Molecular Embryology

Second Edition
Molecular Embryology

Methods and Protocols

Second Edition

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Preface

Most people have some interest in embryos; this probably results, in part, from their interest in understanding the biological origins of themselves and their offspring and, increasingly, concerns about how environmental changes such as pollution might affect human development. Obviously, ethical considerations preclude experimental studies of human embryos and, consequently, the developmental biologist has turned to other species to examine this process. Fortunately, the most significant conclusion to be drawn from the experimental embryology of the last two decades is the manner in which orthologous or closely related molecules are deployed to mediate similar developmental processes in both vertebrates and invertebrates. The molecular mechanisms regulating processes fundamental to most animals, such as axial patterning or axon guidance, are frequently conserved during evolution. (It is now widely believed that the differences between phyla and classes are the result of new genes, arising mostly by duplication and divergence of extant sequences, regulating the appearance of derived characters.)

Other vertebrates are obviously most likely to use the same developmental mechanisms as humans and, within the vertebrate subphylum, the apparent degree of conservation of developmental mechanism is considerable. It has long been recognized that particular vertebrate species offer either distinct advantages in investigating particular stages of development or are especially amenable to particular manipulations. No single animal can provide all the answers because not all types of experiments can be carried out on a single species. Traditionally, developmental biologists have worked on their particular experimental favorite, working, for example, solely on Drosophila, or Xenopus, or the mouse. In the last few years, this has started to change, and there are now increasing numbers of laboratories that have acquired the expertise to work on several different animals and are thus able to harness the experimental advantages of different developmental systems to address specific developmental questions. Alternatively, Developmental Biology departments are becoming organized so that they have expertise in several model organisms. It is the increasing necessity to be able to move between embryos of different vertebrate classes as a project progresses that prompted us to assemble Molecular Embryology: Methods and Protocols, Second Edition. We hope that it will allow researchers to familiarize
themselves with the various commonly studied vertebrate embryos, to make informed choices about which might be best suited to their investigations, and to understand the techniques by which they might be manipulated.

Sadly, while this book was going to press, Nigel Holder, one of its contributors, passed away. Nigel was an excellent developmental biologist, a founder of the Developmental Biology Research Group at King’s College, and had recently been appointed to the Chair of Anatomy and Human Biology at University College London. He was both a colleague and friend to us and to many of the other contributors to this volume. He is greatly missed.

Paul T. Sharpe
Ivor Mason
Preface to Second Edition

The five years or so between the current and first editions of this volume have seen perhaps the greatest period in growth and productivity in the field of Developmental Biology. This is reflected in the addition of new Chapters detailing techniques that have arisen during the intervening period including RNA interference, electroporation, “EC culture” of chick embryos, electroporation, new approaches for efficient production of transgenic zebrafish and microarrays.

We also thank the authors of other Chapters for updating their contributions since the last Edition. Some Chapters remain entirely unchanged, reflecting one of the great delights of this field, namely that “classical” techniques, unchanged for decades, are routinely employed alongside and to complement “state-of-the-art” approaches.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to The MRC, The Wellcome Trust and The BBSRC for supporting the research in our own laboratories. In addition, IM would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for providing him with a Research Fellowship, which greatly facilitated the completion of this volume.

Paul Sharpe and Ivor Mason
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Contents

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

Part I. The Mouse Embryo 1

1 The Mouse as a Developmental Model................................................ 3
   Paul T. Sharpe
2 Culture of Postimplantation Mouse Embryos ................................. 7
   Paul Martin and David L. Cockroft
3 Organ Culture in the Analysis of Tissue Interactions ...................... 23
   Irma Thesleff and Carin Sahlberg
4 Treatment of Mice with Retinoids In Vivo and In Vitro ................. 31
   Gillian M. Morriss-Kay
5 Analysis of Skeletal Ontogenesis through Differential
   Staining of Bone and Cartilage ....................................................... 37
   Michael J. Depew
6 Cell Grafting and Labeling in Postimplantation Mouse Embryos ...... 47
   Gabriel A. Quinlan, Poh-Lynn Khoo, Nicole Wong,
   Paul A. Trainor, and Patrick P.L. Tam
7 Production of Transgenic Rodents by the Microinjection
   of Cloned DNA into Fertilized One-Celled Eggs .............................. 71
   David Murphy
8 Cre Recombinase Mediated Alterations of the Mouse
   Genome Using Embryonic Stem Cells ........................................... 111
   Anna-Katerina Hadjantonakis, Melinda Pirity,
   and András Nagy
9 Gene Trapping in Mouse Embryonic Stem Cells ............................. 133
   Jane Brennan and William C. Skarnes
10 Application of lacZ Transgenic Mice
   to Cell Lineage Studies ................................................................... 149
   Catherine M. Watson, Paul A. Trainor, Tatiana Radziewic,
   Gregory J. Pelka, Sheila X. Zhou, Maala Parameswaran,
   Gabriel A. Quinlan, Monica Gordon, Karin Sturm,
   and Patrick P. L. Tam
11 Transgenic RNA Interference to Investigate Gene
   Function in the Mouse .................................................................... 165
   Tilo Kunath
12 Mouse Primordial Germ Cells: *Isolation and In Vitro Culture* ............... 187
_Patricia A. Labosky and Brigid L. M. Hogan_

13 Gene Transfer to the Rodent Embryo by Retroviral Vectors .................. 201
_Marla B. Luskin_

**PART II. THE CHICKEN EMBryo**

14 The Avian Embryo: *An Overview* .......................................................... 223
_Ivor Mason_

15 Chick Embryos: *Incubation and Isolation* ............................................. 231
_Ivor Mason_

16 New Culture .................................................................................................. 235
_Amata Hornbruch_

17 EC Culture: *A Method to Culture Early Chick Embryos* ......................... 255
_Andrea Streit_

18 Grafting Hensen’s Node .............................................................................. 265
_Claudio D. Stern_

19 Grafting of Somites ..................................................................................... 277
_Claudio D. Stern_

20 Microsurgical Manipulation of the Notochord ......................................... 289
_Lúcia E. Alvares, Corinne Lours, Amira El-Hanfy, and Susanne Dietrich_

21 Transplantation of Avian Neural Tissue .................................................. 305
_Sarah Guthrie_

22 Grafting of Apical Ridge and Polarizing Region ........................................ 313
_Cheryl Tickle_

23 Tissue Recombinations in Collagen Gels .................................................. 325
_Marysia Placzek_

24 Quail–Chick Chimeras .............................................................................. 337
_Marie-Aimée Teillet, Catherine Ziller, and Nicole M. Le Douarin_

25 Using Fluorescent Dyes for Fate Mapping, Lineage Analysis, and Axon Tracing in the Chick Embryo ............... 351
_Jonathan D.W. Clarke_

26 Gene Transfer in Avian Embryos Using Replication-Competent Retroviruses .................................................. 363
_Cairine Logan and Philippa Francis-West_

27 Electroporation in Avian Embryos .......................................................... 377
_Jun-ichi Funahashi and Harukazu Nakamura_

**PART III. AMPHIBIAN EMBRYOS**

28 An Overview of *Xenopus* Development ............................................. 385
_C. Michael Jones and James C. Smith_

29 Mesoderm Induction Assays ..................................................................... 395
_C. Michael Jones and James C. Smith_
30 Experimental Embryological Methods for Analysis of Neural Induction in the Amphibian
   
   Ray Keller, Ann Poznanski, and Tamira Elul

31 A Method for Generating Transgenic Frog Embryos
   
   Shoko Ishibashi, Kristin L. Kroll, and Enrique Amaya

32 Axolotl/Newt
   
   Malcolm Maden

PART IV. ZEBRAFISH AND MEDAKA

33 The Zebrafish: An Overview of Its Early Development
   
   Nigel Holder and Qiling Xu

34 Small-Scale Marker-Based Screening for Mutations in Zebrafish Development
   
   Peter D. Currie, Thomas F. Schilling, and Philip W. Ingham

35 Microinjection and Cell Transplantation in Zebrafish Embryos
   
   Qiling Xu, Derek Stemple, and Katherine Joubin

36 Recent Advances in Meganuclease- and Transposon-Mediated Transgenesis of Medaka and Zebrafish
   
   Clemens Grabher and Joachim Wittbrodt

37 Retinoids in Nonmammalian Embryos
   
   Malcolm Maden

PART V. NONVERTEBRATE CHORDATES

38 Protochordates
   
   Peter W. H. Holland and Hiroshi Wada

PART VI. MOLECULAR TECHNIQUES

39 Subtractive Hybridization and Construction of cDNA Libraries
   
   Bruce Blumberg and Juan Carlos Izpisúa Belmonte

40 Differential Display of Eukaryotic mRNA
   
   Antonio Tugores and Juan Carlos Izpisúa Belmonte

41 Using DNA Microarrays
   
   Clare Pritchard, Peter Underhill, and Andy Greenfield

42 Profiling Gene Transcription in the Developing Embryo: Microarray Analysis on Gene Chips
   
   David Chambers and Andrew Lumsden

43 RT-PCR on Embryos Using Degenerate Oligonucleotide Primers
   
   Anthony Graham

44 Single-Cell RT-PCR cDNA Subtraction
   
   Ebrahim Sakhinia, Damian L. Weaver, César Núñez, Clare Brunet, Victoria Bostock, and Gerard Brady

45 In-Situ Hybridization of Radioactive Riboprobes to RNA in Tissue Sections
   
   Radma Mahmood and Ivor Mason
46 In-Situ Hybridization and Immunohistochemistry in Whole Embryos.......................................................................................................................... 687

Carol Irving

47 Wholemount In Situ Hybridization to Xenopus Embryos .................. 697

C. Michael Jones and James C. Smith

48 Wholemount In Situ Hybridization to Amphioxus Embryos ............... 703

Peter W.H. Holland

49 In-Situ Hybridization to Sections (Nonradioactive).......................... 707

Maria Rex and Paul J. Scotting

50 Immunohistochemistry Using Polyester Wax...................................... 717

Andrew Kent

51 Immunohistochemistry on Whole Embryos....................................... 725

Ivor Mason

52 Whole Embryo Assays for Programmed Cell Death ......................... 729

Anthony Graham

53 Protein Techniques: Immunoprecipitation, In Vitro Kinase Assays, and Western Blotting................................................................. 735

Clive Dickson

PART VII MICROSCOPY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

54 Microscopy and Photomicrography Techniques............................... 747

Richard J.T. Wingate

Index........................................................................................................ 773
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