Hierarchical clustering reveals unique features in the diel dynamics of metabolites in the CAM orchid Phalaenopsis

Nathalie Ceusters1, Stijn Luca2, Regina Feil3, Johan E. Claes4, John E. Lunn3, Wim Van den Ende5 and Johan Ceusters1,6,*

1 KU Leuven, Department of Biosystems, Division of Crop Biotechnics, Research group for Sustainable Crop Production & Protection, Campus Geel, Kleinhoefstraat 4, 2440 Geel, Belgium
2 Ghent University, Department of Data Analysis and Mathematical Modelling, Coupure links 653, 9000 Gent, Belgium
3 Max Planck Institute of Molecular Plant Physiology, Am Mühlenberg 1, 14476 Potsdam-Golm, Germany
4 KU Leuven, Department of Microbial and Molecular systems, Bioengineering Technology TC, Campus Geel, Kleinhoefstraat 4, 2440 Geel, Belgium
5 KU Leuven, Department of Biology, Laboratory of Molecular Plant Biology, Kasteelpark Arenberg 31, 3001 Leuven, Belgium
6 UHasselt, Centre for Environmental Sciences, Environmental Biology, Campus Diepenbeek, Agoralaan Building D, 3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium

* Correspondence: johan.ceusters@kuleuven.be

Received 14 November 2018; Editorial decision 1 April 2019; Accepted 1 April 2019

Editor: Christine Raines, University of Essex, UK

Abstract

Crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) is a major adaptation of photosynthesis that involves temporally separated phases of CO₂ fixation and accumulation of organic acids at night, followed by decarboxylation and refixation of CO₂ by the classical C₃ pathway during the day. Transitory reserves such as soluble sugars or starch are degraded at night to provide the phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP) and energy needed for initial carboxylation by PEP carboxylase. The primary photosynthetic pathways in CAM species are well known, but their integration with other pathways of central C metabolism during different phases of the diel light–dark cycle is poorly understood. Gas exchange was measured in leaves of the CAM orchid Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’ and leaves were sampled every 2 h during a complete 12-h light–12-h dark cycle for metabolite analysis. A hierarchical agglomerative clustering approach was employed to explore the diel dynamics and relationships of metabolites in this CAM species, and compare these with those in model C₃ species. High levels of 3-phosphoglycerate (3PGA) in the light activated ADP-glucose pyrophosphorylase, thereby enhancing production of ADP-glucose, the substrate for starch synthesis. Trehalose 6-phosphate (T6P), a sugar signalling metabolite, was also correlated with ADP-glucose, 3PGA and PEP, but not sucrose, over the diel cycle. Whether or not this indicates a different function of T6P in CAM plants is discussed. T6P levels were low at night, suggesting that starch degradation is regulated primarily by circadian clock-dependent mechanisms. During the lag in starch degradation at dusk, carbon and energy could be supplied by rapid consumption of a large pool of aconitate that accumulates in the light. Our study showed similarities in the diel dynamics and relationships between many photosynthetic metabolites in CAM and C₃ plants, but also revealed some major differences reflecting the specialized metabolic fluxes in CAM plants, especially during light–dark transitions and at night.

Keywords: Aconitate, CAM, hexose monophosphates, hierarchical agglomerative clustering, soluble sugars, starch, trehalose 6-phosphate.
Introduction

Crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) is a photosynthetic specialization whereby plants optimize water use efficiency by taking up CO₂ predominantly at night when evapotranspiration rates are low. Around 6% of plant species are obligate, facultative or weak CAM plants, and CAM is generally considered a key adaptation for survival in water-limited natural environments. There is also significant interest in introducing CAM into crop species to expand sustainable production of food and biomass on semi-arid, abandoned, or marginal agricultural land (Yang et al., 2015). Traditionally, CAM has been defined within a four-phase framework to describe the various modes of photosynthesis that occur at different times during the day and night (Osmond, 1978): (i) phase I: stomata are open in the dark and external CO₂ is fixed via phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylyase (PEPC) into C₄ acids (mostly malate); (ii) phase II: stomata open at the beginning of the light period, and external CO₂ is mainly fixed by ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase–oxygenase (Rubisco); (iii) phase III: stomata are closed in the middle of the day, with decarboxylation of malate (catalysed by NAD(P)-malic enzyme (ME) or phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase) and refixation of CO₂ by Rubisco; and (iv) phase IV: stomata open towards the end of the day, and external CO₂ is mainly fixed via Rubisco. The C₄ product of night-time carboxylation, malate, is stored overnight in a large central vacuole and subsequently processed the following day when the stomata are closed to release CO₂, which is then used during C₃ photosynthesis (Borland et al., 2011).

Transitions between light and dark can initiate dramatic reversible changes in metabolism and might serve as environmental cues to acquire the diel CO₂ rhythms (Wébb, 2003; McClung, 2006). The temporal separation between the initial carboxylation during the night and subsequent decarboxylation and refixation during the day is necessary to avoid futile cycling of carbon during the diel cycle (Borland and Taybi, 2004; Ceusters et al., 2010). This means that timing is of paramount importance to direct the functioning and interplay between the two carboxylating enzymes. These biological oscillations are orchestrated by interaction between the plant’s endogenous circadian clock and the environment. The circadian oscillator operates robustly throughout development and under different environmental conditions (Boxall et al., 2005; Dever et al., 2015). In CAM plants the circadian clock is thought to control PEPC kinase activity (Hartwell et al., 1999). This Ca²⁺-independent, but ATP-dependent, protein kinase brings about reversible phosphorylation of a specific N-terminal regulatory serine residue in PEPC, rendering the enzyme less sensitive to malate inhibition and increasing its activity (Nimmo et al., 1984; Carter et al., 1991; Li and Chollet, 1994). Moreover, PEPC is an allosteric enzyme that is activated by glucose 6-phosphate (Glc6P) and inhibited by L-malate (Carter et al., 1996; Nimmo, 2003). Large differences in sensitivity to malate inhibition have been observed between the dephosphorylated and phosphorylated PEPC, and Kᵢ (malate) consistently increased during the night (Nimmo et al., 1986; Borland and Griffiths, 1997; Borland et al., 1999; Shaheen et al., 2002). However, in the absence of malate, extracts from Kalanchoë fedtschenkoi leaves harvested in the day or night have essentially the same intrinsic maximum PEPC activity (Nimmo et al., 1986).

To support night-time carboxylation, carbohydrate reserves (starch or soluble sugars) are accumulated in the light period and then remobilized at night to produce phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP), the substrate for PEPC. As such, CAM plants are characterized by a higher nocturnal carbon requirements than C₃ plants in which carbohydrate reserves are degraded to fuel dark respiration. Whilst trehalose 6-phosphate (T6P) fulfils an important function in regulating sucrose and starch metabolism in C₃ plants (Lunn et al., 2014), its potential function in CAM is currently unknown. The synthesis of carbohydrate reserves during the day needs to be coordinated with CO₂ (re)fixation by the Calvin–Benson cycle, and their remobilization at night requires coordination of respiratory pathways (glycolysis, the oxidative pentose phosphate pathway and the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle) with malate production (Ceusters et al., 2014). Various authors have speculated about the significance of changes in cellular metabolite levels in pathways involved in malate and starch synthesis but the precise mechanisms are yet unknown (Sideris et al., 1948; Vickery, 1952; Milburn et al., 1968; Cockburn and McAulay, 1977; Pierre and Queiroz, 1979).

In the presented study, integrated measurements of diel leaf gas exchange, diel metabolic dynamics (e.g. malate, starch, sugars, acids, alcohols, diverse phosphorylated sugars, AMP, ADP, ATP and inorganic phosphate) and PEPC activity were performed in leaves of the CAM orchid Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’ (moth orchid). However, due to the inherent complexity and shifts in diel metabolism, the statistical processing of large sets of metabolite data from CAM species is challenging and often limited to comparisons of nocturnal/diurnal accumulations/decreases. As such, specific information in the data might be overlooked, especially when integrated with photosynthetic flux and enzyme activity measurements. A hierarchical agglomerative cluster method was applied to extract the maximum information from the data, and the physiological and biochemical relevance of the presented clusters will be discussed, providing further insights into the metabolic regulation of CAM.

Materials and methods

Plant material and sampling

Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’ is an obligate CAM plant and belongs to the family Orchidaceae. Vegetative plants were cultivated in a growth room with a constant temperature of 28 °C, a relative humidity of 75% and a 12-h photoperiod (zeitgeber time ZT0–ZT12) with photosynthetic photon flux density (PPFD) of 120 µmol m⁻² s⁻¹. Watering was performed twice a week, once with a nutrient solution, Peters 20 N–8.7 P–16.6 K of 1 mS cm⁻¹, and once with distilled water. After 6 weeks, leaf samples (n=5) were taken from the upper one-third of young fully expanded source leaves during a cycle of 24 h starting from 08.00 h (ZT0) every 2 h until 08.00 h (ZT24) the next morning. Additional samples were taken 5 min before (ZT11.55) and 15 min after (ZT12.15) dusk. The samples from 08.00 h (ZT0 and ZT24) were taken when the lights were turned on whilst the samples taken at 20.00 h (ZT12) were taken in the dark under
a green safety light. Samples were immediately frozen in liquid nitrogen, powdered and stored at −80 °C until analysis.

Gas exchange measurements
Net CO₂ exchange was measured on the youngest fully expanded leaves, using a LiCor Portable Photosynthesis System (ADC BioScientific Ltd, UK; https://www.adc.co.uk/). The top part of the leaf was enclosed in a broad leaf chamber (6.25 cm²) and the incoming air was passed through a 20-liter bottle to buffer short-term fluctuations in the CO₂ concentration. Since the LiCor system entails an open system configuration, passing fresh air through the system on a continuous basis, environmental conditions as set in the growth room (see plant material and sampling) were tracked. After 6 weeks, gas exchange data were collected over a 24-h period with measurements obtained at 15-min intervals (n=3).

Chemical analyses of metabolites
Soluble sugars (glucose, fructose, sucrose, malate, and neokestose) were extracted using hot water (80 °C) and quantified by high performance anion exchange chromatography with pulsed amperometric detection as described by Verspriet et al. (2013).

Enzyme activity of PEPC
The extraction of PEPC was assayed as described by Borland and Griffiths (1997). About 200 mg leaf material was homogenized in 1 ml extraction buffer at 4 °C containing: 200 mM Tris–HCl (pH 8.0), 2 mM EDTA, 1 mM dithiothreitol (DTT), 2% (w/v) polyethylene glycol (PEG) 20,000, 1 mM benzamidine and 10 mM malic acid with 240 mM NaHCO₃. The homogenate was centrifuged for 2 min at 16 200 g. The extract was then desalted by passing twice through a 0.5 ml column of Sephadex G-25, equilibrated with 100 mM Tris–HCl (pH 7.5) at 4 °C, 1 mM DTT, 1 mM benzamidine and 5% (w/v) glycerol. The maximal activity of PEPC was assayed and its K₅₅ for malic acid estimated using different malic acid concentrations (0.25, 0.5, 2, 8, 16 mM) in a reaction mix (500 µl) containing: 65 mM Tris–HCl (pH 7.5), 5 mM MgCl₂, 0.2 mM NADH, 10 mM NaHCO₃, and 2.5 mM PEP. Production of oxaloacetate by PEPC was coupled to oxidation of NADH by the high endogenous NAD-dependent malate dehydrogenase activity in the extracts. The reaction was initiated by the addition of 50 µl of extract and change in absorbance at 340 nm was measured for 4 min at 25 °C. Preliminary experiments confirmed a linear decrease of NADH for at least 6 min.

Data analysis
Clustering was performed using the packages stats, dValid, and mclust from the statistical environment R version 3.5.0 (Brock et al. 2008; Scurucca et al., 2016). As the main interest lies in the discovery of curves that are close to each other while clusters are well separated, the Dunn index was used to validate the number of clusters. The Dunn index compares the variance between the members of the clusters with the variance between the means of different clusters. As the dial patterns were equal in size, with measurements every 2 h during a 24-h cycle, a Euclidean distance metric was used as a natural way to express the distance between the dial CAM patterns.

Where appropriate, data were analysed using the statistical software package IBM SPSS Statistics V23. Before carrying out statistical tests, normality of the data was checked by means of the Kolmogorov–Smirnoff statistic (P>0.05). Throughout the manuscript means are compared by an independent sample t-test (α=0.05) except for the multiple comparisons by Tukey’s Studentized range test (α=0.05) in Tables 1–3.
metabolite dataset consisting of about 2500 data points, a hierarchical agglomerative clustering method was applied to group diel patterns with high similarity together. Each pattern consisted of 13 data points with each data point being the mean of five biological replicates. To allow a consistent comparison of patterns ranging from nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW to nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW, the data points were first normalized. For each metabolite, general mean and general standard deviation were calculated over the 24-h period of the experiment taking into account all 65 measurements (13 time points×5 replicates). Normalization was performed according to the formula \((x - \text{general mean})/\text{general standard deviation}\). Using Euclidian distances, clusters were determined with a complete linkage method and a bottom-up approach, where each observation started in its own cluster and pairs of clusters were merged as one moved up the hierarchy. Based on the Dunn index, seven clusters arose that are displayed in a dendrogram (Fig. 1). We assessed the within-cluster distance (defined as the largest distance between two points within the same cluster) as the number of clusters increased from two to 15 and found that this variance varied in the range 2.40–7.00. Increasing the number of clusters above seven only accounted for a decrease from 3.40 to 2.40 for this variance. Moreover, the between-cluster variability (measured by the square root of the weighted sum of the squared distances between the cluster means and the mean of the whole set of data, the weights being the number of elements in the clusters) varies in the range 7.49–15.05 of which the values in the range 7.49–13.85 are covered by a cluster number up to 7. Additional analyses based on \(k\)-means and a model-based algorithm confirmed our choice for seven clusters. Clusters showing clear diel trends will be discussed below.

**Clusters of diel metabolite and leaf gas exchange patterns**

The first cluster was characterized by daytime degradation and nocturnal build-up (Fig. 2A). For example, malate decreased throughout the day to a minimum level of 4±1 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW near the end of the light period and then rose during the night to a maximum level of 61±4 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW before dawn. Similarly, 2-OG massively increased from 15±4 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW near the end of the light period to 153±22 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW before dawn (Fig. 2B). Diel patterns of Glc1,6BP, Fru1,6BP, and Suc6P showed a decline around the middle of the day (ZT6) to minimum levels of 0.8±0.3, 0.3±0.1, and 0.15±0.03 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW, respectively. A nocturnal increase was observed, with levels peaking at 1.4±0.3, 1.6±0.4, and 0.30±0.05 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW, respectively (Fig. 2C–E).

A second cluster containing T6P, ADP-Glc, 3PGA, and PEP was characterized by an initial accumulation at dawn, followed by a steep decrease during the remainder of the day and rather stable values during the dark period (Fig. 3). T6P showed a gradual, although significant \((P<0.05)\), increase during the first 4 h of the photoperiod followed by a decrease to a relatively stable level of 1.9±0.4 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW for the remaining period of the diel cycle (Fig. 3A). ADP-Glc and 3PGA showed a significant \((P<0.05)\) steep increase within the first 2 h of the photoperiod, followed by a gradual decrease \((P<0.05)\) during the remainder of the photoperiod to levels of 0.7±0.3 and 15±4 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW, respectively, which remained rather stable during the dark period (Fig. 3B, C). PEP concentrations dramatically increased \((P<0.05)\) at the onset of the day from less than 5 to 18±3 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW (Fig. 3D). High PEP levels remained until the middle of the day (ZT6) followed by a gradual decrease to 2.6±1.5 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW at dusk. In the dark, PEP remained low and relatively constant at around 1.3±0.6 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW.

Figure 1 also illustrates that the organic acids pyruvate, isocitrate, and citrate form a cluster with the sugars trehalose, maltose, neokestose, rhamnose, arabinose, glucose, and fructose. These diel patterns all remained rather stable during the photoperiod and increased slightly near the end of the dark period (Fig. 4). Only pyruvate and trehalose showed a significant nocturnal increase \((P<0.05)\) between ZT12 and ZT23 of 73±20 and 1.8±0.7 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW respectively (Fig. 4A, F).

Another cluster comprised succinate and sucrose (Figs 1, 5), and was characterized by a rather stable diurnal phase followed by a significant \((P<0.05)\) nocturnal decrease before rising again later part of the night.

As expected, starch (Fig. 6A) showed an inverse diel rhythm compared with malic acid (diel turnover of 57±3 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW, requiring 171 \(\mu\)mol C atoms of PEP for malic acid synthesis) (Fig. 2A), with starch being the main carbohydrate degraded at night to sustain nocturnal CO\(_2\) fixation (diel turnover of 42±7 \(\mu\)mol Glc eq. g\(^{-1}\) FW, potentially providing 252 \(\mu\)mol C atoms for PEP synthesis and respiratory production of ATP and NAD(P)H). Additional measurements indicated a lag in starch degradation for at least 1 h (ZT12: 44±8 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW and ZT13: 43±4 \(\mu\)mol g\(^{-1}\) FW; \(P>0.05\)). The pattern of daytime accumulation and night-time degradation was also shared by aconitate and Gly3P (Figs 1, 6). Aconitate showed very low levels during the first half of the photoperiod followed by a steep increase \((P<0.05)\) until a maximum of 64±12 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW was reached at dusk (Fig. 6B). Upon darkness aconitate concentrations dramatically decreased \((P<0.05)\) to negligible levels during the rest of the night. Similarly, Gly3P increased during the second half of the photoperiod until a maximum of 12±3 nmol g\(^{-1}\) FW at dusk, followed by a gradual decrease during the first half of the dark period (Fig. 6C).

myo-Inositol, iso-erythritol, galactinol, shikimate, glycerate, and UDPGlc were clustered together, with most of these showing little variation over the diel time course \((P>0.05)\) (Figs 1, 7).

A final cluster was composed of all the measured hexose monophosphates (Glc6P, Fru6P, Glc1P, Man6P and Gal1P) along with the diel leaf gas exchange pattern (Figs 1, 8). After an initial decrease at dawn, all of these metabolites showed an increase during the day followed by a dramatic decrease at the day–night transition (ZT12) halving the pre-dusk concentrations (Fig. 8). By the following sample point (ZT14), the levels of the phosphorylated sugars were already restored to the values seen during the day and remained relatively stable during the dark period but decreased again significantly \((P<0.05)\) at the end of the dark period (ZT22). Based on the clustering approach it can be concluded that the diel dynamics
of the hexose monophosphates matched the gas exchange pattern consisting of the four phases of CAM (Fig. 8F).

Metabolite changes around the day–night transition

To corroborate and further investigate the marked depression of the hexose monophosphates upon dusk, additional measurements were carried out for Glc6P, Fru6P, and Glc1P at specific time points around the light–dark transition (ZT12) (Table 1). High concentrations of these metabolites were indeed maintained until the end of the light period (ZT11.55), and when dark set in an immediate decrease was observed (ZT12.15) followed by a gradual recovery (ZT14).

Table 2 shows that the marked depression of hexose monophosphates at dusk was accompanied by a significant increase of 50% for ATP and a significant decrease of 50% for ADP. Measurements at ZT14 confirmed a stable transition towards higher levels of ATP and lower levels of ADP during the night. The pools of both AMP and P_i remained relatively
constant without a significant difference between the time points close to the day–night transition.

Measurements of $K_i$ (malate) for PEPC also revealed significant changes around the light–dark transition (Table 3). At the end of the photoperiod (ZT11.55) PEPC was relatively sensitive to malate inhibition, as indicated by a relatively low $K_i$ value of 6±1 mM. Within only 15 min of the onset of darkness, PEPC became approximately 50% less sensitive to malate, followed by a further decrease of 50% in malate sensitivity by 2 h later. As expected, no significant differences were observed for the maximal activity of PEPC during the transition between day and night (Table 3).

### Discussion

In CAM plants, strict metabolic control is a prerequisite for C and P homeostasis in order to avoid a range of adverse processes such as futile carbon cycling, depletion of inorganic phosphate, and suppression of photosynthesis (Ceusters et al., 2011, 2013; Borland et al., 2016). It goes without saying that myriad metabolites are involved in these physiological processes. However,
besides a recent study published by Abraham et al. (2016) focusing on post-transcriptional and post-translational mechanisms governing CAM in Agave americana ‘Marginata’, no extensive diel CAM metabolite datasets have yet been published. Unlike C₃ model plants, such as Arabidopsis, important potential signalling molecules such as T6P have not yet been investigated in CAM plants. In addition, large diel metabolite datasets not only offer the opportunity to depict a more comprehensive overview of CAM physiology, but are also essential to parameterize and improve diel flux balance models, allowing powerful computational analyses (Cheung et al., 2014; Shameer et al., 2018). In this study we used a hierarchical agglomerative cluster method, which can be applied to the diel course data after a simple normalization. Via this novel approach similar metabolite dynamics were grouped together (Fig. 1), revealing more insights into the metabolic networks involved in CAM. In addition, comparison of the data with published diel data from well-characterized C₃ species revealed both consistencies and marked differences in the relationships between metabolites in CAM and C₃ types of photosynthesis. Being the most comprehensive analysis of diel changes in photosynthetic and central carbon metabolism in a CAM plant to date, this paper
provides a benchmark for further studies exploring the diversity of metabolism in CAM plants. Specific attention should also be paid to related C₃ and CAM species and facultative or weak CAM species complementing current genomic and transcriptomic work (Brilhaus et al., 2016; Heyduk et al., 2016, 2018).

**Diurnal metabolite dynamics**

At the onset of the day stomata gradually close from phase II towards phase III when decarboxylation of malate provides an internal source of CO₂ to sustain Rubisco fixation. Our results show that the start of phase III was marked by a massive increase (about 400%) in 3PGA, PEP, and ADP-Glc (Fig. 3). High levels of PEP during phase III have earlier been reported in different CAM plants and are mainly attributed to the absence of PEPC activity and the interconversion of pyruvate to PEP in gluconeogenesis (Chen and Nose, 2004). The similar dynamics of 3PGA and ADP-Glc during CAM phase III in our study are consistent with knowledge from C₃ plants, where high levels of 3PGA in the light activate AGPase, thereby enhancing production of ADP-Glc, the substrate for starch synthesis (Tiessen et al., 2002; Mugford et al., 2014). However, the gradual decreases of 3PGA and ADP-Glc over the day in CAM, reflecting the shrinking malic acid store, contrasted with the more abrupt decreases at the end of the day in C₃ plants when dark sets in (Scheible et al., 2000). In accordance with the abundance of triose phosphates during the first 6 h of the day, Fru1,6BP levels rose together with consistent increases in the hexose monophosphate pool (Figs 2, 8). At the end of phase III (ZT8), when malate decarboxylation nears completion, triose phosphates became limiting and Fru1,6BP dropped. At this point the gas exchange curves indicated that the stomata opened (phase IV) and direct Rubisco fixation occurred. With initially rising levels followed by a gradual decrease, T6P showed a similar diel pattern to ADP-Glc and these two metabolites were clustered together (Fig. 3). Under some circumstances, a correlation between T6P and ADP-Glc has also been observed in the C₃ plant Arabidopsis. However, it is uncertain whether there is a direct or causal relationship between these two metabolites, because short-term induced changes in T6P levels did not consistently affect either the redox status of AGPase or ADP-Glc levels (Martins et al., 2013, Figueroa et al., 2016), and the influence of T6P on net starch accumulation during the day has recently been shown to be linked to inhibition of starch degradation in the light, rather than stimulation of ADP-Glc synthesis (Figueroa et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2017).

**Focus on the light–dark transition**

The light reactions cease upon the transition from light to dark, making the plant reliant on respiratory pathways for provision of ATP and reducing equivalents to accommodate sucrose synthesis and export. Moreover, in CAM plants, nocturnal carboxylation by PEPC constitutes an important extra energy-consuming process compared with C₃ plants. In the short term, upon onset of the dark, our results indicated a lag in starch degradation of at least 1 h (Fig. 6), which is consistent with some reports from C₃ plants (Pal et al., 2013). At this point the observed drawdown of hexose monophosphates (Fig. 8) can potentially provide reducing power (NADPH) by the action of Glc6P dehydrogenase and 6-phosphogluconate dehydrogenase in the oxidative pentose-phosphate pathway (Dizengremel et al., 2008). Gupta and Anderson (1978) observed no dark in-activation of Glc6P dehydrogenase in the CAM plant Kalanchoe ‘Tetra Vulcan’. In CAM plants, an increased nocturnal NADPH pool is beneficial as it provides a source of reducing equivalents for reduction of OAA to malate by NADP-malate dehydrogenase. In addition, the rapid respiration of aconitate stores, which were accumulated in the preceding light period (Fig. 6), via the TCA cycle might contribute to the observed increase in nocturnal ATP levels (Table 2). In Arabidopsis, the mitochondrial pyruvate dehydrogenase is known to be activated upon dark, switching the TCA cycle from a dual-linear mode to a cyclic mode, thereby boosting ATP production via oxidative phosphorylation (Sweetlove et al., 2010). Findings that isolated mitochondria from the CAM plant Kalanchoe daigremontiana showed considerably increased activity of pyruvate dehydrogenase in phase I compared with phase III support this view (Smith and Bryce, 1992). As such, aconitate might represent an immediately available source of energy upon the light–dark transition to sustain plant metabolism until the main energy supply from starch comes online.

For CAM plants ATP-dependent phosphorylation of PEPC, mediated by PEPC kinase, is essential to lower PEPC’s
Hierarchical clustering of diel CAM metabolite patterns in *Phalaenopsis*

sensitivity to malate inhibition (Carter et al., 1991; Li and Chollet, 1994; Izui et al., 2004). The steep $K_i$ (malate) dynamics (Table 3) show that sensitivity to malate inhibition of PEPC was already seriously diminished from the first hours of the dark period when malic acid levels are still minimal. These results are consistent with the view that PEPC kinase is regulated at the transcriptional level by the circadian clock and high transcript abundance of the kinase has been observed shortly after darkening (Hartwell et al., 1999; Taybi et al., 2000, 2017). Two hours after the onset of darkness, aconitate pools were nearly depleted and significant starch degradation took place. The glucose released by starch degradation will enter glycolysis, restoring the hexose monophosphates to pre-dusk levels, and is quantitatively sufficient to generate all of the PEP needed for night-time carboxylation by PEPC and accumulation of malate. Indeed there is a surplus of C available from starch degradation. This can be respired via the TCA cycle to provide both ATP and reducing equivalents, which is consistent with the stabilization of the levels of ATP and ADP (Table 2).

**Nocturnal metabolite dynamics**

The nocturnal accumulation of malate and decrease in the light is well known (Winter and Smith, 1996): it is the inverse of the diel pattern observed in C_3 plants and one of the most striking differences between the C_3 and CAM photosynthetic pathways. Interestingly Fru1,6BP, a key intermediate in the Calvin–Benson cycle, gluconeogenesis and glycolysis, clustered together with malate and showed a consistent nocturnal build-up (Fig. 2), which has also been reported earlier in other CAM plants, i.e. Kalanchoë fedtschenkoi and pineapple (*Ananas comosus*) (Kenyon et al., 1981; Chen and Nose, 2004). This pattern strongly differs from that in the C_3 plant spinach (*Spinacea oleracea*), which has negligible Fru1,6BP levels in the dark (Gerhardt et al., 1987). As the connection between triose phosphates and the hexose monophosphate pool, Fru1,6BP holds a key position in the biosynthesis and signalling of sucrose (Stitt et al., 1988). In C_3 plants, the forward reaction of FBP aldolase (i.e. aldol cleavage of Fru1,6BP to triose phosphates) is favoured in the dark to feed substrates into the lower half of glycolysis and the TCA cycle. In addition, the *in vivo* activity of sucrose phosphate synthase is low during the night in the C_3 plants spinach and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), due to post-translational deactivation of the enzyme and low substrate (UDP-glucose and Fru6P) and activator (Glc6P) concentrations in the dark (Stitt et al., 1988; Tietlow and Farrar, 1992).

Our measurements in the CAM plant *Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’* showed that nocturnal carboxylation by PEPC exhausts the PEP pool to negligible levels during the night (Fig. 3). As PEP is considered to exert negative feedback on the Fru6P to Fru1,6BP conversion, the nightly draw-down of PEP allows even higher fluxes through glycolysis and the TCA cycle. This is consistent with the nocturnal increases in respiratory intermediates such as pyruvate, 2-OG and succinate (Figs 2, 4, 5), and is in agreement with the higher nocturnal energetic requirements for CAM plants associated with transport of cytosolic malate into the vacuole across the tonoplast (Winter and Smith, 1996). The nocturnal levels of PEP (1.7±1.0 nmol g⁻¹ FW) were about 40-fold lower than those measured in the C_3 plant *Nicotiana tabacum* (Scheible et al., 2000).

As expected, the nocturnal increase in Fru1,6BP also coincided with rising levels of the hexose monophosphate pool and consequently also Suc6P to pre-dusk levels (Figs 2, 8; Table 1). In C_3 plants, such as Arabidopsis and spinach, a transient decrease of Glc6P, Fru6P, and sucrose has been noticed during the dark period immediately after dusk, followed by partial recovery. For C_3 plants these transient decreases have been attributed to a lag in starch degradation and the accompanying maltose formation (Stitt et al., 1985; Gerhardt et al., 1987; Pal et al., 2013). However, evidence

---

**Fig. 6.** Diel patterns of starch (A), aconitate (B), and glycerol 3-phosphate (C) for young fully developed leaves of *Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’*. The dark period is indicated in grey. Data are means ±SD (n=5).
is accumulating that the mode of starch degradation is another important point of divergence between CAM and C₃. In Arabidopsis, starch degradation is primarily hydrolytic (producing mainly maltose via β-amylase), but in CAM plants the phosphorolytic route (producing Glc1P via starch phosphorylase) is thought to dominate (Borland et al., 2016). This view matches with our results for Phalaenopsis ‘Edessa’ showing a significant nocturnal increase in Glc6P accompanied by only a small increase in maltose concentrations (Fig. 4) during the dark period.
Low nocturnal levels of T6P (Fig. 3) indicate that this sucrose-signalling metabolite will exert little inhibition on starch degradation during the night (Martins et al., 2013; dos Anjos et al., 2018). In Arabidopsis leaves there is a strong positive correlation between T6P and sucrose during the diel cycle (Lunn et al., 2006; Martins et al., 2013; Figueroa et al., 2016), consistent with the postulated function of T6P as a signal and regulator of sucrose levels (Figueroa and Lunn, 2016). In *Phalaenopsis* ‘Edessa’ leaves, T6P was not obviously correlated with sucrose (Figs 3A, 5B). This apparent lack of correlation with sucrose might indicate that T6P has a different function in CAM plants. However, there are other potential explanations for the lack of correlation between T6P and sucrose across the 24-h diel cycle. For example, it is possible that the relationship between T6P and sucrose is shifted as the plant moves between the four distinct metabolic phases during the light–dark cycle, or that storage of sucrose in the large vacuoles of CAM plants masks fluctuations in the more metabolically active pools of sucrose in the cytoplasm that are likely to be the main influence on T6P levels (Martins et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

We proposed a novel approach to compare diel metabolite data that are typical for plants with crassulacean acid metabolism. By applying a hierarchical agglomerative cluster method after normalization, clear trends emerged from grouping diverse diel metabolite patterns from different metabolic pathways such as the Calvin–Benson cycle, glycolysis, oxidative pentose phosphate pathway and the TCA cycle. In line with the higher nocturnal energy requirements for CAM plants, different metabolites such as hexose monophosphates and aconitate were proposed to contribute to energy homeostasis in the CAM plant *Phalaenopsis* ‘Edessa’. Unlike the C₃ model plant Arabidopsis, no correlation was found between T6P and sucrose in *Phalaenopsis* ‘Edessa’ leaves. This opens up a question about the function of T6P in CAM plants, and whether it might differ from its function in C₃ plants as a signal and regulator of sucrose levels.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the KU Leuven and by the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (RF and JEL). Microflor NV is acknowledged for supplying plant material and Kim Vekemans (Geel) and Timmy Reijnders (Leuven) for assistance in the lab.

## References

Abraham PE, Yin H, Borland AM, et al. 2016. Transcript, protein and metabolite temporal dynamics in the CAM plant *Agave*. Nature Plants 2, 16178.

Ames BN. 1966. Assay of inorganic phosphate, total phosphate and phosphatases. Methods in Enzymology 8, 115–118.

Borland AM, Barrera Zambrano VA, Ceusters J, Shorrock K. 2011. The photosynthetic plasticity of crassulacean acid metabolism: an evolutionary innovation for sustainable productivity in a changing world. New Phytologist 191, 619–633.

Borland AM, Griffiths H. 1997. A comparative study on the regulation of C₃ and C₄ carboxylation processes in the constitutive crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) plant *Kalanchoë daigremontiana* and the C₃-CAM intermediate *Clusia minor*. Plants 201, 368–378.

Borland AM, Guo HB, Yang X, Cushman JC. 2016. Orchestration of carbohydrate processing for crassulacean acid metabolism. Current Opinion in Plant Biology 31, 118–124.

Borland AM, Hartwell J, Jenkins GI, Wilkins MB, Nimmo HG. 1999. Metabolite control overrides circadian regulation of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase kinase and CO₂ fixation in Crassulacean acid metabolism. Plant Physiology 121, 889–896.

Borland AM, Taybi T. 2004. Synchronization of metabolic processes in plants with Crassulacean acid metabolism. Journal of Experimental Botany 55, 1255–1265.

Boxall SF, Foster JM, Bohnert HJ, Cushman JC, Nimmo HG, Hartwell J. 2003. Conservation and divergence of circadian clock operation in a stress-inducible Crassulacean acid metabolism species reveals clock compensation against stress. Plant Physiology 137, 969–982.

Briulhaus D, Bräutigam A, Mettler-Altman T, Winter K, Weber AP. 2016. Reversible Burst of transcriptional changes during induction of Crassulacean acid metabolism in *Talinum triangulare*. Plant Physiology 170, 102–122.

Brock G, Pihur V, Data S, Datta S. 2008. cValid: An R package for cluster validation. Journal of Statistical Software 25, 1–22.

Carter PJ, Fewson CA, Nimmo GA, Nimmo HG, Wilkins MB. 1996. Roles of circadian rhythms, light and temperature in the regulation of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase in crassulacean acid metabolism. In: Winter K, Smith JAC, eds. Crassulacean acid metabolism: biochemistry, ecophysiology and evolution. Heidelberg: Springer, 46–52.

Carter PJ, Nimmo HG, Fewson CA, Wilkins MB. 1991. Circadian rhythms in the activity of a plant protein kinase. The EMBO Journal 10, 2063–2068.

Ceusters J, Borland AM, Ceusters N, Verdoordt V,Godts C, De Proft MP. 2010. Seasonal influences on carbohydrate metabolism in the CAM bromeliad *Aechmea ‘Maya’*: consequences for carbohydrate partitioning and growth. Annals of Botany 105, 301–309.

Ceusters J, Borland AM, Godts C, Londers E, Croonenborghs S, Van Goethem D, De Proft MP. 2011. Crassulacean acid metabolism under severe light limitation: a matter of plasticity in the shadows? Journal of Experimental Botany 62, 285–291.

Ceusters J, Borland AM, Londers E, Verdoordt V, Godts C, De Proft MP. 2008. Diel shifts in carboxylation pathway and metabolite dynamics in the CAM bromeliad *Aechmea ‘Maya’* in response to elevated CO₂. Annals of Botany 102, 389–397.

Ceusters J, Borland AM, Taybi T, Frans M, Godts C, De Proft MP. 2014. Light quality modulates metabolic synchronization over the diel phases of crassulacean acid metabolism. Journal of Experimental Botany 65, 3705–3714.

Ceusters J, Godts C, Peshev D, Vergauwen R, Dyubankova N, Lescrinier E, De Proft MP, Van den Ende W. 2013. Sedoheptulose accumulation under CO₂ enrichment in leaves of *Kalanchoë pinnata*: a novel mechanism to enhance C and P homeostasis? Journal of Experimental Botany 64, 1497–1507.

Chen LS, Lin Q, Nose A. 2002. A comparative study on diurnal changes in metabolite levels in the leaves of three crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) species, *Ananas comosus*, *Kalanchoë daigremontiana* and *K. pinnata*. Journal of Experimental Botany 53, 341–350.

Chen LS, Nose A. 2004. Day-night changes of energy-rich compounds in Crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) species utilizing hexose and starch. Annals of Botany 94, 449–455.

Cheung CY, Poolman MG, Fell DA, Ratcliffe RG, Sweetlove LJ. 2014. A diel flux balance model captures interactions between light and dark metabolism during day-night cycles in C₃ and Crassulacean acid metabolism leaves. Plant Physiology 165, 917–929.

Cockburn W, McAulay A. 1977. Changes in metabolite levels in *Kalanchoë daigremontiana* and the regulation of malic acid accumulation in Crassulacean acid metabolism. Plant Physiology 59, 455–458.

Dever LV, Boxall SF, Kneová J, Hartwell J. 2015. Transgenic perturbation of the decarboxylation phase of Crassulacean acid metabolism alters physiology and metabolism but has only a small effect on growth. Plant Physiology 167, 44–59.
Dizengremel P, Le Thiec D, Bagard M, Jolivet Y. 2008. Ozone risk assessment for plants: central role of metabolism-dependent changes in reducing power. Environmental Pollution 156, 11–15.

dos Anjou L, Pandey PK, Moreno TA, Feil R, Lunn JE, Stitt M. 2018. Feedback regulation by trehalose 6-phosphate slows down starch mobilization below the rate that would exhaust starch reserves at dawn in Arabidopsis leaves. Plant Direct, doi: 10.1002/pd3.78.

Fernandez O, Ishihara H, George GM, et al. 2017. Leaf starch turnover occurs in long days and in falling light at the end of the day. Plant Physiology 174, 2199–2212.

Figueroa CM, Feil R, Ishihara H, et al. 2016. Trehalose 6-phosphate coordinates organic and amino acid metabolism with carbon availability. The Plant Journal 85, 410–423.

Figueroa CM, Lunn JE. 2016. A tale of two sugars: trehalose 6-phosphate and sucrose. Plant Physiology 172, 7–27.

Gerhardt R, Stitt M, Heldt HW. 1987. Subcellular metabolite levels in spinach leaves: regulation of sucrose synthesis during diurnal alterations in photosynthetic partitioning. Plant Physiology 83, 399–407.

Gupta VK, Anderson LE. 1978. Light modulation of the activity of carbon metabolism enzymes in the crassulacean acid metabolism plant Kalanche. Plant Physiology 61, 469–471.

Hartwell J, Gill A, Nimmo GA, Wilkins MB, Jenkins GI, Nimmo HG. 1999. Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase kinase is a novel protein kinase regulated at the level of expression. The Plant Journal 20, 333–342.

Heyduk K, McKain MR, Lalani F, Leebens-Mack J. 2016. Evolution of a CAM anatomy predates the origins of Crassulacean acid metabolism in the Agavoideae (Asparagaceae). Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution 105, 102–113.

Heyduk K, Ray JN, Ayampalayam S, Leebens-Mack J. 2018. Shifts in gene expression profiles are associated with weak and strong Crassulacean acid metabolism. American Journal of Botany 105, 587–601.

Izui K, Matsumura H, Furumoto T, Kai Y. 2004. Phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase: a new era of structural biology. Annual Review of Plant Biology 55, 69–84.

Jaworek D, Gruber W, Bergmyer HU. 1974. Adenosine 5'-phosphate and adenosine 5-monophosphate. In: Bergmyer HU, ed. Methods of enzymatic analysis, Vol. 4. Weinheim: Verlag Chemic, 2127–2131.

Kenyon WH, Holaday AS, Black CC. 1981. Diurnal changes in metabolite levels and crassulacean acid metabolism in Kalanchoe daigremontiana leaves. Plant Physiology 68, 1002–1007.

Lamprecht W, Trautschold I. 1974. Determination with hexokinase and glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase. In: Bergmyer HU, ed. Methods of enzymatic analysis V4. New York: Elsevier, 2101–2110.

Li B, Chollet R. 2000. Reciprocal diurnal changes of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylyase expression and cytosolic pyruvate kinase, citrate synthase and NADP-isocitrate dehydrogenase expression regulate organic acid metabolism during nitrate assimilation in tobacco leaves. Plant, Cell and Environment 23, 1155–1167.

Scrucca L, Pop M, Murphy TB, Raftery AE. 2016. mclust 5: clustering, classification and density estimation using Gaussian finite mixture models. The R Journal 8, 289–317.

Shaheen A, Nose A, Wasano K. 2002. In vivo properties of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase in crassulacean acid metabolism plants: is pineapple CAM not regulated by PEPC phosphorylation? Environmental Control in Biology 40, 343–354.

Shameer S, Baghalian K, Cheung CYM, Ratcliffe RG, Sweetlove LJ. 2018. Computational analysis of the productivity potential of CAM. Nature Plants 4, 165–171.

Siders CP, Young HY, Chun HH. 1948. Diurnal changes and growth rates as associated with ascorbic acid, titratable acidity, carbohydrate and nitrogenous fractions in the leaves of Ananas comosus (L.) Merr. Plant Physiology 23, 38–69.

Smith JAC, Bryce JH. 1992. Metabolite compartmentation and transport in CAM plants. In: Tobin AK, ed. Plant organelles. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 143–167.

Stitt M, Wilke I, Feil R, Heldt HW. 1988. Coarse control of sucrose-phosphate synthase in leaves: Alterations of the kinetic properties in response to the rate of photosynthesis and the accumulation of sucrose. Planta 174, 217–230.

Sweetlove LJ, Beard KF, Nunes-Nesi A, Fernie AR, Ratcliffe RG. 2010. Not just a circle: flux models in the plant TCA cycle. Trends in Plant Science 15, 462–470.

Taylor T, Cushman JC, Borland AM. 2017. Leaf carbohydrates influence transcripitional and post-transcripational regulation of nocturnal carbon allocation and starch degradation in the facultative CAM plant, Mesembryanthemum crystallinum. Journal of Plant Physiology 218, 144–154.

Taylor T, Patil S, Chollet R, Cushman JC. 2000. A minimal serine/threonine protein kinase circuitarily regulates phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase activity in crassulacean acid metabolism-induced leaves of the common ice plant. Plant Physiology 123, 1471–1482.

Tetlow IJ, Farrar JF. 1992. Sucrose-metabolizing enzymes from leaves of barley infected with brown rust (Puccinia hordei Othm.). New Phytologist 120, 479–489.

Tiessen A, Hendriks JH, Stitt M, Branscheid A, Gibon Y, Farré EM, Geigenberger P. 2002. Starch synthesis in potato tubers is regulated by post-translational redox modification of ADP-glucose pyrophosphorylase: a novel regulatory mechanism linking starch synthesis to the sucrose supply. The Plant Cell 14, 2191–2213.

Vierspree J, Cimini S, Vergauwen R, Dornez E, Locato V, Le Roy K, De Gara L, Van den Ende W, Delcour JA, Courtin CM. 2013. Fructan metabolism in suspension cultures of soybean and rice. Phytochemistry 34, 75–82.

Mugford ST, Fernandez O, Brinton J, et al. 2014. Regulatory properties of ADP glucose pyrophosphorylase are required for adjustment of leaf starch synthesis in different photoperiods. Plant Physiology 166, 1733–1747.

Nimmo GA, Nimmo HG, Feil R, Wilkins MB. 1984. Diurnal changes in the properties of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase in Bryophyllum leaves: a possible covariant modification. FEBS Letters 178, 199–203.

Nimmo HG. 2003. Control of the phosphorylation of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylase in higher plants. Archives of Biochemistry and Biophysics 414, 189–196.

Osmond CB. 1978. Crassulacean acid metabolism. A curiosity in context. Annual Review of Plant Physiology and Plant Molecular Biology 29, 379–414.

Pal SK, Liptut M, Piques M, et al. 2013. Diurnal changes of polysome loading track sucrose content in the rosette of wild-type Arabidopsis and the starrless pgm mutant. Plant Physiology 162, 1246–1265.

Pierre JN, Queiroz O. 1979. Regulation of glycolysis and level of the Crassulacean acid metabolism. Planta 144, 143–151.

Scheible WR, Krappe A, Stitt M. 2000. Reciprocal diurnal changes of phosphoenolpyruvate carboxylyase expression and cytosolic pyruvate kinase, citrate synthase and NADP-isocitrate dehydrogenase expression regulate organic acid metabolism during nitrate assimilation in tobacco leaves. Plant, Cell and Environment 23, 1155–1167.

Schröder J, Pop M, Murphy TB, Raftery AE. 2016. mclust 5: clustering, classification and density estimation using Gaussian finite mixture models. The R Journal 8, 289–317.
metabolism in developing wheat (Triticum aestivum L.) kernels. Plant & Cell Physiology 54, 2047–2057.

Vickery HB. 1952. The behavior of isocitric acid in excised leaves of Bryophyllum calycinum during culture in alternating light and darkness. Plant Physiology 27, 9–17.

Webb AAR. 2003. The physiology of circadian rhythms in plants. New Phytologist 160, 281–303.

Winter K, Smith JAC. 1996. Crassulacean acid metabolism: current status and perspectives. In: Winter K, Smith JAC, eds. Crassulacean acid metabolism: biochemistry, ecophysiology and evolution. Heidelberg: Springer, 230–246.

Yang X, Cushman JC, Borland AM, et al. 2015. A roadmap for research on crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) to enhance sustainable food and bioenergy production in a hotter, drier world. New Phytologist 207, 491–504.