Title- Altered histone modifications in *Aedes aegypti* following Rift Valley fever virus exposure

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1 **Abstract**

When arthropod-borne viruses (arboviruses) are delivered to vector mosquitoes in an infectious

bloodmeal, viral components interact with host proteins to hijack cells and initiate replication.

The extent to which arbovirus infection alters mosquito host transcriptional and genomic

regulatory processes is currently unknown. We hypothesized that histone modifications would

be altered in mosquitoes exposed to Rift Valley fever virus (RVFV MP12, *Phlebovirus riftense*,

family *Phleboviridae*). We interrogated transcriptome and chromatin landscapes in *Aedes*

aegypti midguts by performing Cleavage Under Targets and Release Using Nuclease

(CUT&RUN), using H3K27ac and H3K9me3 marks. Altered H3K27ac marks were identified

following RVFV MP12 exposure, as well as upon bloodfeeding alone. It took several days for

differential H3K27ac marks to be associated with differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in

RVFV-exposed midguts. H3K27ac peaks showed progressive depletion as infection

progressed. Gene set enrichment analysis revealed that immune response transcripts were

enriched at 1 and 3 dpf (days post-feeding) but depleted by 7 dpf. Hedgehog/Gli (glioma-

associated oncogene homolog) signaling pathway transcripts were depleted, indicating possible

viral manipulation of cellular polarization. Moreover, at 7 dpf, 7 of 102 DEGs were proximal to

differentially acetylated sites in a pattern expected to favor viral propagation. However, one

transcript coding for an antiviral effector (LysM-TLDc domain protein) showed significant

depletion of both H3K9me3 and H3K27ac marks. Analysis of midguts after a non-infectious

bloodmeal versus sugar-fed controls revealed global changes to H3K27ac and H3K9me3 marks

during and following the period of bloodmeal digestion. Differential H3K27ac marks were

proximal to one quarter of all DEGs at 1 dpf, consistent with an important role of H3K27ac in

bloodmeal digestion. These results demonstrate that H3K27ac and H3K9me3 patterns are

altered upon virus exposure in a complex interplay that favors viral replication but is also

countered by host responses to limit replication.

Author Summary

Mosquito-borne viruses produce a high disease burden across the globe. Though transgenic

mosquitoes are being developed to help mitigate disease transmission, little is known of the

ways in which arbovirus infection alters chromatin structure in mosquitoes. Arboviruses typically

replicate and assemble on cytoplasmic membranes and have not been traditionally expected to

alter processes in the nucleus. Some histone post-translational modifications, such as, e.g.

histone 3 lysine 27 acetylation (H3K27ac), are associated with accessible chromatin regions,

whereas others, e.g, histone 3 lysine 9 triple-methylation (H3K9me3), are associated with

inaccessible chromatin. This work explores these chromatin modifications and the ways in

which they are tied to gene expression changes. Multiple lines of evidence presented here

support the hypothesis that H3K27ac levels change in RVFV-exposed mosquitoes and are

associated with altered gene expression in a manner consistent with viral hijacking of gene

expression in the nucleus. In addition, bloodfeeding alone also altered H3K27ac levels at 1-day

post-feeding, and over one quarter of differentially expressed genes had changes to H3K27ac

marks near transcription start sites, which is consistent with the idea that broad metabolic

changes occur to support digestion and egg development.

Introduction

Vector-borne disease outbreaks, particularly those caused by arthropod-borne viruses

(arboviruses), have increased in frequency and intensity in recent years[1]. Mosquito-borne

viruses are unique in that they must successfully replicate in an alternating fashion among

invertebrate and vertebrate hosts. As intracellular pathogens, they interact with host proteins to

hijack cellular processes and push metabolic activity in favor of replication and viral assembly.

Regardless of whether the host is a mammal or mosquito, selective repression of transcriptional

activity occurs[2-4], which is a hallmark of cellular hijacking to enable efficient viral propagation.

In vector mosquitoes, immune tolerance and resistance allow viral replication without

pathological signs. Virus replication is affected by and, in turn, influences host genomic

regulation (reviewed in [5]). Though histone modifications have been best studied with DNA

viruses, recent evidence has also implicated histone modifications in the efficacy of RNA virus

infection, including flavivirus infection of mosquitoes[6-9]. These alterations could underpin

features of host tolerance and resistance in vectors.

Histone modifications occur during development [10] across taxa and are also important during

the innate immune response[11, 12]. Histone 3 lysine 27 acetylation (H3K27ac) is a trademark

of accessible chromatin, which facilitates entry and binding of proteins to initiate transcriptional

activation. H3K27ac may also be a marker for enhancer activity and can be perturbed upon

pathogen infection[13, 14]. In particular, H3K27ac levels are elevated during Zika virus infection

in *Ae. aegypti* cell culture via acetyl transferase CBP activity[6]. In contrast, histone 3 lysine 9

triple-methylation (H3K9me3) is associated with heterochromatin or silenced genes (reviewed in

[15]); though, during virus infection, specific genes may be derepressed [16]. Though the details

of the overall structural features of mosquito chromatin are largely unknown[17], recent efforts

have begun to explore distinct elements, such as the importance of histone modifications[18,

19]. Other studies used computational approaches to identify *cis* regulatory elements (CREs)

that differed between dengue virus susceptible and resistant *Ae. aegypti* strains[20]. Still, much

remains to be understood of the role of CREs and chromatin modifications in the vector

response to arbovirus infection.

Here, we focus on Rift Valley fever virus (RVFV MP12, *Phlebovirus riftense*, family

Phleboviridae), a vaccine strain for a zoonotic pathogen of concern in sub-saharan Africa[21,

22]. Our previous studies established *Ae. aegypti* as a suitable model for study of RVFV-

mosquito interactions, including susceptibility to the MP12 vaccine strain[4, 23-25]. Previous

vector competence studies led to the hypothesis that *Ae. aegypti* mounts an effective innate

immune response against RVFV compared to the much more competent vector, *Culex tarsalis*,

as evidenced by viral infection kinetics and differential expression of a key signaling gene,

dishevelled [4, 23]. In nature, *Ae. aegypti* has expanded its range, which is of concern for

spread of mosquito-borne viruses in the US and Europe[26-28].

To define the relationship between gene expression changes and genomic regulatory regions in

arbovirus-infected mosquitoes, we chose to characterize H3K27ac and H3K9me3 histone

modifications in midguts of RVFV-MP12-exposed *Ae. aegypti* adult females and compare them

to gene expression(Fig 1). Midguts are often the first site of arbovirus replication in vector

mosquitoes. Analysis of chromatin marks in mosquito tissues is made possible by recent

advances in chromatin immunoprecipitation sequencing, specifically Cleavage Under Targets

and Release Using Nuclease (CUT&RUN). This technique and similar approaches require

substantially less biological material and have improved signal-to-noise, compared to traditional

chromatin immunoprecipitation methods[29-31](Fig 1B). Midgut gene expression changes that

occur following exposure to RVFV MP12 were paired with companion analyses of mosquitoes

that had received a bloodmeal alone compared to sugar-fed controls. We followed up these

studies with interrogation of H3K27ac and H3K9me3 signatures. Our initial hypothesis was

bloodfeeding induces gene expression and associated chromatin modifications that set the

metabolic foundation for successful arbovirus infection [32]. Moreover, we also predicted

histone modifications would be altered following exposure to RVFV MP12 in a manner that

favors viral hijacking of host processes, as evidenced by functional roles of differentially

expressed genes. We focus first on the changes that occur following RVFV exposure and follow

up with the control experiments.

Figure 1 legend. CUT&RUN enables capture of histone modifications. A. Two major experiments were done, RVFV MP12 vs bloodfed (RVFV v BF) or bloodfed vs sugar-fed (BF v SF) at 1, 3, or 7 dpf. Pools of 20 midguts were used for each sample in triplicate biological replicates of CUT&RUN or RNA-Seq. CUT&RUN libraries with inserts <55 nts were removed from analysis. DNA Peaks from merged libraries were called against input controls. B. General overview of CUT&RUN procedure shows that fixed midguts were bound to magnetic beads coated with concanavalin A (green), permeabilized with digitonin, and treated with antibodies specific for H3K27Ac or H3K9me3. Protein A/G- micrococcal nuclease fusion protein cleaves DNA at antibody binding sites for release into the supernatant, then subjected to purification and library preparation. Created in BioRender. (2026) https://BioRender.com/9y5ab72 C. Representative mosquito titers from RVFV-exposed whole mosquitoes collected at 7 dpf. Top row- Infection rates of mosquitoes shown in graph. Bottom row- Infection rates determined from representative carcasses following removal of midguts for CUT&RUN.

Results

Gene expression upon RVFV exposure

To gain insight into transcriptional profiles following RVFV-MP12 exposure, *Ae. aegypti* were provided an infectious oral bloodmeal, and pooled midguts were processed for RNA-Seq at 1, 3, and 7 days post-feeding (Fig 1A, S1 Table, S1 Fig). Viral bloodmeal titers were 6.9–7.8 log10 plaque-forming units (PFU) per ml. Virological confirmation showed that 50% of whole mosquitoes carried infectious virus at 7 days post-feeding (dpf), and a representative set of

carcasses showed that about 28% of mosquitoes had disseminated infections (Fig 1C). For the

RVFV v bloodfed (BF) comparison at 1 dpf, virus-exposed midgut pools had 94 differential

expressed genes (DEGs, FDR <0.10, Fig 2, S2 Table) compared to blood-fed controls. Gene

set enrichment analysis (GSEA) using our custom annotation was done to calculate the

normalized enrichment score (NES) for each functional category across all the collection times

(S3 Table)[33]. NES analysis indicated that overall signaling and immune response genes were

enriched at 1 dpf, as was the broad category of replication, (DNA) repair, transcription,

translation [34]. As the infection progressed, by 3 dpf, there were 2023 total DEGs. This

functional category continued to be enriched, along with cytoskeletal and structural, immune

and proteolytic pathways (Fig2B, S2 Fig, S3 Table). By 7 dpf, 102 DEGs were differentially

expressed in the RVFV-exposed group, with 71 DEGs depleted, and just 31 transcripts enriched

over BF controls (Fig 2, S2 Table). Custom GSEA analysis indicated that replication, (DNA)

repair, transcription, translation transcript categories were still over-represented in virus-

exposed midguts (S3 Table), which would be consistent with continued viral replication at this

timepoint. However, immune response, proteolysis and metabolic functional categories were

significantly under-represented, consistent with select transcriptional repression expected during

viral hijacking[35, 36].

GSEA analyses are often limited by the number of genes in a transcriptome that are assigned

functional terms. Because our custom annotation is limited in terms of scope and functional

category, we applied gene ontology (GO) term GSEA (GO-GSEA) analysis based on eggNOG

mapper orthological assignments [37]. GO-GSEA provided corroborative evidence that anti-

microbial and signaling responses were enriched at 1 and 3 days following RVFV exposure (Fig

2B, S2 Fig). By 7 dpf, GTPase signaling and overall regulation of signaling processes were

significantly enriched in RVFV exposed midguts compared to BF controls at 7dpf (Fig 2B, S2

Table). Lastly, constituents of the smoothened signaling pathway were depleted at 7 dpf but

unaffected upon bloodfeeding alone. Smoothened is a signaling pathway associated with the

Hedgehog/Gli signaling pathway, which is responsible for maintenance of cell polarity and tissue

development[38]. To further support the role of the smoothened signaling pathway, the

Drosophila melanogaster Ci/Gli consensus (GACCACCCA) was searched against the

promoters of the *Ae. aegypti* genome. Overrepresentation analysis of 3221 unique genes

across the genome with Ci/Gli promoters indicated that negative regulation of chromatin and

epigenetic regulation as well as negative regulation of DNA-templated transcription were major

processes controlled by this promoter(S3 Fig).

Figure 2. Differential gene expression profiles at 1, 3 and 7 days post-treatment.

A. Heatmap of bulk RNA-Seq data pools of 20 midguts per timepoint were ranked by the top

100 genes of the RVFV treatment group on the indicated dpf. Columns group individual

biological replicate z-scores of RPKM values for RVFV vs. BF by treatment group (RVFV, BF,

SF), then by timepoint. Number of replicates ranged from 2 to 4. B. GO-GSEA dotplot of RNA-

Seq differential expression categories for 1, 3 and 7 days post-treatment BF (bloodfed vs sugar-

fed) and RVFV (RVFV-exposed vs BF). GeneRatio refers to the proportion of the gene set of

interest divided by the total number of genes. Highlighted biological processes are noted in red

font. Numbers below indicate DEGs that were enriched (red triangle) or depleted (blue triangle).

Gene expression upon a noninfectious bloodmeal

To differentiate the effects of virus exposure from those of bloodfeeding alone, additional

experiments were performed to reveal effects on differential gene expression and histone

modifications. By providing proteinaceous nutrients critical for egg-laying, bloodfeeding is crucial

for reproduction. Because arbovirus infection of mosquitoes intrinsically requires a bloodfeeding

event, and it is therefore intricately tied to vector competence, we hypothesized that

bloodfeeding alone modulates midgut gene expression to favor mosquito permissiveness to

virus infection [32]. Comparison of blood-fed vs sugar-fed (BF v SF) mosquito midguts at 1 day

post-feeding (dpf) revealed 4480 DEGs (FDR, <0.10, Fig 2, S1 and S4 Figs, S2 Table). The

expression of digestive enzymes is well documented[39], cellular processes with the lowest

adjusted p values (padj) at each timepoint are highlighted here. Multiple RNA processing and

cellular biogenesis pathways were modulated 1 dpf. By 3 dpf, the bloodmeal was completely

digested; nevertheless mitochondrial processes remained elevated (Fig 2B). By 7 dpf,

processes affecting chromosome organization and cell cycle progression were modulated

compared to sugar-fed controls (S4 Fig).

184   Altered H3K27ac profiles in RVFV v BF

Next, to determine whether gene expression changes associated with bloodfeeding and RVFV

exposure were tied to H3K27ac and H3K9me3 modifications, we performed CUT&RUN on

midguts following a bloodmeal and at 1, 3, 7 dpf to RVFV MP12 (S4 and S5 Tables). RVFV

exposure led to incremental changes to global H3K27ac patterns over time that were lower than

that of BF at 1 dpf and gradually increased over the course of infection (Fig 3A, S5 Fig). By 7

dpf, RVFV-exposed midguts showed slightly higher levels of global acetylation patterns than BF

controls (Fig 3A). Upon analysis of statistically significant differences, a striking pattern

emerged. There were 31 significantly different H3K27ac peaks proximal to transcription start

sites (TSS) at 1 dpf (Fig 3B). Of these, 24/30 (80%) peaks were depleted in RVFV-exposed and

just 6 peaks showed higher levels than BF controls. Though the number of altered H3K27ac

peaks were much greater following a bloodmeal alone, the overall proportion of

depleted/enriched peaks were similar (74% peaks depleted).

By 3 dpf, an overall increase in H3K27ac enrichment occurred for both treatment groups (red

bars, Fig 3B). Nevertheless, the proportion of significantly enriched H3K27ac peaks was

reduced in RVFV-exposed (41%) compared to BF v SF treatment group(23% depleted, Fig 3B,

S5 Table). This trend was even more dramatic at 7 dpf, wherein acetylation patterns in RVFV-

exposed mosquitoes showed a marked reduction in acetylation sites compared to BF controls.

In particular, 705/802 (88%) significant peaks were depleted in RVFV exposed midguts

compared to just 29% in the BF v SF group (Fisher's exact test, $p<0.0001$, Fig 3B, S5 Table).

Genes of interest proximal to TSS in RVFV-treated samples showed trends in H3K27ac

occupancy over time that are expected to affect cell morphogenesis at 1 dpf, regulation of

transcriptional processes at 3 dpf and membrane transport by 7 dpf (S6 Fig). We currently

cannot distinguish between the possibilities that overall dysregulation is occurring or whether

these effects are due to viral hijacking.

Figure 3. Midgut histone modification profiles. A. Representative H3K27ac peak heatmaps

of aligned reads at 1, 3 and 7 days post-treatment show global trends within 2 kB of TSS (x

axis). Reads were standardized to reads per genome coverage (RPGC). Y-axis indicates RPGC

of input-subtracted read alignments. B. Proportion of DiffBind peaks within 2 kB of TSS (FDR <=

0.10) for H3K27ac, (red = enriched peaks compared to control, blue = depleted peaks

compared to control) and H3K9me3 (orange = enriched, maroon = depleted). Total numbers of

DiffBind peaks within 2 kB of TSS listed to the right of the bars.

Bloodfeeding alone was associated with changes to H3K27ac peak patterns that varied over the

timecourse. Interestingly, global distributions of H3K27ac patterns increased upon bloodfeeding

compared to SF but waned by 3 dpf (Fig 3A). Of 4073 quantitatively differential BFvSF

CUT&RUN peaks at 1 dpf, 3271 were within 2 kB of DEG TSS (S4 Table, Fig3B). Of those, just

24% of peaks were quantitatively enriched in BF compared to SF controls. At 3 dpf, the overall

numbers of differential peaks were lower, however the proportion of those that were enriched

increased to 0.77. By 7 dpf, the sugar-fed group shows markedly higher levels of acetylation

than either treatment group, which may be an indicator of aging in the absence of a bloodmeal

(Fig 3A). GO-GSEA of genes proximal to TSS showed categories that were consistent with

those of RNA-Seq data (S4 Fig), with genes affecting RNA metabolism showing modulation of

H3K27ac marks at 1 dpf. These altered genomic regions supported changes to regulation of

metabolic processes by 3 dpf. Finally, by 7 dpf, genes responsible for controlling chromosomal

reorganization were identified proximal to H3K27ac sites.

Gene set over-representation analysis (GSORA) of gene functional categories for genes

proximal to H3K27ac marks (MACS2 peaks) showed changes over time in blood-fed vs

sugarfed controls(S7 Fig). In particular, at 1 dpf, peaks proximal to genes associated with

chromosomal organization and histone modifications were altered in the BF treatment group, a

pattern that shifted to catabolic and amide biosynthetic processes by 3 dpf (S7 Fig). These

associations continued over time. In contrast, at 7 dpf, both SF and BF samples showed

H3K27ac marks proximal to genes involved in several intracellular transport categories,

including vesicle-mediated, amide and peptide transport (S7 Fig).

RVFV DEGs with altered H3K27ac patterns

Correlation of DEGs with H3K27ac marks varied across the timecourse. In RVFV-exposed at 1 dpf, no differentially expressed genes had changes to proximal H3K27ac marks. However, at 3 dpf, 9 of 2023 DEGs did. By 7 dpf, there were 7/102 DEGs with depleted promoter-proximal acetylation patterns (S7 Table), 5 of which had enriched RNA levels, consistent with active gene expression. Of these 5 genes, 2 code for proteins that facilitate protein-protein interactions on cellular membranes, including AAEL005849 (synaptic vesicle protein) and AAEL019495 (pleckstrin/PDZ domain). Predicted gene function, coupled with transcript enrichment support the idea that these genes are proviral in supporting virus assembly or intracellular transport. A third gene, AAEL021746 (LysM-TLDc domain), which is predicted to regulate oxidative stress, showed enrichment of transcripts and depletion of H3K27ac marks[40]. The 2 genes with transcript depletion coupled with depletion of H3K27ac marks in RVFV-exposed midguts are predicted to have anti-viral function. One gene was a cytochrome P450 (CYP307A1, AAEL009762) and the second was a leucine-rich repeat (AAEL023746), which could be a novel pattern-recognition receptor.

Post-bloodmeal gene expression changes coincide with histone modifications

A key goal of this study was to identify associations between gene expression changes and histone marks. One day following a noninfectious bloodmeal, about one fourth of all DEGs (1052/4480) showed proximal H3K27ac marks (S5 Table). There were 512 depleted DEGs among those that had altered peaks. Of those, 383/512 showed corroborative depletion of H3K27ac marks. However, for the enriched peaks, just 84/540 enriched DEGs showed the

264 expected pattern of peak enrichment. S8 Fig shows the pattern of DEGs to promoter-proximal

265 DiffBind peaks across all 3 chromosomes. This indicates that regulatory features cannot be

266 explained by H3K27ac enrichment alone. At later timepoints following a bloodmeal alone, even

267 fewer enriched DEGs showed corroborative H3K27ac enrichment, 6/676 and 11/140 at 3 and 7

268 dpf, respectively.

Association between H3K9me3 peak patterns and RVFV-associated de-repression at 3 dpf

H3K9me3 marks may be associated with poised enhancers or transcriptional repression,

depending on adjacent chromatin signatures[41, 42]. Our initial hypothesis was that H3K9me3

could underpin viral associated gene repression. Analysis of differentially bound H3K9me3

peaks by DiffBind showed depletion of peaks following RVFV exposure at 1 and 3 dpf (Fig 3B,

maroon bar, S6 Table, S5 and S9 Figs), which was consistent with transcriptional de-

repression. No DEGs overlapped with H3K9me3 peaks at 1 dpf. By 3 dpf, however, 109 DEGs

showed peaks within 2 kB of TSS (S6 Table). Specifically, of 754 differentially bound peaks in

the 3 dpf RVFV vs BF group, 109 DEGs showed proximal H3K9me3 peaks, 115 of 119 of these

peaks were depleted. Peak depletion was corroborated by the observation that 60 of 109 DEGs

were enriched (S2 Table). GO-GSEA analysis showed that processes affecting behavior and

general metabolic processes were proximal to these marks. Therefore, instead of controlling

part of viral repression of gene expression, as expected, our data was consistent with the idea

that depletion of H3K9me3 peaks at 3 dpf was a correlate of gene de-repression.

By 7 dpf, just one DEG in the RVFV-exposed group, AAEL021746, showed significant depletion

of H3K9me3 peaks. Overall, alterations in H3K9me3 marks were not associated with as many

significant genes of interest as H3K27ac marks were, except for AAEL021746.

290   Enhancers

Enhancers are long-range regulatory elements that activate or repress gene expression.

H3K27ac marks are most often associated with enhancer activation of gene expression,

whereas H3K9me3 enhancers are typically associated with transcriptionally repressed

regions[42-44]. To explore potential involvement of enhancers, we interrogated our datasets for

the presence of H3K27ac or H3K9me3 marks that were 50,000 to 200,000 nts away from TSSs.

H3K27ac enhancers were associated with bloodfeeding at 1, 3 and 7 dpf (S10 Fig). At 1 dpf, the

genes with these putative enhancer elements coded for RNA processing and metabolic

changes (S10A Fig). In contrast, H3K27ac enhancers were enriched upon RVFV exposure only

at 3 dpf.

Putative H3K9me3 enhancers were generally depleted upon bloodfeeding at 1 and 3 dpf (S10

FigB, maroon bar), which would be consistent with large-scale changes in metabolic needs,

necessitating broad scale re-structuring of chromatin concomitant with gene expression

changes. For RVFV exposed samples, enhancers were enriched at 1 and 7 dpf, which supports

our hypothesis of virus-induced transcriptional repression. However, this interpretation is

complicated by the lack of altered peaks at 3 dpf.

Discussion

Global changes in H3K27ac marks occurred in a layered fashion in *Ae. aegypti* midguts upon receiving a non-infectious bloodmeal or concomitant RVFV MP12 exposure. At 1 dpf, BF v SF and RVFV v BF H3K27Ac peak profiles showed similarity in the overall numbers of peaks (Fig 3B). Blood-feeding alone led to an increase in enriched acetylation marks by 3 dpf, but those levels were reduced in RVFV-exposed midguts. By 7 dpf, RVFV exposed midguts showed significant depletion of H3K27ac marks relative to BF controls(Fig 3B). These results were corroborated in the RNA-Seq data, with 70% of DEGs being depleted in the RVFV-exposed group compared to BF controls at 7 dpf (Fig 2B). Moreover, the mean and median peak widths for peaks enriched in BF were significantly larger than those enriched for RVFV-exposed pools. Summary statistics of peak data indicate that RVFV-exposed pools had more peaks at promoter regions, whereas peaks in the BF treatment group had higher representation in gene bodies. These results are consistent with the idea that competitive regulatory processes are stimulated upon virus exposure, with the host activating gene expression to enhance anti-viral defense, while RVFV nonstructural protein on the S segment (NSs) or other viral protein(s) selectively alters gene expression to enhance infection [45, 46]. The patterns changed over time, indicating that elapsed time was required for significant histone modifications to occur. Alternatively, the increasing level of signal over time could be illustrative of a small percentage of infected cells at 1 dpf that expanded to a higher percentage over the course of infection[47].

The study of transcriptional regulation *in vivo* is critical, because histone modification patterns are not synonymous across cell culture and mosquito tissues [48]. Midguts are comprised of mixed cell populations with differing competency for virus infection[47]. The results captured here do not distinguish between different cell types or infection status. In addition, midgut pools were used for each replicate sample, thus reducing the high level of variability expected for

individual mosquitoes[4]. Therefore, the patterns seen here represent overall trends associated

with viral exposure.

RVFV-responsive host gene expression changes for a variety of functional categories occurred

over time. For example, stimulation of cellular differentiation processes at 1 dpf were consistent

with metabolic changes that might be required to support production of viral replication

complexes(Fig 2C) [47]. These were coupled with repression of transcripts coding for

dicarboxylic acid and glutamine metabolic processes, which could affect cellular signaling[49].

By 3 dpf, cellular processes specific to cell polarization processes were modulated (detection of

light stimulus, phototransduction), as well as transcripts that control mitochondrial gene

expression/translation (S3 Fig). By 7 dpf, signal transduction processes were repressed upon

RVFV-exposure but not upon blood-feeding alone. In particular, components of the smoothened

signaling pathway were depleted in the RVFV-exposed group(S4 Table, Fig3B). Smoothened is

a frizzled class G-protein coupled receptor that acts in the hedgehog/Gli pathway to regulate cell

polarity[38, 50]. Multiple lines of evidence indicate that arboviruses preferentially replicate in

polarized cell types[51-53]. RVFV enters polarized mammalian cells more efficiently through the

apical surface, and viral particles mature near basolateral membranes[54]. The smoothened

pathway has antiviral characteristics in mammalian neuronal cells, therefore repression would

likely favor viral propagation [55]. Though genes with C/Gli promoters were present across the

sample sets (S8 Table), the gene set was not detected by GSEA until 7 dpf. We speculate that

repression of transcripts in the smoothened pathway is proviral in mosquitoes; nevertheless, this

will have to be explored further to determine the full extent of these interactions.

Interestingly, one DEG, AAEL021746 (LysM-TLDc domain), which was slightly enriched in

RVFV exposed midguts at 7 dpf, showed significant depletion of both H3K9me3 and H3K27ac

peaks. This gene also has a C/Gli promoter motif (S8 Table). LysM-TLDc containing proteins,

e.g. human NCOA7 (Nuclear receptor coactivator 7), have been shown to interact with vacuolar-

ATPase, which promotes endoplasmic vesicle acidification to impair infection of influenza A

virus, human immunodeficiency virus and SARS-CoV[56-58]. This evidence suggests that

LysM-TLDc domain containing proteins, such as AAEL021746, have anti-viral activity.

We demonstrated enrichment of immune response transcripts at 1 and 3 dpf, which were above

and beyond what was induced by a noninfectious bloodmeal. RVFV-responsive genes of

interest included defensin (AAEL003832, AAEL003857), cecropin (AAEL029046,

AAEL029047), as well as transcriptional regulators that control immune transcriptional

responses. However, by 7 dpf, immune response transcripts, e.g., pattern recognition proteins

(AAEL001414, AAEL001420, AAEL010125, AAEL023746, AAEL024406) were depleted relative

to BF controls.

Overall, these results are consistent with a gradual increase in the efficacy of viral repression of

host gene expression over time. There are multiple examples of arboviral proteins that enter the

nucleus to interact with transcriptional machinery[46, 59]. Bunyamwera (*Orthobunyavirus*

bunyamweraense) nonstructural protein NSs interacts directly with *Mediator 8*[46]; the mediator

complex ties RNA polymerase II to a host of transcription factors. In humans, the RVFV

nonstructural NSs enters the nucleus to transcriptionally modulate beta catenin expression[45,

60]. NSs protein also suppresses host transcription, including of interferon beta, and degrades

host protein kinase R (PKR, EIFAK2); these actions collectively facilitate viral replication as host

cell machinery is co-opted and anti-viral responses are shut down[3, 61]. Even though the

current study utilized an attenuated strain of RVFV, NSs remains fully functional[62]. In another

study, *Ae. aegypti* infected with a deletion mutant strain of RVFV lacking NSs showed

significantly reduced virus dissemination rates, indicating that this protein is playing some role in

mosquito infection in addition to the roles described during vertebrate infection[24]. Therefore,

progressive modulation of immune gene transcription and cell cycle processes in RVFV-infected

mosquitoes may be related to NSs activity as an infection establishes in the mosquito midgut.

A previous report from Zhu et. al. showed that bloodfeeding alone prepared mosquitoes

metabolically to favor arbovirus infection[32]. In the current study, over one quarter of all DEGs

in the BF group at 1 dpf showed evidence of proximal H3K27ac marks. In addition, exposure to

a noninfectious bloodmeal resulted in enrichment of immune response genes, likely a

preventative measure to protect against potential pathogens present in the bloodmeal (S3

Table) [63]. Because H2K27ac promotes chromatin accessibility for gene expression, this result

supports the hypothesis that bloodfeeding alone sets up favorable regulatory conditions that

would favor viral hijacking. BF histone modification patterns were dramatically different than SF

as early as 1 dpf, eased by 3 dpf and, then by 7 dpf, mosquitoes that had not received a

bloodmeal showed substantially higher H3K27ac levels than the other treatment groups,

consistent with a possible role in aging. Genes proximal to H3K27ac marks in SF mosquitoes

did not change much over the course of time in terms of functional category type (S7 Fig).

A more competent vector might have less of a pronounced immune response at these early

timepoints. *Ae. aegypti* has an intermediate level of competency for RVFV infection and

transmission. Competence is much less than that of *Cx tarsalis* and higher than that of *Cx*

pipiens quinquefasciatus[23, 64]. GO-GSEA analysis showed that defense processes were

enriched at 1 and 3 dpf but repressed by 7 dpf. These observations were consistent with active

immune response gene expression early in infection as part of overall intrinsic immune

responses, which are key determinants of mosquito vector competence[65]. We would expect

that a more susceptible mosquito species would show immune response repression earlier in

the course of infection. However, further experiments are needed to sort out chromatin

modulation across susceptible and resistant phenotypes.

Tri-methylation of histone 3 (H3K9me3) is associated with gene silencing. Due to the expected

selective reduction in gene expression upon viral infection[45], we initially hypothesized that

H3K9me3 marks might be enhanced during virus infection but found that instead, the global

changes to H3K9me3 marks were much less dramatic than those found for

H3K27ac. Nevertheless, significant depletion of H3K9me3 marks was observed in the 3 dpf

RVFV vs BF group, which is consistent with derepression of gene expression. It is currently

unclear whether this marked derepression at a time when viral replication complexes are active

is part of viral hijacking or the host response.

Overall, these results provide support for the idea that histone modifications are part of the

overall mosquito response to arbovirus infection. However, the extent to which specific changes

are manipulated by viral proteins or a part of the host defense response must be determined by

further experimentation.

422   Conclusion

H3K27ac marks are significantly altered upon exposure to RVFV MP12, with a subset of DEGs

that had significant changes indicative of active gene expression. However, competing

processes for control of H3K27ac levels seem to be at play. Future efforts will continue to

explore the epigenetic landscape layers in arbovirus exposed mosquitoes to identify the major

players responsible for virus-induced transcriptional repression and whether these changes are

consistent across arbovirus systems.

Materials and Methods

Mosquito and virus experiments

The Poza Rica strain of *Ae. aegypti* was colonized in 2012, originating from the state of

Veracruz, Mexico[66]. Mosquito colonies were maintained at 28 °C on a 12:12 light:dark cycle;

adults were fed water and sucrose (sugar cubes or raisins) *ad libitum*. Larvae were reared on

TetraMin fish food (Spectrum Brands Pet, Blacksburg, VA, USA) ground in a coffee grinder.

Mosquitoes (3–7 days old) were starved for food and water for 24 hours prior to feeding, then

orally exposed to RVFV MP-12 or conditioned cell culture media mixed 1:1 with defibrinated

sheep blood, as described in Campbell et al.[23]. A high passage strain of MP12 (passage

unknown, local lab passage 1), which was a gift from the US Department of Agriculture, was

used for these experiments. In brief, freshly grown MP-12 RVFV was grown in Vero cells at a

multiplicity of infection of 0.01 for 3 days and then mixed 1:1 in defibrinated calf blood (Colorado

Serum Company, Denver, CO, USA), with 1 mM ATP as phagostimulant and orally provided to

adult mosquitoes in water-jacketed feeders set to 37°C. Viral bloodmeal titers were at 6.9–7.8

log10 plaque-forming units (PFU) per ml. As a control, a separate group of age-matched

mosquitoes were held for the indicated period. Three replicates of each experiment were

performed.

Plaque assays were done using methods described previously[23]. Midgut infection rates were

determined as follows. Individual mosquito carcasses were placed in 250 µl mosquito diluent

(DMEM, 20% heat-inactivated FBS, 50 µg/ml Pen-Strep, 50 µg/ml gentamicin, and 2.5 µg/ml

amphotericin B) following removal of midguts for CUT&RUN and stored at -80°C. Samples were

homogenized on a Qiagen Tissuelyzer (Qiagen) at 30 beats per second frequency for 30

seconds. Homogenates were pelleted for 3 minutes at 21,000 x g, then 50 µl homogenate was

placed into one well of a 12 well plate and assayed in duplicate. At 3 days post-infection, wells

were assessed for cytopathic effects.

CUT&RUN

Our approach followed that of Skene, et al.[30] with modifications. Specifically, pools of 20

midguts from blood-fed and RVFV MP12-fed *Aedes aegypti* were dissected 1, 3 and 7 days

post feed or from sugar-fed controls. Midguts were placed into 200 µL of 1x Schneider's

Drosophila Media (Gibco #21720024). Following completion of dissections for all samples, 300

µL of formaldehyde fixation solution was added to each tube for a final concentration of 0.1%

(using 16% methanol-free formaldehyde (Cell Signaling # 12606) in phosphate buffered saline

(PBS) with 1x protease inhibitor cocktail (PIC, cOmplete™ Protease Inhibitor Cocktail, #

11697498001). After a 10-minute incubation at room temperature, 50 µL of 10x Glycine (Cell

Signaling #7005) was added to stop the reactions and samples were incubated for another 5

minutes at room temperature (RT). Samples were centrifuged for 5 minutes at 2000xg 4°C then

washed with 500 µL PIC/PBS. At all steps, tubes were flicked to mix solutions rather than

pipetting to prevent loss of midguts. Midguts were resuspended in 1 ml Wash buffer (200mM

HEPES pH 7.5, 1.5 M NaCl, 0.5 mM spermidine, 1x PIC), then centrifuged for 3 min at 2,000 xg

at RT. Each reaction was resuspended in 100 µL 1x Wash buffer. Ten µL per sample of

concanavalin A beads (Fisher # NC1831103) were activated using the methods of Skene, et

al.[30]. Then the beads were added to the sample and incubated 5 minutes at RT. Each sample

tube was placed on a magnetic stand (ThermoFisher 12321D). Once the solution cleared, the

liquid was removed and replaced with 100 µL Digitonin solution (200mM HEPES pH 7.5, 1.5M

NaCl, 20mM spermidine, 1x PIC, 0.1% digitonin) with 2mM EDTA and the appropriate antibody.

The antibodies used in this study were 2 µg per reaction anti-H3K27ac Ab (Abcam, ab4729), or

1 µg per reaction anti-H3K9me3 Ab (Abcam, ab8898) and Rabbit (DA1E) mAb IgG XP® Isotype

Control (Cell Signaling #66362) as a negative control. Samples were incubated overnight at 4°C

on a rotator. Then the samples were put on the magnetic stand. Once the solution was clear,

the samples were washed with 1 ml Digitonin buffer and put back on the stand. Upon removing

the buffer, 50 µL solution containing 1.5 µL protein A/G- micrococcal nuclease (pAG/MNase,

Epicypher, #15-1116) in Digitonin buffer was added per sample and mixed gently by flicking the

tube. Samples were incubated at 4°C for 1 hour. The samples were then washed twice as

before in 1 ml Digitonin buffer per sample. Samples were resuspended in 150 µL Digitonin

buffer, placed on ice for 5 minutes, then activated by adding 3 µL 100 mM cold Calcium

Chloride to each tube. Samples were incubated at 4°C for 30 minutes. Reactions were stopped

by the addition of 150 µL Stop buffer (0.17 M NaCl, 10mM EDTA, 2mM EGTA, 0.1 mg/ml

glycogen, 0.1% Digitonin, 8.3 mg/ml RNAse A). Samples were the centrifuged at 3 min at

16,000 xg for 2 minutes. Supernatants were transferred to new tubes containing 3 µL 10%

sodium dodecyl sulfate and 2 µl Proteinase K (20 mg/ml). Samples were then incubated at 65°C

for 2 hr, then transferred to low bind tubes. DNA fragments were purified using Qiagen PCR

purification kits.

Input sample preparation

Input samples were processed in parallel with the other samples through the first wash steps.

Total DNA was extracted using a salt extraction method and resuspended in 100µl water [67].

Following extraction, samples were placed in a 0.65 mL Diagenode tube and sonicated in a

Diagenode Bioruptor Pico (Diagenode) for 20 cycles of 30 seconds on, 30 seconds off.

Fragment sizes of ~200 bp were subsequently validated using an HS D1000 chip with an

Agilent 4150 tapestation (Agilent).

Sequencing

Three biological replicates were sequenced per sample group. Briefly, standard library

preparation methods made use of the NEBNext® Ultra™ II DNA Library Prep Kit for Illumina

(E7103L) following manufacturer's directions with 1 ng DNA per library prep and ~13 PCR

cycles for the amplification step. Library quality was confirmed using high sensitivity DNA

reagents (Q33231) on the Qubit 2 (Qubit) and Agilent tapestation 4150 (Agilent). Sequencing

was performed on an Illumina NovaSeq (Azenta.com) with read depths indicated in S2 Table.

Libraries with less than 55 nt inserts were removed from analysis (S2 Table).

Analysis

All scripts utilized for the analysis of this data can be found on GitHub

(https://github.com/CRosenbergCode/Aedes_aegypti_Midgut_CUT-RUN), Sequencing reads

were trimmed and filtered using Fastp version 0.23.4[68]. Duplicate reads were removed for

ChIP-seq reads but retained for RNA-seq analysis[69]. These trimmed and filtered reads were

aligned to an index prepared from the VectorBase-68_AaegyptiLVP_AGWG_Genome.fasta

using HISAT2 version 2.2.1[70, 71]. Only paired reads which aligned concordantly were

retained. Data regarding alignment rates and quality parameters per sample can be found in

Supplemental Tables 1-3. Peak calling was performed on merged alignments using MACS2

macs2 2.2.9.1 using --keep dups all, qvalue 0.05 against VectorBase-

68_AaegyptiLVP_AGWG_Genome.fasta [71, 72]. All samples were standardized using the

corresponding input sample.

Bigwig files were created using Deeptools bamCoverage with a bin size of 10 bases and

normalized using reads per genome coverage (RPGC)[73]. They were then compared against

their corresponding inputs using Deeptools bigwigCompare, with a bin size of 10 bases and --

operation subtract, thus generating bigwigs that use direct subtraction as opposed to fold

change. Peak heatmaps and read density maps were made using deepTools functions

"computeMatrix", and "plotHeatmap". computeMatrix was run with the "make_matrices.sh" script

using VectorBase-68_AaegyptiLVP_AGWG_Genome.bed (No MIT, long-noncoding RNAs or

pseudogenes) as reference.

Differential binding analysis was performed using Diffbind version 3.12.0 with the edgeR option

[74] in R version 4.3.2[75] using a false discovery rate(FDR) threshold of p<0.10. A custom

script was created to determine the proximity of DiffBind peaks to genes or other features of

interest in the *Ae. aegypti* genome (S4 and S5 Tables).

RNA Sequencing and analysis

Three to 4 biological replicates were sequenced per sample group. Bulk RNA-Seq libraries were

prepared from 200 ng total RNA, using polyA+ purification (NEBNext® Poly(A) mRNA Magnetic

Isolation Module) prior to library prep with the NEBNext® Ultra™ II Directional RNA Library Prep

Kit for Illumina. Sequencing was performed on an Illumina NovaSeq (Azenta.com) with read

depths indicated in S1 Table.

For RNA-seq alignment, a reference transcriptome was created using VectorBase-

68_AaegyptiLVP_AGWG_AnnotatedTranscripts.fasta [71] using HISAT2 (2.2.1)[70], then

alignment was performed using standard parameters. Gene-level aggregation was performed

using HTseq-count (2.0.5). Differential expression analysis was performed using DEseq2

(1.48.0).

Gene Set Enrichment analysis

GO-GSEA libraries were built using AnnotationForge version 2.13 in R. Genome-wide

annotation was performed using Entrez gene identifiers[39]. The fast gene set enrichment

analysis algorithm R implemented by the fgsea R package (version 1.28.0) [76] was used for

GO-GSEA analysis[77]. GO terms were obtained using EggNog Mapper 2.1.12, limiting the

orthology search to Diptera only[37]. Custom annotations were utilized to define broader

functional categories as described in Campbell et al 2019 [33]. For both GSEA (ranked

nonparametric analysis) and ORA (simple arithmetical calculation that does not involve ranking),

a minimum size of 15 and a maximum size of 500 were required for a GO annotation to be

included in analysis. Ranking was based on the -log10(p-value). In all cases, ordering was

decided arbitrarily in case of ties. GO-GSEA of RNA-seq differential binding was based on

DESeq2 results. GO-GSEA of ChIP-seq differential binding was based on Diffbind results. In

cases of multiple peaks corresponding to the same gene, only the peak with the highest p-value

was retained. For ORA, duplicate peaks for the same gene were removed to ensure each gene

only occurred once. For analysis of promoters, only peaks within 2000 bp of the TSS were

included for the analysis. For analysis of enhancers, only peaks between 50,000 and 200,000

bp away from a TSS that were annotated as distal using ChIPSeeker were included for the

analysis[78, 79]. The custom annotation was manually compiled based on Campbell et al 2019,

which relied on VectorBase orthological assignments[33, 71].The custom OrgDB database and

GMT files used are provided on the github for this manuscript. Visualization of gene enrichment

utilized enrichplot version 1.28 [80] and ClusterProfiler version 4.15[81].

Motif Enrichment analysis

Enrichment analysis was performed using HOMER (Hypergeometric Optimization of Motif

EnRichment) version 5.1 with a custom genome created using VectorBase-

68_AaegyptiLVP_AGWG annotations[82]. An offset of 2000 base pairs upstream and 200 base

pairs downstream of the transcription start site were used and a random selection of promoter

regions was used as the background. For searching known motifs such as CI/GLI binding sites,

the consensus sequence (GACCACCCA) in *D. melanogaster* was used and a maximum of 1

mismatch was allowed. Genes from this study with these motifs are in S8 Table.

Supporting Information

S1 Table. RNA-Seq raw reads with Q20/Q30 scores, insert sizes and alignment rates.

S2 Table. RNA-Seq DESeq2 analysis for all samples and timepoints.

S3 Table. Normalized Enrichment Score Table for RVFV v BF time course.

S4 Table. CUT&RUN-Seq raw reads with Q20/Q30 scores, insert sizes and alignment rates.

S5 Table. H3K27ac DiffBind output for genes within 2kB of TSS.

S6 Table. H3K9me3 DiffBind output for genes within 2kB of TSS.

S7 Table. RVFV v BF DEGs with proximal H3K27Ac peaks at the 7dpe

S8 Table. CI/GLI promoter regions identified using HOMER.

S1 Fig. MA plots of RNA-Seq differential expression data.

S2 Fig. GO-GSEA of RVFV v BF RNA-Seq differential expression data.

S3 Fig. Over-representation analysis of all *Ae. aegypti* genes with Ci/Gli motif.

S4 Fig. GO-GSEA of BF vs SF RNA-Seq transcript differential expression data.

S5 Fig. H3K27ac and H3K9me3 peak profiles. Top row: H3K27ac Input-subtracted peak

heatmaps of aligned reads at 1, 3 and 7 days post-treatment show global trends within 2 kB of

TSS (x axis). Y-axis indicates RPGC (reads per genome coverage) of input-subtracted read

alignments. Notice the different Y-axis scales. Bottom row: H3K9me3 Input-subtracted peak

heatmaps.

S6 Fig. RVFV vs BF datasets: GSEA of GOIs proximal to H3K27Ac and H3K9me3 marks.

S7 Fig. GO categories for genes proximal to H3K27ac marks change over time. A. GO

terms for genes within 2kB of TSS (MACS2 peak calls) displayed using over-representation

analysis. X axis shows collection day (d1, d3, or d7), BF, bloodfed, SF, sugar-fed. Number in

parentheses below the sample name indicates the number of macs2 peaks considered in the

analysis. This is a qualitative analysis and does not indicate statistically significant differences

between groups. B. Transition of GO terms over time in BF midguts. GO terms for genes within

2kB of TSS (DiffBind peak calls) displayed using over-representation analysis.

S8 Fig. BFvSF 1 dpf: Relationship of H3K27ac peaks and DEGs. Coordinates for DEG start

sites (DEG Log2FC, right y-axis) were plotted alongside H3K27ac peak coordinated and fold-

change values (Peak FC, left y-axis).

S9 Fig. H3K9me3 RVFV vs BF vs SF peak heatmaps. Input-subtracted H3K9me3 peak

heatmaps of aligned reads at 1, 3 and 7 days post-treatment show global trends within 2 kB of

TSS (x axis). Y-axis indicates RPGC (reads per genome coverage) of input-subtracted read

alignments.

S10 Fig. Enhancers. A. GSEA functional groups of genes at the BF v SF 1 dpf timepoint that

showed predicted H3K27ac peaks. B. Proportion of DiffBind peaks within 2 kB of TSS (FDR <=

0.10) for H3K27ac, (red = enriched, blue = depleted) and H3K9me3 (orange = enriched, maroon

= depleted). Total numbers of DiffBind peaks within 2 kB of TSS listed to the right of the bars.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Tissue	Pos	Neg	(Total #)	Infection Rate
Whole mosquitoes	15	15	(30)	50%
Carcasses- dissemination	22	58	(80)	27.5%

Fig1

Fig2

A

d1
SF BF RVFV

d3
SF BF RVFV

d7
SF BF RVFV

H3K27ac

TSS TSS TSS   TSS TSS TSS   TSS TSS TSS

B

H3K27Ac   DiffBind Peaks   H3K9me3   DiffBind Peaks

d1
- BF v SF — 3271 — 3645
- RVFV v BF — 31 — 91

d3
- BF v SF — 150 — 60
- RVFV v BF — 166 — 754

d7
- BF v SF — 1170 — 154
- RVFV v BF — 802 — 131

0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0   0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0

Proportion of peaks ≤ 2kB of TSS

Fig3