Epigenomic mapping in B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia identifies transcriptional regulators and noncoding variants promoting distinct chromatin architectures

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ABSTRACT

B-cell lineage acute lymphoblastic leukemia (B-ALL) is comprised of molecular subtypes spanning a range of aberrant chromosomal rearrangements and chimeric fusions driving malignancy. While transcriptional and DNA methylation profiling of B-ALL subtypes has been extensively examined, the accompanying chromatin landscape is not well characterized for many subtypes. We therefore mapped chromatin accessibility using ATAC-seq for 10 B-ALL molecular subtypes in primary ALL cells from 154 patients. Comparisons with precursor B-cells identified candidate cell-of-origin for B-ALL cell samples as well as B-ALL-specific gene regulatory networks impacting oncogenic signaling pathways that perturb normal B-cell development. Strikingly, we also identified that over 20% of B-ALL accessible chromatin sites exhibiting strong subtype enrichment, with transcription factor (TF) footprint profiling identifying candidate TFs that promote this subtype-specific chromatin architectures. We further mapped over 9000 inherited genetic variants that contribute to variability in chromatin accessibility among patient samples. Overall, this large dataset and associated analyses offer a unique window into the gene regulatory landscape of B-ALL. Our data suggest that differences in chromatin architecture are driven by diverse TFs and inherited genetic variants which promote unique gene regulatory networks and transcriptional changes between precursor B-cells and B-ALL, as well as among B-ALL subtypes.

INTRODUCTION

Acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) is derived from B- and T-cell lineage precursor cells and is the most common childhood cancer (1). A majority of acute lymphoblastic leukemias are derived from B-cell lineages (B-ALL) that are comprised of distinct molecular subtypes characterized by unique chromosomal lesions, including aneuploidy, translocations, gene fusions, point mutations and other chromosomal rearrangements that drive leukemogenesis (2). Numerous studies have identified extensive heterogeneity in transcriptomes (3,4) and DNA methylomes (5,6) among B-ALL subtypes in large patient cohorts, but there is limited understanding of chromatin landscapes and gene regulatory networks. Here we provide an extensive survey of accessible chromatin states and transcription factor (TF) networks in primary B-ALL cells from over 150 patients across the United States.

Chromatin accessibility or open chromatin is a hallmark of active *cis*-regulatory elements that control spatial and temporal gene expression (7). Because ALL typically involves mutations (*PAX5*-altered), complex rearrangements (*DUX4*-rearranged, *PAX5*-altered, *ZNF384*-rearranged, etc.) and/or oncogenic gene fusions (*ETV6::RUNX1*, *TCF3::PBX1*, *KMT2A*-rearranged, etc.) of TF genes as well as disruptions of *cis*-regulatory elements (8), chromatin accessibility maps can provide valuable information to better understand the leukemogenic process. Accessible chromatin sites can be mapped using transposases by performing assay for transposase-accessible chromatin with high-throughput sequencing (ATAC-seq) (9,10). Although DNase treatment has also been used (11), one key advantage of ATAC-seq is the low sample input requirements compared to DNase-based assays. This makes ATAC-seq an attractive assay for mapping open chromatin in primary cells from patients wherein sample availability is limited. Additionally, chromatin accessibility allows for identification of bound TFs through an examination of TF footprints which are defined by a depletion in DNA transposition (12) or DNase (13) cleavage events within regions of accessible chromatin signal. As a result, the underlying TF-binding gene regulatory networks that promote chromatin accessibility and differential gene expression can be predicted.

Previous large-scale studies of chromatin accessibility in primary cells have predominantly focused on distinct cell types (10,14) or distinct tumor types and locations (15,16). Therefore, large-scale analyses aimed to better understand chromatin state in a single heterogeneous malignancy are currently lacking. To address this knowledge gap, we mapped chromatin accessibility in fresh primary ALL cells from 154 patients across 10 molecular subtypes of B-ALL (*BCR::ABL1*, *DUX4*-rearranged, *ETV6::RUNX1*, high hyperdiploid, low hypodiploid, *KMT2A*-rearranged, *BCR::ABL1*-like (Ph-like), *PAX5*-altered, *TCF3::PBX1*, *ZNF384*-rearranged) and B-other patient samples. Notably, these subtypes span the entire spectrum of clinical prognoses, including patients with excellent (*DUX4*-

rearranged, *ETV6::RUNX1*, high hyperdiploid), good (*TCF3::PBX1*), intermediate (*ZNF384*-rearranged,

PAX5-altered) and poor (*BCR::ABL1*, low hypodiploid, *KMT2A*-rearranged and Ph-like) prognosis.

Using ATAC-seq chromatin accessibility and histone profiling in primary ALL cells, we mapped

cis-regulatory element activity in B-ALL. In complement to chromatin accessibility profiling, we identified

thousands of chromatin loops targeting promoters in multiple B-ALL cell lines to better inform linkages

of *cis*-regulatory elements to cognate genes. We coupled these maps to transcription factor (TF)

footprints at accessible chromatin sites to identify key TFs and gene regulatory networks across B-ALL

samples and within distinct B-ALL subtypes. Our results identified extensive chromatin reprogramming

between precursor B-cells and B-ALL, as well as extensive heterogeneity in accessible chromatin

landscapes among B-ALL subtypes. Specifically, we uncovered a focused subset of over 42,000 B-ALL

open chromatin sites exhibiting extensive subtype-enrichment and subtype-enriched TF binding events.

Notably, these sites can predict and classify B-ALL samples with 86% cross-validation accuracy. We

additionally explored the impact of inherited genetic variation on chromatin state and delineated over

9000 ATAC-seq chromatin accessibility quantitative trait loci (ATAC-QTLs) in B-ALL cells, including a

subset that alter neighboring gene expression. Using the largest accessible chromatin accessibility

dataset for B-ALL to date, our data collectively support substantial subtype-specificity in chromatin

accessibility that is driven in part by distinct TFs, as well as pronounced inter-individual heterogeneity in

chromatin state through inherited genetic variants. Our work further supports the role of these unique

chromatin architectures in promoting distinct gene regulatory networks that impact gene expression and

B-ALL cell biology.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

<u>Patient samples</u>

Patient samples were obtained from: St. Jude Children's Research Hospital (Memphis, Tennessee),

ECOG-ACRIN Cancer Research Group, The Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology, MD Anderson

Cancer Center (Houston, Texas), Cook Children's Medical Center (Fort Worth, Texas), Lucile Packard

Children's Hospital (Palo Alto, California), The University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois), Novant Health

Hemby Children's Hospital (Charlotte, North Carolina) and Children's Hospital of Michigan (Detroit,

Michigan). All patients or their legal guardians provided written informed consent. The use of these

samples was approved by the institutional review board at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Functional genomic studies

ATAC-seq using the Fast-ATAC(10) protocol was performed on 10,000 fresh primary ALL cells.

H3K27ac ChIP-seq was performed as previously described(17) on 20 million fresh primary ALL cells.

Promoter capture Hi-C was performed on 10 million B-ALL cell line cells processed according to Arima

promoter capture Hi-C kit instructions (Arima product #s: A510008, A303010, A302010). Next

generation sequencing of ATAC-seq and ChIP-seq was performed at the Hartwell Center for

Bioinformatics and Biotechnology at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Transcriptomic and SNP

genotyping data from B-ALL patient samples were obtained from St. Jude Children's Research

Hospital. Normal B-cell ATAC-seq (10,18) were downloaded from NCBI (GSE122989 and GSE74912).

B-ALL cell histone modification ChIP-seq datasets (H3K27ac, H3K4me1 and H3K27me3) were

downloaded from the Blueprint Epigenome Consortium (https://www.blueprint-epigenome.eu/).

Expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) data was obtained from previous studies (19). Arima promoter

capture Hi-C (Arima; A510008, A303010, A302010) was performed on 10 million B-ALL cell lines (697,

BALL1, Nalm6, RS411, REH, SEM and SUPB15) according to the manufacturers provided instructions

using unspecified proprietary buffers, solutions, enzymes, and reagents. See **Supplementary Methods**

for additional details.

Data analysis

ATAC-seq and ChIP-seq reads were mapped to the hg19 reference genome using bowtie2 (20) and

peaks were identified using MACS2 (21). Regions of interest for ATAC-seq analyses were selected

using a reproducible peak summit approach within each subtype cohort with subsequent region

merging. DESeq2 (22) was employed to identify B-ALL-enriched or subtype-enriched differentially

accessible chromatin sites (DAS). Two B-ALL subtype patient samples (IKZF1 N159Y and iAMP21)

were included in B-ALL versus Pro-B cell analyses but were excluded from additional studies due to

limited sample size. Promoter capture Hi-C libraries from B-ALL cell lines were analyzed at 3-kb

resolution using the Arima CHiC pipeline (v1.4, https://github.com/ArimaGenomics/CHiC). Genomic

regions representing separate loop ends were compiled to facilitate overlap determinations with B-ALL

patient chromatin accessible regions of interest using "bedtools intersect". Enhancer and target gene

prediction for network construction was analyzed with the ABC enhancer algorithm

(https://github.com/broadinstitute/ABC-Enhancer-Gene-Prediction). In brief, inputs for the ABC

enhancer algorithm included, B-ALL enriched DAS, merged B-ALL patient ATAC-seq, H3K27Ac ChIP-

seq, Arima promoter capture Hi-C contact counts with ABC score threshold at 0.04. The Genomic

Regions Enrichment of Annotations Tool (GREAT) (23) was used to identify candidate target genes

associated with DAS. TOBIAS (12) was used to identify TF footprints at accessible chromatin sites. The

Principal Component Analysis-Linear Discriminant Analysis (PCA-LDA) subtype classification model

was constructed stepwise by first PCA transformation of subtype-enriched ATAC-seq counts, then

applying LDA on an optimized number of principal components. RASQUAL (24) was used to map

chromatin accessibility quantitative trait loci using ATAC-seq (ATAC-QTLs). Significant ATAC-QTLs for

each region were identified with a genome-wide computed FDR of 10%. See **Supplementary Methods**

for additional details.

RESULTS

Chromatin accessibility profiles of B-ALL patient samples spanning multiple subtypes

ATAC-seq using the Fast-ATAC (10) method was performed on recently-harvested primary ALL cells

from 154 patients spanning 10 B-ALL molecular subtypes (*BCR::ABL1*, *DUX4*-rearranged,

ETV6::RUNX1, high hyperdiploid, low hypodiploid, *KMT2A*-rearranged, Ph-like, *PAX5*-altered,

TCF3::PBX1, *ZNF384*-rearranged) and B-other samples (**Table S1**) from diverse medical centers,

research groups and clinical trials networks across the United States (see **Methods**). To identify high-

confidence sites, we identified ATAC-seq peak summits using subtype merged data and selected only

loci reproducible among unmerged individual patients. Using this approach we identified 110,468

accessible chromatin sites, on average, in each B-ALL subtype (range= 71,797–142,498), with 217,240

merged sites identified in total representing the final genomic regions of interest (**Figure 1A, Table S2**).

194   Using H3K27ac ChIP-seq data generated from a subset of 10 B-ALL patient samples, as well as

primary B-ALL cell H3K27ac, H3K4me1 and H3K27me3 ChIP-seq data from the Blueprint Epigenome

Consortium (https://www.blueprint-epigenome.eu/), we determined that nearly all open chromatin sites

mapped to regions containing only active histone marks (H3K27ac and/or H3K4me1, 89.6%;

H3K27ac= 3.3%, H3K4me1=34% and H3K4me1+H3K27ac=52.3%) or regions with bivalent marks

suggesting a poised chromatin state (H3K27ac and/or H3K4me1 and H3K27me3, 8.9%), compared to

only 1.5% of ATAC-seq sites that mapped to regions solely harboring repressive chromatin

(H3K27me3; **Figure 1B**). Because these histone modifications are typically found at transcriptional

enhancers and promoters(25-28), these findings suggest that these accessible chromatin regions are

B-ALL *cis*-regulatory elements implicated in gene regulation.

204   In most cases, these candidate *cis*-regulatory elements map within intergenic or intragenic loci

with unclear gene targets. Therefore, to better inform gene connectivity we produced chromatin looping

data using promoter capture Hi-C (29) across seven B-ALL cell lines (697, BALL1, Nalm6, REH,

RS411, SEM and SUPB15) to complement B-ALL patient chromatin accessibility profiles. Collectively,

across the B-ALL cell lines we detected approximately 400,000 chromatin loops, with approximately

50% of the 217,240 chromatin accessible regions of interest intersecting with a promoter loop, including

15,929 chromatin accessible sites that looped to a cancer implicated gene set (**Figure 1C**) (30,31) . In

many instances, large domains of extensive chromatin looping are present, which with chromatin

accessibility and active histone marks emphasize the gene regulatory networks present across B-ALL

patient samples (e.g., **Figure 1D-E**).

Chromatin accessibility identifies Pro-B cell-of-origin for most B-ALL patient samples

To better understand chromatin remodeling during leukemogenesis we sought a comparison of

chromatin accessibility between B-ALL and precursor B-cells. Moreover, although it is widely accepted

that the B-ALL cell of origin is a B-cell precursor, exactly which precursor is not always clear,

particularly at the chromatin accessibility level (32). To resolve this uncertainty, we examined publicly

available ATAC-seq data from several human B-cell precursors (10,18) (**Figure 2A**). When comparing

chromatin accessibility signal between B-cell precursor groups, we identified a set of approximately

42,344 genomic loci which demonstrate a chromatin accessibility enrichment or depletion trend for a B-

cell precursor (**Figure 2B, Table S3**). We refer to these chromatin loci as B-progenitor identity loci due

their distinct patterning across B-progenitor differentiation and are likely representations of stage-

specific gene regulatory programs.

Next, we examined patient B-ALL cell chromatin accessibility across these B-progenitor identity

loci. When plotting chromatin accessibility signal as a heatmap comparing B-cell precursors and B-ALL

patient samples, a high degree of similarity was observed with prePro-B cells and Pro-B cells (**Figure

2B**). Further, when applying the K-nearest neighbor classification model previously trained on B-

progenitor identity loci the majority of B-ALL samples classified as either prePro-B or Pro-B (**Figure 2C-

D**). However, prePro-B cells have been reported to be an extremely rare population beyond embryonic

and fetal development (18). Overall, Pro-B cells demonstrate the most similarity to B-ALL cells at the

chromatin accessibility level when focusing specifically on B-cell precursor defining loci, emphasizing

this precursor B-cell as a common cell-of-origin for B-ALL.

Extensive differences in chromatin accessibility between B-ALL and Pro-B cells

To better understand chromatin remodeling during leukemogenesis we next compared accessible

chromatin sites between B-ALL and Pro-B cells (n=3) and uncovered 42,661 differentially accessible

chromatin sites (DAS) exhibiting lesser or greater accessibility in B-ALL samples (**Figure 3A-C; Table

S4**). Ontology analysis focusing strictly on DAS with higher chromatin accessibility in B-ALL indicated

an enrichment for sites associated with genes involved with toll-like receptor signaling, interleukin

production, metabolism (acetyl-CoA production) and cell proliferation (**Figure 3D**). Enriched ontology

terms were frequently present at multiple fold change thresholds of input B-ALL DAS (**Table S5)**.

In addition to profiling differential chromatin accessibility, global transcription factor (TF) binding

was also compared between B-ALL and Pro-B cells. To identify differential TF binding, we performed

genome-wide TF footprint profiling (12) using 810 TF motifs comparing B-ALL patient samples and

normal Pro-B cell samples across all B-ALL genomic regions of interest (217,240 regions). Differential

binding scores indicated the AP-1 family of TFs (e.g., FOS, JUN, BATF) as the most prominent TFs

with higher binding in B-ALL patient samples compared to normal Pro-B cells (**Figure 3E**). In contrast,

prominent TFs with higher binding in Pro-B cells were TFs such as TFAP2A, TFAP2B, TFAP2C,

ZBTB14 and EBF1.

As an extension of our TF footprinting data we also integrated B-ALL cell line promoter capture

Hi-C using the ABC enhancer algorithm to refine identification of TF-target gene relationships across

top TFs and a cancer implicated gene set (33). Specifically, we focused on top TF footprints within DAS

exhibiting higher chromatin accessibility in B-ALL (B-ALL enriched) and the cancer implicated gene

targets of these DAS predicted by the ABC enhancer algorithm. Concordant with global TF footprint

analysis we identified similar top TFs in the network such as AP1 family TFs, CEBP family TFs, and

BACH2 (**Figure 3F**). We also found prominent top TFs such as NFIC, XBP1, TBX1 and numerous

basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) class TFs (e.g., MYOG, MYF5 and HES5). Top expressed cancer

implicated gene targets for each TF converged on notable genes involved in cell signaling (*TGFBR2,*

CXCR4), histone mark modification (*ARID5B*), transcriptional regulation (*MYC*, *KLF6*, *HIF1A*) and the

PI3K-AKT pathway (*PTEN*) (**Figure 3F**). Collectively, these results highlight a rewiring of signaling

pathways and TFs binding gene regulatory networks facilitating the proliferative potential of B-ALL

samples compared to Pro-B cells.

Identification of subtype-enriched chromatin architecture

To better understand chromatin accessibility within B-ALL, inter-subtype analyses were performed to

identify DAS exhibiting subtype-enriched signal (i.e., henceforth referred to as subtype-enriched DAS)

in 10 B-ALL molecular subtypes harboring known molecular drivers (*BCR::ABL1*, *DUX4*-rearranged,

ETV6::RUNX1, high hyperdiploid, low hypodiploid, *KMT2A*-rearranged, Ph-like, *PAX5*-altered,

TCF3::PBX1 and *ZNF384*-rearranged; **Figure 4A-C**). For this analysis, we compared a single B-ALL

subtype cohort with all other cell samples not belonging to that subtype in pairwise fashion covering all

subtypes. This approach was utilized to emphasize high degrees of subtype enrichment compared to

the full spectrum of chromatin accessibility variability in the remaining sample cohort. We identified

between 307 and 10,639 DAS in each B-ALL subtype, with a total of 42,457 subtype-enriched DAS

identified across all 10 B-ALL subtypes ($\log_2$ fold change >1, FDR<0.05; **Figure 4B, Table S6**). We

annotated subtype-enriched DAS on a subtype basis and determined that a majority of subtype-

enriched DAS in each B-ALL subtype (87%, range=80%-90%) localized to promoter-distal regions of

the genome (intronic and distal intergenic; **Figure 4D**), and 43%, on average (range=39%-49%),

localized to distal intergenic regions, thereby emphasizing the importance of non-genic loci in defining

B-ALL chromatin heterogeneity.

To further evaluate subtype-enriched DAS, we determined if they displayed enrichment patterns

that were consistent with five established human B-ALL cell lines (697= *TCF3::PBX1*, Nalm6= *DUX4*-

rearranged, REH= *ETV6::RUNX1*, SEM= *KMT2A*-rearranged and SUPB15= *BCR::ABL1*). Concordant

with DAS in patient samples, subtype-enriched DAS exhibited the strongest (BCR-ABL, *DUX4*-

rearranged, *ETV6::RUNX1*, *KMT2A*-rearranged) or second strongest (*TCF3::PBX1*) accessibility in the

concordant cell line that was representative of that subtype (**Figure S1**). These data suggest that B-

ALL cell lines exhibit chromatin accessibility that is largely consistent with primary B-ALL cell sample

from the corresponding subtype.

To further determine functional effects on gene expression, we integrated subtype-enriched

DAS with DEGs uniquely up-regulated ($\log_2$ fold change >1, FDR<0.05) in each of the 10 B-ALL

molecular subtypes to determine if they were enriched near DEGs. We identified a statistically

significant enrichment of subtype-enriched DAS near up-regulated DEGs in 9 of 10 subtypes compared

to total expressed genes in the corresponding subtype (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test p< 0.05; **Figure 4E**,

Figure S2) and uncovered a strong statistical trend in Ph-like B-ALL (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test p=

0.06; **Figure S2**). Consequently, these data support the role of subtype-enriched DAS in gene

regulation and gene activation and further suggest that differences in chromatin accessibility contribute

to transcriptomic differences among B-ALL subtypes (3,4). Collectively, these results highlight

extensive open chromatin heterogeneity among B-ALL molecular subtypes.

Mapping transcription factor drivers and gene regulatory networks in B-ALL subtypes

We performed TF footprint profiling using merged ATAC-seq signal from 10 B-ALL subtypes with

known molecular drivers to identify subtype-enriched TF drivers. TF footprint profiling (12) identified

between 4,303,155 and 5,441,937 bound motifs in each B-ALL subtype, with 49,402,067 TF footprints

at 815,992 unique genomic loci identified across all subtypes. Using these data, we next identified key

TF footprints that were enriched in each subtype (i.e., subtype-enriched TF footprints) by calculating

differential footprint scores between every subtype-subtype pair for each TF motif. The top median

differential motif scores for each subtype were selected as subtype-enriched TF footprints. This

approach was utilized to emphasize differential TF footprint motifs that were consistent and distinct for

each subtype rather than repetitive global trends (**Figure 5A**). Notably, subtype-enriched TF footprints

were identified for recognized TF drivers such as DUX4 in *DUX4*-rearranged ALL and ZNF384 in

ZNF384-rearranged ALL. We also identified HOX family TFs (HOXA9, HOXB9, HOXC9 and HOXD9) in

KMT2A-rearranged ALL, GATA family TFs (GATA2, GATA3, GATA4, GATA5 and GATA6) in *ZNF384*-

rearranged ALL and nuclear receptor family TFs in *PAX5*-altered ALL (ESR1, ESR2, ESRRA, NR2F6,

NR2F1, RARA and THRB) that all had strong subtype-enriched TF footprints.

Because DNA consensus motifs can be highly redundant within TF families, we integrated

subtype-enriched TF footprints with DEGs uniquely up-regulated in each subtype to identify candidate

TFs from these TF families that are up-regulated in the corresponding B-ALL subtype. This analysis

identified *HOXA9* and *HOXC9*, *RARA* and *GATA3* as up-regulated genes in *KMT2A*-rearranged, *PAX5*-

altered and *ZNF384*-rearranged subtypes, respectively (**Figure 5B**, **Figure S3**). In addition, *DUX4*

(*DUX4*-rearranged) and *MEIS1* (*KMT2A*-rearranged) were also identified as up-regulated TF genes

with subtype-enriched TF footprints (**Figure S3**).

To determine if these up-regulated TFs promote unique chromatin accessibility landscapes

among B-ALL subtypes, we also performed TF footprinting on subtype-enriched DAS by comparing

differential footprint scores at subtype-enriched DAS between each B-ALL subtype and Pro-B cells

(**Figure 5C**, **Figure S4**). Notably, these data supported a role of DUX4 in *DUX4*-rearranged ALL,

ZNF384 and GATA3 in *ZNF384*-rearranged ALL, and HOXA9 and MEIS1 in *KMT2A*-rearranged ALL in

the generation of subtype-specific chromatin architecture (**Figure 5C**, **Figure S4**).

Predictive potential of B-ALL subtype-enriched DAS

We determined how well chromatin accessibility can predict B-ALL subtypes by constructing a stepwise

Principal Component Analysis-Linear Discriminant Analysis (PCA-LDA) classification model using the

42,457 subtype-enriched DAS ATAC-seq read count matrix as initial input across 10 B-ALL subtypes

harboring known molecular drivers (outlined in **Figure 6A**). Notably, the constructed classification

model was tested with leave-one-out cross validation at an accuracy of 86%. The most common failure

was incorrect classification of *BCR::ABL1* and Ph-like subtypes (**Figure 6B**), as has been observed

with other ALL classification algorithms (34). Taking this into account by grouping *BCR::ABL1* and Ph-

Like subtype samples into a common class yielded a re-calculated cross validation accuracy of 91%.

Visualization of B-ALL subtype separations using select dimensions output by the LDA model

demonstrates distinct groupings of related subtypes emphasizing classification model performance

(**Figure 6C**).

As a further application of our classification model, we also applied the algorithm to 26 B-ALL
patient samples of unknown molecular B-ALL subtype. Although transcriptomic profiling for B-ALL
drivers is not available to fully validate these samples, when processed with the constructed PCA-LDA
model and projected onto original LDA dimensions they distinctly cluster with known molecular
subtypes supporting reasonable predictions (**Figure 6D**). Collectively, these data support the utility of
chromatin structure and subtype-enriched DAS in B-ALL subtype classification.
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Mapping inherited DNA sequence variants that impact chromatin accessibility
To determine how germline variation impacts chromatin accessibility, we identified chromatin
accessibility quantitative trait loci using ATAC-seq (ATAC-QTLs) in a subset of 69 patient samples with
available SNP genotyping information and allele-specific ATAC-seq read counting using RASQUAL
(24). In total, 9080 ATAC-QTLs were identified representing both directionalities, with reference or
alternative alleles increasing chromatin accessibility (FDR<0.1; **Figure 7A**, **Table S7**). Manual
quantification and scaling of allele-specific read counts for select ATAC-QTLs identified with RASQUAL
demonstrated a clear concordance and directionality among individual patient samples classified into
genotype groups (**Figure 7B**). Visual inspection of merged read counts from patient samples grouped
into reference allele homozygote, heterozygote, or alternate allele homozygote for select ATAC-QTLs
further supports the high-quality nature of identified ATAC-QTLs (**Figure 7C**). We further determined
that 218 ATAC-QTLs where also lead eQTL SNPs when compared to GTEx eQTLs (35) from relevant
tissues (blood and lymphoblastoid cells), with 85% also concordant for allele overrepresentation
directionality (**Figure 7D; Table S7**). ATAC-QTLs were also compared with inherited genome-wide
association study (GWAS) variants for ALL disease susceptibility and we identified rs3824662 (*GATA3*)
(36) and rs17481869 (2p22.3) (37) as ATAC-QTLs that were associated with risk of developing B-ALL.
Further supporting the validity of our methodology, rs3824662 was also identified as an ATAC-QTL in
ALL PDX samples (38), and we functionally validated differential allele-specific activity for rs17481869
in multiple B-ALL cell lines (**Figure S5**).
To infer the impact of TF binding in control of chromatin accessibility at ATAC-QTLs we
overlapped ATAC-QTL loci with TF motifs determined as TF-bound by footprint profiling (12). Nearly
one-third (28.8%; 2615/9080 ATAC-QTLs) of these ATAC-QTLs overlapped a TF-bound motif footprint
across multiple B-ALL subtypes, suggesting that most ATAC-QTLs do not have a clear TF-binding
mechanism in how they impact chromatin accessibility. Analysis of bound TF motif footprint prevalence
at ATAC-QTLs identified several ETS family TFs (EHF, ELF3, SPI1/PU.1 and SPIB), zinc finger TFs
(ZNF263, ZNF460, ZNF740 and ZNF148) and CTCF as the most altered motifs leading to differences
in chromatin accessibility between alleles (**Figure 7E**). Notably, we also identified PAX5 and IKZF1,

which have known roles in B-cell development and leukemogenesis (39-42). Collectively, these data

identify inherited DNA sequence variants contributing to chromatin heterogeneity among B-ALL

subtypes and indicate specific TFs of interest for further exploration of ATAC-QTLs.

382 DISCUSSION

Our study provides the first, large-scale examination of chromatin accessibility in the B-ALL genome

across an expansive set of B-ALL subtypes. We further integrated this data with ChIP-seq histone

modification enrichment in primary B-ALL cells and three-dimensional chromatin looping data using

promoter capture Hi-C in multiple B-ALL cell lines. Our data demonstrate that most regions of

chromatin accessibility harbor activating chromatin marks consistent with *cis*-regulatory elements

involved in gene regulation, and we further confirmed direct looping to gene promoters for

approximately 50% of accessible chromatin sites. However, this does not rule out more transient

chromatin looping interactions difficult to detect by current chromatin conformation capture genomic

techniques.

Extensive epigenomic reprogramming was uncovered between precursor B-cells and B-ALL,

and cell-of-origin analyses identified Pro-B cells as the most common cell-of-origin. Our comparison of

B-ALL and pro-B cell chromatin accessibility suggests epigenomic reprogramming that is driven in part

by the activation of AP-1 bound *cis*-regulatory elements in B-ALL. We determined that epigenomic

reprogramming disrupts normal B-cell function through the activation of toll-like receptor signaling and

interleukin production. Acetyl Co-A synthesis was also identified as an enriched gene ontology term

when comparing B-ALL and Pro-B cells. Metabolic alterations in cancer are well known, particularly

acetyl-Co-A synthesis alterations which have been previously reported in cancer (43). In addition to

metabolic alterations, *PTEN*, a known tumor suppressor gene is frequently mutated in a large portion of

cancers (44). However, in B-ALL the cancer role of PTEN has been reported to be inverted, functioning

instead as an oncogene (45). Reinforcing this conclusion and further suggesting PTEN as an intriguing

target for B-ALL treatment, we also found *PTEN* in our network as a top target of B-ALL enriched DAS.

We further examined accessible chromatin landscapes among diverse molecular subtypes of B-

ALL. Collectively, we identified 42,457 subtype-enriched DAS which strikingly represent over 20% of

analyzed accessible chromatin sites across a pan-subtype B-ALL genome. Subtype-enriched DAS

were enriched near up-regulated DEG in the corresponding subtype, supporting their role in gene

activation. Moreover, comparisons between subtype-enriched DAS and chromatin accessibility data

from cell lines identified largely consistent patterns. We further identified candidate TFs that exhibited

strong subtype-specificity through TF footprinting analyses and validated some of these findings using

transcriptomic data from primary B-ALL cells. Collectively, these analyses highlighted the role of

HOXA9 and MEIS1 in *KMT2A*-rearranged ALL, GATA3 in *ZNF384*-rearranged ALL and RARA in

PAX5-altered B-ALL. We further confirmed the previously reported roles of DUX4 and ZNF384 in

DUX4-rearranged and *ZNF384*-rearranged ALLs, respectively. Concordant with our findings, previous

studies have identified the co-upregulation of HOXA9 and MEIS1 in *KMT2A*-rearranged leukemias and

further support that these TFs are key drivers of leukemogenesis (46-48). Our identification of

numerous HOX TFs with enriched footprints in *KMT2A*-rearranged ALL is also consistent with

observations of HOX gene dysregulation in this subtype (49). Further supporting our results, ZNF384

fusion proteins in *ZNF384*-rearranged ALL are known to up-regulate *GATA3* expression (50,51).

Although a direct role for RARA in *PAX5*-altered B-ALL has not been established, previous work has

identified *PAX5* as a target gene of the PLZF-RARA fusion protein in acute promyelocytic leukemia

(52). Moreover, both *RARA* and *PAX5* genes can form fusions with *PML* in acute promyelocytic

leukemia (53) and ALL (54), respectively. While *PAX5*-altered ALL has not been well connected to

RARA nuclear receptor signaling, there has been previous work treating IKZF1 mutated BCR-ABL1

ALL with RARA and RXR agonists that suppressed a self-renewal phenotype (55). Collectively, these

data warrant further investigation of RARA and RXR signaling in *PAX5*-altered ALL.

Supporting the utility of chromatin accessibility in B-ALL classification, subtype-enriched DAS

predicted subtypes with 86% accuracy. As a comparison to chromatin accessibility, transcriptional

profiling using ALLSorts correctly assigned B-ALL subtypes with 92% accuracy (34). However, this

RNA-seq dataset included over 1223 transcriptomes from 18 subtypes representing a considerably

larger dataset for model development. We therefore suspect that additional chromatin accessibility

profiling across more B-ALL subtypes and increased sample sizes will lead to even better subtype

prediction that will rival transcriptomic profiling and importantly, incorporate intergenic heterogeneity

that can elucidate *cis*-regulatory drivers of B-ALL leukemogenesis.

To identify the role of inherited DNA sequence variation on the B-ALL chromatin landscape, we

mapped over 9000 ATAC-QTLs (FDR<0.1). A large subset of ATAC-QTLs mapped to TF footprints and

were concordant in allelic biases with GTEx lead eQTLs. Further validating our analysis, we functionally

validated a variant (rs17481869; 2p22.3) associated with susceptibility to ALL (37). Collectively, this

analysis suggests that chromatin accessibility is additionally modified by inherited DNA sequence

variation, thereby further contributing to increased chromatin heterogeneity in B-ALL.

Overall, our data support pronounced changes in chromatin accessibility between B-ALL and

precursor B-cells, as well as among B-ALL subtypes. Our results further support the role of diverse TFs

and inherited genetic variants in modulating chromatin accessibility. Ultimately, these diverse chromatin

architectures promote unique gene regulatory networks and transcriptional programs, thereby

impacting B-ALL biology. Our work therefore provides a valuable resource to the cancer genomics

research community and can be further used to better understand biological as well as clinical

differences among B-ALL subtypes.

DATA AVAILABILITY

452　ATAC-seq and H3K27ac ChIP-seq from patient biospecimens have been deposited to NCBI Gene

453　Expression Omnibus (GSE211631). Promoter capture Hi-C data from B-ALL cell lines have been

454　deposited to NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus (GSE224204). Other associated genomics data are

455　available upon request via St. Jude cloud (https://www.stjude.cloud/). Further information and requests

456　for resources should be directed to and will be fulfilled by Daniel Savic (daniel.savic@stjude.org).

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

468　The authors declare no competing interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, K.R. Barnett, D.S.; Methodology, K.R. Barnett, D.S.; Investigation, K.R. Barnett,

J.D.D., B.P.B, K.R. Bhattarai; Analysis, K.R. Barnett, D.S.; Data Curation, K.R.B., W.Y.; Patient sample

acquisition, K.R.C., C.S.M., E.J., E.P., M.R.L., S.M.K., W.S., H.I., S.J., C.H.P., C.G.M., M.V.R., W.E.E.,

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FIGURE LEGENDS

FIGURE 1: Chromatin accessibility landscapes in B-ALL. (A) Number and genomic location of accessible chromatin sites for 10 B-ALL subtypes and B-other samples is provided. **(B)** Percentage of B-ALL accessible chromatin sties that maps to H3K4me1 and/or H3K27ac active histone marks (Active; green), H3K27me3 and H3K4me1 and/or H3K27ac bivalent or poised histone marks (Bivalent or Poised; yellow) and H3K27me3 only repressed histone marks (Repressed; red). **(C)** B-ALL cell line chromatin loops detected using promoter capture Hi-C at B-ALL accessible chromatin sites. The total number of B-ALL accessible chromatin sites, number of B-ALL accessible chromatin sites within loops and the total number of accessible chromatin sites with a loop to a gene implicated in cancer is shown. **(D)** UCSC genome browser ATAC-seq signal track of average B-ALL chromatin accessibility and promoter capture Hi-C loops across the *IKZF1* gene locus. **(E)** UCSC genome browser ATAC-seq signal tracks of 10 merged B-ALL subtypes with known molecular drivers across the *IKZF1* gene locus.

FIGURE 2: B-ALL cell type-of-origin defined by chromatin accessibility. (A) Differentiation timeline of B-cell precursors from least differentiated to most differentiated. HSC= hematopoietic stem cell, MPP= multipotent progenitor cell, LMPP= lymphoid-primed multipotent progenitor cell, CLP= common lymphoid progenitor cell, PreProB= prePro-B cell, ProB= Pro-B cell and CD19+,CD20+= B cell. **(B)** Heatmap of B-cell progenitor or B-ALL patient sample variance stabilized ATAC-seq signal across B-cell precursor-defining chromatin loci. B-cell precursor groups most similar to B-ALL patient samples (preProB and ProB) are outlined in yellow. **(C)** Confusion matrix showing number (listed) and percentage (color-coded) of B-cell precursor truths and predictions for leave-one-out cross validation of a K-nearest neighbor classifier model. **(D)** Distribution of B-cell precursor classification across B-ALL patient samples using a K-nearest neighbor classifier model trained with B-cell precursor data.

FIGURE 3: Mapping differential accessibility between B-ALL and Pro-B cells. (A) Heatmap of Pro-B cell or B-ALL patient sample variance stabilized ATAC-seq signal as z-score across Pro-B cell and B-ALL enriched DAS. DAS within heatmap are > 1 or < -1 $\log_2$-adjusted fold change. **(B)** Histogram of $\log_2$-adjusted fold change in ATAC-seq signal at significant DAS between Pro-B cells and B-ALL patient samples. **(C)** ATAC-seq signal track examples of Pro-B-cell-enriched DAS and B-ALL-enriched DAS on the UCSC genome browser. Flanking genomic regions are included for context. **(D)** Gene ontology analysis of DAS with higher accessibility in B-ALL (B-ALL-enriched) at various $\log_2$-adjusted fold change thresholds. All terms were significant using both binomial and hypergeometric statistical tests. **(E)** Differential transcription factor footprinting between Pro-B cells and B-ALL patient samples across

217,240 B-ALL genomic regions of interest. **(F)** Transcription factor and target gene network of DAS

with higher accessibility in B-ALL (B-ALL-enriched). Network is subset for top transcription factor

footprints across DAS ranked by the top mean $\log_2$-adjusted fold change transcription factor footprint

signal. Target genes are subset for a cancer implicated gene set ranked by the top expressed genes.

Network connections are colored as transcription factors (purple blocks) to target gene (green arrow

heads) pairs. Select expansive and highly similar transcription factor motif families are grouped (AP1

family and CEBP family).

FIGURE 4: Mapping differential accessibility among B-ALL molecular subtypes. (A) Heatmap of

variance stabilized ATAC-seq signal as z-score across subtype-enriched DAS. Enrichment patterns for

each subtype DAS set are shown on vertical axis and are grouped by B-ALL subtype patient sample on

the horizontal axis. Ph-like and BCR-ABL subtype-enriched DAS are expanded at the right for clarity.

(B) Pie chart shows the number and percentage of subtype-enriched DAS identified. **(C)** ATAC-seq

signal track examples of subtype-enriched DAS on the UCSC genome browser. **(D)** Genomic

annotations of subtype-enriched DAS for each B-ALL subtype is provided. The fraction of sites

harboring different annotations is plotted. **(E)** Cumulative distribution function for *BCR::ABL1* and

ZNF384-rearranged ALL comparing the fraction (y-axis) of subtype up-regulated genes (Subtype

DEGs; gray or light green) and all expressed subtype genes (Expressed; black) at different distance

cutoffs from subtype-enriched DAS and their transcription start sites (x-axis). Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-

S) p-values are provided.

FIGURE 5: TF footprinting and gene regulatory networks identify key TF drivers in B-ALL

subtypes. (A) Heatmap list of the topmost consistently differential TF footprints between all pairwise

subtype-subtype comparisons (y-axis; labeled to the right of the heatmap as TF motif identifiers)

enriched in 10 B-ALL subtypes (x-axis; labeled on top of heatmap as z-score of differential TF footprint

signal output by TOBIAS). **(B)** RNA-seq transcripts per million (TPM) expression of key TFs with

subtype-enriched footprints that are also up-regulated in the corresponding subtype (colored) versus all

other subtypes (gray). DESeq2 differentially expressed gene FDR significance values are provided. **(C)**

Top TF footprints at *KMT2A*-enriched DAS are shown. Differential footprint score between B-ALL and

Pro-B cells is provided on the x-axis and TF footprint significance is provided on the y-axis. Transcripts

per million (TPM) transcript abundance of associated TF transcript is shown as both color and size of

points.

FIGURE 6: Classification model accurately predicts B-ALL subtypes. (A) Flow chart outlines

process for PCA-LDA classification of B-ALL subtypes. **(B)** Confusion matrix showing number (listed)

and percentage (color-coded) of B-ALL subtype truths and predictions for leave-one-out cross

validation. **(C)** Three-dimensional plots showing clustering of B-ALL subtypes utilizing select

dimensions from the LDA model. **(D)** B-ALL subtype identification for unknown B-ALL samples (black

points). Clustering for unknown samples identified as *DUX4*-rearranged, *BCR::ABL1* and high

hyperdiploid (from left to right) is shown.

FIGURE 7: Identification of ATAC-QTLs impacting chromatin accessibility. (A) ATAC-QTL effect

size (x-axis) and significance (y-axis) is plotted for all significant ATAC-QTLs (FDR<0.1). **(B)** Examples

of allele-specific effects on ATAC-seq read count at ATAC-QTLs between samples from the three

genotype groups. Homozygous reference allele= homoz_REF, heterozygous= heteroz_REFALT and

homozygous alternative allele= homoz_ALT. **(C)** UCSC browser ATAC-seq signal tracks of merged

BAM files from patients with distinct genotypes at *ARL11* (top panel) and *TTC7B* (bottom panel) gene

loci. ATAC-QTLs are marked by an asterisk. Homozygous reference allele= homoz_REF,

heterozygous= heteroz_REFALT and homozygous alternative allele= homoz_ALT. ENCODE ChIP-seq

TF binding sites are shown below each ATAC-seq signal track. **(D)** Scatterplot of effect size for SNPs

significant as both ATAC-QTLs (x-axis) and GTEx lead eQTL (y-axis). **(E)** Abundance of top TF-bound

motifs overlapping ATAC-QTLs. Highly similar TF motifs were grouped into motif families via TOBIAS

motif clustering as shown on the x-axis.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7