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# Accessions of the genetically distinct TauL3 lineage of *Aegilops tauschii* Coss. from newly identified habitats in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran

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**Abstract** *Aegilops tauschii* Coss. (DD genome) is a wild, annual species recognized as a progenitor of common wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L., AABBDD genome). As an important genetic resource for wheat breeding, many accessions of this species are now available from genebanks, providing opportunities for evolutionary and agronomic research. To date, three divergent lineages—TauL1, TauL2, and TauL3—have been identified in this species based on DNA-level genotypes. Among them, TauL3 may have played a critical role in shaping the D genome of common wheat, but its accessions are limited in both geographic origin (previously known only from Georgia) and availability. In this paper, we report TauL3 accessions sampled from previously undocumented habitats in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, discovered while assessing a collection of *Ae. tauschii*

accessions. The newly identified TauL3 accessions suggest that this lineage has a broader distribution in the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions than previously thought. Together with Georgian TauL3 accessions, they provide valuable materials for research on the role of TauL3 in the evolution of common wheat, as well as for breeding practices utilizing *Ae. tauschii* germplasm. Nevertheless, TauL3 remains an exceptionally rare lineage. Conserving its natural habitats is an urgent priority.

**Keywords** Intraspecific lineages · The Transcaucasus · Wheat genetic resources · Wild crop relative conservation · Wild wheat biogeography

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## Introduction

*Aegilops tauschii* Coss. (DD genome) (formerly known as *Ae. squarrosa* L.) is a wild annual species known as the D genome progenitor of common wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L., AABBDD genome) (Kihara 1944; McFadden and Sears 1944). This species is thought to have hybridized with a cultivated form of *T. turgidum* L. (AABB genome), giving rise to common wheat in certain regions of northern Iran and/or the Transcaucasus no later than 8000 years ago (Hillman 1978; Nesbit 2001). The natural habitat of this species expands widely across Central Eurasia, from Syria, eastern Turkey, the Transcaucasus, and northern Iran, through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, to Central Asia and China (van Slageren 1994; Kilian et al. 2011). As an important genetic resource for wheat breeding, many accessions of this species—collected across its vast range through several botanical expeditions since the mid-twentieth century (Kihara et al. 1965)—are now available from genebanks, providing opportunities to study the species' role in the formation of common wheat (Matsuoka and Takumi 2017).

Previous studies have shown that *Ae. tauschii* has a well-defined genetic structure. To date, three divergent lineages—TauL1, TauL2, and TauL3—have been identified based on patterns of polymorphisms observed in nuclear and chloroplast DNA (Matsuoka et al. 2013; Gaurav et al. 2022). TauL1 is distributed across the species' range and consists of two sublineages: TauL1a, occurring in the western part, including the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions, and TauL1b, occurring in the eastern part, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and China. TauL2 is mostly distributed in the western part; however, reports on its occurrence in Central Asia are accumulating (Singh et al. 2019; Li et al. 2022). TauL2 consists of two sublineages: TauL2a, occurring mainly in the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions, and TauL2b, occurring mainly in Caspian Iran (Matsuoka et al. 2015). TauL3 has been reported only from Georgia.

The relationship of these lineages/sublineages with the D genome of common wheat is complex. In general, TauL2 and TauL3 are genetically closer to the D genome of common wheat than TauL1 (Matsuoka et al. 2013). Previous studies have

revealed the composite nature of the common wheat D genome (Cavalet-Giorsa et al. 2024; Wang et al. 2024): it is primarily a patchwork of the genomes of the TauL2 sublineages, with interwoven components from the TauL1 and TauL3 genomes. The TauL3 component exhibits intriguing geographic distribution patterns: common wheat accessions with negligible to low proportions of the TauL3 component are spread across Eurasia and northern Africa, whereas those with substantial proportions are largely restricted to the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions (Cavalet-Giorsa et al. 2024). Additionally, the genomes of several TauL1 and TauL2 *Ae. tauschii* accessions derived from the Transcaucasus and northern Iran also contain notable proportions of a component derived from TauL3 (Koyama et al. 2025).

All these observations suggest that TauL3 may have played a critical role in shaping the genomes of common wheat and *Ae. tauschii*, highlighting the need for further studies on the origins and functions of the TauL3 component in these species. Nevertheless, TauL3 represents a lineage with a small population size, and its accessions are limited in both geographic origin and availability. In this paper, we report on TauL3 accessions sampled from previously undocumented habitats in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, discovered while assessing a collection (more than 570 accessions) of *Ae. tauschii* accessions, and discuss the implications of this finding.

## Materials and methods

### Plant materials

A total of five *Ae. tauschii* accessions, sampled from Armenia (accession IG 126999), Azerbaijan (accessions TN10 and TN11), and Iran (accessions IG 48883 and IG 49140), were used (Table 1).

### Notes on the Azerbaijani accessions

The Azerbaijani accessions were originally collected from a roadside site at Kjuduly village, Sheki district, in 2008 (Fig. 1). When the collected samples were grown in an ex situ field, their spike colors segregated into black and white. Based on this observation, individuals with black spikes and those with white spikes

**Table 1** *Ae. tauschii* accessions used

Accession <sup>a</sup>	Source <sup>b</sup>	Country	Province <sup>c</sup>	Locality <sup>d</sup>	Latitude <sup>e</sup>	Longitude <sup>e</sup>	Altitude <sup>f</sup>	Note <sup>g</sup>
IG 126999	ICARDA	Armenia	Sjunik	Megri distr.; near VV. Agarak and Karchewan	38.87	46.19	769 m	
TN10	Tottori University	Azerbaijan	NA	Kjuduly village, Sheki district	41.16	47.17	329 m	Black spike
TN11	Tottori University	Azerbaijan	NA	Kjuduly village, Sheki district	41.16	47.17	329 m	White spike
IG 48883	ICARDA	Iran	East Azerbaijan	Tabriz	38.08	46.30	NA	
IG 49140	ICARDA	Iran	East Azerbaijan	10 km Ahar to Meshkin Shahr	38.50	47.20	1110 m	

<sup>a</sup>The accession names “TN10” and “TN11” are tentative

<sup>b</sup>ICARDA stands for the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas

<sup>c</sup>An ‘NA’ denotes ‘not available’

<sup>d</sup>Presented as received from the source

<sup>e</sup>Decimal degrees

<sup>f</sup>An ‘NA’ denotes ‘not available’

<sup>g</sup>Presented when available



**Fig. 1** Photographs taken at the collection site of the Azerbaijani accessions: site view (A) and *Ae. tauschii* spikes (B)

were designated as separate accessions. The accession names “TN10” and “TN11” are tentative.

#### Single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) genotyping

For each accession, total DNA was extracted from the young, healthy leaves of a single plant grown in a greenhouse using the CTAB (cetyltrimethylammonium bromide) method (Saghai-Marouf et al. 1984). The accessions were genotyped as described in Koyama et al. (2025) and outlined below. The genotyping-by-random-amplicon-sequencing-direct (GRAS-Di) method (Enoki and Takeuchi 2018) was used to generate 5–10 million raw reads (150 bp long, paired-end) per sample on a NovaSeq 6000 instrument (flow cell type S4) at Eurofins Genomics, Inc (Tokyo, Japan). To prepare the sequencing libraries, the final product of two sequential polymerase chain reaction steps performed for each accession, with the total DNA as the template and a mix of 12 random primers, were pooled. Raw reads were adaptor-trimmed and quality-filtered using Trimmomatic (Bolger et al. 2014) by setting the ILLUMINACLIP option to SLIDINGWINDOW:4:30 MINLEN:50.

BWA version 0.7.18 (r1243) (Li 2013) was used with the mem option to align high-quality reads to the *Ae. tauschii* AL8/78 reference genome sequence (Aet v5.0)

(Wang et al. 2021). In addition, previously obtained, quality-filtered GRAS-Di reads from 210 accessions (Table S1) representing the entire species range were aligned to the reference genome sequence. Reads that could not be mapped to the chromosomal sequences were removed from subsequent analyses. Aligned reads with library insert sizes shorter than 70 bp in length or longer than 600 bp in length were removed using SAMtools version 1.20 (Li et al. 2009) with the command 'samtools view -e '((pnext+150)-pos)>=70 && ((pnext+150)-pos)<=600'. Duplicated reads were removed using SAMtools.

SNPs were identified across 215 accessions relative to the reference genome sequence using BCFtools mpileup version 1.20 (Li 2011) with the '-q 30' setting (minimum mapping quality) and BCFtools call with the '-G' option (Hardy-Wineberg equilibrium not assumed). The filtering was performed using BCFtools with the '-i DP>=5 & MQ>=40' setting. Sites with a minor allele frequency below 5% and missing data frequency greater than 20% were additionally filtered out using VCFtools version 0.1.16 (Danecek et al. 2011). The resulting SNPs were pruned using PLINK version 1.90b7 with the '-indep-pairwise' option set to '20,000 2000 0.5' for subsequent analyses (Purcell et al. 2007).

#### Principal component analysis (PCA)

PCA was performed based on a covariance matrix generated from the SNP genotypes of the accessions, with the genotype at each site coded as '-1' for homozygous reference, '0' for heterozygous, and '1' for homozygous alternate. The probabilistic PCA method available in the *pcaMethods* (version 1.94.0) package (Stacklies et al. 2007) was applied in R version 4.4.1 (R Core Team 2016). The principal component plot was generated using the *scatterplot3d* package for R (Liggett and Mächler 2003).

#### Pairwise $F_{ST}$ estimation

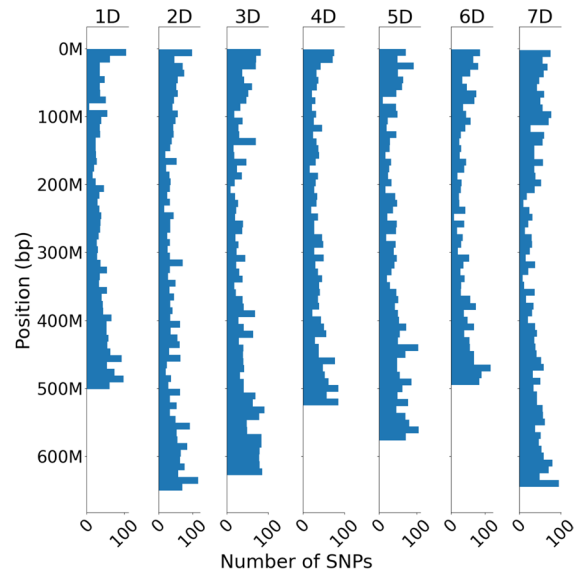
The  $F_{ST}$  values between the five accessions and TauL3, and between the five accessions and each *Ae. tauschii* sublineage, were estimated based on SNPs using the method of Weir and Cockerham (1984), as implemented in the *hierfstat* package (version 0.5-11) for R (Goudet and Jombart 2022).

#### Geographic distribution maps

Maps illustrating the geographic distribution of the accessions were generated using a spatial dataset obtained from Natural Earth, a source of free vector and raster map data (naturalearthdata.com), with the *naturalearth* package for R (Massicotte and South 2024). Plotting was performed using the *ggplot2* package for R ver. 4.4.1 (Wickham 2016).

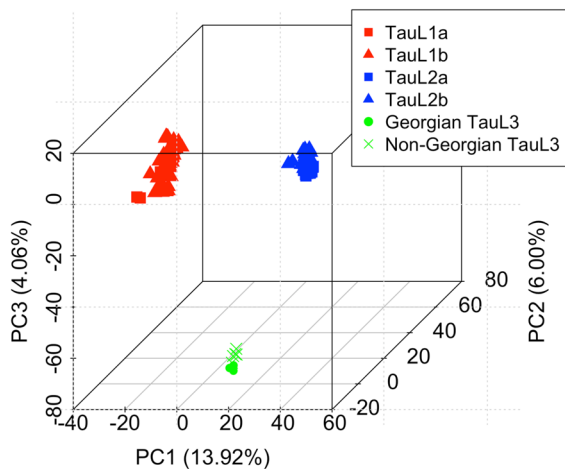
## Results

Across the 215 accessions, high-quality SNPs were widely mapped to the AL8/78 reference genome sequence at 17,893 sites, including 2,180 SNPs on chromosome 1D, 3,095 on 2D, 2,735 on 3D, 2,110 on 4D, 2,738 on 5D, 2,259 on 6D, and 2,776 on 7D (Fig. 2). A PCA performed on the SNP genotype scores revealed a clear association between the five accessions from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran and the previously identified Georgian TauL3 accessions. In a plot based on the first three principal



**Fig. 2** Bar plots of the number of GRAS-Di-derived single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) mapped to the *Ae. tauschii* AL8/78 reference genome sequence (displayed every 10 Mbp)





**Fig. 3** Graph of the first three principal components from a principal component analysis (PCA) based on the GRAS-Di-derived single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) genotypes of 215 accessions. The first component (PC1) accounts for 13.92%, the second (PC2) for 6.00%, and the third (PC3) for 4.06% of the total variance. The accession groups are represented by color and shape for each accession according to the key

components, the five accessions closely aligned with the Georgian TauL3 accessions, whereas they were only distantly related to the TauL1 and TauL2 accessions (Fig. 3; Table S1). The proportions of variance explained by the first three principal components (i.e., PC1, PC2, and PC3) were 13.92%, 6.00%, and 4.06%, respectively.

The five accessions exhibited a low level of genetic differentiation relative to the Georgian TauL3 accessions (pairwise  $F_{ST}=0.04$ ), whereas they showed a higher level of genetic differentiation relative to TauL1a (pairwise  $F_{ST}=0.21$ ), TauL1b (pairwise  $F_{ST}=0.21$ ), TauL2a (pairwise  $F_{ST}=0.28$ ), and TauL2b (pairwise  $F_{ST}=0.26$ ).

The spikes of these five accessions are mildly moniliform, similar in shape to those of the Georgian TauL3 accessions (Fig. 4).

## Discussion

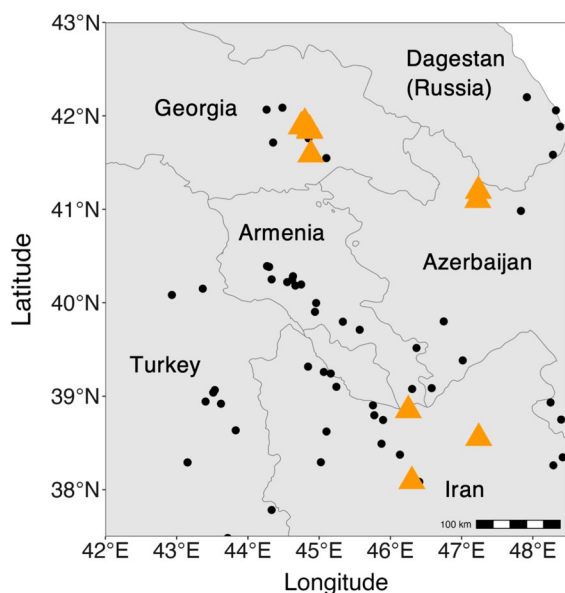
Based on the findings described above, we identify the five accessions from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran as belonging to TauL3. The newly identified TauL3 accessions provide novel insights into the



**Fig. 4** Green spikes of TauL3 *Ae. tauschii* accessions: IG 126999 (Armenia), TN10 (Azerbaijan), IG 48883 (Iran), IG 49140 (Iran), and KU-2832 (Georgia) (left to right). Scale bar: 1 cm

geographic distribution of TauL3, suggesting that this lineage has a broader distribution in the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions than previously thought (Fig. 5). Its actual range most likely includes the North Caucasus, as Dudnikov (1998, 2012) reported a Dagestan population genetically close to a Georgian TauL3 accession.

Nevertheless, TauL3 remains a lineage with a very small population size; so far, only 11 accessions have been found among more than 570 in our collection. Clearly, conserving this lineage's natural habitats is an urgent priority, necessitating further studies on *Ae. tauschii* in the Transcaucasus and adjacent regions. The TauL3 accessions that will be discovered in



**Fig. 5** Geographic distribution of *Ae. tauschii* accessions in the Caucasus region. TauL3 accessions are represented by orange triangles, while other accessions are represented by black points

future studies, together with the newly identified TauL3 accessions from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, as well as those from Georgia, will provide valuable materials for studies on the role of TauL3 in the evolution of common wheat and *Ae. tauschii*, and for breeding practices utilizing *Ae. tauschii* germplasm.

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**Author contributions** Yoshihiro Koyama and Yoshihiro Matsuoka contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation was performed by Hiroyuki Tanaka, Kazuhiro Sato, Hisashi Tsujimoto, Yoshihiro Koyama, and Yoshihiro Matsuoka. Data collection and analysis were performed by Yoshihiro Koyama and Yoshihiro Matsuoka. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Yoshihiro Matsuoka and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Data availability** Datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the National Library of Medicine repository under accession number PRJNA1229811 and DDBJ BioProject repository under accession number PRJDB19942.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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