

1 Complex and critical roles for the AtrR transcription factor in control of *cyp51A*
2 expression in *Aspergillus fumigatus*

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7 Running title: Complex behavior of *cyp51A* promoter duplications

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24 Abstract (231 words)

25 *Aspergillus fumigatus* is the major filamentous fungal pathogen in humans. The gold
26 standard treatment of *A. fumigatus* is based on azole drug use but the appearance of
27 azole-resistant isolates is increasing at an alarming rate. The *cyp51A* gene encodes
28 the enzymatic target of azole drugs and azole-resistant alleles of *cyp51A* often have an
29 unusual genetic structure containing a duplication of a 34 or 46 bp region in the
30 promoter causing enhanced gene transcription. These tandem repeats are called
31 TR34/TR46 and produce duplicated binding sites for the SrbA and AtrR transcription
32 factors. Using site-directed mutagenesis, we demonstrate that both the SrbA (sterol
33 response element: SRE) and AtrR binding sites (AtrR response element: ATRE) are
34 required for normal *cyp51A* gene expression. Loss of either the SRE or ATRE from the
35 distal 34 bp repeat of the TR34 promoter (further 5' from the transcription start site)
36 caused loss of expression of *cyp51A* and decreased voriconazole resistance.
37 Surprisingly, loss of these same binding sites from the proximal 34 or 46 bp repeat led
38 to increased *cyp51A* expression and voriconazole resistance. These data indicate that
39 these duplicated regions in the *cyp51A* promoter function differently. Our findings
40 suggest that the proximal 34 or 46 bp repeat in *cyp51A* recruits a corepressor that
41 requires multiple factors to act while the distal repeat is free of this repression and
42 provides the elevated *cyp51A* expression caused by these promoter duplications.

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44 Importance (142 words)

45 *Aspergillus fumigatus* is the most common human filamentous fungal pathogen. Azole
46 drugs are the current therapy of choice for *A. fumigatus* but the prevalence of azole

47 resistance is increasing. The main genetic alteration causing azole resistance is a
48 change in the *cyp51A* gene that encodes the target of these drugs. Azole-resistant
49 *cyp51A* alleles routinely contain duplications in their promoter regions that cause
50 increased gene transcription. Here, we demonstrate that clinical isolates containing a
51 34 or 46 bp duplication in the *cyp51A* promoter required the presence of the
52 transcription factor-encoding *atrR* gene to exhibit elevated azole resistance. Elimination
53 of transcription factor binding sites in the *cyp51A* gene have differential actions on
54 expression of the resulting mutant allele. These data dissect the molecular inputs to
55 *cyp51A* transcription and reveal a complicated function of the promoter of this gene that
56 is critical in azole resistance.

57

58 Results and discussion

59

60 *Aspergillus fumigatus* is the most common cause of mold infections in humans (1).
61 Azole drugs are currently the first-line therapy for aspergillosis. However, azole-resistant
62 *A. fumigatus* clinical isolates are being found with increasing frequency and are
63 associated with a significantly worse clinical outcome (2). Although multiple
64 mechanisms contribute to azole resistance in *A. fumigatus*, the most commonly
65 reported genetic change associated with this phenotype are alterations in the gene
66 encoding *cyp51A*, the target enzyme of azole drugs (3). The most prevalent azole
67 resistance allele is a compound mutation in *cyp51A* consisting of a 34 bp duplication in
68 the promoter element (TR34) and a single amino acid replacement in the coding

69 sequence (L98H) (4). Both of these mutations are required for the observed high level
70 azole resistance conferred by this compound allele (5).

71 Although it is well-established that the TR34 *cyp51A* promoter drives increased
72 expression of *cyp51A* mRNA compared to the wild-type version (5), we lack a detailed
73 understanding of how this increased expression is achieved. Previous studies from our
74 lab and others have demonstrated that several different transcription factors control
75 transcription of *cyp51A* via the 34 bp region. First, the sterol-responsive SrbA regulator
76 binds to an element in this 34 bp region called the sterol response element (SRE) and
77 stimulates expression when sterols are limiting (6, 7). Second, the AtrR transcription
78 factor binds to a second site within the 34 bp region, referred to as the AtrR response
79 element (ATRE), to activate transcription (8, 9). Finally, two different negative
80 transcriptional regulators repress *cyp51A* expression. The CCAAT-binding complex
81 (CBC) or the iron-responsive transcription factor HapX (10) both reduce *cyp51A*
82 expression: CBC binds within the 34 bp region while HapX binds just 3' to this segment
83 (11, 12). The locations of these sites and their positions relative to the 34 bp region are
84 shown in Supplementary Figure 1A. Note that both the TR34 and TR46 promoters
85 contains two SREs and ATREs owing to the 34 bp duplication. The CBC binding site is
86 also duplicated but the HapX response element (HXRE) is not. To distinguish between
87 these two copies of each site, we refer to them as either the proximal SRE/ATRE
88 (proximal; closest to transcription start, pSRE/pATRE) or distal SRE/ATRE (distal;
89 furthest from transcription start, dSRE/dATRE).

90 To evaluate how the ATRE, SRE and HXRE contribute to expression of both
91 wild-type and TR34 versions of *cyp51A*, site-directed mutations were constructed in

92 these elements (Supplementary Figure 1A) and returned to the natural *cyp51A* genomic
93 location (Figure 1A). These strains were tested for their ability to grow in the presence
94 of voriconazole (Figure 1B) and the level of *cyp51A* expression was evaluated by
95 reverse transcription-quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR) (Figure 1C) or using an anti-Cyp51A
96 antibody (Supplementary Figure 1B) analyses.

97 Loss of either the pSRE (mpSRE) or the pATRE (mpATRE) from wild-type
98 *cyp51A* caused a slight (mpSRE) or a large increase (mpATRE) in voriconazole
99 susceptibility (Figure 1B). Removal of the HXRE led to a large decrease in voriconazole
100 susceptibility. These resistance data were fully consistent with the observed expression
101 changes seen by either RT-qPCR measurements (Figure 1C) or western blotting
102 (Supplementary Figure 1B). Loss of the ATRE from the wild-type *cyp51A* promoter
103 caused such profound hypersensitivity to voriconazole that we were unable to recover
104 sufficient fungus to assay expression. Together, these data are consistent with both the
105 SRE and ATRE acting as positive regulatory elements and the HXRE acting as a
106 negative element to control *cyp51A* expression and function.

107 Insertion of the TR34 promoter into the *cyp51A* locus led to a decrease in
108 voriconazole susceptibility as seen before (4, 13). Strikingly, loss of either the pSRE or
109 the pATRE from TR34 *cyp51A* led to a large decrease in voriconazole susceptibility
110 (Figure 1B). This decrease in voriconazole susceptibility was accompanied by a large
111 increase in the level of Cyp51A expression (Figure 1C, Supplementary Figure 1B).
112 Behavior of each of these proximal element mutations was similar to that caused by
113 loss of the HXRE from TR34 *cyp51A*. Although these proximal binding sites clearly
114 work as primarily as positive elements in the wild-type promoter context, they appear to

115 be involved in repression in the TR34 promoter as their loss leads to a large increase in
116 *cyp51A* expression. Conversely, loss of either of the distal elements (dSRE or dATRE)
117 caused an increase in voriconazole susceptibility, along with a decrease in expression
118 and loss of voriconazole inducibility of *cyp51A* mRNA (Figure 1C) consistent with these
119 binding sites acting as positive sites determining TR34 promoter function.

120 We also produced proximal ATRE and SRE mutant forms of the TR46 *cyp51A*
121 gene to determine if the unexpected behavior of these elements would extend to this
122 different promoter context. TR46 corresponds to duplication of 46 bases with an
123 identical 5' endpoint to TR34 and additional 12 bp at the 3' end (14). As seen for their
124 counterparts in the TR34 promoter, loss of either the proximal SRE or ATRE caused a
125 decrease in voriconazole susceptibility and an increase in expression compared to the
126 starting TR46 promoter-containing strain.

127 These data indicate that the increased Cyp51A expression and reduced
128 voriconazole susceptibility caused by the TR34 or TR46 promoters cannot be explained
129 simply by the increased dosage of the duplicated regions present. The proximal and
130 distal regions have distinct behaviors in the TR34 promoter context and likely in the
131 TR46 promoter as well. The distal 34 bp region behaves strictly as a positive regulator
132 of *cyp51A* transcription while the proximal element exhibits a negative effect when
133 present in the TR34 promoter. This is quite surprising since loss of the pATRE from the
134 wild-type *cyp51A* promoter yields a strain that cannot grow in the presence of
135 voriconazole. These same behaviors are seen for the pSRE, although this strain grew,
136 albeit slowly, in the presence of voriconazole.

137 Given the important role of AtrR in control of *cyp51A* promoter function, we
138 compared the requirement for this factor in voriconazole resistance and Cyp51A
139 expression in wild-type and isogenic TR34 *cyp51A* laboratory strains. We also
140 examined the effect of loss of AtrR in two different clinical strains containing either a
141 TR34 promoter-driven *cyp51A* gene or a TR46 *cyp51A* locus. Each of the clinical
142 isolates tested is associated with different mutant forms of Cyp51A. The *atrR* gene was
143 disrupted in all these 4 strains using CRISPR/cas9 and isogenic *atrR* and *atrR* Δ
144 derivatives tested for voriconazole susceptibility (Figure 2A) and expression of Cyp51A
145 by western blotting (Figure 2B).

146 The presence of AtrR was essential for the normal high level voriconazole
147 resistance seen in both clinical isolates, irrespective of the TR34 or TR46 nature of the
148 *cyp51A* promoter. The overexpression of Cyp51A was also eliminated from these
149 strains when the *atrR* was deleted.

150 Together, these data illustrate the unexpected complexity of the TR34 promoter
151 region in *cyp51A* expression. We argue that a simple increase in dosage of a positively
152 acting region of 34 bp cannot explain the unique behavior of the TR34 promoter. The
153 distal 34 bp repeat behaves positively but the proximal 34 bp repeat has a strong
154 negative effect on TR34 promoter activity. We hypothesize the presence of a
155 multivalent corepressor (Figure 2C) that must be engaged by SrbA and AtrR, along with
156 CBC and HapX to normally repress *cyp51A* transcription. A single transcription factor
157 acting as both a repressor or activator has been extensively documented for
158 mammalian nuclear receptors (15). Loss of the binding sites for SrbA or AtrR strongly
159 activate *cyp51A* expression in the absence of drug induction but only in the context of a

160 duplication of the *cyp51A* promoter. Importantly, neither the TR34 or TR46 duplication
161 includes both the CBC and HapX binding sites, suggesting that these must be lost in
162 order to provide the proper context for the upstream repeat to induce *cyp51A*
163 expression. In the wild-type *cyp51A* promoter, mutations in either the SRE or the ATRE
164 cannot hyperactivate since these elements are also required for normal expression.
165 AtrR is required for voriconazole resistance and Cyp51A overproduction from TR34 and
166 TR46 promoter-driven *cyp51A* genes and, as seen earlier with *SrbA* (16), AtrR is a
167 crucial determinant for azole resistance in clinical isolates of *A. fumigatus*.

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233 Figure Legends

234

235 **Figure 1. Analysis of *cyp51A* promoter function.** A. Schematic diagram of
236 integration of wild-type and mutant *cyp51A* promoter mutants. All mutants analyzed
237 here were reintroduced back at the native *cyp51A* chromosomal location. The relative
238 location of the TR repeat regions is indicated as a box with the two exons of *cyp51A*
239 also noted. The hygromycin selection marker (Hyg cassette) is located downstream of
240 the native 3' end of the *cyp51A* mRNA. B. Disk diffusion assay of mutant forms of the
241 *cyp51A* promoter. A filter disk containing 0.01 mg of voriconazole was placed in the
242 center of 10^6 spores of each indicated strain and allowed to grow at 37° C for 72 hrs. C.
243 Strains containing the listed versions of either the wild-type (left hand side) or TR34
244 (right hand side) *cyp51A* gene were grown to mid-log phase with (+) or without (-)
245 voriconazole treatment. Transcriptional behavior of each mutant promoter was
246 assessed by qRT-PCR relative to the *tef1* gene. Data are presented for the average of
247 two independent experiments. Numbers above each bar represent the average fold
248 increase for each strain in the presence or absence of voriconazole.

249

250 **Figure 2. AtrR is essential for voriconazole resistance in laboratory and clinical**
251 **strains.** A. Isogenic *atrR* and *atrRΔ* derivatives of the indicated strains were tested for
252 voriconazole resistance by disk diffusion assay. B. Western blot analysis of the strains
253 listed above was performed using the anti-Cyp51A antiserum. Note that the L98H-
254 containing enzymes electrophorese very close to a nonspecific background signal as
255 we showed earlier (13). The Y121F T289A Cyp51A is clearly resolved below this
256 background polypeptide. C. Diagram for potential roles of trans- and cis-acting factors
257 at wild-type and TR34 *cyp51A* promoters. A hypothetical corepressor is pictured that

258 makes multivalent contacts with the key regulators of *cyp51A* transcription. Note the
259 proximal ATRE is indicated as the red crosshatched box. Other binding sites are color-
260 coded with their respective regulators. Azole drugs trigger corepressor dissociation and
261 gene activation. In the case of the TR34 promoter (right hand panels), the distal SRE
262 and ATRE in the upstream 34 bp repeat can bypass corepressor function and activate
263 transcription. The 34 (and 46) bp tandem repeats do not include the HXRE but maintain
264 a CBC binding site. Interaction of CBC with the adjacent HXRE is required for strong
265 binding of these factors (17). Exposure of the TR34 *cyp51A* gene to azole drugs or loss
266 of the pSRE or pATRE (shown here) trigger strong induction of expression. Induction of
267 expression in the mpATRE TR34 promoter is maximal even in the absence of azole
268 induction. Only TR34 is shown but we believe the same mechanisms operate for the
269 TR46 promoter.

270

271 Supplementary Figures and Material and Methods

272

273 **Supplementary Figure 1. Detailed map of *cyp51A* promoter mutations and analysis**
274 **of Cyp51A protein levels in response to these alterations.** A. The DNA sequence
275 of the *cyp51A* promoter region of interest in this study is shown. The wild-type promoter
276 is shown on the top and the TR34 equivalent is shown on the bottom. Location of the
277 core binding elements for each transcription are indicated below the DNA sequences.
278 Mutant bases are shown in red lettering in each site. Extent of the 34 bp repeat is
279 shown by the gray highlighting. B. Whole cell protein extracts were prepared and
280 analyzed by western blotting using the anti-Cyp51A antiserum (13). Strains lacking the

281 pATRE in the wild-type *cyp51A* promoter context were unable to be grown in the
282 presence of voriconazole and are absent from that analysis. Lanes are numbered at
283 the top of each panel and the numbers near each Cyp51A polypeptide correspond to
284 the quantitation for this experiment.

285

286 Materials and Methods

287 **Strains & growth conditions.** The lab strains used in this study were derived from the
288 AfS35 (FGSC #A1159). Strains used here are listed in Table 1. *A. fumigatus* strains
289 were typically grown at 37°C in rich medium (Sabouraud dextrose: 0.5% tryptone, 0.5%
290 peptone, 2% dextrose [pH 5.6]). Selection of transformants and the drug disc diffusion
291 assay was performed in minimal medium (MM: 1% glucose, nitrate salts, trace
292 elements, 2% agar [pH 6.5]); trace elements, vitamins, and nitrate salts, supplemented
293 with 1% sorbitol and either 200 mg/liter hygromycin Gold (InvivoGen) or 0.1 mg/litre
294 pyrithiamine. For solid medium, 1.5% agar was added.

295

296 **Transformation and generation of *A. fumigatus cyp51A* mutants.** The plasmid
297 backbone for generating *A. fumigatus cyp51A* promoter mutants was provided by
298 Eveline Snelders and colleagues. This plasmid has a wild-type *cyp51A* promoter, gene
299 and transcription terminator followed by a hygromycin resistance cassette (hph) and 1.3
300 kb downstream of *cyp51A* for homologous targeted integration (5). The specific *cyp51A*
301 promoter mutations were synthesized as DNA fragments and obtained from GenScript
302 USA Inc. The DNA fragments were then subcloned into the vector backbone by
303 digesting the vector and synthesized DNA fragments with PmlI and BglII. SRE, ATRE

304 and HXRE mutations were marked with HindIII, SpeI and BamHI restriction sites,
305 respectively. The recombinant plasmids were verified by PCR amplifying a 1kb region
306 around the mutation sites, and restriction digests using the appropriate restriction
307 enzymes. The recombinant plasmids carrying the different *cyp51A* promoters were
308 digested with PmlI and PstI to release the *cyp51A* promoter-gene-hph cassette for
309 transformation. The list of plasmids used for this study is listed in Table 2.

310

311 Transformation was performed using in vitro-assembled cas9-guide RNA-
312 ribonucleoproteins coupled with 50 bp microhomology repair templates (18).
313 Transformants with targeted integration were confirmed by diagnostic PCR of the novel
314 downstream junction as well as by PCR amplification and subsequent sequencing of the
315 *cyp51A* promoter region to confirm the integrity of the promoter region duplication
316 and/or mutation. The single copy nature of *cyp51A* in the targeted integrants was
317 confirmed using qRT-PCR, as described in (13).

318

319 **Drug Disc Diffusion Assay.** Fresh spores of *A. fumigatus* were suspended in 1X
320 phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) supplemented with 0.01% Tween 20 (1X PBST). The
321 spore suspension was counted using a hemocytometer to determine the spore
322 concentration. Spores were then appropriately diluted in 1X PBST. For the drug
323 diffusion assay, $\sim 10^6$ spores were mixed with 10 ml soft agar (0.7%) and poured over
324 15 ml regular agar (1.5%) containing minimal medium. A sterile paper disk was placed
325 on the center of the plate, and 10 μ l of 2 mg/liter voriconazole was spotted onto the filter
326 paper for analysis of wild-type and TR34 promoter mutant-containing strains. The same

327 protocol was followed by 10 μ l of 3.2 mg/liter voriconazole was spotted onto the filter
328 disk for the analysis of the TR46 promoter-containing strains. The plates were incubated
329 at 37°C and scanned after 72 hours.

330

331 **Western Blotting.** Western blotting was performed as described in (13). The Cyp51A
332 peptide polyclonal antibody used here has been detailed in the reference above, and
333 was used at a 1:500 dilution.

334

335 **Measurement of mRNA level.** Reverse transcription quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR) was
336 performed as described in reference (13), with the following modification. The Ct value
337 of the gene coding for *tef1* was used for normalization of variable cDNA levels to
338 determine the fold difference in transcript levels with respect to *cyp51A*.

339

340 **TABLE 1.** *A. fumigatus* strains used in this study

341	Strain	Parent	Genotype	Source or reference
342	V232-12		TR34 L98H T289A <i>cyp51A</i>	W. Melchers
343	SPF169	V232-12	<i>atrRΔ::ptrA</i>	This study
344	V181-51		TR46 Y121F T289A <i>cyp51A</i>	W. Melchers
345	SPF169	V181-51	<i>atrRΔ::ptrA</i>	This study
346	AfS35	D141	<i>akuA::loxP</i>	FGSC
347	SPF92	AfS35	wt <i>cyp51A</i> hph	(13)
348	SPF200	AfS35	mSRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
349	SPF202	AfS35	mATRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
350	SPF204	AfS35	mHXRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
351	SPF94	AfS35	TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	(13)
352	SPF206	AfS35	mdSRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
353	SPF208	AfS35	mdATRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
354	SPF210	AfS35	mHXRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
355	SPF212	AfS35	mpSRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
356	SPF214	AfS35	mpATRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study

357

358

359 **TABLE 2.** Plasmids used in this study

360	Plasmid	Parent	Genotype	Source or reference
361	A1	pUC57	wt <i>cyp51A</i> hph	(5)
362	pSP119	A1	mSRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
363	pSP120	A1	mATRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
364	pSP121	A1	mHXRE <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
365	L5H	pUC57	TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	(5)
366	pSP122	A1	mdSRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
367	pSP123	A1	mdATRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
368	pSP124	A1	mHXRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
369	SPF125	A1	mpSRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study
370	SPF126	A1	mpATRE TR34 <i>cyp51A</i> hph	This study

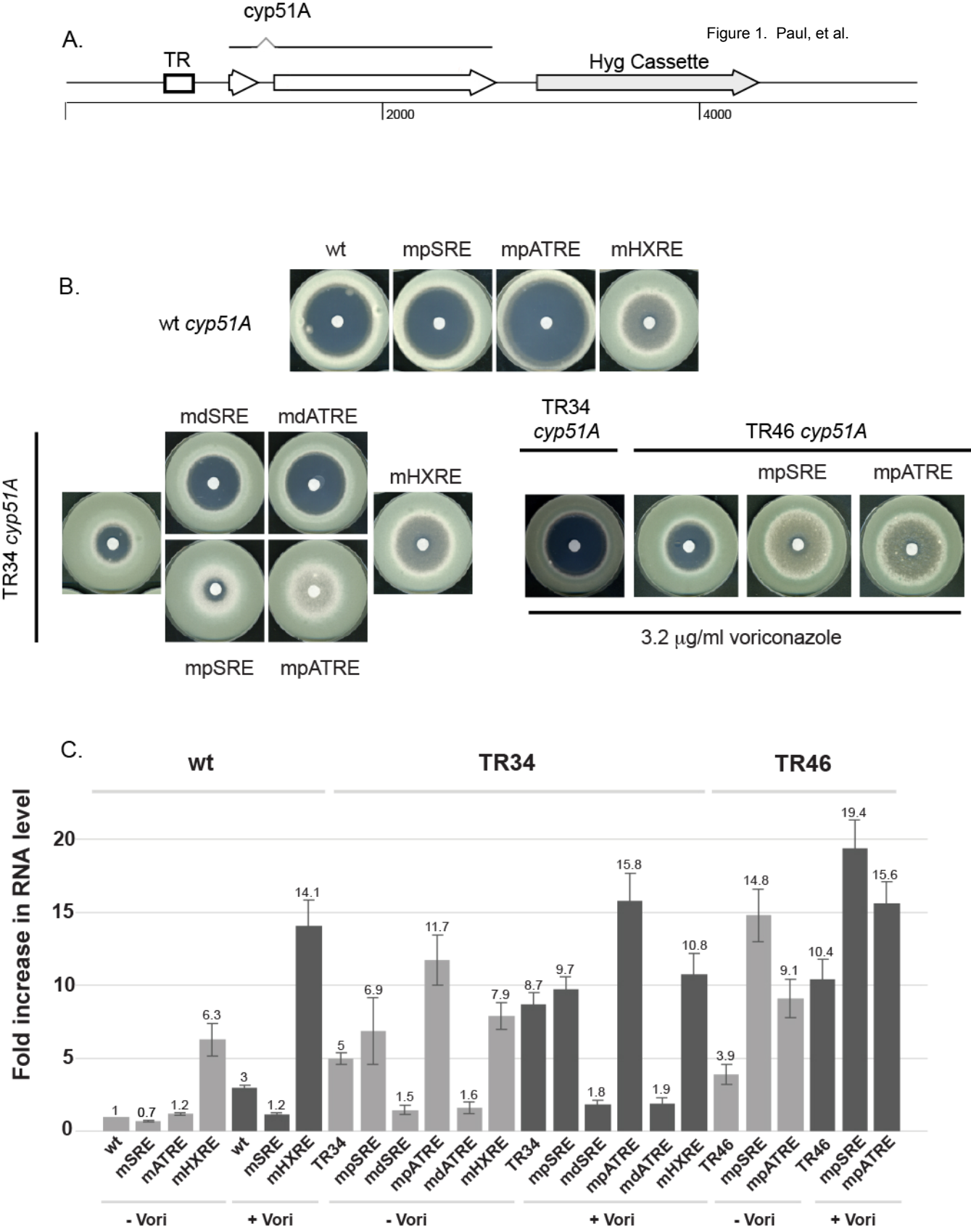
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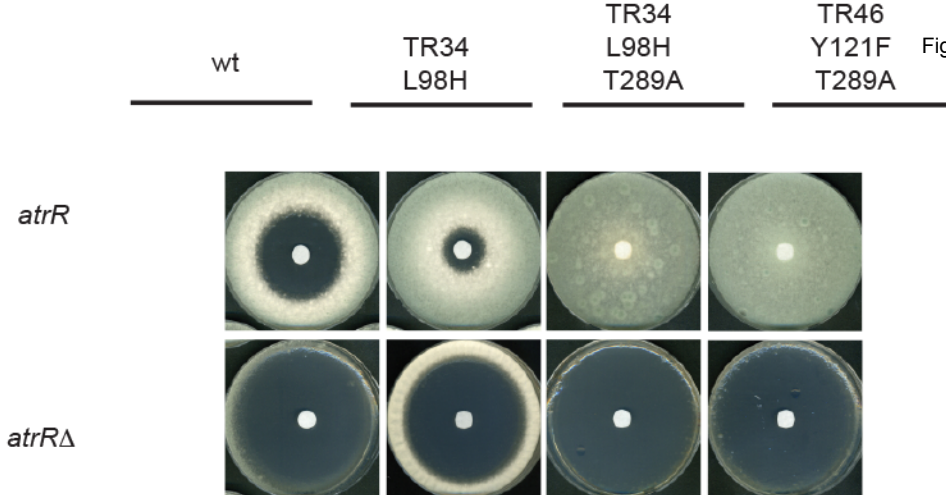
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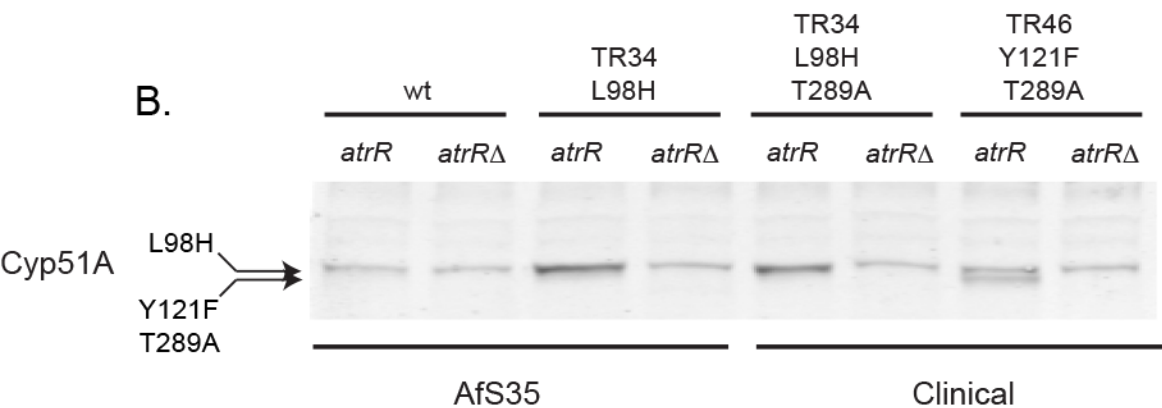
375



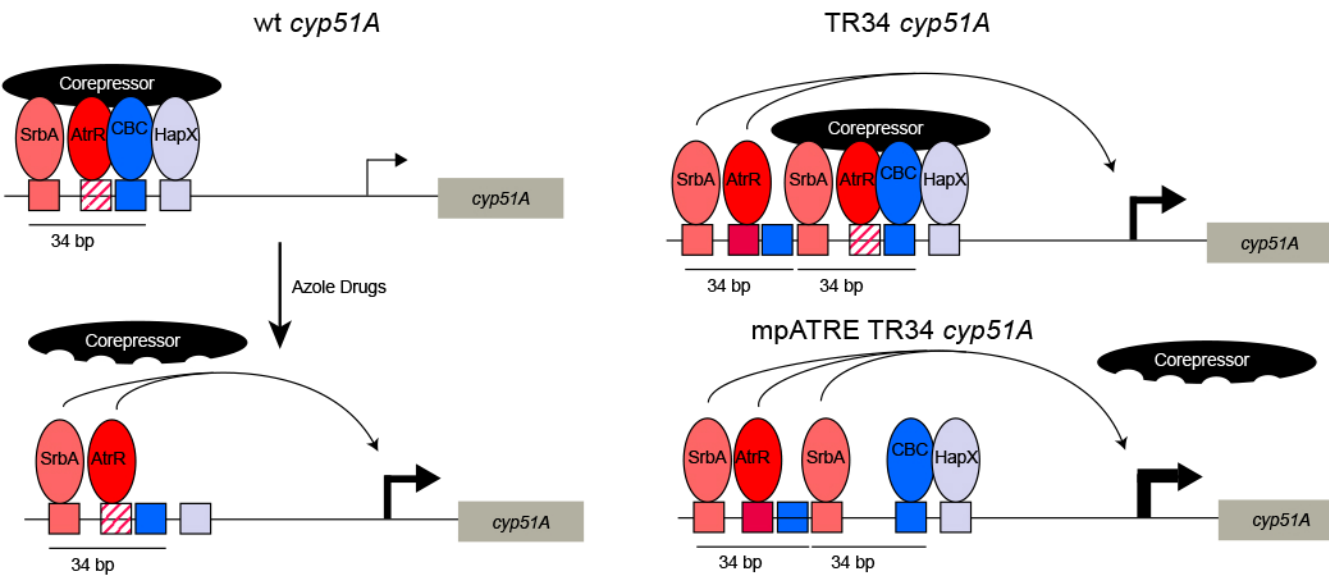
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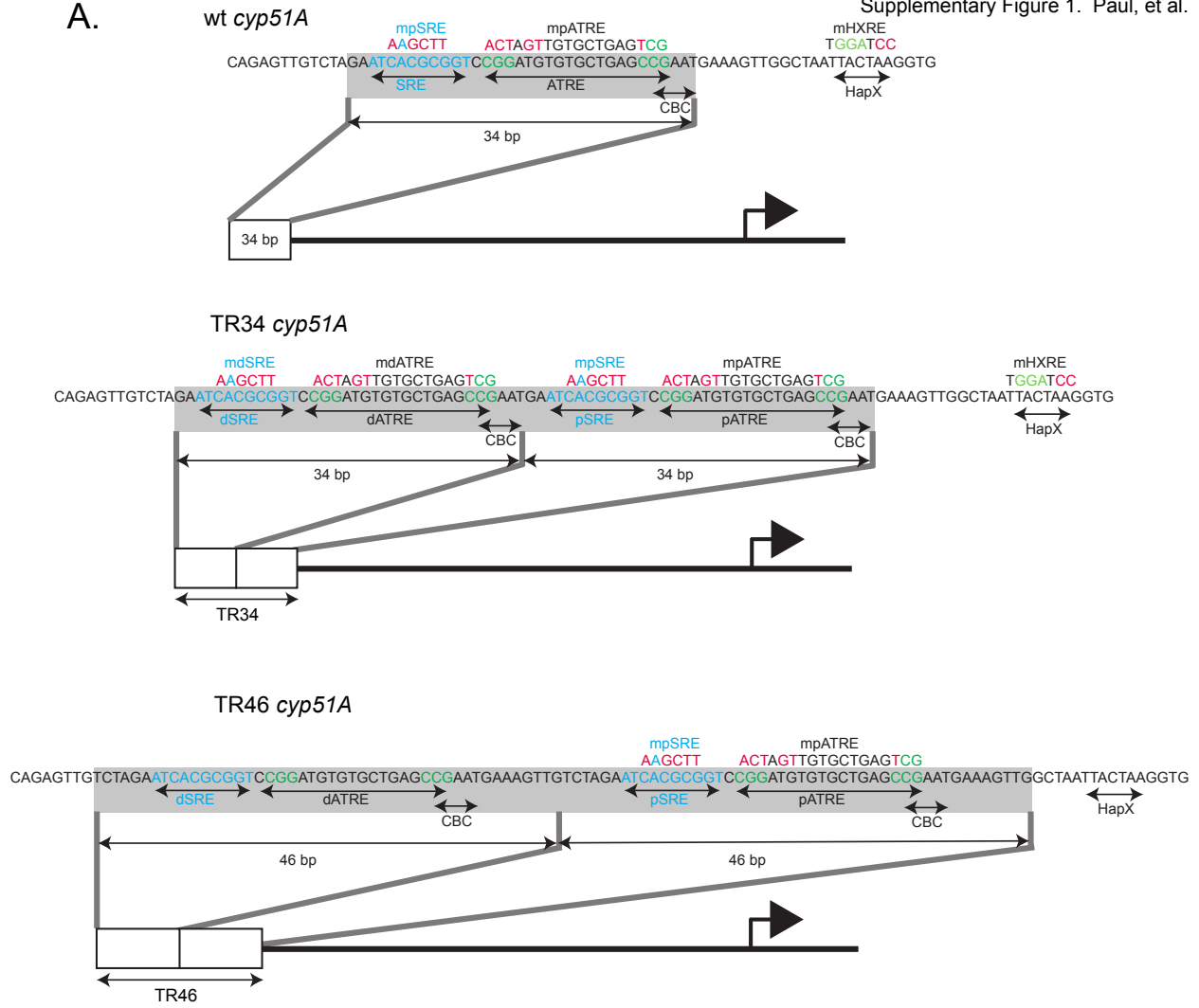
B.



C.

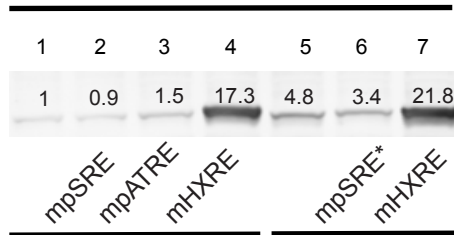


A.

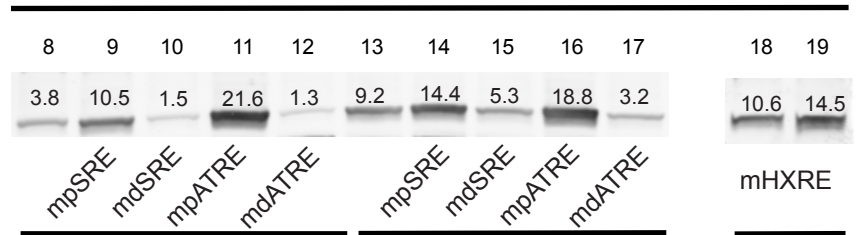


B.

wt *cyp51A*



TR34 *cyp51A*



Voriconazole

-

+

-

+

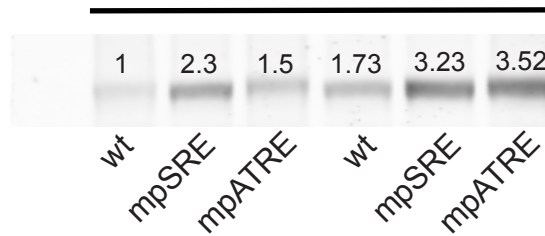
-

+

-

+

TR46 *cyp51A*



- Voriconazole

- Voriconazole