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CONTENTS

DNA RECOMBINATIONS *IN VITRO*

Structural and Functional Analysis of Cloned Bacterial rRNA Genes	3
<i>P. Venetianer, I. Boros, É. Csordás-Tóth, A. Kiss, I. Kiss and B. Sain</i>	
Functional Elements of Sea Urchin Histone Genes	15
<i>C. Hentschel and M. L. Birnstiel</i>	
Structural Studies of Mouse Immunoglobulin Genes	27
<i>M. Steinmetz</i>	
Cloning and Expression of Foreign Replication Origins in the Single Stranded DNA Phage M13	35
<i>J. Kaguni, L. S. LaVerne, M. Strathearn and D. S. Ray</i>	
The Use of Recombinant DNA Techniques in the Analysis of <i>Trypanosoma brucei</i> Kinetoplast DNA	45
<i>F. Brunel, J. Davison, M. Merchez, P. Borst and P. J. Weijers</i>	
Construction of λ gtWES.T5-622: an Improved Recombinant DNA Vector Allowing Selection for Foreign DNA Inserts	55
<i>J. Davison, F. Brunel, M. Merchez</i>	

Contents

Cloning of Carp Preproinsulin cDNA in <i>E. coli</i>	65
<i>D.-H. Liebscher, C. Coutelle, T. A. Rapoport, V. Hahn, S. Rosenthal, S. Prehn and R. Williamson</i>	
Analysis of Balbiani Ring DNA of <i>Chironomus thummi</i> by Cloning in <i>E. coli</i>	73
<i>H. Bäumlein, U. Wobus and R. Panitz</i>	
Excision and Replication of Mitochondrial Genomes from Spontaneous Petite Mutants of Yeast	77
<i>G. Bernardi, G. Baldacci, F. Culard, G. Faugeron-Fonty, C. Gaillard, R. Goursot, F. Strauss and M. de Zamaroczy</i>	
Mitochondrial DNA in Maize	85
<i>Cs. Koncz, J. Sümegi, B. Saini, L. Kálmán and D. Dudits</i>	
Cloning of <i>B. subtilis</i> Genes in <i>E. coli</i> and Expression of Some Cloned Genes in <i>B. subtilis</i>	95
<i>R. Dedonder, G. Rapoport, A. Billault, F. Fargette and A. Klier</i>	
Cloning of the <i>Bacillus sphaericus</i> R Modification Methylase Gene in <i>E. coli</i>	105
<i>A. Kiss, É. Szomolányi and P. Venetianer</i>	
New Members of <i>Bacillus subtilis</i> Phage Group Containing a Protein Link in Their Circular DNA	111
<i>V. Fučík, R. Grunow, H. Grünerová, Z. Hostomský and S. Zdražil</i>	
Characteristics of Clear-Plaques and Temperate Forms of Phage Delta	119
<i>J. Doskočil, J. Forstová and H. Fidlerová</i>	
Relation of Transforming Activity to Molecular Weight of Restriction Fragments of <i>Bacillus subtilis</i> DNA	123
<i>A. Slavičková and S. Zdražil</i>	
Regulatory Sequences in Prokaryotic and Eukaryotic DNA	131
<i>J. Doskočil and J. Forstová</i>	
DNA Sequences in the Yeast 2 μ m Plasmid: Some Recent Innovations in Sequencing Techniques	143
<i>J. Hindley</i>	

Contents

Mapping of Different Stages of Colicin E1 Plasmid DNA Melting	155
<i>Yu. L. Lyubchenko, A. S. Borovik, Yu. A. Kalambet, V. T. Shitov and Eu. I. Golovanov</i>	
Multicopy Plasmid R6KΔ1 in <i>Escherichia coli</i> Minicells - Interaction of Its DNA Molecules with the Cell Membrane	163
<i>J. Hochmannová, J. Nešvera and J. Štokrová</i>	
Action of DNA Methylase from <i>Escherichia coli</i> K-12 on the Complementary Deoxyhexanucleotides d(pC-A-T-C-A-T) and d(G-T-A-G-T-Ap)	171
<i>A. Schmidt, H. Kahl, H. Reinert and H. Venner</i>	
Physical Characterization of the Genome of a Papovavirus of the Syrian Hamster	181
<i>S. Scherneck, F. Vogel and M. Böttger</i>	
Action of Single-Strand Specific Nuclease from Rye Germ Nuclei on Native DNA	191
<i>A. Przykorska and J. W. Szarkowski</i>	
DNA INTERACTIONS	
Preparation and Characterization of Defined DNAs: the Role of DNA Structure in Gene Regulation	199
<i>R. D. Wells, T. Goodman, S. Hardies, W. Hillen, G. Horn, R. Klein, J. Larson, U. Müller, S. Neuendorf, N. Panayotatos, R. Patient, E. Selsing and S. Stirdivant</i>	
Teleaction in DNA and DNA-Protein Complexes: a Quantitative Study	211
<i>J. Gabarro-Arpa, R. Ehrlich, F. Rodier and C. Reiss</i>	
The Rule of Selection of the Transcription Regulatory Sequences in ØX 174 Genome	223
<i>L. Pivec and A. Vitek</i>	
Recognition of Chemically-Damaged DNA by Oligopeptides and Gene 32 Protein from Phage T4	233
<i>C. Hélène, J. J. Toulmé and T. Alev-Behmoaras</i>	
The Role of DNA Composition and Sequence in Selective Binding of Polypeptides and Proteins	245
<i>J. Šponar</i>	

Contents

Thermal Melting of DNA Complexed with Polypeptides Containing Basic and Neutral Aliphatic Amino Acid Residues	253
<i>H. Votavová, K. Bláha and J. Šponar</i>	
Investigation of Nonspecific Complexes of DNA with RNA Polymerase by the Kinetic Method	261
<i>Yu. N. Kosaganov, M. I. Zarudnaya, K. G. Khulordava and Yu. S. Lazurkin</i>	
Infrared Spectroscopic Investigations of DNA-Caffeine Interaction	273
<i>W. Pohle and H. Fritzsche</i>	
DNA - Anthracyclin Antibiotics Interaction <i>In Vitro</i> : Evidence for Intercalation	283
<i>D. Londos-Gagliardi, M. Capri, G. Serros and G. Aubel-Sadron</i>	
Circular Dichroism and Structure of DNA-Phenosafranine Complexes	289
<i>J. Koudelka, V. L. Makarov, A. I. Poletayev and P. G. Sveshnikov</i>	
Structural Domains in Histones	293
<i>C. Crane-Robinson, L. Böhm, P. Puigdomenech, P. D. Cary, P. G. Hartman and E. M. Bradbury</i>	
Enzymatic Methylation of Histones and Nucleosome Assembly <i>In Vitro</i>	301
<i>P. Sarnow and R. Knippers</i>	
Fractionation of Native and Reconstituted Chromatin by Digestion with Deoxyribonuclease II	313
<i>I. G. Pashev, M. M. Nencheva and G. G. Markov</i>	
Salt-Dependent Structural States of Reconstituted SV 40 Minichromosomes	323
<i>M. Böttger, S. Scherneck, C.-U. v. Mickwitz, H. Fenske and R. Lindigkeit</i>	
Changes in the Circular Dichroic Spectrum of Calf Thymus Solubilized Chromatin Caused by Ultraviolet Irradiation	333
<i>M. Vorlíčková, E. Paleček and J. Šponar</i>	

Contents

Effect of Acid Treatment on Staining Properties of Isolated Nucleoprotein and Chromatin in Cell Nuclei	337
<i>V. Kleimächter, P. Krejčí, J. Filkuka, Z. Balcarová and G. Schmidt</i>	
Conservatism of Mouse Satellite DNA in Transplantable Tumors	341
<i>I. G. Ivanov and G. G. Markov</i>	
Specificity of Transcription of Single Copy DNA in Different Rat Tissues	349
<i>G. G. Markov, J. N. Yaneva, N. G. Markova and I. G. Ivanov</i>	
Use of Modern Polarographic Techniques in the DNA Research	359
<i>E. Paleček</i>	
RECOMBINATION IN VIVO	
On the Use of Plasmids for the Study of Genetic Transformation in <i>Bacillus subtilis</i>	365
<i>D. Dubnau, S. Contente and T. J. Gryczan</i>	
Characterization of <i>B. subtilis</i> <i>rech</i> Mutant and of its Revertants with Low Activity of ATP-Dependent DNase	387
<i>S. Zadrazil, V. Fučík, N. M. Lakomova and A. A. Prozorov</i>	
DNA Rearrangements in IS2 that Form New Promoters	395
<i>J. Cullum, H. Sommer, D. Ghosal and H. Saedler</i>	
Genomic and Environmental Influences on Mutagen-Induced Recombination in Plant Chromosomes	403
<i>I. Schubert, R. Rieger, A. Michaelis, K. Heindorff and B. Kaina</i>	
The Effect of Extracellular Factors on DNA Synthesis and Proliferation of Lymphocytes	411
<i>K. Szyfter and K. Wiktorowicz</i>	
Structure of Avian Defective Leukaemia Virus Genomes	419
<i>D. Stéhelin, S. Saule, M. Roussel and N. Pluquet</i>	
Origin of the Endogenous Avian Retrovirus, RAV-0	425
<i>D. Frisby, R. MacCormick, S. Pennie, M. Roussel, D. Stéhelin and R. Weiss</i>	

Contents

<i>In Vivo</i> Effect of Three Transformation-Defective Mutants of Subgroup C Avian Sarcoma Viruses	435
<i>I. Karakoz, J. Geryk and J. Svoboda</i>	
Study of Transfection of the Mechanism of Control of Expression of the Avian Sarcoma Virus Genome in Transformed Mammalian Cells	441
<i>P. Vigier, F. Catala, G. Goubin and A. Weydert</i>	
The Influence of Host Cell on the Mechanism of Transfection	453
<i>I. Hložánek</i>	
<i>In Vivo</i> and <i>In Vitro</i> Recombination Between DNA Molecules in Optimized CaCl_2 -Dependent Transfection Systems - Cloning of the OCR Gene	463
<i>M. Pfeifer, A. Betcke, Ch. Pöhlmann, M. Kurth and D. H. Liebscher</i>	
DNA REPAIR	
Mechanisms of Repair of Methylated Bases in the DNA of <i>Escherichia coli</i>	475
<i>P. Karran</i>	
Loss of Nuclear Photoreactivating Enzyme Following Ultraviolet-Irradiation of <i>Chlamydomonas</i>	483
<i>G. D. Small</i>	
Heterogeneity of AP-Endonuclease in Barley Cells	491
<i>J. Šatava, J. Veleminský and J. Švachulová</i>	
Nucleases of Barley Chloroplasts Acting on DNA Modified by UV-Light and by Methyl Methanesulphonate	495
<i>J. Švachulová, J. Veleminský and J. Šatava</i>	
Cooperation of UV Inducible and Excision Repair Systems in DNA Dark Repair of <i>Escherichia coli</i>	501
<i>M. Sedlíková, J. Brožmanová, K. Kleibl and F. Mašek</i>	
The Effect of UV-Induction on DNA Replication in UV-Irradiated Excision-Deficient <i>Escherichia coli</i>	509
<i>V. Slezáriková and M. Sedlíková</i>	
Induced Repair by Phage DNA	515
<i>Z. Hradečná and Z. Holanová</i>	

Contents

DNA-Membrane Interactions in the Repair of DNA in <i>Bacillus subtilis</i>	519
<i>A. I. Gaziiev, O. F. Chefranova, V. G. Bezlepkin and D. T. Zakrzhevskaya</i>	
Possible Role of Repair Processes in GC to AT Transition Induced by 2-Aminopurine	531
<i>C. Janion</i>	
Ultraviolet and Chemical Induced DNA Repair in Human Cells Assayed by Bromodeoxyuridine Photolysis or by Cytosine Arabinoside Arrest	535
<i>J. D. Regan and W. C. Dunn</i>	
Repair Processes in Normal Human Cells and in Xeroderma Pigmentosum Cells	547
<i>I. J. Körner, H. Fender and W. Malz</i>	
Repair of DNA Damage Induced by Alkylating Agents in Germinating Barley Embryos	557
<i>J. Veleminský, V. Pokorný and T. Giehner</i>	
Replication and Repair Processes in Chinese Hamster Cells: The Effects of Ultraviolet Light, Alkylating Chemicals and X-rays Studied by DNA Unwinding in Alkali	567
<i>B. Johansson and G. Ahnström</i>	
Differential Action of Vinylnitrofurans and Nitro- furaldehyde on Bacterial and Human DNA	575
<i>K. Angelis, M. Čermá and J. Veleminský</i>	
Index	583

DNA RECOMBINATIONS
IN VITRO

STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF CLONED BACTERIAL rRNA GENES

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ABSTRACT

The seven rRNA operons (genes) of *E. coli* were physically mapped by restriction endonucleases, using the Southern blotting technique. Two complete rRNA operons (*rrnB* and *rrnD*) were isolated by the recombinant DNA method, using the pBR322 plasmid cloning vehicle. The rRNA operon carried by the transducing phage λ daroE152 was found to be a hybrid of the *rrnD* and *rrnE* operons. The DNA sequence of the promoter region for *rrnB* was determined. The RNA-polymerase binding sites on the cloned rRNA operons were localized by filter-binding and electron-microscopic techniques. rRNA transcription was investigated by electron microscopy and hybridization analysis of the *in vitro* transcripts. All these findings were correlated with the DNA sequence, and a tentative model was proposed to explain the unusual properties of rRNA promoters.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main advantages of the recombinant DNA technology is that it allows the detailed molecular analysis of genes which are not amenable to classical genetic methods. The ribosomal RNA genes of *Escherichia coli* belong to this group, no mutant has ever been isolated in them. The three stable rRNA (16 S, 23 S, 5 S) components of the bacterial ribosome are synthesised as a 30 S precursor, which is subsequently processed through a complex series of reactions. The genes (operons) coding for this 30 S transcript are redundant, several copies are located scattered on the bacterial chromosome.

These are the most active genes of bacteria. Although they make up only about 0.8 % of the genome, more than 50 % of all transcription takes place on them in exponentially growing cells. This high rate of transcription is subject to several intricate control mechanisms. The problems raised by this interesting system can ultimately be solved only by a detailed molecular analysis of the rRNA genes, especially their regulatory regions. In this report we summarize our work, done in the past few years on this system.

RESULTS

By using the so-called Southern-blotting technique (Southern, 1975) we were able to determine the copy number of *E. coli* rRNA genes. Briefly: *E. coli* DNA was digested with BamHI restriction endonuclease, which does not cleave into the rRNA operon, and the DNA was hybridized to rRNA after electrophoresis. As seven distinct hybridizing bands of approximately equal intensity were detected, it was concluded that the number of rRNA operons is seven (Kiss, Sain, Venetianer, 1977). This approach was then extended, and *E. coli* DNA was similarly analyzed with 9 different restriction endonucleases and 36 different double and triple combinations of these enzymes (Boros, Kiss, Venetianer, 1979). These results unambiguously established that the copy number is indeed seven, and allowed the determination of the physical map of the vicinity of all seven genes. This map, shown on Fig 1. was very helpful in the further analysis of rRNA genes. First: it helped to identify cloned rRNA genes (see below); second: it allowed the detection of hitherto unknown rearrangements. For instance, it was supposed that the transducing phage λ daroE152 carries the bacterial *rrnD* operon (Jorgensen, 1976). A comparison of the physical map of this phage with the *E. coli* map suggests that the RNA operon of this phage is a "hybrid", resulting from recombination between the *rrnD* and *rrnE* operons.

For detailed analysis of individual rRNA genes, and especially their promoter regions we decided to clone them. First the *rrnB* gene was cloned, starting from the transducing phage λ drif^d18 (Kiss and coworkers, 1978). Electronmicroscopic R-loop mapping and in vitro transcription experiments verified that the 7.1 kB BamHI fragment cloned in plasmid pBR 313 indeed carries the intact rRNA gene of the phage.

Then we attempted to clone all seven genes starting from the bacterial chromosome, but this attempt had been only

Analysis of Cloned Bacterial rRNA Genes

partially successful. Out of 2000 screened recombinants only seven clones contained bacterial rRNA genes. By using the physical map shown on Fig 1. it was easy to establish that six of these clones carried the *rrnD* gene and one contained *rrnB*. This latter clone however proved to be rather unstable, the maintenance and large-scale preparation of the recombinant plasmid (termed pBK 17) was difficult. It is interesting to note that the loss of the plasmid appeared to be gradual, through spontaneous deletions starting from the cloned bacterial fragment, but going into the vector plasmid itself. Another interesting observation: in several cases the disappearance of an rRNA gene carrying plasmid was accompanied by the appearance of a new, eighth rRNA gene in the chromosome. These extra copies were also unstable.

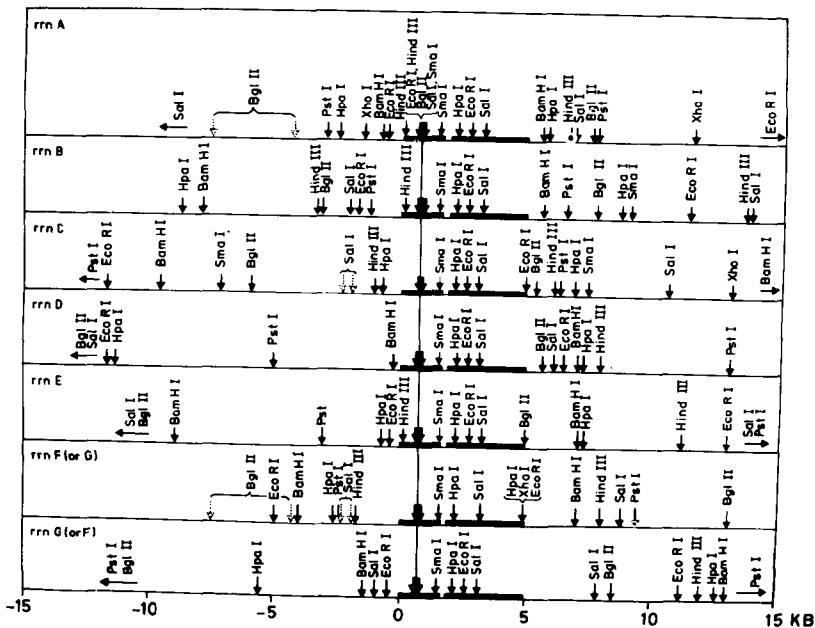


Fig.1. Physical map of the seven rRNA operons of *E. coli*

For further analysis we chose the *rrnB* gene. Fig 2. shows the physical map of the two recombinant plasmids carrying *rrnB*. For practical reasons the sequencing work was done on plasmid 2/12. An 1.6 kB long *Hind* III-BamHI fragment was prepared from this plasmid. It contained all the DNA of bacterial origin from the att region till the 80th nucleotide of the mature 16 S rRNA sequence, thus it must have contained the promoter region. After the determination of the detailed physical map of this region, sequencing was carried out by the technique of Maxam and Gilbert (1977), according to the strategy outlined on Fig 2.

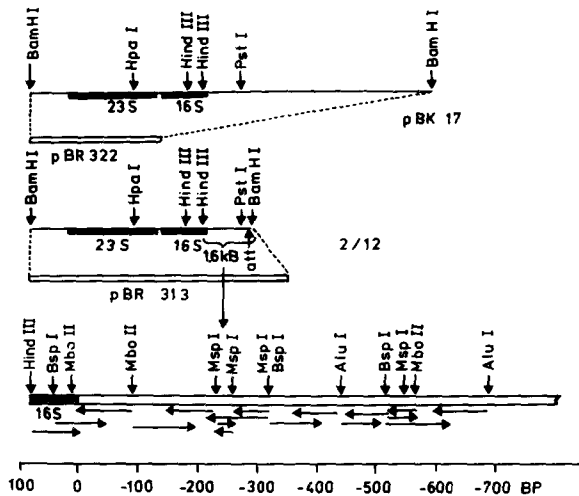


Fig. 2. Physical map of the recombinant plasmids pBK 17 and 2/12 and outline of the sequencing strategy

(Incidentally, it must be noted that at the other end of this fragment the sequence was also determined and this sequence defined a secondary attachment site for phage lambda, Csordás-Tóth, Boros, Venetianer, submitted for publication). The 700 bp long sequence immediately preceding the mature rRNA sequence thus presumably including the entire promoter region is shown on Fig 3.

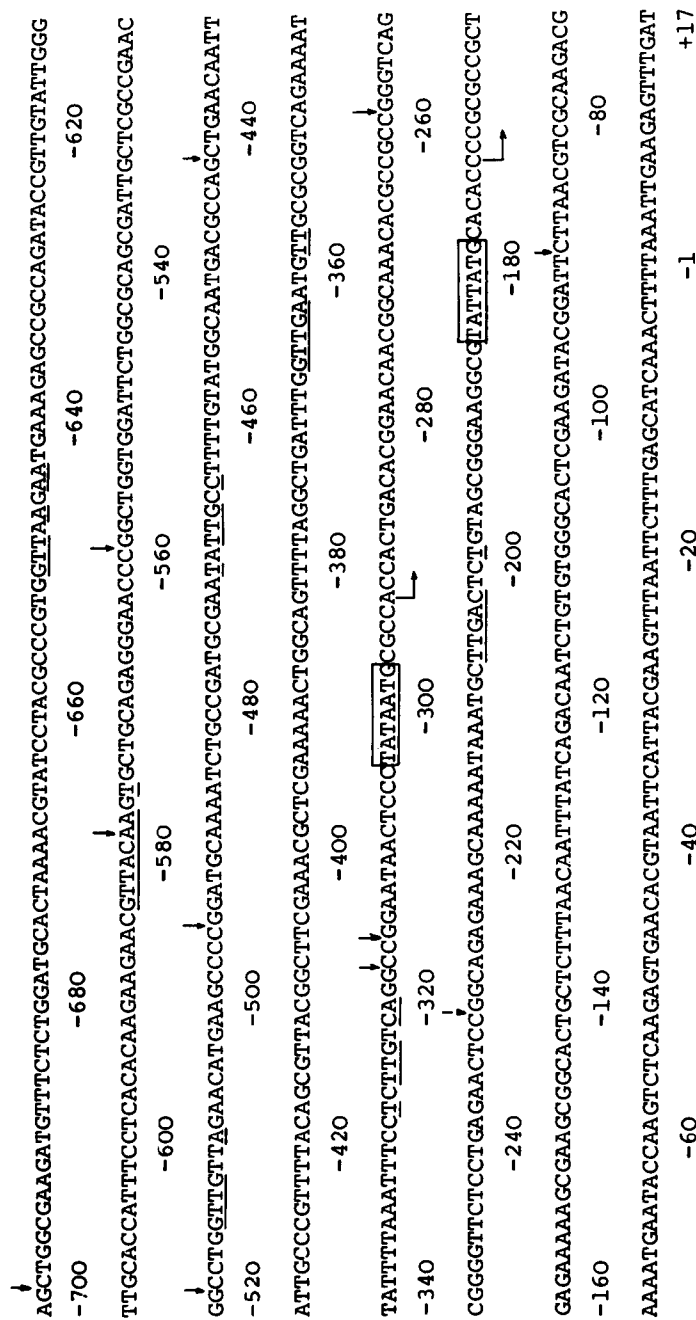
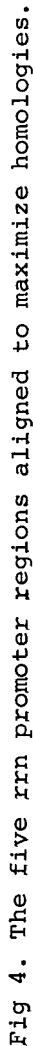


Fig 3. The *rrnB* promoter sequence. Numbering starts at the beginning of the mature 16 S rRNA sequence. Only one strand is shown. Arrows indicate the restriction endonuclease cleavage sites used in sequencing. The Pribnow-sequences corresponding to the two promoters are boxed, broken arrows indicate the sites of initiation. The polymerase recognition sequences are underlined.



Analysis of Cloned Bacterial rRNA Genes

As during the past year the sequence of four other *rrn* promoter regions had been determined in other laboratories (deBoer, Gilbert and Nomura, 1979, Young and Steitz, 1979) it is now possible to compare all five sequences. These are shown on Fig 4. The sequences are aligned by the introduction of a few gaps in such a way that their homologies should be maximal. All five sequences are completely identical up to position -145, this region is not shown (the numbering begins at the beginning of the mature 16 S rRNA sequence). Long stretches of complete homology between all five regions exist up to position -320. The *rrnB* and *rrnA* sequences are completely identical up to -370, and some partial homologies can be detected even further upstream. These farreaching homologies are unlikely to be fortuitous. These sequences are probably parts of the promoter region.

Sequence information in itself is not sufficient to explain the mechanism of action of these promoters, it must be correlated with other experimental results. Several years ago, on the basis of in vitro transcription experiments with total *E. coli* DNA, we proposed a model to explain the extremely high rate of rRNA transcription (Sümegi, Udvardy, Venetianer, 1977). According to this model each rRNA operon has multiple promoters, which are able to store 4-5 RNA polymerase molecules in a heparin-resistant form. Similar proposals have been made by other authors as well (Travers, 1976, Mueller, Oebbecke, Förster, 1977). In an effort to verify this model we performed electron-microscopic polymerase binding experiments with the cloned rRNA genes or with appropriate restriction fragments derived from such clones.

Unfortunately, for technical reasons it was not possible to carry out these binding experiments at polymerase concentrations sufficiently high to saturate all the proposed binding sites. Thus only one or at most two polymerase molecules could be observed on any individual DNA fragment. However the statistical evaluation of a large number of pictures revealed that the rRNA operon promoter region is much wider than a simple binding site. As shown on Fig 5. this region must represent at least two but possibly four or five sites, the width of the region is 200-300 base pairs.

The number of transcription initiation sites can best be studied by rifampicine challenge experiments, or by the analysis of the in vitro transcription products. By the former method we found two initiation sites for *rrnB* (Kiss and co-workers, 1978). Recently Gilbert, deBoer and Nomura (1979), Glaser and Cashel (1979), Young and Steitz (1979) found two distinct initiation sites for *rrnA*, *rrnB*,