A base-line cellular antiviral state is maintained by cGAS and its most frequent naturally occurring variant rs610913

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47 **Nonstandard Abbreviations**

48 BCG – Bacille Calmette-Guérin; Vaccine against Tuberculosis

49 cGAMP – cyclic Guanosine Monophosphate-Adenosine Monophosphate

50 cGAS – Cyclic GMP-AMP Synthase

51 CHIKV – Chikungunya Virus

52 DEG – Differentially Expressed Gene

53 EFV – Efavirenz

54 IFIT1 – Interferon-Induced Protein with Tetratricopeptide Repeats 1

55 IFN – Interferon

56 ISG - Interferon-Stimulated Gene

57 IRF3/7 - Interferon Regulatory Factor 3/7

58 KSHV – Kaposi's Sarcoma-Associated Herpesvirus

59 MX2 – MX Dynamin Like GTPase 2

60 PBMC – Peripheral Blood Mononuclear Cell

61 PHA – Phytohaemagglutinin

62 PRR – Pattern Recognition Receptor

63 RLU – Relative Light Unit

64 RPKM – Reads per Kilobase of Transcript

65 RT – Reverse Transcriptase

66 SNP – Single-Nucleotide Polymorphism

67 STAT1 – Signal Transducer and Activator of Transcription 1

68 STING – Stimulator of Interferon Genes

69 TBK1 – TANK-binding Kinase 1

70 TREX-1 – Three Prime Repair Exonuclease 1

71 VSV-G – Vesicular Stomatitis Virus Glycoprotein

Abstract (250 words limit)

Upon recognition of aberrantly located DNA, the innate immune sensor cGAS activates STING/IRF-3-driven antiviral responses. Here we characterized the ability of a specific variant of the cGAS-encoding gene *MB21D1*, rs610913, to alter cGAS-mediated DNA sensing and viral infection. rs610913 is a frequent G>T polymorphism resulting in a $P^{261}H$ exchange in the cGAS protein. Data from the International Collaboration for the Genomics of HIV suggested that rs610913 nominally associates with HIV-1 acquisition *in vivo*. Molecular modeling of cGAS($P^{261}H$) hinted towards the possibility for an additional binding site for a potential cellular co-factor in cGAS dimers. However, cGAS(WT) or cGAS($P^{261}H$)-reconstituted THP-1 cGAS KO cells shared steady-state expression of interferon-stimulated genes (ISGs), as opposed to cells expressing the enzymatically inactive cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$). Accordingly, cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) cells were less susceptible to lentiviral transduction and infection with HIV-1, HSV-1, and Chikungunya virus as compared to cGAS KO- or cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) cells. Upon DNA challenge, innate immune activation appeared to be mildly reduced upon expression of cGAS($P^{261}H$) compared to cGAS(WT). Finally, DNA challenge of PBMCs from donors homozygously expressing rs610913 provoked a trend towards a slightly reduced type I IFN response as compared to PBMCs from GG donors. Taken together, the steady-state activity of cGAS maintains a base-line antiviral state rendering cells more refractory to ISG-sensitive viral infections. Even though rs610913 failed to grossly differ phenotypically from the wild-type gene, its expression potentially results in a slightly altered susceptibility to viral infections *in vivo*.

Key Words

cGAS, antiviral immunity, interferon, DNA sensing

97

98 **Introduction**

99 Pattern Recognition Receptors (PRRs) of the innate immune system are crucial for the detection
100 of invading pathogens and required to mount an effective immune response. The cyclic-GMP-
101 AMP-synthase (cGAS) binds to double-stranded DNA in the cytosol and nucleus, followed by
102 its enzymatic activation and the production of the second messenger molecule 2'3'-cyclic
103 GMP-AMP (cGAMP) (1, 2). This small molecule, in turn, binds to the Stimulator of IFN Genes
104 (STING), leading to its activation, phosphorylation and eventually induction of a TANK
105 binding kinase (TBK1)/Interferon regulatory factor 3 (IRF3)-dependent signaling cascade,
106 resulting in the transcription of interferons (IFNs) and IFN-stimulated genes (ISGs), many of
107 them exerting antiviral activity.

108 cGAS-mediated recognition of invading pathogens serves as a first-line defense
109 mechanism against multiple viruses, which themselves evolved strategies to counteract cGAS-
110 mediated sensing. The genome of invading DNA viruses, such as HSV-1 or KSHV, is
111 recognized in a cGAS-dependent fashion (reviewed in Ref. 3, 4,5). As a consequence, herpes
112 viruses evolved specific antagonists that counteract cGAS/STING-mediated DNA sensing,
113 including HSV-1 pUL41 which selectively targets cGAS mRNA for degradation (6), HSV-1
114 ICP27 which prevents cGAS phosphorylation (7), or HSV-1-pUL36 which targets STING to
115 proteasomal degradation (8) and therefore interferes with the activation of the crucial
116 transcription factor IRF3. Retroviruses, including HIV-1, evolved a sophisticated replication
117 strategy. Specifically, reverse transcription of their RNA genome into a single DNA
118 intermediate that is destined for integration into a host cell´s chromosome allows retroviruses
119 to largely escape general innate immune activation (9) and cGAS-dependent recognition (10).
120 These observations are in line with studies reporting that innate sensing of HIV-1 infection only
121 occurs upon pharmacological or genetic destabilization of the otherwise nucleic acid-shielding

122 viral capsid (11, 12), and is enhanced in the absence of functional TREX1 expression, that
123 otherwise degrades capsid-escaping and thus cytosolic HIV-1 DNA (13, 14). Interestingly, also
124 RNA viruses have been considered to be inhibited by cGAS-exerted functions, although not
125 mediated through sensing of viral nucleic acids. Rather, cGAS may maintain a basal antiviral
126 state through recognition of self DNA, including endogenous retroelements (15) and/or sensing
127 of DNA released from the nucleus or mitochondria through infection-associated stress
128 induction (16, 17).

129 Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in genes encoding PRRs and downstream
130 adapter molecules modulate infection susceptibility and disease outcome. A remarkable
131 example is the variant of the STING-encoding *TMEM173* gene that contains three non-
132 synonymous SNPs referred to as 'the HAQ haplotype'. Homozygous expression of this
133 haplotype is predominantly found in East Asian (16.07%) and South American (7.78%)
134 populations (18). It is associated with lower susceptibility to stimulation by cyclic dinucleotides
135 (19) and eventually a severely reduced ability to induce IFN-β expression (19, 20).
136 Interestingly, among other homozygous SNPs in the *TMEM173* gene, the HAQ haplotype has
137 a higher prevalence in HIV-1 long-term non-progressors, as compared to HIV-1 non-controllers
138 (21).

139 To date, there is limited knowledge on the role of SNPs in the cGAS-encoding gene
140 *MB21D1*, in particular on implications for DNA sensing and innate immune activation. The
141 most frequent SNP in *MB21D1* is rs610913, a G>T polymorphism that displays a global allele
142 frequency of T = 0.503 (22). The G to T nucleotide exchange results in a single amino acid
143 exchange from histidine (H) to proline (P) at position 261 in the protein sequence. Here, we
144 report structural and functional consequences of the rs610913-encoded $P^{261}H$ single amino acid
145 exchange in the cGAS protein in the context of DNA sensing and restriction of viral infections.

146 **Materials and Methods**

147

148 **Genome-wide association analysis**

149 Summary statistics for HIV-1 acquisition in the region of *MB21D1* were obtained from
150 genome-wide association analyses (GWAS) previously performed by the International
151 Collaboration for the Genomics of HIV (ICGH) (23). The summary statistics were available on
152 a sub-group basis, with a total of 6 groups matched by geographic origin and genotyping
153 platform, as previously described; Group 1 (The Netherlands, Illumina), Group 2 (France,
154 Illumina), Group 3 (North America, Illumina), Group 4 (French European, Illumina), Group 5
155 (North American, Affymetrix), and Group 6 (non-Dutch/non-French European, Affymetrix).
156 Association results across groups were combined using a fixed-effects inverse-variance
157 weighted meta-analysis.

158

159 **Molecular modeling**

160 The structural model of hcGAS($P^{261}H$)•dsDNA assembly in the active (ATP-bound)
161 conformational state was created using the ladder-like crystal structure of mouse cGAS in
162 complex with dsDNA (PDB-code: 5N6I) (24) and the structure of the wild type
163 hcGAS•dsDNA•ATP complex (PDB-code: 6CTA) (25). The protein part of the
164 hcGAS•dsDNA•ATP complex was used to generate a homology model of hcGAS($P^{261}H$) in the
165 active conformational state. The homology model of hcGAS($P^{261}H$) was superimposed on the
166 mcGAS molecules in the ladder-like assembly. The superposition was performed using the
167 program package Coot (26). The secondary structure matching algorithm (SSM) (27) was used
168 to align the structurally conserved parts of the proteins. The resulting model was subjected to
169 an energy minimization procedure using the program HyperChem (Hypercube, Inc.) with
170 AMBER force field (28) and a distance-dependent dielectric constant. The structural analysis
171 and rendering of Figure 1B and C were performed with the final energy minimized model using

172 the programs COOT and PyMOL (The PyMOL Molecular Graphics System, Version 1.8
173 Schrödinger, LLC).
174

175 **Healthy study subjects and blood sample acquisition**

176 Healthy blood donors were recruited at the Interfaculty Institute of Cell Biology, Department
177 of Immunology, University of Tübingen. All healthy blood donors included in this study
178 provided their written informed consent before study participation. Approval for use of their
179 biomaterials was obtained by the respective local ethics committees (approvals 156-2012BO1
180 and 354-2012BO2), in accordance with the principles laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki
181 as well as applicable laws and regulations.
182

183 **Cell lines and primary cells**

184 cGAS KO THP-1 cells (a kind gift from Veit Hornung, Ludwig-Maximilians University,
185 Munich) were cultured in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (FCS),
186 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin, 2 mM L-glutamine, 1x MEM non-essential amino
187 acids solution and 1 mM sodium pyruvate (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts,
188 USA). HEK293T, HEK293T STING-mcherry (1) and BHK-21 cells were maintained in
189 DMEM cell culture medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (FCS), 100 U/ml
190 penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin and 2 mM L-glutamine. HL116 cells (29) were cultured
191 under identical conditions, except for the addition of 1x hypoxanthine-aminopterin-thymidine
192 (HAT) media supplement (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA). THP-1
193 cGAS KO cells and HEK293T STING-mcherry cells were reconstituted with individual cGAS-
194 GFP variants by lentiviral transduction and were maintained under 1 µg/ml puromycin
195 selection. After preparation of PBMCs from EDTA-anticoagulated blood by Ficoll-Hypaque
196 centrifugation, cells were stimulated with IL-2 (10 ng/ml) and phytohaemagglutinin (PHA) (1

197 µg/ml) for 3-4 days, resulting in cultures containing >90% $CD3^+$ T-cells. Cells were maintained
198 in RPMI 1640 containing 10% heat-inactivated fetal calf serum, 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml
199 streptomycin, 2 mM L-glutamine, 1x MEM non-essential amino acids solution, and 1 mM
200 sodium pyruvate (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA).
201

202 **Generation of lentiviral vector particles and virus stocks**

203 VSV-G-pseudotyped lentiviral vector particles encoding GFP or luciferase were generated by
204 calcium phosphate-based transfection of HEK293T cells with the packaging plasmid pCMV
205 ΔR8.91 (30), the lentiviral transfer plasmids pHR-GFP (31) or pCSII-EF-luciferase (32) and
206 pCMV-VSV-G (33). For the generation of cGAS-transducing lentiviral particles, the transfer
207 plasmids pWPI cGAS(WT)-GFP, pWPI cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$)-GFP (34), and pWPI cGAS
208 ($P^{261}H$)-GFP were used. pWPI cGAS($P^{261}H$)-GFP was generated by site-directed mutagenesis
209 (Stratagene California, La Jolla, California, USA), and the correct introduction of the mutation
210 was confirmed by Sanger sequencing. Vector-containing supernatant was collected 40 and 64
211 hours post-transfection and subjected to ultracentrifugation through a 20% sucrose cushion. To
212 remove residual plasmid DNA, concentrated virus stocks were DNase I-digested twice and
213 stored in aliquots at -80°C. VSV-G-pseudotyped HIV-1 NL4.3 luciferase reporter virus was
214 produced by calcium phosphate-based transfection of HEK293T cells with a HIV-1 NL4.3
215 ΔEnv ΔVpr luciferase reporter plasmid (35) and a VSV-G-encoding plasmid. Virus-containing
216 supernatants were harvested 60 hours post-transfection and concentrated by ultracentrifugation.
217 HSV-1 Δ*UL41*N (HSV-1(KOS) UL41NHB) encoding a truncated version of pUL41
218 was kindly provided by David A. Leib (36). To prepare concentrated stocks, extracellular
219 virions were pelleted from the medium of cells infected at a multiplicity of infection (MOI) of
220 0.01 PFU/cell for 3 days (37–39). Virus stocks were plaque-titrated on Vero cells (38, 40). To

221 determine the genome/PFU ratio of HSV-1 stocks, we quantified the number of HSV-1
222 genomes by quantitative PCR as described previously (37, 41).
223 The CHIKV 181/25 infectious stock (42) expressing a nano-Luciferase fused to the E2
224 glycoprotein (a kind gift from G. Simmons, Vitalant Research Institute) was produced by *in*
225 *vitro*-transcription of the full-length, linearized molecular DNA clone into RNA and subsequent
226 RNA electroporation into BHK-21 cells. Virus-containing supernatant was collected three days
227 post electroporation, filtered through membranes of 0.45 µm pores and stored in aliquots at -
228 80°C.
229
230 **Flow cytometry**
231 For quantification of cGAS-GFP expression in transduced THP-1 or HEK293T cells, cells were
232 PFA-fixed and GFP positivity was quantified by flow cytometry. HSV-1-challenged HEK293T
233 cells were PBS-washed, PFA-fixed and immunostained for intracellular HSV-1 VP5 using
234 rabbit anti-HSV-1 VP5 (#SY4563) and an appropriate fluorochrome-conjugated secondary
235 antibody in 0.1% Triton in PBS (10, 43). Samples were analyzed on a FACS Lyric device
236 (Becton Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, USA) with BD Suite Software for analysis.
237
238 **Immunoblotting**
239 Cell lysates were generated with M-PER Mammalian Protein Extraction Reagent (Thermo
240 Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA), run on a 10% SDS-PAGE and transferred
241 onto nitrocellulose using a semi-dry transfer system (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules,
242 California, USA). BSA-blocked membranes were incubated with the primary antibodies
243 mouse-anti human actin (#8226, Abcam, Cambridge, UK), rabbit-anti human cGAS (#15102,
244 Cell Signaling, Danvers Massachusetts, USA), rabbit-anti human IRF3 (#4302, Cell Signaling),
245 rabbit-anti human pIRF3 (#29047, Cell Signaling), rabbit-anti human pSTING (#19781 Cell

246 Signaling), rabbit-anti human pTBK1 (#5483, Cell Signaling), rabbit-anti human STING
247 (#13647S, Cell Signaling), rabbit-anti human TBK1 (#3504, Cell Signaling) or rabbit-anti
248 human TREX1 (#185228, Abcam). Secondary antibodies conjugated to Alexa680/800
249 fluorescent dyes were used for detection and quantification by Odyssey Infrared Imaging
250 System (LI-COR Biosciences Lincoln, NE, USA).
251

252 **Quantitative RT-PCR**

253 Total RNA from cells was extracted using the RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany),
254 and residual DNA contaminations were removed with the RNase-free DNase set (Qiagen,
255 Hilden, Germany). Following cDNA synthesis (New England Biolabs, Ipswich, Massachusetts,
256 USA), quantification of relative mRNA levels was performed using Taq-Man PCR technology
257 (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA) with primer-probe kits (Applied
258 Biosystems, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA) for following genes:
259 *ACTB* (Hs03023943_g1), *ARL16* (Hs01586770_g1), *BST2* (Hs00171632_m1), *cGAS*
260 (Hs00403553_m1), *HAUS7* (Hs00213860_m1), *IFIT1* (Hs01911452_s1), *IFN-β*
261 (Hs01077958_s1), *IRF3* (Hs01547283_m1), *LYAR* (Hs00215132_m1), *MX2*
262 (Hs01550814_m1), *RPL30* (Hs00265497_m1), *RPS11* (Hs06642555_g1), *STING*
263 (Hs00736958_m1), *TCP1* (Hs01053946_g1), *TREX1* (Hs03989617_s1), *TRMT10C*
264 (Hs01933516_s1), *YBX1* (Hs00358903_g1).
265 Relative mRNA levels were determined in multiplex reactions using the ΔΔCt method with
266 human *RNASEP* mRNA as an internal reference. Each sample was analyzed in technical
267 triplicates and with parallel controls omitting reverse transcriptase. Assays were performed on
268 an OneStep Plus machine (Applied Biosystems, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA) or a
269 LightCycler 480 II (Roche, Basel, Switzerland). Data analysis was performed using Applied
270 Biosystems Step One Software (Version 2.3) or LightCycler 480 Software (Version 1.5).

271

272 **RNA sequencing**

273 Total RNA extraction from cells and DNase treatment were performed with the RNeasy Mini
274 kit and RNase-free DNase set (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany). The quality and integrity of total
275 RNA were verified on an Agilent Technologies 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies,
276 Waldbronn, Germany). The RNA sequencing libraries were generated using TruSeq Stranded
277 mRNA Library Prep Kits (Illumina, San Diego, California, USA) following the manufacturer´s
278 protocol. The libraries were sequenced on Illumina HiSeq4000 (paired-end run 2 x 75 bp) with
279 an average of 9 x 10^7 reads per RNA sample. Data generated from individual samples were
280 mapped separately against the hg38 human reference genome. Gene expression was calculated
281 for individual transcripts as reads per kilobase per million bases mapped (RPKM). All
282 transcriptomic analyses were performed using Geneious Prime Version 2020.0.4 (Biomatters,
283 New Zealand). Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) were identified by calculating fold
284 changes in expression, genes were considered to be expressed significantly differently if their
285 expression was increased by at least a factor of two with a p-value of < 0.05. Gene ontology
286 enrichment analyses were performed using the Panther overrepresentation test
287 (http://geneontology.org/), Homo sapiens reference list, and GO biological process complete
288 annotation data set. p-values were corrected using a false discovery rates (Ashburner et al.,
289 2000; The Gene Ontology Consortium, 2019).

290

291 **Electroporation**

292 10 million THP-1 cells and PBMCs were electroporated (140 V, 1000 µF) in serum-free RPMI
293 in the presence of endotoxin-free plasmid DNA (12 µg DNA, or indicated quantities), 4 µg
294 cGAMP (Invivogen, San Diego, Californien, USA), 4 µg c-di-UMP (Invivogen, San Diego,

295 Californien, USA) or mock-electroporated using a Gene Pulser Xcell Electroporation
296 instrument (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, California, USA) and 0.2 cm cuvettes
297

298 **HL116 cell-based detection of bioactive IFNs**

299 Culture supernatants of individual cell lines were titrated on HL116 cells that express the
300 luciferase gene under the control of the IFN-inducible 6-16 promoter (29). Six hours post-
301 inoculation, cells were PBS-washed and luciferase expression was determined using Cell
302 Culture Lysis Buffer (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA) and the Luciferase Assay System
303 (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA). The concentration of IFN was quantified using an IFN-
304 α2a (Roferon) standard curve.
305

306 **Protein Purification**

307 The full-length human cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) proteins were expressed in *E.coli*
308 BL21(DE3). The expression was induced by 0.5 M isopropyl-β-D-thiogalactoside and
309 incubated at 18°C for 18 h. After centrifugation at 5,000 x g for 15 min, pellets were
310 resuspended in 20 ml PBS and centrifuged again at 5000 x g for 15 min. The cells were flash-
311 frozen and stored at -80°C until purification. For purification, pellets were thawed and
312 resuspended in a buffer containing 300 mM NaCl, 50 mM Na_3PO_4, 10 mM imidazole, pH 7.5
313 with complete protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche, Basel, Switzerland) and lysed by sonification
314 for 2 min, with 4 min breaks after eachminute of sonification to prevent overheating of the
315 lysate. DNase I was added to remove a possible impurity caused by the cellular DNA bound to
316 cGAS. After 30 minutes of incubation at room temperature, the sample was centrifuged at
317 40,000 x g for 1 h. The supernatant was filtered using a 0.45 µm syringe filter and loaded onto
318 a 5 ml Protino Ni-NTA column (Macherey-Nagel, Düren, Germany). The column was washed
319 until UV280 had reached a steady value and eluted with 500 mM imidazole, 150 mM NaCl, 50

320 mM Na_3PO_4, pH 7.5. The pooled fractions were diluted with low salt buffer (50 mM NaCl, 20
321 mM Tris, pH 7.5) to prevent protein aggregation caused by a high salt concentration of the
322 elution buffer. The diluted eluate was then loaded onto a 1 ml HiTrap Heparin HP column (GE
323 Healthcare, Chalfont St Giles, UK). After loading, the column was washed until UV280 reached
324 a steady value before elution with an increasing salt gradient buffer: 50 mM – 2 M NaCl, 20
325 mM Tris, pH 7.5. The elution was concentrated by centrifugation with 30,000 MWCO Vivaspin
326 Hydrosart (Sartorius, Göttingen, Germany) and, if needed, diluted with low salt buffer to the
327 final protein concentration used for the *in vitro* activity assay. The purified protein was flash-
328 frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C.
329
330 ***In vitro* cGAS activity assay**
331 2 µM recombinant human cGAS was incubated for 2h at 37°C with the substrates 0.5 mM ATP
332 and 0.5 mM GTP, in the presence of 1 ng/µl dsDNA fragments NoLimits (Thermo Fisher
333 Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA) of 1, 4 or 6 kb length, in a buffer containing 120.25
334 mM $MnCl_2$, 20 mM NaCl, 2.5 mM $MgCl_2$, 8 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5 in a total volume of 200 µl.
335 Following incubation, samples were inactivated at 95°C for 20 min. Samples were centrifuged
336 at 14500 x rpm for 15 min at 4°C, and the supernatant was diluted 1:100 with H_2O for HPLC
337 measurement with the API 4000 LC-MS/MC System (Sciex, Framingham, Massachusetts,
338 USA) for 2'3'cGAMP quantification. The gradient started with 100% buffer A (3/97 (v/v)
339 MeOH/H_2O, 50 mM NH_4Ac, 0.1% HAc) and reached 50% buffer A, 50% buffer B (97/3 (v/v)
340 MeOH/H_2O, 50 mM NH_4Ac, 0.1% HAc) after 5 min. The sample was run over a ZORBAX
341 Eclipse XDB-C18 1.8 µm, 50 × 4.6 mm (Agilent Technologies, Waldbronn, Germany) column.
342 Measurements and data generation were controlled by Analyst software (version 1.5.2.,
343 SCIEX). Calibration was conducted with 10 µl of synthetic derived 2'3'cGAMP mixed with
344 800 µl extraction reagent (2/2/1 [v/v/v] methanol, acetonitrile and water mixture) and 300 µl

345 extraction reagent (25 ng/mL tenofovir in extraction reagent) with tenofovir as the internal
346 standard.
347
348 **Infection and transduction assays**
349 30 min prior to lentiviral transduction, cells were left untreated or treated with Efavirenz (EFV;
350 100 nM). Inhibitor treatment was maintained during the subsequent virus inoculation.
351 Transduction and virus infection assays were performed by spin-inoculation for 60 min at 32°C.
352 Following spinoculation, cells were incubated at 37°C, 5% CO_2, and individual wells were
353 harvested at indicated time points.
354
355 **Luciferase assay**
356 Luciferase expression of cells challenged with VSV-G lentiviral vectors or VSV-G/HIV-1
357 NL4.3 was quantified 72 hours post-transduction. Cells were washed with PBS, lysed using
358 Cell Culture Lysis Buffer (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA) and luciferase activity was
359 quantified using the Luciferase Assay System (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA). To detect
360 nanoluciferase expression in supernatants from CHIKV-infected cells, the Nano-Glo Luciferase
361 Assay System (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA) was used according to manufacturer's
362 instruction.
363
364 **LPS and poly(I:C) treatment**
365 IL-2/PHA-activated PBMCs were treated with 40 ng/ml LPS or 20 µg/ml poly(I:C) as
366 previously described (46, 47).
367
368 **Reagents and inhibitors**

369 Fragmented dsDNA (NoLimits 100 bp DNA Fragment) for *in vitro* experiments were obtained
370 from Thermo Fisher. Lipopolysaccharide (LPS) and poly (I:C) were purchased from Sigma-
371 Aldrich (St. Louis, Missouri, USA). Human IFN-α2a (Roferon) was purchased from Roche. 2'-
372 3'-cGAMP and c-di-UMP were purchased from Invivogen. EFV was purchased from Bristol-
373 Myers Squibb.
374

375 **Genotyping of PBMCs for rs610913 (Tübingen)**

376 200 µl freshly drawn EDTA-anticoagulated venous whole blood (S-Monocette K3 EDTA,
377 Sarstedt, Hümbrecht, Germany) was subjected to DNA isolation using the QIAamp DNA Blood
378 Mini Kit on a Qiacube (both from Qiagen) instrument following the manufacturer's
379 instructions. For genotyping an *MB21D1* rs610913-specific Taqman primer set (Thermo Fisher,
380 C_937459_20), diluted 20x, were used with 20 ng genomic DNA and the appropriate amounts
381 of TaqMan Universal MasterMix II (Thermo Fisher) in a 10 µl reaction volume run in triplicate
382 wells of a 96 well MicroAmp plate run on a QuantStudio 7 qPCR cycler (Thermo Fisher) and
383 QuantStudio Real-Time PCR Software v1.3.
384

385 **Data Availability**

386 RNA-seq datasets will be deposited at the NCBI GEO database.

387

388 **Data presentation and statistical analysis**

389 If not otherwise stated, bars and symbols show the arithmetic mean and error bars the S.E.M of
390 the indicated number of individual experiments. Statistical significance was calculated by
391 performing paired Student´s t-test using GraphPad Prism 8. p values <0.05-0.01 were
392 considered significant (*) and <0.01 very significant (**) or not significant (p-value ≥0.05;
393 n.s.).

394

395 **Results**

396 **rs610913 may facilitate HIV-1 acquisition *in vivo***

397 In the human population, the coding region of the cGAS-encoding gene *MB21D1* harbors
398 several non-synonymous SNPs of different frequencies (**Table 1**). The allele frequencies vary
399 substantially across populations, with rs610913 being the most frequent non-synonymous SNP
400 (**Table 1**). We searched for SNPs in *MB21D1* displaying an association with HIV-1 acquisition
401 using summary statistics covering 6,334 infected cases and 7,247 controls of European ancestry
402 (23) (**Fig. 1A**). Interestingly, we detected a nominal, however not genome-wide significant
403 over-representation of rs610913 (p=0.004) in HIV-1-infected individuals as compared to the
404 uninfected control cohort, suggesting that this SNP may associate with and/or facilitate HIV-1
405 acquisition. Analysing rs610913 in more detail across the six included subgroups, indicated that
406 the signal was primarily arising from Group 3, a group consisting of North American
407 individuals and enriched for HIV controllers (23) (**Fig. 1B**). Given its high global frequency
408 and its potential role in HIV-1 acquisition, we embarked on a functional study of rs610913.

409

410 **Structural modeling of cGAS($P^{261}H$) reveals amino acid position at "head-to-head"**
411 **interface of the cGAS ladder-like assembly**

412 To investigate the structural impact of cGAS($P^{261}H$) mutation, we built a molecular model of
413 the hcGAS($P^{261}H$)•dsDNA assembly in the active (ATP-bound) conformational state. The
414 overall structure of this assembly is based on the experimental ladder-like cGAS•dsDNA
415 crystallographic model obtained for the mouse enzyme (mcGAS) (24). The positions of mcGAS
416 molecules in the ladder-like assembly were substituted by the homology model of the
417 hcGAS($P^{261}H$) mutant based on the structure of the wild type hcGAS•dsDNA•ATP complex

418 (PDB-code: 6CTA)(25). The model of hcGAS $P^{261}H$•dsDNA•ATP ladder-like assembly was
419 optimized, and the geometry of the resulting model (**Fig. 2**) appeared to be very close to the
420 original mcGAS•dsDNA assembly due to the high structural and sequence similarity (r.m.s.d.
421 1.0 Å, sequence identity 70%) between the human and mouse enzymes. In the
422 hcGAS($P^{261}H$)•dsDNA•ATP ladder-like structure, the H^{261} residue is located far away from the
423 active site in the deep cleft created by the "head-to-head" interface between the two hcGAS
424 monomers bound to the dsDNA (**Fig. 2**). Another H^{261} residue from the neighboring "head-to-
425 head" hcGAS($P^{261}H$) molecule is located at the bottom of the same site. Together two imidazole
426 rings of the H^{261} residues create a positively charged surface at the bottom of the "head-to-head"
427 hcGAS $P^{261}H$ cleft (**Fig. 2D**). The distance between the two H^{261} residues in the cleft is rather
428 large (~11 Å), which makes direct interaction between them unlikely. The distances between
429 H261 and the two dsDNA molecules (9.3 Å and 15.6 Å) also do not allow direct contact (**Fig.
430 2C**). At the same time, the side chain of H^{261} makes two new hydrogen bonds with the side
431 chains of S^{201} and E^{259} of the same monomer, which is not possible for the proline side chain
432 of P^{261} in the WT enzyme (**Fig. 2C**). These hydrogen bonds could provide additional
433 stabilization of cGAS($P^{261}H$) monomers in the "head-to-head" cleft and may contribute to the
434 overall stability of the cGAS•dsDNA assembly. Since S^{201}, E^{259}, and H^{261} residues are located
435 in a solvent-accessible area, the free energy of their interaction may be expected to be
436 diminished by the solvent effects. Thus, the modelling analysis, indicates that cGAS $P^{261}H$ is
437 not expected to cause a significant discrepancy in enzymatic activity compared to the WT
438 enzyme, although the overall stability of the multimeric complex with DNA could be affected
439 slightly.

440

441 **Catalytically active cGAS modulates base-line levels of *IFIT1*, *MX2* and *IFNB1* mRNA**
442 **expression**

443 In order to address functional consequences that may result from the proline-to-histidine
444 exchange encoded by rs610913, we stably expressed individual cGAS-GFP variants in THP-1
445 cGAS KO cells by lentiviral transduction, including cGAS(WT)-GFP, catalytically inactive
446 cGAS($G^{212}A$, $S^{213}A$)-GFP (48) and cGAS($P^{261}H$)-GFP. Assessment of GFP expression by flow
447 cytometry and of cGAS expression by immunoblotting confirmed similar expression levels of
448 the transgenes in individual cell lines, as opposed to mock-transduced THP-1 cGAS KO cells
449 (**Fig. 3A**). Other key components of the cGAS signaling cascade, such as STING, IRF3, and
450 TREX1, were expressed at similar levels in the four cell lines (**Fig. 3B**), indicating that
451 abrogation of cGAS expression or of its catalytic activity did not affect mRNA or protein
452 quantities of gene products involved in this pathway. Interestingly, basal expression of *IFIT1*,
453 *MX2*, and *IFNB1* mRNA was clearly reduced in cells devoid of cGAS expression and in cells
454 expressing catalytically inactive cGAS, when compared to cells expressing either WT cGAS or
455 cGAS($P^{261}H$) (**Fig. 3C**).

456

457 **Expression of functional cGAS induces global transcriptomic alterations in THP-1 cells**

458 To explore transcriptional profiles associating with expression of individual functional and non-
459 functional cGAS variants, we subjected total RNA of indicated THP-1 cells to sequencing.
460 Plotting of all RPKM values >0.5 revealed a high overall correlation in the gene expression
461 profile between the individual samples (**Fig. 4A**). cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) cells (**Fig. 4A,**
462 **top panel**) shared a similar expression profile. Comparison of cGAS(WT) or cGAS($P^{261}H$) the
463 catalytically inactive cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) revealed a set of 77 and 115 genes significantly
464 upregulated exclusively in the context of the functional cGAS variants, respectively, suggesting
465 that expression of those genes requires cGAS base-level activity (**Fig. 4B, middle and bottom**
466 **panels**). Interestingly, gene ontology analysis revealed that the genes whose expression was
467 overrepresented in cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$)-expressing cells, as compared to cGAS

468 ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) cells, joined common gene sets, including cellular defense mechanisms to
469 invading pathogens (GO:0009615 Response to Virus; GO:0051607 Defense Response to Virus)
470 or type I IFN signaling (GO:0034340 Response to Type I IFN; GO:0060337 Type I IFN
471 Signaling Pathway) (**Fig. 4C, middle and bottom panels**). In accordance, the fifty most
472 differentially expressed genes (DEGs) among all significant DEGs in cGAS(WT) compared to
473 cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) samples represented mostly ISGs (43 ISGs out of 50 DEGs), such as
474 *IFI44L*, *IFI27* and *MX1* or important components of the type I IFN signaling axis, such as
475 *STAT1* and *IRF7* (**Fig. 4D**). In line with previous experiments, known components or
476 modulators of the cGAS/STING signaling axis were equally expressed throughout all cell lines,
477 independent of functional cGAS expression (**Sup. Fig. 1A**).

478 Although the overall transcriptome of cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) expressing THP-1
479 cells appeared very homogenous (**Fig. 4A, top panel**), 67 genes were DEGs which reached
480 statistical significance (**Fig. 4B, top panel**). These genes, however, displayed low or moderate
481 expression fold changes and *p*-values. In addition, gene ontology enrichment analysis revealed
482 enrichment of gene sets with only moderate *p*-values and divergent functions (**Fig. 4C, top**
483 **panel**), indicating that expression of cGAS($P^{261}H$) does not severely modulate the cellular
484 transcriptome. We selected ten candidate genes based on fold change and statistical significance
485 (**Sup. Fig. 1B**) and evaluated their expression by Q-RT-PCR (**Sup. Fig. 1 C),** aiming at
486 challenging the findings obtained with RNA sequencing. In line with the rather subtle
487 differences in the transcriptomes of cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$)-expressing cells, analysis of
488 several independent samples by Q-RT-PCR confirmed only *TCP-1* out of the ten tested
489 candidate genes as a true DEG whose expression is specifically increased in the context of
490 cGAS($P^{261}H$) expression, thus displaying lower mRNA levels in cGAS(WT)-expressing cells.

491 In summary, the transcriptomic data provide further evidence for a base-line antiviral
492 immunity in cells expressing functional cGAS(WT) or cGAS($P^{261}H$), and both cGAS variants

493 control an overall highly similar cellular transcriptome. In contrast, the absence of cGAS
494 expression or expression of a functionally inactive cGAS mutant decreased the antiviral state
495 of the cell as reflected by lower expression of genes related to virus defense and the type I IFN
496 response.

497

498 **cGAS(WT) and cGAS(P^{261}H) expression reduces susceptibility to lentiviral transduction**
499 **in the absence of transduction-provoked innate immune responses**

500 Since rs610913 may associate with increased probability of HIV-1 infection *in vivo*, we next
501 investigated whether expression of cGAS(P^{261}H) renders cells more susceptible to infection by
502 HIV-1 and other viruses. Specifically, we challenged THP-1 cGAS KO cells reconstituted with
503 cGAS(WT), cGAS(G^{212}A/S^{213}A) or cGAS(P^{261}H) with VSV-G-pseudotyped lentiviral particles
504 or HIV-1 NL4.3 and monitored the transduction efficiency. Interestingly, cells devoid of cGAS
505 expression or expressing the catalytically inactive mutant displayed higher susceptibility to
506 lentiviral transduction as compared to cGAS(WT) or cGAS(P^{261}H)-expressing counterparts
507 (**Fig. 5A-B**). However, cGAS(WT) and cGAS(P^{261}H)-expressing cells shared identical
508 susceptibility to lentiviral transduction.

509 Importantly, transduction of cells with ablated cGAS expression or expressing
510 individual cGAS variants did neither induce expression of *IFIT1*, *MX2* and *IFNB* mRNAs, nor
511 secretion of bioactive IFN into the culture supernatant in an EFV-sensitive fashion (**Fig. 5C**).
512 Lentiviral transduction triggered induction of *IFIT1* mRNA expression to a maximum of 2.9 to
513 7.1-fold in all four cell lines, irrespective of their cGAS expression status or EFV treatment.
514 These results are consistent with absence of cGAS-mediated responses to lentiviral infection
515 reported by others (9, 11) and us (10), suggesting that detectable differences in the susceptibility
516 of our cell lines to transduction are linked to different antiviral states.

517

518 **Base-line antiviral state mediated by cGAS(WT) and cGAS(P^{261}H) expression renders**
519 **cells less susceptible to HSV-1 and CHIKV infection**

520 To explore the role of cGAS in the context of infection with other viruses displaying
521 individual replication strategies and genomic architectures, we reconstituted HEK293T, that
522 lack detectable cGAS and STING expression, and HEK293T mCherry-STING cells (1) with
523 individual cGAS variants (**Sup Fig. 2 A-B**). In line with results obtained in THP-1 cells,
524 expression of STING, IRF3, and TREX1 was not affected by complementation of cGAS
525 expression in HEK293T cells (**Sup Fig. 2 C-D**). Reconstitution with both cGAS and STING
526 expression restored the cGAS-dependent base-level induction of *IFIT1*, *MX2* and *IFNB1*
527 expression in HEK293T cells, indicating the intactness of the remaining signaling pathway in
528 HEK293T cells (**Sup Fig. 2E**). Based on these observations, we considered cGAS/STING-
529 expressing HEK293T cells as a suitable model to monitor cGAS-dependent restriction of viral
530 infections. As a prototypic DNA virus, we used an HSV-1 strain that encodes a truncated
531 version of pUL41, a well-characterized cGAS antagonist (6, 36). Cells expressing cGAS(WT)
532 or cGAS(P^{261}H) were less susceptible to infection with HSV-1 Δ*UL41*N. Their rate of HSV-1
533 Vp5-positive cells scored to 46.7% and 43.8%, respectively, as opposed to 61.7% in
534 cGAS(G^{212}A/S^{213}A)-expressing cells and 56.8% in cGAS-negative cells (**Fig. 6A**). Strikingly,
535 the same pattern was observed in the context of Chikungunya virus (CHIKV) strain 181/25, an
536 RNA virus (**Fig. 6B**). Here, cGAS(WT) or cGAS(P^{261}H)-expressing cells displayed luciferase
537 reporter expression of 5.180 and 5.177 RLU, respectively, as compared to cGAS(G^{212}A/S^{213}A)-
538 expressing cells that yielded a mean value of 16.760 RLU. Together, these data support the idea
539 that cGAS maintains a base-line antiviral milieu that acts in a broad manner against invading
540 viral pathogens. Conclusively, beyond sensing viral DNA intermediates or stress-induced host
541 DNA released from intracellular compartments in the during an ongoing infection, cGAS

542 expression and steady-state activity may maintain a static antiviral state that represents a hurdle
543 for viral infections that are sensitive to the cGAS-controlled antiviral ISG program.
544

545 **cGAS($P^{261}H$) may display a slightly reduced DNA sensing ability**

546 We next investigated the functionality of cGAS-mediated DNA-sensing and induction of the
547 type I IFN response of THP-1 cells expressing cGAS($P^{261}H$) as compared to cGAS(WT) by
548 quantifying the type I IFN response provoked upon electroporation with endotoxin-free plasmid
549 DNA. Of note, human cGAS is efficiently activated upon binding to long dsDNA, as opposed
550 to binding to short DNA fragments (24)(25). Electroporation of plasmid DNA resulted in the
551 release of bioactive IFN at concentrations of 11,158 IU/ml and 33,652 IU/ml into supernatants
552 of cells expressing cGAS(WT) or cGAS($P^{261}H$), respectively (**Fig. 7A**). In contrast, cGAS KO
553 cells and cells expressing the inactive cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) mutant barely responded to plasmid
554 DNA challenge and displayed responses that did not exceed the levels of mock-electroporated
555 cells. Electroporation with the STING agonist cGAMP, but not the control cyclic dinucleotide
556 c-di-UMP, induced release of similar levels of bioactive IFNs in all tested cell lines, indicating
557 the intactness of the STING signaling axis (**Fig. 7A**). Similarly, phosphorylation of STING,
558 TBK1, and IRF3 upon plasmid DNA challenge was detectable as early as 0.5 and 1 hour post
559 plasmid DNA challenge in cells expressing cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$), whereas lysates
560 from both THP-1 cGAS KO cells and THP-1 cells expressing cGAS ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) scored
561 negative in this assay, as expected (**Fig. 7B**). While the quality and kinetics of the type I IFN
562 response upon challenge with a fixed plasmid copy number did not reveal gross differences
563 between cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$), titration of plasmid DNA uncovered a slightly inferior
564 ability of cGAS($P^{261}H$) over cGAS(WT) to induce *IFIT1* mRNA expression (**Fig. 7C**), but not
565 release of bioactive IFNs in the cell culture supernatant (**Fig. 7D**). To unravel potentially
566 different inherent catalytic activities of cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$), both proteins were

567 expressed in *E. coli*, purified and incubated with dsDNA fragments of 1, 4 or 6 kb length in the
568 presence of ATP and GTP. Both proteins presented similar *in vitro* enzymatic activities as
569 judged by 2´-3-cGAMP quantification by LC-MS/MC, with a trend towards higher cGAMP
570 production by cGAS(P^{261}H) as compared to cGAS(WT) (**Fig. 7E**). For both cGAS variants, the
571 enzymatic activity increased with augmenting dsDNA length, in accordance with other reports
572 on cGAS(WT) (24, 49). In summary, while our *in vitro* data seem to suggest a slightly inferior
573 *in vitro* catalytic activity of cGAS(WT) as compared to cGAS(P^{261}H), our functional data in
574 cells indicate a slightly superior sensitivity of the WT protein to DNA that manifests at
575 suboptimal DNA quantities.
576

577 **rs610913 homozygosity results in a trend towards a lower cell-intrinsic response to**
578 **plasmid DNA, but not to LPS and poly(I:C) challenge**

579 According to data from the 1000 genomes project (22), the SNP rs610913 displays an allele
580 frequency of 35.6 to 63.1% in humans. PBMCs from a cohort of healthy individuals were
581 isolated and stratified upon genotyping of corresponding while blood. Steady-state *IFIT1*
582 mRNA expression levels were similar in PBMCs from individuals homozygous for the WT
583 variant and individuals homozygous for rs610913 (**Fig. 8A**). *IFIT1* mRNA expression was
584 slightly, but non-significantly, increased in the rs610913 SNP group compared to the
585 cGAS(WT) group after both LPS and poly(I:C) challenge (**Fig. 8B**). In contrast, plasmid DNA
586 challenge revealed a slightly decreased *IFIT1* mRNA expression in the rs610913 SNP group
587 compared to the cGAS(WT) group. These data point towards the possibility of a slightly
588 impaired DNA sensing ability in the context of the cGAS(P^{261}H)-encoding rs610913 gene
589 variant.
590

591 **Discussion**

592 This study aimed at characterizing the impact of a single amino acid exchange, proline-
593 to-histidine at position 261 of the cGAS protein. The SNP rs610913 encoding for cGAS($P^{261}H$)
594 attracted our attention because of its high allele frequency. With the exception of the protective
595 deleting polymorphism in the *CCR5* gene (*CCR5Δ32*), little genetic contribution on HIV
596 acquisition was identified in previous genome-wide association studies (23, 50). The mild
597 apparent overrepresentation of the rs610913 allele in HIV-1-positive individuals prompted us
598 to hypothesize that it associates with a higher risk of HIV-1 acquisition. Of note, rs610913
599 appeared to be enriched in BCG-vaccinated healthy controls compared to TB-positive
600 vaccinated individuals, suggesting an association of rs610913 with BCG vaccine-mediated
601 protection to TB infection (51). Given the lack of additional data on rs610913, we aimed at
602 evaluating its role *in vitro*, *in cellulo* and *ex vivo*.

603 Interestingly, we first detected a strong association of cGAS expression and
604 maintenance of base-level innate immunity, in the absence of infection or external stimuli. Both
605 the expression of individual tested ISGs, and the global transcriptomic profile shifted
606 significantly towards an antiviral state in THP-1 cGAS KO cells upon restoration of cGAS
607 expression. This observation was corroborated in HEK293T cells equipped with both cGAS
608 and STING expression. Also, components of the IFN signaling cascade, such as *STAT1* and
609 *IRF7*, were expressed at higher levels in the presence of functional cGAS, potentially allowing
610 bystander cells to mount more rapid paracrine responses. This observation is reminiscent of our
611 previous findings in mouse $CD4^+$ T-cells, which equally displayed a cGAS-dependent ISG
612 expression profile in the absence of exogenous stimuli (10). Work by other groups linked the
613 cGAS-mediated priming of innate immunity to the release and sensing of mitochondrial DNA
614 as response to cellular stress (52, 53), a pathway that can be triggered by both DNA or RNA
615 virus infection (16, 52, 54) and to the base-line sensing of endogenous retroviruses. It is
616 therefore conceivable that cGAS-mediated activity may not only target viruses with dsDNA

617 genomes or DNA intermediates, but also RNA viruses. Along this line, several RNA viruses
618 indeed evolved strategies to actively counteract the cGAS/STING signaling axis (17, 55).
619 However, comparison of cells expressing cGAS($P^{261}H$) and cGAS(WT) protein failed
620 to reveal pronounced differences in their ability to maintain a base-line innate immunity in any
621 experimental system we studied, suggesting a similar efficiency of cGAS($P^{261}H$) enzymatic
622 function, at least at steady-state conditions. At base-line levels, we identified a differential
623 regulation of *TCP-1*, which encodes for a molecular chaperone that is part of the TRiC complex
624 (56). Upon challenge with high amounts of plasmid DNA, cells expressing either cGAS(WT)
625 or cGAS($P^{261}H$) supported a robust release of similar concentrations of bioactive IFNs, as
626 opposed to cells expressing the non-functional cGAS mutant and cGAS KO cells. Also, kinetics
627 of phosphorylation of STING, TBK1 and IRF3 were similar in cGAS($P^{261}H$) and cGAS (WT)-
628 expressing cells. In the context of challenge with suboptimal DNA quantities, induction of
629 *IFIT1* mRNA expression was significantly reduced in cGAS($P^{261}H$)-expressing cells compared
630 to cGAS(WT) cells. Likewise, PBMCs from homozygous rs610913 carriers displayed a trend
631 towards reacting at lower magnitudes to DNA challenge than cells from homozygous WT allele
632 carriers. These data point towards a possibly reduced DNA binding affinity of cGAS($P^{261}H$) or
633 differential requirement of cGAS cofactor interaction. The latter idea is supported by the results
634 of our molecular modeling attempts, which hinted towards the possibility of a potential
635 additional co-factor binding site in the cGAS($P^{261}H$) protein. The topology and the surface
636 charge distribution of the "head-to-head" hcGAS($P^{261}H$) cleft containing the two H^{261} residues
637 create a favorable binding site for a potential cellular co-factor that might increase the stability
638 of the hcGAS $P^{261}H$•dsDNA ladder-like assembly *in vivo*. This stability increase would
639 contribute to the nucleation-cooperativity-based mechanism of cGAS (24) and enhanced
640 enzymatic activity. The latter is supported by the observation that a slightly higher *in vitro*
641 catalytic activity of cGAS($P^{261}H$) can be attributed to the additional stabilization of the "head-

642 to-head" area by the two hydrogen bonds between H^{261} and the side-chains of S^{201} and E^{259} of
643 the same monomer, which are absent in the WT enzyme. Besides, the presence of two histidine
644 residues in the cleft makes this site more suitable for specific recognition and high-affinity
645 binding compared to proline. Intriguingly, a previous report suggested a loss of helix and
646 glycosylation of the mutated cGAS($P^{261}H$) protein, and a better capacity for binding interactions
647 (51).

648 Individual expression of cGAS(WT) or cGAS($P^{261}H$) conferred a decreased
649 susceptibility to VSV-G-pseudotyped lentiviral vector-mediated and HIV-1 transduction. This
650 inhibition occurred in the absence of detectable induction of an innate immune response upon
651 transduction. These data support the idea that cGAS-induced base-line antiviral state of the
652 cells, rather than cGAS-mediated detection of viral DNA intermediates or infection-triggered
653 release of mtDNA, is responsible for lower transduction efficiencies. Of note, the absence of
654 innate immune activation upon HIV-1 infection has been linked to the intactness of viral capsids
655 that permit capsid uncoating closely tied to nuclear pores or in proximity to integration sites
656 within the nucleus, thereby preventing exposure of HIV-1 RT products to cytosolic DNA
657 sensors (11, 12, 57, 58). In line with our working model, cGAS expression reduced
658 susceptibility also to infection with HSV-1 and CHIKV, an RNA virus. Schoggins and
659 colleagues proposed cGAS-mediated inhibition of RNA virus infection through exerting an
660 IRF3-dependent but STAT-independent mechanism (15). Alphaviruses including CHIKV are
661 sensitive to STING/IRF3-mediated restriction of infection (59, 60). In contrast, herpesvirus
662 infection can be accompanied by accidental leakage of viral DNA into the cytosol, allowing
663 cGAS-mediated recognition of the viral nucleic acids and subsequent type I IFN responses (61,
664 62). Although we detected a protective role of functional cGAS in our experiments, we failed
665 to establish a specific phenotype of cGAS(WT) compared to the cGAS($P^{261}H$) variant,

666 indicating that both proteins´ expression establishes a cellular antiviral state that sufficiently
667 restricts infection by diverse viruses.

668 In conclusion, we demonstrate the overall intact functionality of rs610913 SNP-encoded
669 cGAS(P^{261}H). This protein, similarly to cGAS(WT) mounts an efficient IFN response upon
670 sensing of dsDNA and decreases susceptibility to infection by different viruses by maintenance
671 of a cGAS-dependent, base-line expression of multiple antiviral factors.

672

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Author Contributions

JK, CE, SX, CG designed research.

JK, CE, KD, SX, AD, FP, JJ, OZ, XZ, RF performed research.

MWL and ANRW were involved in sample acquisition

JK, CE, SX, AD, FP, CWB, OZ, XZ, RF, JF, ANRW, BS, CG analyzed data.

CE, KD, CWB, RF, ANRW, BS contributed to writing the manuscript.

JK and CG wrote the paper.

Legends

715 **FIGURE 1. rs610913 may facilitate HIV-1 acquisition *in vivo***

716 (**A**) Regional association plot of the *MB21D1* region, containing all SNPs included in the meta-
717 analysis and their respective p-values. The plot is centered on rs610913 (purple diamond), with
718 red dots indicating SNPs in high linkage disequilibrium (LD) (r^2>0.8), and green and light blue
719 dots representing SNPs in moderate or low LD. All SNPs in high LD with rs610913 are
720 synonymous SNPs. (**B**) Forest plot of the odds ratios (OR) for rs610913 with 95% confidence
721 intervals across all subgroups and after meta-analysis (diamond) within the ICGH GWAS of
722 HIV-1 acquisition. The number of cases and controls are indicated for each group along with
723 their respective odds ratios.

724

725 **FIGURE 2. Structural model of cGAS(P^{261}H) reveals amino acid position at "head-to-**
726 **head" interface of the cGAS-ladder-like assembly**

727 (**A**) and (**B**) The structural model of human cGAS(P^{261}H)•dsDNA oligomeric assembly created
728 using the ladder-like crystal structure of mouse cGAS in complex with dsDNA (PDB-ID: 5N6I)
729 and the structure of the hcGAS(WT)•dsDNA•ATP complex (PDB-ID: 6CTA) as starting
730 coordinates. The cGAS(P^{261}H) monomers are shown in blue, yellow, magenta, grey, cyan, and
731 green. The two dsDNA molecules are shown in orange and red. The residues H^{261} in the
732 cGAS(P^{261}H) monomers are represented with a Corey-Pauling-Koltun (CPK) model with the
733 corresponding colors. The ATP binding sites are indicated using molecular surface
734 representation.

735 (**C**) Detailed view of H^{261} localization. The closest distances between H^{261} residues and the
736 dsDNA molecules are shown with dotted black lines. The hydrogen bonds between H^{261}, S^{201},
737 and E^{259} are traced with red circles. The close-up panel in the black box shows the comparison
738 of H^{261} and P^{261} side-chain structures.

739 (**D**) Molecular surface representation of the "head-to-head" interface cleft between the two
740 cGAS($P^{261}H$) monomers bound to the dsDNA molecules. The semitransparent surface is
741 colored according to the molecular electrostatic potential with positive, negative, and neutral
742 charges represented by the blue, red, and white colors, respectively. The residues H261 are
743 shown using the CPK model representation.
744

745 **FIGURE 3. Catalytically active cGAS modulates base-line levels of *IFIT1*, *MX2* and**
746 ***IFNB1* mRNA expression**
747 (**A-C**) THP-1 cGAS KO cells were stably transduced with indicated GFP-cGAS variants and
748 analysed for:
749 (**A**) Percentage of GFP-positive cells and steady-state cGAS protein expression by flow
750 cytometry and immunoblotting, respectively.
751 (**B**) Relative expression of *STING*, *IRF3* and *TREX1* mRNA by quantitative RT-PCR and
752 immunoblotting of indicated proteins.
753 (**C**) Relative *IFIT1*, *MX2* and *IFNB1* mRNA expression levels by quantitative RT-PCR.
754 Error bars indicate S.E.M from ≥ three independent experiments. Immunoblots shown are
755 representative blots of two or more.
756

757 **FIGURE 4. Expression of functional cGAS induces global transcriptomic alterations in**
758 **THP-1 cells**
759 (**A-D**) Bulk RNA sequencing analysis was conducted with total RNA extracted from THP-1
760 cGAS KO cells stably expressing indicated cGAS variants.
761 (**A**) Plot of all raw RPKM values > 0.5 of the indicated samples.
762 (**B**) Identification of differentially expressed genes in cGAS (WT) vs cGAS ($P^{261}H$), cGAS
763 (WT) vs cGAS ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) or cGAS ($P^{261}H$) vs cGAS ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) samples by plotting the

764 gene expression fold change and *p*-values of all differentially expressed genes. Genes with a *p*-
765 value < 0.05 and more than two-fold change are highlighted in blue.
766 (**C**) Gene ontology analysis of genes significantly upregulated in cGAS ($P^{261}H$) vs cGAS (WT),
767 cGAS (WT) vs cGAS ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) or cGAS ($P^{261}H$) vs cGAS ($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) expressing cells.
768 (**D**) Heatmap showing the RPKM values of the 50 DEGs of highest absolute fold change of all
769 statistically significant ($p < 0,05$) DEGs in cGAS(WT) vs cGAS($G^{212}A/S^{213}A$) samples. Genes
770 are ranked based on their absolute fold change.
771
772 **FIGURE 5. cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) expression reduces susceptibility to lentiviral**
773 **transduction in the absence of transduction-provoked innate immune responses**
774 (**A**) THP-1 cells were transduced with VSV-G-pseudotyped lentiviral vectors and analyzed for
775 luciferase reporter expression 72 hours post transduction (n = 5).
776 (**B**) THP-1 cells were infected with VSV-G-pseudotyped HIV-1 NL4.3 luciferase and luciferase
777 reporter expression was analyzed 72 hours post transduction (n = 2).
778 (**C**) Indicated THP-1 cells were transduced with VSV-G-pseudotyped lentiviral vectors in the
779 presence or absence of the reverse transcriptase inhibitor Efavirenz (EFV). Shown is *IFIT1*,
780 *MX2* and *IFNB* mRNA expression and the release of bioactive IFNs in cell culture supernatants
781 at the indicated time points (n = 3).
782
783 **FIGURE 6. Base-line antiviral state mediated by cGAS(WT) and cGAS($P^{261}H$) expression**
784 **renders cells less susceptible to HSV-1 and CHIKV infection**
785 (**A**) 293T mCherry-STING cells stably expressing cGAS variants were challenged with HSV-
786 1 Δ*UL41*N followed by quantification of intracellular HSV-1 Vp5 protein expression by flow
787 cytometry.

788 (**B**) 293T mCherry-STING cells stably expressing cGAS variants were infected with CHIKV
789 181/25 luciferase reporter strain followed by luciferase detection 48 hours post infection.
790 Error bars indicate S.E.M. from ≥ 3 individual experiments.
791
792 **FIGURE 7. cGAS(P^{261}H) may display a slightly reduced DNA sensing ability in THP-1**
793 **cells**
794 (**A**) Indicated THP-1 cells were electroporated with plasmid DNA (12 µg), c-di-UMP (6 µg),
795 cGAMP (6 µg) or mock-electroporated. Shown is the release of bioactive IFNs in cell culture
796 supernatants.
797 (**B**) Immunoblotting of indicated total and phosphorylated proteins were performed using
798 lysates from indicated THP-1 cells electroporated with plasmid DNA (12 µg) or mock-
799 electroporated and collected at indicated time points post challenge. One representative blot of
800 two is shown.
801 (**C**) *IFIT1* mRNA expression of indicated THP-1 cells electroporated with increasing amounts
802 of plasmid DNA.
803 (**D**) Release of bioactive IFNs in cell culture supernatant indicated THP-1 cells electroporated
804 with increasing amounts of plasmid DNA.
805 (**E**) The *in vitro* activity of purified cGAS (WT) and cGAS(P^{261}H) proteins in the presence of
806 dsDNA fragments of various lengths (1, 4, and 6 kb) is shown. The *in vitro* activity was
807 measured in terms of 2'3'cGAMP production by cGAS incubated with its substrates ATP and
808 GTP. Error bars indicate S.E.M of two experiments performed with two individual protein
809 purifications.
810 If not otherwise stated error bars indicate S.E.M. from three individual experiments. n.d. = not
811 detectable; p.e. = post electroporation.
812

813 **FIGURE 8. rs610913 homozygosity results in a trend towards a lower cell-intrinsic**
814 **response to plasmid DNA, but not to LPS and poly(I:C) challenge**
815 IL-2/PHA-stimulated PBMCs from healthy donors with indicated genotype were analyzed in
816 respect to:
817 (**A**) Basal level *IFIT1* mRNA expression of IL-2/PHA-stimulated PBMCs.
818 (**B**) *IFIT1* mRNA expression in IL-2/PHA-stimulated PBMCs upon poly(I:C), LPS or plasmid
819 DNA challenge.
820 The symbols indicate individual donors. Error bars display S.E.M.
821

822 **Table 1. Allele frequency of most abundant, non-synonymous SNPs in the cGAS-encoding**
823 **gene *MB21D1***
824 Shown are the respective single nucleotide exchange, resulting amino acid substitution and
825 relative allele frequencies of the reference and alternative alleles in the African, European and
826 global populations.

827

828 **SUPPLEMENTAL FIGURE 1. Transcriptomic Analysis of THP-1 cells stably expressing**
829 **cGAS variants**
830 (**A**) Heatmap showing the raw RPKM values of genes involved in the cGAS/STING signaling
831 axis.
832 (**B**) Plot of differential expressed genes in cGAS(WT) vs cGAS(P^{261}H) samples. Genes that
833 were verified by RT-Q-PCR are highlighted in red.
834 (**C**) C_T values of selected genes normalized to RNASEP expression tested by RT-Q-PCR.
835

836

837

838 **SUPPLEMENTAL FIGURE 2. HEK293T cells reconstituted with cGAS and STING**
839 **display a cGAS-specific ISG expression profile**

840 (**A**) HEK293T cells stably expressing mCherry-STING were reconstituted with individual
841 cGAS-GFP variants. GFP expression was monitored using Flow Cytometry.

842 (**B**) HEK293T cells that lack endogenous STING expression were reconstituted with cGAS-
843 GFP variants and GFP expression was quantified using Flow Cytometry.

844 (**C**) Immunoblot analysis of indicated HEK293T cell lysates. One representative blot of two is
845 shown.

846 (**D**) Expression of *STING*, *IRF3* and *TREX1* mRNA in indicated HEK293T mCherry-STING
847 cells was quantified by RT-Q-PCR and normalized to *RNASEP* mRNA expression.

848 (**E**) Base line mRNA expression of *IFIT1*, *MX2* and *IFNB1* in indicated cells analyzed by RT-
849 Q-PCR and normalized to *RNaseP* mRNA expression.

850 Error bars indicated S.E.M. from ≥ 3 individual experiments.

851

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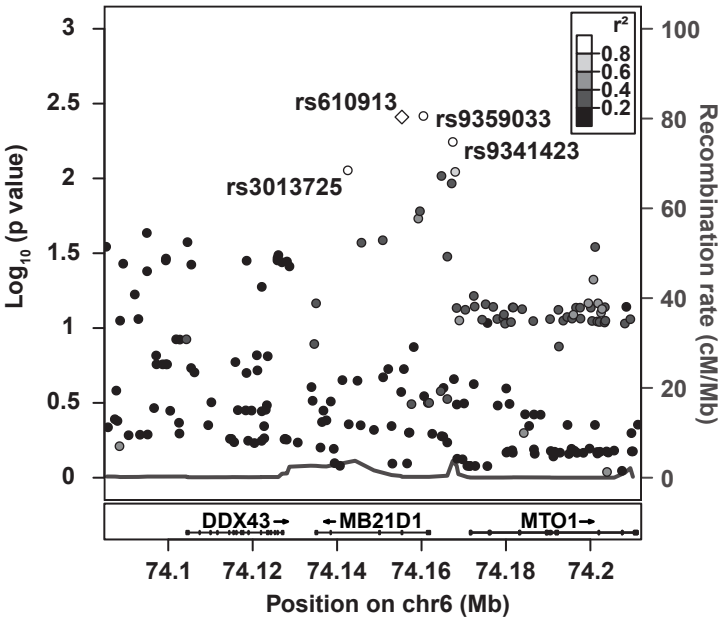
Table 1, Kazmierski et al

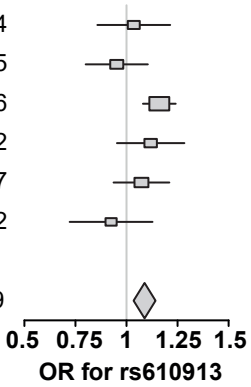
SNP	Alleles	Amino Acids	Total		African		Europe	
			Reference	Alternative	Reference	Alternative	Reference	Alternative
rs9352000	G>T	T35N	15,65	84,35	14,37	85,63	16,28	83,72
rs610913	G>T	P261H	49,72	50,28	63,09	36,91	35,59	64,41
rs35629782	G>T	A48E	94,98	5,02	98,44	5,51	94,49	5,51
rs141133909	C>T	G101R	97,95	2,05	99,38	0,62	97,79	2,21
rs145259959	A>G	L239P	99,80	0,20	99,98	0,02	99,78	0,22
rs138984002	T>A	Y483F	99,96	0,04	99,74	0,26	100,00	0,00
rs114473784	C>T	E422K	99,96	0,04	98,73	1,27	100,00	0,00
rs141390590	G>T	F433L	99,98	0,03	100,00	0,00	99,97	0,03
rs146116825	G>C	S393C	99,98	0,02	99,90	0,10	100,00	0,00

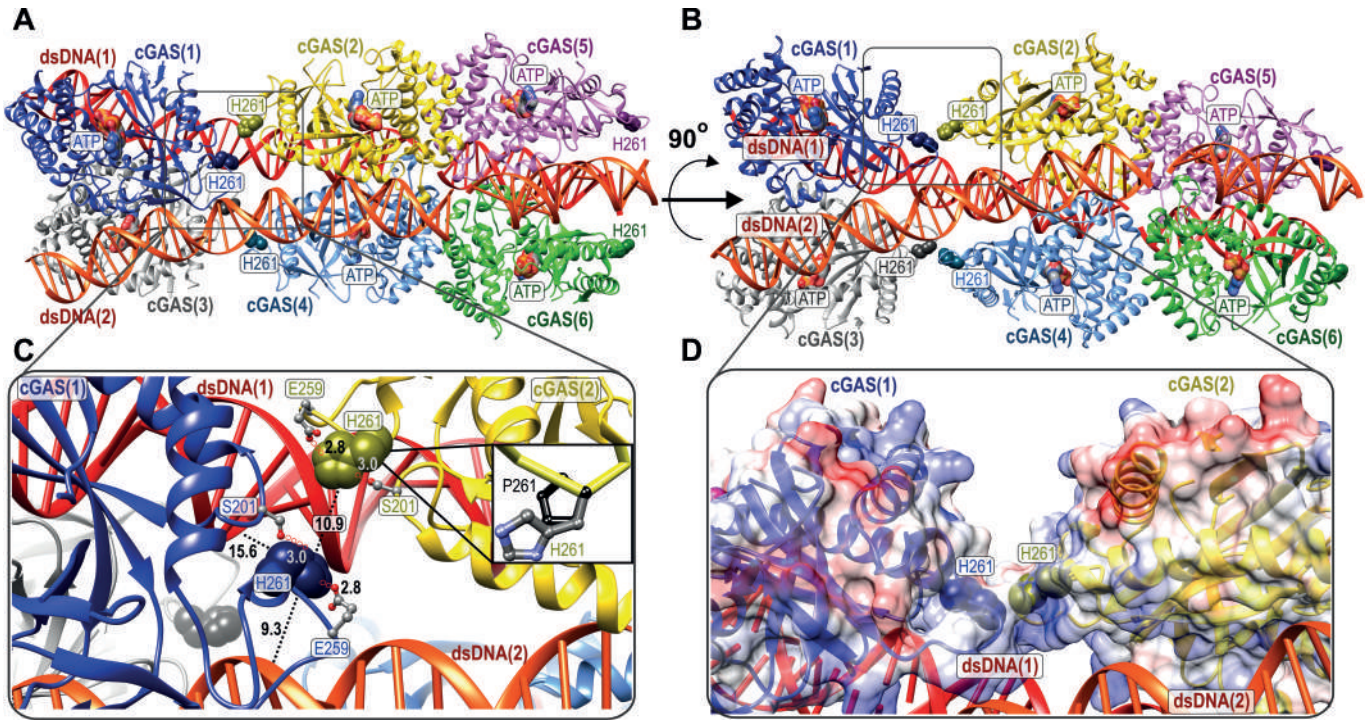
A

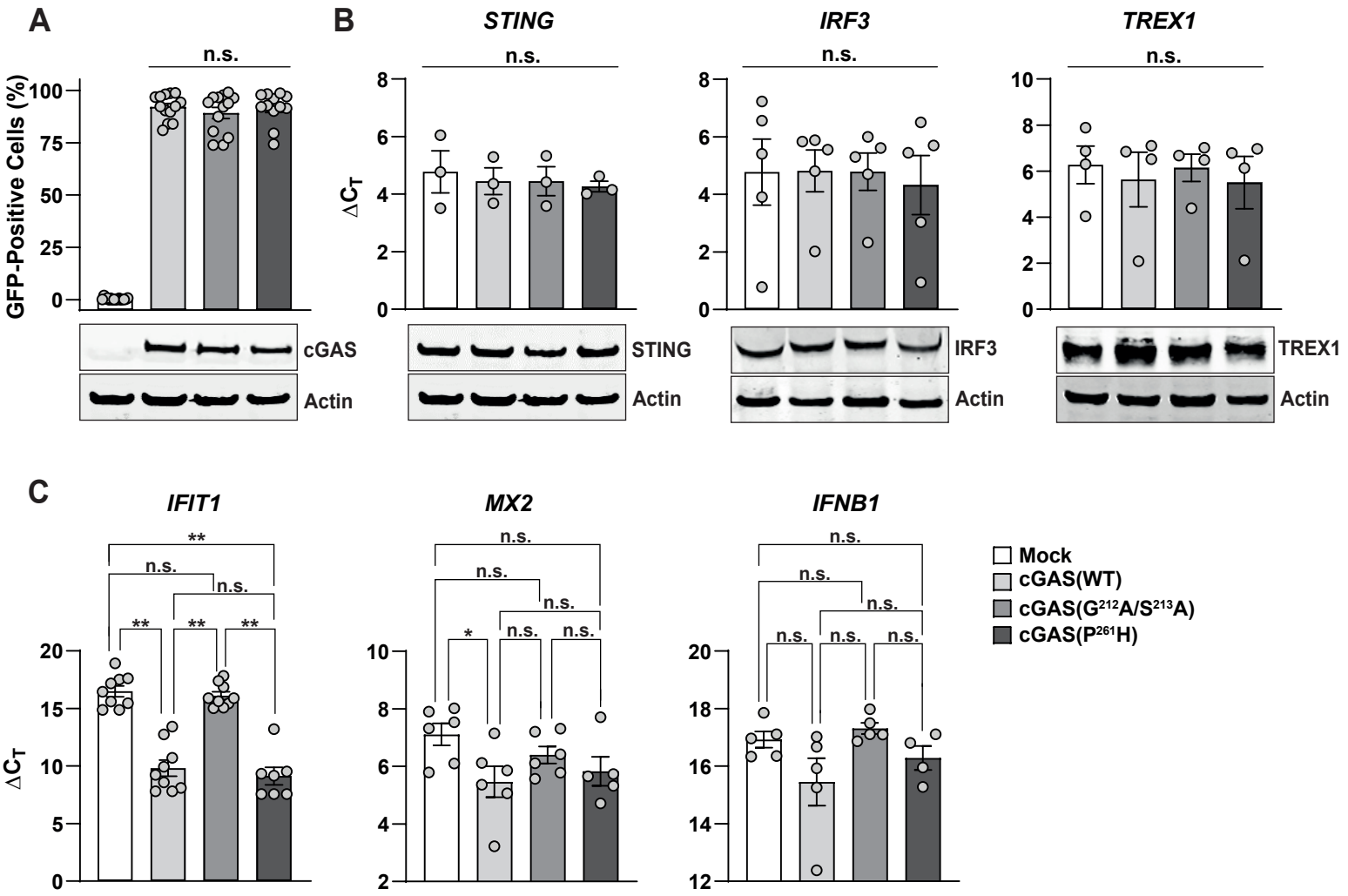


B

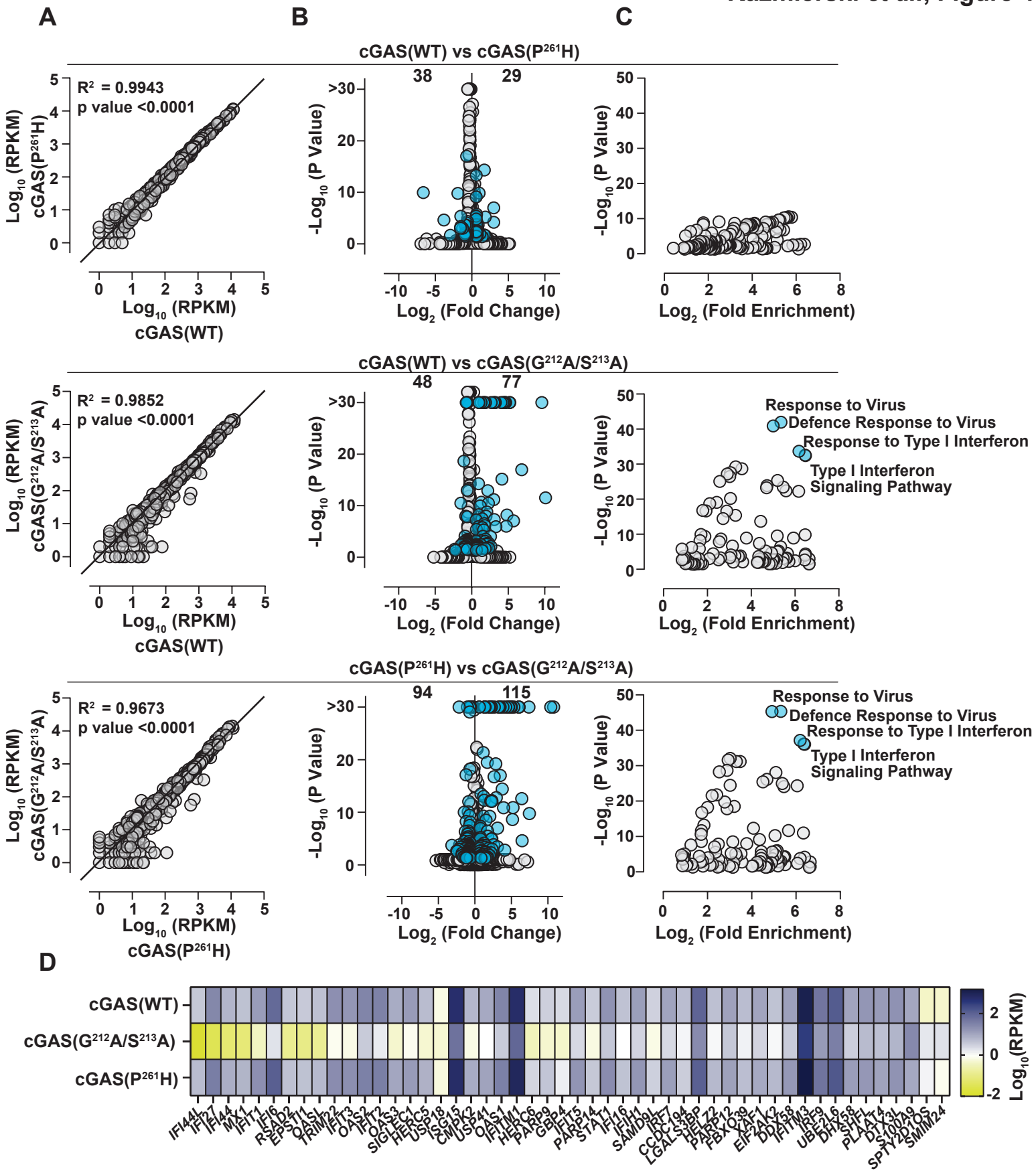
Group	Cases	Controls	OR
Group 1	401	998	1.04
Group 2	850	672	0.95
Group 3	2759	2759	1.16
Group 4	968	513	1.12
Group 5	1026	1190	1.07
Group 6	312	1115	0.92
Summary			1.09

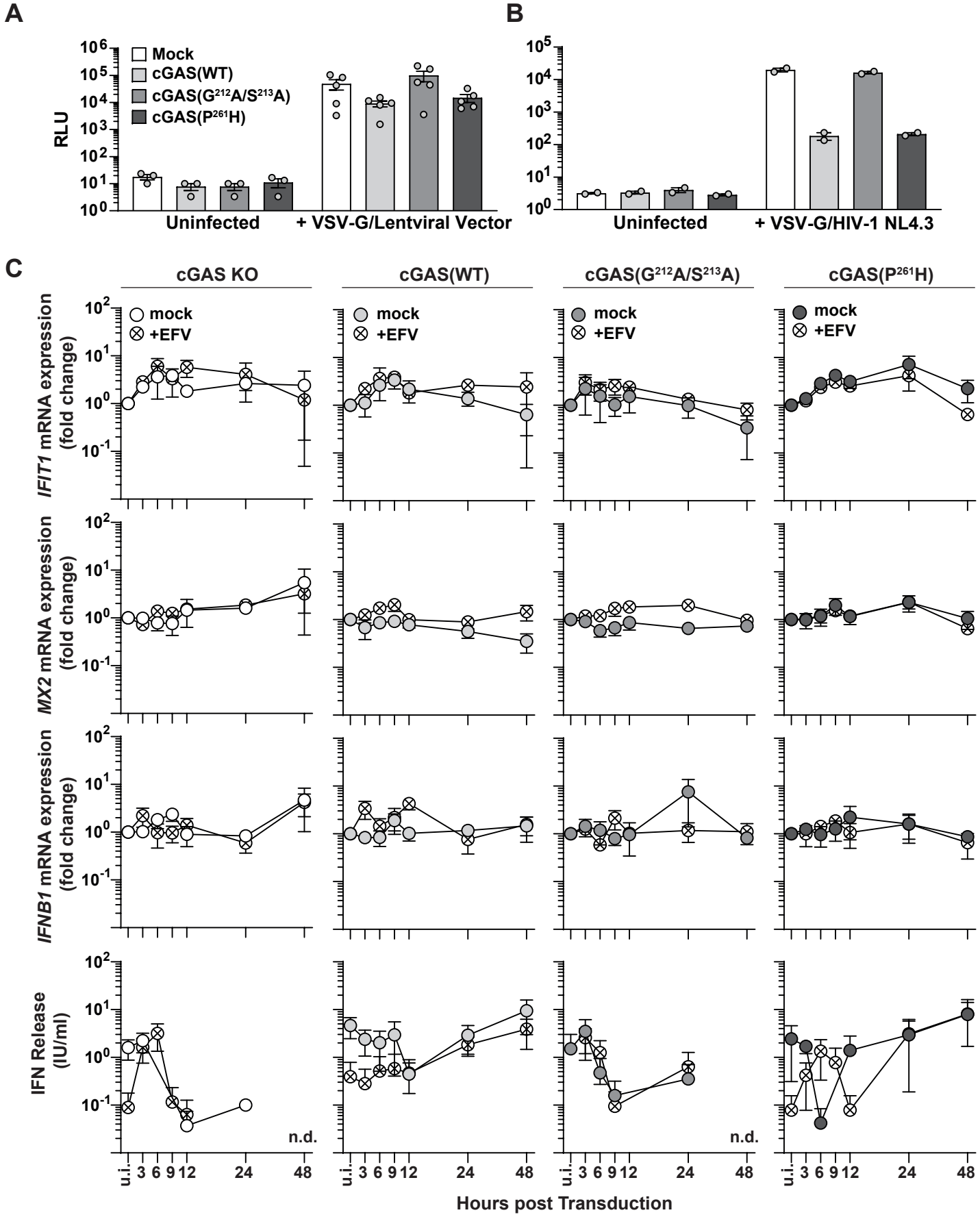


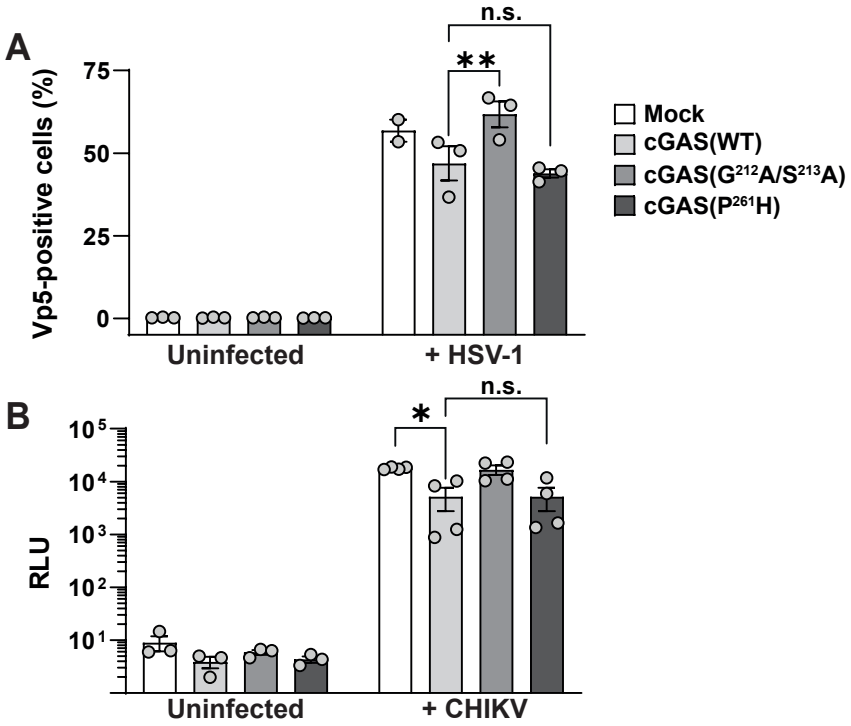

A
dsDNA(1)
cGAS(1)
cGAS(2)
cGAS(5)
ATP
H261
dsDNA(2)
cGAS(3)
cGAS(4)
cGAS(6)
B
90°
C
E259
S201
P261
15.6
10.9
3.0
2.8
9.3
D

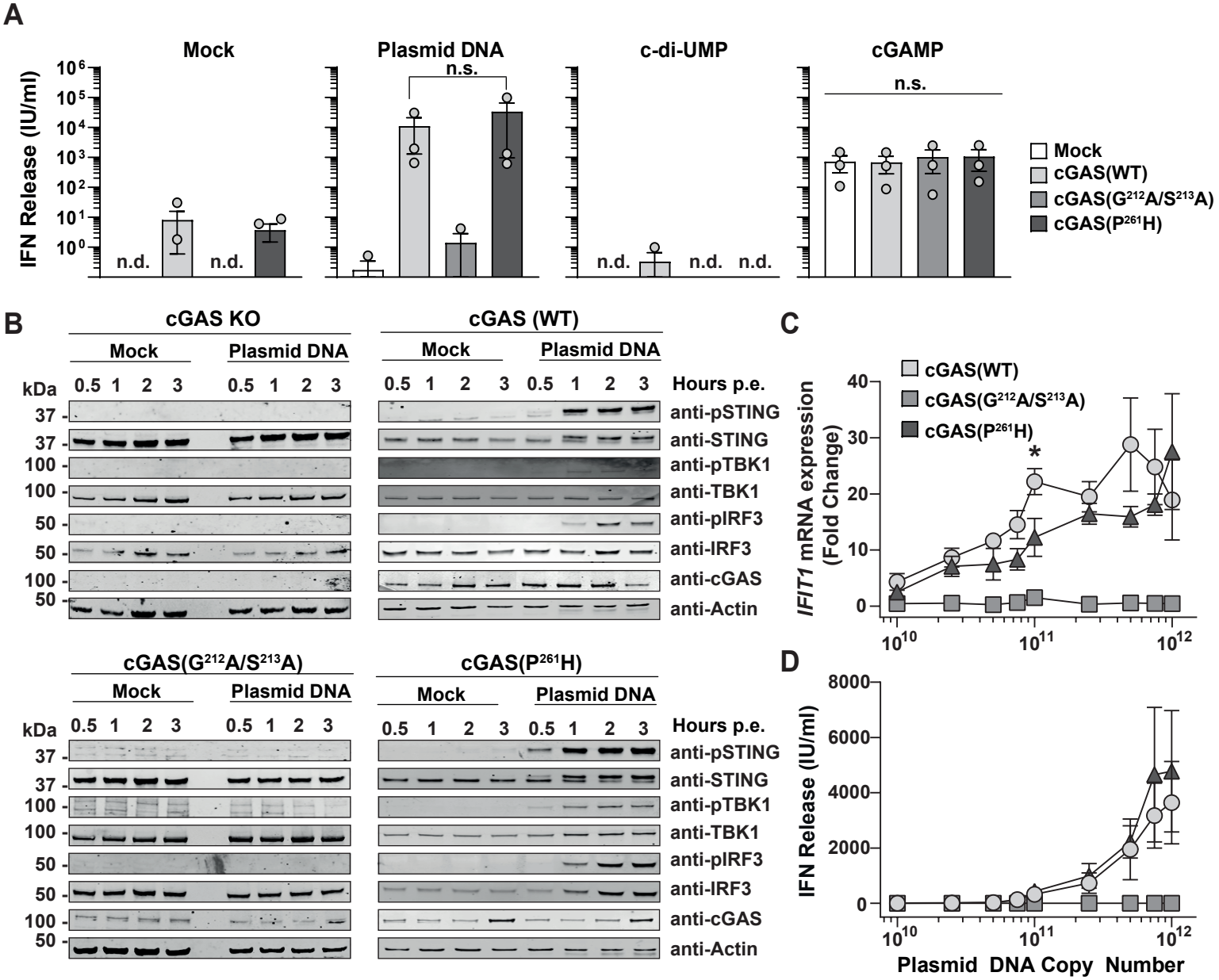

A
B
STING
IRF3
TREX1
n.s.
GFP-Positive Cells (%)
ΔC_T
cGAS
STING
IRF3
TREX1
Actin
C
IFIT1
MX2
IFNB1
**
*
Mock
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)

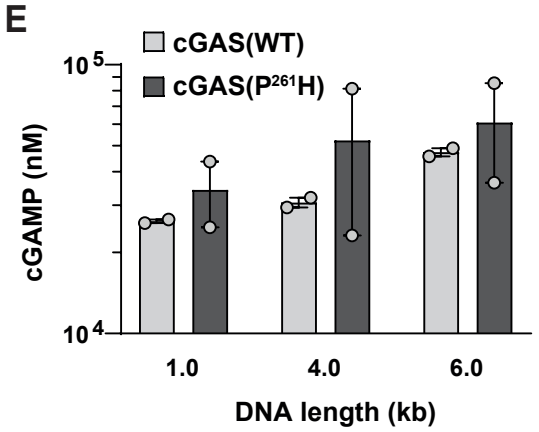
Kazmierski *et al.*, Figure 4

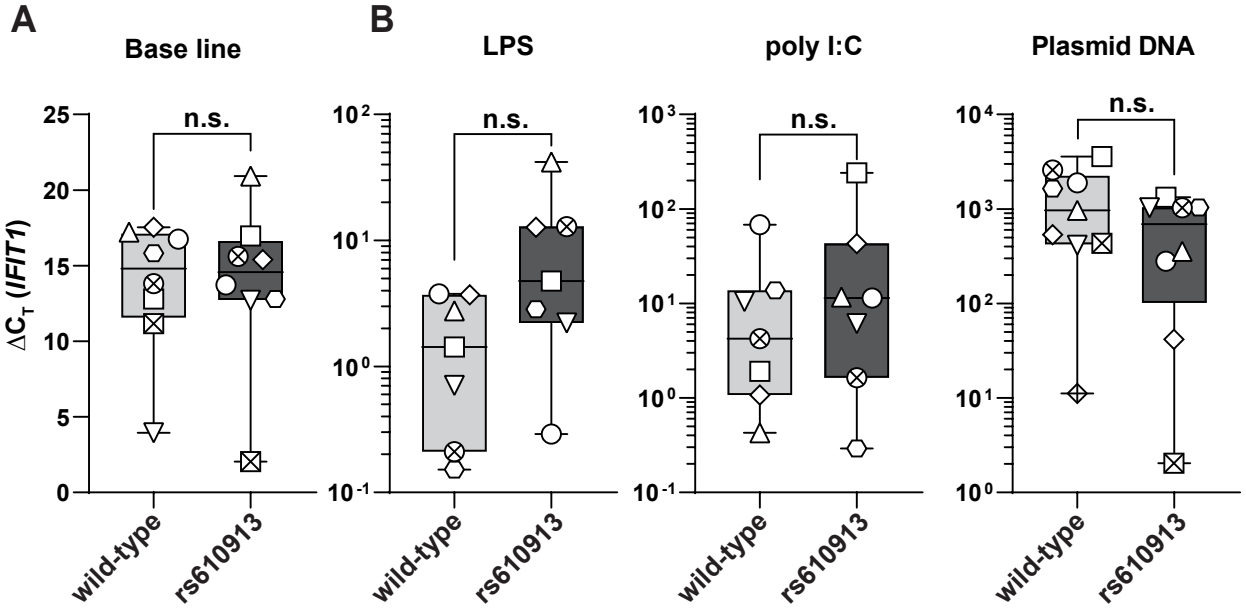


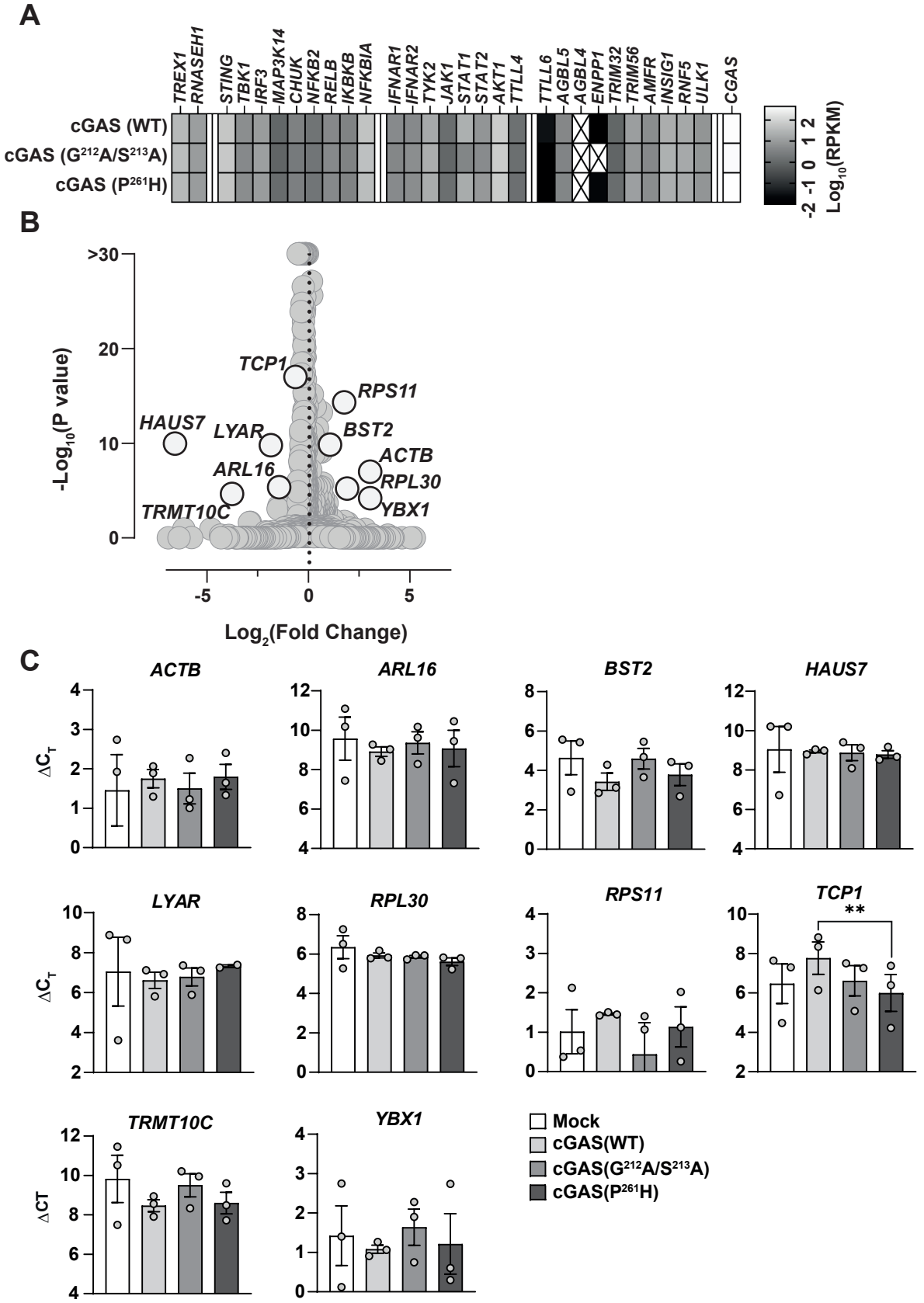

A
Mock
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)
RLU
Uninfected
+ VSV-G/Lentviral Vector
B
Uninfected
+ VSV-G/HIV-1 NL4.3
C
cGAS KO
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)
mock
+EFV
IFIT1 mRNA expression (fold change)
MX2 mRNA expression (fold change)
IFNB1 mRNA expression (fold change)
IFN Release (IU/ml)
n.d.
u.i.
3
6
9
12
24
48
Hours post Transduction


A
Vp5-positive cells (%)
75
50
25
0
n.s.
**
Uninfected
+ HSV-1
Mock
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)
B
RLU
10 5
10 4
10 3
10 2
10 1
*
n.s.
Uninfected
+ CHIKV


A
Mock
Plasmid DNA
c-di-UMP
cGAMP
IFN Release (IU/ml)
n.s.
n.d.
Mock
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)
B
cGAS KO
cGAS (WT)
cGAS(G212A/S213A)
cGAS(P261H)
Mock
Plasmid DNA
kDa
Hours p.e.
anti-pSTING
anti-STING
anti-pTBK1
anti-TBK1
anti-pIRF3
anti-IRF3
anti-cGAS
anti-Actin
C
IFIT1 mRNA expression (Fold Change)
D
IFN Release (IU/ml)
Plasmid DNA Copy Number


E
cGAS(WT)
cGAS(P261H)
cGAMP (nM)
DNA length (kb)


A
Base line
B
LPS
poly I:C
Plasmid DNA
n.s.
n.s.
n.s.
n.s.
ΔC_T (IFIT1)
25
20
15
10
5
0
10^2
10^1
10^0
10^-1
10^3
10^2
10^1
10^0
10^-1
10^4
10^3
10^2
10^1
10^0
wild-type
rs610913
wild-type
rs610913
wild-type
rs610913
wild-type
rs610913

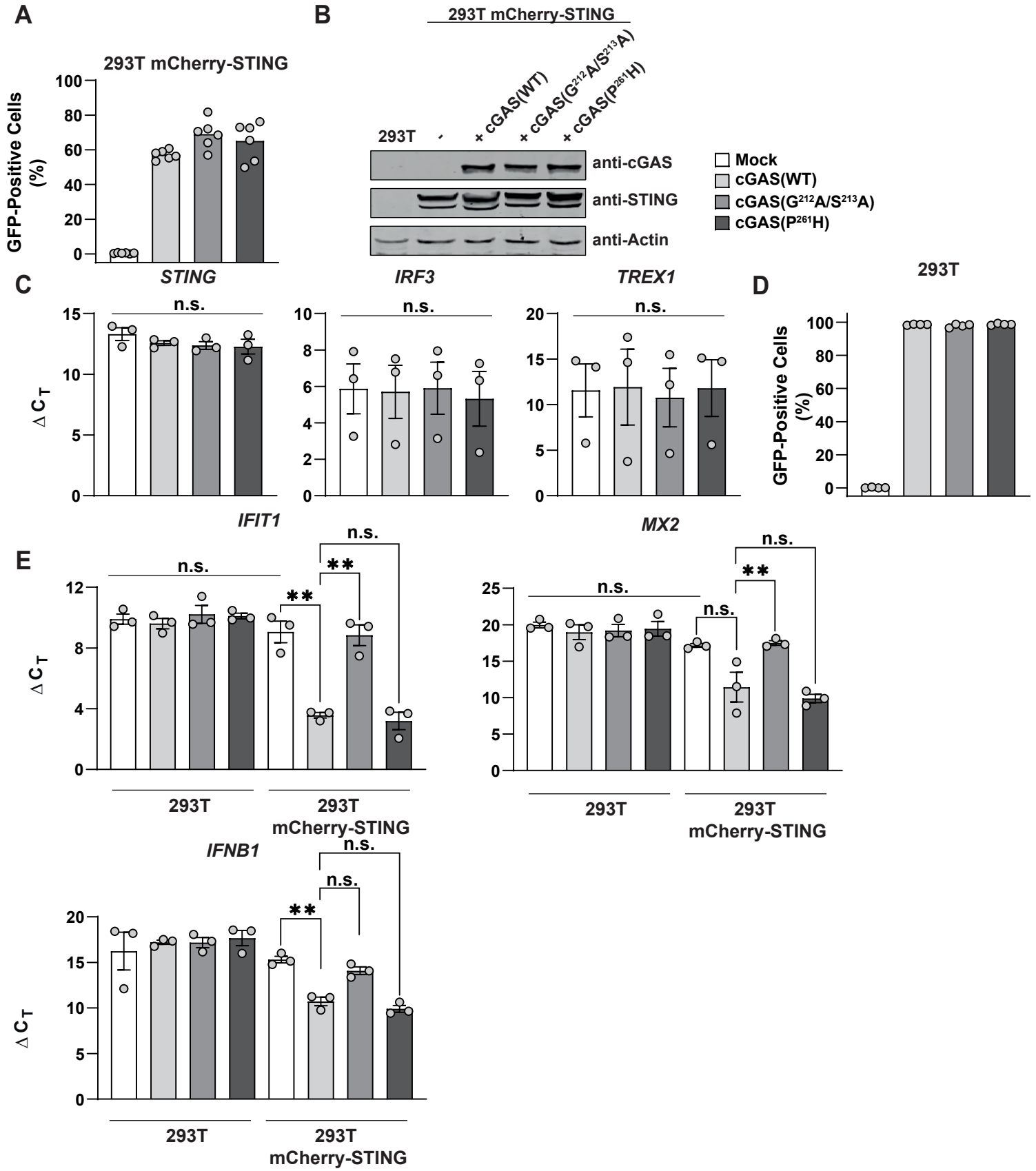


SUPPLEMENTAL FIGURE 1. Transcriptomic Analysis of THP-1 cells stably expressing cGAS variants

(**A**) Heatmap showing the raw RPKM values of genes involved in the cGAS/STING signaling axis.

(**B**) Plot of differential expressed genes in cGAS(WT) vs cGAS(P^{261}H) samples. Genes that were verified by RT-Q-PCR are highlighted in white.

(**C**) C_T values of selected genes normalized to RNASEP expression tested by RT-Q-PCR.



SUPPLEMENTAL FIGURE 2. HEK293T cells reconstituted with cGAS and STING display a cGAS-specific ISG expression profile

(**A**) HEK293T cells stably expressing mCherry-STING were reconstituted with individual cGAS-GFP variants. GFP expression was monitored using Flow Cytometry.

(**B**) HEK293T cells that lack endogenous STING expression were reconstituted with cGAS-GFP variants and GFP expression was quantified using Flow Cytometry.

(**C**) Immunoblot analysis of indicated HEK293T cell lysates. One representative blot of two is shown.

(**D**) Expression of STING, IRF3 and TREX1 mRNA in indicated HEK293T mCherry-STING cells was quantified by RT-Q-PCR and normalized to RNASEP mRNA expression.

(**E**) Base line mRNA expression of IFIT1, MX2 and IFNB1 in indicated cells analyzed by RT-Q-PCR and normalized to RNaseP mRNA expression.

Error bars indicated S.E.M. from ≥ 3 individual experiments.