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Houcemeddine Othman, Zied Bouzlama, Jean-Tristan Brandenburg, Jorge da Rocha ...+4 more authors

Institutions: University of the Witwatersrand, Tunis University, Pasteur Institute

Published on: 27 Mar 2020 - bioRxiv (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory)

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Interaction of the spike protein RBD from SARS-CoV-2 with ACE2: similarity with SARS-CoV, hot-spot analysis and effect of the receptor polymorphism

Houcemeddine Othman^{1*}, Zied Bouslama², Jean-Tristan Brandenburg¹, Jorge da Rocha¹, Yosr Hamdi³, Kais Ghedira⁴, Najet Srairi-Abid⁵, Scott Hazelhurst^{1,6}

¹ Sydney Brenner Institute for Molecular Bioscience, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

² Laboratory of veterinary epidemiology and microbiology LR16IPT03. Institut Pasteur of Tunis. University of Tunis El Manar, Tunis, Tunisia.

³ Laboratory of Biomedical Genomics and Oncogenetics, LR16IPT05, Pasteur Institute of Tunis, University of Tunis El Manar, Tunis, Tunisia.

⁴ Laboratory of Bioinformatics, Biomathematics and Biostatistics - LR16IPT09, Pasteur Institute of Tunis, University of Tunis El Manar, Tunis, Tunisia.

⁵ Université de Tunis El Manar, Institut Pasteur de Tunis, LR11IPT08 Venins et Biomolécules Thérapeutiques, 1002, Tunis, Tunisia.

⁶ School of Electrical and Information Engineering, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

* houcemoo@gmail.com, houcemeddine.othman@wits.ac.za

Abstract

The spread of COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak has been growing since its first identification in December 2019. The publishing of the first SARS-CoV-2 genome made a valuable source of data to study the details about its phylogeny, evolution, and interaction with the host. Protein-protein binding assays have confirmed that Angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) is more likely to be the cell receptor through which the virus invades the host cell. In the present work, we provide an insight into the interaction of the viral spike Receptor Binding Domain (RBD) from different coronavirus isolates with host ACE2 protein. By calculating the

binding energy score between RBD and ACE2, we highlighted the putative jump in the affinity from a progenitor form of SARS-CoV-2 to the current virus responsible for COVID-19 outbreak. Our result was consistent with previously reported phylogenetic analysis and corroborates the opinion that the interface segment of the spike protein RBD might be acquired by SARS-CoV-2 via a complex evolutionary process rather than a progressive accumulation of mutations. We also highlighted the relevance of Q493 and P499 amino acid residues of SARS-CoV-2 RBD for binding to human ACE2 and maintaining the stability of the interface. Moreover, we show from the structural analysis that it is unlikely for the interface residues to be the result of genetic engineering. Finally, we studied the impact of eight different variants located at the interaction surface of ACE2, on the complex formation with SARS-CoV-2 RBD. We found that none of them is likely to disrupt the interaction with the viral RBD of SARS-CoV-2.

key words: COVID-19, ACE2, viral spike Receptor Binding Domain, homology-based protein-protein docking, variants.

1 Introduction

The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (previously known as nCoV-19) has been associated with the recent epidemic of acute respiratory distress syndrome [2]. Recent studies have suggested that the virus binds to the ACE2 receptor on the surface of the host cell using spike proteins, and explored the binary interaction of these two partners [8, 23]. In this work, we focused our analysis on the interface residues to get insight into four main subjects: (1) The architecture of the spike protein interface and whether its evolution in many isolates supports an increase in affinity toward the ACE2 receptor; (2) How the affinity of SARS-COV-2-RBD and SARS-CoV-RBD toward different ACE2 homologous proteins from different species is dictated by a divergent interface sequences (3); A comparison of the interaction hotspots between SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2; and finally, (4) whether any of the studied ACE2 variants may show a different binding property compared to the reference allele. To tackle these questions we used multi-scale modelling approaches in combination with sequence and phylogenetic analysis.

2 Materials and Methods

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2.1 Sequences and data retrieval

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Full genome sequences of 10 Coronaviruses isolates were retrieved from NCBI
Genbank corresponding to the following accession numbers: AY485277.1
(SARS coronavirus Sino1-11), FJ882957.1 (SARS coronavirus MA15), MG772933.1
(Bat SARS-like coronavirus isolate bat-SL-CoVZC45), MG772934.1 (Bat
SARS-like coronavirus isolate bat-SL-CoVZXC21), DQ412043.1 (Bat SARS
coronavirus Rm1), AY304488.1 (SARS coronavirus SZ16), AY395003.1
(SARS coronavirus ZS-C), KT444582.1 (SARS-like coronavirus WIV16),
MN996532.1 (Bat coronavirus RaTG13) in addition to Wuhan seafood
market pneumonia virus commonly known as SARS-CoV-2 (accession
MN908947.3).

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The sequences of the surface glycoprotein were extracted from the Coding
Segment (CDS) translation feature from each genome annotation or by
locally aligning the protein from SARS-CoV-2 with all possible ORFs from
the translated genomes. ACE2 orthologous sequences from Human (Uniprot
sequence Q9BYF1), Masked palm civet (NCBI protein AAX63775.1 from
Paguma larvata), Chinese rufous horseshoe bat (NCBI protein AGZ48803.1
from *Rhinolophus sinicus*), King cobra snake (NCBI protein ETE61880.1
from *Ophiophagus hannah*), chicken (NCBI protein XP_416822.2, *Gallus
gallus*), domestic dog (NCBI protein XP_005641049.1, *Canis lupus famil-
iaris*), pig (NCBI protein XP_020935033.1, *Sus scrofa*) and Brown rat
(NCBI protein NP_001012006.1 *Rattus norvegicus*) were also computed and
retrieved.

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Human variants of the ACE2 gene were collected from the gnomAD
database. Only variants that map to the protein coding region and belonging
to the interface of interaction with the RBD of the spike protein were
retained for further analyses.

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2.2 Sequence analysis and phylogenetic tree calculation

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MAFFT 7.450 was used to align the whole genome sequences and the protein
sequences of viral RBDs [5] (Supplementary Materials 1). Prediction of

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the N-Glycosylation sites was made for all studied ACE2 sequences using 51
NetNGlyc server (<https://www.cbs.dtu.dk/services/NetNGlyc/>). For 52
the genome comparison, we selected the best site model based on lowest 53
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) calculated using model selection 54
tool implemented in MEGA 6 software [16]. The General Time Reversible 55
(GTR) model was chosen as the best fitting model for nucleotide substitution 56
with discrete Gamma distribution (+G) with 5 rate categories. For the 57
RBD sequences, the best substitution model for maximum likelihood (ML) 58
calculation was selected using a model selection tool implemented on MEGA 59
6 software based on the lowest BIC score. Therefore, the WAG model [20] 60
using a discrete Gamma distribution (+G) with 5 rate categories has been 61
selected. 62

Phylogenetic trees were generated using a ML method in MEGA 6. The 63
consistency of the topology, for the RBD sequences, was assessed using a 64
bootstrap method with 1000 replicates. The resulting phylogenetic tree 65
was edited with iTOL [9]. 66

2.3 Homology based protein-protein docking and binding 67 energy scores estimation 68

The co-crystal structure of the spike protein of SARS-CoV complexed 69
to human-civet chimeric receptor ACE2 was solved at 3 Å of resolution 70
(PDB code 3SCL). We used this structure as a template to build the 71
complex of spike protein from different virus isolates with the human ACE2 72
protein (Uniprot sequence Q9BYF1). The template sequences of the ligand 73
(spike protein) and the receptor (ACE2) were aligned locally with the 74
target sequences using the program Water from the EMBOSS package [12]. 75
Modeller version 9.22 [14] was then used to predict the complex model of 76
each spike protein with the ACE2 using a slow refining protocol. For each 77
model, we generated ten conformers from which we selected the model with 78
the best DOPE score [15]. 79

To calculate the binding energy scores we used, PRODIGY server [22], 80
MM-GBSA method implemented in the HawkDock server [19] and FoldX5 81
[3]. The contribution of each amino acid in protein partners was calculated 82
HawkDock server. Different 3D structures of human ACE2 (hACE2), 83

each comprising one of the identified variants, were modeled using the BuildModel module of FoldX5. Because it is more adapted to predict the effect of punctual variations of amino acids, we used DynaMut at this stage of analysis [13].

2.4 Flexibility analysis

We ran a protocol to simulate the spike RBD fluctuation of SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV using the standalone program CABS-flex (version 0.9.14) [7]. Three replicates of the simulation with different seeds were conducted using a temperature value of 1.4 (dimensionless value related to the physical temperature). The protein backbone was kept fully flexible and the number of the Monte Carlo cycles was set to 100.

3 Results

Sequence and phylogenetic analysis

Phylogenetic analysis of the different RBD sequences revealed two well supported clades. Clade 1 includes Rm1 isolate, Bat-SL-CoVZC45 and Bat-SL-CoVZXC21. These three isolates are closely related to SARS-CoV-2 as revealed by the phylogenetic tree constructed from the entire genome (Figure 1A). Clade 2 includes SARS-CoV-2, RatG13, SZ16, ZS-C, WIV16, MA15, and SARS-CoV-Sino1-11 isolates (Figure 1A). SARS-CoV-2 and RatG13 sequences are the closest to the common ancestor of this clade. The exact tree topology is reproduced when we used only the RBD segment corresponding to the interface residues with hACE2. This is a linear sequence spanning from residue N481 to N501 in SARS-CoV-2.

Multiple sequence alignment showed that the interface segment of SARS-CoV-2 shares higher similarity to sequences from clade 2 (Figure 1B). However, we noticed that S494, Q498 and P499 are exclusively similar to their equivalent amino acids in sequences from clade 1. SARS-CoV-2 interface sequence is closely related to RaTG13 sequence, isolated from *Rhinolophus affinis* bat.

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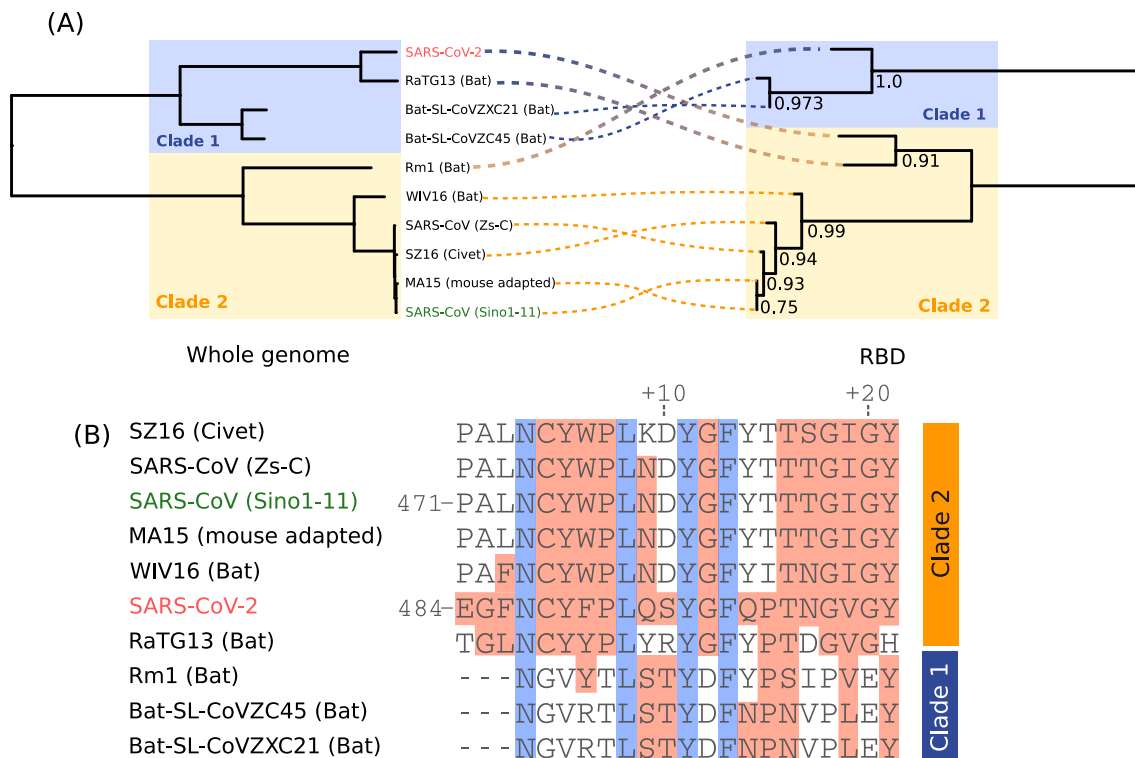


Figure 1. Phylogenetic and sequence analysis based on full genomes and RBDs from the different isolates included in this study. (A) Phylogeny trees are opposed to each other to show the clade discrepancies and discontinuous lines shows the equivalent taxon between each tree. (B) Multiple sequence alignment of the interface residues of RBD. Blocks in red color indicate the residues with similar biochemical properties to the positions in SARS-CoV-2. Conserved residues are colored in blue.

3.1 Prediction of the RBD/hACE2 complex structure

To investigate whether the interface of the spike protein isolate evolves by increasing the affinity toward the ACE2 receptor in the final host, we predicted the interaction models of the envelope anchored spike protein (SP) from several clinically relevant coronavirus isolates with hACE2 receptor (PDB files for the complexes are listed in Supplementary Materials 1). The construction of the complex applies a comparative-based approach that uses a template structure in which both partners (ligand and receptor) are closely related to those in the target system respectively. In our study, we only modeled the interaction of the RBD which was shown to be implicated in the

physical interaction with ACE2 (Figure 2A). The lowest sequence identity of the modeled spike proteins as well as those of any of the orthologous ACE2 sequences (Human, civet, bat, pig, rat, chicken and snake) do not fall below 63% toward their respective templates. At such values of sequence identities it is expected that the template and the target complexes share the same binding mode [6].

3.2 Analysis of the interaction energy scores of hACE2 with other virus isolates

We calculated the binding energy scores of the RBD from different virus isolates interacting with hACE2 (Figure 2b). All three methods used for the calculation are in agreement that RBDs from bat-SL-CoVZC45, bat-SL-CoVZXC21 and Rm1 show the worst energy scores. While the binding energy score falls in the boundary limit of the uncertainty margin for PRODIGY calculation (section 2, Supplementary material 2), the differences in the scores calculated by FoldX and MM-GBSA are not. Therefore we consider that such differences in energies compared to SARS-CoV-2 are consistent between the three methods. Except for FoldX, the affinity is predicted to be more favorable for RBD from SARS-CoV-2 compared to SARS-CoV. However, MM-GBSA only marginally discriminates between the two values.

3.3 Interaction of RBD from SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV with different ACE2 orthologues

To investigate the tendency of SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV to interact with different orthologous forms of ACE2, we analysed the divergence in their respective interacting surfaces. We have also mapped the putative glycosylation sites that overlap with the interface with RBD. Overall, the binding energy scores are similar between SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV considering the estimation of error for each method. Variances are more important for the calculations made by FoldX and although of different formalism, MM-GBSA and PRODIGY scores are relatively in agreement. Compared to hACE2, only the Canidae form shows better energy scores

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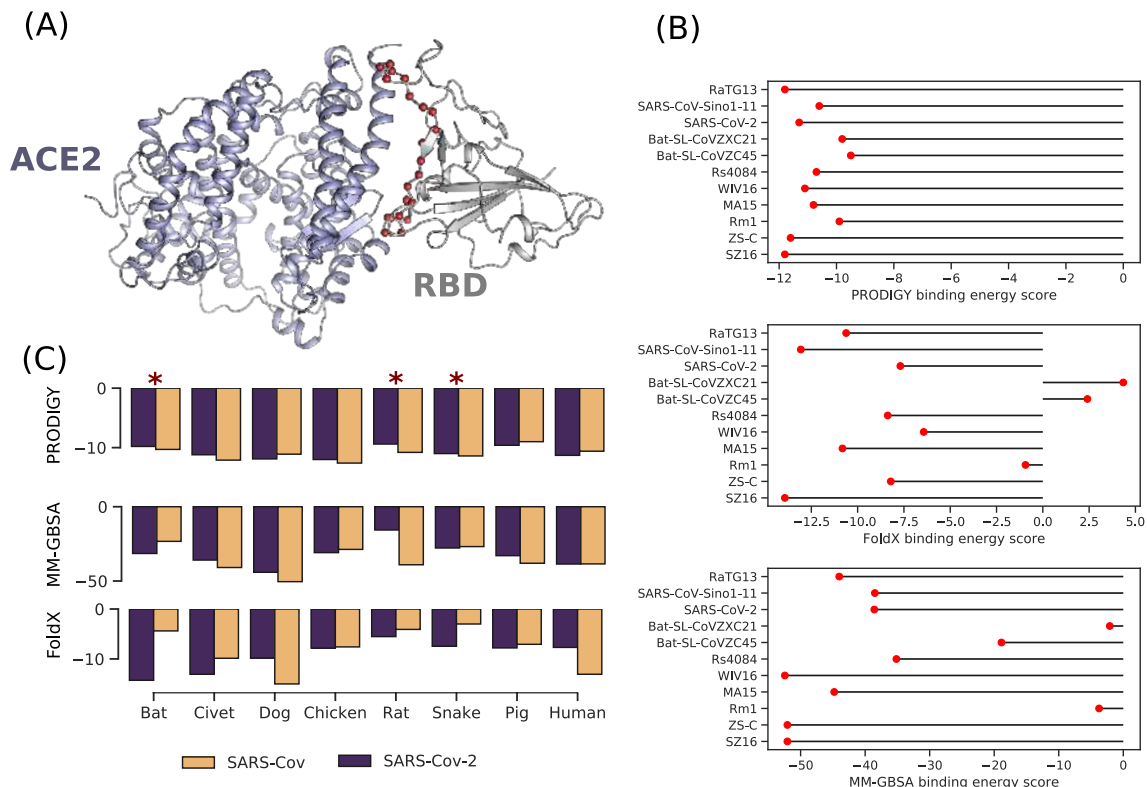


Figure 2. Homology based protein-protein docking of RBD/ACE2 and binding energy score analysis of spike RBD with ACE2 receptor. (A) Homology based protein-protein docking complex of SARS-CoV-2 RBD with hACE2. The red spheres are the interface residues of the RBD. (B) Binding energy scores calculated with PRODIGY, MM-GBSA and FoldX methods for RBDs from different coronaviruses forms with hACE2. (C) Binding energy scores of RBDs from SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV interacting with ACE2 orthologues. Asterisks indicate the putative overlap of a glycosylation site with the protein-protein interface

both in PRODIGY and MM-GBSA for SARS-CoV-2. Moreover, We found 155
 that putative glycosylation sites overlap significantly with RBD interaction 156
 in Snake, Rat and Bat forms (section 3, Supplementary data 2).The docking 157
 also shows that key residues of RBD SARS-CoV-2 tend to interact with 158
 conserved residues on ACE2 (Figure 3, Supplementary data 2) (residues 159
 36-53 in hACE2) which can explain the similar values of energy scores. 160

3.4 Decomposition of the interaction energy 161

MM-GBSA allowed us to assign the contribution of each amino acid in 162
the interface with hACE2, in the binding energy score. We conducted this 163
analysis using both sequences of the SARS-CoV-2 Wuhan-Hu-1 (Figure 3A) 164
and the Sino1-11 SARS-CoV (Figure 3B) isolates. Residues F486, Y489, 165
Q493, G496, T500 and N501 of SARS-CoV-2 RBD forming the hotspots of 166
the interface with hACE2 protein were investigated (we only consider values 167
> 1 or < 1 kcal/mol to ignore the effect due to the thermal fluctuation). 168
All these amino acids form three patches of interaction spread along the 169
linear interface segment (Figure 3C): two from the N and C termini and one 170
central. T500 establishes two hydrogen bonds using its side and main chains 171
with Y41 and N330 of hACE2. N501 forms another hydrogen bond with 172
ACE2 residue K353 buried within the interface. On the other hand, SARS- 173
CoV RBD interface contains five residues (Figure 3D), L473, Y476, Y485, 174
T487 and T488 corresponding to the equivalent hotspot residues of RBD 175
from SARS-CoV-2 F487, Y490, G497, T501 and N502. Therefore, Q493 as 176
a hotspot amino acid is specific to SARS-CoV-2 interface. The equivalent 177
residue N480 in SARS-CoV only shows a non-significant contribution of 178
0.18 kcal/mol. 179

The similarity matrix analysis was conducted to assess the divergence of 180
the interaction interface of RBDs qualitatively, i.e. the specific set of residues 181
implicated in the interaction with ACE2, and quantity, i.e. the contribution 182
of each residue in the binding energy score. The similarity matrix was 183
calculated from free energy decomposition of interface residues of RBDs 184
from SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV in complex with ACE2 orthologous 185
and reported as a network representation (Figure 3E and Figure 1 and 186
2 in Supplementary Materials 2). We noticed the existence of densely 187
interconnected edges involving all the protein-protein complexes for SARS- 188
CoV-2 and SARS-CoV except those involving ACE2 from *Sus scrofa* and 189
Rattus norvegicus. Complexes involving the RBD of SARS-CoV-2 show less 190
intrinsic similarity compared to RBD of SARS-CoV. However, similarity 191
scores tend to be uniform in the group involving ACE2 from human, civet, 192
dog, bat, snake, and chicken. The complex including hACE2 does not seem 193
to diverge from the rest of the members of the SARS-CoV-2 group such as 194
the case of *Sus scrofa* and *Rattus norvegicus*. 195

3.5 Flexibility analysis

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Sequence analysis and the visual inspection of RBD/hACE2 complex might 197
reflect the substitution of P499 in SARS-CoV-2 RBD as a form of adaptation 198
toward a better affinity with the receptor. In order to further investigate 199
its role, we performed a flexibility analysis using a reference structure 200
(SARS-CoV-2 RBD containing P499) and an *in silico* mutated form P499T, 201
a residue found in SARS-CoV and most of the clade 2. Our results show 202
that the mutation caused a significant decrease in stability for nine residues 203
of the interface corresponding to segment 482-491 (Figure 3F). Indeed, the 204
RMSF variability per amino acid for this sequence increases compared to 205
the reference structure. 206

3.6 Analysis of ACE2 variability and affinity with the virus

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A total of eight variants of hACE2 that map to the interaction surface 209
are described in the gnomAD database (Figure 4A). All these variants are 210
rare (Table 1) and mostly found in European non-Finnish and African 211
populations. Considering both the enthalpy (ddG) and the vibrational 212
entropy in our calculation (dds), we found no significant changes (> 1 or 213
 < 1 kcal/mol) in neither the folding energy of the complex (Figure 4B) nor 214
the interaction energy of the protein-protein partners (Figure 4C). 215

4 Discussion

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Since the Covid-2019 outbreak, several milestone papers have been published 217
to examine the particularity of SARS-CoV-2 spike protein and its putative 218
interaction with ACE2 as a receptor [21]. In the current study, we focused 219
our analysis on the interface segments of SARS-CoV-2 spike RBD interacting 220
with ACE2 from different species by estimating interaction energy profiles. 221

We have studied the effect of eight variants of ACE2 in order to detect 222
polymorphisms that may increase or decrease virulence in the host. Our 223
results showed that if ACE2 is the only route for the infection in humans, 224
variants interacting physically with RBD are not likely to disrupt the 225
formation of the complex and would have a marginal effect on the affinity. 226

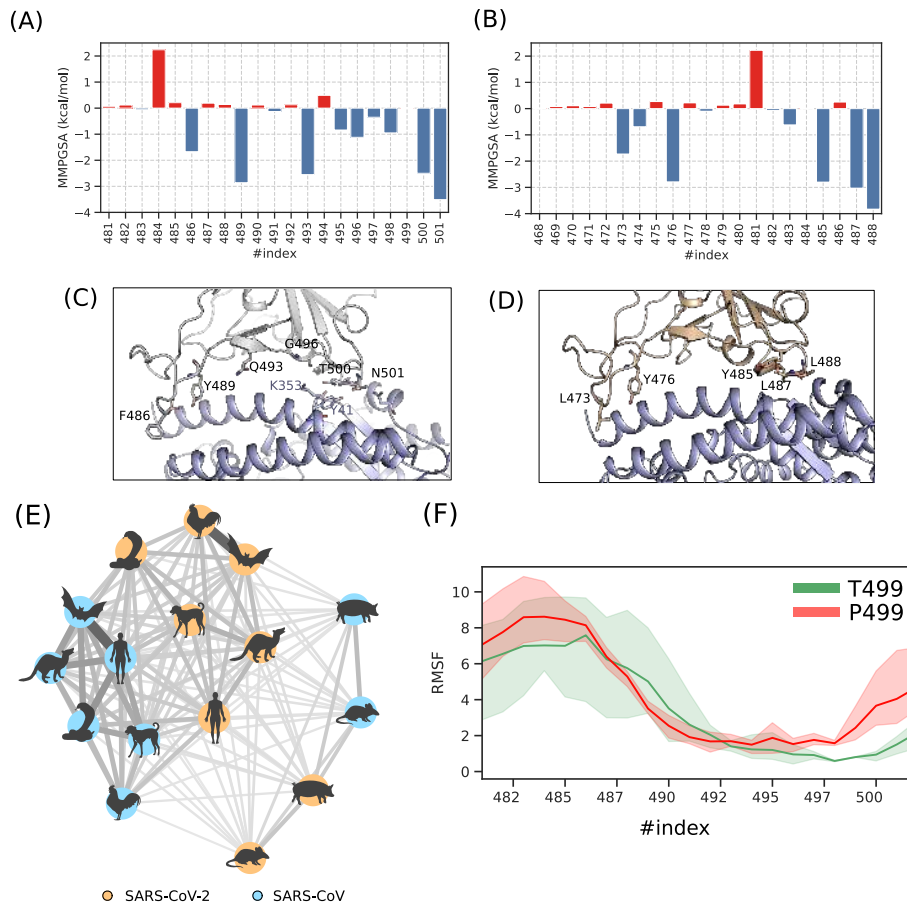


Figure 3. Analysis of the interaction between RBD and hACE2. Decomposition of the MM-GBSA energy for each amino acid of the binding surface from SARS-CoV-2 (A) and SARS-CoV Sino1-11 isolate (B). Position of the hotspot residues of the complexes RBD-SARS-CoV-2/hACE2 (C) and RBD-SARS-CoV/hACE2 (D). (E) similarity matrix in network representation calculated from the free energy decomposition profiles of complexes involving SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV RBDs interacting with different orthologous sequences of ACE2. (F) Flexibility of RBD interface residue expressed as Root Mean Square Fluctuation (RMSF) for two forms of RBD-SARS-CoV-2, T499 and P499.

Therefore, it is unlikely that any form of resistance to the virus, related to the ACE2 gene, exists. However, this analysis merits to be investigated in depth in different ethnic groups for a better assessment of the contribution of genetic variability in host-pathogen interaction.

The similar values of binding energy scores with different ACE2 orthologues suggest that the ability of binding to different ACE2 orthologues is

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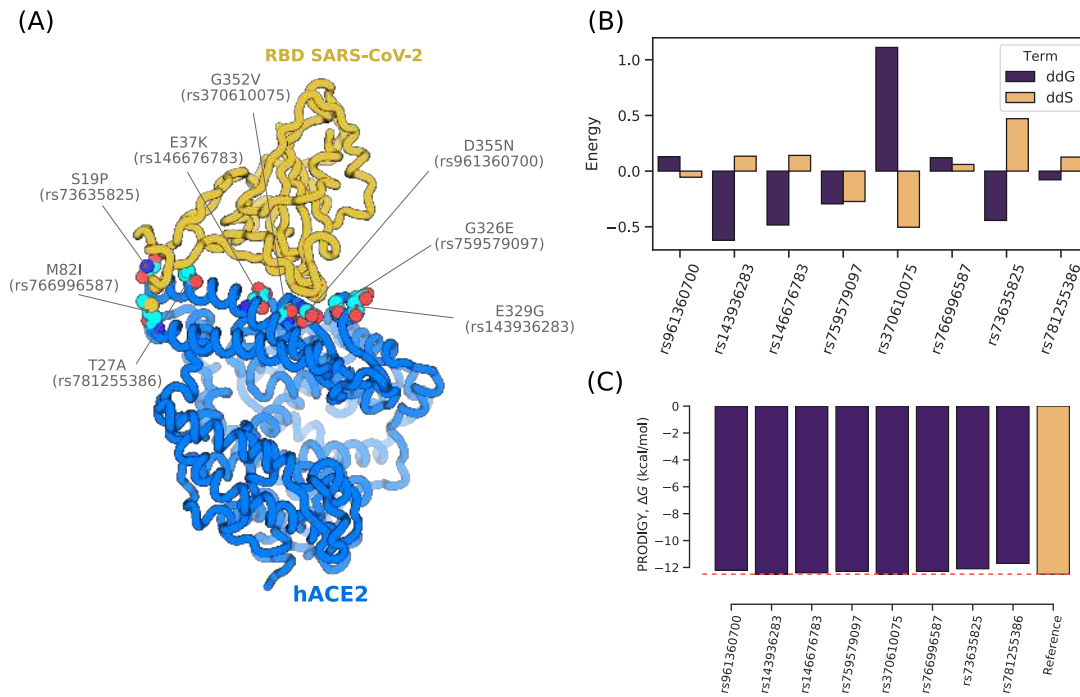


Figure 4. Analyzing the interaction of SARS-CoV-2 RBD with different variants of hACE2. (A) Localization of the variants, labeled by the amino acid change and the dbSNP ID, on the interaction surface of hACE2 and RBD from SARS-CoV-2. Estimation of the changing upon mutation for hACE2 variants calculated for enthalpy (ddG) and entropy (ddS) terms of the folding energy calculated with DynaMut (B) and the interaction energy calculated with PRODIGY (D).

preserved in many species either for SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-CoV. Therefore, 233
the transition to the zoonotic form is trivial if that depends only on ACE2 234
as the primary route to the infection in both the intermediate and the 235
final host. However, we know that such a process is very complex since it 236
requires many protein-protein interactions to acquire the specific capacity 237
of infecting and replicating in the host cells [18]. Consequently, it makes 238
sense to assume that many other types of receptors or co-receptors may 239
be critical to determine the capacity of crossing the species barrier. This 240
has been already suggested for SARS-CoV [1] and similarly, SARS-CoV-2 241
may show the same feature. Moreover, our results show that the significant 242
overlap of glycosylation sites with the protein-protein interface implies a 243
likely interaction of SARS-CoV-2 progenitors with receptors other than 244
ACE2. Finally, recent transcriptomic profiling has suggested the possibility 245

of multiple route infections via the interaction of many human receptors 246
for SARS-CoV-2 [11]. 247

Whole-genome phylogenetic analysis of the different isolates included in 248
this study is consistent with previous works that place the Wuhan-Hu-1 249
isolate close to Bat-SL-CoVZC45 and Bat-SL-CoVZXC21 isolates [10, 17] 250
within the Betacoronavirus genus. The use of RBD sequences, however, 251
places the virus in a clade that comprises SARS-CoV related homologs 252
including isolates from Bat and Civet. The clade swapping as seen in 253
figure 1A, seems also to occur for RaTG13 and Rm1 isolated from bat. This 254
is expected as the use of different phylogenetic markers may considerably 255
affect the topology of the tree. However, The significant divergence in 256
the interfaces segments as a key molecular element contributing to the 257
determination of the tree topology has driven our work toward studying 258
their impact on the interaction with hACE2. The binding of the spike 259
glycoprotein to ACE2 receptor requires a certain level of affinity. In the 260
case where the RBD evolves from an ancestral form closer to that of Bat-SL- 261
CoVZC45 and Bat-SL-CoVZXC21, we expected a decrease of the binding 262
energy scores through the evolution process following incremental changes in 263
the RBD. In such a scenario, we presume that there are other intermediary 264
forms of coronavirus that describe such variation of the binding energy 265
score to reach a level where the pathogen can infect humans with high 266
affinity toward hACE2. On the other hand, our results show that the 267
binding energy score and the interface sequence of SARS-CoV-2 RBD are 268
closer to SARS-CoV related isolates (either from Human or other species). 269
Therefore a recombination event involving the spike protein that might 270
have occurred between SARS-CoV and an ancestral form of the current 271
SARS-CoV-2 virus might be also possible. This will allow for the virus to 272
acquire a minimum set of residues for the interaction with hACE2. The 273
recombination in the spike protein gene has been previously suggested 274
by Wei et al in their phylogenetic analysis [4]. Thereafter, incremental 275
changes in the binding interface segment will occur in order to reach a 276
better affinity toward the receptor. One of these changes may involve P499 277
residue which substitution to threonine seems to drastically destabilize the 278
interface segment and has a distant effect. Moreover, the decomposition 279
of the interaction energy showed that 5 out of 6 hotspot amino acids in 280

SARS-CoV-2 have their equivalent in SARS-CoV including N501. Contrary 281
to what Wan et al [17] have stated, the single mutation N501T does not 282
seem to enhance the affinity. Rather, the residue Q493 might be responsible 283
for such higher affinity due to a better satisfaction of the Van der Waals 284
by the longer polar side chain of asparagine. Indeed, when we made the 285
same analysis while mutating Q493 to N493, the favorable contribution 286
decreases from -2.55 kcal/mol to a non significant value of -0.01 kcal/mol, 287
thus supporting our claim. 288

No major divergence of the interaction interface of SARS-CoV-2 RBD 289
with hACE2 was noticed from the similarity matrix analysis. This suggests 290
that the molecular elements required for the binding with the receptor might 291
also be involved in the interaction with other orthologous forms of ACE2 292
and that these elements are not optimized specifically for the human form. 293
Therefore, it is unlikely that the interface of RBD from SARS-CoV-2 is a 294
result of human intervention via genetic engineering aiming to increase the 295
affinity toward ACE2. For example, residue E484 contributes unfavorably 296
to the binding energy with 2.24 kcal/mol due to an electrostatic repulsion 297
with E75 from hACE2. This residue is an apparent choice for engineering 298
a protein-protein complex with high affinity by substituting E484 with a 299
polar residue. It is, however, noteworthy that the lesser homogeneity of the 300
nodes of SARS-CoV-2 group, in comparison to SARS-CoV, may suggest 301
a higher tolerance for the mutation of the new virus which would allow 302
it to cross the species barrier more easily and to efficiently optimize the 303
interaction in the host. 304

Declaration of competing interest 305

None of the authors has financial interests or conflicts of interest related to 306
this research. 307

Acknowledgement 308

This work was supported by the South African National Research Founda- 309
tion (NRF) and the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific 310
Research. The author H. Othman would like to thank Shahine Othman for 311

being understanding about his absence and for not being able to bring him 312
the marshmallow candy because of the COVID-19 outbreak. 313

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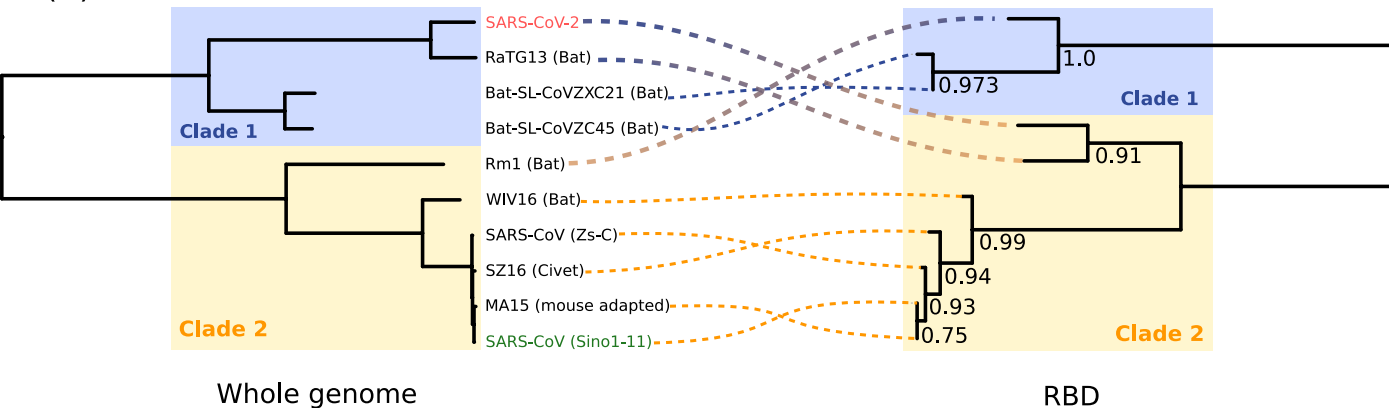
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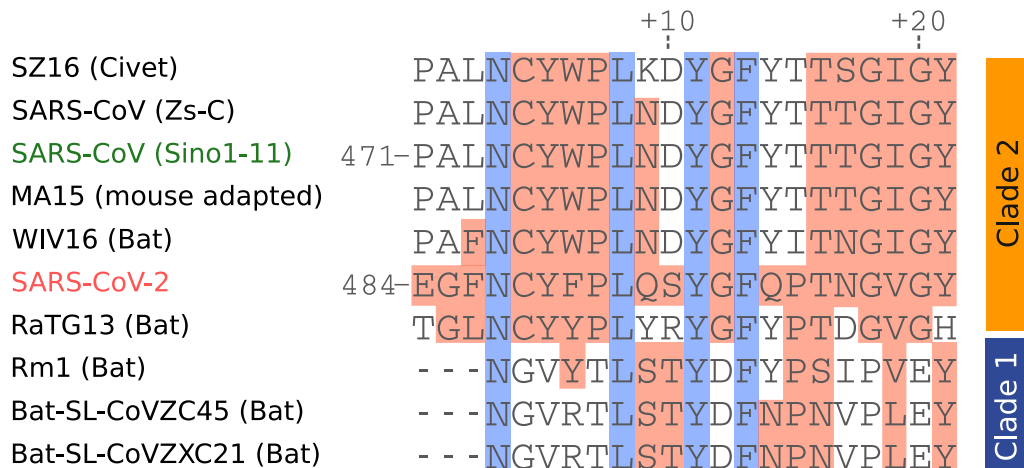
Table 1. Population frequencies of hACE2 missense variants located on the interaction surface with SARS-CoV-2 RBD ($\times 10^{-5}$)

rs ID	European (non-Finnish)	African	Latino	Ashkenazi Jewish	East Asian	South Asian	Finnish	Other	Global
rs961360700	2.59	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.17
rs143936283	6.51	0	0	0	0	0	0	19.05	3.443
rs146676783	0	0.105	0	0	0	0	32.22	0	3.897
rs759579097	0	0.1056	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.9842
rs370610075	1.274	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.5752
rs766996587	0	26.23	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.442
rs73635825	0	332.3	0	0	0	0	0	18.82	31.29
rs781255386	0	0	7.303	0	0	0	0	0	1.091

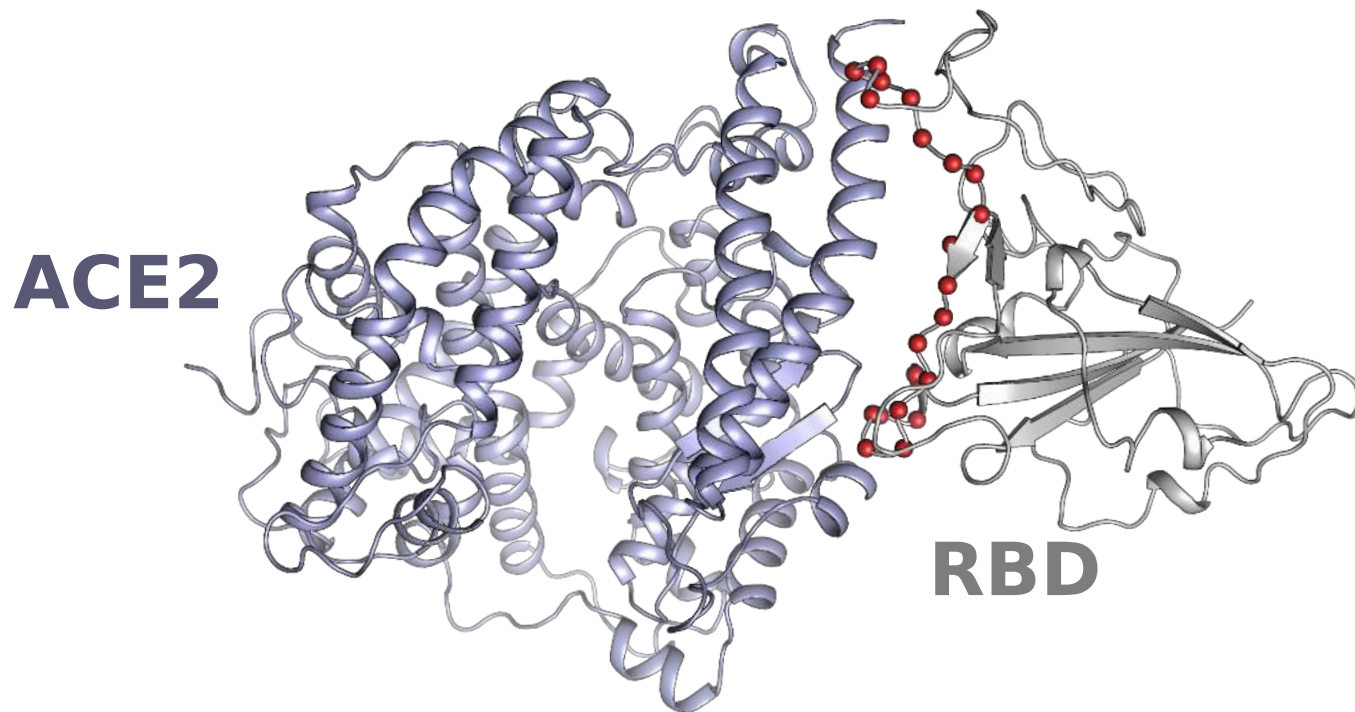
(A)



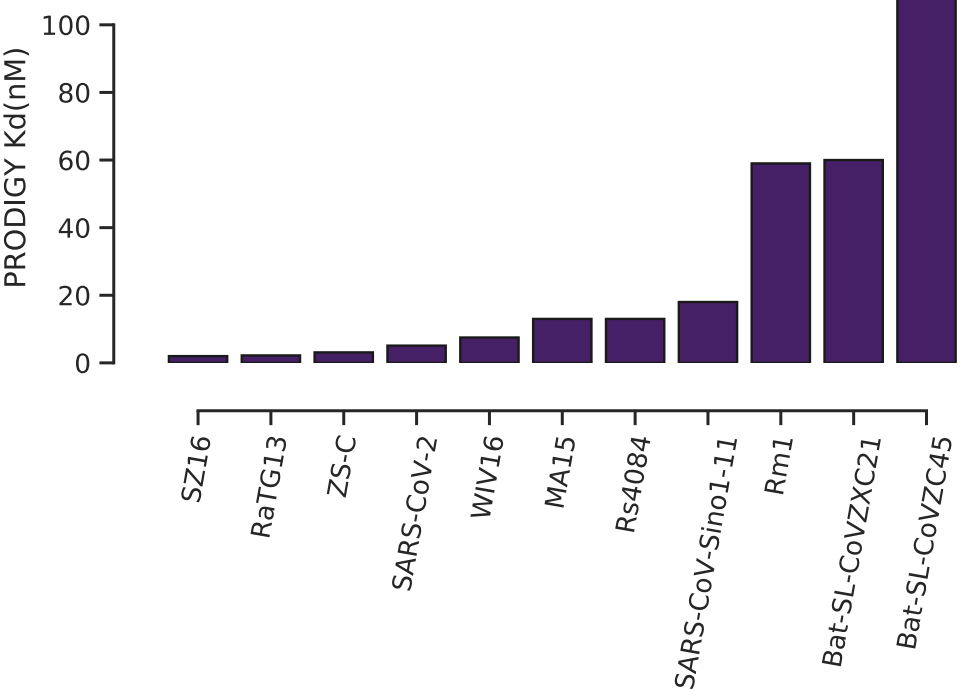
(B)



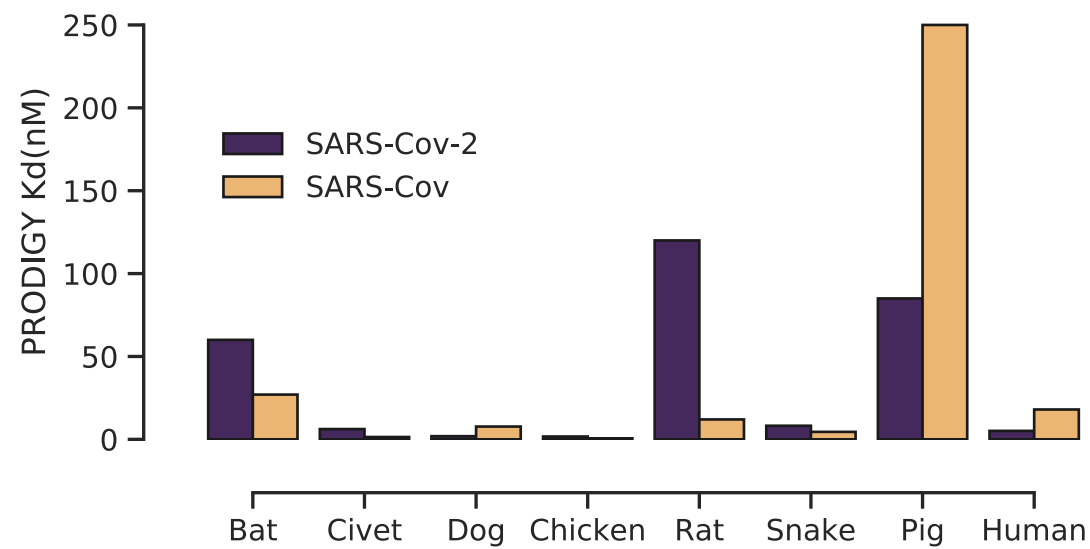
(A)



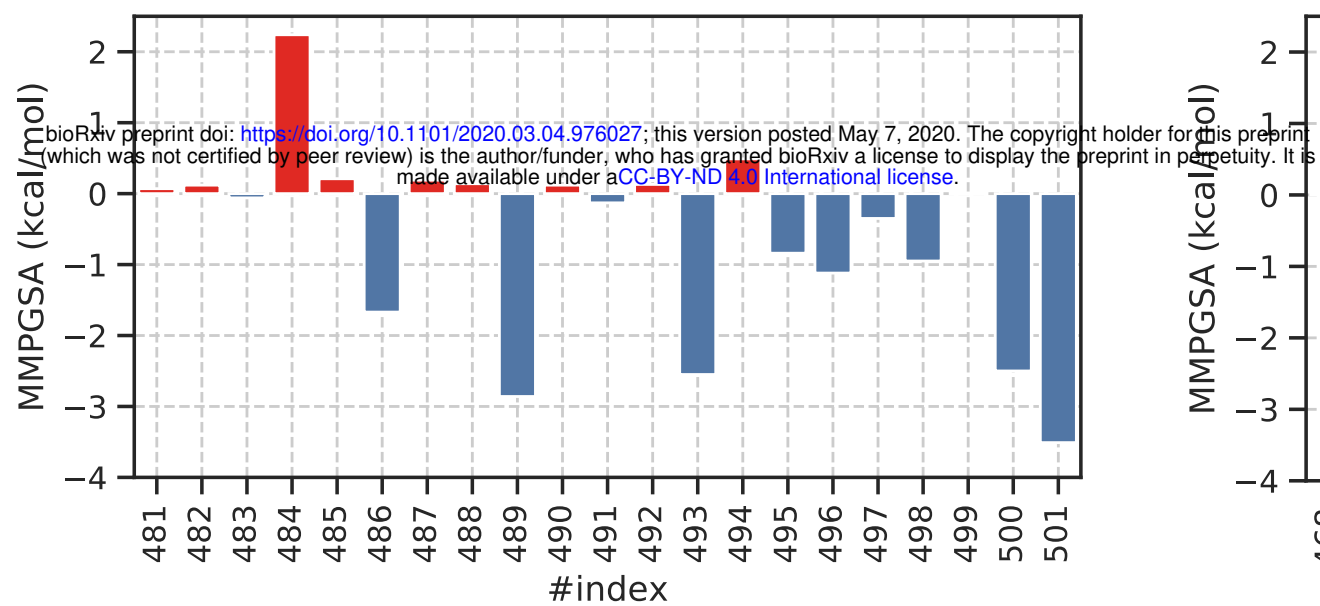
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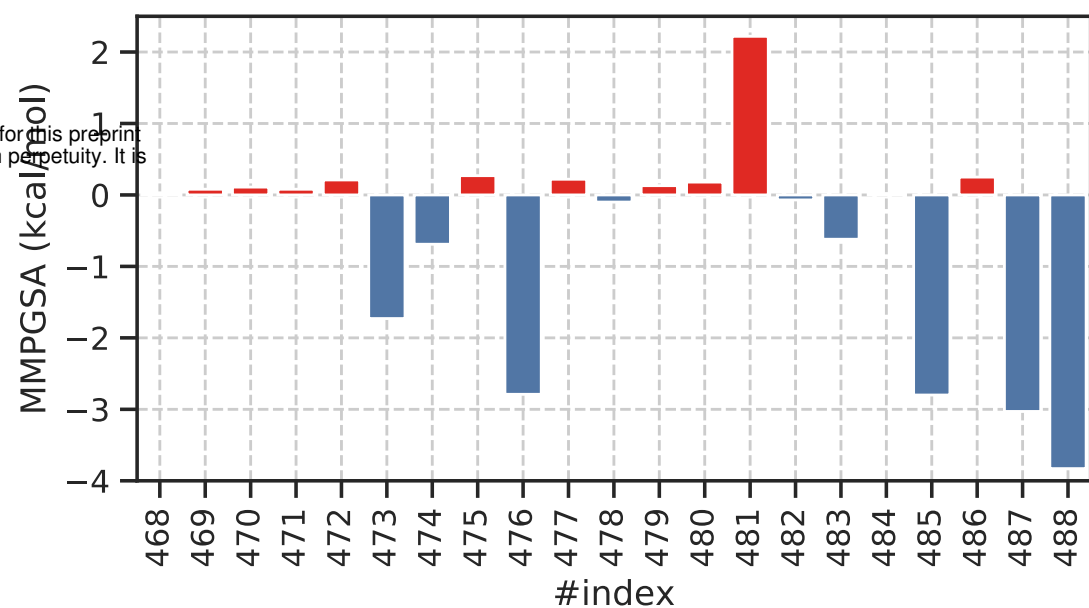
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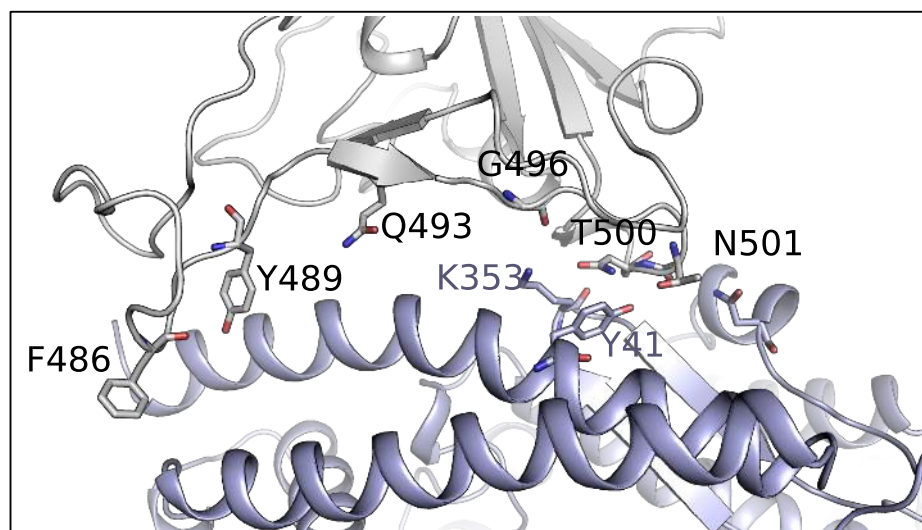
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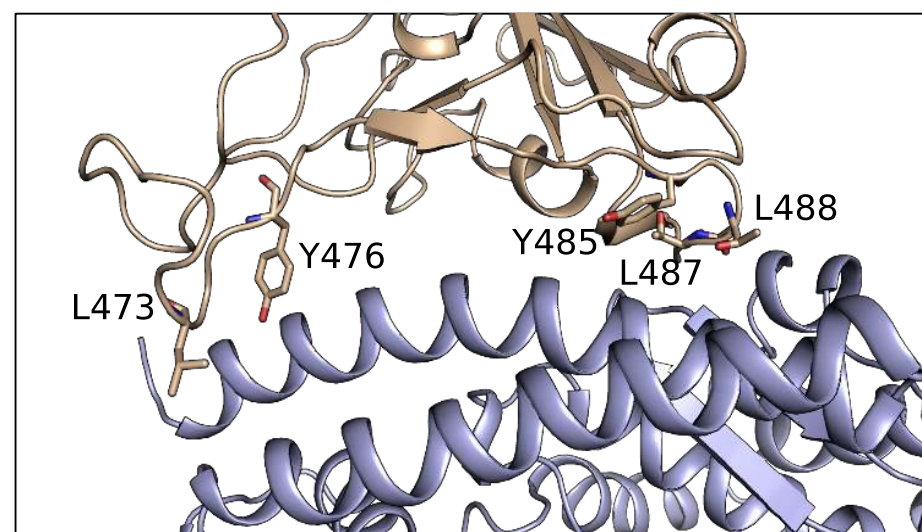
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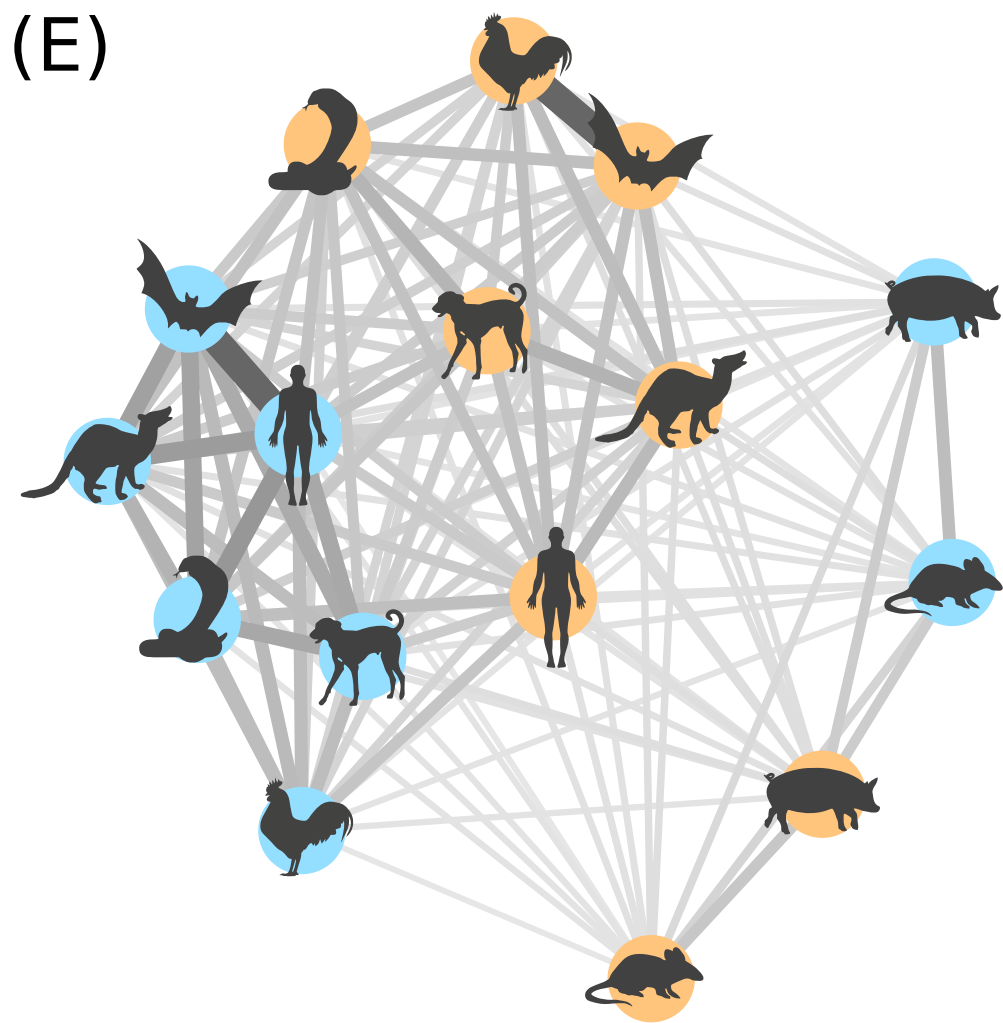
(C)



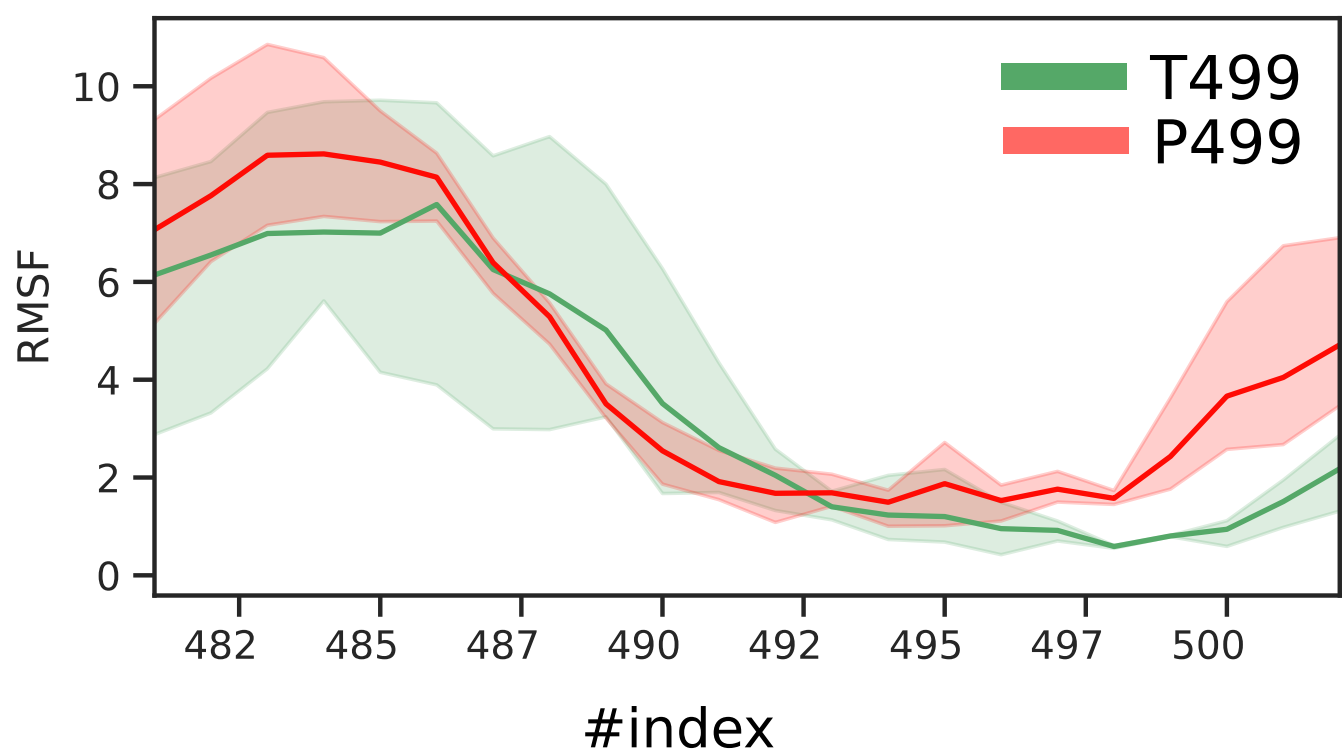
(D)



(E)



(F)



○ SARS-CoV-2

○ SARS-CoV

