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The evolutionary history of the CD209 (DC-SIGN) family in humans and non-human primates

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Abstract

The CD209 gene family that encodes C-type lectins in primates includes CD209 (DC-SIGN), CD209L (L-SIGN) and CD209L2. Understanding the evolution of these genes can help understand the duplication events generating this family, the process leading to the repeated neck region and identify protein domains under selective pressure. We compiled sequences from 14 primates representing 40 million years of evolution and from three non-primate mammal species. Phylogenetic analyses used Bayesian inference, and nucleotide substitutional patterns were assessed by codonbased maximum likelihood. Analyses suggest that CD209 genes emerged from a first duplication event in the common ancestor of anthropoids, yielding CD209L2 and an ancestral CD209 gene, which, in turn, duplicated in the common Old World primate ancestor, giving rise to CD209L and CD209. K_A/K_S values averaged over the entire tree were 0.43 (CD209), 0.52 (CD209L) and 0.35 (CD209L2), consistent with overall signatures of purifying selection. We also assessed the Toll-like receptor (TLR) gene family, which shares with CD209 genes a common profile of evolutionary constraint. The general feature of purifying selection of CD209 genes, despite an apparent redundancy (gene absence and gene loss), may reflect the need to faithfully recognize a multiplicity of pathogen motifs, commensals and a number of self-antigens.

Keywords

C-type lectins; HIV; Ebola; Mycobacteria; innate immunity; DC-SIGN

Introduction

The *CD209* family of genes codes for DC-SIGN (dendritic cell-specific ICAM-grabbing nonintegrin) and related proteins L-SIGN (for liver/lymph node 'L'-SIGN, encoded by *CD209L*) and CD209L2. These homologous genes cluster on chromosome 19p13.3.

DC-SIGN is expressed on phagocytic cells such as dendritic cells and macrophages, whereas L-SIGN expression is restricted to lymph node sinus endothelia and hepatic sinusoidal

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endothelium. The third homologue, *CD209L2*, is absent in humans but present in other primates. In the *Rhesus macaque*, *CD209L2* is expressed in liver, spleen, lymph node, heart and skin.¹ One or more DC-SIGN-like proteins have been reported in mice, rats and dogs. These proteins are type-II C-type lectin receptors with roles as cell-adhesion receptors and in innate immunity as pathogen receptors.^{2–4} DC-SIGN and L-SIGN recognize a vast range of bacteria, mycobacteria, viruses and protozoa (reviewed in Koppel *et al.*2). Their function depends on a carbohydrate-recognition domain separated from a transmembrane region by a neck region made up of several 23-amino acid repeats. DC-SIGN has affinity for mannose oligosaccharides and fucose-containing moieties whereas L-SIGN binds only to mannose oligosaccharides (reviewed in Koppel *et al.*2). The neck region plays a role in the orientation and flexibility of the carbohydrate-recognition domain. The type and number of the neckregion repeats are important in dimer formation and stabilization of protein tetramers.⁵ Thus, neck-length variation could influence the pathogen-binding properties of these lectins. In previous analyses in primates,¹ *CD209* and *CD209L* have variable numbers of repeats. This contrasts with the single partial repeat that characterizes primate *CD209L2*, and that is a general feature of the neck region of other mammal *CD209*-like genes.

The importance of DC-SIGN family members in pathogen recognition as well as the importance of dendritic cells in pathogenesis of human immunodeficiency virus, Ebola and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infection, together with their particular genomic organization make these genes an excellent model system to investigate the mode and intensity of selective pressures that may act on pathogen defense genes.⁶ As a category, immunity- and defenserelated genes have experienced by far the most positive selection in humans and other organisms.7

The aim of the present study was to extend the analysis of the distribution of the three recognized *CD209* family genes in primates to thoroughly assess the evolutionary history of this gene family, to identify possible domains and amino acids under selective pressure, to date the gene-duplication events resulting in this family and to understand the evolutionary process giving rise to the neck repeat region. To trace the evolutionary history of these genes, genecoding sequences are determined for a representative number of primates (hominoids, Old World and New World monkeys), followed by the analysis of amino-acid substitutional patterns in the framework of the accepted primate phylogeny.⁸ The analyses result in global estimates of the patterns of evolution (purifying, neutral, positive selective pressure) as well as shed light on episodes of adaptive evolution at specific sites.⁶

To help build a more contextual interpretation of the CD209 family data, we investigate in parallel the evolution of a second family of major innate immunity microbial sensors, namely the Toll-like receptor (TLR) gene family. TLRs are pattern-recognition receptors that identify specific pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs, conserved molecular patterns of pathogen structures). TLRs are located at the cell surface (TLR1, -2, -4, -5, -6 and -10) or intracellularly (TLR3, -7 and -8). Signalling through TLRs results in a type-1 interferon response and/or the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines.

Results

Homology and species distribution of *CD209* **family members**

Phylogenetic analysis groups the various primate genes with high bootstrap values (Figure 1). Within a species, the percentage of identity at the nucleotide level (excluding the lengthvariable neck region) is 79.0 (range 78.3–79.6) for comparisons of *CD209* and *CD209L* sequences, 78.8 (range 74.4–80.2) for comparisons of *CD209* and *CD209L2*, and 72.1 (range 71.2–72.5) for comparisons of *CD209L* and *CD209L2*.

CD209L2 resembles the ancestral form, because the observed shorter neck region appears to be reminiscent of the shorter neck regions present in *CD209*-like sequences in other mammals. Analysis of the dog genome identifies a single *CD209* homologue. Similarly, we identified by BLAST analysis of cow sequences the presence of a single *CD209* homologue. The dog and cow *CD209*-like sequences are closely related to mouse *CD209g* and *Signr8* (Figure 1). The rat genome codes for the same set of paralogues as mice (not shown). We and others¹ have failed to amplify sequences of *CD209* genes in prosimians. Our study confirms the previous observation that orangutan has a truncated form of *CD209L* and that *CD209L2* is a pseudogene in the gorilla. $¹$ </sup>

The phylogenetic tree (Figure 1) supports a scenario where the three extant *CD209* genes emerged from two duplication events; a first duplication event occurred in the common ancestor of anthropoids, yielding *CD209L2* and an ancestral *CD209* gene, which, in turn, duplicated in the common Old World primate ancestor, giving rise to *CD209L* and *CD209*.

Analysis of sequence evolution and selective pressures

Analysis of the substitutional pattern using several codon-based maximum likelihood procedures allowed the estimation of the number of non-synonymous (K_A) over synonymous (K_S) substitutions per site. Overall, all the three genes have values consistent with purifying selection (Figures 2a-c). The K_A/K_S values averaged over the entire tree were 0.43 (*CD209*), 0.52 (*CD209L*) and 0.35 (*CD209L2*). Due to the high variability in the number of neck-region repeats across the species and the difficulty of obtaining a reliable alignment, this region was not included in this analysis (a separate analysis of the neck region is presented below). Detailed analyses of the trees (Figures 2a-c) did, however, identify a number of branches with K_A/K_S values higher than 1.0, in particular in the gibbon lineage. There were no significant differences in the pattern of selective constrain among *CD209* gene family among primates having all three or only two functional homologues (Figure 2d).

In more detailed analyses, we utilized models that allow for different K_A/K_S rates at different sites of the sequences, because adaptive evolution often occurs at a limited number of sites. This comparison revealed that the null model (which includes sites under purifying selection and neutrally evolving) could not be rejected for *CD209* and *C209L2*. However, the alternative model that adds a third site class that allows for sites under positive selection provided a significantly better fit to the data with respect to *CD209L* with a *P*-value of 6.5E–05 (Table 1). The K_A/K_S for the additional site class is larger than one for L-SIGN (K_A/K_S ∼5), suggesting adaptive protein evolution driven by positive selection at a small subset of sites (Table 1). Using a Bayesian approach, 9 we analysed the site class under positive selection in L-SIGN in more detail. Only one residue, alanine in position 88, located in the first neck repeat is pinpointed to be under positive selection (posterior probability, *P* = 0.99). In addition, threonine 319 and alanine 393, in the C-lectin domain, are identified with lower confidence ($P = 0.90$) and $P = 0.93$ respectively). These two L-SIGN residues map at the protein surface away from the region that contains residues involved in carbohydrate interactions (Figure 3). The binding of small carbohydrate compounds by L-SIGN takes place principally at a calcium coordination site in the carbohydrate-recognition domain. The amino-acid residues involved directly in coordinating the calcium ion,10 Glu359, Asn361, Glu366 and Asp378, are fully conserved across all primates.

Analysis of the neck region

The neck region is characterized by a variable number of a conserved 23-amino acid repeats. In primates included in this work, *CD209* and *CD209L* code five to nine repeats, a number that varies according to the species. The number of repeats may vary also within a species (apes and Old World monkeys).¹ In contrast, the primate *CD209L2* neck region contains a single

(partial) repeat element, a general feature of the neck region of other mammal *CD209*-like genes—an exception being the mouse *Cd209b* (four repeats) and *Cd209c* (two repeats).

To better understand the evolutionary process resulting in the extended and variable length of the neck regions of primate *CD209* and *CD209L* genes, we computed a phylogenetic tree considering all repeats in mammal *CD209* family genes (Figure 4a). The C-terminal partial repeat of primate *CD209* and *CD209L*, and the single partial repeat of *CD209L2* were found to be most closely related to those of *CD209*-like repeats in other mammals. The first (proximal) repeat of primate *CD209* and *CD209L* appears to result from a duplication of the last (distal) repeat. Although intermediate repeats have an unclear origin (that is the analysis does not differentiate whether they originated from the proximal or distal repeat), they are highly conserved within and across the various *CD209* and *CD209L* genes, the only exception being the penultimate repeat of *CD209L* (Figure 4b).

Comparison of evolutionary pattern of *CD209* **and** *TLR* **gene families**

To better define the significance of the pattern of selection in the *CD209* gene family, we performed an evolutionary genetic analysis of a second family of innate immunity receptors. For this, we selected five primate species, representatives of apes and Old and New World monkeys. We used sequence of *TLR*1 (95.7% of coding sequence), *TLR*2 (97.0%), *TLR*3 (97.1%), *TLR*4 (85.2%), *TLR*5 (65.2%), *TLR*6 (98.8%), *TLR*8 (36.0%) and the complete sequence of *TLR*7 and -10.

Overall, all nine *TLR* gene sequences had values consistent with purifying selection (Figure 5). The K_A/K_S values averaged over the entire tree were 0.50 (*TLR1*), 0.49 (*TLR2*), 0.23 (*TLR3*), 0.52 (*TLR4*), 0.59 (*TLR5*), 0.36 (*TLR6*), 0.34 (*TLR7*), 0.47 (*TLR8*) and 0.44 (*TLR10*).

In the set of more detailed analyses using models that allow different K_A/K_S rates at different sites of the sequences (because adaptive evolution often occurs at a limited number of sites), we found that the null model (which includes sites under purifying selection and neutrally evolving) could not be rejected for *TLR2, -3, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8* and *-10*. The alternative model (which adds a third site class that allows for sites under positive selection) provided a significantly better fit to the data with respect to *TLR1*, with a *P*-value of 2.46E–04. One per cent of TLR1 codons have a K_A/K_S ~16.9, suggesting adaptive protein evolution driven by positive selection. Using a Bayesian approach, we analysed the site class under selective pressure in TLR1 in more detail. Two residues, tryptophan 61 located in the extracellular domain and serine 748 located in the Toll/interleukin-1 receptor domain, were predicted to be under positive selection (posterior probability, *P*>0.95).

Discussion

The evolutionary history of the *CD209* gene family in primates is characterized by several episodes of gene duplication, recent gene deletion/truncation and elongation of the neck repeat region. Given the role of DC-SIGN and related proteins in pathogen uptake, it is plausible that these evolutionary changes have occurred in response to temporal selective pressures during primate evolution. However, the evolutionary analysis of various primate homologues and paralogues failed to identify widespread signs of positive selection, as assessed by global *K*A/ K_S values, by lineage and species-specific K_A/K_S values, or by site-specific analyses. Only more detailed analysis of some lineages suggested episodes of recent evolution (that is speciesspecific positive selection), in particular among gibbons. L-SIGN (encoded by *CD209L*) in humans may also be a relevant example of species-specific positive selection that has continued to operate during recent human evolution. Indeed, a study screening for the degree of sequencebased diversity in different human populations has shown that *CD209L* exhibits higher diversity in its coding region, as compared to its homologue *CD209*. 11 These observations

suggest that there has been an advantage for a higher diversity in *CD209L* with respect to *CD209* within humans, probably driving *CD209L* to accumulate new mutations and eventually new functions, possibly compensating the recent loss of *CD209L2* in humans.

The general pattern of purifying selection of the *CD209* family of genes (K_A/K_S) range 0.35– 0.52) and *TLR* family of genes $(K_A/K_S$ range 0.23–0.59) appears similar. These values are greater than the genome-wide average ($K_A/K_S \sim 0.2$) for human–chimpanzee gene pairs.¹² They are, however, much lower than the K_A/K_S estimates for intrinsic defense genes investigated in the context of human immunodeficiency virus pathogenesis, such as *TRIM5*α and *APOBEC3G* ($K_A/K_S = 1.1$ for both genes).¹³ Comparative analysis of the genes that encode APOBEC3G and TRIM5 α has revealed the intensity of the selective pressures resulting from the long-standing conflict between retroviruses and their hosts.^{14,15} These two genes/ proteins constitute a paradigm of pathogen-driven positive selection pressure, not only because of their global elevated K_A/K_S values, but also by the identification of precise residues and domains under strong positive selection. Analysis of APOBEC3G across primate species reveals many residues in the amino-terminal cytidine deaminase domain that are under positive selection, which coincide indeed with the proposed region of interaction with the human immunodeficiency virus-1 Vif protein. Analysis of the TRIM5 α pinpoints a patch of amino acids that is under positive selective pressure at variable regions V1 and V2. The variable regions of TRIM5α have in turn evolved independently to recognize the various retroviral capsids.16

A second point of discussion concerns the length of the neck region that characterizes primate *CD209* and *CD209L* among other *CD209*-like genes in mammals. In this study and in previous analyses in primates1, *CD209* and *CD209L* have variable numbers of repeats. A single partial repeat characterizes primate *CD209L2*; a general feature of the neck region of other mammal *CD209*-like genes. The first and last repeat units of the neck region in *CD209* and *CD209L* originate from a common ancestral motif. We studied only one individual per species, but Barreiro *et al.*11 studied the degree of polymorphism of the neck region in both *CD209* and *CD209L* by genotyping 1064 individuals from 52 worldwide populations. Striking differences were observed between the two genes. Although minimal variation was observed for *CD209, CD209L* exhibited a strong variation in allelic frequencies of different neck lengths. In their population genetics study, the *CD209* genes did not experience selective sweeps (that is directional selection, leading to rapid spread/fixation of an advantageous allele) but rather experienced purifying selection (*CD209*) or balancing selection (*CD209L*).11 Thus, these duplicated genes have evolved, and might still evolve, under completely different selective pressures.

The strong contrast observed in length variation of the neck region between the various genes may have consequences on function. A number of association studies in human populations have attempted to correlate length variation of the neck region and promoter variants with susceptibility to infectious diseases whose etiological agents are known to interact with one (or both) of these lectins. Results, in particular from the analysis of susceptibility to human immunodeficiency virus-1 or *M. tuberculosis* infection, remain under discussion.^{11,17–23}

The usurpation of DC-SIGN and other family members by pathogens such as retroviruses, Ebola and *Mycobacteria* might have led to a pattern of distinctive patches or domains with the characteristic of positive selective pressure as a result of a genetic conflict.^{6,13} Against this expectation, the evolutionary analysis of the family suggests both a pattern of apparent redundancy of *CD209* genes (gene absence and gene loss) and of positive selection in specific lineages, in the context of a general pattern of gene conservation. A similar pattern is identified for a second family of proteins of the innate immunity, the TLRs. This pattern is consistent with the concept put forward by Lynch and Conery²⁴ proposing that most duplicated genes

experience a brief period of relaxation of the selective constraint early in their history. Thereafter, most gene duplicates are silenced within a few million years, with a minority of duplicated genes subsequently experiencing strong purifying selection. The observed degree of purifying selection may be expected given the need to faithfully recognize various pathogen motifs, the inability of the pathogen to modify the molecular pattern, 25 and in the case of the DC-SIGN family, the need to recognize the commensal flora, as well as ICAM-2, ICAM-3 adhesion molecules and other self-proteins.

Materials and methods

Primates

CD209 gene family coding sequences from primates were generated by amplification and sequencing of genomic DNA: bonobo (*Pan paniscus CD209* EU041926, *CD209L* EU041931, *CD209L2* EU041934), chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes CD209L2* EU041935), bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus CD209L* EU041932, *CD209L2* EU041936), lar gibbon (*Hylobates lar CD209L2* EU041937), nomascus (*Hylobates leucogenys CD209* EU041927, *CD209L* EU041933, *CD209L2* EU041938), siamang (*Hylobates syndactylus CD209L2* EU041939), red baboon (*Papio hamadryas CD209L2* EU041940), African green monkey (*Cercopithecus* (*chlorocebus*) *aethiops CD209* EU041928, *CD209L2* EU041941), owl monkey (*Aotus trivirgatus CD209* EU41930). Common marmoset (*Callithrix jacchus jacchus CD209* EU041929, *CD209L2* EU041942) sequences were obtained by amplification and sequencing of cDNA from liver. For cotton-top tamarin (*Saguinus Oedipus*) and golden headed lion (*Leontopithecus rosalia chrysomelas*), partial sequences were obtained for *CD209* and *CD209L2* from cDNA of peripheral blood. Other primate and mammal sequences were downloaded from the NCBI database, human (*Homo sapiens CD209* AF290886, *CD209L* BC038851), chimpanzee (*CD209* AY078913, *CD209L* AH011538), gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla CD209* AY078906, *CD209L* AH011537), bornean orangutan (*CD209* AY078905), lar gibbon (*CD209* AH011540, *CD209L* AH011531), siamang (*CD209* AY078878, *CD209L* AH011532), black crested gibbon (*Hylobates concolor CD209* AY078885, *CD209L* AH011533), rhesus monkey (*Macaca mulatta CD209* NH_001032870, *CD209L2* AY074781), red baboon (*CD209* AY078864), mouse (*Mus musculus Cd209a* AF373408, *Cd209b* AF373409, *Cd209c* AF373410, *Cd209d* AF373411, *Cd209e* AF373412, *Cd209g* XM_284376, *Signr8* XM_284386) and dog (*Canis lupus familiaris CD209*-like XM_542118). A cow (*Bos taurus*) *CD209*-like was identified by BLAST search on is entire genome (UCSC Genome Bioinformatics, www.genome.ucsc.edu).

Toll-like receptor family of gene sequences were generated by amplification and sequencing of genomic DNA of lar gibbon (*Hylobates lar* TLR1 EU488847, TLR2 EU488848, TLR3 EU488849, TLR4 EU488850, TLR5 EU488851, TLR6 EU488852, TLR7 EU488853, TLR8 EU488854, TLR10 EU488855), cotton-top tamarin (*Saguinus Oedipus* TLR1 EU488856, TLR2 EU488857, TLR4 EU488859, TLR5 EU488860, TLR6 EU488861, TLR7 EU488862, TLR8 EU488863, TLR10 EU488864) and cDNA from common marmoset (*Callithrix jacchus jacchus* TLR3 EU488858). Human sequences were downloaded from the NCBI database (TLR1NM_003263, TLR2NM_003264, TLR3NM_003265, TLR4NM_138554, TLR5NM_003268, TLR6NM_006068, TLR7NM_016562, TLR8NM_138636, TLR10NM_030956). Chimpanzee (*P. troglodytes*) and rhesus monkey (*M. mulatta*) sequences were obtained by BLAST search on their entire genome (UCSC Genome Bioinformatics, www.genome.ucsc.edu).

Molecular analysis

Exons were amplified by primers designed for the flanking intron regions (for genomic DNA), and for 3′- and 5′-UTR regions (for cDNA). HotStarTaq Master Mix (Qiagen AG,

Hombrechtikon, Switzerland) was used for PCR amplification of fragments smaller than 1 kb and PrimeSTAR DNA polymerase (TAKARA Bio Inc. Shiga, Japan) for fragments larger than 1 kb. All primer sequences are presented in Supplementary Table S1. Sequences were aligned using MUSCLE.²⁶ Coding regions were aligned according to their corresponding amino-acid sequences using the European Molecular Biology Open Software Suite package.²⁷ To perform phylogenetic analysis, we use a Bayesian inference of phylogeny with Mr Bayes 3.28 Different phylogenetic trees were performed at nucleic acid and amino acid levels, with different lengths of sequence (entire sequences, sequences without the neck repeat region, sequences consisting solely of the carbohydrate-recognition domain and of the neck repeat region).

Evolutionary analyses

To trace the evolutionary history of the *CD209* and *TLR* families, we analysed their substitutional patterns in the framework of the accepted primate phylogeny⁸ using several codon-based maximum likelihood procedures as implemented in the codeml tool of the phylogenetic analysis by maximum likelihood program package.29 To obtain an overview of the coding-sequence evolution, we estimated the number of non-synonymous (K_A) over synonymous (K_S) substitutions per site (averaged over the entire sequence) for each branch of the trees using the free-ratio model of codeml.²⁹ In more detailed analyses, we utilized models that allow for different K_A/K_S rates at different sites of the sequences, because adaptive evolution often occurs at a limited number of sites.³⁰ We first compared a null model $(M1a³9^{,31})$, which assumes two site classes (sites under purifying selection and neutrally evolving sites), to an alternative model ('M2a'9,³¹), which adds a third site class that allows for sites with $K_A/K_S > 1$, using likelihood ratio tests.³²

Supplementary Material

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Figure 1.

Phylogenetic tree of *CD209* family of genes in mammals. Bayesian estimation of the evolutionary relationships among coding sequences (excluding the neck repeat region) of *CD209* family. Bootstrap values are indicated.

Figure 2.

Analysis of sequence evolution and selective pressure acting on *CD209, CD209L* and *CD209L2*. (a–c) K_A/K_S values and the estimated number of non-synonymous and synonymous substitutions (in parentheses) for each branch are indicated. Approximate divergence time in Mya is shown. Species in which a gene is absent or disabled by truncation or pseudogenization are identified by discontinued grey branches. (**d**) Differences in the degree of purifying selection among primates carrying two or three functional members of the *CD209* family. K_A and K_S values obtained with PAML analysis are represented. Triangles represent values for primates carrying all three *CD209* family members (*CD209, CD209L* and *CD209L2*). Black circles represent values for primates carrying two *CD209* family members or having a copy

disabled by truncation or pseudogenization. The upper left area represents positive selection; lower right area represents purifying selection. PAML, phylogenetic analysis by maximum likelihood.

Figure 3.

Structure of the carbohydrate-recognition domain of L-SIGN. Three residues were predicted to be under positive selection (in red): alanine 88 (in the neck repeat domain) and threonine 319 and alanine 393. The last two L-SIGN residues map at the protein surface away from recognized domains involved in carbohydrate interaction. Residues involved directly in coordinating the calcium ion are shown in blue, residues important for binding with carbohydrates are shown in green.

Figure 4.

Analysis of the neck repeat region of DC-SIGN family in mammals. (**a**) Neighbor-joining tree of amino-acid sequences of the neck repeat region. Colour coding of circles and squares correspond to those described in (**b**). Black rhombus represents repeats of mouse SIGNR1–5, and dog and cow CD209-like. (**b**) Alignment of the neck region of DC-SIGN, L-SIGN and CD209L2 from bonobo (as representative of other primate repeat sequences). Repeats are numerated 1–8 (N- to C-terminal), colour coded and represented by circles for DC-SIGN and by squares for L-SIGN and CD209L2.

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Figure 5.

Phylogenetic trees of Toll-like receptor1, -2, -3, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8 and -10. K_A/K_S values and the estimated number of non-synonymous and synonymous substitutions (in parantheses) for each branch are indicated. Approximate divergence time in Mya is shown.

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*d*Class of sites that may show

*K*A/*K*S > 1 positive selection.

 $d_{\mbox{Class of sites that may show $K_{\mbox{A}}/K_{\mbox{S}}>1$ positive selection.}}$

*e*Sites pinpointed to be under positive selection by Bayes Empirical Bayes analysis.

² Sites pinpointed to be under positive selection by Bayes Empirical Bayes analysis.

*f*Test not applicable (M1 and M2a not significantly different).

 $f_{\rm Test}$ not applicable (M1 and M2a not significantly different).