

# **Hepacivirus / hepatocyte interplay leading to liver metabolic disorders**

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### **To cite this version:**

Angeliki Anna Beka. Hepacivirus / hepatocyte interplay leading to liver metabolic disorders. Virology. Université Paris Cité, 2023. English. NNT : 2023UNIP5194. tel-04839867

## **HAL Id: tel-04839867 <https://theses.hal.science/tel-04839867v1>**

Submitted on 16 Dec 2024

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# Université Paris Cité

**École doctorale Bio Sorbonne Paris Cité – ED 562** *Institut Pasteur Département de Virologie* 

# **Hepacivirus/hepatocyte interplay leading to liver metabolic disorders**

Par **Angeliki Anna BEKA**

Thèse de doctorat d'Infectiologie

Dirigée par **Annette MARTIN**

Présentée et soutenue **publiquement**

le 15/12/2023

Devant un jury composé de :

- I. **Annette MARTIN**, DR-HDR, Institut Pasteur, Directrice de thèse
- II. **Darius MORADPOUR**, Full Professor, Université de Lausanne, Rapporteur
- III. **Mirjam ZEISEL**, CR-HDR, Université de Lyon 1, Rapportrice
- IV. **Pierre-Emmanuel CECCALDI**, PU-HDR, Université Paris Cité, Examinateur
- V. **Edward EMMOTT**, Lecturer, University of Liverpool, Examinateur
- VI. **Hervé LERAT**, PhD-HDR, Université Grenoble Alpes, Membre invité

### **Acknowledgements**

As my PhD thesis is coming to its end it is hard not to reflect back to all the people who were instrumental in the completion of this work in one way or another. Therefore, before guiding you through the networks of hepacivirus-driven interferences, I would like to start by presenting the top enriched terms of gratitude in my network of "partners in crime".

#### *AB Scientific, "The supervisor", 1 core node in my network*

There is no one who deserves to be in this section more than my guiding light through this endeavor, my thesis supervisor, **Dr Annette Martin**, head of the Hepacivirus-Host Interactions (HEPA) group. Thank you for the privilege of interacting with you in a both scientific and human level, for always making yourself available and ready to provide rigorous feedback and suggestions, and for patiently allowing me to mature as a scientist over the past years. For your confidence in me and the trust you showed me by allowing me to pursue this project and to present our collective results in national and international conferences, while always cheering for me. For your patience and all the life lessons you generously delivered. For fighting to provide the best working conditions possible for our group and for trying your best to ensure that work flowed effortlessly. For being a true mentor, I will always be indebted.

#### *AB Scientific, "PhD Thesis jury", 6 nodes in my network*

I want to express my gratitude to the scientists who I admire and who have willingly accepted to evaluate my thesis work. **Dr Mirjam Zeisel** it has been a great pleasure interacting with you during the various HCV-related conferences, only to find out that the great scientist is also a very gracious human being. **Prof Darius Moradpour** it is an honor to have the person, whose publications have guided me since I started my HCV career, assess my labor. Thank you both *in advance* for taking the time to thoroughly examine my manuscript and provide insightful suggestions.

I also want to thank both **Dr Edward Emmott**, who so amiably accepted to help a strange student, and **Prof Pierre-Emmanuel Ceccaldi**, who has been an inspirational figure ever since my Master 2 at Institut Pasteur, for their availability and for kindly agreeing to be part of my PhD jury and the scientific discussions this entails.

A very big thanks is dedicated to the invited member of my jury, **Dr Hervé Lerat**, who has been the kindest collaborator anyone could wish for. Thank you for all the discussions, time and effort put in our project, which without you could not have been possible!

#### *AB Scientific, "Best lab-mates ever", 10 nodes in my network*

Whether currently in the lab, or long gone to pursue their dreams this work could not have been accomplished without the collective efforts of all the people mentioned in this set of PPIs (person-person interactions).

I primarily want to thank the person who took the time to train me when I first joined the HEPA lab and whose incredible work has been a basis for a large part of this thesis, the formerly PhD student and now doctor, **Dr Emeline Simon**. I am so grateful for everything you taught me, for your continuous availability, your precious scientific insight and for becoming a great friend who was there for me in times of need.

A heartfelt, gigantic thank you goes out to **Dr Houda Tabbal**, former post-doctoral fellow in the HEPA group, who performed the preliminary purification experiments of HCV NS5A protein complexes and helped me set up the protocol, while carrying out the purifications of HCV Core protein complexes herself. Habibi, I am blessed to have shared this lab experience with you and I will forever be grateful for your unconditional support, understanding and life lessons on empathy and compassion!

It can never be enough, but I hope this paragraph can serve as a token of my never-ending appreciation of the future doctor **Eftychia Filippopoulou**, who did not only prove to be invaluable in the generation of the NS5A chimeras we produced, but was also the voice of reason at times I got desperate. You were my favourite "minion" in the lab in Greece and I am now an extremely proud lab-mama watching you evolve and accomplish amazing things! I hope your thesis turns out as incredible as you made mine with your friendship. You were my biggest cheerleader and gave me so much strength to push forward. Rock on Euti!

I also wish to thank **Brigitte Blumen**, technician in the HEPA group, who was instrumental in constructing and sequencing most of the viruses used in the projects presented in this manuscript. Madame Brigitte, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help and for always being yourself! -Le haricot vert.

To **Damien Batalie**, the HEPA group pillar with a technician's badge, I owe an enormous thank you for primarily making sure the materials and tools we might need are readily available and second for all the long experiments he had to do in my place while I was writing this manuscript. Thank you, Dam, for slowly, but surely becoming a dear friend during my Parisian days.

I am also so incredibly moved to thank **Noémi Beuscart**, who started as a stagiaire in the HEPA lab, and is now continuing in our group as a technician. Noémi your progress has been amazing and your help in the construction and characterization of the tagged NS5A chimeras has been priceless!

A big thanks is dedicated to **Dr Stephanie Aicher**, former member of the HEPA lab, the one who initiated the Core-related projects and did an excellent job in paving the way to France for all of us Greeks who followed.

My gratitude is also extended to **Dr Matthieu Fritz**, who was the first to pursue HCVhost PPIs in our group, using NS2 as his bait. Without Matthieu's initial work, none of my accomplishments could have been in time for a 3-year PhD.

Lastly, I want to thank the newest member of our group, **Eleanora Stouthamer**, who is now attempting to co-immunoprecipitate selected Core and NS5A host partners and to functionally characterize them. Noor, you've been a delight to work with, a torpedo of energy and joy, you required minimal efforts to be trained and I'm so grateful you chose our lab for your internship!

#### *AB Scientific, "Collaborators", 18 nodes in my network*

Following the advice instilled by the favourite African proverb of the person who initiated me to the magical world of viral hepatitis, **Prof Penelope Mavromara**, "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together", together I went.

I want to acknowledge the key contribution of **Dr Claire Gondeau** in the early stages of these projects, for providing and characterizing the clinical strains and for leading the preliminary experiments on primary hepatocyte cultures.

A thank you is also addressed to **Dr Richard Njouom** and **Dr Gabriela Oprisan** for the clinical viral strains they so kindly provided.

I am particularly thankful to **Thibaut Douche**, **Dr Quentin Giai Gianetto** and **Dr Mariette Matondo** from the Proteomics platform of Institut Pasteur for their collaboration in our proteomics projects and for their availability and patience with my many ideas and questions.

I also thank **Dr Thomas Cokelaer, Juliana Pipoli Da Fonseca,** and **Dr Marc Monot**, members of the Biomics platform of Institut Pasteur for running the RNA-Seq experiments and for the preliminary analysis. Thank you, Thomas, for taking the time to discuss and elaborate on the controls used and what each meant.

The warmest thank you in this respect goes to the person I never thought I'd find, who understood and shared my vision for the transcriptomics analyses from the first moment we discussed about the project, **Dr Emeline Perthame**. Thank you for being a model of professionalism. If every cross-disciplinary collaboration was as flawless and flowing as ours scientific advancements would have proceeded much faster.

I need to also thank **Prof Philippe Roingeard**, the third co-collaborator in our RHV project, which would not have been initiated weren't for him, and has since evolved through our multiple scientific discussions and exchanged together with Hervé and Annette.

For their participation in this project in the side of Hervé in Grenoble, I need to also thank **Marion Ressejac Mercey**, who performed the viral titrations in the first procedure of the RHV project, and **Maryline Cossin,** who assisted in the first intrahepatic inoculations of the virus.

Ι also thank **Dr Thibault Tubiana** and **Dr Stéphane Bressanelli** for the AlphaFold based reconstructions of hepaciviral proteins in relation to the RHV studies.

Lastly, our collaboration with the group of **Prof Philippe Chouteau**, has allowed us to further our hepacivirus observations in a system better mimicking the liver environment. Thank you, Philippe, for your participation in this project and for all of our interesting discussions. Thank you, **Dr Mathilde Couteaudier**, for the effort and time put into the characterization of our HCV recombinants in your hypo-diff system and for performing the infections towards a transcriptomic analysis in this system.

#### *AB Scientific, "The amazing HCV Community", 8 nodes in my network*

There is something unique and invitingly special about **the HCV community**, which I have been a member of for the past seven years. I am thankful to all of those with which I have interacting during meetings and events, for always being polite and encouraging and for openly discussing science in a scientific era of secrecy and animalistic competition.

I am particularly grateful to **Prof John McLauchlan** for the fruitful discussions and sharing of precious antibodies, **Prof Ralf Bartenschlager, Prof Charles Rice, Prof Jens Bukh, Dr Takaji Wakita, Dr Eliane Meurs, Dr Robert Purcell** and **Dr Agata Budkowska,**  who have shared essential biological materials with us.

#### *AB Scientific, "CSI", 3 nodes in my network*

I would also like to express my appreciation to the members of my *Comité de Suivi Individuel*, **Dr Nicole Pavio** and **Dr Pascal Pineau**, for their insightful input in this work and for their kindness.

I would be remiss in not mentioning my Pasteurian PhD thesis tutor, **Dr Han Li**, who met with me at least once every year to ensure that the conditions of my thesis were optimal. As this was not always the case, I thank you for being there to record that and console me.

#### *AB Scientific, "Financial Aid", 4 nodes in my network*

This work would not have been implemented without the 3-year doctoral fellowship attributed to me by the **Université Paris Cité** and the research allowance provided by the **Virology Department of Institut Pasteur**, which allowed me to extend my time in the lab for three more months.

I'd like to also recognize the contribution of **ANRS** in funding the research proposals of our group, allowing us to bring them to life.

Lastly, I'd like to mention the **organizing committee of the HCV-Flavi meeting**, who facilitated my participation in this conference with the travel fellowships they allocated to me.

#### *AB Support Groups, "In the lab", 11 nodes in my network*

I'm extremely grateful to **Prof Sylvie van der Werf**, who initially welcomed me in her Unit back in 2019 and has been an idol ever since, thanks to her scientific rigor, her tremendous appreciation of students and her devotion to virology research.

I am also deeply indebted to **Dr Nicolas Escriou** for his numerous scientific and technological advice. Thank you, Nicolas, for bringing an extra brain to help solve these puzzles, but also for your paramount contribution in extinguishing my tiny home invaders, so that I can finish writing my manuscript in serenity.

I am further grateful for meeting and interacting with **Zeineb Choucha** and **Jérémy Brunet** during our common lab events or while having a drink afterwork to steam off.

I wish to expand my gratitude to **Martine Vandaele, Edmond Bellance, Jennifer Chevalier, Mohamed Hicaine**, as well as **Leila Campanaro** and **Tom Benayoun** for continuously providing all of us with the necessary consumable equipment to perform our experiments before and after the move of our lab, respectively.

A special thanks goes to **Dr Julien Fernandes**, research engineer in the Photonic Bioimaging platform at Insitut Pasteur, for training and advising me on the use of the confocal microscope and imaging tools.

#### *AB Support Groups, "StaPa", at least 17 nodes in my network*

My time at IP would not have been as enjoyable and rewarding without the Young Researchers' Association of Institut Pasteur, or **StaPa**. I want to thank all the former and current members of the **StaPa Bureau** with whom I shared this sometimes difficult, yet rewarding task of making this association grow and become acknowledged by the state. Thank you to the **StaPa Direction** for your trust in me becoming the Head of Communications and for having the immense pleasure of being one of the first people to welcome new students on campus and initiate them to the addiction StaPa has become!

In particular, I want to thank **Laura Pedro-Cos**, who except for a fellow fighter, she also became one of my closest friends on campus. Thank you, hon, for your understanding, availability and for just being you!

I am also extremely appreciative of **Francesco Andreace**, the Spanish guy trapped in an Italian body, with whom I clicked since the moment we met. Thank you, Frank, for always being a shoulder to cry on or a punching bag to release some of the stress. I hope I have been there for you as much as you were for me!

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to **Lorenzo Zolfanelli**, who stayed longer at work -on a Sunday of all days- to witness the revelation of the western blot that made me exclaim "Sh\*t! I'm going to become a Doctor!". Thank you, Lor, for all of our deep discussions and for always having the right and well-thought thing to say!

I'd like to also recognize the significant efforts and contribution of **Clarisabel Garcia Rodriguez** in conceptualizing many and organizing all of the outreaching StaPa events. Clari, thank you for making it possible for us to take part in these enriching experiences and witness the awe in children's eyes as food coloring dyes are separated under current!

My gratitude is further extended to all the members of this association, without whom StaPa would not have been the same, including but not limited to **Valerio Laghi** and **Franka D'Angelo** (our Mr and Mrs President, who so warningly opened their house to us), **Puck Nasman Norell** (*the best* secretary we could have ever wished for), **Samuel Garcia Huete** (who we shared and bonded over our struggles with the French language in the beginning of our PhDs and is now one of my dearest friends on campus), **Sara Napolitano** (the kindest soul of the group), **Viktoriia Gross** (our amazing photographer), **Agnès Baud** (the friendliest of the French), **Manuel Ares Arroyo** (the craziest, funniest post-doc), **Remy Walocha** (the *très chic* party animal) and the recent PPU additions, who thanks to Eftychia's praise have also been cheering for me the past months, helping me stay strong: **Juan Sienes Bailo, Bruno Tello Rubio,** and **Léa Manke**.

#### *AB Support Groups, "PhirologisDs", at least 8 nodes in my network*

I further wish to express my gratitude to the PhD students of the Virology Department of Institut Pasteur who elected me their representative, allowing me to advocate for our needs and rights.

Thank you in particular to **Felix Streicher**, my fellow co-representative, who was always there to support me emotionally and to take over whenever I was too overwhelmed by the thesis. I am so grateful I shared this adventure with you and I am so proud of what we have accomplished!

My thanks are further extended to **all the PhD Reps** of the different IP departments, together with who we have fought for the rights and mental health of the students on campus. We have been many over the years, but each one of us has put a little stone towards a better PhD experience for the rest, so thank you guys!

I would also like to thank the students who actively participated in our monthly meetings, becoming a true support groups for all of us, namely **Elodie Couderc**, **Mauro Castello Sanjuan, Heidy Maria Vera Peralta, Kyle Raymond, Maxim Chazal, Alexander Bergman** and **Martin Groznica** (now Jungbauer-Groznica). To you, Martin, I am especially grateful for your kindness and involvement in the PhD issues, for the trust you put in Felix and me, and for never neglecting to check up on us, the Reps, as well, to make sure we are doing okay.

#### *AB Support Groups, "The IP Greek community", 6 nodes in my network*

Studying abroad is accompanied by a strong -at times- saudade of one's original country, language, food, and traditions. My saudade never became too intense thanks to the evergrowing Pasteurian Greek community composed of, well, Eftychia, but also **Stelios Papadopoulos**, **Artemis Matrakis, Thea Chrysostomou, Alexandros Belavilas Trovas** and the always delightful to interact with κυρία **Evi Melanitou**, who made sure I felt at home.

#### *AB Support Groups, "Making plans for the future", 1 node in my network*

I am also delighted to add **Marion Guessoum**, career advisor within the MAASC, in my list of acknowledgements. Marion, thank you for guiding me through a crazy, beautiful adventure of getting to know myself, my professional needs and my strengths better than ever before! I am particularly grateful for your encouragement, support and patience with my unconventional ways to twist every exercise you gave me into something creative and aesthetically pleasing.

#### *AB Friends, "SMAD4", 3 nodes in my network*

I would also like to articulate my sincerest appreciation of the three people who were beside during my whole scientific career, since the first day at DuTH, **Sofia Gkagkaridou, Michaela Moula** and **Dimitris Palamidas**. You guys have been my guides, advisors, therapists, friends and so much more. I consider myself so lucky to have you in my life and by my side on the big defense date!

#### *AB Friends, "Friends for life", 4 nodes in my network*

I want to further thank my friends **Maro Anagnostopoulou, Sofia-Maria Tsakotelli** and **Giorgos Zarpapis**, who have been by my side for almost as long as I can remember and continue to be there for me through good times and bad. After all, Maro, Sofia and I share the same age…

I could not omit my purring companion, who was instrumental to my stress relief every time I got to cat-sit him, **Ilo the cat**.

#### *AB Family, "Relatives", at least 2 nodes in my network*

My appreciation is extended to my relatives, who in one way or another helped me reach this point. Notably, my fairy godmother, **Katerina Fountedaki**, or Arina Mpoumpina, who made the trip to be with me in my special day, and her bright son, **Giannis Koutsoumpinas**.

#### *AB Family, "Strangers who became family", 3 nodes in my network*

In times of crisis, it is important to have one constant to rely on. I am sanctified to have at least five. The two came in one package from the same womb. **Eirini** and **Christina Kyrgialani** my childhood friends, have always been there for me, especially through the most difficult times, helping me get up and fight, like true sisters. Thank you for all the beautiful moments we have shared and for never giving up on me!

The core of my strength, happiness and peace of mind through this PhD came from no other than my better half, my safe haven, the best man -*human-* walking on earth, **Giannis Koutsoliakos**. You never stop surprising me and making me feel the luckiest girl on this planet. I am beyond words proud of you and I admire you for all that you are and do, so your encouragement and awe of my work mean the world to me! Thank you for your patience and understanding the past three years – we made it!

#### *AB Family, "Μπεκαίοι", 2 nodes in my network*

Dedicating everything I have ever accomplished to my father, my hero, **Giannis Bekas**, and my brother, my pillar, **Giorgos Bekas**, can only merely show my gratitude and appreciation of their moral and financial support during my entire life. I thank you for helping me pursue my dreams, never giving up on me and always looking out for me. I've always kept your advice and words of wisdom close to my heart, serving me well during this journey. I hope you can be as proud of me and as I am of both of you!

#### *AB Supernatural, "Guardian angels", ~ nodes in my network*

Lastly, I wish to pay my tribute to those who are no longer with us, whose presence and input have nonetheless one way or another been decisive to me becoming who I am and to the successful completion of the present thesis.

To my mother, **Sofia Prifti**, my role model, who nurtured me very wisely and managed to transfer to me her knowledge, her ways (of thinking, of writing, of behaving), her strength, and everything that made her so beloved and unique in our community.

To my partner's mother, **Anita Josepha Cornelia Mocking**, who welcomed me into her home and her life, making me feel as her own, who taught me the importance of diversity and unconditional acceptance.

To my aunt **Maria Beka**, whose early loss underlined the importance of appreciation.

To my grandmothers, **Anna Prifti** and **Angeliki Beka**, who neither deserved the pain that they went through, but taught me that life can be utterly unfair and all we can do is hold on and fight.

To my godfather **Stefanos Koutsoumpinas**, with the deep appreciation and love for the French language and culture, the oil which he used during my christening apparently transferred several of his traits to me.

And to many other family friends and relatives taken too early, who taught me how to live, learn and explore.

To all of the enriched terms in my network, but primarily to my family and our guardian angels

### **Résumé**

#### *Etude des interactions entre hepacivirus et hépatocytes conduisant à des perturbations métaboliques du foie*

L'hépatite C chronique est une maladie progressive du foie, entraînant la stéatose, une accumulation anormale de lipides, ainsi qu'une cirrhose et un carcinome hépatocellulaire (CHC) à long terme. La prévalence de ces manifestations varie selon le génotype (Gt) viral, le Gt3 étant très fortement associé à la stéatose. Ces pathologies sont le résultat de mécanismes à la fois directs, supposés être principalement médiés par les protéines Core et NS5A du virus de l'hépatite C (VHC), et indirects. La compréhension des mécanismes moléculaires mis en jeu souffre de l'absence d'un modèle d'étude pertinent. Un modèle de substitution prometteur a émergé avec la démonstration en 2018 qu'un nouvel hepacivirus de rongeur (RHV-rn1) établit une infection chronique chez le rat.

Ce travail visait à élucider les bases moléculaires de la dérégulation des voies hépatocytaires menant à la stéatose et au CHC, notamment les effets communs et différentiels des Gts du VHC. Dans le premier projet, les partenaires cellulaires (IPs) des protéines NS5A et Core et les voies de signalisation dérégulées spécifiquement ont été identifiés dans un système d'infection pertinent. Le deuxième projet a permis de disposer d'un modèle animal immunocompétent, celui des rats Sprague Dawley infectés par le RHV-rn1, pour réaliser l'étude des désordres métaboliques *in vivo*.

Nous avons produit un ensemble de virus chimériques dérivés d'une souche adaptée du Gt2a (Jad) codant NS5A ou Core d'isolats de patients de Gt1-4 pour lesquels les données cliniques étaient disponibles, et des recombinants Jad exprimant Core ou NS5A dotées d'un tag twin-strep (ST) à des fins de purification de complexes protéiques à partir de cellules d'hépatome humain Huh-7.5 infectées. Les IPs ont été identifiés par nano-chromatographie liquide couplée à la spectrométrie de masse en tandem. Les IPs forts ont été discriminés par rapport à des contrôles non spécifiques avec un nouvel algorithme que nous avons développé. À l'aide des outils CytoScape et STRING, les voies cellulaires en majorité enrichies parmi les 134 IPs de Core s'avèrent impliquées dans la régulation de l'expression des gènes de l'hôte, tandis que les 527 IPs de NS5A font essentiellement partie des voies impliquées dans les processus métaboliques, du transport, des réponses immunes et du CHC. Nous avons ensuite identifié des IPs de NS5A spécifiques de souche/Gt, les voies de biosynthèse du cholestérol et de gluconéogenèse étant enrichies principalement pour les IPs de NS5A du Gt3. Le séquençage comparé des ARNm des cellules Huh-7.5 infectées par les différents virus intergénotypiques exprimant Core des Gt1-4 a démontré un impact élevé de tous les virus par rapport aux cellules non infectées. Des dérégulations transcriptomiques différentielles selon les souches/Gts ont été observées par analyse d'enrichissement de gènes.

En parallèle, nous avons développé avec succès le modèle animal de substitution du VHC basé sur des rats Sprague Dawley infectés par RHV-rn1, montrant un taux élevé d'infections chroniques et de stéatose hépatique. Des analyses pilotes lipidomiques et métabolomiques comparatives de rats chroniquement infectés par rapport à des rats non infectés ont révélé une gluconéogenèse perturbée, ainsi qu'une augmentation des esters de cholestérol et des diacylglycérides dans les foies infectés.

En conclusion, dans des systèmes d'infection pertinents, nous avons montré que NS5A et Core du VHC peuvent contribuer à la progression des lésions hépatiques d'une manière spécifique selon le génotype viral, respectivement en interagissant directement avec des protéines impliquées dans des voies spécifiques de l'hôte ou en dérégulant le transcriptome. Nous avons également identifié des altérations métaboliques au cours des infections chroniques à hepacivirus dans un modèle animal de substitution, ouvrant la voie à une caractérisation plus approfondie, y compris en présence de facteurs de comorbidité de l'hôte comme le régime alimentaire.

**Mots cles** : VHC, NS5A, Core, interactomique, transcriptomique, métabolisme du foie, stéatose, carcinome hépatocellulaire, modèle animal, virus recombinants

### **Abstract**

#### *Hepacivirus/hepatocyte interplay leading to liver metabolic disorders*

Chronic hepatitis C is a progressive liver disease, resulting in metabolic disorders, such as steatosis, an abnormal lipid accumulation in hepatocytes, and long-term complications of cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The prevalence of clinical manifestations varies according to hepatitis C virus (HCV) genotypes (Gt), with Gt3 being highly associated with steatosis. HCV-induced pathologies can be driven by both indirect mechanisms and virus-driven host deregulations, thought to be essentially mediated by two pleiotropic viral proteins, the capsid protein (Core) and a nonstructural protein, NS5A. A detailed understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved has been hindered by the absence of a fully pertinent study model. A promising surrogate model emerged with the demonstration in 2018 that a new rodent hepacivirus (RHV-rn1) establishes chronic infection in rats.

This work aimed at elucidating the molecular bases for HCV manipulation of host pathways leading to steatosis and HCC, with a focus on the common and distinct effects of HCV Gts. The first project targeted the identification of cellular interacting partners (IPs) of HCV NS5A and Core and specifically deregulated signaling pathways in a relevant infection system. The second project provided an immunocompetent surrogate animal model to focus on the study of metabolic disorders *in vivo*.

We generated a panel of functional recombinant viruses encoding HCV NS5A or Core of Gt1-4 within the backbone of a Gt2a highly cell culture-adapted strain (Jad). NS5A and Core sequences were selected from clinical isolates of patients with known stages of liver damage. In frame twin strep-tag (ST) fusion to NS5A or Core allowed affinity purification of protein complexes from infected human hepatoma Huh-7.5 cells. IPs were identified by liquid nano-chromatography coupled to tandem mass spectrometry. Strong IPs were discriminated with respect to nonbinding V5-tagged controls by a novel scoring algorithm that we developed. Using CytoScape and STRING tools, the highest scored pathways enriched among the 134 IPs of Jad Core were involved in the regulation of host gene expression, while for the 527 Jad NS5A IPs, enrichment highlighted pathways involved in metabolic, transport, immune system and HCC processes. We next unveiled Gt/strain-specific IPs of NS5A, with cholesterol biosynthesis and gluconeogenesis pathways being enriched mainly in the Gt3 NS5A IPs. To further proteomic data obtained on Core, we examined hepatocyte transcriptomic deregulations in response to infection of Huh-7.5 cells with Core intergenotypic recombinant viruses. RNA sequencing analysis demonstrated a high impact of all viruses compared to noninfected cells. Differential regulations by specific strains and/or Gts were observed by gene set enrichment analyses.

In parallel, we successfully developed the HCV surrogate animal model based on Sprague Dawley rats infected with RHV-rn1, showing a high rate of chronic infections and liver steatosis. Pilot comparative lipidomic and metabolomic analyses of chronically infected versus noninfected rats revealed perturbed gluconeogenesis, as well as increased cholesteryl ester and diacylglycerides in infected livers. Moreover, the composition of cholesteryl esters, free fatty acids, diacylglycerides and triacylglycerides was found altered by RHV-rn1 infection, with a preferential accumulation of longer fatty acyl chains in the infected rats.

In conclusion, in relevant infection systems, we found that NS5A and Core may contribute to the progression of HCV-induced liver damage in a genotype-specific manner, by directly interacting with proteins involved in specific host pathways or by deregulating the host transcriptome, respectively. We also identified hepacivirus-induced metabolic alterations during chronic infection in a surrogate hepacivirus animal model, paving the way for further characterization, including in the presence of host comorbidity factors like western diet.

**Keywords:** HCV, NS5A, Core, interactomics, transcriptomics, liver metabolism, steatosis, hepatocellular carcinoma, animal model, recombinant virus

#### **Résumé substantiel en français**

#### **Introduction**

Le virus de l'hépatite C (VHC) est un hepacivirus humain, qui infecte globalement 1.5 millions d'individus par an. L'hépatite C chronique est une maladie progressive du foie, entraînant une stéatose, une accumulation anormale de lipides dans les hépatocytes, ainsi que des complications à long terme telles que la fibrose, la cirrhose et le carcinome hépatocellulaire (CHC). La prévalence de ces manifestations cliniques varie selon le génotype viral (8 génotypes et >90 sous-types identifiés à ce jour). L'infection par le génotype 3, très répandue parmi les utilisateurs de drogues par voie intraveineuse (UDVI) en Europe, présente une prévalence accrue de la stéatose de l'ordre de 80% des infections, et l'infection par le sous-type 1b serait associée à un risque accru de développement du CHC, alors que des données cliniques font défaut pour les génotypes 4 à 8.

Les pathologies induites par le VHC peuvent être provoquées par une combinaison complexe de mécanismes à la fois directs et indirects tels que l'inflammation chronique du foie, potentiellement aggravée par un régime alimentaire de type occidental, le diabète ou la consommation d'alcool. Les mécanismes directs semblent principalement médiés par deux protéines virales pléiotropes : la protéine de capside, Core, et une protéine non structurale, NS5A, qui seraient associées à la dérégulation de multiples processus cellulaires de l'hôte, notamment les cascades des réponses immunitaires ainsi que les voies de signalisation métaboliques, qui pourraient être associées au développement de la stéatose, et celles connues pour être impliquées dans le développement du CHC. Cependant, en l'absence de systèmes de culture cellulaire permettant l'étude des souches cliniques du VHC, ces dérégulations spécifiques de génotype et/ou impliquant les protéines du VHC ont été principalement étudiées dans des systèmes *in vitro* de surexpression protéique transitoire et/ou dans des cellules non hépatiques.

De plus, une compréhension détaillée des mécanismes moléculaires impliqués dans la pathologie induite par le VHC est entravée par l'absence de modèles d'étude pleinement pertinents, que ce soit en culture cellulaire ou *in vivo*. Cette connaissance reste pourtant cruciale, même à l'ère des agents antiviraux directs (AAD), qui peuvent actuellement guérir plus de 95% des infections chroniques, car la clairance virale n'élimine pas toujours le risque de progression vers des lésions hépatiques graves induites par le VHC. De plus, le coût élevé des traitements ciblés et la proportion accrue d'individus infectés qui ignorent leur statut sont des facteurs restrictifs importants qui doivent réglés avant de pouvoir envisager la diminution drastique de 80% de l'incidence des nouvelles infections à VHC et de 65% de la mortalité liée au VHC, objectif fixé par l'Organisation Mondiale de la Santé à l'échelle mondiale à l'horizon 2030. Dans ce contexte et en l'absence de vaccin préventif contre le VHC, il reste important de compléter nos connaissances sur le cycle viral, les interactions du VHC avec les composants cellulaires et l'association entre la variabilité génotypique du VHC et la pathogenèse.

Une découverte prometteuse a été faite en 2014 : le séquençage d'un nouvel hepacivirus de rat, le RHV-rn1. Malgré sa forte divergence génétique par rapport au VHC, l'infection par le RHV-rn1 présente chez le rat, son hôte naturel, des caractéristiques très similaires à celles du VHC chez l'homme, incluant un hépatotropisme, une virémie persistante détectable pendant plus d'un an et de nombreux traits de la pathologie hépatique liée au VHC, tels que les microet macro- stéatose vésiculaire, agrégation lymphoïde et lésions épithéliales biliaires.

Dans la partie introductive du manuscrit de thèse, ces informations sont développées, et une revue plus générale de l'état de l'art synthétise de très nombreuses études concernant les hepacivirus humain, VHC, et animaux, notamment le RHV, les données moléculaires relatives au cycle infectieux du VHC, la pathogenèse de l'hépatite C chronique, les modèles d'étude disponibles et les interférences connues entre le VHC et l'hépatocyte hôte.

#### **Objectifs des travaux de thèse**

Notre groupe vise à élucider les interactions moléculaires entre les hepacivirus et leurs hôtes conduisant à des troubles métaboliques hépatiques. Ma thèse est ainsi composée de deux projets visant à élucider dans des systèmes d'infection pertinents les bases moléculaires de la manipulation par le VHC des voies de signalisation de l'hôte conduisant à la stéatose et au CHC, en mettant l'accent sur les effets communs et distincts de protéines du VHC d'origines génotypiques diverses.

À cette fin, un premier projet a ciblé l'identification (i) des partenaires cellulaires d'interaction (IP) des protéines Core et NS5A de virus prototypiques et de virus de différents génotypes et (ii) des voies de signalisation cellulaires spécifiquement dérégulées. Ce projet comprenait le développement de nouveaux outils viraux capables de se répliquer dans des cellules d'hépatome humain et codant les protéines Core ou NS5A dérivées de souches cliniques de différents génotypes, isolées de patients présentant divers degrés de troubles hépatiques. Ces modèles ont été utilisés pour l'étude des dérégulations transcriptomiques spécifiques de l'origine génotypique de ces protéines. La génération d'un ensemble de virus recombinants parentaux et inter-génotypiques codant les protéines Core et NS5A respectives fusionnées en phase avec un twin strep-tag (ST) a permis la purification par affinité de complexes protéiques impliquant d'une part Core et d'autre part NS5A, et la détermination de l'interactome de ces deux protéines virales.

Dans le second projet, le modèle animal de substitution immunocompétent basé sur des rats Sprague Dawley infectés par le RHV-rn1, initialement établi en 2018 par le laboratoire du Dr Amit Kapoor (Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA) a été mis en place en France grâce à son don généreux de l'ADNc de longueur génomique du RHV-rn1. Avec ce modèle, nous avons cherché à caractériser les troubles métaboliques hépatiques déclenchés par une infection chronique par le RHV, à l'aide, dans un premier temps, de cohortes de rats de taille limitée, afin d'établir une preuve de concept de l'intérêt de ce modèle de substitution pour poursuivre des études de physiopathologie, alors que d'autres groupes dans le monde l'utilisent pour des études vaccinales.

Ces deux projets font partie d'études collaboratives soutenues par l'agence ANRS MIE, qui devraient à terme contribuer à une meilleure compréhension des mécanismes moléculaires impliqués dans la stéatose et le CHC induits par le VHC en lien direct avec des facteurs viraux spécifiques et des polymorphismes génotypiques, ainsi que livrer des informations précieuses sur l'incidence de facteurs de co-morbidité et sur la persistance potentielle des perturbations métaboliques après élimination de l'hepacivirus infectant, études qui n'ont quasiment pas pu être abordées chez l'homme.

#### **Matériels et Méthodes**

Une partie détaillée de Matériels et Méthodes décrit l'ensemble des matériels disponibles au laboratoire et produits au cours de ma thèse, ainsi que toutes les approches méthodologiques que j'ai suivies au cours de ces travaux ou qui ont été mises en oeuvre sur les plateformes technologiques avec lesquelles nous avons collaboré.

#### **Résultats**

Nous avons généré avec succès par génétique inverse une série de virus recombinants fonctionnels dérivés d'une souche du génotype 2a (Jad) hautement adaptée à la culture cellulaire et codant les protéines Core ou NS5A de VHC de génotypes 1 à 4. Les séquences Core et NS5A ont été sélectionnées à partir d'isolats cliniques de patients présentant des stades connus de lésions hépatiques ou de souches prototypiques du VHC. Certains virus recombinants (codant Core) avaient été préalablement développés au laboratoire, tandis que les séquences consensus des protéines NS5A ont été établies et les virus recombinants ont été produits au cours de ma thèse après substitution de la séquence codante de NS5A au sein de l'ADNc du Jad par ces séquences de génotypes différents, puis transfection de cellules d'hépatome humain avec les ARN synthétiques correspondants produits *in vitro*. Les virus recombinants ont ensuite été caractérisés. Les virus intergénotypiques exprimant les protéines NS5A hétérologues des sous-types 1a, 1b et 2a se sont avérés hautement réplicatifs, alors que ceux exprimant les protéines NS5A des génotypes 3 et 4 ont nécessité des mutations de compensation au sein des séquences codant les protéines non structurales NS3 et NS4B afin d'aboutir à des virus hautement infectieux.

Des virus Jad recombinants exprimant les protéines Core ou NS5A parentales étiquetées par l'insertion en phase d'un "twin strep tag" (ST) ont été produits à des fins de purification des complexes protéiques impliquant ces protéines virales. Les insertions ont été réalisées près de l'extrémité amino-terminale de Core ou à l'une des deux positions identifiées dans le segment carboxy-terminal de NS5A. Pour les recombinants intergénotypiques exprimant les protéines NS5A d'autres génotypes, une seule des deux positions d'insertion était utilisable et a été sélectionnée. Dans tous les cas, l'insertion de l'étiquette a été un succès sans abroger la réplication virale, la morphogenèse ou altérer la localisation subcellulaire des protéines virales.

Les complexes protéiques ont alors été purifiés par affinité à partir de trois ou cinq réplicats biologiques issus de l'infection de cellules d'hépatocarcinome humain Huh-7.5, à l'aide de billes magnétiques recouvertes de résine StrepTactin. Les partenaires d'interaction ont été identifiés par nano-chromatographie liquide couplée à la spectrométrie de masse en tandem (Nano-LC-MS/MS). Les IP forts ont été discriminés par rapport à des contrôles non spécifiques étiquetés avec un tag V5, en ayant recours à un nouvel algorithme de notation que nous avons développé en intégrant les statistiques d'interaction par spectrométrie de masse (MiST) et l'analyse de significativité des scores INTeractome (SAINT) à notre analyse statistique initiale "label free". À l'aide des outils CytoScape et STRING, les voies de signalisation qui se sont avérées les mieux notées après enrichissement à partir des 134 IP de la protéine Core du parent Jad sont celles impliquées dans la régulation de l'expression des gènes de l'hôte. En revanche, pour les 527 IP de la protéine NS5A du parent Jad, l'enrichissement a mis en évidence les voies impliquées dans les processus métaboliques, de transport, du système immunitaire et du CHC. L'analyse comparative des interactomes déterminés pour les différentes isoformes de NS5A a révélé 96 partenaires d'interaction communs à tous les génotypes, ainsi que certains partenaires spécifiques. Nous avons en outre pu identifier certains partenaires cellulaires impliqués dans le métabolisme de la cellules hôte interagissant spécifiquement avec les protéines NS5A de sous-type 3a associées au phénotype stéatogène, ce qui corrobore l'association observée sur le plan clinique du génotype 3 du VHC avec une prévalence plus élevée de stéatose. Les données protéomiques nous ont également permis d'identifier des sites de phosphorylation connus pour le génotype 2a et utilisés différentiellement pour les protéines NS5A des différents génotypes, ainsi que deux sites sites de phosphorylation de NS5A, qui n'ont à notre connaissance encore jamais été décrits et qui mériteraient d'être explorés davantage.

Pour approfondir les données protéomiques obtenues avec Core, nous avons examiné les dérégulations transcriptomiques des cellules Huh-7.5 en réponse à l'infection par des virus recombinants intergénotypiques exprimant des protéines Core de divers génotypes. L'analyse du séquençage à haut débit de l'ARN a démontré un impact élevé de tous les virus par rapport aux cellules non infectées. Des régulations communes et différentielles par des souches et/ou des génotypes spécifiques ont été déterminées par l'analyse d'enrichissement d'ensembles de gènes. Ce travail a révélé que les gènes impliqués dans les processus métaboliques étant régulés négativement par tous les virus recombinants exprimant Core de différents génotypes et que la régulation négative de la majorité de ces gènes était plus forte quand les protéines Core exprimées étaient issues de génotypes autres que le génotype 3.

En parallèle, nous avons réussi à implémenter le modèle animal de substitution du VHC basé sur des rats Sprague Dawley infectés par le RHV-rn1, qui a révélé un taux élevé (> 90%) d'infections chroniques et de stéatose hépatique. Des analyses lipidomiques et métabolomiques pilotes comparées, avec des cohortes de taille limitée de rats chroniquement infectés par rapport à des rats non infectés ont révélé une gluconéogenèse perturbée, ainsi qu'une augmentation des esters de cholestérol et des diacylglycérides dans les foies infectés. De plus, la composition des esters de cholestérol, des acides gras libres, des diacylglycérides et des triacylglycérides s'est avérée altérée par l'infection par le RHV-rn1, avec une accumulation préférentielle de "fatty acyl chains" plus longues dans le foie des rats infectés, en accord avec des mécanismes d'altération métabolique observés pour le VHC.

#### **Conclusion et Perspectives**

En conclusion, dans les systèmes d'infection utilisés, nous avons constaté que Core et NS5A sont impliquées dans la progression des lésions hépatiques induites par le VHC de manière spécifique à la souche et/ou au génotype infectant, en dérégulant, respectivement le transcriptome de l'hôte ou en interagissant directement avec des facteurs cellulaires impliqués dans des voies de signalisation spécifiques de l'hôte. Nous avons également identifié des altérations métaboliques du foie induites par un hepacivirus au cours d'une infection chronique dans un modèle animal de substitution, ouvrant la voie à une caractérisation plus approfondie, y compris en présence de facteurs de co-morbidité de l'hôte, comme un régime alimentaire de type occidental riche en sucres et en graisses. Il est important de noter que nos observations réalisées dans le modèle animal de substitution avec un hepacivirus animal sont en accord avec celles conduites dans des cultures de cellules infectées par le VHC, validant ainsi nos résultats et mettant en évidence certaines cibles cellulaires dont nous avons entrepris d'approfondir le rôle. Il s'agit désormais d'avoir recours à des systèmes encore plus physiologiques, comme les cultures de cellules Huh-7.5 différenciées et maintenues sous hypoxie, qui recréent un environnement se rapprochant du foie. Des études transcriptomiques réalisées dans ces modèles cellulaires renforceront les données acquises au cours de ces travaux de thèse et pourraient dévoiler de nouvelles voies de signalisation d'intérêt. Nous nous concentrons également sur la validation d'une sélection de partenaires cellulaires des protéines Core et NS5A et sur la caractérisation fonctionnelle plus approfondie de ces interactions. Enfin, nous attendons des études dans le modèle animal de substitution du VHC qu'elles étayent la compréhension des mécanismes plus généralement impliqués dans le développement de la stéatopathie non alcoolique, en combinaison ou non avec l'infection virale.

## **Table of Contents**









### **Abbreviations**

### **Numerical**

2'5'OAS: 2'-5'-oligoadenylate synthase

### **A**

aa: Amino acid residue(s) ABHD5: 1-acylglycerol-3-phosphate O-acyltransferase Abs: antibodies ACACA: acetyl-CoA carboxylase alpha ACC1: acetyl-coenzyme A carboxylase 1 ACN: acetonitrile ACSL3: acyl-CoA synthetase long chain family member 3 ACSL5: acyl-CoA synthetase long chain family member 5 ADRP: adipose differentiation-related protein ALDH1A1: aldehyde dehydrogenase 1 family, member A1 ALT, GPT2: alanine amino transferase ANOVA: Analysis of variance ANXA2: annexin A2 ANXA3: annexin 3 AP: Affinity purification AP-MS: Affinity purification coucpled to mass spectrometry AP2M1: clathrin adaptor protein complex 2 APEX: ascorbic acid peroxidase Apo: apolipoprotein ARFGAP1: ADP-ribosylation factor GTPase-activating protein 1 ARFI: acoustic radiation force impulse imaging ARLD: alcohol-related liver disease AST, GOT1, GOT2: aspartate amino transferase ATGL: adipose triglyceride lipase ATP: adenosine triphosphate

### **B**

BIN1: amphiphysin II BOC: Boceprevir

### **C**

CALX: calnexin CD81: cluster of differentiation 81 Cdk1: cyclin-dependent kinase 1 CE: Cholesteryl esters CERT: ceramide transfer protein CGI-58: Comparative Gene Identification 58 CHC: chronic HCV infection CHIM(s): Controlled Human Infection Model(s) CK1a: casein kinase Ia CKII: casein kinase II

CLIA: chemiluminescence immunoassay CLND1: claudin1 COH: Free Cholesterol COPI: cargo sorting in coat protein complex I CPT1A: carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1A CsA: cyclosporin A CypA: Cyclophilin A

### **D**

D: Domain DAA(s): direct antiviral agent(s) DAB: 3,3'-diaminobenzidine DAG: diacylglycerol DAPI: 4-, 6-diamidino-2-phenylindole  $DC(s)$ : dendritic cell(s) DCV: Daclatasvir  $DEG(s)$ : differentially expressed gene(s) DGAT1: diacylglycerol O-acetyltransferase 1 DHAP: dihydroxyacetone phosphate DMEM: Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium DMV(s): double membrane vesicle(s) DPBS: Dulbecco's Phosphate Buffered Saline dsRNA: double-stranded RNA DSV: Dasabuvir DTT: dithiothreitol

### **E**

EASL: European Association for the Study of the Liver EBR: Elbasvir ECM: extracellular matrix EGF: Epidermal Growth Factor EGFR: epidermal growth factor receptor ELISA: enzyme linked immunosorbent assay EMCV: encephalomyocarditis virus EMT: epithelial mesenchymal transition EphA2: ephrin type-A receptor ER: endoplasmic reticulum ESC: embryonic stem cells ESYT1: extended synaptotagmin 1 ETC: electron transport chain

### **F**

FA: formic acid FAD: flavin adenine dinucleotide FADH2: dihydroflavine-adenine dinucleotide FAM: 6-carboxyfluorescein FAs: fatty acids FAS1: fatty acid synthetase 1

FASN: fatty acid synthase FBS: fetal calf serum FDR: false discovery rate  $FFA(s)$ : free fatty acid(s) FOXO1: forkhead box O1

### **G**

G6PD: glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase GA3P: glucose-6-phosphate GBVB: GB virus B GEQ: genome equivalent GLE: Glecarevir GLRX: glutaredoxin-1 GPC3: glypican-3 GST: glutathione s-transferase GZR: Grazoprevir

### **H**

H&E: Hematoxylin‐eosin HADH: hydroxyacyl-CoA dehydrogenase HAV: Hepatitis A Virus HBV: Hepatitis B Virus HCC: Hepatocellular carcinoma HCV: Hepatitis C Virus HCVcc: hepatitis C virus cell cuclture system HCVpp: hepatitis C virus pseudo particles system HDL: High-density-lipoproteins HEK: human embryonic kidney HIF-1α: the hypoxia-inducible factor  $1α$ HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus HMG-CoA: β-Hydroxy β-methylglutaryl-CoA HMGCR: 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl-CoA reductase HRP: 3,3'-diaminobenzidine peroxidase HSCs: Hepatic Stellate Cells HSPGs: heparan sulfate proteoglycans HVR(s): Hypervariable region(s)

### **I**

ICC-MS: immuno-competitive capture mass spectrometry ICTV: International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses IFNα: interferon alpha IL: interleukin IP: immunoprecipitation IPs: interacting partners IPSC: induced pluripotent stem cells IR: insulin resistance IRES: internal ribosome entry site IRS-1: insulin receptor substrate signaling 1

ISDR: Interferon Sensitivity Determining Region ISG: interferon-stimulated gene ITGB1: Integrin β1 IVDU: intravenous drug users

### **J**

Jad: JFH1 adapted JFH1: Japanese fulminant hepatitis strain 1

### **K**

KEGG: Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes KO: knockout

### $\mathbf{L}$

LB: Luria Bertani LBR: delta(14)-sterol reductase LBR LC-MS/MS: liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry LCS: low complexity sequence  $LD(s)$ : Lipid droplet(s) LDL: Low-density-lipoproteins LDLR: low-density lipoprotein receptor LDV: Ledipasvir lncRNAs: long noncoding RNAs LPC: Lysophosphatidylcholine LPE: Lysophosphatidylethanolamine LVP(s): Lipo-viro-particle(s)

### **M**

MAG: monoacylglycerol MAPK: mitogen-activated protein kinase MASLD: metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease MAVS: mitochondrial antiviral-signaling protein MDA5: melanoma differentiation-associated protein 5 MICOS: mitochondrial contact site and cristae organizing system MMPs: metalloproteinases MNPs: multi-nucleotide polymorphisms MR: magnetic resonance MRI-PDFF: magnetic resonance imaging proton density fat fraction mRNA: messenger RNA MS: mass spectrometry MSigDB: Molecular Signatures Database MTP: microsomal transfer protein MTTP: microsomal triglyceride transfer protein MVB: multi-vesicular bodies

### **N**

NADH: nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide hydride

NANBH: nonA, nonB hepatitis nano-LC-MS/MS: nano liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry NAP1L1: Nucleosome Assembly Protein 1 Like 1 NAP1L4: Nucleosome Assembly Protein 1 Like 4 NCCVH: National Committee for the Control of Viral Hepatitis NDUF: NADH dehydrogenase ubiquinone neo: neomycin phosphotransferase gene NF-κB: Nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells NFAT5: nuclear factor of activated T cells 5 NH3: ammonia NK: natural killer (cells) NMR: Nuclear Magnetic Resonance NP-40: octylphenoxypolyethoxyethanol NPC1L1: Niemann-Pick C1-like 1 NPHV: nonprimate hepacivirus NrHV-1, RHV-rn1: Norway rat hepacivirus 1 NrHV-2, RHV-rn2: Norway rat hepacivirus 2

### **O**

OAA: oxaloacetate OBV: Ombitasvir OCLN: occludin ORF: open reading frame ORO: Oil-Red-O OSBP: oxysterol-binding protein OXPHOS: oxidative phosphorylation

### **P**

PATL1: Protein PAT1 homolog 1 PBS-T: Dulbecco's Phosphate Buffered Saline containing 0.1% Tween-20 PC: Phosphatidylcholine PCA: protein-fragment complementation assay PCA: principal component analysis PCBP1: Poly(rC)-binding protein 1 PCCB: mitochondrial propionyl-CoA carboxylase beta chain pDC: plasmacytoid dendritic cell PE: Phosphatidylethanolamine PEG: polyethylene glycol PEP: phosphoenol pyruvate PG: Phosphatidylglycerol PHH: primary human hepatocytes PI: Phosphatidylinositol PI4KIIIα, PI4KA: phosphatidylinositol 4-kinase IIIα PI4KIIIβ, PI4KΒ: phosphatidylinositol 4-kinase IIIβ PI4P: phosphatidylinositol 4-phosphate PIB: Pibrentasvir PKA: protein kinase A PKR: protein kinase R PLAs: proximity ligation assays

PLIN1: phosphorylates perilipin 1 PLIN2: phosphorylates perilipin 2 PNPLA2: patatin-like phospholipase domain-containing proteins 2 PNPLA3: patatin-like phospholipase domain-containing proteins 3 PPARGC1A: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator 1 alpha PPARα: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha PPARγ: peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma PREB: prolactin regulatory element-binding protein PRR: pattern recognition receptors PS: Phosphatidylserine PTEN: Phosphatase and tensin homolog deleted on chromosome ten PTT: pyruvate tolerance test PTV/RTV: Paritaprevir/Ritonavir

### **R**

RAF: RAF proto-oncogene serine/threonine-protein kinase RBV: ribavirin RDH11: Retinol dehydrogenase 11 RdRp: RNA-dependent RNA polymerase RHV: Rodent hepacivirus RHVcc: Rodent hepacivirus cell culture system RIBA: recombinant immunoblot assays RIG-I: retinoic acid-inducible gene I ROS: reactive oxygen species RT: reverse transcription RT-(q)PCR, qRT-PCR: quantitative real-time PCR

### **S**

SARS-CoV-2: severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 SCARB1: scavenger receptor class B member 1 SCD: stearoyl-CoA desaturase SEC14L2: SEC14-like protein 2 siRNA: short interfering RNA SIV: Simian Immunodeficiency Virus SM: sphingomyelin SMV: Simeprevir SMYD3: Histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SMYD3 SN: supernatants retrieved following binding to Strep-Tactin beads sncRNAs: small noncoding RNAs SNPs: single-nucleotide polymorphisms SOCS3: suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 SOF: Sofosbuvir SPP: Signal peptide peptidase SR-B1: Scavenger Receptor class B type 1 SREBF2: sterol regulatory element binding transcription factor 2 SREBP1: sterol regulatory element binding protein 1 SREBP1c: sterol regulatory element binding protein-1c ST: strep tag STAT3: signal transducer and activator of transcription 3

SVR: sustained virological response SWE: dynamic shear wave transient elastography

### **T**

T2DM: type 2 diabetes mellitus TAG: triacylglycerol TAMRA: 6-carboxytetramethylrhodamine TB: tuberculosis TBK1: tank binding kinase TCA cycle: tricarboxylic acid cycle TCEP: tris(2-carboxyethyl)phosphine reducing agent TCID50: 50% tissue culture infectious dose TE: transient elastography TEL: Telaprevir TEV: tobacco etch virus TG(s): triglyceride(s) TGF-β: Transforming Growth Factor beta TIMP(s): Tissue inhibitor(s) of metalloproteinase TLR: Toll-like receptor TM(s): transmembrane segment(s) TNF-α: Tumor Necrosis Factor alpha TRAM1: translocating chain-associated membrane protein 1 TRIF: Toll/IL-1 receptor domain-containing adapter inducing IFN-beta

### **U**

UHTS: unbiased high-throughput sequencing UMP-CMPK1: monophosphate-cytidine monophosphate kinase 1 UPR: unfolded protein response UTR(s): untranslated region(s)

### **V**

VAP: vesicle-associated membrane protein-associated protein VAPA: vesicle-associated protein A VAPB: vesicle-associated protein B VEGF: Vascular endothelial growth factor VEL: Velpatasvir VLDL: Very-low-density-lipoproteins VLDLR: Very-low-density-lipoprotein receptor VOX: Voxilaprevir VST: Variance Stabilizing Transformation

### **W**

WHO: World Health Organization

### **Y**

Y2H: yeast 2 hybrid

# **List of Figures**







# **List of Tables**



# **List of Supplementary Figures**



# **List of Supplementary Tables**



### **I. Introduction**

#### **I.A Hepacivirus genus**

#### **I.A.(α)What is a hepacivirus?**

Hepacivirus is the genus of lipidated enveloped viruses with spherical virions of about 40- 75nm in diameter, which are known to infect the livers of mammals<sup>1</sup>. Hepacivirus have evolved to infect a variety of hosts including humans<sup>2</sup>, rodents<sup>3</sup>, bats<sup>4</sup>, cattle<sup>5</sup>, boars<sup>6</sup>, small primates<sup>7</sup>, possums<sup>8</sup>, shrews<sup>9</sup>, treeshrews<sup>10</sup>, squirrels<sup>11</sup>, sloths<sup>12</sup>, dogs<sup>13</sup>and horses<sup>14,15</sup>. They can also be found in nonmammalian hosts (reptiles<sup>16</sup>, amphibians<sup>17</sup>, birds<sup>16,18</sup>, sharks and other fish<sup>19,20</sup>), as well as nonvertebrates, such as ticks $21,22$  and mosquitos $23$ . No geographical restriction is evident, since hepacivirus infections have been documented worldwide<sup>24,13,9,3,16,25</sup>. However, certain of these viruses are endemic in specific regions. In most instances, they cause acute infections accompanied by liver inflammation or hepatitis. However, this is not the same in humans, as it will be described in  $\S$ I.B.( $\sigma\tau$ ).

The only known human hepacivirus was also the first to be identified in  $1989<sup>26</sup>$ : the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV has been studied widely, and our knowledge on the hepacivirus genus comes almost exclusively from studies of this virus. Therefore, the extent and limitations of shared attributes between HCV and the nonhuman hepaciviruses are still not fully uncovered, especially with respect to pathology, possible virus recombination, immune evasion, evolutionary dynamics and rate of infection.

Although HCV was the first hepacivirus to be discovered, it was not the first to emerge and is hypothesized that it has a zoonotic origin of millions of years  $ago^{27,28}$ . The foundation of this SIV/HIV (Simian Immunodeficiency Virus/Human Immunodeficiency Virus) reminiscing hypothesis lies on the geographical circulation of HCV in areas co-populated by Old World monkeys, humans, and apes. Convincing evidence to this remark is still missing, but the identification of the huge animal reservoir of hepacivirus and the study of the genetic distances and evolution among them may provide a definite answer. For the moment, multiple evidence of hepacivirus crossing over species<sup>25</sup> and even orders<sup>27,12</sup> favour the hypothesis of HCV originating from an animal hepacivirus.

#### **I.A.(β) Classification and genetic variability**

Hepacivirus are a member of the group IV in the Baltimore Classification system, with their genome consisting of a single positivestrand RNA molecule of about 10kb that encodes the structural and nonstructural viral proteins in a polyprotein format. Hepacivirus classification and evolution has been studied based on the differences found in their coding sequences, attributing them the following lineage: Riboviria; Orthornavirae; Kitrinoviricota; Flasuviricetes; Amarillovirales; Flaviviridae.

Although hepaciviruses were only discovered in the past thirty-five years, their emergence is suggested to have happened



*Table 1: Hepacivirus species recognized by ICTV and their natural host range.*

millions of years ago, resulting to their high diversity and variety of species<sup>28,10</sup>.



*Figure 1: Up-to-date phylogenetic tree of Hepacivirus genus based on complete genomes by Li et al.*29*, 2023.* 

*The figure was used according to and is protected by Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).*

The species recognised by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) and their respective natural hosts are summarized in Table 1. According to this, a single species is recognized to be infecting cattle, equine, canine, and human hosts, two species nonhuman primates, three species bats and six species rodents, while it becomes evident that a wide variety of hosts described in the previous paragraphs is missing from this list. In fact, there is an evergrowing number of nonclassified hepaciviruses, probably due to the increased discovery rate of the past years, thanks to the scientific advancements and the expanding interest in identifying surrogate animal models for HCV.

The most recent phylogenetic tree of the Hepacivirus genus has been constructed by Li et al. $\frac{29}{28}$ , as shown in Figure 1. The authors have respected the most recent ICTV classification, hence the tree branches of identified hepaciviruses without official nomenclature. Some interesting information arising from the clustering and proposed evolution of these viruses include the close proximity of HCV (Hepacivirus hominis) with the species infecting horses and dogs (Hepacivirus equi). Furthermore, in accordance with previous findings $4.25$ , the uppermost observed genetic heterogeneity across species of bat and rodent hepaciviruses tentatively renders them a highly probable initial source of transmission among mammals $\frac{27}{2}$ . However, this might simply be due to greater search in these small animal populations that are more readily accessible. Lastly, the phylogenetically most distant viruses are the nonclassified hepacivirus infecting the genetically most distant hosts, the poikilotherms, indicating that they have co-evolved with their hosts. The evolution of hepaciviruses thus seems to have followed the evolution of life.

#### **I.B Hepatitis C Virus**

#### **I.B.(α) Hepatitis C history**

Hepatitis is the medical term describing liver inflammation, often caused by viral infection. The history of human hepatitis goes back to the ancient times, with first references of a similar disease called "epidemic jaundice" being written by Hippocrates. However, the first report of hepatitis being caused by a pathogen was made in 1963, with the identification of the Australia antigen, the envelope of hepatitis B virus (HBV)  $\frac{30,31}{2}$ . HBV infection results in chronic hepatitis with severe manifestation in the liver. A decade later, the causative agent of an acute hepatitis, the hepatitis A virus (HAV), was first seen under the microscope<sup>32</sup>. One of the great differences between HAV and HBV is the method of transmission: HAV is transmitted through infected sources of water and food, while HBV is a bloodborne virus, transmitted through infected blood and its byproducts.

Following the discovery of HBV, blood screening begun, in order to eliminate the transmission of the pathogen through transfusion. However, over the following years, a high percentage of blood recipients continued to develop hepatitis. In order to exclude the probability of the blood being infected despite the screening, Dr Harvey J. Alter and his colleagues tested the blood for the presence of the Australia antigen and for cross-reactivity with HBV and HAV antibodies. In 1975, they reported receiving only negative results, giving rise to the nonA, nonB hepatitis (NANBH) $^{33}$ . In 1978, Dr Harvey J. Alter further inoculated chimpanzees with plasma or serum from patients with NANBH and observed that they developed hepatitis, concluding that NANBH is caused by a transmissible agent $34$ .

This agent was isolated and identified in 1989 by Dr Michael Houghton and his colleagues, in a clone of a cDNA library generated from the plasma of chimpanzees presenting NANBH, that cross-reacted with the serum of NANBH positive patients. This new agent was named hepatitis C virus and the NANBH was then called hepatitis  $C^{26}$ . Towards keeping the blood supply clean from both HBV and HCV and in order to be able to identify HCV carriers, Dr Houghton and his colleagues also developed a diagnostic test against HCV in 1989<sup>35</sup>.

Further significant advancements in the HCV research were made in 1997 by Dr Charles M. Rice, who, using molecular biology, achieved to clone a genome-length cDNA and recapitulated the virus life cycle following intrahepatic inoculation of cDNA-derived, synthetic RNAs, that caused chronic infection and similar manifestations in the chimpanzee study model, as those observed in humans $\frac{36}{2}$ .

However, despite the attempts to control its transmission, HCV infection remains today one of the main causes of chronic hepatitis worldwide. Chronic hepatitis C is a silent disease, that takes years to manifest its symptoms, allowing the carriers to unknowingly spread the virus. With World Health Organization (WHO) most recent report accounting for 57.8 million infections worldwide attributed to 0.8% of Earth's population, and over 280.000 annual deaths $\frac{37}{2}$ , chronic hepatitis C is a major global health problem. Due to this, the discoveries and advancements made by Drs Alter, Houghton and Rice, rightfully earned them the 2020 Nobel in Physiology or Medicine. It is, though, unfortunate that the tremendous contribution of Dr Ralf Bartenschlager in the development of HCV cell culture study systems was not equally recognized, since highly efficient HCV therapy could not have been available today without the efforts of him and his team in Germany.

Selected milestones of the HCV history, as will be presented in the following paragraphs, are illustrated in Figure 25, page - 48 -.

#### **I.B.(β) Transmission and prevention**

Like HBV, HCV is mainly transmitted parenterally, meaning through contact with infected blood. Hence, one mode of transmission is through untested blood transfusion, or unsafe medical procedures, occurring mainly in underdeveloped countries. Nowadays, injected drug use if considered to be the most common way of contracting  $HCV<sup>38</sup>$ . Although less documented, incidences of infection through sexual intercourse, during cosmetic procedures that may lead to exposed blood (e.g. tattooing, shaving at a barber's shop), after medical personnel's interaction with infected material have also been reported $\frac{39}{2}$ . Transmission from infected mother to infant during labor is also rare, but has been associated to the mother's viral load, while the risk is doubled in mothers co-infected with HCV and  $HIV_{40,41}^{40,41}$ .

Though reduced, compared to the global prevalence of the past years, the HCV burden is not alleviated, with a multitude of individuals either remaining chronically infected, or becoming infected every day. Since 2016, the WHO has adopted an HCV elimination strategy, aiming at reducing HCV incidence by 80% and HCV-induced mortality by 65% by the year 2030. This goal implies the adoption of both national and international policies and collaboration among decision makers, health care providers, scientists, and pharmaceutical companies.

In the absence of an HCV prophylactic vaccine, prevention relies solely on elimination of exposure. This can be achieved by thorough testing of donated blood for HCV and other pathogens, the sterilization of the equipment used in any medical, dental, or cosmetic intervention that could involve blood, and the appropriate training of personnel conducting it, as well as by managing the spread among the groups of intravenous drug users (IVDU). However, harm reduction is not the only way to achieve exposure management. An increase in testing, in order to identify the unaware infected individuals, and access to the available therapy (see  $\S$  I.B. $(\zeta)$ ) would help towards reduction of the infected population, hence the pool of the virus<sup>42</sup>.

Implementation of the WHO strategy has helped decrease the overall number of global active HCV infections, when compared to before the WHO strategy. However, modelling studies indicate that the reduction rate observed is not sufficient to achieve the WHO goal by 2030, with some western countries not reaching this target before 2050 and several underdeveloped countries possibly never succeeding in this endeavor $43,44$ .
### **I.B.(γ) Virus particle organization, genome, and proteins**

### I.B.γ.(i) HCV virion and structural proteins

HCV particles are comprised of the viral genome, enclosed in a nucleocapsid of no apparent symmetry, formed by the capsid protein, or Core, surrounded by a phospholipid envelope, in which the viral glycoproteins, E1 and E2, neutral lipids (cholesterol esters and triglycerides), and cellular apolipoproteins (ApoB, ApoC, ApoE, ApoM) are embedded $\frac{45-47}{45}$ (Figure 2). HCV virions are spherical, highly heterogenous particles, depending on their association or not with lipoproteins or immunoglobulins $48$ . The association of HCV with different cellular lipoproteins of diverse densities, such as low-density-lipoproteins (LDL), very-low-density-lipoproteins (VLDL) has resulted into HCV particles of a wide range of sizes (40-100nm in diameter<sup> $49$ </sup>), buoyant densities and associated components<sup>50</sup>. This heterogenous population of HCV particles has been observed in both infected cell cultures and in patient sera by electron tomography, cryo-electron microscopy, or transmission electron microscopy<sup>51,47,52</sup>, and is considered to affect HCV infectivity. Particles related to lipoproteins (lipo-viro-particles, LVPs) are more infectious and constitute the majority of blood-circulating virions $\frac{53}{2}$ . Moreover, LVP immunogenicity is reduced, due to their resemblance to cellular circulating lipoproteins, and due to the decreased accessibility of anti-E2 antibodies.



### *Figure 2: Structural organization of the HCV particle.*

*(A, B) Representative electron micrographs of particles immunocaptured with anti-E2 monoclonal antibody AR3A from the serum of an HCV-infected patient (A-B). Photos reproduced from Piver et al., 2017*<sup>52</sup> *with permission from BMJ Publishing Group Ltd (License No 5612391449360). (C) The theoretical model of the lipoviroparticle illustrating the similarities in structure and composition with serum lipoproteins. The surface glycoproteins E1 and E2, the apolipoproteins (ApoB, ApoC, ApoE) and the nucleocapsid composed of Core and viral RNA are shown. Adapted with permission from Lavie et*  al., 2015<sup>54</sup>.

### E1 and E2

Each viral envelope glycoprotein E1 and E2 consists of an amino-terminal protruding region, a transmembrane domain and a carboxyl-terminal hydrophobic region, features that in E2 are separated by an amphipathic stem helix, amounting to their computed molecular weight of 31 kDa for E1 and 70 kDa for  $E2^{55}$ . Both glycoproteins are highly glycosylated, with 4-5 Nglycosylation sites in E1 and 9-11 sites found in E2, depending on the viral genotype and/or strain (for genotypes see §I.B.δ.(ii)). Glycosylation not only protects E1 and E2 from humoral immune recognition and neutralization<sup>56</sup>, but also ensures the proper folding of the proteins, together with the disulfide bonds created by the cysteine residues present in their ectodomains<sup>57</sup>.

Of note, there are three hypervariable regions (HVR1, HVR2 and  $IgVR$ )<sup>58</sup>, differing up to 80% among HCV genotypes (see  $\S$ I.B. $\delta$ .(ii)), within the N-terminus of E2 with dual roles<sup>59</sup>. First, as exposed E2 represents an immunogenic target, HVR1, HVR2 and IgVR can function as "decoys" and hide the most conserved regions from the host immune cells, in order to protect the virus against neutralizing antibodies. Second, HVR1 is essential for recognition and attachment to the host target-cell. Despite the lack of conservation in the exact residue sequence of HVR1, the charge of the residues in certain positions and the overall conformation are maintained  $\frac{60}{6}$ . Entry in the host-cell is thought to be the result of coordinated action between E2 recognition and binding to cell receptors and E1-mediated fusion with the endosomal membrane<sup>61</sup>, as further described in  $\S$ I.B.( $\delta$ ).



*Figure 3: The structural model and 3D electron microscopy (EM) reconstruction of HCV E1E2 heterodimer.* 

*A pair of de novo designed helical hairpins (DHD15, PDB entry: 6DMA) was used to replace the transmembrane domains of E1 and E2 in order to maximize the yield of E1E2 heterodimer. Three views at different angles of the coevolution-based E1E2-DH15 structural model (low-density contour: grey mesh; high-density contour: surface) fitted into the EM reconstruction are shown. The solved structures of E2 (PDB entry: 4MWF, green), E1 (PDB entry: 4UOI, orange), and DHD15 (brown) are plotted against the EM density, revealing that a significant fraction of E1 and E2 are missing in the known crystal structures. In the high-density contour, the densities corresponding to E2, E1, and DHD15 are colored green, orange, and brown, respectively. The structural model depicts E2 hypervariable region 2 (HVR2, blue) and E1 probable fusion peptide (magenta). Figure from Cao et al., 2019*62*, with Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).*

To shape the viral envelope, E1 and E2 are arranged in heterodimers through their transmembrane domains. A resolved 3D structure of the E1-E2 dimers is only available through computational reconstruction of or in complex with neutralizing antibodies (Figure 3). Furthermore, according to computational prediction modelling, the E1-E2 dimers may form trimers (trimers of dimers) $63$ , which are stabilized by disulphide bonds, and finally adopt a conformation of twelve pentamers of trimers of dimers<sup>64</sup>.

### Core

In contrast, the 3D arrangement of Core homo-oligomers is not yet resolved. The only available nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) data come from a partial region, with Core still in complex with E1, revealing the mechanism of Core maturation through cleavage by the cellular signal peptide peptidase (SPP)<sup>65</sup>. Immature Core protein, localized at the ER, consists of 191 amino acid residues (aa), and requires a cleavage of its carboxyl-terminus in order to produce its mature, active form of 173-179 residues and 21 kDa $^{66}$ . Mature Core can be found on the surface of cytosolic lipid droplets (LDs), an association essential for viral replication and HCV particle assembly<sup>45</sup>, as illustrated in  $\S$ I.B.(ε).

Core is composed of two principal (D1, D2) and a provisional (D3) domains (Figure 4) and its amino acid sequence is highly preserved across HCV genotypes<sup>67</sup>. RNA binding and oligomerization capacity of Core lie within its N-terminal D1 domain, a flexible hydrophilic domain, further divided in three arginine-, lysine-, glycine- and proline-rich basic subdomains $68,69$ . D1 is also essential for the mediation of Core-host interactions, as described in §I.B. $\theta$ .(ii). D2 contains residues 118-177, forms two amphipathic  $\alpha$ -helices separated by a highly hydrophobic loop and is responsible for Core association to LDs. More specifically, aa 138-169 are essential for Core localization at LD surface<sup>70</sup>. Lastly, D3 is formed by the 20 C-

terminal residues of the protein, which are responsible for its retention to the ER. This region contains a sequence recognized and cleaved by SPP, allowing the maturation of Core<sup>71</sup>.



*Figure 4: HCV Core protein structural domains.* 

Figure from Strosberg et al., 2010<sup>72</sup>, *with Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC BY 3.0).*

### I.B.γ.(ii)HCV genome

HCV genome (see Figure 5 & Figure 6), similar to that of the other species of the Hepacivirus genus, consists of a positive single stranded RNA of approximately 9.6kb. The viral genome serves not only as a messenger RNA (mRNA) for the translation of all the viral proteins, but also as a matrix for the production of multiple copies of itself, during viral replication. Furthermore, one copy of the genome is allocated per virus particle, during HCV assembly. Due to its critical roles, the protection of the viral genome is of utmost importance and RNA viruses have developed strategies to protect and mask their genetic material, such as 5'-capping. No such tactic was uncovered for HCV, until the publication of Sherwood et al.<sup>73</sup>, this year, demonstrating that in  $\sim$ 75% of HCV RNA the 5'end of the genome consists of a redox-active coenzyme, the flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD), resulting in 5'-FAD capping! Importantly, the 5'-FAD cap was conserved across genotypes, was also identified *in vivo,* and was shown to inhibit HCV recognition by the innate immunity pathway of the retinoic acidinducible gene I (RIG-I).

The coding sequences of the genome (open reading frame, ORF) are framed by the 5'- and 3'- untranslated regions (UTRs), which form secondary structures and are essential for virus replication and/or assembly.

The  $5'$ -UTR is a well conserved sequence of  $\sim$ 340 nucleotides forming four stem-loops (I- $IV<sup>45</sup>$ . HCV genome replication and translation is dependent on regulatory elements found in this region. Parts of stems I and II form a pseudoknot<sup> $74$ </sup>, while stems II-IV and the first 30 nucleotides coding the capsid protein shape a type III internal ribosome entry site  $(IRES)^{75}$ . The IRES allows the docking of the small ribosomal subunit (40S) and is crucial for the initiation of viral RNA translation<sup> $76$ </sup>. Two binding sites of miR-122, a micro-RNA expressed exclusively in the liver<sup> $77$ </sup>, have been identified adjoining stem I and below stem II. Whether one of the two annealing positions is more significant than the other is still debated $78-82$ , however miR-22 binding to both positions is essential for HCV RNA stability, promotion of replication and translation. Additional annealing sites of miR-122 in NS5B and in the 3'-UTR have been reported, although their relevance is still under investigation<sup>83</sup>. Overall, the significance of miR-122 in HCV replication and translation, taken together with the liver specificity of the microRNA, could justify the strict hepatotropism of the virus.



*Figure 5: Structure of the HCV UTRs and cis-acting replication elements (CRE) that are involved in the regulation of genome translation and replication.* 

*Regions of the 5′-UTR, 3′-UTR, and CRE that bind to the ribosomal 40S subunit are highlighted in light yellow. Stem-loops (SLs) in the 5′UTR are numbered by roman numerals. The IRES includes SLs II–IV of the 5′UTR but also spans into the Core coding region. The canonical AUG start codon in SL IV of the 5′UTR is illustrated by a black dot. The 3′UTR contains the variable region, a poly(U/C) tract (U/C), and the so-called 3′X region including SLs 1, 2, and 3. The SL 5BSL3.2 in the 3′-region of the NS5B coding region is a CRE, flanked by upstream SL 5BSL3.1 and downstream 5BSL3.3. The polyprotein stop codon is located in the SL 5BSL3.4 indicated by an asterisk. Alternative reading frame start codons are shown in grey dots. Positively and negatively acting long-range RNA–RNA interactions (LRIs) are shown in green or red arrows, respectively. Selected binding sites for miR-122 are shown in blue. Binding of miR-122 within the 5′-UTR is also illustrated together with the sequence and canonical RNA secondary structure of the HCV IRES in (B). The sequence shown is from genotype 2a (J6 isolate). Length variations among HCV isolates are indicated by short horizontal dashes at nucleotide positions within Core and NS5B sequences. Figure adapted from Niepmann et al., 2020*75*, protected by Creative Commons Attribution License.*

The 3'-UTR is shorter than the 5'-UTR by approximately 100 nucleotides and is composed of three distinct domains. A low-conservation sequence of 40 nucleotides is situated directly downstream of the ORF, followed by a pyrimidine-rich sequence of about 90 nucleotides (poly-U/C) and a highly conserved sequence of 98 nucleotides, forming the 3' X-tail<sup>84</sup>. Similar to the 5'-UTR, the first domains of the 3'-UTR have been found to enhance the IRES-mediated translation<sup>85</sup>, while the second of the three stem-loop structures within the  $3'X$ -tail has been found to promote genome replication *in cis* through interaction with the loop 5B-SL3.2 present in the coding sequence of the HCV RNA-dependent RNA polymerase,  $\text{NS5B}^{\frac{86}{6}}$ .

### I.B.γ.(iii) HCV nonstructural proteins

Translation of the viral genome through the IRES within the 5'-UTR generates a polyprotein of ~3000 aa residues. The polyprotein is proteolytically cleaved simultaneously with or directly after the translation $\frac{87}{7}$ , leading to the formation of three structural (Core, E1, E2) and seven nonstructural (p7, NS2-NS5B) proteins. The structural proteins and the p7 oligopeptide are cleaved by cellular signal peptidases, while the rest of the nonstructural proteins are cleaved by the two virus-encoded proteases, NS2 or NS3/4A, as described in the paragraphs of the virus life cycle  $(I.B.(\delta))$ . The existence of an alternative ORF, overlapping with the core coding sequence at the frame  $+1$ , has been reported following computer-assisted analysis of the HCV genome<sup>88</sup>. This ORF may code for an accessory HCV protein, the alternative reading frame protein (ARFP), frameshift (F) or Core+ $1\frac{89}{2}$ . Despite the reports of anti-Core+1 antibodies present in patient sera<sup>90,91</sup>, the expression of the protein itself has yet to be verified in patients or in infected cells, allowing for scientific controversy in the field $\frac{92}{2}$ .

The structural proteins, as described in  $\S$ I.B. $\gamma$ .(i), constitute the HCV virus particles. Heterodimers of E1 and E2 are embedded into the HCV virion envelope, while the capsid protein, Core, forges the viral capsid, in which the viral genome is insulated.

The nonstructural proteins are responsible for carrying out the various steps of the HCV life cycle. Many of these proteins are involved in multiple viral processes, a multi-functionality that can by favoured by either frequent conformational changes or by alterations in the cellular microenvironment, involving a specific network of interactions with other viral and cellular partners, as described in  $\delta$ I.B. $(\theta)$ .



### *Figure 6: The HCV genome (a) and encoded proteins function and topology with respect to membrane bilayer (b).*

*(a) The ORF of HCV is illustrated between the predicted secondary structures of 5′- and 3′-UTRs, also called nontranslated regions (NTRs). Start and stop codons of the ORF are indicated by black bullets. Cleavage sites of cellular signal peptidases are indicated by scissors at the corresponding ORF position, while the cleavage removing the carboxy-terminal region of the Core, required for protein maturation, mediated by cellular signal peptide peptidase, is indicated by an asterisk. Arrows illustrate cleavage sites of the viral protease. (b) The key roles and membrane topologies of the HCV polyprotein cleavage products are shown. Each HCV protein is connected to ER membranes by at least one transmembrane segment or, in the case of Core and NS5A, by amphipathic α-helices. NS3 binds to membranes through a short α-helix and through its cofactor, NS4A, which intercalates into the NS3 amino-terminal protease domain. Only NS5A is represented as a dimer, although the vast majority, if not all, of HCV proteins form homo- or heterodimers. Figure reproduced from Bartenschlager et al., 2013*93*, with permission from Springer Nature (License No 5633130933991).*

#### Protein p7

P7 is a small polypeptide of 63 aa residues, localized in the endoplasmic reticulum (ER). P7 is a viroporin, consisting of two transmembrane  $\alpha$ -helices connected by a cytoplasmic loop. It serves as an ion channel upon oligomerization (hexamer or heptamer) and the regions forming the channel are highly conserved across genotypes) $\frac{94}{4}$ . A graphical representation of models from NMR examination of the ion channel created by p7 of genotypes 1a, 1b and 5 can be found in Figure 7. This protein is essential for the assembly and release of infectious HCV particles<sup>95</sup> and can induce cellular immune responses<sup>96</sup>.



*Figure 7: Representation of p7 viroporin models of GT1a, 1b, or 5a (from left to right) from NMR. Differences in conformation of p7 monomers forming the ion channel based on the genotypic origin of the protein are shown. Reprinted from Kalita et al., 2015*97*, with permission from Elsevier (Licence No: 5612020870723).*

### NS2

Nonstructural protein 2 (NS2) is a transmembrane protein of 217 aa residues and estimated molecular weight of 23 kDa. NS2 amino-terminus has 3 predicted transmembrane passages and a protruding end within the ER, while the C-terminal catalytic domain (aa 94–217) has cytosolic localization and forms a dimeric cysteine protease with two composite active sites (Figure 8). NS2 3D atomic structure was obtained by X-ray crystallography in  $2006\frac{98}{9}$ .

NS2 role during the virus life cycle is to self-cleave from the polyprotein at the NS2/NS3 junction and to promote the assembly of viral particles<sup>99</sup>.

### *Figure 8: Crystal Structure of the dimeric NS2 Protease Domain.*

*Monomers are in blue and red, respectively. Side chains of the residues contributing the two protease catalytic triads are shown. Reprint from Lorenz, 2010*<sup>100</sup>. *Creative Commons Attribution License.*



### NS3

NS3 is a multifunctional protein of 631 aa residues with a predicted molecular weight of 70 kDa. NS3 has two distinct domains, with two distinct roles: the N-terminal serine protease domain (aa 1–180) and the NTPase/RNA helicase domain in its C-terminal two-thirds (aa 181– 631). Those NS3 activities are crucial for the processing of the polyprotein, viral genome replication and HCV assembly<sup>101</sup>.

To form the active HCV protease, carrying out the cleavage of the peptide bonds between  $NS3/NS4A$  (autoregulation), NS4A/NS4B, NS4B/NS5A and NS5A/NS5B<sup>55</sup>, NS3 creates a noncovalent complex with its co-factor, NS4A. The amino-terminal transmembrane segment of NS4A, together with NS3 N-terminal  $\alpha$ -helix are responsible for the complex' association to ER membranes, as shown in Figure 9. NS3 protease fold resembles that of chymotrypsin, with with two β-barrel subdomains and a zinc  $(Zn^{2+})$  binding site. The latter is essential for the stabilization of the structure and for the NS2/NS3 processing by  $NS2^{102}$ . The protease catalytic triad consists of His 57, Asp 81 and Ser 139 and NS3/4A substrates are composed of an acidic residue at P6 position, a cysteine or threonine at P1 and a small side chain amino acid at the P1΄. However, cellular substrates of the protease do not always bear the consensus recognition site of the enzyme, while a plethora of host proteins with the exact consensus cleavage pattern are not cleaved by NS3/4A, indicating that additional parameters are required for determination of NS3/4A substrate specificity. Such substrates include the cellular Toll/IL-1 receptor domaincontaining adapter inducing IFN-beta (TRIF) and mitochondrial antiviral-signaling protein (MAVS), which are necessary for natural innate immune responses $\frac{101}{10}$  (see I.B. $\theta$ .(i)).

The NS3 helicase contains 3 subdomains and is a member of the DExH/D-box group of the helicase superfamily 2. Its role is to unwind double-stranded or single-stranded RNA regions with extensive secondary structure, while hydrolyzing ATP. The exact function(s) of NS3 helicase remains elusive, yet it is known to be vital for HCV genome replication and assembly $\frac{103}{2}$ . Reverse genetic analysis of NS3 surface residues have correlated alteration of conserved NS3 aa residues with decreased NS5A hyperphosphorylation (see below), genome replication and virion assembly, indicating that NS3 participates in the regulation of the HCV life cycle and its different steps $\frac{104,105}{2}$ . A recent study further showed that the ATP-binding

domain of the NS3 helicase is required for NS5A sequential phosphorylation, probably by recruiting casein kinase Ia (CKIa)<sup>106</sup>.

#### *Figure 9: NS3/4A protease structural model and topology.*

*The cytosolic side of the membrane bilayer is illustrated on the top. Green represents the N-terminal α-helix of NS3 (amino acids 13–23), cyan represents the serine protease domain, while the side-chain atoms of the catalytic triad (His 57, Asp 81, and Ser 139) are highlighted in magenta. Co-factor NS4A is shown in yellow/orange. Adapted from Brass et al., 2008*<sup>107</sup> *with permission from PNAS. Copyright 2008 National Academy of Sciences, USA.*



### NS4A

NS4A is a small protein (54 aa), which in spite of its length has multiple functions. As a co-factor of NS3, NS4A central portion (aa 21-32) is necessary for NS3 proper folding, while its N-terminal α-helix (aa 1-21) ensures integral membrane association of the NS3/4A protease. NS4A is also responsible for the regulation of NS5A hyperphosphorylation (see below) and can have an effect on HCV replication and assembly through its carboxyl-terminal portion (aa 40-54)<sup>108,109,101</sup>.

### NS4B

NS4B is a hydrophobic protein of 27kDa and 261 aa in length. NS4B structure, as shown in Figure 10A, is composed of an N-terminal domain of  $\sim$ 70aa forming two consecutive  $\alpha$ helices (AH1 and AH2), a middle potion of ~120aa with 4 transmembrane segments (TMs), and a C-terminal domain ( $\sim$ 70aa) similar to amino-terminus, with two  $\alpha$ -helices (H1 and  $H2)$ <sup>110</sup>.

NS4B has been found to induce the formation of the membranous web $\frac{111}{11}$ , the site of HCV RNA replication (see §I.B.ε.(iii)) and to interact with other viral nonstructural proteins and  $RNA<sup>112</sup>$ , highlighting its role in HCV replicase. The N-terminus of NS4B may adopt two different topologies, either a cytosolic, or an ER luminal. Its orientation has been found to be affected by the expression of other viral proteins, especially NS5A, proposing a dynamic, protein-protein-interaction-dependent topology of NS4B AH1 and  $AH2<sup>113</sup>$ . NS4B has further been reported to oligomerize, alterations of which are inhibiting membranous web formation and viral genome replication $\frac{114,115}{110}$ , while it is also important for HCV particle assembly  $\frac{116}{110}$ .

Apart from the virus life cycle, NS4B A may also favor HCV immune evasion by interaction with STING protein, further hindering the interaction of STING with Cardif, therefore suppressing the RIG-I induced IFN-b pathway<sup>117</sup>.

## *Figure 10: HCV NS4B N-terminus has dual topology. Illustrations of the (A) cytosolic and the (B) ER membrane topology.*

*The predicted transmembrane segments (TMs) of the protein are shown as grey cylinders. Figure reprinted from Gouttenoire, 2014*<sup>110</sup>. *Creative Commons Attribution License.*



## NS5A

NS5A is a membrane-associated protein of ~460 aa residues, with an N-terminal amphipathic  $\alpha$ -helix (AH), three domains (DI-DIII), and two intermediate low complexity sequences (LCSI and LCSII) (for review, Ross-Thriepland & Harris,  $2015^{118}$ ). Via its AH, NS5A is predominantly embedded in the cytosolic leaflet of the ER or ER-derived membranes. NS5A has no known enzymatic activity, but has been found to be involved in several steps of the virus life cycle, rendering it a perfect example of viral genetic economy.

Functional NS5A is a homodimer generated by the interaction of their DI domains, the most conserved region of NS5A across genotypes, whose crystal structure was first resolved in  $2005\frac{119}{10}$ . DI has the ability to bind RNA and, in this original structural model reported, an RNA binding groove was formed at the interface of the DI monomers $120$ . However in a NS5A crystal structure solved later, the previously hypothesized RNA binding residues were located within two flat surfaces that were further apart<sup>121</sup>. NS5A RNA binding capacity is actually not restricted *in vitro* to DI and the essentially disordered DII and DIII have also been reported to bind  $RNA<sup>122</sup>$ . NS5A DI is involved in virus replication and can induce re-arrangements of the ER membrane to form the HCV replication factories (see I.B. $\varepsilon$ . (iii)) $\frac{123,124}{123,124}$ . The reported existence of different NS5A DI dimer conformations is suggestive of distinct NS5A roles during HCV life cycle, an attribute further supported by the proposed mechanisms of action of NS5A-targeted therapeutic small molecules (see I.B.ζ.(ii)).

DII is largely dispensable for HCV replication, although specific residues in its C-terminus are essential for this process $\frac{125,126}{5}$ . NS5A was found to interact with Cyclophilin A (CypA), which catalyses the cis/trans isomerization of peptidyl-prolyl bonds within domain II of NS5A (P319 for subtype 1b and P315 for type 2a), stimulating NS5A binding to the 3'UTR of HCV genome<sup>127</sup>. NMR experiments have revealed that CypA may influence HCV genome replication efficiency by fine-tuning the dynamic ensemble of the disordered  $DII^{128}$ , while also revealing evidence of three α-helices formation near the NS5A carboxyl-terminus, when expressed together with the low complexity sequences<sup>129</sup>. DII also contains a 39-residue region called Interferon Sensitivity Determining Region (ISDR), which is considered to suppress the activation of cellular protein kinase R (PKR), conferring interferon-resistance to  $HCV^{\frac{130}{2}}$ . Intriguingly, the most conserved region of DII among the most well-studied HCV subtypes 1b and 2a is also located at its C-terminal part. However, despite the high conservation, mutational analysis of these amino acids revealed different phenotypes for these viruses, possibly reflecting differential protein–protein interactions of NS5A proteins of this genotypic origin with factors involved in the virus life cycle $131,132$ .

NS5A LCSII of all genotypes contains a PxxPxR motif, allowing the protein to interact with cellular Src homology 3 (SH3)-domain-containing proteins, such as amphiphysin II (BINI). Amino acid substitutions within this motif abolished PxxPxR/SH3 interactions in a subgenomic replicon system $\frac{133}{2}$ , and were found to have no effect on genome replication or virion assembly, while they inhibited the activation of a pro-apoptotic potassium channel (Kv2.1) in response to oxidative stress, highlighting a putative role of NS5A in establishing viral persistence<sup>134</sup>.



**Nature Reviews | Microbiology** 

## *Figure 11: Illustration of the full-length NS5A dimer associated with a phospholipid membrane and a more detailed representation of the NS5A DI dimer structure according to data published in Love et al., 2009*<sup>121</sup> (PDB accession 3FQQ) (b) and in Tellinghuisen et al., 2005<sup>120</sup>.

*Each monomer (lilac or cyan) consists of the N-terminal amphipathic α-helix (AH; Protein Data Bank (PDB) accession 1R7E), the highly structured domain 1 (DI; PDB accession 1ZH1) — which is shown in position relative to a 1-palmitoyl-2-oleoyl-3-sn-glycero-3-phospholcholine membrane bilayer, according to data published in Tellinghuisen et al., 2005* <sup>120</sup>*— and the intrinsically unfolded DII and DIII. A surface representation of cyclophilin A (CypA) in complex with cyclosporin A (CsA) is shown on the upper left (PDB accession 1CWA), while a putative structure for CypA and its main binding site in NS5A DII is shown on the upper right. (a) The left images of panels b and c illustrate side views, and the right images show views of the putative membrane-interacting surface of DI homodimers. The respective positions of mutations conferring resistance to NS5A inhibitors are shown. Mutation of Pro58 has been associated with secondary daclatasvir resistance, but does not confer resistance by itself*<sup>135</sup>*; this residue is shown to distinguish the alternative monomer orientations in the different homodimer structures. The structure of the NS5A targeting antiviral daclatasvir (see I.B.ζ.(ii)), shown by stick representation in scale, is also added. Figure reproduced from Bartenschlager et al., 2013*<sup>93</sup>*, with permission from Springer Nature (License No 5633130933991).*

NS5A DIII has no significant role in HCV genome replication, but is indispensable for efficient virus assembly. Mutational analysis revealed that deletion of small region within DIII and mutation of a single serine residue within this region in particular, serine 457, can abrogate HCV virion assembly at early assembly stages<sup>136</sup>.

Moreover, NS5A is a phosphoprotein existing in two forms, a basally- and a hyperphosphorylated one, with corresponding molecular weights of 56kDa and 58kDa, respectively<sup>137</sup>. NS5A basal-phosphorylation determinants cluster mainly in DII and DIII, while hyperphosphorylation is targeting a serine rich cluster within LCSI. This latter highly conserved cluster contains eight serine residues, six of which have been identified by mass spectrometry as phosphorylation sites: S222, S225, S229, S232, S235 and S238 (see Figure 12). Phosphorylation of NS5A is mediated by several cellular kinases, but the two best characterized are CKIa and casein kinase II (CKII). CKIa is primarily responsible for NS5A hyperphosphorylation, while CKII phosphorylates residues within DII and DIII representing the basal phosphorylation of the protein<sup>138</sup>. CKII in particular is known to phosphorylate serine 457 (S457), within NS5A DIII, leading to augmented infectious HCV particle production. S457-phosphorylated NS5A is mainly recruited to low density membrane structures around LDs and has been associated with Core/NS5A interaction $\frac{139}{2}$ .



*Figure 12: NS5A protein domain organization with a focus on positions of key interactions with cellular protein (top) and phosphorylation sites (bottom).* 

*The protein-protein interaction sites highlighted include the tetracysteine zinc-coordination motif (Tellinghuisen et al., 2005*120*), specific residues implicated in daclatasvir (DCV) resistance (Fridell et al., 2010*135*), the reported lipid droplet-binding motif (Miyanari et al., 2007*140*), PI4KIIIα-binding motif (Reiss et al., 2013*<sup>141</sup>*), the binding site of Cyclophilin A (Hanoulle et al., 2009*<sup>142</sup>*) and P2 polyproline SH3-binding motif (Hughes et al., 2009*133*). Previously reported phosphorylation sites that have been determined by mass spectrometry (in red), or predicted phosphorylation sites based on genetic evidence in the absence of any biochemical data (in blue) are also shown for NS5A sequences of genotype 1b (J4 isolate, GenBank accession number AF054250, upper sequence) and genotype 2a (JFH-1 isolate, GenBank accession number AB047639, lower sequence). Figure reproduced from Ross-Thriepland & Harris, 2015*<sup>118</sup> *, permission conveyed by Copyright Clearance Center, Inc (License ID 1403228-1).*

Both pulse-chase and mutational studies have shown that basal and hyper-phosphorylation of NS5A occur only after the proteolytic NS4B/NS5A and NS5A/NS5B cleavages are completed, indicating that NS5A phosphorylation in general is dependent on correct cleavage and/or NS5A protein structure $\frac{143-145,137}{2}$ . NS5A hyperphosphorylation is the result of sequential phosphorylation of residues within DI, LCSI and DIII. More specifically, phosphorylation of S457 is considered to be a prerequisite towards the modification of other phospho-acceptors involved in p58 NS5A generation<sup>136</sup>, while phosphorylation of S146 in DI is also considered to promote NS5A hyperphosphorylation in genotype 2 HCV strains. Within LCSI, the sequence of phosphorylation by CKIα is hypothesized to commence by NS3-mediated recruitment of the kinase and phosphorylation of S225<sup>106</sup>. Subsequent phosphorylation of S229 triggers the phosphorylation of  $S232$ ,  $S235$ , and  $S238<sup>146</sup>$ . A negative feedback loop starts with the phosphorylation of S235, signaling dephosphorylation of S229, putting a pause to the hyperphosphorylation cascade $\frac{147}{12}$ . Mutational analysis of these serine residues in NS5A proteins of genotype 1, 3, 4, and 5 revealed that S>A mutation reduces p58 and enhances HCV genome replication<sup>148</sup>, while, surprisingly, the same mutations decreased both hyperphosphorylation and viral replication in genotype 2 strains<sup>149-152,146</sup>. These mutations, however, did not affect NS5A phosphorylation but rather resulted in reduced activation of the lipid kinase phosphatidylinositol 4-kinase IIIα (PI4KIIIα), whose overactivation was shown to be detrimental to viral replication<sup>153</sup>. Recently, S229, S232 and S238 phosphorylation was also found to regulate DI-mediated NS5A dimerization and HCV genome translation<sup>154</sup>. Furthermore, a threonine-rich cluster downstream of LCSI was found to also affect p56/p58 balance<sup>155</sup>.

Each of p56 and p58 forms are considered to regulate either HCV genome replication or assembly. Inhibition of basal NS5A phosphorylation in DII and/or DIII had no evident effect on HCV RNA replication $\frac{148}{12}$ , but reduced HCV virion production, while mutagenesis in DIII reduced Core/NS5A interaction $\frac{139}{12}$ . These data, together with the findings by Secci et al. $\frac{138}{5}$ , indicate that basal NS5A phosphorylation is essential for HCV assembly. On the other hand, the functions of hyperphosphorylated NS5A are a subject of controversy. Phosphorylated S222 (pS222) and p58 in general are considered negative modulators of HCV genome replication<sup>156,157</sup>, while other researchers claim that pS235 promotes the formation of HCV replication complex<sup>151</sup> and is essential for HCV RNA replication<sup>158</sup> and Goonawardane et al.<sup>159</sup> report no direct effect of NS5A hyperphosphorylation on virus genome replication.

A collective conclusion could be that p56/p58 balance might function as a regulatory switch between RNA replication and virion assembly, with different effects for strains of various genotypic origins. Because of this intricacy, the experimental characterization of the diverse NS5A functions is extremely challenging. Although the exact mechanisms for this multifunctionality of NS5A remain unknown, recent evidence show that the NS5A phosphovariants interact with distinct host cell components<sup>160</sup>.

### NS5B

The last protein to be encoded in the HCV polyprotein format is the RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp), NS5B. NS5B consists of 591aa and has an estimated molecular weight of 66 kDa. The N-terminal 530 aa of the enzyme form its catalytic domain, which is linked by 40 aa with the carboxyl-terminal membrane anchor α-helix of the protein (aa 570-591)<sup>161</sup>. HCV RdRp is responsible for the synthesis of positive HCV RNA strands, as well as of the intermediate negative copies<sup>162</sup>.

Similar to the RdRps of the other member of the Flaviviridae family, HCV NS5B comprises a highly conserved GDD motif in its catalytic domain and an overall structure of subdomains resembling a right palm with fingers and a thumb $163$  (Figure 13). The enzyme's active center is represented by the palm, while the thumb and fingers regulate the interaction with the viral RNA substrates $\frac{164}{1}$ .

Due to its crucial role in HCV replication, NS5B constitutes the perfect target for anti-viral drugs (see §I.B.(ζ) for more information).

### *Figure 13: Illustration of the full-length NS5B (Protein Data Bank accession 1GX6) and its topology with respect to a membrane bilayer via its C-terminal transmembrane tail.*

*The finger, thumb and palm subdomains are indicated, with the β-loop shown in orange. The C-terminal linker sequence (grey) links the enzyme's core to the membrane insertion anchor (magenta). Two priming nucleotides (yellow) highlight the active site. The RNA-binding groove is masked in this predicted closed conformation by the NS5B ectodomain, which stacks to the membrane. Figure reproduced from Bartenschlager et al., 2013*<sup>93</sup>*, with permission from Springer Nature (License No 5633130933991).*



#### **I.B.(δ) Heterogeneity and Prevalence**

#### I.B.δ.(i) HCV Global Prevalence

HCV infection constitutes a pandemic spread across all continents. However the burden of hepatitis C is unevenly distributed across and within continents, geographic regions and countries. HCV prevalence is low in the developed countries of Europe and North America, while the higher percentages of highly affected countries are located within Asia and Africa, as shown in Figure 14A. Since 2015, and stably every year, the countries with the highest HCV distribution have been Pakistan, China, and India, with almost 10, over 8 and over 5 million chronic infections recorded, respectively (Figure 14B).

Until 2016, the country following these three in total number of infections was Egypt, which in 2008 had the highest global prevalence of HCV in percentage (15% of Egypt population was HCV seropositive). Now, despite Egypt still being in the top 20 countries in total number of infections, the national HCV prevalence has been decreased to below 0.4%, nominating it one of the few countries that might actually achieve the goals set by WHO for 2030. Egypt's success story relies on important initiatives embraced by the government, such as the establishment of the National Committee for the Control of Viral Hepatitis (NCCVH) in 2006, the launch of the national treatment program with direct antiviral agents (DAAs) in 2014 and the adoption of a national screening program in 2018. These efforts, however, would not have prospered without the significant contribution of pharmaceutical companies developing the highly efficient and extremely expensive DAA drugs against HCV (see  $\S$ I.B. $(\zeta)$  for virus treatment options). In an unprecedented token of humanity, John Martins, the then CEO of Gilead, the big pharma in charge of production and distribution of these new drugs, accepted not only to distribute the pills in almost  $1/100<sup>th</sup>$  of the initial price to low-income sub-Saharan African countries, but also to waive patent protection of the product in the area, allowing other companies to manufacture and distribute the therapy at the same low price. Overall, the example of Egypt shows that HCV elimination is achievable in a welfare state with the coordinated efforts of all actors responsible and benevolence as a guide (for a review see Waked,  $2022_{165}^{165}$ ).

#### I.B.δ.(ii) HCV heterogeneity and distribution

Isolation of the virus from around the globe and analysis of its genomic sequence revealed substantial nucleotide sequence variability throughout the viral genome. This evolutionary advantage of RNA viruses usually arises from exerted pressure by the host's immune system and the combination of high replication rates of the viral genome, together with errors made by the RdRp lacking a proofreading capacity $\frac{166}{10}$ . The mutation rate introduced by HCV NS5B per replicative cycle is estimated at  $3.5x10^{-5167}$ .



*Figure 14: HCV viremic prevalence (A) and top 20 countries/territories with most HCV infections (B) in 2023.* 

*Adapted from CDA Foundation's Polaris Observatory; 2023 [updated Aug 21 2023]. Available from https://cdafound.org/polaris/ (Accessed 24/08/2023).*

In the interest of organisation and simplification of future epidemiological and phylogenetic studies of HCV, Simmonds et al. proposed an HCV classification system in 1994. According to this system, variants with analogous sequences were grouped together in "genotypes", while groups of variants with more similar sequences within these genotypes were grouped into individual "subtypes"<sup>168</sup>. The adopted nomenclature followed the chronological order of discovery, staring with the classification of the strain identified by Choo et al., in 1989<sup>26</sup> in genotype 1, subtype a, or subtype 1a. The strains considered for classification of a novel geno- or sub-type have some common characteristics, such as formation of a distinct phylogenetic group, representation by at least three isolates of unrelated epidemiology and absence of recombination (see I.B.δ.(iv)). Today, HCV is classified in 8 genotypes, differing by 30% or more among each other, and 93 recognized subtypes, with a nucleotide sequence divergence below 15% among the members of each subtype<sup> $169,170$ </sup> (Figure 15). The genotypic and subtypic differences among the different HCV strains are defined within the conserved sequences of the 5'-UTR, the 98 nucleotides of 3'-UTR, the Core or the NS5B coding sequences<sup>169</sup>.

In contrast to these conserved sequences, the viral genome also comprises some sequences of high variability, such as those encoding the hypervariable region 1 (HVR1) within E2 amino terminus and NS5A $\frac{171}{12}$ . NS5A varies up to 50% at the nucleotide level and by  $\sim$ 20 aa residues in length, notably in DII-III. Interestingly, NS5A AH, DI, DII and LCSI are all indispensable for HCV genotype 1-7 genome replication, while mutations in LCSII and deletions in DII and DIII have been found to cause genotype-specific effects, such as reduced RNA replication and/or viral titers, indicating functional diversity among the NS5A protein of diverse genotypic





*Figure 15: Phylogenetic tree of the 93 identified HCV strains as of March 2022.*  Figure from International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses<sup>169</sup>. CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

Matching the imbalanced distribution of HCV infections across the globe, genotype and subtype distribution also varies, as shown in Figure 16. Genotypes 1-3 circulation is not restricted, while genotypes 4-7 are mostly found in distinct geographical areas of the African and Asian WHO region<sup> $173$ </sup>. Genotype 8 was identified only 5 years ago in the plasma of four patients originated from Punjab, India<sup> $174$ </sup>. Almost half of the global infections occur by strains of genotype 1, while genotype 3 is the second most prevalent $\frac{175}{2}$ .



*Figure 16: Global distribution of HCV genotypes.* 

*Figure from Cuypers et al, 2016*<sup>176</sup>*, with permission from John Wiley and Sons (License No 5615300718825).*

## I.B.δ.(iii) HCV quasi-species

The same mechanisms that are responsible for HCV evolution and genotypic divergence, i.e. high replication rates, NS5B introduced mutations and pressure by host immunity, are also liable for the development of a high number of close related, yet distinct HCV RNA sequences within one host, called "quasi-species". This term was first introduced in 1977 in an attempt to mathematically model and predict the evolutionary process of primitive life forms<sup>177</sup>. Since then, it has been found and extensively studied in viruses, which usually differ by no more than 1-3%. The sequences of the different quasi-species found in an organism verge to a consensus sequence, which may, at times, be nothing but a nonexistent, averaged creation of the alignment of the different mutated sequences.

The accumulation of these mutation might have either a detrimental or an evolutionary advantageous effect on the virus. If the mutations occur in genomic sequences of great value for viral functions (e.g. replication, translation, particle production), or if the mutation rate is increased, deficient genomes are produced. Intracellular accumulation of deficient genomes has been shown for other viruses to be attenuating, either due to the inability of the virus to retain genetic information or due to increased probability of the viral genome to be sensed by the immune system (reviewed in Domingo et al.,  $2005^{178}$  and Bordería et al.,  $2016^{179}$ ). On the other hand, a few mutation in less conserved sequences may increase the adaptation of the virus and provide an escape mechanism from immune sensing  $\frac{180}{180}$  and antiviral factors  $\frac{181}{180}$ . Furthermore, this attribute of HCV increases the difficulty in vaccine development attempts.

#### I.B.δ.(iv) Natural HCV recombination

HCV evolution is additionally promoted by viral recombination, i.e. the formation of chimeric viruses comprising genomic sequences of distinct phylogenetic origin. HCV recombination was first reported in 2002. Today, 14 natural HCV recombinants have been reported bearing sequences of either different HCV genotypes (intergenotypic recombination) or of different HCV subtypes (intragenotypic recombination).

A necessary event for recombination to occur is a simultaneous infection of a host-cell with two different viral strains. For some RNA viruses, HCV included, infected cells have been shown to become refractory to subsequent infection of the same or related virus species (superinfection exclusion)<sup>182</sup> severely limiting the possibility of finding two viruses in the same cell. Nonetheless, superinfection has been detected in HCV patients receiving blood donation, undergoing haemodialysis, organ transplantation or using drugs intravenously<sup>183-185</sup>. In vitro studies have further demonstrated that HCV co-infection of a cell is possible when it is simultaneous, while a pre-infected cell is resistant to another infection<sup>186</sup>. Additionally, 18% of chronically infected patients have been found to host recombinant viruses 187.

Most of the natural HCV chimeras include sequences of genotype 2 genetic origin, suggesting the putative existence of genotype-specific elements that could stabilize or favor the functionality of recombinant viruses. The process of recombination takes place during the simultaneous replication of two viral genomes, as the RdRp exchanges RNA matrices in frame, leading to the formation of complementary hybrid strands<sup>188</sup>. Usually, the recombination occurs at the NS2/NS3 junction, resulting in a replication-necessary fraction of one strain/genotype and a structural fraction of another<sup>189</sup>. This is also the case for the only actively circulating chimera, encoding the structural genes of a subtype 2k strain and the nonstructural genes of a subtype 1b strain. This virus has been isolated from patients in Austria<sup>190</sup>, Georgia<sup>191</sup>, the Netherlands<sup>192</sup>, Cyprus<sup>193</sup>, France<sup>194</sup>, Uzbekistan<sup>195</sup> and Ireland<sup>196</sup>. Interestingly, all the circulating 2k/1b chimeras have originated from the same strain, identified in 2002 in St Petersburg<sup>197</sup>.

For the time-being, HCV chimeras are being characterized and studied, but not classified, since this would require identification of the exact junction point between the two strains combined in each chimera<sup>171</sup>.

### **I.B.(ε) Virus life cycle**

Although significant advancements have been made in the characterization and resolution of crucial steps of the HCV life cycle, certain aspects remain elusive. A simplified view of the main steps of the viral life cycle is illustrated in Figure 17. HCV entry, genome translation, formation of the replication factories, genome replication and particle assembly are described in the following paragraphs with an emphasis on the roles of lipids in these steps.

#### I.B.ε.(i) HCV entry in hepatocytes

As a hepacivirus, the main target of HCV are the liver cells. Following HCV parenteral transmission, as described in I.B.(β), viral particles circulating in host's blood may cross the endothelium of the hepatic sinusoid cells and end up in the space of Disse. There, HCV particles are exposed to the basolateral pole of hepatocytes and can infect them through the "cell-free" HCV entry process. However, viral persistence is also achieved thanks to cell-tocell transmission of HCV from an infected hepatocyte to adjacent ones. The cell-free HCV entry will be described below, while highlighting the common and discrete aspects with comparison to cell-to-cell transmission.

HCV entry consists of three key steps: (1) viral attachment to the hepatocyte, (2) cellular receptor-mediated endocytosis of the viral particle, and (3) endosomal fusion for the release of the viral genome (Figure 18).

As described in §I.B.γ.(i), HCV particles circulating in the bloodstream are coupled to lipoproteins, hence the low-density lipoprotein receptor  $(LDLR)<sup>198</sup>$ , glycosaminoglycans such as heparan sulfate proteoglycans (HSPGs) $\frac{199}{2}$  and Scavenger Receptor class B type 1 (SR-B1) $\frac{200}{2}$ have been found to contribute to viral attachment. Additionally, cholesterol transporter Niemann-Pick C1-like 1 (NPC1L1) has also been found to be involved in HCV entry, although

its exact role remains evasive $\frac{201}{10}$ . These factors are likely contributing to cellular HCV transmission as well<sup>202</sup>. SR-B1 seems to be promoting a modification of the lipid profile of the LVP, allowing the interaction of SR-B1 with the HVR1 of E2, further exposing the domain of E2 interacting with cluster of differentiation 81 (CD81). E2 interaction with CD81 and epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) leads to translocation from the hepatocyte basolateral membrane to the tight junctions and association of CD81 to tight junction protein claudin1  $(CLDN1)<sup>203</sup>$ , while occludin (OCLN) is also essential for HCV entry<sup>204</sup>. Other host factors, such as protein kinase A (PKA) and ephrin type-A receptor 2 (EphA2), are also known to promote this association, both in cell-free and cell-to-cell related HCV entry $\frac{205,206}{20}$ . However, CD81 presents an example of a factor that is not essential for cell-to-cell transmission $\frac{207}{1}$ .



**Trends in Microbiology** 

*Figure 17: Main steps of HCV life cycle and targets of therapeutic regimes. Reprinted from Pietschmann & Brown, 2019*<sup>208</sup>*, with permission from Elsevier (License No: 5614301403047).*

Viral internalization is dependent on plasma membrane rearrangements, leading to clathrin-mediated HCV endocytosis. Cellular factors, namely phosphatidylinositol 4-kinases type III alpha (PI4KIIIα) and beta (PI4KIIIβ) have been suggested to affect membrane remodelling and HCV trafficking during entry in a genotype-specific manner<sup>209</sup>. Following endocytosis, E2 and E1 heterodimerize promoting fusion between the viral envelope and the endosomal membrane. The viral fusion is promoted by acidification of the endosomal lumen by V-type ATPases, while the endosomes containing the virus are transported into the cell by cellular microtubules. Cellular factors, such as EGFR and EphA2 may also contribute to HCV fusion $\frac{205}{5}$ . Lastly, the virus capsid disassembles, and releases the viral RNA in the cytoplasm, allowing the initiation of translation and replication.



*Figure 18: Schematic representation of the HCV LVP "cell-free" entry process from cell attachment to genome cytoplasmic release.* 

*Interaction with cellular glycosaminoglycans (GAG), LDLR and SR-BI, promotes HCV binding to CD81 and EGFR activation (1). HCV/CD81 coupled to EGFR are translocated to the tight junctions, where CD81 interacts with claudin1 (CLDN1). Internalization is completed by clathrin-mediated endocytosis (3-4), while the viral genome is released in the cell via a pH-dependent membrane fusion mechanism, mediated by the viral glycoproteins E1 and E2 (4). Figure adapted from Colpitts et al., 2020*210*. Creative Commons Attribution License.*

#### I.B.ε.(ii)HCV genome translation

Upon release in the cytoplasm, the  $(+)$ ssRNA genome of HCV serves directly as an mRNA to produce the viral polyprotein. As described above, the 5'-UTR of HCV forms an IRES, allowing the docking of the 40S subunit of the ribosome $\frac{211}{1}$ . Towards ribosome assembly, the cellular factors eIF2, eIF3 and RNA initiation factors (tRNA) are required  $212$ . These are successively recruited to the IRES. Binding of miR-122, as previously described, initiates the recruitment of translation initiator factors eIF2 and eIF3. The pre-initiation complex (48S) is formed by eIF3 and eIF2 in complex with the methionine-tRNA and a guanosine triphosphate (GTP) molecule. The 80S functional ribosome is formed by the recruitment of the 60S ribosomal subunit, following the hydrolysis of eIF2-GTP and eIF5B-GTP by eIF5. During this process eIF2 and eIF3 disassociate from HCV IRES<sup>213,214</sup>. Met-tRNA is then placed at the P ribosomal position, signaling the initiation of protein elongation.

The N-terminal part of the viral polyprotein is directed to endoplasmic reticulum (ER) lumen by four signal peptides present within C-E1-E2-p7 coding sequences. There, the polyprotein is subjected in meta-translational modifications, towards release of functional HCV proteins. It is co-translationally cleaved by cellular signal peptidases (SP), catalysing the cleavage at Core/E1, E1/E2, E2/p7, and p7/NS2 junctions. NS2 self-cleaves at the junction with NS3, the release of which initiates its serine protease activity. NS3, while still C-

terminally associated with its cofactor NS4A, cleaves sequentially the NS5A/NS5B, NS4B/NS5A, and NS4A/NS4B junctions. The NS4B/NS5A cleavage site in particular seems to be cleaved in two paces, either rapidly, attested by the early detection of NS4A/NS4B precursors, or more slowly, with a half-life of  $\nu$ -1h, supported by the detection of a stable NS4A/NS4B/NS5A<sup>55,215</sup>.

Released mature viral proteins are retained at the ER through a process mediated by geranylgeranyl pyrophosphate, a product of cholesterol biosynthetic pathway whose role in the association of HCV proteins with the membranes is largely dependent on cellular fatty acid contents of the cell $216,217$ . HCV ER-integrated envelope proteins are in the ER lumen, the nonstructural proteins are oriented towards the cytosolic face, while Core and NS5A are not solely localised in the ER. Core requires an additional cleavage of its transmembrane segments retaining it at the ER, by cellular SPP, towards protein maturation. Mature Core is mainly found in association with cytosolic  $LDs^{\frac{1}{2}}$ . Lipid droplets are lipid storage organelles consisting of a hydrophobic core of neutral lipids and cholesterol esters, surrounded by a monolayer of phospholipids. Core localization at the LD surface is a prerequisite for assembly of virions<sup>218</sup>. NS5A has a peculiar subcellular localization and can either remain anchored at the ER, in order to assist HCV genome replication, or be found in close proximity to LDs, probably to further HCV particle assembly (for review see He et al.,  $2006\frac{219}{21}$ ).

## I.B.ε.(iii) Formation of the HCV replication factories

Viral replication is the next stage of the viral life cycle. HCV transcription and replication take place in a "replication niche", within the membranous web. The membranous web is generated by HCV-induced remodelling of the ER, forming mainly double membrane vesicles (DMVs). These alterations have been described within hepatocytes from either patients or chimpanzees infected with HCV and constitute typical replication sites of  $(+)$ RNA viruses $\frac{220}{2}$ .

Their formation confers a micro-environment protected from RIG-I and MDA5 (melanoma differentiation-associated protein 5) immune system sensing  $221$ , nucleases, and proteinases $\frac{222}{1}$ , in which the local concentration of the factors necessary for HCV genome replication is increased, further boosting RNA replication efficiency. Moreover, this spatial separation of viral proteins and cellular components may aid in the coordination of the different stages of the viral cycle.

The exact mechanisms of the membranous web biogenesis are undetermined, yet kinetics of DMV formation has been correlated with HCV RNA replication during cell infection. The expression of NS3-NS5B subgenomic replicon (see §I.B.η.(i)) has been found sufficient to induce these alterations in ER organization<sup>223</sup>. Experiments of independent expression of each nonstructural protein have shown that NS4B alone can cause the formation of a membrane network resembling that observed in infected cells. However, NS4B was found to provoke the formation of single-membrane vesicles instead of DMVs. On the other hand, although not highly efficient, NS5A alone could lead to the appearance of DMV structures  $220$ , while mutagenesis and/or deletion of NS5A α-helix and possibly DI would abrogate DMVs formation, in the context of NS3-NS5B expression without RNA replication<sup>124</sup>. Importantly, if the cleavage of the polyprotein at the NS4B/NS5A junction is too fast or if the synthesis of the NS4B-NS5A precursor is prevented (e.g. insertion of an IRES), the formation of DMVs is reduced or completely perturbed, respectively, demonstrating the importance of the NS4B/NS5A precursor in the DMV biogenesis $\frac{124}{2}$ . This study by Romero-Brey et al. also highlighted the role of NS3 in this process. Furthermore, the observed compensatory mutations in the NS5A coding sequence, in response to mutations introduced into the sequence of NS4B, suggest a further coordinated role between these two proteins $\frac{224,110}{ }$ .

Nevertheless, the effect of viral protein expression in ER rearrangement is bolstered by cellular factors. The most well described roles of host proteins aiding DMV formation are those of the prolactin regulatory element-binding protein (PREB), and a variety of factors involved in lipid metabolic processes, such as sphingomyelin (SM), oxysterol-binding protein (OSBP) and PI4KIIIα.



*Figure 19: HCV-induced formation of double-membrane vesicles (DMVs) and multimembrane vesicles (MMVs) following subversion of host lipid homeostasis.* 

*In the left panel a representation of an uninfected hepatocyte is shown, with decreased phosphatidylinositol 4-phosphate (PI4P) and cholesterol levels. In the right panel a model of HCVsubverted host cell proteins and lipids is shown with respect to DMV/MMV formation. PI4KIIIα interacts with NS5A and NS5B to induce elevated levels of PI4P (1), which in turn induce the recruitment of oxysterol-binding protein (OSBP). OSBP recruitment, further facilitated by NS5A interaction with VAPA and VAPB (2), also delivers cholesterol to the remodelled membranes. Inside the enlarged DMV on the right, the replication complex of HCV is depicted, consisting of the viral genome and the nonstructural proteins NS3-4A (in grey-blue-orange), NS4B (in green), NS5A (in purple) and NS5B (in red). Illustration reprinted from Paul et al., 2014*225*, with permission from Elsevier (License Number 5644900180336).*

PREB expression has been reported to be induced by HCV infection *in vitro* and *in vivo*, while the protein had been was found to interact with the central portion of NS4B. Inhibition of this interaction demonstrated the importance PREB in the formation of the membranous web and the maintenance of its structural integrity $\frac{226}{5}$ .

The first steps of SM biosynthesis in the ER give rise to ceramide, which is then transferred to the Golgi apparatus by ceramide transfer protein (CERT). There, ceramide is converted to SM. Reduced SM biosynthesis, induced by either inhibitors or by knockout (KO) of CERT, leads to observed low numbers of DMVs and decreased viral genome replication in HCVreplicon transfected human hepatoma cells. SM supplementation or CERT expression reverted the phenotype, only when CERT mutants that were able to associate with the vesicle-associated membrane protein-associated protein (VAP) or phosphatidylinositol 4-phosphate (PI4P) were used. These findings suggest that SM is important for the HCV-induced ER deregulations, while VAP and PI4P are essential for virus replication $\frac{227}{2}$ .

The PI4P phospholipid is physiologically transferred from the Golgi apparatus to the ER in a counter-exchange of cholesterol transportation from the ER to the Golgi apparatus by

OSBP. OSBP is hijacked by PI4KIII $\alpha$  recruitment to DMVs $^{228}$ , leading to increased PI4P levels at HCV replication sites $\frac{229}{ }$ . This process is regulated by PPIs between the viral NS5A protein,  $OSPB<sup>230</sup>$  and PI4KIII $\alpha<sup>231</sup>$ . As expected, OSBP/PI4KIII $\alpha$  depletion significantly alters HCVinduced DMV structure, with clusters of smaller diameters being observed. Of note, NS5A interaction with PI4KIIIα has a dual role in HCV replication, since it prevents NS5A hyperphosphorylation by CK-Iα, leading to an abundance of the RNA replication associated p56 form of NS5A<sup>141,149</sup>. In fact, NS5A seems to play a major role in HCV genome replication, not only as a co-factor of the replication complex, as described below, but also as a key regulator of PI4P levels in the DMVs. This is coordinated, not only by the mechanism described above, but also by interaction of NS5A with ADP-ribosylation factor GTPase-activating protein 1 (ARFGAP1), a central player of cargo sorting in coat protein complex I (COPI) transport<sup>232</sup>. COPI is a highly conserved pathway of protein and lipid trafficking between the ER and the Golgi.

Overall, these findings reveal the importance of both viral proteins and host factors in the ER remodelling and DMV formation. Nonetheless, transmission electron microscopy imaging of liver biopsies from patients chronically infected with HCV strains of diverse genotypic origin has not validated the formation of DMVs *in vivo*, despite the presence of virus-induced membrane rearrangements. This discrepancy might either be due to either the lack of interferon in human hepatoma cultures, which highly affects HCV RNA replication, or due to higher virus replication rates in cell culture, resulting in higher levels of expression of viral proteins, which are possibly essential for this phenotype $\frac{233}{2}$ .

## I.B.ε.(iv) HCV genome replication

Within the "replication niche" of the remodelled ER, the HCV RNA is copied through an intermediate step of negative, complementary ssRNA synthesis. The RNAs of the two polarities constitute a double-stranded RNA intermediate, which is possibly unwinded by the NS3 helicase, although the exact NS3 role has not yet been uncovered $\frac{234}{1}$ . The (-)ssRNA then serves as a matrix for *de novo* production of new  $(+)$ ssRNA molecules $\frac{235}{25}$ . The HCV RNA replication is mediated by the viral RdRp, NS5B, in collaboration with other viral and cellular factors, forming the replication complex. Among the mature HCV proteins, only NS3-NS5B are indispensable for RNA replication, as proved by the development of self-replicating subgenomic RNA<sup>236</sup>. Elements present in HCV 5'- and 3'-UTRs are also important for the *cis*regulation of this process, as described in §I.B.γ.(ii).

NS5B initiates RNA synthesis from the 3' end of the (+)ssRNA in a primer-independent manner $\frac{237}{ }$ . The positive HCV genome starts with an adenosine (A) or guanosine (G) and terminates with a 3′ uridine (U) for all known strains. Propagation of viruses with other nucleotides in their termini results in reversion to the original A/G or U, respectively, suggesting selective pressure for A-priming of the (-)ssRNA and some of the (+)ssRNA, such as JFH1 (see  $$I.B.\eta.(iii)$ )<sup>238-240</sup>.

This year, the Danish groups of Drs Jens Bukh, Troelsch Scheel and Jeppe Vinther (University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark) uncovered that NS5B initiates (-)ssRNA with the cellular metabolite FAD, resulting into 5'-FAD-capping of the reverse HCV genome. The researchers reported a high frequency of 75% FAD-capped 5'-termini in genomes of both polarities in Huh-7.5 hepatoma cells infected with the HCV subtype 2a J6/JFH1 recombinant variant c2. FAD cap was also found in RNA intermediates of strains from genotypes 1-6, in the positive RNA genomes of genotypes 2a, 3a and 6a and was also detected *in vivo*! No effect of the metabolite on HCV RNA stability was documented. This study further constitutes the first report of an immune escape mechanism at the 5' of (-)ssRNA, since FAD was also found to protect the RNA from RIG-I sensing $\frac{73}{2}$ .

On the other hand, the well-studied proximal binding of the liver-specific cellular micro RNA miR-122 in 5'-UTR is known to stabilize the viral RNA, to protect it from recognition by the host innate immune system and to increase the number of viral RNA copies *in vitro* and *in vivo*241-243 .

A cellular protein interacting with NS5A and NS5B, CypA, is another well-documented host factor that is critical for HCV genome replication. CypA/NS5B interaction facilitates RdRp proper folding $\frac{244,245}{ }$ , while CypA catalyzes the isomerization of certain domains of NS5A towards a functional replication complex $\frac{246,245}{ }$ . VAPA, apart from its role in PI4P level regulation at the DMVs, further promotes HCV RNA replication by facilitating the correct positioning of NS5B within the lipid rafts<sup>247</sup>.

### I.B.ε.(v) HCV particle assembly

Once copies of the HCV genome and mature viral proteins are in abundance, the formation of new virions commences. Although the HCV particle assembly process is not yet completely understood, certain steps and key factors of both viral and cellular origin have fairly been characterized. Overall, HCV assembly can be subdivided in the sequential processes of encapsidation, envelopment though budding into the ER lumen, virion lipidation towards "mature" LVP production and release in the extracellular environment.

### Encapsidation

HCV encapsidation involves the interaction of Core with the RNA genome and the formation of the viral capsid by progressive Core oligomerization. However, there is a spatial issue in this process, since mature Core protein is anchored at the surface of cytosolic  $LDs<sup>248</sup>$ , while the copies of  $(+)$ ssRNA of HCV are produced and localized at the viral factories in the ER-derived DMVs.

Core/LD association is vital for virus morphogenesis, since HCV assembly is abolished in the presence of mutated Core unable to traffic to the LDs. Another element supporting this notion is the high conservation of the Core/LD anchoring motif across HCV genotypes<sup>249,140,250</sup>. Whether the localization of Core at the surface of LDs is important for (i) divergence of the protein from the replication sites to abrogate competition with the replication complex for RNA binding, (ii) interaction of Core with key components of HCV life cycle stored in the LDs (proteins and lipids), (iii) redirection of cellular proteins from other cellular compartments to the LDs in order to inhibit their natural function, (iv) indirect regulation by Core of LD factors/activators/inhibitors thereby brought in proximity, or (v) all of the above remains still unclear<sup>225</sup>.

As a matter of fact, in support of notions (ii) and (iv) Core has been found to decrease intracellular triglyceride (TG) degradation (lipolysis) by interfering with the activity of a key enzyme of the first lipolytic steps, the adipose triglyceride lipase (ATGL). Camus et al. $\frac{251}{51}$ showed that Core/LD association is a pre-requisite for Core-induced inhibition of ATGLmediated lipid mobilization. These researchers further demonstrated that Core increased the interaction of ATGL with its activator, the Comparative Gene Identification 58 (CGI-58), as well as their recruitment to LDs. Furthermore, in support of notion (iii), recent experiments by Boson et al.<sup>252</sup>, revealed Core-directed re-localization of Nup98 from annulate lamellae to LDapposed areas. This nucleoporin was further found to bind viral RNA, while downregulation of Nup98 expression was associated with exclusion of HCV genome from areas containing active translating ribosomes and the Core and NS5A proteins. Increased concentrations of HCV RNA and Nup98 in the vicinity of LDs suggest a favourable role of this host protein in HCV encapsidation. Taken together, these results endorse the multifunctional theory of Core dispatch from ER to LDs.

Nonetheless, Core is eventually required to verge towards the RNA, or vice-versa, in order to commence the encapsidation process. Whether HCV encapsidation occurs at the LD surface or at the ER membranes is still unclear. Additionally, exactly how Core and HCV RNA come together stands ambiguous, yet HCV NS5A has been documented to play an important role in this process. Immunofluorescent observations have revealed NS5A localization in the periphery of LDs, in a concentric distribution external to that of core<sup>253</sup>, while yeast two-hybrid and NS5A/Core co-immunoprecipitation experiments $254$  are further attesting to NS5A/Core/LD interactions. Inhibition of this synergy by mutations in NS5A DIII has been shown to perturb HCV virion production $\frac{125,139}{2}$ . This interplay may additionally be regulated by cellular and viral factors, such as diacylglycerol O-acetyltransferase 1 (DGAT1), which has been reported to promote the co-localization and interaction of Core and NS5A to LDs<sup>255,256</sup>. In addition, NS3 has been proposed to both interact with and modulate NS5A hyperphosphorylation, hence the switch between NS5A participation in HCV genome replication or assembly  $\frac{144}{12}$ . Of note, mutations of conserved residues of NS3 have recently been reported to interfere with early HCV assembly steps, but not with lipidation of nucleocapsids, nor release of infectious particles<sup>105</sup>.

The RNA binding capacity and mobility of NS5A across cellular membranes would allow the protein to deliver HCV RNA to Core at the surface of  $LDs^{\frac{139,122,257}{2}}$ , while on the other scenario, its interaction with Core, could recruit the LDs at the ER for encapsidation, in coordination with NS2 and  $p7258$ . Despite its instrumental role in HCV encapsidation, the mechanism of  $p7$  action in this process is yet undetermined<sup>259</sup>. Nevertheless, eventual release of Core from the LDs is necessary for HCV infectivity. This is mediated by interaction of Core with the μ subunit of clathrin adaptor protein complex 2 (AP2M1). AP2M1 is physiologically involved in targeting cargo proteins to clathrin vesicles and inhibition of its interaction with Core was shown to confer increased accumulation of Core at the LDs, leading to a defect of HCV assembly<sup>260</sup>.

Although it is not clear on which exact step(s), NS5A also plays a decisive role in viral assembly, mainly through its DIII. This is supported by the fact that several mutations and deletions in this region have been found to (i) abolish virus production at an early assembly stage<sup>136</sup>, (ii) significantly reduce viral titers<sup>125</sup>, (iii) perturb NS5A/Core association<sup>125,257</sup>, (iv) reduce NS5A RNA binding capacity and therefore trafficking of viral RNAs to LDs for assembly $\frac{257}{ }$ , without in any case affecting genomic replication. It is hypothesized that these results are linked to an alteration or loss of a N-terminal cluster of four positively charged residues within DIII and/or of the CKIIα recognition sequence, leading to impaired NS5A phosphorylation at serine  $457\frac{257}{10}$ . Furthermore, a region that is essential for NS5A association with LDs and subsequently Core has been found within NS5A  $DI^{\frac{136}{}}$ .

#### Budding

Neosynthesized encapsidated virions acquire their envelope glycoproteins through budding in the ER lumen, where non-covalent heterodimers of E1 and E2 remain localized<sup>261,218</sup>. Deletion of E1 and E2 coding sequences was found to decrease the interaction between Core and viral RNA, indicating that encapsidation and envelopment are two related steps of the virus life cycle. Electron microscopy studies revealed that envelopment is taking place at the ER membrane in close proximity  $LDs^{262,263}$ . Progressive formation of the viral nucleocapsid promotes intussusception of the ER membrane towards the lumen, allowing the envelopment<sup>257</sup>.

HCV budding is mainly coordinated by the viral E2, NS2 and p7 proteins. Notably, NS2 is known to interact with E1/E2 and to induce the migration of the heterodimer to the assembly  $sites<sup>264,265</sup>$ .

#### Post-envelopment lipidation

HCV virion maturation takes place upon diversion of the VLDL assembly route towards lipidation of the particles. Cholesterol, sphingolipids and some of the main components of LDs are essential for the production of highly infectious viral particles  $\frac{266}{10}$  and are made available to HCV by ATGL-dependent lipolysis of the LDs under the control of 1-acylglycerol-3 phosphate O-acyltransferase  $(ABHD5)^{267}$ . Cholesterol-esters and TG are incorporated to the virions via the action of the microsomal transfer protein (MTP). MTP physiologically acts in VLDL synthesis via interaction with ApoB100 and formation of luminal LDs, incorporating ApoE and ApoCIII at their surface. HCV may also fuse with pre-VLDLs or with luminal LDs to incorporate the necessary lipids. Luminal LD association to HCV virions has been found to be an effect of E2 interaction with ApoE under the control of a regulator of the endo- and exocytosis trafficking pathways, the annexin 3  $(ANXA3)^{268}$ . Many apolipoproteins can be found at the surface of circulating HCV particles, such as ApoB, ApoAI, and ApoCI-III, though incorporation of ApoE alone would be sufficient to render the particle infectious, in accordance with its role in viral entry (see  $\S$ I.B. $\varepsilon$ .(i)) $\frac{269,270}{269,270}$ . ApoE has also been shown to physically interact with HCV NS5A in yeast two-hybrid and co-immunoprecipitation studies $\frac{271,272}{27}$ . Interestingly, ApoE dependence and association to LVPs has been found to differ across HCV genotypes and cell lines $\frac{273}{2}$ .

#### Release

Egress of infectious particles is dependent on endosomal sorting complex components and *trans*-Golgi network-associating adaptors, supporting viral release by a TGN-endosomal secretion pathway, distinctive of the VLDL secretion route<sup> $274,275$ </sup>. In support of the Golgimediated HCV secretion, unlike the heterodimers observed in the ER, E1/E2 dimers on infectious particles are found in covalent complexes by disulphide bridges, N-glycosylated and associated with complex sugars resistant to treatment with endoglycosidase  $H^{\frac{276}{2}}$ .

Furthermore, viral particles have been found in COP-II vesicles, an anterograde transport of cargo proteins from the ER to the Golgi $\frac{277}{7}$ . In addition, inhibition of the Rab1b GTPase, which is responsible for the regulation of the ER-Golgi trafficking, reduces the rate of LVPs release $\frac{278}{10}$ . Virion maturation is completed while egressing, once their density resembles that of VLDLs. In parallel, p7 oligomerizes to form an ion channel to balance the pH in the transport vesicles of the maturing viral particles, towards protecting them from an acidic environment. A defect in the capacity of p7 to form the channel inhibits HCV release, but can surprisingly be compensated by the expression of viroporin M2 of the influenza virus  $\frac{279}{12}$ . Within the trans-Golgi network, LVPs join the endosomal compartment $\frac{280}{ }$ , and are secreted via clathrin vesicles $\frac{281}{ }$  or via exosomes budding from multi-vesicular bodies (MVB) $\frac{282,283}{ }$ .

Alternatives to this secretory pathway, which do not involve the Golgi apparatus in the final steps of the virus life cycle have also been proposed. In this model the COP-II vesicles may fuse directly with the plasma membrane or with the late endosomes and successively release the cargo in the extracellular matrix $\frac{284}{2}$ .

Overall, virus assembly and release are regulated by both viral and cellular factors and the exact mechanisms are still to be uncovered. Recent, studies unravelled the role of Poly(rC) binding protein 1 (PCBP1) in regulation of HCV assembly and release<sup>285</sup>. PCBP1 is known to interact with the 5'-UTR of the viral genome $\frac{286}{5}$ . Although PCBP1 knock down decreases viral RNA accumulation, it simultaneously increases virion secretion, suggesting that PCBP1 may play a regulatory role in preventing RNA molecules from entering the assembly and release step of the virus life cycle. To further support this, PCBP1 knockdown had no direct impact on viral entry, translation, genome stability or replication. Experiments in Huh-7.5 cells infected with the J6/JFH1 chimeric strain revealed the role of PCBP1 in both virion packaging and release, while the same experiments with a cell culture-adapted JFH1 strain suggest that the

RNA has already been packaged into new infectious viral particles before the assistance of  $PCBP1$  is required $\frac{285}{100}$ .

### **I.B.(στ) Pathogenesis**

The HCV incubation period lasts approximately 7 weeks and corresponds to the period during which the virus multiplies in the hepatocytes of its new host. Following this incubation phase, a sudden elevation of the serum levels of two markers of hepatic cell lysis, the alanine amino transferase (ALT) and the aspartate amino transferase (AST), mark the acute phase of HCV infection. In general, this phase is more often asymptomatic, while symptoms such as discomfort, nausea, and jaundice may emerge in 20% of reported cases. About one in four HCV infected individuals may spontaneously clear the virus during the first 12 months postinfection<sup>287,288</sup>, while the lack of CD4+ responses during the acute phase is associated with the development of chronic disease  $\frac{289,290}{2}$ . During chronic infection, the virus damages the hepatic cells, causing inflammation, the seriousness of which increases over time and its persistence can lead to liver fibrosis and liver cirrhosis development. Ultimately, 1-7% of viral infected patients with established cirrhosis will form hepatocellular carcinoma each year, due to chronic HCV infection (CHC). A large proportion of chronically infected patients have been found to develop an additional liver pathology associated with the accumulation of triglycerides and cholesterol esters in the form of LDs in infected hepatocytes, called steatosis. Steatosis prevalence has been found to be double in patients infected with HCV genotype 3 strains over those infected with non3 genotypes $291$ . Rarely, another form of hepatitis may be manifested early in the weeks following the infection. This is called fulminant hepatitis, corresponding to rapid and massive necrosis of hepatic parenchyma, accompanied by a decrease in liver size, that winds up fatal in the majority of cases. The overall evolution of hepatitis C pathology is summarized in Figure 20.

The assessment of liver damage in patients may be performed by both invasive (e.g. liver biopsy) and noninvasive methods. As biopsies are generally limited due to invasiveness, sampling errors (liver sections of biopsy samples usually represent  $1/50.000<sup>th</sup>$  of the total liver mass, depending on the individual $\frac{292}{2}$ ), possible complications and ineptness of regular repetition to monitor progression, noninvasive imaging techniques are generally preferred (for a review on fibrosis see Sebastiani et al.,  $2014\frac{293}{8}$ , Horowitz et al.,  $2017\frac{294}{8}$ , for a review on steatosis see Park et al.,  $2022\frac{295}{5}$ . These include ultrasound elastography, acoustic radiation force impulse imaging (ARFI), dynamic shear wave transient elastography (SWE), the most validated transient elastography (TE) and the most accurate, especially for the determination of mild fibrotic stages, magnetic resonance (MR) elastography for the assessment of liver fibrosis. Liver steatosis can noninvasively better be assessed by MR spectroscopy and magnetic resonance imaging proton density fat fraction (MRI-PDFF). Direct or indirect markers of hepatic fibrosis can also be found in patients' sera, allowing serological tests to detect respectively either the byproducts of collagen synthesis/degradation, or serum aspartate aminotransferase to platelet ratio index, indicative of altered hepatocyte function. However, serological tests are not able to discriminate among stages of liver damage except for low to high fibrosis, and their results may be influenced by the existence of extrahepatic inflammation in the patient's body.



### *Figure 20: Evolution of HCV-induced pathogenesis.*

*HCC: Hepatocellular carcinoma, ESLD: End stage liver disease. Images adapted and put together from HCV online (Cartoon liver representations, Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License) and from Liang et al., 2014*<sup>296</sup> *(electron microscopy photo of human steatotic liver, Creative Commons Attribution License) with percentages of occurrence from Lingala et al., 2015*<sup>297</sup> *.* 

Steatosis is generally characterized as fatty liver disease, with no early manifestation of symptoms, resulting to its detection most commonly during routine blood tests, by the abnormally increased levels of liver enzymes (e.g. AST, ALT transaminases) or biomarkers, such as albumin and bilirubin. Hepatic steatosis is defined as a hepatic fat content exceeding  $5\%$  of liver weight $\frac{298}{8}$ , which is in clinical practice diagnosed by the quantification of hepatocytes containing fatty vacuoles, otherwise known as  $LDs<sup>299</sup>$ . The severity of liver steatosis is determined histologically by the percentage of lipid-rich hepatocytes. Mild steatosis is defined by a maximum of 33% LD-containing hepatocytes, moderate steatosis by 34-66% and severe steatosis by more than  $66\frac{\sqrt{300}}{20}$ .

Two forms of steatosis with distinct hepatocyte alterations may be detected in steatotic patients: macrovesicular steatosis, in which few large vacuoles occupy the cytoplasm of the cell, displacing the nucleus and distorting the cellular architecture, and microvesicular steatosis characterized by numerous, small finely defined LDs in hepatocellular cytoplasm, as a result of mitochondrial damage leading to impaired β-oxidation. Microvesicular steatosis is less common but generally more serious than its counterpart.

Human liver might be protected by controlled accumulation of lipids, but prolonged lipid accumulation may induce inflammation and reduction of liver metabolic competence<sup>301</sup>. This leads to lobular inflammation with mixed infiltration of neutrophils, lymphocytes and macrophages, a condition called steatohepatitis. The exact virological mechanisms inducing this type of liver damage are yet not completely resolved, but HCV is known to deregulate the intrahepatic metabolism of lipids by altering lipid peroxidation, lipid synthesis, insulin resistance, VLDL assembly and secretion, as well as to induce oxidative stress, in order to promote its highly lipid-dependent life cycle  $\frac{302-304}{902-304}$ . A simplified overview of critical pathways of the human metabolism can be found in "Information box 1". More mechanistically, excessive storage of TGs in LDs could be the result of increased in TG synthesis, combined with LD biogenesis, decreased lipid catabolism and LD lipolysis, altered lipoprotein secretion or a combination of these processes (reviewed in Gluchowski et al.,  $2017\frac{305}{305}$ ). Physiologically, LD formation is increased in response to excessive accumulation of lipids under hypoxic conditions, which modulate the expression of genes involved in the absorption and synthesis of fatty acids $306$ . The excess of free fatty acids (FFAs) as substrates for β-oxidation results in increased synthesis of acetyl-CoA that may uncouple the tricarboxylic acid cycle (TCA cycle) function from mitochondrial respiration in the liver and promote the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS). In addition, it might further shift the normal metabolic process to the synthesis of toxic lipid intermediates, such as ceramides.

Hepatic steatosis was considered to be a benign and reversible pathology, though now, it has become a serious HCV-driven issue, that has been associated with higher fibrosis scores in chronically infected patients $307$ , and varying response to HCV treatment depending on the viral genotype<sup>308</sup>.

#### I.B.στ.(ii) Fibrosis

Liver fibrosis is developed following the persistent inflammation induced by the expression of HCV proteins in hepatocytes, promoting certain signaling and metabolic pathways and inducing host's immune responses. Hepatic inflammation is a wound-healing process coordinated by a population of liver cells, the activated Hepatic Stellate Cells (HSCs). Upon HCV induced hepatic injury, HSCs are differentiated into their active form, myofibroblasts, which are responsible for the regulation of extracellular matrix (ECM) production and degradation balance, by metalloproteinases (the ECM degradation enzymes, MMPs) and their inhibitors (TIMPs). CHC-induced inflammation disrupts the equilibrium between MMPs and TIMPs production, subsequently resulting in ECM overproduction. A progressive thickening of fibrotic septae and chemical crosslinking of collagen ensues in the liver, namely fibrosis $\frac{309}{8}$ . The formation of fibrous scar tissue in the liver can be induced by HCV either directly, due to oxidative stress induced by HCV replication $\frac{310}{10}$  and activation of HSCs by Core protein $\frac{311}{21}$ , or via indirect mechanisms that involve activating immune responses and certain host signaling pathways.

Using the *Metavir* Score, fibrosis is divided into five stages ranked from zero to four (F0- F4), with patients assigned a stage based on their hepatic stiffness and F4 representing mostly cirrhotic stages of liver damage<sup>300</sup>.

## I.B.στ.(iii) Cirrhosis

Liver cirrhosis follows the stage of fibrosis and is the result of the combined action of several cellular and molecular factors over a course of approximately three decades. The main clinical manifestations of cirrhosis are the gradual loss of liver function, portal hypertension and progress of liver disease to the HCC development stage. Cirrhosis is marked by distortion of the liver parenchyma and vascular architecture, with one of its most prominent features being the formation of degenerative parenchyma nodules surrounded by fibrotic septae. Cirrhosis cases can be divided into compensated or decompensated stages. During the initial stage of compensated cirrhosis the liver is still capable of performing most of its basic functions and no significant symptoms are present, with the rare exceptions of possible fatigue, nausea, anorexia, and weight  $loss^{\frac{312}{2}}$ . However, when patients with compensated cirrhosis are left unattended, there is a great risk of progression to an uncompensated phase, which is characterized by the appearance of more serious complications (e.g. variceal bleeding, portal hypertension, ascites, encephalopathy, jaundice, and spontaneous bacterial peritonitis)<sup>313</sup>. The survival of the patient is at risk during decompensated cirrhosis since half of the patients might not survive more than five years after entering this stage<sup>314</sup>. This leaves in many cases liver transplantation as the only option of survival.

## I.B.στ.(iv) Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC)

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the most common form of primary liver cancer, the  $7<sup>th</sup>$ most prevalent and  $2<sup>nd</sup>$  deadlier type of cancer globally<sup>315</sup>. The main causal factor of HCC formation is chronic infection with hepatitis B and C viruses, as well as pre-existing liver cirrhosis due to these chronic infections. Hepatocarcinogenesis is a complex process that evolves over decades and involves the accumulation of genetic changes that will ultimately lead to the malignant transformation of hepatocytes. Regardless of the causative agent, malignant transformation of hepatocytes is believed to be the result of the continuous changes that cells undergo due to chronic and recurrent liver injury and regeneration, that lead to an imbalance between controlled cell proliferation and apoptosis $\frac{316}{1}$ . In transgenic animal models expression of independent HCV proteins has been associated with HCC development, data that may also be corroborated by the epidemiology observed in HCV patients. Several signaling pathways that regulate cell proliferation, differentiation, survival, as well as inflammatory and angiogenic responses are affected during HCV-induced hepatocarcinogenesis (for review see Virzi et al.,  $2018\frac{317}{10}$ , Goto et al.,  $2020\frac{318}{10}$  and Farzaneh et al.,  $2021\frac{319}{10}$ . Briefly, these pathways are mainly the Transforming Growth Factor beta (TGF-β), Wnt/β-catenin, Hedgehog, Notch, Epidermal Growth Factor (EGF), Vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), mitogenactivated protein kinase (MAPK), Stat3, PI3K-Akt-mTor-PTEN, peroxisome proliferatoractivated receptor gamma (PPARγ), Nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells (NF-κB), Tumor Necrosis Factor alpha (TNF-α), p53, and pRB signaling pathways. The interplay between HCV and these pathways will be more extensively described in  $\S$ I.B. $(\theta)$ . HCV-induced DNA modifications may also play a role in HCV carcinogenesis, notably alterations in CpG methylation, histone modifications and expression of small noncoding RNAs (sncRNAs) and long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs).



## **Information box 1: Simplified overview of human energy metabolism. (…continued)**

The liver is a major player in human metabolism, regulating the balance among energy production over storage, based on the signals from elements in the bloodstream (e.g. insulin and glucagon). The primary source of energy for the cells is glucose, which can be stored in the form of glycogen through glucogenesis. Conversion of glycogen to glucose is done by a process called glycogenolysis, while through glycolysis glucose is converted to pyruvate. With the exception of a few steps in this process, such as phosphoenol pyruvate (PEP) conversion to pyruvate by the pyruvate kinase, most of the reactions are reversible. Some intermediate steps, such as fructose-6-phosphate conversion to fructose-1,6-biphosphate are not illustrated for conciseness purposes.

In the aerobic conditions of the liver mitochondria, pyruvate goes through a transition phase to acetyl-CoA. Acetyl-CoA has a central role in energy metabolism, linking glycolysis to the tricarboxylic acid cycle, (TCA cycle), also known as Krebs cycle and citric acid cycle, to cholesterol synthesis, to lipid and ketone metabolism. The result of TCA cycles are nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide hydride (NADH) and dihydroflavine-adenine dinucleotide (FADH2) molecules, that enter the electron transport chain (ETC) in the mitochondria. ETC involves iron and cytochrome c, leading to the production and release of protons  $(H^*)$  from the mitochondria matrix to the intermembrane space. High  $H^*$  concentration chemiosmotically activates oxidative phosphorylation (OXPHOS) for the production of energy in the form of adenosine triphosphate (ATP).

Acetyl-CoA can also be the result of lipid metabolism, and more specifically of triglycerides (TGs). TGs are produced by a process called lipogenesis, during which a glycerol molecule sequentially incorporates three fatty acid (FA) chains, generating monoacylglycerol (MAG), diacylglycerol (DAG) and triacylglycerol or TGs. The FA used in this process are synthetized during hyperglycemia and/or when ATP levels are increased. In these instances, citrate concentrations are increased, leading to its transfer to the cytoplasm, where it is broken back down to oxaloacetate (OAA) and acetyl-CoA. Part of the acetyl-CoA is then used for the production of the FA "building block", the malonyl-CoA and the other part is directly used together with malonyl-CoA by the fatty acid synthetase 1 (FAS1) for the initiation of FA synthesis, generating a 4 carbon molecule that gets enriched in every round of synthesis by 2 carbons from malonyl-CoA. To produce, for example, a palmitoleic acid (16 carbons), 7 rounds of FA synthesis are required. The inverse process of breaking down FA to acetyl-CoA that could be used for ATP production through the TCA cycle is called β-oxidation. Interestingly, even-chain FA β-oxidation gives rise to 8 acetyl-CoA molecules through 7 rounds, while in odd chain FA, the final 5-carbon chain yields one molecule of acetyl CoA and one molecule of propionyl CoA, which can then be converted to succinyl-CoA and enter the TCA cycle. Peroxisomes are another site of β-oxidation, with the difference that instead of redirection of the byproducts to the ETC, H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> is generated, further converted by the enzyme catalase to H2O and oxygen. In any case, the availability of FA is dependent on TG mobilization and lipolysis, a process regulated by protein kinase A (PKA), which phosphorylates perilipin 1 (PLIN1), allowing lipases to break down the TGs.

# **Information box 1: Simplified overview of human energy metabolism. (…last part)**



Accumulated acetyl-CoA molecules in hypoglycemic conditions, not allowing the furthering of the TCA cycle, can be combined together in a pathway that will eventually form β-Hydroxy β-methylglutaryl-CoA (HMG-CoA), which serves as a substrate for either cholesterol synthesis or ketone bodies, such as acetoacetate and β-OH-buterate. Ketone bodies travelling to the muscles and brain can be catabolized back to acetyl-CoA, providing ATP to these organs via TCA cycle and ETC coupled to OXPHOS.

On the other hand, the cholesterol formed after several steps in the cholesterol synthesis process is important for membrane preservation, steroid hormone production, lipid emulsification through the production of bile salts and generation of VLDL, LDL and HDL upon transformation to cholesterol-ester.

Proteins can be another source of energy in cases of severe stress or starvation since their amino acids (aa) can participate in the formation of new glucose molecules through gluconeogenesis. The first steps towards this process involve aa transamination in the presence of a keto acid (e.g. α-ketoglutarate), leading to the formation of a new aa and a new keto acid, from the exchange of the amine group and the oxygen between the two molecules. The new aa can undergo oxidative de-amination, reverting this process and generating ammonia (NH3). To reduce the effects of its toxicity, ammonia is converted to urea, through the urea cycle. Different aa give rise to different keto acids. The green boxes in the figure indicate the aa whose transamination can lead to the direct or indirect production of the indicated products.

Pentose phosphate pathway has an oxidative and a nonoxidative phase, leading to the production of ribose-5-phosphate, using glucose-6-phosphate or fructose-6 phosphate and glucose-6-phosphate (GA3P) as substrates, respectively. Ribose-5 phosphate can further be used for the synthesis of DNA, RNA, ATP, NAD+, FAD, CoA, or be converted back to fructose-6-phosphate and GA3P towards gluconeogenesis.

Pyruvate produced from glucose or from protein transamination in the anaerobic conditions of muscles can be converted to lactic acid. Lactic acid can be released in the bloodstream, uptaken by the liver and be used for gluconeogenesis. The glucose produced can travel through the bloodstream back to the muscles and enter a new glycolysis pathway. This cycle is known as the Cori cycle.

Lastly, gluconeogenesis is the process of producing glucose within the cells, independent of dietary intake. As shown in the box summarizing the substrates and products of each metabolic process, gluconeogenesis can be initiated from 4 pathways, although the contribution of odd chain FA β-oxidation is minimal. The other three involve (i) the Cori cycle and the lactic acid produced in the muscles uptaken by the liver to produce glucose, (ii) dihydroxyacetone phosphate (DHAP) production by glycerol, that can follow the inverted pathway of glucose synthesis, and (iii) aa transamination, leading to the production of keto acids involved in the TCA cycle, of acetyl-CoA or pyruvate that can end up in OAA synthesis, further going back to PEP, and from there to glucose.

### HCV induced extrahepatic manifestations

Despite the hepatotropism of the virus, HCV exhibits extrahepatic manifestations, some of which are better supported by epidemiological data than others. By disrupting its host's glucose and lipid homeostasis HCV may extend its burden to a systemic level. Summarized in Figure 21 are metabolic, cardiovascular, autoimmune, neoplastic, neuropsychiatric, and organspecific manifestations that have been associated with HCV infection (reviewed in Cacoub et al.,  $2021\frac{320}{2}$ ).

More specifically, metabolic disorders include insulin resistance (IR) and type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM). HCV infection may induce IR through downregulation of insulin receptor substrate signaling 1 (IRS-1), by overexpression of suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 (SOCS3) and TNF- $\alpha^{321}$ . IR together with the release of proinflammatory cytokines, and other HCVinduced immune-mediated processes may drive T2DM development, which has an increased incidence rate in HCV infected patients versus non infected individuals $322$ .

These alterations may further cause cardiovascular events, by inducing chronic endothelial lesions and accelerated atherosclerosis in a pro-inflammatory, pro-fibrogenic environment $323$ . The most commonly reported cardiovascular events include carotid atherosclerosis, myocarditis, acute coronary syndrome, and dilated or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy $\frac{324}{2}$ .

Autoimmune manifestations are referred to cryoglobulinemic vasculitis, an immunemediated inflammation of blood vessels, and to the rare cases of rheumatoid arthritis. Autoimmunity may be organ directed, leading to thyroid dysfunction, pulmonary fibrosis, dermatological disorders, ocular Sicca or Sjögren's syndromes<sup>325</sup>. Cryoglobulinemic vasculitis is the most common HCV-induced extrahepatic manifestation that may appear after the production of auto- anti-IgG antibodies after chronic antigen stimulation by the virus. This chronic stimuli, together with the action of HCV proteins, may also lead to clonal proliferation of B-cells and lymphoma development. HCV has been also found to cause endothelial and mesangial inflammation, as well as podocyte and tubular damage in the kidneys, in addition to chronic inflammation caused by atherosclerosis and insulin resistance, that could result into

chronic nephropathy $\frac{326}{2}$ . Glomeruli may be the epicenter of cryo-precipitable deposits, which are commonly expressed as type membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis.

Nonetheless, the extent and type of liver damage observed in HCV patients, whether intra- or extra-hepatic, is influenced by both viral and host determinants, as described below.

## *Figure 21: Illustrative summary of extrahepatic manifestations of HCV infection.*

*HCV-related benign (cryoglobulinaemic vasculitis) or malignant lymphoproliferative disorders are shown at the left, while HCV effects on various organs are shown in the yellow panel at the right. AIHA: autoimmune haemolytic anaemia, ITP: immune thrombocytopenia, MACE: major adverse cardiovascular event, MGUS: monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance, RF: rheumatoid factor. Reproduced with permission from Cacoub et al., 2021*320*, Copyright Massachusetts Medical Society.*



### I.B.στ.(v) HCV genotype-related pathologies

Viral determinants refer to the genotypic origin of the HCV strain causing the chronic infection. More specifically, the globally most prevalent genotype 1, and subtype 1b in particular, has been found to be more aggressive and associated with a higher incidence rate of HCC development in CHC patients<sup>327,328</sup>. Certain aa polymorphisms within HCV 1b NS5A DI have also been correlated with HCC incidence, such as S3T, T122M, M133I, and Q181 $E^{\frac{329}{2}}$ . On the contrary, HCV genotype 2 is rarely related to HCC incidence. CHC by genotype 3 strains has been linked to a higher prevalence of steatosis and therefore an increased risk of progression to severe hepatic complications of fibrosis, cirrhosis and  $HCC<sup>330</sup>$ . In fact, steatosis found in HCV genotype 3 infected patients has been correlated with expression of the HCV proteins and with viral loads. It could be reverted upon elimination of the virus, giving it the title of "viral steatosis", while in the presence of non3 HCV genotypes "metabolic steatosis" is mostly developed in the presence of comorbidity factors described in the next paragraph<sup>331-333</sup>. Genotype 4, although generally less characterized for its clinical manifestations, was highly endemic in Egypt, accounting for over 65% of Egyptian patients with HCC, while the distribution of HCV genotype 4 infection within the country was closely paralleled by the distribution of HCC development. However, solely these epidemiological data do not suffice for a conclusion on HCV genotype 4 association with  $HCC<sup>334</sup>$ . Similarly, the clinical characteristics of patients infected with HCV genotypes 5-8 are even less studied, for a conclusion to be made on the association of these genotypes with liver pathology.

Nonetheless, the data on genotypes 1-3 underline the importance of combined clinical studies and fundamental analyses in order to identify signatures specific to certain genotypes, or even directly "at risk" residues within viral sequences.

## I.B.στ.(vi) Host comorbidity factors and reversal of liver damage

Liver damage can, of course, be developed independently of HCV infection, influenced by patient factors and characteristics. However these factors in the presence of the virus, whether induced by HCV or not, may drive the development of liver damage either faster, or to greater degrees. In the initial stages of HCV infection, comorbidity factors are relatively less prominent, although the host's age, gender, and genetic factors can influence the progression of liver disease. In general, age at the time of infection has been found to impact the rate of fibrosis progression, with older individuals often experiencing a more rapid deterioration of liver function $\frac{335}{2}$ , while male gender has also been associated with increased risk of advanced liver disease.

Liver steatosis is mainly attributed to increased alcohol consumption that can inhibit fat mobilization by altering the redox balance through the recurrent detoxification of ethanol to acetate $\frac{336}{1}$ , in the frame of alcohol-related liver disease (ARLD), or to other nonalcohol related risk factors, in the frame of metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease  $(MASLD)^{337}$ . Risk factors of MASLD include obesity, T2DM, IR, thyroid function abnormalities, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, metabolic syndrome (a combination of diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity), increased age and smoking (reviewed in Huang et al.,  $2021\frac{338}{20}$ . More specifically, increased intake of omega 6 and fructose stimulate de novo lipogenesis, while excess nutrition in general can lead to desensitization of the liver to insulin secretion. IR promotes the release of free fatty acids from adipose tissue into the blood and their re-absorption by the liver<sup>339</sup>. High glucose and free fatty acid levels, in the presence of increased insulin lead to overstimulation of lipogenesis, and eventual to liver steatosis $\frac{340}{1}$ . Of note, host genetic polymorphisms in the PNPLA $3\frac{341}{2}$  and TM6SF $2\frac{342}{2}$  genes that are involved in a defect in lipoprotein lipidation, are also risk factors for the development of steatosis.

In HCV fibrotic stages, host-dependent factors, including age, sex, coinfection with HIV or HBV, and alcohol intake become increasingly significant. Moreover, obesity and IR can exacerbate liver damage during this stage, as they are linked to increased inflammation and fibrogenesis<sup>343</sup>.

In advanced stages of HCV-induced liver disease host-dependent comorbidity factors continue to be crucial, with HCV aetiology of cirrhosis varying according to the geographic region. Alcoholism, chronic HCV infection and MASLD are the main causes in Western countries, while chronic HBV infection is the main cause of cirrhosis in regions of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa<sup>344</sup>. Risk factors for cirrhosis also include increased age, male sex, obesity, T2DM, autoimmune hepatitis, and inherited diseases such as cystic fibrosis, Wilson's disease and hemochromatosis $\frac{345}{1}$ . Risk factors for HCC development include all of the above and the development of liver steatosis $\frac{316}{1}$ . It should be noted however, that liver damage caused by HCV may progress to the severest forms of cirrhosis and HCC even upon SVR, with the progression risk being higher in the presence of alcoholism, older age, infection with HCV genotype 3, and elevated markers of hepatic fibrosis<sup>346</sup>.

For the moment, there are no approved treatments of liver damage, although some steatosis targeting therapies are in pre-clinical development or in clinical trials. However, steatosis is a reversible condition, which can disappear by elimination of the cause, e.g. weight loss and a more appropriate diet, in the case of  $MASLD<sup>347,348</sup>$ , a cessation of alcohol consumption in the case of ARLD and SVR in the case of CHC. However, the more advanced the liver disease, the more limited the effects of elimination of the cause will be. Therefore, at this stage, the only available treatment options would be liver transplantation or tumor removal coupled to elimination of the cause. Maximum life expectancy without liver transplantation for patients with decompensated cirrhosis is 3 years, provided that they remain under close monitoring and heavy medical treatment and 5 years for HCC. Liver transplantation is the second most common organ transplantation after kidney transplantation. However, less than one in ten people requiring liver transplantation can successfully undergo the procedure, due to a limited number of donors $\frac{349}{2}$ . Despite the measures taken to encourage donations and to develop emergency transplant procedures following cardiac arrests, the number of liver transplants remains insufficient in Western and developing countries. The selection of the patients who will receive the valuable organ is based on criteria predicting the benefit of transplantation for each patient<sup>350</sup>.

## **I.B.(ζ) Diagnosis and Treatment options**

## I.B.ζ.(i) HCV Diagnosis

A timely diagnosis of active HCV infection is not only essential towards prevention of virus spreading, but can also be decisive of an auspicious outcome. Unfortunately, though, most of HCV cases are diagnosed upon turning into a chronic state, due to the absence of symptoms during the onset of infection. Diagnosis of HCV infection typically occurs in three stages with three types of tests: (i) indirect tests examining the presence of antibodies against the virus, (ii) direct tests, detecting viral components, and (iii) genotyping of the infectious strain (reviewed in Roger et al.,  $2021\frac{351}{1}$ ).

HCV serological tests were developed soon after the identification of HCV, following the cloning of the HCV genome, mainly towards screening of blood donations. Antibodies against specific epitopes of HCV Core and NS3-5 are detected in the plasma of HCV infected patients by immunoassays, such as ELISA (enzyme linked immunosorbent assay) or CLIA (chemiluminescence immunoassay). Third generation ELISA is most commonly used and can detect seroconversion at 8-12 weeks following infection. Fourth generation tests, introduced in 2008, have decreased the waiting period to 4 weeks, allowing both anti-HCV antibodies (Abs) and HCV antigen (Core, cAg) detection $\frac{352,353}{8}$ . Despite the low incidence of false positive results, mostly associated with patients in haemodialysis or profoundly immunocompromised, the reported sensitivity and specificity of these tests approaches  $99\% \frac{354}{354}$ . Determination of false positive tests could be achieved by recombinant immunoblot assays (RIBA), which are no longer in use.

In case of positive HCV-Ab detection, patients are screened for viral components, such as HCV RNA or cAg antigen. This test is important to distinguish patients with active HCV infection from those who have successfully cleared the virus, yet still carry antiviral Abs. HCV RNA genome detection and quantification is performed by quantitative real-time PCR (qRT-PCR). WHO has established an international unit for the evaluation of HCV loads, expressed in IU/mL $\frac{355}{100}$ , with the qRT-PCR tests conferring a high sensitivity of 10-50 IU/mL $\frac{356}{100}$ . However, these tests can be expensive and required certain expertise to be conducted. Therefore, ELISA or CLIA tests against the cAg were developed in the early  $2000<sup>357</sup>$ , with a limit of detection now at 500-3000 HCV RNA IU/mL $\frac{358}{256}$ .

Lastly, identification of the HCV genotype is essential to determine the most appropriate therapeutic approach and duration of treatment, as discussed below. HCV genotyping is based on the sequencing of conserved HCV regions. Sequencing of the 5'-UTR is mostly selected by the laboratories, providing an accuracy rate higher than 97%<sup>356</sup>.

### I.B.ζ.(ii)HCV treatment

Nonspecific therapies have been widely available not long after the virus was identified. The desired outcome of HCV treatment is the persistent elimination of viral RNA from patient sera, called sustained virological response (SVR). SVR is considered achieved by the end of treatment, in the absence of HCV RNA detection for a minimum of twelve  $(SVR_{12})$  or twentyfour (SVR<sub>24</sub>) weeks thereafter<sup>359</sup>. However, the high number of infections globally, even in the era of highly efficient treatment options, as it will be discussed below, is indicative of restraints in achieving the goals set by WHO for 2030. Recently, a meta-analytic study, evaluated the reported barriers of CHC treatment and found significant differences among geographic locations for factors such as prioritization of HCV management, comorbidities, patients' psychology and cost of treatment (Figure 22).



# *Figure 22: Meta-analysis results of types of barriers of untreated chronic hepatitis C (CHC) patients by continent.*

*Restriction factors with significant variation among geographic regions include HCV not being a priority, advancement of liver disease, inability to follow-up, lack of knowledge of infection due to the absence of symptoms, medical co-morbidities, and cost of treatment. HCV, hepatitis C virus. Figure from Nguyen et al., 2023*<sup>360</sup>, reproduced with permission from John Wiley and Sons (License N<sup>o</sup>) *5615950332562).* 

# Interferon against HCV

Similar to the treatment scheme against hepatitis B and other viruses, since 1989 patients with chronic HCV infection received interferon alpha (IFN $\alpha$ ) as therapy. IFN $\alpha$  is a key mediator of antiviral innate immune responses, yet its exact mechanism of action against HCV has not yet been identified. IFN $\alpha$  alone exhibited low percentages of successful virus clearance, hence it was complemented in 1998 by ribavirin (RBV), another known antiviral agent, doubling SVR rates from  $\leq 20\%$  to  $\sim 40\%$  361, 362. A further augmentation of SVR was achieved with the replacement of IFN $\alpha$  by a covalent conjugate of it with polyethylene glycol (PEG). Up until 2011, administration of PEG-IFNα/RBV for 24-48 weeks was the standard of care against HCV, with an SVR rate of 90% for acute infections and 55% for chronic ones $\frac{363,364}{2}$ . Response to  $PEG-IFN\alpha/RBV$  therapy is highly dependent on both virus and host characteristics. Viral genotypes 2 and 3 are easier to treat, with an SVR rate of 65-80%, while genotypes 1 and 4 are more resistant  $\frac{365}{5}$ . Furthermore, patient's gender, age, ethnicity, nutrition habits and certain polymorphisms (e.g. IFNL3 rs12979860 and IFNL4 rs368234815) have been shown to affect both response to treatment and SVR rates $366,367$ . Finally, on top of PEG-IFNα/RBV low efficiency, this treatment was also associated with a multitude of side effects, such as anemia, neutropenia, thrombocytopenia, fatigue, depression, autoimmunity, and thyroid dysfunction, driving  $\sim$ 10% of the patients to quit before completion of the treatment cycle.

# Direct Antiviral Agents (DAAs)

Over the time following HCV discovery, the accumulated deeper understanding of the virus life cycle and its key components allowed researchers to identify ideal targets for drug development. This led to the introduction of Direct Antiviral Agents or DAAs in 2011, which were designed to inhibit viral polyprotein processing, genome replication and virion assembly (see also Figure 17, page - 21 -). DAAs can be divided into three categories according to their viral target:

- 1. NS3/4A protease inhibitors: drug name ending in "-previr", such as Grazoprevir (GZR), Paritaprevir/Ritonavir (PTV/RTV), Telaprevir (TEL), Boceprevir (BOC), Simeprevir (SMV), Voxilaprevir (VOX) and Glecarevir (GLE)
- 2. NS5A inhibitors: drug name ending in "-asvir", such as Daclatasvir (DCV) Elbasvir (EBR), Ledipasvir (LDV), Ombitasvir (OBV), Pibrentasvir (PIB) and Velpatasvir (VEL)
- 3. NS5B polymerase inhibitors, drug name ending in "-buvir", which are either nucleotide analogues (Sofosbuvir, SOF), which act by competing for binding to the active site of the RdRp or nonnucleoside inhibitors (Dasabuvir, DSV) that bind at allosteric sites

These new drugs presented significant advantages compared to PEG-IFNα/RBV therapy, since they can be administered orally, they present fewer and easily manageable side effects (e.g. fatigue, headaches, nausea), require shorter treatment cycles (8-12 weeks), and exhibit an SVR of above 90%, even in patients with compensated cirrhosis. However, there are some contra-indications for patients with specific co-morbidities. For example, protease inhibitors should not be prescribed to patients with decompensate cirrhosis, due to possible liver toxicity,

while SOF and RBV in combination with any DAA should be avoided in severe renal impairment cases (glomerular filtration rate<30ml/min).

*Table 2: Simplified recommendations for HCV therapeutic regimens and duration, depending on HCV genotype, cirrhosis status, prior treatment experience, issued by the European Association for*  the Study of the Liver (EASL) in 2020<sup>368</sup>.



*Table adjusted and reproduced with permission from Elsevier (License N<sup>o</sup>5615960490326).* 

IFN, interferon; RASs, resistance-associated substitutions.

<sup>a</sup>lf resistance testing is performed, only patients with the NS5A Y93H RAS at baseline should be treated with sofosbuvir/velpatasvir plus ribavirin or with

sofosbuvir/velpatasvir/voxilaprevir, whereas patients without the Y93H RAS should be treated with sofosbuvir/velpatasvir alone.

<sup>b</sup>In treatment-naïve patients infected with genotype 3 with compensated (Child-Pugh A) cirrhosis, treatment with glecaprevir/pibrentasvir can be shortened to 8 weeks, but more data are needed to consolidate this recommendation.

<sup>c</sup>As determined by sequence analysis of the NS5A region by means of population sequencing or deep sequencing (cutoff 15%).

dWhenever HCV genotype and subtype determination is not available, not affordable and/or limits access to care

Importantly, since  $2015\frac{369}{9}$ , clinical trials have shown that two or more inhibitors may be combined, resulting in SVR rates of 95-100%, with potentially pan-genotypic effects! The pangenotypic combinational regimens currently in use and approved by the European Association for the Study of the Liver  $(EASL)$ <sup>368</sup> are the protease/NS5A inhibitors GLE/PIB, under the commercial name *Maviret®* and the NS5A/NS5B inhibitors SOF/VEL, under the commercial name *Epclusa®*. *Maviret®* proposed administration period is 8 weeks, with weeks added depending on previous therapy attempts, infection with HCV genotype 3 strains and liver cirrhosis, while for *Epclusa®* 12 weeks are required. Two more combinational regimes are also in use, with a genotype-specific effect. These are the NS5A/NS5B inhibitors LED/SOF, under the commercial name *Harvoni®* and the protease/NS5A inhibitors GZR/EBR, under the commercial name *Zapatier®. Harvoni®* is indicated for patients infected with HCV genotype 1, 4, or 6, independently of liver cirrhosis, for 12 weeks. This period may be decreased to 8 weeks in some very specific cases depending on HCV genotype and liver damage. *Zapatier®*  is efficient against genotypes 1 and 4 with a duration of therapy of 12 weeks, independently of liver cirrhosis. Both *Harvoni®* and *Zapatier®* are only rarely used, due to the approval of pangenotypic regimens, while the high efficiency of these combinational regimes has led to the voluntary discontinuation of some DAAs, such as TEL and BOC, by the owner companies. For the few patients with failed IFN-free, DAA-based therapy, the highly efficient VOX/VEL/SOF against all three HCV targets is proposed for a duration of 12 weeks. These most recent EASL guidelines for HCV therapy are summarized in Table 2, in a simplified version.

The greatest barrier to universal therapy using DAAs is their high cost, which prevents some patients from receiving such treatment and necessitates prioritizing. This year, the first DAA pharmacovigilance study accentuated their safety, while revealing the correlation of certain regimens with higher incidences of side effects, such as the association of
OBV/PTV/RBV with a 4-fold increase in the risk of renal impairment and 9-fold increase of anaemia, when compared to SOF-based regimens<sup>370</sup>.

Nevertheless, the need for a protective vaccine remains, since HCV cure does not eliminate the risk of re-infection, nor the progression of HCV-induced liver damage to the severest forms of cirrhosis and HCC, even upon  $SVR^{371}$ . Several aspects of HCV may hinder vaccine development attempts, i.e. its high genetic diversity, its immune evasion mechanisms, the low immune responses mounted by the host and the lack of an easily manageable, immunocompetent, animal model to evaluate the efficacy of vaccine candidates. However, with the great success of DAAs, some researchers are considering to assess vaccine candidates in humans, in a controlled human infection model $\frac{372}{2}$ .

#### **I.B.(η) Study models**

HCV research was greatly impacted for almost a decade following the discovery of the virus, due to the absence of cellular or animal study models amenable to reproducing the virus life cycle. Initially, virus-containing serum from HCV infected patients was used in an attempt to infect cultured cells, with extremely low replication efficiency and inefficient viral production, if at all. The construction of the first infectious cDNA clone from a subtype 1a isolate of HCV, H77, allowed the in vitro transcription of HCV genome-length synthetic RNAs, which could be intrahepatically inoculated to chimpanzees, causing productive infection. Nonetheless, such HCV RNAs were not infectious in cell culture<sup>373,36</sup>. Soon after, the first subgenomic replicon systems in cell culture were developed, followed by pseudotyped particle study systems and the infectious models we are using today in cell culture or in the various animal models described below (reviewed in Ramirez & Bukh,  $2018^{240}$ , Lohmann,  $2019^{374}$  and Burm et al.,  $2018^{375}$ ).

## I.B.η.(i) Replicon systems

In 1999, the construction of HCV bicistronic subgenomic RNAs, that self-replicate in vitro in human hepatoma cells was a milestone in HCV research. In their original form, viral RNA replicons were derived from a subtype 1b viral strain (Con1b), in which the coding sequences of the structural proteins and p7-NS2 were replaced by the neomycin phosphotransferase gene (neo), conferring resistance to the antibiotic neomycin (G418). The viral genome was separated in two cistrons, the one downstream of HCV 5'UTR and IRES driving neo synthesis and a second cistron downstream of the heterologous encephalomyocarditis virus (EMCV) IRES driving translation of the HCV non-structural proteins NS3-NS5B followed by HCV 3'UTR of the virus<sup>236,376373</sup> (Figure 23). The constructed replicon was cloned under the transcriptional control of a phage promoter, that would allow the transcription of the full-length viral RNA. Importantly, the neo gene may be replaced by genes coding for luminescent proteins, such as the firefly luciferase, allowing researchers to quantify viral replication through measurement of the intensity of luminescence.

*Figure 23: Schematic representation of HCV genomic and replicon RNAs. ECMV: Encephalomyocarditis Virus, IRES: Internal ribosome entry site, Neo: Neomycin phosphotransferase gene. Figure reproduced from Uprichard et al., 2006*377*. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License (CC BY 2.0).*



Transfection of the human hepatoma cell line Huh-7 with the subgenomic RNA and maintenance of the cells under selective pressure of G418 yielded only a small number of neomycin-resistant cell colonies, in which HCV RNA was stably replicating. Of course, in the absence of structural proteins, no infectious particles can be produced in this system. Following the construction of the Con1b subgenomic replicon, the development of other replicon systems followed, in which the sequences of various strains from genotypes  $1-6$  were used  $378-389$ . Nonetheless, the replication efficiency of subgenomic replicons was still low unless adaptive mutations providing replication fitness were selected 378,390-393. The replicons system has further been significantly improved following the identification of SEC14-like protein 2 (SEC14L2) as a critical host factor allowing increased RNA replication of this system without the requirement of adaptive mutations<sup>394</sup>.

In parallel to viral adaptive mutations, the cell lines clones harboring stably replicating HCV replicons, such as Huh-7.5 $\frac{395}{5}$  and Huh-7-Lunet  $\frac{86}{5}$  cells were shown to have evolved to support high HCV replication rates. At least two phenotypes may support an HCV-replication favorable environment: first, host factors essential for this process can be highly expressed (e.g. PI4KIIIα), and second, pathways of innate immunity, such as RIG-I in the case of Huh-7.5, are defective in these cells $\frac{396}{2}$ .

Altogether, this subgenomic replicon system has been extremely useful in the study of the molecular details of HCV genome replication, including the characterization of the membranous network involved in this process  $45$  and in the development of antiviral therapies $\frac{397}{2}$ . Regardless, this system also presents some limitations, the main of which is the inability to undergo the full life cycle of the virus, not allowing the study of crucial steps, such as the entry, particle assembly and release of infectious virions.

#### I.B.η.(ii) Pseudo-particles

Early stages of the HCV life cycle can be studied using the pseudo-typed system (HCVpp), introduced in 2003, in which defective retroviruses coding for a reporter gene (e.g. luciferase) express the HCV glycoproteins E1 and E2 on their surface  $\frac{398,399}{2}$ . For the production of HCVpp a human embryonic kidney cell line (HEK-293T) is co-transfected by three independent vectors encoding (i) the HCV glycoproteins, (ii) the structural proteins gag-pol-env of a retrovirus (usually the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV or the murine leukemia virus, MLV), and (iii) the recombinant retroviral genome including a reporter gene. This approach has been adopted for the generation of HCVpp expressing E1 and E2 of diverse genotypic origin (genotypes 1-6), allowing comparative studies of HCV entry across genotypes $400$  and strains isolated derived from HCV patients<sup>401</sup>.

This system has been extensively used for the identification of essential HCV entry factors, for the characterization of E1/E2 conformational changes during HCV entry, for *in vitro* studies of HCV neutralization, and for extensive screening of putative HCV entry inhibitors  $402,403,61,404$ . This models further allows the investigation of conserved protein functions across genotypes and clinical isolates $\frac{405}{ }$ . However, the limitations of this HCVpp model include an observed alteration of E1/E2 glycosylation patterns compared to virions produced in cell culture  $(HCVcc)_{406}^{406}$  and an absence of associated lipoproteins and proper particle lipidation upon production of HCVpp in HEK-293T<sup>407</sup>, 398, 408, 409.

#### I.B.η.(iii) Cell culture infection systems

A major breakthrough in HCV research was accomplished in 2003, with the isolation of a peculiar HCV strain of subtype 2a from a Japanese patient with fulminant hepatitis, the JFH1 strain, and the demonstration that a subgenomic replicon derived from it was able to readily replicate at high levels without requirement for adaptive mutations $\frac{410}{1}$ . Two years later, genome-length JFH1 RNA was found to not only efficiently yield to progeny virus in Huh-7

cells and chimpanzees $\frac{411}{1}$ , but cell cultured-grown JFH1-derived virus was able to also infect chimpanzees and humanized mice (see  $$I.B.\eta.(iv)$ )<sup>412</sup>. The first HCV infectious model was born.

Nonetheless, the infectivity of this viral clone was low, turning researchers into a quest for virus adaptation. Through serial passaging of the virus in cell culture, recurring mutations in certain region of the viral genome conferred higher viral replication rate. Most commonly, the mutations were clustered in NS5A and E2, while a p7 mutation was also highly associated with increased viral titers of HCVcc. The combination of three adaptive mutations, two in NS5A (V2153A, V2440L) and one in NS5B (V2941), were found to boost viral production to high titers in Huh-7.5 cells $\frac{413}{12}$ , giving rise to the JFH-1 adapted (Jad) virus, that we are using in our lab today. Other groups have selected strains with different single or combined adaptive mutations for their studies.

Another mechanism that proved to increase HCV titers in cell culture by up to 2-3 log units was the construction of intragenotypic chimeric viruses, comprised of the 5'-UTR and NS3-3'UTR sequences of JFH1 and Core-NS2 sequences of another subtype 2a strain, the  $J6<sup>414</sup>$ . Another widely used chimeric HCV virus, with high propagation in cell culture is the Jc1 strains, which is again a (J6/JFH1) chimera, with the only difference that in which Core to the first transmembrane domain of NS2 haves the J6 sequence, while the rest of the NS2 to the 3'UTRremaining comes from the JFH1 strain. With exchanges like this similar designs, several HCV chimeras intra- or inter-genotypic recombinant viruses have been developed, using Core-NS2, or Core-NS2 and NS5A sequences of J6 and/or sequences from strains of other genotypes within the JFH1 backbone, with additional substitutions of JFH1 sequences in some instances to produce infectious virus. A summary of these attempts is illustrated in Figure 24, reproduced from Ramirez et al.,  $2018^{\underline{240}}$ .

Over the past few years, a restricted number of strains from the most commonly circulating genotypes have been adapted by serial passage in cell culture, as well as through the introduction of multiple point mutations within several protein coding sequences by genetic engineering. Ultimately, these accumulated coding alterations have enabled a moderately efficient replication of these viruses in cell culture. These strains, however, remain scarce and heavily mutated in comparison to the initial clinical strains.

Despite its multiple advantages, this Huh-7.5 infection cell culture system has limitations. The necessity of adaptive mutations for efficient virus production prevents the use of clincial strains. The blocked IFN signaling pathway precludes host's immune pressure on virus evolution during infection and such a hepatoma cell line does not allow the evaluation of carcinogenesis mechanisms<sup>415</sup>.

An alternative to this system, could be the less accessible, yet more liver-resembling option of culturing primary human hepatocytes (PHH), differentiating stem cells or using liver organoids. However, even these models come with significant considerations. PHH, for example, coming from non-cancerogenic liver sections retrieved during a biopsy are difficult to obtain, they vary considerably from one donor to another, they have only a limited life span in culture, where they also eventually lose the biological characteristics of hepatocytes $\frac{416}{1}$ . On the other hand, despite the increased reproducibility conferred by differentiation of embryonic stem cells (ESC) or induced pluripotent stem cells (IPSC) to mature hepatocytes, the latter are not highly permissive to HCV infection and may clear the virus within  $\sim$ 10 days of infection $\frac{417,418}{2}$ . The same issues on permissivity are uncovered through attempts to infect liver organoids, which can be produced from stem cells cultured in extracellular matrices in the presence of spontaneous tissue self-organization growth factors, giving rise to hepatocytes and the three main nonparenchymal cells of the liver (HSCs, Kupffer cells and endothelial cells) $\frac{419}{2}$ .



*Figure 24: A summary of the HCV chimeric genomes developed within the JFH1 backbone. Full-length JFH1 and J6/JFH1 genomes are shown on top. Sequences derived from JFH1are displayed in blue, from J6 in orange, and from various other genotypes in green. The names of the various HCV genomic sections encoded proteins are only shown in the JFH1 genome depiction, but are comparable in the schematic representations of the rest remaining genomes schemes. The name of each virus recombinant and the genotypes available for that chimera are displayed on the left side of the illustration indicate the viral sequence exchanged and genotypic origins available, while the corresponding literature references to the literature are presented on the right. NS3-P: NS3 protease domain, NS3-H: NS3 helicase, ΔHVR1: deletion of the hypervariable region 1 in E2.Figure from Ramirez et al., 2018*240*, reproduced with permission from Elsevier (License No 5618870536666).*

#### I.B.η.(iv) Models for *in vivo* studies

Since the discovery of the virus, HCV research has greatly been contingent on animal models, that can support the infection and/or develop similar pathologies as the humans. The *in vivo* models for HCV studies can be divided in five big categories (summarized in Table 3): (i) hosts that can be naturally infected by the virus without the need of viral adaptation and/or host manipulation, (ii) transgenic animals, (iii) genetically humanised mice, (iv) xenotransplant mice, and (v) surrogate animal models (for review see Vercauteren et al., 2015  $\frac{420}{2}$ , Catanese et al.,  $2015\frac{405}{5}$ , Burm et al.,  $2018\frac{375}{5}$  and Yong et al.,  $2019\frac{421}{5}$ .

## Hosts supporting natural infection

Besides humans, chimpanzees are the only animal species to be naturally susceptible to highly productive HCV infection rendering it the only acceptable model for the evaluation of therapeutic and vaccine strategies. However, since 2010, new ethical guidelines have hampered the use of chimpanzees as animal testing models for HCV in the European Union and since 2015 in the United States as well $\frac{422}{2}$ .

Almost a decade following the discovery of HCV a small mammal resembling squirrels, the tree shrew, was found to support HCV infection $\frac{423}{2}$ , and develop liver fibrosis, cirrhosis, and oxidative stress just as chronic HCV infected patients might  $d\sigma^{424,425}$ . However, the viremia induced was not high and this model is not widely available.

Recently, well-renowned scientists of the hepatitis C field have been contemplating that in the absence of a better animal model, either due to ethical or financial restrictions, and in the presence of highly efficient and effective antiviral treatment, vaccine candidate testing could be redirected to the natural HCV host, the humans $\frac{372}{1}$ . In fact, this is not the first instance in which such a concept is being proposed $426$ . Controlled Human Infection Models (CHIMs) entail deliberate exposure of healthy human volunteers to a well-documented pathogen towards in depth investigation of disease processes, treatment, and vaccine assessment, and are already undergoing optimisation and refinement for tuberculosis (TB) and severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) studies  $427,428$ . A lot of collective thinking has been put into this model, with specific workshops being held over the past years, led mainly by Drs Jake Liang and Jordan Feld. During these meetings several considerations have been raised and an in-depth proposal addressing them has been recently submitted $429$ . Personally, I fail to comprehend how the ethical and financial repercussions of a human animal model are lesser that those of a nonhuman one. Even more so, when the consensus proposal on the human cohort suggested to undergo the controlled infection targets a vulnerable subgroup of people, those addicted to intravenous drug use. No matter the extended knowledge we have acquired over HCV life cycle, we are still not completely aware of the associated pathology inducing mechanisms and we are only recently beginning to fathom the extent to which an HCV infection may still affect the host upon clearance, e.g. through epigenetic alterations and reprogramming of host gene expression $\frac{430}{12}$ . Despite scientists' thirst for knowledge and need to serve the public, it might be beneficial to occasionally ask ourselves "Would I enroll my child in this?".

#### Transgenic mice

Mice do not express human hepatocyte factors essential for HCV entry (for review, Sandmann and Ploss,  $2013<sup>431</sup>$  and they do express factors restricting viral multiplication in murine hepatocytes $\frac{432}{ }$ , rendering them resistant to HCV infection. Transgenic animal technology, allowing for the germline insertion of exogenous genes, has provided researchers with a model in which HCV coding regions, from selected proteins to the whole polyprotein, are expressed in mice and the effects of this expression can be observed (for review Barth et al.,  $2008\frac{433}{3}$ ). Transgenic mice are unable to recreate the full life cycle of the virus, but they have been reported to exhibit liver pathology. Steatosis, HCC and oxidative stress have been documented, following the expression of HCV Core protein $\frac{434-436}{8}$ , while the expression of the complete viral polyprotein was associated with an increased risk of cancer $437$  suggesting that hepatocarcinogenesis is the result of the combined action of several HCV proteins. It should be noted however that the observed pathogenesis has not always been successfully reproduced by independent groups $\frac{438,439}{ }$ . Nonetheless, as this model does not support HCV infection, not all findings are directly relevant to the HCV pathogenesis *in vivo*.

#### Genetically humanized mice

In order to address this this constraint, mice can be rendered susceptible to infection through transgenic introduction of the human orthologs required for HCV entry $\frac{440}{1}$ . Indeed, expression of the HCV co-receptors CD81, SR-B1, CLDN1 and OLCN permitted HCV entry in mouse hepatocytes *in vivo*<sup>441</sup>, while in the context of immunodeficient mice HCV persistent infection could be recapitulated $\frac{442}{2}$ .

Although no apparent pathology has been observed in these mice, possibly due to the absence of inflammation in this immunodeficient background, they embody an appropriate model for the study of antivirals and murine vaccine responses  $\frac{443-445}{2}$ . They have also largely been used for *in vivo* examination of the virus life cycle<sup>446-448</sup>. Fibrosis development has been reported in this model (Table 3), an observation made by a single group in immunocompetent humanized mice that developed sustained viremia for more than 12 months in parallel with hepatic lesions<sup>449</sup>.

### Xenotransplanted mice

Another method to overcome the species barrier entails xenotransplantation of PHH or *in vitro* cultured human hepatic organoids towards humanization of the murine liver<sup>450</sup>. However, this process can only be successful in the absence of B-, T- and natural killer (NK) cell responses, meaning that these mice are severely immunocompromised. To improve this model, transplantation of both PHH and human hematopoietic cells has led to the development of immunocompetent chimeric mice, with human liver and immune system. These can prove to be invaluable in the investigation of HCV-induced liver damage and in the pre-clinical validation process of vaccine candidates, once proven to be permissive to HCV infection<sup>451,452</sup>.

### HCV surrogate animal models

For several years, the only available surrogate animal model for HCV was the distantly related GB-virus B (GBV-B) infection of small New World primates, such as tamarins and marmosets. GBV-B is the exemplar virus of the Hepacivirus platyrrhini species, within the Hepacivirus genus. GBV-B can cause acute hepatitis and rare persistent infections upon experimental administration in small primates, serving as a useful model for the understanding of immune responses and possible restrictions in vaccine development attempts for  $HCV<sup>453-</sup>$  $\frac{455}{1}$ .

With the recent advancements in the Hepacivirus field, several new species have been identified and phylogenetically analysed, revealing the increased genetic proximity of the human Hepacivirus hominis to the canine Hepacivirus equi. Otherwise known as nonprimate hepacivirus (NPHV), this virus was first isolated from infected dogs $456$ . However, it was later found that its natural host are horses (Equus ferus), in which NPHV can induce persistent infection, with hepatotropism and development of liver inflammation. The chronicity of infection is decreased compared to HCV in humans, but the exerted immune response is highly similar, with delayed seroconversion and inflammation in the liver  $457$ . Therefore, the immunocompetent horses infected with NPHV would be a great model to study Hepacivirus pathology and responses, had the animal been easier to manage and less costly to sustain.

Lastly, the rodent hepaciviruses identified over a decade ago also constitute a greatly interesting surrogate model for HCV and will be described with in more detail at the dedicated section (see §I.C).

## *Table 3: In vivo models for the study of HCV, possible surrogate animal models and their applications.*

*All immunocompetent surrogate animal models are appropriate for the study of therapies and vaccine development against the respective virus, hence not applicable (NA) for HCV. HCC: hepatocellular carcinoma.* 





#### *Figure 25: A summary of the HCV milestones described so far in this manuscript.*

*Bibliographic references can be found within the corresponding section of the manuscript. Figures reproduced with permission from SmartServier (https://smart.servier.com/), Freepik (https://www.freepik.com/), Inotiv (https://www.inotivco.com/), or Uprichard et al., 2006*<sup>377</sup> *(CC BY 2.0).*

#### **I.B.(θ) Virus-host interactions**

HCV promotes its life cycle and induces deregulations in the host cells through the actions of virus-encoded proteins, which may cause rewiring of cellular pathways either by direct interaction with cellular proteins implicated in these processes or by modifying the expression of cellular genes. A schematic synopsis of the HCV-induced perturbations of hepatocellular homeostasis essentially leading to HCC is provided in Figure 26, with an emphasis on the implications of the viral proteins modulating each process. These disturbances of host processes may be induced at the protein or at the gene level. Since a detailed overview of all host cell modulations is beyond the scope of this manuscript, the interactions of HCV with the host immunity is briefly presented below, followed by an outline of reported PPIs and regulation of cellular gene expression by HCV proteins, with stress on the roles of Core and NS5A.



*Figure 26: Schematic summary of HCV-induced perturbations of hepatocellular homeostasis. The main focus is on HCV-host interactions and signaling during viral infection that contribute to cellular transformation and HCC development. Red arrows are indicative of the direct effects of HCV RNA or proteins on specific hallmark processes. HCC mechanisms observed in the clinics and in in vivo models are linked to the hallmarks by the black arrows. Dotted lines represent examples of inflammation-driven carcinogenesis. EMT: epithelial mesenchymal transition, HSC: hepatic stellate cells, IFN: interferon, sRNA: small RNA. Reprinted from Bandiera et al., 2016*<sup>471</sup>*, with permission from Elsevier (License number: 5623560073115) and from original Mesri et al., 2014*472*(License number: 5623561123899).*

#### I.B.θ.(i) Immune evasion

Infection of hepatocytes with HCV triggers the activation of the immune system in order to clear the virus $\frac{473}{5}$ . To this end, dendritic cells (DC), HSCs, and Kupffer cells express cytokines (MIP-1, IL-12, IL-15, and IL-18) to attract NK cells that will produce IFN $\gamma$  in the liver $474,475$ . The production of type I and III interferons causes sinusoidal endothelial cells to secrete chemokines (CXCL10, MIG), further attracting T lymphocytes toward viral clearance<sup>476</sup>.

Nonetheless, HCV can evade the host immune system and cause persistent infection. The virus accomplishes this in a variety of ways, including the disruption of DCs and NK cells. HCV has been demonstrated to increase the levels of indoleamine-2,3,-deoxygenase, disrupting DC maturation and antigen-presenting capabilities  $\frac{477}{7}$ . DC disruptions further include altered phagocytic capabilities through induced plasmacytoid dendritic cell (pDC) apoptosis and impaired DC proteasomal subunits<sup>478</sup>. Early in HCV infection, impaired DC activity leads to low levels of NK cell maturation and an immunosuppressive regulatory T-cell phenotype due to poor priming of CD4+ and CD8+ T cells $\frac{479,480}{2}$ . Persistent HCV infection also results in varying expansion and differentiation of NK cells among patients $\frac{481}{ }$ , while NK cell function during HCV acute and chronic infection have also been found to permutate  $482$ .



#### *Figure 27: Mechanisms of HCV evasion of innate immunity.*

*The steps in which viral proteins interfere with physiological host immunity pathways are highlighted by red "stop" signs. eIF2α: eukaryotic initiation factor 2α, HCV: hepatitis C virus, IFN: interferon, IRF: IFN regulatory factor, ISG: IFN-stimulated gene, MAVS: mitochondria antiviral signaling protein, MITA: mediator of IRF3 activation, MyD88: myeloid differentiation pro-inflammatory response 88, PIAS1: protein inhibitor of activated STAT1, PKR: protein kinase R, PRMT1: protein arginine methyltransferase 1, SOCS3: suppressor of cytokine signaling 3, STAT: signal transducer and activator of transcription, STING: stimulator of interferon gene, TLR: Toll-like receptor, TRIF: TIR domaincontaining adaptor inducing IFN-β. Figure reproduced from Wong et al., 2016* <sup>484</sup> *under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 Unported License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).*

At the molecular level, host cells possess several recognition and defence mechanisms against viral intrusion (Figure 27). Two important signaling pathways that activate the host innate immunity against viral infection can be subverted by HCV-encoded proteins. One of these pathways utilizes members of Toll-like receptor (TLR) family and the other senses intracellular viral double-stranded RNA (dsRNA) via the RNA helicase RIG-I and is involved in the activation of transcription factors. Viral detection by these pattern recognition receptors (PRR) is the first step to type I IFN ( $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ ) and interferon-stimulated gene (ISG) induction, via the activation of IRF3, IRF7 and NF-κB transcription factors by adapter proteins such as TRIF, MYD88 and MAVS. Secreted IFN is detected by interferon receptors of neighbouring cells and induces through the JAK/STAT pathway the transcription of ISGs, such as inflammatory cytokines, pattern recognition receptors and effector proteins $483$ .

The best characterized mechanism of subversion of HCV immunity is the NS3/4A protease-induced inhibition of the RIG-I and TLR3 signaling pathways through the cleavage of MAVS and TRIF, respectively<sup>485,486</sup>. Additionally, NS3 itself has been found to bind tank binding kinase (TBK1) in order to prevent the engagement of IRF3 and the expression of IFN<sup>487</sup>. TBK1 is also a target of NS4B, which in turn targets the STING-mediated activation of the protein, to suppress the induction of type I IFN $\frac{488}{3}$ . Core also plays an important role by inhibiting the JAK/STAT signaling through direct interaction with  $STAT1<sup>489</sup>$  and by inducing the production of suppressor of cytokine signaling proteins (SOCS1 and SOCS3) $\frac{490,491}{2}$ . Core binding to STAT1 was shown to prevent its phosphorylation and thus, its activation $\frac{492}{2}$ . Core, in its monomeric form, can additionally stimulate TLR2 pathway assisting the virus evasion of the innate immune system $\frac{493,494}{2}$ . Moreover, E2 and NS5A are known to inhibit PKR $\frac{495,496}{2}$ , while NS5A additionally interacts with 2'-5'-oligoadenylate synthase (2'5'OAS), blocking its antiviral effect and reducing ISG expression levels $\frac{497}{ }$  and with the TLR adaptor MyD88 to inhibit TLR-mediated innate immune evasion $\frac{496}{6}$ . Furthermore, NS5A induces gene transcription of interleukin 8 (IL-8), which has been found to suppress the antiviral actions of IFN- $\alpha$ <sup>498</sup> and to downregulate the expressions of NKG2D, an activating cell surface receptor on NK cells, via TLR4 pathway, impairing the functional ability of these cells $499$ .

Nonetheless, despite all these subversion mechanisms, activation of the IFN pathway is still detected in HCV infected patients, an attribute that could be explained by the fact that not all hepatocytes are infected or by induction of the signaling before the production of viral proteins<sup>500</sup>. These mechanisms are collectively represented in Figure 27<sup>484</sup>.

#### I.B.θ.(ii) Protein-protein interactions

The identification and functional characterization of individual HCV-host PPIs can be of great importance towards better understanding the mechanisms of viral pathogenesis and promotion of the HCV life cycle. On the other hand, a more collective mapping of these PPIs into networks may reveal valuable insights into functional constitution of the viral protein interactomes, through analysis of different aspects of the network, such as its complexity and size.

Several researchers of the HCV field have undertaken to identify HCV-host PPIs by different small-scale or high-throughput experimental approaches, or by computational prediction models. The wet lab techniques more commonly used to identify direct or indirect PPIs include the *in vivo* Yeast 2 Hybrid (Y2H) system, and the *in vitro* glutathione s-transferase (GST) pull-down, affinity chromatography, co-immunoprecipitation, protein-fragment complementation assays (PCA), biotin-based proximity labeling techniques (BioID, APEX)<sup>501</sup>, and (tandem) affinity purification of protein complexes coupled to identification of retrieved peptides by mass spectrometry (AP-MS) (for review see Rao et al.,  $2014\frac{502}{2}$ ).

Whether attempting to produce a comprehensive map of HCV by determining the interactomes of multiple viral proteins, or just focusing on a single viral protein and functionally characterizing few selected partners, the list of publications on HCV PPIs is enormous. For a time, a group of researchers had created and manually curated an HCVspecific PPI publicly available database called  $HCV pro<sup>503</sup> (http://cbrc.kaust.edu.sa/hcvpro/),$ which unfortunately has not been maintained during the past few years. Similarly, the VirusMINT database<sup>504</sup> (http://mint.bio.uniroma2.it/virusmint/), containing viral PPIs includes only limited HCV-related data, that are rarely linked with specific HCV proteins, but rather with the polyprotein.

Hence, exhaustive lists of HCV protein PPIs are currently lacking. Some researchers have employed text-mining approaches attempting to tackle this, such as in the publications of:

- (i) Mukhopadhyay & Maulik (2014), who performed mining of HCVpro to uncover HCV-host PPIs, String database to extract cellular PPIs and the Genetic Disease Association Database to collect protein associations to disease phenotypes<sup>505</sup>,
- (ii) Saik et al. (2016), who developed a mining tool, ANDSystem, and recovered HCVhost PPIs from PubMed abstracts and full text articles<sup>506</sup>,
- (iii) Farooq & Khan (2019), who extracted HCV PPIs from a selected list of 13 papers with accessible interaction data, out of the 729 studies retrieved by advanced search of PubMed for HCV PPIs<sup>507</sup>,

or, in an attempt to complement their own experimental data, the works of:

- (i) de Chassey et al. (2008), who complemented the interactome of Con1b derived proteins obtained by Y2H using a fetal brain and spleen cDNA library by textmining data obtained by BIND database and PubMed<sup>508</sup>, and
- (ii) Thripathi et al. (2013), who focused solely on HCV NS5A protein, performing a Y2H screen using truncated NS5A (aa1973-2419) of genotype 1b J1 strain and a human liver cDNA library and reported previously described pairwise NS5Ahuman interactions mined from Medline, supplemented by follow-up manual inspections<sup>509</sup>.

Original high-throughput studies addressing the HCV interactome include those of:

- (i) Dolan et al. (2013), who carried out large scale Y2H screens using genotype 2a JFH1-derived whole or truncated proteins (Core, E2, NS2, NS3, NS4B, NS5A, NS5B) and a human liver cDNA library to identify HCV-host PPIs<sup>510</sup>,
- (ii) Germain et al. (2014), who used HEK 293T cells expressing 3xFLAG-tagged Core (JFH1-derived), NS2, NS3/4A, NS4B, NS5A (Con1b-derived), or NS5B viral proteins to perform immunoprecipitation (IP) of viral–host protein complexes coupled to liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) expreiments $\frac{511}{2}$ , and
- (iii) Ramage et al. (2015), who implemented affinity purification (AP) coupled to MS (AP-MS) experiments using the lysates of Huh-7 cells independently overexpressing each JFH1 protein and verified the retrieved interaction in a replicon system<sup>512</sup>.

High-throughput investigation of the Core interactome has been carried out in the studies of:

- (i) Roohvand et al. (2009), who performed protein chip and direct Core-dependent pull-down assays, followed by mass spectrometry, using C-terminally His-tagged Core proteins aa  $2-169$  (D1 and D2) and aa  $2-122$  (D1) expressed in Huh-7 cells $\frac{513}{2}$ ,
- (ii) Tripathi et al. (2010), performing a Y2H screen using Core of Con1b strain and a human liver cDNA library<sup>514</sup>, and
- (iii) Dolan et al. (2015), who investigated the interactomes of two N-terminal computationally predicted molecular recognition features of JFH1-derived Core in a Y2H screen with a human liver cDNA library $\frac{515}{2}$ .

For NS5A, while the distinct interactomes of the two phosphorylation forms has been studied by Pan et al.<sup>160</sup>, using lysates of genotype 2a J6/JFH1 infected Huh-7.5.1 cells to perform AP- MS/MS using antibodies specific to either p56 or p58 NS5A, other studies evaluating the NS5A interactome without discriminating NS5A phosphorylation status include those of:

- (i) Meistermann et al. (2013), who identified NS5A interactors in Huh-7 cells stably expressing Con1b subgenomic replicon by immuno-competitive capture mass spectrometry (ICC-MS) experiments<sup>516</sup>,
- (ii) Eberle et al. (2014), who performed a TAP-MS screen using HEK293 cells ectopically expressing genotype 2a Jc1 NS5 $A<sup>517</sup>$ , and
- (iii) Vlaicu et al. (2017), who constructed a full-length functional replicon in the context of a modified JFH1 genome encoding tagged NS5A protein with a compensatory deletion of 40aa (previously described by Moradpour et al.  $\frac{518}{10}$ , and Gottwein et al. $\frac{519}{2}$ ) towards AP-MS experiments using Huh-7 cells $\frac{520}{2}$ .

Many of these data, including additional PPIs are reported in the review papers of Kao et al.<sup>521</sup> for Core and Ross-Thriepland & Harris<sup>118</sup> for NS5A (Supplementary Table 1 and Supplementary Table 2). As detailed above, the limitations of the vast majority of these studies lie in the fact that they have rarely been performed in fully relevant infection systems.

Concerning NS5A, its interaction with certain cellular factors has well been documented and functionally characterized. More specifically, the crucial role of CypA and PI4KIIIα for HCV replication has already been presented in §I.B.ε.(iv) and is supported by extensive experimental evidence. Furthermore, interaction of NS5A with Amphiphysin II (BIN1) was shown to down-regulate NS5A phosphorylation, affecting the HCV life cycle $522$ , although the interaction was found to be dispensable for HCV RNA replication $523$ . NS5A interaction through its DIII with annexin A2 (ANXA2) was also extensively studied, while ANXA knockdown or silencing were shown to dramatically affect HCV Jc1 titers in infected cells $\frac{524}{7}$ , or to decrease the formation of membranous web-like structures and HCV genotype 1b and 2a RNA replication<sup>525</sup>, respectively. NS5A/Heat shock protein 72 PPI was also thoroughly examined, with the interaction being mapped to aa 147-301 of NS5A and aa 231-380 of Hsp72. Overexpression and knockdown experiments in Huh-7.5.1 cells stably carrying HCV subgenomic replicon pSGR-JFH1 showed that Hsp72 acts as a positive regulator of HCV replication possibly by increasing the stability of viral proteins levels within the replicase or by enhanced IRES translational efficiency<sup>526</sup>. Moreover, Hsp72 levels were found increased in the presence of NS5A, an effect that could be linked to increased nuclear factor of activated T cells 5 (NFAT5) activity due to ROS production by NS5A. Hsp72 modulation via NFAT5 might be a potential mechanism implicated in NS5A-directed induced liver pathology $\frac{527}{2}$ .

The host factors mentioned above are only a few of the reported NS5A interacting partners, with a more extensive list in Supplementary Table 2.

#### I.B.θ.(iii) Regulation of gene expression

Microarray studies in liver biopsies from HCV-infected patients in comparison to non-HCV infected controls showed that HCV infection can perturb host gene expression $\frac{528,529}{ }$ . Combined experiments in HCV infected cell culture, chimeric mice with humanized liver and liver tissues from HCV patients revealed HCV-induced perturbations in metabolic, immune response, and HCC-related pathways<sup>530</sup>.

The role of HCV Core, in particular, in host gene expression disturbances has been underlined by many studies in cell culture systems and in animal models, focusing on the effects on both the virus life cycle and the viral pathogenesis (for review see Kao et al.,  $2016\frac{521}{10}$ . Ectopic expression of the protein alone in transgenic mice has been extensively studied and found to be in link with pathologies observed in HCV infected patients. Notably activation of retinoid X receptor alpha, alteration of cytokine expression, oxidative stress, steatosis, and HCC are part of the liver phenotypes observed in such mice (for review see Barth et al., 2008<sup>433</sup>). One mechanism of HCV Core-induced development of steatosis may rely on the reported downregulation of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor alpha (PPARα), an important regulator of fatty acids degradation in the liver<sup>531</sup>. Core has also been found to induce the expression of TGF- $\beta$ 1<sup>532</sup>, the levels of which are found significantly elevated in HCV infected patients<sup>533</sup>. An overstimulation of the genes encoding PPAR $\alpha$  and TGF- $\beta$  by genotype 3a highly cell culture-adapted strains compared to genotype 1a strain was reported by Patra et al., 2019<sup>534</sup>. In support of the role of HCV Core in steatosis development, this viral protein has also been found to upregulate the transcription of the sterol regulatory element binding protein 1 (SREBP1) and of the peroxisome proliferators-activated receptor gamma (PPARγ), which are involved in the regulation of hepatocellular lipid metabolism $\frac{535}{2}$ . HCV Core has further been found to regulate the expression of antioxidant genes $\frac{536}{5}$ , proto-oncogenes, as well as hepatic miR-122, which has the intrinsic property to regulate genes involved in suppression of metastasis. Core exhibits both pro- and anti-apoptotic properties, such as its ability to stimulate or inhibit intrinsic or extrinsic pathways mediated by p53 or by TNF- $\alpha_{.}^{537}$ .

Sharing some host signaling pathways with Core, NS5A seems to modulate MAPK, phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase, Wnt/β-catenin, p53 and NF-κB, resulting in the activation of cell proliferation and the inhibition of apoptosis, thus likely contributing to HCV pathology<sup>538,118</sup>. NS5A is also involved in HCV-induced lipid metabolism perturbations, as it has been found to increase the expression levels of sterol regulatory element binding protein-1c (SREBP1c), acetyl-coenzyme A carboxylase 1 (ACC1) and fatty acid synthase (FASN) *in vitro* and by ectopic expression in mice<sup>539</sup>.

Despite the apparent huge body of reported data with regard to hepatocyte pathways deregulated by HCV, many works have not been carried out in physiologically relevant infection systems or with a diversity of HCV genotypes or have led to discrepant statements, calling for additional works to consolidate and reconciliate these data.

## **I.C Rodent Hepacivirus**

## **I.C.(α) History**

Following the identification of Hepacivirus equi, many researchers attempted to find HCV-related viruses in a plethora of hosts. One of these groups was the lab of Dr. Ian Lipkin (Center for Infection and Immunity, Columbia University, New York, USA), who captured and examined more than 400 wild rodents from four Rodentia species, for the presence of novel viruses $\frac{24}{1}$ . Brown sewer rats (Rattus norvegicus) from New York city were found to be infected with two novel hepaciviruses among others, the Norway rat hepacivirus 1 (NrHV-1, RHV-rn1 or Hepacivirus ratti) and the Norway rat hepacivirus 2 (NrHV-2, or Hepacivirus norvegicus) $\frac{540}{2}$ . These viruses were identified in rat sera by unbiased high-throughput sequencing (UHTS) using degenerate primer sets targeting conserved domains within the NS3 helicase of known hepaciviruses and the closely related pegiviruses within the Flaviviridae family.

The identification of RHV was followed by the reported presence of such viruses in the sera and organ tissues of South African four-striped mice (Rhabdomys pumilio) and European bank voles (Myodes glareolus), following the screening of 4,770 rodents (Rodentia, 41 species) from Africa, Europe, Mexico, and Thailand. The hepatotropism of these viruses was supported by the presence of viral RNA and low levels of lymphocytic invasion found by histopathological and molecular analyses of liver samples from RHV-infected bank voles. Moreover, these animals seem to be able to control hepacivirus infections, since low serological co-occurrence of viral RNA and anti-RHV NS3 antibodies was reported in PCRpositive animals  $(5.3\%)$ <sup>541</sup>.

#### **I.C.(β) Genome, proteins, and virus particle organization**

As shown in Figure 1 (page - 2 -), phylogenetic analyses of the various RHV species identified up to date have revealed a substantially great molecular divergence from HCV, unlike that observed between HCV and NPHV, indicating an absence of hepaciviral cospeciation<sup>29,24,541,542</sup>. A considerable level of genetic diversity has also been observed among RHV species, rendering the individual RHV species as unrelated to each other as they are to other species among the Hepacivirus genus identified in a plethora of hosts $457$ .

The overall genome organization of rodent hepaciviruses is highly similar to that of HCV, with 5<sup>2</sup>- and 3<sup>2</sup>-UTRs and a long ORF encoding three structural and seven nonstructural proteins, with homologous predicted cleavage sites  $24$ . However, distinct differences are found in the sequence and structure of the UTRs, with their complete functional characterization remaining unmet to date. More specifically, the number of miR-122 binding sites within the 5'-UTR ranges from one to two among the different species, while two of the RHV lineages obtained from European bank voles contain an IRES resembling that present in the species of the Pegivirus genus<sup>541</sup>. The main difference among RHV species and HCV within the  $3'-UTR$ seems to be the absence of a poly(U) tract in the former, whereas similarities exist within the terminal stem-loop of certain RHV isolates $\frac{24,541}{2}$ .

The hepacivirus ratti, or RHV-rn1 that is used in the present study was first sequenced by the group of Dr Amit Kapoor (Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA). In spite of the high nucleotide divergence with HCV species, hepacivirus ratti harbours a well-structured 5'- UTR containing an IRES and two miR-122 seed sequences, like HCV, an important determinant for efficient replication in liver cells. In contrast, hepacivirus norvegici, or RHVrn2, was found to harbour only one miR-122 binding sites within its  $5'$ -UTR $469$ .

As for HCV, little is known about the structure of infectious RHV particles, although recent studies in cell culture (see I.C.(δ)) revealed that cell-culture derived RHV-rn1 particles have biophysical properties characteristic of HCV, such as a very low density, and lack of correlation of increased levels of RHV E2 embedded in the virion envelope with highest infectivity in *vitro*<sup>543</sup>.

### **I.C.(γ) Host information**

The order Rodentia constitute the most diverse and over-represented group of mammals (40%). In the absence of a clearly matching phylogenetic clustering of the evolutionary history of RHV and mammals, it is suspected that the unexpected diversity found among RHV species is the result of several cross-species transmissions. Nonetheless, further research is required to determine whether hepaciviruses from other mammalian hosts are capable of crossing species and infecting rodents.

Rodents' ecology and behaviour are incredibly diversified, rendering them viable in practically any terrestrial ecosystem, including man-made habitats. All rodents, however, share numerous physical characteristics, the most representative of which is their pairs of continually developing, razor-sharp, open-rooted incisors. The majority of rodents are herbivorous, meaning they only eat plant material such as seeds, stems, leaves, flowers, and roots, while some are omnivorous, and others are predators.

Rats is the common name for the genus Rattus of muroid rodents. Rats are medium-sized, long-tailed rodent. The main discriminatory factor among rats and mice (Mus) is their size, with rats being significantly bigger. The black rat (Rattus rattus) and the brown rat (Rattus norvegicus) have become the most well-known rat species, with the latter often used as model organisms for scientific research. Interestingly, despite the high genetic differences among rats and humans, the livers of these mammals present more similarities than differences. The differences include the presence of lobation and the absence of a gallbladder in rats, though in the presence of a highly similar liver microarchitecture $\frac{544}{1}$ .

The existing resemblances, taken together with the intrinsic predisposition of certain rat species to develop obesity, DM2 and MASLD, and the fact that large sequences of the genome of Rattus norvegicus are now known, render rats a unique model for liver-disease associated studies  $\frac{545}{10}$ . For experimental purposes, entirely new breeds or "lines" of brown rats have been outbred, including the Wistar, the Long–Evans, and the Sprague Dawley rats.

Wistars are albino rats, developed by the Wistar Institute in 1906 for use in biological and medical research as a model organism over the predominantly utilized house mouse (Mus musculus) at the time. The original colony formed by physiologist Henry Herbert Donaldson, scientific administrator Milton J. Greenman, and genetic researcher/embryologist Helen Dean King is the source of more than half of all laboratory rat lines. The Wistar rat, distinguished by its broad head, big ears, and a tail that is usually shorter than its body length, is today one of the most often used laboratory rodents.



*Figure 28: Different lines of laboratory rats that have been used for setting up the RHV model*<sup>468</sup>. *Wistar Han (A), Long Evans (B), Sprague Dawley (C) and Holtzman (D) rats are not shown in scale. Photos reproduced with permission from Inotiv (https://www.inotivco.com/).*

Wistars were used for the breeding of the Long–Evans, and the Sprague Dawley rats and are usually more energetic than these other breeds. Long and Evans produced the Long-Evans rats in 1915 by crossing Wistar females with wild grey males. Long-Evans rats are white with a darker coloured hood (black or brown). They are commonly used as a versatile model organism in behavioral studies, particularly in alcohol research, as they consume alcohol at a considerably faster rate than other lines, allowing for more time-efficient behavioral investigations.

The Sprague Dawley rats were first produced by the Sprague Dawley farms in Madison, Wisconsin in 1925, by crossbreeding a hooded male hybrid of unknown origin with a Wistar female, and repeating with the female's progeny for 7 generations. Sprague Dawley rats are albino, and typically have an elongated head and a longer tail in proportion to their body length than their parental breed, Wistars. They are extensively used in medical and nutritional research, and they are preferred due to their rapid growth, docility, and ease to handle. Sprague Dawleys have been further used for the outbreeding of other laboratory rat lines, such as the Harlan Sprague-Dawley rats by Harlan Co. (Indianapolis, IN) and the Holtzman Sprague-Dawley rats by Holtzman Co. (Madison, WI).

### **I.C.(δ) Pathogenesis and surrogate animal model for HCV**

As described in  $\S$ I.B.n.(iv), HCV can robustly infect only humans and chimpanzees, with the restricted use of the latter in biomedical research tremendously limiting *in vivo* modeling of chronic infection and pathogenesis. Hence, in the absence of a more appropriate animal model available, RHV infecting its natural host, rats, seems to be an ideal alternative thanks to the manageability and extended knowledge researchers possess of the animal, the chronicity of infection reported in immunocompetent animals, the HCV-like pathogenicity observed, and the permissivity for vaccine studies.

More specifically, serum from a wild brown rat infected with one of the rat hepacivirus species isolated from Rattus norvegicus, the RHV-rn1, has been used to infect Sprague Dawley laboratory rats. The viral genome thereof has been cloned and synthetic RNA derived from this cDNA has been intrahepatically inoculated in Sprague-Dawley, Holtzman, Long-Evans, and Wistar Han outbred laboratory rats, resulting in liver infection. This study by the group of Dr Amit Kapoor revealed moderate hepatic inflammation in experimentally infected rats, characterized by a consistent pattern of dense lymphocytic aggregates focused on the portal tracts, and more parenchymal damage with hepatic plate disarray at later times in chronically infected animals. Interestingly, liver steatosis was also observed in these animals. Furthermore, analysis of differentially expressed genes in the liver of a small cohort of infected rats showed activation of interferon signaling pathways that increased in late stages of chronic infection, as in HCV infected patients<sup>468</sup>.

Importantly, this RHV strain fails to establish persistent infection in immunocompetent laboratory mice, though immunocompromised mice lacking type I interferon and adaptive immunity (A129, AG129, and NRG) can be chronically infected. Evidence of possible RHV adaptation to the immunocompromised mouse host also surfaced from these attempts<sup>469</sup>.

As *in vivo* studies are usually coupled to molecular analyses *in vitro*, the group of Dr Troels Scheel (University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark) undertook to establish an *in vitro* model to culture RHV in hepatic cells of rat origin. First, efficient RHV-rn1 selectable subgenomic replicons were developed and then cell clones that could harbour stably replicating RHV-rn1 subgenomic RNAs without the need of adaptive mutations were selected. Interestingly, the efficiency of RHV replication in cells of rat origin may be increased following the introduction of adaptive mutations in NS4B and NS5A, previously identified in transfected hepatoma cell lines of murine origin, implying that adaptive mutations are not species-specific but rather boost RHV genome replication in cell culture more broadly. Miravirsen, a miR-122 antagonist that suppresses HCV replication, was also shown to suppress RHV-rn1 genome replication, demonstrating the ubiquitous relevance of this host factor for hepaciviruses, the importance of the existence of the miR-122 binding sites in RHV 5'-UTR, further highlighting significant commonalities between RHV and  $HCV<sup>546</sup>$ .

Scheel et al. further described an infectious reverse genetic cell culture system for RHVrn1 employing the selected highly permissive rat hepatoma cells and RHV-rn1 bearing adaptive mutations in E2, NS4B, and NS5A viral proteins. RHV-rn1 particles produced in cell culture (RHVcc) present similar biophysical properties as HCV and are infectious in rats. In immunocompetent rats, culture adaptive mutations attenuated RHV, and the mutations reversed after extended infection<sup>543</sup>.

Overall, RHV-rn1 in rats has a profile very similar to that of HCV in humans, characterized by hepatotropism, persistent viremia detectable for over 1 year and recapitulation of many aspects of liver pathology, such as micro- and macro-vesicular steatosis, lymphoid aggregation, and biliary epithelial damage<sup>468</sup>. These attributes render it an appropriate surrogate model to study viral persistence, the role of various interferon stimulating genes and immune responses in hepacivirus pathogenesis, as well as vaccine candidate efficiency. In fact, the group of Dr Kapoor is now devoted to exploring vaccine strategies, recently showing that single-dose immunization with vaccine candidate composed of a recombinant adenovirus vector expressing RHV nonstructural proteins can induce effective immunity in vaccinated rats. Resolution of RHV infection was found to coincide with a vigorous recall of intrahepatic cellular responses, while this study also provided direct evidence of the importance of cooperation between CD4+ and CD8+ T cells for hepacivirus immunity $547$ . Furthermore, viruses containing escape mutations within MHC class I-restricted epitopes reduced the efficacy of this vaccine candidate upon challenge $548$ . Further research into the immune responses that result in protection against various RHV challenges in this model may aid in the development of widely effective HCV vaccines, increasing the appeal of this rat model.

## **II. Objectives**

Chronic HCV infection is a progressive and long-term asymptomatic disease, resulting in metabolic disorders, such as steatosis, an abnormal accumulation of neutral lipids in hepatocytes, and long-term complications of cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The prevalence of clinical manifestations varies according to the hepatitis C virus (HCV) genotype (8 genotypes and >90 subtypes identified so far), with g. Genotype 3 infection, which is highly prevalent among IVDU in Europe presenting an increased association with steatosis, with an incidence rate of 80%, and subtype 1b infections being are associated with increased risk for HCC development, while significant clinical data are lacking for genotypes 4-8

HCV-induced pathologies can be driven by a complex combination of both direct, as well as indirect mechanisms such as chronic liver inflammation. Virus-driven mechanisms are thought to be essentially mediated by two pleiotropic viral proteins, the capsid protein, Core, and the nonstructural protein NS5A. Core and NS5A are reportedly involved in the deregulation of several host pathways (see  $I.B.(\theta)$ ), including metabolic signaling pathways that could be associated with steatosis development, immune system cascades and signaling pathways known to be involved in HCC development. However, in the absence of cell culture systems allowing the study of clinical strains of HCV, these HCV genotype- and/or proteinspecific deregulations have mainly been studied in transient protein over-expression systems and/or in non-hepatic cells in vitro.

Moreover, a detailed understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved in HCVinduced pathology is hindered by the absence of a fully pertinent study model. This knowledge remains crucial, even in the era of DAAs, which can currently cure ≥95% chronic infections, since SVR does not always eliminate the risk of developing liver complications. In addition, the high cost of the treatment and the increased proportion of unknowingly infected individuals are restrictive factors of prominent HCV elimination, highlighting the need of a preventive vaccine. A promising surrogate model emerged with the demonstration in 2018 that a new rodent hepacivirus (RHV-rn1) establishes chronic infection in rats, its natural host and can, similar to HCV in humans, cause steatosis.

Our group is aiming at elucidating in relevant infection systems the molecular bases of HCV manipulation of host pathways leading to steatosis and HCC, with a focus on the common and distinct effects of HCV proteins with diverse genotypic origins.

Towards this end, a first project targeted the identification of (i) cellular interacting partners (IPs) of Core and NS5A and (ii) specifically deregulated signaling pathways. This project included the development of new virological models capable of replicating in human hepatoma cells, encoding Core or NS5A from clinical strains of different genotypes isolated from patients with varying degrees of liver disease. These systems were used for the study of transcriptomic deregulations specific to the genotypic origin of the protein. The generation of a panel of HCV Core and NS5A intergenotypic recombinants encoding respective proteins tagged in frame with a twin strep-tag (ST) allowed the affinity purification of protein complexes and the determination of the interactome of these proteins.

In our second project, the immunocompetent surrogate animal model based on Sprague Dawley rats infected with RHV-rn1, initially established by the lab of Dr. Kapoor $\frac{468}{ }$  (Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA) was set up in France thanks to his generous gift of RHV-rn1 genome-length cDNA. With this model, we aimed at characterizing liver metabolic disorders triggered by chronic RHV infection using small rat cohorts, in order to validate the high potency of this surrogate model to pursue pathobiology studies, while other groups in the world are using it for vaccine-related investigations<sup>547,548</sup>.

Both projects are part of collaborative studies supported by the ANRS and are expected to ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved in HCV-

induced steatosis and HCC in direct link with specific viral factors and genotypic polymorphisms, as well as provide information about the interaction with co-morbidity factors and potential persistence of metabolic perturbations following hepacivirus cure.

# **III. Materials and Methods**

## **III.A Ethics Statement**

This study complied with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (1975) and has been approved by the following committees and institutes concerning:

- (i) animal experimentation
	- § The Ethics Committee on animal experimentation n°012 (number C3851610006) delivered to our collaborator running the animal facility, Dr. Hervé Lerat (UMS hTAG, Université Grenoble Alpes, Inserm US46, CNRS UAR2019, La Tronche, France).
- (ii) clinical virus strains
	- The National Consultative Ethics Committee for the Life Sciences and health in France (declaration number DC-2008-531), delivered to our collaborator, Dr. Claire Gondeau (Institut de Médecine Régénératrice et de Biothérapie, Hôpital Saint-Eloi, Montpellier, France)
	- § The National Ethics Committee of Cameroon (number 199/CNE/SE/2011) and the Ministry of Cameroon Health (number 631-01.12), delivered to our collaborator Dr. Richard Njouom (Centre Pasteur du Cameroun, Yaoundé, Cameroon)
	- § The *Bioethics Committee of the Cantacuzino National Medical-Military Institute of Research and Development* of Romania (number 16/CEE), delivered to our collaborator Dr. Gabriela Oprisan (Titu Maiorescu University, Faculty of Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania).

Written informed consent was obtained from all patients or their families. Patient data communicated to the laboratory were restricted to patient gender, age, the reason for the surgical resection and comorbidity factors, when available. HCV RNAs extracted from patients' sera were provided to the laboratory by its collaborators.

## **III.B Cell culture**

Human hepatocarcinoma Huh-7.5 cells, highly permissive to HCV infection $\frac{395}{2}$ , were a kind gift from Dr. Charles Rice (The Rockefeller University, New York, USA). Huh-7.5 is a cell clone derived from Huh-7 hepatocarcinoma cells harboring stably autonomously replicating subgenomic HCV RNA, that have been cured from it by interferon treatment.

Huh-7.5 cells were cultured as a monolayer at  $37^{\circ}$ C in an atmosphere of 5% CO<sub>2</sub> in complete medium, i.e. DMEM medium (Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium, Gibco, #11574486) supplemented with decomplemented 10% fetal calf serum (FBS, Gibco, #10270- 106), 1mM sodium pyruvate (Gibco, #11360039), 100 U/mL penicillin, 100μg/mL streptomycin (Gibco, #11548876) and non-essential amino acids (Gibco, #11140035). Cells were split every 3–4-days following detachment with trypsin/EDTA solution. Cells were quantified by the *Countess*<sup>™</sup> *II Automated Cell Counter* (Invitrogen<sup>™</sup>) in Trypan blue solution and were seeded at a range of  $0.6$ -1.2x10<sup>6</sup> cells per  $75cm^2$ -flask, or proportionally adjusted for the sizes of other flasks and multi-well plates.

## **III.C Recombinant hepatitis C viruses**

## **III.C (α) Clinical isolates and prototypical strains of HCV**

Viral RNAs extracted from the serum of chronically infected HCV patients with varying degrees of micro- and macro-steatosis were provided by Dr. Claire Gondeau (Institut of Research in Biotherapy, Montpellier, France) $\frac{549}{1}$ . The degree of steatosis was determined by semi-quantitative estimation of the percentage of hepatocytes containing fat vacuoles compared to all hepatocytes by optical microscopy of stained liver sections.

The sequence coding Core of subtype 4a isolate (designated 4aR, ENA #ERZ655054) was isolated from an HCV positive blood donor and provided by Dr. Gabriela Oprisan. The Core coding sequence of the subtype 4f isolate (designated 4fC, ENA #ERZ672786) was isolated from a patient with HCC and provided by Dr. Richard Njouom. The 4aR and 4fC Core sequences have been determined and published in a previous study from our laboratory<sup>550</sup>. The Core coding sequence of the prototypical strain H77 subtype 1a was derived from the genomelength cDNA (1aH77, GenBank #AF011751)<sup>373</sup>, generously provided by Dr. Robert Purcell (National Institute of Health, Bethesda, United States). Core and NS5A coding sequences of subtype 2a prototypical JFH-1 (GenBank #AB047639) and J6 (GenBank #D00944) strains were derived from full-length cDNAs, pJFH1 and pJc1-2EI3 or pJFH1-(C-NS2)J6-(NS5A)2a-J6 (GenBank #HQ852461), generously provided by Drs. Takaji Wakita (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan) $\frac{411}{11}$  and Ralf Bartenschlager (University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany)<sup>99</sup> and Jens Bukh (University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark) $\frac{172}{2}$ , respectively.

The sequences of Core used by Emeline Simon, Brigitte Blumen and Stephanie Aicher to produce the Core intergenotypic recombinant viruses presented in this study are summarized in Table 4.

<b>Viral</b> <b>Genotype</b>	<b>Patient</b> Code	<b>Patient</b> <b>Birth year</b>	<b>Steatosis</b>	<b>Steatosis</b> Ranking	<b>Remarks</b>
1a	S411	1960	Moderate steatosis	<b>MS</b>	Cirrhosis - No response to <b>IFN/RBV</b>
3a	<b>P98L</b>	1964	Micro-steatosis and macro- steatosis $50\%$	MS	
	376	1968	Macro-steatosis 20%	<b>MS</b>	Treatment naïve - Diabetic
	S389	1965	$< 5\%$	<b>NS</b>	Treatment naive
	S390	1974	Micro-steatosis and macro- steatosis $60\%$	<b>HS</b>	Treatment naïve - Obese
	S395	1962	Macro-steatosis 40%	<b>MS</b>	Relapser - Alcohol consumption
	S <sub>401</sub>	1952	Micro-steatosis and macro- steatosis $5%$	<b>LS</b>	Intolerance to IFN/RBV
4	4aR	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	
	4fC	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	

*Table 4: Clinical HCV strains used to retrieve NS5A sequences. LS: low steatosis, MS: moderate steatosis, HS: High steatosis, nc: not communicated.*

## **III.C (β) Sequencing and cloning of NS5A from clinical HCV strains**

Clinical strains incorporated in this study were selected based on viral genotype and the level of assessed steatosis severity in patient liver sections. Exclusion criteria were treatment attempts before or during the period of liver damage estimation and the existence of comorbidity factors, as described in §I.B.στ.(vi). This resulted into the selection of the strains summarized in Table 5.

<b>Viral</b> <b>Genotype</b>	<b>Patient</b> Code	<b>Patient</b> <b>Birth year</b>	<b>Steatosis</b>	<b>Steatosis</b> Ranking	<b>Remarks</b>
1a	S411	1960	Moderate steatosis	<b>MS</b>	Cirrhosis - No response to IFN/RBV
1b	S434	1962	Not communicated	nc	Treatment naive
3a	S <sub>401</sub>	1952	Micro-steatosis and macro-steatosis 5%	LS	Intolerance to IFN/RBV
	S385	1956	Macro-steatosis 50%	<b>MS</b>	Treatment naive
	S <sub>407</sub>	1966	Macro-steatosis 80%	<b>HS</b>	Intolerance to IFN/RBV
	S431	1965	Not communicated	nc	Relapse

*Table 5: Clinical HCV strains used to retrieve NS5A sequences. LS: low steatosis, MS: moderate steatosis, HS: High steatosis, nc: not communicated.*

The NS5A coding sequences from the clinical strains were obtained after reverse transcription (RT) of the viral RNAs using a non-specific random hexamer primer and the *Transcriptor High Fidelity cDNA Synthesis* kit (Roche), followed by PCR amplification using the *Phusion Hot Start II High-Fidelity DNA Polymerase kit* (Thermo Scientific™). In some instances semi-nested or nested PCR amplification was required, To design specific primer pairs that would hybridize to subtype-specific NS4B and NS5B consensus coding sequences framing NS5A sequence, HCV genome-length or target-protein-specific nucleotide sequences were retrieved from euHCVdb (https://euuhcvdb.lyon.inserm.fr/euHCVdb/) and aligned using CLC Main Workbench 20.0 (QIAGEN). Primer sequences are summarized in Table 6.

The amplified PCR fragments were purified using the *NucleoSpin® Gel and PCR cleanup* kit (Macherey-Nagel) with 50% buffer NTI and were sequenced as bulk products by Sanger (Eurofins), as described in §III.F.(γ). Additional internal primers were designed for sequencing purposes, based on the first sequences retrieved with external primers (see Table 6). Next, the DNA fragments were cloned in a shuttle vector using the *Zero Blunt® TOPO® PCR Cloning kit for Sequencing* (Thermo Fisher Scientific), in order to acquire a clonal sequence to substitute that of Jad NS5A, as well as to appreciate the presence and the frequency of possible quasispecies. For this second step, twelve (12) clones were selected for expansion, plasmid purification with the *NucleoSpin® Plasmid* kit (Macherey-Nagel), and sequencing of NS5A coding sequence by Sanger (see  $\SIII.F.(\gamma)$ ). The predominant consensus sequences encoding NS5A were established from these analyses, and the clones reflecting them at the protein level were selected to construct the intergenotypic recombinant cDNAs.

## *Table 6: Custom primers designed to amplify and/or sequence NS5A sequences of clinical HCV strains.*

*The targeted viral genotype (Gt), subtype (St) or sample (S), the polarity of the primer (FW: forward, RV: reverse) and the position with respect to viral proteins (int: NS5A internal) were incorporated in the primer name. To increase the primers' efficiency, degenerate nucleotides were incorporated; H =A/C/T, Y =C/T, R =A/G, K=T/G when required. More external primers are indicated with odd numbers, while more internal ones, used for (semi-)nested PCR reactions are indicated with even numbers in their name.*



## **III.C (γ) Plasmids**

Plasmid **pJad** contains the genome-length cDNA of a highly cell culture-adapted derivative<sup>413</sup> of HCV subtype 2a JFH1 strain<sup>411</sup>, (JFH1-adapt or Jad), cloned downstream of bacteriophage T7 RNA polymerase promoter. Three codon substitutions, two in NS5A (V2153A, V2440L) and one in NS5B (V2941M) coding sequences (see Figure 29) confer high titer growth to Jad.

Plasmids **pJad/GAA** and **pJad/ΔΕp7** are derived from pJad, containing codon substitutions in NS5B coding sequence (GDD-->GAA) or an in-frame cDNA deletion of the E1-E2-p7 coding sequence, respectively. Plasmids **pJad/NS5A-(TEV)-ST-418, -ST-449, - V5-418, -V5-449** and **pJad/C17-ST**, **/C17-V5** were constructed and available in the laboratory. They derived from pJad and contain in-frame insertions of heterologous sequences within NS5A coding sequence following codon 418 or 449, as indicated, or Core coding sequence following codon 17, respectively. In addition to the twin-strep tag (ST) or V5 tag itself, a 7-aa coding sequence was inserted upstream (ENLYFQS), corresponding to the recognition site of tobacco etch virus (TEV) protease for purification purposes. The (TEV)-ST and (TEV)-V5 sequences were framed by Ser-Gly and Ser-Gly-Gly, Ser-Gly-Ser or Gly-Gly flexible hinges at their N- and C-termini, respectively, that were either additionally inserted or present in the authentic NS5A sequence.



#### *Figure 29: Map of the pJad plasmid.*

*The genome-length cDNA of the Jad strain (black) was inserted downstream of the T7 RNA polymerase promoter, generating the 12,360-base pair (bp) plasmid pJad. The open reading frame coding the Jad proteins is indicated in grey, while each protein is shown by alternating pink and blue colours. Jad adaptive mutations V2153A, V2440L and V2153M are indicated in purple, together with the positions of the mutations required for the adaptation of the chimeras with the NS5A sequence of the genotype 3 or 4 strains (G4458A, G6050A, C6233T). The unique restriction site (XbaI) used towards DNA linearization prior to in vitro transcription is shown in yellow, while the unique restriction sites (NsiI and BsrGI) used for construction of the intergenotypic recombinant cDNAs are indicated in orange. The map was using the CLCMainWorkbench software.*

## III.C.γ (i) Construction of chimeric pJad plasmids

The construction of the plasmids containing the chimeric cDNAs is based on an overlapping PCR strategy designed to exchange only the Jad NS5A coding sequence for those of the predominant NS5A sequences from the clinical strains previously obtained in pTOPO vectors. Briefly, three segments of viral cDNA were amplified as a first step, two segments upstream and downstream of NS5A coding sequences, respectively, using pJad as a template and a middle segment corresponding to the heterologous NS5A coding sequence using pTOPO vectors. For this, primers with extensions complementary to the segments to be fused were used, which in turn allowed the overlapping of the products and the amplification of fusion products with exact junction points (see Table 7) using the 3 PCR products from the first step as templates. Following digestion with appropriate enzymes recognizing restriction sites close to the extremities of the fusion product, the hybrid fragments were lastly cloned in the pJad vector digested with these same enzymes, yielding the **pJad/NS5A(x)** plasmids indicated in Table 7.

### *Table 7: Custom primers for overlapping PCR reactions to exchange NS5A sequence of pJad to that of other prototypic virus or clinical strains.*

*The sample number and the polarity of the primer (+: forward, -: reverse) were incorporated in the primer name. Blue font colour represents the sequence of the corresponding clinical strain or other prototypic virus. Pink font colour represents JFH1 sequences. Black letters correspond to Jad adaptive mutation V2440L within NS5A sequence. Underlined sequences fully hybridized on selected templates for PCR reactions. Highlighted sequences represent primer overlap for overlapping PCR reactions and lowercase characters indicate nucleotide differences between Jad NS5A sequence and the corresponding selected strain.*



XL1-Blue competent bacteria (Agilent) were transformed with the ligation mixtures (*Rapid DNA ligation* kit, Roche) following a heat-shock and cultured for 16h at 37<sup>o</sup>C on Luria Bertani (LB) Petri dishes containing 500 μg/mL ampicillin. Plasmid DNA was purified from bacterial colonies using *Nucleospin plasmid* kit (Macherey-Nagel) and screened by restriction reactions with the cloning enzymes (Nsi $I<sup>HF</sup> + BsrGI<sup>HF</sup>$ ) and with enzymes allowing to discriminate the desired NS5A sequence from that of Jad. More specifically, genotype 1 and 3 strains were discriminated by Sall<sup>HF</sup> digestion, genotype 4 by PstI and the J6 strain by triple digestion with NsiI + BsrGI $^{\text{HF}}$  and PstI. All restriction enzymes and respective buffers were from New England Biolabs. The nucleotide sequence of NS5A within selected plasmid DNAs was further verified by Sanger sequencing (see §III.F.(γ)). Large scale DNA preparations of the clones found to have substitutions were performed using *Nucleobond Xtra Midi Plus* kit (Macherey-Nagel).

Custom primers to insert identified adaptive mutations within the NS3 and/or NS4B coding regions were designed to accommodate the overlapping PCR strategy described above (see Table 8). The plasmids pJad and  $pJad/NS5A(x)$  were used as templates for the primary PCR reactions, while pJad digested either with NsiI<sup>HF</sup> + BsrGI<sup>HF</sup> or with SpeI<sup>HF</sup> + BsrGI<sup>HF</sup> served as vector for the insertion of a single mutation in NS4B sequence (genotype 4 NS5A recombinant) or one mutation in NS3 and one in NS4B (genotype 3 NS5A recombinants), respectively. Since point mutations were introduced, the clones obtained were first validated by restriction with the respective cloning enzymes and then by Sanger sequencing (see §III.F.(γ)). The names of the derived plasmids were: pJad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-385, pJad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-401, pJad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-407, pJad/G4458A/G6233A/NS5A-407 and pJad/G6050A/NS5A-431.

*Table 8: Custom primers to insert adaptive mutations in intergenotypic pJad recombinants. The position and nature of the substitution, as well as the polarity of the primer (FW: forward, RV: reverse) were incorporated in the primer name. Pink font colour represents JFH1 sequences. Black letters correspond to the position of the indicated adaptive mutations within the indicated viral protein sequence.*



The substitution of Jad core coding sequence by core sequences from other genotypes was previously done according to the same strategy by other members of the group. The Jad Core recombinant viruses did not require adaptive mutations (Aicher et al., 2018 and unpublished data).

## III.C.γ (ii) Construction of chimeric pJad plasmids encoding tagged NS5A

Custom primers to insert ST- or V5-tag sequences following a conserved Pro codon equivalent to codon 418 of NS5A in Jad were designed to accommodate the overlapping PCR strategy described above (see Table 9). The plasmid pJad digested either with  $NsiI^{HF} + BsrGI^{HF}$ served as vector for the insertion of PCR-amplified fragments introducing the tagged clinical or J6 NS5A sequences produced from the following templates used for the primary PCR reactions: pJad/NS5A(x), pJad-NS5A-(TEV)-418-ST, pJad-NS5A-(TEV)-418-V5 and pJFH1- (C-NS2)J6-(NS5A)2a-J6. The nucleotide sequence of the fragment between the ligation points in the selected clones was verified with triple digestion with NsiI, BsrGIHF and PstI and by Sanger sequencing (see  $\SIII.F.(\gamma)$ ).

## *Table 9: Custom primers for insertion of twin-strep or V5 tag in NS5A of intergenotypic pJad recombinant at position 418.*

*The genotype or sample number and the polarity of the primer (+: forward, -: reverse) were incorporated in the primer name. Blue font colour represents the unique sequence of the corresponding clinical strain or other prototypic virus. Pink font colour represents common sequences of JFH1 and the clinical or prototypic strains. Green font colour corresponds to silent nucleotide substitutions inserted by the primer within subtype 3a strains. Orange font colour represents the sequence of flexible linker - Tobacco Etch Virus (TEV) protease recognition site – tag. Underlined sequences fully hybridize on selected templates for PCR reactions. Highlighted sequences represent primer overlap for overlapping PCR reactions.*



## **III.C (δ) In vitro RNA transcription of genome-length viral cDNAs**

Jad-derived plasmids were linearized by XbaI restriction enzyme, generating a protruding 3' end, which was subsequently eliminated by treatment with Mung Bean nuclease (New England Biolabs), and purified by phenol/chloroform (Sigma-Aldrich) extraction and ethanol precipitation. Linearized DNAs (1μg, quantified on 1% agarose gel) served as templates for *in vitro* transcription of the cDNAs using bacteriophage T7 RNA polymerase (*T7 RiboMAX Express Large Scale RNA Production System*, Promega). DNA templates were subsequently removed by treatment with 1U of *RQ1 RNase-free DNase* (Promega). Synthetic RNAs were purified by extraction with phenol/chloroform and precipitated with 1 volume of isopropanol supplemented with 0.3M sodium acetate. The quality and quantity of RNA resuspended in RNAse-free H<sub>2</sub>O were evaluated by electrophoresis on 1% agarose gel and by measurement of the absorbance at 260nm using *mySPEC* microvolume spectrophotometer (Ozyme).

## **III.D Cell transfection**

Huh-7.5 cells (2x10<sup>6</sup> cells) diluted in opti-MEM Reduced Serum Medium (Gibco, Thermo Fisher) were electroporated with 5μg *in vitro*-transcribed viral RNA using 4mm-width cuvettes in a *Gene pulser XCELL electroporation system* (Bio-Rad) and a pulse at 240V, 900μF. In case more cells were required (e.g for purification of protein complexes), the above-mentioned quantities were adjusted proportionally for the experiments concerning the parental Core and NS5A, or an increase of 30% in RNA over the number of cells was employed for the purification of NS5A complexes with the inter- and intra-genotypic recombinant viruses. Following electroporation, cells were immediately resuspended in complete DMEM.

- (i) For transfections performed toward protein expression monitoring through Western blotting, transfected cells  $(3x10^5$  cells) were seeded in 1 well of 6-well plates and cultured for 72h post-transfection (p.tf.) Protein extracts were prepared in 200μL *NuPage LDS Sample Buffer* (Lithium Dodecyl Sulfate buffer, Invitrogen™) supplemented with 0.71M ß-mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich), as indicated in §III.G.
- (ii) For transfections performed toward virus passage and amplification, transfected cells  $(1.7x10<sup>6</sup>$  cells) were seeded in  $75cm<sup>2</sup>$ -flasks and cultured for up to 18 days (d) p.tf., with cell splitting ranging from 1:2-1:8 dilutions every 3-4 days. Supernatants were collected at each cell passage and were clarified by centrifugation at 12,000g, 4°C for 10min. Clarified supernatants were stored at  $4^{\circ}$ C for a short period of time (<1 month) or stored in aliquots at -80°C. Part of the split cells was kept for intracellular total RNA extraction with *RNAzol® RT* (Sigma-Aldrich).
- (iii)For transfections performed toward immuno-labelling and confocal microscopy kinetic experiments, transfected cells  $(1x10<sup>4</sup>$  cells) were seeded per channel in glass  $\mu$ -Slide VI 0.5 (Ibidi) and fixed at 48h, 72h or 96h p.tf. (see §III.H).
- (iv)For transfections performed toward Core protein complex purification, transfected cells  $(4.5x10<sup>6</sup>$  cells) were seeded in 175cm<sup>2</sup>-flasks and cultured for 3d p.tf. For purification of protein complexes involving NS5A of diverse genotypic origins, transfected cells  $(2.5x10<sup>6</sup>$  cells) were seeded in 175cm<sup>2</sup>-flasks and cultured for 5d p.tf. Cell lysates were collected from trypsinised cells, as indicated in §III.J.

In all cases, following transfection, cells were incubated at  $37^{\circ}$ C under  $5\%$  CO<sub>2</sub> for 4h and then the medium was replaced by fresh DMEM to remove the cellular debris from electric shock.

## **III.E Cell infection**

Huh-7.5 cells were seeded 24h prior to infection and were then infected by replacement of the growth medium with the appropriate viral inoculum diluted in complete DMEM as needed.

- i) For preparation of viral stocks,  $1.3x10^6$  cells were seeded in  $75cm^2$ -flasks and infected at a multiplicity of infection (MOI) of 0.01 Tissue Culture Infectious Dose 50% (TCID50) /cell. Infected cells were expanded by passaging every 2-3 days up until 10d post-infection (p.i.). Supernatants were collected and clarified at every passage.
- ii) For confocal microscopy,  $5x10^3$  cells were seeded per channel of glass slides ( $\mu$ -Slide VI 0.5, Ibidi) and infected with the viral inoculum at the maximum MOI possible for each virus. Infected cells were incubated at  $37^{\circ}$ C in a  $5\%$  CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere for 96h prior to processing for indirect immunofluorescence, as indicated in §III.G.
- iii)For protein purification,  $1.8x10^6$  cells were seeded in 175cm<sup>2</sup>-flasks 24h prior to infection were infected with the tagged NS5A parental Jad viruses at MOI of 1. Infection volumes were adjusted with fresh DMEM between pairs of ST/V5 corresponding viruses to be equal, depending on the viral titers of the replicate stocks used. Cells were cultured in 23mL DMEM for 4d p.i. before lysis, as indicated in §III.J.

iv)For total RNA extracts toward transcriptomic studies,  $1.5x10<sup>4</sup>$  cells were seeded per well in 24-well plates, infected with an MOI of 3 in a total inoculum volume of 300μL. Infected cells were cultured in 1mL fresh DMEM, until lysis at 5d p.i., as indicated in §III.K

In all cases, following infection, cells were incubated at  $37^{\circ}$ C under  $5\%$  CO<sub>2</sub> for 4h and then the inoculum was replaced by fresh DMEM to better support cell growth. When recquired, cells were washed with fresh DMEM at this stage to remove any traces of infectious inoculum towards specific titration of neosynthesized virus.

## **III.F HCV characterization**

### **III.F.(α) HCV genome quantification**

To extract intracellular RNAs, infected Huh-7.5 trypsinised from half 175cm<sup>2</sup>-flask were thoroughly washed in Dulbecco's Phosphate Buffered Saline (DPBS) and resuspended in 500μL *RNAzol® RT* (Sigma-Aldrich). The lysates were transferred in RNase free Eppendorf tubes and frozen at -20°C. After thawing, total RNA was extracted according to the manufacturer's guidelines. RNA pellets were resuspended in  $15{\text -}30\mu$ L ribonuclease-free H<sub>2</sub>O, quantified by optical density using a nano-spectrophotometer (*MySpec*, Ozyme) and stored at  $-80^{\circ}$ C.

For extractions of viral RNAs from 140μL infected cell culture supernatant, the *QiaAmp Viral RNA Mini kit* (Qiagen) was used, according to the manufacturer's guidelines. Viral RNAs were eluted in 60μL ribonuclease-free H2O and stored at -80°C.

Viral genomes were quantified in 20ng of total intracellular RNA or 5μL of particulate RNA by one-step RT-qPCR using the *TaqMan Fast-virus 1 Step Master Mix* kit (Applied Biosystems), with a pair of primers that target the 5'-UTR of HCV and the 5'-FAM (6 carboxyfluorescein)- 3'-TAMRA (6-carboxytetramethylrhodamine) fluorescent probes. Measurements were acquired by the *7500 Fast Real-Time PCR System* (Applied Biosystems) real-time thermocycler with the following program: RT at 50°C for 5 min, then after denaturation of the RT enzyme at 95°C for 20s, the qPCR steps were carried out over 40 cycles of 15s at 95°C and 1min at 60°C.

Absolute quantification of viral genomes was obtained using a standard curve established from HCV RNA transcribed *in vitro*, for which the concentration in genome equivalents per microliter (copies/μL) was determined by measuring the absorbance at 260nm. Quantities of intracellular RNA were normalized with respect to the amount of ribosomal RNA measured using primers and a VIC fluorescent probe (20-chloro-70phenyl-1,4-dichloro-6-carboxyfluorescein) specific for the 18S RNA (*Eukaryotic 18S rRNA Endogenous Control*, Applied Biosystems). Values were expressed in copies/mL or in copies/µg of total RNA.

### **III.F.(β) HCV infectivity titration by endpoint dilutions**

Huh-7.5 cells  $(1.8-2.5x10^3 \text{ cells})$  were seeded in 96-well plates 24h prior to infection. Serial dilutions of virus inocula were prepared in complete DMEM and each dilution was used to infect 8 wells. Dilution factors were chosen such as to start with a virus dilution ensuring infection of all 8 wells and end with a virus dilution unable to infect a single cell in all 8 wells. Cells were infected with 100μL of each viral dilution and cultured for 5 days. Cells were then fixed and permeabilized in methanol.

Staining of infected cell foci was performed by quenching endogenous peroxidase activity with 0.3% hydrogen peroxide, blocking nonspecific antigenic sites with 1.25% normal horse serum in DPBS (blocking solution, *ImmPRESS HRP* kit, Vector Laboratories), and probing infected cells by an overnight incubation with anti-HCV NS3 mouse monoclonal antibody 2E3 (BioFront Technologies) diluted 1:3000 in DPBS containing 0.1% Tween-20 (PBS-T). After washing, cells were incubated with anti-mouse IgG–HRP ImmPress reagent (*ImmPRESS HRP*  kit, Vector Laboratories) diluted 1:2 in PBS-T and stained brown with chromogenic substrate 3,3'-diaminobenzidine (DAB), using the *DAB Peroxidase (HRP) Substrate* kit (Vector Laboratories) according to manufacturer's guidelines. Plates were observed under a light microscope to score infected wells containing at least one focus of ≥2 infected cells. Data were introduced into the Reed and Muench TCID50 algorithm<sup>551</sup>, in order to obtain TCID50/mL titers.

## **III.F.(γ) Sequencing of HCV genome(s)**

Intracellular (1μg total RNA) or particulate (10µL) viral RNA extracted as described above  $(\text{SIII.F.}(\alpha))$  was subjected to reverse transcription using 3-6μM pdN(6) hexamer, 2mM dNTP mix, 10mM dithiothreitol (DTT), 20U ribonuclease inhibitor and 22U THFT enzyme in THFT Reaction Buffer (*Transcriptor High Fidelity cDNA Synthesis* kit, Roche). Following denaturation of RNA structures by incubation at 65°C for 10min, then immediate transfer onto ice, RT reactions were assembled and subjected to successive incubations at 25°C for 10min, at 42°C for 50min and at 70°C for 15min.

The cDNAs (1-2μL) were further subjected to PCR amplification using the *Phusion Hot Start II High-Fidelity DNA Polymerase* kit (Thermo Scientific™) according to the manufacturer's guidelines, with 0.5μM of each forward (+) and reverse (-) HCV-JFH1-specific primers (summarized in Table 10). The following cycling program was used: 1 cycle at 98°C for 30s, 30-40 cycles comprising 98°C for 30s, 58°C for 30s, 72°C for 1min/1000 base pairs, 1 cycle at 72°C for 5min. RT-PCR products were checked on 1% agarose gels and were purified using *Nucleospin PCR Clean up* kit (Macherey-Nagel) with 50% Buffer NTI. Following purification, RT-PCR product concentration was determined by electrophoresis on agarose gels and comparison with a DNA molecular weight ladder (*Mass ruler express forward DNA ladder mix*, Thermo Scientific<sup>™</sup>) containing known quantities of DNA fragments.

Sanger sequencing reactions (in 10μL total volume) were performed in 96-well plates using 15-30ng RT-PCR product, 0.32μM appropriate primer (Table 10) and *Big Dye Terminator v3.1 cycle sequencing* kit (Applied Biosystems™). The cycling program was the following: 1 cycle at 95°C for 1min and 25 cycles comprising 95°C for 45s, 50°C for 30s, 60°C for 4min. Sequencing reactions were then processed by Eurofins and data were analyzed using *CLC Main Workbench* (Qiagen).

*Table 10 : List of oligonucleotides complementary to JFH1 sequences, used as primers for PCR and/or Sanger sequencing of virus-genome-containing plasmids, viral cDNAs or RNAs. The polarity of the primer was incorporated in the primer name and represented in black for forward (+) and pink for reverse (-). Primers used for PCR amplification are indicated by asterisks (\*).*





## **III.G Immunoblotting**

 Protein extracts from transfected or infected Huh-7.5 cells lysed in denaturating Lithium Dodecyl Sulfate buffer (*NuPAGE™ LDS Sample Buffer*, Invitrogen™) complemented with 5% ß -mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich) were denaturated by a 15min incubation at 95<sup>o</sup>C and stored at -20 $^{\circ}$ C. Aliquots of these extracts were loaded onto 4-12%, 10% or 12% 10- or 12well polyacrylamide gels (*NuPAGE Bis-Tris Gels*, Invitrogen™ & *BOLT Bis-Tris Gels*, Invitrogen™). The samples were electrophoresed in *MOPS SDS Running Buffer* (Invitrogen™) at 200V for ~45min. Proteins were transferred onto a nitrocellulose membrane (*Nitrocellulose Premium*, 0.45μm, Amersham) by wet transfer at 40V for 1h45, using *NuPAGE Transfer Buffer* (Invitrogen™), or onto a PVDF membrane by semi-dry transfer, using the *iBlot™ 2 Gel Transfer Device* (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and pre-cast *iBlot™ Transfer Stack* (Thermo Fisher Scientific), according to manufacturer's guidelines. The membrane was saturated by incubation in DPBS containing 5% skimmed milk (blocking solution) for 1h at room temperature under shaking, then overnight at 4°C with the appropriate primary antibody (see Table 11), diluted in PBS-T containing 1% milk. Following three PBS-T washes, the membrane was incubated for 30min with fluorescent anti-Ig conjugates (see Table 12) diluted 1:20,000 in 1% milk-PBS-T. Following three PBS-T and one DPBS washes, fluorescent signals were acquired by scanning the membrane on the *Odyssey CLx infrared imaging system* (LI-COR) and analysed using the *ImageStudioLite* software (LI-COR).

In case the membrane was re-used to hybridize another primary antibody, antibody stripping was performed using *Antibody Stripping Buffer* (Gene Bio Application) for 15min under shaking. The membrane was then washed extensively with H2O and western blotting was performed as described above, starting from blocking step.

## **III.H Indirect Immunofluorescence**

Infected cells in Ibidi slides were fixed at 48h, 72h, 96h or 120h p.i. using 4% paraformaldehyde (Electron Microscopy Sciences) and permeabilized in 40μg/mL digitonin (Sigma-Aldrich). Blocking of unspecific antigenic sites was performed by a 15min incubation in DPBS containing 5% animal serum (Sigma-Aldrich). Serum origin was determined by origin of secondary antibodies. If the different antibodies used were generated in both goat and donkey, 2.5% of each serum was used. Cells were successively incubated for 1h with the appropriate primary antibodies (see Table 11), then with the secondary antibodies coupled to fluorochromes Alexa Fluor 488, 555, or 647 (Thermo Fisher Scientific, see Table 12), both diluted in DPBS containing 1% corresponding animal serum. LDs were either labelled metabolically for 15h before fixation using a fluorescently-labeled fatty acid (*BODIPY® 558/568 C12*, Invitrogen™) diluted 1:10,000 in DMEM without serum, or immuno-labelled post-fixation, using an antibody against adipose differentiation-related protein (ADRP) that is found on LD surface, or by a 30min incubation in *HCS LipidTOX™ Red Neutral Lipid Stain, for cellular imaging* (Invitrogen™) at a dilution of 1:1,000 in DPBS. Following immunolabeling, cells were incubated with 4-, 6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (*DAPI*, 1μg/mL, Invitrogen™) for 10 min at room temperature and were conserved at 4°C in non-polymerizing mounting medium (*Ibidi mounting medium*, Ibidi).



*Table 11: List of primary antibodies used for immunolabelling.* 

*IF: used for indirect immunofluorescence experiments, WB: used for western blotting, MAb: monoclonal antibody, PAb: polyclonal antibody.*







## **III.I Confocal Microscopy**

Slides were observed with an LSM 700 inverted confocal microscope (Zeiss). Images were acquired using the 40X or the 63X objective in oil immersion and the ZEN software (Zeiss). The emission filters were configured to detect signals sequentially with a restriction of ≤460nm for DAPI, 490 to 555nm for Alexa Fluor 488, 550 to 620nm for Alexa Fluor 555, and ≥640nm for AlexaFluor 647. Confocal diaphragm was adjusted such as to prevent light outside the focal plane from reaching the detector by placing it in 1 Airy unit and the resolution of acquired images was either 1024x1024 or 2048x2048, in order to obtain a pixel size of 0.05μm x 0.05μm, which is optimal for image deconvolution. Once laser power and voltage (gain) for all channels were fixed for the control sample, snapshots or z-stacks were acquired for all samples of the slide with the same conditions. The vertical interval between stacks was standardly set to  $0.15 \mu m$ .

## **III.J Protein complex purification and identification**

## **III.J.(α) Affinity Purification of HCV Protein Complexes**

Huh-7.5 cells were infected as described in §III.E with verified stocks of Jad/NS5A- (TEV)-ST-418, -V5-418, -ST-449, -V5-449 viruses, or transfected with genome-length RNAs of Jad/C17-ST, /C17-V5, or Jad/NS5A-(TEV)-1a-411-V5, -1a-411-ST, -1b-434-ST, -2a-J6- ST, -3a-385-ST, -3a-401-ST, -3a-407-ST, -4-431-ST, as indicated in §III.D. Cells were cultured in 175cm<sup>2</sup>-flasks (T175) for the indicated period and trypsinised for lysate preparation. Lysis buffer was composed of 25 mM Tris-HCL pH 8 (Sigma-Aldrich), 150mM NaCl (Sigma-Aldrich), 2mM ß-mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich), 0.5% NP40 (Thermo Scientific),

200μg/mL avidin, anti-protease cocktail (*Complete*, Roche) and, only in the NS5A experiments, anti-phosphatase cocktail (*PhosSTOP*, Roche). Cell lysates were collected at 96h p.i. from 1xT175 per replicate sample for infected cells, at 120d p.tf. from 1xT175 per replicate sample for transfected cells for NS5A-related experiments and at 72d p.tf. from 5xT175 per replicate sample for Core-related experiments. Cell lysis was performed in 1.2mL lysis buffer per T175 for each replicate sample for 20min in ice with regular agitation. Cell debris were removed by a 20min centrifugation at 16,000g at 4°C and supernatants were transferred in a clean Protein LoBind® 5mL tube (Eppendorf). At this step, a lysate aliquot corresponding to approximately  $0.04 \times 175$  (i.e.  $\sim 9 \times 10^4$  cells) was retrieved and mixed with appropriate volume of LDS+ß-mercaptoethanol to be used for immunoblotting.

The remaining lysates were mixed with 300µL prepared *MagStrep "type3" XT* magnetic beads (IBA Lifesciences) for NS5A complex purifications or 75µL *StrepTactin Sepharose High Performance* beads (Cytiva) for Core complex purifications. Bead preparation entails three (3) washes in washing buffer (25 mM Tris-HCL pH 8, 150mM NaCl, 2mM ßmercaptoethanol,  $0.5\%$  NP40, anti-protease cocktail  $\pm$  anti-phosphatase cocktail). Protein binding was performed on a rotating wheel at  $4^{\circ}$ C for 1h for NS5A and 1.5h for Core.

Beads were then successively washed three times in wash buffer without NP40 for NS5A, or once with wash buffer and twice with wash buffer without NP40 for Core purification, in order to eliminate unspecifically bound proteins and the detergent itself. During the last wash, aliquots corresponding to approximately  $9x10<sup>4</sup>$  cells were retrieved to be used for immunoblotting. Washed beads were resuspended in 560μL 50mM ammonium bicarbonate (NH4HCO3) buffer containing 20 mM tris(2-carboxyethyl)phosphine reducing agent (TCEP,  $C_9H_{15}O_6P$ ).

Five biological replicates of these samples for each tagged-NS5A and three for tagged-Core viruses were provided to the Proteomics Platform of Institut Pasteur (UTechS MSBio) for the nano liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry (nano-LC-MS/MS) analysis of proteins retrieved..

#### **III.J.(β) Nano-LC-MS/MS**

## III.J.β.(i) On-beads protein digestion

Digestion of the proteins were performed on-bead using 0.5µg of Sequencing Grade Modified Trypsin (Promega) for 16 hours at 37°C under agitation at 1,000 rpm.

#### For NS5A interactomic experiments:

First supernatants were retrieved following a short centrifugation step (4,000 rpm, 30 sec, room temperature). Next, a 1 min incubation of the beads with  $100\mu$ L of NH<sub>4</sub>HCO<sub>3</sub> 50 mM on a magnetic device led to a second supernatant that was pooled with the first one, and formic acid (FA) was added at 1% final concentration.

#### For Core interactomic experiments:

First supernatants were retrieved following a centrifugation step at 10,000 rpm for 5 min at room temperature. Then,  $100 \mu L$  of NH<sub>4</sub>HCO<sub>3</sub> 50 mM were added to the beads and placed in a membrane-containing filter unit (Corning™ Costar™ Spin-X™ Centrifuge Tube Filters, Fisher Scientific), 200µL of the same buffer was then added and the flow-through was retrieved by a centrifugation at 6,000 g for 30 sec at room temperature. This operation was repeted in the same conditions. Pooled supernatants were acidified with FA at 1% final concentration and filtered on a new filter unit.

#### III.J.β.(ii) Peptide desalting

#### For Jad NS5A and Core interactomic experiments:

Acidifed peptide solutions were desalted using stage-tip $\frac{552}{2}$  and three C18 Empore discs, and were eluted with 80µL acetonitrile (ACN) 80%, FA 0.1%. All samples were dried in a Speed-Vac and peptides were resuspended in ACN 2%, FA 0.1% prior to LC-MS/MS analysis.

### For other NS5A interactomic experiments:

Acidifed peptide solutions were desalted using an automatic workflow with the AssayMAP Bravo (Agilent). Peptides were eluted from the C18 cartridge (Agilent Technologies, 5μL bead volume) with 60µL ACN 80%, FA 0.1% and all samples were speedvac dried. Peptides were resuspended in ACN 2%, FA 0.1% prior to LC-MS/MS analysis.

#### III.J.β.(iii) LC-MS/MS: Data Dependent Acquisition

#### For Jad NS5A and Core interactomic experiments:

A nanochromatographic system (Proxeon EASY-nLC 1200, Thermo Fisher Scientific) was coupled on-line to a Q Exactive HF mass spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using an integrated column oven (PRSO-V1, Sonation). For each sample, peptides were loaded on a home-made 39cm capillary column picotip silica emitter tip (75μm inner diameter) with C18 resin (1.9μm particles, 100Å pore size, Reprosil-Pur Basic C18-HD resin, Dr. Maisch) after an equilibration step in 100 % solvent A ( $H_2O$ , FA 0.1%). Peptides were eluted with a multi-step gradient using 2-7% solvent B (ACN 80%, FA0.1 %) for 5min, 7- 23% for 70min, 23-45% for 30min and 45-95% for 5min at a flow rate of 250nL/min over 132min. Column temperature was set at 60°C.

Mass spectra were acquired using Xcalibur software and a data-dependent Top 10 method with survey scans  $(300-1700 \text{ m/z})$  at a resolution of 60,000 and MS/MS scans (fixed first mass 100 m/z) at a resolution of 15,000. The AGC target and maximum injection time for the survey scans and the MS/MS scans were set at 3.0E+06, 50ms and 2.0E+05, 60ms, respectively. The isolation window was set at 1.2m/z and normalized collision energy fixed at 28 for HCD fragmentation. A minimum AGC target of 2.5E+03 for an intensity threshold of 4.2E+04 was used. Unassigned precursor ion charge states, as well as 1, 7, 8 and >8 charged states were rejected and peptide match was disable. "Exclude isotopes" was enabled and selected ions were dynamically excluded for 30 seconds.

#### For other NS5A interactomic experiments:

A nanochromatographic system (Proxeon EASY-nLC 1200, Thermo Fisher Scientific) was coupled on-line to a Q Exactive Plus mass spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific) using an integrated column oven (PRSO-V1, Sonation). For each sample, peptides were loaded on a home-made 49cm capillary column picotip silica emitter tip (75μm inner diameter) with C18 resin (1.9μm particles, 100Å pore size, Reprosil-Pur Basic C18-HD resin, Dr. Maisch) after an equilibration step in 100% solvent A (H<sub>2</sub>O, FA 0.1%). Peptides were eluted with a multi-step gradient using 5- 25% solvent B (ACN 80%, FA 0.1%) for 95min, 25- 40% for 15min and 40- 95% for 10min at a flow rate of 250nL/min over 130min. Column temperature was set at 60°C.

Mass spectra were acquired using Xcalibur software using a data-dependent Top 10 method with survey scans (300-1700 m/z) at a resolution of 70,000 and MS/MS scans (fixed first mass 100m/z) at a resolution of 17,500. The AGC target and maximum injection time for the survey scans and the MS/MS scans were set at 3.0E+06, 20ms and 1.0E+06, 60ms, respectively. The isolation window was set at 1.6m/z and normalized collision energy fixed to 28 for HCD fragmentation. We used a minimum AGC target of 1.0E+04 for an intensity threshold of 1.7E+05. Unassigned precursor ion charge states, as well as 1, 7, 8 and >8 charged states were rejected and peptide match was disable. "Exclude isotopes" was enabled and selected ions were dynamically excluded for 45 seconds.
## III.J.β.(iv) Data processing for protein identification and quantification

Raw data were analysed using MaxQuant software version 1.6.6.0<sup>553</sup> using the Andromeda search engine<sup>554</sup>. The MS/MS spectra were searched against a UniProt *Homo sapiens* database (downloaded in 18/06/2020, 20,353 entries) and virus databases including ST- and V5- tagged proteins (Jad NS5A: 10 entries, Core: 13 entries, other NS5A: 20 entries). Usual known mass spectrometry contaminants and reversed sequences of all entries were included.

Andromeda searches were performed choosing trypsin as specific enzyme with a maximum number of two missed cleavages. Possible modifications included carbamidomethylation (Cys, fixed), oxidation (Met, variable), N-terminal acetylation (variable) and phosphorylation (Ser, Thr, Tyr, variable). The mass tolerance in MS was set to 20ppm for the first search, then 4.5ppm for the main search and 20ppm for the MS/MS. Maximum peptide charge was set to 7 and 7aa were required as minimum peptide length.

The "match between runs" feature was applied for samples having the same experimental condition with a maximal retention time window of 0.7 min. One unique peptide to the protein group was required for the protein identification. A false discovery rate (FDR) cut-off of 1% was applied at the peptide and protein levels.

## III.J.β.(v) Specific case for NS3, NS4B and NS5A proteins

NS5A proteins derived from various genotypes share > 55% aa sequence identity. A number of peptides, notably short peptides retrieved can therefore be common to all NS5A proteins, while some peptides are unique and specific to each of the NS5A proteins. In MaxQuant software, razor peptides $\frac{553}{2}$  are peptides that are found in more than one protein. In "razor" peptide assignment, the peptide and its related intensity is assigned to the protein group with the larger number of identified peptides or, in case of a tie, to the protein group with more highly scoring peptides. In our case, 8 NS5A sequences were gathered in a database and peptides were wrongly assigned by MaxQuant rules to nonmatching NS5A proteins. Because we know which NS5A protein was expressed in a given sample, "razor" peptides were reattributed to the proper NS5A protein, leading to the real intensity of each NS5A in each genotype. Same was applied for NS3 and NS4B with compensatory mutations.

# **III.K Hepatocellular transcriptome analysis by RNA-Seq**

Infected Huh-7.5 (see §III.E) were lysed in 350μL lysis buffer (*RNeasy Plus Mini* kit, Qiagen) supplemented with 0.1 % ß-mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich), following the manufacturer's instructions, and total RNAs were extracted. Genomic DNA was eliminated by DNase treatment on the column for 15min (*RNase-free DNase Set*, Qiagen). RNA integrity and quality were assessed by *MySpec* nano-spectrophotometer (Ozyme) and the *2100 Bioanalyzer* (Agilent). Following the *MGI's RNA Direction Library prep set user Manual* (MGI Tech, Shenzen Shi, China), poly(A) mRNAs were enriched from 200ng total RNA using *Dynabeads mRNA Purification Kit* (Thermo Fisher Scientific), and were subsequently cleaved into fragments of 150 bp, reverse-transcribed and complemented. MGI adapters were ligated before a 14-cycle DNA fragment amplification step. The quality of the DNA libraries was checked by capillary electrophoresis (*Fragment Analyzer*, Agilent) using the *HS NGS Fragment* Kit (Agilent). The DNA libraries were then assembled and prepared according to the *RNA Directional Library prep set* and *High-throughput (Rapid) Sequencing Set* user manuals of MGI (MGI Tech, Shenzen Shi, China) and sequenced on a high-throughput cell in single 100bp reads (DNBSEQ-G400, MGI Tech, Shenzen Shi, China).

# **III.L RHV-rn1 virus production**

## **III.L.(α) RHV-rn1 genome-length RNA**

RHV-rn1 genome-length cDNA (GenBank accession No KX905133)<sup>468</sup> cloned in pUC57 was kindly provided by Dr Amit Kapoor (Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA). XL1- Blue competent bacteria (Agilent) were transformed with this vector following a heat-shock and cultured for 16h at  $37^{\circ}$ C on LB Petri dishes containing 500  $\mu$ g/mL ampicillin. Plasmid DNA was purified from cultured bacterial colonies using *Nucleospin plasmid* kit (Macherey-Nagel) and screened by restriction reactions spanning both the plasmid and the inserted viral cDNA sequences with the following enzymes:

i) EcoRI

iii) SmaI

ii) BamHI

iv) MluI & BspEI

All restriction enzymes and respective buffers were from New England Biolabs. Large scale DNA preparations of two clones with a correct pattern were performed using *Nucleobond Xtra Midi Plus* kit (Macherey-Nagel) and the nucleotide sequence was further verified by Sanger sequencing (see  $\SIII.F.(\gamma)$ ) using the primers indicated in Table 13.

*Table 13 : List of oligonucleotides complementary to RHV-rn1 sequences, used as primers for PCR and/or Sanger sequencing of viral RNAs.* 

*The polarity of the primer was incorporated in the primer name and represented in black for forward (F) and pink for reverse (R). Primers used for PCR amplification are indicated by asterisks (\*).*



RHV-rn1 plasmid was linearized by MluI digestion and purified by phenol/chloroform (Sigma-Aldrich) extraction and ethanol precipitation. Linearized DNAs (1μg, quantified on 1% agarose gel) served as templates for *in vitro* transcription of the viral cDNA using bacteriophage T7 RNA polymerase (*T7 RiboMAX Express Large Scale RNA Production System*, Promega). In preparation of two types of samples for intrahepatic inoculations of Sprague Dawley rats, some reactions underwent DNase treatment (Promega), and purifications as described in §III.C (δ), while others were kept unpurified. Purified products subjected to a second round or purification with ethanol, to eliminate the residual un-incorporated ribonucleotides, served for the preparation of aliquots with known quantity of RHV-rn1 molecules towards standard curve necessary for RT-qPCR assays. The quality and quantity of RNAs were evaluated by electrophoresis on 1% agarose gel and by measurement of the absorbance at 260nm using *mySPEC* microvolume spectrophotometer (Ozyme), while their sequence was verified following reverse transcription, amplification in overlapping PCR fragments spanning the entire genome (see Table 12), and sequencing by Sanger sequencing as indicated above.

## **III.L.(β) RHV-rn1 viral stocks generation**

Sprague Dawley rat intrahepatic inoculations of purified or nonpurified RHV-rn1 genomelength RNAs were performed by our collaborator, Hervé Lerat (hTAG, La Tronche, France). Briefly, the procedure was performed under general anaesthesia of the rats with isoflurane: anaesthetic induction by inhalation of a mixture of oxygen at a flow rate of 3L/minute and isoflurane at 4% for 2 minutes in an appropriate hermetic cage. The animals were kept asleep by inhaling a mixture of 2.5% isoflurane and oxygen at a rate of 1.5L/minute. This technique is the one with the least reported impact on liver metabolism. The viral RNA solution was injected intra-hepatically at 4 different injection points (in the left lateral and median lobes), according to the following procedure:

- $\triangleright$  The laparotomy was performed by first making a skin incision of about 2cm along the linea alba, then an incision in the peritoneal wall, 1 cm below the xiphoid process, on shaved, Vetadine treated area.
- $\triangleright$  Part of the left lobes of the liver was pushed slightly outwards and stabilized with a cotton applicator. Intrahepatic injection was performed using a 30G needle mounted on a 0.3 mL syringe. After removal of the needle, light pressure was applied by a cotton applicator to ensure haemostasis. After each injection, the absence of haemorrhage was verified and, if necessary, a Gelfoam resorbable haemostatic gelatine sponge was be placed at the injection sites.
- $\triangleright$  The liver was pushed back into the abdomen, making sure that there is no active bleeding.
- $\triangleright$  Closure was performed in two planes: first of the peritoneo-muscular plane and then of the cutaneous plane with sterile 5/0 silk thread.

Rats that underwent surgery were isolated for a maximum of 1 week, depending on their recovery, and were then grouped with their original congeners to re-establish social links. Free access to drinking water and food pellets was provided to all animals. Blood samples were recovered from the sublingual vein, following general anaesthesia, every 4 days for 12 days to detect and quantify the viremia, by RT-(q)PCR, as described below.

Infectious serum (viral) stocks were generated by intrahepatic inoculation of 3 rats that were exsanguinated post-mortem at day 12 post-inoculation.

## **III.L.(γ) RHV-rn1 genome quantification**

Viremia was quantified by RT-(q)PCR by analysing 5μL of RNA extracted from 70μL rat sera samples using the *QiaAmp Viral RNA Mini* kit (Qiagen), according to the manufacturer's guidelines. One-step RT-(q)PCR reactions were performed using the *TaqMan Fast-virus 1 Step Master Mix* kit (Applied Biosystems), with a pair of primers and 5'-FAM (6 carboxyfluorescein)- 3'-TAMRA (6-carboxytetramethylrhodamine) fluorescent probe, as previously described by Trivedi et al.<sup>468</sup>.

Optimal concentrations of primers and probe were worked out as 400/400/100nM, respectively. Measurements were acquired by the *7500 Fast Real-Time PCR System* (Applied Biosystems) real-time thermocycler with the following program: RT at 50°C for 5 min, then after denaturation of the RT enzyme at 95°C for 20s, the qPCR steps are carried out over 45 cycles of 15s at 95°C and 1min at 60°C.

## **III.L.(δ) Next Generation Sequencing of viral RNA extracted from rat sera**

RHV-rn1 genomic RNA was extracted from 70 µ pooled rat sera representing viral stocks, using the *QiaAmp Viral RNA Mini* kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's guidelines, in the absence of carrier RNA.

RNA was reverse transcribed and successful RNA extraction was tested by PCR amplification using RHV-specific primers RHV 1 F and RHV 3570 R, as described in §III.F.(γ) (see Table 13). Resulting cDNA was then used to synthesize a second DNA strand and generate Illumina TruSeq nano libraries following fragmentation into 350bp-long fragments, UDI indexation and 15-cycle amplification (Illumina). Paired-end sequencing was performed on a NextSeq 2000 system with a P1 flowcell and reagents for 151 cycles (Illumina) by the Biomics platform at Institut Pasteur.

Quasispecies were analyzed using the variant calling pipeline from the Sequana project  $(v0.8.5)$ <sup>555</sup>. First, the homogeneity of the coverage was checked with Sequana coverage<sup>556</sup>. Next, single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), insertions and deletions (indels) and multinucleotide polymorphisms (MNPs) were detected with Freebayes (v1.3.2) using the default option except for the ploidy option, which was set at  $25<sup>557</sup>$ . Variants were filtered, and only those with a Freebayes score >1, a frequency  $\geq$ 5%, a minimal depth of 10, and a minimal forward and reverse strand ratio of 0.2 were retained.

Titers of viral stocks were also quantified according to the procedure described in §III.M.

## **III.M RHV-rn1 experiments in Sprague Dawley rats**

Towards **infection**, the rats underwent light general anaesthesia to perform a sublingual harvest and were directly after intravenously injected with 10-100μL of infectious serum, so as to receive  $3x10^4$ ,  $3x10^5$  or  $3x10^6$  viral genome equivalents.

Towards **treatment evaluation**, the DAA combination called *Maviret (*Glecaprevir & Pibrentasvir) was administered orally according to the dosage described in the studies performed in humanized mice infected with HCV (*Maviret*: Glecaprevir 60mg/kg/day and Pibrentasvir 25 mg/kg/day for 6 weeks)<sup>558</sup>.

For **pyruvate tolerance test (PTT)**, the animals were fasted for 5 hours prior to injection of a solution of pyruvate  $(2 \text{ g/kg}, \text{ IP})$ , and the blood sugar of the animals was monitored by *OneTouch®Ultra®* glucometer for 120 minutes. For this, a blood sample of 5μL was taken from the end of the rat tail at  $t=0$ , 15, 30, 45, 60, 90 and 120 minutes after the injection. Intraperitoneal injection and blood sampling are not painful for the animal and do not require any anaesthesia or restraint.

Liver tissues were fixed in formalin solution, neutral buffered at 10% (Sigma‐Aldrich) and paraffin‐embedded, then four‐micrometer sections of tissue were prepared. Hematoxylin‐eosin (H&E) staining was used for the histopathological examination. Frozen tissue sections were prepared (8 µm) and stained with Oil-Red-O (ORO) dye (Sigma‐Aldrich) to identify neutral lipids. Images were acquired with an AxioCamMR5 camera (ZEISS Industrial Metrology) and the degree of steatosis was estimated by calculating the percentage of the area occupied by oil red O–stained lipid droplets using Image-J software (https://imagej.net/), averaging 3–5 separate, randomly selected fields.

Towards **metabolomics and lipidomics** analyses, upon rat sacrifice, liver tissues were snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80°C. Whole frozen livers were then pulverized using a mortar. A biphasic extraction was performed on 50mg of each sample. The polar phase was used for metabolomic analysis of 56 different metabolites by NMR, while the nonpolar phase was used for lipidomic analysis by GC-MS/LC-MS by the GEMELI lipidomics platform (C. Botté, IAB, La Tronche).

## **III.N Bioinformatic tools and statistical analyses**

## **III.N.(α) Analysis of LC-MS/MS data**

## III.N.α.(i) Statistical analysis

To identify the proteins more abundant in one condition than in another (ST- Vs V5-tag), the intensity values from Maxquant were compared. Reverse hits, potential contaminants, and proteins "Only identified by site" were removed from the analysis. Then, proteins identified with at least one peptide that is not common to other proteins in the FASTA file used for the identification (at least one "unique" peptide) were kept. Additionally, only proteins with at least four intensity values (NS5A replicates) and 2/3 or 3/3 intensity values (Core replicates) in one of the two compared conditions were kept for further statistics. Proteins absent in a condition and present in another were put aside ("exclusive" partners). These proteins can directly be assumed differentially abundant between the conditions. After this filtering, intensities of the remaining proteins were first log-transformed (log2). Next, intensity values were normalized by median centering within conditions (section 3.5 in Giai Gianetto,  $2023\frac{559}{9}$ ). Statistical testing was conducted using a limma t-test thanks to the R package limma<sup>560</sup>. An adaptive Benjamini-Hochberg procedure was applied on the resulting p-values thanks to the function adjust.p of the cp4p R package<sup>561</sup> using the robust method described in Pounds & Cheng,  $2006\frac{562}{10}$  to estimate the proportion of true null hypotheses among the set of statistical tests. The proteins associated to an adjusted p-value inferior to an FDR level of  $5\%$  and an absolute log<sub>2</sub>(foldchange) superior to 1 have been considered as significantly differentially abundant proteins. Therefore, the proteins of interest are those which emerge from this statistical analysis supplemented by exclusive partners which are be present in one condition and absent in another.

## III.N.α.(ii) Scoring of protein-protein interactions and network analysis

In order to score PPIs with ST-tagged bait proteins in infected samples, two dedicated software were used: SAINTexpress $\frac{563}{2}$  and MiST $\frac{564}{2}$ . In both methods, corresponding samples infected with V5-tagged recombinant viruses were used as controls.

For SAINTexpress, posterior probabilities of true interactions (AvgP) superior to 0.5 can be associated to potentially true interactors. For MiST, a score superior to 0.75 can be associated to potentially true interactors.

To enrich the representation of our data from the nano-LC-MS/MS statistical analysis, we generated a "final score" based on the collective results of these statistical analyses, as well as MiST and SAINT scores. The statistical analysis was essential to consider a hit as a putative interactor in all cases (score  $+1$ ). This score was increased by 1 in case the same hit was also found as a significant potential interactor by MiST  $(>0.75)$  or by SAINT $(>0.5)$ . For Core, taking into account the dual statistical analysis performed (2/3 or 3/3 intensity values), we increased the final score by 0.5 for partners coming up in both. Exceptionally, taking into consideration our additional aim at putatively identifying partners' domain of interaction with Jad NS5A, we considered as common interactors of NS5A-ST-418 and NS5A-ST-449 those that significantly came up in both statistical analyses, or in the statistical analysis of the one and the MiST score of the other, making the analysis of retrieved 418- or 449-specific partners more stringent. Based on the comparative analysis of scoring tools by Verschueren et al.<sup>565</sup>, who found MiST to be the more accurate scoring tool among those tested, we also decided to assign an additional 0.5 in the final score in case a hit was reproducibly coming up in our statistical analysis and with MiST, but not with SAINT. For the putative interacting partners of NS5A proteins of diverse genotypic origins, we instead assigned an additional 0.5 in the final score for each partner retrieved exclusively with NS5A-ST. For all NS5A analyses the final score was normalized with respect to the number of baits it was significantly identified with.

## **III.N.(β) Analysis of RNA-Seq data**

Statistical analyses were performed to identify host genes for which the expression profiles were significantly different between viruses and genotypes. Differential analyses were performed using the DESeq2 R package. All log<sub>2</sub>FC were shrunken with the "ashr" option (see lfcShrink() function). For each comparison of interest, one separate DESeq2 model was fitted to perform the following comparisons:

- Jad C1a 411 vs Mock
- Jad C1a H77 vs Mock
- Jad C2a J6 vs Mock
- Jad C3a 389 vs Mock
- Jad C3a 390 vs Mock
- Jad C3a 395 vs Mock
- Jad C3a 401 vs Mock
- Jad C3a 376 vs Mock
- Jad C3aP98L vs Mock
- Jad C4aR vs Mock
- Jad\_C4fC\_vs\_Mock
- Genotype 1 strains Vs Mock (G1M)
- Genotype 2 strain Vs Mock (G2M)
- Genotype 3 strains Vs Mock (G3M)
- Genotype 4 strains Vs Mock (G4M)
- Non-genotype 3 strains Vs Mock (G124M)

Based on the same contrasts, a functional analysis was performed using CAMERA model from limma R package with default parameters for inter-gene correlations. The model was applied on Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes  $(KEGG)$ <sup>566</sup>, The Molecular Signatures Database (MSigDB) Hallmark gene set collection<sup>567</sup>, reactome<sup>568,569</sup>, wikiPathways<sup>570,571</sup>.

Batch correction for visualization (PCA, heatmaps) was performed with RemoveBatchEffect() function from limma R package, on log counts with batch factor set as the concatenation of the library preparation and extraction dates and the batch kit. In differential and functional analysis, batch was accounted for by adjusting the statistical model on the biological condition (viruses, genotypes) and on the concatenated batch factor simultaneously.

Principal Component Analysis was performed taking the 500 most variable genes, on scaled Variance Stabilizing Transformation (VST) transformed expression table.

## **III.N.(γ) Representation of results in figures**

Illustrations of results were created by either of the following tools, unless otherwise indicated: Prism 9 (GraphPad, San Diego, United States), Cytoscape 3.9.1<sup>572,573</sup>, stringApp  $2.0.1\frac{574}{576}$ .

Pathway databases exploited were Gene Ontology<sup> $575,576$ </sup>, Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG)<sup>566</sup>, The Molecular Signatures Database (MSigDB) Hallmark gene set collection<sup>567</sup>, reactome<sup>568,569</sup>, wikiPathways<sup>570,571</sup>, and DISEASES<sup>577</sup>.

Upset graphs

Upset graphs are extensions of Venn diagrams to allow the visualization of the intersections between more than 5 sets of genes. Upset graphs from the UpSetR R package were used to compare lists of differentially expressed genes (DEGs) for some comparisons between genotypes and viruses. The bars on the left indicate the size of each set of genes. The vertical bars indicate the size of the intersection between combinations of comparisons indicated by black dots and connected with black lines.

## Heatmap of DEGs

DEGs were represented with heatmaps based on genes expression table standardized with VST transformation or batch correction expression table. To allow comparisons among genes, the gene expression table was scaled by gene. Only genes significant (p-adjusted  $\leq 0.05$ ) for at least one comparison are used in the heatmaps.

#### Heatmap of functional analysis

Pathways and gene sets deregulated between groups were represented by heatmaps based on the CAMERA analysis output (limma R package). We used the enrichment score computed by CAMERA as a proxy of the regulation direction of significant genes sets (p-adjusted < 0.05): for a comparison of group A vs group B, a positive enrichment score (in red) suggests that a given genes set has higher expressions in group A rather in group B. Similarly for negative enrichment score (in blue) and lower expressions.

## Bubble plots of enrichment analysis (ORA)

Enrichment of the intersection of significant genes for several comparisons (among all viruses and among all viruses except Jad) was performed using Over-Representation Analysis (ORA) implemented in the enricher() function of clusterProfiler R package. After filtering the significant genes sets (p-adjusted  $\leq$  0.05), the results are represented by bubble plots showing the averaged log2FC (from DESeq2 analysis) within each genes set, for all viruses. Colour indicates the amplitude (the darker, the higher) and the direction of the average log2FC (blue for negative value, red for positive values). Size of the bubbles shows the level of significance (\*: p-adjusted <  $0.05$ , \*\*: p-adjusted <  $0.01$ , \*\*\*: p-adjusted <  $0.001$ 

## Volcano plots for comparisons between viruses

The differential analysis output involving comparisons between viruses and Mock was visualized with volcano plots. For better visualization, log2FC higher than 5 in absolute value were set to 5 or -5 depending on their sign. Then we used EnhancedVolcano R package to show distribution of adjusted p-values against log<sub>2</sub>FC. The dotted lines correspond to the  $5\%$ threshold for p-values and to  $(-1,1)$  threshold for log<sub>2</sub>FC. Colours of the points are derived from these thresholds.

## Volcano plots for comparisons between genotypes

Differential analysis output involving comparisons between genotypes are visualized using complex volcano plots in which comparisons between genotypes are enriched with the results of comparisons with the Mock. Each panel shows the adjusted p-values against the log2FC of comparisons between genotypes (e.g. G1 vs G4) or combinations of genotypes (e.g. G3 vs G1+G2+G4 without Jad). Colours indicate if a gene is significant only for genotypes (blue), only compared to Mock (green), both (red) or none of the above (grey).

# **IV. Results**

# **Part 1: HCV-host interplay in infected cell cultures**

This first part of my PhD was focused on examining the interplay between HCV proteins of diverse genotypic origins and the host *in vitro*, in a system as physiological as possible. To this end, we have chosen to conduct our experiment in an infection system comprised of cultured human hepatoma Huh-7.5 cells and intra-/inter-genotypic recombinant viruses generated in the backbone of the JFH1-adapted strain, Jad.

The two proteins of interest, Core and NS5A, were selected based on their reported diverse induced hepatocyte deregulations, as described in  $\S$ I.B. $(\theta)$ .

Core intra- and inter-genotypic recombinant viruses were previously generated and characterized in the lab, during the respective PhD theses of Stephanie Aicher and Emeline Simon. Core sequences were derived either from HCV prototypic strains, or from clinical strains isolated from patient sera and collected by Dr Claire Gondeau (Institut de Médecine Régénératrice et de Biothérapie, Montpellier, France). Core substitution did not significantly affect viral genome replication or viral assembly, leading to the generation of viruses that exhibited similar growth curves, allowing comparative studies at the same time-points (Aicher et al.,  $2018_{50}^{550}$ ; Simon, Aicher, et al., unpublished data, Supplementary Figure 2).

The successful production of NS5A intra- and inter-genotypic recombinant viruses was previously described by Scheel et al. $\frac{172}{2}$ , within the backbone of chimeric virus J6/JFH1, consisting of the Core to NS2 sequences of subtype 2a J6 strain and the remaining of subtype 2a JFH1 strain. The sequences of NS5A that were selected in the Scheel study were derived from prototypic HCV isolates: H77C(1a), TN(1a), J4(1b), J6(2a), S52(3a), ED43(4a), SA13(5a), HK6a(6a), or QC69(7a). Most of the recombinant viruses were reported to grow equally well as the parent without the need for adaptive mutations, with the exception of the 1b, 3a and 4a chimeras. Wang et al $\frac{578}{2}$  also described a 2a-1b triple chimera (FL-J6/JFH1-NS5A.J4N) and Okamoto et al.<sup>579</sup> reported other NS5A chimeric viruses within the JFH1 backbone bearing NS5A sequences from strains of genotypes 1a (JFH1-NS5A.H77), 1b (JFH1- NS5A.Con1b), 2a (JFH1-NS5A.J6CF), and 2b (JFH1-NS5A.MA). These findings supported that the development of NS5A intra- and inter-genotypic recombinant viruses within the Jad backbone with NS5A sequences from field strains was feasible, although some adaptive mutations might be required. Our successful generation of these viruses is described in the following  $\S$ I.B. $(\theta)$ .

The study of the interplay of HCV proteins with the host cells is divided in two sections: the interactions of Core and NS5A with human hepatocyte proteins (proteomic/interactomic studies) and the HCV protein-driven regulations of host gene expression (transcriptomic studies), which are both described in this chapter.

• For the transcriptomic studies, Core intergenotypic chimeras briefly described above were used.

• For the interactomic studies, parental, as well as intra- and inter-genotypic NS5A recombinant viruses expressing tagged NS5A were developed and characterized during my thesis, as described in the following paragraphs ( $\S$ IV.C. $(\alpha)$ ) and  $\S$ IV.C. $(\beta)$ ). Jad recombinant viruses expressing similarly tagged Core were previously developed and characterized by Stephanie Aicher and Houda Tabbal, a former post-doctoral researcher in the laboratory.

Evidence for tolerance of insertions within Core and/or NS5A sequences has previously been reported in ectopic protein expression $\frac{580}{18}$ , subgenomic replicon $\frac{518}{18}$  and infection systems<sup>581,186,582,583</sup>, without abolishing HCV RNA replication or virion morphogenesis. Additional specific positions within the Core and NS5A sequences that may tolerate insertions

have also been identified by transposon-based insertional mutagenesis coupled to nextgeneration sequencing<sup>584</sup>.

A schematic summary of the viral tools produced, the experimental processes followed and the analyses performed can be found in Figure 30.



*Figure 30: Schematic illustration of the viral tools, experimental processes and analyses in this study. For certain items BioRender.com was used (https://www.biorender.com/).*

# **IV.A Characterization of the NS5A sequences derived from clinical isolates**

HCV patient sera were kindly provided by C. Gondeau, together with the patient information summarized in Table 5 (see  $\S$ I.B. $\sigma\tau$ . $(vi)$ , page - 36 -). The clinical isolates to be used in this project were selected based on the level of patient's assessed liver damage and the absence of known co-morbidity factors that could influence a quicker progression to more severe steatosis. RNAs were extracted from the sera, reverse transcribed in two independent reactions, then amplified by PCR with the primers indicated in Table 6 (Materials and Methods, page - 64 -) and sequenced by Sanger sequencing. Consensus aa sequences were compared to each other and to the consensus aa sequences of NS5A from all respective genotypes and/or subtypes in euHCVdb<sup>585</sup>. These alignments first confirmed the genotyping of the selected strains and second revealed the specific features of these strains with respect to the consensus NS5A sequences of each geno-/sub-type of HCV (data not shown). In the case of sample 431 of genotype 4, alignment of this NS5A sequence with those retrieved from the euHCVdb revealed closest phylogenetic distance of our sequence of interest with that of genotype 4d. Blasting of 431-NS5A also returned subtype 4d sequences with the highest percentages of identity, similarity and best e-values. Therefore, we may consider that the 434 NS5A sequence is likely of subtype 4d, although no definite conclusion can be drawn in the absence of sequencing data in any other genomic region.

In a second step, the PCR products were cloned in TOPO vector to select a clone with the desired consensus sequence, to be further cloned in pJad, as described in §III.C (γ). Overall, at least 10 TOPO clones for each strain were sequenced. For 1a-411 18% of the sequenced clones was found with the consensus sequence, for 1b-434 60%, for the three subtype 3a sequences, the percentage of consensus sequence recovered clones was 40-44% and for 431 only 9%. Notably, both NS5A aa Val-2153 and Val-2440 were 100% conserved in a total of 86 clones sequenced for all strains and differ from residues corresponding to the two Jad adaptive mutations at these positions in NS5A. Since we were aiming at developing the intergenotypic recombinants within the Jad backbone and given that the adaptive mutation V2440L was shown by Kaul et al. $\frac{413}{ }$  to be the most important of the three substitutions within the Jad sequence for virus highly cell culture adaptation, we incorporated it in the sequence of all clinical strains.

The alignment of the different NS5A sequences of the clinical isolates bearing the engineered NS5A C-terminal adaptive mutation with the parental sequence and the sequence of another prototypic strain of subtype 2a (J6) can be found in Figure 31. Figure 32 shows phylogenetic proximity/distance between these strains.

Analyses presented in Figure 31 and Figure 32B reveal low conservation of NS5A protein sequences in general, both in aa identities, with up to 45% divergence among strains, and in protein lengths, with over 35 residues missing in certain strains. Proteins of the same genotypic origin do cluster together in a phylogenetic UPGMA tree constructed using the Jukes-Cantor model to measure protein distance (Figure 32A), however, quantified percentages of identity differ among genotypes. For example, the three subtype 3a strains differ from each other by only 6-7%, while subtype 2a strains differ by  $\sim$ 15% and genotype 1 strains by  $\sim$ 20%. There are no differences in protein length among the subtype 3a strains and among the subtype 2a strains, but there is one additional residue in the C-terminal NS5A sequence (aa468 in alignment) derived from the 1a strain, when compared to the 1b strain.

A few regions of NS5A are conserved among strains of all four genotypes, including the hyper-phosphorylation region within LCSI, which bears only few differences at position 226 and a highly conserved A231 aa residue in all sequences except for Jad. A sequence of ~20 aa within NS5A C-terminal domain III, which includes one of the positions that tolerate insertions, downstream of aa 449, is specific to subtype 2a strains and is absent from all clinical NS5A sequences. In contrast, the other possible insertion position, downstream of aa 418, together with its surrounding region are highly conserved in all strains examined (Figure 31).



*Figure 31: Alignment of NS5A protein sequences derived from clinical or prototypic strains.*

*Consensus aa sequences from RNA nucleotide sequencing of viruses from patient sera are classified according to the genotype of the infecting strain. Identical residues are depicted by dots and missing*  1 *residues, by dashes. The most representative aa of each position is in black colour, while different or unique residues are in red. A bar diagram showing the percentage of sequence conservation is included below the alignment, followed by a line diagram depicting the gap fraction within the aligned sequences, and the sequence logo, incorporating all residues present in each position, with the more prevalent in higher font size. The adaptive mutation V2153A of Jad, and V2440L, present in Jad and engineered in all other sequences, are shown by black arrows. A purple and a blue arrow illustrate the* 

## *418 and 449 putative tag insertion positions, respectively. The yellow box spans the NS5A hyperphosphorylation region within LCSI.*

Since there is only one representative strain of HCV subtype 3a associated to each grade of steatosis, it is difficult to conclude on a potential correlation between a particular sequence or aa and the steatosis likelihood. However, it is interesting to note that there seems to be no association between the genetic distance of NS5A and the steatosis severity observed in patients infected with HCV subtype 3a, since the sequences of the strains with no steatosis (401) and high steatosis (407) are clustered closer together, while the NS5A of the strain causing medium steatosis (385) is genetically more distant. In fact, looking at the percentages of sequence identity, the 385 strain is closer genetically to the 401 strain, than the 407.



## *Figure 32: Analysis of the sequence alignment of the NS5A proteins derived from prototypic strains or clinical isolates.*

*(A) Circular Phylogenetic tree of NS5A sequences of diverse genotypic origins used in this study. The UPGMA tree was constructed using the Jukes-Cantor model to measure protein distance. Resampling from 100 replicates was performed to assess the reliability of clustering. Significant values (>65%) are indicated in light grey. The tree is drawn to scale, the length of the branches being proportional to the average number of aa substitutions per site, as shown by the scale bar. (B) Pair-wise comparisons of NS5A sequences of diverse genotypic origins used in this study, shown by percentage of aa sequence identity (top right comparisons) and by number of gaps between the two compared sequences (bottom left). Low values are shown in shades of blue and high values in shades of red.*

# **IV.B Development of NS5A inter- and intra- genotypic recombinant viruses**

## **IV.B.(α) Virus production and characterization**

The strategy of chimeric viruses, rather than transient expression systems, was selected in order to monitor the effects of the proteins in the context of viral infection, to sustain the physiological subcellular localization of NS5A, that might be perturbed in the absence of the other viral proteins, and to avoid triggering irrelevant cellular disturbances by protein overexpression.

The goal of our approach, as described above, was to produce recombinant cDNAs derived from Jad, by substituting the NS5A coding sequence with the sequences corresponding to either other prototypical strains or clinical isolates of other genotypes. Introduction of a heterologous NS5A sequence can have three potential deleterious implications on the viral cycle: (i) a cleavage defect at the intergenotypic hybrid junctions NS4B/NS5A and NS5A/NS5B by the Jad protease NS3/4A, (ii) an impairment of viral RNA genome replication, and/or (iii) an alteration in the synthesis of viral particles. NS5A is indeed part of the HCV replication complex and has to interact with the other viral members of the replicase and with viral RNA, as well as with cellular proteins to be effective in both genome replication and virion morphogenesis. Should these interactions be genotype-specific, they might be disrupted at least to some extent by heterologous NS5A.

Recombinant cDNAs have been constructed and synthetic, genome-length RNAs have been produced, as described in the Materials and Methods section. Following transfection of Huh-7.5 cells with these RNAs, in order to quickly assess whether rescued chimeras would require adaptation, as was the case for some of the recombinant viruses described by Scheel et al. $\frac{172}{2}$ , viral protein expression and infectious particle production were first monitored at 72h p.tf.

Infectious particle production was severely impaired in genotype 3 and 4 NS5A recombinant viruses and observably, though not significantly lower, in the subtype 1b NS5A chimera (Figure 33A), while it was at parent-like levels for subtype 1a and 2a chimeras. Jad Core detection, as a common protein to all chimeras, demonstrated decreased levels for genotype 3 and 4 NS5A chimeras and Jad-like levels for genotype 1 and 2a chimeras (Figure 33B). These data are indicative of a probable defect in polyprotein cleavage and/or RNA replication for genotype 3a and 4 recombinant viruses.

Transfected cells from two independent transfections were passaged for 11days and, as shown in Figure 33C, no evolution of viral titers was noted for the genotype 3 and 4 NS5A recombinant viruses, indicating that there was a marked virus replication defect that might be rescued only at later time-points upon genome adaptation. In contrast, the viral titers of the subtype 1a chimera (411) were consistently high over this observation period, as were those of the 1b NS5A chimera (434) in one transfection. In the replicate 434 transfection, titers were initially lower but increased over time, eventually reaching those of 411, suggesting that replication of this virus may be slightly delayed. A validation of this assumption came when the entire ORF of 411 and 434 intracellular RNAs extracted at 14d p.tf. were sequenced and no mutation was found in the genome of both chimeras.



*Figure 33: Monitoring of protein expression and infectious titers of intergenotypic NS5A chimeras over the course of transfection.* 

*(A) Mean viral titers (log<sup>10</sup> TCID50/mL) quantified at 72h p.tf.in transfected cell supernatants from 2- 4 independent replicate transfection experiments. Statistical analysis with respect to Jad parent was performed by a t-test with hypothetical value set at the mean of Jad quantified values. Only significantly different data are shown according to: (\*)<0.05, (\*\*)<0.01, (\*\*\*\*)<0.0001 (B) HCV Core protein expression monitoring at 72h p.tf. using anti-Core monoclonal antibody 1851. Electrophoretic mobilities of proteins with known molecular weights (MW, kDa) is shown at the left. (C) Viral titer evolution (expressed in log10TCID50/mL) in two independent transfection experiments (marked as -1 and -2) over a course of 11 day-observation period. Replicate viruses are represented by the same colour with different symbols to discriminate the two experiments. The grey area covers values below the limit of quantification of the assay, which is indicated by the dotted line.*

## **IV.B.(β) Virus adaptation**

Towards adaptation of the NS5A chimeric viruses with significantly reduced infectious virus production, transfected Huh-7.5 cells of the two independent experiments were serially passaged for a period of two months. The viral titer evolution during this period is illustrated in Figure 34. Passaging of subtype 1a and 1b chimeras was stopped when viral titers reached parent-like levels. Passaging of Jad was also interrupted at 14d p.tf. during the first experiment and at 21d p.tf. during the second, since the virus cytopathic effect did not allow us to continue cell splitting at the same pace as chimeras.

We were unsuccessful in adapting the subtype 3a 401 virus, but we did successfully rescue adapted viruses for the other two constructs bearing NS5A sequence of subtype 3a (385 and 407) in one or in both adaptation attempts, as well as for NS5A 434 of genotype 4. As summarized in Table 14, RT-PCR products spanning either the whole ORF or only the NS5A coding region of these viruses, produced from extracted intracellular RNAs as templates were sequenced by Sanger method. In addition, the p7-NS5A coding region was also sequenced using particulate RNAs extracted from corresponding infected cell culture supernatants.

For both genotype 1 NS5A sequences (411 and 434), intracellular RNAs were collected at day 14 p.tf. in the two transfections. No mutation was found over the ORFs, confirming the robust fitness of these 2a/1a and 2a/1b NS5A recombinant viruses.





#### *Figure 34: Intergenotypic NS5A chimera adaptation.*

*Viral titer evolution in two independent transfection experiments (marked as -1 and -2) over a course of 56-day observation period. Titration experiments were performed on fresh cell culture supernatants collected at the indicated times p.tf. Replicate viruses are represented by the same colour and different symbols to discriminate between the two experiments. The grey area covers values below the limit of detection of the assay, which is indicated by the dotted line.*

Subtype 3a 385 virus was sequenced at 25d p.tf. in the first transfection and at 19d p.tf. (NS5A) and 33d p.tf. (ORF) in the second transfection. Five fully established or quasi-species, non-synonymous substitutions were identified in attempt 1 and three, in attempt 2. These mutations were found within E2, NS3 and NS4B coding sequences, respectively, in both experiments. One mutation toward a biochemically similar aa (Ile>Leu), but with high occurrence rate was also identified within NS5A of attempt 1. Interestingly, one of the NS3 mutations (G4458A), encoding an arginine to glutamine substitution was present in both adaptation attempts, indicating that this mutation is likely highly significant for the fitness of this virus. Notably, the same mutation was found in the genome of adapted Jad/NS5A-3a-407, which was eventually rescued at a very late time point (56d p.tf.). These findings strongly suggest that the Arg1373Gln substitution within the helicase region of NS3 is likely essential for an optimal crosstalk of Jad NS3 with subtype 3a NS5A to ensure an essential virus life cycle step.

The rescued Jad/NS5A-3a-385 virus also bore a G6050A substitution, encoding an alanine to threonine substitution in NS4B. Similarly, the same NS4B mutation was also found in one of the Jad/NS5A-4-431 rescued virus, with equally high occurrence rate. Furthermore, the presence of another mutation in the same NS4B coding region (G6060A), found in the replicate 385 rescued virus pointed towards the importance of an adaptive mutation within this NS4B region for the efficient adaptation of the genotype 3 and 4 NS5A chimeras.

Subtype 3a 407 virus was rescued after a long delay and only in one attempt. Intriguingly, in addition to the NS3 helicase substitution discussed above and a point substitution in NS4B (C6233T), this virus also harboured a T9120C mutation within NS5B coding sequence. This mutation targeted the Jad NS5B high titer-adaptive mutation. However, instead of reverting the methionine to valine, the original aa found in JFH1, methionine was substituted to threonine.

Lastly, genotype 4 431 virus was sequenced at 16d p.tf. (NS5A) and 32d p.tf. (NS5A & ORF) in attempt 1 and at 19d p.tf. (NS5A & ORF) in attempt 2. Substitutions occurred in NS4B in the two independently rescued viruses, remarkably also including the same G6050A substitution in one virus, as indicated above. One case of each NS5A and E2 quasi-species was also reported.

*Table 14: Genome sequence of intergenotypic NS5A chimeric viruses collected at various times p.tf. The time-points selected were either close to the beginning of viral adaptation or close to the end of passaging when the viral titer was the highest. The coding region sequenced indicated is that from intracellular RNAs. Estimated percentages of mutation occurrence was based on Sanger electropherograms from multiple sequencing reactions. The numbering of nucleotides subjected to mutations corresponds to their position within the genome of each virus. Due to differences in NS5A lengths (see §IV.A), nucleotide positions in NS5A and NS5B coding sequences may vary form one virus to the other. Recurring mutations are in the same font colour (either red or yellow). "-": no mutation found, "NA": not applicable, "Unknown": region not sequenced.*



Altogether, it was remarkable that mutations were not reliably selected in heterologous NS5A coding sequences, but that rather second-site, recurrent point mutations appeared in Jad NS4B and/or NS3 coding sequences for both genotype 3 and 4 NS5A intergenotypic recombinant viruses. Therefore, one NS4B mutation is likely to confer some level of compensation for the exchange of both genotype 3 and 4 NS5A sequences. In addition, another adaptive mutation in NS3 is likely necessary for genotype 3 NS5A chimeric viruses, and one or more substitutions are possibly needed in E2 for both genotype 3 and 4 NS5A recombinants. In contrast, no adaptive mutation appeared to be required for subtype 1a and 1b NS5A chimeras.

## **IV.B.(γ) Characterization of adapted viruses obtained by reverse genetic analysis– Genotype 3 and 4 NS5A chimeras**

The observed decrease in protein production from genotype 3a and 4 NS5A recombinants suggested impaired replication of these nonadapted intergenotypic chimeras. Some published studies reported compensatory mutations in the NS5A coding sequence in response to mutations introduced into the NS4B sequence, indicating a coordinated role of these two proteins in JFH1 genome replication $\frac{224,124}{ }$ . Therefore, based on these reports and on the well described role of the NS3 helicase in HCV genome replication, we hypothesised that introduction of the NS3 and NS4B mutations in the genotype 3 recombinant viruses and of the NS4B mutation alone in the genotype 4 chimera would suffice to rescue fully functional viruses. Hence, as a first step, G4458A NS3 codon substitution and G6050A NS4B substitution were introduced in the cDNAs of Jad/NS5A-3a-385, 3a-401, 3a-407, while only G6050A NS4B substitution was introduced in the cDNA of Jad/NS5A-4-431 (summarized in Figure 35). For the 3a-407 chimera, another mutant was generated, in which in addition to the NS3 codon mutation, the C6233T NS4B codon substitution that was uniquely recovered during the adaptation process of this virus was incorporated.



**Figure 35: Schematic representation of the NS5A and Core recombinant genomes used in this work.** Core and NS5A sequences of diverse genotypic origins are illustrated in colourful boxes, while Twinstrep (ST) or V5 tags are shown by orange textured rectangles. JFH1 cell culture adaptive mutations are represented by red lines, while compensatory mutations introduced in NS3 and NS4B for the rescue of genotype 3 and 4 NS5A chimeras are represented by blue and purple lines, respectively. The NS4B *compensatory mutation finally chosen for adapted virus Jad/NS5A-3a-407 is C6233T, while it is G6050A in the other chimeras (see text).* 

Genome replication and infectious virus production were monitored at 96h p.tf. in Huh-7.5 cells electroporated with the genome-length RNA transcripts of the genotype 3 and 4 NS5A recombinants carrying or not engineered putative compensatory mutations in NS3 and NS4B sequences. Three control RNAs were used for comparison purposes: i) Jad parent, ii) Jad/GAA in which the sequence encoding the active site of NS5B polymerase (Gly-Asp-Asp) has been substituted by nonfunctional codons (Gly-Ala-Ala), providing a replication-deficient control, and iii) Jad/ΔΕp7 containing an in-frame deletion of E1-E2 envelope glycoprotein and p7 viroporin coding sequences, as an assembly-deficient control.

For RNA replication, intracellular RNAs were extracted and viral RNAs were quantified by RT-(q)PCR, following normalization with respect to quantified ribosomal 18S values (Figure 36A). The quantification of remaining RNA of the input replication-deficient GAA control set the baseline of replication-incompetent RNAs.  $\Delta Ep7$  quantified log<sub>10</sub> genome equivalents (GEQ) /μg total RNA were as high as the parent, indicating full genome replication competency. For all four NS5A intergenotypic recombinant viruses in the absence of any compensatory mutation, the quantified viral RNA levels were significantly lower compared to the parent (2.0-2.5 log, one-way ANOVA test;  $p \le 0.001$ ), yet reproducibly higher than the replication deficient GAA control, indicating substantially impaired RNA replication. The introduction of the adaptive mutations in NS3 and/or NS4B increased the RNA replication levels to different degrees, with an average of 1.5 log increase in GEQ/μg total RNA that rescued 385, 401 and 431 genome replication to Jad-like levels (one-way ANOVA test; p > 0,05). For both 407 adapted chimeras, the increase in genome replication was more modest  $(-0.6 \log \text{ and significantly different from Jad, one-way ANOVA test; p < 0.01)$ , but similar for either NS4B compensatory mutation (one-way ANOVA test;  $p > 0.05$ ).



#### A Genome Replication at 96h p.tf. B **Infectious virus particle production at 96h p.tf.**

*Figure 36: Comparative monitoring of viral genome replication and infectious virion production for NS5A intergenotypic recombinant viruses in the presence and absence of putative compensatory mutations.* 

*Viral RNAs quantified in intracellular RNA extracts from transfected Huh-7.5 at 4d p.tf. are expressed in log<sup>10</sup> GEQ per μg total RNA (A), while infectious titers are expressed in log10TCID50/mL (B). Cells transfected with genome-length parental RNA, the replication deficient GAA construct, or the assembly deficient ΔEp7 construct served as controls. Asterisks represent p-values obtained following one way ANOVA and correction with the Tukey's multiple comparisons test: p <0,05 (\*) ; p <0,01 (\*\*) ; p <0,001 (\*\*\*) ; p <0,0001 (\*\*\*\*) ; p >0,05 (ns : not significant).*

We then examined the efficiency of infectious virus production by end-point dilution titration of the respectively collected transfected cell culture supernatants. We found that three out the four genotype 3a and 4 NS5A recombinant viruses produced viral titers below the detection limit of our assay, while the fourth, 385, was significantly impaired in virus production compared to the parent (Figure 36B, one-way ANOVA test;  $p \le 0.001$ ). Introduction of the compensatory mutations led to the successful rescue of all viruses, with the exception of the 407 intergenotypic recombinant bearing the G6050A mutation. There was a 1 log difference in TCID50/mL viral titers between the Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-407 and Jad/G4458A/C6233T/NS5A-3a-407 viruses. These data, taken together with their similar RNA replication levels (Figure 35A) support a specific effect of the NS4B C6233T mutation in boosting virion assembly. These findings further point to a role of NS4B in the particle assembly step of the virus life cycle. It should be noted that 385 and 431 were rescued at or close to parent levels, whereas 401 and 407 remain less efficient in virus production. These data indicate that alternative aa changes in NS3, NS4B, and/or in additional genomic regions, as found in selected 407 virus, may be more prone to provide fitness to these 2a/3a chimeras.

## **IV.B.(δ) Evaluation of recognition of heterologous NS5A proteins from different genotypes by monoclonal antibodies**

NS5A expression levels from NS5A intergenotypic recombinants were more tricky to monitor, since most of the commercially available NS5A-pecific antibodies are produced using HCV prototypic strains, such as JFH-1 of subtype 2a or Con1b of subtype 1b, while NS5A sequence is not well conserved across genotypes (see §IV.A).

To find pan-genotypic antibodies, we tested a panel of antibodies against protein lysates collected at 3d.p.tf. from Huh-7.5 cells transfected by the different intra- and intergenotypic chimeras, or by the parent. Detection of the cellular ß-actin served to attest to similar total protein loads, while detection of HCV Core, a shared JFH1 protein showed that all viruses exhibited similar viral protein expression levels (Figure 37).

Anti-NS5A antibodies that did not recognize the majority of the NS5A proteins were all monoclonal antibodies raised in mice against either the JFH1 NS5A, as 7B5 (Biofront Technologies), or against full-length NS5A of unknown genotypic origin, H26 (abcam) and IDVG1127 (kindly gifted by Dr. Eliane Meurs, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France). The only antibody that did recognize the NS5A proteins of all genotypic origins, except for the 2a-J6 strain was the mouse monoclonal 9E10 (IgG2aλ clone) raised in the laboratory of Dr Charles Rice<sup>414</sup> (The Rockefeller University, New York, USA) against a C-terminal epitope of Con1b NS5A protein. This antibody was kindly provided to us by Prof. John McLauchlan (University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK) and also became commercially available by Merck during the second year of my PhD thesis. It should be noted that NS5A of the various virus strains used have different electrophoretic mobilities that are not necessarily in link with the number of aa of the protein.



*Figure 37: Evaluation of the recognition efficiency of NS5A proteins of diverse genotypic origins by a panel of monoclonal mouse antibodies.* 

*Total proteins extracted at 72h p.i. from Huh-7.5 cells infected with intergenotypic recombinant viruses, the parental strain, or PBS (mock infected) were separated by SDS-PAGE electrophoresis and probed with the antibody indicated at the side of each panel. Genotype 3a and 4 NS5A chimeras used were those bearing compensatory mutations in NS3 and/or NS4B. When detected, NS5A p56 is shown by red arrows and p58 by pink. Detection of viral Core protein and β-actin are shown separately. Markers of molecular masses (kDa) are indicated at the left of the images.*

# **IV.C Development of tagged NS5A recombinant viruses towards protein complex purification**



## **IV.C.(α) Parental Jad protein tagging**

*For space economy , Core and NS5A tagged viruses are illustrated below a single backbone.*

*Figure 38: Schematic representation of Jad encoding tagged Core or NS5A.*

*The Jad genome with the 3 structural and 7 nonstructural proteins is illustrated at the top. The three Jad adaptive mutations are represented by red bars, twin-strep tag insertions are illustrated in orange boxes and V5 tag, in yellow. Tobacco Etch Virus (TEV) protease recognition peptide inserted Cterminally from the tag in Core and N-terminally from the tag in NS5A chimeras is illustrated by a black broken line.*

# IV.C. $\alpha$ .(i) Jad NS5A

Towards affinity purification of Jad NS5A protein complexes and identification of NS5A interacting partners in infected cells, a twin strep-tag (ST) or a control V5 tag was fused in frame with the protein downstream of aa 418 or aa 449 within the Jad backbone (Figure 38).

NS5A insertion position 418 has previously been described in the context of a replicon Con1b system<sup>518</sup> and has previously been exploited by our laboratory for the insertion of a fluorescent protein gene (mCherry) within the 2a-Jad genome-length cDNA. This was found to substantially impair infectious viral production (reduction of >2.0 log TCID50/mL titers with respect to Jad parent) and lead to virus genomic instability resulting in large in-frame deletions of the mCherry gene as well as NS5A DIII sequences upon virus passage (Kotanidou et al., unpublished data).

NS5A insertion position 449 appeared as relatively tolerant to insertions from a study monitoring the effect on Jc1 replication and infectivity of random, transposon-driven 15ntinsertions throughout the genome<sup>584</sup>. Our aim was to insert the purification tag at the most Cterminal point within NS5A without preventing NS5A/NS5B cleavage and such as to avoid the disruption of any NS5A/cellular factor interaction, keeping in mind that the important interaction with CypA, for example, involves the C-terminus of NS5A DIII $\frac{586}{5}$ . In that respect, insertion position 449 was downstream of the most C-terminal Pro residue affected by CypA and still reasonably distant from the NS5A/NS5B cleavage site to expect no polyprotein cleavage defect. Of note, previous works from the laboratory have explored the possibility to

insert small tags 2 to 5 aa upstream of the NS5A/ NS5B cleavage site. However, this resulted in drastic impairment of viral RNA infectivity (Aicher et al., unpublished data).

In addition to the ST or V5 tag itself, a 7-aa coding sequence was inserted upstream, corresponding to the recognition site of tobacco etch virus (TEV) protease for intended purification purposes. The (TEV)-ST and (TEV)-V5 sequences were framed by Ser-Gly and Ser-Gly-Gly, Ser-Gly-Ser or Gly-Gly flexible hinges at their N- and C-termini, respectively, that were either additionally inserted or present in the authentic NS5A sequence.

## IV.C. $\alpha$ .(ii) Jad Core

Towards affinity purification of Jad Core protein complexes and identification of Core interacting partners in infected cells, a twin strep-tag (ST) or a control V5 tag were fused in frame near the N-terminus of the protein, downstream of aa 17 within the Jad backbone (Figure 38, also see Figure 35, page - 93 -). Additional TEV protease recognition site sequence and flexible linkers were also inserted, as described for Jad NS5A. Different insertion positions were previously examined in our laboratory, based on the random, transposon-driven 15ntinsertion data of Remenyi et al. $\frac{584}{9}$  or previously reported to bear very short tetracystein tag insertion (Coller et al., 2012<sup>583</sup>; Counihan et al., 2011<sup>582</sup>). Namely, positions downstream of codons 2, 3, 8, or 15 have been investigated in the presence or absence of the TEV protease recognition site. However, these attempts were found to affect profoundly (positions 2, 3, 8) or significantly (position 15) HCV infectious particle production and/or distort Core subcellular localization and association with the LDs (unpublished group data).

## **IV.C.(β) Tagging of intra- and inter-genotypic NS5A chimeras**

Alignment of the NS5A protein sequences of the clinical isolates, J6 and Jad revealed high conservation of the residues in and around the Jad 418 position across samples and the absence of the residues in and around the Jad 449 position in non-genotype 2a samples (see Figure 31, page - 87 -). Therefore, towards affinity purification of protein complexed with NS5A of diverse genotypic origins from infected cells, the corresponding Jad position 418 was used for the insertion of the TEV protease recognition site, followed by a ST or control V5 tag, framed by Ser-Gly and Ser-Gly-Gly, Ser-Gly-Ser or Gly-Gly flexible linkers (Figure 35, page - 93 -).

In order to minimize the number of replicate samples required for the AP-MS/MS, only one V5 control was produced in the 1a-411 intergenotypic recombinant Jad backbone and used for further experiments.

# **IV.D Characterization of recombinant viruses expressing Core or NS5A in fusion or not with ST/V5 tags**

## **IV.D.(α) Jad viruses encoding tagged Core**

Both tagged Core Jad and intra-/inter-genotypic Core recombinant viruses were previously developed and characterized in the group by combined efforts of Stephanie Aicher, Brigitte Blumen, Emeline Simon and Houda Tabbal.

Briefly, chimeras expressing Core sequences of diverse genotypic origins were used to infect Huh-7.5 cells at an MOI of 3 TCID50/mL and viral genome replication, particle assembly and infectious virion production were monitored by quantification of intracellular viral RNA and extracellular viral RNA by RT-(q)PCR and infectious viral titers by endpoint dilution assays. Interestingly, all chimeras were found to grow according to similar kinetics, with no requirement for compensatory mutations, allowing their use in comparative transcriptomic studies (Simon, PhD manuscript, Supplementary Figure 2).

Jad/C17-ST and Jad/C17-V5 Core protein expression was monitored at 72h p.tf. in protein extract collected from cells transfected with the respective genome-length RNAs and compared to parental Jad Core expression. Fusion proteins C17-ST and C17-V5 were detected with apparent electrophoretic mobilities consistent with their increasing molecular masses due to inserted sequences, the TEV-V5 and TEV-ST insertions introducing 24 and 39 additional aa in Core, respectively (Figure 39A). Insertion of the tag was found to only minimally decrease infectious virus particle production (by  $\leq 0.5$  log units), but consistently for both tags (Figure 39B), allowing the use of these tagged viruses in comparative interactomic studies.

*Figure 39: ST/V5-Corefusion protein expression and viral titers monitored in cells transfected with genome-length Jad/C17-V5, /C17-ST or Jad RNAs. (A) Core protein expression monitored in transfected cell lysates collected at 72h p.tf. using monoclonal anti-Core 1851 antibody (B) Viral production measured in the supernatant of transfected cells at 72h p.tf. Asterisks represent p-values obtained following one way ANOVA and correction with the Tukey's multiple comparisons test:*  $p \le 0.05$  *(\*); ns : not significant.*



## **IV.D.(β) Fusion of ST/V5 tags to Jad NS5A does not affect virus production or subcellular NS5A localization**

NS5A is released from viral polyprotein by NS3/4A protease-mediated cleavage, according to HCV polyprotein maturation scheme. The tag insertion in the C-terminal part of NS5A could potentially alter the folding of the protein, hence its stability and /or interfere with proteolytic cleavage at the NS5A/NS5B junction. To address these questions, expression levels of tagged NS5A and cleavage from polyprotein were monitored for all recombinant RNAs.

Toward this end, Huh-7.5 cells were electroporated with *in vitro* transcribed recombinant Jad/NS5A-tagged RNAs or with  $H_2O$  as a negative control (Mock). Protein extracts were prepared from transfected cells at 72h p.tf. and probed for expression of NS5A with mouse anti-NS5A monoclonal antibody 7B5. An example of the images obtained from replicate transfections is shown in Figure 40.

Jad NS5A is detected as a doublet of products, corresponding to basally and hyperphosphorylated NS5A forms. Similarly, all NS5A-V5, NS5A-ST (with insertions at either 418 or 449 position) were detected under these two phosphorylation forms and with apparent electrophoretic mobilities consistent with their increased molecular masses following insertion lengths (Figure 40A). Consistent results were also obtained when a mixture of anti-ST and anti-V5 monoclonal antibodies was used to probe NS5A-(TEV)-V5 and NS5A-(TEV)-ST tagged proteins (data not shown). Detection of β-actin to roughly similar levels in all samples indicated similar total protein loading across samples.

In order to monitor the genetic stability of Jad/NS5A-(TEV)-ST and NS5A-(TEV)-V5 viruses, transfected cells were serially passaged every 3-4d for 14d p.tf. At each passage, transfected cell supernatants were collected and viral infectivity was monitored by endpoint dilution virus titration. Jad parent was used as a control in parallel. Infectious titers of all NS5A tagged recombinants were consistently high and Jad parent-like over the observation period (Figure 40B). The experiment was stopped at 14d p.tf. due to the high cytopathic effect induced by these viruses.

Viruses were amplified to generate high amounts of viral stocks dedicated to the infection of Huh-7.5 cells toward AP/MS-MS experiments. Titers of viral stocks were not significantly different from those of the parental virus (Figure 40C), and the NS5A-tagged nucleotide sequences were shown to be identical to the engineered sequences.

Since the Jad/NS5A-(TEV)-ST viruses were meant to be used to seek host interacting partners of NS5A in infected cells using a high-throughput mass spectrometry analysis, we also verified that the fusion with ST did not alter subcellular localization of NS5A during Jad life cycle. In addition, we undertook to comparatively investigate subcellular localization of NS5A-ST/V5 and Jad NS5A with respect to ER and LDs. Representative figures from experiments performed with Jad virus bearing ST insertion at position 449, along with the V5-449 virus and Jad parent are shown in Figure 41 (For NS5A-(TEV)-ST-418 related data, please see Figure 44, page - 109 -).



*(A) Comparative and the stracts of the extracts were prepared from Huh-7.5 cells transfected with the indicated RNAs and probed for HCV NS5A (upper panel), HCV Core (middle particle parameter panel) are shown at the left in molecular weight markers (MW) are shown at the left of the imagenta arrows pinpoint basally and hyper-phosphorylated NS5A, respectively.* 

*(B) Evolution of infectious viral titers over time post-transfection. Supernatants were collected from cells transfected with parental RNA Jad or with the indicated recombinant RNAs over the indicated days p.tf., then titrated by endpoint dilution assay. (C) Comparison of viral stock titers obtained for parental virus and tagged-NS5A chimeras.*

Huh-7.5 cells seeded in Ibidi slide channels were infected at the highest MOI achievable with respect to viral stock titers, given that our purpose was to analyze single infected cells. Jad was used at an MOI of 0.2 TCID50/cell, while Jad/NS5A-(TEV)-ST-449 and -V5-449 were used at an MOI of 0.07 TCID50/cell. Cells incubated with complete medium served as noninfected controls. Infected cells were fixed at 96h p.i. and processed for indirect immunolabeling using a mixture of three primary antibodies: a mouse anti-JFH1 NS5A monoclonal antibody, rabbit anti-calnexin (CALX) polyclonal antibodies to label ER, and sheep anti-ADRP polyclonal antibodies to label LDs. Following incubation with appropriate anti-species Ig conjugates, then DAPI to label cell nuclei and mounting in a nonpolymerizing medium, cells were observed by confocal microscopy. NS5A labelling was revealed with the 488 channel (green), CALX with the 555 channel (red) and ADRP with the 647 channel (white).

NS5A of the two recombinant viruses, as well as Jad NS5A presented similar patterns, either a cytoplasmic localization in a large peri-nuclear region or a localization in dot- or ringlike structures (green arrows, Figure 41, left images). From these images, it was difficult to conclude whether the first was exclusively reticulate and coincides with ER labelling. Interestingly, the dot- or ring-like pattern of NS5A was found to coincide, at least in part, with ADRP labelling of LDs (overlapping green arrows and grey arrowheads in merged images). Of note, dot/ring-like labelling of LDs with anti-ADRP was easier to visualize in noninfected cells (Mock and "NI" cells) than in infected cells, a feature that has already been reported by us and others. Altogether, these observations indicate that neither ST nor V5 tag alters Jad NS5A intracellular localization during the viral life cycle.



*Figure 41: Subcellular localization of NS5A-(TEV)-ST-449, NS5A-(TEV)-V5-449 and parental NS5A with respect to LDs and ER.* 

*Huh-7.5 infected with the indicated viruses and noninfected cells were probed for expression of proteins indicated on top of each column and color-coded according to the channel used. Merged images with additional DAPI staining are shown at the right. Images were acquired on a confocal microscope using a 63X objective. The scale bar indicates 10µm.*

# **IV.D.(γ) Comparative characterization of all chimeric viruses encoding NS5A from different genotypes**

# IV.D.γ.(i) Monitoring of viral replication and protein expression

Comparative monitoring of virus genome replication and infectious virus production of all NS5A intra-/inter-genotypic recombinant viruses described thus far was performed by quantification of intracellular viral RNAs and infectious titers in supernatants collected at 72h p. tf. from Huh-7.5 cells transfected with the respective genome-length RNAs. Cells transfected with genome-length parental RNA, the replication deficient GAA construct, or the assembly deficient ΔEp7 construct served as controls.

As illustrated by the solid filled bars in Figure 42, exchange for cognate proteins of genotypes 1 and 2a did not affect viral RNA replication nor infectious virion production compared to the parental virus (one-way ANOVA test;  $p > 0.05$ ). With genotype 3a and 4 NS5A, viral genome replication and infectious virus production was rescued by the insertion of compensatory mutations in NS3 and NS4B proteins, with the exception of the 3a-407 virus carrying G6050A substitution in NS4B, as already described above  $(IV.B.(\gamma))$ .

Interestingly, insertion of ST or V5 tag within the backbone of viruses bearing NS5A of genotypes 1, 2 or 4 did not significantly affect genome replication capacity compared to Jad nor to corresponding chimeras encoding untagged NS5A (Figure 42A). Infectious titers of these tagged NS5A recombinants were also not significantly different from the titers of their respective untagged counterparts (Figure 42B). In genotype 3 NS5A chimeras, insertion of the ST tag significantly affected both RNA replication and infectious virus production only in the case of 385 NS5A ( $p < 0.0001$ ), while assembly of infectious particles was also impacted in the Jad/G4458A/C6233T/NS5A-3a-407 virus ( $p = 0.0025$ ). Presence of the inserted tag sequences were verified in intracellular viral RNAs in all cases.

Altogether, among the eight intra- or inter-genotypic recombinant viruses encoding tagged NS5A, only two viruses (385-ST and 407-ST) were significantly affected in infectious particle production, although most of them were not as efficiently replicating as the Jad parent.

These data were further supported by the monitoring of HCV Core and NS5A expression in infected cell lysates collected at 72h p.tf., as shown in Figure 43. For the labelling of NS5A, two different monoclonal antibodies were used, 9E10 recognizing the majority of NS5A homologues and 7B5, recognizing (at least to some extent) the J6 derived NS5A.

Unfortunately, insertion of the tag disrupted the recognition of NS5A by the 9E10 antibody in all cases, except for NS5A of genotype 1b (data not shown), as the epitope recognized spans aa 414–428 $587$ . Hence, for the monitoring of tagged protein expression, we relied on anti-ST and anti-V5 antibodies (Figure 43). As a consequence, comparative observations across all viruses can only be made with respect to the expression of Core protein, which is common to all viruses and for which the same antibody was used.

In aggregate, viral protein expression was as high as with the parental Jad in all intra- and inter-genotypic chimeras, with or without a tag insertion, provided that the identified compensatory adaptive mutations were introduced into the backbone of 3a and 4 chimeras.

Furthermore, the hyperphosphorylated form of NS5A was evident as an additional band of higher molecular weight only in the genotype 2a samples, Jad and J6. Of note, 7B5 affinity for J6 NS5A appeared considerably reduced compared to 9E10 affinity for Jad (compare relative Core and NS5A intensities), hence preventing from visualizing p58 band in the 2a-J6 chimera. Over-exposure of the same membrane actually revealed a second product of slightly higher molecular weight in the 2a-J6 lane (data not shown). Hyperphosphorylation of genotype 1 NS5A proteins has previously been reported $\frac{148,138}{2}$ , while there is a paucity of information regarding the phosphorylation status of NS5A of genotypic origins other than genotype 2. Hence, the absence of a visible second NS5A-reactive product that may represent the hyperphosphorylated form of genotype 1, 3a, 4 NS5A could either be attributed to closer electrophoretic mobilities of the two forms of non-genotype 2 NS5A that were not resolved in these gel conditions, to technique limitations or to the actual absence of the hyperphosphorylated form in some or all instances.

High volume stocks were produced for untagged viruses, which had titers in the range of 4.1-5.3 log<sub>10</sub>TCID50/mL. The genomic sequence of chimeric viruses thus amplified was found to be as expected over the ORF by Sanger sequencing, supporting their genetic stability.

### **Genome Replication at 72h p.tf.**



**Infectious virus particle production at 72h p.tf.**





*Viral RNAs quantified at 72h p.tf. in intracellular RNA extracts from transfected Huh-7.5 are expressed in log<sup>10</sup> genome equivalents per μg total RNA (A), while infectious titers measured by virus end-point*  *dilution assays in the respectively collected culture supernatants are expressed in log10TCID50/mL. Cells transfected with genome-length parental RNA, the replication deficient GAA construct, or the assembly deficient ΔEp7 construct served as controls. Asterisks represent p-values obtained following one way ANOVA and correction with the Tukey's multiple comparisons test: p <0,05 (\*); p <0,01 (\*\*); p <0,001 (\*\*\*); p <0,0001 (\*\*\*\*); p >0,05. For space economy nonsignificant (ns) comparisons with the parent or between the non-tagged and the tagged chimeras are not illustrated.*



*Figure 43: Comparative characterization of protein expression of all NS5A recombinant viruses developed in this study.* 

*A comparative analysis of NS5A expression levels was performed in protein extracts prepared from Huh-7.5 cells transfected with the indicated RNAs and probed with HCV NS5A, ST and V5 (upper panel), HCV Core (middle panel) and β-actin (lower panel) -specific antibodies. The migration of protein molecular weight markers (MW) is indicated on the left of the images. GAGA: G4458A/G6050A mutations, GA: G6050A mutation, GACT: G4458A/C6233T mutations.*

I.A.α (i) Monitoring of subcellular NS5A localization

NS5A subcellular localization was studied following infection of Huh-7.5 cells seeded in Ibidi slide channels with intra- and inter-genotypic recombinant viruses at an MOI of 1 TCID50/cell (Figure 44, - 109 -). For tagged NS5A-encoding viruses, cells electroporated with *in vitro* transcribed genome-length RNAs were seeded in Ibidi slides. Cells incubated with complete medium ("Mock-infected") or transfected with H2O served as noninfected controls. Infected cells were fixed at 120h p.i./p.tf. and processed for indirect immunolabeling using a mixture of two primary antibodies: either the mouse 9E10 anti-NS5A monoclonal antibody or anti-tag mouse monoclonal antibodies, and rabbit anti-CALX polyclonal antibodies to label ER. LDs were labelled metabolically with the use of a fatty acid analogue, the 4,4-difluoro-4 bora-3a,4a-diaza-s-indacene or BODIPY. Following incubation with appropriate anti-species Ig conjugates, then DAPI to label cell nuclei and mounting in a nonpolymerizing medium, cells were observed by confocal microscopy. NS5A labelling was revealed with the 488 channel (green), BODIPY with the 555 channel (red) and CALX with the 647 channel (magenta). J6 NS5A intragenotypic recombinant virus is not shown, since none of the NS5A-specific antibodies available recognized 2a-J6 NS5A in its native conformation, but J6-NS5A-ST is shown with anti-ST labelling.

LD staining with BODIPY was clearer than the anti-ADRP staining described previously, allowing us to identify the LDs in the form of solid and clear spheres. We have previously shown that HCV infection leads to a redistribution and progressive strong clustering of LDs, as attested by the increase in LD observed average size and simultaneous decrease in number. We have identified HCV Core as the driver of this LD association. The LD distance observed at 120h p.i. by confocal microscopy is below the threshold of the microscope's resolution, leading us to believe that Core might even drive fusion of LDs over the course of Jad infection (Simon et al., manuscript in preparation).

Here, we also observed clustered LDs, polarized preferentially around the nuclei in most cells infected at a late stage (denoted by red arrows with a yellow frame, for a few examples), while in cells that are at an earlier stage of infection or that are not infected, LDs are spread evenly over the cytoplasm.

The NS5A proteins of intergenotypic viruses and Jad NS5A exhibited relatively similar intracellular distributions, which are in all cases not homogenous from one cell to another within the infected cell monolayers. Either a reticulate localization throughout the cytoplasm, with variable amounts of intense dots of diverse sizes (blue frames, as examples), or a localization in the form of larger "aggregates" or "clusters" (yellow frames) was observed. The reticulate pattern mainly coincided with the labelling of the ER, while the more clustered pattern overlapped with or was found adjacent to the LD labelling (yellow signal or apposed green/red signals in the merged channel images). However, this is not equally straightforward in all images, due to a potential differential affinity of the 9E10 anti-NS5A antibody for the different NS5A homologues. In addition, technical issues stemmed from different volumes of the cells and single Z-stack acquisitions, leading to potentially different signal intensities for each labelled object (nucleus, ER, LD and viral protein).

Altogether, we can conclude that for all intergenotypic viruses, two distinct NS5A intracellular distribution profiles can be visualized within the same cell monolayer, with proportions possibly varying from one virus to another. The different NS5A patterns may suggest that cells do not host the virus at the same stage of the infectious cycle. With NS5A undergoing translation (reticular distribution) or involved at the stage of genomic replication (punctiform distribution), the cell would present an earlier stage of the viral cycle. NS5A aggregation could reflect the viral particle assembly stage during which viral proteins accumulate in the cytoplasm of the infected cell and NS5A tends to interact with the LDs.

Importantly, NS5A-1b-434-ST protein was efficiently detected by both anti-NS5A 9E10 and anti-ST antibodies. Both reticulate and LD-associated patterns were also observed with the two antibodies in cells infected with Jad/NS5A-1b-434-ST, indicating that the ST labelling can substitute for 9E10 labeling for tagged viruses. This observation also held true for parental Jad-NS5A-(TEV)-ST (data not shown).

For all tagged recombinant viruses, as for their untagged counterparts, both reticulate-like and clustered NS5A was observed, in association with the ER or the LDs, respectively, allowing us to conclude that the insertion of the ST or the V5 tag did not alter NS5A subcellular localization. Therefore, these tools were employed for the investigation of NS5A-host PPIs.









*Figure 44: Comparative analysis of the subcellular localization of native or ST/V5-tagged NS5A of various genotypes in infected Huh-7.5 cells*

*Representative images of Huh-7.5 cells infected with intergenotypic viruses or transfected with tagged intergenotypic RNAs, acquired at 120h p.i./p.tf. NS5A(-ST) proteins are shown in green, LDs are marked in red, ER is revealed in magenta, and nuclei in blue. The "MERGE" images show the superposition of all stainings. Anti-NS5A 9E10 antibody was used to label NS5A in the absence of a tag and anti-ST, or anti-V5 antibodies were used to stain tagged NS5A proteins, unless otherwise indicated. All illustrated pictures were acquired using an inverted confocal microscope and a 40X objective. Scale bars (20µm) are shown at the bottom right of each image. Blue and yellow rectangles depict representative cells with different NS5A subcellular localization patterns and red arrows point to cells in which LD redistribution and clustering are prominent.* 

# **IV.E Protein-protein interaction networks of HCV Core and NS5A**

In order to identify the Core and NS5A interactomes of the parental Jad virus, the tagged recombinant viruses developed (see Figure 35, page - 93 -) were used to infect human hepatoma Huh-7.5 cells, as described in §III.J.(α). Cell lysates were independently incubated with Strep-Tactin beads to allow the binding of tagged viral proteins and their protein complexes. Following on-bead trypsin digestion and identification of retrieved proteins by nano liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry (nano-LC-MS/MS), hits were scored following our stringent algorithm, incorporating the label-free statistical analysis, the MiST $<sup>564</sup>$  and the</sup> SAINT<sup>563</sup> scores. Core and NS5A interactomes were visualized in the form of networks using Cytoscape<sup>572</sup> and StringApp<sup>574</sup>. Further enrichment of the networks revealed interesting pathways for each protein, as described below. An illustration of the experimental processes followed can be found in Figure 30 (page - 85 -).

## **IV.E.(α) The interactome of Jad NS5A**

# IV.E.α.(i) Successful affinity purification and identification of NS5A-ST complexes

Five biological replicates of each of the Jad/NS5A-(TEV)-ST-418, -V5-418, -ST-449, - V5-449 infected Huh-7.5 cell lysates collected at 96h p.i. were subjected to an affinity purification protocol relying on the high affinity of the twin-strep tag fused to NS5A with a Strep-Tactin®XT resin covering magnetic agarose beads (see III.J). To monitor the success of the affinity purification process, aliquots of proportional quantities of infected Huh-7.5 lysates (Lysate), supernatants retrieved following binding to Strep-Tactin beads (SN), pools of postbinding washes of the beads with an appropriate buffer (Wash), and final eluates of bound proteins retrieved upon incubation of beads for 10min at 70°C in LDS+β-mercaptoethanol buffer (Eluate) were analysed by western blotting. Proteins were revealed using the anti-NS5A 7B5 antibody (Figure 45A-B).

NS5A-(TEV)-ST and NS5A-(TEV)-V5 were detected in similar amounts in lysate aliquots from cells infected with the corresponding viruses for both pairs with 418 and 449 insertion positions, indicating equivalent bait protein abundances in the cell lysates. NS5A-ST products were detected in eluates for both ST samples, whereas the absence of signal in both V5 eluates demonstrated specific purification of tagged NS5A and protein complexes. This was further supported by the fact that most NS5A-V5 present in the lysates was retrieved in the postbinding supernatants for both V5 control samples. Of note, the retrieval of a faint NS5A-ST signal in the lanes corresponding to post-binding supernatants of the ST-tagged samples was indicative of probable bead saturation. Moreover, the absence of detectable NS5A signal in the Wash samples suggested that the wash conditions performed did not interfere with NS5A-ST retention on the beads.





*(A, B) Western blotting analysis of the indicated samples for the 418 virus pair (A) or the 449 virus pair (B) aliquoted during the course of the affinity purification of infected Huh-7.5 lysates: Lysate; SN: supernatant retrieved following binding of the lysate onto Strep-Tactin beads; Wash: pool of supernatants retrieved following binding to Strep-Tactin beads and 3 washes each with a buffer that does not contain NP40; Eluate: elution of bound proteins with LDS+β-mercaptoethanol solution. Loaded sample quantities correspond to 0.02xT175 in all cases, except Wash, which is equivalent to 0.01xT175. Immunoblotting was performed with a-NS5A 7B5 antibody. (C) SDS-PAGE gel stained with fluorescent total protein SyproRuby staining solution. Samples loaded correspond to affinity-purified proteins (eluates) from a T175 flask of cells infected with the indicated viruses. MW: Molecular Weight marker (kDa).* 

A sixth replicate sample was prepared under the same conditions in parallel with the five biological replicates set aside for nano-LC-MS/MS analyses, but all bound proteins were eluted by a 10min incubation of the beads with LDS+β-mercaptoethanol at  $70^{\circ}$ C. The whole eluate, which was equivalent to the total protein load of one replicate provided to the Proteomics platform, was loaded onto a denaturing polyacrylamide-SDS gel. Protein staining of the gel with SyproRuby also demonstrated specific purification of NS5A-ST and partners only in the presence of the ST, whereas no NS5A-V5 product, expected to migrate with a slightly faster electrophoretic mobility, was visualized in V5 samples (Figure 45C). Other discrete, specific protein products were present only in the ST samples, possibly representing specific NS5A partners.

Following this sixth control and verification of aliquots from all five replicate samples prepared for the MS study, as exemplified in Figure 45A-B, the nano-LC-MS/MS was the next step, carried out in collaboration with the Proteomics platform at Institut Pasteur. Pearson correlation coefficients between ST and V5 replicates were computed using all complete pairs of observations in these samples. These demonstrated that sets of ST and V5 replicates clustered tightly together and segregated in two groups, as expected (Figure 46A, C).

A differential analysis of peptides retrieved by the nano-LC-MS/MS was then performed with the limits of the log<sub>2</sub>[Fold-Change(ST/V5)] and the FDR set at 1 and 5%, respectively. Overall, 160 proteins were specifically retrieved from the NS5A-ST-418 replicate samples and 213 proteins were significantly more abundant in the ST-418 versus the V5-418 replicate samples, adding up to 388 proteins reliably interacting with NS5A-ST-418 (Figure 46B). In the NS5A-ST-449 replicate samples,193 proteins were specifically retrieved and 237 proteins were significantly more abundant in the ST-449 than in the V5-449 replicate samples, adding up to 430 proteins reliably interacting with NS5A-ST-449 (Figure 46D). The whole list of retrieved potential NS5A interactors, with their respective scores can be found in Supplementary Table 3.

The fact that we found a higher number of interacting factors with NS5A-ST-449 than with NS5A-ST-418 suggested that more interactions were disrupted by ST insertion at position 418.



*Figure 46: Pearson correlation of tagged NS5A replicate samples and differential analysis of retrieved proteins.* 

*(A, C) Quality control correlation matrix based on Pearson correlation coefficient among ST replicate samples and V5 replicate samples, with the tag insertion downstream of amino acid 418 (A) or 449 (C). (B, D) The volcano plots and framing graphs show proteins identified following the label-free analysis of the liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry data. Proteins retrieved uniquely in the NS5A-ST (preys of interest) or the NS5A-V5 samples (nonspecific preys) are plotted in the graphs as horizontal bars on the right and left of the volcano plots, respectively, according to the logarithmic value in the base of 2 of their iBAQ values. Proteins retrieved in both NS5A-ST and -V5 samples are represented as dots in the Volcano plots according to the logarithmic value in the base of 2 of their respective intensities in the NS5A-ST replicates over the NS5A-V5replicates (X axis) and the negative logarithmic value in the base of 10 of their corresponding adjusted p-values (Y axis). This defines significant preys of interest in the coloured upper right quarters of the Volcano plots.*

## IV.E.α.(ii) Analysis of NS5A phosphopeptides retrieved

As the different forms of phosphorylated NS5A have been linked to distinct roles of the protein during the various steps of the HCV life cycle (see Figure 12 and the corresponding introductory section on NS5A) and as p56 and p58 have been reported to differentially interact
with specific host factors<sup>160</sup>, we examined our retrieved NS5A peptides for post-translational modifications.

We identified phosphorylation of Jad NS5A serine residues at positions 146, 174, 222, 225, 230, 232, 235, and 360, and threonine residues at positions 164, 348 and 356, as well as of serine 12 within the twin-strep tag insertion. Most of these sites have previously been found to be phosphorylated by mass spectrometry in studies using genotype 2a HCV strains, subgenomic replicons or over-expressed NS5A, while fewer studies addressed the NS5A phosphorylation of genotype 1 derived sequences (Appel et al.,  $20005\frac{148}{15}$ ; Cordek et al., 2014<sup>588</sup>). The overlap of our data and published findings is represented in Table 15, which also includes NS5A residues that might support phosphorylation based on mutational analyses, in the absence of biochemical evidence and MS observations, but that we did not recover in our nano-LC-MS/MS work.

Focusing specifically on the peptide mainly associated with NS5A hyperphosphorylation, G**S**PP**S**EASS**S**V**S**QL**S**APS, the underlined and bolded five serine residues were found to be phosphorylated in our ST replicate samples, while unmodified counterparts of this peptide were also recovered, indicating that phosphorylation of NS5A was not affected by the insertion of the ST tag, and that neither the p56 nor the p58 form were preferentially selected during the affinity purification process. As we were aiming at recovering NS5A interacting partners acting at the different stages of the viral life cycle, these results corroborate that we have reached this goal.

*Table 15: Phosphorylated NS5A residues reported in the literature or found in the present study. Phosphorylated amino acids found by us and not previously reported in the literature are highlighted in dark purple, while those previously reported as detected by mass-spectrometry (MS) are highlighted in light pink. Putative phosphorylated residues supported by genetic data from the literature but not by biochemical or MS evidence, and phosphorylated residues retrieved by MS but not found in our study are highlighted in blue and white, respectively. "-": no detail available*





#### IV.E.α.(iii) Analysis of previously reported NS5A interacting partners

As an additional verification step of our AP-MS/MS method, we screened the lists of Jad NS5A interacting partners for previously reported HCV NS5A cellular interactors. In the absence of an up-to-date maintained database of HCV-host PPIs, we relied on the databases and publications described in I.B.θ.(ii) to construct a more complete list of HCV NS5A interacting partners (Supplementary Table 2). To achieve this, we used the data from the HCVpro database<sup>503</sup> and the "HCV Hypo- vs. Hyper-Phosphorylated NS5A Interactome Database"<sup>160</sup>, the review paper of Ross-Thriepland & Harris,  $2015^{118}$  and the original papers of Saik et al., 2016 $^{506}$ , de Chassey et al., 2008 $^{508}$ , Tripathi et al., 2013 $^{509}$ , Germain et al., 2014 $^{511}$ , Dolan et al., 2013<sup>510</sup>, Ramage et al., 2015<sup>512</sup>, Meistermann et al., 2014<sup>516</sup>, Eberle et al., 2014<sup>517</sup> and Vlaicu et al.,  $2017_{20}^{520}$ . To avoid redundancy, the paper of Mukhopadhyay & Maulik,  $2014\frac{505}{10}$ , in which they performed text mining of the HCV pro database, was not incorporated, while due to the absence of available data at the time of the preparation of this list, the paper of Farooq & Khan, 2019<sup>507</sup> and the VirusMINT database<sup>504</sup> were also not used.

Since some of these papers relied on text-mining tools to generate their lists of NS5A interacting partners, we sorted the previously reported NS5A partners in our list by method of identification. Hence, data from papers using both experimental methods and *in silico* mining were separated in two respective columns.

We then compared the combined list of 527 NS5A interacting partners retrieved in this work with ST-418 and ST-449 after removal of redundant proteins interacting with both (see next paragraph) with the list of previously reported NS5A interactors we generated. As shown in the Venn diagram in Figure 47B, we uncovered 408 previously unreported cellular interacting partners of NS5A and 115 partners previously reported in the literature. Of those, the vast majority had been reported in high-throughput original studies using either two-hybrid

screens or different methods of protein complex purification coupled to MS identification of retrieved peptides.

We identified well-known NS5A partners, such as PI4KIIIα, ApoE, VAPA, VAPB and BIN1, whose roles in the HCV life cycle have been well documented and presented throughout this manuscript (I.B.(ε), page- 20 -, I.B. $\theta$ .(ii), page - 51 -, Table 15), fully validating our experimental approach. Furthermore, our study unveiled many more, previously unreported NS5A interacting partners. Actually, the overlap between our data and findings from published high-throughput original studies, databases, review publications and text-mining approaches was remarkably low. This could easily be explained by the different experimental approaches followed in most original studies, which, with the exception of those by Vlaicu et al.  $\frac{520}{2}$  and Pan et al. $\frac{160}{160}$ , were not performed in infection systems, nor in many cases even in hepatic cells lines. In addition, one should mind the pitfalls of text-mining, including unspecific recovery of cellular hits whose gene expression is known or suspected to be regulated in the presence of the viral protein, while no physical interaction with NS5A has been shown.

Finally, the higher overlap of our data with experimentally reported NS5A partners, in contrast to the relatively low overlap with proteins from databases, review studies or textmining calls for the maintenance of an exhaustive and up-to-date database.

#### IV.E.α.(iv) Network and enriched pathways of Jad NS5A interactome

#### **Organization of the network representing the Jad NS5A interactome**

We performed additional analyses of our MS data on top of the label-free analysis, using the MiST and SAINT scores. Incorporating the three analyses in a final combined score, as described in  $\SIII.N.(\alpha)$  allowed us to discriminate more reliable interactors of NS5A and to increase the stringency for the identification of cellular proteins differentially interacting with NS5A according to the ST insertion position.

Retrieved Jad NS5A interacting partners were organised in a network using the Cytoscape software<sup> $572$ </sup>, as shown in Figure 47. The nodes represented correspond to those retrieved with statistical significance based on the label free analysis of the MS data, with increased size if the corresponding protein also passed the MiST and SAINT filters. Proteins found to interact with NS5A-ST-418 are linked with the 418 node with purple lines, while proteins found to interact with NS5A-ST-449 are linked with the 449 node with teal-coloured lines. A protein was considered as a specific interactor of NS5A-ST-418 or NS5A-ST-449 in case it was retrieved only in one of the two screens by all label free, MiST, and SAINT scores, hence it was represented around the corresponding NS5A node in the network.

Proteins found to interact with both NS5A-ST-418 and NS5A-ST-449 and have no known physical interaction with any of the cellular proteins represented in the network, according to String database, were clustered in the central big circle at the top of the network, while proteins entertaining more than three interactions between themselves are clustered in the bottom center. Interactions among cellular proteins are shown by node connections with grey lines.

NS5A interacting partners previously reported in the indicated list of publications and databases are discriminated by a black edge, amounting to 115 cellular proteins already known or proposed to interact with NS5A. The 4 viral proteins found to interact with NS5A, namely E2, NS3, NS4B and NS5B are depicted in black nodes.

This organization of the NS5A interactome network allowed us to discriminate more probable physical NS5A interacting partners (those that do not have other cellular partners, found in circles around the NS5A nodes and in the top central circle) from strong protein partners that may have been pulled down via interaction with third partner cellular intermediates. Nonetheless, such a claim would need to be substantiated by additional protein complementation assays or co-immunoprecipitation experiments with each cellular protein used as bait.

Furthermore, PPIs that were retrieved with NS5A-ST-418 but not with NS5A-ST-449 or vice-versa provided an indication of the interaction site within NS5A for these specific partners. It is likely that the ST alters NS5A folding at least in the insertion region and/or interrupts a peptide sequence that may be required for the interaction of some partners. The incidence of ST insertion at position 418 may be more detrimental than at position 449, which is more C-terminal to the protein. In agreement with this, a well characterized interactor of NS5A, Nucleosome Assembly Protein 1 Like 1 (NAP1L1), which we found to specifically interact with NS5A-ST-418, was shown to be unable to bind NS5A in the absence of aa 443- 457, and was further mapped to a cluster of serine residues in the C-terminal NS5A region $\frac{590}{2}$ . Similarly, another NS5A interactor previously studied in-depth, the protein called SET And MYND Domain Containing 3 (SMYD3), was previously shown to interact with NS5A only in the presence of aa 343-448, pointing to a potential role of sequences around position 418 for this interaction and supporting our specific retrieval of SMYD3 with NS5A-ST-449 and not with  $NS5A-ST-418<sup>517</sup>$ .

### **Enriched pathways in the Jad NS5A interactome**

String enrichment of the Jad NS5A interactome using the Gene Ontology, KEGG, reactome, WikiPathways and Disease Ontology resources of the StringApp withing the Cytoscape software revealed a plethora of enriched pathways within our network (Supplementary Table 4). With a redundancy cutoff set at 0.5, the top three hits based on each term's FDR were the GO Biological Process "Transport" pathway, with an FDR of 5.89E-35 (253 proteins in our network) and the reactome Pathways "The citric acid (TCA) cycle and respiratory electron transport" (FDR 6.4E-31, 52 proteins in our network) and "Metabolism" (FDR 4.48E-28, 153 proteins in our network). These findings indicate that Jad NS5A is highly involved in these specific cellular processes through direct or indirect interactions with the proteins orchestrating the intracellular transport and metabolism. Due to redundancy among the two highly enriched reactome Pathways, only the proteins included in the more inclusive "Metabolism" term are highlighted in Figure 47.

Notably, the separation of NS5A cellular interacting partners retrieved that are reported in STRING to physically interact with each other and their organization at the bottom part of our network revealed some interesting clustering of protein complexes that may have been copurified with NS5A in aggregate. These groups are indicated within coloured dashed boxes in Figure 48 and represent proteins involved in or belonging to the mitochondrial contact site and cristae organizing system (MICOS), the cell cycle, immunity, protein production, degradation and modifications (translation, proteasome, N-linked glycosylation, protein folding upon ATP hydrolysis), metabolic processes (Krebs cycle, electron transport chain, oxidative phosphorylation) and proteins known to physically interact with each other by two, three, or four that are involved in intracellular transport. Indeed, a redundancy of enriched pathways can be observed across and within resources highlighting pathways involved in transport and metabolism in general, including more specifically pathways involved in pentose, protein and lipid metabolism, as well as the coupled Krebs cycle, electron transport chain and oxidative phosphorylation (TCA-ETC-OXPHOS). Pathways implicated in host immune responses and HCC development were also found enriched with good FDR values (Figure 49), being indicative of possible NS5A-driven deregulation of all these processes. The illustrated pathways in Figure 49 no longer represent exact terms enriched within the interrogated resources, but manually curated subsets of all the pathways implicated in each cellular process, upon removal of pathways with 100% redundant protein content, for visualization purposes.





*The network was created with the Cytoscape software with the use of StringApp. Protein names are shown in the center of the respective nodes. 418 and 449 correspond to the bait proteins NS5A-ST-418 and NS5A-ST-449, respectively. Node size of the partners corresponds to the final combined score of label-free analysis, MiST and SAINT. (A) Venn diagram of common and distinct PPIs of NS5A-ST-418 (left, purple) and NS5A-ST-449 (right, teal). (B) Venn diagram of common and distinct NS5A PPIs found in our work compared to published literature and databases, as shown in the indicated list of publications.*



*Figure 48: Pathway enrichment of the Jad NS5A interactome identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells. The network was created in Cytoscape with the use of StringApp. String Enrichment primarily highlighted pathways involved in intracellular transport (purple) and metabolism (green). Clusters of NS5A partners known to physically interact with each other were also found to be part of specific cellular processes, as indicated by dashed rectangles and coloured legend at the bottom right.*



#### **IV.E.(β) The interactome of Jad Core**

IV.E.β.(i) Successful affinity purification and identification of ST-Core complexes

Triplicate samples of ST-Core and V5-Core infected cell lysates collected at 72h p.tf. were subjected to our affinity purification protocol and tagged Core and protein complexes were successfully retrieved only in the ST samples, whereas no unspecific Core product was visualized by western blot with the control V5 tag (Figure 50A). These experiments were standardized and performed by Dr Houda Tabbal during her post-doctoral fellowship in our laboratory. It should be mentioned that due to either the instability or short half-life of the C17- ST protein or to the difficulty in successfully extracting or purifying this protein, a lot more infected cells were required to reach sufficient protein complex quantities for further analyses.

 Ward's method with a correlation-based distance among quantified values of replicate ST-tagged and V5-tagged samples revealed high correlation among the ST-Core replicates and among the control samples, as expected (Figure 50B).

A differential analysis of peptides retrieved via nano-LC-MS/MS was then performed with the limits of the log<sub>2</sub>[Fold-Change(ST/V5)] and the FDR set at 1 and 5%, respectively. Overall, 78 proteins were specifically retrieved in the ST-Core replicate samples and 56 proteins were significantly more abundant in the ST-Core than in the V5-Core replicate samples, adding up to 134 proteins reliably interacting with ST**-**Core (Figure 50C). The whole list of retrieved potential Core interactors, with their respective scores can be found in Supplementary Table 5.



#### *Figure 50: Jad ST-Core protein complex purification.*

*(A) Western blotting of Huh-7.5 lysates (0.02xT175) and LDS+β-mercaptoethanol eluates (0.4xT175) of bound ST or V5-tagged Jad Core on StrepTactin Sepharose High Performance beads. Immunoblotting was performed with a-core 1851 antibody. (B) Ward's method with a correlation-based distance among replicate ST-tagged and V5-tagged samples. The distance height is plotted on the Y axis. (C) The volcano plot and framing graphs show proteins retrieved following the label-free analysis of the liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry data. Proteins retrieved uniquely in the ST-Core (preys of interest) or the V5-Core samples (nonspecific preys) are plotted (as horizontal bars) on the right and left of the volcano plot, respectively, according to their iBAQ values. Proteins identified in ST- and V5-Core samples are represented as dots in the Volcano plot according to the logarithmic value in the base of 2 of their respective intensities in the ST-Core replicates over the V5-Core replicates (X axis) and the negative logarithmic value in the base of 10 of their corresponding adjusted p-values (Y axis). Significant preys appear in orange.*

#### IV.E.β.(ii) Analysis of previously reported Core interacting partners

As for the NS5A analyses, we screened our lists of Jad Core interacting partners for previously reported HCV Core cellular interactors. For Core, we relied on the data from the HCVpro database<sup>503</sup>, the review paper of Kao,  $2016<sup>521</sup>$  and the original papers of Saik et al.,

 $2016_{206}^{506}$ , de Chassey et al.,  $2008_{208}^{508}$ , Tripathi et al.,  $2010_{214}^{514}$ , Germain et al.,  $2014_{214}^{511}$ , Dolan et al., 2013<sup>510</sup>, Ramage et al., 2015<sup>512</sup>, Dolan et al., 2015<sup>515</sup> and Roohvand et al., 2009<sup>513</sup>. Again, the papers of Mukhopadhyay & Maulik,  $2014\frac{505}{9}$  and of Farooq & Khan,  $2019\frac{507}{9}$ , as well as the VirusMINT database $504$  were not incorporated in this list. Data from the literature were separated in experiment-derived PPIs and text-mining hits (Supplementary Table 1).

For Core we only retrieved seven previously reported interacting partners, while the remaining 131 cellular proteins we identified following the AP-MS/MS experiments were novel hits (see Figure 51).

## IV.E.β.(iii) Network and enriched pathways of Jad Core interactome

Strikingly, String enrichment of the Jad Core interactome using the Gene Ontology, KEGG, reactome, WikiPathways and Disease Ontology resources of the StringApp within the Cytoscape software mainly highlighted pathways involved in the regulation of gene expression, such as the illustrated GO Biological Process "Gene expression" (FDR 2.85E-16, 55 proteins in our network), "Regulation of transcription by RNA polymerase II" (FDR 0.015, 30 proteins in our network), and reactome "Gene expression (Transcription)" (FDR 5.25E-7, 33 proteins in our network) pathways, as illustrated in Figure 51. Moreover, an important proportion of enriched pathways within the Core interactome, including the top enriched GO Molecular Function term represent proteins involved in RNA-binding, -metabolism and -transport, underlining the strong association of Core with RNA, RNA-related processes, and their regulation (Supplementary Table 6).



*Figure 51: Jad Core interactome identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells and enrichment of host pathways involved in regulation of gene expression.* 

*The network was created with the Cytoscape software with the use of StringApp. Protein names are shown in the center of the respective nodes. Node size of the partners corresponds to the final combined score of label-free analysis, MiST and SAINT. The seven Core PPIs previously published in the selected, indicated literature and database sources are discriminated by a black node border, while the three*  *viral proteins retrieved are shown in black nodes. Proteins from three selected pathways involved in the regulation of gene expression are highlighted by nodes in shades of orange and red.*

#### IV.E.β.(iv) Common Jad Core and NS5A interacting partners

Once the interactomes of Jad NS5A and Core were analysed, we undertook to identify proteins retrieved by both AP/MS-MS experiments, which would be indicative of common Core and NS5A interacting partners during infection. Though not directly comparable and in no case exhaustive since the Core analysis was performed at 72h p.tf., while the NS5A analysis was performed at 96h p.i., we believe that the cellular proteins that we did retrieve with both Core and NS5A are highly likely to interact with both proteins, since no physical interactions are reported among the cellular hits based on STRING (see network in Figure 52). To support this claim, we do find two proteins, Nucleosome Assembly Protein 1 Like 1 and 4 (NAP1L1 and NAP1L4) that have previously been reported to interact with both Core and NS5A. Interestingly, we also retrieved two proteins previously reported to interact with Core, which were now also included in our interactome of Jad NS5A and would be of interest to further validate: the delta(14)-sterol reductase LBR (LBR) and the translocating chain-associated membrane protein 1 (TRAM1). LBR is physiologically participating in a metabolic pathway leading to cholesterol biosynthesis $\frac{591}{91}$ , while TRAM1 has been found to participates in the disposal of misfolded ER membrane proteins as part of the unfolded protein response (UPR) under conditions of ER stress<sup>592</sup>.

Overall, we retrieved 14 common Core/NS5A PPIs, including two with the viral proteins E2 and NS3. Among those, three common PPIs were specific to NS5A-ST-449 and five to NS5A-ST-418, while six were retrieved by Core and NS5A ST-tagged in both positions. Enrichment of this network was also performed, with a single pathway coming up with good FDR values across databases, the Gene Ontology Molecular Function "RNA binding pathway", in link with the known capacity of both HCV Core and NS5A in binding viral RNA.



*Figure 52: Common Jad Core and NS5A interacting partners identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells. The network was generated in Cytoscape with the use of StringApp. Protein names are shown in the center of the respective node. Proteins interacting with Core are connected with it with black edges, purple edges are used to connect the PPIs of Jad/NS5-ST-418 and teal ones to connect the PPIs of Jad/NS5-ST-449. The three common Core/NS5A-ST-449 PPIs are clustered in the top, the five common Core/NS5A-ST-418 PPIs are clustered in the bottom and the six proteins retrieved by all three baits are clustered in the center of the network. Core partners previously published in the selected, indicated literature and database sources are discriminated by a black node border, while those previously found for both Core and NS5A by a red node border. Viral proteins found to interact Core and/or NS5A are illustrated in red nodes.* 

Despite the unveiling of these few common interactors of Jad Core and NS5A, the overlap between the two networks is quite low. Interestingly, the pathways found significantly enriched in each network vary drastically. The majority of Core interacting partners are associated with RNA and regulation of gene expression, whereas NS5A interacting partners are involved in a wider range of pathways. Based on this observation, we next undertook to explore the common and differential PPIs of NS5A of diverse genotypic origins in similar infection system. In parallel, the regulation of host gene expression in cells infected by recombinant viruses encoding core from different genotypes was explored.

## **IV.E.(γ) NS5A from clinical and prototypic strains of diverse genotypic origins exhibit common and distinct PPIs**

In order to explore the interactomes of NS5A proteins of genotypes 1-4, we relied on the tagged NS5A intra- and intergenotypic recombinant viruses that we produced and characterized, as described in §IV.C and §IV.D. Huh-7.5 cells were transfected with genomelength, synthetic RNAs of the following 7 ST-tagged chimeras and 1 V5-tagged control viruses: Jad/NS5A-1a-411-V5 (nonspecific binding control), Jad/NS5A-1a-411-ST, Jad/NS5A-1b-434-ST, Jad/NS5A-2a-J6-ST, Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-385-ST, Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-401-ST, Jad/G4458A/C6233T/NS5A-3a-407-ST and Jad/ G6050A/NS5A-4-431-ST. For simplicity, these viruses or the respective NS5A proteins will be referred to in the subsequent paragraphs only with the strain number and tag inserted (e.g. 385-ST instead of Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-385-ST).

### IV.E.γ.(i) Successful affinity purification and identification of the interactomes of ST-tagged NS5A of diverse genotypic origin

A kinetic analysis of protein expression levels at 72h, 96h, 120h p.tf. in cells transfected with the different NS5A-tagged chimeras demonstrated progressive accumulation of NS5A-ST/V5 over time, reaching maximal levels at 120h p.tf. for all viruses, including viruses whose replication appeared weaker at earlier time-points or delayed, such as e.g. 3a-385 (Figure 53). The 120h p.tf. time-point was thus selected for further proteomic studies.



*Figure 53: Kinetic analysis of tagged NS5A protein expression over a 120h infection pediod. A comparative analysis of tagged NS5A expression levels at different time-points p.tf. was performed in protein extracts prepared from Huh-7.5 cells transfected with the indicated RNAs and probed with HCV NS5A, ST and V5 (upper panels), HCV Core (middle panels) and β-actin (lower panels)-specific antibodies. The migration of protein molecular weight markers (MW) is indicated on the left of the* 

*images. Red and pink arrows point to the NS5A p56 and p58 forms, respectively. In bottom left panel nontagged 434 protein expression is also shown.*

Transfected cell lysates from five replicate experiments collected at 120h p.tf. underwent the same affinity purification procedures as described for parental Jad NS5A protein complex purification. Tagged-NS5A was specifically retrieved only with the ST-tagged samples and not with the control V5 tag, as shown by the staining of the totality of an eluate loaded onto an SDS-polyacrylamide gel, corresponding to a replicate of the samples analyzed by nano-LC-MS/MS (Figure 54A). This was further confirmed by immunoblotting of a fraction of the eluates (corresponding to 2% of a T175) from a series of samples provided to the platform, revealed with a mixture of anti-ST and anti-V5 primary antibodies (Figure 54B). No control NS5A-411-V5 was visualized in the V5 eluate, whereas all corresponding lysate content was found unbound, in the post-binding supernatant retrieved following incubation with StrepTactin beads. In contrast, all ST samples were readily detected. In addition, in Figure 54C, proportionate aliquots of lysates and eluates of all ST- or V5-tagged samples were loaded on a gel (Figure 54C). This showed that for ST-viruses, NS5A-ST is entirely bound to the StrepTactin beads and retrieved at the end of the purification process, whereas in the case of the control V5 virus, NS5A-V5 is found in the respective post-binding SN as shown in Figure 54B. For comparison purposes, the same amount of StrepTactin beads was used for all purifications, leading to bead saturation for some ST samples, as attested by the detection of low levels of NS5A-ST in the post-binding SNs of 434-ST, J6-ST, 401-ST and 431-ST (Figure 54C), also corresponding to the samples with higher quantities of total NS5A retrieved following purification (Figure 54A). These modest differences in the amounts of NS5A-ST eluted proteins were reflected in the corresponding lysates and are likely due to slightly different viral replication efficiency and/or induced cytopathogenicity of these viruses at 120h p.tf. (also see Figure 42 at 72h p.tf., page - 103 -). Aliquots of all 5 replicates provided to the platform were verified by western blot analysis as in Figure 54B.

Altogether, these data demonstrated that the quantities retrieved across samples and replicates were adequate to identify NS5A partners by nano-LC-MS/MS. As for the previous MS work, Pearson correlation using all complete pairs of observations in these samples confirmed ST and V5 replicate independent clustering, as expected (Supplementary Figure 1).

Differential analysis of peptides retrieved by nano-LC-MS/MS was then performed as previously, with the limits of the  $log_2[Fold-Change(ST/V5)]$  and the FDR set at 1 and 5%, respectively. Adjusted p-values were used to set the thresholds of identification of differentially abundant hits between V5-tagged control and ST-tagged samples.



*Figure 54: NS5A-ST protein complex purification from Huh-7.5 cells infected with intergenotypic NS5A recombinant viruses.* 

*(A) SDS-polyacrylamide gel stained with fluorescent total protein SyproRuby allowed the probing of the indicated LDS-β-mercaptoethanol protein eluates, purified with MagStrep "type 3" XT magnetic beadsfrom lysates of infected Huh-7.5 cells collected at 120h p.tf. (B) Western blotting of protein eluates shown in (A), in parallel with control V5 post-binding supernatant (SN). (C) Western blotting of infected Huh-7.5 lysates, supernatants retrieved after binding of lysates to StrepTactin beads (SN) followed by 3 washes in the absence of NP40 (Wash), and purified proteins eluted in LDS+β-mercaptoethanol (Eluate). Sample quantities loaded correspond to 1xT175 for total protein staining (A) and 0.02xT175 for all samples except Wash (0.01xT175) for western blots (B-C). Immunoblotting was performed with a mixture of a-ST and a-V5 antibodies. MW: Molecular Weight marker.*

Overall, 639 cellular proteins were specifically retrieved in the NS5A-ST replicate samples across genotypes. More specifically for each of the 7 chimeric viruses, 194 cellular proteins were found either exclusively or statistically more abundant in the genotype 1a 411-ST replicates over the control 411-V5, 350 in the genotype 1b 434-ST, 376 in the genotype 2a J6- ST, 252, 395 and 367 in the genotype 3a 385-ST, 401-ST, and 407-ST, respectively, and 314 in the genotype 4 431-ST replicate samples (Figure 55A-G).

A meta-analysis of the retrieved proteins for each NS5A highlighted 96 proteins commonly retrieved with NS5A proteins of all selected clinical strains and J6, as shown in the center of the 7-branch Venn diagram illustrated in Figure H. In this flower-shaped illustration, each number represents the sum of host factors only retrieved together with the NS5A-ST protein(s) of the strain(s) corresponding to the coloured outer line(s) with respect of the center of the plot. For example, within the 434-dedicated petal, there are 32 proteins specifically retrieved with 434-ST and no other NS5A-ST (only enclosed by the pink line), 7 retrieved with 434-ST, 431-ST and no other NS5A-ST (pink and purple line are above number 7), 2 retrieved with 434-ST, 407-ST and no other NS5A-ST (pink and turquoise line are above number 2), 2 retrieved with 434-ST, 431-ST, 407-ST and no other NS5A-ST (pink, purple and turquoise line are above number 2), and so on. The whole list of retrieved potential NS5A interactors, with their respective scores can be found in Supplementary Table 7.

## **Organization of the network representing the interactomes of NS5A of diverse genotypic origins**

We then used MiST and SAINT to further stringently score our list of 639 potential NS5A interactors and we represented the combined results of these analyses in the Cytoscape-derived network illustrated in Figure 56, whose organization is described in the figure legend. In the presence of a single control condition, to consider a cellular protein as a significant interactor of a given NS5A-ST, we relied solely on the label free statistical analysis, then increased the final combined score of interaction by a fixed factor in case PPI was also above the thresholds of the MiST and SAINT analyses.

We further compared our list of retrieved NS5A interacting partners with those previously reported in the selected list of publications and databases mentioned in §IV.E.α.(iii), amounting to 713 cellular proteins already known to interact to some extent with NS5A.

As shown in the Venn diagram in Figure 56, we uncovered 491 previously unreported cellular interacting partners of NS5A and 148 partners previously reported in the literature. Again, we observed a higher overlap of our list of hits with preys derived from high-throughput original studies (112 common hits) than with those found in databases or by literature mining (17 common hits). Once again, the overlap of the three groups is just as low as that observed for Jad NS5A, probably due to the same reasons previously elaborated in §IV.E.α.(iii).

We then examined the overlap between the NS5A interactome of the intergenotypic recombinant viruses with that of Jad NS5A (Figure 56). Although an exact comparison between the two sets of data cannot be made, since one analysis was performed at 96h p.i. and the other at 120h p.t.f., the identification of commonly retrieved hits can testify to the reliability of such PPIs. Overall, 270 cellular proteins of this chimera network have also been retrieved by Jad-ST-418 (36), Jad-ST-449 (30) or both (204). Besides, 218 Jad NS5A partners were also retrieved in this AP-MS with J6-NS5A of the same 2a subtype. Interestingly, out of the 96 common cellular interactors to all genotype NS5A-ST baits used in this analysis, 77 were also retrieved with parental Jad NS5A-ST, whether Jad-ST-418 (7), Jad-ST-449 (9) or both (61), such as the previously described HCV-essential BIN1, VAPA, VAPB, PI4KIIIα. Surprisingly, APOE was only recovered by J6 and 401 NS5A proteins, in addition to the parental.



*Figure 55: Illustrations of the differential label-free statistical analyses of NS5A interacting partners using NS5A of diverse genotypic origins as baits.* 

*(A-G) Hits retrieved uniquely in the NS5A-ST (preys of interest) or the NS5A-V5 samples are shown in the graphs on the right and left of the volcano plots, respectively, according to the logarithmic value in the base of 2 of their iBAQ values. Proteins retrieved in both NS5A-ST and -V5 samples are represented* *by dots in the Volcano plots according to the logarithmic value in the base of 2 of their respective intensities in the NS5A-ST replicates over the NS5A-V5replicates (X axis) and the negative logarithmic value in the base of 10 of their corresponding adjusted p-values (Y axis). Significant preys of interest thus appear in the colored upper right quarters of the Volcano plots. (H) A 7-branch Venn diagram illustrating the distribution among the 7 NS5A-ST species of the 639 interactors found more abundant in at least one the NS5A-ST versus the V5 control.*

### IV.E.γ.(ii) Enriched pathways of NS5A interactomes

String enrichment of the pan-genotypic (to the limits of this study) NS5A interactomes was performed as described for the Jad NS5A network and revealed a number of identical enriched pathways (Supplementary Table 8).

Interestingly, using the same 0.5 redundancy cutoff of String enriched terms, the top three enriched pathways based on each pathway FDR were GO Molecular Function "RNA binding", with an FDR of 1.42E-75 (203 proteins in our network), the reactome Pathway "Metabolism" (FDR 7.46E-35, 189 proteins in our network) and GO Biological Process "Metabolic Process" term, with an FDR of 1.48E-33 (431 proteins in our network). Included in the full list of enriched terms, we also found terms related to (i) intracellular transport, (ii) metabolism in general, including more specifically pathways involved in pentose, protein and lipid metabolism, as well as the coupled Krebs cycle, electron transport chain and oxidative phosphorylation (TCA-ETC-OXPHOS), (iii) host immune responses, and (iv) HCC development. Interestingly, in addition to shared enriched pathways with parental NS5A, we also uncovered NS5A partners that specifically led to the enrichment of gluconeogenesis and cholesterol metabolism pathways, as well as regulation of gene expression.

More in-depth analysis of the genotype 3-specific partners and the nongenotype 3-specific ones unveiled enrichment of the gluconeogenesis and cholesterol metabolism pathways only in the genotype 3 specific network, in line with metabolic disorders that are more prevalent for genotype 3 HCV strains. On the other hand, the GO Biological Process "gene expression" term only came up in the nongenotype 3 network (data not shown).



*Figure 56: The interactome of HCV NS5A from clinical strains of various genotypes and 2a-J6 identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells.* 

*The network was created in Cytoscape with the use of StringApp. Protein names are shown in the center of each node. Three-digit numbers within the big, coloured nodes correspond to the identification of NS5A-ST bait proteins. Shades of pink represent genotype 1 derived NS5A sequences, grey, genotype 2a, shades of blue, genotype 3a and purple, genotype 4, as also indicated by the external gradient coloured circle. Each cellular protein/NS5A PPI is shown by lines colour-coded according to baits, while cellular PPIs are depicted by yellow lines. Strain-specific hits are clustered around the corresponding bait in the absence of known physical PPIs within the network, or in front of the corresponding bait towards the center in the presence of such PPIs. The 96 PPIs common to all baits are shown in the center of the network, with each concentric circle moving outwards representing PPIs retrieved by 6, 5, 4, or 3 of the baits, respectively. Hits common among two baits are represented in clusters inbetween NS5A nodes. Node size of the partners corresponds to the final combined score of label-free statistical analysis, MiST and SAINT. Previously reported NS5A PPIs (see IV.E.α.(iii)) are* 

*circled in black and the overlap of our network with the published PPIs can be found in the Venn diagram at the bottom. Proteins previously found in the Jad NS5A network are coloured according to the squared legend.*



*Figure 57: Extensive pathway enrichment of the NS5A interactome identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells.* 

*The network was created as in Figure 56. String Enrichment highlighted pathways involved in metabolism (shades of green and yellow), transport (purple), immune response (pink), HCC development related pathways (dark blue), gluconeogenesis (turquoise) and regulation of gene expression (red).*

IV.E.γ.(iii) NS5A intra-viral interactome

We further performed an analysis of retrieved peptides corresponding to HCV proteins, in order to identify the intra-viral NS5A network across genotypes and in comparison to the

parental virus. These results are illustrated in Figure 58. Due to the compensatory mutations introduced into NS3 and NS4B of some of the NS5A intergenotypic recombinants, peptides identified by the MS/MS and derived from these two Jad proteins were not identical in all viruses. For this reason and also to compare with independently-ran parent data, no combined score of statistical analysis, MiST and SAINT was implemented. Hence, the lines illustrate the retrieval of peptides of each viral protein together with the indicated NS5A based solely on the label-free analysis. Interaction of NS3, NS4B and NS5B with all NS5A proteins we tested was evident from these data. Core and NS2 derived peptides were also identified in the majority of the NS5A-ST eluates, except for Jad and 385. For the latter, it might be attributed to the lower NS5A-ST level in infected cell lysates and AP-MS eluates. E2 was specifically retrieved with subtype 1b and 2a derived NS5A baits, for reasons that are unclear without further investigation.

Overall, the identification of both nonstructural and structural HCV proteins in complex with NS5A is indicative of the documented implication of the protein in both genome replication and particle assembly steps of the virus life cycle. Moreover, NS5A/NS3 and NS5A/NS4B PPIs found in this study strongly substantiate the selection of second-site substitutions in these nonstructural proteins to compensate for heterologous NS5A.



*Figure 58:The intraviral network of NS5A proteins of diverse genotypic origins identified in infected Huh-7.5 cells.* 

*NS5A proteins derived from genotype 1 clinical isolates are shown in shades of pink, proteins of prototypic genotype 2a strains are shown in black (parent, Jad) or grey (J6), NS5A derived from genotype 3a clinical isolates are shown in shades of blue and the genotype 4 derived NS5A is illustrated in purple. Color-coded lines connect the proteins retrieved with the respective NS5A-ST as bait.*

IV.E.γ.(iv) Analysis of retrieved NS5A phosphopeptides

Exhaustive research about the phosphorylation status of NS5A of diverse genotypic origins is missing. In light of data supporting differential effects of NS5A hyperphosphorylation in HCV life cycle according to the viral genotype, either promoting (genotype 2a) or inhibitory (genotype  $1)$ <sup>148,589,149,153</sup>, we next examined the NS5A peptides we retrieved for post-translational modifications, with a specific focus on phosphorylation. A summary of NS5A phosphopeptides and phosphosites identified can be found in Table 16. Six peptides were found to be phosphorylated at aligned sites within the different NS5A isoforms, spread throughout the NS5A DI, LCSI, DII, LCSII, and DIII, with more than one phosphosites identified within each peptide in some instances.

## *Table 16: Retrieved NS5A phosphopeptides and identification of specific phosphosites.*

*Peptides found at aligned sequences within the different NS5A isoforms are highlighted in the same colour within the first column. Phosphosites identified are shown in bigger case letters and those recovered with a localization probability above 0.75 are in bold.* 



Importantly, for all discovered phosphopeptides, the nonphosphorylated counterpart was also detected, indicating that there was no bias regarding phosphorylation status of NS5A during the affinity purification process. These data show for the first time dynamic phosphorylation of NS5A across genotypes.

Interestingly, we identified phosphorylation of two aa residue within DIII, which to our knowledge has not previously been reported. We found them either phosphorylated for the majority of NS5A proteins studied, or naturally occupied by a phospho-mimetic aa residue (D), suggesting that phosphorylation of this particular residue might be of great importance for the virus life cycle. More specifically, aa at position 364 of the alignment shown in Figure 31 (page - 88 -) was found phosphorylated in the form of a serine residue for Jad, J6 and 4-431 NS5A and in the form of threonine for 1a-411 NS5A, while it is an aspartic acid residue in all of the genotype 3a strains we studied. Similarly, aa 366 in the alignment is a serine in all sequences, except for the phospho-mimetic aspartic acid in J6, and was found phosphorylated in all genotype 1, 3 and 4 strains, except for 385.

For J6 NS5A, we also did identify the p-T348 (Val or Ile in the other strains, position 352 in the alignment) and p-T356 (position 360), as we did for Jad, with the latter being reportedly phosphorylated by PKA and essential for genome replication<sup>588</sup>. Surprisingly, although aa 174 is conserved across strains to receive phosphorylation (S or T), we did not recover this modification in any of these NS5A isoforms, unlike Jad NS5A. Moreover, S146 that was found phosphorylated in Jad NS5A and is reported in the literature to be phosphorylated in genotype 2a strains, was not recovered for J6, similarly to T164, nor for 1a-411, while it is an alanine residue in the rest of the NS5A sequences we examined.

Upon further investigation of the peptide mainly associated with NS5A hyperphosphorylation (Table 17), we detected differential phosphorylation of specific aa residues in the different isoforms of NS5A. More specifically, although S222 was found phosphorylated by all studied isoforms, the remaining serine residues of the peptide were found modified only in NS5A proteins of some genotypes or strains. For example, S228 and S229 modification was only evident in the genotype 1b derived NS5A, S232 only in Jad NS5A, S225 and S230 in all but genotype 3a NS5A proteins, with the exception of S225 in J6- and 401- NS5A, while S235 was found modified only in genotype 1b, 2a and 4 NS5A proteins and not in 1a and 3a ones. The unique extent of hyperphosphorylation of this peptide for 434-NS5A-ST, similar to Jad NS5A, is likely to account for the detection of a clearly separated hyperphosphorylated NS5A species by western blot for this strain.

### *Table 17: Phosphorylated residues identified by mass spectrometry within the different isoforms of the NS5A peptide associated with the p58 form of the protein.*

*The intensities of each phosphosite identified are coloured from 0 (green) to high intensity (red) with yellow for intermediate values. The total intensities of NS5A (phosphorylated and nonphosphorylated NS5A counterpart) are coloured from the lowest to greatest values in a scale from blue to red.*



## **IV.F Differential modulation of host pathways by Core sequences from various genotypes**

With a high percentage of Core interacting partners being involved in the regulation of gene expression, we next undertook to investigate the effect of infection of Huh-7.5 cells with Core intergenotypic recombinant viruses expressing Core proteins derived from clinical isolates of genotypes 1, 3, or 4. Our aim was to further investigate potential differential regulations of gene expression induced by genotype 3 Core with respect to steatosis development. The examination of the abundance of cellular mRNAs was carried out using RNA extracts collected at 120h p.i., a late time point at which an infection rate close to 100%

was observed for all viruses (Simon et al., unpublished data, see Supplementary Figure 2). Furthermore, it has been shown that from 96-120h p.i., the hepatocyte transcriptional deregulation profile is established and stable in partially differentiated Huh-7.5 cells infected with the subtype 2a Jc1 recombinant strain $\frac{530}{2}$ .

Four biological replicates of noninfected cultures or cultures infected with our panel of intergenotypic viruses or with the parental Jad strain were prepared. These experiments and preliminary analyses to address each of the questions related to independent gene expression were performed by Emeline Simon (former PhD student in our laboratory). The groups of viruses used and their respective Core genotypic origins are summarized in Table 18.

*Table 18: Grouped list of Core intergenotypic recombinant viruses used for the study of genotype-specific, HCV-induced transcriptomic alterations with respect to steatosis development.* 

*\*Parental virus, the data of which were not used in the analyses presented here.* 



The preliminary analysis of the data obtained towards the identification of enriched Coreregulated pathways was performed in collaboration with Dr Emeline Perthame from the Biostatistics Hub of Institut Pasteur and is presented in the following pages.

#### **IV.F.(α) Correction of batch effect introduced by RNA extraction**

Our data first underwent a correction of the batch effect which was introduced by performing the extraction of total RNAs from infected cells during different rounds, due to technical restrictions. The principal component analysis (PCA) obtained is presented in Figure 59. In panel A, the batch effect was evident since replicate samples unexpectedly segregated in two, well defined groups, a feature that was clearly visible for the control Mock infected and Jad infected samples. Hence, the batch effect was attributed to dimension 1 (Dim1), or principal component 1 (PC1), which accounts for over 83% of the variation observed in the gene expression levels in our data set. Dim2, or PC2 is the second level of variation, introduced by the infection with the different viral strains. Before batch correction it is evident that our observations are highly affected by the batch effect and the virus strain-induced variance is below 7%. In Figure 59B, following the batch correction of the whole dataset, as described in Materials & Methods, the PCA showed that replicate samples clustered closer together, as expected. The groups of Mock control and parent Jad segregated with clearly marked higher variance compared to the rest of the dataset, while the variance retrieved among the RNA reads in cells infected with the different Core intergenotypic recombinant viruses was surprisingly low, though in probable link with relatively conserved Core sequences. This shows that the batch effect was successfully masked and replaced by the viral strain as the first source of variation, then accounting for 56% of the observed differences. In this instance, Dim2 corresponds to the biological variability introduced by the replicate experiments, e.g. cell



passage.

In order to focus on expectedly subtle transcriptional differences induced by these various Core sequences, in my PhD manuscript, transcriptomic analyses were performed exclusively with the intra- /inter-genotypic recombinant viruses compared to noninfected cells.

*Figure 59: Principal component analysis (PCA) of the replicate samples of Core intergenotypic recombinants, the parental virus and mock infected control cells that underwent RNA-sequencing before (A) and after batch effect correction (B).* 

*PCA dimensions 1 (Dim1) and 2 (Dim2) are illustrated with the respective PCA values in parentheses.* 

### **IV.F.(β) HCV induced deregulations irrespective of Core genotype**

Comparative analysis of the genes significantly deregulated by infection compared to noninfected cells revealed 864 genes commonly deregulated by all Core recombinant viruses (Figure 60). Gene set enrichment analysis of these commonly deregulated genes using the Hallmark, KEGG, reactome and WikiPathways gene set databases highlighted interesting gene sets deregulated by all Core recombinants.



*Figure 60: Comparative analysis of significantly deregulated hepatocyte genes identified by sequencing of total intracellular RNAs extracted from cells infected with each Core intergenotypic recombinant virus or noninfected (Mock) cells collected at 120h p.i.* 

*In this up-set graph, black dots refer to the comparisons indicated on the left that apply to each bar.*  Values above bars indicate the number of significantly commonly deregulated mRNAs by the *corresponding group of viruses.*

More specifically, gene sets involved in intracellular transport, metabolism, and HCC related pathways (Figure 61) were found to be deregulated by all Core intergenotypic recombinants examined, as they were also found to be enriched in the NS5A PPI networks. Specific gene sets such as reactome glycolysis, amino acid transport across the plasma membrane, regulation of Insulin Like Growth Factor IGF transport and uptake by Insulin Like Growth Factor Binding Proteins IGFBPS, and Hallmark mtorc1 signaling were reproducibly enriched in a similar set of experiments aiming at identifying the Core induced transcriptional alterations in link with genotypes 1 and 4, further validating our data (Tabbal et al., data not shown). Gene sets related to glycolysis and gluconeogenesis were also found enriched in this list of genes commonly deregulated by all strains compared to mock infected cells.

We further identified gene sets, such as hypoxia and epithelial mesenchymal transition (EMT) significantly deregulated across HCV Core recombinant strains. This makes sense, as hypoxic conditions are known to enhance HCV replication $\frac{593}{93}$ , while the virus is also known to stabilize the hypoxia-inducible factor  $1\alpha$  (HIF-1 $\alpha$ ) through oxidative stress<sup>594</sup>. Similarly, EMT has been found to be induced by HCV in primary hepatocytes<sup>595</sup> and is known to be involved in the processes of fibrosis and HCC development.

The expression levels of a list of selected genes were examined based on the fact that their products or their expression levels have been reproducibly found associated with HCV-induced liver damage in cell culture or in the livers of infected patients $596-598,530$ , together with enzymes

known to be essential in the processes of  $\beta$ -oxidation and gluconeogenesis<sup>599</sup>, As shown in Figure 62, the expression of the majority of these selected genes was deregulated by infection to various extents. However, acetyl-CoA carboxylase alpha (ACACA), acyl-CoA synthetase long chain family member 3 and member 5 (ACSL3, ACSL5), FASN, forkhead box O1 (FOXO1), glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl-CoA reductase (HMGCR), PPARγ, scavenger receptor class B member 1 (SCARB1), sterol regulatory element binding transcription factor 2 (SREBF2), signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) and the hydroxyacyl-CoA dehydrogenases (HADH, HADHA and HADHB) were surprisingly not significantly regulated.

To the contrary, almost all of the remaining genes were deregulated by all Core proteins derived from the clinical strains to seemingly equal degrees. Notably, the very low-density lipoprotein receptor (VLDLR), the secretion pathway of which is used by HCV for egress was found significantly upregulated by all strains. The expression levels of PPARα αnd PPARγ were found unchanged, yet the PPARγ coactivator 1 alpha (PPARGC1A) gene transcription was found significantly elevated by infection. In accordance with the published literature, the pyruvate carboxylase  $(PC)^{597}$  and the microsomal triglyceride transfer protein  $(MTTP)^{600}$  were found downregulated by HCV, while the transcription of gene coding for alanine aminotransferase 2 (GPT2 - ALT) was found significantly elevated. Surprisingly, aspartate aminotransferase 1 and 2 (GOT1, GOT2 - AST) genes were significantly downregulated, and the carnitine palmitoyltransferase 1A (CPT1A) expression was more than doubled in infected versus non infected cells, in contrast to what has previously been reported in HCV infected patients<sup>601,602</sup>.







*Figure 62: Expression levels of selected genes with respect to Mock infected cells, based on their roles in steatosis development, gluconeogenesis, β-oxidation and oxidative phosphorylation. Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) are represented with heatmaps based on genes expression Table standardized with variance stabilizing transformation or batch correction expression Table and are listed by alphabetical order. Nonsignificant values (p-adjusted > 5%) are shown in black.*

## **IV.F.(γ) Differential, genotype-specific Core-induced deregulations**

Volcano plots of the genes deregulated between viral genotypes or groups of genotypes are shown in Figure 63A-E.



*Figure 63: Volcano plots representing genes (dots) deregulated by each viral genotype or group of genotypes versus mock infected cells (A-E) or differentially deregulated genes between genotype 3 (G3) and nongenotype 3 (G124\_noJad) strains (F-H).*

*In A-E, red dots represent genes above the log2FC=1 or below log2FC=-1thresholds. In G-H, green dots represent genes significantly deregulated between each of the compared groups and the mock condition, blue dots represent differentially expressed genes among the two compared conditions but not with respect to the control condition, while this comparison is taken into account in the red dots. Grey dots represent non significantly differentially expressed genes (NS). Some gene codes are assigned to corresponding dots.*

To study the differential, genotype-specific Core-induced pathway deregulation, significance was obtained provided that we considered as differentially deregulated the genes and gene sets that were enriched not only in the comparisons among two genotypes or groups of genotypes (e.g. genotype 3 versus nongenotype 3), but also at least in one of the compared conditions versus the control, Mock infected cells. This strategy was undertaken in order to

identify even the slightest differentially deregulated genes or enriched gene sets without being poisoned by artifacts, that would come up as differentially deregulated parameters among two tested conditions, while they are actually not deregulated with respect to noninfected cells. One such example is highlighted when comparing SNAP25 in panels F and H of Figure 63. Interestingly, the more intuitively, biologically solid way to approach the differential deregulations induced by Core sequences of genotype 3 versus nongenotype 3 Core (Figure 63G) was to compare independently each set of strains of each genotype with the Mock, then to compare all of them together. The more sound choice from a statistician's perspective (Figure 63H) was to compare each group of genotypes with the Mock condition, then to compare groups of genotypes between them. No difference could be observed between the two retrieved volcano plots, allowing us to use the latter method in our analysis.

Gene set enrichment analysis performed on the batch-corrected data aimed at identifying Core genotype-specific deregulated pathways using the MSigDB Hallmark, KEGG, reactome, and WikiPathways gene sets. This analysis revealed enriched pathways commonly deregulated by all studied Core genotypes, highlighting global HCV-driven deregulations, as well as pathways differentially regulated among Jad recombinants expressing Core proteins derived from genotype 3a clinical strains in comparison to those expressing non-genotype 3a Core. The totality of enriched networks for Hallmark, KEGG, and WikiPathways is represented in Figure 65, while due to the length of the list, only selected reactome enriched gene sets are illustrated. The full list can be found in Supplementary Figure 3.

Overall, we observed a downregulation in the majority of Huh-7.5 pathways by infection with any recombinant virus, with a few exceptions. Gene sets previously identified to be enriched by all studied strains were also found to be commonly deregulated by all genotypes, with the expression of the respective genes being lower in infected than in noninfected cells. These include a wide range of metabolism related pathways, namely those involved in glucoserelated energy metabolism (*Hallmark* glycolysis / *KEGG* glycolysis gluconeogenesis / *reactome* gluconeogenesis, glucose metabolism, glycolysis, glyoxylate metabolism and glycine degradation, pyruvate metabolism and citric acid TCA cycle, pyruvate metabolism / *WikiPathways* aerobic glycolysis, glycolysis and gluconeogenesis, glycolysis in senescence, cori cycle, glycogen synthesis and degradation), lipid metabolism (*Hallmark* peroxisome, bile acid metabolism, fatty acid metabolism / *reactome* β-oxidation of octanoyl CoA to hexanoyl CoA, β-oxidation of hexanoyl CoA to butanoyl CoA), protein metabolism (*KEGG* arginine and proline metabolism, alanine, aspartate and glutamate metabolism, cysteine and methionine metabolism / *reactome* branched chain amino acid catabolism, glutamate and glutamine metabolism / *WikiPathways* urea cycle and metabolism of amino groups, urea cycle and associated pathways, amino acid metabolism, biomarkers for urea cycle disorders), and pentose metabolism (*KEGG* pentose phosphate pathway, pyrimidine metabolism, purine metabolism, fructose and mannose metabolism, galactose metabolism, starch and sucrose metabolism / *WikiPathways* purine metabolism and related disorders).

On the other hand, the upregulated pathways are those involved in immune responses, e.g. *Hallmark* interferon alpha response / *reactome* interleukin 6 signaling / *WikiPathways* cytokines and inflammatory response, or in perturbation of cell cycle in link with HCC, such as *Hallmark* TNF-α signaling via NF-κB, TGF-β signaling / *reactome* MAPK1 Erk2 activation.

Interestingly, these pathways were found commonly down- or up-regulated by all strains, regardless of the Core genotype.

In fact, the direction of deregulation was found common among all genotype chimeras for all deregulated pathways, meaning that differential effects of Core from different genotypes would have to be investigated either in the absence/presence of regulation of certain pathways, or at the level of induced deregulation. Indeed, the genes set enrichment analysis of the genes found significantly deregulated by infection with HCV expressing Core of genotype 3 versus Core of nongenotype 3 origin (Figure 63H) highlighted a number of differentially deregulated pathways (Figure 65).



*Figure 64: Pipeline to interpret the various scenarios of differential pathway enrichment. An illustration of a scale used across our analyses is at the bottom of the figure without values. For a comparison of group A vs group B, a negative enrichment score, represented in blue suggests that the given gene set has lower expression in group A rather in group B. Inversely, for positive enrichment score (in red) and higher expression. An illustration of these scenarios is shown immediately at the right of the coloured boxes. The combined, final interpretation of enrichment, taking into account the enrichment score of each group with respect to Mock and the comparison between them is shown at the right of the brackets, accompanied by the respective conclusion.*

The direction of deregulation between the genotype 3 versus the nongenotype 3 group is shown in the last column of each enriched gene set database (Figure 65). However, this is not informative to also conclude on the direction of deregulation with respect to Mock infected cells, that needs to be taken into consideration, as elaborated in Figure 64. For example, a negative enrichment score between the genotype 3 versus the nongenotype 3 groups could be any of the scenarios A, D, E or H of Figure 64, coming up with a different conclusion in each case.

Using this pipeline to analyse our data, we mainly came across a positive enrichment score of the G3 Vs G124 comparison (Figure 65), which, taken together with the negative enrichment score compared to Mock in the majority of the cases, indicated that in most instances Core of the non-3 genotypes induce a stronger gene downregulation than Core of genotype 3 (case C in Figure 64). This is particularly true for many HCC-related pathways found differentially enriched, such as the *Hallmark* c-Myc targets V1 and the *reactome* regulation of PTEN stability and activity gene set, with tumor suppressor Phosphatase and tensin homolog deleted on chromosome ten (PTEN) reduced expression associated with HCC in human livers (for review see Peyrou et al. $\frac{603}{2}$ ). Surprisingly, some sets of genes involved in metabolic pathways were also found more downregulated by the expression of nongenotype 3 Core over genotype 3 Core, including metabolism of amino acids, such as the highly recurrent oxidative phosphorylation pathway.



Electron Transport Chain Oxphos System In Mitochondria (76/123) Mitochondrial Complex I Assembly Model Oxphos System (46/71) Oxidative Phosphorylation (44/77) Proteasome Degradation (55/121) Aerobic Glycolysis (9/14) Dna Mismatch Repair (23/23) Dna Replication (40/42) Mrna Processing (120/163) Photodynamic Therapyinduced Unfolded Protein Response (26/29) Retinoblastoma Gene In Cancer (85/89) Urea Cycle And Metabolism Of Amino Groups (18/22) Cell Cycle (115/127) Cori Cycle (12/20)<br>Covid19 Thrombosis And Anticoagulation (6/7)<br>Gi To S Cell Cycle Control (60/71)<br>Metabolic Reprogramming In Colon Cancer (39/47)<br>Nucleotide Excision Repair In Xeroderma Pigmentosum (66/89)<br>Parkinubiquitin Urea Cycle And Associated Pathways (18/24) Amino Acid Metabolism (77/102) Complement And Coagulation Cascades (44/81) Cytokines And Inflammatory Response (8/45) Glycolysis And Gluconeogenesis (32/49) Glycolysis In Senescence (9/12) Hypertrophy Model (16/21)<br>Mammary Gland Development Pathway Puberty Stage 2 Of 4 (11/13)<br>Mitochondrial Complex Iii Assembly (14/16)<br>Purine Metabolism And Related Disorders (19/23) Thymic Stromal Lymphopoietin Tslp Signaling Pathway (39/47) Valproic Acid Pathway (11/14) Biomarkers For Urea Cycle Disorders (10/12) Blood Clotting Cascade (18/24) Gaba Metabolism Aka Ghb (4/6) Glycogen Synthesis And Degradation (34/42) Mrna Protein And Metabolite Inducation Pathway By Cyclosporin A (7/7) −5 5 WikiPathways Tryptophan Metabolism (31/41)<br>Rna Degradation (55/80)<br>Histidine Metabolism (23/30) Huntingtons Disease (147/204) Oxidative Phosphorylation (88/158) Parkinsons Disease (92/148) Proteasome (39/65) Spliceosome (119/170) Beta Alanine Metabolism (19/22) Valine Leucine And Isoleucine Degradation (42/46) Arginine And Proline Metabolism (40/56) Cell Cycle (119/130) Oocyte Meiosis (86/119) Pyrimidine Metabolism (84/109) Systemic Lupus Erythernatosus (63/264)<br>Epithelial Cell Signaling In Helicobacter Pylori Infection (53/79)<br>Glycolysis Gluconeogenesis (40/67)<br>Pentose Phosphate Pathway (18/28)<br>Prorine Metabolism (125/175)<br>Purine Metabolism Alanine Aspartate And Glutamate Metabolism (25/33) Complement And Coagulation Cascades (51/94) Cysteine And Methionine Metabolism (28/36) Fructose And Mannose Metabolism (26/35) Galactose Metabolism (19/29) Lysosome (105/139) Other Glycan Degradation (14/25) Peroxisome (69/86) Starch And Sucrose Metabolism (30/59)<br>Fatty Acid Metabolism (35/42)<br>Limonene And Pinene Degradation (9/10) −5  $\Omega$ 5 KEGG Mismatch Repair (22/24) Tryptophan Metabolism (31/41)

*Figure 65: Pathways and gene sets deregulated between groups of genotype 3 Vs vs nongenotype 3 Core intergenotypic chimeras were represented by heatmaps based on the CAMERA analysis output (limma R package).*

*Enrichment score computed by CAMERA was used as a proxy of the regulation direction of significant genes sets (p-adjusted < 5%) and the scale for each gene set database illustrated are added on the right. Positive enrichment score (in red) suggests higher expression of the respective gene set in group A rather in group B for each A Vs B comparison. Similarly for negative enrichment score (in blue) and lower expression. All enriched gene sets of MSigDB Hallmark (A), KEGG (B) and WikiPathways (D) are represented, while only selected enriched reactome gene sets are shown (C). Comparisons among HCV genotypes (G) and Mock infected cells are shown in the first five columns, while genotype 3 (G3) versus nongenotype 3 (G124\_no Jad, excluding the parent Jad) comparisons are shown in the last column.*

However, we also did retrieve pathways that were either exclusively deregulated by or more deregulated in the presence of Core from genotype 3. Interestingly, genes involved in the hydrolysis of DAG and TAG fatty acids by patatin-like phospholipase domain-containing proteins 2 and 3, PNPLA2 and PNPLA3 (*reactome* acyl chain remodelling of DAG and TAG) were found more downregulated by genotype 3 Core, suggesting a G3 Core-driven accumulation of DAG and TAG in hepatoma cells. Excess lipid storage in hepatocytes in the form of LDs is the hallmark of hepatic steatosis. In accordance with toxic lipid accumulation in the form of DAG and TAG, the genes involved in UPR were also found more upregulated in genotype 3 Core expressing infected cells. The role of UPR in lipid homeostasis and in relation to hepatic steatosis is very eloquently described in a review by Song et al<sup>604</sup>. Lastly, the significant, differential upregulation of the *reactome* "metallothioneins bind metals" and "response to metal ion" gene sets, in combination with the differential downregulation of the "zinc influx into cells by the slc39 gene family" suggests an increased oxidative stress when Core of genotype 3 is expressed.

# **Part 2: Surrogate animal model for the study of hepacivirus-driven metabolic disorders**



### *Figure 66: Summary of experimental procedures towards setting up RHV-rn1 Sprague Dawley rat infection model.*

*Procedure 1 & 2: Intrahepatic inoculation of the indicated quantities and purification status of RHVrn1 genome-length RNA in Sprague Dawley rats. Each group consisted of 3-4 rats. By the end of this procedure, rat sera titrating around similar GEQ/mL were pooled together, generating virus stocks Pools 1-3. Procedure 3: Intravenous inoculation of the indicated GEQ quantities of Pool1 stock serum in three groups of rats. Each group consisted of 3 rats. Procedure 4: Intravenous inoculation of the indicated GEQ quantities of Pool1 stock serum in two groups of rats or PBS. Each group consisted of 6 rats. One of the two infected groups received HCV-specific antiviral treatment (Maviret) for six weeks. PTT: Pyruvate Tolerance Test; GEQ: genome equivalent; DAA: direct antiviral agent.*

In order to tackle the mechanisms of hepacivirus-driven metabolic disorders and putative contribution of co-morbidity factors like western diet, and challenge our finding in HCVinfected cell culture systems, an *in vivo* immunocompetent model of infection was required. Our aim was to set up the surrogate RHV-rn1-based rat model initially described in the US and bring proof of concept that it was amenable to such hepacivirus-linked pathobiology studies. This led us to the experimental work summarized in Figure 66.

## **IV.G Setting up of RHV-rn1 Sprague Dawley rat infection model**

## **IV.G.(α) Production and characterization of RHV-rn1 viral stocks**

Towards production of viral stocks, starting from a fully sequenced RHV-rn1 cDNA, synthetic, genome-length RNAs were produced and intrahepatically inoculated in Sprague Dawley rats, as described in §0 and shown in Figure 66, Procedure 1. The quantity of inoculated RNA and/or the purification status of the inoculum may affect the efficacy of the procedure (A. Martin, personal communication). Therefore, the first step was to establish the best condition by inoculating two different quantities (10μg or 50μg) of purified or nonpurified genome-length *in vitro* transcribed RHV-rn1 RNA in four groups of three rats. One rat that received 10μg of nonpurified RNA passed away the day following the procedure. Viral titers in rat sera were monitored at day 12 post-inoculation by RT-(q)PCR, as described in  $\SIII.L.(\gamma)$ . No consistent effect of RNA quantity or purity was observed on the titers. Hence, sera from three rats with similar titers were pooled together, generating the first two viral stocks, as shown in Table 19.

#### *Table 19: Sprague Dawley rat intrahepatic inoculations with genome length RHV-rn1 RNA towards viral stock production.*



*10 or 50μg of in vitro transcribed, purified (P) or nonpurified (NP) RNA were inoculated in the respective groups of rats (1-3). Rat 10NP1 did not survive until day 12. GEQ: genome equivalent.*

Since the viral titers in rats inoculated with 50μg purified RNA were the most consistent, this condition (same batch of RNA transcripts as in Procedure 1) was chosen for the generation of viral pool 3 (Figure 66, Procedure 2). All three pools were sequenced by next generation sequencing, as described in  $\SIII.L.(\delta)$ , and re-titrated by RT-(q)PCR. Final viral titers of the three stocks and identified quasi-species identified by NGS are summarized in Table 20. NGS coverage was satisfactory with means of  $\sim$ 360, 290, 55 reads per nt position for pool stocks 1, 2, 3, respectively. One synonymous quasi-species, C384T (Gly>Gly) in Core coding sequence was identified in all three stocks with varying frequency (18-43%), possibly accounting for a spurious error of the T7 RNA polymerase upon synthetic RNA production. An additional synonymous quasi-species (T8033C, Ile>Ile) was identified in NS5B coding region of pool 3 with low frequency (6.9%), while in pool 2 a low frequency (7.7%) of a non-synonymous quasi-species (T1936C) leading to Val/Ala change was found withing E2 coding sequence. Altogether, no consistent quasi-species or mutation emerged, demonstrating that the RHV genomic sequence of the initial clonal inoculum was stable *in vivo* at this early time postinfection. Thanks to its highest viral titer and lack of significant mutations, pool 1 was used in further experiments.

	<b>RHV-rn1</b> stock		<b>Next Generation Sequencing data</b>						
	Titer (GEQ/mL)	Total Volume (mL)	Genome Position	Nucleotide quasi- species	Ouasi- species Frequency	Protein region targeted	Encoded amino acid change	Note	
pool 1	5.2 x $10^8$	6,3	384	C > T	18.4%	Core		Silent	
			384	C > T	23.7%	Core		Silent	
pool 2	$1.4 \times 10^8$	6,4	1936	T > C	$7.7\%$	E2	Val > Ala	Low frequency	
pool 3	$5.0 \times 10^{7}$	9,3	384	C > T	43.3%	Core		Silent	
			8033	T > C	$6.9\%$	NS5B		Silent	

*Table 20: RHV-rn1 stock characteristics. GEQ: genome equivalent.*

Next, we examined conditions of intravenous RHV-rn1 inoculation for successful infection of rats (Figure 66, Procedure 3). To this end, three groups of three rats were infected by the intravenous route with  $3x10^6$ ,  $3x10^5$ , or  $3x10^4$  GEQ of pool 1 RHV-rn1 stock. Viral titers were measured in rat sera at 4, 7 and 11days p.i. by RT-(q)PCR (Table 21). One rat receiving  $3x10^5$  RHV-rn1 GEQ and one rat receiving  $3x10^4$  RHV-rn1 GEQ did not survive throughout this follow-up period, limiting the statistical significance of the group size numbers for the two lower doses inoculated.

No consistent virus dose-specific effect was observed in this experiment. The lowesttitrated inoculum led to viremia as high as in the group of rats which received the highest dose, while viral loads varied by up to 7-fold among animals inoculated with the same dose. We decided to use the  $3x10^6$  GEQ dose in the subsequent experiment.

		Serum viral titer (GEQ/mL) at day p.i.				
Virus dose	Rats			11		
	1	$1,3E+07$	3,8E+07	1,6E+08		
$3x106$ GEQ	$\mathfrak z$	7,7E+06	$4,3E+07$	$1,3E+08$		
	3	$9,7E+06$	$3,4E+07$	7,9E+07		
$3x105$ GEQ	4	7,1E+07	$5,8E+07$	1,4E+08		
	5	5E+06	$1,1E+07$	$2,1E+07$		
$3x104$ GEQ	6	$2,5E+08$	1,8E+08	$3,6E+08$		
		$2,4E+07$	4,6E+07	1,5E+08		

*Table 21: Monitoring of viremia in rats intravenously inoculated with various doses of RHV-rn1. GEQ: genome equivalent.*

## **IV.G.(β) RHV-rn1 induces chronic infection.**

In order to corroborate in our system the findings of chronic RHV-rn1 infection rate described in Trivedi et al.<sup>468</sup>, six Sprague Dawley rats were infected by intravenous inoculation of 3x10<sup>6</sup> RHV-rn1 GEQ from pool 1, while six rats were "mock" infected by intravenous inoculation of PBS (Figure 66, Procedure 4). Rats were bled weekly or bi-weekly and viral titers were monitored for a course of 227 days. As shown in Figure 67 all six rats of the infected group were successfully infected at 7 d p.i. and serum measurements of all noninfected rats were below the limit of detection for the duration of the experiment. For all animals, viral titers peaked at  $10^8$ -10<sup>9</sup> GEQ/mL from the first time p.i. measured at 4d p.i., then started to progressively slowly decreased. Five out of the six rats (~85%) remained chronically infected throughout the observation period with titers ranging from  $\sim$ 5x10<sup>6</sup> to 10<sup>8</sup> GEQ/mL. The sixth rat exhibited suppression of the viremia starting from day 56 and remained under or close to the detection limit from this time-point on until the end of this study. Occasional virus clearance was also reported by Trivedi et al.<sup>468</sup> in HTZ rats infected with RHV-rn1, but had not been described in Sprague Dawley rats yet. High chronic infection rate thus appears to be a common attribute of RHV infection in rats and HCV infection in humans, with similar percentage of occurrence  $287,288$ . RHV-rn-1 loads were between  $4x10^6$  and  $4x10^7$  GEQ/mL at the time of sacrifice.



*Figure 67: RHV-rn1 RNA titers measured in the serum of infected and noninfected Sprague Dawley rats.* 

*Six rats were infected with 3x10<sup>6</sup>genome equivalents (GEQ) pool 1 RHV-rn1, shown in shades of purple. In noninfected rats (shades of blue), PBS was intravenously inoculated. Serum was collected at the indicated time-points and viral RNAs were extracted and quantified by RT-(q)PCR. Titers are expressed in GEQ/mL serum.* 

Infection had no effect on rat weight, as indicated in graph A of Figure 69. Although not

significant, infection tended to lead to an increase of rat liver weight, as measured at the time of sacrifice and to liver over body weight, as shown in graphs C and D of Figure 69, respectively. A macroscopic examination showed that the livers of infected rats were pale in

*Figure 68: Representative photos of (A) noninfected or (B) RHV-rn1 infected Sprague Dawley rat livers.*




colour and enlarged in size, reflecting potential lipid accumulation and hepatomegaly (Figure 68).



*Figure 69: Effect of RHV-rn1 infection on rat body and liver weights. Weight (grams) gained by rats over the course of the experiment (A). Liver weight (B) and liver to body weight ratio (C), as measured at the time of euthanasia at day 227 post-infection. Infected rat values are shown in purple, while noninfected condition is depicted in light blue.*

### **IV.G.(γ) HCV Maviret therapy is ineffective when administered orally to RHV-rn1 infected Sprague Dawley rats.**

In an effort to clear RHV-rn1 infection and evaluate the evolution of various parameters following virus clearance, we also examined whether the readily available, HCV-specific therapeutic regimen *Maviret* could be effective against RHV-rn1. As mentioned in §I.B.ζ.(ii), *Maviret* is the combination of two DAAs, one against HCV NS3 protease, glecaprevir, and one targeting NS5A, pibrentasvir. Dr Stéphane Bressanelli (I2BC Paris Saclay, Paris, France) recently generated a three-dimensional atomic model of RHV-rn1 NS3 protease domain using AlphaFold $605$ . These studies revealed that the overall structure was relatively conserved compared to the crystallographic three-dimensional structure of HCV cognate protease. However, marked divergence in the vicinity of the active site of RHV and HCV NS3 proteases suggested that the former may be a poor target for at least some HCV-optimized protease inhibitors like glecaprevir (Tubiana & Bressanelli, data not shown). This is in agreement with the findings of Wolfisberg et al.  $\frac{546}{9}$ , who reported lack of inhibition of RHV subgenomic RNA replication in rat or mouse hepatoma cells treated with glecaprevir. For the non-enzymatic NS5A with the largely unstructured domains II and III, refined predictive structural models would be required, moreover, the exact mechanism of action of pibrentasvir, hence docking of the compound on HCV NS5A has not been solved.

*Maviret* was administered in another group of six infected rats at 56d (8 weeks) p.i. and for the course of 6 weeks, as described in §III.M. The viremia pattern in this group of rats was very similar to what was observed in the other group of infected rats described above during the first 4 weeks p.i. (Figure 70).Animals were assigned to the treated and untreated groups based on serum viral titers at 35d p.i., which were in the same range between  $10^7$  and  $10^8$ GEQ/mL in all animals except for rat 11, in which RHV load had started to decrease and which was therefore attributed to the untreated group. Of note, rats 1, 2 and 12, assigned to the treated group, actually turned out to have slightly decreased RHV loads at the time of treatment initiation ( $\leq 10^7$  GEQ/mL). As shown in Figure 70, viral titers remained stable during the treatment window for both treated and nontreated rats, ranging between approximately  $10<sup>7</sup>$  to  $10^8$  GEQ/mL, except for the 3 rats, which had already a declining viremia before the treatment onset and showed stable lower titers  $(\sim 1-5x10^6$  GEQ/mL) during the treatment period. RHV

titers appeared more variable in the treated group when compared to the nontreated rats, however no statistically significant variation was observed between the two groups, neither during the administration period, nor in the following weeks.This indicates that either the HCV-specific DAAs of this regimen cannot interfere with the function of cognate RHV proteins, or the DAA mode of administration, dose, and/or bioavailability were not appropriate in rats.



*Figure 70: Effect of Maviret treatment on the RHV-rn1 RNA titers measured in the serum of infected treated, infected untreated and noninfected Sprague Dawley rats.* 

*Twelve rats were infected with 3x10<sup>6</sup>GEQ of RHV pool 1 and six rats were inoculated with PBS. Serum was collected at the indicated time-points and RHV loads were quantified by RT-(q)PCR and expressed in genome equivalents per serum mL (GEQ/mL). Six infected rats (illustrated in shades of orange) received Maviret by gavage during a period of six weeks, as depicted by an orange area. Six untreated infected rats are shown in shades of purple, while the six noninfected rats are represented by blue dots.* 

# **IV.H Preliminary results support that RHV-rn1 induces similar liver disorders in Sprague Dawley rats as HCV in humans.**

### **IV.H.(α) Steatosis**

The livers of 6 noninfected rats and 5 chronically infected rats were examined at 33 weeks p.i., i.e. more than 8 months after virus infection. Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining of livers sections revealed higher steatosis grade and higher inflammation in infected animals, yet without reaching statistical significance with these small cohorts and type of staining (Figure 71A-B). Importantly, neutral lipid quantification following Oil Red O (ORO) staining of liver sections showed significant accumulation of LDs in infected livers as compared to noninfected livers (Figure 71C-D).



*Figure 71: Histopathological analysis of liver sections.* 

*(A, B) Scoring of inflammation and steatosis in RHV infected liver sections stained with H&E. Examples of periportal inflammatory foci (open arrowhead) and steatosis (filled arrowheads) are shown in (A). Steatosis and inflammation were evaluated in 4 liver sections per animal with steatosis score defined as: 0, <5% of hepatocytes in the field; 1, 5-33%; 2, 33-66% and 3, >66%, and inflammation score, as: 0, no inflammation in the field; 1, <2 inflammation foci per field; 2, 2-4 inflammation foci, 3, >4 inflammation foci. Results are plotted in (B) for the n=5 infected animals and n=6 noninfected rats. Field of view: 200X. (C, D) Scoring of lipid droplet accumulation in RHV infected livers. Representative images show ORO staining of LDs in red (C). The extent of ORO-stained areas evaluated from 4-5 liver sections per animal has been quantified (D).* 

### **IV.H.(β) Alterations in glucose metabolism**

To test estimate gluconeogenesis in the livers of infected and noninfected rats, we performed a pyruvate tolerance test (PTT) at 8 months p.i. (222d p.i.). PTT indirectly measures gluconeogenesis by assessing the levels of glucose following administration of pyruvate and its conversion to glucose. As shown in Figure 72A, we found that glucose production was statistically significantly increased in infected versus noninfected rats during PTT, indicating impaired liver gluconeogenesis in all infected animals. In addition, there was a highly significant positive correlation between fasted glycemia before and during the test (T0 and T+60min glycemia) and viral titers (Figure 72B).



#### *Figure 72: Assessment of gluconeogenesis in RHV infected rats.*

*(A) Pyruvate Tolerance Test (PTT) results. Mean glycemia measurements in RHV infected rats (purple, n=5) versus noninfected (blue, n=6) over the 2h observation period. (B) Linear correlations by Pearson testing between rat/liver weight characteristics, RHV titers at 227d p.i. (D227) and observed liver damage. Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is illustrated in the bottom left triangle, while respective pvalues are illustrated on the remaining top half. Glyc: glycemia measured in mg/dL before (T0) and during PTT (T60); ORO: Oil Red O staining assessment of liver steatosis.*

### **IV.H.(γ) Serum biochemical parameters**

HCV infection may induce severe alterations in serum biochemical parameters due to the excessive liver damage. We examined whether RHV infection induced similar alterations of several biochemical parameters, namely urea, creatinine, urea/creatinine ratio, total protein, glucose, cholesterol, total bilirubin, uric acid, alanine aminotransferase, aspartate aminotransferase, alkaline phosphatases, gamma glutamyl aminotransferase, creatinine kinase, amylase, calcium, phosphorus, albumin, globulins and albumin/globulin ratio. We found no statistically significant differences between infected and noninfected groups at 8 months p.i. (227d p.i.) for any of the tested parameters. However, there was a trend for higher values for glucose in infected with respect to noninfected animals, in line with PTT data (Figure 73), as well as for aspartate aminotransferase, alanine aminotransferase and total bilirubin, indicative of liver damage.









**GLUCOSE**





Infected

•⊵

**URIC ACID**

**Non infected**

**AMYLASE**

**Non infected** 

**0**

**500**

**1000 UI/L**

**1500**

**2000**

**Infected** 

 $\overline{\mathbf{R}}$  $\frac{1}{\epsilon}$ 

**0**

**50**

**100**

**mg/L**

**150**





**GLOBULINS**







**PHOSPHORUS**



**80**



*Figure 73: Assessment of serum parameters in infected rats. Indicated biochemical parameters were measured in blood samples of RHV infected (purple, n=5) and noninfected rats (blue, n=6) collected at day 227 p.i.* 

### **IV.H.(δ) Lipid and metabolic alterations in rat livers during infection**

A pilot metabolomic/lipidomic analysis of the livers recovered from 5 chronically infected and 6 noninfected rats at 8 months p.i. was then undertaken. The rat who exhibited spontaneous clearance (rat 11) was also independently included as a single representative of a third "group" in this analysis. Frozen liver tissue retrieved upon sacrifice was homogenized and separated in aqueous and nonaqueous phases. Fifty-six metabolites were analysed from the polar phase by NMR, while lipids were analysed from the nonpolar phase by gas chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry (GC/MS) or nano LC-MS/MS. These analyses allowed us to list and quantify most metabolites from the central carbon metabolism (glycolysis, TCA cycle, gluconeogenesis), as well as all lipid metabolites, including FAs, the major building blocks of membrane lipids, phospholipids (structural components of biological membranes), and neutral lipids (DAG, TAG, cholesterol, and cholesteryl-esters).

We found no observable difference in the total lipids quantified among chronically infected and noninfected rats (Figure 74A), but we did observe a notable trend in infected rats displaying higher concentrations of total fatty acid abundance (Figure 74B).

Furthermore, the abundance of different subsets of hepatic lipids were significantly modified by RHV infection. We noted a significant increase in cholesteryl ester (CE) and DAG in chronically infected livers (Figure 74C). Interestingly, for these lipid subsets, corresponding values in the single case of spontaneous clearance were close, if not lower than those of noninfected rats, providing a first hint in support of either absence of alteration of metabolic and lipid homeostasis during acute infection or regression of altered parameters back to normal following virus clearance.

CE fatty acid composition is a typical biomarker of fatty acid intake from the diet, such as polyunsaturated FAs (C18:3, C20:5, C20:4). Interestingly, we found that the composition of CE was profoundly impacted by RHV infection, since most molecular species of CE were significantly deregulated (Figure 75A). Most importantly, the levels of CE 20:4 were significantly decreased in infected livers, whereas levels of CE18:1 were found significantly increased. Typically, this suggests that RHV infection may have a direct impact on immune responses in infected livers concomitantly to a putative boost in membrane biogenesis in these infected individuals. Indeed, C20:4 is the precursor for the synthesis of most pro-inflammatory molecules (prostaglandin, leukotriene) and C18:1 (oleate) is more often used as the main building blocks of membrane lipids and/or lipid storage. This is in line with previous observations made in HCV infected cultured cells, in which the remodelling of ER membranes to produce the membranous web supporting genomic replication was accompanied by an increase in C18:1 content<sup>606</sup>. Thus, our observations could possibly reflect both the modulation of membrane biogenesis, favouring viral propagation, and a putative downregulation of the host immune response, also favouring RHV replication. Such intriguing results could indicate a metabolic reprogramming of the host upon viral infection, which begs for further analyses and experimental confirmation.

Similarly, certain molecular species comprising FFAs, DAG and TAG were affected to different degrees by infection (Figure 75B-D). More specifically, significant deregulations were found for palmitic (16:0), heptadecanoic (17:0), oleic (18:1), and behenic (22:0) free fatty acids. In support to HCV-related data<sup>606</sup>, a significant enrichment of short-fatty-acyl-chain DAG and TAG was observed in noninfected rats, while a preferential accumulation of longer fatty acyl chains was observed in the infected rats. In these preliminary data, it seems that the switch of preference from shorter to longer fatty acyl chain triacylglycerides (TAG) starts from 52 carbon atoms.





*CE: Cholesteryl esters, COH: Free Cholesterol, TAG: Triacylglycerol, DAG: Diacylglycerol, FFA: free fatty acids, PC: Phosphatidylcholine, PG: Phosphatidylglycerol, PE: Phosphatidylethanolamine, PI: Phosphatidylinositol, SM: Sphingomyelin, PS: Phosphatidylserine, LPC: Lysophosphatidylcholine, LPE: Lysophosphatidylethanolamine.* 



*Figure 75: Fatty acid compositions of cholesteryl esters (CE, A), free fatty acids (FFA, B), triacyl glycerides (TAG, C) and diacyl glycerides (DAG, D).*

# **V. Discussion**

The availability of highly efficient therapeutic options based on various combinations of direct antiviral agents (DAAs) against HCV does not, unfortunately, despite its undeniable importance, erase the imprinting of virus-driven deregulations, thus does not necessarily prevent progression toward hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), maybe nor sustain full improvement of metabolic disorders following successful HCV cure $607-609$ . The potential mechanisms through which chronically infected patients successfully undergoing HCV cure may still progress toward HCC or persistent increase in fasting glucose are just starting to be unveiled and are still subjected to debates. Therefore, research aimed at deciphering and understanding the molecular and pathophysiological mechanisms linked to HCV infection remains essential to date, yet is hampered by the lack of appropriate culture systems and animal models permissive to infection. In particular, the mechanisms linked to the disturbances induced by the infection with specific HCV genotypes remain poorly understood.

In an attempt to contribute to the understanding of HCV-host interplay, my thesis focused on the identification of HCV NS5A and Core interacting partners and associated deregulated cellular pathways in a relevant infection system. Keeping in mind the clinical and epidemiological meta-data obtained from patient cohorts revealing a prevalence of 80% cases of severe steatosis in chronic infections with genotype 3 strains $\frac{330}{3}$ , which was interpreted as the result of a direct "steatogenic" effect of viruses of this genotype $610$ , we also explored the effects of the expression of Core and NS5A of diverse genotypic origins in the same infection system. Using high-throughput -omic analyses with novel viral tools and infections models, my work documented interesting differential interacting partners and hepatocyte deregulations according to the genotypic origin of HCV NS5A and Core proteins.

In parallel, we relied on the work of the group of Dr Amit Kapoor $\frac{468}{10}$  to establish a highly relevant immunocompetent surrogate animal model in France and to preliminary characterize the effects of hepacivirus infection on host metabolites and lipids. This part of the work allowed us to provide proof of concept that this surrogate *in vivo* model recapitulates the chronic infection rate and the metabolic disorders observed in HCV chronically infected patients, setting the stage for further investigation of this important field.

# **V.A The production of chimeric viruses expressing heterologous HCV proteins as new tools to evaluate the potential direct link between the genotypic origin of NS5A and induced hepatocyte deregulations revealed essential intra-viral interactions in HCV life cycle**

One category of the aforementioned DAAs, the "-asvir", exemplified by Daclatasvir, directly targets NS5A, underlying the importance of this viral protein in HCV life cycle. NS5A is critical for both HCV genomic replication and virion assembly, is implicated in the manipulation of the infected cellular membranous environment and is known to deregulate a wide range of host signaling pathways<sup>538</sup>, despite its lack of known enzymatic function and incompletely understood detailed mechanisms of action. This justified the focus of my work on this viral protein.

A central and genotype-specific role in HCV-associated cellular metabolism dysfunctions, including lipogenesis, steatosis and β-oxidation has been attributed to the Core protein (for review, Kao et al.,  $2016\frac{521}{2}$ . Conversely, other studies based on histological analyzes of liver biopsies from patients widely diverge on this subject and call into question the preferential association of HCV genotype 3 with hepatic steatosis (for a review, Roingeard,  $2013<sup>611</sup>$ ). These contradictory testimonies reinforced the need to use relevant infection systems for such studies of physio-pathological correlates and led me to complement this work with studies focused on HCV Core.

The JFH-1 strain of HCV genotype 2a is the only natural isolate that spontaneously recapitulates the entire viral cycle leading to the production of HCV particles in the human hepatoma cell line Huh-7.5 $\frac{411}{1}$ . The panel of intergenotypic chimeric viruses we successfully developed within the backbone of the Jad strain<sup>413</sup> that express in lieu of the native NS5A or Core the equivalent protein from field strains of genotypes 1, 3 or 4 allowed us to address the role of protein sequences derived from isolates associated with known induced liver damage documented from patient liver biopsies. In this study, field strains were mainly isolated from patients who developed varying degrees of macro- and micro-vesicular steatosis, with variable accumulation of fatty vesicles in the hepatocytes, and in some cases to known developing HCC. Sequences from prototypic strains of genotypes 1 or 2a have also been used for comparison purposes.

### **Forcing crosstalk of heterologous NS5A proteins of various genotypes with the remaining HCV 2a elements revealed permissive combinations and secondary site rescue for genome replication and viral particle assembly**

Chimeric genomes expressing different variants of the NS5A proteins of subtypes 1a, 1b, 2a or 3a, as well as NS5A derived from a genotype 4 strain, the nucleotide sequence of which was found to be phylogenetically closer to subtype 4d strain sequences, were newly produced for this study. The genotype 1 and 2a NS5A chimeras were found to readily result in robust RNA replication and synthesis of infectious viral particles without the requirement for compensatory mutations, supporting efficient cross-talks between intra-genotypic 2a elements, as well as between 1a or 1b and 2a viral sequences. This is in agreement with previous works from Scheel et al.<sup>172</sup> showing that NS5A substitution for 1a, 2a and 7a corresponding prototypic sequences in the context of a chimeric J6/JFH1 virus was amenable to relatively efficient HCV replication without the need for compensatory substitutions.

The intergenotypic viruses encoding the NS5A proteins of genotype 3a and 4 were found to be suboptimal, with reduced viral RNA replication levels. An adaptation following successive passages over a course of 8 weeks of Huh-7.5 cells transfected with the corresponding *in vitro* transcribed RNAs made it possible to generate variants of viruses Jad/NS5A-3a-385, -3a-407 and -4-431 as robust as the parental virus. Examination of the genomic sequence of these variants from replicate experiments revealed reproducible compensatory mutations in NS3 (R1373Q) and NS4B (A1904T or H1965Y) codons for the subtype 3a adapted strains and in NS4B (A1904T) for the genotype 4. Interestingly, no mutations were reliably selected in heterologous NS5A coding sequences. The fact that substitutions in NS3 helicase domain and in NS4B can compensate for heterologous NS5A for efficient genome replication are in line with previously described interactions between these HCV nonstructural proteins and the findings supporting the regulation of the NS3-NS5B replication complex by NS4B612,613. The C-terminus of NS4B has further been reported to influence NS5A hyperphosphorylation and motility, with certain mutations in that region being detrimental to viral replication<sup>116</sup>. We found a 1-log difference in TCID50/mL viral titers but similar genomic replication levels between Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-407 and Jad/G4458A/C6233T/NS5A-3a-407 harboring different compensatory mutations in NS4B. These findings support a specific effect of the NS4B H1965Y mutation in boosting virion assembly and further point to a role of NS4B in the particle assembly step of the virus life cycle. Interestingly, other authors previously reported the selection of NS5A substitutions within DI that partially compensated a defect introduced within the C-terminal domain of JFH1

NS4B, nicely complementing our data and strengthening the critical role of NS4B/NS5A interaction for virus replication $\frac{224,110}{ }$ .

The panel of chimeric Jad genomes previously constructed in our group and encoding Core from prototypic or clinical strains of subtypes 1a, 1b, 3a, 4a, 4f and 4p of HCV was found to yield to robust viral progeny, with comparable replication kinetics and protein expression levels without the need for further adaptive mutations (Aicher et al.,  $2018_{50}^{50}$ , and Simon, Aicher, et al., unpublished data, see Supplementary Figure 2). These data demonstrated that there was no genotype-specific interactions between Core and other viral proteins and/or viral RNA to ensure efficient particle assembly.

Overall, these joint studies from our group demonstrate for the first time the existence of largely permissive interactions between heterologous Core proteins of subtypes 1a, 1b, 3a, 4a, 4f and 4p or between heterologous NS5A proteins of genotypes 1 and 2a, and native Jad-2a elements, which efficiently lead to genome replication and assembly of infectious viral particles. With the successful rescue of intergenotypic recombinant viruses expressing NS5A of subtypes 3a or 4d with second site compensatory mutations in NS3 and/or NS4B, this work further documented permissive or essential intra-viral interactions that widen the spectrum of known features of HCV infectious life cycle  $\frac{59,614}{ }$ .

Of note, to date, no natural HCV recombinant with exact substitution of the coding sequence of a single viral protein has been detected in the field. The "hot spots" of natural intergenotypic recombination identified are clustered within the NS2 coding sequence or in the first nucleotides of the NS3 gene, thus encoding hybrid proteins, or at the NS2/NS3 junction, separating the presumed "assembly module" (Core-NS2) from the "replication machinery" (NS3-NS5B) (for a review, see Echeverria et al.,  $2015\frac{166}{10}$ ). This frequent junction could be indicative of the importance of preserving homologous interactions between the elements specific to each module, in order not to disrupt HCV genomic replication and assembly of viral particles. This is why most of the functional intergenotypic genomes generated by genetic engineering towards the study of pathophysiological properties of other viral genotypes or for testing pan-neutralizing humoral responses carry the coding sequence of heterologous Core-E1-E2-p7-NS2 (for review see Ramirez et al.,  $2018\frac{240}{10}$ , Figure 24, page - 44 -). Another approach was to successfully adapt strains of various HCV genotypes into hepatocyte lines, such as the H77-S, TN and HCV1 genotype 1a strains $615-617$ , strains J6 and T9 of genotype  $2a<sup>618</sup>$ , strains DH8 and J6 of genotype  $2b<sup>619</sup>$ , the clinical strain S83 of genotype  $2c<sup>620</sup>$ , and the clinical strains DBN3a, S52, S310 of genotype  $3a^{621-623}$ . However, not only do these hyperadapted strains not reflect the native sequence of clinical strains, since they contain multiple adaptation mutations throughout the genome, but their multiplication remains very variable, which makes their use difficult for comparative transcriptomic studies.

The added value of the new type of intergenotypic viruses we describe in this work lies in the fact that solely the sequence of NS5A or Core is substituted in each chimera, allowing the expression of identical remaining HCV proteins (derived from Jad). Therefore, the phenotypes observed can be promptly associated with each different heterologous NS5A or Core protein with unmodified field sequence.

#### **Identification of permissive insertion positions for affinity purification tags in Core and NS5A allowing the determination of NS5A domains involved in PPIs**

Toward proteomic studies, tagged NS5A and Core recombinant viruses encoding proteins fused to an affinity purification twin strep tag or a nonspecific V5 tag were produced, relying on permissive insertion positions previously reported in the literature  $518$ , or investigated according to a published 15-nt transposon-based screen<sup>584</sup>. We found that insertion sites in Core between aa 17 and 18, among several positions tested, and in NS5A between aa 418 and

419 or aa 449 and 450 were well tolerant to 21-40 aa-long exogenous insertions. The viruses generated were highly replication and assembly competent, genetically stable and highly infectious. Insertion of the tags in the parental virus only minorly affected viral replication in the case of Core recombinants, and equally for the ST- and V5-insertions. It is interesting to note that insertion of short exogenous sequences of 12 aa representing a tetracystein tag devoted to protein tracking in live cells was successfully achieved within HCV Jc1 or J6/JFH Core downstream of aa 2 or 3 of the protein, respectively without abrogating virus replication<sup>582,583</sup>. We attempted to insert longer  $ST/V5$  sequences fused to TEV protease recognition site and framed by flexible hinges at both these positions but failed to obtain replication competent viruses, notably with the longer ST tag, pointing to existing constraints on the N-terminus of Core, maybe in link with the involvement of the N-terminal Core codons in IRES-driven translation. Importantly in our work, the insertion of ST/V5 tag in Core or NS5A did not affect the stability of the protein nor the phosphorylation status of NS5A, as observed by immunoblotting. Tagging of the NS5A intra-/intergenotypic recombinant viruses significantly affected, without completely abrogating, the RNA replication of Jad/G4458A/G6050A/NS5A-3a-385, further resulting in decreased viral titers. The titers of Jad/G4458A/C6233T/NS5A-3a-407 were also significantly decreased by the ST insertion, without the corresponding effects in genome replication.

We hypothesize that the insertion of the tag in these latter viruses might impair the association of NS5A with E2 and/or ApoE, thus decreasing viral assembly. This hypothesis is based on data derived both from our experiments and from the published literature. First, we found in the parental virus that both Core and NS5A interact with E2, an interaction that is, however, disrupted by the tag insertion at position 418 of NS5A for the parent. Accordingly, Core, E2, and NS5A have been found to colocalize with Apo $E^{624}$ , an essential factor for infectious HCV production<sup>270</sup>, the silencing of which impairing viral assembly and release<sup>272</sup>. E2 in particular exhibited stronger interaction with ApoE than the other viral proteins, while the triple ApoE-E2-NS5A association has repeatedly been reported $625$ . Taken together with the lack of retrieved ApoE in the interactomic networks of 385-ST and 407-ST, it is tempting to speculate that the introduction of the mutation that spontaneously appeared in E2 coding sequence during the cell culture adaptation process of these viruses might enhance infectious viral production.

Notably, HCV E2 was specifically retrieved with Jad/NS5A-ST-449, not with Jad/NS5A-ST-418, but with 2a-J6-ST and 1b-434-ST bearing ST at a position equivalent to 418. This suggested that the E2 interaction could be mapped in a region relatively distant from, but still affected by conformational changes around aa 418. In fact, the dual positions of ST insertion in Jad NS5A allowed us not only to avoid losing the interactions disrupted by insertion of the tag at one of the positions, but also to putatively characterize the domains of interaction of the 418- and 449-specifically retrieved NS5A PPIs. In support of this notion, the interaction between NS5A and the Histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SMYD3 (SMYD3) protein has been characterized by Eberle et al.<sup>517</sup>, and was mapped in genotype 2a NS5A DIII to overlap with the recognition site of the 9E10 antibody, which is surrounding the 418 insertion position. Accordingly, insertion of the tag in Jad NS5A disrupted interaction with SMYD3, which was recovered with the highest final score achievable specifically with NS5A-ST-449.

Hence, the lists of 418- and 449-specific PPIs that we identified could be exploited to determine the likely interaction site of previously reported or novel NS5A partners.

### **All NS5A proteins from genotypes 1-4 exhibit two distinct subcellular localization patterns**

In our infectious system, we observed two subcellular localization patterns by confocal microscopy of fixed infected Huh-7.5 cells for all of the NS5A proteins of genotypes 1-4 that we studied: either scattered throughout the cytoplasm in close proximity to ER, or in dot/ringlike foci. We also found that the dot/ring-like patterns coincided with some NS5A wrapping around the LDs. These observations are in accordance with NS5A localization studies performed with genotype 1 or 2 prototypic strains, which further reported that the NS5A dotlike pattern coincided with LD and Core colocalization $\frac{626,627}{2}$ . Core wrapping around the LDs, reminiscing the NS5A pattern we observed, has previously been well characterized by our group (Simon et al., manuscript in preparation).

Taking this into account, we hypothesize that cells with more scattered, ER-like NS5A distribution were probably more recently infected, representing viral genome translation and replication, while NS5A in close proximity with LDs would mark a switch to virion assembly. This assumption is corroborated by the findings of Eyre et al. $628$ , who monitored the NS5A dynamics in living, virus-producing hepatoma cells and found that newly synthesized NS5A foci are small and distinct from aged foci. Core-NS5A colocalization was actually found to be transient by in situ proximity ligation assays (PLAs) coupled to confocal microscopy, with only a few copies of NS5A in close proximity to Core  $(\leq 40 \text{nm})^{\frac{628}{628}}$ . This transient and low-copy interaction would provide a possible explanation to the differential retrieval of NS5A complexed with Core protein by our AP-MS/MS, i.e. Core was not identified in complex with NS5A-3a-385 and Jad-NS5A, and vice-versa Jad NS5A was absent in the Jad Core PPI network.

The subcellular localization of NS5A of diverse genotypic origins in our system could have been affected by the chimeric nature of our viruses, since ectopically expressed genotype 1b-NS5A protein exhibited distinct distribution from the pattern observed when it was coexpressed with the remaining nonstructural proteins from a subgenomic replicon, indicating that NS5A subcellular localization is affected by the co-expression of viral proteins $626$ . However, our observations are in line with those made by Galli et al. $587$ , who studied the subcellular localization of NS5A in Huh-7.5 cells infected with Core–NS2/NS5A HCV chimeric viruses developed in the JFH1 backbone with Core–NS2 and NS5A sequences of genotype 1–7 prototypic strains. During productive infection, the authors found NS5A to adopt a localization similar to that described in subgenomic replicon systems. Furthermore, NS5A colocalization with each homologous Core and LDs was found similar across all studied recombinants in that study.

#### **NS5A proteins of different genotypes exhibit differential phosphorylation patterns**

Phosphorylation is a well-established post-translational modification of NS5A, however, the function and emergence of the two phosphorylation forms of NS5A (p58 and p56) have been a matter of scientific controversy (see NS5A paragraph, page - 8 -). In the paucity of data regarding the phosphorylation levels of NS5A of diverse genotypes, especially those derived from clinical isolates, and in light of the high conservation across genotypes of the main peptide associated with NSA hyperphosphorylation, our study of the phosphorylation status of the NS5A peptides retrieved following AP-MS/MS shed some light on the phosphorylation patterns of NS5A proteins from genotypes 1-4.

We identified both common and distinct phosphorylation sites in the different NS5A isoforms, with pS222 found across genotypes and pS228/pS229 identified only in NS5A-1b-434. Interestingly, two novel phosphosites were identified within NS5A DIII, aa 364 and aa 366 in the alignment shown in Figure 30 (page - 85 -). These sites were both highly conserved and found to be either a phosphoreceptive or a phosphomimetic residues. This high conservation might be indicative of the importance of an aa with specific conformation at this position for HCV regardless of the genotype, and is worthy of further characterization, by mutational analysis.

Importantly, for all discovered phosphopeptides, we also identified the nonphosphorylated counterpart peptides, corroborating the postulated role of NS5A phosphorylation in the regulation of the switch from replication to assembly.

# **V.B HCV NS5A and Core preferred mode of action is revealed by their respective interactomes**

This is -to our knowledge- the first report of an HCV Core interactome identified in an infection system and of a comparative study of the interactomes of NS5A from circulating strains identified in Huh-7.5 hepatoma cells infected with different intergenotypic viruses. Our studies were not only performed in a more relevant system, but they also enriched the lists of previously reported Core (>250) and NS5A (>700) cellular interactors (see paragraph I.B.θ.(ii)) by 123 and 675 putative additional cellular interacting partners, respectively (Supplementary Table 1 and Supplementary Table 2). However, given that one protein cannot possibly interact with as many factors at the same time, even in the presence of the postulated intrinsically disordered DII and DIII, a hypothesis can be made on distinct spatial and temporal NS5A PPIs, based on the subcellular localization of the protein, the stage of the virus life cycle and the transience of the interaction. This would allow NS5A to be a main orchestrator of the different steps of the HCV life cycle. In this regard, the regulation of such processes has been proposed to be heavily dependent on the phosphorylation of the protein by cellular kinases, such as the casein kinase  $1\alpha$  (CK1 $\alpha$ )<sup>629,149</sup>, the casein kinase 2 (CKII)<sup>136,138</sup>, the cyclin-dependent kinase 1  $(Cdk1)$ <sup>630</sup> and cAMP-dependent protein kinase A  $(PKA)$ <sup>631</sup>. While we cannot discriminate specific interactors of NS5A p56 or p58 in our study, Pan et al. $\frac{160}{160}$  have identified cellular proteins that are significantly more abundant in the p58 interactome over the p56, supporting our abovementioned assumption.

Since HCV is a virus with a relatively compact genome, we would expect that any role of its encoded proteins in disruption or alteration of host cellular functions would be limited to a few targets per pathway/process. However, with the extent of networks recovered here, it was highly tempting to investigate the enrichment of cellular signaling pathways and processes.

Unexpectedly, this enrichment in the case of Jad Core and NS5A revealed a putative preferred mode of action for each protein in promoting the viral life cycle and the subsequent HCV-induced pathology. For Jad Core, a significant enrichment of pathways involved in the regulation of gene expression was found, suggesting that Core might regulate cellular processes by subverting or by activating host transcription factors. On the other hand, Jad NS5A was found to interact with proteins involved in metabolic, intracellular transport, HCC-linked, and immune processes. For the metabolic processes in particular, complexes of more than 40 proteins responsible for the Krebs cycle, the electron transport chain and the oxidative phosphorylation machinery were affinity purified together with Jad NS5A as bait, pointing to a strong interaction of NS5A with mitochondrial proteins. These pathways were further found enriched in the interactomic network of NS5A proteins derived from field isolates, supporting a more unified mode of action. Additionally, enrichment of gene sets involved in the regulation of gene expression, gluconeogenesis and cholesterol metabolism was identified in this network, with the two latter indicating a putative mode of virus-induced host metabolic deregulations, which are more extensively described in §V.E.

Interestingly, preliminary gene set enrichment analyses of the proteins identified only, one the one hand in the genotype 3 NS5A interactomes and, on the other hand only in the nongenotype 3 NS5A interactomes highlighted the gluconeogenesis and cholesterol metabolism pathways exclusively in genotype 3, and the gene expression enrichment only in the second group (data not shown). This is suggestive of differential HCV NS5A induced regulations in link with the higher prevalence of steatosis in HCV genotype 3 infected individuals due to NS5A-mediated perturbations in cholesterol metabolism and gluconeogenesis. In fact, a key enzyme in energy metabolism, the pyruvate catalase was found to specifically interact with genotype 3a NS5A-407, the one derived from the patient with the highest degree of steatosis, suggesting a possible differential mechanism in link with increased steatosis development.

Similarly, aldehyde dehydrogenase 1 family member A1 (ALDH1A1), an enzyme involved in the major oxidative pathway of ethanol metabolism, and glutaredoxin-1 (GLRX) were found to specifically interact with both NS5A-407 and NS5A-385 (50% steatosis in the infected patient). GLRX in particular is essential to maintain normal hepatic lipid homeostasis and prevent fatty liver disease $632$  and GLRX mRNA was found to be downregulated by infection in our Core transcriptomic studies. Therefore, we hypothesize that NS5A interaction with GLRX could possibly have a role as safety valve within a general inhibition strategy of this pathway together with transcriptional shut down, that eventually results in the deregulation of glutathione-protein mixed disulfide bonds and increase of oxidative stress. Even if all the tagged intergenotypic NS5A viruses used in our study do not have identical growth kinetics, it should be noted that NS5A-385 and NS5A-407 are the lowest titrated viruses at 120h p.tf., strengthening that retrieval of interactors with these viruses and not with other chimeras is likely to be meaningful. One should keep in mind, however that absence of PPIs should be considered with caution given putative limitations in the mass spectrometry identification of peptides present in low concentration that could affect the retrieval of certain interactors.

A limitation of our study involves the lysis of the infected cells in the presence of NP-40 detergent, in order to inactivate the virus, which does not ensure a sustained integrity of cellular organelles during lysis. Hence, it might theoretically be possible to recover interactions of our proteins of interest with proteins that might not physiologically be accessible during infection in the living cells. For example, Core is an RNA binding protein, which could potentially bind different RNA molecules upon lysis of the cells and potential permeabilization of the nucleus, leading to the co-purification of indirectly bound RNA-binding proteins. However, such interactions are generally less stable and would not reproducibly withhold the AP procedures thereafter. In support of the specific retrieval of RNA-binding proteins complexed with Core, RNA binding proteins retrieved with Jad NS5A as bait were scarce, despite NS5A known RNA binding capacity.

## **V.C Focus on HCV NS5A and Core PPI roles in the virus life cycle**

The collective identification of HCV Core and NS5A respective interactomic networks allowed us to increase our knowledge of the cellular targets of these proteins, as well as strengthen previously reported data. For example, we reproducibly recovered well characterized NS5A interacting partners, such as PI4KIIIα (or PI4KA), VAPA, VAPB, the roles of which in the formation of the viral replication factories have extensively been presented in §I.B.ε.(iii). This was the case with all of our tagged NS5A proteins, including with the insertion of the tag in both Jad NS5A positions, with great final scores, further validating our screens.

We are beginning to explore the functional characterization of selected partners, the biological function of which could indicate a potential role in HCV life cycle or HCV-induced pathogenesis. To do so, we validate the interaction with additional co-immunoprecipitation experiments and protein complementation assays. In parallel, we are using small interfering RNAs (siRNA) to shut down the expression of these partners and monitor the effect of the silencing on the virus life cycle by infectious titration. The list of partners we are exploring includes the above-described proteins ALDH1A1, GLRX and PC in link with genotype 3 specific pathogenesis, as well as the proteins described in the next paragraphs.

Extended synaptotagmin 1 (ESYT1), an ER protein involved in the transport of glycerolipids and  $Ca^{2+}$  was found to interact with all NS5A proteins we tested. We hypothesize that ESYT1 interaction with NS5A might be involved in the ER membrane rearrangements towards the formation of HCV replication factories $\frac{633}{2}$ .

Retinol dehydrogenase 11 (RDH11) was found to interact with NS5A proteins of nongenotype 1 origins. The role of the enzyme is self-explanatory by its name, retinoic acid is regulating intracellular antiviral innate immune responses in hepatocytes $634$  and hepatic retinol levels have been found increased in MASLD mice $635$ . We therefore are interested in validating the RDH11 interaction (or absence of it) with our different NS5A isoforms and to then monitor the effect in of RDH11 silencing in cell culture.

Similarly, we found Integrin β1 (ITGB1) to interact with NS5A proteins of nongenotype 1 origins. ITGB1 is a well characterized receptor for viruses of different orders, such as Picornavirales<sup>636</sup>, Herpesvirales<sup>637,638</sup>, Piccovirales<sup>639</sup>, and Reovirales<sup>640,641</sup>, and has been associated with virus-induced pathogenesis $642$ . ITGB1 is also involved in liver regeneration processes, through activation of growth factor signaling $643$  and has been found to mediate IFN signaling with implications in HCV replication $\frac{644}{9}$ . While this manuscript was in preparation, a paper was published reporting on an APEX2-based proximity biotinylation screen of NS5A partners, with ITGB1 being in the list of identified biotinylated proteins<sup>645</sup>.

Interestingly, another NS5A interactor similarly retrieved with all tagged NS5A proteins and both Jad NS5A-ST with good final scores, had previously been reported to have an effect on HCV assembly. More specifically, the role in cellular processes of long chain acyl-CoA synthetase 3 (ACSL3), an enzyme catalyzing the activation of FA towards their incorporation to various lipids including TAG, CE, and phospholipids such as phosphatidylcholine (PC) and phosphatidylethanolamine (PE) was characterized by Yao and Ye in  $2007\frac{646}{1}$ . These authors found that ACSL3 is specifically required for incorporation of FA into PC, an essential reaction for VLDL assembly. They further showed that targeting of ACSL3 by small interfering RNAs inhibited the secretion of ApoB and the release of HCV from Huh-7.5 cells. Our reproducible retrieval of ACSL3 and ACSL4, the predominant ACSL isoform expressed in Huh-7.5 cells, by all studied NS5A proteins, as well as of ACSL1 by half of them is a strong indication of a putative role of these PPIs in the regulation of HCV assembly by NS5A. Further coimmunoprecipitation experiments would be required to verify this interaction. As a second step, identification of the NS5A domain of interaction and further disruption of the interaction would be necessary in order to functionally characterize its role in the HCV assembly process.

Protein PAT1 homolog 1 (PATL1), an RNA-binding protein involved in mRNAs decapping, leading to the degradation of mRNAs, was reported by Scheller et al. $\frac{647}{ }$  to be essential for HCV translation and replication of genotype 1b and 2a replicons and viruses. We identified PATL1 as a putative interactor of both Jad Core and NS5A-ST-418, PPIs that are being further investigated to verify whether this factor is involved in HCV genome translation and replication.

A cell surface proteoglycan, glypican-3 (GPC3) was affinity purified in complex with Core. GPC3 has been found to negatively regulates the hedgehog signaling pathway and to positively regulate the canonical Wnt signaling pathway by binding to the Wnt receptor Frizzled and stimulating the binding of the Frizzled receptor to Wnt ligands $648$ , while it also binds CD81, an entry factor of  $HCV^{649}$  650. Thus, further validation and functional characterization of this interaction would be of interest to unravel possible HCV Core-induced deregulations in link with HCV pathology through PPIs.

Lastly, two proteins that could potentially be involved in HCV-induced pathogenesis in link with metabolic disorders, PCCB and SCD, will also be explored. The roles and possible effects of HCV interaction with these proteins will be presented in the following paragraphs.

# **V.D The liver transcriptome is differentially modulated according to the genotypic origin of Core**

Our comparative study of the transcriptomes of hepatoma cells infected with different intergenotypic viruses revealed for the first time in an infection system a differential deregulation of the expression profile of hepatic genes depending on the genotypic origin of Core. Overall, we found the vast majority of deregulated gene sets to be significantly downregulated by HCV infection. Importantly, the majority of deregulated genes were more downregulated by the expression of nongenotype 3 Core than Gt 3. Looking in more details into the nonGt3 group, the most extreme downregulation seemed to be induced by genotype 4 Core recombinants. A previous study from our group focused on the link between natural Core polymorphisms present in genotype 4 strains emerging in Central Africa and the Wnt/ß-catenin signaling pathway which contributes to the development of  $HCC<sub>550</sub>$ . The main conclusion of this study reveals that Jad/C4fC induced a significantly greater activation of the Wnt/ß-catenin pathway than Jad/C4aR, which could be linked to a single aa difference in Core sequences.

In tentative link with steatosis development, we did find some gene sets significantly more disturbed by genotype 3 Core, namely the downregulated reactome "acyl chain remodelling of DAG and TAG" that could lead to increased intracellular lipid accumulation, the upregulated WikiPathways "Photodynamic Therapy induced Unfolded Protein Response", a mechanism activated in response to hypoxia, altered protein glycosylation and ER stress due to dysregulated lipid homoeostasis and toxic lipid accumulation. Oxidative stress may activate metallothioneins, which have recently been found to be induced by HCV infection *in vitro*<sup>651</sup>. Hence, increased expression of genes involved in "metallothioneins bind metals", "response to metal ion" and "zinc influx into cells by the slc39 gene family" by genotype 3 Core might be an indirect indication of particularly elevated intracellular accumulation of reactive oxygen species triggered by genotype 3 Core.

Differential modulation of hepatic genes depending on the genotypic origin of Core had previously only been described in expression systems of isolated Core protein of genotype 1b, 2a, 3a or 4d  $\frac{601,652,653}{1}$ , or in liver biopsies from patients infected with a genotype 1 or 3 strain $\frac{654,600,655,656}{6}$ . The conclusions of these authors relating to a proven effect of genotype 3 on lipid metabolism or on pro-inflammatory pathways diverge according to the study models, which make it difficult to derive a universal statement without additional investigations.

# **V.E Combined hepacivirus–induced metabolic reprogramming from analyses in cell culture and** *in vivo*

We successfully reproduced in France the RHV-rn1 model initially described by Trivedi et al. $\frac{468}{2}$  and we recovered a high chronicity rate in outbred Sprague Dawley rats infected with RHV-rn1 (11/12 infected rats, 92%).

This model allowed us to uncover some very interesting metabolic and lipid alterations induced in the liver of animals chronically infected by this hepacivirus, despite the low number of rats used in this preliminary study. These alterations were either absent or reverted in the single case of an infected rat with spontaneous sustained viral suppression. RHV-rn1 chronically infected rats displayed increased fasted glucose levels compared to non-infected rats, impaired gluconeogenesis, increased levels of CE18:1, signifying RHV-induced modulation of membrane biogenesis, and an increased accumulation of TAG lipids with more than 52 carbon atoms in total, coupled to a decrease in TAG lipids with 51 or less carbon atoms.

Impaired gluconeogenesis may lead to increased reliance on amino acids for glucose production, while high levels of fatty acids and non-polar amino acids contribute to liver dysfunction and insulin resistance, further complicating glucose homeostasis. The virus might benefit from these modifications for balancing energy production and for redirecting lipoproteins production essential for the viral life cycle. In fact, impaired gluconeogenesis, attested by high glucose levels and decreased levels of TCA metabolites, such as malate was also observed in Huh-7.5.1 differentiated cells persistently infected with HCV genotype 2a Jc1<sup>530</sup>, bringing closer observations in RHV and HCV models. Our transcriptomic studies also uncovered a significant downregulation of gluconeogenesis in link with HCV infection regardless of the Core genotypic origin, while the significant downregulation of Cori cycle was a further testament to reduced lactate conversion to glucose. Moreover, our NS5A interactomic data showed an enrichment of factors involved in gluconeogenesis in the interactomes of genotype 3 NS5A proteins, also pointing to a deregulation of this process.

In link with decreased TCA metabolites, an HCV-induced Warburg-like effect (for a review, see Gerresheim, et al.,  $2019<sup>657</sup>$ ) was also characterized by a metabolic switch, with a reduced activity of the TCA cycle and OXPHOS, which was reproducibly statistically enriched in our transcriptomic data. The Warburg effect is a characteristic of cancer cells, and more marked downregulation by nongenotype3 Core expressing chimeras over the genotype 3 Core chimeras could be a testament to higher cancerogenic capacity of these Core proteins. Despite the fact that these observations were made in hepatocarcinoma cells, they were also found significant in comparison to non-infected control cancer cells, while similar assumptions were previously made by Diamond et al. $\frac{597}{9}$ , and Lupberger et al. $\frac{530}{9}$ . Furthermore, the highly reproducible identification of the various NADH dehydrogenase ubiquinone complex proteins (NDUF*xx*) of the TCA cycle and the ATP synthase subunits (ATP*xx*) carrying out OXPHOS as potential NS5A interactors, regardless of the HCV genotype of NS5A, attest to HCVinduced perturbation of TCA-OXPHOS at both the gene expression and protein levels.

Studies in animal models and in HCV patients have shown HCV induced IR coupled to elevated blood glucose levels and a (pre-)diabetic state of the patients (reviewed in Chang et al.,  $2016\frac{658}{9}$ . Both high glucose<sup>659</sup> and HCV infection have been shown to downregulate the expression of PPAR $\alpha_{01}^{001}$ , leading to reduced peroxisomal function. Indeed, in our transcriptomic data, we found both the PPARα gene expression significantly downregulated by almost all Core intergenotypic recombinants, and the peroxisomal pathways impaired in the presence of Core proteins of any HCV genotype. Intracellular accumulation of lipids further signifies impaired mitochondrial and/or peroxisomal β-oxidation. Very long chain fatty acids (VLCFA) are degraded exclusively in peroxisomes<sup>599</sup>, pointing rather to a peroxisomal  $\beta$ oxidation perturbation in RHV-rn1 infected Sprague Dawley rats. A preference of HCV for VLCFA has also been well documented in infected hepatoma cultures $606,530$ , while elevated FFAs were found in HCV patients pre-SVR, in a multi-omic study performed in blood, feces and liver tissue samples of said patients $660$ . The authors further reported downregulation of all enriched metabolic pathways, as in our case, and a significant downregulation of KEGG gene sets in common with our transcriptomic study, e.g. peroxisome, bile acid metabolism and metabolism of aa, such as glycine, serine, threonine, valine, leucine and isoleucine. Furthermore, in accordance with the transcriptomic and proteomic data reported by Lupberger et al.<sup>530</sup> in liver tissues of chronically infected HCV patients and in differentiated Huh-7.5.1 infected with HCV Jc1 strain, we found that regardless of the genotype of Core expressed in the context of productive infection, the hallmark gene sets fatty acid metabolism, bile acid metabolism, peroxisome and KEGG peroxisome are downregulated by HCV infection.

According to our interactomic data, the modulation of cellular lipid metabolism might further be induced through Core and NS5A PPIs. We found that ST-Core pulled down mitochondrial propionyl-CoA carboxylase beta chain (PCCB), an enzyme involved in the catabolism of odd chain fatty acids, branched-chain amino acids isoleucine, threonine, methionine, and valine and other metabolites $\frac{661}{5}$ , whose action might be enhanced or perturbed through interaction with Core. Furthermore, stearoyl-CoA desaturase (SCD), which we also identified as a putative Jad Core interactor, is a key contributor in the biosynthesis of membrane phospholipids, cholesterol esters and triglycerides, utilizing O<sub>2</sub> and electrons from reduced cytochrome b5 to introduce the first double bond into saturated fatty acyl-CoA substrates and giving rise to a mixture of 16:1 and 18:1 unsaturated fatty acids $662$ . Notably, the expression levels of the PCCB and SCD respective genes were found unaltered by HCV infection in the presence of any Core genotype (data not shown), suggesting that any regulation of these factors is probably exerted at the protein level. Lastly, delta(14)-sterol reductase LBR (LBR) was one of the few common putative interactors of Core and NS5A, a protein catalyzing the reduction of the C14-unsaturated bond of lanosterol towards cholesterol biosynthesis $\frac{591,663}{591,663}$ , which was also found significantly downregulated by all strains used in our transcriptomic analysis (average  $log_2FC = -0.31$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Taken together, our combined data from interactomic and transcriptomic studies in cell culture with metabolomic and lipidomic observations in a surrogate animal model allowed us to pinpoint and elaborate on specific steps/processes of host metabolism disturbed by hepacivirus infection, namely increased glucose levels coupled to impaired gluconeogenesis, TCA-OXPHOS, β-oxidation and a preference for longer fatty acyl chains in infected cells. With this work, the contributions of Core and NS5A proteins of various HCV genotypes in these regulations is now well established.

## **V.F Evolution towards more physiological study systems**

Despite the questionable ethics of the act, the retrieval of cervical tumor cells from Henrietta Lacks in 1953 greatly impacted virology studies. With the advent of the easy-tomaintain, immortal HeLa cells and the cell lines that followed, it has been made possible to culture and study many human viruses *in vitro*. However, when studying pathogens, it is important to consider the limitations of the respective model used for each experiment. Immortalized cellular models are not always physiologically close to natural infection and it would be more prudent to perform studies of the pathology drivers of a cancerogenic virus in a non-cancerous cell line, if at all possible.

Preliminary PHH infection attempts using the recombinant viruses constructed in the Jad backbone were carried out in collaboration with C. Gondeau (Institut de Recherche en Bioothérapie, Montpellier, France), but we were unable to show a robust and reproducible infection in PHH cultures from different donors. Our additional analyses suggested that intergenotypic viruses constructed in the native JFH-1 backbone would be more suitable in this model, since Jad adaptation mutations confer a replication attenuation phenotype in these cultures.

A cell culture model that more physiologically reproduced the hepatic environment was recently developed by the laboratory of Dr Philippe Chouteau, who partially differentiated Huh-7.5 cells, which were then maintained under hypoxia<sup>664</sup>. This new, more relevant cellular model emulates the characteristics of primary hepatocytes and the production of highly lipidated HCV LVPs, hence representing a model of choice for the future directions of our projects. Collaborative preliminary experiments performed in this system showed that Jad intergenotypic recombinant viruses described in this work, whether expressing Core or NS5A isoforms were infectious in this system, allowing for a rate of infection amenable to subsequent RNA-Seq analyses. This would allow us to verify and extend the Core transcriptomic data we obtained in plain Huh-7.5, as well as examine the effects of NS5A of different genotypic origins on host gene expression in a more physiological system.

Lastly, the development of the HCV surrogate model may also serve for the validation of certain cell-culture based observations. We aim at using this surrogate animal model to do an in-depth characterization of the RHV-driven metabolic disorders we found during the course of chronic infection, and to evaluate how a combination of chronic hepacivirus infection and high fat/high sugar (western) diet may aggravate these pathologies. This would entail deciphering the lipid metabolism disorders occurring in the liver of chronically infected rats using larger number of rats for increased statistical depth and identification of highly deregulated hepatic pathways in response to RHV infection and/or western diet.

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## **VII. Annex**

*Supplementary Table 1: List of previously reported Core interacting partners combined to our list of retrieved Jad Core PPIs.*



















*Supplementary Table 2: List of previously reported NS5A interacting partners combined to our list of retrieved NS5A PPIs.*






























































































*Supplementary Table 3: List of Jad NS5A retrieved PPIs.*



















*Supplementary Table 4: String enriched pathways in our Jad NS5A interactomic network.* 


































*Supplementary Table 5: List of Jad Core retrieved PPIs.*







*Supplementary Table 6: String enriched pathways in our Jad Core interactomic network.*











## *Supplementary Figure 1: Pearson correlation of different tagged NS5A isoforms replicate samples and differential analysis of retrieved proteins.*

*Quality control correlation matrix based on Pearson correlation coefficient among ST replicate samples and V5 replicate samples, with the tag insertion downstream of amino acid 418.*

*Supplementary Table 7: List of PPIs retrieved using tagged NS5A proteins of diverse genotypic origins as baits.*






















*Supplementary Table 8: String enriched pathways in our interactomic network of NS5A proteins of diverse genotypic origins.*















































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**Reactome gene sets**



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## *Supplementary Figure 3: Pathways and gene sets deregulated between groups of genotype 3 Vs nongenotype 3 Core intergenotypic Jad strains enriched within the reactome database.*

*Enrichment score computed by CAMERA was used as a proxy of the regulation direction of significant genes sets (p-adjusted < 5%) and the scale for each gene set database illustrated are added on the right. Positive enrichment score (in red) suggests higher expressions of the respective gene set in group A rather in group B for each A Vs B comparison. Similarly for negative enrichment score (in blue) and lower expressions. Comparisons among HCV genotypes and Mock infected cells are shown in the first five columns, while genotype 3 versus nongenotype 3 (excluding the parent Jad) comparisons are shown in the last column.*