Apparent role of *Tribolium orthodenticle* in anteroposterior blastoderm patterning largely reflects novel functions in dorsoventral axis formation and cell survival

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**SUMMARY**

In the short-germ beetle *Tribolium castaneum*, the head gap gene *orthodenticle* (*Tc-otd*) has been proposed to functionally substitute for *bicoid*, the anterior morphogen unique to higher dipterans. In this study we reanalyzed the function of *Tc-otd*. We obtained a similar range of cuticle phenotypes as in previously described RNAi experiments; however, we noticed unexpected effects on blastodermal cell fates. First, we found that *Tc-otd* is essential for dorsoventral patterning. RNAi depletion results in lateralized embryos, a fate map change that by itself can explain the observed loss of the anterior head, which is a ventral anlage in *Tribolium*. We find that this effect is due to diminished expression of *short gastrulation* (*sog*), a gene essential for establishment of the Decapentaplegic (Dpp) gradient in this species. Second, we found that gnathal segment primordia in *Tc-otd* RNAi embryos are shifted anteriorly but otherwise appear patterned normally. This anteroposterior (AP) fate map shift might largely be due to diminished *zen-1* expression and is not responsible for the severe segmentation defects observed in some *Tc-otd* RNAi embryos. As neither *Tc-sog* nor *Tc-zen-1* probably requires Otd gradient-mediated positional information, we posit that the blastodermic function of Tc-Otd depends on its initial homogeneous maternal expression and that this maternal factor does not provide significant positional information for *Tribolium* blastoderm embryos.

**KEY WORDS:** *Tribolium*, Short-germ insect, Anteroposterior patterning, Dorsoventral patterning, Orthodenticle, Bicoid

**INTRODUCTION**

Morphogenesis in *Drosophila* is a result of progressive subdivision of the embryo along the dorsoventral (DV) and anteroposterior (AP) axes. Development of each of these axes is initiated by maternally supplied factors and development proceeds largely independently along the two axes (Lal and Patel, 2001). DV polarity in *Drosophila* depends on the nuclear concentration gradient of the Dorsal transcription factor, which subdivides the embryo into a series of domains with different fates: amnioserosa, dorsal ectoderm, neurogenic ectoderm and mesoderm. The boundaries of these domains are established by the activities of zygotic genes transcribed at different thresholds of the Dorsal protein (Moussian and Roth, 2005; Stathopoulos and Levine, 2002). One zygotic target of Dorsal is the gene *decapentaplegic* (*dpp*), encoding a bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) homolog. *Dpp* specifies at high levels the extra-embryonic amnioserosa, whereas moderate BMP levels mediate dorsal ectoderm (Moussian and Roth, 2005; Stathopoulos and Levine, 2002). At more-ventral positions, BMP activity is inhibited by Short gastrulation (*sog*) and Brinker (*Brk*), which allow neuroectoderm specification (Ashe and Levine, 1999; Biels et al., 1996; Marques et al., 1997). Whereas Brinker is dispensable for *Tribolium* embryogenesis, *Sog* is essential to direct Dpp activity towards the dorsal side of the embryo, and the depletion of *sog* leads to the complete loss of neurogenic tissue (van der Zee et al., 2006).

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gradient (Schroder, 2003). As development proceeds, Tc-otd-1 also retracts from the anterior pole, forming a domain that covers the anterior head, resembling *otd* expression in *Drosophila* (Cohen and Jurgens, 1990; Finkelstein and Perrimon, 1990; Finkelstein et al., 1990; Schinko et al., 2005; Schroder, 2003). In *Drosophila*, depletion of *otd* results in the deletion of the ocular and the antennal segments (Cohen and Jurgens, 1990; Finkelstein and Perrimon, 1990; Finkelstein et al., 1990). A comparable phenotype has been described for *Tribolium* after knockdown of zygotic *Tc-otd-1* by late blastodermal dsRNA injection (Schinko et al., 2008). Thus, it is feasible to assume that the zygotic function of *otd* in patterning pregnathal segments is conserved among these insects (Schinko et al., 2008).

Knocking down *Tc-otd-1* by parental RNAi results in larvae that are depleted of anterior segments (Schroder et al., 2008; Schroder, 2003). This segmentation phenotype is enhanced by the combined knockdown of *Tc-otd-1* and *Tc-hb*, which led to the proposition that Otd and Hb might substitute for Bcd as anterior morphogens in non-dipteran insects (Schroder, 2003). This idea is supported by functional studies in the long-germ wasp *Nasonia*, where *hb* and *otd* are crucial to early patterning (Lynch et al., 2006; Pulzt et al., 2005). However, recent work in *Tribolium* suggests that *hunchback* functions in abdominal metamORIZATION only, whereas in the head and thorax it regulates segment identity (Marques-Souza et al., 2008), raising the question whether Otd can indeed provide concentration-dependent positional information, i.e. act as a Bcd-like morphogen, during *Tribolium* blastoderm patterning.

In this study, we investigated the role of orthodonticle during early *Tribolium* development. Surprisingly, we found that *Tc-otd-1* RNAi results in cell lethality already during the differentiated blastoderm stage. To elucidate whether this phenotype is due to disruption of early AP patterning, we monitored gap and pair-rule gene expression patterns throughout blastoderm stages. We found that patterning of gnathal and thoracic segment primordia is not severely affected, whereas the anlagen of the pregnathal head and the serosa are reduced in size. Unexpectedly, we found *Tc-otd-1* RNAi also to have a major impact on DV patterning. We identified *Tc-zen-1* and *Tc-sog* as major target genes of *Tc-otd-1*. Both genes, however, are unlikely to receive concentration-dependent positional input from *Tc-otd-1*. Instead, *Tc-otd-1* appears to provide a more general function in AP and DV axis formation during *Tribolium* short-germ development.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Histology**

Fixation, single in situ hybridization and immunofluorescence staining were performed using standard protocols (Patel et al., 1989; Tautz and Pfeifle, 1989). For double staining, fluorescent- and digoxigenin-labeled probes were detected using alkaline phosphatase and beta-galactosidase, the latter after signal enhancement via biotin deposition (Prpic et al., 2001). The rabbit polyclonal pMAD antibody (gift of Dr Morata, Centro de Biologia Molecular, Madrid, Spain) was used at a concentration of 1:3000. An alkaline-phosphatase-conjugated goat anti-rabbit antibody (1:2000, Dianova) was used for detection. Embryos were subsequently counterstained with Hoechst 33342. TUNEL assays were performed as previously described (Prpic and Damen, 2005). A detailed protocol is available from the authors.

**RNAi**

Parental RNAi was performed as described (Bucher and Klingler, 2004; Bucher et al., 2002). For *Tc-otd-1* dsRNA synthesis, the previously described full-length clone (Schroder, 2003) and two non-overlapping PCR fragments were used as a template. RNAi for all three fragments yielded identical *Tc-otd-1* RNAi phenotypes, excluding the possibility that an unrelated gene was affected. *Tc-sog* and *Tc-zen-1* dsRNAs were produced from previously described clones (Falciani et al., 1996; van der Zee et al., 2005). Double-stranded RNAs were injected into female pupae at a concentration of 1 μg/μl (*Tc-otd-1* and *Tc-zen-1*). To produce a pheno-typic series of *Tc-sog* RNAi phenotypes, dsRNA at concentration of 0.2 μg/μl was injected. Females were mated with wild-type males and reared under standard conditions.

**RESULTS**

**Tc-otd-1 RNAi causes a fate map shift at the expense of the pregnathal region**

Previous studies have indicated that the loss of *Tc-otd-1* function causes the deletion of anterior segments including pregnathal, gnathal and, in the strongest cases, even thoracic segments (Schinko et al., 2008; Schroder, 2003). However, these authors did not elucidate how *Tc-otd-1* affects the earliest stages of AP patterning. To understand how *Tc-otd-1* regulates the blastoderm fate map, we investigated the expression patterns of the *Tribolium* gap genes *hunchback* (Tc-hb), *giant* (Tc-gt), *knirps* (Tc-kni), *mille-pattes* (Tc-mlpt) and *Krüppel* (Tc-Kr) (Bucher and Klingler, 2004; Cerny et al., 2005; Cerny et al., 2008; Marques-Souza et al., 2008; Savard et al., 2006; Sommer and Tautz, 1993; Wolff et al., 1995) in *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos (Fig. 1).

In wild type, *Tc-hb* initially is expressed homogeneously. With the formation of the serosa, *Tc-hb* fades from the anterior head, which results in the formation of a serosal and a gnathal domain (Fig. 1A) (Wolff et al., 1995). Upon depletion of *Tc-otd-1*, the gnathal Tc-hb domain was shifted towards the anterior and the distance between this domain and the hb serosa domain was strongly reduced (Fig. 1A,B).

*Tc-gt* forms at the differentiated blastoderm stage an anterior domain comprising pregnathal and gnathal segments, but excluding the serosa (Fig. 1C) (Bucher and Klingler, 2004). In *Tc-otd-1* RNAi, this domain was shifted towards the anterior and its size was reduced (Fig. 1D). It appears that the less strongly expressing portion of the domain corresponding to the anterior head is reduced in size, whereas the strongly expressed gnathal part is less affected.

The expression of *Tribolium* *knirps* (Tc-kni) (Cerny et al., 2008) arises at the undifferentiated blastoderm stage in a rather broad central domain, which refines to a wedge-shaped domain covering the mandibular and pregnathal region (Fig. 1E). As for *Tc-gt* and *Tc-hb*, the depletion of *Tc-otd-1* resulted in a shift of Tc-kni expression towards the anterior and a concomitant reduction in size (Fig. 1F). These changes in Tc-hb, Tc-gt and Tc-kni expression suggest that *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos lack pregnathal anlagen already during early embryonic stages, whereas the gnathal region is expanded rather than reduced (see Fig. S2 in the supplementary material for *Tc-empty-spiracles* and *Tc-buttonhead* expression in *Tc-otd-1* RNAi). This coordinated shift of expression domains might extend to *Tribolium* *Krüppel* (Cerny et al., 2005; Sommer and Tautz, 1993), which appeared to expand toward the anterior in *Tc-otd-1*-depleted embryos (Fig. 1I-L).

Unlike anterior gap gene domains in *Drosophila* bicoid mutant embryos, none of these domains were lost in *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos. The anterior *Tc-mlpt* domain (Savard et al., 2006), however, was abolished by *Tc-otd-1* RNAi (Fig. 1H), indicating
that, unlike other gap genes, Tc-mlpt requires Tc-otd-1 for its activation. However, given that the anterior Tc-mlpt domain has no obvious function in segmentation (Savard et al., 2006), it does not appear that the loss of Tc-mlpt activity contributes to the Tc-otd-1 RNAi phenotype.

**Gnathal and thoracic anlagen are represented in Tc-otd-1 RNAi blastoderms**

To further elucidate the function of Tc-otd-1 in patterning gnathal and thoracic segments, we visualized the emergence of segment primordia by analyzing the Tc-even-skipped expression pattern (Fig. 2). In wild-type embryos, Tc-eve is initially expressed in a double-segmental pattern, each stripe later resolving into secondary segmental stripes (Patel et al., 1994; Schoppmeier and Schroder, 2005). The first two primary Tc-eve stripes (Tc-eve stripe 1 and stripe 2; Fig. 2A), mark the maxillary and the first thoracic (T1) segment primordia, whereas the third primary stripe (Tc-eve stripe 3) covers the region where the growth zone will develop (Fig. 2C). In Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos, these primary Tc-eve stripes were formed, but the position of the first and second primary stripes was shifted towards the anterior (Fig. 2B). In addition, stripe 2 arose much broader than in wild type and only later refined to nearly normal width (Fig. 2D). Thus, like in wild type, all three primary Tc-eve domains develop during blastodermal stages, and their position and width reflects an expanded fate map congruous to the shifted positions of gap gene domains as described above.

We then asked whether other primary pair-rule gene patterns are similarly shifted. To this end, we double-stained wild-type and Tc-otd-1-depleted embryos for Tc-eve and Tc-runt and Tc-eve and Tc-odd, respectively (Fig. 3). In wild type, the primary Tc-eve stripe 1 partially overlaps with the first primary runt stripe (Fig. 3A), whereas Tc-odd stripe 1 was expressed complementary to Tc-eve stripes 1 and 2 (Fig. 3B) (Choe et al., 2006). Also in Tc-otd-1 knockdown embryos, the expression domains of Tc-odd and Tc-run

![Fig. 1. Expression of gap genes in Tc-otd-1 RNAi.](image)

(A-L) Differentiated blastoderm wild-type (A,C,E,G,I,K) and Tc-otd-1 RNAi (B,D,F,H,J,L) embryos, stained for hunchback (hb; A,B), giant (gt; C,D), knirps (kni; E,F), milles-patées (mlpt; G,H) or Krüppel (Kr; I-L) mRNA. Embryos in I,J were counterstained with Hoechst 33342 (K,L). (A,B) In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, the embryonic hb domain is shifted towards the anterior (bars) and the posterior border of the serosal hb domain is not longer oblique (arrowheads). (C,D) Also, the anterior Tc-gt domain shifts toward the anterior (bars). (E,F) In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, the pregnatal part of the kni domain is lost, whereas the gnathal part of the domain is shifted towards the anterior (bars). (G,H) The anterior mlpt domain is lost in Tc-otd-1 RNAi. (I-L) The shift of gap-gene domain might expand to the Tc-Kr domain (L, bars). Arrowheads indicate the posterior boundary of the serosa. All figures are anterior to the left, lateral views.

![Fig. 2. Gnathal segment anlagen are initially patterned in Tc-otd-1 and Tc-otd-1 Tc-hb double RNAi.](image)

(A-H) Expression of even-skipped in wild-type (A,B,E), Tc-otd-1 RNAi (B,D,F), Tc-hb (G) and (H) Tc-otd-1 Tc-hb double RNAi. Some embryos were counterstained by Hoechst 33342 (panels E,F depict the same embryos as C,D). Embryos in A,B,G,H are in the undifferentiated blastoderm stage and embryos in C,D are in the differentiated blastoderm stage. (A-F) In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, the primary Tc-eve stripes are still present, but shifted towards the anterior (compare A with B, stripe 1 and stripe 2). In addition, Tc-eve stripe 2 is enlarged. With the formation of Tc-eve stripe 3, the primary eve stripe 2 domain gets reduced to almost normal width (compare C with D). (G,H) In Tc-hb RNAi (G), the first primary Tc-eve domain is essentially unchanged, whereas in Tc-otd-1 and Tc-hb double RNAi (H), a Tc-otd-1 RNAi-like shift of the first primary Tc-eve domain is visible. Asterisks indicate the emerging Tc-eve stripe 2 domain. Arrows indicate the posterior boundary of the serosa.
were shifted towards the anterior. Importantly, the stripes of all three pair-rule genes appeared to be shifted in a coordinated manner and phasing among pair-rule patterns was preserved (Fig. 3C,D). These results clearly demonstrate that knockdown of Tc-otd-1 does not affect the blastoderm fate map in a manner that could explain the loss of gnathum and thorax in RNAi larvae.

We further tested whether the combined knockdown of Tc-otd-1 and Tc-hb has a more severe impact on the early fate map (Schroder, 2003). In Tc-hb RNAi blastoderms, pair-rule gene expression was delayed to some degree, as the third, and occasionally the second, primary stripes did not form until the early germ rudiment (Marques-Souza et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the gnathal segment anlagen are formed in Tc-hb RNAi embryos (Marques-Souza et al., 2008). Although we found Tc-hb RNAi not to shift the blastodermal fate map (Fig. 2G), in double-knockdown embryos a similar shift of the early Tc-eve domain was evident as in the Tc-otd-1 RNAi situation (Fig. 2H). Thus, the Tc-otd-1 RNAi-mediated AP fate map shift is not enhanced by simultaneous knock-down of Tc-hb.

Tc-otd-1 is required for serosa formation

Depletion of Tc-otd-1 affects the morphological integrity of the serosa during differentiated blastoderm stages (Schroder, 2003). To analyze early patterning of the serosa anlage, we stained Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos for zerknüllt-1 (Tc-zen-1), which in wild type is already expressed in the presumptive serosa before these cells become morphologically distinct from embryonic tissue (Fig. 4A) (Falciani et al., 1996; van der Zee et al., 2005). Knockdown of Tc-otd-1 restricted early Tc-zen-1 expression to a small region near the anterior pole of the egg, indicating that the anlage of the serosa was severely reduced but not completely absent (Fig. 4A,B). Thus, Tc-Otd-1 appears to contribute to the early serosal size regulation.

Strikingly, although in wild type the serosa-embryo boundary in the differentiated blastoderm is oblique, the smaller Tc-zen-1 domain in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos was rotationally symmetric with respect to the egg axis (Fig. 4B). Rotational symmetry of the Tc-zen-1 domain is indicative of defective DV patterning (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008; van der Zee et al., 2006). Thus, the loss of Tc-zen-1 expression asymmetry and the symmetric serosa-embryo boundary in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos (e.g. Fig. 1A,B,K,L; Fig. 2E,F; Fig. 4A,B,E,F) suggested that Tc-otd-1 might not only be involved in early serosa size regulation, but also influence DV axis formation.

**Fig. 3.** Pair-rule gene expression in Tc-otd-1 RNAi. (A-D) Stage-matched wild-type (A,B) and Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos (C,D) double-stained for even-skipped and runt (A,C) or even-skipped and odd-skipped (B,D). (A,C) In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, the anterior Tc-eve stripe 1 and Tc-runt stripe 1 domains shift towards the anterior. Both are still expressed in the same register, indicating that their interactions are largely unchanged. (B,D) Apart from slight variations, Tc-odd and Tc-eve are still expressed in complementary anterior domains upon Tc-otd-1 RNAi.

**Fig. 4.** Tc-otd-1 RNAi affects dorsoventral patterning. (A-N) Stage-matched wild-type (A,C,E,G,I,K,M) and Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos (B,D,F,H,J,L,N). Embryos in C,D were counterstained by Hoechst 33342 to visualize the morphology (E,F). (A,B) The serosal Tc-zen-1 domain is symmetric and reduced in Tc-otd-1 RNAi (arrowheads). (C-F) As indicated by the Tc-iro staining, the serosa embryo boundary has lost its obliqueness in Tc-otd-1. Moreover, the dorsal amnion (arrow in C) is not specified in Tc-otd-1 RNAi. (G,H) Whereas in the wild-type Tc-doc is restricted to the dorsal serosa, it become ubiquitously expressed in Tc-otd-1 RNAi (arrowheads in H point to the posterior border of the serosa). (I,J) The ventral Tc-sog domain is severely reduced in Tc-otd-1 RNAi. (K,L) Embryos were stained with an antibody recognizing phosphorylated MAD (pMAD). In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, pMAD becomes ubiquitously expressed in the serosa. (M,N) In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, Tc-dpp becomes symmetrically expressed. All panels are lateral views except for I,J, which are ventral views.
**Tc-otd-1 controls Dpp activity via the regulation of sog expression**

It has been shown previously that the obliqueness of the serosa-germ rudiment border in *Tribolium* depends on BMP signaling. In the beetle blastoderm, Short gastrulation (Sog) is required to direct Dpp activity towards the dorsal side of the embryo (van der Zee et al., 2006). Interestingly, BMP signaling in *Tribolium* also is required for head formation as the head is a ventral anlage (van der Zee et al., 2006). Consequently, ventralization of the embryo through Tc-otd-1 RNAi results in an enlarged head region at the expense of the serosa. In such embryos, the serosa-germ rudiment border is rotationally symmetric and located at a more anterior position (van der Zee et al., 2006). Tc-sog RNAi, conversely, has the opposite effect, i.e. dorsalization of the embryo, along with serosa expansion at the expense of the head region. Also in this case, the serosa-embryo boundary develops perpendicularly to the egg axis, but at a more posterior position than in wild type (van der Zee et al., 2006). Thus, there are obvious similarities between Tc-otd-1 and Tc-sog RNAi phenotypes, as in both phenotypes the serosa-germ rudiment boundary is rotation-symmetric and the anterior head is deleted.

To elucidate the impact of Tc-Otd-1 on DV axis formation, we monitored the expression of dorsocross (Tc-doc), which is asymmetrically distributed along the DV axis (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008; Tomoyasu et al., 2005; van der Zee et al., 2006). In wild type, Tc-doc is expressed in the dorsal 30% of the serosa (Fig. 4G). Tc-otd-1 knockdown resulted in Tc-doc expression expanding into a broad DV-symmetric domain covering most of the residual serosa anlage (Fig. 4H). This resembles the situation in Tc-sog RNAi embryos (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008; van der Zee et al., 2006). Thus, in both Tc-otd-1 and Tc-sog RNAi embryos, anterior tissue becomes dorsalized, as if the depletion of Tc-otd-1 would prevent the diffusion-driven ventral-to-dorsal transport of Dpp by Sog. To investigate this further, we analyzed the expression of Tc-sog and Tc-dpp in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos and monitored the activity of the Dpp signaling cascade by antibody staining against phosphorylated MAD (Mothers against MAD, abbreviated as MAD) (Fig. 4).

In wild type, Tc-sog is initially expressed in a broad ventral domain, which subsequently becomes more narrow and retracts from the serosa anlage (van der Zee et al., 2006). Tc-dpp mRNA is initially expressed near the anterior pole of the blastoderm embryo and later becomes localized in a stripe along the serosa-embryo boundary (Fig. 3M) (van der Zee et al., 2006). It has been shown that this anterior pattern of Tc-dpp expression is converted into a DV activity gradient (as monitored by pMAD staining) by Sog-mediated ventral-to-dorsal transport of Dpp (Fig. 4K) (van der Zee et al., 2006). We found that the ventral expression of Tc-sog was almost completely lost upon Tc-otd-1 RNAi, as only a few cells near the serosa-embryo boundary still expressed Tc-sog mRNA (Fig. 4J). Consistent with Tc-sog downregulation, pMAD activity was no longer restricted to the dorsal side of the serosa in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos but became ubiquitously distributed in this tissue (Fig. 4L), which is in accordance with the changes in expression of the Dpp target gene Tc-doc (Fig. 4I). Dpp activity in embryonic tissue, however, was largely absent (Fig. 4L), again resembling the situation after Tc-sog RNAi (van der Zee et al., 2006). These results indicate that Tc-Otd-1 positively regulates Tc-sog expression, and thus is required for establishing DV polarity.

Consistent with reduced Sog activity, not only ventral tissue, but also dorsal structures, are lost upon Tc-otd-1 RNAi. In the wild type, the iroquois gene (Tc-iro) (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008; Tomoyasu et al., 2005; van der Zee et al., 2006) is expressed in a narrow stripe marking the anterior border of the germ rudiment, which will give rise to the anterior amnion (Fig. 4C,E). In addition, Tc-iro is expressed in the dorsal amnion (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008). In Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos, the anterior stripe of Tc-iro expression was maintained, but became rotation-symmetric, indicating that the anterior amnion anlagen was present while the dorsal amnion was lost, as no dorsal or posterior Tc-iro expression could be detected (Fig. 4D,F). Thus, as in Tc-sog RNAi embryos (van der Zee et al., 2006), anterior tissue is dorsalized after Tc-otd-1 RNAi, whereas more-posterior tissues lack peak levels of Dpp activity and become lateralized.

In conclusion, Tc-otd-1 is essential for the appropriate distribution of Dpp activity. In Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos, Sog levels are severely reduced and Dpp activity does not become restricted to the dorsal side. As a consequence, the serosa-germ rudiment border remains straight and anterior embryonic tissue becomes dorsalized, which causes the loss of the anterior head.

**Can the combined knockout of sog and zen-1 phenocopy the effect of Tc-otd-1 RNAi?**

Our discovery that Tc-otd-1 is involved in DV patterning raises the question of to which degree this function by itself can explain the loss of head structures in Tc-otd-1 RNAi larvae. To investigate if partial inactivation of Tc-sog results in head phenotypes similar to Tc-otd-1 RNAi larvae, we injected double-stranded Tc-sog RNA at low concentrations (200 ng/µl) into female pupae and analyzed their offspring for larval cuticle phenotypes (see Fig. S3, Table S2 in the supplementary material). In the first week of egg collection, most Tc-sog RNAi larvae displayed strong cuticle aberrations, including the 'double dorsal' phenotype described by van der Zee et al. (van der Zee et al., 2006) (see Fig. S3B-D in the supplementary material). As the RNAi effect subsided, normal cuticle morphology is restored in a posterior-to-anterior direction, ultimately resulting in larvae exhibiting normal DV polarity but lacking segments of the anterior head, resembling the situation after Tc-otd-1 RNAi (see Fig. S3F in the supplementary material). Thus, in weak Tc-sog, as in Tc-otd-1 RNAi, phenotypes, the anterior head (see Fig. S3F in the supplementary material) is deleted, indicating that the head defects in Tc-otd-1 RNAi might well be due to dorsoventral misspecification of anterior ventral tissue (Fig. 7A,B).

Tc-otd-1 RNAi alters DV positional information through regulation of sog, even though Tc-Otd-1 itself is rotation-symmetrically expressed. Evidently, the spatially specific expression of Tc-sog must be regulated by another factor, i.e. Dorsal (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008). This raises the question of whether the observed shift of gap and pair-rule gene domains reflects positional information provided by Tribolium Otd or if this blastoderm fate map shift might also be an indirect effect. It has been shown previously that inactivation of Tc-zen-1 results in an expansion of anterior germ rudiment structures (van der Zee et al., 2005) and that Tc-zen-1 expression is reduced in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos (Fig. 4B). We wondered whether the combined knockdown of the Tc-Otd-1 target genes Tc-zen-1 and Tc-sog can phenocopy the Tc-otd-1 RNAi fate map shift along the AP axis. Indeed, we found that the double-knockdown of Tc-zen-1 and Tc-sog results in a coordinated shift of knirps, mlpt and even-skipped expression domains towards the anterior, a shift not observed in embryos depleted for Tc-sog alone (Fig. 5; see also Fig. S2 in the supplementary material). Interestingly, whereas Tc-otd-1 RNAi also results in the loss of the gnathal Tc-mlpt domain (Fig. 1H), in Tc-
sog Tc-zen-1 double-RNAi this Tc-mlpt domain is still present (Fig. 5C,D), suggesting that, in addition to Tc-sog and Tc-zen-1, Tc-Otd-1 activates at least one additional gene.

The combined knockdown of Tc-zen-1 and Tc-sog results in a phenotype that comprises most aspects of the Tc-otd-1 RNAi phenotype. As regulation of Tc-zen-1 is unlikely to depend on the Tc-Otd-1 gradient, it seems possible that Tc-Otd-1 does not provide concentration-dependent positional information at the blastoderm stage.

**Tc-otd-1 knockdown causes early embryonic lethality**

In addition to the phenotypes described above, strongly affected Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos suffer from additional severe defects. Only about 30% of eggs collected in the first week after eclosion of injected animals were capable of secreting a larval cuticle, whereas 70% of the embryos die prior to completion of embryonic development (see Fig. S1, Table S1 in the supplementary material). This phenotype differs from that of other DV or AP patterning genes. Suspecting a more general basis of these severe phenotypes, we examined programmed cell death (apoptosis) in Tc-otd-1 RNAi embryos by TUNEL staining (Fig. 6). Indeed, we found that upon Tc-otd-1 RNAi, most embryonic and extra-embryonic cells already undergo apoptosis within the differentiated blastoderm stage (Fig. 6C,D), whereas in corresponding wild-type blastoderm, no sign of programmed cell death were recognized (Fig. 6A,B). This apoptosis phenotype is not observed in Tc-sog RNAi embryos and is most prominent in the first week after injection (see Fig. S1 and Table S1 in the supplementary material), which might be why previous studies (Schinko et al., 2008; Schroder, 2003) missed this effect.

The anterior head clearly is the most sensitive structure, affected in nearly all Tc-otd-1 RNAi larvae (see Fig. S1, Table S1 in the supplementary material), and this defect is also observed when Tc-otd-1 dsRNA is injected at advanced embryonic stages such that only late otd expression is affected (Schinko et al., 2008). More rarely, segmentation defects are also observed in the thorax and abdomen (Schinko et al., 2008; Schroder, 2003). Interestingly, these more-posterior defects do not seem to fall into a clear AP progression, i.e. anterior thoracic defects are not more frequent than posterior thoracic defects, and these are not more frequent than abdominal defects (see Table S1 in the supplementary material). Thus, these trunk phenotypes cannot easily be ordered into a phenotypic series reflecting the AP Otd gradient. These randomly positioned defects can be explained, however, by randomly located apoptotic patches emerging in embryos where the degree of Tc-otd-1 inactivation approaches the threshold required for cell survival. This model implies that, in addition to Tc-sog and several segmentation genes, Otd has additional as yet unidentified target genes, which we admit remain to be identified (candidates include any early expressed housekeeping gene).

**DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we demonstrate two previously overlooked functions of Tc-otd-1, which are effected outside of the AP patterning paradigm but dominate the apparent segmentation phenotype of this gene in Tribolium. In consequence, we argue that the Tc-otd-1 segmentation function itself is more limited than previously thought, and that it shares few similarities with the role that Bicoid plays during Drosophila segmentation.
The role of Tc-otd-1 in determining the AP fate map is less extensive than previously thought

There is no bicoid ortholog in Tribolium (Brown et al., 2001; Richards et al., 2008) and it has been proposed that Tc-otd-1 might play a similar role in directing patterning along the AP axis as Bcd does in Drosophila (Schroder, 2003). This conjecture was supported by a phenotypic series of Tc-otd-1 RNAi larvae — anterior deletions extending into gnathum and thorax — similar to that of bicoid mutants. Moreover, simultaneous knockdown of Tc-otd-1 and Tc-hb appeared to synergistically enhance the phenotype, reminiscent of synergistic activation of target genes by Bcd and Hb in Drosophila (Simpson-Brose et al., 1994). Given that in Drosophila the transcription factors Otd and Bcd have similar target specificities (Finkelstein and Perrimon, 1990; Tahayato et al., 2003; Wimmer et al., 2000), this proposition appeared to support a simple evolutionary model according to which, in higher dipterans, Bcd took over anterior regulatory functions previously fulfilled by the widely conserved otd gene. We reanalyzed the Tribolium otd-1 phenotype using additional molecular markers and come to very different conclusions (Fig. 7).

In order to see whether the fate map of Tribolium blastoderm embryos reflects the patterning defects observed in larval cuticles, we investigated the expression of early active marker genes. We find that gnathal and thoracic expression domains of gap gene orthologs — Tc-hb, Tc-kiwi, Tc-ght and Tc-btd — are not obliterated as they are in bicoid mutants (Driever and Nusslein-Volhard, 1988; Hulskamp et al., 1990; Kraut and Levine, 1991; Rivera-Pomar et al., 1995; Tautz, 1988). These domains are shifted anteriorly in a coordinated fashion (Fig. 1; see Fig. S2 in the supplementary material), which in principle is consistent with a long-range morphogen function of Tc-Otd-1. However, the observed fate map shift in Tc-otd-1 knockdown embryos is small and can only explain the pregnathal defects observed in the terminal phenotype, not the segmental deletions in gnathal and thoracic regions. This surprisingly small effect of Tc-otd-1 inactivation on AP patterning is confirmed at the level of pair-rule genes, where we find that the first three stripes of the primary pair-rule genes Tc-run, Tc-eve and Tc-odd are formed normally, albeit shifted anteriorly (Figs 2, 3). The pregnathal region — the interval between the first pair-rule gene stripe and the serosa-embryo boundary — is reduced in size in Tc-otd-1 RNAi blastoderms, consistent with the loss of pregnathal structures observed in the terminal phenotype. These pregnathal defects (see Fig. S2 in the supplementary material for Tc-ems expression) might be explained by the mild AP fate map shift we observed, but also the dorsoventral changes we find in Tc-otd-1 RNAI embryos must result in loss of the pregnathal head (see below).

It is a strange coincidence, however, that these pregnathal defects can also be explained by the dorsoventral changes we find in these RNAI embryos (see below). Moreover, it has been shown that inactivation of Tc-otd-1 at post-blastodermal stages also results in the loss of labrum and antennae (Schinko et al., 2008). Therefore, it is remarkable that all three obvious patterning effects of Tc-otd-1 can only explain loss of the most-anterior head structures, not the segmental deletions in gnathal and thoracic regions in the terminal phenotype.

It had been previously proposed that Tc-Otd-1 and Tc-Hb cooperatively function as anterior morphogens in Tribolium (Schroder, 2003). However, the fate map shift in Tc-otd-1 RNAI blastoderms is not enhanced by the simultaneous knockdown of Tc-hb (Fig. 2G,H). Thus, there is no obvious synergistic effect of Tc-otd-1 and Tc-hb on blastodermal patterning. Marques-Souza and colleagues (Marques-Souza et al., 2008) already showed (and our unpublished results confirm this) that knockdown of Tc-hb results not in the loss of gnathal and thoracic segments but in their transformation to abdominal fates. Abdominal segments are deleted, however, in strong Tc-hb RNAI embryos. Thus, the severe double-RNAi defects (Schroder, 2003) should be interpreted as a superposition of anterior deletions (Tc-otd-1) and posterior deletions (Tc-hb) rather than synergistic morphogen action.

Given that the gnathal and thoracic region are enlarged rather than reduced in Tc-otd-1 RNAI blastoderm embryos, their absence in many RNAI larvae appears to be due to secondary loss at post-blastodermal stages. Several mechanisms could account for this secondary loss. According to one scenario, certain Tc-otd-1 target genes might be shifted or misexpressed to a larger degree than others, resulting in abnormal overlaps of expression activities, which might be incompatible with continued development of these primordia. However, we found that a number of segmentation gene domains shift in a coordinated fashion (Figs 1-3; see also Figs S2 and S5 in the supplementary material). Nevertheless, we cannot exclude that some other gene(s) might fail to obey that pattern. Our finding that the anterior domain of mlpt is affected differently than those of Tc-kiwi and Tc-ght (Fig. 1) could be seen as support for such a mechanism, even though this domain does not appear to be involved in segmentation (Savard et al., 2006). However, the pleiotropic nature of the Tc-otd-1 phenotype suggests a different explanation for the secondary loss of gnathal and thoracic primordia in these embryos (see below).
**Tc-otd-1 is essential for sog activation and dorsoventral patterning**

*Tribolium* wild-type embryos exhibit, at the differentiated blastoderm stage, a distinct dorsoventral polarity in that the serosa expands dorsally, displacing the embryonic tissue towards the ventral and posterior (Falciani et al., 1996; van der Zee et al., 2005). By contrast, *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos retain rotation symmetry at this stage and during subsequent gastrulation movements (Fig. 4). This phenotype is reminiscent of that caused by knockdown of dorsoventral genes (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008; van der Zee et al., 2006). Indeed, we find that mRNA expression of the pivotal ventral factor *Tc-sog* is severely reduced in these embryos. Similar to *Tc-sog* RNAi embryos, *Tc-otd-1* blastodermers are dorsIALIZED at an anterior-ventral level and lateralized at a posterior-dorsal level, as demonstrated by circumferential expression of a dorsal serosa marker (doc), loss of dorsal amnion (pnr) and a reduced dorsal activity of the zygotic dorsal morphogen Tc-Dpp (pMAD; Fig. 4).

The anterior head is a ventral primordium in *Tribolium* (van der Zee et al., 2006) and dorsIALIZED embryos lack anterior head structures. This is also the case in *Tc-sog* RNAi larvae (see Fig. S3 in the supplementary material) (van der Zee et al., 2006), and the severe reduction of *Tc-sog* expression in principle could fully account for the loss of anterior head primordia in *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos (Fig. 7). As *Tc-sog* expression also requires activation by Dorsal (Nunes da Fonseca et al., 2008), our results indicate that DV axis patterning (and anterior head formation) in *Tribolium* depends on the combinatorial input of signals from DV (Tc-Dorsal) and AP (Tc-Otd-1) patterning systems. Also in *Drosophila*, the formation of AP and DV axes is not entirely independent, as certain aspects of AP gene expression respond to DV positional information (Carroll et al., 1987; Gao and Finkelson, 1998; Liaw and Lengyel, 1993; Rothe et al., 1994; Zeitlinger et al., 2007). However, segmentation gene expression in *Drosophila* is only modulated somewhat by the DV system, whereas in *Tribolium* the input of the ‘AP factor’ Otd-1 is absolutely essential for DV patterning.

An important difference between the fate map changes in *Tc-sog* and *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos, however, concerns the size of the serosa. Consistent with the oblique boundary of the serosa anlagen in wild type, in dorsIALIZED embryos the serosa expands at the expense of the (ventrally located) anterior head. In *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos, however, the serosa primordium is dramatically reduced in size, albeit rotation-symmetric as in dorsIALIZED blastodermers (e.g. Fig. 3). *Tc-zen-1* is required for serosa formation in *Tribolium* (van der Zee et al., 2005) and the expression of this gene is reduced in *Tc-otd-1* but not in *Tc-sog* RNAi. *Tc-zen-1*, therefore, is a probable third direct target activated by Tc-Otd-1, in addition to *Tc-sog* and *Tc-mplt* (Figs 1, 7).

**Early homogeneous expression might account for all blastoderm functions of Tc-otd-1**

The spatial localization of the *Tc-sog* domain is clearly provided through its activation by Tc-Dorsal (Nunes de Fonseca et al., 2008). Given that Tc-Otd-1 appears only to ‘boost’ a promoter activity whose spatial specificity is provided by another input, and given the early onset of *Tc-sog* expression, it is probably the initial homogeneous expression of Tc-Otd-1 that is used by the *sog* promoter to amplify the activating signal provided by the DV system.

Similarly, we would argue that *Tc-zen-1* also receives spatially specific regulatory information from another source, i.e. the terminal system, as in *Tc-tor* or *Tc-tsl* RNAi embryos the *Tc-zen-1* domain is much reduced in size (M.S., unpublished). Indeed, upon *Tc-otd-1* and *Tc-tsl* double RNAi, *Tc-zen-1* expression is lost (see Fig. S4 in the supplementary material). Although *Tc-otd-1* clearly influences the size of the *Tc-zen-1* domain (Fig. 4), it is unlikely that the *Tc-zen-1* expression boundary is read from the Tc-Otd-1 gradient as, at this anterior position in the egg, Tc-Otd-1 expression levels are rather uniform throughout blastoderm development (Schroder, 2003). Instead, the terminal system appears to provide a short-range graded signal near the anterior pole, which is enhanced by Tc-Otd-1 (Schoppmeier and Schroder, 2005).

It might well be that the similarity between *Tc-sog* and *Tc-zen-1* in receiving a general boost rather than spatial information from Tc-Otd-1 also extends to the way they mediate the fate map changes resulting from Tc-Otd-1 inactivation. In the case of *Tc-sog*, it is clear that all DV defects of *Tc-otd-1* RNAi can be accounted for by its effect on *Tc-sog* expression. Our *Tc-sog Tc-zen-1* double RNAi experiment shows that most of the AP fate map effect of *Tc-otd-1* inactivation might be mediated through Tc-Zen-1. In double knockdown embryos, also fates outside the serosa region, e.g. the anterior Tc-kni domain and the first two eve stripes, are shifted anteriorly (Fig. 5). It is conceivable, therefore, that all or most of the AP fate map shift caused by *Tc-otd-1* knockdown can be explained by its activating effect on *Tc-zen-1* alone.

A general requirement, presumably provided by early uniform Tc-Otd-1 expression, is also revealed by the cell lethality phenotype of *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos (Fig. 6). In *Drosophila*, segmentation mutants show a dramatic increase in apoptotic death (Adachi-Yamada and O’Connor, 2002; DiNardo et al., 1994; Klingensmith et al., 1989; Magrassi and Lawrence, 1988; Namba et al., 1997; White and Lehmann, 1986). However, although apoptosis in such *Drosophila* mutants is locally restricted, the situation in strong *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos is different, as all extra-embryonic and embryonic cells undergo apoptosis (Fig. 6). Less severe apoptosis phenotypes, however, could explain the previously described stronger cuticle phenotypes (Schinko et al., 2008; Schroder, 2003), which we also observed (see Fig. S1, Table S1 in the supplementary material). In such embryos, apoptosis might be restricted to patches covering few segment primordia, which enables the residual (probably less affected) embryonic anlagen to escape lethality and to eventually secrete cuticle (see Fig. S1 and Table S1 in the supplementary material). Although we do not know the exact causes of early cell lethality in *Tc-otd-1* RNAi embryos, this apoptosis phenotype might well represent a third function of Tc-Otd-1, i.e. a function independent of its role in blastoderm patterning, which probably involves additional target genes, e.g. zygotically expressed early housekeeping genes that rely on homogeneously expressed Tc-Otd-1 for gene activation.

In conclusion, our data provide little reason to believe that the gradient of Tc-Otd-1 is more than a transitional stage between homogeneous blastoderm function and the subsequent head gap gene function (Schinko et al., 2008). In this respect, the Otd gradient in *Tribolium* might be more comparable to the *Drosophila* Caudal gradient, which only provides general activation rather than positional information (Cho et al., 2005; Hader et al., 1998; Macdonald and Struhl, 1986; Młodzik et al., 1990; Niessing et al., 2002; Niessing et al., 1999; Rivera-Pomar et al., 1996).

**Anterior patterning in short-germ insects**

AP pattern formation in the early *Drosophila* embryo is initiated by three maternally provided systems (St Johnston and Nusslein-Volhard, 1992). In the short-germ beetle *Tribolium*, the terminal system (i.e. Torso receptor tyrosine kinase signaling) plays a
prominent role in early axis formation (Schoppmeier and Schroder, 2005). At the posterior, Torso-signaling is required for growth zone formation and, at the anterior, it is involved in serosa formation via activation of Te-zen-1 (Fig. 7). Patterning of gnathum and the thorax depends on a posterior-to-anterior Tc-Cad gradient (Copf et al., 2003). This gradient is formed through translational repression, mediated by combined activities of zygotically expressed Tc-Mex-3 and Tc-Zen-2 (Schoppmeier et al., 2009). However, the Tc-Cad gradient does not appear to provide concentration-dependent positional information (Schoppmeier et al., 2009). In Tc-otd-1 RNAi, Tc-Mex-3 expression resembles the effects of Tc-otd-1 RNAi on the Tribolium gap genes (see Fig. S5 in the supplementary material), indicating that Tc-Mex-3 also does not require Tc-Otd-1 for its activation.

As the posterior system (nanos and pumilio) also plays only a minor role in the Tribolium blastoderm (C. Schmitt and M.S., in preparation), we believe that additional maternal positional information systems must be present in this species. However, our data indicate that this function is not provided by the Tc-otd-Te-hb system. Anterior patterning in long-germ insects involves localized determinants [e.g. bcd in Drosophila (Driever and Nusslein-Volhard, 1988) and otd, cad and gt in Nasonia (Brent et al., 2007; Lynch et al., 2006; Olesnicki et al., 2006)]. In Tribolium, only two localized mRNAs are known so far that have no patterning activity (Bucher et al., 2005). However, given that the localization machinery evidently is functioning during Tribolium oogenesis, we expect that additional maternally localized gradient systems remain to be identified in this species.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a stunning similarity between the fate map effects caused by the loss of Drosophila bcd and those caused by zen-1 RNAi in Tribolium as, in both, anterior regions of the early embryo are deleted and replaced by the expansion of more-posterior regions (van der Zee et al., 2005). Even those caused by Tc-Zen-1 as a long-reaching AP regulator is expansion of more-posterior regions (van der Zee et al., 2005). Even though the effect of Tc-Zen-1 as a long-reaching AP regulator is expected that additional maternally localized gradient systems remain to be identified in this species.

References


