PsPMEP, a pollen specific pectin methylesterase of pea (*Pisum sativum* L.)

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Key words: PsPMEP, pectin methylesterase (PME), pea (*Pisum sativum* L.), pollen specific, gene promoter, pollen tube growth.

Running title: PsPMEP a pollen specific pectin methylesterase

Abstract

Pectin methylesterases (PMEs) are a family of enzymes involved in plant reproductive processes such as pollen development and pollen tube growth. We have isolated and characterized *PsPMEP*, a pea (*Pisum sativum* L.) pollen specific gene that encodes a protein with homology to PMEs. Sequence analysis showed that *PsPMEP* belongs to group 2 PMEs, which are characterised by the presence of a processable amino-terminal PMEI (inhibitory) domain followed by the catalytic PME domain. Moreover, several motifs highly conserved among PMEs contain the essential amino acid residues involved in enzyme substrate binding and catalysis. Northern blot and *in situ* hybridization analyses showed that *PsPMEP* is expressed in pollen grains from 4 days before anthesis till anther dehiscence and in pollinated carpels. In the *PsPMEP* promoter region we have identified three CArG boxes showing the consensus motif C[A/T]8G, which is preferentially bound by the MADS domain of the transcriptional regulator AGAMOUS-like 15 (AGL15), as well as other conserved cis regulatory elements that have been associated to gene pollen specific expression. Expression analysis of *PsPMEP* promoter fused to the *uidA* reporter gene in *Arabidopsis thaliana* plants showed a similar expression pattern when compared with pea, indicating that this promoter is also functional in a non-leguminous plant. GUS expression was detected in mature pollen grains, during pollen germination and during pollen tube penetration and elongation along the transmitting tract and when the pollen tube reaches the embryo sac in the ovule.

*PsPMEP* GenBank accession n.: KC964536
Introduction

Pectin methylesterases (PMEs) produced by plants are involved in diverse physiological processes associated to both vegetative and reproductive development (Pelloux et al. 2007). Their roles in reproductive development have mainly concerned with pollen development and pollen tube growth (Jiang et al. 2005; Francis et al., 2006; Tiang et al., 2006; Bosch and Hepler; 2006). PMEs belong to family 8 (CE8) of carbohydrate esterases (http://www.cazy.org/fam/CE8.html). These enzymes catalyze the specific demethylesterification of the homogalacturonan (HGA) fraction, a major component of pectins, within plant cell walls, releasing methanol and protons, and creating negatively charged carboxyl groups in the process. The demethylesterified HGA can either form Ca\(^{2+}\) bonds, which promote the formation of the so-called ‘egg-box’ model structure, thus forming gels, or become a target for pectin-degrading enzymes, such as polygalacturonases, affecting the texture and rigidity of the cell wall. The enzymatic activity of PMEs can lead either to cell wall loosening or to cell wall stiffening, depending on the apoplastic pH and the availability of divalent cations, thereby affecting shape and growth of plant cells. Thus, PMEs have major roles in pectin remodelling in muro. PMEs belong to large multigene families and their primary and quaternary structures are conserved among plant taxa (Markowic and Janecek 2004).

Higher plant PMEs are frequently so-called pre-pro-proteins, in which the mature, active part of the protein (PME domain) is preceded by an N-terminal extension (pro-region) that varies in length and shows a relatively low level of amino acids identity between isoforms. The pre-region is required for protein targeting to the endoplasmic reticulum, while only the mature part of the PME, without the pro-region, is extracted from the cell wall. Although several functions for the pro-region have been suggested (Micheli 2001; Markowic and Janecek 2004; Pelloux et al. 2007; Jolie et al. 2010), including targeting of PME to the cell wall, correct folding of PME and inhibition of PME enzyme activity, none has been conclusively established. Transient expression studies with green fluorescent protein (GFP) fusion proteins suggest that the pro-region is important for the correct targeting of the mature PME to the apoplast and data from in vitro growth analysis further support the idea that this region also acts as an intramolecular inhibitor of PME activity (Bosch et al. 2005). Spatial and temporal regulation of PME activity during plant development is based on a large family of isoforms. The pro-region shares similarities with the PME inhibitor domain (PMEI domain; Camardella et al. 2000; Scognamiglio et al. 2003). PME inhibitors are thought to be key regulators of cell wall stability at the tip of the pollen tube. A classification has been created, based on the presence or absence of the PMEI domain: Arabidopsis PMEs of group 1 (250 to 400 amino acids; 27-45 kDa) have no PMEI domain; those of group 2 (500-900 amino acids; 52- 105 kDa) have 1-3 PMEI domains. These groups were formerly known as types II and I, respectively. Type-I PME genes contain one to three introns and the deduced proteins include a long pro-region, whereas type-II genes contain five or six introns and the pro-region of the deduced proteins is missing in most cases. The mature PMEs have similar structures and belong to the family of parallel \(\beta\)-helix proteins with major differences in loops making up the
substrate binding cleft. The active site of PMEs is located in the long shallow cleft lined by two absolutely conserved aspartic acid residues in the center, Asp 136 and Asp 157 in the carrot PME, the first 3D crystallographic structure obtained of a plant PME (Johanson et al. 2002; Gummadi et al. 2007).

Many of the characterized genes which are specifically expressed during pollen development, pollen germination and pollen tube growth encode proteins that are likely to play a role in cell wall metabolism, like is the case of PMEs. Earlier studies revealed that expression of PME genes is strongly regulated in a tissue-specific manner (Li et al. 2002). The temporal expression of such genes has been studied and they are found to be expressed late in microsporogenesis reaching a maximum in mature microsporocytes. In some cases continued expression in the pollen tube has also been demonstrated (Kononowicz et al. 1992; Bosch and Hepler 2005). The genetic and molecular mechanisms that control the penetration of pollen tubes through stigmatic and stylar tissues still poorly understood. The wall in the tip region of the pollen tube is composed of a single pectin layer. The PMEs catalyze the demethylesterification of homogalactururonans releasing acidic pectins and methanol, contributing to cell development by regulating the mechanical and chemical properties of plant cell walls (Micheli 2001).

Several studies have led to the identification of pollen tube-specific PMEs that could be involved in the processes of pollen tube development and its interaction with female floral tissues (Wakeley et al. 1998; Futamura et al. 2000; Li et al. 2002). Recent advances in our understanding of PME functions in reproductive development have mainly concerned their roles in pollen development and pollen tube growth demonstrated using reverse genetics. The first functional analysis of a pollen tube-expressed PME was described by Jiang et al. (2005). VANGUARD1 (VGD1) is an Arabidopsis thaliana gene that encodes a PME-homologous protein required for enhancing the pollen tube growth in the style and transmitting tract tissues. The vgd1 mutation resulted in defects of male gametophytic function (pollen tubes structurally unstable) but did not affect female gametophytic function. Moreover, it has been shown in Arabidopsis that QUARTET1 (QRT1), which is expressed in pollen and surrounding anther tissues, has a role in pollen tetrad separation during floral development and has PME activity when expressed in E. coli (Francis et al. 2006). Rodriguez-Llorente et al. (2004) reported the presence of a gene family of at least eight differentially expressed PMEs in the model legume Medicago truncatula. One subfamily is represented by a single symbiotic gene (MIPER) that could participate in the infection process during nodulation and two pollen-expressed genes that could be involved in pollen grain development (MtPEF1 and MtPEF2).

Pollen specific PMEs are of special interest because their putative roles in pollen maturation, germination and pollen tube growth. Here we show the isolation and characterization of a pollen specific gene of pea (PsPMEP) which product shows homology to PMEs. The PsPMEP promoter has different conserved cis regulatory elements putatively responsible of gene pollen specific expression and three CArG boxes showing the consensus motif that is preferentially bound by the MADS domain of the transcriptional regulator AGL15 (Tang and Pery 2003). The PsPMEP promoter fused to the uidA reporter gene shows specific GUS activity in the
mature pollen grains, during pollen germination and in the growing pollen tubes of transgenic Arabidopsis thaliana plants. Therefore, the PsPMEP promoter interestingly maintains its expression pattern in a non-leguminous species and suggest that PsPMEP plays a role during pollen development and pollen tube growth.

Materials and methods

Plant material
Pisum sativum cv. Alaska plants were used in this study. Plants were grown in the greenhouse, at 22°C (day) and 18°C (night) with a 16 h light / 8 h dark photoperiod, in a mixture of soil:sand (3:1) irrigated with Hoagland N\(^+\) solution supplemented with oligoelements (Hewitt 1966). Arabidopsis thaliana cv. Columbia (Nottingham Arabidopsis stock centre, UK) plants were grown in cabinets at 21°C under long-day (16 h light) conditions, illuminated by cool-white fluorescent lamps (150 \(\mu\)mol quanta m\(^{-2}\) sec\(^{-1}\)), in a (1:1:1) mixture of sphagnum : perlite : vermiculite and irrigated with water and, once a week, with the same mineral solution.

Isolation and sequence analysis of the PsPMEP gene
Poly(A\(^+\)) RNA obtained from pea pollen and pollinated stigmas was amplified by RT-PCR to isolate cDNA fragments with homology to PME genes. For preparation of poly(A\(^+\)) RNA from total RNA we used the Dynabeads mRNA purification kit (Invitrogen, http://www.invitrogen.com). RT-PCR experiments were carry out using degenerated primers corresponding to two conserved domains in almost all plant PMEs: GVYNE (5’-GGNGTNTAYAAYGAR-3’) and YLGRPW (5’-CCA NGGNCTTCTARRTA-3’). We isolated a cDNA fragment corresponding to the expected length, 552 bp, which was cloned in the pGem-T-easy vector (Promega, http://www.promega.es/) and sequenced. Later on, a screening of a pea genomic library generated in the vector EMBL4 using partially EcoRI digested genomic DNA was performed, using the 552 pb fragment obtained by RT-PCR as a probe. The hybridization and washings were carried out using standard procedures (Sambrook et al. 1989). \(\lambda\) DNA from the positive plaques was extracted using a \(\lambda\) DNA extraction kit (Qiagen, http://www.qiagen.com) and a 4.8 Kb \(\lambda\) DNA fragment containing the complete PsPMEP gene was sequenced (GenBank accession n.: KC964536). Primers used for sequencing are listed in supplementary table S1. The full-length ORF cDNA was isolated by RT-PCR from Poly(A\(^+\)) RNA obtained from pea pollinated stigmas, using primers containing the start and the stop codon (5’-ATGGCAGAGGTTGGATGCAC-3’ and 5’-TCACCATGTAAGCAGTGTCCTTTTG-3’), and cloned into the pGEM-T-easy vector (Promega, http://www.promega.es/).

Sequence alignment and similarity comparisons of the inferred protein were performed using the MACVECTOR 9.5 software (MacVector, Inc., http://www.macvector.com/). The deduced amino acid sequence was aligned using the CLUSTALW tool in MACVECTOR 9.5 and further refined by hand. Secondary structure prediction of the mature protein was performed using the SOPMA
application (http://npsa-pbil.ibcp.fr/cgi-bin/npsa_automat.pl?page=/NPSA/npsa_sopma.html; Combet et al., 2000). Frequency distribution of different cis-regulatory elements in the PsPMEP promoter was analyzed in the PLACE database (http://www.dna.affrc.go.jp/PLACE/).

**Phylogenetic tree**

The phylogenetic tree was inferred by Neighbor-Joining using Poisson-corrected amino acid distances. Reliability of internal nodes was assessed using bootstrap with 1000 pseudo-replicates. Tree inference was conducted using MEGA version 4 (Tamura et al. 2007). The tree is based on the alignment of conserved PMEs domains (Pfam01095) predicted with the SMART program (http://smart.embl-heidelberg.de/).

**Structure modelling**

The PSIPRED server (http://bioinf.cs.ucl.ac.uk/psipred/) was used to search for protein structures suitable to be used as templates for modelling. Carrot pectin methylsterase (Johansson et al. 2002) (PDB id. 1GQ8) was chosen as the template for mature PsPMEP. The Swiss Model server (http://swissmodel.expasy.org/) was used to generate the enzyme model. DeepView-Swiss-PdbViewer (http://spdbv.vital-it.ch/) was used to analyse the structures and generate the figures.

**Expression analysis of PsPMEP**

For Northern blot, root nodules, leaves, roots, stems and flower buds were collected, frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80°C. Total RNA (15 µg) was isolated using 500 µl of extraction buffer (4% p-aminosalicylic acid, 1% 1,5 naphtalenodisulfonic acid) and 1 ml of phenol:chloroform (1:1). The RNA was precipitated in 1/10 V of NaOAc 3M, 2V of EtOH 100% on ice. The resultant pellet was dissolved in water and finally the RNA precipitation took place overnight at 4°C on an equal volume of 8M lithium chloride. Total RNA was separated by electrophoresis in formaldehyde-agarose gel, transferred to Hybond N+ membranes (Amersham Biosciences, http://www.gehealthcare.com/), and hybridized with the 32P-labelled 552 bp fragment under standard conditions (Sambrook et al. 1989). RNA in situ hybridization with digoxigenin-labelled probes was performed on 8 µM longitudinal paraffin sections of Pisum sativum flowers as described in Gómez et al. (2004) and on pollen grains (whole-mount) as described in de Almeida Engler et al. (1998). Digoxigenin-labelled antisense and sense RNA probes were synthesized from the 552 bp cDNA fragment of PsPMEP cloned into the pGEM-T-easy vector (Promega, http://www.promega.es/), using the corresponding T3 and T7 RNA polymerases and following the manufacturer’s instructions (Roche, http://www.roche-applied-science.com/). The RNA probes were hydrolyzed to 150 nt before use in the hybridizations reactions. Control experiments were performed with the sense probe and no significant signal was detected. Photographs were taken with a light microscope (Eclipse E600 Nikon, http://www.nikon.com).

**Chimaeric construct PsPMEP::uidA and production of transgenic A. thaliana plants**
Analysis of the *PsPMEP* promoter was carried out using a chimaeric construct in the vector pBI101 containing the nopaline synthase constitutive promoter (nos-pro) fused to the *nptII* gene (kanamycin resistance) and a 2138 bp HindIII/Sall fragment containing the 5’ region upstream of the *PsPMEP* start codon fused to the *uidA* gene (β-glucuronidase) and the polyadenilation signal of the nopaline synthase gene (nos-ter) as terminator in the 3’ ends of both genes (Fig. 5a). *Arabidopsis thaliana* cv. Columbia genetic transformation was performed by vacuum infiltration and selection of the plants resistant to kanamycin as described Bechtold et al. (1993), using the strain C58 of *A. tumefaciens*. The kanamycin resistant plants were transferred to pots with vermiculite: perlite: peat (1: 1: 1) and grown in culture chambers at 22ºC in long-day conditions until the seeds were collected. Control plants were also transformed with the empty plasmid pBI101.

β-glucuronidase (GUS) histochemical assay

Transformed plants were submitted to histochemical analysis of the β-glucuronidase activity. Vegetative and floral tissues were infiltrated using two vacuum pulses of 5 min in a GUS assay buffer [0.1 M NaH₂PO₄, 10mM Na₂EDTA.H₂O, 0.5 M K₃Fe(CN)₆, 0.1% Triton X-100 and 0.3% 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl β-D-glucuronide (X-Gluc)] and incubated in this solution at 37ºC for 16 hours. Afterwards, de-staining was carried out using successive washes with ethanol of 50º, 70º and 90º. GUS positive zones were identified as those coloured blue. Light photographs were made with a dissecting microscope (MZ28 Leica, www.leica-microsystems.com/) and a bright-field microscope (Diaphot Nikon, http://www.nikon.com).

Results

*PsPMEP* isolation and sequence analyses

In order to isolate and characterize pollen specific genes belonging to the PMEs family in pea, mRNA from pollinated stigmas and pollen was amplified by RT-PCR using degenerated primers of well conserved regions present in different pollen specific PMEs. The RT-PCR fragment obtained was used in the screening of a pea genomic library and five putative clones were isolated. After four consecutive rounds of screening, a purified phage clone containing a full size cDNA was subjected to further analysis. A 4800 pb cDNA fragment was sequenced and, after verifying that contained a gene with homology to PMEs, was named *PsPMEP* (GenBank accession n. KC964536). The coding region is comprised between the nucleotides 2139 (ATG) and 4009 (TGA). This region is interrupted by one intron at position 3183-3269. At nucleotides 4813 to 4818 was located a consensus sequence of polyadenilation (AATAAT).

The deduced protein sequence has 584 aminoacids, an estimated molecular weight of 65.57 kDa and an estimated isoelelectric point of 6.83. The hydropathic profile of PsPMEP shows a region of hydrophobic amino acids. This region is located between the amino acids 1 and 29, and could represent the signal peptide. Protein sequence comparison with different PMEs shows...
that the mature protein has 353 amino acids, an estimated molecular weight of 40.10 kDa and an estimated isoelectric point of 8.01.

The deduced amino acid sequence of the mature protein shows high homology with other pollen specific PMEs of different plant species, including Inverted Repeat-Lacking Clade (IRLC) legumes like *Medicago truncatula* (Q9SC89, Q9SC90) and *Medicago sativa* (Q42920). Other plant species with pollen specific PMEs showing homologies with PsPMEP are: *Arabidopsis thaliana* (AAX13972, O80722, Q9FJ21, AEE35001, ABI97858.1), *Brassica napus* (P41510), *Brassica rapa* (Q42608), *Petunia integrifolia* subsp. Inflate (Q43043), *Nicotiana tabacum* (Q9SC89, Q9SC90) and *Zea mays* (Q24596). A Neighbor-Joining Tree regarding the homologies between PsPMEP and the selected pollen specific PMEs is shown in Fig. 1. We inferred the phylogeny based on the alignment of mature enzyme sequences of 14 representative PMEs from pollen, which are clustered into four clades (A to D). The low bootstrap values suggest that sequences comprised in cluster A forms only one clade. All four clades are well supported by bootstrap. Remarkably, several of the lineages, including PsPMEP, show evidence of accelerated rates of evolution. However, to identify signatures of accelerated evolution would require further evolutionary analysis that may shed light on the selective constrains underlying such accelerated evolution.

**PsPMEP structure analysis**

The analysis of PsPMEP sequence revealed that it is a typical group 2 pectin methylesterase composed by a pre region (signal peptide), comprising amino acids 1 to 29, a PMEI domain, which should have an inhibitory effect on the enzymatic activity, and a catalytic PME domain. A processing signal (RRLL sequence) is present between the two domains (Fig. 2a and b). Only the polypeptide region corresponding to the PME domain is present in the cell wall as mature protein. A search of the protein Data Bank for homologues of PsPMEP yielded carrot PME, with a sequence identity of 46%, as the best available template to model the mature protein. Fig. 2c shows the model of the PME domain. Similarly to other proteins of the CE8 family, the structure consists of a single domain made of right-handed parallel \(\beta\)-strands folded into a triangular prism. Several motifs highly conserved among PMEs (underlined amino acids in Fig. 2a and depicted in blue in Fig. 2c) contain essential residues (Q363, Q385, D386, D407 and R474) involved in substrate binding and catalysis. Fig. 2d shows a detail of the catalytic site of the enzyme. The positioning of residues D407 and D386 agree with their presumed role as nucleophile and acid/base catalyst, respectively, on the deesterification reaction.

**PsPMEP expression pattern**

Northern blot analysis showed that this gene is specifically expressed in stamens from 4 days before anthesis until anther dehiscence (Fig. 3a). This timeframe corresponds to the developmental stage in which the microspore mitosis is over and the walls (exin and intin) of the pollen grain begin to be synthesized (pollen maturation). No *PsPMEP* expression was located in other vegetative or floral tissues (Fig. 3b and c). At stage 2 days before anthesis, *PsPMEP*
expression was specifically located in anthers and in pollinated carpels after anthesis (Fig. 3c). These results indicated that PsPMEP could be a pollen specific gene.

The expression analysis of this gene was also performed by in situ hybridization on paraffin sections of pea anthers at different developmental stages. We observed that the gene expression is located only in the pollen grains (Fig. 4a and b). Furthermore, “whole mount” hybridizations using isolated pollen grains during the stage of anthesis indicated gene activity in mature pollen (Fig. 4c and d).

Characterization of the PsPMEP promoter

To characterize the PsPMEP promoter region, 2138 bp upstream of the transcription start codon were sequenced. The sequence analysis of this region showed the presence of different regulatory motifs involved in the specificity and intensity of pollen gene expression. Three cis regulatory elements of special relevance were identified: the AGAAA and AATTGA motifs that have been described to be responsible of the pollen specific expression of different genes and three CArG boxes showing the consensus motif C[A/T]8G, which is preferentially bound by the MADS domain transcriptional regulator AGL15. The well conserved cis regulatory element AATTGA, located at positions -647(+), -845(-), contains the TGA triplet that was shown to comprise an active part in other similarly regulated pollen specific promoters. The pollen specific motif AGAAA was located at positions -187, -622, -1037, -1170, -1436(+), -2097(-). The CArG boxes for AGL15 were located at positions -266, -384, -985(+-). Other putative pollen specific motifs identified in the PsPMEP promoter sequence are summarized in supplementary table S2.

The functional analysis of the PsPMEP promoter was achieved by genetic transformation of Arabidopsis thaliana plants, using a chimaeric construct in the vector pBI101 with the PsPMEP promoter driving the expression of the uidA reporter gene (Fig. 5a). The results obtained showed a similar expression pattern of this gene in A. thaliana when compared with the pollen specific expression of PsPMEP in pea. GUS activity was located in anthers (pollen sacs) from 4 days before anthesis to anthesis (Fig. 5c and d) and it was restricted to the later developmental stages of the pollen grains (pollen maturation; Fig. 5d, arrow). High GUS expression was also detected during pollen germination (Figure 5e, arrow). No GUS activity was detected in leaves (Fig. 5f), shoots (Fig. 5g), roots (Fig. 5h), unpollinated carpels (Fig. 5i), siliques (Fig. 5j) or seeds (Fig. 5k). GUS expression was maintained during pollen tube elongation along the transmitting tract of the style and ovary (Fig. 5l, arrow). This expression pattern was maintained till the pollen tube reached the embryo sac in the ovule (Fig. 5m, n; arrows). These results indicated that the 2138 bp fragment contains the regulatory sequences necessary to direct the PsPMEP expression, showing the same pollen specific pattern in Arabidopsis than in pea. In addition, we detected that PsPMEP is also expressed during pollen germination and pollen tube growth.
Discussion

Pollen tube growth and progression in the carpel is an important step in the sexual reproduction of a flowering plant. Progression of the pollen tube through stigma, style, and transmitting tract is essential for delivery of sperm nuclei to the egg cells embedded deeply within female tissues. During this process the pollen tubes invade the stigmatic tissue, penetrate the style, and deposit the two sperm cells into the embryo sac where they fuse with the egg and central cell to form the zygote and endosperm. However, the genetic and molecular mechanisms that control the penetration of pollen tubes through stigmatic and stylar tissues are currently poorly understood. The wall of the pollen tube tip is composed of a single layer of pectin and, unlike most other plant cell walls, does not contain cellulose or callose. Pectin methylesterases (PMEs) likely play a central role in the pollen tube elongation and determination of pollen morphology (Tian et al. 2006). Moreover, a compatible interaction between pollen tubes and stigmatic cells is required for triggering degradation of the stigmatic and stylar cell walls (Atkinson et al. 1993; Hiscock et al. 1994; Johnson and Preuss 2002; Lord and Russell 2002).

PME-related genes are expressed in pollen of many diverse plant species, including legumes like alfalfa (Qiu and Erickson 1995) or *Medicago truncatula* (Rodríguez-Llorente et al. 2004). Here we described a pea pollen specific gene that codifies a protein with homology to PMEs and with a putative role in pollen maturation, pollen germination and pollen tube growth. PsPMEP sequence analysis showed the typical composition of group 2 methylesterases (Pelloux et al. 2007) made of a pre-region (signal peptide), which will drive the protein to the endoplasmatic reticulum, a pro-region (PMI, inhibitory domain) present in many plant PMEs and invertases and a catalytic domain (PME, mature protein). The pro-PME is modified in the Golgi and secreted later to the apoplastic space. Only the region located between the amino acids 260 to 560 of PsPMEP would be finally present in the cell wall as mature protein. This catalytic domain, presumably active, is highly similar to carrot PME (Johanson et al. 2002), which we used as template for modelling. Markovic and Janecek (2004) carried out a comparison of 127 amino acid sequences of the CE8 family. Their analysis showed the existence of five conserved motifs: 44_GxYxE, 113_QAVAL, 135_QDTL, 157_DFIFG, 223_LGRPW (*Daucus carota* numbering) holding critical residues for substrate binding and enzyme activity. Thus, Q113 and Q135 form an anion hole which stabilizes the negatively charged transition product of the catalytic reaction. D157 and D136 are respectively the nucleophile and acid/base catalyst whereas R225 interacts with the nucleophile assuring its right spatial orientation. All these residues are present and correctly positioned in mature PsPMEP, strongly supporting that PsPMEP encodes for a functional esterase.

In the *PsPMEP* promoter region we have identified a conserved cis regulatory element (AATTGA) at position -647/-642 upstream of the ATG codon, which has been described to be responsible of the pollen specific expression in the alfalfa *MsPG3* promoter (Rodríguez-Llorente et al. 2004). Moreover, analysis of the *MsPG11* regulatory region revealed the presence of an AAATGA motif, which was described by Weterings et al. (1995) in the NTP303 promoter of *N.
tabacum and the Bp10 promoter of B. napus as a putative pollen specific cis-regulatory element. In all these motifs, the TGA triplet was shown to be important for the pollen specific activity. The possibility that expression of the reporter gene in the pollen could be controlled through this AATTGA motif in the MsPG3 promoter was investigated in Nicotiana tabacum plants by mutating the TGA triplet. This TGA sequence was changed to AAA and the resulting mutated version of the complete MsPG3 promoter was fused to the uidA (GUS) reporter gene and introduced into tobacco. A low level of expression of the reporter gene in the transgenic plants carrying the mutated promoter region suggested that the expression of this promoter in tobacco pollen grains was effectively regulated through the AATTGA element. Other interesting motif present in the PsPMEP promoter is AGAAA, which is responsible of the specific activation in pollen of the tomato LAT52 gene (Bate and Twell 1998).

We have also identified three CArG boxes showing the consensus motif C[A/T]_nG, which is preferentially bound by the MADS domain transcriptional regulator AGAMOUS-Like 15 (AGL15; Tang and Perry 2003). MADS-box genes encode a large family of transcription factors, most of them are expressed during reproductive development controlling flowering time, meristem and floral organ identity and fruit development. AGL15 is the only member of the MIKC subgroup identified to date that is preferentially expressed during embryo development (Zhu and Perry 2005). Therefore, PsPMEP could be a target gene of the MADS domain protein AGL15. However AGL15 regulatory function at the molecular level is still missing. Therefore, the presence of the above mentioned CArG boxes suggests that PsPMEP could be a target gene of the MADS domain protein AGL15. This molecular interaction, if confirmed experimentally, could help to uncover a role for AGL15 in the control of pollen development.

In higher plants, different PME isoforms are encoded by multiple gene families (Richard et al. 1996; Micheli et al. 1998; Markovic and Janecek 2004) and act in the demethylesterification of cell wall pectin, contributing to different processes of plant development (Micheli 2001). Therefore, the PsPMEP product may be involved in growth of the pollen tube by modification of the pollen tube wall. PsPMEP was expressed specifically in developing pollen grains and it is not expressed elsewhere. Functional analysis of the PsPMEP promoter fused to the uidA gene showed a similar expression pattern of this gene in A. thaliana when compared with the pollen specific expression of PsPMEP in pea. GUS expression was located initially in the anthers (pollen sacs) at 4 days before anthesis till anther dehiscence and it was restricted to the later developmental stages of the pollen grains (pollen maturation). High GUS expression was also detected during pollen germination and the expression was maintained during pollen tube elongation along the transmitting tract of the style and ovary. This expression pattern was maintained till the pollen tube reached the embryo sac in the ovule. These results indicated that the PsPMEP promoter is also functional in a non-leguminous plant, showing the same pollen specific expression pattern than in pea.

Studies have shown that mature PMEs could have different modes of action. They may act either randomly or linearly along the pectin chain (Markovic and Kohn 1984; Micheli 2001). It is commonly believed that random demethylesterification of pectin depends on acidic PMEs,
whereas linear demethylesterification of pectin requires basic PMEs (Micheli 2001). The PsPMEP mature protein showed a predicted basic isoelectric point of 8.61. Therefore, PsPMEP may act by linear demethylesterification of pollen wall pectin. The linear demethylesterification on homogalacturonans by PME gives rise to blocks of free carboxyl groups that could interact with Ca\(^{2+}\), creating a pectate gel (Goldberg 1996). The Ca\(^{2+}\) pectate gel is believed to contribute to cell wall stiffening and cell attachment by limitation of the action of endopolygalaturonases and formation of Ca\(^{2+}\) pectate gel lawn.

To date there is not any annotation in the GenBank concerning genes with homology to pollen specific PMEs in pea (*Pisum sativum* L.), a model legume also relevant by its agronomic interest. We have identified a new pea pollen specific PME (PsPMEP) and characterized its native expression pattern by Northern-blot and *in situ* hybridization. Also, we introduced a *PsPMEP* promoter-gus gene fusion into *Arabidopsis thaliana* plants, corroborating the spatial and temporal expression of *PsPMEP* previously observed in pea. Our results suggest that *PsPMEP* could be implicated in pollen development and pollen tube growth through stigma, style and transmitting tract within female tissues. Further functional analyses, using reverse genetics approaches, are needed to confirm the role of the PsPMEP protein in such processes. A possibility is to silence the orthologous gene in the model legume *Medicago truncatula* which is relatively easy to transform. In addition, the *PsPMEP* pollen specific promoter seem to be a promising candidate to target expression of a desired gene during late pollen development or pollen tube growth and to induce male sterility, fused to a cytotoxic gene, without affecting plant development (Roque et al. 2007; Pistón et al. 2008; García-Sogo et al. 2010, 2012). This approach could help in overcoming problems related to transgene escape from GM crops to organic or traditional ones.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was funded by grants BIO2006-09374 and BIO2009-08134 from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN). The collaboration and assistance of Rafael Martínez-Pardo in the greenhouse is gratefully acknowledged. We would like to thank the HAPRECI consortium (COST Action FA0903) to bring us the opportunity to collaborate with other european research groups working in the field of Plant Reproduction and to select our manuscript to be published in this special issue.

**Figure legends**

**Fig. 1.** Neighbor-Joining Tree of selected pollen specific PMEs. The numbers next to the nodes refer to bootstrap values from 1000 pseudo-replicates. Accession numbers for the PME proteins used in this N-J tree are: AAX13972, O80722, Q9FJ21, AEE35001 and ABI97858.1 (*Arabidopsis thaliana*); P41510 (*Brassica napus*); Q42608 (*Brassica rapa*); Q43043 (*Petunia integrifolia* subsp. *inflata*); AAX13972 (*Nicotiana tabacum*); Q9MBB6 (*Salix gilgiana*); Q24596
(Zea mays); Q9SC89, Q9SC90 (Medicago truncatula); Q42920 (Medicago sativa) and KC964536, PsPMEP (Pisum sativum). Branch lengths are proportional to sequence divergence.

Fig. 2. Structure of PsPMEP. a. Deduced amino acid sequence of the cDNA-encoded polypeptide. The predicted signal peptide and the processing motif (RRLL) are represented in bold type. The PMI domain in marked in red. The sequence corresponding to the PME domain is shadowed. Blocks of residues highly conserved among pectin methyltransferases are underlined. Putative catalytic residues, D386 (red) and D407 (blue) are marked. b. Schematic representation of the domain structure of PsPMEP. c. Homology-based model of the pectin methyltransferase domain. Groups of highly conserved amino acids are depicted in blue color. d. Detail of the pectin methyltransferase active site showing the putative catalytic residues D386 (acid-base catalyst) and D407 (nucleophile).

Fig. 3. Northern blot analysis of the PsPMEP expression in different vegetative and floral tissues of pea. a. Expression was detected in stamens (St) from 4 days before anthesis till anthesis, but not in floral buds (F) at 6-8 days before anthesis. b. No expression was detected in vegetative tissues like roots (R), mature shoots (S), young shoots (YS), leaves (L) and tendrils (T). c. Anther-specific expression of PsPMEP in flowers at 2 days before anthesis and in pollinated carpels after anthesis (PC). There is no expression in the other floral organs: sepals (S-2), petals (P-2) and unpollinated carpels (C-2) at 2 days before anthesis.

Fig. 4. PsPMEP expression pattern analyzed by in situ hybridization. In situ hybridization on paraffin sections of pea anthers at 2 days before anthesis. a. Control section hybridized with a PsPEMP sense probe. b. Anther section hybridized with the antisense probe. PsPMEP expression was located exclusively in the pollen grains and not in other anther tissues. c. “Whole mount” of isolated pollen grains hybridized with the sense probe as control. d. “Whole mount” hybridization with the antisense probe on isolated pollen grains at anthesis showing PsPMEP expression. Co: Connetive tissue; Ep: epidermis; Po: pollen grains; En: endotegument; Vb: vascular bundles.

Fig. 5. Expression analysis of the PsPMEP promoter fused to the uidA gene in transgenic Arabidopsis thaliana plants. a. PsPMEP::uidA chimaeric construct in the vector pBI101 containing the nopalin synthase constitutive promoter (nos-pro) fused to the nptII gene (kanamycin resistance), the PsPMEP promoter fused to the uidA gene (β-glucuronidase, GUS-intron) and the polyadenilation signal of the nopalin synthase gene (nos-ter) as terminator at the 3’ ends of both genes. b. Transgenic A. thaliana flowers at one day before anthesis transformed with the empty vector pBI101 (control). c. Transgenic A. thaliana flowers carrying the chimaeric construct PsPMEP::uidA showing GUS expression in the pollen sacs of developed anthers. d. Id. a detailed view of the pollen sacs (arrow) with mature pollen grains showing GUS expression. e. GUS expression in the germinating pollen grains (arrow) located on the stigmatic papillae. f. No GUS expression in leaves. g. Id. in shoots. h. Id. in roots. i. Id. in unpollinated carpels. j. Id. in
siliques. k. Id. in seeds. l. GUS expression in the elongated pollen tubes along the stylar and ovarian transmitting tract. m-n. The PsPMEP expression pattern was maintained till the pollen tube (Pt) reached the embryo sac (Es) in the ovule (Ov).

Supplementary material

Table S1. Primers used to sequence the PsPMEP genomic clone.

Table S2. Putative pollen specific motifs identified in the PsPMEP promoter region (-1 to -2133).

References


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