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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Genome-wide survey of miRNAs and their evolutionary history in the ascidian, *Halocynthia roretzi*

Kai Wang<sup>1,3\*</sup>, Christelle Dantec<sup>2</sup>, Patrick Lemaire<sup>2</sup>, Takeshi A. Onuma<sup>1</sup> and Hiroki Nishida<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

**Background:** miRNAs play essential roles in the modulation of cellular functions via degradation and/or translation attenuation of target mRNAs. They have been surveyed in a single ascidian genus, *Ciona*. Recently, an annotated draft genome sequence for a distantly related ascidian, *Halocynthia roretzi*, has become available, but miRNAs in *H. roretzi* have not been previously studied.

**Results:** We report the prediction of 319 candidate *H. roretzi* miRNAs, obtained through three complementary methods. Experimental validation suggests that more than half of these candidate miRNAs are expressed during embryogenesis. The majority of predicted *H. roretzi* miRNAs appear specific to ascidians or tunicates, and only 32 candidates, belonging to 25 families, are widely conserved across metazoans.

**Conclusion:** Our study presents a comprehensive identification of candidate *H. roretzi* miRNAs. This resource will facilitate the study of the mechanisms for miRNA-controlled gene regulatory networks during ascidian development. Further, our analysis suggests that the majority of *Halocynthia* miRNAs are specific to ascidian or tunicates, with only a small number of widely conserved miRNAs. This result is consistent with the general notion that animal miRNAs are less conserved between taxa than plant ones.

**Keywords:** Ascidian, *Halocynthia roretzi*, miRNA, Genome-wide survey, miRNA targets

## Background

miRNAs are a class of short endogenous non-coding regulatory RNAs whose length is approximately 22 nt. They modulate various biological processes, such as cellular differentiation, proliferation, apoptosis, development and homeostasis [1–4]. They act by repressing translation or destabilizing target mRNA, thereby providing an additional layer of control in gene regulatory networks [5]. In animals, a seed sequence is present at nucleotides 2–7 of the mature sequence and is a major determinant of miRNA targeting specificity. miRNAs sharing the same seed are considered to belong to the same family [6]. miRNA genes generally locate in non-coding intergenic or

intronic regions [7], with some rare cases found in protein-coding regions [8]. The activity of miRNA genes is often restricted to specific developmental stages or tissues, and their expression is sometimes only stimulated by environmental cues such as temperature [9, 10], oxidative [11], salt or drought [12] stresses. While high-throughput small RNA sequencing (miRNA-seq) [13–16] provides a powerful approach for miRNA identification, their restricted expression makes it difficult to use this method to exhaustively survey miRNAs in a given species. Potential miRNA genes can also be computationally predicted in whole genome sequences, and this could usefully complement miRNA-seq approaches.

Ascidians (Phylum: Chordata, Subphylum: Tunicata, Class: Ascidiacea) have been used as model species in development biology for over a century [17, 18]. These species offer attractive experimental features, including a compact genome (e.g. *Halocynthia roretzi* genome is around 170 Mb with about 16,000 protein-coding genes [19]), invariant embryonic cell lineages, small embryonic

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cell number, and translucent embryos, which allow the description of developmental processes with a cellular level of resolution. 15 years ago, the complete genome sequences of two ascidian species, *Ciona robusta* [20] (formerly *Ciona intestinalis* Type A [21]) and *Ciona savignyi* [22] were assembled, annotated and made publicly accessible through genome browsers [19]. Since then, the genomes of additional tunicate species have been sequenced, partially annotated and publicly released [19, 23–26], opening the way to a study of the evolution of ascidian coding and non-coding genetic elements. It is generally considered that ascidians are subject to rapid molecular evolution, in both coding and non-coding sequences [27, 28].

Recently, many miRNAs have been described in *C. robusta* and *C. savignyi* (Order: Phlebobranchia) [29–33]. Over 400 miRNA candidates were predicted [31] and the expression of 380 of them was experimentally detected in *C. robusta* by miRNA-seq and microarray data [31, 32]. Some *C. robusta* miRNAs control development processes [19]. For example, miR-124 promotes neuronal development via the inhibition of Notch signaling [34, 35], while miR-1 and miR-133 have muscle-specific functions, as in vertebrates.

In this study, we performed a comprehensive search for miRNA in *H. roretzi*, an ascidian of a different order, the stolidobranchia, using a recently sequenced and annotated genome draft [19]. Three major approaches were used to predict miRNAs: conservation to miRNA described in miRBase, *de novo* miRNAs prediction, and similarity to *Ciona* small RNA-seq reads. A total of 319 miRNA genes were discovered, whose evolutionary conservation was studied. This study thus advances our understanding of the complex gene regulatory network of ascidian embryos and will facilitate future developmental biology studies.

## Result

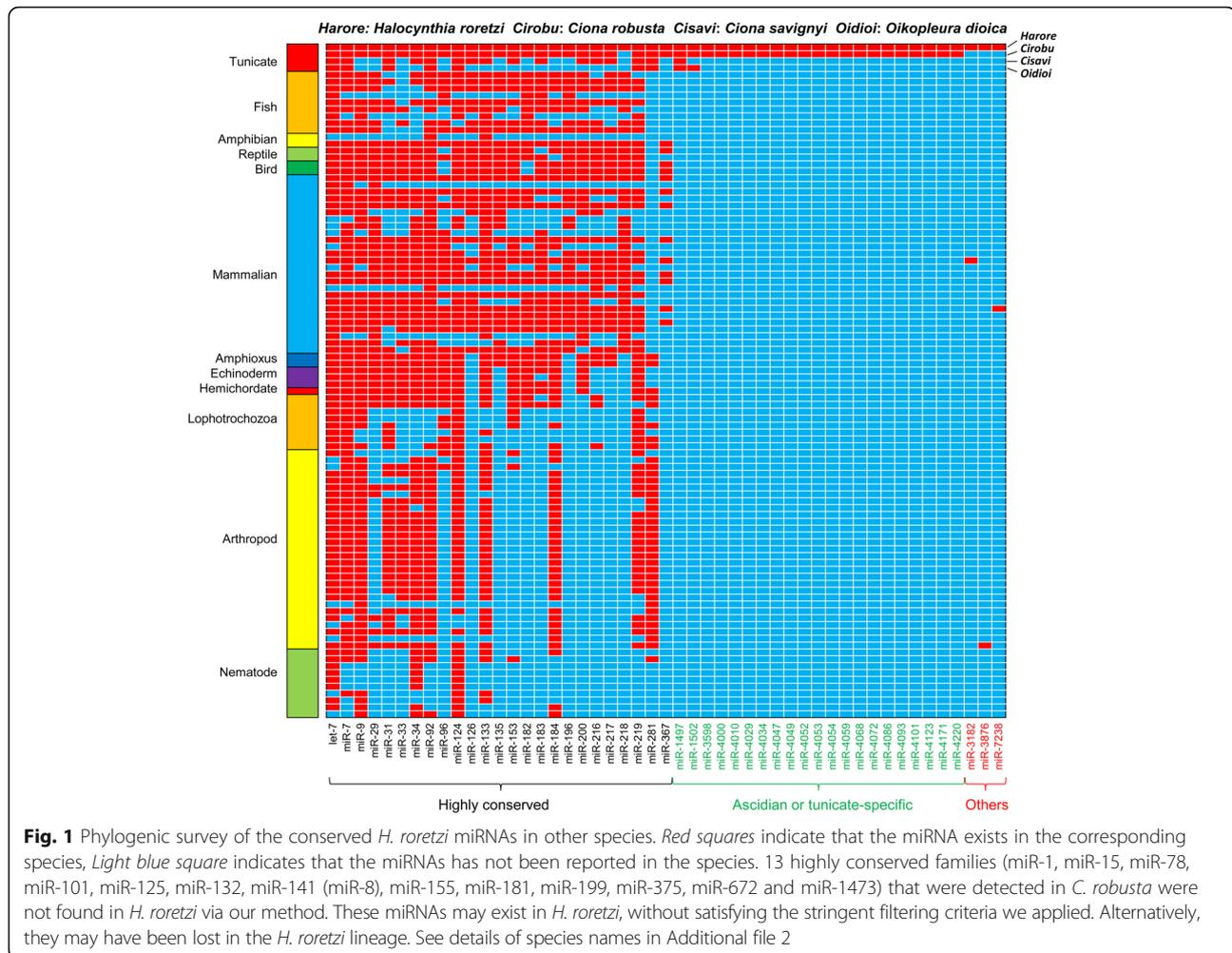
### 61 miRBase metazoan miRNAs are conserved in *Halocynthia* and approximately half of them may be ascidian or tunicate-specific

To survey the repertoire of miRNAs in *H. roretzi*, we first carried out a BLASTN similarity search (word size 7, *E*-value <10, see Methods) in the *H. roretzi* genome, using as input all known mature metazoan miRNAs deposited in miRBase (28,645 entries) [36]. We further selected miRNA candidates whose flanking genome sequences passed our filtration criteria on the stem-loop structure and minimum folding free energy (MFE) (see Methods section for details). This identified 61 candidate *H. roretzi* miRNA precursors, belonging to 49 known miRNA families (Fig. 1, Table 1 and Additional file 1). Figure 2 shows the stem loops formed by genomic sequences flanking a selection of predicted *H. roretzi* miRNAs.

The phylogenetic distribution of these *H. roretzi* 49 miRNA families in miRBase was next examined (Fig. 1 and Additional file 2). 25 families were highly conserved across metazoa, including let-7 and miR-7 to -367 (Fig. 1). Of these, 18 families were found in both deuterostomes and protostomes and may thus represent ancestral metazoan miRNAs. Seven families were exclusively found in deuterostomes, in either only chordates (6) or in both chordates and ambulacraria. We attribute the absence of miR-218 from *Ciona* and *Oikopleura* to the possible restricted expression of this miRNA, which may have precluded its identification by miRNA-seq. Interestingly, an ancestral metazoan miRNA, miR-281, appears to have been specifically lost from the vertebrate lineage, as it is present in all surveyed tunicates, amphioxus, and protostomes. The loss in echinoderms is not clear, since the number of species is only three.

Twenty one families were found in the distantly related *C. robusta* and *H. roretzi* ascidians but not in other animals (labeled in green on Fig. 1), and may thus correspond to ascidian or tunicate-specific miRNAs. These miRNAs are all represented by at least 10 reads in the *Ciona* small RNA sequencing dataset [32] (BLASTN, word size of 15, and *E*-value  $\leq 1000$ ), suggesting that they are expressed during *C. robusta* embryogenesis and are therefore likely to be genuine miRNAs. Finally, three miRNA families, miR-3182, miR-3876 and miR-7238 were only found in *H. roretzi* and a single non-tunicate species (Fig. 1, right most three columns). Our confidence in the predictions of these miRNAs is more limited.

To test whether the small number of candidate *Halocynthia* miRNAs conserved across metazoa reflected a low sensitivity in our identification method, or the overall weak conservation of ascidian miRNAs, we checked the situation in *C. robusta*. A total of 348 *C. robusta* miRNAs, belonging to 285 families, were previously identified and deposited in miRBase. These miRNAs were predicted from miRNA-seq data collected from *Ciona* embryos at the gastrula and larval stages, using the miRTRAP computational program [32], a method that makes no hypothesis on the evolutionary conservation of these candidates. Of these 348 miRNAs, only 47 miRNAs, belonging to 36 families, were widely conserved in many non-tunicate metazoan species (Additional file 3). An additional six miRNAs (*Cirobu*-mir-1473, *Cirobu*-mir-1497, *Cirobu*-mir-1502a, *Cirobu*-mir-1502b, *Cirobu*-mir-1502c, *Cirobu*-mir-1502d) belonging to three families were found in at least one tunicate species other than *C. robusta* (miRNA data had so far been described in three tunicate species, *C. robusta* [29–32], *Ciona savignyi*, 43 miRNAs in miRBase [32, 36, 37], and *Oikopleura dioica*, 69 miRNAs reported, [36, 37]). miRNA candidate *Cirobu*-mir-3575 was also found in *Rattus norvegicus*. The remaining 294 *C. robusta*



candidate miRNAs (belonging to 239 families) appeared to be specific for *C. robusta*.

The evolutionary analysis of these *Ciona* miRNAs, and the small number of *Halocynthia* candidate miRNA detected by conservation to miRBase entries suggest that a majority of ascidian miRNAs may be either ascidian or tunicate-specific. Discriminating between these two possibilities is currently difficult as the number of miRNA reported so far in the non-ascidian tunicate *Oikopleura dioica* ( $n = 69$ ) are small, suggesting that the list could be far from complete. Similarly, the current repertoire of *Ciona savignyi* miRNA ( $n = 43$ ) is incomplete, explaining the small number of the miRNAs for this species listed in Fig. 1.

#### De novo miRNAs prediction

To extend our study of the *Halocynthia* miRNA repertoire, we next used srnaloop [38], to detect potential miRNA precursors on the sole basis of the presence of a canonical stem-loop structure [16, 39]. Genomic sequences that met minimum folding free energy (MFE)

and stem-loop structure filtration criteria were considered as potential novel miRNA precursors. Clustering of these candidate sequences using CD-HIT (sequence identity threshold: 0.9) [40] identified some clusters with high similarity. Some of these clustered sequences were mapped to repeated sequences, which could form palindromes and confound srnaloop. These sequences were excluded from the final predictions. This approach predicted 268 miRNA candidates including 42 that were found in the previous section (Fig. 3, Additional file 1, miR-5000 to -5257). These novel candidates showed no significant hit by BLASTX (E-value  $\leq 1e-3$ ) with proteins in nr and UniProtKB/Swiss-Prot database confirming that they are non-coding RNAs.

miRNA precursors are transcribed from only one of the double-stranded DNA template. Which strand the miRNA precursors originated from was inferred in 291 cases from published transcript information (see Method section). Prediction of the mature miRNA sequences for *de novo* predicted miRNAs is difficult and moderately reliable as the precise mechanism by which Dicer cuts

**Table 1** Conserved miRNAs in *H. roretzi*

Location in Scaffolds (S) and the orientation (+,-)	Family	Mature sequences (5'-3')	Precursor Length (nt)	MFE (kcal/mol)
S648_2373-2295:-	let-7	UGAGGUAGUAGGUUUAUAGUUU	79	-30.4
S93_67805-67726:-	let-7	UGAGGUAGUGGAUUUUGCAGUU	80	-30.1
S93_68361-68283:-	let-7	UGAGGUAGUAGGUUAUUCAGU	79	-22.6
S93_68526-68445:-	let-7	UGAGGUAGUAGGUUAUGUAGUG	82	-24.6
S93_68698-68609:-	let-7	CUGAGGUAGUAGGUUAUGCAGUU	90	-31.2
S24_284667-284752:+	miR-7	UGGAAGACUAGUGAUUUUGUUGUUC	86	-19.5
S159_72225-72288:+	miR-9	UCUUUGGUUAUCUAGUUUUGUG	64	-20.3
S93_128856-128791:-	miR-29	UAGCACCAUUGGAAUUCGGUC	66	-19.8
S65_9585-9666:+	miR-31	UAUGGCAAGAUGUUGGCAUAGCUGC	82	-34
S298_83663-83598:-	miR-33	AAGUGCAUUGUAGUUGCAUUGCACA	66	-20.8
S160_170587-170662:+	miR-34	AGGCAGUGUAGUUAGCUAGUUG	76	-19.3
S27_318389-318451:+	miR-92	UAUUGCACUUGUCCCGGCCU	63	-18.8
S57_155850-155929:+	miR-92	UAUUGCACUCGUCGCGGCCUUAU	80	-21.5
S181_161093-161016:-	miR-96	UUUGGCACUAGCACAUAUU	78	-25.2
S375_52432-52351:-	miR-124	CGUGUUCACUGCAGACCUU, CAUUAAGGCACGCGGUGAAUGCUAU	82	-30
S375_52641-52557:-	miR-124	AAUUAAGGCACGCGGUGAAUGCAGAA	85	-37.6
S375_60909-60992:+	miR-124	UAUUAAGGCACGCGGUGAAUGCCAAG	84	-37
S60_145419-145497:+	miR-126	CCUUGUUAUUUUAUUCUGUGUGA	79	-38.2
S6_131727-131818:+	miR-133	GCUGGUCACACCGAACCACAAUC, UUUUGUCCCUUAACACCAGCUGUU	92	-29.5
S56_118756-118667:-	miR-135	UAUGGCUUUUUUAUUCUGUGUGA	90	-32.9
S67_157861-157774:-	miR-153	GUCAUUUUUGUAUUUUGCAA, UUGCAUAGUAACAAAAGUGAUCAU	88	-40.3
S181_160894-160804:-	miR-182	CUUGGCAAAAUUAAGAACUC	91	-36.1
S181_165741-165631:-	miR-183	UAUGGCACUAGUAGAAUUCACUGC	111	-36.3
S602_41811-41890:+	miR-184	UGGACGGAGAAUUGAUUAGGAA	80	-30.4
S54_165680-165756:+	miR-196	UAGGUAGUUAACAAGUUGUGG	77	-25.6
S353_78598-78518:-	miR-200	UAAUACUGCUUGGUAAUGAUGAU	81	-24.5
S244_68891-68803:-	miR-216	UAAUCUCAGCUGGCAUUCUGUGA	89	-35.3
S244_68624-68517:-	miR-217	AUACUGCAUUAAGGAACUGAUUGGU	108	-30.3
S248_20812-20705:-	miR-218	UAUGUGCUUUGAUUAACCAUGU	108	-34.9
S21_373535-373467:-	miR-219	UGAUUGUCCAAACGCAAUUCGCG	69	-19.3
S11_93983-94061:+	miR-281	UGUCAUGGAGUUGCUCUUAUU	79	-24.3
S99_176620-176695:+	miR-367	UAUUGCACAUUGUAAUGGUA	76	-29.3
S291_113322-113388:+	miR-1497	UUGAAGAAUUGCAGGUGGUAGGU	67	-23.2
S290_113331-113406:+	miR-1502	UUGAACUUUCUUAAGGAAUAG	76	-30.2
S19_110094-110150:+	miR-3182	GCUUUUGUAGUUUAGUC	57	-20.4
S210_48343-48421:+	miR-3598	UCACAGUGGUUGUAUACUGC	79	-42.1
S176_129704-129781:+	miR-3876	GUUUUGUUUAACACUUAUAC	78	-22.4

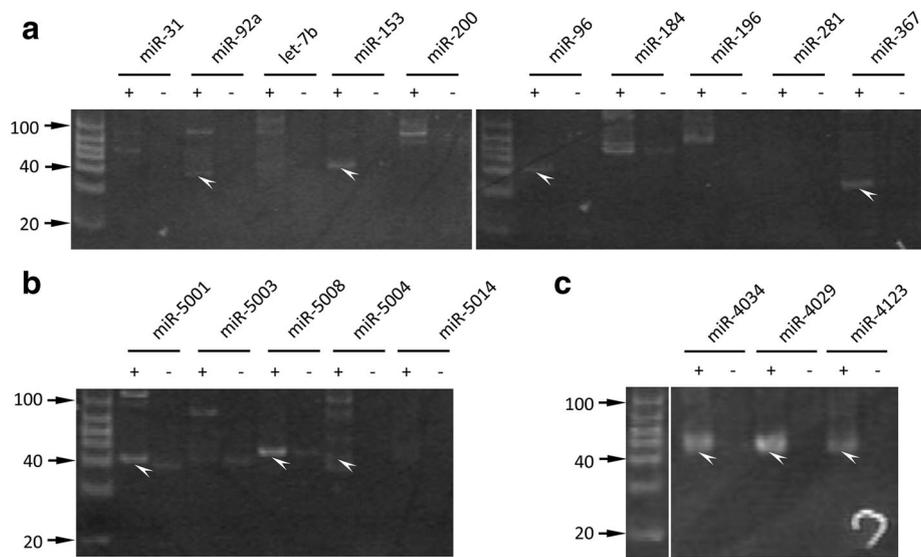
In the cases of miR-124, 126, 133, and 153, both of 5' and 3' mature sequences are reported in different species

miRNAs from the hairpin structure remains unknown. Li *et al* [7] reported an inference method for mature miRNA locations by supposing that Dicer precisely cuts the mature miRNA at the loop-stem junction. We note, however, that the majority of miRBase miRNAs do not obey this rule. Furthermore, 5p and 3p miRNAs are

localized to the two parallel arms of the hairpin structure, and are not exactly complementary in sequence (see Fig. 2). So we tentatively predict the positions of 5p and 3p miRNAs by detecting paired segments using patscan although we do not know which of 5p and/or 3p is the actual miRNA [13, 41, 42]. For those precursors,







**Fig. 5** RT-PCR validation of miRNAs. **a** RT-PCR results of some well-conserved miRNAs listed in Table 1. **b** RT-PCR validation of some potential miRNAs that were predicted *de novo* and by using *C. robusta* small RNA-Seq reads. **c** Ascidian or tunicate-specific miRNAs (miR-4034, 4029 and 4123). '+' indicates PCR with reverse transcriptase; '-' indicates PCR without reverse transcriptase. The expected size of the amplified fragment is ~40 bp (arrowheads) because the 19 bp universal primer is amplified together with ~20 bp miRNA-specific primers. Other bands would be non-specific bands

sequence may be erroneous resulting in inadequate primer choice, or because these miRNAs are not expressed during embryogenesis.

#### Potential target prediction of the miRNAs

To get insight into the functions of the miRNAs, 3' UTR sequences were extracted from each gene model in Aniseed [19] (<http://www.aniseed.cnrs.fr/>). Then, targets were tentatively predicted. A total of 3451 possible target sites in putative 3' UTR sequences, which correspond to 17% of coding genes (2734 genes out of approximately 16,000 gene models), were detected for 275 miRNAs. Among those, 285 target genes of 140 miRNAs have gene ontology (GO) terms associated with various development processes. Although the functional validation of these targets goes beyond the scope of this article and these targets have not been functionally validated, information on their identity, provided as a list in Additional file 5, may be useful for future studies of miRNA functions.

#### Discussion

Compared to high-throughput small RNA sequencing, computational miRNA discovery approaches offer several advantages when reference genome sequence is available. First, they do not need the availability of small RNA-Seq. Second, it could in theory discover all possible miRNAs, while small RNA sequencing can only identify miRNAs expressed in the cells, tissues, organs, from which the RNA was collected. This

is particularly useful as some miRNAs are only expressed in response to stresses, such as hypersalinity, hyper osmotic pressure and disease. On the other hand, the disadvantage of computational predictions is that no direct experimental support of the predicted miRNAs is provided until their expression is validated via RT-PCR or small RNA-Seq.

In this study, the repertoire of miRNAs in the *H. roretzi* genome was investigated by bioinformatics methods (Fig. 3 and Additional file 1) using three methods: homology search using mature miRNAs sequences deposited in miRBase (method 1 in Fig. 3), *de novo* miRNAs prediction using srnaloop (method 2), and prediction based on sequence similarity with *C. robusta* small RNA-Seq data (method 3). We found 61 conserved miRNAs, 226 additional miRNAs predicted by srnaloop, and another non-overlapping set of 32 miRNAs using *C. robusta* small RNA-Seq data. 38 conserved miRNAs were predicted by all three methods, a significant overlap supporting the reliability of the methods used in the present study.

These miRNAs sum up to 319 in total, a lower number than described in *Ciona* [31], suggesting that our repertoire may be incomplete. To estimate the proportion of undiscovered miRNAs, we investigated how many metazoan miRNA precursors deposited in the miRBase would pass our selection criteria used in this study in terms of precursor length, loop number, MFE, GC content, and precursor base pairing situation as shown below. Nucleotide lengths of 97.4% precursors

are between 50 and 130 bp (Fig. 6a), 92.6% precursors have only one loop (Fig. 6b), 95.3% precursors' minimum folding free energy (MFE)  $\leq -0.31 * L + 6.00$  (Fig. 6c), 94.7% precursors' GC content are between 30 and 70% (Fig. 6d), 97.5% precursors have more than 55% paired bases (Fig. 6e). Despite the individual recovery rate are pretty high, however, only 67.8% miRNAs passed all of these criteria. Therefore, roughly 32% of miRNAs could not pass our criteria and still to be discovered in *H. roretzi*.

Thirty two (25 families) of 319 miRNAs (10%) are well-conserved miRNAs over several phyla, and 24 (21 families) are shared only with *C. robusta*. In addition, 230 novel miRNAs of *H. roretzi* were predicted. 41 of these may correspond to genuine miRNAs in *C. robusta*. Therefore, 20% (65) miRNAs may correspond to ascidian/tunicate-specific miRNAs shared between *H. roretzi* (order Stolidobranchia) and *C. robusta* (order Stolidobranchia), although this estimation is still rough. The situation is similar in *C. robusta*. We checked the 348 previously identified miRNAs in *C. robusta* that are deposited in miRBase [44] and found that only 47 of them are well-conserved miRNAs over phyla. Therefore, it seems that ascidian species have small number of widely conserved miRNAs, and a larger number of ascidian/tunicate-specific miRNAs. These results are consistent with the general conjecture that animal miRNAs are not well conserved between distant taxa [45].

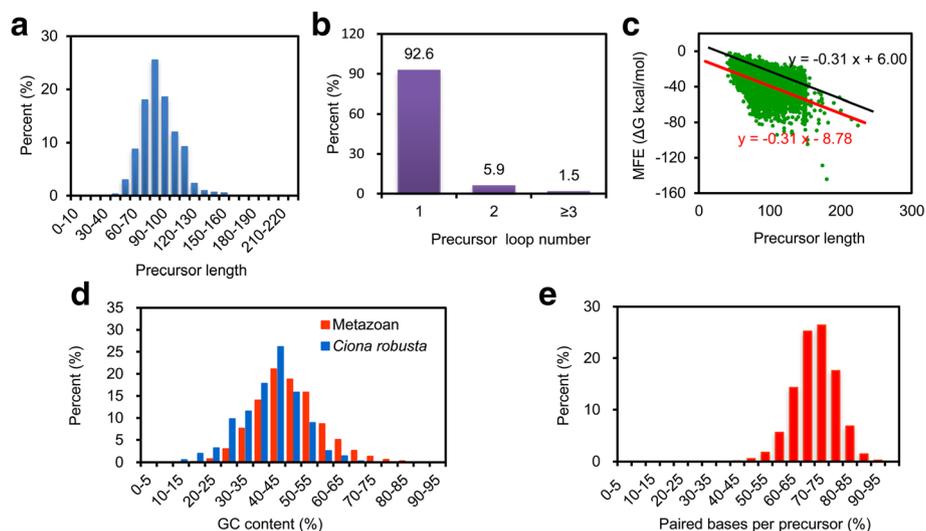
## Conclusion

miRNAs play crucial roles in the modulation of developmental processes as well as response to environment stresses, but little is known about their functions in the tunicate species. We reported potential *H. roretzi* miRNAs inferred from the genome sequence, and showed that only a small number of miRNAs were conserved across phyla. Most miRNAs were newly discovered in this study. Our study suggested the possibility that many miRNAs could be conserved among ascidian species. This finding would hopefully facilitate future studies of gene regulation by miRNAs.

## Methods

### Data Preparation & Pre-processing

The *H. roretzi* genome sequences were assembled by us and are publicly available through the Aniseed database (<http://www.aniseed.cnrs.fr/>) [19]. Prior to miRNA prediction, we masked genomic regions with less miRNA-coding possibility. This includes protein coding and non-coding RNA generating regions that are rRNAs, tRNAs, snoRNAs and lncRNAs. To be specific, coding sequences and repeat regions were masked firstly. Coding regions were obtained from the predicted gene models in the Aniseed, and repeat regions were generated by RepeatMasker and RepeatModeler (<http://repeatmasker.org>). Tandem repeats were masked by Tandem Repeats Finder [46]. Other RNAs, including rRNAs, tRNAs, snRNAs and lncRNAs were filtered



**Fig. 6** Criteria that were used in this study and its evaluation by application to metazoan miRNA precursors that are registered in miRBase. **a** Precursor length distribution and their percent of metazoan miRNA precursors that are registered in miRBase. **b** Loop number per precursor. Loop number was predicted by RNAfold. **c** Relationship of MFE and precursor length. MFE was calculated by RNAfold. Red line indicates the equation simulated via linear regression analysis. Black line represents the equation with the shifted constant used in this study, and it allowed ~95.3% precursors to pass the criterion,  $MFE \leq -0.31 * L + 6.00$ . **d** GC content distribution. **e** Paired bases per precursor. Paired bases per precursor were obtained by RNAfold results

using Rfam database (Release 11.0) [47] by cmsearch in INFERNAL [48] (E-value threshold:  $1e-3$ ). Potential tRNAs were also screened by tRNAscan-SE [49].

#### Identification of widely conserved miRNAs and precursors

To reduce the search space, we firstly queried all metazoan mature miRNA seeds deposited in miRBase database (Release 21) [44] against the masked *H. roretzi* genome sequences using blastn with a word size of 7 and E-value of 10. The 110 bp sequences of matched genomic regions were retrieved separately and extended for additional 20 bp from both 5' and 3' ends. Potential miRNAs with no more than two mismatches with known metazoan miRNAs were identified by patscan [13, 41, 42], and the candidates were folded by RNAfold [50, 51] subsequently. Unmatched sequences were trimmed. If more than one miRNA were mapped to the overlapping position, only the best one with the minimum folding free energy (MFE) was kept. In addition, Rfam (Release 11.0) [52] covariance model (CM) was also used to search for conserved miRNA structures. Low complexity sequences were removed. We retained sequences whose minimum folding free energy (MFE) and stem-loop structure passed our filtration criteria that are mentioned below.

#### De novo miRNAs prediction

To detect potential miRNA precursors, srnaloop [38] was employed to identify hairpin structures from masked *H. roretzi* genome sequence. We used the parameter “-st d -Gs -1.5 -gu 1 -sml 100000000 -am 990000 -t 15 -lml 5”. “-st d” means that we used the DNA sequences, “-Gs -1.5” means that gap start score is -1.5, “-gu 1” means that GU base pairs score is 1, “-t 15” means that alignment score threshold is 15, “-lml 5” means that minimum size of hairpin loop is 5. The sequence length parameter “-sml” and the maximum hairpin alignments “-am” parameters were set at their maximal possible value (100000000 and 900000). In srnaloop software, the predicated hairpin lengths were less than and tend to be close to the length parameter that is set, while the miRNA precursors length generally ranges from 60 to 120 (Fig. 6a). Therefore, the maximum length of hairpin sequence parameter “-l” was set from 60 to 130 with an interval of 10, and chose the shortest hairpin that passed the folding free energy evaluation. Potential precursors were further blasted against nr database to remove protein coding genes (E-value threshold of 10).

#### miRNAs prediction using *C. robusta* small RNA-Seq data

The *C. robusta* small RNA-Seq reads (SRR038843, SRR038844, 26 nt) were mapped onto the repeat-sequence-masked *H. roretzi* reference genome using BLASTN (E-value of  $\leq 1000$ , word size of 10). Only the

best hits with a high-scoring segment pair (HSP) identity of  $\geq 90\%$  and an alignment length of  $\geq 20$  and  $\leq 2$  mismatches were kept. Then, we examined possible stem-loop structures in the sequences and the flanking 100 bp sequences using srnaloop [38]. Sequences whose minimum folding free energy (MFE) and stem-loop structure passed our filtration criteria were reserved. Among the candidate stem-loops, those with more than ten *H. roretzi* mRNA reads in mRNA-seq results (C. Dantec, H. Nishida and P. Lemaire, unpublished results) were excluded.

#### Filtration criteria

All the potential miRNAs reported in this study passed the following filtration criteria. The miRNA precursors were generally considered that they have a smaller minimum folding free energy (MFE,  $\Delta G$  kcal/mol) than ordinary genomic sequences of the same length. In this study, the MFE of potential precursors were obtained by folding their sequences using RNAfold, and whose minimum folding free energy not satisfying the following threshold were excluded from further analysis:

$$\text{MFE} \leq -0.31 * L + 6.00 \text{ (see Fig. 6c)}$$

Where, L indicates the predicated precursor length. The relationship between MFE and the length of miRNA precursor were tested on all metazoan species and simulated by a linear regression analysis [53, 54]. Then, the stem-loop structures were manually checked to exclude sequences with big bulges, or in which a part of mature miRNA is presented in the loop. To reduce false positive predictions, precursors that contain more than one loop (folded by RNAfold) were discarded (see Fig. 6b).

The GC contents are relatively low in the *C. robusta* (34.7%) and *H. roretzi* (35.7%) genome sequences. We have calculated GC content of the miRNAs in *C. robusta* (see Fig. 6d, blue bars). The GC content is not as biased as that of the genome. Therefore, we used 30–70% GC contents as filtration criterion since most miRNAs of *C. robusta* also fit this criterion. There could be a constraint on the GC contents of miRNAs as they have to firmly bind to target mRNAs.

#### Inference of Mature miRNA for novel miRNA precursors

Patscan were used to find 5p and 3p mature miRNAs. The pattern file is: p1 = 22...27 5...50 ~ p1[6,0,0]. “p1 = 22...27” means that match the 5p mature miRNA sequence whose length is between 22 nt and 27 nt. “5...50” means that the distance between 5p and 3p mature miRNAs could range from 5 nt to 50 nt. “~ p1[6,0,0]” means that match the 3p mature miRNA sequence by allowing up to six mismatches to the reverse and complement 5p mature miRNA sequence. If more than one pairs were detected, the one closest to loop structure was kept. If no paired sequence found, the 24 bp pair sequences closest to

the loop structure would be used. Putative miRNAs and miRNA stars were simply named using the suffix “5p” and “3p” subsequently.

### Inference of strand of miRNA precursors

The strands of the miRNAs were determined according to the miRBase database (Release 21) [44] (best BLASTN hit), *Halocynthia* ESTs (<http://magest.hgc.jp>) (E-value  $\leq 1e-5$ ) and *Ciona* small RNA-Seq data (best BLASTN hit). In miRNAs without a significant hit, the sequences of them are tentatively represented by those in plus strand of the reference genome.

### Prediction of miRNA targets

To get insight into the functions of the miRNAs, 3' UTR sequences (defined as 400 bp sequence that immediately follows the translation stop codon in the genome sequence in this study) were extracted from each gene model in Aniseed [19] (<http://www.aniseed.cnrs.fr/>). We adopted RNAhybrid [55] to identify miRNA targets with p-value  $\leq 0.01$ . Considering that position of the putative mature miRNAs could not be precisely inferred, we adjusted the seed sequence by using a series of helix constraint parameter “-f 1,6”, “-f 2,7”, “-f 3,8”, “-f 4,9”, “-f 5,10”, “-f 6,11”.

### Validation of miRNAs via RT-PCR

To validate the expression of predicted miRNAs, embryonic samples of six stages, unfertilized egg, blastula, gastrula, neurula, tailbud and hatched larvae were collected. Eggs of two adults were fertilized with sperms of five adults. Follicle cells that reside outside of the vitelline membrane and test cells that reside inside of the vitelline membrane were removed by digesting the vitelline membrane with protease, as previously described [56]. Total RNAs were extracted using TRIzol Reagent (Life Technologies). The quantity of total RNA was examined using Ultraspec 2100 pro (Life Sciences) and RNA integrity was assessed via agarose gel electrophoresis. RT-PCR primers (Additional file 4) were synthesized and purchased from Eurofins Genomics (Tokyo, Japan). Simple miRNA Detection Kit (BioDynamics Laboratory Inc. Japan) was used for RT-PCR according to the manufacturer's protocol. The PCR products were exposed to UV light after the polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis, and the images were taken with NIPPON genetics FAS-IV illuminator. The expected size of the amplified fragment is ~40 bp because the 19 bp universal primer is amplified together with ~20 bp miRNA-specific primers. To validate sequences of the PCR products, they were dissected from the gel, subcloned into the pGEM-T Easy vector (Promega), and sequencing reaction was performed at Eurofins Genomics (Tokyo, Japan).

## Additional files

**Additional file 1:** List and information of predicted miRNAs of *H. roretzi*. (XLS 118 kb)

**Additional file 2:** Phylogenetic survey of the conserved *H. roretzi* miRNAs in other species. This Figure is similar to Fig. 1, but all of species names are given in this. (PDF 61 kb)

**Additional file 3:** *Ciona robusta* (formerly *intestinalis*) miRNAs that are conserved across metazoans. (XLS 33 kb)

**Additional file 4:** Primers used to validate expression of the miRNAs. (DOC 48 kb)

**Additional file 5:** miRNAs associated with various development processes and their target GO annotation. (XLS 216 kb)

### Abbreviations

CM: Covariance model; GO: Gene ontology; HSP: High-scoring segment pair; MFE: Minimum folding free energy

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### Availability of data and materials

The data supporting this article can be found in the Additional files.

### Authors' contributions

KW, CD, PL, TO and HN designed the study, wrote and revised the manuscript. KW analyzed and interpreted the data. KW and TO performed experimental validation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

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