Article

Identification of Candidate Genes Regulating Carcass Depth and Hind Leg Circumference in Simmental Beef Cattle Using Illumina Bovine Beadchip and Next-Generation Sequencing Analyses

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Simple Summary: The performance of genome-wide association studies with high-density single-nucleotide polymorphism panels and next-generation sequencing is a robust approach to the identification of genetic variants that can elucidate variation in complex diseases and economically important traits in farm animals. We identified many markers associated with crucial traits, such as muscle development in Simmental beef cattle. This information can be used to pinpoint candidate genes affecting traits of interest. Our results contribute to the clarification of molecular mechanisms underlying processes associated with hind-leg meat yield and carcass depth in beef cattle.

Abstract: Genome-wide association studies are a robust means of identifying candidate genes that regulate economically important traits in farm animals. The aim of this study is to identify single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) and candidate genes potentially related to carcass depth and hind leg circumference in Simmental beef cattle. We performed Illumina Bovine HD Beadchip (~670 k SNPs) and next-generation sequencing (~12 million imputed SNPs) analyses of data from 1252 beef cattle, to which we applied a linear mixed model. Using a statistical threshold ($p = 0.05/\text{number of SNPs identified}$) and adopting a false discovery rate (FDR), we identified many putative SNPs on different bovine chromosomes. We identified 12 candidate genes potentially annotated with the markers identified, including $CDKAL1$ and $E2F3$, related to myogenesis and skeletal muscle development. The identification of such genes in Simmental beef cattle will help breeders to understand and improve related traits, such as meat yield.

Keywords: genome-wide association study; carcass depth; hind leg circumference; next-generation sequencing; Simmental beef cattle

1. Introduction

Farm animals, particularly cattle, are of major economic importance in many parts of the world [1]. Beef cattle breeds are being developed genetically to maximize the efficiency of meat production [2] using breeding programs based on traits related to meat yield [3]. Recently, beef breeders have been inclined toward the augmentation of lean muscle mass growth to meet rapidly changing consumer demand for lean meat [4]. Thus, in the past several years, researchers have made more efforts to increase our understanding of genetic
influences on economically important traits covering different aspects of meat production, especially muscle growth and development.

Simmental beef cattle, distributed in nearly all parts of the world, are bred primarily due to their high levels of growth and lean meat production under an appropriate diet [5–7]. Many studies have been conducted to examine the economically crucial traits of this breed, such as meat production [8], meat quality [9], carcass characteristics [10], and growth [11]. An understanding of the effects of genetic variation on meat quality, meat yield, and carcass quality will aid breeders’ implementation of methods to effectively address beef market demands.

The search for candidate genes via genetic association studies, conducted for almost all species [12], may be practical for the extension of our understanding of genes affecting economically important traits. Candidate genes may affect particular biological actions related to different aspects of a trait of interest, and their identification is an important step in efforts to identify quantitative trait loci (QTLs) that regulate the genetic variation of traits of interest [13].

The performance of genome-wide association studies (GWASs) using high-density single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) panels is a robust approach to the identification of different parts of the genome and genetic variants that can elucidate variation in complex diseases and prominent or economically important traits in farm animals [14–16] and humans [17–19]. GWAS results can be sensitive to different factors, such as the sample size and the number of genes affecting traits of interest [20]. Next-generation sequencing (NGS) can be employed to access numerous genetic variants in close proximity to genes affecting traits of interest. Sharma et al. [21] used NGS to identify 18 mutations associated with Mendelian diseases in Hanwoo cattle; in addition, in the same cattle, 33 genes were found to be associated with domestication [22]. In Simmental beef cattle, NGS has been used to identify important genes that control hind leg width, such as PLXNA4, ASB15, SLC13A1, NDUFA5, IQUB, LMOD2, and WASL [23], and a promising candidate gene that controls net meat weight (MTPN) [24]. However, due to the high SNP density in NGS data, the calculation of marker effects is challenging [23–25].

Hindquarters from beef carcasses include valuable cuts, and their properties are thus important components of meat-related traits [23]. The hindquarter consists of connective tissues; the femur, tibia, and fibula; muscles including the semitendinosus, vastus lateralis, tensor fascia lata, gluteus medius, gastrocnemius, semimembranosus, and biceps femoris. Most of these muscles are skeletal and supply large amounts of meat. Muscle quantity has been reported to be closely related to the hind leg dimension [26]. In addition, the hind-leg muscle thickness correlated positively with the growth rate of European beef cattle [26].

In the past several years, genetic selection for carcass conformation traits has been practiced in most beef cattle populations. Carcass depth is an important carcass conformation trait that covers the principal muscle and bone tissues and thus is profitable in the beef industry. Han et al. [27] illustrated that it was associated with the IGF2 gene, a key gene for muscle development and growth in farm animals [28]. However, the literature on carcass depth is limited, and more research is needed.

In this GWAS, we detected SNPs for the identification of candidate genes (via QTLs and markers) associated with hind leg circumference and carcass depth in Simmental beef cattle. Our results can contribute to the clarification of the molecular mechanisms underlying hind-leg meat yield and carcass depth.

2. Material and Methods
2.1. Ethics Statement

All procedures were conducted in accordance with the guidelines of China’s Council on Animal Care, and the study protocol was approved by the Institute of Animal Science of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Science, Beijing, China (approval number: RNL09/07). Analyses associated with animals adhered to the rules of China’s Council on Animal Welfare.
2.2. Animal Resources and Phenotype Data

The Simmental beef cattle population examined in this study comprised 1346 cattle born between 2009 and 2015 in Ulgai, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia, China. Following weaning, the cattle were transferred to the Jinweifuren Farm feedlot in Beijing. All calves were raised under standard conditions and fed a total mixed ration based on the nutritional requirements of beef cattle (NRC, 2018). At 16–18 months of age, the animals were slaughtered. Immediately after bloodletting, the target carcasses were refrigerated at 4°C until trait measurement (about 9 h after slaughter). The carcasses were hanged, and the carcass depth and hind leg circumference were measured in centimeters using a tape (Figure 1). Trait means, standard deviations, and ranges are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean carcass depth and hind leg circumference.

| Trait                  | Mean (cm) | Standard Deviation (cm) | Maximum (cm) | Minimum (cm) |
|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Carcass depth          | 63.88     | 4.62                    | 82           | 13           |
| Circumference of hind leg | 68.01    | 16.58                   | 110          | 22           |

2.3. Genotype Examination and Quality Control

Illumina Bovine HD SNP Beadchip (770 k) and genotype examinations were performed using Illumina Genome Studio (Illumina Inc., San Diego, CA, USA). For quality control, individuals with high Pi-Hat values (representing sample duplication) were excluded, and animals and SNPs were excluded if the SNP call rate <90%, minor allele frequency (MAF) <5%, deviation from Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium detected ($p < 10^{-6}$), or >10% genotype data missing. These criteria were assessed using PLINK software (ver. 1.07) [29]. After the exclusion of 94 cattle, 671,204 autosomal SNPs from 1252 cattle were analyzed.

2.4. Resequencing

Using genomic relationship data and Pi-Hat values, we chose 44 unrelated cattle for resequencing. The TIANamp Blood DNA kit (Tiangen Biotech Company Limited, Beijing, China) was used to extract genomic DNA. DNA concentrations and purity were quantified using the NanoPhotometer N50 device (Implen GmbH, Munich, Germany). DNA (1.5 μg) with an A260/280-nm absorbance ratio of 1.8–2 and A260/230-nm absorbance ratio of 2.0–2.2 was splintered using the Ultrasonicator S2 (Covaris, Woburn, MA, USA). Sequencing libraries were prepared using the Truseq Nano DNA HT sample preparation kit (Illumina Inc.) according to the manufacturer’s instructions of manufacturers. Each sample was given an index code for sequence recognition. The DNA samples were splintered into ≤350-base pair fragments by sonication, and DNA fragments were chosen for end polishing, addition of A-tailing, and sequencing with further PCR amplification using a full-length adapter. Sequencing libraries were prepared using the Illumina HiSeq 2500 system (Illumina Inc.). We obtained 9,621,765,847 reads and subjected them to quality control; low-quality reads with >10% unrecognized bases, >10% mismatches, or >50% poor-quality reads with >10% unrecognized bases, >10% mismatches, or >50% poor-quality
bases were removed. To facilitate downstream analysis, SAM files were converted to BAM files. Then, we performed variant calling using samtools-0.1.19 mpileup [30]. Variants were excluded if an overall quality (QUAL) score of <20, a mapping quality (MQ) score of <30, and a read depth of <10. Moreover, we used the following proximity filters: if a variant was within 3 bp of another variant, the variant with the lower QUAL score was also excluded. Only bi-allelic SNPs were retained for subsequent analyses. The average sequencing depth (representing the number of sequences for each base) of the samples was about 20×.

2.5. Variant Imputation

NSG-derived variants with MAFs > 0.05 (21,043,398 sequence variants from 44 animals) were subjected to imputation using BEAGLE (ver. 4.1) [31] with the default settings, based on algorithms determined by population data to infer genotypes for animals with missing information and haplotypes. We labeled genotypes for imputed sequence variants as 0 (homozygotes), 1 (heterozygotes), and 2 (alternative homozygotes). In total, 12,468,401 SNPs were obtained for chromosomes 1–29 from the RNA sequencing data with the use of the standard of imputation quality >0.1 [32].

2.6. Statistical Analysis

We employed a general mixed linear model based on the formula $y = 1\mu + Xb + m_ib_j + Zu + e$, where $y$ is a vector phenotypic value and $\mu$ represents the population mean. We applied two fixed-effect variables for single marker regression; $b$ reflects noise associated with fixed effects (weight, sex, fattening days, and birth year) and $b_j$ reflects SNP effects. $m_i$ is the vector for the $i$th marker and $u$ reflects the polygenic effect assumed with $N(0, \sigma^2K)$, where $K$ corresponds to the kinship matrix and $\sigma^2$ is the additive genetic variance. Although all SNPs on autosomal chromosomes were qualified for inclusion in the analysis, SNPs on chromosomes with $m_i$ were excluded. $X$ and $Z$ are the incidence matrices connecting the phenotypic values to fixed and polygenic effects, respectively. $e$ represents random residual effects assumed with $V(e) = I\sigma^2_e$, where $I$ is an identity matrix and $\sigma^2_e$ is the residual variance.

Associated SNPs were identified using GenABEL (ver. 1.8-0) [33] in R, with the application of the significance criterion of Bonferroni-corrected $p < 0.05$ in accordance with division by the number of SNPs. For carcass depth, dependable QTLs and putative candidate genes were identified with a stringent significance threshold of $7.45 \times 10^{-8}$. To obtain $p$ values for the SNPs, $t$ values were calculated. Considering the fact that Bonferroni correction outcomes are too stringent with low statistical power [34], we determined the threshold values for GWAS by adopting false discovery rate (FDR). The FDR was defined as 0.01, and the threshold $p$ value was computed based on the formula $P = FDR \times n/m$, where $n$ is the number of $p < 0.01$, and $m$ represents the total number of SNPs [35].

To detect candidate genes of interest, we used the UCSC genome browser (http://www.genome.ucsc.edu, Bos_taurus_UMD_3.1, accessed on 2 October 2020). NGS dataset analysis is complex due to the enormous number of markers, which can make conventional $p$-value computation for SNPs difficult [23,24]. We coped with this problem by dividing chromosomes into the following segments: segment 1 consisted of chromosomes 1–10 with 5,830,727 SNPs, segment 2 consisted of chromosomes 11–20 with 4,063,690 SNPs, and segment 3 consisted of chromosomes 21–29 with 2,573,984 SNPs. Dependant QTLs and putative candidate genes were detected using the significance thresholds of $p = 8.58 \times 10^{-9}$ for segment 1, $p = 1.24 \times 10^{-7}$ for segment 2, and $p = 1.95 \times 10^{-7}$ for segment 3, based on the number of markers in each segment.

2.7. Heritability Estimation

The heritabilities for carcass depth and hind leg circumference were estimated using GCTA v1.93.1 software in accordance with Bovine HD SNP array and imputed NGS. The genomic heritability of each trait was calculated using $h^2 = \sigma^2_g / \sigma^2_g + \sigma^2_e$. 

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3. Results

3.1. SNPs Associated with Carcass Depth

The estimated heritability for carcass depth was high (0.41 ± 0.06). With beadchip analysis, we identified several SNPs associated significantly with carcass depth (Table 2), including BovineHD0200025561 \( (p = 1.49 \times 10^{-14}) \) in candidate gene CLKI on chromosome 2 and BovineHD0200025553 \( (p = 3.4 \times 10^{-13}) \) and BovineHD0200025550 \( (p = 8.3 \times 10^{-13}) \) in candidate gene BZWI. Exploration of the region that is about 10 kb upstream of the marker BovineHD0200025562 \( (p = 1.49 \times 10^{-14}) \) led to the identification of candidate gene PPIL3. The marker BovineHD0500023139 \( (p = 2.17 \times 10^{-8}) \) was found in the gene CCDC91 on chromosome 5. In addition, the candidate genes DIP2B and LARP4 were identified about 3 kb upstream and 24 kb downstream of the marker BovineHD0500008673 \( (p = 1.3 \times 10^{-13}) \), respectively. On chromosome 17, the gene c17h22orf31 was identified about 14 kb downstream of the SNP BovineHD1700020542 \( (p = 3.47 \times 10^{-8}) \). We also identified two significantly associated SNPs on chromosomes 10 (BovineHD1000031388; \( p = 1.17 \times 10^{-8} \)) and 26 (BovineHD2600013096; \( p = 5.58 \times 10^{-8} \)), but no associated candidate gene. Figure 2 shows the Manhattan plot for putative QTLs related to carcass depth.

Table 2. SNPs associated with carcass depth, determined by GWAS analysis.

| SNP             | Chromosome | Position    | p-Value          |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| BovineHD0200025561 | 2          | 89923045    | \( 1.49 \times 10^{-14} \) |
| BovineHD0200025562 | 2          | 89926675    | \( 1.49 \times 10^{-14} \) |
| BovineHD0200025553 | 2          | 89896059    | \( 3.4 \times 10^{-13} \) |
| BovineHD0200025550 | 2          | 89887085    | \( 8.3 \times 10^{-13} \) |
| BovineHD0500008673 | 5          | 29582709    | \( 1.3 \times 10^{-13} \) |
| BovineHD0500023139 | 5          | 81891942    | \( 2.17 \times 10^{-8} \) |
| BovineHD1000031388 | 10         | 44213755    | \( 1.17 \times 10^{-8} \) |
| BovineHD1700020542 | 17         | 70557765    | \( 3.47 \times 10^{-8} \) |
| BovineHD2600013096 | 26         | 46267236    | \( 5.58 \times 10^{-8} \) |

Figure 2. Manhattan plot of \(-\log_{10}(p)\) for carcass depth. The horizontal line represents the threshold.
3.2. SNPs Associated with Hind Leg Circumference

The estimated heritability for hind leg circumference was high (0.52 ± 0.12). Of the 9,621,765,847 raw reads acquired, 9,584,920,309 reads were examined after the application of quality control measures. In segment 1, we identified one SNP (rs91327124; \( p = 1.23 \times 10^{-9} \)) in BTA5 related to hind leg circumference, but no candidate gene in the vicinity of this SNP. In segment 2, several associated SNPs were identified (Table 3). The candidate gene ZBTB16 was identified about 50 kb downstream of the most strongly associated SNP in this segment (rs25168454; \( p = 1.31 \times 10^{-10} \)), NXPE4 was identified about 4.7 kb downstream of the SNP rs25439719 (\( p = 4.14 \times 10^{-8} \)), and the candidate gene RBM7 was found about 20 kb upstream of the SNP rs25237349 (\( p = 1.12 \times 10^{-7} \)).

Table 3. SNPs in segment 2 associated with hind leg circumference, as determined by NGS dataset analysis.

| SNP        | Chromosome | Position | p-Value     |
|------------|------------|----------|-------------|
| rs84436800 | 12         | 84436800 | 2.17 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs84450386 | 12         | 84450386 | 3.45 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs84441028 | 12         | 84441028 | 6.93 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs84429941 | 12         | 84429941 | 8.13 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs84428499 | 12         | 84428499 | 8.24 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs25168454 | 15         | 25168454 | 1.31 \times 10^{-10} |
| rs25439719 | 15         | 25439719 | 4.14 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs25457101 | 15         | 25457101 | 4.14 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs25237349 | 15         | 25237349 | 1.12 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs25224780 | 15         | 25224780 | 1.22 \times 10^{-7} |

In segment 3, we found many putative QTLs on chromosomes 23, 26, and 29 (Table 4). Exploration around flanking SNPs in BTA26 and BTA29 revealed no related candidate genes. The only associated SNP in BTA23 (rs37207517; \( p = 8.61 \times 10^{-8} \)) was located in the gene CDKAL1, which might be a crucial gene for Simmental beef cattle. About 47 kb upstream of this gene, the candidate gene E2F3 was identified. Figure 3 shows the Manhattan plots for putative QTLs in segments 1–3 related to hind leg circumference.

Table 4. SNPs in segment 3 associated with hind leg circumference, as determined by NGS dataset analysis.

| SNP        | Chromosome | Position | p-Value     |
|------------|------------|----------|-------------|
| rs37207517 | 23         | 37207517 | 8.61 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs12211246 | 26         | 12211246 | 1.54 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs12211363 | 26         | 12211363 | 1.54 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs12211411 | 26         | 12211411 | 1.54 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs34314488 | 29         | 34314488 | 6.32 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34314780 | 29         | 34314780 | 6.32 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34329034 | 29         | 34329034 | 6.32 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34330397 | 29         | 34330397 | 6.32 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34417763 | 29         | 34417763 | 9.3 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34423556 | 29         | 34423556 | 9.3 \times 10^{-8} |
| rs34376791 | 29         | 34376791 | 1.27 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs34381008 | 29         | 34381008 | 1.27 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs34381454 | 29         | 34381454 | 1.27 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs34381516 | 29         | 34381516 | 1.27 \times 10^{-7} |
| rs34416372 | 29         | 34416372 | 1.5 \times 10^{-7} |
4. Discussion

GWASs have been conducted for many animals (e.g., [36]) and plant (e.g., [37]) species, contributing to a better understanding of molecular mechanisms underlying economically important traits in farm animals, including beef and dairy cattle [15,23,24,38–44]. GWASs are a powerful approach to the detection of genome regions that carry causative genes [45–47]. We anticipate that NGS technology will aid scientists’ detection of currently unknown genetic variants [48]. In this study, NGS analysis yielded no results related to carcass depth, but the use of an SNP array did yield such results; the opposite was true for hind leg circumference.

Beadchip analysis revealed that the \( \text{CLK1} \) gene harbors the SNP BovineHD0200025561 in BTA2, associated most strongly with carcass depth. This gene codes for a protein kinase with binary specificity that phosphorylates tyrosine and serine/threonine residues [49]. Its N-terminal includes a regulatory portion containing receptors for EGF and other growth elements [50]. EGF plays a key role in cellular development by promoting cell proliferation and differentiation. \( \text{CLK1} \) has been reported to play a role in cancer due to the associations among \( \text{CLK1} \), \( \text{ASF/SF2} \), and \( \text{SRp20} \) [49] and in muscular dystrophy [51]. The \( \text{CLK1} \) inhibitor, TG693, is a splicing modulator with therapeutic potential for patients with Duchenne muscular dystrophy [51]. In pigs, high expression levels of the full-length splice form of \( \text{CLK1} \) were observed in the kidney, small intestine, and longissimus dorsi tissues [52]. In a rat model, \( \text{CLK} \) gene expression showed downregulation related to muscle fat during lactation [51]. In a gene ontology analysis, Lee et al. [53] detected a negative association...
between CLK1 and the intermuscular fat content in Hanwoo cattle. In another study of Hanwoo cattle, CLK1 was associated significantly with marbling (i.e., intramuscular fat) [54]. However, information on the effects of CLK1 on meat quality and its relationship to cellular (especially muscle and bone) development in Simmental beef cattle is lacking. We hypothesize that CLK1 plays a role related to meat quality and likely muscle cell development in Simmental beef cattle, but more research is needed to validate the relationship of this candidate gene to these traits.

In BTA2, we identified the candidate gene BZW1, which harbors two SNPs associated significantly with carcass depth (BovineHD0200025553 and BovineHD0200025550). This gene has been reported to be a proliferation regulator that promotes the progression of many aggressive cancers, such as salivary mucoepidermoid carcinoma [55]. BZW1 plays an important role in cell cycle processes and transcriptionally manages the histone H4 gene in the G1/S phase. Chiou et al. [56] reported that its downregulation can repress lung adenocarcinoma metastasis. The roles of BZW1 in tumor growth [57] and Alzheimer’s disease progression [58] have also been well demonstrated. However, very few studies have examined the function of this gene in farm animals. BZW1 has been associated with bovine endometriosis [59], and Hoelker et al. [59] showed that its downregulation could influence the dynamic progression of embryos from cattle with subclinical endometritis. We hypothesize that BZW1 is associated with carcass depth in Simmental beef cattle. More research is warranted to validate this association. We also identified the gene PPIL3 about 10 kb upstream of the SNP BovineHD0200025562. PPIL3 has been associated with estrogen receptor-negative breast cancer [60], but information on its function in farm animals is lacking. Thus, our identification of the potential association of PPIL3 with carcass depth in Simmental cattle is novel. Further research is needed to corroborate this association.

In BTA5, we identified the candidate gene CCDC91, which harbors the SNP BovineHD0500023139, associated significantly with carcass depth. This gene is expressed in numerous cancer cell lines. CCDC91 has been identified as a candidate gene associated with production traits (fat percentage) in dairy cattle [61], but few studies have examined this gene in farm animals. We hypothesize that this gene is associated with carcass depth in Simmental beef cattle. Moreover, we identified the candidate gene DIP2B about 3 kb downstream of the SNP BovineHD0500008673. In cattle, this gene has been associated with fatty acid content [62], an important trait affecting meat quality. DIP2B has also been associated with lipid metabolism, skeletal system development, and insulin signaling [62]. Information on its associations with traits in Simmental beef cattle is lacking; we hypothesize that it is related to carcass depth. We also identified the candidate gene LARP4 about 24 kb upstream of the SNP BovineHD0500008673. This gene may be able to suppress cancer cell migration and invasion [63]. Egiz et al. [64] reported that LARP4 repressed the motility and metastatic development of ovarian cancer cells. This gene has also been shown to control mRNA solidity and translation [65]. Zhou et al. [66] identified several candidate genes, including LARP4B, that influence milk protein composition traits in Holstein cattle. We hypothesize that LARP4 is associated with carcass depth in Simmental beef cattle.

In the NGS analysis, we found that the SNP rs25168454 in BTA15 was associated most strongly with hind leg circumference. The candidate gene ZBTB16 was located about 50 kb downstream of this SNP in segment 2. This conserved gene, broadly expressed in normal tissues such as cardiac and skeletal muscle [67,68] and also recognized as PLZF and Zfp145, acts as a crucial transcriptional suppressor or activator [69] that is required for various biological and developmental processes, including cellular apoptosis [70], hind limb construction [71], spermatogenesis [72], and anti-tumorigenesis activities [73]. It is also involved in processes such as metabolism regulation [74] and mesenchymal stem cell (MSC) differentiation [75], which is important during bone regeneration. In addition, ZBTB16 controls homeostasis and the fate of hematopoietic stem cells [76]. Epigenomics and transcriptomics research has revealed its role in adipogenesis, as it controls fat accumulation [77,78], and it has been found to control thermogensics in brown fat and muscle [79]. Wei et al. [80] reported that the overexpression of ZBTB16 enhances white adipogenesis...
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5. Conclusions

Using the Illumina Bovine HD Beadchip and NGS dataset analyses, we identified many putative QTLs on several chromosomes that were associated with carcass traits in 1252 Simmental beef cattle. Several candidate genes related to carcass depth and hind leg circumference were identified. Among them, CDKAL1 and E2F3 may be associated with myogenesis and muscle development. Although the data were obtained by analyzing the genome of the Simmental breed, they can also be extended and validated in other cattle breeds. The identification of such genes helps breeders to understand and improve traits such as carcass depth and hind leg circumference.

Author Contributions: Statistical analyses, writing—original draft preparation and Writing—review and editing, F.B.; validation and supervision, J.L.; conceptualization and project administration, M.M.; conceptualization and writing—review and editing, L.X. and L.Z.; validation and writing—review and editing, J.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This study was supported by the Agricultural Science and Technology Innovation Program in the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (ASTIP-IAS03 and CAAS-ZDRW202102), China Agriculture Research System of MOF and MARA and the National Beef Cattle Industrial Technology System (CARS-37). The project was also partly supported by the Science and Technology Project of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (2020GG0210 and KJXM2020002-01) for the data analysis and interpretation of the study.
Institutional Review Board Statement: All procedures were conducted in accordance with the guidelines of China’s Council on Animal Care, and the study protocol was approved by the Institute of An-inmal Science of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Science, Beijing, China (approval number: RNL09/07). Analyses associated with animals adhered to the rules of China’s Council on Animal Welfare.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data underlying this study have been uploaded to Dryad. The raw genotype data are accessible using the following doi: 10.5061/dryad.4qc06.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Abbreviations

EGF: epidermal growth factor; GWAS: genome-wide association study; MAF: minor allele frequency; NGS: next-generation sequencing; QTL: quantitative trait locus; SNP: single-nucleotide polymorphism; MSC: mesenchymal stem cells.

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