Cryptic, extensive and non-random chromosome reorganization revealed by a

butterfly chromonome

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Abstract

Chromosome evolution, an important component of mico- and macroevolutionary dynamics [1–5],

presents an enigma in the mega-diverse Lepidoptera[6]. While most species exhibit constrained

chromosome evolution, with nearly identical haploid chromosome counts and chromosome-level

shared gene content and collinearity among species despite more than 140 Million years of

divergence[7], a small fraction of species independently exhibit dramatic changes in chromosomal

count due to extensive fission and fusion events that are facilitated by their holocentric

chromosomes[7–9]. Here we address this enigma of simultaneous conservation and dynamism in

chromosome evolution in our analysis of the chromonome (chromosome level assembly[10]) of the

green-veined white butterfly, *Pieris napi* (Pieridae, Linnaeus, 1758). We report an unprecedented

reorganization of the standard Lepidopteran chromosome structure via more than 90 fission and

fusion events that are cryptic at other scales, as the haploid chromosome number is identical to

related genera and gene collinearity within the large rearranged segments matches other

Lepidoptera. Furthermore, these rearranged segments are significantly enriched for clusters of

functionally related genes and the maintenance of ancient telomeric ends. These results suggest an

unexpected role for selection in shaping chromosomal evolution when the structural constraints of

monocentric chromosomes are relaxed.

Butterflies and moths comprise nearly 10% of all described species[6] and inhabit diverse niches with

varied life histories, yet they exhibit a striking similarity in their genome architecture despite 140

million generations[19] of divergence. The vast majority have a haploid chromosome number between

28 and 32[7,11,12], and within chromosomes the gene content and order is remarkably similar among

divergent species as adduced by three previous chromonomes[7,13], BAC sequencing and

chromosomal structure analyses[14,15]. Complicating this picture of conservation, haploid chromosome

counts in species of Lepidoptera, as compared to all non-polyploid animals, exhibit the highest

variance in number between species within a genus (n = 5 to 226[16–18]), the highest single count

(n=226[9]), and polymorphism in counts that do not affect fertility in crosses[3,19]. Lepidoptera tolerate

such chromosomal variation due to their holokinetic chromosomes, which facilitate the successful

inheritance of novel fission or fusion fragments[20]. Thus, while Lepidoptera can avoid the deleterious

consequences of large-scale bouts of chromosomal fission and fusion, in the vast majority of cases

such events are only found in young clades, suggesting an evolutionary cost of chromosomal

rearrangement.

The *P. napi* chromonome was generated using DNA from inbred siblings from Sweden, a

genome assembly using variable fragment size libraries (180 bp to 100 kb; N50-length of 4.2 Mb

and a total length of 350 Mb), and a high density linkage map generated using 275 full-sib larva,

which placed 122 scaffolds into 25 linkage groups, consistent with previous karyotyping of *P.*

napi[21,22]. After assessment and correction, the total chromosome level assembly was 299 Mb,

comprising 85% of the total assembly size and 114% of the k-mer estimated haploid genome size,

with 2943 scaffolds left unplaced (Supplementary Note 3). Subsequent annotation predicted 13,622

gene models with 9,346 functional predictions (Supplementary Note 4) and 94% of expected single

copy genes (BUSCOs) were found complete (Supplementary Note 1), along with a typical mtDNA

genome (Supplementary Figure 6).

The content and structure of the *P. napi* chromonome was compared with the available

Lepidopteran chromonomes: the silk moth *Bombyx mori* (Bombycidae), the postman butterfly

Heliconius melpomene (Nymphalidae), and the Glanville fritillary *Melitaea cinxia* (Nymphalidae).

These latter three species exhibit gene collinearity along their chromosomes that is maintained even

after chromosomal fusion and fission events, readily reflecting the history of these few

events[13] (Fig. 1). After identifying the shared single copy orthologs (SCO) among these four

species' chromonomes, we placed these results into a comparative chromosomal context.

Unexpectedly, nearly every *P. napi* chromosome was uniquely reorganized on the scale of

megabasepairs in what appeared to be the result of a massive bout of fission and subsequent fusion

events, including the Z chromosome (Fig. 1a). A detailed comparison of the size and number of

these rearrangements was then made between *P. napi* and *B. mori*, as the latter has a high quality

chromonome and a haploid chromosome count (n=28) closest to the Lepidopteran mode of n=31.

Using the shared SCOs, 99 well defined blocks of collinear gene order (hereafter referred to as

"collinear blocks") were identified, with each collinear block having an average of 69 SCOs. Each

P. napi chromosome contained an average of 3.96 (SD = 1.67) collinear blocks, which derived from

an average of 3.5 different *B. mori* chromosomes. In *P. napi*, the average collinear block length was

2.82 Mb (SD = 1.97 Mb) and contained 264 genes in our annotation (SD = 219).

This novel chromosomal reorganization was validated using four complementary but

independent approaches to assess the scaffold joins used to make the chromosomal level assembly.

First, we generated a second linkage map for *P. napi* and used this to confirmed the 25 linkage

groups, our assembly scaffolds and their placement within chromosomes (Fig. 2b,c; Supplementary

Fig. 2). Second, since mate-pair (MP) reads spanning the scaffold joins that were indicated by the

first linkage map provide an independent assessment of validity of those joins, we quantified the

number of MP reads spanning each base pair position along chromosomes, revealing consistent

support for the scaffold joins within chromosomes (Fig. 2a; Supplementary Fig. 2, Note 7). Third,

we aligned the scaffolds of a recent high quality genome of *P. rapae*[23] to our *P. napi* chromonome,

identifying *P. rapae* scaffolds that spanned the scaffold joins within *P. napi*, finding support for 71

of the 97 joins (Supplementary Fig. 5). Fourth, since the *P. napi* scaffold joins are not associated

with *B. mori* collinear blocks of SCOs, we identified boundaries of *B. mori* collinear blocks that

spanned scaffold joins within *P. napi* chromosomes, finding support for 62 of the 97 scaffold joins

in *P. napi* and none against them (Fig. 2d; Supplementary Fig. 2, Note 8,9). Thus, the *Pieris napi*

chromonome is well supported.

We next compared the *P. napi* chromosomal structure to the additional genomes available in

the Lepidoptera (n=20). Like most eukaryotic genomes, most Lepidopteran genome assemblies are

not chromonomes, complicating comparative assessments of chromosomal structure (Supplemental

Figure 6). To overcome this limitation, we queried each scaffold of each of these genomes for

SCO's that were shared with *B. mori* and *P. napi*, and then quantified whether the scaffold

supported the chromosomal structure of *B. mori* or *P. napi*. While all non-*Pieris* species have more

scaffolds supporting *B.mori*-like chromosomes, two independent assemblies of the congener *P.*

rapae exhibited more *P. napi*-like scaffolds (Fig 3a). Finally, we assessed the evolutionary history

of haploid chromosome count in the family Pieridae, by integrating for the first time nearly 200

species level observations with a temporally calibrated phylogeny. The haploid chromosomal count

of *P. napi* and *P. rapae* is essentially identical to all but one species in their clade going back to a

common ancestor > 30 million years divergent[24] (Fig 3b). Thus, the chromosomal structure of the

Pieris lineage is novel, morphologically cryptic, and possibly old.

To further assess this novel chromosomal organization, we investigated the ordering and

content of the collinear blocks that constitute the *P. napi* chromosomes. First, we tested whether *P.*

napi maintained the traditional telomeres of Lepidoptera despite its extensive chromosomal

reshuffling (Fig. 4a), finding evidence of significantly more telomeres in common between *B. mori*

and *P. napi* than random chance (P < 0.01, two tailed t-test; Fig. 4b). We also identified a significant

enrichment for SCOs in *B. mori* and *P. napi* located at roughly similar distance from the end of their

respective chromosomes (Fig. 4c). Both of these findings are consistent with the ongoing use of

ancient telomeric ends. Second, since gene order is non-random across diverse eurkaryotes[5], we

tested whether there was a gene set functional enrichment within the observed collinear blocks by

investigating the full set of annotated *P. napi* genes within them. We found that 57 of the 99

collinear blocks in the *P. napi* genome contained at least three genes with a shared gene ontology

(GO) term that was significantly less frequent in the rest of the genome (P < 0.01, Fishers Exact

Test). We then tested whether the observed enrichment in the collinear blocks of *P. napi* was greater

than expected by randomly assigning the genome into similarly sized blocks. The mean number of

GO enriched fragments in each of 10,000 simulated genomes was 38.8 (variance of 46.6 and

maximum of 52), which was significantly lower than the observed (P < 0.0001)(Supplementary Fig.

3). Thus, we find evidence of selection favoring the modal Lepidopteran chromosomal structure, in

both the retention of ancient teleomeric ends and gene order.

Repeats are known to affect chromosomal reorganization. To assess this, we surveyed the

distribution of different repeat element classes across the genome, looking for enrichment of

specific categories near the borders of collinear blocks. While Class 1 transposons were found to be

at higher density near the ends of chromosomes relative to the distribution internally

(Supplementary fig. 4), no repeat elements were enriched relative to the position of syntenic block

regions. We therefore investigated whether any repeat element classes had expanded within *Pieris*

compared to other sequenced genomes by assessing the distribution of repeat element classes and

genome size among sequenced Lepidoptera genomes. Consistent with previous findings[25], we

observe strong relationship between genome size and repetitive element content in *Pieris* species,

though no element classes appear enriched within this lineage (Supplemental Fig. 7). Thus, while

repetitive elements such as transposable elements are likely to have been involved in the

reshuffling, our inability to find evidence of this suggests these events may be old and their signal

decayed.

The novel chromosomal organization of *P. napi* and *P. rapae* implies their ancestral lineage

underwent a rampant series of fission, then fusion events. Although such chromosomal

rearrangements (CRs) are well documented in Lepidoptera[8,9,11,12,15], and the Pieridae in particular[3,15],

our evidence for a return to the near the modal haploid number of Lepidoptera after a bout of

runaway fissions is unexpected. Moreover, this fragmentation and reconciliation does not appear

random, as we detect the maintenance of functional gene clusters, a bias toward the use of ancient

telomeric ends, and a convergence upon a common haploid count, suggesting there was a potential

fitness advantage of all three. While it is tempting to envision nearly neutral selection pressures

acting upon these aspects of chromosomal structure varying over time due to changes in effective

population size, additional chromonomes and modeling are necessary before such scenarios can be

substantiated.

Online Content Methods, along with any additional Extended Data display items and Source Data,
are available in the online version of the paper; references unique to these sections appear only in
the online paper.

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Supplementary Information is available in the online version of the paper.

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Figure 1 | Chromosomal mapping of the moth *Bombyx mori* (Bombycoidea) to the butterflies *Pieris*
napi (Pieridae), *Heliconius melpomene* and *Melitaea cinxia* (Nymphalidae)[24]. **a)** Single copy
orthologs (SCOs) connecting *B. mori* to *P. napi* (n=2354) and to *H. melpomene* (n=2771). The Z
chromosome is chromosome 1 in *B. mori* and *P. napi* and 21 in *H. melpomene*. Links between
orthologs originate from *B. mori* and are colored by their chromosome of origin, then extend to *P.*
napi chromosomes (colored blue) and *H. melpomene* chromosomes (colored orange). Links are
clustered into blocks of synteny, forming colored ribbons that represent a contiguous block of genes
spanning a region in both species. Chromosomes 2-25 in *P. napi* are ordered in size from largest to
smallest. **b)** SCOs between the two largest autosomes of *P. napi* and the other Lepidoptera highlight
the former's novel and derived chromosomal fusion and fission events. Here, band width for each
species is proportional to the length of the inferred chromosomal region of orthology, although the
individual chromosomes are not to scale.

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Figure 2 | Validation of the largest four *P. napi* chromosomes. Within each, **a)** mate pair spanning
depth is shown across each chromosome, summed from the 3kb, 7kb, and 40kb libraries (genome
averaged = 1356). Of the scaffold join positions 74 of 97 were spanned by > 50 properly paired
reads (mean = 117.8, S.D. = 298.7), while the remaining 23 scaffold joins had 0 mate pair spans. **b)**
black dots represent RAD-seq linkage markers and their recombination distance along
chromosomes from the first linkage map **c)** Results from the second linkage map of maternally
inherited markers (RNA-seq and whole genome data), where all markers within a chromosome are
completely linked due to suppressed recombination in females (i.e. recombination distance is not
shown on Y axis). **d)** *B. mori* collinear blocks, colored and labeled by their chromosomal origin,
along with orientation by arrow, as in Fig. 1a. **e)** *P. napi* scaffolds comprising each chromosome,
labeled to indicate scaffold number and orientation. **f)** To the right of each *P. napi* chromosome is a
circos plot showing the location and orientation of the collinear blocks from each *B. mori* donor
chromosome that comprise a given *P. napi* chromosome, colored as in Fig. 1a. A twist in the ribbon
indicates a reversal of the 5' to 3' orientation of the *B. mori* relative to the *P. napi* chromsomes.
Ribbon width on the *P. napi* chromosome is relative to the size of the collinear block. Remaining
chromosomes shown in Supplementary Fig. 2.
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Species	napi-like scaffolds	mori-like scaffolds	napi/mori ratio
Plutella xylostella	8	31	0.26
Bombyx mori	4	37	0.11
Manduca sexta	0	0	NA
Operophtera brumata	1	6	0.17
Spodoptera frugiperda	10	17	0.59
Helicoverpa armigera	5	34	0.15
Plodia interpunctella	4	25	0.16
Chilo suppressalis	0	0	NA
Papilio glaucus	7	38	0.18
Papilio machaon	7	22	0.32
Papilio polytes	2	21	0.1
Papilio xuthus	1	13	0.08
Lerema accius	6	30	0.2
Calycopis cecrops	2	30	0.07
Danaus plexippus	5	31	0.16
Bicyclus anynana	4	30	0.13
Malitaea cinxia	2	8	0.25
Heliconius melpomene	3	19	0.16
Heliconius erato demophoon	2	9	0.22
Leptidia sinapis	0	4	0
Phoebis sennae	7	31	0.23
Pieris rapae HiRise	26	5	5.2
Pieris napi	21	14	1.5
Pieris rapae	25	12	2.1

Figure 3 | Comparative chromosomal evolution across Lepidoptera, with a focus upon the family Pieridae. a) A chronogram of currently available Lepidopteran genomes (n=24) with estimates of their chromosomal similarity relative to *B. mori* vs. *P. napi*, with time in million years ago (MYA). For each scaffold of each species, SCOs were determined with *B. mori* and *P. napi*, then we quantified the number of times a scaffold contained SCOs derived from two separate chromosomes of *B. mori*, but from a single *P. napi* chromosome (napi-like scaffold), or vice versa (mori-like scaffold)(see Supplemental Note for more details). **b)** Ancestral state reconstruction of the chromosomal fusion and fission events across a chronogram of Pieridae (n=201 species). As only a time calibrated genus-level phylogeny exists for Pieridae, all genera with > 1 species were set to an arbitrary polytomy at 5 MYA, while deeper branches reflect calibrated nodes. The haploid chromosomal count of tips (histogram) and interior branches (color coding) are indicated, with the outgroup set to n=31 reflecting the butterfly chromosomal mode. Genus names are indicated for the larger clades (all tips labels shown in Supplemental Material).

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Figure 4. Comparison of gene content and chromosomal location of collinear blocks between *P. napi* and *B. mori* in observed and randomly permuted genomes. **a)** Observed pattern of conserved collinear block location within *P. napi* Chromosome 9, wherein telomere facing and interior origins of the syntenic blocks are conserved between species despite their reshuffling. **b)** Comparisons of the number of collinear blocks that are terminal in both *P. napi* and *B. mori* chromosomes (n=18, red line), compared to 10,000 simulated genomes (histogram: average 10.7, std dev= 6.8). **c)** Percentage distance from the end (DFE) of SCOs in a *P. napi* vs. *B. mori* chromosomes. Counts binned on the color axis. **d)** Comparison between the observed DFE distribution and the expected distribution generated from 10,000 genomes of 25 chromosomes constructed from the random fusion of the observed collinear blocks. Bins in which more genes occur in the observed genomes than the expected distribution are in orange, less genes in blue, P < 0.05 in either direction are denoted by a white dot. SCO spatial distribution was significantly higher than expected along the diagonal (two bins with p < 0.05), while significantly lower than expected off the diagonal (four bins with p < 0.05).