

Mutation research

Problems, results and perspectives

CHARLOTTE AUERBACH F.R.S.

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Preface

This book is intended for the senior undergraduate (Honours student) in genetics, and for the postgraduate who wants a survey of the whole field or information on a special area within it. In order to cater for readers with such different requirements, I have made the list of references unusually large for a textbook. It includes classical papers as well as very recent ones (to the end of 1974); reviews as well as specialized articles; elementary expositions from *Scientific American* as well as highly technical papers from journals on genetics and molecular biology. In areas of active research, I have given preference to the latest references, which will lead the reader to earlier ones. In addition to the references at the end of each chapter, a bibliography at the end of the book lists relevant books and general reviews.

Apart from the first chapter, the book is not written as a history of mutation research; but throughout I have tried to emphasize the continuity of the problems, concepts and ideas. The reader will find many examples of this. Muller's once famous and then almost forgotten classification of genes by their action has now been given biochemical reality by studies of gene action *in vitro*. The problem of whether mutations can arise in non-replicating genomes is one of the oldest in mutation research; yet an unequivocal solution was obtained only recently with bacteriophage. Bateson's presence-absence theory of mutation took long to die, especially in relation to X-rays, but was finally refuted by nucleotide sequencing. While some of the old problems have been solved by new techniques, many of them are still with us, waiting for new methods of attack. I hope that some readers will be stimulated to go back to the

classical papers, e.g. by Muller and Stadler. They will find not only beautiful work beautifully presented, but also discussions of fundamental problems in great depth and breadth.

A second truth that I want to drive home is that, in their fundamental responses to a natural or artificial mutagenic stimulus, the genes of all organisms from virus to man resemble each other. The early mutation workers never underestimated the importance of this truth, independent of whether — like Demerec — they experimented on a variety of organisms or — like Muller — remained committed to one (*Drosophila*). Muller, indeed, was the first to suggest that mutagenesis might be profitably studied in the 'naked' genes of bacteriophage. His review articles were of general validity for their time because they were based on all available evidence from macro- and micro-organisms. In our age of specialization, this is no longer so. The field is now so large and diversified that it has become impossible for any one mutation worker to remain well informed about developments outside his special area. Unfortunately, however, these areas are defined by organism rather than by problem. Mutation workers consider themselves specialists on bacteriophage, *E.coli*, yeast, *Neurospora*, *Drosophila*, *Vicia faba* etc; not as being committed to the analysis of a special *problem*, even though their experiments may be restricted to one *organism*. This attitude results in general conclusions based on specialized evidence. Such conclusions may be, and often are, wrong; but they may have a long life span thanks to the same compartmentalization of interest that first gave birth to them. Wherever possible, I have tried to draw cross-connections between observations on different organisms. They are not difficult to trace: supersuppressors, unstable genes, mutagen specificity, photorepair and dark repair are among many phenomena that are encountered, and can be analysed, in a variety of prokaryotic and eukaryotic species. The freedom to choose the most suitable species for answering a special problem should stimulate cooperation between mutation workers. To be sure, there are differences between organisms in their mutational behaviour. Set against the background of an essential similarity at the primary level of DNA, these may become important tools for analysing the roles of chromosome structure, metabolic patterns and other cellular and organismal factors in mutagenesis.

This brings me to the final, and principal, point that I have stressed throughout this book: the need to realize that mutagenesis is much

more than a physicochemical reaction of environmental agents with DNA. It is a biological process and, like all other biological processes, it is deeply enmeshed in the structural and biochemical complexities of the cell. A little more than ten years ago, after the spectacular success of the molecular analysis of mutational changes in DNA, mutation research seemed to be in danger of becoming relegated to a branch of nucleic acid chemistry. Indeed, I remember a very famous geneticist saying to me at that time that the best way to study mutagenesis was to treat DNA in the test tube with a mutagen. If this were true, mutation research would now be more or less at an end; but fortunately for the research worker it is far from true. This naive picture, which never gained the allegiance of biologically-minded geneticists, broke down under the impact of findings that implicate cellular processes such as repair and replication in mutagenesis. These findings have started a new era of mutation research, with many new problems being added to the old and still unsolved ones.

In a previous book ('Mutation Methods', see Bibliography), I have discussed the rationale and basic protocols of the most important techniques in mutation research. In the present book, I have incorporated only as much methodology as seemed indispensable for an understanding of the results and conclusions. I know from teaching experience that it is tedious for the student to go through a course on methodology before he knows the particular problems that the methods are meant to solve. I have therefore inserted sections, and one whole chapter, on methods wherever it seemed required. It may be useful to list them here. Chapter 2 brings the genetic test for translocations in *Drosophila*, and the generally applicable specific-locus test for the detection of visible mutations. The best known *Drosophila* tests — the test for sex-linked lethals and the attached-X tests for sex-linked visibles and large deletions — are described in Chapter 5; the same chapter brings also the extension of the sex-linked lethal test to the detection of delayed mutations. Chapter 10 includes methods for mutation research on flowering plants, especially maize. Chapter 11 is wholly devoted to methods of mutation research on micro-organisms and cell cultures.

I owe thanks to many who have helped me with the writing of this book. First of all to my publishers, who have been understanding enough not to hustle me beyond my customary slow speed of writing. Then to their, anonymous, referees both of whom have

made very useful remarks and have rescued the book from important omissions, mis-statements and ambiguities. Several colleagues here and abroad have critically and helpfully read sections of the book, or have supplied me with information; to all of them I am very grateful. Most of all I owe thanks to my colleague, Dr. D.J. Bond, of this institute, who has read very carefully every word of the book. I am sure that without his criticism, the book would contain many more obscurities; he is not responsible for those that remain. I am very grateful to Professor D.S. Falconer for letting me use the facilities of the Genetics Department. Mr E.D. Roberts has been very helpful and ingenious in making a number of original drawings. Mrs Mardi Denell, Dr Clara Queiroz and Mrs Jacqueline Stewart have saved me much time and effort by collecting references, tables and illustrations, and Mrs Valerie Rennie has been a careful and intelligent typist. For proof-reading and the compilation of the index and glossary I have had the competent help of Dr Joan Dawes. To all these helpers I extend thanks. I also wish to thank the Leverhulme Trust for generously financing the work of these assistants through a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship grant.

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Contents

Illustrations	page	xvi
Tables		xxi
Preface		xxv
1 The history of mutation research		1
The first period (1900-1927)		2
The second period: 1927 to the beginning of the Second World War		4
Intergenic and intragenic changes		4
The relation between crossing-over and rearrangements		5
Dose effect curves		6
The target theory		6
Spontaneous mutations		6
Ultraviolet light		7
The third period: beginning of the Second World War to 1953		8
The fourth period: 1953-about 1965		10
The fifth period: (about 1965 onwards)		11
References		12
2 Classification of mutational changes at the chromosomal level		15
Intergenic changes		16
Unrejoined (open) breaks. The breakage-fusion-bridge cycle.		16
Chromosome rearrangements		19
		vii

	Deletions, deficiencies — Inversions — Reciprocal translocations — Insertional translocations Duplications	
	Intragenic changes. Criteria for distinguishing them from deletions of whole genes	24
	References	28
3	Classification of gene mutations	31
	I. Mutations affecting single genes	31
	Classification by effect	31
	Hypomorphs	32
	Hypermorphs	34
	Amorphs	35
	Neomorphs	36
	Antimorphs	37
	Classification by molecular changes in nucleic acid	38
	Base substitutions	38
	Mis-sense mutations — Nonsense mutations	
	Deletions and additions of one or several bases: frameshift (or sign) mutations	42
	II. Mutations that affect several or many genes	46
	Supersuppressors	47
	Polarity mutations	47
	Position effect mutations	48
	Mutator and antimutator genes	48
	References	48
4	Reverse mutations. Suppressors	54
	True reverse mutations	55
	Intracistronic suppression	55
	Suppression of a frameshift	55
	Suppression of a base substitution	56
	Phenotypic suppression	57
	Extracistronic suppression	60
	Mis-sense suppression	61
	Nonsense suppression	63
	Frameshift suppression. Suppression of base changes by frameshifts	65
	Suppressors acting in other ways	66
	References	68

5	The classical X-ray work. I: Mutations. The target theory	73
	Drosophila techniques	73
	The test for sex-linked lethals	73
	The attached-X test for sex-linked visibles and large deletions	77
	First results. The target concept: preliminary tests for a direct and immediate action of X-rays on the genes	78
	Biophysical analysis. Hit theory and target theory	82
	References	86
6	The classical X-ray work II: Chromosome breaks and rearrangements. Do X-rays produce true gene mutations?	88
	The detection of breaks and rearrangements in mitotic cells	88
	Kinetics of break production	90
	Kinetics of rearrangement formation. 'Breakage-first' and 'contact' hypotheses	90
	Dose response to neutrons. Role of LET. Rejoining distance and rejoining sites	95
	Summary of the target theory	97
	Do X-rays produce true gene mutations?	99
	References	101
7	Direct and indirect action of X-rays. Radio-isotopes. Radiation-sterilized food	105
	Indirect action of X-rays	105
	The dilution effect	108
	The protection effect	108
	The oxygen effect	110
	Ubiquity of oxygen effect	110
	Mechanism	112
	Radioisotopes	114
	Is X-ray sterilized food mutagenic?	116
	References	119
8	Repair of X-ray damage I: Repair of chromosome breaks	125
	Fractionation experiments. Rejoining time	125
	The role of oxygen in repair	128
	The role of protein synthesis in repair	129
	References	130

9	Repair of X-ray damage II: Repair of mutagenic lesions.	
	Molecular action of X-rays. Sensitivity differences	133
	<i>Paramecium</i> . Differences in sensitivity between stages of the cell cycle	135
	<i>Drosophila</i> . Sensitivity differences between germ cells	138
	Mice; silkworm. Dose rate, dose fractionation	143
	Micro-organisms. Dose-effect curves	148
	The molecular mechanism of X-ray mutagenesis	150
	Species differences in sensitivity	151
	References	153
10	Mutagenesis by ultraviolet and visible light I: Early work on macro-organisms	159
	The problems studied	159
	Methods of mutation research on maize and other flowering plants	160
	The life cycle of maize	160
	Genetical effects scored	162
	Dominant lethals — Deficiencies. Visible mutations at marked loci — Visible mutations at unmarked loci — Chromosome breaks and rearrangements	
	Some special problems of UV-mutagenesis	163
	Penetration; physiological damage	163
	Measurement of the genetically effective dose	164
	Results	165
	Types of effect and their relative frequencies	165
	Differences between the effects of UV and X-rays	166
	Wavelength dependence	170
	References	171
11	Mutagenesis by ultraviolet and visible light II: Methods of mutation research on microorganisms and mammalian cell cultures	173
	I. General	173
	II. Fungi, algae, bacteria	175
	Screening tests	175
	Reversions from auxotrophy to prototrophy	175
	Resistance mutations	180
	Tests that do not utilize screening techniques	181
	Recessive lethals	181

Auxotrophs at unselected loci	183
Auxotrophs at selected loci	184
Mutations in growing cultures	185
The fluctuation test. Chemostat and turbidostat	185
Adaptation <i>versus</i> mutation	186
III. Bacteriophages and other viruses	189
Screening tests for reverse mutations	189
Tests for forward mutations	190
IV. Transforming principle	191
V. Mammalian cell cultures	192
VI. Verification and analysis of mutations	194
References	199
12 Mutagenesis by ultraviolet and visible light II:	
Early work on micro-organisms	203
Wavelength	203
Dose-effect curves	203
Photoreactivation	205
The production of mutations by irradiation of the medium	207
Mutation fixation (MF) and mutation frequency decline (MFD)	210
References	214
13 The molecular action of ultraviolet and visible light I:	
Photoproducts. Photorepair	218
Photoproducts in DNA	218
Effects of dyes	219
The role of pyrimidine dimers in UV-damage	221
Wavelength dependence of dimer formation	221
Photorepair	222
References	229
14 The molecular action of ultraviolet and visible light II:	
Dark repair. Mechanisms of mutation induction	234
Pre-replication repair	235
Excision repair	235
Liquid holding recovery. Photoprotection	240
Mutation frequency decline	241

Post-replication repair	241
The mechanism of UV-mutagenesis	244
The molecular nature of UV-induced mutations	246
References	248
15 Chemical mutagens: alkylating agents. I: Genetical effects	256
Discovery of the mutagenic action of mustard gas	257
Comparison with X-rays	257
The shortage of large rearrangements. Storage effect on rearrangement frequencies	258
The excess of small deficiencies and duplications	267
Delayed mutation. Replicating instabilities	270
References	276
16 Chemical mutagens: alkylating agents. II: Chemistry.	
Molecular analysis of mutants. Influence of cellular processes. Kinetics	279
Chemical structure of alkylating agents	279
Reactions with DNA	281
The effect of functionality	282
Molecular analysis of mutants	285
Influence of cellular processes	288
Repair	288
Replication and transcription	289
Metabolism	291
Dose-effect curves. Dose-rate. Storage effect on gene mutations	293
References	298
17 Chemical mutagens: purines; base analogues; acridines; hydroxylamine; hydrazine; bisulphite. Reversions analysis	306
Caffeine and related purines	306
Base analogues	307
Dyes: pylonin, acridines	313
Reversion analysis, first part	318
Hydroxylamine; hydrazine, maleic hydrazide; sodium bisulphite	320
Reversion analysis, second part	323
References	328

Contents

xiii

18 Nitrous acid. Other chemical mutagens	335
Nitrous acid	336
'4-NQO'	338
Organic peroxides; sodium azide; oxygen	338
Formaldehyde	339
Urethane	345
Alkaloids	346
Inorganic salts	347
Phenols and quinones	348
³⁵ S; amino acid analogues; 5-fluorouracil	349
³⁵ S	349
Amino acid analogues	350
Fluorouracil	351
DNA and other macromolecules	352
References	353
19 The relation between induced crossovers, rearrangements and mutations. The origin of complete (non-mosaic) mutations	362
The relation between crossing-over, rearrangement formation and mutation	362
The origin of 'complete' mutants	366
The problem	366
The dual-action hypothesis	367
The master-strand hypothesis	367
The lethal-hit hypothesis	367
The repair hypothesis	370
Dose-effect curves for the ratio between mosaic and complete mutants	372
Mosaics in repair-deficient strains	374
References	374
20 Mutagen specificity	378
Early results	379
The mutagenic pathway (Fig. 20.1)	381
Penetration (a)	382
Reaction with DNA (b)	385
Repair and its alternatives (c, d, e)	386
Expression (f)	387

Effect of plating medium — Residual genotype	18
Clone formation (g, h)	393
Analysis of a case of mutagen specificity in <i>Neurospora</i>	395
DEB	396
Dose of treatment — Dose rate — Storage — Type of treatment — Cytoplasmic background	
UV	399
Dose — Temperature during treatment — Photorepair — Ionic environment during treatment — Age of conidia — Chemical pre- or post-treatment	
References	401
21 Spontaneous mutations	406
Mutation without replication	406
The nature and origin of spontaneous mutations	409
Replication-independent causes of mutation	409
Replication-dependent causes of mutation. Mutators and antimutators	410
Bacteriophage. The role of DNA replication — Bacteria. The role of repair — Fungi. The role of recombination — <i>Drosophila</i>	
Mutation rates	419
Mutagenesis by transduction and transformation	421
Mutagenic effects of extrachromosomal elements, bacteriophages and viruses. Insertion mutations	422
Genotrophs	424
Paramutation	424
References	425
22 Instabilities	433
Instabilities in untreated organisms	433
Controlling elements	433
Exosomes	437
Tandem duplications	438
Translocations	440
Transposed duplications	443
Induced instabilities	445
References	449

23	Applied mutation research	452
	I. Increasing the number of useful mutations	452
	Mutation breeding	453
	Genetic control of insect pests	455
	Cancer therapy	456
	II. Reducing the number of harmful mutations	457
	Radiation hazards	457
	Environmental chemical mutagens	461
	Mutation and the origin of cancer. Mutagens and carcinogens	464
	References	465
	Bibliography	469
	Author Index	473
	Subject Index	489

Illustrations

2.1	The origin of variegated aleurone colour in maize kernels through the operation of the breakage-fusion-bridge cycle.	18
2.2	Schematic representation of symmetric and asymmetric two-hit aberrations.	19
2.3	The translocation cross in meiosis of a translocation heterozygote, and the gametes formed.	22
2.4	The detection of translocations between autosomes II and III in <i>Drosophila melanogaster</i> .	23
2.5	A. Electron micrograph of a heteroduplex DNA molecule of phage λ . B. Interpretive drawing.	26
3.1	The codon catalogue	39
3.2	Co-linearity of gene and protein as shown with the aid of mis-sense mutations.	42
3.3	Co-linearity of gene and protein as shown with the aid of nonsense mutations.	43
3.4	Frameshift mutations and their suppression.	45
3.5	Example of a suppressed frameshift in phage T4.	45
5.1	Test for sex-linked recessive lethals in <i>Drosophila</i> .	75
5.2	Test for sex-linked visible mutations in <i>Drosophila</i> by the attached-X method.	76
5.3	The detection of large deletions by the attached-X method.	78
5.4	Test for delayed production of a sex-linked lethal.	82
5.5	Direct proportionality of the rates of sex-linked mutations in <i>Drosophila melanogaster</i> to the X-ray dose.	83