Circadian Rhythms
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Methods and Protocols

Edited by

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Preface

Rhythmicity is a pervasive feature of life. Most organisms, from bacteria to humans, have the ability to interpret and predict the daily cycles of our world, which indicates the presence of a timing device, a circadian (from the Latin *circa diem*, “about a day”) clock, able to synchronize the endogenous functions with the external environment. Furthermore, the ability to manipulate the temporal dimension offers ground to complexity, as the organisms have the opportunity to separate competing or even incompatible functions within the same cell. Thus, it is not surprising that natural selection is operating on the circadian clock, an additional reminder of the importance of this regulatory pathway. Selection has been shown directly by competition experiments between clocks with different periodicities, and indirectly by studying the molecular evolution of clock genes.

In the last 20 years, the molecular mechanisms underlying the functioning of the circadian clock have been actively investigated for several model systems. It has emerged that circadian timing affects every kind of organism and, in multicellular organisms, many different cell types. Basic and specialized cell functions are regulated by the clock through multiple molecular events. Furthermore, although the major divisions of life use different molecular cogs in the building of the pacemaker, there is a common design based on interlocked negative feedback loops. Many components and molecular functions can feed into the loops at different levels, making the architecture of the clock intrinsically robust and open to a wide range of interactions with other major regulatory pathways. This has become even more apparent after microarray studies have shown that key regulators of metabolic pathways, cell cycle components, ion channels, and immuno-response genes are all transcribed in a rhythmic fashion. Further developments have extended the description of the interconnection between the circadian and cell cycles and sketched a role for clock dysfunctions in cancer development. Although we have begun to understand the basic mechanisms of the clock, we still do not have a definitive answer to many questions. We still ask ourselves how the clock generates rhythmic phenotypes in the model systems we have studied for so long. Moreover, we start asking with more insistence how the circadian clock is regulated in other organisms, especially those also showing robust rhythmicity in other temporal domains.
To answer those questions, we have at our disposal a large arsenal of methodologies. These range from a whole organism approach, analyzing physiology and behavior, to a more reductionist attitude using genetics, molecular and cellular biology, and post-genomics technologies. The power of this multilevel approach is visible in the huge progress achieved by the chronobiology field in the last 20 years. However, the variety of methods, further multiplied by the peculiarities of each model system, and the hitches added by the temporal dimension, might have a hard impact on the novice.

The aim of *Circadian Rhythms: Methods and Protocols* has been to provide a resource that can be adopted by several types of users: those who are new to circadian biology, those who are already active in the field but are interested in learning new techniques, and researchers who are considering moving to a new model system or undertaking comparative studies and would like to consult protocols applied to different organisms before starting the study of new species. This task has been achieved by collecting a full range of methods, many provided by leading experts in the field, that should satisfy the needs of the novice, by illustrating procedures that have been recently introduced in circadian studies, and by presenting, for many basic techniques, variations to take into account the peculiarities of different model systems.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the contributors who have shared their protocols and experience with the community, making the realization of *Circadian Rhythms: Methods and Protocols* possible.

_Ezio Rosato_
Contents

Preface ..............................................................................................................ⅴ
Contributors .................................................................................................xi

PART I. OVERVIEWS

1. Light, Photoreceptors, and Circadian Clocks ................................. 3
   Russell G. Foster, Mark W. Hankins, and Stuart N. Peirson
2. Statistical Analysis of Biological Rhythm Data ................................. 29
   Harold B. Dowse

PART II. RHYTHMIC READOUTS

3. Rhythmic Conidiation in Neurospora crassa ..................................... 49
   Cas Kramer
4. Monitoring and Analyzing Drosophila Circadian Locomotor Activity ......................................................... 67
   Mauro A. Zordan, Clara Benna, and Gabriella Mazzotta
5. Automated Video Image Analysis of Larval Zebrafish Locomotor Rhythms ..................................................... 83
   Gregory M. Cahill
6. Locomotor Activity in Rodents .............................................................. 95
   Gianluca Tosini
7. Analysis of Circadian Leaf Movement Rhythms in Arabidopsis thaliana ............................................................... 103
   Kieron D. Edwards and Andrew J. Millar
8. Detection of Rhythmic Bioluminescence From Luciferase Reporters in Cyanobacteria ........................................... 115
   Shannon R. Mackey, Jayna L. Ditty, Eugenia M. Clerico, and Susan S. Golden
9. Analysis of Rhythmic Gene Expression in Adult Drosophila Using the Firefly Luciferase Reporter Gene ...................... 131
   Ralf Stanewsky
10. Monitoring Circadian Rhythms in Arabidopsis thaliana Using Luciferase Reporter Genes .................................... 143
    Anthony Hall and Paul Brown
### PART III. IDENTIFICATION OF CLOCK GENES

11. Specialized Techniques for Site-Directed Mutagenesis in Cyanobacteria ................................................................. 155  
   *Eugenia M. Clerico, Jayna L. Ditty, and Susan S. Golden*

   *Kruno Sveric, Moyra Mason, Till Roenneberg, and Martha Merrow*

13. Mutagenesis With *Drosophila* .................................................. 187  
   *Patrick Emery*

14. Mutagenesis in *Arabidopsis* .................................................. 197  
   *Jodi Maple and Simon G. Møller*

15. Yeast Two-Hybrid Screening ................................................. 207  
   *Jodi Maple and Simon G. Møller*

16. Microarrays: Quality Control and Hybridization Protocol ........ 225  
   *Ken-ichiro Uno and Hiroki R. Ueda*

17. Microarrays: Statistical Methods for Circadian Rhythms .......... 245  
   *Rikuhiro Yamada and Hiroki R. Ueda*

18. Identification of Clock Genes Using Difference Gel Electrophoresis .......................................................... 265  
   *Natasha A. Karp and Kathryn S. Lilley*

### PART IV. GENE EXPRESSION: RNA

19. Isolation of Total RNA From *Neurospora* Mycelium ............... 291  
   *Cas Kramer*

20. RNA Extraction From *Drosophila* Heads .............................. 305  
   *Patrick Emery*

21. Extraction of Plant RNA ......................................................... 309  
   *Michael G. Salter and Helen E. Conlon*

22. RNA Extraction From Mammalian Tissues .............................. 315  
   *Stuart N. Peirson and Jason N. Butler*

23. Northern Analysis of Sense and Antisense frequency RNA in *Neurospora crassa* .................................................. 329  
   *Cas Kramer and Susan K. Crosthwaite*

24. RNase Protection Assay .......................................................... 343  
   *Patrick Emery*

25. Quantitative Polymerase Chain Reaction ................................ 349  
   *Stuart N. Peirson and Jason N. Butler*
PART V. GENE EXPRESSION: PROTEINS

26. Protein Extraction, Fractionation, and Purification From Cyanobacteria ................................................................. 365
   Natalia B. Ivleva and Susan S. Golden
27. Protein Extraction From Drosophila Heads ........................................ 375
   Patrick Emery
28. Plant Protein Extraction .................................................................. 379
   Helen E. Conlon and Michael G. Salter
29. Protein Extraction From Mammalian Tissues .................................. 385
   Choogon Lee
30. Western Blotting ............................................................................. 391
   Choogon Lee
31. Coimmunoprecipitation Assay .......................................................... 401
   Choogon Lee
32. In Vitro Phosphorylation and Kinase Assays in Neurospora crassa ...... 407
   Lisa Franchi and Giuseppe Macino

PART VI. IN VITRO SYSTEMS

33. Basic Protocols for Drosophila S2 Cell Line: Maintenance and Transfection .................................................. 415
    M. Fernanda Ceriani
34. Coimmunoprecipitation on Drosophila Cells in Culture ................. 423
    M. Fernanda Ceriani
35. Basic Protocols for Zebrafish Cell Lines: Maintenance and Transfection ........................................................................... 429
    Daniela Vallone, Cristina Santoriello, Srinivas Babu Gondi, and Nicholas S. Foulkes
36. Manipulation of Mammalian Cell Lines for Circadian Studies ...... 443
    Filippo Tamanini
37. Reporter Assays ................................................................................ 455
    M. Fernanda Ceriani
38. Use of Firefly Luciferase Activity Assays to Monitor Circadian Molecular Rhythms In Vivo and In Vitro ........................................ 465
    Wangjie Yu and Paul E. Hardin
39. Suprachiasmatic Nucleus Cultures That Maintain Rhythmic Properties In Vitro ..................................................... 481
    K. Tominaga-Yoshino, Tomoko Ueyama, and Hitoshi Okamura
PART VII. MICROSCOPY ANALYSIS

40. RNA In Situ Hybridizations on Drosophila Whole Mounts ............... 495  
Corinna Wülbeck and Charlotte Helfrich-Förster

41. In Situ Hybridization of Suprachiasmatic Nucleus Slices ............... 513  
Horacio O. de la Iglesia

42. Immunohistochemistry in Drosophila: Sections and Whole Mounts ... 533  
Charlotte Helfrich-Förster

43. Immunocytochemistry on Suprachiasmatic Nucleus Slices ............... 549  
Marta Muñoz Llamosas

44. Immunofluorescence Analysis of Circadian Protein Dynamics  
in Cultured Mammalian Cells .......................................................... 561  
Filippo Tamanini

Index ........................................................................................................... 569
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