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Molecular characterization of a Marek's disease virus strain detected in tumour-bearing turkeys

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1	Molecular characterisation of a Marek's disease virus strain detected in tumour-bearing
2	turkeys
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24 Abstract

25	Marek's disease (MD) is a lymphoproliferative disease caused by Gallid alphaherpesvirus 2
26	(GaHV-2), which primarily affects chickens. However, the virus is also able to induce
27	tumours in turkeys, albeit less frequently than in chickens. This study reports the molecular
28	characterisation of a GaHV-2 strain detected in a flock of Italian meat-type turkeys exhibiting
29	visceral lymphomas. Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of the meq gene revealed that the
30	turkey GaHV-2 has molecular features of high virulence and genetic similarity with GaHV-2
31	strains recently detected in Italian commercial and backyard chickens. GaHV-2 is ubiquitous
32	among chickens despite the vaccination, and chicken-to-turkey transmission is hypothesised
33	due to the presence of broilers in neighbouring pens.
34	
35	
36	Keywords: Marek's disease, turkey, Gallid alphaherpesvirus 2, meq gene, molecular
37	characterisation, Turkey herpesvirus.
38	
39	Research highlights
40	• A GaHV-2 strain from Italian turkeys was molecularly characterised;
41	• The turkey strain presented molecular characteristics of high virulence in its <i>meq</i> gene;
42	• The turkey strain was closely related to previously detected chicken strains.
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47 Introduction

Marek's disease (MD) virus or *Gallid alphaherpesvirus 2* (GaHV-2), the causative agent of 48 MD, is a herpesvirus belonging to the subfamily Alphaherpesvirinae, genus Mardivirus. Two 49 50 other viral species are included in this genus: Gallid alphaherpesvirus 3 (GaHV-3) and Meleagrid alphaherpesvirus 1 (MeHV-1) or Turkey herpesvirus (HVT), frequently used as 51 vaccines against MD in chickens. GaHV-2 isolates can be classified into four pathotypes: 52 mild, virulent, very virulent and very virulent plus (Witter, 1997). GaHV-2 has been 53 extensively studied and described in chickens, whether experimentally or naturally infected. 54 In contrast, studies have seldom focused on GaHV-2 infections in turkeys, and scientific 55 56 reports remain limited. The first report on a Marek's disease-like condition in turkeys was from Florida, where two 57 wild turkeys exhibited lymphoid visceral tumours resembling the MD-related tumours of the 58 chicken (Busch & Williams, 1970). Subsequently, field cases were reported from the 59 Netherlands (Voute & Wagenaar-Schaafsma, 1974), France (Coudert et al., 1995), Germany 60 (Voeckell et al., 1999), Israel (Davidson et al., 2002) and the United Kingdom (Pennycott & 61 Venugopal, 2002; Deuchande et al., 2012, Blake-Dyke & Baigent, 2013). 62 Susceptibility to GaHV-2 infection and tumour development has been demonstrated in 63 64 experimentally infected turkeys with GaHV-2 isolates of chicken or turkey origin (Paul et al., 1977; Elmubarak et al., 1981; Powell et al., 1984; Davidson et al., 2002). 65 At post-mortem examination, GaHV-2-induced tumours in turkeys resemble tumours induced 66 by either the Reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV) (Nair et al., 2013) or the 67 Lymphoprolipherative disease virus (LPDV) (Biggs, 1997). 68 Some of these studies have primarily diagnosed MD based on histopathology, but this is not a 69 decisive assay because even microscopically the neoplastic infiltrate can prove very similar 70 71 across these lymphoproliferative diseases (Schat & Nair, 2013).

72	Relatively few studies have employed the PCR to confirm the GaHV-2 tumour's aetiology
73	(Voechell et al., 1999, Davidson et al., 2002, Deuchande et al., 2012; Blake-Dyke & Baigent,
74	2013). In our study, the meq gene was selected to serve for turkey GaHV-2 identification and
75	classification, having been described as carrying virulence-specific markers (Shamblin et al.,
76	2004). Indeed, Shamblin et al. (2004) and Renz et al. (2012) have observed that the number
77	of sequences of four proline molecules (PPPP) is significantly correlated with the viral
78	pathotype. Isolates of lower virulence present greater PPPP number than higher virulence
79	isolates, which contain the lowest number of four-proline repeats or disrupted PPPP motifs
80	due to point mutations. The determination of GaHV-2 virulence by molecular sequencing is
81	only able to suggest the viral pathotype, as in vivo pathotyping assays (Witter et al., 2005)
82	using susceptible chickens are mandatory for an exact inclusion of GaHV-2 strains into one of
83	the known pathotypes.
84	The aim of the present study is to report the description of GaHV-2-caused visceral tumours
85	in Italian commercial turkeys, alongside with the first molecular characterisation of the
86	detected GaHV-2 strain through meq gene sequence analysis and phylogeny.
87	
88	Materials and Methods
89	
90	Commercial turkeys. During the year 2016, three-to-four-month-old white meat turkeys,
91	unvaccinated against MD and reared on a commercial free-range farm located in the Lazio
92	region of Italy, experienced mortality. At post-mortem examination livers were enlarged and
93	contained whitish lesions of lymphoproliferative nature. The flock had been reared indoors up
94	to 50 days of age, before moving into outdoor pens until slaughter at five months old. On the
95	same farm, HVT-vaccinated broiler chickens were reared outdoors in neighbouring pens.

97 DNA extraction. A selected tumour-bearing liver served for the genomic DNA extraction

98 using the commercial kit NucleoSpin® Tissue (MACHEREY-NAGEL GmbH & Co. KG,

99 Düren, Germany), according to the manufacturer's instructions.

100 PCRs for GaHV-2 meq gene amplification and HVT detection. The full-length meq gene

- 101 of GaHV-2 was amplified with a previously described PCR protocol (Mescolini *et al.*, 2019a).
- 102 DNA was subjected to a further PCR protocol employing an oligonucleotide set specifically
- designed to amplify the US3 gene of HVT (Handberg *et al.*, 2001). PCR was conducted by
- adding 3 μ L DNA to a 22 μ L reaction mixture containing 0.125 μ L GoTaq G2 Flexi DNA
- 105 Polymerase (Promega, Madison, WI), 5 µL 5X Colorless Go-Taq Flexi Buffer, 1.75 µL
- 106 MgCl2 solution, 0.5 µL dNTPs, 13 µL H2O for molecular biology, 1 µL primer forward
- 107 HVT-1 (5'-ATG GAA GTA GAT GTT GAG TCT TCG-3') and 1 μL primer reverse HVT-2
- 108 (5'-CGA TAT ACA CGC ATT GCC ATA CAC-3'). Cycling conditions were as follows: 2
- 109 min of denaturation at 95°C followed by 35 cycles, each consisting of denaturation at 95°C
- 110 for 1 min, annealing at 55°C for 1 min, and extension at 72°C for 1 min. A final elongation
- step at 72°C for 5 min completed the reaction. The PCR products were separated on agarose
- 112 gel (2%), stained with ethidium bromide, and visualized under ultraviolet light after an

electrophoretic run at 110 V and 400 mA for 35 min.

- 114
- 115 Sequencing and sequence analysis. PCR products were purified using ExoSAP-IT Express
- 116 PCR Product Cleanup (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Massachusetts, USA) and sequenced by a
- 117 commercial sequencing service (Macrogen Spain, Madrid, Spain).
- 118 In order to obtain the whole *meq* gene sequence, PCR primers *Eco*R-Q for (5'-GGT GAT
- 119 ATA AAG ACG ATA GTC ATG-3') and EcoR-Q rev (5'-CTC ATA CTT CGG AAC TCC
- 120 TGG AG-3') (Shamblin et al., 2004) as well as an additional and internal primer (meq-F, 5'-
- 121 ATG TCT CAG GAG CCA GAG CCG-3') (Hassanin *et al.*, 2013) were used for sequencing.
 - 5

122	The sequence was edited and assembled using BioEdit Sequence Alignment Editor, Version
123	7.2.5.0 (Tom Hall, Ibis Therapeutics, Carlsbad, California, USA), before being aligned
124	against selected complete meq gene sequences of 36 reference GaHV-2 strains of known
125	pathotype and 32 GaHV-2 strains recently detected during MD outbreaks in Italian backyard
126	(Mescolini et al., 2019a) and commercial chickens (Mescolini et al., 2019b) (Table 1). The
127	number of PPPP motifs contained in the proline-rich repeats (PPRs) of the transactivation
128	domain, the proline content (%) and the amino acid (aa) substitutions in meq gene-deduced
129	amino acid sequence were evaluated.
130	A phylogenetic tree based on the <i>meq</i> gene aa sequences was constructed with the maximum
131	likelihood (ML) method using MEGAX (Kumar et al., 2018). Nodes of the tree with
132	bootstrap values obtained with 1,000 replicates equal to or greater than 70 were considered
133	significant.
134	The HVT US3 gene amplicon was sequenced in both directions using the PCR primers and
135	was submitted to the basic local alignment search tool (BLAST) for a similarity search.
136	
137	Accession numbers. Sequences were submitted to the GenBank database and are available
138	under the following accession numbers: MN017102 (meq gene of GaHV-2) and MN017103
139	(US3 gene of MeHV-1).
140	
141	Results
142	The analysed sample was positive at PCR for the GaHV-2 meq gene, producing an amplicon
143	of the expected size. The detected strain was named GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16. Sequence
144	analysis revealed a meq gene encoding for a 339 aa-long Meq protein isoform with a proline

content of 21.18% and a 100% nucleotide sequence identity with Italian GaHV-2 strains

recently detected in commercial (Mescolini *et al.*, 2019b) and rural chicken flocks (Mescolini *et al.*, 2019a).

Four PPPPs were identified in the transactivation domain together with a PPSP sequence, in 148 which a serine replaced a proline at position 218 (P218S). The overall molecular 149 characteristics of the detected strain are reported in Table 2. GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16 150 showed an aa substitution (S71A) that is typically found in all *in vivo* pathotyped vv+ strains 151 and other three as substitutions (D80Y, C110S and P218S) found in field strains from Italy 152 (Mescolini et al., 2019a, b) and Poland (Woźniakowski et al., 2010; Woźniakowski & 153 Samorek-Salamonowicz, 2014; Trimpert et al., 2017) with an history of elevated virulence in 154 the field. The phylogenetic analysis (Figure 1) confirmed the close relationship of the turkey 155 strain with GaHV-2s recently detected in Italy from MD outbreaks in chickens, as they belong 156 to the same cluster. 157

158 Finally, an amplicon of the expected size (505 bp) was obtained when the specific PCR for

the US3 gene of HVT was applied. The BLAST search confirmed the detection of an HVT

strain (MeHV-1/Italy/Turkey/601/16), presenting a 100% sequence identity with the US3

161 gene of the HVT strain FC126 (GenBank accession number AF291866), commonly used as

162 MD vaccine in chickens.

163

164 **Discussion**

The present report, which molecularly identifies a GaHV-2 strain in free-range commercial
turkeys, builds upon the few existing studies of turkeys infected by GaHV-2, which is
primarily a chicken's pathogen. The *meq* gene, the main GaHV-2 viral oncogene, was
selected for the molecular characterisation of the GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16 strain owing to
its molecular variability, which correlates with the level of virulence of the strain (Lee *et al.*,
2000; Shamblin *et al.*, 2004). The GaHV-2 strain showed molecular features suggestive of

high virulence due to the presence, in the transactivation domain of the Meq protein, of a low 171 172 number of four-proline repeats, of a disrupted PPPP motif and of aa substitutions typically found in all vv+strains (S71A) and in Italian and Polish strains (D80Y, C110S and P218S) 173 with an history of high virulence in the field (Woźniakowski et al., 2010; Woźniakowski & 174 Samorek-Salamonowicz, 2014; Trimpert et al., 2017; Mescolini et al., 2019a, b). In order to 175 report the original turkey GaHV-2 sequence without any possible molecular changes that may 176 have occurred during tissue culture propagation (Shamblin et al., 2004), this study employed 177 the original turkey tissue for amplification and sequencing, as advocated by Davidson et al. 178 (1995) and Davidson and Silva (2008). 179 For the first time a turkey GaHV-2 meg gene sequence was obtained and compared with meg 180 gene sequence GaHV-2 strains of known pathotype and GaHV-2 strains recently detected 181 during MD outbreaks in Italian chickens. 182 183 A resemblance of the turkey GaHV-2 to chicken GaHV-2 strains with molecular characteristics suggestive of high virulence previously detected in Italy was evident from the 184 meq gene sequence characterisation and phylogenetic analysis. 185 This report strengthens the previously sporadic observation of the potentially detrimental 186 effects of virulent GaHV-2 strains infecting the turkey. In particular, turkeys reared with the 187 possibility of contact with GaHV-2-affected chickens are prone to infection by circulating 188 GaHV-2 strains. Whereas Davidson et al. (2002) reported MD in commercial turkey flocks 189 reared in poultry houses previously occupied by MD affected chickens, the present report 190 describes free-range birds of both species located in neighbouring pens. Due to the high and 191 efficient horizontal environmental spread of GaHV-2 by means of desquamated feather 192 follicle epithelial cells, which harbour infectious viral particles, it can be assumed that the 193 194 affected turkey flock has been subjected to considerable risk of infection due to the continuous and close presence of broilers. Unfortunately, the neighbouring broiler flock was 195

not tested for GaHV-2 presence, but the virus is ubiquitous in chickens and might infectvaccinated chickens asymptomatically.

Although the susceptibility of turkeys to GaHV-2 infection has been recognised, reports on
MD in this species are rare. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness, to different degrees
of MD genetic resistance, or to the widespread presence of HVT in this species, which as
hypothesised by Witter and Solomon (1971) may confer a certain degree of protection against
the disease.

203 Nevertheless, the latter possibility has been contested by Elmubarak *et al.* (1981), who have

204 found that HVT vaccination is ineffective in protecting turkeys against MD under

experimental conditions, and Blake-Dyke and Baigent (2013), who report that an early

206 infection with HVT may prove unable to provide adequate immunity and protect turkeys from

the challenge with a field GaHV-2 strain. The moment at which the birds in our investigation

208 became infected with HVT is unknown, because the virus was detected simultaneously with

the MD outbreak, and so the role of HVT in protecting turkeys from MD remains unclear.

210 The genetic similarity of the detected HVT strain with the FC126 vaccine strain suggests that

the virus probably came from the neighbouring broilers, but it cannot be excluded that the

examined turkey flock naturally harboured the detected HVT strain.

213 The protection of turkeys against MD is at present heavily reliant on management procedures,

namely the effective separation from GaHV-2-affected chickens. Further studies are required

to understand whether the associations of currently available vaccines are able to prevent MDin turkeys.

217

218 Disclosure statement

219 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

220

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GAHV-2 strain	Country	Year	Pathotyp e	Size of Meq (aa)	PPPPs (N°)	GenBank Accession N°	Reference
CVI988	The Netherlands	1969	att ^a	398	7	DQ530348	Spatz <i>et al.</i> , 2007
814	China	1986	att	398	7	JF742597	Zhang <i>et al.</i> , 2012
3004	Russia	NA ^b	att	398	7	EU032468	NA
CU-2	USA	1970s	m ^c	398	7	AY362708	Shamblin et al., 2004
MD70/13	Hungary	1970	v^d	339	5	MF431495	Trimpert et al., 2017
571	USA	1989	V	339	3	AY362710	Shamblin et al., 2004
617A	USA	1993	V	339	4	AY362712	Shamblin et al., 2004

Table 1. Chicken GaHV-2 strains included in the analysis.

MPF57	Australia	1994	V	398	5	EF523774	Renz et al., 2012
04CRE	Australia	2004	V	398	5	EF523773	Renz et al., 2012
573	USA	NA	V	339	4	AY362711	Shamblin et al., 2004
567	USA	NA	V	339	4	AY362709	Shamblin et al., 2004
637	USA	NA	V	339	4	AY362713	Shamblin et al., 2004
BC-1	USA	NA	V	398	7	AY362707	Shamblin et al., 2004
JM	USA	NA	V	398	7	AY243331	Shamblin et al., 2004
JM/102W	USA	NA	V	399	7	DQ534539	Spatz & Silva, 2007
Md5	USA	1977	vv ^e	339	4	AF243438	Tulman <i>et al.</i> , 2000
549	USA	1987	VV	339	2	AY362714	Shamblin et al., 2004
595	USA	1991	VV	339	2	AY362715	Shamblin et al., 2004
C12/130	UK	1992	VV	339	5	FJ436096	Spatz <i>et al.</i> , 2011

Woodlands1	Australia	1992	VV	399	5	EF523775	Renz et al., 2012
643P	USA	1994	VV	339	2	AY362716	Shamblin et al., 2004
02LAR	Australia	2002	VV	398	5	EF523772	Renz et al., 2012
FT158	Australia	2002	VV	398	5	EF523771	Renz et al., 2012
RB1B	USA	NA	VV	339	5	AY243332	Shamblin et al., 2004
648A	USA	1994	$vv+^{f}$	339	2	AY362725	Shamblin et al., 2004
New	USA	1999	vv+	339	2	AY362719	Shamblin et al., 2004
W	USA	1999	vv+	339	4	AY362723	Shamblin et al., 2004
ATE2539	Hungary	2000	vv+	339	5	MF431493	Trimpert et al., 2017
660-A	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362726	Shamblin et al., 2004
686	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362727	Shamblin et al., 2004
L	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362717	Shamblin et al., 2004

Ν	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362718	Shamblin et al., 2004
RL	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362720	Shamblin et al., 2004
ТК	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362721	Shamblin et al., 2004
U	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362722	Shamblin et al., 2004
Х	USA	NA	vv+	339	2	AY362724	Shamblin et al., 2004
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/487/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	5	MK139660	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/507/15	Italy	2015	NA	418	9	MK139661	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/509/15	Italy	2015	NA	418	9	MK139662	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/510/15	Italy	2015	NA	418	9	MK139663	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/562/15	Italy	2015	NA	418	9	MK139664	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/599/16	Italy	2016	NA	418	9	MK139665	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/625/16	Italy	2016	NA	339	4	MK139666	Mescolini et al., 2019a

GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/674/16	Italy	2016	NA	339	4	MK139667	Mescolini et al., 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/689/16	Italy	2016	NA	339	4	MK139668	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/722/16	Italy	2016	NA	339	4	MK139669	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/801/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK139670	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/810/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK139671	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/847/17	Italy	2017	NA	418	10	MK139672	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/848/17	Italy	2017	NA	418	9	MK139673	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/850/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	5	MK139674	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/852/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK139675	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/853/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK139676	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/854/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK139677	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/855/17	Italy	2017	NA	298	2	MK139678	Mescolini <i>et al.</i> , 2019a

GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/456/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855054	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/498/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855055	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/513/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855056	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/515/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855057	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/559/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855058	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/561/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855059	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/565/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855060	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/567/15	Italy	2015	NA	339	4	MK855061	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/757/17	Italy	2017	NA	339	4	MK855062	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/875/18	Italy	2018	NA	339	4	MK855063	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/876/18	Italy	2018	NA	339	4	MK855064	Mescolini et al., 2019b
GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/921/18	Italy	2018	NA	339	4	MK855065	Mescolini et al., 2019b

GaHV-2/Italy/Ck/1083/18	Italy	2018	NA	339	4	MK855066	Mescolini et al., 2019b
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^a Attenuated

^b Not available, the strain has not been subjected to the *in vivo* pathotyping test.

° Mild

^d Virulent

^e Very virulent

^f Very virulent plus

 Table 2. Molecular characteristics of the meq protein aa sequence of GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16 strain, compared to prototype strains. Amino

 acid substitutions interrupting PPPPs are underlined.

Strain	Meq	PPPPs (n°)	Amino acid substitutions														
	length		71	77	80	110	119	153	176	180	216 ^a	217	218	277	283	320	326
	(aa)			00		117	100	170	100	210	217	210	_ / /	200	520	520	
CV1988	398	7	S	Е	D	С	С	Р	Р	Т	Р	Р	Р	L	А	Ι	Ι
CU-2	398	7	S	E	D	С	С	Р	Р	Т	Р	Р	Р	L	А	Ι	Т
JM/102W	399	7	А	E	D	С	С	Р	Р	Т	<u>S</u>	Р	Р	L	А	Ι	Т
Md5	339	4	А	K	D	С	С	Р	Р	Т	Р	<u>A</u>	Р	L	V	Т	Т
648A	339	2	А	K	D	С	R	Q	<u>A</u>	А	Р	<u>A</u>	Р	Р	А	Ι	Т
GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16	339	4	А	Е	Y	S	С	Р	Р	Т	Р	Р	<u>S</u>	L	А	Ι	Т

^a Amino acid position according to the 339 aa-long Meq isoform

337 Legend to the Figure

- **Figure 1.** Phylogenetic tree based on *meq* as sequences of GaHV-2/Italy/Turkey/601/16 (marked with a black triangle), reference GaHV-2
- retrieved from GenBank, Italian GaHV-2 and three vaccine strains (CVI988, 814 and 3004).

