

# Use of MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry to explore the peptidome and proteome of in-vitro produced bovine embryos pre-exposed to oviduct fluid

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Charles Banliat, Valérie Labas, Daniel Tomas, Ana-Paula Teixeira-Gomes, Benoît Guyonnet, et al.. Use of MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry to explore the peptidome and proteome of in-vitro produced bovine embryos pre-exposed to oviduct fluid. Reproductive biology, 2021, 21 (4), pp.1-5. 10.1016/j.repbio.2021.100545 . hal-03511989

HAL Id: hal-03511989

https://hal.science/hal-03511989

Submitted on 22 Aug 2023

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- 1 Short communication
- 2 Title: Use of MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry to explore the peptidome and proteome of
- 3 in-vitro produced bovine embryos pre-exposed to oviduct fluid.
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- 13 **Competing interest:** none.

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14 **Short title:** MALDI-TOF MS analysis of cattle embryos.

- Abstract. In order to identify oviduct fluid (OF) peptides and proteins possibly uptaken by
  developing embryos, *in-vitro* produced bovine embryos exposed or not to OF were
  individually analyzed by MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry. Overall, 11 masses were
  overabundant in OF-treated embryos compared to controls, among which one at 8.9 kDa
  annotated as immediate early response 3-interacting protein 1 or a peptide of transitional
  endoplasmic reticulum ATPase met the criteria of an OF embryo-interacting protein or
- **Keywords:** Oviduct, Fallopian tube, peptidomics, proteomics, embryo.

peptide.

### 1. Introduction

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Cattle embryos develop up to the 8-16 cell or morula stage in contact with the oviduct fluid (OF) [1]. However, very few studies did investigate the molecular interactions between proteins present in the OF and developing embryos [2-4]. Extracellular vesicles isolated from the bovine OF and added to the culture medium were reported to be taken up by developing embryos and to improve the developmental rates and embryo quality in terms of cell number, hatching rates, cryosurvival and metabolism [5-7]. Intact cell matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionisation time-of-flight (MALDI-TOF) - mass spectrometry (MS) allows a direct detection of intact proteins, peptides and lipids from whole cells, with a high sensitivity (from femtomolar to picomolar concentrations) and over a relatively wide mass range (1-30 kDa) [8]. Recently, MALDI-TOF MS applied on in-vitro produced embryos increased our comprehension of the phospholipid composition of bovine blastocysts under different culture conditions [9, 10]. Here we applied MALDI-TOF MS on intact single bovine embryos fertilized in vitro and pre-exposed or not to post-ovulatory OF in order to detect OF proteins and peptides possibly uptaken by the embryos. We hypothesized that the uptake of OF proteins and peptides would increase over time the abundance of specific OF masses in the MS profiles of OF-treated embryos compared to untreated controls.

### 2. Materials and methods

All reagents were purchased from Sigma-Merck (Saint-Louis, MO, USA) unless otherwise stated. PMSG, hCG and PG-600 were obtained from MSD Animal Health (Brussels, Belgium). Oviducts and both ovaries from adult cows were transported on ice from a local slaughterhouse and processed for OF collection less than 2 h after death. Post-ovulatory OF (based on the presence of a red, recently ovulated corpus luteum < 1 cm in diameter with cells loosely organized, corresponding to approximately day 1-5 post-ovulation [11]) was collected from the oviduct ipsilateral to the corpus luteum, as previously described [2]. The OF from 22

cows were pooled, assayed for protein concentration (69.5 mg/mL), divided into 15-µL aliquots and stored at -80 °C until use for incubation with embryos. In vitro embryo production was carried out as previously described [2]. Briefly, in-vitro matured COCs (50 per well) and Percoll-washed spermatozoa from one Normande bull (Evolution, Noyal-sur-Vilaine, France) at a final concentration of  $1 \times 10^6$  spermatozoa/mL were co-incubated in fertilization medium (Tyrode medium supplemented with 25 mM bicarbonate, 10 mM lactate, 1 mM pyruvate, 6 mg/mL fatty-acid free BSA, 10 μg/mL heparin and 40 μg/mL gentamycin) for 22 h (Day 0). At Day 1, all presumptive zygotes were cultured in 25 µL of synthetic oviductal fluid (SOF, [12]) supplemented with 0.01 % of polyvinyl alcohol (SOF-PVA) without any serum or protein supplementation, under mineral oil (M8410) at 38.8 °C with 5 % CO<sub>2</sub> and 5 % O<sub>2</sub>. At Days 3 and 5, groups of 30-50 intact embryos of normal morphology (spherical embryos with blastomeres uniform in size, color and density) at the 4-6 cell and early morula (stage code 3 according to the IETS classification) stages, respectively, in 15 µL of SOF-PVA were randomly allocated to incubation in 15 µL of OF (OF-treated embryos) or in 15 µL of SOF-PVA (controls), leading to a final volume of 30 µL for 3 h or 6 h at 38.8 °C in humidified atmosphere with 5 % CO<sub>2</sub> and 5 % O<sub>2</sub>. After incubation, 10-15 embryos per group were washed three times in 500 µL of 20 mM Tris-HCl buffer (pH 6.8) supplemented with 8.9 % sucrose (Tris-sucrose) then stored in groups of 10-15 at -80 °C. For MALDI-TOF MS analysis, embryos were thawed on ice then individually dropped with a minimal volume of Tris-sucrose buffer onto the MALDI plate using a videomicroscope before addition of 0.5 μL of saturated α-cyano-4-hydroxycinnamic acid (CHCA) matrix solution containing 50 % acetonitrile / 50 % H<sub>2</sub>0 in presence of 0.2 % trifluoroacetic acid (TFA). The matrix/sample was allowed to evaporate at room temperature for 30 min before MS analysis. In addition to embryos, one aliquot of the frozen-thawed OF used for co-incubation was desalted and concentrated using Zip-Tip C<sub>4</sub> solid-phase extraction (Merck Millipore,

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Massachusetts, USA) and analyzed by MALDI-TOF with the same matrix (1 µL of OF + 1 μL of matrix): 10 technical replicates were performed. All mass spectra were generated using a MALDI-TOF mass spectrometer UltrafleXtreme (Bruker Daltonics, Bremen, Germany) equipped with a Smartbeam laser at 2 kHz laser repetition controlled by flexControl 3.4 software (Bruker Daltonics, Bremen, Germany) and operating in positive ion mode and linear MS mode. External calibration was performed using 1 µL of a standard mixture of peptides and proteins (1:1; v/v in CHCA matrix solution): Glu1-fibrinopeptide B, ACTH (fragment18-39), insulin and ubiquitin, each at 1 pmol/µL, 2 pmol/µL cytochrome C, 4 pmol/µL myoglobin and 8 pmol/µL trypsinogen. Spectral profiles were acquired in the mass range of 2,000 -25,000 m/z with 5000 shots per spectrum. All embryos from one IVF were analyzed on the same MALDI plate and all analyses were made within two weeks. To increase mass accuracy (final mass error < 0.05%), an internal calibration was applied to all spectra by performing a lock mass correction using the m/z at 8,452 or 8,565 corresponding to the ubiquitin protein (naturally present in embryos). In total, 140 4-6 cell embryos (3-h treatment: 29 treated, 29 controls; 6-h treatment: 40 treated, 42 controls) and 144 morulas (3-h treatment: 29 treated, 27 controls; 6-h treatment: 47 treated, 41 controls) originated from 3 or 4 IVF were individually analyzed. The data were analyzed using the MALDIquant package adapted for mass spectrometry data [13] of the R software (version 3.6.2). The mass spectra were treated for baseline subtraction as previously described for embryo lipidomics [9]. The normalization of intensity values was performed using the total ion count method. Peaks were detected using a total average spectrum and MAD (median absolute deviation) method with a signal:background noise > 2 and a frequency of detection in at least 10 % of all mass spectra. The repeatability of the MS acquisitions was evaluated by calculating the coefficient of variation (CV) from the normalized peak intensity values of the three technical replicates for each embryo (technical

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variability). The average CV obtained was 27.9 %. The comparison between groups was analyzed using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test with the Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple comparisons. The hierarchical clustering of differential masses was performed using Spearman correlations and the gplot package (v 3.0.1.2) of FactoMineR (v 2.1). Comparison between treated and control embryos at each stage and incubation time was analyzed using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. Masses were considered differentially abundant between groups with a p-value < 0.05. Masses were considered as potential embryo-interacting proteins originating in the OF if they met both following criteria: exclusive detection in OF-treated embryos or abundance significantly increased in OF-treated embryos compared to controls with a fold-change  $\geq 2$  in at least one stage×incubation-time combination; and identification by MALDI-TOF MS in the OF with a final mass error of 0.05%. Masses were annotated based on theoretical masses of m/z  $\pm$  0.05% using a home database generated from bovine granulosa cells and oocytes top-down proteomics [14] or using top-down database compiled by the Consortium for Top-Down Proteomic (CTDP) gateway (https://www.topdownproteomics.org).

## 3. Results and discussion

MALDI-TOF MS analysis of single bovine embryos evidenced up to 197 masses corresponding to peptides and proteins in the range of 2 – 25 kDa (see Suppl. Table 1 for the exhaustive list of masses quantified in embryos). The MS analysis of the pool of OF used for embryo incubation evidenced a specific spectrum of 136 masses in the same mass range (Suppl. Table 1). The hierarchical clustering of differential masses between groups evidenced the embryonic stage (4-6 cell embryos *vs.* morula) as the most discriminating factor followed by the treatment (OF-treated *vs.* control) and the time of incubation in OF (3 h *vs.* 6 h) (Figure 1). To our knowledge, this is the first use of MALDI-TOF MS to explore the peptidome and proteome of bovine embryos. Our results show that the MS profiles of individual early

embryos could be discriminated according to their stage of development, the pre-exposure to OF and time of exposure, showing the high sensitivity of this method to discriminate changes in peptides and proteins from a low amount of material, although in a mass range less than 25 kDa. The stage-specific changes in embryonic MS profiles may rely on the variation in the physico-chemical properties of the zona pellucida during embryo development [15] and on the major activation of the embryonic genome, which occurs between the 8-cell and 16-cell stages in the cattle embryo [16]. Exposure to OF had no apparent effect on the morphological quality of embryos at both stages (data not shown). It was hypothesized that masses found overabundant or exclusively in OFtreated embryos compared to controls may originate in the OF. No mass was specifically detected in OF-treated embryos. By applying a minimal fold-change ratio of 2, a total of 16 differentially abundant masses were detected, among which 11 were overabundant in OFtreated embryos: five exclusively in 4-6 cell embryos, four exclusively in morulas and two in both stages (see the volcano plots of differentially abundant masses with annotations for 4-6 cell embryos and morulas in Figures 2 and 3, respectively; p-values and fold-change ratios in Suppl. Table 1). Among the overabundant masses, one mass at m/z 8882.31 and annotated as immediate early response 3-interacting protein 1 (IER3IP1, 9 kDa) or a peptide of transitional endoplasmic reticulum ATPase (VCP, 89 kDa) was 3.4-fold more abundant in 4-6 cell embryos compared to controls after 6 h of OF exposure and was also identified in the postovulatory OF with a final mass error less than 0.05% (m/z 8878.14; Suppl. table 1). Therefore, this mass of 8.9 kDa met the criteria to be considered as an embryo-interacting protein or peptide originated in the OF. Previous data from our laboratory showed that protein interactions in bovine 4-8 cell embryos were localized in the zona pellucida, perivitelline space and into blastomeres [2], however, further experiments using specific immunostaining would be necessary to precisely localize these interactions.

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This result has to be taken with caution for several reasons. First, most masses found overabundant in OF-treated embryos were not detected in the OF used for embryo coincubation and therefore did not meet the criteria for being considered as embryo-interacting proteins. One hypothesis is that OF proteins/peptides internalized by embryos may have been at levels under the detection threshold of MALDI-TOF MS as only 136 masses could be quantified in the OF. Another hypothesis is that OF proteins with molecular weight higher than 25 kDa were cleaved in smaller peptides by proteolysis at the time of their internalization in embryonic cells and could thus not be detected in their native form in the OF due to the mass range of MALDI-TOF detection. Furthermore, short incubation times (< 6 h) were chosen to avoid the detection of proteins neosynthesized by the embryo, however, we cannot exclude an increase in embryo synthesis of specific proteins due to OF exposure, leading to the differential abundance of embryo-derived masses between groups. The transcriptional activity and protein synthesis in embryos during short incubation with OF have not been investigated so far. However, under basic culture conditions, a transcriptional activity has been reported to occur in bovine 4-cell and 8-cell embryos [17]. Further studies are needed to determine if masses found increased in abundance in OF-treated embryos are due to endogenous embryo protein synthesis or to internalization from the OF with possible protein cleavage. In conclusion, the MALDI-TOF MS analysis of individual embryos pre-exposed to OF allowed us to identify one possible protein/peptide originated from the oviduct and interacting with the early bovine embryo. Further work is now needed to identify the roles of these interactions.

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**Author contributions:** MSD and VL conceived and designed the experiments; CB performed in vitro experiments and proteomic analyses; APTG and DT contributed to the analysis of

- proteomic data; VL, BG and PM provided guidance and resources; MSD administrated the
- project; MSD and CB wrote the paper; all authors read and approved the manuscript.
- 175 **Funding**: Charles Banliat was funded by Union Evolution and the Association Nationale de
- la Recherche et de la Technologie (ANRT) as recipient of the Convention Industrielle de
- 177 Formation par la Recherche N°2017/0684. The RapiFlex MALDI-TOF instrument (Up-
- Phenotymass project) was financed by the CPER 'Biomédicaments' project supported by the
- 179 Centre Regional Council, the French Ministry of Education and INRAE.

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## Figure legends

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**Figure 1.** Hierarchical clustering of the differentially abundant masses (p < 0.05) characterized between stages of development (4-6 cell embryos vs. morula), treatment (OFtreated in green frames vs. controls in purple frames) and times of exposure to OF (3 h vs. 6 h). Each column represents the mean intensity value per group and each line corresponds to one mass. For a given condition and mass, red lines represent higher abundance while blue lines represent lower abundance compared with other conditions. The proximity between conditions and peptide/protein profiles are shown by the hierarchical trees on the top and left, respectively. Figure 2: Volcano plot analysis of peptides and proteins quantified in 4-6 cell embryos after 3-h (A) and 6-h (B) exposure to post-ovulatory OF. In each plot, the horizontal and vertical dotted lines demarcate the p-value at 0.05 and fold-change ratio  $\leq 0.5$  or  $\geq 2$ , respectively. Dark blue points indicate significantly less abundant masses with OF-treated:control ratios ≤ 0.5 while red points indicate overabundant masses with OF-treated:control ratios ≥ 2. Gene symbols are indicated for annotated masses. The red arrows indicates a parallel identification in the OF with a final mass error less than 0.05%. ATP5IF1, ATPase inhibitor, mitochondrial; CKS1B, cyclin-dependent kinase regulatory subunit 1; COX7A2P2, putative cytochrome c oxidase subunit 7A3; FGB, fibrinogen beta chain; H2B1H, histone H2B type 1-H; H2BC4, histone H2B type 1-C; HBA, hemoglobin subunit alpha; IE3IP1, immediate early response 3interacting protein 1; MAP4K4, mitogen-activated protein kinase kinase kinase kinase 4; VCP, transitional endoplasmic reticulum ATPase. Figure 3: Volcano plot analysis of peptide/protein masses quantified in morulas after 3-h (A) and 6-h (B) exposure to bovine post-ovulatory OF. In each plot, the horizontal and vertical dotted lines demarcate the p-value at 0.05 and fold-change ratio  $\leq$  0.5 or  $\geq$  2, respectively. Dark blue points indicate significantly less abundant masses with OF-treated:control ratios ≤ 0.5 while red points indicate overabundant masses with OF-treated:control ratios ≥ 2. Gene symbols are indicated for annotated masses. COL1A1, collagen alpha-1 chain; H2BC4, histone H2B type 1-C; HMGN3, high mobility group nucleosome-binding domain-containing protein 3; OGDH, oxoglutarate dehydrogenase; PTMA, Prothymosin alpha; TAGL2, transgelin-2; RPL39, 60S ribosomal protein L39.

Supplementary table 1. List of peptidomic and proteomic masses (m/z) quantified in the post-ovulatory oviduct fluid (OF) and in 4-6 cell embryos and morulas after incubation or not (controls) in OF during 3 h or 6 h *in vitro*.





