

# Genomic features shaping the landscape of meiotic double-strand-break hotspots in maize

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Meiotic recombination is the most important source of genetic variation in higher eukaryotes. It is initiated by formation of double-strand breaks (DSBs) in chromosomal DNA in early meiotic prophase. The DSBs are subsequently repaired, resulting in crossovers (COs) and noncrossovers (NCOs). Recombination events are not distributed evenly along chromosomes but cluster at recombination hotspots. How specific sites become hotspots is poorly understood. Studies in yeast and mammals linked initiation of meiotic recombination to active chromatin features present upstream from genes, such as absence of nucleosomes and presence of trimethylation of lysine 4 in histone H3 (H3K4me3). Core recombination components are conserved among eukaryotes, but it is unclear whether this conservation results in universal characteristics of recombination landscapes shared by a wide range of species. To address this question, we mapped meiotic DSBs in maize, a higher eukaryote with a large genome that is rich in repetitive DNA. We found DSBs in maize to be frequent in all chromosome regions, including sites lacking COs, such as centromeres and pericentromeric regions. Furthermore, most DSBs are formed in repetitive DNA, predominantly *Gypsy* retrotransposons, and only one-quarter of DSB hotspots are near genes. Genic and nongenic hotspots differ in several characteristics, and only genic DSBs contribute to crossover formation. Maize hotspots overlap regions of low nucleosome occupancy but show only limited association with H3K4me3 sites. Overall, maize DSB hotspots exhibit distribution patterns and characteristics not reported previously in other species. Understanding recombination patterns in maize will shed light on mechanisms affecting dynamics of the plant genome.

recombination | meiosis | double-strand breaks | chromosomes | maize

Meiotic recombination is responsible for generating genetic variation and facilitates purging deleterious mutations from genomes. However, despite their importance, recombination events in most species are not distributed uniformly across the genome. Instead, they are predominantly clustered at recombination hotspots, which are interspersed with coldspots, regions of low recombination (1–3). Studies in yeast and mammals have linked initiation of meiotic recombination to the presence of open chromatin sites located upstream from genes and to trimethylation of lysine 4 in histone H3 (H3K4me3), a mark of active chromatin (2, 4–7). Core components of the meiotic recombination pathway are well conserved among species (8), and it is conceivable that this conservation would result in universal characteristics of recombination landscapes. However, as yeast and mammals possess unique characteristics, such as a very small genome size (yeast) or the presence of species-specific recombination mechanism features, such as PRDM9 (mammals) (9), analyzing a wider range of taxa will be helpful to distinguish between species-specific and universal aspects of recombination landscape. Here, we examined recombination initiation patterns in maize (*Zea mays* L.), a large-genome higher

eukaryote with a set of recombination proteins that are widely shared by many species (8).

Meiotic recombination is universally initiated early in meiosis by formation of double-strand breaks (DSBs) in chromosomal DNA by a topoisomerase VI-like complex (10, 11). In plants, this complex contains three paralogous proteins, SPO11-1, SPO11-2, and MTOPVIB (11). The DSBs are subsequently resected to create single-stranded (ssDNA) ends, which become coated by two proteins, RAD51 and DMC1, to form a nucleoprotein filament, which then invades the homologous double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) region (12). Meiotic DSB repair results in the formation of two product types, crossovers (COs) and noncrossovers (NCOs), the latter including gene conversions (Fig. 1A). CO formation involves formation and resolution of double Holliday junctions (13). In contrast, most NCOs are produced through a separate pathway that does not use Holliday junction

## Significance

Meiotic recombination is a process in plants, animals, and fungi during which chromosomes exchange their parts. It generates new genetic variation in the progeny and is one of the reasons why progeny are both similar to and different from their parents. Recombination is initiated by formation of breaks in chromosomal DNA. We generated a high-resolution map of sites where these breaks are formed in the genome of maize. Surprisingly, we found that DNA breaks are abundant in all genome regions, including sites where recombination was thought to be limited, such as repetitive DNA. The map will allow understanding of how recombination patterns shape the genome and aid development of more efficient breeding methods.

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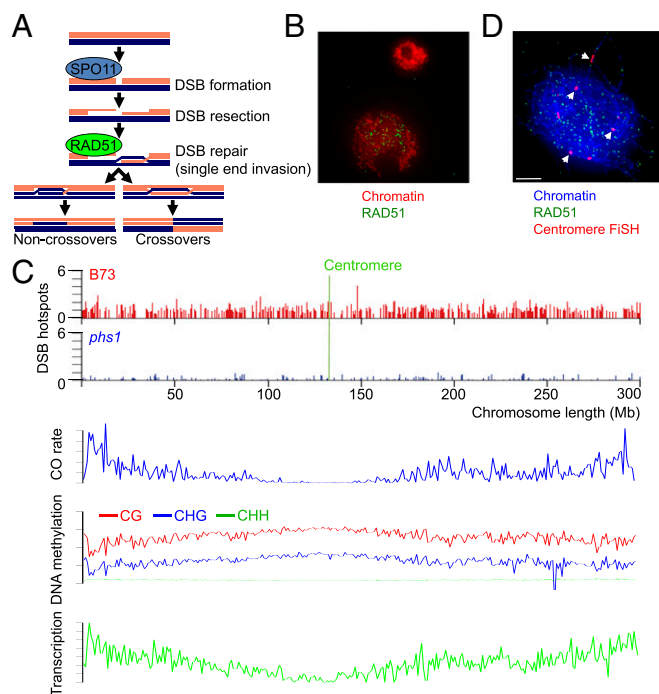
Data deposition: RAD51 ChIP sequence data reported in this paper have been deposited in the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?token=khqfysmzinzrcj&acc=GSE55701> (accession no. GSE55701); H3K4me3 ChIP and RNA sequence data have been deposited in the NCBI database, [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/biosample/LinkName=bioproject\\_biosample\\_all&from\\_uid=185817](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/biosample/LinkName=bioproject_biosample_all&from_uid=185817) [accession nos. SAMN01884257–SAMN01884260 (H3K4me3 ChIP), and SAMN01889176 and SAMN01889179 (RNA)]; nucleosome occupancy sequence data have been deposited in the NCBI GEO database, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE84368> (accession no. GSE84368).

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**Fig. 1.** Mapping meiotic DSB hotspots in maize. (A) Diagram of the main steps of the meiotic recombination pathway. (B) Comparison of RAD51 antibody staining in a meiocyte (large cell) and a somatic cell (small cell) of the maize anther showing that RAD51 foci are absent from somatic cells. (C) Map of DSB hotspots on chromosome 1 of the B73 inbred of maize (Top) and the *phs1* mutant (Bottom). The y axis represents hotspot strength compared to input control. Position of the centromere is marked with a green line. See *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*, for the other chromosomes. Shown below are patterns of CO distribution, DNA methylation, and location of genes expressed during meiosis, calculated using a 1-Mb sliding window. (D) Colocalization of RAD51 foci with maize centromeres in a zygotene meiocyte of B73 using immunofluorescence. RAD51 foci overlapping centromeres identified in 3D images are marked with arrows. (Scale bar: 5  $\mu\text{m}$ .) Images in B and D are flat projections of 5–10 consecutive optical sections of 3D image stacks.

intermediates but utilizes a synthesis-dependent strand annealing mechanism (14, 15). Some NCOs are also formed through alternative resolution of double Holliday junctions (16, 17). Repair of the majority of meiotic DSBs leads to NCOs. In maize male meiocytes, there are ~500 DSBs, yet their repair leads to fewer than ~20 COs (18). The distribution of DSB hotspots may not necessarily mirror the CO hotspot distribution. In budding yeast and mice, the fraction of DSBs repaired in COs and NCOs varies in different genomic regions (19, 20). This, however, is not the case in humans (21).

In mice and humans, the key determinant of the recombination initiation landscape is PRDM9, a histone methyl transferase that also contains a series of DNA-binding zinc finger domains (9). Through the zinc finger domains, PRDM9 targets H3K4 trimethylation to genome sites containing a guanine-cytosine (GC)-rich degenerate DNA sequence motif, which become DSB hotspot locations (9). PRDM9 homologs have been identified in many vertebrates but not in plants or fungi (22, 23). In contrast to mammals, yeast does not have DNA sequence motifs associated with meiotic DSB formation, and its DSB hotspots tend to be located in promoters of genes (2, 24). However, yeast has a small and very compact genome characterized by short intergenic spaces and small amounts of repetitive DNA. These features make it distinct from many higher eukaryotes, which possess large genomes rich in repetitive DNA, both known to affect recombination event distribution (3, 25).

To elucidate recombination landscape features that are common to a broad spectrum of eukaryotes, we mapped sites of recombination initiation in maize. The genome of maize is typical for many higher eukaryotes in terms of size (2.4 Gbp) and

the content of repetitive DNA (~85%) (26). Most COs in maize are formed near chromosome ends (27) and close to genes (3). CO formation is suppressed at centromeres. Extensive pericentromeric regions also exhibit few COs, even though they contain a significant fraction, ~20%, of maize genes (27). Mapping DSB hotspots in maize revealed that recombination is initiated in all regions of chromosomes, including centromeric and pericentromeric regions. Furthermore, the majority of DSBs are in repetitive DNA, mainly retrotransposons, whereas only one-quarter of DSBs are in genes. Our data suggest that DSBs in repetitive DNA and those in genic regions exhibit distinct features and that only DSBs formed in genic regions contribute to CO formation.

## Results

**DSB Hotspots Are Ubiquitous in All Chromosome Regions.** To generate a map of DSB sites, we used a chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) approach in which chromatin from flowers containing zygotene meiocytes was enriched in fragments associated with the RAD51 protein. RAD51 forms distinct foci on chromosomes at the sites of meiotic DSBs, facilitating their repair (12, 28). In maize, the foci are visible from early zygotene to late pachytene, with a peak number of roughly 500 per meiocyte at midzygotene (*SI Appendix, Fig. S1*). RAD51 foci have been reported absent from somatic cells in maize plants grown under normal conditions (28), which we confirmed by examining over 200 somatic cells from zygotene anthers (Fig. 1B). Thus, the RAD51-associated chromatin originated exclusively from meiocytes.

DNA fragments recovered from ChIP were sequenced on the Illumina platform, and the sequence reads were mapped to the reference genome (26). To identify sites in the genome occupied by RAD51, we compared the distribution of RAD51 ChIP-seq reads to the following: (i) meiotic chromatin that was not subjected to ChIP (input chromatin); (ii) ChIP products generated from meiotic chromatin using preimmune IgG, instead of the anti-RAD51 antibody; and (iii) ChIP products generated from leaf tissue chromatin using the anti-RAD51 antibody. As expected, the two latter treatments yielded very low amounts of DNA (~2 and ~5% of those recovered in RAD51 ChIP on meiotic flowers, respectively). Using a conservative false discovery rate of <0.01, we identified 3,126 meiotic RAD51 peaks across the maize genome (*SI Appendix, Fig. S2*).

We utilized a recombination-deficient meiotic mutant to validate that the 3,126 peaks are indeed sites of RAD51 present at meiotic DSBs. As a *spo11* mutant in maize has not been described yet, we employed the *phs1* mutant, which is defective in early steps of meiotic recombination. The *phs1* mutant lacks RAD51 foci; instead of the 500 foci observed in the wild type, *phs1* meiocytes show only about three RAD51 foci per cell (29). Very little DNA was recovered in the *phs1* ChIP experiments, ~2% of the amount obtained in the wild type. Furthermore, we found only about 60 RAD51 peaks in the ChIP-seq data in *phs1*, with none of them at the same location as in the wild type. Thus, we concluded that the 3,126 wild-type peaks indeed represent hotspots of meiotic DSB formation.

We found that DSB hotspots were, on average, 1.2 kb long (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3A*) and exhibited relatively random spacing (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3B*). The number of hotspots per chromosome was strongly correlated with chromosome length ( $r = 0.95$ ;  $P < 2.2 \times 10^{-16}$ ) (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3C*). Hotspots were present in all chromosome regions, including centromeric and pericentromeric locations (Fig. 1C and *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*). Despite constituting a large fraction of the genome, most repetitive elements in maize are unique sequence-wise due to mutations as well as transposon insertions into repetitive DNA, which create unique sequence borders (30). Due to the substantial sequence diversity, maize centromeres are well assembled (31), even though they consist predominantly of tandemly arranged CentC repeats interspersed with retrotransposons (31).

Finding DSBs in centromeres/pericentromeres was interesting, as these regions lack COs (3, 27). To confirm the DSB presence







devoid of COs (3, 27), the DSBs must be repaired as NCOs. Indeed, presence of gene conversions has been reported in maize centromeric DNA (45, 46). Nevertheless, finding DSB hotspots at centromeres was surprising, as DSB formation in centromeric regions has not been reported in either yeast or mammals (1, 2, 21, 47). It is highly unlikely that these hotspots could be ChIP-seq mapping artifacts because (i) maize centromeres are well assembled (31), which enables accurate mapping of ChIP-seq reads; and (ii) the ChIP-seq mapping data are corroborated by immuno-FISH experiments showing colocalization of RAD51 foci with centromeric repeats. Our data are consistent with previous reports of the presence of early recombination nodules in pericentromeric regions of maize chromosomes (48). Early nodules are cytological structures visible in transmission electron microscopy that correspond to RAD51/DMC1 protein complexes (48). Furthermore, signatures of recombination during centromere evolution have been found in rice, which is another species with well-assembled centromere region sequences (49).

We also discovered that the majority of DSBs were formed in repetitive DNA, which was unexpected as well. DSB formation in retrotransposons has been reported in budding yeast (50). Thus, the presence of a large fraction of DSBs in retrotransposons could be a reflection of the abundance of these elements in the maize genome (26). However, other maize transposons, such as *Copia*, *LINE*, and DNA transposons, exhibited fewer DSB hotspots relative to their ubiquity in the genome (*SI Appendix, Fig. S5*). Furthermore, yeast lack the highly condensed heterochromatin ubiquitous in maize (51), suggesting that DSB formation in retrotransposons in maize may differ at the mechanistic level from that in yeast.

**Two DSB Classes in Maize.** The differing characteristics of DSB hotspots located in genic vs. repetitive genome regions suggest that they represent two distinct classes of DSBs. DSB hotspots in genes were associated with the presence of MHS, while hotspots in repetitive DNA were not. Hotspots in genic regions were also more likely to overlap active chromatin sites marked with H3K4me3 than hotspots in repetitive DNA.

Differences in characteristics between genic and nongenic hotspots may reflect differences in how the two DSB classes are formed. They also likely affect the way in which DSBs are repaired, as mainly genic DSBs contribute to CO formation. It has been proposed that DSB fate may depend on the timing of DSB formation; DSBs made earlier are more likely to be repaired as COs than those made later (52, 53). DSBs in euchromatin regions may form earlier than those in heterochromatin and thus be more prone to result in COs.

**Mechanistic Underpinnings of DSB Hotspot Recognition in Maize.** Comparing recombination patterns in maize with those of yeast and mammals will be helpful for identifying universal recombination landscape features that are shared by a broad spectrum of species. Several general characteristics of maize DSB hotspot distribution patterns, such as hotspot width and spacing, are similar to those reported in mammals and yeast (1, 2, 21, 47). Association of DSB hotspots with nucleosome-free chromatin is also shared among species (2, 7), including maize hotspots located in genic regions and repetitive DNA. These commonalities suggest that there are conserved aspects of the DSB-targeting mechanism, which may have implications for genome evolution.

A striking difference in DSB distribution patterns between maize vs. yeast and mammals is the relatively low overlap of DSB hotspots with H3K4me3 sites in maize. In mice, the 93.9% of DSB-hotspot overlap with H3K4me3 (1) is a result of the action of PRDM9 (7). In PRDM9-lacking mouse mutants, DSBs are still produced but show altered distribution (54). These data suggest that PRDM9 functions primarily to sequester DSB formation away from 5' regulatory regions of genes. In budding yeast, colocalization between DSB hotspots and H3K4me3 marks is also strong, but it may be a result of the compactness of the yeast genome rather than a causal

relationship (24). Our data in maize suggest that the presence of H3K4me3 is not an absolute requirement for DSB formation.

Similar to the studies of COs in maize and *Arabidopsis* (3, 23, 38, 55), our data point to a key role of DNA methylation in determining the location of recombination events. However, the relationship between DNA methylation and recombination in maize may be more complex than in *Arabidopsis*. Whereas recombination hotspots are hypomethylated in both species (3, 23, 38, 55), chromosome-wide methylation patterns differ relative to the recombination landscape. In wild-type *Arabidopsis*, CO suppression around the centromere closely reflects the increase in DNA methylation (23, 38, 55). In contrast, DNA methylation in maize (56) does not follow the same strongly U-shaped distribution pattern as COs (Fig. 1C). Furthermore, maize has much higher overall DNA methylation levels than *Arabidopsis*, and the presence of DNA methylation in maize is more critical to genome functioning. Disrupting the DNA methylation pathway in maize generally results in embryo lethality (57).

Overall, our analyses of DSB hotspots, along with studies of CO hotspots in maize and other plant species (3, 23, 38, 43, 55), do not unequivocally point to a single determinant of hotspot location in plants. It is possible that in plants, hotspots form at sites that harbor a combination of features, including open chromatin and reduced levels of DNA methylation. However, the presence of open chromatin may not be by itself sufficient for a site to become a DSB hotspot. We base this conclusion on the fact that highly transcribed genes, which harbor highly open chromatin, rarely become sites of DSB hotspots in maize.

Finding a hotspot motif in maize is intriguing also because the motif is present only at genic DSB hotspots. Although presence of a motif resembles the situation in mammals, it does not imply that the recognition mode in plants and mammals is the same due to the lack of PRDM9-equivalents in maize. It is, however, possible that the overall function of MHS is similar to that of the mammalian motif, despite a different hotspot recognition mechanism. MHS is also similar to the sequences identified as associated with CO hotspots in *Arabidopsis*, particularly in terms of the 3-bp G/C periodicity (23, 38, 55). The latter similarity is an indication of a conserved hotspot recognition mechanism in plants.

We anticipate that the high-resolution map of DSB hotspots in maize will be valuable for both basic plant biology and plant breeding. Understanding distribution of meiotic recombination events, and elucidating factors that control it, will aid studies of how recombination affects population dynamics and species evolution. This knowledge should also allow engineering recombination hotspots in genomic regions with limited COs.

## Methods

**DSB Mapping Using RAD51 ChIP.** Polyclonal antibodies were raised in rabbits against a recombinant protein produced by expressing a full-length coding sequence of the *ZmRAD51A1* gene in *Escherichia coli*. Two rounds of immunoprecipitation were performed on chromatin extracted from male flowers at the zygotene stage of meiotic prophase I. Details of the experimental procedures are described in *SI Appendix, SI Methods*.

**H3K4me3 ChIP-Seq.** Male meiocytes in leptotene and zygotene were collected using the capillary collection of meiocytes method as previously described (58). Ten microliters of rabbit polyclonal anti-trimethyl-histone (Lys4) antibody (EMD Millipore) was used on chromatin extracted from ~30,000 meiocytes, following instructions of the MAGnify ChIP Kit (Invitrogen). Standard Illumina protocols were used for library construction and sequencing.

**Nucleosome Occupancy Mapping.** Nuclei were prepared from zygotene-stage anthers as described in the ChIP protocol except that EDTA was omitted from buffers. Details of the procedure are described in *SI Appendix, SI Methods*.

**Cytological Analyses.** Preparation of immunolocalization and immuno-FISH microscopic slides is described in detail in *SI Appendix, SI Methods*. The slides were examined using a DeltaVision imaging station (Applied Precision). Three-dimensional stacks of images were collected across the entire thickness of the specimen with optical sections 150 nm apart. The image stacks were subjected to constrained iterative deconvolution and analyzed with the softWoRx

software (Applied Precision). Colocalization analyses were conducted in 3D space to distinguish between actual colocalization and accidental overlap. For counting, protein foci were located automatically in the datasets by identifying local peak intensities in three dimensions.

**Computational Analyses.** A computational pipeline was developed to process ChIP-seq datasets. Details of the pipeline procedure, as well as protocols for peak calling, generating, and analysis of the DSB hotspot map, are described

in *SI Appendix, SI Methods*. Standard procedures were used to identify DNA sequence motifs associated with the presence of DSB hotspots and COs.

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