

Primate and Rodent Specific Intron Gains and the Origin of Retrogenes with Splice Variants

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Abstract

Retroposition, a leading mechanism for gene duplication, is an important process shaping the evolution of genomes. Retrogenes are also involved in the gene structure evolution as a major player in the process of intron deletion. Here, we demonstrate the role of retrogenes in intron gain in mammals. We identified one case of “intronization,” the transformation of exonic sequences into an intron, in the primate specific retrogene *RNF113B* and two independent “intronization” events in the retrogene *DCAF12L2*, one in the common ancestor of primates and rodents and another one in the rodent lineage. Intron gain resulted from the origin of new splice variants, and both genes have two transcript forms, one with retained intron and one with the intron spliced out. Evolution of these genes, especially *RNF113B*, has been very dynamic and has been accompanied by several additional events including parental gene loss, secondary retroposition, and exaptation of transposable elements.

Key words: intron gain, gene structure evolution, splice variant, *RNF113*, *DCAF12*.

The majority of protein-coding genes in eukaryotes are interrupted by introns that are removed from the pre-mRNA by a RNA–protein complex called the spliceosome (Cavalier-Smith 1985; Crick 1979). Introns and the splicing machinery have been found in all eukaryotic species with fully sequenced genomes (Chow et al. 1977; Roy and Gilbert 2006). Comparative genomic studies have revealed striking conservation of intron positions in distant eukaryotes such as animals and plants (Fedorov et al. 2002; Rogozin et al. 2003; Carmel et al. 2007). On the other hand, many genome-wide comparisons of eukaryotic species demonstrated multiple intron losses and intron gains (Roy et al. 2003; Cho et al. 2004; Qiu et al. 2004; Coulombe-Huntington and Majewski 2007b; Li et al. 2009). However, it was found that intron gain is a very rare event in vertebrate evolution (Loh et al. 2007) and no intron gains into intact conserved coding regions of mammalian genes are known (Roy et al. 2003; Coulombe-Huntington and Majewski 2007a).

Comparative gene structure studies have not revealed any intron gain into existing exons in mammals. The only reported new introns were acquired, by and large, by either a fusion of retrogene with host genes or de novo from the genomic environment as a result of new exon capture (O’Neill et al. 1998; Vinckenbosch et al. 2006; Sela et al. 2007; Baertsch et al. 2008; Fablet et al. 2009). Here, we report two retrogenes, *RNF113B* and *DCAF12*, where the exon sequence was split by creation of a new intron as the result

of mutations and emergence of new splice sites. The introns discovered by us represent cases of intron creation via recruitment of exonic sequence (intronization) proposed by Irimia et al. (2008) and Lahn and Page (1999).

Evolution of Introns

RNF113A is a retrogene encoding a ring finger protein of unknown function and is present in the genomes of all vertebrates. Interestingly, in mammalian genomes, only intronless copy exist, whereas in all other vertebrates, a ten-exon parental gene is present and no retrogenes were detected. Genomic sequence analysis showed that there are two copies of *RNF113* in primates, rodents, carnivores, and even-toed ungulates and only one in the genomes of the other mammals we studied. The first copy of *RNF113* was retroposed into the intronic region of *NDUFA1* gene in the genome of the mammalian ancestor. Following the retroposition, the parental gene was lost. This likely took place before the divergence of Prototheria (Monotremes) and Theria (Marsupials and Placentals) because in the genomes of all species representing these lineages, the multiexon form of *RNF113* is absent. After the mammalian radiation the *RNF113A* retrogene was duplicated, by retropositions or segmental duplications, in several lineages. Analysis of genomic locations of these copies suggests that the duplication events were independent in each lineage. For example, in rodents, the *RNF113* copy (*RNF113A2*) was inserted into an intron of

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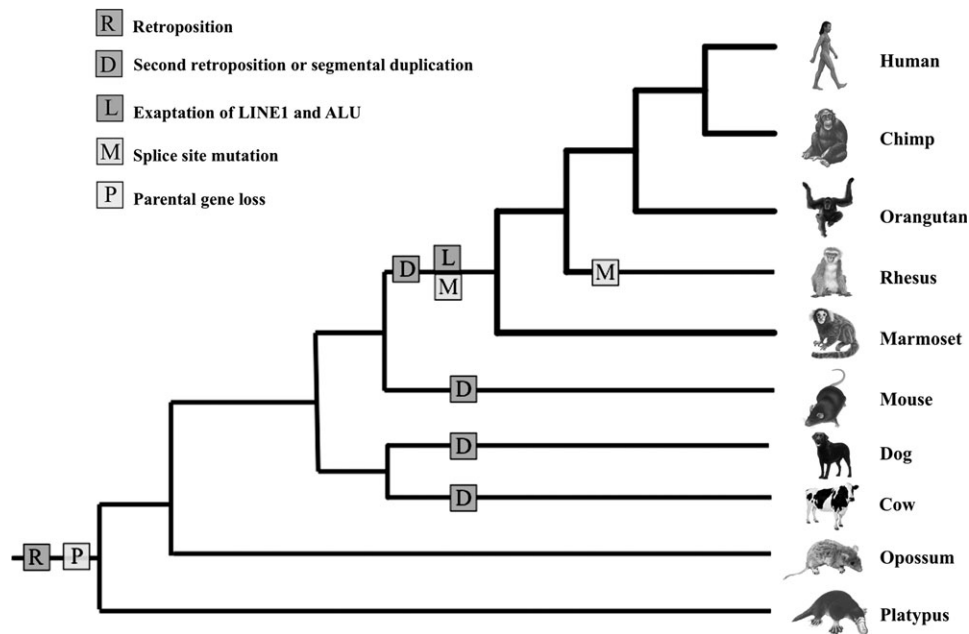


Fig. 1. Schematic tree representing major events during evolution of *RNF113* gene in mammalian lineage. Color version of the figure can be found in [supplementary Data](#) (Supplementary Material online).

the 2900006K08Rik gene, whereas the primate specific gene, *RNF113B*, was copied into an intron of the *FARP1* gene. The primate specific duplication happened before Old World Monkeys and New World Monkeys diverged (fig. 1).

After the retroposition/duplication, the primate specific *RNF113B* gene underwent rapid evolution including intron gain. The presence of the intron is surprising, however, it is supported by several GenBank mRNA sequences (accession numbers: AF539427, BC025388, and BC017585). To confirm the existence of the intron and learn about its origin, we compared *RNF113B* sequences from available primate genomes (human, marmoset, macaque, orangutan, and chimpanzee) with sequences of other mammalian *RNF113A* genes. Sequence alignment revealed that the intron of *RNF113B* is not a de novo insertion but rather originated from the exonic sequence (fig. 2a). A double point mutation, AG → GT, generated the donor site (fig. 2a). The origin of acceptor site is not so clear. One possibility is that a point mutation, GG → AG, created acceptor site. Another option is that the acceptor site was brought during the exonization of L1 element, merged at the 3' end of *RNF113B* (fig. 2b). The newly generated splice sites together with the branch site and the polypyrimidine tract likely enabled recognition of the new intron by the U2 spliceosome (fig. 2a). The 105 bp intron contains 59 nucleotides of previously coding sequence and 46 nucleotides from the 3' UTR.

Generation of splice sites most probably occurred in the primate specific *RNF113B* copy since neither human *RNF113A* gene, which gave a rise to primate *RNF113B*, nor *RNF113A* genes from other mammals have AG or GT at the donor and acceptor positions. Splicing signals were formed before the Old World Monkeys and New Monkeys split. Interestingly, loss of the splicing boundaries subsequently converted the intron into a “retained intron”

in some primates. In rhesus, for example, acceptor was lost due to a point mutation (AG → AA change) (fig. 1b).

The creation of splicing signals was accompanied not only by exaptation of an L1 element but also by exonization of an Alu element. The L1 element inserted within the 3' end of the gene could have contributed the acceptor site and provided a new polyA signal used for the new splice variant (fig. 2a). The complete AluSx element transposed upstream the gene was exapted at the 5' end and most probably delivered some regulatory elements.

Sequencing of the human *RNF113B* cDNA using primers flanking the intronic sequence revealed that *RNF113B* produces two variant transcripts. One variant has two exons, as described above, and the other one is a single exon transcript similar to *RNF113A*. Consequently, most primates have three transcripts of *RNF113*: one from the *RNF113A* retrogene and two from the *RNF113B* (fig. 2b). Rodents, cow, and dog have two transcripts, each coming from different copy of *RNF113*, and all other mammals have only one *RNF113* transcript. The presence of the splice variants in the retrogene is very surprising and has only been reported once before (Lahn and Page 1999).

A second case involves *DCAF12* (DDB1 and CUL4 associated factor 12), which encodes a WD repeat-containing protein that interacts with the COP9 signalosome (Jin et al. 2006). Although the gene is present in vertebrate and insect genomes, only placental mammals have retrocopies of this gene. One copy, *DCAF12L2*, has the same location in all placental mammals and therefore most likely was retroposited in the placental mammals ancestor. Another copy, *DCAF12L1*, is present only in Euarchontoglires (a clade which includes rodents and primates). It likely emerged as a result of tandem duplication of *DCAF12L2* as it is located next to the *DCAG12L1* gene. There were two events that changed the

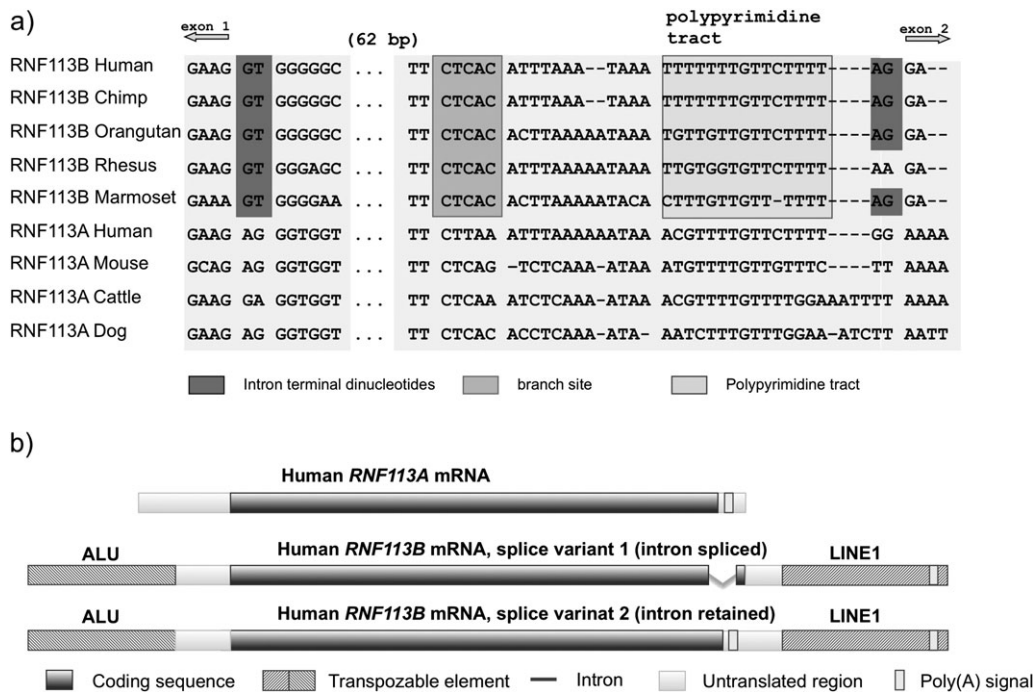


Fig. 2. (a) Alignment of mammalian *RNF113A* and primate *RNF113B* genomic sequences at the acceptor and donor sites. (b) Structure of human *RNF113A* mRNA and two splice variants of *RNF113B*. Color version of the figure can be found in [supplementary Data \(Supplementary Material online\)](#).

splicing pattern in *DCAF12L2*. First, an intronization event occurred in the common ancestor of primates and rodents. Second, an alternative donor site emerged in rodents only (fig. 3). The limited available data and sequence divergence make any conclusions in regard to the exact pattern of splice

site evolution infeasible. However, there is convincing experimental evidence confirming both splicing events (fig. 3): splicing at the shared rodent–primate intron, boundaries are confirmed by two expressed sequence tags (ESTs) (AK034343 and AK047360), and usage of the rodent

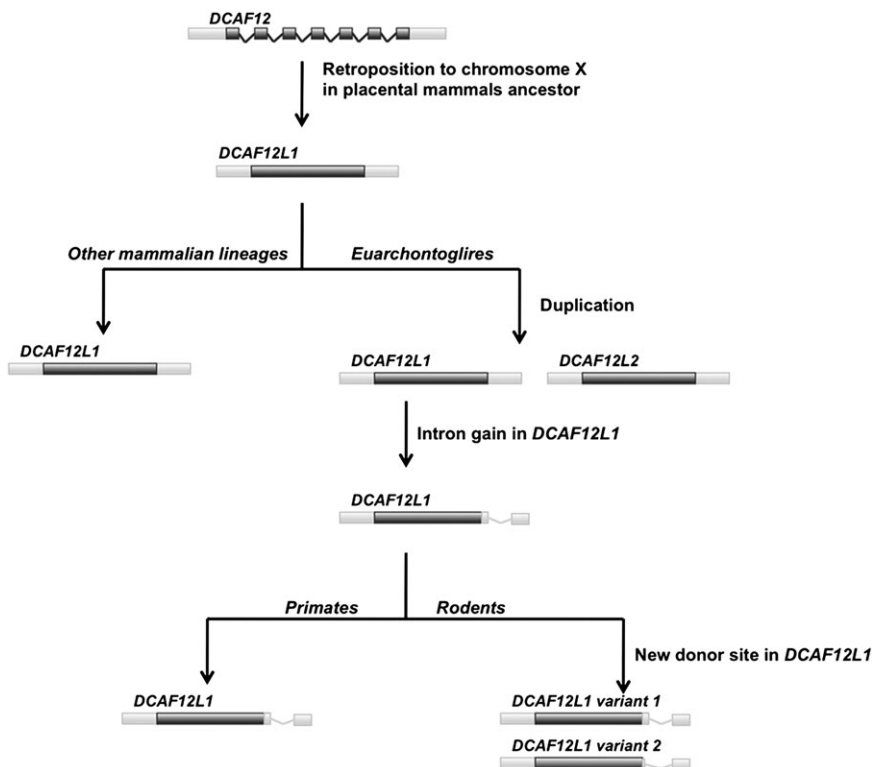


Fig. 3. Pattern of *DCAF12* duplication and “intronization” events in mammalian genomes. Color version of the figure can be found in [supplementary Data \(Supplementary Material online\)](#).

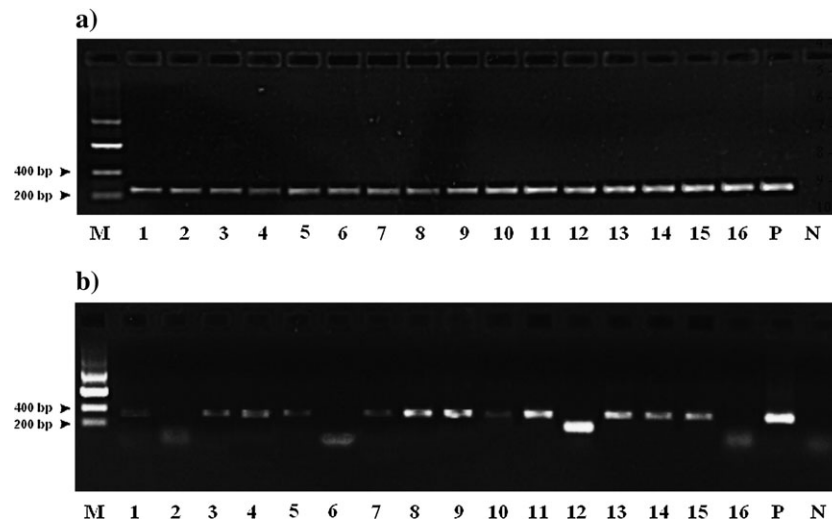


Fig. 4. Expression pattern of *RNF113A* and two forms of *RNF113B* (195 bp product with intron spliced; 295 bp product-form with intron retained) in 16 human tissues: 1: heart, 2: brain, 3: placenta, 4: lung, 5: liver, 6: skeletal muscle, 7: kidney, 8: pancreas, 9: spleen, 10: thymus, 11: prostate, 12: testis, 13: ovary, 14: small intestine w/o mucosal lining, 15: colon, 16: peripheral leukocytes, P: genomic DNA, and N: water.

alternative donor site is confirmed by four ESTs (AK038557, BC068319, AK034472, and AK039767).

Retrogene Expression

Numerous studies revealed a tendency of retrogenes to be expressed exclusively in testis. It was suggested that the hypertranscription present in the meiotic and postmeiotic spermatogenic cells makes possible transcription of DNA that is usually not transcribed. This may facilitate transcription of retrocopies in the testis during their early evolution (reviewed in (Kaessmann et al. 2009)). Another hypothesis explains the high expression of retrogenes in testis by the fact that these are, in most cases, retrocopies of spermatogenesis-related genes located on the X chromosome. Because the X chromosome is inactivated during meiosis, retroposition to autosomes enables escape from inactivation and expression during spermatogenesis (Turner 2007).

The retroposition of both genes studied here, *RNF113* and *DCAF12*, was in the opposite direction, from autosomes to chromosome X. In the case of *RNF113*, the parental gene is detectable by sequence similarity as an apparent pseudogene on chromosome 9. The parental multiexon *DCAF12* gene is coincidentally also located on chromosome 9. *RNF113A* and both *DCAF12* retrogenes are on chromosome X. We surveyed the expression pattern of all human *RNF113* transcripts (one from *RNF113A* and two from *RNF113B*) in 16 human tissues (fig. 4) (for methods, see [Supplementary Material](#) online). *RNF113A* was expressed in all studied tissues, including testes. Interestingly, *RNF113B* exhibited tissue-specific splicing; while the unspliced form of *RNF113B* was expressed in all tissues but testis, the spliced variant was expressed in testis, prostate, thymus, and lung. Both *RNF113B* splice variants were present in thymus, prostate, and lung, but in all of these tissues, the form with the intron spliced out had much lower expression level than the single exon primary form. Relatively

high expression of the new form of *RNF113B*, form with the intron spliced out, was observed only in testis.

According to the EST data, the human *DCAF12* gene is widely expressed. EST sequences present in the dbEST database represent almost 40 libraries and show the highest expression in testis and trachea. The retrogene *DCAF12L1* is expressed only in kidney and testis and a second human retrogene, *DCAF12L2*, is expressed in eye and testis. Therefore, both retrogenes show very different expression patterns than their parental genes, with very limited and low expression level and notable expression in testis.

Conclusions

Retroposition, a major mechanism for gene duplication, is an important process shaping the evolution of genomes (Brosius 1991; Marques et al. 2005). Our study confirms the unusual role of retrogenes in shaping the genomes and underscores the importance of mobile elements in evolution. It also reveals that retrogenes may be responsible for a wealth of species-specific features including species-specific introns and splice variants.

Previous analyses of introns in the vertebrate genomes did not uncover any intron gain in mammals (Roy et al. 2003). Our study clearly shows that creation of introns has occurred during mammalian evolution. The failure of previous studies to find intron gains can be explained by the fact that they were focused on different intron gain mechanisms and did not consider exon intronization. In addition, they looked at conserved among studied species genes, while we focused on young and in many cases lineage-specific retrogenes.

Interestingly, the retrogenes studied here exhibit testis-specific expression typically associated with genes escaping from the X chromosome despite their opposite history (retroposition from autosome to X). This biased expression pattern may not be exclusively related to meiotic genes, sex chromosome inactivation, and dosage compensation

(Marques et al. 2005; Vinckenbosch et al. 2006; Potrzebowski et al. 2008). The same pattern of high expression level in testis is observed in young, primate-specific splice variant of retrogene *RNF113B* as well as in both retroposed copies of *DCAF12* retroposed on the human X chromosome. The older, unspliced variant of *RNF113B*, as well as an earlier retrocopy *RNF113A*, displays more diverse expression patterns. Therefore, testis-specific expression could be a common feature of all newly evolved transcripts regardless of their chromosomal localization and may reflect a transcriptional noise due to “hypertranscription” in testis, facilitating the activation of new transcripts (Kleene et al. 1998).

The small number of observed intron gain in retrogenes may reflect that this is a rare event. Alternatively, the low number of observations could reflect the difficulties in identification of such events. One major complication lies in annotation problems and the common expectation that retrogenes do not have introns. Genome-wide comparative studies currently underway have already showed that intron gain in retrogenes could be more frequent than we expected but that annotations remain a major obstacle in uncovering this phenomenon.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Data are available at *Molecular Biology and Evolution* online (<http://www.mbe.oxfordjournals.org/>).

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