

1 **Uncovering the repertoire of endogenous flaviviral elements in *Aedes***
2 **mosquito genomes**

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24 **Abstract**

25 Endogenous viral elements derived from non-retroviral RNA viruses were described in
26 various animal genomes. Whether they have a biological function such as host immune
27 protection against related viruses is a field of intense study. Here, we investigated the
28 repertoire of endogenous flaviviral elements (EFVEs) in *Aedes* mosquitoes, the vectors
29 of arboviruses such as dengue and chikungunya viruses. Previous studies identified
30 three EFVEs from *Ae. albopictus* and one from *Ae. aegypti* cell lines. However, in-depth
31 characterization of EFVEs in wild-type mosquito populations and individuals *in vivo* has
32 not been performed. We detected the full-length DNA sequence of the previously
33 described EFVEs and their respective transcripts in several *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae.*
34 *aegypti* populations from geographically distinct areas. However, EFVE-derived proteins
35 were not detected by mass spectrometry. Using deep sequencing, we detected the
36 production of piRNA-like small RNAs in antisense orientation, targeting the EFVEs and
37 their flanking regions *in vivo*. The EFVEs were integrated in repetitive regions of the
38 mosquito genomes, and their flanking sequences varied among mosquito populations
39 from different geographical regions. We bioinformatically predicted several new EFVEs
40 from a Vietnamese *Ae. albopictus* population and observed variation in the occurrence
41 of those elements among mosquito populations. Phylogenetic analysis of an *Ae. aegypti*
42 EFVE suggested that it integrated prior to the global expansion of the species and
43 subsequently diverged among and within populations. Together, this study revealed
44 substantial structural and nucleotide diversity of flaviviral integrations in *Aedes* genomes.
45 Unraveling this diversity will help to elucidate the potential biological function of these
46 EFVEs.

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48 **Importance**

49 Endogenous viral elements (EVEs) are whole or partial viral sequences integrated in
50 host genomes. Interestingly, some EVEs have important functions for host fitness and
51 antiviral defense. Because mosquitoes also have EVEs in their genomes, we decided to
52 thoroughly characterized them to lay the foundation of the potential use of these EVEs to
53 manipulate the mosquito antiviral response. Here, we focused on EVEs related to the
54 *Flavivirus* genus, to which dengue and Zika viruses belong, in *Aedes* mosquito
55 individuals from geographically distinct areas. We showed the existence *in vivo* of
56 flaviviral EVEs previously identified in mosquito cell lines and we detected new ones. We
57 showed that EVEs have evolved differently in each mosquito population. They produced
58 transcripts and small RNAs, but not proteins, suggesting a function at the RNA level.
59 Our study uncovers the diverse repertoire of flaviviral EVEs in *Aedes* mosquito
60 populations and suggests a role in the host antiviral system.

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72 **Introduction**

73 Endogenous viral elements (EVEs), also known as viral fossils, are whole or partial viral
74 sequences integrated in host genomes (1). When viral DNA integration occurs in the
75 germline, it can be inherited and retained in the host genome as evidence of ancient
76 viral infections old from millions of years. Retrovirus-derived EVEs are the best-known
77 examples since retroviruses actively integrate their DNA into the host genome as part of
78 their life cycle during infection. However, single-stranded DNA virus-derived elements
79 were detected in plants (2) and more recently, non-retrovirus-derived EVEs have been
80 shown in various animal hosts (3-7). Indeed, recent advances in bioinformatics have
81 dramatically changed the landscape of paleovirology. *In silico* surveys were used to
82 screen for EVEs in various animal genomes and identified a number of non-retroviral
83 EVEs sequences belonging to several virus families (5-8). The integrated viral elements
84 mostly accumulate random mutations that render them inactive. In several instances,
85 however, EVEs have maintained open reading frames (ORFs) and produce functional
86 proteins that can serve during infections by closely related viruses (9-12). For example,
87 endogenous bornavirus-like nucleoproteins from thirteen-lined ground squirrel, *Ictidomys*
88 *tridecemlineatus*, (itEBLN) is the first non-retroviral EVE demonstrated to serve as a
89 negative regulator against infection by a related virus (10). Overexpression of itEBLN
90 inhibits borna disease virus (BDV) infection in mammalian cell lines, presumably by
91 decreasing BDV polymerase activity. More recently, a virophage mavirus, which
92 parasitizes *Cafeteria roenbergensis* virus (CroV), was shown to be endogenized as an
93 EVE in a marine flagellate, *Cafeteria roenbergensis* (*C. roenbergensis*) (9). CroV
94 infection activates the endogenized mavirus genes in *C. roenbergensis* and produces
95 infectious mavirus particles. These particles are secreted and protect surrounding

96 flagellates from subsequent CroV infection. These studies demonstrate that EVEs can
97 play critical roles in the host antiviral system.

98 Like most species examined, *Aedes* mosquitoes also have EVEs in their genomes.
99 *Aedes* (*Ae.*) *aegypti* and *Ae. albopictus* are major vectors of arthropod-borne viruses
100 (arboviruses) such as dengue virus (DENV) and Zika virus (ZIKV). DENV and ZIKV are
101 members of the *Flavivirus* genus, which consists of enveloped viruses with a positive-
102 sense, single-stranded RNA genome. In addition to these medically important mosquito-
103 borne flaviviruses, *Aedes* mosquitoes in nature are infected by insect-specific
104 flaviviruses (ISFs) such as cell-fusing agent virus (CFAV), Kamiti River virus (KRV) and
105 *Aedes* flavivirus (AEFV) (13-15). Using *Ae. aegypti* and *albopictus* cell lines, Crochu *et*
106 *al.* detected endogenous flaviviral elements (EFVEs) which showed approximately 60%,
107 70% and 80% amino-acid similarity to CFAV, KRV and AEFV sequences, respectively
108 (4). In recent years, the availability of reference genome sequences for both *Ae. aegypti*
109 and *Ae. albopictus*, and *in silico* studies confirmed the existence of various EFVEs in
110 *Aedes* mosquitoes (5, 8). However, very limited experimental validation has been
111 performed *in vivo*. To support our hypothesis that EVEs could be used to manipulate the
112 mosquito antiviral response to stop arbovirus transmission to the human host, we
113 conducted a comprehensive characterization of EVEs in *Aedes* mosquitoes
114 representative of natural populations worldwide.

115 We investigated EFVEs found in two species of *Aedes* mosquitoes, *Ae. albopictus* and
116 *Ae. aegypti* using several populations of each species sampled from geographically
117 distinct locations. We showed the presence of EFVE DNA and RNA transcripts *in vivo*.
118 We confirmed the production of small RNAs derived from EFVEs RNA *in vivo*. We
119 further performed genomic DNA sequencing analysis in *Ae. albopictus* and applied an *in*

120 *silico* screening procedure that identified several new EFVEs in this species. Together,
121 our results demonstrate the ubiquitous presence of diverse EFVEs *in vivo* and contribute
122 to understand the putative role of these elements in the antiviral defense system of
123 mosquitoes during EFVE-related viral infection.

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144 **Results**

145 **Detection of endogenous flaviviral elements in *Aedes* mosquitoes**

146 Several EFVEs in *Aedes* mosquitoes have been previously described (4, 5, 8). We
147 focused on annotated EFVEs containing flaviviral non-structural (NS) genes, three in *Ae.*
148 *albopictus* (one named CSA1, and two unnamed) and one in *Ae. aegypti* (named CSA2)
149 (4). For simplicity, we renamed these EFVEs as: *Albopictus* Flaviviral Element (ALFE) 1
150 to 3, and *Aegypti* Flaviviral Element (AEFE) 1 (Fig. 1A). ALFE1-3 were originally
151 identified in C6/36 (*Ae. albopictus*) and AEFE1 in A20 (*Ae. aegypti*) cell lines. Laboratory
152 and field-collected *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti* mosquitoes were positive by PCR for
153 the NS3 and/or NS5 regions of both ALFE and AEFE (4). However, the full-length
154 elements were not confirmed in individual mosquitoes. Because geographical origin is
155 expected to be associated with genetic divergence due to selective pressures particular
156 to each geographical region and/or genetic drift, we explored EFVEs in mosquitoes from
157 different parts of the world. We used *Ae. albopictus* from Gabon and Vietnam, and *Ae.*
158 *aegypti* from Cameroon, French Guiana and Thailand. First, we attempted to detect full-
159 length DNA for ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 *in vivo*. Cell lines corresponding to each mosquito
160 species (Aag2 for *Ae. aegypti* and C6/36 and U4.4 for *Ae. albopictus*) were used in
161 addition to mosquito individuals. PCR showed amplicons with the expected sizes for
162 ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 except for ALFE1 in the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain (no
163 amplification band) and ALFE2 in U4.4 cell line (a larger band) (Fig. 1B, white
164 arrowhead). We further characterized ALFE1 in the Vietnam strain by PCR with different
165 primer pairs. ALFE1 was amplified with a primer pair targeting the element without the
166 first 200 base pairs (bp) at its 5' end (Fig. 1B). This result suggests that ALFE1 in *Ae.*
167 *albopictus* Vietnam differs from ALFE1 in *Ae. albopictus* Gabon, C6/36 and U4.4 cells in

168 the first 200 bp of the element. For ALFE2, sequencing of the PCR product in U4.4 cells
169 showed a partial ALFE2 sequence fused with unannotated mosquito sequences,
170 suggesting that ALFE2 is recombined in U4.4 cells.

171 Next, we examined mRNA expression for ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 by RT-PCR. Previous
172 work by Crochu *et al.* showed ALFE1 mRNA in C6/36 but not *in vivo* while ALFE2, -3
173 and AEFE1 mRNAs had not been tested *in vitro* nor *in vivo* (4). ALFE1 mRNA was
174 observed with a primer pair targeting the NS2 region but not the full-length element (Fig.
175 1C). ALFE2 and -3 mRNAs were present in all samples except for ALFE2 in U4.4 cells.
176 Full-length AEFE1 mRNA was observed in Aag2 cells and in the *Ae. aegypti* French
177 Guiana strain but not in the *Ae. aegypti* Cameroon and Thailand strains. The first 1.2 kb
178 of AEFE1 mRNA were detected in all *Ae. aegypti* samples (Fig. 1C). The *Ae. aegypti*
179 French Guiana strain was the only to show the full-length transcript of AEFE1 among all
180 *Ae. aegypti* strains tested. Altogether, our results indicated that ALFE1-3 and AEFE1
181 were established by ancient viral infections in nature and not by artificial recombination
182 in cell culture. In addition, ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 are well conserved and their mRNAs are
183 expressed among *Aedes* mosquito populations from different parts of the world.

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185 **ALFE and AEFE produce piRNA-like molecules in *Aedes* mosquitoes**

186 We previously reported that *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti* infected with chikungunya
187 virus (CHIKV) produce viral cDNA through endogenous retrotransposon activity and that
188 this viral cDNA generates small interfering RNAs (siRNAs) and PIWI-interacting RNAs
189 (piRNA) mediating viral persistence (16). CHIKV is an alphavirus from the *Togaviridae*
190 family, which consists of enveloped viruses with a single-stranded, positive-sense RNA
191 genome. CHIKV is also a mosquito-borne virus with great impact on human health (17).

192 To check if ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 transcripts were also capable of generating small
193 RNAs, as CHIKV-derived viral DNA, we re-analyzed small RNA libraries from *Ae.*
194 *albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti*, infected or uninfected with CHIKV, that were already
195 available in the laboratory (Fig. 2 and Fig. S1). The majority of small RNAs that mapped
196 to ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 were 27-29 bases in length with an enrichment of uridine at the
197 first position of the small RNA, and thus identified as primary piRNA-like molecules (Fig.
198 2A and Fig. S1A). We observed that piRNAs derived from these endogenous viral
199 elements were only in antisense orientation. CHIKV infection did not affect the size
200 distribution and profiles of the small RNAs derived from ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 (Fig. 2B
201 and Fig. S1B). We examined the production of piRNAs targeting the flanking regions of
202 ALFE1-3 determined by Crochu *et al* (4). We only detected production of antisense
203 strand piRNA-like molecules on these regions, similar to ALFE1-3 (Fig. S2). In addition,
204 the flanking regions of ALFE1 and 2, produced 21-nucleotide-long small RNAs
205 corresponding to siRNAs. These results indicate that ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 produce
206 piRNAs only in antisense orientation and also that these elements are located in specific
207 regions of the genome that generate long transcripts for endogenous siRNAs and piRNA
208 production.

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210 **DENV infection does not affect AEFE1 transcript abundance in *Ae. aegypti***
211 Virus infections affect the expression of a number of host genes, for instance DENV
212 suppresses immune gene expression in the *Ae. aegypti* Aag2 cell line (18). The
213 presence of mRNA and small RNAs from ALFE and AEFE in *Aedes* mosquitoes
214 prompted us to check whether the expression level of their transcripts was altered during
215 DENV infections *in vivo*. We utilized unpublished transcriptome datasets from *Ae.*

216 *aegypti* females orally infected or uninfected with either of two DENV serotypes (DENV1
217 and DENV3), which were available in our laboratory to examine AEFE1 mRNA
218 expression. DENV1 infection did not affect AEFE1 mRNA expression at 24 and 96 hours
219 post infection (Fig. 3A). No significant difference in AEFE1 mRNA expression was
220 observed between DENV1 and -3 infected *Ae. aegypti* at 18 and 24 hours post infection
221 (Fig. 3B). The data suggest that AEFE1 is constitutively transcribed and not affected by
222 DENV1 and -3 infections in *Ae. aegypti* adult females.

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224 **Searching for new flavivirus-like elements in *Aedes* mosquitoes**

225 PCR for full-length ALFE1 DNA in the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain did not result in
226 amplification (Fig. 1B). We then performed PCR with primer pairs targeting ALFE1 and
227 its flanking regions and amplified bands with unexpected sizes (data not shown).
228 Because of the heterogeneity of the PCR products, we moved on to confirm the
229 existence of ALFE1 and to search for new ALFEs in *Ae. albopictus*. We performed
230 whole-genome DNA sequencing of the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain and C6/36 cell line.
231 First, we mapped reads from the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam and C6/36 DNA libraries to
232 ALFE1-3 and their respective flanking region sequences (Fig. 4 DNA coverage showed
233 the presence of full-length ALFE1 in the genomes of the Vietnam strain and of C6/36
234 cells (Fig. 4A), despite the lack of PCR amplification. In addition, the relative coverage of
235 ALFE1-3 flanking regions was substantially higher, indicating that these elements are
236 integrated in multi-copy regions (Fig. 4A-C). We also observed a similar trend of
237 insertion of ALFEs in multi-copy sequences when analyzing the genome sequence of
238 the *Ae. albopictus* Foshan strain available in Vectorbase (data not shown).

239 To identify new ALFEs, we performed an *in silico* screening based on an iterative
240 mapping and assembly procedure using ALFE1-3 sequences as scaffolds and the DNA
241 library from the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain as the query (details provided in materials
242 and methods). This *in silico* screening yielded eight contigs named ALFE4-11 harboring
243 ALFE1-3 partial sequences (Fig. 5A). For instance, ALFE4 was composed by a portion
244 of ALFE1 followed by the full-length ALFE3. We detected different flanking genomic
245 sequences to each ALFE, suggesting that multiple versions of each ALFE are present in
246 the genome of the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain. The sequences of the nearby regions
247 are unique to *Aedes* mosquitoes, as homology search against Genbank and Vectorbase
248 databases did not show homology with any known organisms. Moreover, the six-phase
249 translation of the flanking sequences did not show any similarity with known proteins
250 from UniProt Knowledge database.

251 To confirm the existence of the bioinformatically predicted ALFE4-11, we used two
252 different assessments: 1) quality of DNA mapping of *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam and C6/36
253 reads to the new ALFE contigs, and 2) PCR with primer pairs specific to the new ALFE
254 contigs. For the DNA mapping, depth and continuity of the coverage along the ALFE
255 sequences were used to confirm the ALFE existence in the Vietnam strain. Figure 5B
256 shows DNA coverage and continuity of reads on ALFE7 as an example of the validation.
257 In the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain the reads continuously covered the ALFE7 contig
258 sequence while in C6/36 cells there are differences in continuity of the coverage
259 (presence of a gap). In addition, the read counts corresponding to the flanking regions of
260 ALFE7 confirmed that this element is integrated in multi-copy sequences in the *Ae.*
261 *albopictus* genome. Figure 5C shows PCR amplification products of predicted ALFE4, -7
262 and -8. These three elements were detected in the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain

263 whereas only ALFE8 was present in the Gabon strain. Neither C6/36 nor U4.4 genomes
264 showed the presence of these elements. In addition, we checked small RNA production
265 from the newly described ALFEs. As observed with ALFE1-3, the bioinformatically
266 predicted ALFEs and their flanking sequences are covered by only antisense piRNA-like
267 molecules with a U1 bias (Fig. S3).

268 Lastly, we compared the ALFE contigs identified from C6/36 and *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam
269 with *Ae. albopictus* Foshan genomic DNA supercontigs. We observed considerable
270 variation in the flanking regions between ALFEs in the different strains. For example, the
271 *in silico* pipeline predicted the existence of ALFE4 (a fusion between ALFE1 and ALFE3)
272 in the Vietnam strain (Fig. 6). When the ALFE4 contig was compared to ALFE4-like
273 contig in C6/36 cells, a 1.3-kbp host sequence was present between ALFE1 and -3. This
274 host sequence also exists in the Foshan genome but is much longer (11 kbp) and
275 contains a repeat sequence at both extremities of a coding DNA sequence (CDS) with a
276 gag-, reverse transcriptase- and proteinase-like domains. The analysis suggests that
277 ALFE1 and -3 were originally the same element in the Vietnam strain (ALFE4) and were
278 separated by insertion of a retrotransposon in the Foshan strain or vice versa.

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280 **ALFE- and AEFE-derived proteins are undetectable by mass spectrometry**

281 Because ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 generated mRNA *in vitro* and *in vivo*, we checked
282 whether they could produce detectable proteins. As antibodies against ALFE, AEFE or
283 similar flaviviruses are not available, we performed mass spectrometry (MS) analysis
284 with C6/36 and Aag2 cell lines to find ALFE and AEFE-derived peptides. Proteins from
285 C6/36 and Aag2 cells were purified and subjected to MS for bottom-up proteomics
286 analysis. Although we identified Ago2, Dcr2 and Piwi5, as well as thousands of proteins

287 from all the subcellular fractions and ranging from 5.6 to 811 kDa (Table 1 and Table S1),
288 no ALFE- neither AEFE-proteolytic peptides were identified in both C6/36 and Aag2 cells.
289 This result suggests that ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 are not translated at high level, if
290 translate at all, in both mosquito cell lines.

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292 **Phylogenetic analysis of AEFE1 in *Ae. aegypti***

293 As mentioned above, different environmental conditions or reduced gene flow could
294 result in divergent evolution of EVEs between geographical locations. To study this, we
295 examined AEFE1 in *Ae. aegypti* from Cameroon, French Guiana and Thailand. The full-
296 length sequence of AEFE1 in individual mosquitoes from each strain was amplified and
297 sequenced. Some individual mosquitoes from Cameroon and Thailand populations did
298 not show amplification of AEFE1 and were therefore excluded from this analysis. Next,
299 we generated maximum-likelihood phylogenetic trees of AEFE1 consensus sequences
300 from each individual and their homologous sequence in the genome of ISFs closely
301 related to AEFE1 such as CFAV, KRV and AEFV, as well as homologous sequences in
302 related medically important flaviviruses. As expected, the AEFE1 sequence is closely
303 related to the ISFs (Fig. S4). To further examine the relationship among AEFE1
304 sequences from different geographical locations, an additional tree was generated and
305 rooted with the ISFs as the outgroup, but is presented without the ISFs for visual clarity
306 (Fig. 7). The phylogenetic analysis showed that among the three ISFs considered, KRV
307 is the closest to AEFE1 (Fig. S4). In addition, the phylogenetic relationships among
308 AEFE1 sequences mainly recapitulate the recent evolutionary history of *Ae. aegypti*
309 populations (Fig. 7). With two exceptions, AEFE1 sequences in mosquitoes from the
310 non-African (Thailand and French Guiana) populations were derived from AEFE1

311 sequences found in the African (Cameroon) population. A basal evolutionary position of
312 African populations is typically observed for *Ae. aegypti* genes (19), consistent with the
313 recent out-of-Africa geographical expansion of the species. Thus, the phylogenetic
314 analysis suggests that AEFE1 evolved consistently with other host genes at the species
315 level.

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329 Discussion

330 Recently, reactivation of EVEs due to related or unrelated viral infections have been
331 reported, strongly suggesting a role of EVEs during the immune response of the host (9-
332 11). Dozens of EVEs, comprising flavivirus-, rhabdovirus- and reovirus-related EVEs
333 have been bioinformatically predicted for different mosquito strains and some of them
334 were confirmed in mosquito cell lines or strains (4, 5, 7, 8, 20). However, few studies
335 have been conducted to characterize EVEs *in vivo*, a necessary step to further
336 investigate their role during viral infection of mosquitoes. Due to the current disease
337 outbreaks caused by mosquito-borne flaviviruses, such as Zika and dengue viruses, we
338 decided to study and characterize *in vivo* endogenous flaviviral elements (EFVEs) that
339 were previously identified in *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti* mosquito cell lines. To
340 improve our understanding of the forces shaping the evolution of these EFVEs, we
341 assessed their presence, transcription, small RNA production, protein production and
342 phylogeny using African, Asian and American populations of *Aedes* mosquitoes. These
343 wild-type populations are epidemiologically relevant because they occur in regions
344 where they act as the main arbovirus vectors (21, 22). As to simplify nomenclature, we
345 propose to name ALFE x the EFVEs identified in *Ae. albopictus* and AEFEx the ones
346 identified in *Ae. aegypti*, where x is a number.

347 We first showed the presence of full-length ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 DNA in *Ae. albopictus*
348 or *Ae. aegypti* individuals, respectively, in several populations of both mosquito species.
349 This indicates that ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 are likely derived from ancient integration
350 events of flavivirus DNA in nature that have persisted during recent evolution of the
351 species. We also detected complete or partial mRNA of ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 *in vivo*.
352 The expression level of AEFE1 remained unchanged following DENV1 and -3 infection

353 of *Ae. aegypti* mosquitoes, suggesting a constitutive expression. However, experiments
354 addressing AEFE and ALFE mRNA regulation during different virus infections or
355 different abiotic or biotic stimuli should be designed and performed in the future.
356 In most documented cases, functional EVEs play a role at the protein level (9-12). We
357 performed a powerful bottom-up proteomic approach to search for ALFE- and AEFE-
358 proteolytic peptides in C6/36 and Aag2 cell lines. The mass spectrometry analysis could
359 not validate the expression of ALFE1-3 and AEFE1 proteins in any of the subcellular
360 fractions analyzed, while control peptides for each cell type were readily detected. Due
361 to the conservation of ALFE and AEFE *in vivo* and *in vitro*, this result strongly suggests
362 that ALFE and AEFE mRNAs are not translated into proteins. However, EFVEs could
363 need specific conditions to be translated. For instance, the mosquito cell lines we used
364 were established from larvae or embryos (23, 24). ALFE and AEFE could be translated
365 only in specific tissues or stages of development *in vivo*. Another interesting possibility is
366 that because the transcripts were observed by RT-PCR and RNA sequencing, ALFE
367 and AEFE could have a function at the RNA levels.
368 Small RNAs have critical roles in various aspects of host fitness and antiviral immunity in
369 mosquitoes (16, 25-31). The piRNA pathway is one of the small RNA pathways and is
370 mainly controlling “non-self” sequences, such as retrotransposable elements (32-34).
371 According to the PIWI proteins involved and available for piRNA biogenesis, they are
372 classified into primary piRNAs or secondary piRNAs, the latter being produced from an
373 amplification cycle known as the ping-pong cycle. We found that all ALFE1-3, AEFE1
374 and their flanking regions produced a population of primary piRNA-like molecules only in
375 antisense orientation that were not affected during CHIKV infection. A recent study also
376 found that some annotated genes produce antisense primary piRNA-like small RNAs in

377 *Ae. aegypti* Aag2 cells (35). Two hypotheses could account for the production of only
378 primary piRNA-like molecules by ALFE and AEFE. First, the production of ALFE- and
379 AEFE-derived primary piRNAs may be only happening in specific tissues lacking PIWI
380 proteins, such as Piwi5 and/or -6, involved in ping-pong amplification. Second, there
381 could exist an unknown selection mechanism to produce only primary piRNA from EVE-
382 enriched regions. Even if these hypotheses could account for the only primary piRNAs,
383 none of them explains why piRNAs are only in antisense orientation. Curiously, in
384 vertebrates, some murine EBLNs and their flanking regions also generate antisense
385 piRNA-like small RNAs (36). This suggest that EVEs have common features on small
386 RNA productions across species and kingdoms. To elucidate how and why this is
387 happening deserver further studies.

388 Regarding the function of these EFVE-derived piRNAs, it is tempting to propose that
389 they could regulate infections by closely related viruses by targeting viral RNA in *Aedes*
390 mosquitoes. ALFE and AEFE do not contain sequences of 24-30 nucleotides that
391 perfectly span AEFV and KRV sequences, which are the most closely related known
392 ISFs. However, piRNAs allow some mismatches with target sequences (37-39). If ALFE
393 and AEFE-derived piRNAs are loaded into the ping-pong amplification cycle during viral
394 infection, a number of piRNAs that match the virus could be produced and those piRNAs
395 could contribute to control viral replication. We and others previously demonstrated that
396 viral piRNAs (vpiRNAs) were detected in *Aedes* mosquitoes and in mosquito cell lines
397 infected with mosquito-borne viruses such as CHIKV and Rift Valley Fever virus
398 (phlebovirus, *Bunyaviridae* family) (16, 28). Although the direct effects of vpiRNA on viral
399 replication remains unclear, vpiRNAs could render the mosquitoes tolerant to the virus

400 infections (16). By providing closely related piRNAs into the ping-pong cycle, ALFE and
401 AEFE may contribute to control pathogenesis during exogenous viral infections.

402 Using a bioinformatics approach, we identified several new ALFEs composed of partial
403 or complete ALFE1-3 sequences in *Ae. albopictus* mosquitoes from Vietnam. Some of
404 these new ALFEs were predicted only in our mosquito strain but not found in the C6/36
405 cell line genome. PCR also showed variability in the detection of ALFE4-11 among the
406 mosquito strains, suggesting that each mosquito population has a different set of EFVEs
407 in their genome. The recent genome sequencing of *Ae. albopictus* Foshan strain *Chen*
408 *et al.* (8) found more than 20 EFVEs that were mostly related to NS1 or NS5 genes from
409 ISFs. Likewise, we also found three elements containing NS1 and four containing NS5
410 out of eight identified ALFE-like contigs. Another study performed on field-collected *Ae.*
411 *albopictus* in Northern Italy detected flaviviral NS5 related to CFAV and KRV NS5 (40).

412 Therefore, *Aedes* mosquitoes seem to have preferentially accumulated ancient flaviviral
413 NS5 sequences in their genome. There are two potential and not exclusive explanations
414 for this: (1) NS5 could be preferably endogenized compared to other flaviviral sequences,
415 (2) NS5 sequences could be positively maintained over generations. Although the
416 mechanism of endogenization has not been elucidated, we and others suggested that it
417 happens in a retrotransposon-dependent manner (16, 41, 42). *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae.*
418 *aegypti* genomes harbor 50% to 70% of repetitive sequences such as retrotransposons
419 and long interspersed nuclear elements (LINEs) (8, 43). Accordingly, it is interesting to
420 propose that the sequence of NS5 could be efficiently recognized by retrotransposons in
421 *Aedes* mosquito genomes.

422 One interesting observation arose when we compared the newly identified ALFE4
423 between our Vietnam strain and the Foshan strain of *Ae. albopictus*. In the Vietnam

424 strain, ALFE4 appears as a fusion of ALFE1 and ALFE3. In the Foshan strain, a large
425 CDS containing retrotransposon RT-like domain with terminal repeat sequences exists
426 between ALFE1 and -3. Katzourakis *et al.* (5) observed in *Ae. aegypti* and *Ae. albopictus*
427 the presence of an almost entire flaviviral genome fragmented in several pieces across
428 the mosquito genome. Likely, we propose that ALFE- and AEFE-like sequences are
429 inserted in repetitive regions of the mosquito genome, where transposons can be acting
430 as a trap for non-retroviral DNA. These intergenic flanking regions display substantial
431 structural variation among mosquito populations, arguing for an active rearrangement
432 and continuous change of EFVE-containing regions and pointing to a role of these
433 captured viral sequences in the evolution of host genomes.

434 It is, however, important to stress that we faced significant challenges working with the
435 genome sequence of the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain. This is presumably due to the
436 difficulties in assembling the different contigs, despite a comfortable depth of coverage,
437 due to the high content of repetitive sequences. Indeed, the currently available genome
438 assemblies of *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti* in Vectorbase consist of thousands of
439 unassembled supercontigs. There is an urgent need to assemble these fragmented
440 reference genome sequences into end-to-end chromosome maps. Hopefully, the advent
441 of new tools such as long-read sequencing technologies and chromosome confirmation
442 capture will be a leap forward in the study of mosquito genomes.

443 Finally, a phylogenetic analysis of AEFE1 in *Ae. aegypti* from Cameroon, French Guiana
444 and Thailand showed that the evolutionary history of AEFE1 was similar to that of most
445 nuclear genes (19). AEFE1 was genetically more diverse in the Cameroon strain
446 compared to the French Guiana and Thailand strains, which is also consistent with
447 patterns of genetic diversity for nuclear genes. Our phylogenetic analysis suggests that

448 the integration events of AEFE1 occurred before *Ae. aegypti* mosquitoes expanded out
449 of the African continent. However, we found some *Ae. aegypti* individuals from
450 Cameroon and Thailand in which the full-length AEFE1 could not be amplified,
451 suggesting that both structural and nucleotide variants of AEFE1 exist within the same
452 population. It is likely that following the initial integration event, complex evolutionary
453 forces have shaped the genetic diversity of EFVEs that is observed today. Unraveling
454 this diversity will be necessary to elucidate their potential functional role.

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472 **Materials and Methods**

473 **Ethics statement**

474 The Institut Pasteur animal facility has received accreditation from the French Ministry of
475 Agriculture to perform experiments on live animals in compliance with the French and
476 European regulations on care and protection of laboratory animals. Rabbit blood draws
477 performed during the course of this study were approved by the Institutional Animal Care
478 and Use Committee at Institut Pasteur under protocol number 2015-0032, in accordance
479 with European directive 2010/63/UE and French legislation.

480

481 **Cell culture**

482 C6/36 (ATCC CRL-1660) and U4.4 (*Ae. albopictus*) (24), and Aag2 (*Ae. aegypti*) (44)
483 cell lines (kindly provided by G. P. Pijlman, Wageningen University, the Netherlands)
484 were maintained 28°C in L-15 Leibovitz medium (Gibco) supplemented with 10% foetal
485 bovine serum (Gibco), 1% nonessential amino acids (Gibco), 2% tryptose phosphate
486 broth (Sigma) and 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Gibco).

487

488 **Mosquitoes**

489 Laboratory colonies of *Ae. aegypti* were established from field collections in Cameroon
490 (2014), French Guiana (2015), and Thailand (2013). Laboratory colonies of *Ae.*
491 *albopictus* were established from field collections in Gabon (2014) and Vietnam (2011).
492 All the experiments were performed within 16 generations of laboratory colonization. The
493 insectary conditions for mosquito maintenance were 28°C, 70% relative humidity and a
494 12 h light: 12 h dark cycle. Adults were maintained with permanent access to 10%

495 sucrose solution. Adult females were offered commercial rabbit blood (BCL) twice a
496 week through a membrane feeding system (Hemotek Ltd).

497

498 **Experimental DENV infections *in vivo***

499 Wild-type, low-passage DENV isolates (DENV1: KDH0030A (45); DENV3:
500 GabonMDA2010 (46)) were originally obtained in 2010 from the serum of dengue
501 patients. Informed consent of the patients was not necessary because the viruses
502 isolated in cell culture are longer considered human samples. KDH0030A was isolated
503 at the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences, Bangkok, Thailand.
504 GabonMDA2010 was isolated at the Centre International de Recherches Médicales de
505 Franceville, Gabon. Virus stocks were prepared and experimental mosquito infections
506 were conducted as previously described (47). Briefly, 4- to 7-day-old female mosquitoes
507 were deprived of sucrose for 24 hours and transferred to a biosafety level-3 insectary.
508 Washed rabbit erythrocytes resuspended in PBS were mixed 2:1 with pre-diluted viral
509 stock and supplemented with 10 mM ATP (Sigma-Aldrich). The viral stock was pre-
510 diluted in Leibovitz's L-15 medium with 10% FBS, 0.1% penicillin/streptomycin and 1%
511 sodium bicarbonate (Gibco) to reach an infectious titer ranging from 5×10^6 to 1.1×10^7
512 focus-forming units per mL of blood using a standard focus-forming assay in C6/36 cells
513 (47). A control blood meal was prepared identically except that the supernatant of mock-
514 inoculated cells replaced the viral suspension. Mosquitoes were offered the infectious or
515 control blood meal for 30 min through a membrane feeding system (Hemotek Ltd) set at
516 37°C with a piece of desalted pig intestine as the membrane. Following the blood meal,
517 fully engorged females were selected and incubated at 28°C, 70% relative humidity and
518 under a 12 h light: 12 h dark cycle with permanent access to 10% sucrose.

519

520 **PCR and RT-PCR**

521 Total DNA was extracted from mosquito cell lines or individuals with NucleoSpin Tissue
522 kit (Macherey-Nagel). Total RNA was extracted from the mosquito samples with TRIzol
523 (Invitrogen). Following DNase I (Promega) treatment, cDNA was synthesized with
524 Maxima H Minus Reverse Transcriptase and oligodT primers according to the
525 manufacturer's instructions (Thermo Fisher Scientific). PCR and nested PCR were
526 performed with DreamTaq DNA polymerase (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The sequences
527 of the primers are provided in supplementary Table S2.

528

529 **Transcriptome data analysis**

530 Individual midgut libraries of *Ae. aegypti* infected with DENV-1 or DENV-3 were
531 prepared from total RNA extracts from individual midguts after quality control with a
532 Bioanalyzer RNA 6000 kit (Agilent). Purification and fragmentation of mRNA, cDNA
533 synthesis, end-repair, A-tailing, Illumina indexes ligation and PCR amplification were
534 performed using TruSeq RNA Sample Prep v2 (Illumina) followed by cDNA quality check
535 by Bioanalyzer DNA 1000 kit (Agilent). Libraries were diluted to 10 pM after Qubit
536 quantification (Thermo Fisher Scientific), loaded onto a flow cell, clustered with cBOT
537 (Illumina). Single-end reads of 51 nucleotides in length were generated on a HiSeq2000
538 sequencing platform (Illumina). Sequencing reads with a quality score <30 were trimmed
539 using Cutadapt (<https://cutadapt.readthedocs.io/en/stable/>). Passing-filter reads were
540 mapped to *Ae. aegypti* transcripts (AaegL3.1, <http://vectorbase.org>) using Bowtie2 then
541 processed with the Samtools suite to create of a matrix of raw counts used for gene
542 expression analysis by DESeq2 package.

543

544 **Small RNA and genome DNA libraries**

545 To analyze small RNA productions from ALFE and AEFE, we used small RNA libraries
546 of *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti* infected with or without CHIKV that are publically
547 available in the Sequence Read Archive with accession code SRP062828. For genomic
548 DNA libraries, total DNA from C6/36 and *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam was extracted using
549 NucleoSpin Tissue kit (Macherey-Nagel). Genomic DNA was then sheared into 200 bp
550 using Covaris S220 device with the following parameters: Peak Incident Power, 175;
551 Duty Factor, 10; Cycle Burst, 200; Duration, 180 seconds. Genomic DNA libraries were
552 prepared using KAPA LTP Library Preparation Kit Illumina Platforms (KAPA
553 BIOSYSTEMS). The library was amplified with 10 PCR cycles and 2 x 151 pair-end
554 reads were sequenced on NextSeq 500.

555 For bioinformatics analysis, the quality of fastq files was assessed with FastQC
556 (www.bioinformatics.babraham.ac.uk/projects/fastqc/). Low-quality bases and adaptors
557 were trimmed from each read by Cutadapt. Only reads with acceptable quality (phred
558 score 20) were retained. A second set of graphics was generated by FastQC using the
559 fastq files trimmed by cutadapt. Reads were mapped to target sequences using bowtie1
560 with the '-v 1' or bowtie2 with the '--sensitive' for small RNA or DNA library,
561 respectively. Bowtie1 (small RNA library) and -2 (DNA library) generate results in sam
562 format. All sam files were analyzed by the samtools package to produce bam indexed
563 files. Home-made R scripts with Rsamtools and Shortreads in Bioconductor were used
564 for analysis of the bam files.

565

566 ***In silico* screening for new EFVEs**

567 To identify all versions of EVEs in the mosquito DNA contigs we developed an iterative
568 bioinformatics pipeline. Each iteration is composed of 4 steps:

569 1/ Blastn using DNA library as database and with an e-value threshold of 1E-20

570 2/ Reads extraction according to the blastn result

571 3/ Assembly of these reads using SPAdes 3

572 4/ Extraction of contigs larger than 400 bases

573 For the first iteration, the already known ALFEs sequences were used as queries. For

574 the following iterations, the contigs selected from previous iteration were used as

575 queries. Due to the very large number of matches detected by blastn after some

576 iterations (repetitive regions), only 5 iteration were used in order to analyze the contigs

577 obtained.

578

579 **Mass Spectrometry**

580 C6/36 and Aag2 cells (10^7) were lysed by sonication (twice 20 sec using an ultrasonic

581 probe) in lysis buffer (urea 6M; TrisHCl 150 mM pH 8.8; β octyl 1%; DTT 10 mM). In

582 addition, in order to have an indication of subcellular location of the proteins of interest,

583 subcellular fractionation of cells extract was performed using a commercial kit

584 (Subcellular Protein Fractionation Kit for Cultured Cells, Thermo Fisher Scientific),

585 according to manufacturer's instructions, resulting in 6 fractions: cytoplasmic, membrane,

586 soluble nuclear, chromatin-bound, cytoskeletal extracts, and insoluble pellet. Proteolysis

587 was performed using Filter-Assisted Sample Preparation strategy. Briefly, proteins were

588 transferred over a 10 kDa filter (Microcon, Amicon Merck), reduced and alkylated (DTT

589 10 mM final, 2h, 37 °C; iodoacetamide, 50 mM final, 30 min in dark at room

590 temperature). After 3 times-washing with ammonium bicarbonate 50 mM, proteins were

591 proteolysed with trypsin (10 ng modified sequencing grade trypsin; Roche; 37°C,
592 overnight). The resulting proteolytic peptides were recovered by centrifugation (15 min at
593 10,000 x g), acidified with 0.1% aqueous TFA and desalted using C18 Sample Prep
594 Pipette Tips (Ziptip C18, Millipore). Peptides were purified on a capillary reversed-phase
595 column (C18 Acclaim PepMap100 Å, 75 µm i.d., 50-cm length; Thermo Fisher Scientific)
596 at a constant flow rate of 220 nL/min, with a gradient of 2% to 40% buffer B in buffer A in
597 170 min; buffer A: H₂O/acetonitrile(ACN)/ FA 98:2:0.1 (v/v/v); buffer B: H₂O/ACN/FA
598 10:90:0.1 (v/v/v). The MS analysis was performed on a Q Exactive mass spectrometer
599 (Thermo Fisher Scientific) with a top 10 acquisition method: MS resolution 70,000, mass
600 range 400–2,000 Da, followed by 10 MS/MS on the ten most intense peaks at resolution
601 17,500, with a dynamic exclusion for 90 s. Raw data was processed using Proteome
602 Discoverer 2.1 (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The database search was done with Mascot
603 search engine (Matrix Science Mascot 2.2.04) on a home-made protein databank
604 containing the putative proteins for endogenous viral elements as well as *Aedes* proteins
605 (17,756 sequences). The following parameters were used: MS tolerance 10 ppm;
606 MS/MS tolerance 0.02 Da; semi-tryptic peptides; two miscleavages allowed; partial
607 modifications carbamidomethylation ©, oxidation (M), deamidation (NQ).

608

609 **Phylogenetic analysis of AEFE1**

610 DNA was extracted from individual *Ae. aegypti*. PCR was performed for the full-length
611 AEFE1 element and the amplicons were sequenced by the Sanger technique. Forward
612 and reverse sequences were trimmed based on chromatogram quality and aligned to
613 generate a consensus sequence using the program Geneious v7

614 (<http://www.geneious.com>, (48)). Sequences from all successfully sequenced individuals,
615 closely related ISFs, and medically important flaviviruses were aligned using ClustalW
616 and trimmed to the same length. The program PHYML (49) was used to generate two
617 phylogenetic trees using the PhyML Best AIC Tree and the Fast likelihood-based
618 method. The first tree contains closely related ISFs, medically relevant flavivirus, and a
619 representative AEFE1 sequence. The second tree was constructed using only the ISFs
620 and the AEFE1 sequences from *Ae. aegypti*. The best nucleotide substitution method
621 was GTR +G for both trees.

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840 **Figure legends**

841 **Fig 1. Detection of ALFE and AEFE DNA and mRNA in *Aedes* mosquitoes.**

842 (A) Schematic representation of ALFE1-3 and AEFE1. (B) Detection of ALFE1-3 and

843 AEFE1 DNA by PCR and (C) mRNA by RT-PCR in C6/36 and U4.4 cell lines, *Ae.*

844 *albopictus* Gabon and Vietnam strains (left panels) and Aag2 cell line, *Ae. aegypti*

845 Cameroon, French Guiana and Thailand strains (right panels). Black and white

846 arrowheads in (B) indicate ALFE2-derived bands in C6/36 cell line, Gabon and Vietnam

847 strains, and ALFE2 fused with host sequence in U4.4 cell line. 18S and Actin genes

848 were used as controls for *Ae. albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti*, respectively.

849

850 **Fig 2. Primary piRNA-like small RNA production from ALFE2.**

851 Size distribution (upper panels) and profiles (middle panels) of small RNAs mapped to

852 ALFE2 in *Ae. albopictus* (A) without or (B) with CHIKV infection. Orange and blue

853 indicate positive- and negative-stranded reads, respectively. For the small RNA profiles,

854 the x-axis represents the nucleotide position on the ALFE2-containing contig; the y-axis

855 shows the number of reads for each nucleotide position; gray lines represent uncovered

856 regions. Bottom panel: relative nucleotide frequency per position of the 28-nt ALFE2-

857 derived small RNA shown as heat map. The intensity varies in correlation with frequency.

858

859 **Fig 3. DENV1 and -3 infections have no detectable impact on AEFE1 mRNA**

860 **expression *in vivo*.**

861 AEFE1 transcription level was analyzed by DESeq2 using a transcriptome dataset from

862 *Ae. aegypti* infected (A) with or without DENV1, (B) with DENV1 or -3 at the indicated

863 time points. The average number of reads were calculated from several individual

864 libraries: 7 and 17 libraries for Mock and DENV1 respectively at 24 hpi; 6 and 17
865 libraries for Mock and DENV1 at 96 hpi; 3 for each library on DENV1 or -3 infection at
866 both time points. Statistical significance was determined by DESeq2, ns indicates no
867 significant difference (adjusted p-value >0.05).

868

869 **Fig 4. ALFE and AEFE are integrated in repetitive regions in *Aedes mosquito***
870 **genomes.**

871 DNA reads from the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain and C6/36 DNA library mapped to (A)
872 ALFE1, (B) ALFE2 and (C) ALFE3 and their flanking regions. Orange and blue indicate
873 positive- and negative-stranded reads, respectively. Box indicates each ALFE and the
874 black bar represents the flanking regions. The x-axis represents the nucleotide position
875 on the ALFE-containing contig. The y-axis shows the number of reads for each
876 nucleotide position. Gray lines represent uncovered regions.

877

878 **Fig 5. New ALFEs identified in the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain.**

879 *In silico* pipeline generated 8 new ALFE-like contigs. (A) Schematic representation of
880 ALFE-contigs. ALFE4 is a fusion element composed of ALFE1 and -3. ALFE5-7 are
881 partial sequences of ALFE1. ALFE8-11 are ALFE2-like contigs. Box indicates ALFE-
882 derived sequence and the black line indicates non-ALFE sequence. Presence (+) or
883 absence (-) of the contigs is summarized on the left column. (B) DNA coverage of
884 ALFE7 with *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam DNA library. Orange and blue indicate positive- and
885 negative-stranded DNA respectively. Gray lines represent uncovered regions. (C)
886 ALFE4, -7 and -8 DNA detection in C6/36 and U4.4 cell lines, and in the *Ae. albopictus*
887 Gabon and Vietnam strains by PCR.

888 **Fig 6. Comparison of ALFE1/3 sequence in the *Ae. albopictus* Vietnam strain,**
889 **Foshan strain and C6/36 cells.**

890 Schematic representation of ALFE4 (Vietnam), ALFE4-like element (C6/36) and the
891 Foshan ALFE1 and -3 with their flanking regions. ALFE1/3 in the Foshan strain has a
892 gap of approximately 11 kbp in length with a CDS harboring a retrotransposon gag,
893 reverse transcriptase and protease domains and repeat sequences at both 5' and 3'
894 extremities. Overlapped regions of ALFE1 and 3 are visualized with red and blue lines.
895 Light blue bar indicates repeat sequences.

896

897 **Fig 7. Phylogenetic relationships among AEFE1 sequences from different *Ae.***
898 ***aegypti* populations.**

899 A maximum-likelihood tree was generated using the Fast likelihood-based approach.
900 AEFE1 DNA was sequenced in individual mosquitoes from the *Ae. aegypti* Cameroon,
901 French Guiana and Thailand strains. The scale bar indicates the number of nucleotide
902 substitutions per site and node support values are shown for major nodes. The tree was
903 rooted with ISF sequences (S4 Fig) but the outgroup was omitted for visual clarity. Node
904 values represent Shimodaira-Hasegawa (SH)-like branch support (only values > 0.7 are
905 shown).

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Table 1. Proteomic characterization of C6/36 and Aag2 cell lines.

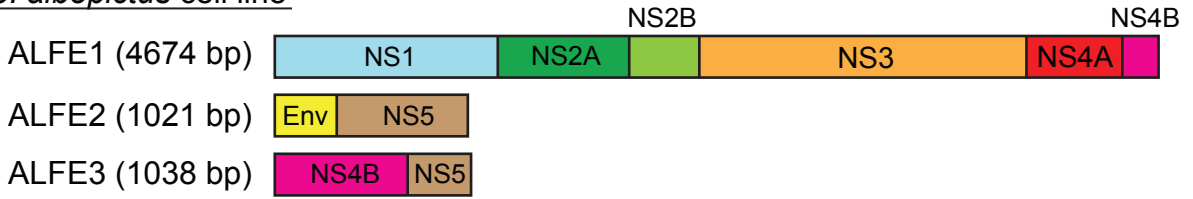
	EFVEs	Piwi5	Dcr2	Ago2	Number of identified proteins
C6/36	0	3	0*	2	1942 ± 637
Aag2	0	3	2	2	2054 ± 291

Number of times that proteolytic peptides corresponding to EVEs proteins and positive controls (out of 3 experiments) were found. The average total number of identified proteins is depicted. *C6/36 cells are Dcr2 deficient.

913

A

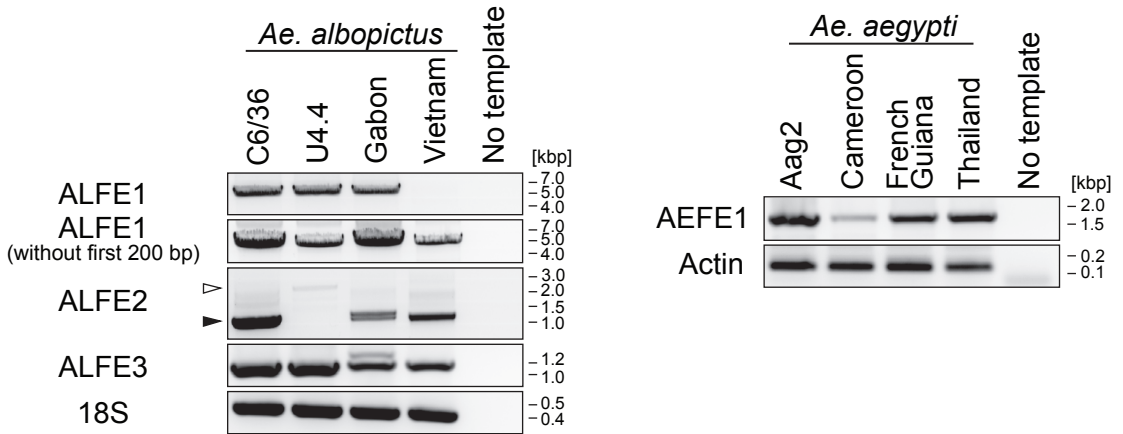
Ae. albopictus cell line



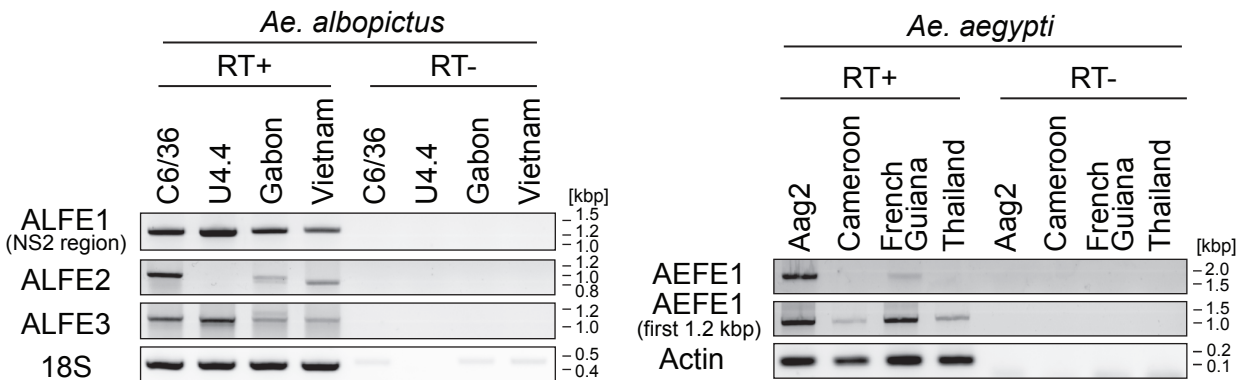
Ae. aegypti cell line

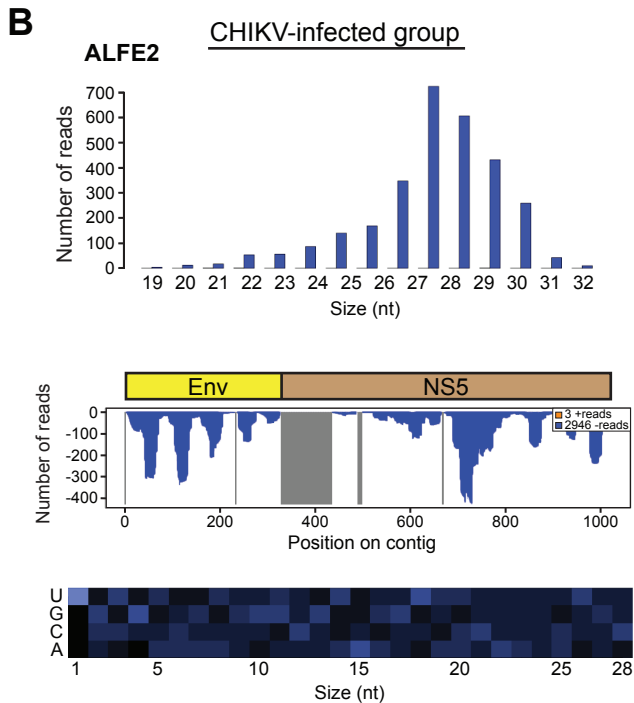
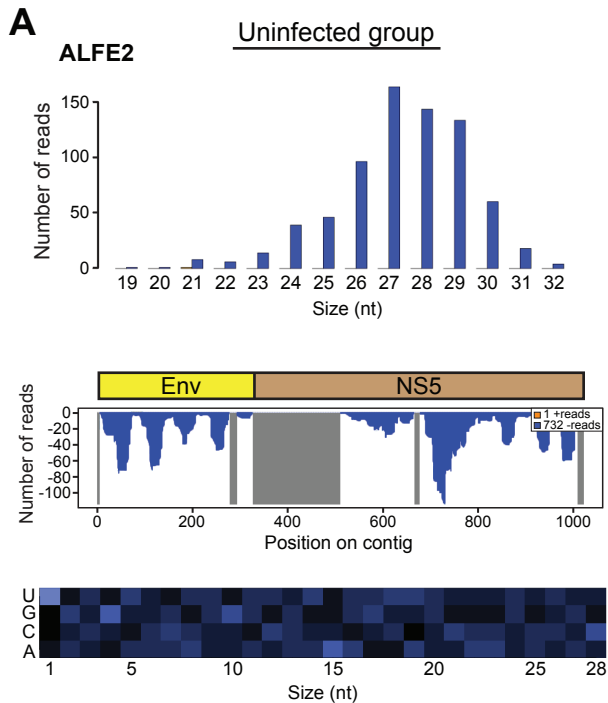


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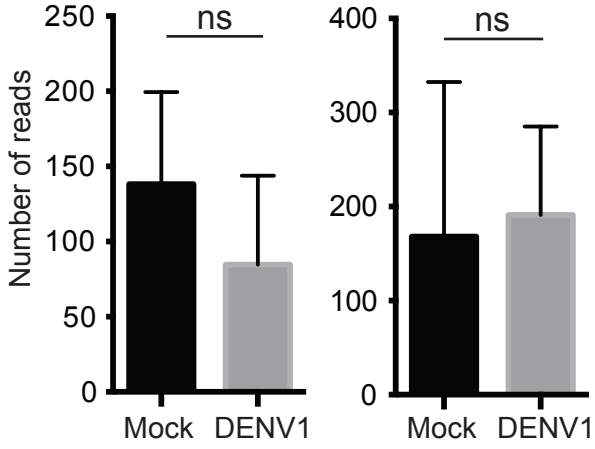




A

24 hpi

96 hpi



B

18 hpi

24 hpi

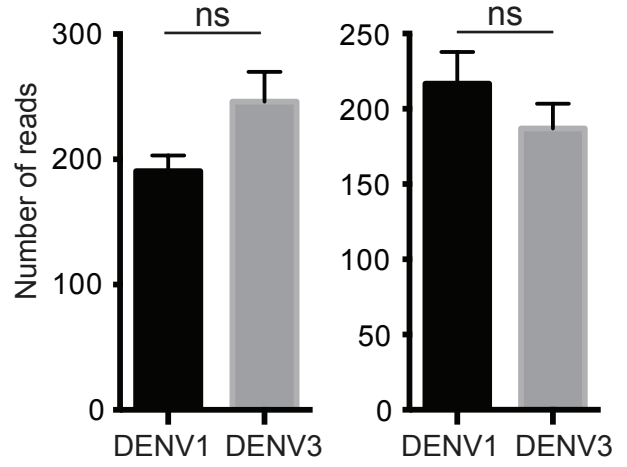
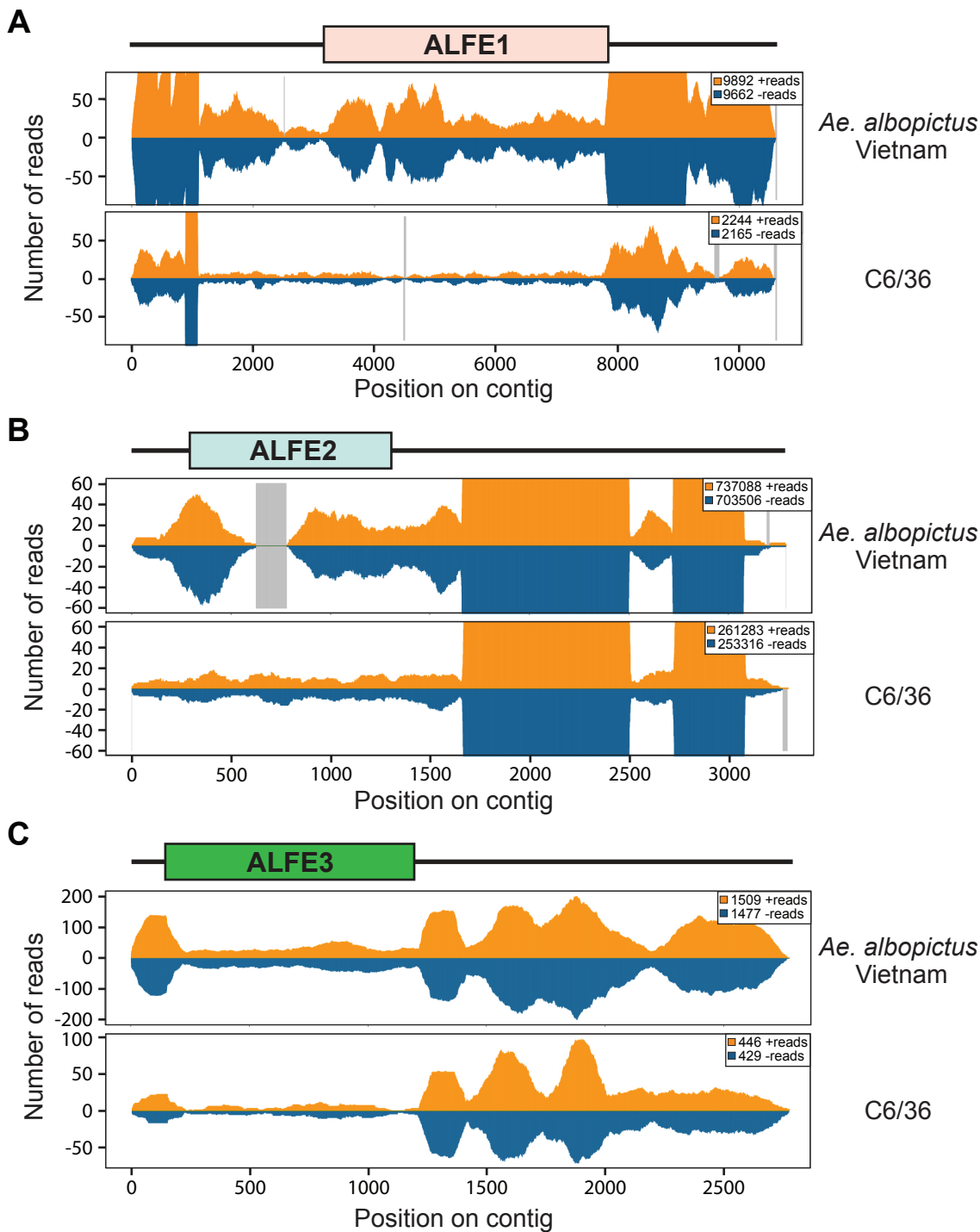


Figure 4

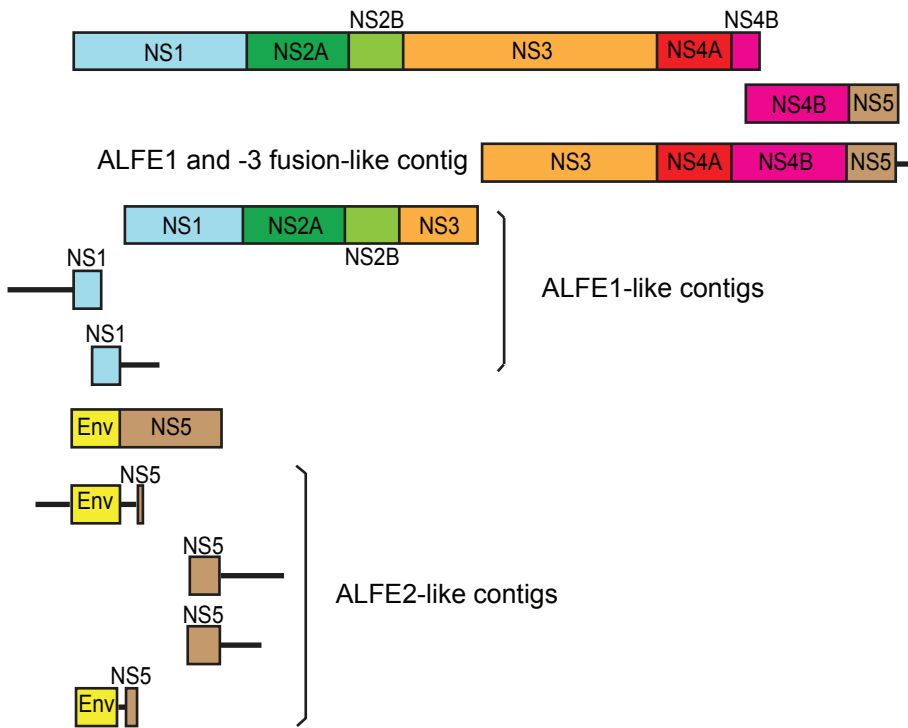


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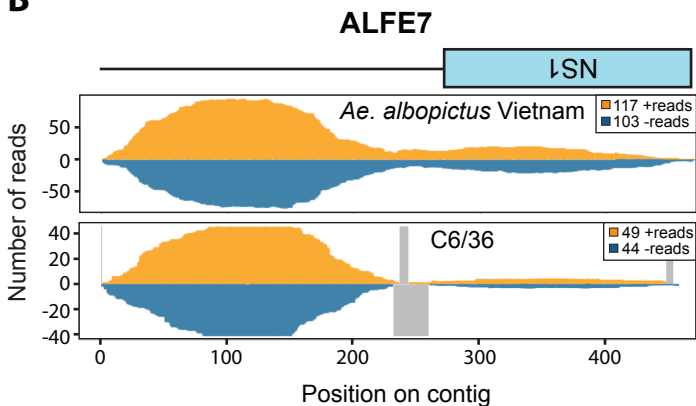
Presence of contigs

C6/36 Vietnam

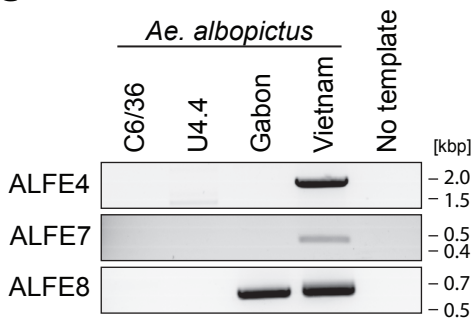
C6/36	Vietnam	Contig Name	Size (bp)
+	+	ALFE1	4674
+	+	ALFE3	1038
-	+	ALFE4	2960
-	+	ALFE5	2421
-	+	ALFE6	637
-	+	ALFE7	453
+	+	ALFE2	1021
-	+	ALFE8	694
+	+	ALFE9	633
+	+	ALFE10	504
-	+	ALFE11	421

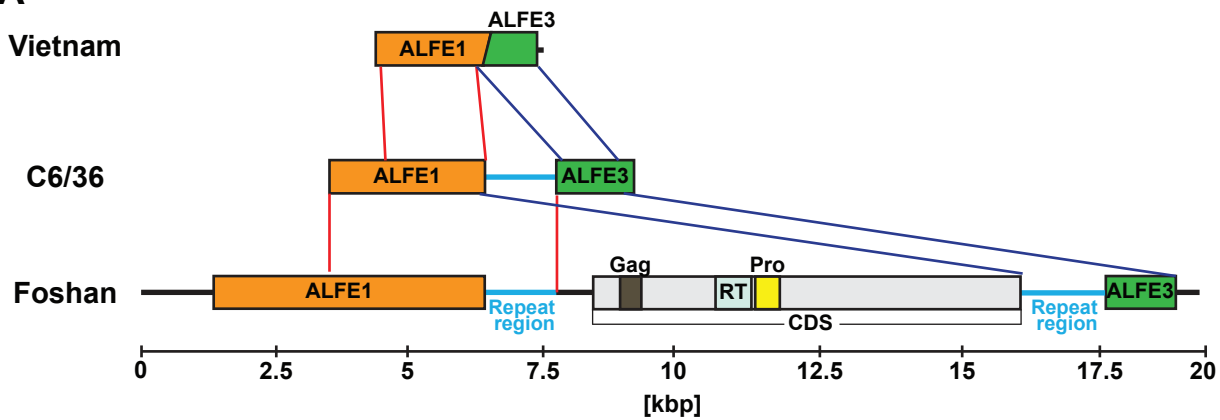


B



C



A

A

