

# MOLECULAR IDENTIFICATION OF BRUCELLA SPECIES-SPECIFIC DNA BY MULTIPLEX POLYMERASE CHAIN REACTION ASSAY

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## Abstract

A multiplex polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay was used to simultaneously amplify *Brucella abortus* and *Brucella melitensis*-specific target sequences. Genomic DNA from all of 3 *B. abortus* and *B. melitensis* reference strains, and 4 *B. abortus* and *B. melitensis* local field isolates were analyzed this assay. All *B. abortus* and *B. melitensis* strains and isolates produced corresponding amplified species-specific target fragments, respectively. No amplification was detected with DNAs from 2 gram-negative bacteria showing serological cross-reaction with *Brucella* species. To evaluate the diagnostic ability of the assay for the detection of *Brucella* species in field samples, a total of 54 bovine maternal samples, collected from sero-positive bovines for *Brucella* were tested by the assay. Of 24 multiplex PCR-positive samples, 21 (87.5%) and 3 (12.5%) were positive for *B. abortus* and *B. melitensis*-specific amplification, respectively. These findings were supported by the results of bacteriological examination of the field samples. The rapidity of multiplex PCR assay and its ability to detect and identify *Brucella* species in laboratory cultures and in field samples may provide a valuable tool for the rapid diagnosis of animal brucellosis.

## Introduction:

Brucellosis is a major cause of disease in livestock world-wide, with substantial implications for animal health and economic output (Scott et al., 2007). Furthermore, as the most common zoonosis, it remains a significant public health concern (WHO, 2002). *Brucella* species, the causative agents of brucellosis, are gram-negative, facultative, intracellular bacteria that are pathogenic to a variety of domestic and wild animals (Gee et al., 2004). Of the currently recognized species, *B. abortus* is predominantly associated with bovine brucellosis and *B. melitensis* is predominantly associated with small animal brucellosis (Alton et al., 1988). Animal brucellosis frequently results in a marked decrease in reproductive efficiency owing to a clinical disease, infertility and diminished levels of milk production (Bricker and 1994).

The diagnosis of brucellosis is classically based on serological and microbiological tests (Alton et al., 1988). It is known that serological methods are always sensitive or specific (Perry and Bundle, 1990; Diaz-Aparicio et al., 1994). Moreover, they have been reported to cross-react with antigens other than the

*Brucella* species (Nielsen, 2002). Culture-based identification procedures can be consuming, insensitive for individuals with chronic infections (Lulu et al., 2001) and also can impose hazard to laboratory personal (Gee et al., 2004). Because of these difficulties, the development of new diagnostic testes for the direct detection of *Brucella* species in clinical samples is increasingly interesting.

PCR assay has been shown to be a valuable method to detect different microorganisms (Michael Olive and Bean, 1999). In Egypt, previous studies have been conducted on using single PCR assays to detect *Brucella* DNA in laboratory cultures or in clinical or field samples (Gabal et al., 1994, Mohar and Radwan and Ibrahim, 2000). In these reports, the PCR assays were performed using oligonucleotide PCR primers to amplify *Brucella* unique conserved sequences of a gene encoding for a 31 KDa- protein. However, the PCR assay described by the authors did not differentiate *Brucella* tested isolates at the species level. The present study aims at the application of a multiplex PCR assay as a new method for the specific detection and identification of *Brucella* species. The objective of this study is to determine the effectiveness of this method in the diagnosis of animal brucellosis.

## Materials and methods

**Bacterial strains.** The *Brucella* reference strains and local *Brucella* field isolates used in the present study are listed in Table 1. Local field isolates were identified and typed by colonial morphology, Gram staining, biochemical and serological characteristics according to the procedures described by Alton et al. (1992). *Escherichia coli* O: 111 and *Yersinia enterocolitica* O: 9 were used as controls. Culture conditions were used for the other organisms as appropriate (Alton et al., 1992; Woodward et al., 1992).

**Preparation of genomic DNA.** DNA was isolated from fresh cultures of reference strains, local field isolates, *E. coli* and *Y. enterocolitica* as described by Fekete et al. (1992). The DNA concentration was measured by spectrophotometry at 260 nm. DNA preparations were stored at -20°C until further use.

**Primers.** The oligonucleotide primers were synthesized at New England Biolabs, Beverly, MA, USA. A cocktail of 2 *Brucella* species-specific primers; *B. melitensis*-specific primer: 5' GAC-GAA-CGG-AAT-TTT-TCC-AAT-CCC 3', *B. melitensis*-specific primer: 5' AAA-TCG-CGT-CCT-TGC-TGG-TCT-GA 3' and IS711-specific primer: 5' TGC-CGA-TCA-CTT-AAG-GGC-CTT-CAT 3' were used for specific amplification of *Brucella* species DNA (Bricker and Halling, 1994).

**Multiplex PCR.** Amplification reaction mixtures were prepared in a 25 µl containing 50 mM KCl, 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.3), 1.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 25 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphate (dNTP), the two-primer cocktail (200 nM of *B. melitensis*- and *B. melitensis*-specific primers), and 100 nM IS711-specific primer of Taq DNA polymerase (Advanced Biotechnologies, Surrey, UK) and genomic DNA. The samples were cycled (1.15 minute at 95°C, 2 minute at 72°C) 35 times-cycles in a thermocycler (Biometra, Goettingen). After the last cycle, the reaction mixtures were incubated at 72°C for 5 minutes and they were stored at 4°C.

**Agarose gel electrophoresis of PCR products.** After amplification, the PCR products (10 µl from the amplification reaction mixture) were analyzed by electrophoresis

1.5% ethidium bromide-stained agarose gel (Sambrook et al., 1998) and photographed.

PCR testing and bacteriological examination of field samples. A total of 24 bovine maternal field samples (milk, placental cotyledons and supramammary nodes) were collected from serologically positive cattle and buffaloes by standard Bengal and tube agglutination tests for brucellosis. The samples were sent to the laboratory to be tested for *Brucella* species. Samples were processed for PCR testing by bacteriological assay as previously described (Radwan and Ibrahim, 2000). PCR amplification was performed as described above for bacterial strains. For identification of growing suspected *Brucella* colonies were done following standard laboratory procedures described by Alton et al., (1988).

## Results

### MULTIPLEX PCR AMPLIFICATION OF DNA FROM BRUCELLA REFERENCE STRAINS AND LOCAL ISOLATES

The results from the multiplex PCR amplification of *Brucella* species D reference strains and local field isolates using a 3- *Brucella* species -specific cocktail (*B. abortus*-, *B. melitensis*- and the genetic element IS711-specific) are given in fig.1. As predicted, one band of the expected size (498 bp) was amplified from the DNAs of *B. abortus* 544, *B. abortus* S19 reference strains, 3 *B. abortus* 1 local field isolates (Fig.1, lanes 2-5, respectively). On the other hand, DNA from *B. melitensis* 16M reference strains and 1 *B. melitensis* biovar 3 field isolate amplified DNA bands of 731 bp on agarose gel (Fig. 1, lanes 7 and 8, respectively). No amplification product fragments were detected for DNAs from *E. coli* O: 11 and *Enterococcus faecalis* O: 9 used as negative controls (Fig.1, lanes 9 and 10, respectively).

### MULTIPLEX PCR TESTING AND BACTERIOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF FIELD SAMPLES

To assess the utility of the multiplex PCR assay in the detection of *Brucella* species-specific DNA in field samples from infected animals, a total of 24 bovine placental and lymph node tissue samples collected from serologically reactive animals were tested by multiplex PCR and culture procedures. Out of 24 field samples, 21 (87.5%) yielded positive results on multiplex PCR testing. The results of specificity of detected *Brucella* species-specific DNA in the field samples by multiplex PCR assay are given in table (2). Out of the 24 samples, 21 (87.5%) yielded PCR product DNA fragments specific for *B. abortus*. On the other hand, only 3 (12.5%) produced fragments specific for *B. melitensis*.

The results of bacteriological examination of the 24 bovine field samples positive on the multiplex PCR assay are given in table 3. A total of 21 isolates were identified as *B. abortus* biovar 1 (9, 1, 2 and 9 isolates were recovered from buffalo milk, placental and lymph node tissue samples, respectively). On the other hand, only 3 isolates were identified as *B. melitensis* biovar 3 (2 and 1 isolates were recovered from cow milk and buffalo milk, respectively). Fig.2 shows agarose gel electrophoresis of PCR product DNA amplified from DNAs of representative field samples. *B. abortus*- specific amplified DNA fragments (498 bp) were observed with DNAs from cattle milk, buffalo milk, cattle placental tissue and lymph node tissue samples, respectively. *B. melitensis*-specific amplified DNA fragments (731 bp) were observed with DNAs from cattle and buffalo milk, respectively.

## Discussion

Brucellosis impacts agricultural economics and public health worldwide of its high infectivity rate (Corbel, 1997). The fight against brucellosis is mainly on veterinary sanitation measures focused on the reduction or eradication of this disease in farm animals. Owing to continuous efforts to control and eradicate brucellosis, in domestic animals, the levels of brucellosis have been reduced in many countries (Godfroid and Käsbohrer, 2002). The rapidity with which a diagnosis can be obtained is an critical component of every outbreak in animals because knowledge about the causative agent plays a pivotal role in implementing appropriate control decisions in a timely manner (Gee, 2004). The routine diagnosis of brucellosis is mainly based on serological response (Nielsen, 2002), which is often unspecific owing to cross-reactions or sub-sensitive reactions in samples from animals with low or subclinical prevalence of brucellosis (Weynants et al., 1996; Godfroid et al., 2002). Another diagnostic option for animal brucellosis depends primarily on the isolation of *Brucella* species from field samples followed by performing a set of bacteriological, biochemical and serological tests that allow for reliable identification of the species and biovar level but that requires up to 7 days for completion (Alton et al., 1988; Alton et al., 1995). The disadvantages of serological and bacteriological testing procedures demand the need for alternative molecular diagnostics for *Brucella* infections in animals (Bricker, 2002b).

Efforts have been expended on the development of molecular diagnostics based on amplification of different genomic targets by the PCR for the identification of *Brucella* species (Bricker, 2002a). However, the development of such diagnostic molecular tools has been problematic, reflecting the lack of genetic polymorphisms among *Brucella* species (Halling and Zehr, 1990). Development of PCR - based methods for differentiation between *Brucella* species and biovars has been previously reported (Bricker and Halling, 1994; Bricker and Halling, 1995; Ouahrani-Bettache et al., 1998; Ewalt and Bricker, 2000; Bogdanovich et al., 2004; Whatmore et al., 2000; Yoldi et al., 2006; Scott et al., 2007; Lopez-Goni et al., 2008). The aim of this study was to use of the multiplex PCR-based assay for detection and identification of *Brucella* species and to assess its utility in the diagnosis of brucellosis in livestock.

In the present study, a multiplex PCR assay which utilizes oligonucleotide primers specific for *B. abortus*, *B. melitensis* and *Brucella* species gene IS711 to simultaneously amplify *B. abortus*- and *B. melitensis*-specific target DNA sequences. It is based on the observation that the genetic element IS711 is present in several species-specific or biovar-specific chromosomal loci (Halling and Zehr, 1990). The assay was tested on purified genomic DNAs (10 ng/ 50- $\mu$ l assay mixture) from each of the *Brucella* reference strains and local field isolates. Species-specific amplification was obtained from the 2 *Brucella* species tested including *B. abortus* biovar 1 (498 bp) and *B. melitensis* biovars 1 and 3 (731 bp). The lack of amplification when genomic DNAs extracted from *E. coli* O: 111 and *Y. enterocolitica* O: 4 were repeatedly reported to cross-react serologically with *Brucella* species (Alton, 1988; Weynants et al., 1996; Godfroid et al., 2002) supports the specific amplification of *Brucella*-specific sequences.

Previous studies have shown the potential of single PCR assay for detection of *B. abortus* (Leal-Klevezas et al., 2000; Sreevastan et al., 2000), *B. melitensis*

al., 2001) and *B. ovis* (Manterola et al., 2003) in naturally infected animals. In the present study, in order to assess the utility of the multiplex PCR test, a total of 24 bovine maternal field samples (milk, placental and lymph node tissues) were analyzed for the detection of *Brucella* species. *B. abortus* and *B. melitensis*-specific sequences were identified in 21 (87.5%) and 3 (12.5%) out of 24 samples found for the multiplex PCR assay. These results indicate the success of DNA extraction and multiplex PCR protocols in the selective detection of *Brucella* species-specific DNA in field samples from naturally infected animals.

The results of the multiplex PCR assay on field samples were confirmed by the results of bacteriological testing of the same field samples that reveal the identity of 21 *B. abortus* biovar 1 isolates (recovered from cow milk, buffalo milk, placental and lymph node tissue samples) and 3 *B. melitensis* biovar 3 isolates (recovered from cow milk and buffalo milk samples), respectively.

The multiplex PCR assay described in the present study may have advantages over the other conventional microbiological diagnostic methods for *Brucella* species. The assay allowed specific identification of *Brucella* species. This assay could be applied to simultaneously screen samples for multiple *Brucella* species. A major advantage is the speed with which the assay can be performed, where results could be obtained within less than 1 working day. Conventional methods are slow procedures and require at least several days or even weeks to get results (Bricker and Halling, 1994; Ewalt and Bricker, 2000). Moreover, the assay eliminates the need for handling the organism in the laboratory. This is significant because *Brucella* is a zoonotic human pathogen (Gee et al., 2004).

The results presented in this study have demonstrated the reliability of the multiplex PCR assay for use in the detection and identification of *Brucella* species-specific DNA and its utility in detecting the presence of the *Brucella* species in field samples from naturally infected animals. This multiplex-based assay may be an alternative diagnostic method for brucellosis in animals in Egypt.

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**Table 1: Brucella strains and isolates used in this study.**

Species and biovars	Strain	Source	Origin
B. abortus 1	544	Reference strain	CVL*, Weybridge, U
	S19	Reference vaccine strain	CVL*, Weybridge, U
		Local Field Isolate (cattle milk)	ARRI**, Giza, Egypt
		Local Field Isolate (buffalo milk)	ARRI**, Giza, Egypt
		Local Field Isolate (cattle uterus)	ARRI**, Giza, Egypt
B. melitensis 1	16M	Reference strain	CVL*, Weybridge, U
B. melitensis 3		Local Field Isolate (sheep lymph node)	ARRI**, Giza, Egypt

\* CVL: Central Veterinary Laboratory.

\*\* ARRI: Animal Reproduction Research Institute.

**Table 2: Specificity of detection of Brucella species-specific DNA samples by multiplex PCR assay.**

Test result	PCR product DNA specific for <i>B. abortus</i> (498 bp)		PCR product DNA specific for <i>B. melitensis</i> (731 bp)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Positive	21	87.5	3	12.5
Negative	3	12.5	21	87.5
Total	24	100.0	24	100.0

**Table 3: Result of bacteriological identification of the 31 field samples found positive on multiplex PCR assay.**

Field sample	Animal species	Typing of Brucella isolates		Total
		B.abortus biovar 1	B.melitensis biovar 3	
Milk	Cattle	9	2	11
	Buffalo	1	1	2
Placental tissue	Cattle	2	0	3
Lymph node tissue	Cattle	9	0	9
Total		21	3	24



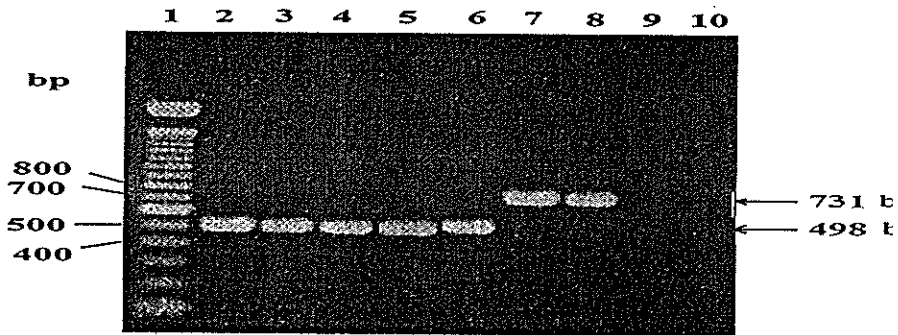


Fig.1. Amplification products from *Brucella* strains and local field isolates tested with the 3-primer multiplex PCR assay as described in the text. Lane 1: molecular marker (100 bp ladder); lane 2: *B. abortus* 544; lane 3: *B. abortus* S19; lanes 4-5: *B. abortus* biovar 1 local field isolates from cattle milk, buffalo milk, and cattle lymph node, respectively. Lane 6: control. Lane 7: *B. melitensis* 16M; lane 8: *B. melitensis* biovar 3 local field isolate from sheep lymph node. Lanes 9 and 10: *E. coli* O: 111 and *Y. enterocolitica*, respectively. Numbers along the left margin of the panel indicate the sizes (in bp) of selected fragments of the molecular weight marker. Arrows on the right indicate the 498-bp (*B. abortus*) and 731-bp (*B. melitensis*) amplified fragments, respectively.

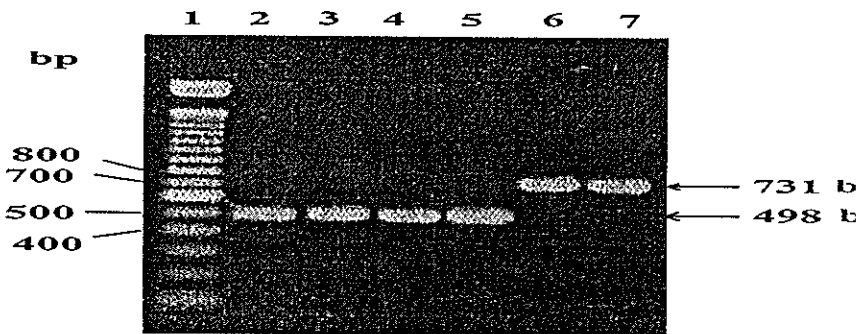


Fig.2. Amplification products from representative bovine field samples (positive for *Brucella* species by culture procedures) tested with the 3-primer multiplex PCR assay as described in the text. Lane 1: molecular weight marker (100 bp ladder); Lanes 2-5: cattle milk, buffalo milk, cattle placental tissue, and cattle lymph node tissues, respectively (*B. abortus* biovar 1). Lanes 6-7: cattle and buffalo milk, respectively (*B. melitensis* biovar 3). Numbers along the left margin of the panel indicate the sizes (in bp) of selected fragments of the molecular weight marker. Arrows on the right indicate the 498-bp (*B. abortus*) and 731-bp (*B. melitensis*) amplified fragments, respectively.

العربي ،

## لجزيئي على الحمض النووي المميز لأنواع ميكروب البروسيلات باستخدام يم البلمرة المتسلسل متعدد بادئات التفاعل

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اختبار إنزيم البلمرة المتسلسل متعدد بادئات التفاعل في مضاعفة متزامنة لتتابعات نيكلوتيدية مستهدفة من  
ي المميز لميكروب البروسيلات ابورتس والبروسيلات ميليتنس. تم اختبار الحمض النووي المستخلص من ٢  
بة من البروسيلات ابورتس والبروسيلات ميليتنس بالإضافة إلى ٤ عزلات حقلية محلية للبروسيلات من نوع  
وسيلات من نوع ميليتنس وأعطت جميعها نتائج إيجابية حيث تم الكشف عن والتعرف على الحمض النووي  
وب البروسيلات لكلا النوعين. ولم يعط الاختبار أي نتائج إيجابية بالنسبة لنوعين آخرين تم اختبارهما من  
لجرام والمعروفة بحدوث تفاعلات غير نوعية مع ميكروبات البروسيلات سيروولوجيا .  
ة، التشخيصية لاختبار إنزيم البلمرة المتسلسل متعدد بادئات التفاعل للكشف عن ميكروبات البروسيلات في  
ة من الأبقار والجاموس، تم اختبار عدد ٥٤ عينة من الأبقار والجاموس الأمهات إيجابية للبروسيلات  
ميروولوجية بواسطة كل من هذا الاختبار والفحص البكتيريولوجي وقد امكن الكشف عن والتعرف على  
، للبروسيلات من نوع ابورتس ونوع ميليتنس في ٢١ (٨٧,٥%) و ٣ (١٢,٥%) على الترتيب من أصل ٢٤  
نتاج إيجابية لاختبار إنزيم البلمرة المتسلسل متعدد بادئات التفاعل . وقد تم تأكيد هذه النتائج بواسطة نتائج  
ولوجي على نفس العينات.

الاستنتاج نظرا لما يتميز به اختبار إنزيم البلمرة المتسلسل متعدد بادئات التفاعل من الكشف بتخصص  
ي المميز لأنواع الميكروب في المزارع المعملية بالإضافة إلى قدرة الاختبار في الكشف عن والتعرف  
نووي للبروسيلات في العينات الحقلية فإنه يمكن استخدام الاختبار كاختبار ذو فائدة قيمة في التشخيص السريع  
ية لأنواع المختلفة لميكروب البروسيلات .