Early Transcription of Agrobacterium T-DNA Genes in Tobacco and Maize

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We developed a sensitive procedure to investigate the kinetics of transcription of an Agrobacterium tumefaciens transferred (T)-DNA-encoded β-glucuronidase gusA (uidA) gene soon after infection of plant suspension culture cells. The procedure uses a reverse transcriptase–polymerase chain reaction and enables detection of gusA transcripts within 18 to 24 hr after cocultivation of the bacteria with either tobacco or maize cells. Detection of gusA transcripts depended absolutely on the intact virulence (vir) genes virB, virD1/virD2, and virD4 within the bacterium. Mutations in virC and virE resulted in delayed and highly attenuated expression of the gusA gene. A nonpolar transposon insertion into the C-terminal coding region of virD2 resulted in only slightly decreased production of gusA mRNA, although this insertion resulted in the loss of the nuclear localization sequence and the important ω region from VirD2 protein and rendered the bacterium avirulent. However, expression of gusA transcripts in tobacco infected by this virD2 mutant was more transient than in cells infected by a wild-type strain. Infection of tobacco cells with an Agrobacterium strain harboring a mutant virD2 allele from which the ω region had been deleted resulted in similar transient expression of gusA mRNA. These data indicate that the C-terminal nuclear localization signal of the VirD2 protein is not essential for nuclear uptake of T-DNA and further suggest that the ω domain of VirD2 may be required for efficient integration of T-DNA into the plant genome. The finding that the initial kinetics of gusA gene expression in maize cells are similar to those shown in infected tobacco cells but that the presence of gusA mRNA in maize is highly transient suggests that the block to maize transformation involves T-DNA integration and not T-DNA entry into the cell or nuclear targeting.

INTRODUCTION

During the inception of crown gall tumorigenesis, Agrobacterium tumefaciens processes a region of DNA (the transferred or T-DNA) from the resident tumor-inducing (Ti) plasmid and transfers this DNA to plant cells. Proteins encoded by the virulence (vir) region of the Ti plasmid regulate T-DNA processing and transfer. Nicking of 25-bp directly repeated T-DNA “border” sequences by the VirD2 endonuclease results in the generation of single-stranded T-DNA molecules (T strands) with which VirD2 is tightly associated at the 5’ end (Herrera-Estrella et al., 1988; Ward and Barnes, 1988; Young and Nester, 1988; Howard et al., 1989). These single-stranded DNA molecules are transferred to the plant cytoplasm (Yusibov et al., 1994), perhaps as a complex (the T complex; Howard and Citovsky, 1990) with the single-stranded DNA binding protein VirE2 (Gietl et al., 1987; Christie et al., 1988; Citovsky et al., 1988; Das, 1988). Targeting of the T-DNA to the plant nucleus may be mediated by nuclear localization sequences (NLSs) within the associated VirD2 and VirE2 proteins (Herrera-Estrella et al., 1990; Howard et al., 1992; Shuvrivel et al., 1992; Tinland et al., 1992; Koukolikova-Nicola et al., 1993; Rossi et al., 1993; Citovsky et al., 1994). T-DNA molecules eventually integrate into the plant chromosomes, thereby stabilizing the oncogenes and opine biosynthesis genes encoded by the T-DNA. However, nonintegrated copies of T-DNA may persist in the nucleus for a period of time.

During the past two decades, research in a number of laboratories has resulted in a fairly detailed understanding of the early events in Agrobacterium that result in vir gene induction, T-DNA processing, and T-DNA transfer. Similarly, we now have a good understanding of the molecular mechanisms of T-DNA expression that result in opine biosynthesis and tumorigenesis within the plant cell (reviewed in Ream, 1989; Winans, 1992; Zambryski, 1992; Gelvin, 1993; Hooykaas and Beijersbergen, 1994; Zupan and Zambryski, 1995). Little is known, however, about the events within the plant cell that involve the targeting of T-DNA to the nucleus, its ultimate integration into plant nuclear DNA, and the early stages of T-DNA expression. To date, the earliest detectable expression of T-DNA-encoded genes...
occurs 2 days after infection. Fraley et al. (1984) first detected nopaline biosynthetic activity 2 days after infection of regenerating petunia protoplasts by Agrobacterium. Using a modified cauliflower mosaic virus 35S promoter-β-glucuronidase gusA chimeric gene that lacks a Shine-Dalgarno ribosome binding site (such that GUS expression is minimized in Agrobacterium), Janssen and Gardner (1989) detected GUS activity in petunia leaf explants 2 days after infection. Similarly, using a gusA gene containing an intron (such that GUS activity is eliminated in Agrobacterium), Li et al. (1992) first detected GUS activity 2 days after infection of rice stem explants.

We recently detected single-stranded T-DNA in the cytoplasm of regenerating tobacco protoplasts within 30 min of cocultivation with Agrobacterium. The bacteria had been previously incubated with acetosyringone to induce vir gene activity and process T-DNA from the Ti plasmid (Yusibov et al., 1994). In an attempt to elucidate the kinetics of T-DNA transport to the nucleus as well as to determine which Vir proteins are necessary to effect this process, we developed a very sensitive assay to detect T-DNA transcription early after infection. The sensitivity of this assay depends on two factors. The first is the use of a “super promoter” (Ni et al., 1995) to direct high-level transcription of a gusA gene (containing an intron) harbored by the T-DNA. The second factor is the use of a reverse transcriptase–polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) assay to detect very low amounts (<10 fg) of gusA mRNA in the infected plant cells. This assay thus measures the very early kinetics of transcription including the molecular steps (T-DNA transfer, nuclear targeting and transport, and replication to a double-stranded T-DNA molecule) that must precede transcription. Our assay does not necessarily reflect transcription of integrated T-DNA molecules; rather, circumstantial evidence suggests that most early transcription of the T-DNA results from the transcription of nonintegrated T-DNA molecules (Janssen and Gardner, 1999).

Using this assay, we detected T-DNA transcription 18 hr after cocultivation of tobacco suspension culture cells with Agrobacterium. Transient transcription of the T-DNA absolutely depends on intact VirB, VirD1/VirD2, and VirD4 proteins. Transient transcription decreased without intact VirC and VirE2 proteins. A mutation of VirD2 that eliminates the ω domain (Shurvinton et al., 1992) resulted in an Agrobacterium strain with very weak virulence, but we showed that it still transiently directs a high level of gusA transcription. These results suggest that the ω domain of VirD2 is at least partially responsible for the stabilization of T-DNA transcription, perhaps by aiding T-DNA integration. The initial kinetics of gusA transcription in maize suspension culture cells are similar to those of tobacco cells, suggesting that T-DNA transfer, nuclear targeting, and replication to a double-stranded form occur in maize in a manner similar to that occurring in tobacco. In maize, however, transcription of the gusA gene is highly transient, suggesting that the block to stable transformation of maize by Agrobacterium occurs at the stage of integration of T-DNA.

RESULTS

Development of a System to Detect the Early Transcription of T-DNA

To determine the kinetics of transport of the T-DNA from the cytoplasm to the nucleus and the importance of various Vir proteins in this process, we developed a sensitive assay to detect early transcription of the T-DNA. The rationale for this line of experimentation was that the early kinetics of T-DNA expression reveal the maximal time necessary for T-DNA to translocate from the cytoplasm to the nucleus, for single-stranded T-DNA to replicate to a double-stranded form, and for transcripts to accumulate to an extent that they can be detected.

We first constructed a T-DNA binary vector, pBISN1 (Figure 1), that contains a gusA (uidA) gene under the transcriptional

![Figure 1. Map of the T-DNA Region of the Binary Vector pBISN1.](image-url)
control of a super promoter (Ni et al., 1995). The gusA gene contains a 189-bp intron from the potato ST-LS1 gene (Vancanneyt et al., 1990). We generated PCR primers that would amplify a 732-bp region containing this intron. However, if the intron were processed from a gusA transcript, we would amplify (using RT-PCR) a 543-bp fragment. Because of the size difference in amplification products from the gusA-intron gene and the processed gusA transcript, we could distinguish between gusA mRNA and gusA-intron DNA from contaminating Agrobacterium cells. RT-PCR analysis of in vitro—transcribed gusA RNA indicated that, by using this assay, we could readily detect 10 fg of gusA mRNA.

We infected rapidly dividing tobacco BY-2 suspension culture cells (~20 bacterial cells per tobacco cell) with each of three Agrobacterium strains harboring pBISNL. Agrobacterium strain A1793 lacks a Ti plasmid, Agrobacterium strain At789 contains the octopine-type Ti plasmid pTiA6, and Agrobacterium strain A1790 contains the agropine-type supervirulent Ti plasmid pTiBo542. After cocultivation for 12 hr, the plant cells were pelleted by centrifugation, washed in plant culture medium, and resuspended in plant culture medium containing antibiotics, which were added to kill any remaining bacterial cells. We isolated total cellular RNA from infected plant cells at various times starting from the initiation of cocultivation, and we subjected the RNA to RT-PCR, using primers that would amplify the region of gusA mRNA flanking the (processed) intron.

**Kinetics of Expression of T-DNA-Encoded Genes Early after Infection of Tobacco BY-2 Suspension Culture Cells**

Figures 2A and 2B show that we could detect gusA transcripts beginning 20 to 24 hr after infection of tobacco BY-2 suspension culture cells by either Agrobacterium strain containing a Ti plasmid. The level of gusA mRNA increased and peaked at 36 hr, after which there was a slight decline in gusA mRNA. This decline was highly reproducible and occurred consistently in each of >10 independent cocultivation experiments. We could not detect gusA mRNA in noninfected plant cells or in plant cells from which RNA was extracted immediately after the start of cocultivation (0 hr time point). The synthesis of gusA mRNA in cocultivated plant cells depended on the presence of a Ti plasmid within the infecting Agrobacterium strain. Repeated analyses of RNA extracted from tobacco cells cocultivated with Agrobacterium strain At793 (lacking a Ti plasmid) never revealed the presence of gusA mRNA (Figure 2C). These data suggest that expression of the gusA gene was vir gene dependent. We have previously shown that the transfer of single-stranded T-DNA to the tobacco cell cytoplasm is dependent on an intact virB locus (Yusibov et al., 1994).

We next determined the stability of gusA gene expression after infection with Agrobacterium. We cocultivated tobacco BY-2 cells with various Agrobacterium strains, washed the cells 24 hr after infection, resuspended them in culture medium containing antibiotics to kill the bacteria, and isolated total cellular RNA at 24-hr intervals starting from the initiation of cocultivation. Figure 3A shows that by using Agrobacterium strain At789 (containing pTiA6), we could detect gusA mRNA for up to 3 days after the initiation of cocultivation. We could never detect gusA transcripts after 72 hr of infection. Using Agrobacterium strain At790 (containing pTiBo542), however, we routinely detected gusA mRNA for at least 7 days (the latest time point that we assayed; Figure 3B). Using Agrobacterium strain At793 (lacking a Ti plasmid), we again could not detect gusA transcripts (Figure 3C).

**Cocultivation for 2 Hr Suffices to Generate Detectable Levels of T-DNA Gene Expression**

To determine the minimal infection time required for synthesis of detectable levels of gusA mRNA, we infected tobacco BY-2 cells with Agrobacterium strain At790 (at a ratio of 100 bacterial cells per plant cell), washed the tobacco cells and
Quantitation of gusA Transcripts in Infected Tobacco Cells

To determine the quantity of gusA mRNA molecules in cocultivated plant cells, we first determined the percentage of tobacco cells infected by Agrobacterium. We assayed GUS activity by staining the infected tobacco cells with the chromogenic substrate 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl [β-D-glucuronic acid (X-gluc)] at various times after infection. Because infected plant material consisted of small clusters of cells rather than individual cells and because the tobacco cells continued to divide during this experiment, we estimated the percentage of infected cells by counting the percentage of cell clusters, rather than individual cells, that stained blue. Table 1 shows that we first detected GUS activity 2.5 days after infection. The percentage of stained cells increased thereafter and then stabilized by day 5 after infection. The fact that we could detect gusA mRNA by using RT-PCR after 18 to 24 hr of infection but could detect GUS activity only starting 2.5 days after infection most likely reflects the relative sensitivity of these two assays. Infection of a particular batch of tobacco BY-2 cells with Agrobacterium strain At790 (containing the supervirulent Ti plasmid pTiBo542) consistently resulted in an ~10-fold higher percentage of infected cells than did infection of the same batch of cells with Agrobacterium strain At789 (containing the octopine-type Ti plasmid pTiA6). We used the data in Table 1 to calculate the quantity of gusA mRNA as determined in Figure 5B. However, the percentage of infected cells differed from experiment to experiment. Cocultivation with Agrobac-

Figure 3. Kinetics of gusA Gene Expression (until 7 Days) in Tobacco Suspension Culture Cells.

Tobacco cells were infected with Agrobacterium strains for 24 hr, washed free of bacteria, and resuspended in culture medium plus antibiotics for various periods of time. RNA was extracted, subjected to RT-PCR, and analyzed by agarose gel electrophoresis, as described in Methods. Time points indicate the number of days after the initiation of cocultivation.

(A) Strain At789.
(B) Strain At790.
(C) Strain At793.
Lambda HindIII and GUS intron are as given in legend to Figure 2.

resuspended them in culture medium containing antibiotics at various periods of time, and extracted total cellular RNA 24 hr after the start of cocultivation. Figure 4 shows that we could detect the synthesis of gusA mRNA only after a minimal cocultivation period of 2 hr. We repeated this experiment using higher inoculation ratios of bacterial cells to plant cells (ranging up to 2000:1), but we were never able to detect the presence of gusA transcripts with a cocultivation period of <2 hr (data not shown). At higher ratios of bacterial to plant cells used for inoculations, the bacteria rapidly overgrew and killed the plant cells. The 2-hr minimal cocultivation period necessary to detect gusA transcripts correlates well with the time (2 hr) of maximal single-stranded T-DNA accumulation in the tobacco cell cytoplasm after the initiation of cocultivation (Yusibov et al., 1994).

Figure 4. Cocultivation Time Requirement for gusA Gene Expression in Tobacco Suspension Culture Cells.

Tobacco cells were infected with Agrobacterium strain At790 for various periods of time, after which the plant cells were washed and resuspended in medium containing antibiotics to kill the bacteria. The tobacco cells were harvested 24 hr after the start of cocultivation; the RNA was then extracted, subjected to RT-PCR, and analyzed by agarose gel electrophoresis, as described in Methods. Lambda HindIII and GUS intron are as given in legend to Figure 2.
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Table 1. Percentage of Tobacco Cells Stained Blue by Using X-gluc

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agrobacterium Strain</th>
<th>Ti Plasmid</th>
<th>Days after the Initiation of Cocultivation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1793</td>
<td>No pTi</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1789</td>
<td>pTiA6</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1790</td>
<td>pTiBo542</td>
<td>0.1 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1805</td>
<td>pTiA6 virB1-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1806</td>
<td>pTiA6 virD1-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1807</td>
<td>pTiA6 virE2-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1808</td>
<td>pTiA6 virD2-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1871</td>
<td>pTiA6 virC1-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1819</td>
<td>pTiA6 virD4-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1822</td>
<td>pTiA6</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1829</td>
<td>pTiA6 virD2-</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(co substitution)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Data represent the mean of three or more independent experiments. A minimum of 3000 cell clusters were scored for each time point.

Occasional blue-staining cells observed.

Agrobacterium strain A1789 ultimately resulted in infection of 0.1 to 1.0% of the cells, whereas cocultivation with Agrobacterium strain A1790 ultimately resulted in infection of 1.0 to 7.3% of the cells.

We next determined the quantity of gusA mRNA present per microgram of total tobacco cellular RNA. To do this, we first established the sensitivity of our RT-PCR reaction. Figure 5A shows that when we mixed various amounts of in vitro-transcribed gusA-intron mRNA with 1 μg of total tobacco RNA, we could detect 10 fg of gusA RNA.

We next mixed various quantities of in vitro–transcribed (standard) gusA-intron RNA with 1 μg of RNA extracted from tobacco cells 36 hr after the start of cocultivation and subjected the mixture to RT-PCR. By conducting a "competition" between the processed sample of gusA mRNA and the unprocessed "standard" gusA mRNA, we could determine the concentration at which amplification of each mRNA yielded approximately the same intensity signal. Comparison of the intensity of the 732-bp (standard gusA-intron) cDNA signal with the 543-bp processed gusA cDNA signal indicated that, unexpectedly, populations of tobacco cells cocultivated with either Agrobacterium strain A1789 or A1790 contained approximately the same amount of gusA mRNA. At 36 hr after infection with strain A1789, ~0.05 pg of gusA mRNA was present per microgram of total cellular RNA from all cells. For tobacco cells infected with strain A1790, ~0.01 pg of gusA mRNA was present per microgram of total cellular RNA from all cells (Figure 5B). We repeatedly obtained this result despite the ~10-fold difference in the percentage of infected cells, as determined by X-gluc staining, with use of the two Agrobacterium strains (Table 1).

Considering the percentage of cocultivated cells that ultimately produced GUS activity (~0.1 to 1.0% after infection by strain A1789 and ~1.0 to 7.3% after infection by strain A1790; Table 1) and assuming that ~1% of the total tobacco cellular RNA is poly(A)+ mRNA, we calculated that ~0.02% of the...
poly(A)$^+$ mRNA was represented by gusA mRNA when tobacco cells were cocultivated with Agrobacterium strain A1789. When Agrobacterium strain A1789 was used, ~1.0% of the poly(A)$^+$ mRNA was represented by gusA transcripts. We made these calculations using RT-PCR data taken from the 36-hr time point (the time of maximal expression of gusA mRNA) and X-gluc staining data from day 5. In making these calculations, we assumed that the tobacco cells were maximally transformed by 36 hr (because the bacteria had been killed by that time), but we could not determine the maximal percentage of transformed cells until day 5 because of the insensitivity of the X-gluc staining assay relative to the RT-PCR assay.

**Dependence of Early T-DNA Transcription on vir Gene Function**

To determine the importance of different vir proteins in the early stages of T-DNA transfer, transcription, and perhaps integration, we introduced pBISN1 or pBISN2 into Agrobacterium containing mutations in various vir genes. Initially, we investigated mutant bacterial strains harboring Tn3-HoHo1 insertions (Stachel and Nester, 1986) in virB1 (mx243; A1805), virC1 (mx365; A1871), virD1 (mx311; A1806), virD4 (mx367; A1819), virE2 (mx341; A1807), and a nonpolar insertion in the 3′ end of virD2 (mx304; A1808). We incubated each mutant strain separately with tobacco BY-2 suspension culture cells, washed the plant cells and killed the bacteria with antibiotics after cocultivation for 12 hr, extracted tobacco RNA at 18, 24, 36, and 48 hr after the initiation of cocultivation, and assayed for the presence of gusA mRNA by RT-PCR.

Figure 6A shows that Agrobacterium A1789 containing wild-type vir genes directed the synthesis of gusA mRNA in tobacco cells to a maximal extent at 36 hr, similar to the result shown in Figure 2A. Figure 6B shows that the Agrobacterium A1805 mutant in virB could not direct the synthesis of gusA mRNA in infected tobacco cells. We have previously shown that this same strain could not transfer T-DNA to the cytoplasm of tobacco cells (Yusibov et al., 1994), although wild-type levels of T strands accumulated in protoplast-induced (Veluthambi et al., 1988) or acetosyringone-induced (Stachel et al., 1987) bacterial cells. Similarly, Agrobacterium strain A1871, containing a mutant virD4 gene, could not effect gusA transcription in cocultivated tobacco cells (Figure 6H). VirD4 is a bacterial periplasmic membrane-localized protein (Okamoto et al., 1991).

Agrobacterium or *Escherichia coli* strains containing mutant virD4 genes can process T-DNA and accumulate T strands (Jayaswal et al., 1987; Stachel et al., 1987). Agrobacterium cells mutant in virD4 may not, however, be able to export T strands through the VirB protein export apparatus. Agrobacterium strain A1806, containing a polar insertion in virD1, could not direct gusA mRNA synthesis (Figure 6E). An Agrobacterium strain containing this same virD1 mutation could not process T-DNA or accumulate T strands (Stachel et al., 1987; Veluthambi et al., 1988).

Cocultivation of tobacco cells with Agrobacterium strain A1807 (mutant in virE) resulted in only a low level of gusA mRNA accumulation late (48 hr) in the course of infection (Figure 6D). Stachel and Nester (1986) have shown that similar mutations in virE greatly attenuate bacterial virulence, despite the fact that normal levels of T strands accumulate in induced cells (Stachel et al., 1987; Veluthambi et al., 1988). Thus, the presence of a VirE2 single-stranded DNA binding protein is not necessary to protect the T strand within the bacterium. The low level of gusA transcripts that accumulated late after infection reflects the low steady state level of single-stranded T-DNA that accumulates in the cytoplasm of infected tobacco cells (Yusibov et al., 1994).

Mutations in virC severely attenuate the virulence of Agrobacterium on most plant species, including tobacco (Stachel and Nester, 1986), although nearly wild-type levels of T strands accumulate in induced bacterial cells (Stachel et al., 1987; Veluthambi et al., 1988). Agrobacterium strain A1871, mutant...
in \textit{virC}, could direct only a very low level of transient \textit{gusA} mRNA accumulation in infected tobacco cells (Figure 6C).

Agrobacterium strains containing the nonpolar insertion mx304 in the 3' end of \textit{virD2} are avirulent (Stachel and Nester, 1986; Koukolikova-Nicola et al., 1993), although they accumulate T strands after induction by acetosyringone (Stachel and Nester, 1986). The Tn3-HoHo1 insertion is separated by 73 amino acids from the C terminus of \textit{VirD2} and translationally fuses the \textit{\beta}-galactosidase protein to the C terminus of \textit{VirD2} (Koukolikova-Nicola et al., 1993). The resulting altered \textit{VirD2} protein lacks the C-terminal NLS (Howard et al., 1992; Tinland et al., 1992) and the \(\omega\) region that is important for efficient tumorigenesis in potato (Shurvinton et al., 1992) and tobacco (S. Gelvin, unpublished data). Therefore, we were surprised to detect relatively high levels of \textit{gusA} transcripts in tobacco cells infected with Agrobacterium strain At808 harboring this \textit{virD2} mutation (Figure 6F).

Quantitative RT-PCR indicated that the level of \textit{gusA} transcript resulting from infection of tobacco cells by this mutant Agrobacterium strain was 20 to 30% of that found in tobacco cells cocultivated with strain At709 containing a wild-type \textit{virD2} gene (data not shown). The high level of \textit{gusA} mRNA in these cells was considerably more transient than that resulting from infection by the wild-type bacterium. Arabidopsis roots infected by a similar Agrobacterium strain harboring the same nonpolar \textit{virD2} mutation showed \(>50\)% of the GUS activity present in roots infected by a wild-type Agrobacterium strain (J. Nam and S.B. Gelvin, unpublished data). These data indicate that deletion of the C-terminal NLS and/or the \(\omega\) region of \textit{VirD2} results in high-level transient expression of T-DNA-encoded genes. The high level of transient \textit{gusA} gene expression after infection of tobacco cells by strain At808 suggests that, despite the lack of a C-terminal NLS in the \textit{VirD2} protein encoded by this strain, the T-DNA is efficiently directed to the plant nucleus.

The translational fusion of \(\beta\)-galactosidase protein to the C terminus of \textit{VirD2} in Agrobacterium strain At808 could result in a protein with altered properties. Therefore, we repeated the tobacco cell infections, using strain At829. This strain encodes a mutated \textit{VirD2} protein containing two serine residues in place of four of the five amino acids in the \(\omega\) region (Shurvinton et al., 1992); therefore, it lacks the \(\omega\) region yet still retains the NLS. Infection of potato tuber discs (Shurvinton et al., 1992) or tobacco leaf sections (S.B. Gelvin, unpublished data) with a similar Agrobacterium strain harboring this same \textit{virD2} mutation resulted in 3.3 and 2.5%, respectively, of the number of tumors present in infection with a strain harboring a wild-type \textit{virD2} gene. Figure 6G shows that strain At829 directed a high level of transient transcription of the \textit{gusA} gene. Quantitative RT-PCR indicated that similar to Agrobacterium strain At808, \textit{gusA} transcripts accumulated up to 20 to 30% of the level of wild-type strain At822 in infected tobacco cells (data not shown). These data indicate that the \(\omega\) region of \textit{VirD2} is not required for T-DNA transport to the plant cytoplasm or nucleus, for replication to a double-stranded form, or for transcription. The data suggest, however, that this region of \textit{VirD2} may be involved in the stabilization of T-DNA transcription, perhaps by mediating integration of T-DNA into the plant genome.

**Transcript Expression of \textit{gusA} mRNA in Maize Suspension Culture Cells**

Ritchie et al. (1993) and Shen et al. (1993) have shown that Agrobacterium can transfer T-DNA to maize tissue explants and that infected tissue can express GUS activity. However, these authors did not extensively investigate the stability of GUS expression. Considering the high stability of GUS enzymatic activity in many plant tissues (Jefferson et al., 1987), we thought it particularly important to investigate the stability of expression of \textit{gusA} mRNA in infected maize cells. Therefore, we cocultivated maize Black Mexican Sweet (BMS) suspension culture cells with Agrobacterium strain At789 (harboring pTiA6) or At790 (harboring pTiBo542) that had been previously induced with acetosyringone. Figure 7 shows that by using RT-PCR, we could detect \textit{gusA} transcripts within infected maize cells 24 hr after infection when either strain was used. The appearance of \textit{gusA} mRNA was, however, very transient. By 36 hr after the initiation of cocultivation, the level of \textit{gusA} mRNA had decreased greatly, and it was never detected at 48 hr. We detected the same kinetics of transcript accumulation and disappearance in three independent cocultivation experiments. Thus, the kinetics of initial appearance of \textit{gusA} mRNA in maize approximated that of tobacco. In maize, however, the presence of \textit{gusA} mRNA was highly transient, suggesting that in this monocot species, T-DNA integration and/or stable transcription was defective.

![Figure 7. Kinetics of \textit{gusA} Gene Expression (until 48 Hr) in Maize Suspension Culture Cells.](image-url)
DISCUSSION

A New System to Investigate the Early Events of T-DNA Expression in Plants

We developed an experimental system to investigate the expression of T-DNA-encoded genes in plant cells soon after infection by Agrobacterium. Because this system uses acetoxyringone-induced Agrobacterium cells cocultivated with plant suspension culture cells rather than regenerating plant protoplasts, it is easier to use than many previously described cocultivation procedures (Fraley et al., 1983; Horsch et al., 1985). Infection of rapidly dividing tobacco cells by Agrobacterium was reported by An (1985). In these experiments, he noted that maximal induction of bacterial vir genes by the plant cells required 2 to 3 days. We induced Agrobacterium vir genes with acetoxyringone for 14 to 18 hr before cocultivation. Therefore, T-DNA processing and the establishment of the VirB-mediated T-DNA transport machinery had already taken place. We have shown that by using these infection conditions and regenerating tobacco protoplasts, we could detect T-DNA transfer to the plant cytoplasm within 30 min of infection (Yusibov et al., 1994). Therefore, we believe that our infection protocol results in a rapid and relatively synchronous "burst" of T-DNA transfer to plant cells and is therefore useful for studying the initial kinetics of T-DNA transfer processes.

Several other aspects of our system make it especially amenable for investigating the early molecular events of T-DNA expression in plant cells. The use of RT-PCR allowed us to detect very small quantities (10 fg) of gusA mRNA. By using PCR primers that span an exon-encoding sequence within the gusA gene, we could easily distinguish the amplified product derived from processed gusA mRNA from that of the gusA gene that may have been present due to contaminating Agrobacterium cells. However, we rarely detected the larger amplified product, most likely because of the DNase I treatment of the tobacco nucleic acids before PCR amplification. Finally, the use of a strong, constitutive super promoter (Ni et al., 1995) to direct expression of the gusA gene provided an additional level of sensitivity essential for conducting these experiments. Repeated attempts to detect gusA transcripts within the first 2 days after the start of cocultivation failed when we used the cauliflower mosaic virus 35S promoter to direct expression of the gusA gene.

Kinetics and Stability of T-DNA Transfer and Expression in Tobacco Cells

Using these protocols for infection and analysis, we could detect gusA gene expression in tobacco cells as early as 18 hr after infection (Figure 6). Because we have previously shown that T-DNA transfer to the plant cytoplasm is very rapid with these procedures, this interval represents the time necessary for transport of the T-DNA to the nucleus, conversion to a double-stranded molecule, and transcription of the gusA gene to a level detectable by RT-PCR. T strands are generated from the right to the left T-DNA border (Stachel et al., 1986; Veluthambi et al., 1988). Thus, because of the orientation of the gusA gene in pBISN1 relative to the right border, the coding strand of the gusA gene is transferred to the plant as the T strand. Therefore, the template for transcription of gusA will be present only after conversion of the single-stranded T strand to a double-stranded form. In addition, the nuclear-localized RNA polymerase II that transcribes T-DNA genes (Willmitzer et al., 1981) requires a double-stranded DNA template. Transcription of such a double-stranded DNA molecule does not require the integration of T-DNA into the plant genome.

The earliest previous detection of T-DNA-encoded activity occurred 2 days after infection (nopaline synthase activity [Fraley et al., 1984] or GUS activity [Janssen and Gardner, 1989; Castle and Morris, 1990; Li et al., 1992]). In our experiments, the levels of gusA mRNA increased until 36 hr after infection and then declined (Figures 2, 3, and 6). Janssen and Gardner (1989) described a similar decline in the expression of GUS activity after 3 days of infection of petunia leaf sections. These authors attributed this pattern of expression to the transient presence and expression of nonintegrated copies of the T-DNA in the nucleus. We interpret our data similarly. Although it is formally possible that the decline in T-DNA expression resulted from a repression of gusA transcription after integration of the T-DNA into the plant genome, we think that the large and rapid decrease in gusA mRNA levels that we observed was not likely to occur in such a manner.

Tobacco cells infected with Agrobacterium strain A789 (harboring the octopine-type Ti plasmid pTiA6) contained detectable amounts of gusA mRNA for only 3 days after infection, whereas tobacco cells infected with Agrobacterium strain A790 (harboring the agropine-type supervirulent Ti plasmid pTiBo542) expressed detectable levels of gusA transcripts for >7 days. We do not interpret the transient nature of detectable gusA mRNA accumulation to indicate that tobacco cells infected with strain A789 only briefly contain T-DNA; indeed, this strain is virulent. We speculate, however, that most of the initial gusA transcription results from nonintegrated copies of T-DNA and that use of strain A789 caused the extent of T-DNA integration and expression to fall below our level of detection. We further speculate that the continuous expression of gusA mRNA in tobacco cells infected with strain A790 reflects a higher level of gusA transcription after integration of T-DNA. Increased integration might be attributed to more transfer of T-DNA to the plant, a higher efficiency of T-DNA integration (perhaps catalyzed by the supervirulent VirD2 or VirE2 proteins), or both. We are currently developing quantitative T-DNA integration assays to investigate these events.

To measure the amount of gusA mRNA present in infected tobacco cells, we added various known amounts of in vitro-transcribed gusA mRNA (containing an intron) to 1 μg of total RNA extracted from cocultivated plant cells and sub-
jected the mixture to RT-PCR. Comparison of the PCR signal intensity of the two amplification products indicated the amount of gusA mRNA among the total population of tobacco RNA. Although the quantity of gusA mRNA per microgram of total RNA was higher after infection of tobacco cells with Agrobacterium strain At790 than with strain At789, fewer cells stained blue when the octopine-type strain was used. Thus, it appears that strain At789 directed a higher level of gusA transcript accumulation (per infected cell) than did the supervirulent strain At790. We suggest that this paradox may derive from an artifact of our quantitation procedure and may best be explained by assuming that X-gluc staining may underestimate the percentage of cells infected by failing to detect those that did not express GUS activity long enough to result in blue staining. For example, we could never detect blue staining of maize cells after transformation by Agrobacterium, although we could detect transient gusA gene expression by using RT-PCR (Figure 7). Thus, we may not be able to detect GUS activity, as determined by blue staining of cells with X-gluc, until gusA mRNA accumulates to a particular threshold level. Similarly, we may not be able to detect GUS activity if gusA mRNA is not stable for a long enough time to become translated to a threshold level of GUS protein.

Effects of vir Gene Mutations on the Early Events of T-DNA Expression

By using mutant Agrobacterium strains, we established the importance of various vir gene products in the expression of gusA mRNA. Mutations in virB and virD4 result in loss of virulence (Stachel and Nester, 1986), despite the fact that T-DNA processing and T strand accumulation in the bacteria are not impaired (Stachel et al., 1987; Veluthambi et al., 1988). VirB proteins presumably make up the channels through which T-DNA and some Vir proteins exit from the bacteria (Thompson et al., 1988; Ward et al., 1988; Kulda et al., 1990), and Agrobacterium strains mutant in virB cannot transfer T-DNA to the cytoplasm of regenerating tobacco protoplasts (Yusibov et al., 1994). The VirD4 protein associates with the bacterial inner membrane and may play a role in T-DNA export from the bacterium (Okamoto et al., 1991). Therefore, we expected that Agrobacterium strains mutant in these genes would not direct the expression of gusA mRNA in cocultivated plant cells, and they did not (Figure 6). An Agrobacterium strain containing a polar mutation in virD1 also did not induce gusA transcription in tobacco cells. A similar strain harboring the same virD1 mutation was unable to process T-DNA and generate T strands (Stachel et al., 1987).

Agrobacterium strains mutant in virC and virE demonstrate a highly attenuated virulence phenotype (Stachel and Nester, 1986), although they accumulate wild-type levels of T strands (Stachel et al., 1987; Veluthambi et al., 1988). They must therefore be defective in processes involved in virulence subsequent to T-DNA processing. We have shown (Figure 6) that these mutants direct only a very low level of gusA transcription, corresponding to the low level of tumorigenesis. We have previously demonstrated that an Agrobacterium virE mutant can transfer T strands to the cytoplasm of regenerating tobacco protoplasts (Yusibov et al., 1994). However, the steady state level of T-DNA that accumulates in the plant cytoplasm was ~20% of that found when the protoplasts were infected by a wild-type strain. The VirE2 protein binds to single-stranded DNA molecules (Gietl et al., 1987; Christie et al., 1988; Citovsky et al., 1988; Sen et al., 1989) and may therefore protect the T strand in the plant cell. We speculate that the low level of delayed gusA transcription that we detected subsequent to infection of tobacco cells with an Agrobacterium virO2 mutant resulted from the transport of fewer intact T strands to the nucleus and the subsequent lower initial levels of T-DNA transcription. The likely importance of the VirE2 protein in the plant cell, but not in the bacterial cell, has been suggested by "extracellular" complementation of Agrobacterium virE2 mutants by coinoculation of plants with an Agrobacterium strain harboring an intact virE locus but no T-DNA (Otten et al., 1984). The restoration of tumorigenesis by infection of transgenic tobacco plants that synthesize the VirE2 protein with an avirulent Agrobacterium virE2 mutant (Citovsky et al., 1992) further suggests an important function for VirE2 protein in the plant cell.

Infection of tobacco BY-2 cells with an Agrobacterium strain containing the transposon Th3-HoHot1 in virD2 (mx304) resulted in the transient accumulation of gusA mRNA to levels ~20 to 30% of that found after infection by wild-type strains (Figure 6). A similar strain harboring this same transposon insertion either is avirulent (Stachel and Nester, 1986) or shows extremely attenuated virulence (<10^-6 to 10^-5) on host plants (Koukolikova-Nicola et al., 1993). Koukolikova-Nicola et al. (1993) also claimed that this strain shows low transient GUS expression and can incite disease symptoms on turnip plants at only 0.1 to 10% of the level of wild-type Agrobacterium strains after agroinfection with cauliflower mosaic virus. The transposon insertion in Agrobacterium mx304 results in deletion of the last 73 amino acids of VirD2 (Koukolikova-Nicola et al., 1993), including the C-terminal NLS and the conserved w domain (Shurvinton et al., 1992). This mutation also translationally fuses β-galactosidase to the C terminus of the VirD2 protein.

Our finding that infection of plants by this avirulent strain still resulted in a relatively high (20 to 30% of that of the wild type) level of gusA transcript accumulation suggests that deletion of the C-terminal NLS and w domains does not markedly inhibit nuclear transport of the T strand or its conversion to a double-stranded form and apparently contradicts the conclusions of Koukolikova-Nicola et al. (1993). We propose that deletion of the C-terminal NLS of the VirD2 protein can be partially compensated for by NLS sequences within VirE2 protein molecules that presumably coat T strands in the plant cell (Citovsky et al., 1992). In support of this conclusion, Shurvinton et al. (1992) showed that a precise deletion of both of the four amino acid domains constituting the C-terminal NLS results
...in only a 40% reduction of virulence, as measured by a quantitative potato tuber disc assay.

In addition, we have shown that such a precise deletion of the C-terminal NLS results in only a slight decrease in transient GUS activity in infected Arabidopsis roots (J. Nam and S.B. Gelvin, unpublished data) and a similar slight decrease in the transient accumulation of gusA mRNA in infected tobacco BY-2 cells (X.-b. Deng and S.B. Gelvin, unpublished data). Furthermore, our data demonstrate that the o domain of the VirD2 protein is not essential for T-DNA transfer to the plant or for T-DNA nuclear targeting.

In contrast to our conclusions that the o domain of VirD2 is not important for nuclear transport of T strands, our data implicate this domain in T-DNA integration into the plant genome. Replacement of the four o domain amino acids DDGR by two serine residues reduced virulence to 3.3% of the wild-type strain on potato tuber discs (Shurvinton et al., 1992) and to 2.5% on tobacco leaf explants (S.B. Gelvin, unpublished data). However, the accumulation of gusA mRNA in infected tobacco BY-2 cells when using this o mutation was still 20 to 30% of that of the wild type (Figure 6). This expression was more transient than expression using an Agrobacterium strain containing a wild-type virD2 gene. These results suggest that gusA transcription was not stabilized in the tobacco cells, perhaps because the T-DNA did not integrate into the tobacco genome. We are currently investigating the importance of the o domain of the VirD2 protein in both the extent and precision of T-DNA integration into plant DNA.

**T-DNA Is Rapidly Transferred to but Transiently Expressed in Maize Cells**

Many monocot species, especially the agronomically important cereal grains, are highly recalcitrant to transformation by Agrobacterium. The reasons for this recalcitrance are not known, although agroinoculation of maize with maize streak virus (Grimsmo et al., 1987) and the transient expression of GUS activity in Agrobacterium-infected maize tissues (Ritchie et al., 1993; Shen et al., 1993) indicate that T-DNA can be transferred from Agrobacterium into maize cells.

We showed that infection of rapidly dividing maize BMS cells by two Agrobacterium strains results in the highly transient expression of gusA transcripts (Figure 7). The initial kinetics of appearance of these transcripts in maize (24 hr) and in tobacco (18 to 20 hr) are approximately equal. Thus, there does not appear to be any major difference in T-DNA transfer, nuclear targeting, conversion to a double-stranded DNA form, or transcription between tobacco BY-2 cells and maize BMS cells. However, transcription of the gusA gene in tobacco cells continued for 3 days to at least 7 days (depending on the Agrobacterium strain used for infection), whereas transcripts disappeared from maize cells by 36 hr after infection. These data indicate that the transcription of transgenes introduced by Agrobacterium-mediated infection of maize is highly transient and suggest that the block to maize transformation may be at the level of T-DNA integration into the genome. We are currently conducting experiments to test this hypothesis directly.

**METHODS**

**Bacterial Strains and Growth Conditions**

We grew Escherichia coli strains at 37°C on Luria-Bertani medium (Maniatis et al., 1982) and Agrobacterium tumefaciens strains at 30°C on AB-sucrose minimal medium (Lichtenstein and Draper, 1986) containing the appropriate antibiotics. Antibiotic concentrations (μg/mL) are as follows: ampicillin, 100; kanamycin, 20 for E. coli; carbenicillin, 100; kanamycin, 100; spectinomycin, 100; rifampicin, 10 for Agrobacterium. Table 2 lists the Agrobacterium strains used in this study and their relevant characteristics. We conducted these experiments under P1 containment conditions as specified by the National Institutes of Health recombinant DNA guidelines.

**Construction of pBISN1 and Its Derivatives**

To construct the transferred (T)-DNA binary vector pBISN1, we first cloned an EcoRI-Sall fragment of pCNL65 (Li et al., 1992), containing a β-glucuronidase gusA gene with the ST-LS1 second intron (Vancanneyt et al., 1990), into pBluescript SK+ (Strategene). We digested this plasmid with Xhol (upstream of the gusA gene), filled in the overhanging ends, using the Klenow fragment of DNA polymerase I and nucleotide triphosphates, and released the gusA-intron gene using Sall. We removed the gusA gene (lacking an intron) from pE1120 (Ni et al., 1995) by using Sall and Sall and replaced this gusA gene fragment with the gusA-intron gene fragment described above. The final plasmid, pBISN1, contains T-DNA border repeat sequences, a nopaline synthase–neomycin phosphotransferase II gene for selection of kanamycin-resistant transgenic plants, and a gusA-intron gene under the regulation of the “super promoter” from pE1120. pBISN1 is based on the incP replicon RK2). To place the entire T-DNA region of pBISN1 into an incW replicon, we digested pBISN1 with BglII (which cuts just outside the left and right T-DNA borders) and cloned the T-DNA–containing fragment into the large BamHI fragment of a derivative of pUCD2 (Close et al., 1984) that had been digested with PstI and treated with T4 DNA polymerase to disrupt the β-lactamase gene. We designated the resulting plasmid pBISN2.

We mobilized pBISN1 or pBISN2 into Agrobacterium strains, using a triparental mating procedure (Figurski and Helinski, 1979) and the mobilizing plasmid pRK2013 (Ditta et al., 1980). We selected transconjugants on AB–sucrose minimal medium containing rifampicin and kanamycin (pBISN1) or rifampicin and spectinomycin (pBISN2).

**Growth and Infection of Plant Cells and Determination of GUS Activity**

We propagated Nicotiana tabacum BY-2 cells in Murashige and Skoog medium (Gibco BRL) containing 3% sucrose, 1 μg/mL thiamine, 0.2 μg/mL 2,4-D, and 370 μg/mL KH₂PO₄. We propagated Zea mays Black strains on potato tuber discs (Shurvinton et al., 1992) and 30% of that of the wild type (Figure 6). This expression was more transient than expression using an Agrobacterium strain containing a wild-type virD2 gene. These results suggest that gusA transcription was not stabilized in the tobacco cells, perhaps because the T-DNA did not integrate into the tobacco genome. We are currently investigating the importance of the o domain of the VirD2 protein in both the extent and precision of T-DNA integration into plant DNA.
Table 2. Agrobacterium Strains Used in This Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strain</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Antibiotic Resistance</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At2 (A136)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>C58 lacking a Ti plasmid</td>
<td>Rif</td>
<td>Montoya et al. (1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At6 (A348)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>C58 containing pTiA6</td>
<td>Rif</td>
<td>Knauf and Nester (1982)</td>
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<td>At77 (A281)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>C58 containing pTiBo542</td>
<td>Rif</td>
<td>Sciaky et al. (1978)</td>
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<td>At793</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in A136</td>
<td>Rif, Kan</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At798</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in A348</td>
<td>Rif, Kan</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At799</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in A281</td>
<td>Rif, Kan</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At808</td>
<td>A348 (mx243); Tn3-HoHol in virB1</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
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<td>At50</td>
<td>A348 (mx365); Tn3-HoHol in virC1</td>
<td>Rif, Cb</td>
<td>Stachel and Nester (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At51</td>
<td>A348 (mx311); Tn3-HoHol in virD1</td>
<td>Rif, Cb</td>
<td>Stachel and Nester (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At810</td>
<td>A348 (mx367); Tn3-HoHol in virD4</td>
<td>Rif, Cb</td>
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<td>Rif, Cb</td>
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<td>At219</td>
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<td>Rif, Cb</td>
<td>Stachel and Nester (1986)</td>
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<td>At805</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in At44</td>
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<td>At871</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in At50</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
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<td>At806</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in At51</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
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<td>At819</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in At810</td>
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<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
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<td>At808</td>
<td>pBlSN1 in At219</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
<td>At747 [WR1753]&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Wild-type virD2 in WR1715&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
<td>Shurvinton et al. (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At746 [WR1826]&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>virD2 with substitution in WR1715&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan</td>
<td>Shurvinton et al. (1992)</td>
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<td>At822</td>
<td>pBlSN2 in At747</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan, Spc</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
<td>At823</td>
<td>pBlSN2 in At746</td>
<td>Rif, Cb, Kan, Spc</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Rif, rifampicin; Kan, kanamycin; Cb, carbenicillin; Spc, spectinomycin.

<sup>b</sup> Numbers within parentheses are Nester laboratory strain numbers.

<sup>c</sup> Numbers within brackets are Ream laboratory strain numbers.

<sup>d</sup> WR1715 is an octopine-type Agrobacterium strain harboring a large deletion in VirD2 (Shurvinton et al., 1992).

Mexican Sweet (BMS) cells in Murashige and Skoog medium containing 2% sucrose, 2 µg/mL 2,4-D, 0.2 mg/mL myoinositol, 0.13 mg/mL L-asparagine, 0.13 µg/mL nicotinic acid, and 0.25 µg/mL each of thiamine, pyridoxine, and pantothenic acid. The cultures were shaken at 140 rpm at 25°C in continuous light.

To infect plant cells, we first induced virulence (vir) gene activity in Agrobacterium with acetosyringone. We grew Agrobacterium cells to a density of 2 x 10<sup>8</sup> cells per mL (A = 100, using a Klett-Summerson spectrophotometer; red filter) in AB-sucrose medium. We centrifuged the cells at 10,000g, suspended them at a concentration of 1 x 10<sup>9</sup> cells per mL (A = 50) in induction medium (AB salts, 0.5% glucose, 2 mM sodium phosphate, 50 mM Mes, pH 5.6, 50 µM acetosyringone), and incubated them with gentle shaking at 25°C for 14 to 18 hr. After washing the bacterial cells in plant culture medium, we inoculated plant cells with induced Agrobacterium (~20 bacterial cells per plant cell, except where noted otherwise) and cocultivated the cells at 25°C with shaking at 140 rpm for various periods of time. We washed off most of the bacteria by centrifugation of the cocultivation mixture at 300 rpm (model GLC-2 clinical centrifuge; Beckman Sorvall, Newtown, CT) for 2 min. The plant cell pellet was suspended and washed once more in plant culture medium and then resuspended in culture containing either 100 µg/mL timentin or 200 µg/mL cefotaxime. To collect plant cells for isolation of RNA, we washed the cells three times, as described above, in plant culture medium. We extracted RNA from these cells either directly after harvesting (either of the two methods listed below) or after freezing in liquid nitrogen and storage at -70°C (TRizol reagent [Gibco BRL] extraction method).

Isolation of Plant RNA and Reverse Transcriptase–Polymerase Chain Reaction

After sonication of the cells, we isolated RNA by using the GlassMAX system (Gibco BRL), according to the instructions of the supplier. Alternatively, after freezing the cells in liquid nitrogen, we isolated RNA by using the TRizol reagent system according to the instructions of the supplier, with modifications (as described in the Bethesda Research Laboratory corporate publication Focus 17, 20-21). The TRizol reagent method yielded considerably more RNA than the alternate method. We treated the nucleic acids with RNase-free DNase I (1 unit per µg; Gibco BRL) and then heat-inactivated DNase I and subjected the resulting RNA (1 µg) to reverse transcription using a reverse transcription system (Promega) according to the instructions of the supplier. We used oligo (dT) to prime cDNA synthesis.

We amplified gus<sup>A</sup> sequences in a 50- or 100-µL reaction volume by using Taq DNA polymerase and the primers 5'-ACGATCAGTTCG-CCATGG-3' (forward primer) and 5'-TCCCGGACTGCTTTGGCCTTGCC-3' (reverse primer). The amplification was conducted for 40 cycles with the following program: 94°C for 2 min (one cycle); 92°C for 40 sec,
53°C for 1 min, and 72°C for 2 min (40 cycles); and 72°C for 5 min (one cycle). We analyzed 10- to 15-μL samples by electrophoresis through a 1.5% agarose gel. DNA gel blot hybridization, using a gusA gene probe, verified that the amplified bands represented gusA sequences (data not shown).

Quantitation of gusA mRNA

We quantitated gusA mRNA by adding a known quantity of in vitro–transcribed gusA-intron RNA to the reverse transcriptase–polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) containing plant RNA. To generate the gusA-intron template for in vitro transcription, we first cloned an EcoRI (made blunt by using the Klenow fragment)–SalI fragment (containing the gusA-intron gene) into the Smal and SalI sites of pSP64(polyA) (Promega) to generate pE1287. We next cloned a SalI-EcoRI fragment from pE1287 into pBluescript SK+ to generate pE1288. To generate in vitro gusA-intron transcripts from pE1288, we used T7 RNA polymerase and an in vitro transcription kit (Stratagene) according to the specifications of the supplier. We mixed various amounts of in vitro–synthesized gusA-intron RNA with 1 pg of plant RNA and subjected the mixture to RT-PCR as described above, including the use of oligo(dT) to prime cDNA synthesis. After electrophoresis of the amplified products, we compared the signal intensity derived from the gusA-intron RNA (732 bp) with that derived from the processed gusA mRNA (543 bp). We quantitated the amount of processed gusA mRNA in the plant samples by comparison with the amount of gusA-intron RNA that yielded a signal of the same intensity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Dr. Burgund Bassuner for her excellent technical assistance, Dr. Walt Ream for his generous donation of many strains and his critical reading of the manuscript, and Dr. Barbara Hohn and members of her laboratory for many helpful discussions about the data presented in this article. This work was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (No. 93-37301-9427).

Received December 8, 1995; accepted March 11, 1995.

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Plant Cell 1996;8:873-886
DOI 10.1105/tpc.8.5.873

This information is current as of October 19, 2017