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Ergothioneine Biosynthesis and Functionality in the Opportunistic Fungal Pathogen, *Aspergillus fumigatus*

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Ergothioneine (EGT; 2-mercaptohistidine trimethylbetaine) is a trimethylated and sulphurised histidine derivative which exhibits antioxidant properties. Here we report that deletion of *Aspergillus fumigatus* *egtA* (AFUA_2G15650), which encodes a trimodular enzyme, abrogated EGT biosynthesis in this opportunistic pathogen. EGT biosynthetic deficiency in *A. fumigatus* significantly reduced resistance to elevated H₂O₂ and menadione, respectively, impaired gliotoxin production and resulted in attenuated conidiation. Quantitative proteomic analysis revealed substantial proteomic remodelling in Δ *egtA* compared to wild-type under both basal and ROS conditions, whereby the abundance of 290 proteins was altered. Specifically, the reciprocal differential abundance of cystathionine γ -synthase and β -lyase, respectively, influenced cystathionine availability to effect EGT biosynthesis. A combined deficiency in EGT biosynthesis and the oxidative stress response regulator Yap1, which led to extreme oxidative stress susceptibility, decreased resistance to heavy metals and production of the extracellular siderophore triacetylfusarinine C and increased accumulation of the intracellular siderophore ferricrocin. EGT dissipated H₂O₂ *in vitro*, and elevated intracellular GSH levels accompanied abrogation of EGT biosynthesis. EGT deficiency only decreased resistance to high H₂O₂ levels which suggests functionality as an auxiliary antioxidant, required for growth at elevated oxidative stress conditions. Combined, these data reveal new interactions between cellular redox homeostasis, secondary metabolism and metal ion homeostasis.

Ergothioneine (2-mercaptohistidine trimethylbetaine; EGT) is derived from histidine and exists in a tautomeric state between both the thione and thiol forms (Fig. 1a)¹. EGT exhibits a high redox potential (−0.06 V) and so is classified as a powerful antioxidant^{2,3}. Humans cannot biosynthesize EGT and acquire it in the diet from both plant and animal sources, however it appears that EGT biosynthesis only occurs in specific bacterial and fungal species⁴. Human cells possess a receptor, termed OCTN1, which facilitates EGT uptake, and this receptor is highly abundant in trachea, ileum and kidney cells as well as CD71⁺ cells from bone marrow, cord blood and fetal liver⁵. Although its dietary antioxidant properties have been extensively studied^{6–11}, it remains to be conclusively proven that EGT has demonstrable health benefits in humans.

The seminal work of Seebeck¹² revealed the mechanism of EGT biosynthesis in *Mycobacterium smegmatis*, which involves five discrete enzymes (EgtA–E). It is now clear that EGT biosynthesis in bacteria requires trimethylation of the NH₂ group of histidine to generate hercynine. γ -glutamylcysteine (a thiol source) is then conjugated to the imidazole side chain of hercynine, followed by subsequent enzymatic processing to yield EGT. The crystal structures of EgtB, EgtC and EgtD have been recently determined^{13–15}. In filamentous fungi, *egt-1* has been demonstrated to be essential for EGT biosynthesis in *Neurospora crassa*¹⁶. This gene encodes a protein with both S-adenosyl methionine (SAM)-dependant methyltransferase and formylglycine-generating enzyme (FGE) sulphatase domains. Egt-1 is postulated to carry out the first two steps of EGT biosynthesis: trimethylation of

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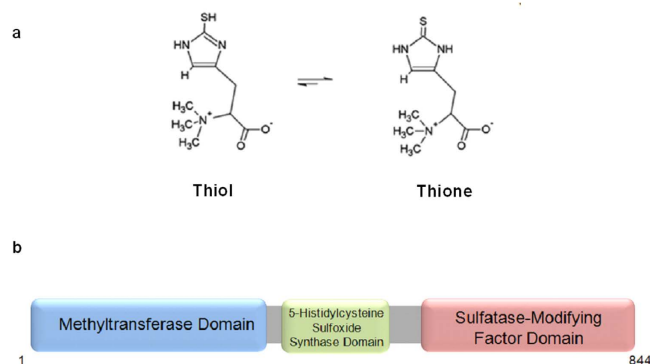


Figure 1. Ergothioneine displayed in both thiol and thione form and EgtA structure. (a) The structure of ergothioneine in both thiol and thione form. (b) EgtA domain architecture, 844 amino acids, domains include a methyltransferase domain at the N-terminal end, a sulfatase-modifying factor enzyme 1 at the C-terminal and an internal 5'-histidylcysteine sulfoxide synthase domain.

histidine to mercynine, followed by sulphoxidation of the mercynine to mercynylcysteine sulphoxide. The final step in EGT biosynthesis converts mercynylcysteine sulphoxide to EGT via a pyridoxal phosphate requiring enzyme, possibly encoded independently of *egt-1*. Analysis of an *Ncegt-1* deletion strain revealed increased conidial sensitivity to peroxide, but not superoxide or Cu^{2+} , during germination. EGT also appeared to protect conidia in the time-period between conidiogenesis and germination. No other significant phenotypes associated with absence of EGT were observed in the *Ncegt-1* deletion strain¹⁶.

In *Schizosaccharomyces pombe*, EGT biosynthesis has been postulated to require only two genes, namely *egt1*, which showed domain and functional homology to EgtB and EgtD of *M. smegmatis* and *egt2* as a possible homolog of *egtE* from *M. smegmatis*¹⁷. Because fungi appear to lack the enzyme which removes the glutamyl residue from a biosynthetic intermediate in bacterial EGT biosynthetic process¹², *N. crassa* and *S. pombe* use cysteine rather than γ -glutamylcysteine to effect EGT formation. Deficiency of *S. pombe egt1* results in the loss of EGT production. If *egt2* is missing, minor amounts of EGT can be found possibly due to the spontaneous reaction of mercynylcysteine sulphoxide catalyzed by an unrelated pyridoxal phosphate (PLP)-binding enzyme. Interestingly, Pluskal *et al.*¹⁷ found no impact of EGT on the resistance against oxidative stress and argued that the antioxidant might not play a role in primary defense as loss is compensated by other mechanisms. Thus, details of the precise role of EGT in fungi are outstanding.

Although EGT presence has been studied extensively in *Basidiomycetes* as a source of dietary antioxidants, minimal data exist relative to the presence or function of EGT in pathogenic fungi, especially *Aspergillus fumigatus*. Relevantly, Gallagher *et al.*¹⁸ were the first to detect EGT in *A. fumigatus*, a fungal airborne pathogen which causes severe allergic or invasive diseases in immunosuppressed individuals. Gallagher *et al.*¹⁸ revealed that disruption of gliotoxin biosynthesis at a specific step (deletion of the γ -glutamyl cyclotransferase *gliK*), concomitantly resulted in significant oxidative stress and significantly elevated EGT levels in *A. fumigatus*. Notably, apart from that work representing the first identification of EGT in *A. fumigatus*, it presented a novel alkylation strategy, utilizing 5'-iodoacetamidofluorescein (5'-IAF), combined with either reverse-phase high-performance liquid chromatography (RP-HPLC) or LC-mass spectrometry (LC-MS), to detect EGT. An identical strategy has subsequently been deployed by others, using capillary electrophoresis, to determine EGT levels in human plasma^{19,20}.

Oxidative stress can also arise from altered iron metabolism in *A. fumigatus*. Iron is an essential trace element and is involved in various cellular processes. In excess, iron can produce oxidative stress via the Haber-Weiss/Fenton chemistry²¹. In *A. fumigatus*, iron limitation leads to the formation of low molecular mass ferric iron-specific chelators (siderophores), which are either excreted as extracellular siderophores, like fusarinine C (FsC) or triacetyl-fusarinine C (TAFC) to import Fe^{3+} into the fungus, or intracellular siderophores ferricrocin (FC) or hydroxyl-ferricrocin (HFC) to store or transport iron to other parts of the hyphae or conidia^{22–26}. Lack of siderophores and subsequent lower uptake of iron led to attenuated virulence in *A. fumigatus*, which was shown in neutropenic mice²⁵. Furthermore, the inability to protect against oxidative stress by deficiency in protein phosphatase Z, PhzA, leads to defective virulence of *A. fumigatus* in the immunocompetent murine model of corneal infection²⁷. A key component of oxidative stress defense in *A. fumigatus* is Yap1. This transcriptional regulator has been shown to play an important role in coordinating the oxidative stress response and its deletion in *A. fumigatus* results in sensitivity to damage via elevated ROS levels²⁸.

Here we describe the identification of a key EGT biosynthetic gene in *A. fumigatus* and reveal new insights into systems biology of EGT biosynthesis and functionality in fungi.

Results

Characterization and bioinformatic analysis of EgtA in *A. fumigatus*. The biosynthesis of EGT was first described in the prokaryote *M. smegmatis* and recent genetic comparative studies and homology searches identified the biosynthetic genes in *N. crassa* and *S. pombe*^{16,17}. Blast searches (<http://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi>) revealed possible homologous enzymes to *M. smegmatis* EgtB and EgtD, which are involved in the EGT biosynthesis annotated as DUF323 (AFUA_2G15650; *egtA*) in *A. fumigatus*, NCU04343 (*NcEgt-1*) in *N. crassa*¹⁶, and SPBC1604.01 (*egt1*) in *S. pombe*¹⁷. Alignments and genome-wide in-depth phylogenetic analyses showed

that a gene fusion occurred possibly during the evolution in bacterial species⁴ and that EgtA from *A. fumigatus* also exhibited the fusion product of the two enzymes of *M. smegmatis* as seen in the aforementioned fungal species. In *A. fumigatus*, EgtA comprises 844 amino acids, has domains of a histidine-specific SAM-dependent methyltransferase at the N-terminal end, a sulphatase-modifying factor enzyme 1 at the C-terminal end and an intervening 5-histidylcysteine sulphoxide synthase domain (Fig. 1b). The 5'UTR comprises 902 nucleotides, the 3'UTR extends 265 nucleotides and the coding sequence is interrupted by six introns, whereby the genomic DNA is 2890 nucleotides long (http://www.aspergillusgenome.org/cgi-bin/locus.pl?locus=AFUA_2g15650&organism=A_fumigatus_Af293).

egtA deletion and complementation. *A. fumigatus* *egtA* was deleted from strains AfS77 (a $\DeltaakuA::loxP$ strain derived from ATCC46645 lacking non-homologous recombination²⁹) and ATCC26933 using a split marker strategy²⁹. Both strains were deployed as they produce low and high amounts of gliotoxin, respectively, and the impact of *egtA* deletion on gliotoxin biosynthesis was of relevance, since intracellular EGT levels significantly increase in a gliotoxin-deficient strain of *A. fumigatus*^{18,30}. Deletion of *egtA* was confirmed via Southern analysis (Supplementary Figures S1 and S2) and abolition of gene expression was confirmed via RT-PCR (Supplementary Figure S3). Complementation of *egtA* in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ was achieved using an alternative resistance marker as confirmed by Southern analysis (Supplementary Figure S4), and *egtA* expression was restored in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, as confirmed via RT-PCR (Supplementary Figure S3). *egtA* deletion was also successfully achieved in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta yap1^{AfS77}$, to yield $\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$ and complementation of *egtA* in this double mutant was demonstrated (Supplementary Figure S2).

Absence of EGT biosynthesis in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA$. Analysis of EGT biosynthesis was undertaken via RP-HPLC and LC-MS. 5'-IAF-alkylated mycelial lysates of wild-type, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and *egtA*^{C26933} were compared to commercially available EGT and revealed alkylated EGT in the wild-type and complemented strains at a retention time of 12.4 min. EGT was absent in $\Delta egtA$ mycelial lysates (Fig. 2a). EGT levels in *egtA*^{C26933} were elevated compared to wild-type. LC-MS analysis of TCA-precipitated 5'-IAF labelled mycelial lysates further confirmed the presence of EGT in the wild-type and complemented strains and its absence from *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA$ (Fig. 2b). Consistent with the ATCC26933, *egtA* deletion blocked EGT production also in *A. fumigatus* strain AfS77 strain (data not shown).

H₂O₂ and menadione significantly impair growth of $\Delta egtA$ and exacerbate $\Delta yap1$ phenotype in $\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$ during oxidative and heavy metal stress. Plate assays to assess H₂O₂, menadione and diamide sensitivity in ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and *egtA*^{C26933} revealed that $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ displayed increased sensitivity to H₂O₂ and menadione, but not diamide. After 72 h growth on *Aspergillus* minimal media (AMM) agar containing 3 mM H₂O₂, radial growth of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ was significantly ($P = 0.0081$) reduced compared to wild-type and complemented strains. At 1 mM and 2 mM H₂O₂ however, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ radial growth was unaffected compared to the wild-type (Fig. 3a). Wild-type growth was abolished at 4 mM H₂O₂, indicating EGT loss only effects protection from H₂O₂ at near lethal doses in *A. fumigatus* and positions it as an 'antioxidant of last resort'. A significant decrease in radial growth was seen in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ when exposed to menadione, at 40 μ M ($P = 0.0043$) and 60 μ M ($P = 0.0013$) (Fig. 3b). No sensitivity to diamide was observed within a range of 1.25 mM–1.75 mM (Fig. 3c). To further analyze the function of EGT against oxidative burden and metal toxicity, $\Delta egtA^{AfS77}$ (10⁴ spores/dot) were spotted on AMM agar containing the indicated amount of stress-inducing agents or metals, which was incubated up to 48 h at 37 °C (Fig. 4). EGT deficiency in the AfS77 background reduced resistance to hydrogen peroxide (3 mM H₂O₂) and menadione (20 μ M) in $\Delta egtA^{AfS77}$. Moreover, the redox sensitivity phenotype of *A. fumigatus* $\Delta yap1$ was further exacerbated if EGT was absent ($\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$) whereby susceptibility was increased upon H₂O₂ (0.4 mM), paraquat (1.5 mM PQ), menadione (10 μ M MD), *tert*-butylhydroperoxide (TBHP), iron, zinc, copper and cobalt exposure, respectively. EGT limitation also reduced sporulation of $\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$ at low zinc and at high concentrations of zinc, iron and copper (Fig. 4). The complemented strain *egtA*^Δ *yap1* showed the same phenotype as the $\Delta yap1$ strain.

Comparative Label Free Quantitative (LFQ) Proteomics Reveals Dysregulation of Redox-related Proteins in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ in response to H₂O₂. LFQ proteomic analysis revealed significant differences between ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. A comparison of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 under basal conditions showed that absence of EGT biosynthesis resulted in a major proteomic adjustment in *A. fumigatus*. Specifically, the abundance of 26 proteins was increased or unique in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type, while 121 proteins were decreased in abundance or absent (Supplementary Table S1). Comparison of the proteomic profiles of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 under H₂O₂-induced stress revealed an exacerbation of the differences between the mutant and wild-type. When exposed to 3 mM H₂O₂, the abundance of 290 proteins was dysregulated in the mutant compared to the wild-type, with 250 proteins increased or unique in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to ATCC26933, while 40 underwent reduced abundance or were absent (Supplementary Table S2). Many proteins which underwent dysregulated abundance under both basal and ROS conditions were reductases, oxidases, stress response proteins and enzymes with oxidising products (Supplementary Tables S3 and S4). This strongly suggests a disruption of redox homeostasis and oxidative stress defence in the $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, compared to ATCC26933, particularly when exposed to 3 mM H₂O₂. Of particular interest is redox sensitive subunit of the CCAAT-binding complex (CBC), HapC. Previously, the CCAAT-binding complex has been shown to be involved in oxidative stress response³¹. Therefore the absence of HapC in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type under basal conditions could be indicative of a defective oxidative defence system.

Cystathionine is a sulphur-containing metabolite involved in cysteine and methionine metabolism (Fig. 5), and the abundance of two proteins with activities related to cystathionine metabolism was dysregulated when the

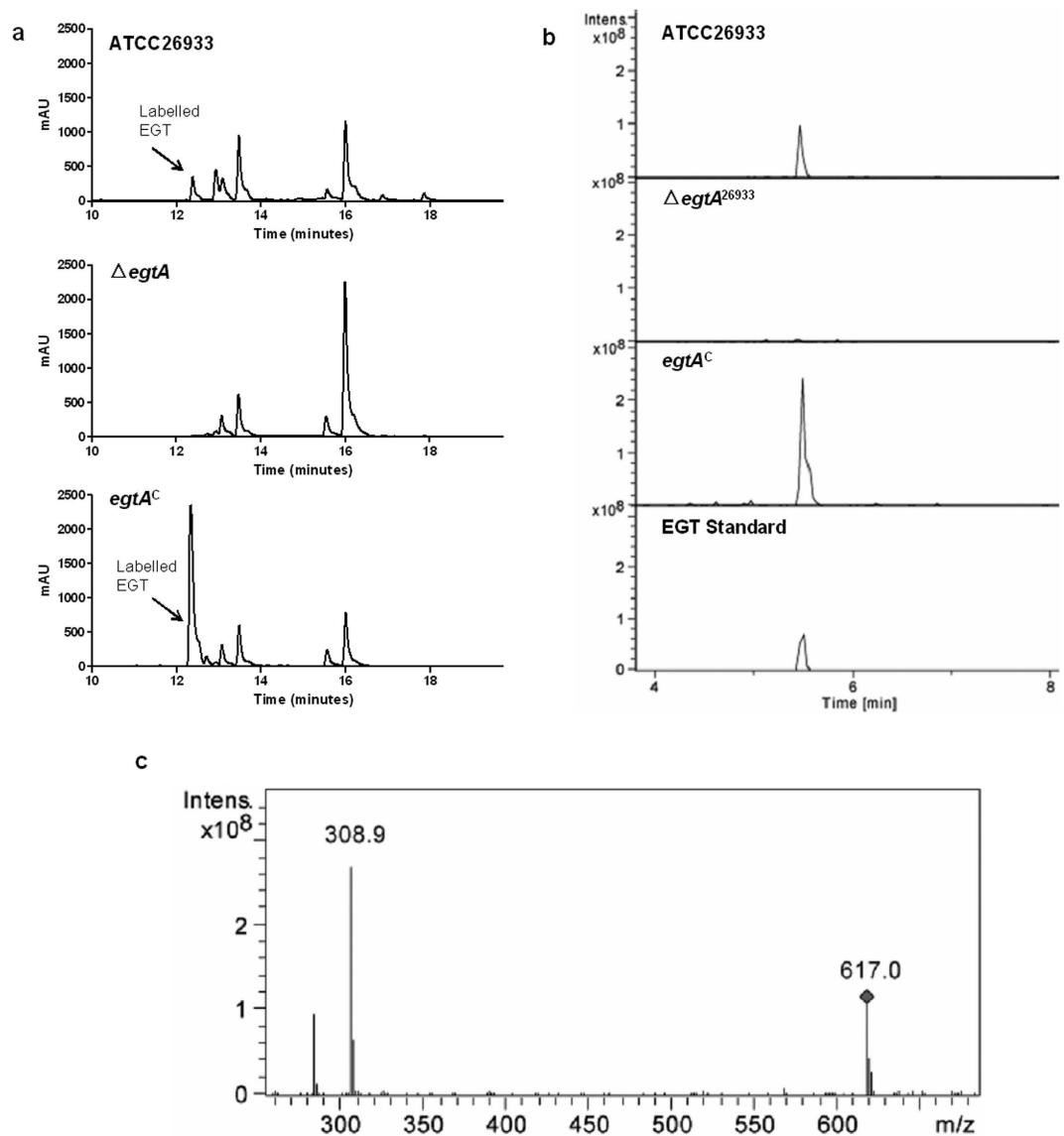


Figure 2. EGT detection via RP-HPLC and LC-MS in ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$. (a) RP-HPLC Chromatograms showing the detection of 5'-IAF labelled EGT. EGT was detected at a retention time of 12.4 min. EGT was detected in the wild-type and complemented sample at 12.4 min, but is absent from $\Delta egtA$. (b) Extracted Ion Chromatographs (m/z: 617) following LC-MS analysis of TCA precipitated 5'-IAF-labelled protein extracts from ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$, in addition to an EGT standard. A peak at 5.3 min was confirmed to be EGT. This peak was absent from the $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ fraction, confirming the absence of EGT from the mutant. (c) Signature Ion breakdown corresponding to 5'-IAF labelled EGT.

proteomic profiles of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 were compared under both basal and H_2O_2 -stressed conditions. Under basal conditions, cystathionine γ -synthase (CGS; AFUA_7G01590) was found to be absent in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to the wild-type. CGS catalyzes the formation of cystathionine from homoserine and cysteine³² and its absence in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ suggests that cystathionine production is attenuated when EGT biosynthesis cannot occur, perhaps to provide cysteine in order to increase GSH production. Comparing $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 upon addition of H_2O_2 , there was a significant increase (\log_2 3.1-fold) in cystathionine β -lyase (CBL; AFUA_4G03950). CBL catalyzes the conversion of cystathionine to homocysteine, ammonia and pyruvate³². Homocysteine can be converted into methionine, required for SAM biosynthesis. EGT biosynthesis requires SAM for the tri-methylation step via EgtA. Thus, a shift towards increased homocysteine formation, via CBL, in response to H_2O_2 addition could be part of an overall transition towards increasing SAM availability for EGT biosynthesis.

RT-qPCR analysis of CGS and CBL gene expression revealed a similar pattern to proteomic abundance alteration (Supplementary Figure S5). The CGS gene showed a non-significant reduction in expression in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type under basal conditions. A significant ($P = 0.003$) increase in the CBL gene was seen in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type under ROS conditions.

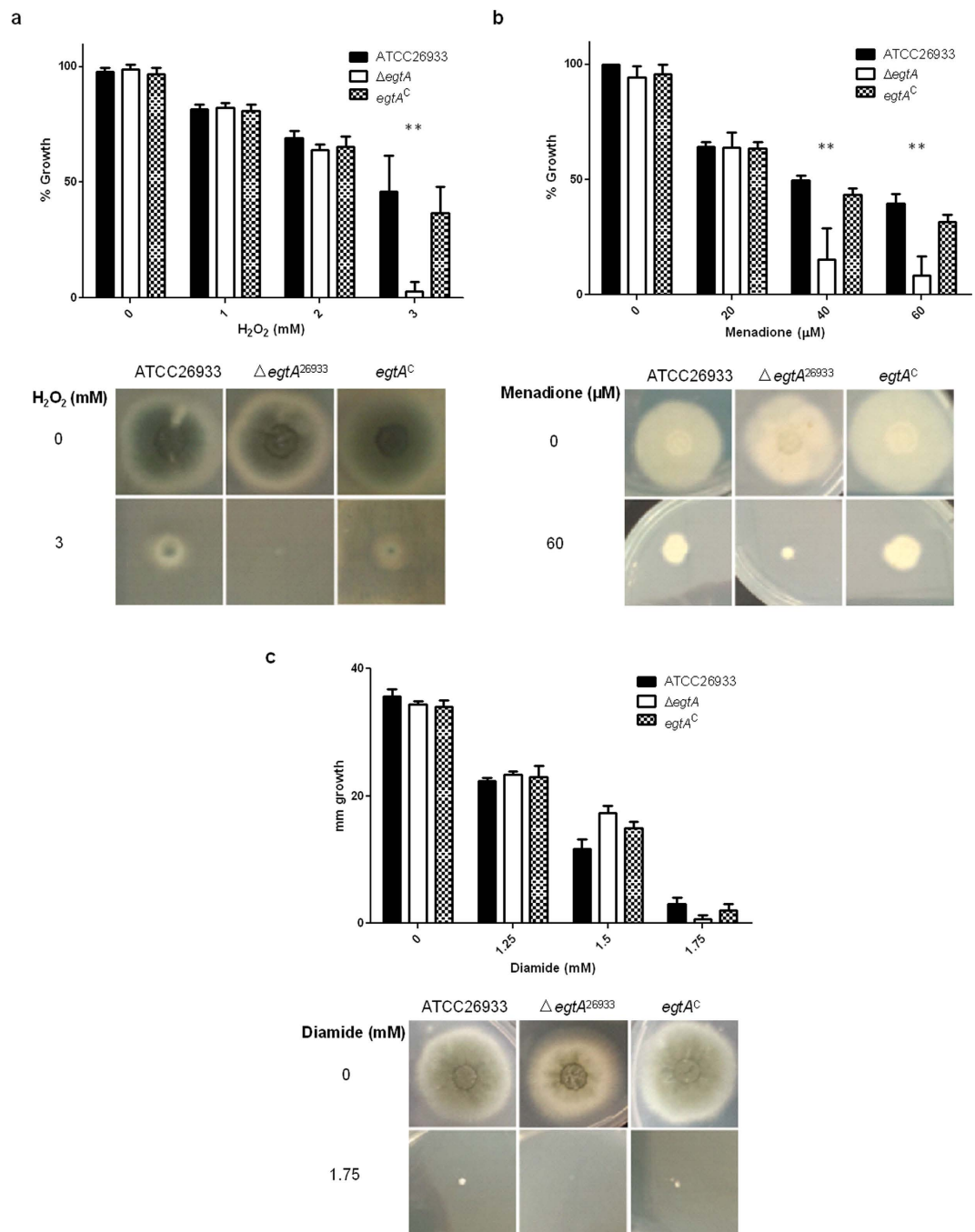


Figure 3. Plate assays performed on AMM agar (containing 5 mM ammonium tartrate as nitrogen source) for 72 h to test for sensitivity to various ROS inducing agents. (a) Plate assay with H₂O₂ ranging from 0 to 3 mM. $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ shows a significant ($P=0.0081$) reduction in growth compared to ATCC26933 and *egtA^C* at 3 mM H₂O₂. **(b)** Plate assay with menadione ranging from 0 to 60 μ M. $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ shows significantly reduced growth compared to ATCC26933 and *egtA^C* at both 40 μ M ($p=0.0043$) and 60 μ M ($P=0.0013$) menadione. **(c)** Plate assays with diamide ranging from 1.25 to 1.75 mM. $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ shows no significant difference in growth compared to ATCC26933 or *egtA^C*.

It was noted that no significant change in abundance of these proteins (CGS and CBL) was observed when comparing $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ under basal conditions to $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ under ROS conditions (Supplementary Table S5). This suggests that these changes are only significant when compared to the ATCC26933 response when exposed to 3 mM H₂O₂. This further illustrates the proteomic remodeling *A. fumigatus* undergoes when EGT biosynthesis is impeded and the mutant is forced to deal with oxidative stress.

H₂O₂ addition to $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ resulted in increased abundance of imidazole glycerol phosphate synthase subunit HisF (AFUA_2G06230) of log₂ 1.11-fold compared to ATCC26933 under the same conditions. HisF is involved in histidine biosynthesis catalyzing the closure of the imidazole ring³³. The observation of an increased

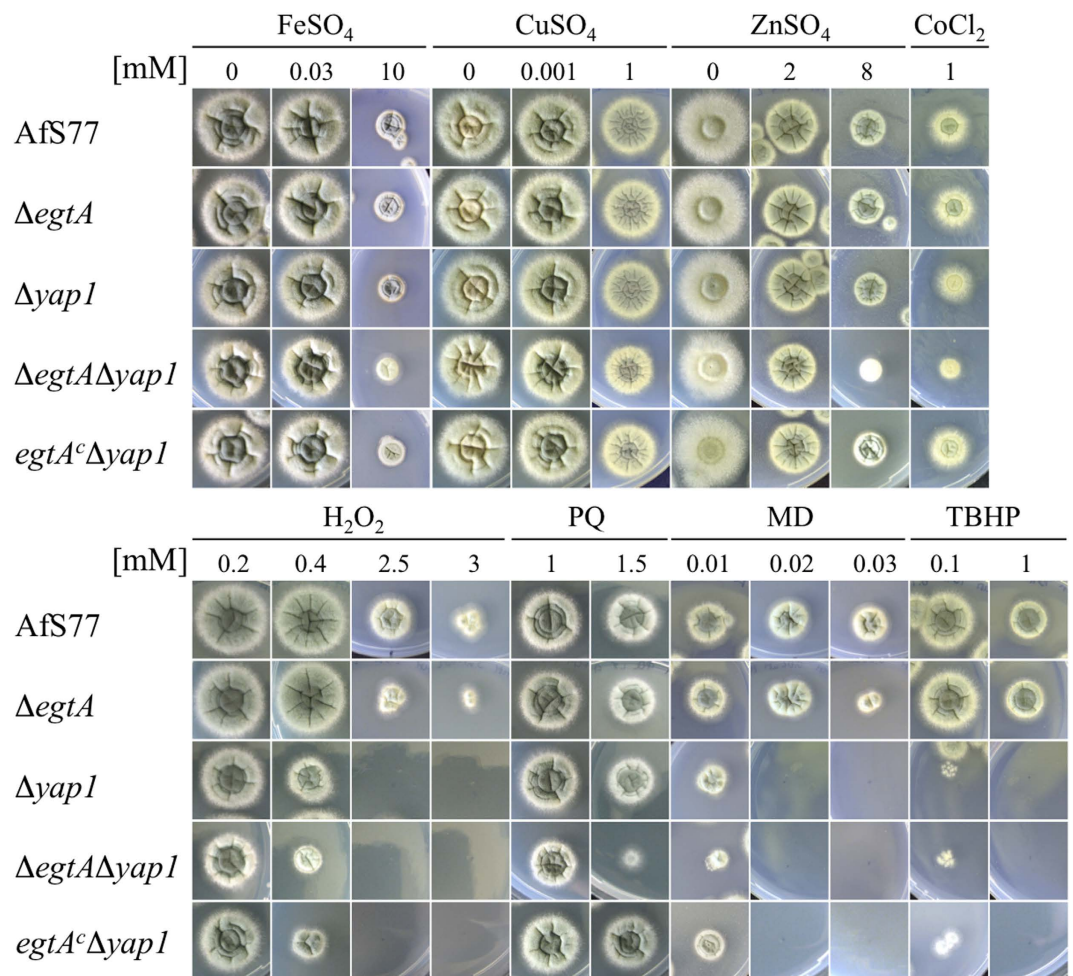


Figure 4. Plate assays performed on AMM agar (containing 20 mM L-glutamine as nitrogen source) for 48 h to test for sensitivity to various ROS inducing agents and heavy metals. Concentrations of stress-inducing agents (hydrogen peroxide, H₂O₂; paraquat, PQ; menadione, MD; *tert*-butylhydroperoxide, TBHP) and metals (iron, FeSO₄; copper, CuSO₄; zinc, ZnSO₄; cobalt, CoCl₂) are given in mM; All strains are AfS77 derivatives and 10⁴ spores were spotted. In wild-type-background EGT deficiency (strain $\Delta egtA$) impaired resistance against H₂O₂ and MD and in a $\Delta yap1$ -background (strain $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$; Yap1 is a transcriptional activator orchestrating oxidative stress defense²⁸) additionally against PQ and the metals copper, zinc and cobalt and iron. Complementation of EGT deficiency in the double mutant strain ($egtA^c\Delta yap1$) restored phenotype to that of a Yap1-lacking mutant.

abundance of imidazole glycerol phosphate synthase subunit HisF in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type under oxidative stress suggests that histidine production is increased when *A. fumigatus* is exposed to H₂O₂ in the absence of EGT biosynthesis. This could further indicate a shift towards attempting to synthesize EGT in the mutant, given that histidine is a key biosynthetic precursor of EGT.

A log₂ 2.22-fold increase in a putative sulphite reductase (AFUA_2G15590; Supplementary Table S2) in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ under oxidative stress compared to wild-type indicates an increased need for sulphur in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, which could reflect attempted EGT production or an increase in GSH biosynthesis.

***egtA* expression, but not EGT levels, increases in response to H₂O₂ exposure.** Quantitative RT-PCR of ATCC26933 cultures exposed to 3 mM H₂O₂ for 1 h in Sabouraud Dextrose broth showed a significant (P = 0.0002) increase in *egtA* expression in response to H₂O₂ compared to the control (Fig. 6a). This indicates H₂O₂ induces *egtA* expression. Unexpectedly, no corresponding increase in EGT levels was observed in ATCC26933 mycelial lysates following H₂O₂ exposure, which suggested that EGT may react to dissipate H₂O₂ (Fig. 6b). It was observed that treatment of purified EGT with H₂O₂ caused a significant decrease (~50%; P = 0.0029) in levels of the antioxidant (Fig. 6c), which is in accordance with EGT consumption by reaction with H₂O₂, and infers that *egtA* expression is increased to maintain intracellular EGT homeostasis.

GSH levels in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ are increased compared to wild-type and complement. Supernatants from mycelial lysates following 5'-IAF alkylation and TCA precipitation, from 72 h cultures of ATCC26933,



Figure 5. Metabolic pathways linking cystathionine, glutathione and methionine metabolism.

(a) Comparison of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 under basal conditions showing an absence of cystathionine γ -synthase, which converts cysteine to cystathionine. This could be due to a switch towards increased glutathione production. (b) Comparison of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and ATCC26933 upon addition of 3 mM H_2O_2 shows an increased abundance of cystathionine β -synthase, which converts cystathionine to homocysteine. This would result in increased production of SAM, which is required for EGT biosynthesis.

$\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$, were analysed via LC-MS. Extracted Ion Chromatograms at m/z 695 revealed a significantly ($P = 0.0016$) increased abundance of total cellular glutathione (GSH) in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to both the wild-type and complemented strains (Fig. 7 and Supplementary Figure S6). This indicates a significant increase in the level of GSH in response to, or as a result of, abrogation of EGT biosynthesis. LFQ proteomics revealed that cystathionine γ -synthase (CGS; AFUA_7G01590) is missing from $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. This enzyme converts cysteine to cystathionine and its absence in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ may be to ensure cysteine flux is available to facilitate increased GSH biosynthesis (Supplementary Table S1). The ratio of free GSH:GSSG pools increases when $egtA$ is deleted, and drops again upon complementation (Supplementary Table S7, Supplementary Figure S6). Thus, absence of EGT biosynthesis is accompanied by an increased relative GSH content in mycelia.

EGT deficiency increased ferricrocin in wild-type and reduced triacetylfusarinine C but increased fusarinine C content in a $\Delta yap1$ background.

To analyze a possible role of EGT in adaptation to iron starvation, production of biomass and siderophores of strains lacking $egtA$, $yap1$ or both was compared to the wild-type during iron sufficiency and starvation. The biomass production of the strains did not differ significantly (Fig. 8a). Biomass production during iron depletion was about 30% compared to iron sufficiency confirming iron starvation conditions. During iron starvation, *A. fumigatus* produces the intracellular siderophore ferricrocin (FC) and the two extracellular siderophores fusarinine C (FsC) and triacetylfusarinine C (TAFC)³⁴. In the wild-type, EGT deficiency increased the cellular accumulation of FC by about 15% (Fig. 8c). In *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$, EGT deficiency increased production of FsC by 60% and decreased production of TAFC by 53%, while the total extracellular siderophore production was not significantly altered. Figure 8d shows an exemplar RP-HPLC analysis of culture supernatants, demonstrating the increase of FsC and decrease of TAFC in the $\Delta egtA \Delta yap1$ strain compared to $\Delta yap1$.

EGT deficiency leads to transcriptional downregulation of $sidG$.

To further analyze the role of EGT in siderophore production, the transcript levels of selected genes were analysed by Northern analysis during iron starvation and sufficiency with and without H_2O_2 stress (Fig. 9). The absence of $egtA$ transcripts in $\Delta egtA^{A1577}$ confirmed deletion of the gene. Slight up-regulation of $egtA$ expression was seen after wild-type treatment with H_2O_2 , which is in accordance with the results for ATCC26933 exposed to 3 mM H_2O_2 . The up-regulation of the catalase-peroxidase gene $cat2$ (AFUA_8G01670)³⁵ in response to H_2O_2 treatment in wild-type and $\Delta egtA$ confirms oxidative stress. The lack of $cat2$ up-regulation in $\Delta yap1$ is consistent with the function of Yap1 as an activator of oxidative stress response²⁸. The conversion of FsC to TAFC is mediated by the acetyltransferase SidG (AFUA_3G03650)³⁴. As shown in Fig. 9, $sidG$ is transcriptionally up-regulated during iron starvation, as

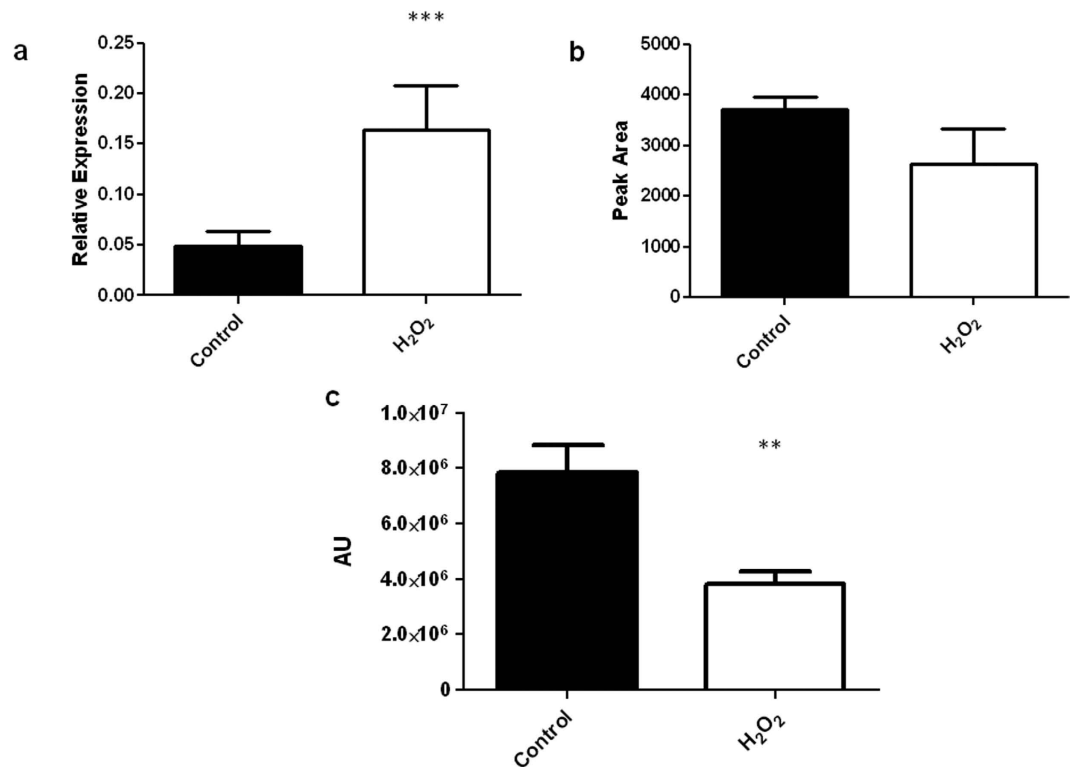


Figure 6. *egtA* expression and EGT detection following 3 mM H₂O₂ exposure. (a) Quantitative RT-PCR data showing the relative expression of *egtA* in ATCC26933 following exposure to 3 mM H₂O₂. *egtA* levels are significantly ($P = 0.0002$) increased in ATCC26933 when exposed to H₂O₂ compared to control levels. (b) RP-HPLC analysis of 5'-IAF labelled EGT following ATCC26933 exposure to 3 mM H₂O₂. No significant variation in EGT levels was observed in H₂O₂ samples compared to control. (c) RP-HPLC data showing peak area of 5'-IAF labelled EGT following purified EGT incubation with 3 mM in H₂O₂. EGT levels drop significantly ($P = 0.029$) following 3 h reaction with 3 mM H₂O₂.

previously shown³⁴, and down-regulated in $\Delta egtA$, $\Delta yap1$ and nearly undetectable in $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$. Notably, *sidG* expression is completely absent after treatment with H₂O₂. The down-regulation of *sidG* is consistent with increased FsC and decreased TAFC production.

Gliotoxin production in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ is significantly reduced compared to wild-type. Organic extracts from 72 h culture supernatants of ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ were analysed via RP-HPLC, gliotoxin was detected at a retention time of 14.9 min in both wild-type and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and subsequent analysis via LC-MS confirmed the presence of gliotoxin (Fig. 10). However, gliotoxin levels in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ were significantly reduced compared to the wild-type ($P = 0.0003$) (Fig. 10b). Thus, an inability to biosynthesize EGT appears to lead to attenuated gliotoxin production compared to wild-type. Relevantly, gliotoxin oxidoreductase GliT (AFUA_6G09740), essential for gliotoxin production³⁶, was absent from $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ through LFQ proteomic analysis (Supplementary Table S1), which could, at least in part, explain the significant diminution of gliotoxin biosynthesis in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. GliT absence in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ could point towards potential sensitivity as per Schrettl *et al.*³⁶, however this was not found to be the case (data not shown). LFQ proteomic comparison of $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ with and without gliotoxin revealed GliT is still induced by gliotoxin exposure, thus no sensitivity is observed (Supplementary Figure S7).

$\Delta egtA^{26933}$ colonies produce paler conidia and show lower levels of conidiation. Colonies from $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ grown on AMM for 72 h exhibited visibly paler conidia compared to those of ATCC26933. Subsequently, levels of conidia were measured by haemocytometry which revealed that $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ produced significantly ($P < 0.05$) lower levels of conidia compared to the wild-type (Fig. 11). This suggests a link between EGT and conidial health, as has been previously observed¹⁶. Relevantly, LFQ proteomics revealed that proteins important for conidiation and conidial health are absent in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ (Supplementary Table S1). These include mannosyltransferases PMT2 (AFUA_1G07690) and PMT4 (AFUA_8G04500), conidial hydrophobin RodB (AFUA_1G17250) and FluG (AFUA_3G07140), an extracellular developmental signal biosynthesis protein^{35,37–39}. In addition, abundance of the LaeA-like protein VipC (AFUA_8G01930) was shown to be increased under basal conditions (\log_2 1.23 fold increase) and further enhanced when exposed to 3 mM H₂O₂ (\log_2 2.5 fold increase) (Supplementary Tables S1 and S2). VipC is part of the Velvet complex and dysregulation could have consequences for conidiation and has been shown to control the switch between sexual and asexual reproduction in *Aspergillus nidulans*⁴⁰. An *A. nidulans* mutant with over-abundant VipC protein showed reduced asexual development⁴⁰.

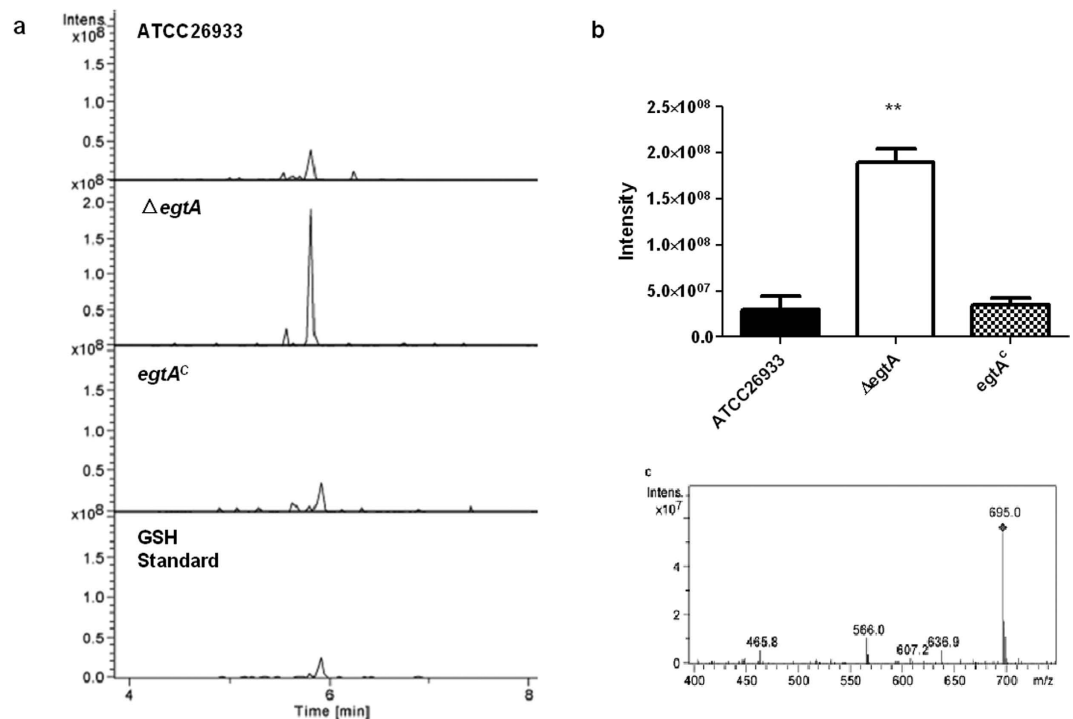


Figure 7. GSH detection via LC-MS in ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$. (a) Extracted Ion Chromatographs (m/z: 695) following LC-MS analysis of TCA precipitated 5'-IAF-labelled mycelial extracts from ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$, in addition to a GSH standard. A peak at 5.9 min was confirmed to be GSH. (b) Peak height data from LC-MS analysis comparing GSH levels in ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ and $egtA^{C26933}$. GSH levels are significantly ($P = 0.0016$) increased in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to the wild-type and complemented samples. (c) Signature Ion breakdown corresponding to 5-IAF labelled GSH.

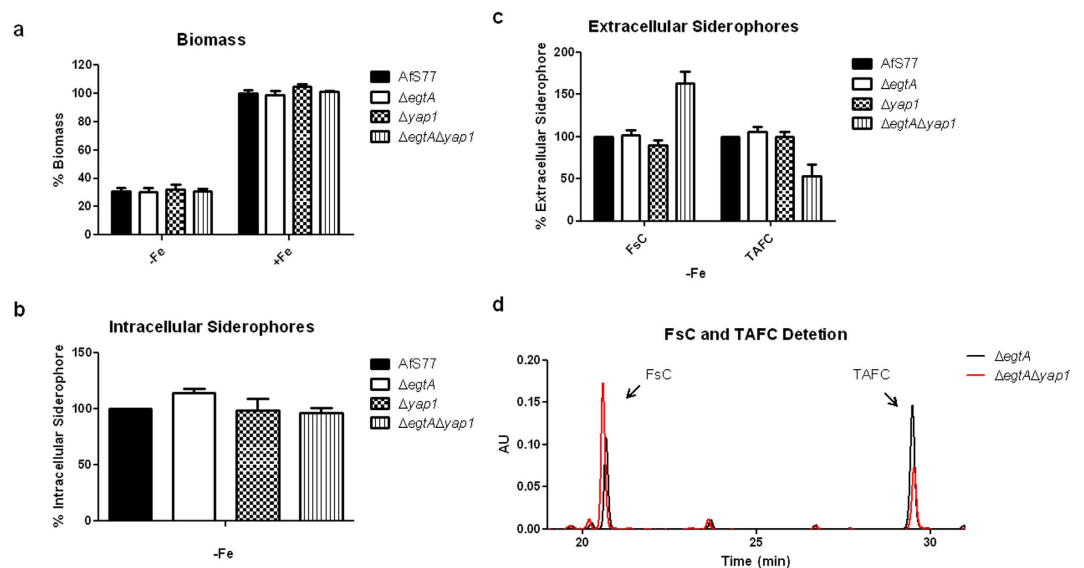


Figure 8. Biomass levels and siderophore production of AfS77, $\Delta egtA^{AfS77}$, $\Delta yap1$ and $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ under iron-deplete conditions (containing 20 mM L-glutamine as nitrogen source). (a) Biomass production of *A. fumigatus* strains cultivated for 24 h at 37 °C during iron starvation (-Fe) and iron sufficiency (+Fe) show no remarkable differences. (b) EGT-deficiency (strain $\Delta egtA$) caused higher levels of FcC. (c) Combined with Yap1 deficiency, EGT deficiency increased FcC and decreased TAFC production. (d) Exemplar RP-HPLC chromatogram (detection at 435 nm to detect red siderophores after iron saturation of the culture supernatants) confirming increased FcC and decreased TAFC production in $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ (red line) in comparison to $\Delta yap1$ (black line).

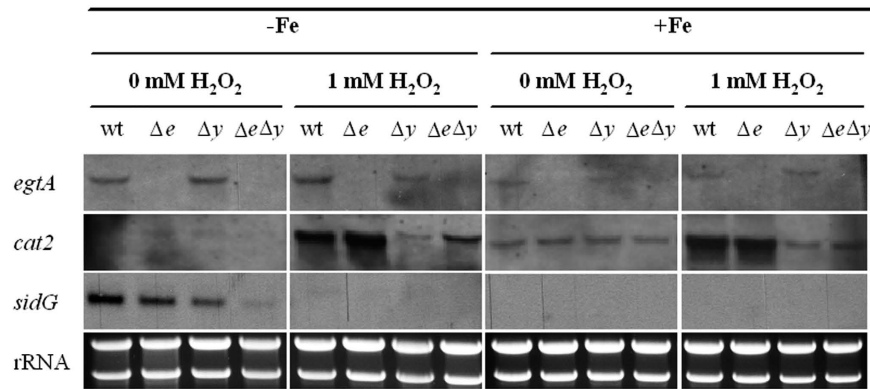
16 h + 45 min ± 1 mM H₂O₂

Figure 9. Northern analysis revealing downregulation of *sidG* expression in $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$. Total RNA (10 μ g) from AfS77 (wt), $\Delta egtA^{AfS77}$ (Δe), $\Delta yap1$ (Δy) and $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ ($\Delta e\Delta y$) was isolated from submerged AMM cultures (containing 20 mM L-glutamine as nitrogen source) grown under iron starvation (–Fe) or sufficiency (+Fe) at 37 °C for 16 h plus 45 min with or without addition of H₂O₂ to a final concentration of 1 mM. See Supplementary Figure S8.

Discussion

Here we present the first identification of the key gene, *egtA*, which encodes EGT biosynthesis in the opportunistic pathogen, *A. fumigatus*. EGT significantly contributes to resistance to high level oxidative stress induced by H₂O₂, superoxide and metal ions, and its presence also influences siderophore and gliotoxin biosynthesis. Conidial proteome remodeling occurs in the absence of EGT, which is associated with attenuated conidiation. Overall, we introduce a new player into the sulphur and iron interactome of *A. fumigatus*.

Through Blast searches (<http://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi>), it was shown that the first two enzymes of *M. smegmatis*, EgtD and EgtB, show sequence or functional homologies to a single enzyme in *A. fumigatus*, encoded by AFUA_2G15650, herein termed *egtA*. EgtA from *A. fumigatus* encodes putative sulphatase and methyltransferase activities; additionally it contains an OvoA-domain (5-histidylcysteine sulphoxide synthase domain). In marine organisms and some human pathogens, this enzyme fulfills the function of a sulphoxide synthase catalyzing the first step in ovothiol A biosynthesis to generate an unmethylated sulphur-containing thiohistidine precursor of this metabolite^{41,42}. The same enzymatic reaction is carried out by EgtB in *M. smegmatis* and by EgtA in *A. fumigatus*. Ovothiol A originates from L-cysteine, L-histidine, O₂ and SAM, as does EGT^{43,44}. The iron-dependent step catalyzed by OvoA was described to mediate the oxidative sulphur transfer in *Erwinia smaniensis*⁴⁵. Ovothiol A is thought to play a role in cellular redox homeostasis in the fertilization of sea urchin eggs⁴⁶, during infection by *Leishmania sp.*, *Trypanosoma sp.*^{47,48} and it also induced autophagy in the human hepatic cancer cell line Hep-G2⁴². *In vitro* studies revealed a potent antioxidative function of ovothiols against various radicals *via* ovothiol-promoted NAD(P)H-O₂ oxidoreductase activity⁴⁹.

The biosynthetic pathway for EGT was recently studied in non-pathogenic fungi. In *S. pombe* the first step is catalyzed by Egt1 leading to mercynylcysteine sulphoxide formation^{16,17}. The next and last step for the generation of EGT remains still elusive and was not well characterized in eukaryotes. However *S. pombe* likely contains a two-step biosynthetic pathway to generate EGT from L-histidine and utilizes L-cysteine rather than γ -glutamylcysteine as in *M. smegmatis*, since no homolog of *egtC* was found in *S. pombe* which could encode an enzyme capable of glutamyl residue removal¹⁷. No hits have been found in *A. fumigatus* when searching for homologs of *M. smegmatis* EgtC. However, Pluskal *et al.*¹⁷ showed that there is a possible homolog of EgtE, a pyridoxal-phosphate (PLP)-binding enzyme in *S. pombe* by screening for EGT production in deletion mutants of possible homologs obtained from a stock center (Bioneer haploid deletion library). They found one mutant strain defective in the gene designated as SPBC660.12c, renamed to *egt2*, which showed lower EGT but raised amounts of the precursor mercynylcysteine sulphoxide. A minimal amount of EGT was still found in the Egt2 deletion strain, explained by a spontaneous conversion of mercynylcysteine sulphoxide to EGT by an unrelated PLP-binding enzyme¹⁷. While no homologs have been reported for *N. crassa*, a potential homolog to the *M. smegmatis* EgtE and Egt2 from *S. pombe* could be the gene annotated as *lot1* (AFUA_2G13295) in *A. fumigatus*. Further studies will validate this result of sequence homology analysis.

EGT production was abolished in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{AfS77}$ and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, and complementation with *egtA* restored EGT production in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, thereby confirming the role of the gene in EGT biosynthesis. Both *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA$ deletion strains exhibited a redox-sensitive phenotype at 3 mM H₂O₂, with no effects seen at lower H₂O₂ concentrations, while wild-type growth was completely inhibited at 4 mM H₂O₂. This suggests EGT may act as an auxiliary, or ‘anti-oxidant of last resort’ against oxidative stress in *A. fumigatus*. Sensitivity to menadione was also observed, at both 40 μ M and 60 μ M, though the mutant matched wild-type growth levels at 20 μ M. This reveals that while not essential for primary protection, EGT is important for protection against elevated levels of superoxide radicals in *A. fumigatus*.

Previously, no phenotypic or protective effect of EGT could be shown in *S. pombe* when tested against oxidative stress-inducing agents like H₂O₂ and *tert*-butylhydroperoxide¹⁷ as was demonstrated in *N. crassa*, where

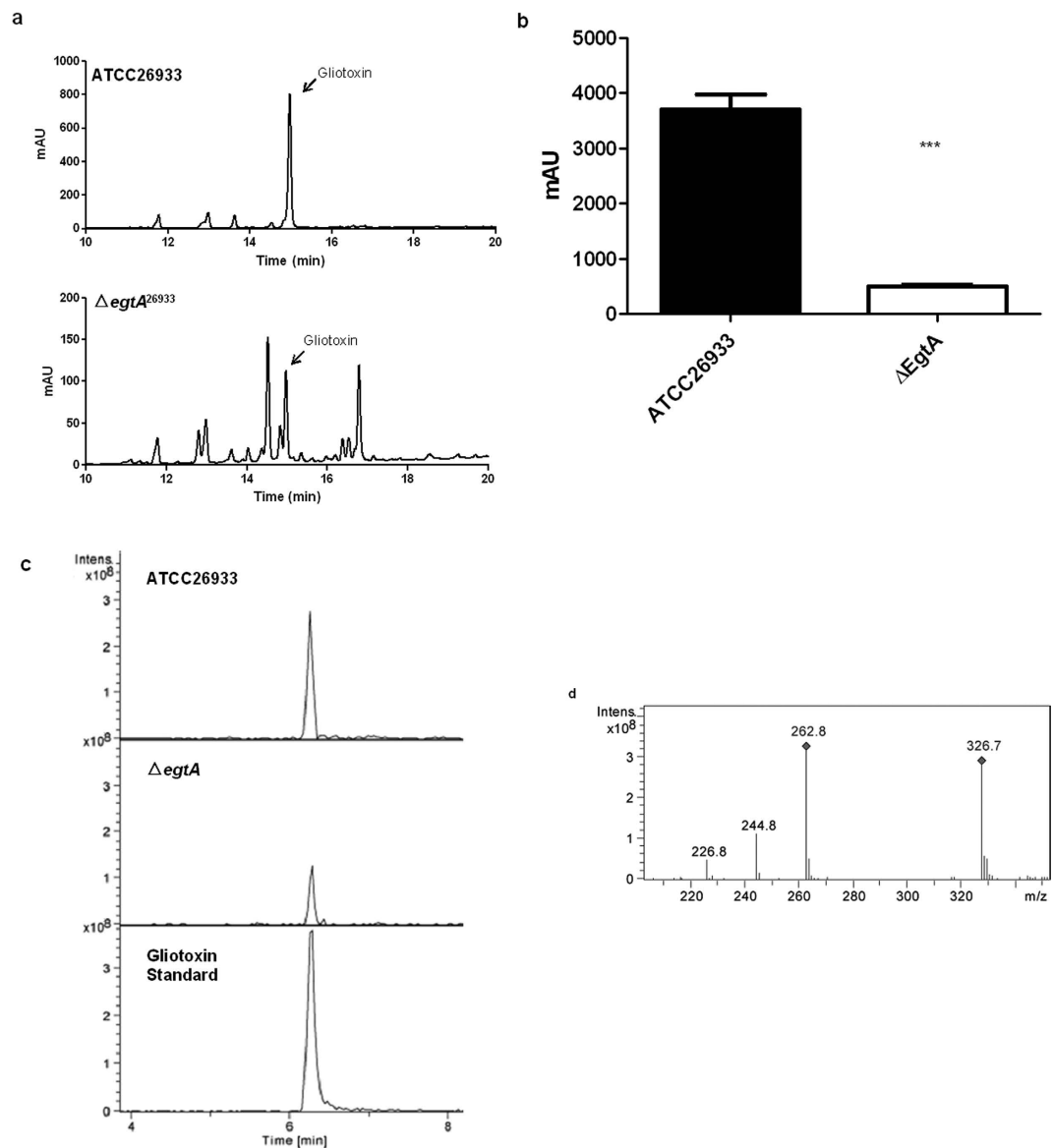


Figure 10. Gliotoxin detection via RP-HPLC and LC-MS in ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. (a) RP-HPLC analysis of organic extracts from the supernatants of 72 h cultures of ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. Gliotoxin is present in all chromatograms for both samples at 14.9 min. (b) Comparison of gliotoxin peak area from RP-HPLC analysis for ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ performed in triplicate. The peak area was found to be significantly ($P=0.0003$) lowered in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. (c) Extracted Ion Chromatographs (m/z : 327) following LC-MS analysis of organic extracts of supernatants from ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, in addition to a gliotoxin standard. A peak at 6.3 min was confirmed to be gliotoxin. (d) Signature ion breakdown corresponding to gliotoxin.

EGT contributes to the antioxidative defense against peroxides in conidia and plays a role in conidiogenesis and conidial longevity, but does not protect against UV-induced mutation rate^{16,50}. However, herein we show that endogenous EGT confers significant resistance against H_2O_2 and menadione in the *A. fumigatus*. It was also shown that the key regulator of oxidative response Yap1²⁸ is very important to protect *A. fumigatus* against oxidative burden. Additionally, it was demonstrated that EGT deficiency exacerbates the phenotype of the extremely sensitive mutant strain lacking Yap1 too ($\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$) during treatment with oxidative stressors or metals. The fact that Yap1 deficiency extends the $\Delta egtA$ phenotype indicates that in wild-type, EGT limitation is partially compensated by other detoxification mechanisms that require activation by Yap1.

The role of EGT in protection against oxidative stress and maintenance of redox homeostasis is further underlined by the results of LFQ proteomics. The abundance of a number of proteins related to redox homeostasis and oxidative stress is dysregulated in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ (Supplementary Tables S3 and S4). This apparent proteomic remodelling when $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ is exposed to H_2O_2 underpins the important role played by EGT in maintaining redox homeostasis in the presence of specific oxidants. Loss of EGT results in altered abundance of redox-related proteins, possibly due to an increased level of cellular H_2O_2 consequent to abrogation of cellular EGT presence. LFQ

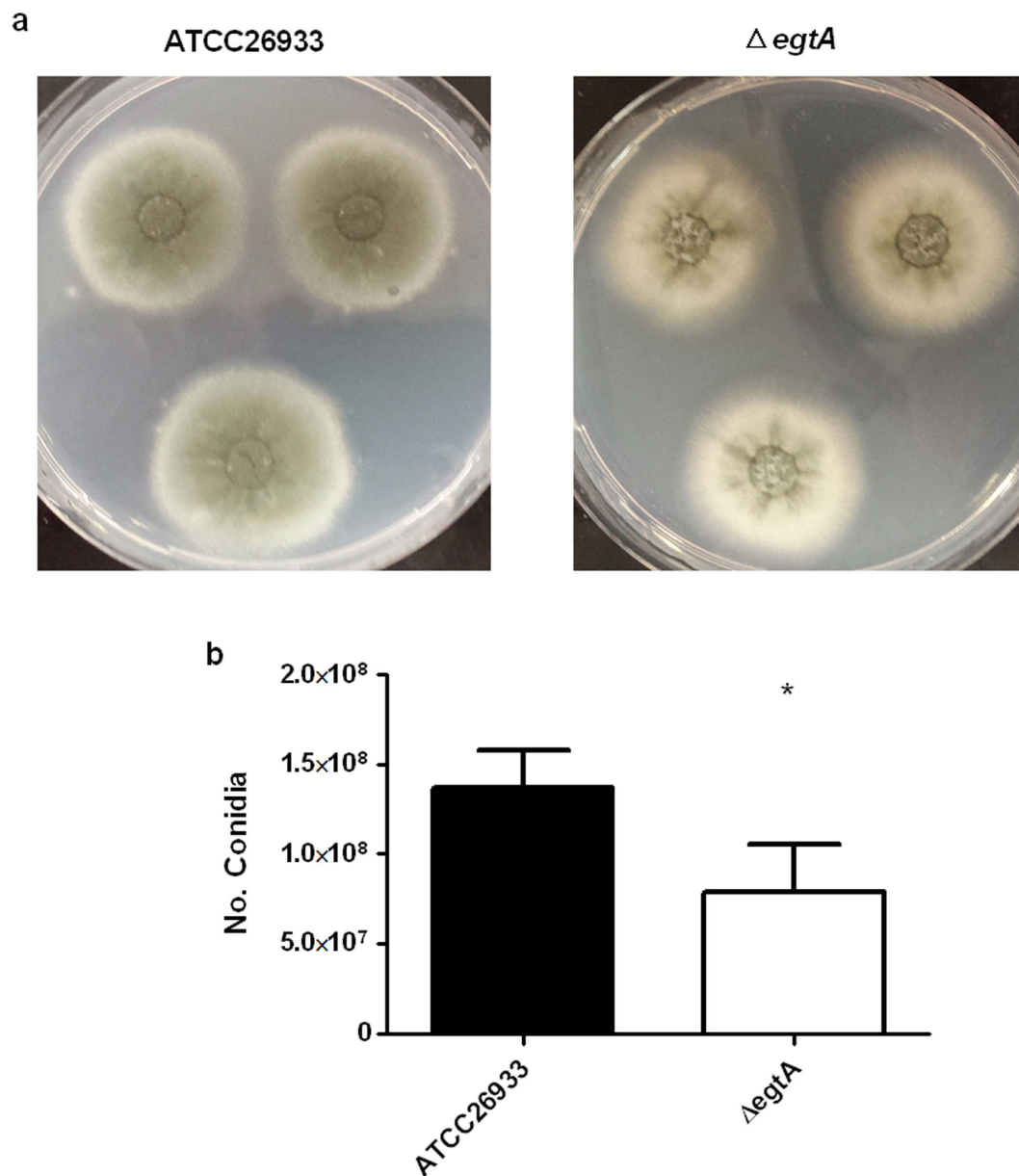


Figure 11. Conidiation in ATCC26933 and $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. (a) Comparison of conidial colour and appearance in colonies from ATCC26933 and $egtA^{26933}$. (b) Comparison of conidiation levels from ATCC26933 and $egtA^{26933}$ (5 mM ammonium tartrate as nitrogen source).

proteomic data also suggests that $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ attempts to synthesise EGT upon H_2O_2 exposure, and hints at a possible degradative pathway for EGT. In addition, increased abundance of HisF (AFUA_2G06230) and cystathionine β -lyase (AFUA_4G03950) shows an increased requirement for histidine and SAM respectively, necessary for the biosynthesis of EGT. Furthermore, the increased abundance of a sulphite reductase (AFUA_2G15590) observed could indicate an increased need for sulphur in order to biosynthesise EGT. Previously it has been shown in *A. nidulans* that, the CCAAT-binding complex (CBC, also termed Hap complex or AnCF in *A. nidulans*) senses the cellular redox status via oxidative modification of thiol groups within its subunit HapC³¹. The absence of HapC in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ (Supplementary Tables S3 and S4) indicates another layer of CBC regulation, which could lead to an impaired global oxidative stress response.

The changes observed in CGS and CBL in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ under basal and ROS conditions when compared to wild-type suggest a metabolic change caused by EGT absence centred on cystathionine usage. Under basal conditions, CGS is downregulated, which would curtail cystathionine production³². This would result in cysteine availability for GSH production. Upon addition of 3 mM H_2O_2 , a “switch” is observed and CBL abundance was increased in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ compared to wild-type. This should increase conversion of cystathionine to homocysteine³² which may ultimately provide SAM, via the methyl/methionine cycle⁵¹ for EGT biosynthesis (Fig. 5) and

suggests that $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ attempts to biosynthesise EGT under ROS conditions, thereby highlighting its role in oxidative stress response.

In correspondence, qRT-PCR analysis showed that *egtA* expression was up-regulated in response to H_2O_2 exposure, a further indicator that EGT is essential for attenuating oxidative stress in *A. fumigatus*. However despite the increase in *egtA* expression, intracellular EGT levels did not increase upon addition of H_2O_2 , most likely due to reactivity with ROS species as we observed for purified EGT. This suggests that intracellular EGT is dissipated consequent to its antioxidant activity and is consistent with data from Servillo *et al.*⁵² who reported that EGT is degraded upon oxidation, mainly into hercynine and sulphurous acid. Conversely, the observed rise in EGT levels in $\Delta gliK^{18}$, deficient in gliotoxin biosynthesis, could be due to either a sensory deficiency in the cellular oxidative stress response, or a compensatory mechanism to replace the frontline antioxidant, GSH, utilised for gliotoxin biosynthesis but which cannot undergo replenishment due to GliK γ -glutamyl cyclotransferase deficiency.

RP-HPLC and LC-MS analysis revealed attenuated gliotoxin production, while GSH production is significantly increased, in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. GSH production is likely increased to deal with the increased ROS caused by EGT absence. LFQ proteomic analysis provides revealing insight into the putative mechanisms facilitating this observation. Under basal conditions, cystathionine γ -synthase is undetectable in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$, which would prevent the conversion of cysteine to cystathionine, therefore channelling more cysteine towards GSH biosynthesis (Fig. 5). GSH is the source of both thiols in gliotoxin^{53–55}, and gliotoxin biosynthesis has been shown to be greater in ATCC26933 than ATCC46645³⁶. Thus, increased GSH levels in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ may be consequent to the observed decrease in gliotoxin biosynthesis, and the consequential absence of GSH incorporation into gliotoxin. GSH may, in turn, be diverted from gliotoxin biosynthesis to detoxify ROS, leading to reduced gliotoxin production in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. LFQ proteomics also revealed an absence of the gliotoxin oxidoreductase GliT in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ (Supplementary Table S6). Deletion of *gliT*, which catalyzes the final step of gliotoxin biosynthesis, results in abrogated gliotoxin production³⁶ and its absence in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ is entirely in accordance with the observed diminution in gliotoxin biosynthesis. Attenuated gliotoxin production was unexpected, as previous observations in $\Delta gliK$ suggested an inverse relationship between gliotoxin and EGT. Decreased gliotoxin production following the loss of EGT contradicts that view; however it nonetheless suggests that the production of these two sulphur-containing, redox-active metabolites is interlinked.

Unexpectedly, GSH biosynthesis is not altered in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{AF577}$ (Supplementary Figure S6). Because of the interconnection of the EGT pathway to GSH biosynthesis in EGT producing bacteria such as *Synechocystis* sp. PCC6803 it had been argued that this interaction may be the case for other EGT-producing organisms, like *A. fumigatus*, resulting in an up-regulation of GSH biosynthesis as a result of a block in the EGT pathway and a higher content of intermediates, or to compensate for the loss of EGT. However, it has been suggested that GSH biosynthesis in EGT-producing fungi does not provide any intermediate for the EGT pathway, because of the missing enzyme annotated as EgtC in *M. smegmatis*, which would catalyze further reactions, remove the glutamyl residue or the absent up-regulation of GSH to utilize the accumulated intermediates or to compensate for the loss of EGT^{17,56}. Another factor is the previously discussed link between gliotoxin and GSH, the latter essential for the biosynthesis of gliotoxin⁵³. With lower gliotoxin production in AFS77 compared to ATCC26933, this may impact the behavior of GSH in the two EGT deficient mutants. Indeed a comparison of GSH levels (Supplementary Figure S6) in the two wild-type strains show that ATCC26933 has lower GSH levels than AFS77, perhaps linked to the different levels of gliotoxin production. The subsequent drop in gliotoxin production in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ thus may explain the rise in GSH.

EGT deficiency alters siderophore biosynthesis in *A. fumigatus* $\Delta egtA^{AF577}$. Whereas, FcC and TAFC are produced under iron starvation to be excreted for chelation and import of ferric iron, FC and HFC act as intracellular storage and transport vehicles^{22,57}. Moreover, it was demonstrated that oxidative stress (H_2O_2 , PQ) leads to higher levels of FC during both iron states, but most obvious at excess iron in *Aspergillus nidulans* through up-regulation of *sidC*⁵⁷. Siderophore analysis herein implies that EGT is involved in oxidative stress defense because of the higher amounts of FC in EGT-lacking strains. Additionally, this study supports the theory that siderophore biosynthesis is intertwined with oxidative stress response by shifting the production of extracellular siderophores towards the progenitor FsC instead of TAFC in the sensitive $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ mutant strains. Northern analysis related the decreased amounts of TAFC in $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ consequent to a down-regulated expression of *sidG* (AFUA_3G03650), the acetyltransferase catalyzing the triacetylation of FsC to generate TAFC³⁴. It was shown previously that HapX deficiency results in selective suppression of TAFC but not FsC biosynthesis, caused by lower transcript levels of *sidG*, but only minor impact on *sidA* and *sidF* expression⁵⁸. This phenotype partially matches that of the $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ mutant indicating that EGT or oxidative stress might negatively influence HapX activity, which leads to the reduction in *sidG* transcription. Alternatively, oxidative stress and EGT, respectively, affect *sidG* expression and HapX independently. Northern blot analysis indicated transcriptional upregulation of *egtA* during iron starvation compared to iron sufficiency (Fig. 9). In this context it is interesting to note that cellular accumulation of the EGT precursor histidine was previously also found to be significantly increased during iron starvation compared to iron sufficiency⁵⁸.

Bello *et al.*¹⁶ demonstrated that EGT plays an important role in conidial health in *N. crassa*. This seems to be shared with *A. fumigatus*, with paler conidia and lower levels of conidiation observed in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$. LFQ proteomics reveals several important proteins involved in conidial health and development are missing in $\Delta egtA^{26933}$ including, conidial hydrophobin RodB (AFUA_1G17250), extracellular developmental signal biosynthesis protein FluG (AFUA_3G07140) and mannosyltransferases PMT2 (AFUA_1G07690) and PMT4 (AFUA_8G04500) (Supplementary Table S1). RodB is a structural protein found in the cell wall of conidia³⁵. FluG is a signaling protein associated with asexual development, indeed deletion of FluG in *A. flavus* resulted in reduced conidiation³⁹. A mannosyltransferase PMT4 mutant also displayed reduced conidiation, however a deletion mutant of PMT2 was not viable suggesting the gene is essential³⁸. Fang *et al.*³⁷ demonstrated that reducing *pmt2* transcription in

A. fumigatus resulted in reduced conidiation, retarded germination and impaired cell wall integrity. The absence of these conidiation-associated proteins suggests that EGT presence, or global cellular redox homeostasis play an important role in the conidiation process in *A. fumigatus*. Moreover, it has been postulated that ROS may play a role in regulating cellular differentiation⁵⁹ and the loss of EGT, and subsequent dysregulation of the redox system, may further explain the loss of these proteins and the effects on conidiation observed in $\Delta egtA$ ²⁶⁹³³. Another protein with altered expression was VipC (AFUA_8G01930), a methyltransferase that forms part of the Velvet complex⁴⁰ (Supplementary Tables S1 and S2). Sarikaya-Bayram *et al.* demonstrated in *A. nidulans* that VipC is important for the appropriate activation of either sexual or asexual reproduction in response to darkness or light respectively. While increased abundance of VipC was associated with increased asexual reproduction, a VipC over-expression mutant showed repression of both asexual conidiation and sexual fruiting bodies.

To conclude, EGT biosynthesis is linked to multiple, apparently unrelated systems in *A. fumigatus*. Cystathionine metabolism and the transsulphuration pathway is altered in $\Delta egtA$, especially under oxidative stress conditions. This 'cystathionine switch' could be an important control mechanism to deal with altered redox homeostasis in *A. fumigatus*.

Methods

Strains, growth conditions, and oligonucleotides. *A. fumigatus* strains were grown at 37 °C using *Aspergillus* minimal medium (AMM) agar. AMM contained 1% (w/v) glucose as the carbon source, 5 mM ammonium tartrate or 20 mM L-glutamine as the nitrogen source and trace elements⁶⁰. Liquid cultures were performed with 100 ml Czapek-Dox broth or AMM in 500 ml Erlenmeyer flasks inoculated with 10⁸ conidia. For growth assays, 5 × 10⁴ conidia of the respective strains were point inoculated on AMM agar plates containing the relevant supplements and incubated for 72 h at 37 °C. All *A. fumigatus* strains and oligonucleotides used are listed in Supplementary Tables S8 and S9 respectively.

Deletion of *egtA* and *yap1* and complementation of the $\Delta egtA$ and $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$ strains. For generating *egtA* and *yap1* deletions in AfS77, and the associated double mutants, the bipartite marker technique was used⁶¹. Briefly, *A. fumigatus* was co-transformed with two DNA fragments, each containing overlapping but incomplete fragments of a resistance cassette (pyrithiamine, *ptrA*; hygromycin, *hph*) fused to the 5' and 3' flanks of *egtA*. The *egtA* 5'-flanking region (1199 bp) was PCR amplified from genomic DNA using primers oAfDUF323.1 and oAfDUF323.2. For the amplification of the 3'-flanking region (1149 bp) primers oAfDUF323.3 and oAfDUF323.4 were employed. Subsequent to gel purification, these fragments were digested with *HindIII* and *PstI*, respectively. The *ptrA* selection marker was released from plasmid pSK275 by digestion with *HindIII* (5'-flanking region) and *PstI* (3'-flanking region) and ligated with the 5'- and 3'-flanking regions respectively. The transformation construct A (2022 bp, fusion of the *egtA* 5'-flanking region to *ptrA* split marker) was amplified from the ligation product using oAfDUF323.5 and oAoptrA1. For amplification of transformation construct B (2476 bp, fusion of *ptrA* split marker with 3'-flanking region) primers oAoptrA.2 and oAfDUF323.6 were employed. For transformation of *A. fumigatus* protoplasts both constructs were simultaneously used. To generate a knockout mutant strain deficient in Yap1 in the background of AfS77, genomic DNA including the resistance cassette gene *hph* of $\Delta yap1$ in the genetic background of the AfS77 was amplified using primers oAfyap1.5'f and oAfyap1.3'r (4 kb). The PCR-product was transformed in *A. fumigatus* AfS77 and $\Delta egtA$ protoplasts to generate $\Delta yap1$ and $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$, respectively.

The same strategy⁶¹ was used for the generation of $\Delta egtA$ ²⁶⁹³³. *A. fumigatus* strain ATCC26933 was co-transformed with two DNA constructs, both containing incomplete fragments of the pyrithiamine gene, *ptrA*⁶². Fragments were generated via PCR from DNA extracted from $\Delta egtA$ ^{AfS77} using primers oAfDUF323.5 and oAoptrA1 for the 5' fragments, and oADUF323.6 and oAoptrA2 for the 3' fragment. Generation of the mutant was confirmed by Southern analysis⁵³.

For the reconstitution of $\Delta egtA$ ^{AfS77}, a functional copy of *egtA* (a 5691 bp PCR-amplified fragment generated with the primers oAetgA1.7_f and oAetgA1.8_r) was subcloned into pAN8.1 containing the phleomycin resistance cassette (*ble*) by a digestion with *SphI* and *NheI* resulting in (*pegTA:ble*). The resulting 10,508 bp plasmid was linearized with *SphI* and used for the transformation of *A. fumigatus* protoplasts of $\Delta egtA$ and $\Delta egtA\Delta yap1$. To complement $\Delta egtA$ ²⁶⁹³³, a PCR fragment containing the *egtA* locus including promoter and terminator was amplified using primers oAfDUF323.5 and oAfDUF323.6 and then inserted into the pCR[®] 2.1-TOPO[®] TA vector. This vector (*pegTA*) was linearised with *AatII* and transformed into $\Delta egtA$ ²⁶⁹³³ alongside the plasmid pAN 7-1, containing the *hph* selection marker for hygromycin resistance. Insertion of the *egtA* gene was confirmed via Southern analysis. Transformation of *A. fumigatus* was carried out as described previously²⁵. For selection of positive transformants 0.1 mg/ml pyrithiamine (Sigma), 0.2 mg/ml hygromycin (Sigma) or 0.02 mg/ml phleomycin (Eubio) was used. Southern blot analyses were used to screen for positive transformants. PCR primers used for generating hybridization probes are listed in Supplementary Table S9.

RNA Isolation, Reverse Transcription PCR and Quantitative PCR. RNA was isolated and purified from *A. fumigatus* hyphae crushed in liquid N₂ using the RNeasy plant minikit (Qiagen). RNA was treated with DNase I (Invitrogen), and cDNA synthesis from mRNA (500 ng) was performed using a qScript cDNA SuperMix kit (Quanta Biosciences). The gene encoding calmodulin (AFUA_4G10050)⁶³, which is constitutively expressed in *A. fumigatus*, served as a control in RT-PCR and RT-qPCR experiments. RT-qPCR was performed using a Roche Lightcycler 480⁶⁴. Northern Analysis was performed as described elsewhere²⁴.

Ergothioneine Analysis. To analyze ergothioneine production, *A. fumigatus* ATCC26933, $\Delta egtA$ ²⁶⁹³³ and $\Delta egtA$ ^{C26933} were grown at 37 °C for 72 h in Czapek-Dox broth. Mycelia were snap frozen in liquid N₂ and lyophilised overnight. Lyophilised mycelia were bead beaten in lysis buffer, incubated on ice for 1 h and centrifuged

(13,000 g) at 4 °C. Supernatants (50 µl) were treated with 5'-IAF (10 µl; 3 mg/ml in DMSO) and analyzed via RP-HPLC and LC-MS as described¹⁸.

Sensitivity Assays for Oxidative Stress. *A. fumigatus* strains were incubated on AMM agar at 37 °C for up to 72 h in the presence of oxidising agents. Sensitivity was determined by comparing mean radial growth from 3 replicates, significance was determined via one-way ANOVA. Oxidising agents used were H₂O₂ (0–3 mM), menadione (0–60 µM) and diamide (0–1.75 mM). Metal toxicity was assayed with iron (0–10 mM), copper (0–1.0 mM), zinc (0–8 mM), and cobalt (0–1 mM).

Determination of Ergothioneine reactivity with H₂O₂. Reactivity between EGT and H₂O₂ was analysed by incubating 3 mM EGT (Sigma-Aldrich) with, and without, 3 mM H₂O₂ for 3 h at room temperature. Triplicate specimens were then analyzed by back-titration to detect remaining EGT by labelling with 5'-IAF followed by RP-HPLC detection as described above. Residual EGT amounts were compared using unpaired t-test.

Glutathione Analysis via LC-MS. *A. fumigatus* mycelia were grown for 72 h at 37 °C in Czapek-Dox broth, snap-frozen in liquid N₂ and lyophilised overnight. Lyophilised mycelia were bead beaten in lysis buffer, incubated on ice for 1 h and centrifuged (13,000 g) at 4 °C. Supernatants (50 µl) were treated with 5'-IAF (10 µl; 3 mg/ml in DMSO) and analyzed using LC-MS as described¹⁸. GSH levels were compared using one-way ANOVA.

GSH/GSSG determination. *A. fumigatus* mycelia were grown for 72 h at 37 °C in Czapek-Dox Broth, harvested through miracloth and snap frozen in liquid N₂. GSH and GSSG levels were then determined as described previously⁶⁵.

Comparative Label Free Quantitative (LFO) Proteomic Analysis of *A. fumigatus* ATCC26933 and Δ egtA²⁶⁹³³. *A. fumigatus* ATCC26933 and Δ egtA²⁶⁹³³ ($n = 4$ biological replicates each) were cultured in Sabouraud-Dextrose media for 23 h followed by H₂O₂ addition (3 mM final) or equivalent volume of H₂O for 1 h. Mycelial lysates were prepared in lysis buffer (100 mM Tris-HCl, 50 mM NaCl, 20 mM EDTA, 10% (v/v) Glycerol, 1 mM PMSF, 1 µg/ml pepstatin A, pH 7.5) with grinding, sonication and clarified using centrifugation (13,000 g, 20 min, 4 °C). Lysates were then precipitated using trichloroacetic acid/acetone and resuspended in 100 mM Tris-HCl, 6 M urea, 2 M thiourea, pH 8.0. Samples were reduced and alkylated using DTT and iodoacetamide respectively, then treated with trypsin and ProteaseMax surfactant^{55,66}. Resultant peptide mixtures were analyzed via a Thermo Fisher Q-Exactive mass spectrometer coupled to a Dionex RSLCnano. LC gradients operated from 4 to 45% B over 2 h, and data was collected using a Top15 method for MS/MS scans. Comparative proteome abundance and data analysis were performed using MaxQuant software (version 1.3.0.5⁶⁷), with Andromeda used for database searching and Perseus used to organize the data (version 1.4.1.3).

Siderophore analysis. Analysis of extracellular and intracellular siderophores was performed by RP-HPLC as described previously²⁴.

Gliotoxin Analysis. To analyze gliotoxin production, *A. fumigatus* ATCC26933 and Δ egtA²⁶⁹³³ were grown at 37 °C for 72 h in Czapek-Dox medium. Supernatants were chloroform extracted and fractions were dried to completion under vacuum. Extracts were resolubilised in methanol and analyzed using RP-HPLC and LC-MS as previously described³⁶. Gliotoxin levels were compared via unpaired t-test.

Conidial Quantification. Colonies of ATCC26933 or Δ egtA²⁶⁹³³ were grown on AMM (containing 5 mM ammonium tartrate as nitrogen source) for 72 h at 37 °C. Plugs were taken from the centre of each colony and placed into 1 ml of PBS in 1.5 ml tubes. After vigorous vortexing, 20 µl of each solution was placed on a haemocytometer and quantified. Mean conidial concentrations were computed from $n = 3$ independent colonies. Conidial concentrations were compared via unpaired t-test.

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Author Contributions

S.D., H.H. and G.W.J. conceived the study and wrote the manuscript. B.E.L., K.J.S., G.O.K., M.A.K., E.R.W. and H.L. carried out experimental work. B.E.L. and K.J.S. also contributed to manuscript drafting.

Additional Information

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