Haplosporidiosis in the Pacific oyster
*Crassostrea gigas* from the French Atlantic coast

Tristan Renault\(^1,\)*, Nancy A. Stokes\(^2\), Bruno Chollet\(^1\), Nathalie Cochennec\(^1\), Franck Berthe\(^1\), André Gérard\(^1\), Eugene M. Burreson\(^2\)

\(^1\)IFREMER, Laboratoire de Génétique et Pathologie, BP 133, 17390 La Tremblade, France

\(^2\)Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William and Mary, Gloucester Point, Virginia 23062, USA

**ABSTRACT:** Two cases of haplosporidian infection occurred during 1993 in Pacific oysters *Crassostrea gigas* from the French Atlantic coast. The localization and ultrastructure of the plasmodia are described. *In situ* hybridization of infected tissue sections was conducted with DNA probes for oyster-infecting haplosporidians. The *Haplosporidium nelsoni*-specific DNA probe MSX1347 hybridized with the *C. gigas* parasite, and the *H. costale*-specific probe SSO1318 did not hybridize. Total genomic DNA was extracted from the infected tissue sections for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification of the haplosporidian. PCR amplifications with *H. nelsoni*-specific primers and with ‘universal’ actin primers did not yield the expected products of 573 and 700 bp, respectively. A series of primers was designed to amplify short regions of small subunit ribosomal DNA (SSU rDNA) from most haplosporidians. The primers encompass a highly variable region of the SSU rDNA and did not amplify oyster DNA. PCR amplification of the infected *C. gigas* genomic DNA with these primers yielded the expected-sized product from the primer pair targeting the shortest region (94 bp). This PCR product was sequenced and it was identical to the corresponding SSU rDNA region of *H. nelsoni*.

**KEY WORDS:** Pacific oyster · *Crassostrea gigas* · Haplosporidiosis · *Haplosporidium nelsoni*

**INTRODUCTION**


Haplosporidian parasites have been detected in Pacific oysters from different parts of the world, including Korea (Kern 1976), Taiwan (Rosenfield et al. 1966), Japan (Friedman et al. 1991, Friedman 1996), California, USA (Friedman 1996), and France (Comps & Pichot 1991), during routine histological examination for bivalve parasites. In this study, the discovery of haplosporidian plasmodial stages is reported in juvenile Pacific oysters from the French Atlantic coast during epizootiological surveys for bivalve pathogens. The lack of spores in infected oysters prohibited positive identification by morphological criteria; therefore, DNA-based diagnostics were used to identify the haplosporidian as *Haplosporidium nelsoni*.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Source of specimens. 617 adult and 174 juvenile cultured Pacific oysters Crassostrea gigas were collected for routine histological surveys from different locations along the French Atlantic coast between January 1993 and October 1993.

Light microscopy. Oysters were examined for condition and gross signs of disease. After individuals were removed from the shell, they were sagitally sectioned, then half was placed in Davidson’s fixative and the other half in Carson’s fixative. Samples fixed in Davidson’s fixative were dehydrated through an ascending ethanol series, cleared in xylene and infiltrated in paraffin in a tissue processor. Following these steps, samples were embedded in paraffin, sectioned at 3 or 4 µm thickness, stained by hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) and carefully checked for lesions and parasites.

Electron microscopy. Pieces of gill and digestive gland tissue stored in Carson’s fixative were rinsed for 48 h in 0.2 M cacodylate buffer, fixed in 2.5% glutaraldehyde in 0.2 M cacodylate buffer at pH 7.2 and post-fixed in 1% osmium tetroxide in the same buffer. Specimens were dehydrated in an ascending ethanol series, cleared in propylene oxide and embedded in Epon resin. Blocks were cut on a LKB ultramicrotome. One µm thick sections for light microscopy were stained in 2.5% toluidine blue in 1% aqueous sodium borate solution. Ultra thin sections were collected on copper grids and double stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate (Reynolds 1963) and observed in a JEOL JEM 1200 EX transmission electron microscope at 60 kV.

In situ hybridization. In situ hybridization was performed on Davidson’s fixed, paraffin-embedded tissue of the oyster collected at Morlaix using 5 ng µl–1 of the Haplosporidium costale-specific DNA probe SSO1318 or the H. nelsoni-specific DNA probe MSX1347, as described elsewhere (Stokes & Burreson 1995). These probes, which target one of the variable regions of the small subunit ribosomal RNA (SSU rRNA) gene are sensitive and specific for the target organisms (Stokes & Burreson 1995, 1999). Positive control in situ hybridizations consisted of tissue sections of Crassostrea virginica infected with H. costale, collected from Burton Bay, on the Atlantic coast of Virginia, in May 1984 and Crassostrea gigas infected with H. nelsoni, collected from York River, a tributary of the lower Chesapeake Bay, in Virginia in November 1995. Negative controls contained no probe in the hybridization solution.

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR). DNA was isolated from tissue sections of the Morlaix oyster by 3 different methods, as previously described (Wright & Manos 1990, Vachot & Monnerot 1996, Shedlock et al. 1997). The genomic DNA isolated from each of these methods was subjected to PCR amplification using Haplosporidium nelsoni-specific primers MSX-A’ and MSX-B (Table 1). PCR reaction mixtures contained reaction buffer (10 mM Tris, pH 8.3; 50 mM KCl; 1.5 mM MgCl2; 10 µg ml–1 gelatin), 400 µg ml–1 bovine serum albumin, 25 pmol of each primer, 200 µM each of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, dTTP, 0.6 units AmpliTag DNA polymerase (Perkin-Elmer), and template DNA in a total volume of 25 µl. The MSX-A’ + B reaction mixtures were cycled in a GeneAmp PCR System 9600 thermal cycler (Perkin-Elmer) 35 times at 94°C for 30 s, 59°C for 30 s, and 72°C for 1.5 min with final extension at 72°C for 5 min. Genomic DNA was tested for amplifiability using ‘universal’ eukaryotic actin gene primers 480 and 483 designed by G. Warr (Medical University of South Carolina) and M. Wilson (Mississippi State Medical Center). Amplification of oyster genomic DNA with these primers yields an expected product of about 700 bp. The actin PCR reaction mixtures were prepared and cycled as above, except the annealing temperature was 45°C and extension temperature was 65°C. Lack of amplifiability with either the H. nelsoni-specific primers or the actin primers prompted design of a series of primers that would amplify small regions of the small subunit ribosomal DNA (SSU rDNA) (approximately 90 to 360 bp) of most haplosporidians. The PCR primers, designated HAP-F1, HAP-F2, HAP-R1, HAP-R2, and HAP-R3 (Table 1), encompassed the variable region targeted by the DNA probes MSX1347 and SSO1318. The HAP PCR reaction mixtures were prepared and cycled as described above, except the annealing temperature was 48°C for the HAP-F1 reactions and 44°C for the HAP-F2 reactions and the extension time was 1 min per cycle. An aliquot (10% of reaction volume) of each PCR reaction was checked for amplification product by agarose gel electrophoresis and ethidium bromide staining (see Table 2).

Sequencing. PCR product was ethanol precipitated, ligated into the plasmid vector pCR2.1 (Invitrogen), and transformed into DH5α E. coli according to the manufacturer’s instructions and selected for ampicillin resistance. The amplified products were sequenced using the Sequenase kit (US Biochemical). A partially sequenced genome was obtained from the Pacific oyster Crassostrea gigas, containing the actin gene and a part of the SSU rDNA. Table 1. PCR primers. MSX-A’ is MSX-A with an additional 8 bases at the 5’ end; the latter primer, along with MSX-B, was reported previously (Stokes et al. 1995). MSX-A’ and MSX-B are Haplosporidium nelsoni-specific, targeting a 565 bp region of the SSU rDNA. The HAP primers amplify small regions of the SSU rDNA of all haplosporidians. All of the HAP amplification products encompass the variable region targeted by the H. nelsoni and H. costale DNA probes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer name</th>
<th>Primer sequence (5’–3’)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSX-A’</td>
<td>CGACTTTGGCAATTAGGTTTCAACCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSX-B</td>
<td>ATGTTGTGGTCCGTAACCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F1</td>
<td>GGTTCTTCTGATCTTAGTMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F2</td>
<td>GCCRTCTAATGCTS</td>
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<td>HAP-R1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-R2</td>
<td>GATGGAAYAAATGCCAACATCYCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-R3</td>
<td>AKRHRTTCCTWGTTTCAAGAYGA</td>
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and transformed into *Escherichia coli* INVF<sup>’</sup> cells. Clones with inserts were cycle sequenced via simultaneous bidirectional sequencing using M13 forward and reverse primers labeled with the fluorescent dyes IRD-700 and IRD-800 (LI-COR). Sequencing reactions were electrophoresed on a 41 cm 5% polyacrylamide gel in a Li-Cor Model 4200 automated sequencer. Sequence data were aligned with haplosporidian SSU rDNA sequences using the MacVector software package (Oxford Molecular).

**RESULTS**

**Pathology**

Adult oysters appeared gravid or in different stages of gonad resorption during the sampling period. Histological examination of stained sections showed the presence of haplosporidian-like infections within the digestive gland and gill connective tissues of juvenile oysters. Among the 791 individuals examined, 2 were found infected (prevalence 0.27%): a 7 mo old spat from Arcachon Bay (south French Atlantic coast—July 1993) and a 14 mo old individual collected in Morlaix area (Brittany—August 1993). This oyster had been transferred to Brittany from Arcachon Bay. The protozoan infection was accompanied by infiltration of host hemocytes into the areas of parasitic infection. Numerous early plasmodial stages (2 to 8 nuclei), 8 to 15 µm in diameter, were found in connective tissues of gills and digestive gland (Fig. 1). No sporogonic stages or spores were observed. The normal architecture of affected tissues was altered; necrosis and cell lysis were observed within host tissues surrounding parasites.

**Electron microscopy**

Electron microscopic examination showed uni- and multinucleated plasmodia, 8 to 15 µm in diameter, scattered in connective tissues of gills and digestive gland (Fig. 2). Uninucleated and binucleated forms were the most frequently seen (Figs. 3 & 4), multinucleated plasmodia (more than 2 nuclei) were rarely observed (Fig. 5). Parasitic cells at this development stage were not delimited by a wall. The fine structure of plasmodia in infected tissues was diverse; however, most plasmodial stages possessed osmophilic round bodies 150 to 180 nm in diameter scattered throughout the cytoplasm (Figs. 2, 4 & 5). These structures were limited by a membrane and identified by an inner electron-lucent configuration usually having appearance of a ‘squat vase’ (Fig. 6). The area within this configuration was usually not as electron-dense as the area to its exterior. The haplosporidian electron-dense bodies or haplosporosomes were physically associated with membrane-limited regions and numerous membrane ‘spherules’. The round dense bodies appeared to bud off from these areas (Fig. 7). The number of haplosporosomes within any given plasmodium varied greatly, but these structures were often abundant (average 51 ± 19, n = 20, per plasmodium section). An additional structure consistently found in the plasmodium cytoplasm was round, approximately 130 nm in diameter, membrane-limited, and had a dense core which appeared to be connected to the periphery by fine radiating fibers arranged in a spike-like fashion (Fig. 8). The cytoplasmic fine structure included large distended oval or round mitochondria with vesicular cristae (Figs. 3, 4 & 5). Endoplasmic reticulum was sparse and free of ribosomes, the latter being found in high density in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer pair</th>
<th>Expected PCR product (bp)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSX-A’ + MSX-B</td>
<td>573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F1 + HAP-R1</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F1 + HAP-R2</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F1 + HAP-R3</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F2 + HAP-R1</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F2 + HAP-R2</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP-F2 + HAP-R3</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Expected PCR product sizes from haplosporidian DNA with the primer pairs listed. Oyster (*Crassostrea gigas* or *C. virginica*) DNA does not yield amplification product with any of these primer pairs

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Fig. 1. Haplosporidian parasitizing *Crassostrea gigas*. Early plasmodial stages in connective tissue of the digestive gland (arrows). Light microscopy. H&E stain. Scale bar = 1 µm
Figs. 2 to 7. Electron micrographs of haplosporidian parasitizing *Crassostrea gigas*. Fig. 2. Uni- and multinucleated plasmodia in connective tissue of the digestive gland (arrows). Scale bar = 2 µm. Fig. 3. Uninucleated plasmodium. Scale bar = 500 nm. Fig. 4. Binucleated plasmodium. Scale bar = 1 µm. Fig. 5. Multinucleated plasmodium. Scale bar = 1 µm. Fig. 6. High magnification of haplosporosomes. Note internal electron-lucent configuration of polar-oriented haplosporosomes (arrow). Scale bar = 50 nm. Fig. 7. Budding off of haplosporosomes from electron-dense areas (arrows). Scale bar = 200 nm.
ground cytoplasm. The nuclei were usually paired and each was characterized by a single prominent endosome which was round or oval and against the nuclear envelope (Figs. 4 & 5). The nucleal Feulgen and Rossenbeck reaction indicated primarily peripheral location of the DNA. Degenerating parasites were occasionally found with pycnotic nuclei, swollen mitochondria and leached plasma membranes (Fig. 9).

**DNA-based assays**

_In situ_ hybridization of DNA probe MSX1347 (*Haplosporidium nelsoni*) to infected oyster tissue sections yielded strong hybridization of the probe to plasmodia, while DNA probe SSO1318 (*H. costale*) did not hybridize (Fig. 10). Both probes hybridized with the plasmodia in the respective positive controls (data not shown). Repeated attempts to amplify DNA isolated from tissue sections were unsuccessful using the ‘universal’ actin primers and the *H. nelsoni*-specific primers, MSX-A’ and MSX-B. Consequently, the HAP primers were developed to specifically amplify smaller regions of haplosporian SSU rDNA from infected host tissue DNA. All 6 HAP primer pair combinations were used in PCR amplifications of the Morlaix oyster tissue DNA; only HAP-F2 + HAP-R1 yielded PCR product, which was the size expected for a haplosporidian (Table 2). Eight clones of the PCR product were sequenced. The sequence was 94 bases long and was identical to the published sequence for bases 1305 to 1398 of the *H. nelsoni* SSU rDNA.

Fig. 8. Concentric bodies in the plasmodium cytoplasm (arrows). Scale bar = 200 nm. Fig. 9. Degenerating plasmodium containing pycnotic nuclei, swollen mitochondria and leached plasma membranes (arrows). Scale bar = 2 µm.

Fig. 10. _In situ_ hybridizations with DNA probes on adjacent tissue sections of haplosporidian-infected _Crassostrea gigas_ collected in Morlaix. Scale bar = 100 µm. (a) Positive reaction with plasmodia using 5 ng µl⁻¹ of *Haplosporidium nelsoni*-specific probe MSX1347. (b) Absence of reaction with plasmodia using 5 ng µl⁻¹ of *H. costale*-specific probe SSO1318.
DISCUSSION

The haplosporidian parasite observed in Crassostrea gigas from the French Atlantic coast is similar to Haplosporidium nelsoni of C. virginica in tissue location, morphology and size of plasmodial stages. Infection with the haplosporidian parasite is characterized by the presence of uni- and multinucleated plasmodia throughout gill, gonad and digestive gland connective tissues. Parasites elicit a hemic response. These observations are consistent with early systemic infections of H. nelsoni (Andrews 1966, Perkins 1968, 1969). The dense bodies reported here are typical of those observed in the cytoplasm of H. nelsoni plasmodial stages (Scro & Ford 1990), in contrast with the round, oval or pyriform haplosporosomes of H. costale (Perkins 1969). In addition to difference in shape, the electron-dense bodies of H. costale were found less abundantly than those in H. nelsoni. Such differences were used to help distinguish the plasmodia of both species; for example, a section through a H. nelsoni plasmodium often showed more than 70 free electron-dense bodies, whereas in a comparable sized plasmodial section of H. costale a maximum of 15 structures were counted (Perkins 1968, 1969). The average number of haplosporosomes counted here (51) is more comparable to the number 70, previously observed in H. nelsoni plasmodia, than to the 15 observed in H. costale plasmodia (Perkins 1968, 1969). The amount of haplosporosomes within plasmodia in C. gigas, however, varied greatly per parasite section (Perkins 1968, 1969). The additional structures seen in the cytoplasm of C. gigas haplosporidian parasites are similar to the ‘concentric bodies’ described by Scro & Ford (1990) in the H. nelsoni cytoplasm.

Results of the DNA-based diagnostic assays supported each other. Plasmodia in the Morlaix Crassostrea gigas sample hybridized only with the Haplosporidium nelsoni-specific DNA probe MSX1347 and the sequence of the PCR-amplified DNA was identical to the corresponding SSU rDNA sequence of H. nelsoni. Even though DNA isolated from tissue sections of the oyster collected from Morlaix was not amplifiable with the primer pairs MSX-A’ + MSX-B or actin 480 + 483, it did yield amplification product with the haplosporidian SSU rDNA primers HAP-F2 + HAP-R1. This is consistent with observations that PCR amplification of target regions greater than 200 to 500 bp is very difficult to achieve on DNA from archival samples, due to fragmentation of DNA and crosslinking of histones to DNA during formaldehyde fixation of tissues (Pääbo 1990, Hamazaki et al. 1993, Vachot & Monnerot 1996).

DNA-based diagnostics have been used previously (Burreson et al. 2000) to identify haplosporidian plasmodia that were detected in Crassostrea gigas from Korea (Kern 1976) and Japan and California, USA (Friedman 1996). Lack of sporogonic stages in the latter survey precluded definite identification of the haplosporidian. Therefore, in situ hybridizations using MSX1347, the same DNA probe used in this study, were performed on paraffin-embedded tissue sections of the infected oysters from Japan and California, and one of the non-sporulating oysters from Korea. The Haplosporidium nelsoni probe hybridized with haplosporidian plasmodia in all of these oysters (Burreson et al. 2000). In addition, genomic DNA was isolated from the infected California oysters and subjected to PCR amplification with the primers MSX-A and MSX-B (Stokes et al. 1995). DNA from the California oysters amplified with the H. nelsoni PCR primers and the 565 bp sequence was identical to the H. nelsoni SSU rDNA target region, with only one nucleotide difference (Burreson et al. 2000). In this study, the H. nelsoni primers MSX-A’ (same as MSX-A, but with an additional 8 bases at the 5’ end) and MSX-B did not amplify the plasmodial DNA but the haplosporidian primers HAP-F2 and HAP-R1 did. Even though the PCR product generated by the HAP primers was shorter, it amplified a variable region of the SSU rDNA that contains sequence unique to each haplosporidian.

Tissues from the California oysters were fixed for only 24 h in neutral buffered formalin (Burreson et al. 2000), whereas tissues from the French oysters in this study were fixed for at least 1 wk in Davidson’s AFA. The former fixation treatment has been shown to yield DNA that can PCR amplify longer target regions than DNA from long-term storage in unbuffered fixative (Vachot & Monnerot 1996). Davidson’s AFA is the fixative of choice for marine invertebrates. Traditional fixation procedures include tissue storage in Davidson’s AFA from 1 d up to a few months. Diagnosis of parasites by histological examination is not affected by this practice; however, the quality of DNA isolated from fixed tissues is reduced the longer those tissues are stored in fixative (Hamazaki et al. 1993, O’Leary et al. 1994). The HAP primers were developed in order to work with archived samples that were fixed for indeterminate periods. The smaller target regions are more amenable to PCR amplification and the primers specifically amplify most haplosporidians from the total genomic DNA isolated from infected hosts.

The morphological observations, in situ hybridization with the Haplosporidium nelsoni-specific probe, and sequence of the PCR amplified product that was identical to an SSU rDNA variable region of H. nelsoni confirm that the haplosporidian parasite in Crassostrea gigas from the French Atlantic coast is H. nelsoni or a
very closely related parasite. Indeed, the molecular methods used can only confirm identification in relation to known species or strains. Other parasites for which sequence data are not available could conceivably give the same identification.

The prevalence of infected oysters found in this study was very low (0.27%). The 2 infected oysters originated from the same area (Arcachon Bay, south Atlantic French coast). Other disease survey studies of *Crassostrea gigas* have found similarly low prevalences of haplosporidian infection. During a 4 yr sampling of 1438 oysters from Korea, 4 (0.28%) were infected with haplosporidians (Kern 1976). In a survey of *C. gigas* from Japan, 10/100 spat and 1/171 adult oysters were infected with haplosporidians that closely resembled *Haplosporidium nelsoni* (Friedman et al. 1991). In a subsequent study, Friedman (1996) observed haplosporidian infections in 1 to 3% of oysters from Japan and up to 7% of oysters from California. In 2 yr of routine surveys of *C. gigas* from Elang de Thau, France, Comps & Pichot (1991) found 3 oysters infected with haplosporidians. Based on electron microscopic studies of the spores, the parasite seemed similar to *H. costale*. The low prevalence of haplosporidian parasite infections in *C. gigas* suggests that this oyster species is less sensitive to the infection than *C. virginica* and that *C. gigas* can react against the parasite and limit its spread. Moreover, early plasmodial stages are mainly observed in infected *C. gigas* oysters, suggesting that the parasite is not able to develop normally in this bivalve species.

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