Relief from nitrogen starvation entails quick unexpected down-regulation of glycolytic/lipid metabolism genes in enological *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*

Tesnière Catherine[1], Bessière Chloé[1], Pradal Martine[1], Sanchez Isabelle[1¤], Blondin Bruno[1], Bigey Frédéric[1*]

1 SPO, INRA, Montpellier SupAgro, Univ Montpellier, Montpellier, France

¤Current Address: MISTEA, INRA, Montpellier SupAgro, Univ Montpellier, Montpellier, France

* frederic.bigey@inra.fr

Abstract

Nitrogen composition of the grape must has an impact on yeast growth and fermentation kinetics as well as on the organoleptic properties of the final product. In some technological processes, such as white wine/rosé winemaking, the yeast-assimilable nitrogen content is sometimes insufficient to cover yeast requirements, which can lead to slow or sluggish fermentations. Growth is nevertheless quickly restored upon relief from nutrient starvation, e.g.through the addition of ammonium nitrogen, allowing fermentation completion. The aim of this study was to determine how nitrogen repletion affected the genomic cell response of a *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* wine yeast strain, in particular within the first hour after nitrogen addition. We found almost 4000 genes induced or repressed, sometimes within minutes after nutrient changes. Some of the transcriptional responses to nitrogen depended on the TOR pathway, which controls positively ribosomal protein genes, amino acid and purine biosynthesis or amino acid permease genes and negatively stress-response genes, RTG specific TCA cycle genes and NCR sensitive genes. Some unexpected transcriptional responses concerned all the

glycolytic genes, the starch and glucose metabolism and citrate cycle-related genes that were down-regulated, as well as genes from the lipid metabolism.

Introduction

The yeast cell *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* is able to control its growth in response to changes in nutrient availability. Nitrogen limitation is one of the most frequent limitations observed during wine fermentation [1]. The actual nitrogen content in must is dependent on many factors including rootstock, grape variety, climate, vine growing conditions, and grape processing. In enological conditions, musts are considered as nitrogen-limited when the assimilable nitrogen content is below 150 mg/L [1]. Assimilable nitrogen is important for fermentation kinetics, the maximal fermentative rate being related to the nitrogen level in the must [1]. In most cases of sluggish fermentations, nitrogen depletion quickly results in cells entering a stationary phase. This phenomenon is not related to a decrease in viability, but could rather be related to a catabolic inactivation of the hexose transporters [2] or to lower protein synthesis and cell protein content [3]. Other physiological changes such as autophagy, nitrogen recycling systems and the reorientation of the carbon flux to favour glycogen and trehalose storage have also been observed at the onset of nitrogen starvation [4]. In addition, the transcriptional remodelling associated with the onset of starvation during wine alcoholic fermentations has been described [3], including the development of a general stress response. These transcriptional changes are mostly controlled by the TOR pathway, sensing cell nitrogen status and adapting nitrogen metabolism to nutrient availability [5, 6]. Nitrogen limitation stably arrests the cell cycle in G_1/G_0, whereas medium replenishment with the limiting nutrient quickly restores growth. Relief from nitrogen starvation is a way to increase the fermentation rate, while reducing its duration. In fact assimilable nitrogen addition to nitrogen-deficient must results in a reactivating protein synthesis and increasing sugar transport speed. Although this nitrogen addition is currently practised to reduce the risk of stuck fermentation in white and rosé wines, the molecular mechanisms triggered by nitrogen replenishment are poorly understood.

We report here an investigation of the rapid changes that occur in a wine yeast

strain in response to relief from nitrogen starvation with the aim of elucidating the underlying molecular mechanisms. We performed a transcriptomic study and investigated the changes occurring during the first hour following nitrogen addition. We found that nitrogen repletion very rapidly alters by at least 2-fold the levels of transcripts, a large portion of which are involved with either protein production during growth or decrease in response to stress. Signalling pathways involving PKA and TOR were also affected. The unexpected down-regulation of the glycolysis-related genes and of genes related to the lipid metabolism is discussed.

Materials and methods

Strain and culture conditions

All fermentation experiments were carried out in triplicates using the yeast strain *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* EC1118, a commercial wine yeast from Lallemand SA. The fermentation medium mimicks a standard natural must and has the same composition as the synthetic medium SM300 previously described [1], except for the total concentration of assimilable nitrogen that was 100 mg/L and the addition of 17 g/L $FeCl_3 6\,H_2O$. Fermentations were conducted under constant stirring at 24°C in 1.2 L flasks equipped with locks to maintain anaerobiosis. Production of CO_2 was monitored by weighing the flasks every 20 min, to determine weight loss. The rate of CO_2 production was estimated using a polynomial smoothing as previously described [7]. The number of cells was determined with a particle counter (Coulter counter, Beckman Coulter). Preliminary experiments had shown that, under this condition, cells were starved for nitrogen (i.e. reached stationary phase) after 42 h when 14 g of CO_2 has been released. Some cells were collected at this stage as controls ($t = 0$), then diammonium phosphate (DAP) was added to the culture medium (300 mg/L final concentration), after removing an equivalent volume of medium to keep the total volume unchanged. Sampling was then performed 15, 30, 45 and 60 min after DAP addition and cells were quickly recovered by filtration as previously described [8].

Fig 1. Fermentation profiles CO_2 production rate during fermentation in a nitrogen-depleted synthetic must (black). In another experiment (red), DAP was added at the beginning of the stationary phase (42 h; 14 g CO_2 released)

Numerous changes in gene expression

Significantly regulated genes

We studied the expression of yeast genes within 1 hour following DAP addition at 0, 15, 30, 45 and 60 min (S1 Table). Transcriptome analysis revealed numerous changes during this first hour with almost 4800 nitrogen-regulated genes identified (S2 Table). This is much higher than the 350 genes regulated after 2 hours upon the addition of DAP to active dried yeast inoculated in a Riesling must [9], or than the 1000 [10] or 3000 [8] transcripts altered by the addition of nitrogen to laboratory yeast cells. These differences are probably due to improvements in the DNA microarray technology, to a reduced time-scale or to the experimental conditions (synthetic versus natural must, industrial versus laboratory yeast strains). Respectively 2292 and 2507 genes were significantly up- or down-regulated (S2 Table), reflecting a massive change in expression patterns upon nitrogen repletion. Analysis of expression (S1 Fig) allowed us to classify genes expression profiles in 8 patterns depending on whether expression was induced (Fig 2) or repressed (Fig 3).

Fig 2. Clusters of up-regulated genes Clustering of expression pattern and GO-term enrichment were performed as described in the Materials and Methods

Fig 3. Clusters of down-regulated genes Clustering of expression pattern and GO-term enrichment were performed as described in the Materials and Methods

Up-regulated genes

Cluster 1 contained 1555 genes exhibiting an initial linear increase ($b_1 > 0$, S1 Fig), sharp but transient, then a decrease of expression due to the negative quadratic term of the equation ($b_2 < 0$). Functional analysis using GO-term enrichment showed that this cluster contained many genes involved in or related to ribosome biogenesis, RNA processing, transcription, translation, nitrogen compound metabolic process, nuclear transport (S3 Table). Cluster 3 contained 381 genes linearly induced within the first hour following repletion ($b_1 > 0$ and $b_2 = 0$), encoding proteins involved in the regulation of gene expression and of metabolic and biosynthetic processes. Cluster 5, which contained 292 genes that exhibited an expression accelerating with time ($b_1 = 0$

and $b_2 > 0$), was enriched in genes involved in cellular amino-acid (*TRP2, MET8, HIS3, LEU4, TRP3, LYS2, HIS5, ARG4, HIS4, ARG7*, *ARG1*) and organic acids biosynthetic processes. Cluster 7 contained 64 genes that exhibited the highest increase in expression among all up-regulated genes, following a linear profile ($b_1 > 0$) with a slight acceleration ($b_2 > 0$). Functional analysis showed that this cluster was similar to cluster 5.

This global response is similar to what was described for the commercial wine yeast strain VIN13, 2 hours after DAP addition [9], where an up-regulation was observed for genes involved in amino acid metabolism, de novo purine biosynthesis, and protein synthesis. Such changes likely corresponded to an activation of the Target of Rapamycin (TOR) signaling pathway which positively controls ribosomal protein genes [11], amino acid and purine biosynthesis or amino acid permease genes [12]. Surprisingly, within 60 min we didn't find any change in the expression of genes related to sulfate assimilation, although this had been observed (after two hours) by [9].

Three components of the MCM (mini-chromosome maintenance) hexameric complex helicase, binding to chromatin as a part of the pre-replicative complex (*MCM2*, *MCM3*, and *MCM6*), and also *MAD1* and *YCG1*, were transiently but sharply induced after relief from nitrogen starvation. The MCM complex is required for the initiation of eukaryotic replication, while MAD1 is a coiled-coil protein involved in the spindle-assembly checkpoint. Its phosphorylation leads to an inhibition of the activity of the anaphase promoting complex. YCG1 is required for establishment and maintenance of chromosome condensation, chromosome segregation and chromatin binding of the condensin complex and is also required for clustering tRNA genes at the nucleolus. In addition, other cell-cycle related genes were induced, such as *RAD59*, *CDC20*, *RFA3*, *MSH2* and *YHM2*. Thus, all these transient inductions are coherent with a restart of the cell cycle in response to nitrogen replenishment.

Down-regulated genes

Among the clusters corresponding to down-regulated genes (Fig 3), 2235 genes in cluster 2 exhibited an initial linear decrease ($b_1 < 0$), sharp but transient, then an increase of expression due to the positive quadratic term of the equation ($b_2 > 0$). Functional analysis showed that cluster 2 contained many genes involved in protein catabolic

process, proteolysis, organonitrogen compound catabolic process, lipid metabolic process, response to stress, oxydo-reduction process, ATP synthesis, nucleotide metabolic process and aerobic respiration. Cluster 4 contained 168 genes that were linearly repressed during the first hour following repletion ($b_1 < 0$ and $b_2 = 0$). No significant enrichment in GO-terms was observed for this cluster. Cluster 6 contained 99 genes that exhibited a decelerating expression with time ($b_1 = 0$ and $b_2 < 0$) and was enriched in genes involved in nucleoside and ribonucleoside metabolic process, glycolytic process and ATP biosynthetic process. Finally, cluster 8 contained only 5 genes that exhibited an amplitude of down-regulation similar to the previous clusters. This is a linear profile ($b_1 < 0$) with a slightly deceleration ($b_2 < 0$). Functional analysis showed no significant enrichment.

In our conditions (i.e. within one hour after repletion), we found other functions for down-regulated genes than those described previously [9]. In fact, genes related to cellular transport and transport mechanism were repressed in response to DAP addition (*NCE102*, *POR1*, *PMA2*, *ATP19*, *ATP2*, *UGA4*, *PUT4*, *GSP2*, *YPT53*). Other most interesting genes were those related to stress response, to NCR , to glycolysis or related lipid biosynthetic processes (among which ergosterol). Among genes in this last group, we found *ETR1*, *IFA38,ERG28*, *ERG4*, *ERG25*, *ERG11*, *NCP1*, *ERG20*, *ELO1*, *FAS1*, *ERG3*, *ERG6*, *ERG5*, *LIP1*, *ERG24*, *ACC1*, *POT1*, *TIP1*, *OPI3*, *YML131W*, *AAD10*, *GCY1*, *GRE3*, *TGL4* and, more specifically those related to ergosterol biosynthesis (*ERG28*, *ERG4*, *ERG25*, *ERG11*, *NCP1*, *ERG20*, *MCR1*, *ERG3*, *ERG6*, *ERG5*, *ERG24*, *ERG10*).

Moreover, DAP addition to a nitrogen starved yeast culture decreased the expression of a large group of stress-related genes, such as heat-shock protein related genes, but also PAU-related genes, which mostly belong to cluster 2. This pattern indicated that the down-regulation of these genes was a rapid phenomena, largely decreasing within the first 15 min after nitrogen repletion. Other genes related to stress gene regulation such as *HSF1*, *MSN2*, and *MSN4* [13] were also down-regulated in our study as well as genes involved in trehalose and glycogen metabolisms (*TPS1*, *TPS2*, *TPS3*, *ATH1*, *NTH1*, *NTH2*, *TSL1*, *GPH1*, *GPD1*, *GSY1*, *GSY2*).

Such changes are also likely related to an activation of the TOR signaling pathway that negatively controls stress response genes, the retrograde response (RTG) specific to

the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle genes and nitrogen catabolite repression (NCR) sensitive genes [12].

Interestingly, the down-regulation of genes related to glycolysis, which has been previously reported in similar experimental conditions but on a laboratory strain [8], was confirmed here in an enological strain (S2 Fig). This indicates the conservation of this mechanism independently of strain specificity. As previously suggested, these unexpected results were probably revealed by analyzing the very early events following nitrogen replenishment. This repression of glycolytic genes in wine yeast had already been observed, but in rather different experimental conditions such as after rehydration of active dried yeasts and inoculation of a fermentation medium [14]. This repression could be linked to a decrease in energy demand as suggested by these authors.

Other important changes were also revealed in the present study, concerning for instance the down-regulation of genes related to the MAPK signaling pathways, oxidoreductase activity,or NCR metabolism. Concerning genes related to stress and to NCR, their down-regulation corresponded to a common response to glucose, nitrogen and phosphorous repletion, whereas the down-regulation of nitrogenous compound catabolism and amino acid derivative transport were nitrogen-specific [10]. For these authors, both PKA and TOR signaling pathways might be involved in the responses to all three nutriments viz. glucose, nitrogen and phosphate. Surprisingly, these authors found that genes associated with glycolysis and gluconeogenesis were specifically repressed by phosphorous, whereas in the present study they were both nitrogen- and phosphate-regulated (as we used ammonium phosphate).

It was in fact surprising to observe the repression of all the glycolysis-related genes whereas genes related to ribosomal protein synthesis were up-regulated. This could indicate that the restart of the fermentative activity shortly after the addition of DAP was unrelated to the glycolytic pathway but rather to the cell cycle and protein synthesis activation. In fact, Rim15p, which gene expression is down-regulated in our study, has been found to integrate signals derived from PKA, TORC1 and Sch9p, which transmit the information concerning the availability of nutrients [15]. Rim15p regulates proper entry into G_0 via the transcription factors Msn2/4p and Gis1p whose related genes were also down-regulated. The down-regulation of *RIM15* is thus coherent with the up-regulation of cell-cycle related genes and correspond to the model previously

suggested [8].

Conclusion

The addition of nitrogen to starved wine yeast cells thus contributed to the development of a favorable environment for wine yeast growth and also to limit the general stress response. Most of these responses are quite the converse of changes observed in nitrogen-starved yeast, when cells reach the stationary phase stage [4].

Supporting information

S1 Fig. Clustering method. Schematic representation of the method used for the manual clustering of expression profiles. (PDF)

S2 Fig. Expression profiles of glycolytic genes. Expression profile of 16 glycolytic genes. (PDF)

S1 Table. Gene expression over time. Table of 6000 genes expression after normalization. (TSV)

S2 Table. Clusters' composition. Spreadsheet containing the name and function of each genes belonging to each cluster. (XLSX)

S3 Table. Functional analysis. Spreadsheet containing the GO-term enrichment for each cluster. (XLSX)

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Author contributions

B.B., C.T. and F.B. jointly conceived the study, interpreted the data and wrote the paper. C.B. and M.P. performed experiments. I.S. and F.B. conducted statistical analyses of microarray data.

Data availability

Dataset, R scripts, figures and tables are available in open-access on Zenodo (doi:10.5281/zenodo.1295508)

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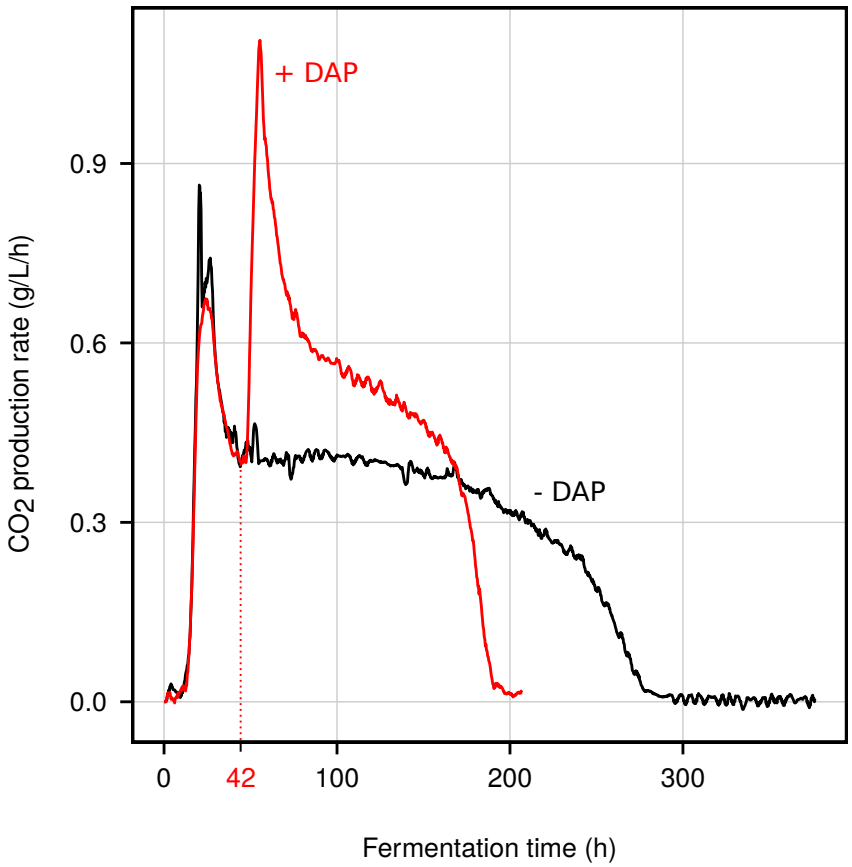
+ DAP
- DAP
0.9
0.6
0.3
0.0
CO_2 production rate (g/L/h)
0
42
100
200
300
Fermentation time (h)

Figure 1

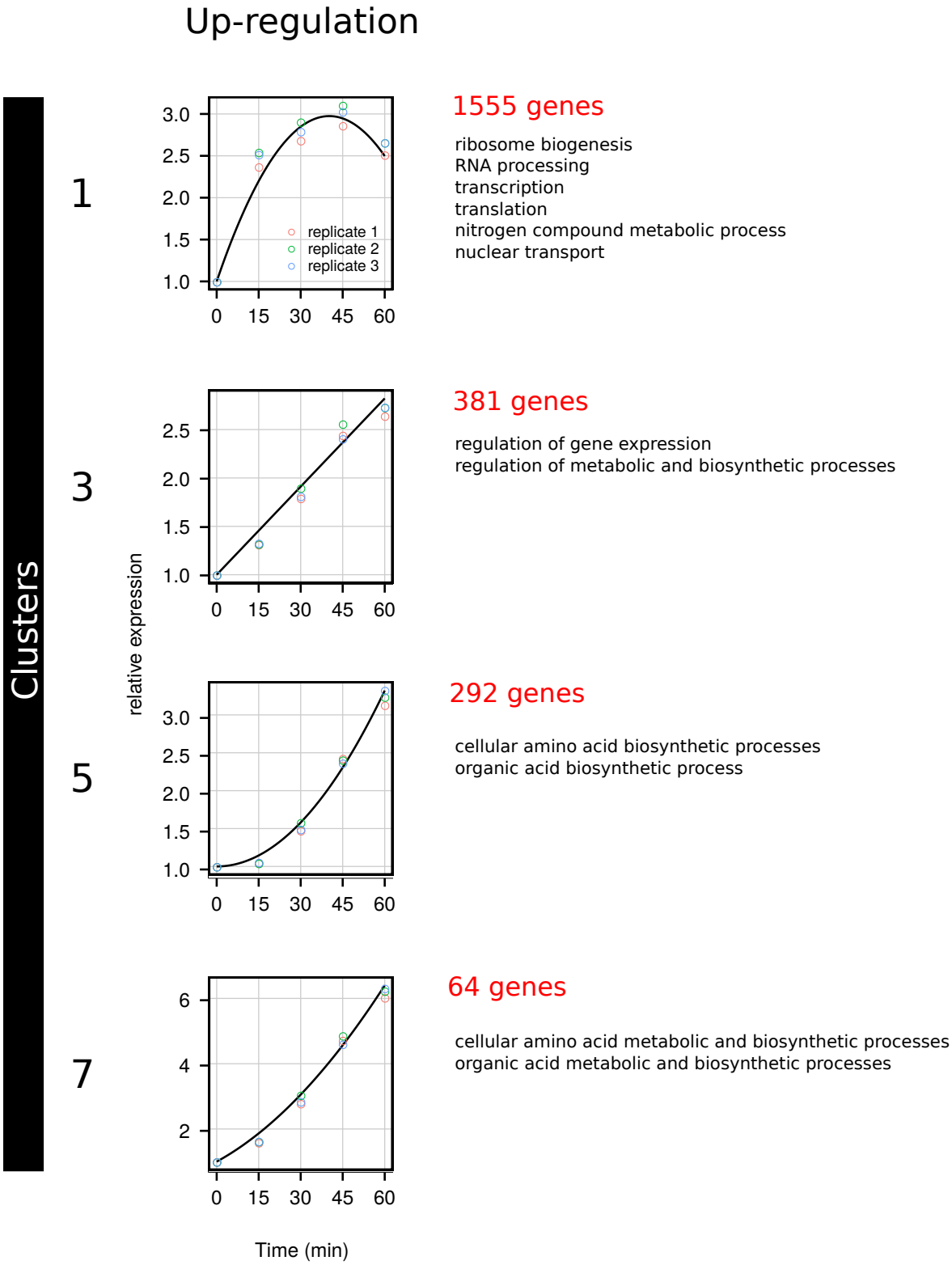
Up-regulation
Clusters
1
3
5
7
relative expression
Time (min)
replicate 1
replicate 2
replicate 3
1555 genes
ribosome biogenesis
RNA processing
transcription
translation
nitrogen compound metabolic process
nuclear transport
381 genes
regulation of gene expression
regulation of metabolic and biosynthetic processes
292 genes
cellular amino acid biosynthetic processes
organic acid biosynthetic process
64 genes
cellular amino acid metabolic and biosynthetic processes
organic acid metabolic and biosynthetic processes

Figure 2

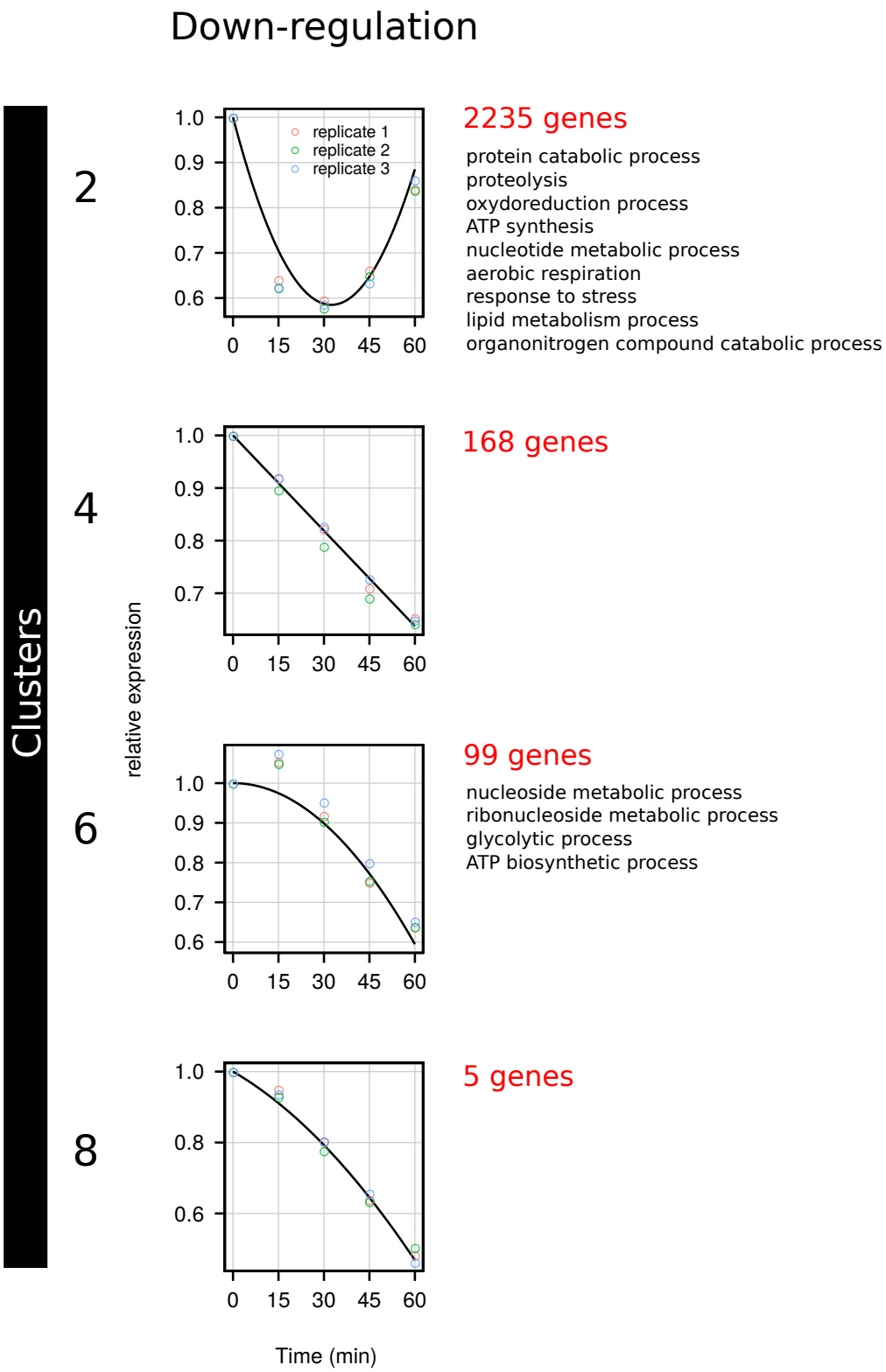
Down-regulation
Clusters
2
4
6
8
replicate 1
replicate 2
replicate 3
relative expression
Time (min)
2235 genes
protein catabolic process
proteolysis
oxydoreduction process
ATP synthesis
nucleotide metabolic process
aerobic respiration
response to stress
lipid metabolism process
organonitrogen compound catabolic process
168 genes
99 genes
nucleoside metabolic process
ribonucleoside metabolic process
glycolytic process
ATP biosynthetic process
5 genes

Figure 3