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Andrea Rolando & Liliana Di Stasio

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SHORT COMMUNICATION

MC1R gene analysis applied to breed traceability of beef

Andrea Rolando, Liliana Di Stasio
Dipartimento di Scienze Zootecniche. Università di Torino, Italy

Corresponding author: Prof. Liliana Di Stasio. Dipartimento di Scienze Zootecniche. Università di Torino. Via L. da Vinci 44, 10095 Grugliasco (TO), Italy – Tel. +39 011 6708570 – Fax: +39 011 6708563 – Email: liliana.distasio@unito.it

ABSTRACT

Since the breed of origin highly affects the beef price, reliable methods are needed to detect incorrect declarations. As most breeds are standardised for coat colour, the Melanocortin 1 Receptor gene (MC1R), involved in the regulation of eu/pheomelanins synthesis, has been suggested as marker for breed traceability of products of animal origin. The aim of this investigation is to characterise the main breeds reared in the Piedmont Region by MC1R locus and to apply the analysis of the locus to breed traceability of beef cuts purchased in different outlets of the Region. A total of 168 DNA samples of four cattle breeds (Piemontese, Blonde d’Aquitaine, Italian Friesian and Aosta Red Pied) were analysed for MC1R locus by PCR-RFLP. In addition, 28 DNA samples from beef with breed indication were tested. Piemontese and Blonde d'Aquitaine were monomorphic for the $E^+$ and $e$ allele, respectively. In the Friesian breed the $E^+E^+$ genotype was the most frequent, but $E^+e$ was also observed (2%). Aosta Red Pied was the most variable breed, with the presence of the three alleles and five genotypes out of six. The comparison of the genotypic distribution in the four breeds clearly indicates that it is possible to distinguish among Piemontese, Blonde d’Aquitaine and Friesian breeds, but the same is not true for Aosta Red Pied, which has genotypes in common with the other breeds. The results on beef samples revealed a high percentage of mislabelling (about 18%), which concerned Friesian breed and crossbreds. These results indicate that MC1R locus is an effective marker in breed traceability of beef, when the involved breeds are characterised by different genotypes. Moreover, compared to other genetic markers, it has the great advantage of not requiring DNA reference samples. This survey, though limited, has revealed a high percentage of incompatibilities. Therefore, the analysis of MC1R locus is recommended in the framework of product certification, at least for random controls within a system aimed at preventing fraud.

Key Words: Cattle, Beef, MC1R gene, Traceability.

RIASSUNTO

ANALISI DEL GENE MC1R PER LA RINTRACCIABILITÀ DELLA RAZZA DI ORIGINE DELLA CARNE

Per rispondere alla crescente richiesta di informazioni da parte dei consumatori, gli operatori della filiera carne hanno adottato un sistema di etichettatura volontaria, tramite il quale mettere a disposizione, oltre alle informazioni previste per legge, anche altri dati come, ad esempio, la razza dell’animale da cui proviene la carne. Poiché la maggior parte delle razze bovine sono ormai standardizzate per il mantello, il gene Melanocortin Receptor 1 (MC1R), coinvolto nella regolazione della sintesi di eu/feomelanine, è stato suggerito come marcatore per la rintracciabilità di razza dei prodotti di origine animale. L’obiettivo del lavoro è di valutare l’applicabilità dell’analisi del gene MC1R come strumento di verifica della razza dichiarata nell’etichetta che accompagna il taglio di carne. A tale scopo sono stati analizzati complessivamente 168 soggetti appartenenti alle razze più diffuse in Piemonte: Piemontese, Blonde d’Aquitaine, Frisona Italiana e Valdostana Pezzata Rossa, per caratterizzarne la struttura genetica nei riguardi del locus MC1R. Sono stati, quindi, analizzati 28 campioni di carne per i quali era indicata la razza di origine, prelevati in differenti punti vendita. Tutti i soggetti Blonde
Introduction

In the framework of beef certification the current European Commission regulation (CE n. 1760/2000) provides for the possibility of giving additional information, including the breed of the subjects from which beef derives. Even though traceability systems based on electronic records (Nageotte et al., 2000) have been developed, mislabelling of beef can occur, due to unintentional or intentional errors along the chain from farm to market. As the breed of origin highly contributes in determining the price of the product, reliable methods are needed to detect incorrect declarations. It is well known that the microsatellite markers are the best tool for individual identification, provided that DNA from the live animal is available for comparison (Cunningham, 2000; Arana et al., 2002; Vásquez et al., 2004). However, the creation of DNA archives that include all the animals is an expensive solution, so at present the DNA banks are still of limited use. For this reason there is a need for other genetic markers which are suitable to be used even in absence of reference samples.

As most breeds are standardised for coat colour, the Melacortin 1 Receptor gene (MC1R), involved in the regulation of eu-/pheomelans synthesis (Klungland et al., 1995), has been suggested as a marker for breed traceability of products, such as milk, cheese or meat (Chung et al., 2000; Maudet and Tuberlet, 2001; Crepaldi et al., 2003). The aim of this investigation is to characterise the main cattle breeds reared in the Piedmont Region by the MC1R alleles with visible effect and to apply the analysis of the locus to breed traceability of beef cuts purchased in different outlets of the Region.

Material and methods

A total of 168 DNA samples from the following breeds were analysed: Piemontese (41), Blonde d’Aquitaine (40), Italian Friesian (44), Aosta Red Pied (43). In addition, 28 DNA samples from beef with breed indication were tested.

A single PCR was employed to amplify a fragment of 402 bp, extending from nt 193 to nt 594 of the MC1R gene (Genbank accession n. U39469) and including the point mutations for Ed allele (296 T/C), responsible for production of eumelans, and e allele (310 G del), responsible for pheomelans. The primers M1 and M2 described by Crepaldi et al. (2003) were used, with a slight modification in the reverse primer (one A added at the 5’ end), introduced in order to have primers with the same annealing temperature. The PCR reaction contained 50-100 ng of genomic DNA, 1X PCR buffer II, 1.5 mM MgCl2, 200 µM each dNTP, 0.16 µM per primer, 1U RedTaq DNA polymerase (Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA), in a total volume of 25 µl. The amplification was performed under the following conditions: 5 min at 94°C, 35 cycles of 94°C for 30 sec, 61°C for 30 sec, 72°C for 1 min, and a final extension at 72°C for 5 min.

The PCR products were double digested in two separate reactions, with Mspa11 and MspI enzymes, according to manufacturer’s instructions. The digested fragments were electrophoresed on 2.5% agarose gels, stained with ethidium bromide and visualised under UV light.
Results and discussion

The genotype at MC1R locus was identified by integrating the results obtained with the two endonucleases, as shown in Figure 1: MspAI discriminated $E^+$ (249, 105 and 48 bp) from $E^-$ and $e$ (249 and 153 bp), while MspI recognized $e$ (401 bp) from $E^+$ and $E^-$ (286 and 116 bp).

Concerning the investigated breeds (Table 1), Piemontese and Blonde d’Aquitaine were monomorphic for $E^+$ and $e$ allele, respectively, as already reported (Rouzaud et al., 2000; Crepaldi et al., 2003). The results on Italian Friesian confirmed the presence of $e$ allele, found in heterozygote condition, together with the widespread $E^+$ allele. However, a different scenario can be foreseen for the future for this breed. In fact, in the past the red animals were excluded from the Herd Book, which has led to the present situation, with the $E^+$ allele almost fixed. Since the red colour is no longer selected against (even some Friesian IA bulls are red), it is likely that in the future the frequency of $e$ allele will increase. If this happens, the breed will lose its genetic uniformity for MC1R locus, making its use in product traceability less effective.

Table 1. Genotypic frequencies of MC1R locus in the investigated breeds.

| Breed               | n.  | $E' E'$ | $E' E^+$ | $E' e$ | $E^+ E'$ | $E^+ e$ | ee |
|---------------------|-----|---------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----|
| Piemontese          | 41  | -       | -        | -      | 1.00     | -      | -  |
| Blonde d’Aquitaine  | 40  | -       | -        | -      | -        | -      | 1.00|
| Italian Friesian    | 44  | 0.98    | 0.02     | -      | -        | -      | -  |
| Aosta Red Pied      | 43  | 0.05    | 0.07     | -      | 0.16     | 0.14   | 0.58|
As far as we know, these data represent the first report on MC1R polymorphism in Aosta Red Pied, which showed a remarkable polymorphism with the presence of the three alleles and five genotypes out of six. As expected, the most frequent was \( ee \) (0.58), but also \( E'E' \) and \( E'e \) had quite high frequencies (0.16 and 0.14 respectively). In addition, \( E'E' \) and \( E'E' \) genotypes were observed with a cumulative frequency of 0.12. The high genetic variability observed is not so surprising if some historical and geographical aspects are considered. In fact, Aosta Red Pied is an autochthonous population of the Aosta Valley, which has not been so intensively selected as the main standardised breeds. For this reason it may have maintained a higher genetic variability, as also observed for other local breeds like the Aubrac and Gasconne in France (Rouzaud et al., 2000). This variability could in part be traced back to the documented, though sporadic, use of Simmental, Jersey and Montbéliard bulls introduced in the past century to improve the breed (Dupont, 1992). Furthermore, the breeding history of Aosta Red Pied is closely linked to that of two other local populations reared in the same area and characterised by different colours: the Aosta Black Pied and Aosta Chestnut. Their common origin (Del Bo et al., 2001) and uncontrolled genetic admixtures could contribute in maintaining some variability for coat colour genes as well.

The comparison of the genotypic distribution in the four breeds clearly indicates that it is possible to distinguish among Piemontese, Blonde d’Aquitaine and Friesian breeds, but the same does is not true for the Aosta Red Pied, which has genotypes in common with the other breeds.

The results on beef samples (Table 2) revealed a high percentage of mislabelling (about 18%), which concerned Friesian breed (three samples) and crossbreds (two samples). The two beef cuts labelled as ‘Piemontese x Friesian’ derived most likely from pure Friesian breed, as their genotype is \( E'E' \). As beef from the Piemontese x Friesian crossbred has a higher quality than beef from Friesian (Destefanis et al., 2000), intentional mislabelling is a possibility. The MC1R genotype also resulted incompatible for three samples labelled as ‘Friesian’; they were all heterozygous and different from each other (\( E'E' \), \( E'e \) and \( E'E' \)). Some hypotheses could be put forth as respects the real origin of these beef samples, but none of them seemed to be more probable than the others. In any case, it is most likely that the inconsistencies found were due to casual errors.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the MC1R analysis in breed traceability, a basic aspect is to be taken into account: if genetic incompatibilities are detected, the error in the declarations is proved, while in case of compatibility the assignment of a breed is never proved, because beef could derive from another breed with the same genotypes as the declared one. When incompatibilities are observed, hypotheses on the real breed of origin can be put forth, while investigating each case individually and taking into consideration not only the MC1R genotype, but also any other avail-

| Declared breed       | Consistent with MC1R genotype |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
|                      | Yes  | No  |
| Piemontese           | 3    | -   |
| Blonde d’Aquitaine   | 2    | -   |
| Italian Friesian     | 12   | 3   |
| Aosta Red Pied       | 1    | 0   |
| Crossbred            | 5    | 2   |
| **Total**            | **23** | **5** |

Table 2. Breed traceability of beef samples.
able information. However, when the inconsistencies are due to unintentional errors, the assignment of a putative breed is usually very difficult, because such errors occur at random, without any logical basis.

Conclusions

The MC1R locus has been shown to be an effective marker in breed traceability of beef when the involved breeds are characterised by different genotypes. Moreover, compared to other genetic markers, it has the great advantage of not requiring DNA reference samples. This survey, though limited, has revealed a high percentage of incompatibilities. Therefore, the analysis of MC1R locus is recommended in the framework of product certification, at least for random controls within a system aimed at preventing fraud.

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