

Allele specific expression analysis identifies regulatory variation associated with stress-related genes in the Mexican highland maize landrace Palomero Toluqueño

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1 **ABSTRACT**

2 **Background.** Gene regulatory variation has been proposed to play an important role in the adaptation
3 of plants to environmental stress. In the central highlands of Mexico, farmer selection has generated a
4 unique group of maize landraces adapted the challenges of the highland niche. In this study, gene
5 expression in Mexican highland maize and a reference maize breeding line were compared to identify
6 evidence of regulatory variation in stress-related genes. It was hypothesised that local adaptation in
7 Mexican highland maize would be associated with a transcriptional signature observable even under
8 benign conditions.

9 **Methods.** Allele specific expression analysis was performed using the seedling-leaf transcriptome of an
10 F₁ individual generated from the cross between the highland adapted Mexican landrace Palomero
11 Toluqueño and the reference line B73, grown under benign conditions. Results were compared with a
12 published dataset describing the transcriptional response of B73 seedlings to cold, heat, salt and UV
13 treatments.

14 **Results.** A total of 2386 genes were identified to show allele specific expression. Of these, 277 showed
15 an expression difference between Palomero Toluqueño and B73 alleles that mirrored the response of
16 B73 cold, heat, salt and/or UV treatments, and, as such, were considered to display a constitutive stress
17 response. Constitutive stress response candidates included genes associated with plant hormone
18 signaling and a number of transcription factors. Construction of a gene co-expression network revealed
19 further signaling and stress-related genes to be among the potential targets of the transcription factors
20 candidates.

21 **Discussion.** Constitutive activation of responses may represent the best strategy when stresses are
22 severe but predictable. Expression differences observed here between PT and B73 alleles indicate the
23 presence of *cis*-acting regulatory variation linked to stress-related genes in PT. Considered alongside
24 gene annotation and population data, allele specific expression analysis of plants grown under benign

25 conditions provides an attractive strategy to identify functional variation potentially linked to local
26 adaptation.

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28

29 INTRODUCTION

30 Extensive study across different plant species has identified a range of transcriptional responses to
31 abiotic stresses. Although basic responses are typically conserved, variation in the regulation of stress-
32 responsive genes has been observed among individuals and varieties, potentially playing an important
33 role in adaptation to stressful environments (Hannah et al., 2006); (Swanson-Wagner et al., 2012);
34 (Rengel et al., 2012); (Lasky et al., 2014). From an agronomic perspective, biotechnological approaches
35 to enhance crop stress tolerance to abiotic stress often aim to manipulate gene expression rather than
36 engineer protein sequences (*e.g.* (Kamthan et al., 2016)). Similarly, efforts to identify suitable material
37 for breeding towards similar goals have drawn on natural *cis*-acting regulatory variation acting on
38 stress-responsive gene expression (*e.g.* (Mao et al., 2015)). As such efforts are intensified in the face of
39 mounting concern regarding the impact of climate change on crop productivity, there is ever greater
40 interest in the genetic basis of variation in stress-responses (Des Marais, Hernandez & Juenger, 2013).

41 Crop landrace varieties represent an invaluable genetic resource. Collectively, the range of
42 environments exploited by landraces typically exceeds that of improved varieties, and many landraces
43 are adapted to conditions that would be considered stressful in conventional agriculture (Ruiz Corral et
44 al., 2008) (Romero Navarro et al., 2017). Nonetheless, although landraces represent a compelling
45 source for enhancing abiotic stress tolerance in breeding programs, the task of identifying useful
46 genetic variants and transferring them to breeding material is far from trivial (Sood et al., 2014). In
47 addition to the complication of working with often heterogenous landrace germplasm, reproducing
48 stress conditions for evaluation is costly and difficult. Furthermore, stress is not well reflected by a
49 single experimental treatment, but rather represents a continuous environmental range defined by
50 interacting variables acting over the lifetime of the plant. Large-scale phenomics efforts are an attempt
51 to implement the factorial designs required to capture such complexity (Houle, Govindaraju & Omholt,
52 2010); (Furber & Tester, 2011), but they require a substantial investment in infrastructure that may

53 not be feasible in many research contexts. One possible alternative is to leave aside the difficulties of
54 managing the environment and to look for signatures of an enhanced stress response that are hardwired
55 in locally adapted material and evident under benign conditions.

56 Stress responses are considered to be an adaptation to an unpredictable, changing environment.
57 When conditions are adverse, but predictable, however, theory suggests that the plastic response may
58 be replaced by constitutive activation, a process referred to as canalization (Waddington, 1942);
59 (Levins); (von Heckel, Stephan & Hutter, 2016). One potential advantage of canalization is to avoid the
60 delay between stimulus and response inherent in plasticity. In cultivated systems, non-adapted varieties
61 can benefit from mild priming stress treatments that activate protective mechanisms and prepare the
62 plants for future more severe environmental challenges (Hilker et al., 2016). In practice, however, the
63 first exposure to a stress may be severe, placing the unprepared organism at risk. Under strong yet
64 predictable environmental stress, constitutive activation may represent the best strategy. On this basis,
65 the transcriptome may reflect local adaptation even under benign conditions, presenting an opportunity
66 to identify genetic variation related to enhanced stress tolerance without the complication of managing
67 the stress environment.

68 Comparative transcriptome analysis of stress tolerant and non-tolerant varieties provides a
69 powerful approach to identify the molecular mechanisms underlying tolerance variation (*e.g.* (Hayano-
70 Kanashiro et al., 2009); (von Heckel, Stephan & Hutter, 2016). The number of differentially
71 accumulating transcripts, however, may be large, and the data reflect both *cis*-acting and *trans*-acting
72 regulatory variation. Critically, *per se* comparison of varieties has little power to characterize the
73 genetic architecture of stress tolerance or to identify causative genetic variation. In addition, when
74 material is diverse, phenological differences can make it difficult to devise an appropriate sampling
75 strategy. With the development of sequencing based methods to study the transcriptome, it is possible
76 to make use of natural sequence variation to quantify allele specific expression (ASE) in F₁ hybrid

77 individuals generated from the cross of two different lines of interest (Springer & Stupar, 2007b);
78 (Springer & Stupar, 2007a); (Zhang & Borevitz, 2009); (Lemmon et al., 2014). Characterization of
79 ASE in F₁ material avoids the problems of comparing parents that may be very different in growth and
80 development by evaluating both alleles within the same cellular environment, directly revealing *cis*-
81 acting genetic variation for transcript accumulation (Springer & Stupar, 2007b); (Lemmon et al., 2014);
82 (Waters et al., 2017).

83 In this study, a transcriptome dataset was examined for evidence of *cis*-regulatory variation
84 linked to stress-associated genes in Palomero Toluqueño (PT), a maize landrace adapted to the
85 highlands of Central Mexico (Prasanna, 2012); (Perales & Golicher, 2014). The Mexican highland
86 environment exposes maize plants to a number of abiotic stresses: bringing plants to maturity under
87 low-temperatures necessitates planting early in the year, exposing seedlings to late frosts and water
88 deficit before onset of the annual rains; throughout the growing season, low-temperature, high-levels of
89 UV radiation and hail storms pose further challenges (Eagles & Lothrop, 1994); (Lafitte & Edmeades,
90 1997); (Jiang et al., 1999); (Mercer, Martínez-Vásquez & Perales, 2008); (Ruiz Corral et al., 2008). To
91 identify evidence of regulatory variation that might underlie adaptation to these conditions, an F₁ was
92 generated between PT and the midwest-adapted maize reference line B73, and the leaf transcriptome
93 analyzed under benign greenhouse conditions to detect ASE. Results of the analysis were compared
94 with a published study in which B73 seedlings were exposed to cold, heat, salt and UV stress
95 treatments (Makarevitch et al., 2015). A total of 277 genes were identified showing a pattern of ASE
96 under benign conditions that mirrored the response of the same gene under stress in B73, hereafter
97 referred to as constitutively stress responsive (CR). The CR candidate set included transcription factors
98 and genes associated with plant hormone signalling, a number of which are discussed in more detail
99 and presented as candidates for future functional analysis.

101 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

102 **Plant material, RNA preparation, and sequencing**

103 Seed of the Mexican highland landrace Palomero Toluqueño accession Mexi5 was obtained from the
104 International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT; stock GID 244857). The original
105 collection was made near to the city of Toluca, in Mexico state (19.286184 N, -99.570871 W), at an
106 elevation of 2597 masl. An F₁ hybrid stock was generated from the cross between the inbred line B73
107 and PT grown under greenhouse conditions and total RNA was extracted from a single, 14 days-old
108 seedling using the Qiagen RNeasy Plant Mini Kit (cat ID 74904) according to the manufacturer's
109 protocol. RNA integrity was assessed by spectrophotometry and agarose gel electrophoresis. Library
110 preparation was performed using the Illumina protocol as outlined in the TruSeq RNA Sample
111 Preparation Guide (15008136 A, November 2010) and paired-end sequencing was carried out on the
112 Illumina HiSeq 2000 platform. Raw data is available in the NCBI (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) Sequence
113 Read Archive under accession SRP011579.

114

115 **Allele Specific Expression (ASE) analysis**

116 Allele specific expression (ASE) analysis was based on the method of Lemmon and collaborators
117 (Lemmon et al., 2014) and the detailed pipeline is presented as [Supplementary Data 1 \[pipeline\]](#). A set
118 of 39475 B73 transcripts was generated by selecting the longest predicted transcript for each gene
119 annotated in the AGPv3.22 B73 reference genome (<ftp://ftp.ensemblgenomes.org/pub/release-22/>). Six
120 transcripts whose sequences consisted of only, or mostly, undefined (N) bases were removed
121 (GRMZM2G031216_T01, GRMZM2G179334_T01, GRMZM2G307432_T01,
122 GRMZM2G316264_T01, GRMZM2G406088_T01 and GRMZM2G700875_T01), resulting in a set of
123 39469 sequences. A total of 151,168,196 paired-end reads from the B73xPT F₁ transcriptome were
124 trimmed using Trimmomatic (Bolger, Lohse & Usadel, 2014) and aligned using bwa mem (Li, 2013) to

125 the set of B73 transcripts. The resulting alignment was processed using samtools, bcftools and vcfutils
126 (Li et al., 2009); (Li, 2011a); (Li, 2011a,b) to identify polymorphisms. We then created a set of PT
127 pseudo-transcripts by substituting the identified sequence variants into the B73 reference transcripts. A
128 single fasta file was created that contained two sequences per locus, one B73 transcript and one PT
129 pseudo-transcript, and B73xPT F₁ reads were re-aligned to this F₁ pseudo-reference using bowtie2
130 (Langmead & Salzberg, 2012) with eXpress (Roberts et al., 2011); (Roberts & Pachter, 2013)
131 recommended parameters. The number of reads per B73 and/or PT transcript was then quantified using
132 eXpress. A total of 9256 transcripts were identified to contain polymorphisms, allowing estimation of
133 ASE. Genes were considered to show ASE when the number of associated reads assigned to B73 or PT
134 transcripts was significantly different (χ^2 test against an equal number of counts; $p < 0.05$; Bonferroni
135 correction for multiple tests) and the absolute log₂-transformed ratio of PT/B73 reads was > 1 .

136

137 **Gene Ontology annotation, enrichment analyses and comparison of ASE genes to published data**

138 Candidate ASE genes were assigned to Gene Ontology categories (release 52 available at
139 <ftp://ftp.gramene.org/pub/gramene>). Obsolete annotations were replaced by the corresponding
140 “consider” or “replaced_by” category(ies) in the ontology file (go.obo) available at
141 <http://www.geneontology.org/> (dated 2016-09-19). Categories associated with at least 10 genes were
142 considered in further analysis. Enrichment analyses were performed comparing ASE candidates against
143 the 9256 polymorphic gene set, using the Bingo (Maere, Heymans & Kuiper, 2005) Cytoscape
144 (Shannon et al., 2003) plugin, controlling for multiple tests using Benjamini and Hochberg False
145 Discovery Rate at 1%.

146 Candidate ASE genes were cross-referenced to a published study describing transcriptional
147 responses in maize seedlings exposed to cold, heat, salt and UV stresses (Makarevitch et al., 2015).
148 Although a number of inbred lines were analyzed in the Makarevitch study, only the B73 data was used

149 in the comparison with the B73xPT transcriptome. Genes were considered to show a constitutive stress
150 response (CR) with respect to a given stress when: 1) identified as ASE; 2) responding significantly to
151 stress in the Makarevitch study (absolute \log_2 fold change >1 ; called as significant in the Makarevitch
152 study; calls “up” or “on” in the published study were considered here as “up”, similarly, “down” or
153 “off” were considered as “down”); 3) the sign of ASE was concordant with the sign of stress response.

154 Fst values for population level differentiation between Mesoamerican and South American
155 highland and lowland maize populations (Takuno *et al.*, 2015) were obtained from
156 https://github.com/rossibarra/hilo_paper/tree/master/fst; where multiple SNPs are associated with a
157 single gene, the values reported correspond to the SNP showing the highest Fst in Mesoamerica.

158

159 **Reconstruction of a gene co-expression network**

160 Publicly available maize Affymetrix microarray data was downloaded from the ArrayExpress website
161 (<http://www.ebi.ac.uk/arrayexpress/>; experiments E-GEOD-10023, E-GEOD-12770, E-GEOD-12892,
162 E-GEOD-18846, E-GEOD-19785, E-GEOD-22479, E-GEOD-28479, E-GEOD-31188, E-GEOD-
163 40052, E-GEOD-41956, E-GEOD-48406, E-GEOD-48536, E-GEOD-54310, E-GEOD-59533, E-
164 GEOD-69659, E-MEXP-1222, E-MEXP-1464, E-MEXP-1465, E-MEXP-2364, E-MEXP-2366, E-
165 MEXP-2367, E-MEXP-3992). Low quality CEL files identified using the arrayQualityMetrics
166 (Kauffmann, Gentleman & Huber, 2009) R package were discarded. Using the sample data relationship
167 file (sdrf) associated with each experiment, samples for B73 leaves were selected, resulting in a high
168 quality, homogeneous dataset of 165 CEL files.

169 Probeset sequences for the maize Affymetrix microarray were aligned using seqmap (Jiang & Wong,
170 2008) to the AGPv3.22 transcripts with no mismatches allowed, and probesets whose probe sequences
171 did not align or aligned to transcripts corresponding to more than one locus were discarded. Probesets
172 that were represented by less than 4 probe sequences were also discarded. This resulted in a list of

173 11299 probesets that unambiguously matched one locus. The list of 11299 probesets was used to create
174 a custom chip definition file (CDF) using the ArrayInitiative python package
175 (<http://wellerlab.uncc.edu/ArrayInitiative/>), and to filter the original Affymetrix Maize.probe_tab file to
176 create a custom probe_tab file. The custom CDF and custom probe_tab file were then used to create the
177 corresponding cdf and probe_tab R packages using the makecdfenv (Irizarry *et al.*, 2006) and
178 AnnotationForge (Carlson and Pages, 2017) R packages, respectively. The microarray name in the 165
179 CEL files was then modified to match the custom cdf and probe_tab packages name, and these
180 modified CEL files were normalized using gcrma (Wu and Gentry, 2017). The resulting normalized
181 dataset was then used as input for the ARACNE algorithm (Margolin *et al.*, 2006a); (Margolin *et al.*,
182 2006b), and inference was carried out for the 7 ASE and stress-responsive transcription factors (see
183 Results) at DPI 0.1 as previously described (Chávez Montes *et al.*, 2014). Enrichment analysis of the
184 1938 TF targets gene set was done as described above against the 11299 genes represented in the
185 microarray.

186

187 **RESULTS**

188 **A total of 2386 genes exhibited allele specific expression in the B73xPT F₁ hybrid**

189 To identify regulatory variation associated with stress-related genes, high throughput sequencing was
190 used to quantify transcript abundance in leaves harvested from an F₁ seedling generated from the cross
191 between the Mexican highland landrace PT and the reference line B73. Alignment to the B73 reference
192 gene models identified 9256 genes containing at least one sequence variant that could be used to
193 distinguish the products of B73 and PT alleles. For 2386 (26%) of these 9256 polymorphic transcripts,
194 the number of reads corresponding to the B73 allele differed significantly ($p < 0.05$; Bonferroni
195 correction for multiple tests) from the number of reads corresponding to the PT allele with an absolute
196 \log_2 fold change >1 , and these genes were considered to exhibit allele specific expression (ASE;

197 **Supplementary Data 2 [F1_counts]**). For 1412 (59%) of the ASE candidate genes, accumulation of the
198 PT transcript was lower than that of the B73 transcript ($\log_2 \text{PT/B73} < -1$; hereafter, “PT-down”), while
199 for the remaining 974 (41%) of the ASE candidates, the PT transcript was accumulated at higher levels
200 ($\log_2 \text{PT/B73} > 1$; hereafter, “PT-up”).

201 To obtain an overview of the ASE candidates, a Gene Ontology (GO) analysis was performed.
202 The set of 2386 ASE candidates was not enriched for any specific GO categories with respect to the
203 9256 polymorphic gene set, but, nonetheless, many individual genes belonged to biological processes
204 categories related to stress responses, including responses to heat (GO: 0009408), cold (GO: 0009409)
205 and salt (GO: 0009651) (**Fig. 1**). Overall, 52 biological process categories were represented by at least
206 10 genes. Of these, 38 (73%) were PT-down (based on the median $\log_2 \text{PT/B73}$ of the associated
207 genes), and 11 (21%) were PT-up, and the remaining 3 categories had a median $\log_2 \text{PT/B73}$ close to 0
208 (**Supplementary Data 3 [ASE_loci_GO_P]**). A similar pattern was observed for molecular function
209 categories: 57 categories were associated with at least ten ASE genes, 42 PT-down, 12 PT-up and 3
210 showing no trend (**Supplementary Data 4 [ASE_loci_GO_F]**).

211

212 **A total of 277 genes showed constitutive stress responses**

213 To identify evidence of a constitutive stress response (CR) in PT, the ASE gene set was compared with
214 a previous study reporting changes in the transcriptome of B73 seedlings exposed to cold, heat, salt or
215 UV treatments (Makarevitch *et al.*, 2015). A total of 1407 stress responsive genes identified in the
216 Makarevitch study were present also in the 9256 polymorphic gene set for which ASE had been
217 evaluated (**Supplementary Data 2 [F1_counts]**). Of these 1407 genes, 432 (31%) showed ASE, a slight
218 enrichment compared with the 2386 (26%) ASE genes in the 9256 polymorphic gene set as a whole (χ^2
219 = 15.7, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.001$). From this 432 gene set, a gene was considered to exhibit CR in PT if the
220 sign of ASE was concordant with the sign of B73 stress response: *i.e.* PT-up and induced by stress in

221 B73, or PT-down and repressed by stress in B73. On this basis, a set of 277 CR candidates was
222 identified (Fig. 2A-D; Supplementary Data 5 [Maka_can_annot]). The majority of these 277 genes
223 respond to two or more stress treatments (Fig. 3A, C), but often in different directions such that most
224 present stress-specific CR (Fig. 3B, C): 194 were identified as showing CR with respect to one
225 treatment, 62 with respect to two, 17 with respect to three, and 4 with respect to all four (Fig. 3C). Of
226 the 277 genes, 92 showed CR with respect to cold, 65 with respect to heat, 136 with respect to salt, and
227 92 with respect to UV (Fig. 3B). The number of CR genes with respect to any given stress was
228 proportional to the number of genes responding to that stress in the 1407 polymorphic gene set ($\chi^2 =$
229 4.4, d.f. = 3, $p = 0.22$), and there was no indication of an enrichment for CR with respect to any one of
230 the four treatments. In contrast to the complete ASE gene set, the majority of the 277 CR genes were
231 PT-up (181 PT-up, 96 PT-down; Supplementary Data 5 [Maka_can_annot]), reflecting a bias also
232 present in the 1407 gene set, although this general trend was not observed when the UV treatment was
233 considered alone, where the majority of CR genes were PT-down (Fig. 2D).

234

235 **Hormone related genes and transcription factors showed constitutive stress responses in PT**

236 A primary aim of the analysis was the definition of a small number of candidate genes for future
237 functional analysis. For this purpose, the CR candidate genes were cross-referenced with the classical
238 maize gene list, a curated set of 4908 well-annotated genes, many linked with existing functional data
239 (www.maizegdb.org/gene_center/gene). Of the 277 CR candidate genes, 48 were present in the
240 classical gene list (Fig. 4; Supplementary Data 5 [Maka_can_annot]), including 9 genes associated with
241 hormone homeostasis (Table 1) and 12 transcription factors (TFs; Table 2; (Jin et al., 2017)) that were
242 considered of special interest. The 277 CR candidates were cross referenced with a published study of
243 population level differentiation between Mesoamerican and South American highland and lowland
244 maize (Takuno *et al.*, 2015). Twenty-two of the 277 CR candidates showed significant F_{st} ($p < 0.01$)

245 between highland and lowland Mesoamerican populations, including the hormone associated gene
246 *Czog1* (GRMZM2G168474; [Supplementary Data 5 \[Maka_can_annot\]](#)). To gain insight into potential
247 TF targets and their role in stress responses, a gene co-expression network for the CR TFs was
248 generated using available maize Affymetrix microarray data and the ARACNE algorithm. Seven of the
249 12 TFs were unambiguously identified in the maize Affymetrix microarray probeset, and were co-
250 expressed with 1938 genes ([Supplementary Data 6 \[tfs_ASE_01_suppl\]](#)). Co-expressed genes represent
251 potential targets of TF action, and, as such, may not themselves exhibit ASE. Indeed, of the 1938 genes
252 associated with the 7 TFs, 1097 were present in the polymorphic gene set, but only 239 showed ASE. A
253 total of 344 of the 1938 co-expressed genes (17%) were responsive to one or more stress treatments in
254 the Makarevitch dataset ([Fig. 5](#)). A GO analysis detected enrichment in the 1938 gene co-expression set
255 with respect to translation, photosynthesis and non-mevalonate isoprenoid pathway categories
256 ([Supplementary Data 7 \[Bingo_aracne\]](#)).

257

258 **DISCUSSION**

259 From a starting set of 9256 polymorphic genes, we identified 2386 genes presenting allele specific
260 expression (ASE) in seedling leaves of an F₁ B73xPT hybrid individual. Comparison of our ASE gene
261 list with a published dataset reporting B73 stress responses (Makarevitch et al., 2015) identified a
262 subset of 277 (out of 432) constitutive stress response (CR) candidate genes exhibiting a bias in
263 transcript accumulation between PT and B73 alleles that mirrored the B73 response to one or more
264 stress treatments. We did not observe an enrichment in GO term assignments in either our ASE gene set
265 or our CR gene set. Nonetheless, given that ASE is assaying *cis*-acting variation, a small number of
266 genes associated with a given GO term may have biological significance. The ASE gene set showed a
267 bias towards lower expression of the PT allele, reflected in the observation that the median value of
268 ASE for the majority of GO categories associated with ASE genes was also negative. Contrary to this

269 trend, the subset of 277 selected CR candidates showed a bias towards higher expression of the PT
270 allele (181 of 277 presented higher expression of the PT allele), also reflected in the 1407 polymorphic
271 genes that overlapped with the Makarevitch set.

272 The bulk of the CR gene set (206 of 277) responded to two or more stresses in the Makarevitch
273 B73 data, although in the majority (194 of 277) of cases the CR itself was with respect to a single stress
274 only (Fig. 3), indicating that in many cases the sign (up/down) of the response in B73 differed between
275 stresses (Supplementary Data 5 [Maka_can_annot]). In total, of the 1407 polymorphic and stress-
276 responsive genes in the working set, 511 genes induced in B73 under at least one stress treatment were
277 repressed under at least one other (Supplementary Data 2 [F1_counts]). By definition, a gene could not
278 show CR with respect to both of two different stresses if the B73 responses were opposing. There was
279 no evidence that genes showing opposing stress responses in B73 were less likely to show CR in PT --
280 indeed, such genes were actually better represented in the 277 CR gene set (56%) than in the 1407
281 polymorphic and stress-responsive gene set (36%). As such, many ASE events may appear
282 contradictory with respect to any given stress, *i.e.* PT-up ASE in genes repressed by B73 under stress,
283 or PT-down ASE in genes induced by B73, especially in the context of cold and UV treatments, against
284 which PT is considered to be well adapted. The spatio-temporal dynamics of stress responses, however,
285 are complex (*e.g.* (Secco et al., 2013), and the resolution of the present analysis, based on single time
286 points and tissues, is limited. For example, the previously characterized salt associated HD-ZIP
287 transcription factor *Hb54* (also named *ZmHdz10*, GRMZM2G041127; (Zhao et al., 2011); (Zhao et al.,
288 2014) showed PT-up ASE, but was repressed by salt treatment in the Makarevitch dataset, and
289 consequently not considered to show CR. In this case, however, an additional functional study reports
290 *Hb54* to indeed be induced by salt treatment (Zhao et al., 2014), albeit at a different time point, and
291 with a different treatment than that applied in the Makarevitch study (300mM NaCl for 20hrs in
292 Makarevitch *et al.*; 200mM NaCl for 3-12hrs in Zhao *et al.*). The study of Zhao and colleagues reports

293 also that constitutive expression of *Hb54* in *Arabidopsis* and rice increases ABA sensitivity and
294 tolerance to drought and salt stress. In light of these data, PT-up ASE of *Hb54* may indeed have
295 biological relevance, reflected by the number and nature of associated co-expression candidates (Fig.
296 5). In the absence of further characterization, it would be premature to discount the potential phenotypic
297 impact, or adaptive value, of other examples where ASE in PT is opposed to the B73 stress response
298 reported in the Makarevitch data.

299 Previous studies have highlighted the importance of *cis*-acting regulatory variation in driving
300 diversity in plant stress responses (*e.g.* (Waters et al., 2017). The generation of novel physiological
301 strategies to confront stress conditions may be most efficient when a change in the regulation of a
302 single gene has multiple, coordinated downstream consequences. Mechanistically, two functional
303 categories of clear interest are hormones, systemic regulators of physiology at the whole plant level,
304 and transcription factors (TFs), with their capacity to impact multiple downstream targets through a
305 regulatory cascade. The 277 CR gene list includes eight hormone-related genes (Table 1), including
306 genes implicated in the metabolism of cytokinin (*Czog1*; (Martin et al., 2001), jasmonate (*ZmOpr7*;
307 (Yan et al., 2012) and ethylene (*Acco31*; (Gallie & Young, 2004); (Avila et al., 2016). Additional CR
308 candidates included *Ks2* (GRMZM2G093526; *ZmKSL5*), a gene related to the *ent*-kaurene synthase
309 required for gibberellin biosynthesis, but more likely involved in the more specialized kauralexin A
310 series biosynthesis pathway (Fu et al., 2016), and *Thi2* (GRMZM2G074097), encoding a thiamine
311 thiazole synthase activity required for synthesis of the thiazole moiety during the production of thiamin
312 (vitamin B₁; (Woodward et al., 2010). With regard to the latter candidate, B vitamins, although not
313 strictly plant hormones, can play an analogous role in whole plant physiology in the face of stress
314 (Hanson et al., 2016). Thiamin application has been reported to alleviate the impact of abiotic stress in
315 a number of crops, including maize (*e.g.* (Kaya et al., 2015), and thiamin synthesis has been proposed
316 as a target for transgenic biofortification (*e.g.* (Dong, Stockwell & Goyer, 2015). Identification of PT-

317 up ASE associated with *Thi2* represents a compelling target for further analysis. Interestingly, both
318 *Thi2* and the related gene *Thi1* (GRMZM2G018375) were also co-expressed with the PT-up ASE
319 drought and salt associated HD-ZIP TF *Hb54* ((Zhao et al., 2014); Table 2; Fig. 5; [Supplementary Data](#)
320 [6](#)). Interestingly, the CR candidates *Czog1* and *Ks2* were reported previously to show significant
321 population level differentiation between highland and lowland mesoamerican maize populations (F_{st} ; p
322 = 0.004, $p = 0.04$, respectively; (Takuno et al., 2015), indicating that variation at these loci may indeed
323 play a role in local adaptation.

324 In total, twelve TFs were present in the 277 CR candidate gene set (Table 1), including four
325 NAC TFs. The NAC TFs are a plant-specific family implicated broadly in abiotic stress responses
326 (Nakashima et al., 2012); (Puranik et al., 2012); (Nuruzzaman, Sharoni & Kikuchi, 2013); (Nakashima,
327 Yamaguchi-Shinozaki & Shinozaki, 2014), previously proposed as a target for engineering multiple
328 stress tolerance (Shao, Wang & Tang, 2015). The potential role of NAC TFs in a generalized stress
329 response is reflected by the observation that the candidates *ZmNacTF5* (GRMZM2G162739),
330 *ZmNacTF25* (also named *ZmNac111*, GRMZM2G127379; (Mao et al., 2015), *ZmNacTF61*
331 (GRMZM2G003715) and *ZmNacTF70* (GRMZM2G312201) responded to 3, 3, 2 and 1 stress
332 treatments, respectively (Table 2). The genes *ZmNacTF5* and *ZmNacTF25* showed PT-down ASE, and
333 CR with respect to salt and cold, respectively, while the genes *ZmNacTF61* and *ZmNacTF70* showed
334 PT-up ASE and CR with respect to cold and UV, respectively. In B73, insertion of a miniature
335 inverted-repeat transposable element (MITE) in the *ZmNacTF25* promoter has been reported previously
336 to be associated with reduced gene expression (relative to a number of tropical lines) and increased
337 susceptibility to drought (Mao et al., 2015). The accumulation of *ZmNacTF25* transcripts in B73,
338 however, is reduced under cold in the Makarevitch dataset, indicating a potential trade-off between
339 temperate and tropical lines, and possible relevance of the PT-down ASE in the highland niche. The
340 gene *ZmNacTF61* was notable for strong PT-up ASE (\log_2 PT/B73 = 3.26 and 2.15), up-regulation

341 under both cold and UV stress, and association with a large number (116) of strongly cold- and UV-
342 induced co-expression candidates, including the jasmonate biosynthetic genes *Opr7* and *Lox4* (Fig. 4;
343 Fig. 5; [Supplementary Data 6](#)).

344 Candidate CR genes presented here were identified on the basis of ASE under benign
345 conditions. Investigation of the degree to which ASE is maintained under stress conditions is required
346 to determine whether expression of these candidates has indeed been canalized to a constitutively
347 responsive state, or whether expression of the PT alleles remains plastic, albeit with an expression level
348 different from B73. Nonetheless, the potential to identify relevant *cis*-regulatory variation through
349 exploration of the transcriptome under benign conditions presents an attractive avenue to investigate
350 stress response and local adaptation. A number of the candidates identified here suggest testable
351 predictions regarding hormone accumulation and expression of candidate TF targets in the PT landrace.
352 In a number of cases, ASE was observed in genes reported previously to show significant genetic
353 differentiation between lowland and highland Mexican maize populations, offering further evidence of
354 a link to adaptation to the highland niche ([Supplementary Data 5 \[Maka_can_annot\]](#)). A recent study in
355 monkey flower (*Mimulus guttatus*) using ASE analysis to compare locally adapted coastal and inland
356 accessions has found *cis*-regulatory effects to be the main driver for regulatory variation, providing a
357 precedent for the approach proposed here (Gould, Chen & Lowry, 2017). Validation of specific
358 candidate genes will require functional characterization, but it is anticipated that this will be greatly
359 facilitated by continued development of resources for maize reverse genetics and the forthcoming
360 availability of introgression lines derived from Mexican highland maize (Matt Hufford and Ruairidh
361 Sawers, unpublished data).

362

363 CONCLUSIONS

364 Expression differences were observed between PT and B73 alleles under benign conditions that mirror
365 the B73 response to cold, heat, salt and/or UV treatments. The observed patterns of expression indicate

366 the presence of *cis*-acting regulatory variation differentiating the PT landrace from the B73 reference
367 inbred. Regulatory variants linked to classical genes associated with signaling and stress-responses
368 potentially contribute to the adaptation of PT to the Mexican highland environment.

369

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372 and Cheng Ting Yeh for generation of transcriptome data.

373

Table 1. ASE and stress-responsive hormone-related genes. List of genes involved in hormone biosynthesis, transport or catabolism present in the 277 CR gene set. ASE call indicates biased expression of the PT allele (1) or B73 allele (-1). Response to stress indicates the name of the stress for which the gene was called as differentially expressed in the Makarevitch dataset. Constitutive response indicates the stress condition for which the sign of the ASE call and the stress response coincide.

Gene id	Symbol	Molecular function	Hormone	ASE call	Response to stress	Constitutive response
GRMZM2G070563	---	auxin efflux carrier	auxin transport	1	heat, salt, uv	heat, salt
GRMZM2G072632	---	auxin efflux carrier	auxin transport	1	heat, salt, uv	heat, salt
GRMZM2G112598	---	auxin efflux carrier	auxin transport	1	heat, salt, uv	heat, salt
GRMZM2G475148	---	auxin efflux carrier	auxin transport	1	heat, salt	heat, salt
GRMZM2G072529	<i>Acco31</i>	1-aminocyclopropane-1-carboxylate oxidase	ethylene biosynthesis	1	cold, heat, salt, uv	cold, heat, salt, uv
GRMZM2G020761	--	putative cytochrome P450 (castasterone C-26 hydroxylase)	brassinosteroid catabolism	-1	cold, salt, uv	cold, uv
GRMZM2G148281	<i>Opr7</i>	12-oxo-phytodienoic acid	jasmonate biosynthesis	-1	salt, uv	salt

		reductase				
GRMZM2G168474	<i>Czogl</i>	<i>cis</i> -zeatin O-glucosyl transferase	cytokinin homeostasis	1	salt	salt

Table 2. ASE and stress-responsive TFs. List of TFs present in the 277 CR gene set. PlantTFDB family indicates the TF family according to the PlantTFDB ([Jin et al. 2017](#)). ASE call indicates biased expression of the PT allele (1) or B73 allele (-1). Response to stress indicates the name of the stress for which the gene was called as differentially expressed in the Makarevitch dataset. Constitutive response indicates the stress condition for which the sign of the ASE call and the stress response coincide. In Affymetrix array indicates of the TF is represented in the maize Affymetrix microarray.

Gene id	Symbol	PlantTFDB family	ASE call	Response to stress	Constitutive response	In Affymetrix array?
GRMZM2G159937	<i>Bhlh57</i>	bHLH	1	cold, salt, uv	cold, uv	no
GRMZM2G148333	<i>Ereb202</i>	ERF	1	uv	uv	yes
GRMZM2G010920	<i>Glk18</i>	G2-like	-1	heat, uv	uv	no
GRMZM2G127537	<i>Hb11</i>	HD-ZIP	1	salt, uv	salt	yes
GRMZM2G041127	<i>Hb54/ZmHdz10</i>	HD-ZIP	1	cold, heat, salt	cold	yes
GRMZM2G049695	<i>Mybr24</i>	MYB-related	1	salt, uv	salt, uv	no
GRMZM2G121753	<i>Mybr89</i>	MYB-related	-1	cold, salt, uv	uv	no

GRMZM2G12737 9	<i>NacTF25/ZmNAC11</i> <i>1</i>	NAC	-1	cold, salt, uv	cold	no
GRMZM2G16273 9	<i>NacTF5</i>	NAC	-1	cold, salt, uv	salt	yes
GRMZM2G00371 5	<i>NacTF61</i>	NAC	1	cold, uv	cold, uv	yes
GRMZM2G31220 1	<i>NacTF70</i>	NAC	1	uv	uv	yes
GRMZM2G07190 7	<i>Wrky50</i>	WRKY	1	salt	salt	yes

Figure 1. ASE candidate genes are assigned to a range of biological process Gene Ontology categories. Hierarchical tree of Gene Ontology biological process categories represented in ASE loci. Nodes represent categories, with the root GO:0008150 *biological process* as the uppermost node. Edges represent the parent-child (*i.e.* “is_a”) relationship between categories. Node color indicates the median ASE (\log_2 PT/B73) for the genes in the category, with light blue indicating negative values and dark red indicating positive values. Node size is proportional to the number of loci assigned to corresponding category. Some category names were abbreviated for clarity.
[2 COLUMNS]

Figure 2. ASE identifies constitutive stress response in PT with respect to B73. ASE (\log_2 PT/B73) in control F₁ leaves for the 1407 sequence variant, stress-responsive gene set against B73 stress response (\log_2 stress/control) for A) cold, B) heat, C) salt and D) UV treatments as reported in the Makarevitch dataset. Numbers in each quadrant represent the count of genes called as significant in ASE and stress comparisons. In each plot, the quadrants represent (clockwise from upper left) genes up ASE / down stress, up ASE / up stress, down ASE / up stress, down ASE / down stress. Genes called as up ASE / up stress or down ASE / down stress are considered canalized and are shown as filled circles. Other genes are shown as points. Axes through the origin are shown as red dashed lines. A number of genes outside the axis range are not shown, but are considered in the gene count.
[TWO COLUMNS]

Figure 3. CR candidates may respond to multiple stresses in B73. A) Number of genes from the 277 CR gene set that responded to cold, heat, salt, UV or a combination of stresses in the Makarevitch B73 study. B) Number of genes called as CR in PT with respect to each stress from the same 277 gene set. C) Counts with respect to number of stresses of genes in A and B. Numbers above bars give counts.
[ONE COLUMN]

Figure 4. Classical CR candidate genes. Heatmap representation of ASE (\log_2 PT/B73) and B73 response to cold, heat, salt and UV stress (\log_2 stress/control) as reported in the Makarevitch dataset. Asterisks (*) in the stress columns indicate a given gene was called as CR with respect to that stress.
[ONE COLUMN]

Figure 5. Co-expression networks for CR TFs and their putative stress-responsive targets. Nodes represent genes and edges represent co-expression as calculated by the ARACNE algorithm at DPI 0.1. The center panel presents a network of seven CR TFs (labeled centres of circles) with their co-expressed, stress-responsive (genes called up/on or down/off in the Makarevitch dataset) putative targets. Triangles indicate genes that were called as presenting ASE. The network was filtered to retain only co-expressed genes responsive cold, salt, UV or heat treatments. In the filtered networks the red and blue colors indicate up or down regulation (as \log_2 FC from the Makarevitch dataset), respectively, under the corresponding stress.
[TWO COLUMNS]

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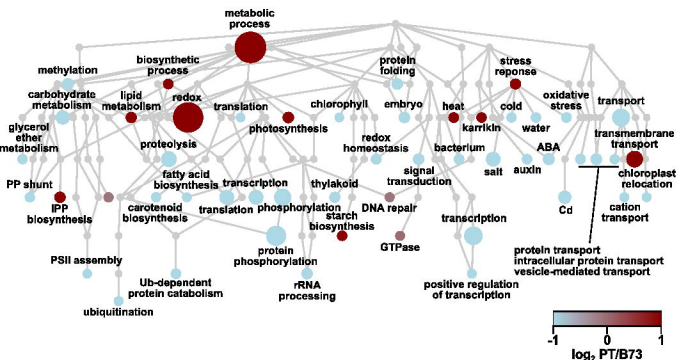
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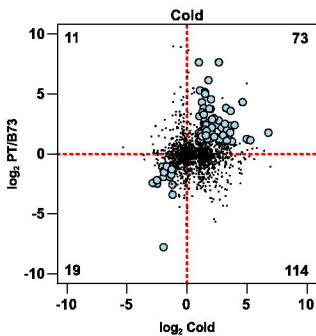
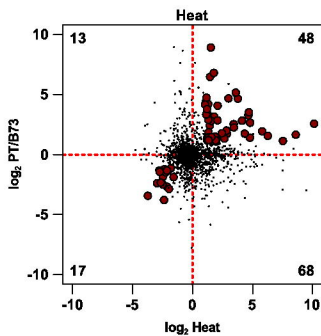
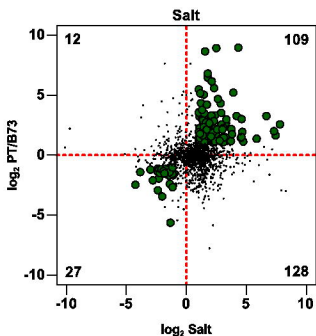
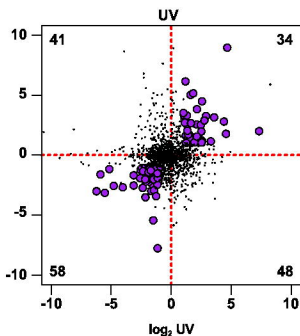
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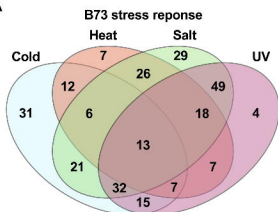
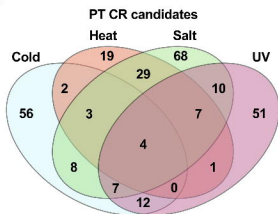
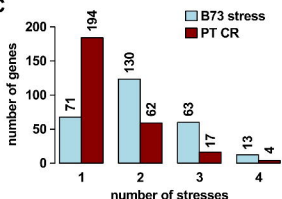
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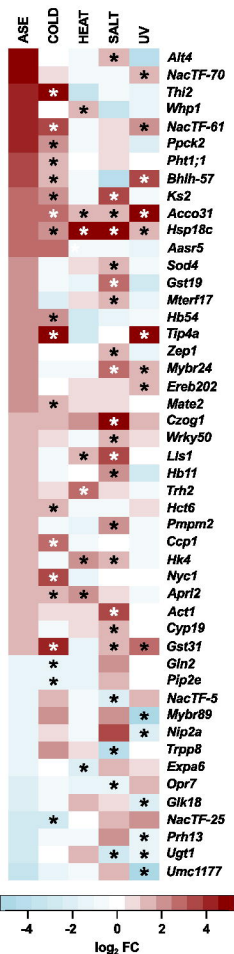
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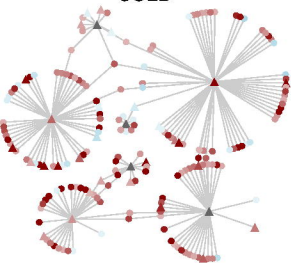


A**B****C****D**

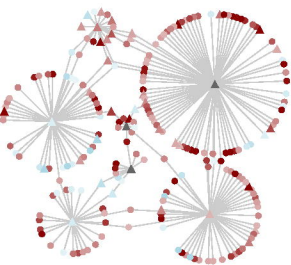
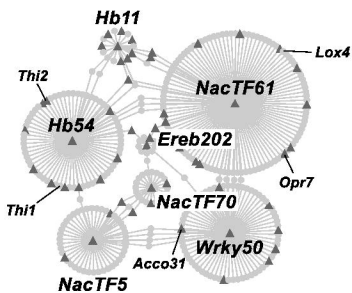
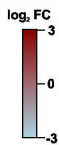
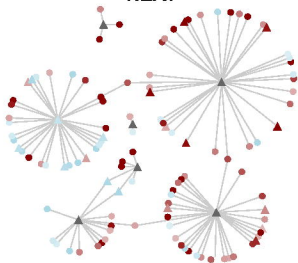
A**B****C**



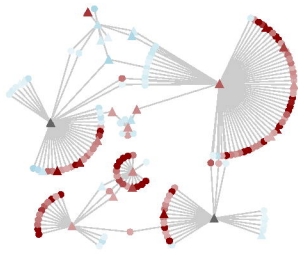
COLD



HEAT



SALT



UV