Transcription through the *iab-7 cis*-regulatory domain of the bithorax complex interferes with maintenance of Polycomb-mediated silencing

Ilham Hogga and François Karch

Department of Zoology and Animal Biology, University of Geneva, 30 quai E. Ansermet, 1211 Geneva-4, Switzerland
Author for correspondence: (e-mail: francois.karch@zoo.unige.ch)

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SUMMARY

The *Fab-7* chromatin domain boundary insures functional autonomy of the *iab-6* and *iab-7 cis*-regulatory domains in the bithorax complex (BX-C). We have previously shown that chromatin insulators such as *gypsy* or *scs*min are potent insulators that cannot substitute for *Fab-7* function within the BX-C. During the early stages of these swapping experiments, we initially used a fragment of *scs* that was slightly larger than a minimal *scs* element (*scs*min). We report that this *scs* fragment, unlike *scs*min, interferes in an orientation-dependent manner with the output of a regulatory region covering 80 kb of DNA (from *iab-4* to *iab-8*). At the core of this orientation-dependent phenotype is a promoter located immediately adjacent to the *scs* insulator. In one orientation, the promoter traps the activity of the *iab-3* through *iab-5 cis*-regulatory domains, diverting them from the *abd-A* gene. In the opposite orientation, the promoter is transcribing the *iab-7 cis*-regulatory domain, resulting in ectopic activation of the latter. Our data suggest that transcription through a Polycomb-Response Element (PRE) interferes with the maintenance of a Polycomb repression complex.

Key words: Boundary, Insulator, Scs, *Fab-7*, Bithorax complex, Polycomb, Transcription, Silencing, Drosophila

INTRODUCTION

The bithorax complex (BX-C) contains three homeotic genes, *Ubx*, *abd-A* and *Abd-B*, that are responsible for determining the identity of parasegments 5 to 14 (PS5-14). These parasegments will form the posterior thorax (T2 and T3) and all eight abdominal segments of the adult fly (A1 to A8) (Lewis, 1978; Sanchez-Herrero et al., 1985). The PS-specific expression pattern of *Ubx*, *abd-A* and *Abd-B* is controlled by a large *cis*-regulatory region that covers 300 kb of DNA and that is subdivided into nine functionally autonomous *cis*-regulatory domains (*abx/bx, bxd/pbx, iab-2 to iab-8*) (for reviews, see Duncan, 1987; Peifer et al., 1987). For example, the *iab-5 cis*-regulatory domain regulates *Abd-B* expression in a pattern that confers PS10/A5 identity to the cells of that PS. Similarly, the *iab-6, iab-7* and *iab-8 cis*-regulatory domains activate *Abd-B* expression in patterns appropriate for PS11/A6, PS12/A7 and PS13/A8 identity, respectively (Celniker et al., 1990; Sanchez-Herrero, 1991). When one of the *cis*-regulatory domains is inactivated, the parasegment specified by the affected regulatory domain is transformed into a copy of the PS immediately anterior. Thus, in a deletion of *iab-7*, *PS12/A7* is transformed into PS11/A6. In this case, *Abd-B* expression in both PS11 and PS12 is driven by the *iab-6 cis*-regulatory domain alone (Galloni et al., 1993).

The regulation of the BX-C homeotic genes during embryogenesis is subdivided into two phases: initiation and maintenance. In the initiation phase, the products of the gap and pair-rule segmentation genes are responsible for initiating the parasegment specific expression of the BX-C homeotic genes. These proteins interact with target sequences (called initiation elements) in the nine *cis*-regulatory domains (Simon et al., 1990; Qian et al., 1991; Muller and Bienz, 1992; Shimell et al., 1994). However, the products of the segmentation genes are present only transiently in the early embryo. Maintenance of the initial pattern requires the *trithorax-Group* (*trx-G*) and *Polycomb-Group* (*Pc-G*) genes. The *trx-G* genes function to keep the homeotic genes on, while the *Pc-G* genes function to maintain the inactive state of the homeotic genes (reviewed by Paro, 1990; Simon and Tamkun, 2002). Experiments with reporter constructs have identified elements, called Polycomb Response elements or PREs, in several of the BX-C *cis*-regulatory domains, that appear to be targets for *Pc-G* action. When these PREs are combined with a parasegment-specific initiation element, they maintain the parasegmentally restricted expression pattern conferred on the reporter by the initiation element (Muller and Bienz, 1991; Busturia and Bienz, 1993; Simon et al., 1993; Chan et al., 1994; Chiang et al., 1995; Poux et al., 1996). In addition to this maintenance activity, PREs are also able to repress the activity of the mini-white reporter gene used to establish transgenic lines. Usually, transgenic lines carrying the mini-white gene harbor darker eye color when the inserts are homozygous. When they are included in a *mini-white* transgene, the PREs repress or even eliminate *mini-white* expression when the animals are homozygous (a phenomenon referred to as the pairing-sensitive repression assay) (Kassis et al., 1991; Chan et al., 1994; Gindhart and Kaufman, 1995;
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Gene conversion

Fab-7 was replaced by scs\textsubscript{prom} (or prom\textsubscript{SCS}) using the gene conversion strategy described by Hogga et al. (Hogga et al., 2001).

DNA techniques, fly work, antibody staining and in situ hybridization

DNA techniques, fly work, antibody staining and in situ hybridization have been described previously (Mihaly et al., 1997; Hogga et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 1999). The antibody against ABD-B was kindly provided by Sue Celniker (Celniker, 1990).

Abdominal cuticles

Adult abdominal cuticles were mounted as described elsewhere (Mihaly et al., 1997), examined and photographed on an Axioplan microscope with a 5× lens. Only half cuticles are shown in Fig. 2. The dorsal surface of each abdominal segment has a rectangular plate of hard cuticle called the tergite (only half of the tergites are visible on the left of each panel, as well as the genitalia at the bottom). The ventral surface of abdominal segments is composed of soft cuticle called the pleura. On the ventral midline of the second (A2) and more posterior segments, there are small plates of harder cuticle called sternites. In males only six abdominal segments are visible. The sternites on A5 and A6 are pigmented and can be therefore distinguished from more anterior sternites. On the ventral side, the sixth sternites can be distinguished from the more anterior sternites by its different shape and by the absence of bristles. Homeotic transformations associated with Fab-7 are best visible in males where most (Fab-7\textsuperscript{2}) or all of A6 (Fab-7\textsuperscript{1}) is missing (see Fig. 2B). As A7 and A8 do not contribute to any visible cuticle after metamorphosis in males, homeotic transformations associated with Fab-8 are detected in females where A7 develops as a smaller segments than the anterior segments (see Fig. 2C).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Orientation dependent effects of scs when integrated in the BX-C

The slightly larger scs fragment used to replace Fab-7 in the present studies is depicted in Fig. 1. The extra-DNA (relative to scs\textsubscript{min}) consists in the 282bp MluI-PsI fragment at one edge of scs\textsubscript{min}. In the prom\textsubscript{SCS} convertant line, the 282 bp extra DNA fragment faces iab-6. In scs\textsubscript{prom}, this extra DNA is juxtaposed to iab-7.

Fig. 2A shows the phenotype observed in homozygous males in which the prom\textsubscript{SCS} construct replaces Fab-7. In these flies, A3 to A6 were transformed into a mixture of A2-A3 identity, indicating that iab-3 through iab-6 are affected by the prom\textsubscript{SCS} element. In prior experiments, we have shown that replacement of Fab-7 by the minimal scs insulator (scs\textsubscript{min}) in both orientations results in a consistent phenotype in which iab-5 and iab-6 are prevented from interacting with Abd-B by the intervening insulator (Hogga et al., 2001). Thus, the extra 282 bp DNA element appeared to interfere at a distance with iab-3 and iab-4. Interference with iab-3 and iab-4 functions in prom\textsubscript{SCS} is surprising, because these cis-regulatory domains regulate abd-A (see Fig. 5A) and are distant from prom\textsubscript{SCS}. This result implies that prom\textsubscript{SCS} exerts a negative polar effect that can spread 40 kb away into iab-3. In addition, we have previously provided evidence that, upon insulation from Abd-B by the intervening scs\textsubscript{min} insulator, iab-5 is targeted instead to the abd-A gene, which it activates in a pattern appropriate
for specifying a A5-like identity (see Hogga et al., 2001). In promSCS, A5 is transformed into A2-A3, indicating that the negative polar effect exerted by promSCS also affects iab-5/abd-A interaction. This phenotype was seen in four independent conversion lines and a whole genome Southern analysis has verified that there are no large rearrangements affecting the iab-3 through iab-5 regions of the promSCS chromosome. Finally, as heterozygous flies are wild type, the negative polar effect of promSCS on iab-3 through iab-5 is only acting in cis.

**Fig. 2.** Homeotic transformations in promSCS and scs prom.
Wholemounts of abdominal cuticles (see Materials and Methods for description of the abdominal segments). (A) In homozygous promSCS males, the presence of bristles on the sixth sternite (shown by arrows in wild type, left) indicates a homeotic transformation of A6 towards a more anterior segment. On the dorsal side, A5 and A6 tergites have a patchy pigmentation, indicating a transformation into a more anterior abdominal segment. This could reflect a transformation into A4. However, dissection of whole abdomen revealed that they contain only rudimentary gonads. As the somatic part of the gonads is derived from A3 (Bender and Hudson, 2000), rudimentary gonads reflect a transformation towards a more anterior segment. Taken altogether, these homeotic transformations indicate that A3, A4, A5 and A6 are transformed into a more anterior abdominal segment [a mixture of A2 and A3 (2-3)]. (B) A wild-type male has six abdominal segments. The seventh abdominal segment (A7), which is present in larvae, is suppressed during metamorphosis. In Fab-7^2, iab-7 (left) is ectopically activated in most cells of A6. As a consequence, A6 assumes A7 identity and most of the sixth tergite and sternite are absent. There are, however, cells of A6 in which ectopic activation of iab-7 does not take place. These cells, which are visible as a small tergite (shown by an arrow), adopt A5 identity, indicating that not only iab-7 is inactive, but also iab-6. In Fab-7^12 homozygotes (right), iab-7 is ectopically expressed in all cells of A6, giving rise to a fly with no apparent tissue in A6 (open arrow). In scs prom homozygotes, A6 is completely transformed into A7, as revealed by the complete absence of tergite or sternite tissue in A6 (open arrow). (C) The derepression of iab-8 in A6 and A7 (Fab-7 and Fab-8 phenotype). The A7 into A8 transformation is detectable in females where A7 develops. scs prom homozygous females show a phenotype reminiscent of an Fab-8 boundary deletion, as revealed by the strong reduction of the seventh tergite. Because in scs prom, the Fab-7 boundary function is also affected, the sixth tergite is also reduced in size.

**Fig. 1.** Structure of the different P elements used to induce the swapping of Fab-7 by scs. The 3.1 kb fragment (containing the Fab-7^2 deletion) that serves as ectopic donor in the gene conversion experiment is drawn in dark blue at the scale indicated at the bottom of the figure. The iab7-PRE abutting the Fab-7^2 boundary is indicated. This Fab-7 fragment is inserted in front of a mini-white gene within a P-element (the feet of the P element are indicated by black rectangles; the miniwhite gene in red is not drawn at scale). The structure of the SCS element that was inserted in the NsiI site just upstream from the Fab7^2 deletion endpoint is shown in green above the Fab-7 DNA line with a few relevant restriction sites (drawn at the same scale; B, BamHI; H, Hpal; M, MluI; P, PstI). The promoter driving transcription under the control of the iab cis-regulatory domains from within the BX-C is indicated in dark green. The promoter described by Avramova and Thikonov (Avramova and Thikonov, 1999) is shown in light green. The percentage of pairing sensitive lines from each construct is indicated with the numbers of lines scored (only homozygous viable lines are reported).
removed Fab-7 by introducing the Fab-7^2 deletion, we confirmed by sequencing that scs^prom is intact. Moreover, the same phenotype is observed in the five other independent conversion events that we recovered. The dominant gain-of-function phenotype associated with scs^prom was confirmed by the observation that heterozygotes (scs^prom/+ ) displayed the same phenotype, although not as severe. Because the dominant gain of function associated with scs^prom was absent from the flies in which Fab-7 was replaced by scs^min, we conclude that the same extra 282 bp fragment (MluI-PstI) is responsible for the loss-of-function phenotype in prom scs and the dominant gain-of-function phenotype in scs^prom.

An anti-PRE at the edge of scs^prom

Closer examination of the males shown in Fig. 2B revealed that the phenotype of scs^prom flies was slightly different from the phenotype generated by the Fab-7^2 deletion alone. As mentioned in the Introduction, class 2 mutations such as Fab-7^2, which remove only the boundary and leave an intact iab-7PRE, caused a mixed gain- and loss-of-function phenotype: most cells of A6 adopted A7 identity while the remaining adopted A5 identity (see Fig. 2B). If the scs^prom construct had no effect on the region, we should have observed a Fab-7^2 phenotype simply because of the removal of the Fab-7 element. Fig. 2B shows that this was not the case: A6 was completely transformed into A7 in homozygous scs^prom flies. This phenotype is identical to the phenotype of the class I Fab-7^2 allele where the boundary and nearby iab-7PRE are deleted (Fig. 2B). Thus, introduction of the scs^prom element converts a class II allele into a class I allele, as if the extra 282 bp fragment (MluI-PstI) interfered with the activity of the nearby iab-7 PRE. To test this hypothesis, we decided to verify how scs^prom affected PRE-mediated pairing-sensitive repression of a minigene reporter construct (see Introduction). Although transformants with the scs element in the prom scs orientation are pairing sensitive in 63% of the lines, when the scs element is in the opposite orientation (scs^prom) the pairing-sensitive frequency decreases to 11% (Fig. 1). Thus, our hypothesis that scs^prom within the BX-C contains an anti-PRE activity is supported by these ectopic constructs. To localize this anti-PRE activity, we analyzed the pairing-sensitivity of scs^prom derivatives in which the scs^prom fragment was progressively shaved from one end (see Fig. 1). A deletion removing 282 bp from the end (MluI-PstI deletion; scs^min) restored pairing-sensitivity to a frequency of 47%. Because a deletion that extended further towards the Hpal site did not significantly increase the proportion of pairing-sensitive lines (50%), we conclude that most of the anti-PRE element of scs is located within the MluI-PstI fragment.

The anti-PRE associated with scs^prom interferes with iab-8 silencing

Examination of homozygous scs^prom females indicated that iab-8 was also partially activated in the sixth and seventh abdominal segments, both of which show an identity intermediate between A7 and A8, a phenotype that is reminiscent of Fab-8 boundary deletions (Fig. 2C) (Barges et al., 2001). These observations suggest that the anti-PRE activity contained in scs^prom is not only interfering with the functioning of the nearby iab-7 PRE, but spreads across the whole iab-7 domain and reaches iab-8.

The gain-of-function effect associated with scs^prom is post-embryonic

We also examined the Abd-B expression pattern in embryos (Fig. 3). In scs^min, the partial block between iab-5/iab-6 and Abd-B promoter was visualized by the great reduction of Abd-B expression in PS10 and PS11 (Hogga et al., 2001). In scs^prom, because of the posterior transformation of A6 into A7, we were expecting to monitor a reiterator of the PS12/A7 Abd-B expression pattern in PS11/A6 (Galloni et al., 1993). This is not what we found. In PS10 and PS11, the expression patterns were similar to the patterns detected in scs^min. In PS12, the expression pattern was much lower than in wild type and was similar to the pattern detected in PS11. In fact, this expression pattern resembled that of an iab-7 deletion mutant (Galloni et al., 1993). This should lead to a transformation of PS12 into PS11, exactly the opposite of the phenotype that we observe in adults. Unfortunately, there are no distinguishing morphological landmarks in embryos and larvae that definitively identify these two parasegments earlier in development. It is not clear why, in the adult, the readout of scs^prom results in a gain-of-function phenotype, whereas in the embryo, Abd-B expression resembles loss of function. We believe these findings indicate that iab-7 misexpression is more pronounced in the pupa, when the adult structures are forming, strongly supporting the idea that scs^prom affects primarily the maintenance phase. Bender and Fitzgerald have described similar mutations that affect the maintenance phase of iab-2 silencing in PS6/A1 (Bender and Fitzgerald, 2002). In their case, the identity of the affected abdominal segment PS6/A1 could be easily recognized in embryos and larvae from PS7/A2. Intriguingly, the dominant gain-of-function phenotype associated with their mutations was also only detectable in adult.
Transcription interferes with Polycomb silencing

The region responsible for the orientation-dependent effect contains a promoter

We have previously shown that scs contains a chromatin insulator element (scs\textsuperscript{min}) that is able to interfere with long-range enhancer-promoter interactions (Hogga et al., 2001). In addition to the insulator, the 1.2 kb scs fragment contains at one extremity an element that, in conjunction with scs\textsuperscript{min}, is able to induce a gain-of or loss-of-function phenotype when replacing Fab-7. When facing iab-7, this element destabilizes iab-7 and iab-8 silencing in A6. However, when facing iab-6, this element exerts a negative polar effect on iab-5, iab-4 and iab-3. These two gain- and loss-of-function effects are difficult to reconcile. Previously, Avramova and Tikhonov (Avramova and Tikhonov, 1999) discovered that scs contained a promoter and challenged the idea that scs was a neutral chromatin domain boundary. Their finding supported the promoter decoy hypothesis of Geyer (Geyer, 1997), in which insulation is achieved by a promoter-trapping mechanism. Although the promoter described by Avramova and Tikhonov (Avramova and Tikhonov, 1999) maps to the other side of scs (see Fig. 1), promoter trapping could have accounted for the polar effect on iab-5, iab-4 and iab-3. In this scheme, insertion of a promoter at the iab-6 edge of Fab-7 would attract the nearby cis-regulatory elements and divert them from their normal Abd-A and/or Abd-B promoter (see Fig. 5A). In this case, transcription of sequences near the promoter should be detected in parasegments affected by prom\textsc{scs} (and scs\textsuperscript{prom}). In order to test this hypothesis, we performed whole-mount in situ hybridization on embryos of the prom\textsc{scs} and scs\textsuperscript{prom} lines. We synthesized strand-specific probes from the iab-6 (probe A; Fig. 4) or iab-7 DNA (probe B; Fig. 4) flanking the scs element. Using both probes on prom\textsc{scs}, scs\textsuperscript{prom} and scs\textsuperscript{min} lines, we found that the promoter described by Avramova and Tikhonov (Avramova and Tikhonov, 1999) remained silent in the context of the BX-C. There was, however, a promoter that became active in the context of the BX-C at the other side of the scs fragment. Fig. 4 shows the results obtained with a probe from the iab-6 side of prom\textsc{scs} (probe A). In wild type (or Fab-7\textsuperscript{2}), transcription was detected from a very early stage throughout embryogenesis in PS13 and PS14. The expression profile of this transcript was reminiscent of a transcript that originates from a promoter localized just downstream from the Abd-B transcription unit (Zhou et al., 1999). In prom\textsc{scs} embryos, however, we detected additional transcripts in PS10/A5, PS11/A6 and PS12/A7. Interestingly, we failed to detect these transcripts when the truncated version of prom\textsc{scs} (scs\textsuperscript{min}) replaced Fab-7, indicating that the MlI-PstI fragment contains the promoter (or sequences necessary for its activity). Appearance of PS10-specific transcripts may explain the polar effect of prom\textsc{scs} on iab-5 if we assume that iab-5 activity is trapped by the scs promoter and thus diverted from the Abd-A promoter [in the prom\textsc{scs} context, iab-5 is insulated from Abd-B by the intervening scs\textsuperscript{min} insulator, see Hogga et al. (Hogga et al., 2001)]. A similar mechanism would explain the polar effect on iab-4 and iab-3 (Fig. 5A). However, we failed to detect transcription in PS9 and PS8, where both regulatory domains are active (Fig. 4). The discrepancy between the observed pattern of embryonic transcription and the adult phenotype may reflect a higher affinity of the promoter to iab-3,4 in adults.

It is not entirely clear which regulatory domain activates transcription in PS12. In the prom\textsc{scs} context, the scs insulator is located between the promoter and the iab-7 cis-regulatory domain. As reported by Hogga et al. (Hogga et al., 2001), the insulator alone does not completely impair interactions between the distal iab-5/iab-6 cis-regulatory domains and their Abd-B target promoter (see also Fig. 3). Thus, in prom\textsc{scs}, iab-7 may not be completely insulated from the promoter and activates transcription in PS12. As an alternative explanation we believe that transcription in PS12 in prom\textsc{scs} embryos results from activation by the more anterior cis-regulatory domains (iab-3, iab-4, iab-5 or iab-6), which once activated in a given parasegment, remain active in the more posterior parasegments, as first proposed in Ed Lewis’ model (Lewis,
It should be noted that although promoter-trapping is an attractive explanation accounting for the polar effect of promsCS on the iab-3, iab-4, iab-5 and iab-6, we cannot exclude the possibility that transcription through these cis-regulatory domains is the cause of their inactivation.

Transcription through the iab-7PRE may interfere with iab-7 silencing

In scsprom, the edge of scs containing the promoter is facing the iab-7 cis-regulatory domain. Not surprisingly, we detected intense transcription in PS12 with a probe from the iab-7 edge (probe B, Fig. 4). The same probe failed to detect any transcript in wild type or in embryos in which Fab-7 is replaced by scsmin. These results indicate that the PS12-specific transcript very likely originates from the same promoter that is firing in PS10-12 in promsCS. We also detected equally intense transcription in PS11. Thus, the fragment harboring anti-PRE activity when associated with scsprom contains a promoter that fires transcription across the iab-7PRE with which it interferes. As mentioned above, the anti-PRE activity contained in scsprom not only interferes with the functioning of the nearby iab-7PRE, but spreads across the whole iab-7 domain and reaches iab-8. Notably, the same transcription pattern in PS11 and PS12 is observed with a strand-specific probe originating from iab-8 (data not shown, see Fig. 4).

Fig. 5B suggests how the transcription from scsprom might cause the posterior transformation in the sixth and seventh abdominal segments (PS11 and PS12). The promoter in scsprom is activated in PS11 and PS12 (Fig. 4), sending transcripts across the iab-7 and iab-8 regulatory regions. In PS11, both of these regulatory regions are normally silent, but the act of transcription apparently reverses the silencing, causing the cells in PS11 to differentiate in the same way as those of PS12 or PS13. Likewise, in PS12, transcription across the iab-8 region activates it, transforming PS12 cells towards PS13 character. We do not observe transcription from scsprom in PS13. In this parasegement, however, the iab-8 promoter is activated, giving rise to leftwards transcription (Zhou et al., 1999). It is possible that this leftwards transcription interferes with rightwards transcription from scsprom. It is perhaps surprising that the transcription from scsprom begins in PS11, as the PS12-specific regulatory region (iab-6) is separated from the promoter of scsprom by the scs insulator. However, the insulator in an scsmin conversion at the same site does not completely insulate iab-6 from the Abd-B target promoter (Hogga et al., 2001) (see also Fig. 3), making it likely that iab-6 can activate the scsprom across the insulator. It is also possible that the function of an insulator depends on neighboring sequences. If, for example, insulator function is enhanced by a nearby PRE, then partial loss of the iab-7PRE function might weaken the scsprom insulator.

There are precedents where transcription has been suggested...
to play a role in chromatin remodeling. For example, the human β-globin locus is subdivided into three chromatin domains, each of which become more accessible to nucleosome digestions upon gene activation (Ashe et al., 1997; Griebnau et al., 2000; Plant et al., 2001). Interestingly, large intergenic transcripts delineate each of these domains and chromatin remodeling of each domain is preceded by its transcription. Another example has been reported by Rank et al. (Rank et al., 2002). Using a transgenic context, they found that transcription across a PRE could interfere with silencing. Finally, in the accompanying paper, Fitzgerald and Bender provide evidence that transcription across the iab-2 cis-regulatory domains in PS6/A1 interferes with iab-2 silencing, resulting in the posterior transformation of PS6/A1 into PS7/A2 (Bender and Fitzgerald, 2002). In this case, the identity of the affected abdominal segment can easily be recognized in embryos and larvae. Despite the existence of intense transcription of iab-2 in embryos, the dominant gain-of-function phenotype associated with iab-2 misexpression is only detectable in the adult. Thus, as in our case, transcription across the iab regulatory regions appear to interfere with silencing during the late maintenance phase, when the adult structures are forming.

If transcription can interfere with Pc-G silencing, what are the mechanisms responsible for this activity? Factors that affect RNA polymerase II (RNAPII) transcript elongation have been shown to have an effect on chromatin. For example, it has been suggested that histone acetyl transferases (HAT) such as PCAF (Cho, 1998) or ELP3 (Wittschieben, 1999) assist RNAPII in relieving inhibition caused by nucleosome arrays. Although active chromatin requires acetylation of specific lysine residues in the H3 and/or H4 histone tails (Moazed, 2001), the recent purification of Pc complexes suggests that histone deacylation is required for establishing a stable long-term Pc-G silencing complex (Saurin et al., 2001; Tie et al., 2001). In the case of sscprom, perhaps the frequent passage of RNAPII and its associated histone acetylation activities though the PREs interferes with the assembly of the Pc-G silencing. Involvement of acetylated histones in antagonizing Pc-G dependent silencing is supported by the findings of Cavalli and Paro (Cavalli and Paro, 1999) showing that high levels of acetylated histone H4 are associated with non-repressive PRE sequences. Alternatively, it has been recently found that variant histone H3.3 was deposited on active chromatin during transcription, providing a mechanism for the immediate activation of genes that are silenced by histone modification (Ahmad and Henikoff, 2002). It may be possible that transcription across iab-7 (and also iab-8) results in deposition of new nucleosome marked by H3.3, interfering thereby with the maintenance of silencing by the Pc-G complex.

**Concluding remarks**

It has been known for a long time that the large cis-regulatory regions of the bithorax complex are transcribed (Lipshitz et al., 1987; Sanchez-Herrero and Akam, 1989; Cumberledge et al., 1990). In blastoderm stage embryos, the iab-2 though iab-8 regions can be divided into three domains, each transcribed in a region that extends from a specific anterior limit to the posterior limit of the segmented part of the embryo. These domains are only broadly defined but their order on the chromosome reflects the anterior limit of expression for each of them. In the light of our data, it is tempting to speculate that transcription of the iab domains convey a regulatory signal, preventing assembly of the Polycomb-repressing complex on the iab domains that need to remain active. If this is true, transcripts should appear in the anteriormost parasegments/segments where each cis-regulatory domain is activated. However, so far, we have not seen transcripts in every regulatory region, which would account for the sequential activation of each regulatory domain. Moreover, this model predicts that the iab-7 PRE and iab-7 domains should be transcribed from PS12, where iab-7 is first active. So far transcripts across the iab-7 domain have only been detected in PS13 and 14 (this study) (Zhou et al., 1999). Thus, it remains unclear whether intergenic transcription plays a role in wild-type animals to create and/or maintain open chromatin, or whether the existence of intergenic transcripts is the consequence of an open structure. However, our experiments strongly suggest that forced transcription through an inactive cis-regulatory domain interferes with the maintenance of silencing, highlighting an incompatibility between transcription and Pc-G mediated silencing. This activity probably reflects a fundamental mechanism to protect an actively transcribed gene from being inactivated by the Pc-G proteins that are present in all cells.

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