

Investigation of Pathways for Complex Sphingolipid Biosynthesis in *Arabidopsis*

thaliana (L.) Heynh

By

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ARABIDOPSIS THALIANA CONTAINS THREE CERAMIDE SYNTHASE
ISOFORMS EACH WITH DISTINCT SUBSTRATE SPECIFICITY THAT MEDIATE
SPHINGOLIPID COMPOSITION, PLANT GROWTH, AND MYCOTOXIN
RESISTANCE

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Sphingolipids are essential components of eukaryote membranes. The ceramide backbone of complex sphingolipids is composed of an 18 carbon Long Chain Base (LCB) bound to a 16-26 carbon fatty acid (FA) through an amide linkage. Ceramides are synthesized *de novo* from a free LCB and fatty acyl coA by ceramide synthase (sphingosine N-acyl transferase, EC 2.3.1.24) which can be inhibited by the fungal mycotoxin Fumonisin B₁. *Arabidopsis thaliana* contains three ceramide synthases denoted *LOH1*, *LOH2*, and *LOH3* that have previously been hypothesized to have unique substrate preferences that control the final sphingolipid composition, different susceptibilities to Fumonisin, and different influences plant growth/development. This dissertation works to answers to these questions as well as identify novel complex sphingolipid biosynthetic pathways. Through the use of *in vitro* assays it was found that LOH1 and LOH3 prefer LCBs with hydroxyls at the C1, C2, and C4 positions (trihydroxy) and C20-24 saturated FA while LOH2 prefers LCBs with hydroxyls at the C1 and C2 positions (dihydroxy) and C16 saturated fatty acids. None of the isoforms

were able to use ω 9 desaturated acyl CoAs which are abundant in the final sphingolipid profile. Surprisingly LOH2 showed the highest level of activity with C4 unsaturated LCBs which are not commonly found in leaf. Each isoform was also overexpressed *in planta* to determine the effects ceramide composition has on plant growth.

Overexpression of *LOH1* or *LOH3* led to an increase in biomass while overexpression of *LOH2* resulted in a dwarf phenotype. Both the *in vitro* assays and *in planta* overexpression found LOH1 to be the most susceptible to FB₁ inhibition. In addition to ceramide synthesis a novel Δ 8 LCB desaturase from castor bean was identified which required the presence of a Δ 4 double bond for activity. The presence of Δ 4,8 unsaturated LCBs was found to result in increased glucosylceramide levels as revealed by LCB feeding experiments and pollen sphingolipid profiling. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the presence of a Δ 4 unsaturation targets LCBs through a LOH2-like ceramide synthase for subsequent Δ 8 desaturation and glucosylceramide synthesis.

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PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction.....	2
1.2 Sphingolipid Structure	3
1.3 Sphingolipid Biosynthesis	7
1.3.1 Synthesis of Long Chain Bases.....	7
1.3.2 C-4 Hydroxylation	9
1.3.3 LCB $\Delta 8$ Desaturation.....	9
1.3.4 LCB $\Delta 4$ Desaturation.....	10
1.3.5 Sphingolipid Fatty Acid Synthesis and Structural Modifications	11
1.3.6 Ceramide Synthesis.....	14
1.3.7 Glucosylceramide Synthesis	18
1.3.8 Inositolphosphoceramide synthesis	20
1.4 Sphingolipid Function-Programed Cell Death and the Hyper-sensitive response.....	20
1.5 Rational	23
1.6 References.....	27
 Chapter 2: A mass spectrometry-based method for the assay of ceramide synthase substrate specificity.....	31
2.1 Introduction.....	32

2.2 Results	35
2.2.1 Measurement of in vitro background activity	35
2.2.2 Optimization of assay conditions	36
2.2.3 Enzyme linearity with respect to time and protein concentration	40
2.2.4 Assay flexibility with respect to substrate.....	42
2.3 Discussion	43
2.4 Experimental	46
2.4.1 Purification of LCB substrate from <i>S. cerevisiae</i>	46
2.4.2 Microsome isolation.....	47
2.4.3 BSA/LCB complex formation.....	48
2.4.4 LCB equilibration into microsomes	48
2.4.5 Ceramide synthase in vitro assay	49
2.4.6 Quantification by LC-tandem MS.....	49
2.4.7 LCB/PC liposome formation.....	50
2.4.8 Non-enzyme catalyzed ceramide production	50
2.5 References	52

Chapter 3: Substrate specificity, kinetic properties, and Inhibition by Fumonisin B₁ of ceramide synthase isoforms from Arabidopsis	55
3.1 Introduction	56
3.2 Results	61

3.2.1	Functionality of Arabidopsis ceramide synthase expressed in yeast.....	61
3.2.2	Optimization of assay conditions	63
3.2.3	Kinetic parameters of Arabidopsis ceramide synthases towards LCB substrates.....	64
3.2.4	Specificity of Arabidopsis ceramide synthases towards acyl-coA substrates.....	67
3.2.5	Specificity of Arabidopsis ceramide synthases towards modified LCB substrates.....	69
3.2.6	Arabidopsis ceramide synthases show differential sensitivity to divalent cations	70
3.2.7	Sensitivity of Arabidopsis ceramide synthase isoforms to inhibition by Fumonisin B ₁	72
3.3	Discussion.....	75
3.4	Experimental Procedures	81
3.4.1	Heterologous expression of LOH genes in <i>Saccharomyces cerevisiae</i>	81
3.4.2	Western blot of heterologous expressed LOH genes in <i>Saccharomyces cerevisiae</i>	81
3.4.3	Yeast ceramide inositolphosphoceramide analysis	82
3.4.4	Homologous overexpression of LOH -1, -2, and -3	82
3.4.5	Preparation of microsomes.....	82

3.4.6	Ceramide synthase assay	83
3.4.7	Purification of LCB substrates	84
3.4.8	Formation of substrate-inhibitor complexes with BSA and inhibitor studies	85
3.5	Acknowledgements.....	85
3.6	References.....	85
Chapter 4:	Overexpression of Arabidopsis ceramide synthases differentially affects growth, sphingolipid metabolism, programmed cell death, and mycotoxin resistance.....	89
4.1	Introduction.....	90
4.2	Results.....	93
4.2.1	Overexpression of LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 in Arabidopsis results in differentially altered growth.....	93
4.2.2	LOH1, LOH2 and LOH3 overexpression in Arabidopsis differentially alters sphingolipid profiles.....	98
4.2.3	LOH2 overexpression enhances salicylic acid production and induces hypersensitive response-type programmed cell death.....	103
4.2.4	LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 overexpressing plants displayed different phenotypes when grown on Fumonisin B ₁	106
4.3	Discussion	109
4.4	Materials and Methods.....	116

4.4.1 Plant growth conditions	117
4.4.2 Plant transformations	118
4.4.3 Transgene expression analyses	119
4.4.4 Sphingolipidomic analysis	120
4.4.5 Total LCB analysis	121
4.4.6 Total dry weight analysis	121
4.4.7 Root meristem imaging and cell number measurement...	121
4.4.8 RT-PCR of programmed cell death related genes	122
4.4.9 Salicylic acid measurements	122
4.5 References	123

Chapter 5: Sphingolipid metabolism is strikingly different between pollen and leaf in Arabidopsis as revealed by compositional and gene expression profiling .127

5.1 Introduction	126
5.2 Results	132
5.2.1 Pollen isolation	132
5.2.2 Arabidopsis Col-0 pollen sphingolipidome	133
5.2.3 Sphingolipidome of pollen from a LCB $\Delta 4$ desaturase mutant	139
5.2.4 Gene expression data mining of sphingolipid biosynthetic genes in pollen relative to seedling and leaf	140
5.3 Discussion	143

5.4 Concluding remarks	149
5.5 Experimental	150
5.5.1 Pollen isolation	150
5.5.2 Sphingolipidomic analysis	150
5.5.3 Complex GIPC multiple reaction monitoring method	151
5.5.4 Expanded LC-ESI/MS/MS profiling method modifications	151
5.5.5 RNA-Seq and microarray data mining	152
5.5.6 RT-PCR and qPCR	153
5.5.7 Pollen imaging	153
5.6 Acknowledgement	154
5.7 References	154
 Chapter 6: Identification and characterization of a $\Delta 8$ long chain base desaturase that is highly specific for $\Delta 4$ unsaturated long chain bases	157
6.1 Introduction	158
6.2 Results	160
6.2.1 Identification and expression of a castor bean $\Delta 8$ LCB desaturase	160
6.2.2 Phylogenetic analysis reveals distinct evolutionary $\Delta 8$ LCB desaturase branches	161
6.2.3 Castor bean $\Delta 8$ LCB DES requires a $\Delta 4$ desaturated LCB for activity	163

6.3 Discussion	166
6.4 Experimental	169
6.4.1 Phylogenetic analysis of $\Delta 8$ LCB DES	169
6.4.2 ΔSLD1/ΔSLD2 mutant background.....	170
6.4.3 Overexpression of SLD2 and castor bean $\Delta 8$ LCB DESes in Arabidopsis.....	170
6.4.4 LCB feeding experiments.....	171
6.4.5 Total LCB Analysis.....	171
6.4.6 Sphingolipidomic analysis	171
6.5 References	172
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Future Directions	173
7.1 Conclusions.....	174
7.2 Future research perspectives	178
7.2.1 Structural domains responsible for substrate specificity ...	178
7.2.2 Regulation of ceramide synthesis in Arabidopsis	179
7.2.3 In planta functions of LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3	181
7.2.4 Function and synthesis of highly glycosylated GIPCs.....	182
7.3 Concluding remarks	182
7.4 References	183
Appendix A Enzymatic data for LOH1 overexpression Arabidopsis microsomes	185
Appendix B LCB composition of purified LCB fractions	186

Appendix C MRM Parameters for yeast ceramide profiling	187
Appendix D Primers used amplification of LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 cDNA and semi quantitative RT-PCR of hypersensitive response related PCD genes	189
Appendix E Mass Spectrometry parameters and masses monitored	190
Appendix F Arabidopsis eFP Browser probe sets used for micro array data mining.....	206
Appendix G Sphingolipid profiles for Col-0, Δ sld1/sld2, Δ sld1/sld2 + CbDES8-1, and Δ sld1/sld2 + SLD2 on control media and media supplemented with either d17:0 or d17:1(4).....	207
Appendix H Amino acid sequences for NTD8DES1 and NTD8DES2	242
Appendix I LC-MS/MS parameters for C17 LCB sphingolipids	243

LIST OF MULTIMEDIA OBJECTS

Figure 1.1 Examples of long chain bases and sphingolipids found in plants	6
Figure 1.2 Abbreviated plant sphingolipid biosynthetic pathway	8
Figure 1.3 Model of ceramide synthase mediated long chain base and fatty acid routing	17
Figure 1.4 Phosphorylated/dephosphorylated long-chain bases and ceramides serve as mediators of physiological processes in plants	22
Figure 2.1 Dependence of ceramide synthase activity on the addition of substrates.....	35
Figure 2.2 high concentrations of LCB result in deviation from Michaelis-Menten kinetics	36
Figure 2.3 Effect of BSA on ceramide synthase activity	37
Figure 2.4 LCBs quickly equilibrate with microsomes from BSA complexes.....	38
Figure 2.5 Non-enzyme catalyzed ceramide production	40
Figure 2.6 Linearity of assay with respect to protein and time.....	41
Figure 2.7 Detection of ceramide synthase activity with a variety of LCB and acyl-CoA substrates.....	43
Figure 3.1 Structural reaction for the synthesis of ceramide	57

Figure 3.2 Functional complementation of $\Delta lag1/\Delta lac1$ <i>S. cerevisiae</i> mutants with LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3	62
Figure 3.3 Enzyme activity in yeast and Arabidopsis microsomes	63
Figure 3.4 Linearity with respect to protein and time.....	64
Figure 3.5 Determination of kinetic constants in regards to trihydroxy and dihydroxy LCBs	66
Figure 3.6 Activity of the ceramide synthase isoforms with different acyl-CoA substrates	68
Figure 3.7 Activity of the ceramide synthase isoforms with different LCB substrates	70
Figure 3.8 Effect of divalent cations on the activity of Arabidopsis ceramide synthases	71
Figure 3.9 Inhibition of Arabidopsis ceramide synthase activity by fumonsin B ₁	73
Table 3.1 Inhibition parameters and statistical analysis for LOH1	74
Table 3.2 Inhibition parameters and statistical analysis for LOH2	74
Table 3.3 Inhibition parameters and statistical analysis for LOH3	75
Figure 3.10 Proposed model for the synthesis of Ceramide in Arabidopsis	80
Figure 4.1 Expression level of LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 in leaves of independent overexpression lines.....	94

Figure 4.2 Comparison of rosette and root biomasses in ceramide synthase overexpression lines.....	96
Figure 4.3 Comparison of epidermal cell numbers in root meristematic region of ceramide synthase overexpression lines	97
Figure 4.4 Representative root meristem region for measurement of cell numbers	98
Figure 4.5 Comparison of concentrations of long chain bases and C16 fatty acids in total sphingolipids from four week old rosettes of wild type plants (Col-0) and LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 overexpression lines.....	100
Figure 4.6 Sphingolipidome of wild-type (Col-0) and LOH2 overexpression lines	101
Figure 4.7 Sphingolipidome of LOH1 and LOH3 overexpression lines	102
Figure 4.8 Expression of marker genes for hypersensitive response programmed cell death in wild type (Col-0) and LOH2 overexpression lines and a comparison of salicylic acid concentrations in wild type (Col-0) and LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 overexpression lines.....	104
Figure 4.9 Expression of marker genes for hypersensitive response programmed cell death in wild type (Col-0), LOH1-, and LOH3-overexpression lines	105
Figure 4.10 Comparison of response of wild-type and ceramide synthase overexpression lines to the mycotoxin Fumonisin B ₁	107

Figure 4.11 Sphingolipid of Fumonisin B ₁ treated wild type and ceramide synthase overexpression lines.....	108
Figure 4.12 Model of ceramide synthesis and biochemical and physiological outcomes from overexpression of LOH1-, LOH2-, and LOH3-encoded ceramide synthases	110
Figure 4.13 Gene expression levels for LOH1, LOH2, and LOH3 in various tissues....	113
Figure 5.1 Viability staining of Col-0 pollen.....	133
Figure 5.2 Sphingolipid profiles of glucosylceramides (GlcCer), provisionally identified glycosylinositolphosphoceramides (Hex(OH)-HexA-IPCs, Series A), ceramides, hydroxyceramides, and free LCBs for enriched pollen from Col-0 and LCB D4 desaturase knockout mutant.....	135
Figure 5.3 ESI–MS/MS spectrum of ions detected by precursor m/z 662.6 scanning of GIPC species eluted between 5 and 10 min during chromatography	137
Figure 5.4 Detection of provisionally identified complex GIPC species in Arabidopsis Col-0	138
Table 5.1 Total amounts of each sphingolipid class in pollen from Col-0 and LCB $\Delta 4$ desaturase mutant ($\Delta 4$ DES KO) plants.....	139
Figure 5.5 Col-0 and $\Delta 4$ DES mutant pollen sphingolipid concentrations.....	140
Figure 5.6 Arabidopsis RNA-Seq gene expression levels for different genes involved with sphingolipid synthesis in pollen and seedling.....	142

Figure 5.7 Arabidopsis RNA-Seq gene expression levels for different genes involved with sphingolipid synthesis in pollen and seedling.....	143
Figure 5.8 qPCR of LOH2 in leaf and pollen tissues.....	146
Figure 5.9 Inferred structure of the major GIPC species in Arabidopsis pollen.....	148
Figure 6.1 Total LCB profile of mature castor bean leaves.....	160
Figure 6.2 Total LCB profiles from representative plants.....	161
Figure 6.3 Phylogenetic analysis of confirmed and putative $\Delta 8$ LCB DESes from plants and fungi	162
Figure 6.4 Total LCB and GlcCer analysis of plants chemically complemented with d17:1(4) LCB	164
Figure 6.5 Total LCB analysis of plants chemically complemented with d17:0 LCB ...	165
Figure 6.6 Proposed pathway for the partitioning of LCBs into the GlcCer fraction by desaturation of the LCB through a specialized $\Delta 8$ LCB DES	167
Figure 7.1 Model of sphingolipid synthesis showing distinct pathways for complex sphingolipid synthesis.....	177

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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PREVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Sphingolipids were originally identified in the late 19th century by Johann Thudichum as an “enigmatic” major lipidic component of the brain (Thudichum 1884). Since this discovery, sphingolipids have been recognized as essential components of eukaryotic cells and have been extensively studied in humans due to their association with a number of lipid storage disorders, including Tay-Sachs disease and Niemann-Pick disease (Sandhoff 2013). Sphingolipids, however, were not identified in plants until the late 1950s (Carter et al. 1958) and for nearly four decades following this discovery, sphingolipid research in plants was limited mainly to structural and compositional analyses, including studies of sphingolipid compositional changes in response to abiotic stresses. Since the late 1990s, plant sphingolipids have become an increasing research focus. Driving this heightened interest is the realization that sphingolipids are among the most abundant endomembrane lipids in plant cells and that they contribute not only to membrane structure and function that underlies abiotic and biotic stress resistance, but also to the regulation of cellular processes (Dunn et al. 2004). Recent advances in plant sphingolipid research have been spurred by development and application of advanced mass spectrometry methods that enable the rapid and quantitative measurement of molecular species of specific sphingolipid classes (Markham and Jaworski 2007). Coupling of these methods with the characterization of *Arabidopsis* mutants and transgenics have resulted in advances in our fundamental understanding of plant sphingolipid metabolism.

The backbone of complex sphingolipids, the ceramide, is composed of a long chain base bound to a fatty acid through an amide linkage (Dunn et al. 2004). Ceramide

synthesis has been recognized as a key branching point in sphingolipid metabolism with the ceramide long chain base/fatty acid composition hypothesized to play a key role in determining the final complex sphingolipid formed (Markham et al. 2011; Chen et al. 2008). In mammals it has been found that different ceramide synthases have distinct substrate preferences allowing the organism to control ceramide composition (Venkataraman et al. 2002a; Laviad et al. 2008; Mizutani et al. 2006, 2005; Riebeling et al. 2003). Through the use of mutants, evidence suggests that plant ceramide synthases also have distinct substrate preferences (Markham et al. 2011; Ternes et al. 2011; Chen et al. 2008), though this has yet to be determined through the use of *in vitro* assays. This dissertation describes the characterization of the Arabidopsis ceramide synthases and the effects that ceramide composition has on plant growth/development, fungal mycotoxin resistance, and complex sphingolipid synthesis.

1.2 SPHINGOLIPID STRUCTURE

Sphingolipids consist of hydrophobic ceramide backbones that are typically linked to polar sugar residues to form amphipathic lipid components of membranes (Lynch and Dunn 2004; Chen et al. 2010). The ceramide backbone contains a long chain amino alcohol referred to as a sphingoid long-chain base (LCB) linked through an amide bond to a fatty acid. LCBs are unique to sphingolipids. In plants, LCBs typically have chain lengths of 18 carbon atoms and can contain double bonds in the $\Delta 4$ or $\Delta 8$ positions (Figure 1.1A). The $\Delta 4$ double bond is found only in the *trans* configuration, while the $\Delta 8$ double bond can be found in either the *trans* or *cis* configurations. Following its initial synthesis, a LCB has two hydroxyl groups at the C-1 and C-3 carbons (Lynch and Dunn 2004; Chen et al. 2010). These LCBs are referred to as dihydroxy LCBs. A third

hydroxyl group can be enzymatically added at the C-4 carbon to form a trihydroxy LCB. In the short-hand nomenclature, a dihydroxy LCB with 18 carbons and one double bond is referred to as “d18:1”, and a trihydroxy LCB with 18 carbons and one double bond is referred to as “t18:1”. LCBs can be phosphorylated at the C-1 position to form LCB-phosphates (LCB-P). Free LCBs and their phosphorylated forms are typically in low abundance in plant cells (Markham and Jaworski 2007; Markham et al. 2006). Instead, the majority of LCBs are found linked to fatty acids in ceramides (Figure 1.1B). The chain-lengths of plant ceramide fatty acids range from 16 to 26 carbon atoms, the majority of which contain an enzymatically added hydroxyl group at the C-2 or α -position (Lynch and Dunn 2004; Chen et al. 2010). Analogous to the diacylglycerol backbone of glycerolipids, ceramides serve as the hydrophobic component of complex sphingolipids. The polar head group of ceramides is attached at its C-1 position and can be a phosphate residue or a variety of sugar residues (Chen et al. 2010). The latter are referred to as glycosphingolipids. The simplest glycosphingolipid in plants is the glucosylceramide (GlcCer) with a single glucose residue and comprises approximately one-third of the glycosphingolipids of *Arabidopsis* leaves (Markham and Jaworski 2007; Markham et al. 2006) (Figure 1.1C). The most abundant glycosphingolipid in plants contains an inositol phosphate bound to the ceramide with up to seven additional hexose and pentose residues (Figure 1.1C) (Cacas et al. 2013). These molecules are referred to as glycosyl inositolphosphoceramides or GIPCs and comprise approximately two-thirds of the glycosphingolipids of *Arabidopsis* leaves (Markham and Jaworski 2007; Markham et al. 2006). The quantitative significance of GIPCs in plants was overlooked for many years due to the difficulty in their extraction using standard lipid analytical protocols

because of the high polarity of their glycosylated head groups. Between the different carbon chain-lengths and hydroxylation and unsaturation states of LCBs and fatty acids and the array of polar head groups, hundreds of potentially different sphingolipid species can occur in plants, the individual significance of which are only beginning to be elucidated (Markham et al. 2013; Bure et al. 2011).

PREVIEW