*Sr35*-avirulent isolate 99K758A-1) with ethylmethylsulfonate (EMS). We isolated 15 *Pgt* mutants virulent to the *Sr35* gene, suggesting that they carry mutations affecting the *Sr35*-specific *Avr* factor (Tables S1 and S2) (7). Both microscopy and time-course RNA-sequencing (RNA-seq) analyses showed no obvious effects of these mutations on the *Pgt* mutants’ interaction with a wheat host compared to the wild-type *Pgt* isolate (figs. S1 and S2, and tables S3 to S5) (7), perhaps due to the functional redundancy of virulence factors that can compensate mutations in the *AvrSr35* gene (8). The genome of the wild-type *Pgt* isolate was assembled, annotated using RNA-seq data (tables S4 and S6), and compared with Illumina reads generated for each of 15 independent *Pgt* mutants (table S7), resulting in the detection of 30,429 EMS-induced mutations (table S8 and data S1).

Only one gene (MF474474) carried mutations in each *Pgt* mutant; 12 mutants had nonsense mutations, one mutant carried a splice-site disrupting mutation, and two mutants had the same nonsynonymous mutation producing valine to isoleucine (V128I) substitution (Fig. 2A and table S9). This *AvrSr35* candidate gene encoded a 578-amino acid protein with a predicted secretion signal peptide (fig. S3). The protein was larger than many previously identified effectors (9); it showed no similarity to proteins from other species within the protein databases, nor did it contain any detectable protein domains (fig. S4) (7). Gene expression analysis of a *Pgt*-infected susceptible wheat line showed increased amounts of the...
AvrSr35 transcripts in the leaf tissues over the course of infection (fig. S3).

To understand the origin of virulence to Sr35 in the field, we resequenced AvrSr35 from 12 Sr35-virulent and 15 Sr35-avirulent natural isolates (tables S10 and S11 and data S2). Phylogenetic analysis revealed two major clades (Fig. 2B). Clade A sequences had intact coding sequences and were found only in the Sr35-avirulent isolates, including 99KS76A-1 and Ug99, indicating that functional AvrSr35 is required for triggering Sr35 resistance against Ug99. Clade V sequences were preferentially found in the Sr35-virulent isolates, except for five Sr35-avirulent isolates (77ND82A, 72CA1A, 75-36-700-3, 68SD657C, and 74MN1049) that carry at least two AvrSr35 gene copies from both clades (7). Clade V had the miniature inverted transposable element (MITE) in exon 6, resulting in the premature stop codon. Because even less severe AvrSr35 truncations detected in the Pgt mutants (Fig. 2A) caused Sr35-avirulence function loss, this MITE insertion is predicted to produce a nonfunctional protein. These results suggest that transposon-mediated disruption of AvrSr35 resulted in the origin of natural Sr35-virulent Pgt isolates. It is likely that the loss of Avr factors is facilitated by transposon proliferation in the rust genomes, which display the higher abundance of mobile elements compared with other fungi (9, 10), contributing to the erosion of plant R genes conferring resistance to rusts.

The ability of the wheat Sr35 gene to recognize the fungal AvrSr35 and trigger HR was confirmed.
Fig. 4. Sr35 and AvrSr35 proteins colocalize in plant cells and interact. (A) Coexpressed fluorescently tagged Sr35 and AvrSr35 colocalized in the N. benthamiana leaf epidermal cells. Scale bar, 20 μm. (B) in the N. benthamiana cells, the AvrSr35ΔPxSP:mRFP protein fusion accumulated in the ER strands (small arrows) and perinuclear space. Scale bar, 10 μm. (C) The Sr35(K206L):GFP protein fusion colocalized with the ER marker ER-mCherry in N. benthamiana cells (fig. S7). (D) Bimolecular fluorescent complementation showed interaction between Sr35 and AvrSr35 in the N. benthamiana cells. Compared with wild-type Sr35, the fluorescence intensity was significantly reduced in the cells expressing sr35ΔM1120 (Tukey’s test adjusted P = 7.4 × 10^-4) and negative control (Tukey’s test adjusted P = 8.7 × 10^-5). Scale bar, 50 μm. N. nucleus.

In *N. benthamiana* cells, fluorescently tagged Sr35 and AvrSr35 proteins, either coexpressed together or expressed individually, colocalized in the same subcellular compartment (Fig. 4, A to C). Colocalization of coexpressed Sr35:GFP protein fusion and the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) marker suggest that Sr35 and AvrSr35 expressed in *N. benthamiana* are likely associated with the ER (Figs. 4C and fig. S7). To investigate whether colocalized Sr35 and AvrSr35 interact in planta, we used bimolecular fluorescent complementation (BiFC) (Fig. 4D and figs. S8 and S9). The complementary AvrSr35 and Sr35 fusion proteins coexpressed in *N. benthamiana* produced a fluorescence signal that is consistent with a protein-protein interaction. The nonsynonymous mutations (sr35ΔM1120 allele) affecting the LRR domain reduced the fluorescent signal intensity implicating the LRR domain in the Sr35-AvrSr35 interaction. These results suggest that the Ug99-susceptible wheat mutant M1120 (6) is associated with the inability of sr35ΔM1120 to interact effectively with AvrSr35. The coinmunoprecipitation of epitope-tagged Sr35 and AvrSr35 expressed in *N. benthamiana* leaves supported the BiFC results, indicating that these proteins are capable of interacting in plant cells (fig. S10).

The identification of AvrSr35 and AvrSr50 (17) provides valuable tools for molecular surveillance and early detection of virulent fungal pathogen races, which can inform the deployment of resistance genes to prevent epidemics. AvrSr35 can also be used to confirm the expression of the functional Sr35 protein in the resistance gene cassettes, allowing for Sr35 to be quickly pyramided alongside other R genes. As more corresponding R-avr gene pairs are identified, this information can guide the selection of complementary R genes targeting multiple avirulence factors to increase the durability of the deployed resistance gene pyramids and reduce the probability of spontaneous virulent *Pgt* strain origin.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

7. Materials and methods are available as supplementary materials.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Data are available from the National Center for Biotechnology Information database: MF474174, MF596174, PRJNA415853, PRJNA313188, SRX1619626-SRX1619626, and GEO GSE106937. The project is funded by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture grant 2012-67013-19401 and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant BMGF 01511000146 to E.A., and USDA Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture grant 2012-67013-19401 and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant BMGF 01511000146 to E.A., and USDA Agricultural Research Service funding 3020-21000-010-00-D to B.H. J.D. acknowledges support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. We thank J. Jin for providing stem rust cultures, H. Liang and Y. Lun for technical assistance, R. Todd for valuable suggestions, and D. Cantu for initial contribution to the sequencing of Pgt races. The supplementary materials contain additional data. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Materials and Methods

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21 August 2017; accepted 9 November 2017

10.1126/science.aao7294
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Science 358 (6370), 1604-1606. DOI: 10.1126/science.aao7294

Fungal effectors of wheat stem rust

The fungal pathogen Ug99 (named for its identification in Uganda in 1999) threatens wheat crops worldwide. Ug99 can kill entire fields of wheat and is undeterred by many of the disease-resistance genes that otherwise protect wheat crops. Two papers describe two peptides secreted by the fungus as it attacks the wheat (see the Perspective by Moscou and van Esse). Chen et al. show that fungal AvrSr50 binds to the plant's immune receptor Sr50, and Salcedo et al. show that fungal AvrSr35 binds to Sr35. Successful binding activates the plant's immune defenses. Removing or inactivating these Avr effectors leaves the plant defenseless and susceptible to disease.

Science, this issue p. 1607, p. 1604; see also p. 1541