Patterns of fluctuating asymmetry in beetle horns: no evidence for reliable signaling

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Negative relations between trait size and levels of fluctuating asymmetry in secondary sexual traits have been claimed to be indicative of honest signaling of male quality. Comparative studies of beetle horns have been used to illustrate the required negative relation between trait size and asymmetry. However, such studies may be confounded by measurement error or sampling bias due to population differences or differences within species in the phenotypic expression of hornedness. We examined the patterns of fluctuating asymmetry within two species of horned beetle. We found that, in agreement with theory, horns exhibit greater asymmetry than naturally selected traits. However, we found a strong positive relation between horn size and asymmetry in Onthophagus taurus, a species with male dimorphisms, and a flat relation in Bubas bison, a species with continuous variation in horn size. We suggest that these differences may reflect functional differences in horns. We conclude that patterns of asymmetry in horned beetles do not support the notion of honest signaling. Key words: beetle horns, Bubas bison, fluctuating asymmetry, honest signaling, Onthophagus taurus, sexual selection. [Behav Ecol 9:465-470 (1998)]

Morphological traits differ in the degree to which they are developmentally canalized during development, according to their functional importance (Møller, 1993a; Møller and Pomiankowski, 1993; Palmer and Strobeck, 1986). Traits that have high functional importance are typically highly canalized and developmentally stable and thus demonstrate low levels of fluctuating asymmetry (FA). Traits that have less functional importance are frequently less stable and have higher levels of FA. This has been highlighted by an apparent dichotomy between secondary sexual and nonsexual morphological traits. Various studies have demonstrated that the degree of FA in male sexual ornaments and/or weapons generally exceeds that in other nonsexual morphological traits such as legs or wings (Møller, 1992; Møller and Eriksson, 1994; Møller and Hoglund, 1991; but see Balmford et al., 1995). Similarly, sexual traits in males generally possess higher levels of FA than homologous, and presumably nonsexual, traits in females (Manning and Chamberlain, 1993; Møller and Hoglund, 1991).

Møller (1993a) argued that the relationship between trait size and FA may be a potential indicator of individual quality. Individuals of low phenotypic and/or genetic quality are proposed to invest relatively more in the production of small traits, with the cost of high investment manifest as high levels of FA. In contrast, individuals of superior quality are proposed to invest relatively less and to be able to produce larger yet more symmetrical traits. Møller (1990, 1992, 1993a,b) and Møller and Hoglund (1991) thus propose that negative relations between trait size and asymmetry serve as honest signals of male quality. Negative relations between FA and trait size have been demonstrated for some taxa (Manning and Chamberlain, 1993; Manning and Harlcy, 1991; Møller, 1990, 1993b; Møller and Eriksson, 1994, 1995) but not others (Allen and Simmons, 1996; Evans et al., 1995; Mateos and Carranza, 1996; Møller et al., 1996; Tomkins and Simmons, 1995).

In his comparative study of the patterns of FA in the horns and elytra of eight species of horned beetles, Møller (1992) demonstrated that the degree of FA in horns was considerably larger than in elytra. In addition, he found that, on average, the relation between absolute FA and trait size was negative for horns and flat or U-shaped for elytra. From this Møller (1992) concluded that the patterns of FA in the horns of beetles may honestly signal male competitive ability. There are several problems with this study and with many of the studies of FA cited above. Rarely do these studies adequately account for measurement error which has statistical properties identical to FA, and often, particularly with comparative studies, they may be confounded by sampling bias; since both the level of FA and the size of the trait are often environmentally determined, a negative relation between FA and trait size might be expected as a confounding result of heterogeneous sampling (Simmons et al., 1995; Swaddle et al., 1994). One particular problem with Møller's (1992) study of beetle horns is that, within species males are often dimorphic for the expression of horns (Eberhard and Gutiérrez, 1991; Ote and Stayman, 1979); only males of high phenotypic quality produce horns (Emlen, 1994; Hunt and Simmons, 1997) so that pooling data on FA across morphs may represent a form of sampling error (Tomkins and Simmons, 1996). This may be particularly true because, in beetles, horned males can represent a cohort of superior phenotypic quality (e.g., Brown and Barton, 1986; Cook, 1990; Emlen, 1994; Hunt and Simmons, 1997; Goldsmith, 1987), so that large horns and symmetrical horns may represent dichotomous, rather than continuous, conditions. Beetle horns are subject to strong sexual selection; horned males outcompete their hornless conspecifics (Emlen, 1997; Siva-Jothy, 1987) and, among horned males, those with longer horns are superior competitors (Conner, 1988; Emlen, 1997). To test Møller's (1992) findings regarding the levels and patterns of FA in horned beetles, we examined the relation between FA and trait size in the sexual and nonsexual traits within populations of both Onthophagus taurus and Bubas bison (Coleoptera: Scarabaeidae).

METHODS
We collected Onthophagus taurus from Narikup (34°45' S, 117°01' E), approximately 370 km south of Perth, Western Australia, and Bubas bison from Kojonup (33°51' S, 117°01' E), approximately 260 km south of Perth. Animals were collected by overturning fresh dung pads and extracting beetles...
Figure 1
Scanning micrographs showing the horn structures of (A) *Bubas bison* and (B) *Onthophagus taurus*.

by hand as they attempted to bury into the underlying soil or move back through the pad. Beetles that escaped down their burrows were unearthed and also collected. For each species, animals were sampled from the same local population and on the same day.

**Patterns of trait size and FA**

For *O. taurus*, we measured size and FA in the paired head horns and the elytra of males and in the elytra of females. In *B. bison* FA was measured in the paired head horns and hind femur of both males and females. We also measured the size of the central pronotal horn of male *B. bison* (Figure 1). In each case FA was calculated by subtracting the left from the right side. The selection of morphological traits was based on the following criteria: (1) ease of measurement, which was largely determined by the presence of well-defined measurement landmarks, (2) traits that were less vulnerable to damage (e.g., hind femurs were less frequently worn or damaged than fore femurs), (3) both trait size and FA had to be measured with a high repeatability and a low level of measurement error, and (4) traits being used in FA examination had to conform to the statistical guidelines of FA (Swaddle et al., 1994). Where possible we measured the homologous traits in females to ascertain the differential selective pressures acting on the sexes. In both species, pronotum width was measured as an index of body size.

All FA measurements were made twice. Measurement error was estimated for the level of signed FA in bilateral traits following method 1 of Merilä and Björklund (1995). FA measures are especially sensitive to measurement error because the magnitude of FA is usually small (often \( \leq 1-5\% \) of the total variation in a given trait) and is random by definition. Therefore, more than a single measurement is required to accurately assess the magnitude of FA relative to measurement error (Merilä and Björklund, 1995; Yezerinac et al., 1992). Sexes, and where present male morphs (see below), were treated separately.

We assessed the presence of significant FA using procedures recommended by Palmer (1994). A mixed-model ANOVA using sides (left or right), individuals, and replicate entered as main factors provides an interaction variance, individual-by-sides, that is an estimate of the asymmetry variance. This was compared with the variance due to measurement error (see also Swaddle et al., 1994). Traits were accepted as showing FA, rather than antisymmetry, if the signed asymmetries were normally distributed (determined by a Kolmogorov-Smirnov goodness-of-fit test) around a mean of zero (determined by a one-sample *t* test) or, if they did differ from normality, they only did so through leptokurtosis and not platykurtosis or skewness (Palmer and Strobeck, 1986). Leptokurtosis in the adult population is expected to arise through selection operating against asymmetric individuals during the course of development (Naugler and Leech, 1994; Ueno, 1994). In contrast, platykurtosis is likely to reflect a developmental bias generating antisymmetry (Palmer and Strobeck, 1986). If FA was non-normally distributed, both skewness and kurtosis were tested to determine the underlying cause. The statistical properties of our FA measures are given in Table 1.

We used mixed-model ANOVAs to control for measurement error variance when examining differences in FA between traits or between species. Variance ratio tests were performed using degrees of freedom calculated according to Palmer (1994). For heuristic purposes, we present the mean absolute values of FA or relative FA to illustrate the observed differences between samples, in addition to the measurement error-corrected variances in FA obtained from the mixed-model ANOVAs (measures FA1, FA2, and FA10 respectively; see Palmer, 1994). Means are presented ±1 SE.

**RESULTS**

**Horn morphology**

Variation in horn size differed between the two species examined. There was sigmoidal variation in horn height with increasing pronotum width in *O. taurus* (Figure 2) and continuous variation in horn height with increasing pronotum width in *B. bison* (Figure 3). These different relations suggest that male *O. taurus* are dimorphic for horn morphology; whereas *B. bison* exhibit continuous growth. The existence of male dimorphisms was tested statistically using the models outlined by Eberhard and Gutierrez (1991).

First, the relationship between pronotum width and horn height in male *O. taurus* and horn height and pronotal horn height in *B. bison* were examined to assess nonlinearity across
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Scanning micrographs showing the horn structures of (A) Bubas bison and (B) Onthropagrus taurus.

by hand as they attempted to bury into the underlying soil or move back through the pad. Beetles that escaped down their burrows were unearthed and also collected. For each species, animals were sampled from the same local population and on the same day.

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RESULTS

Horn morphology

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First, the relationship between pronotum width and horn height in male O. taurus and horn height and pronotal horn height in B. bison were examined to assess nonlinearity across
males. Nonlinearity is expected if there is a critical body size after which beetles switch to producing a major body plan (Eberhard and Gutierrez, 1991; Emlen, 1994; Otte and Stayman, 1979). A partial regression of log. (pronotum width) and [log. (pronotum width)] on log. (horn height) generates two partial regression coefficients ($\alpha_1$ and $\alpha_2$), where an $\alpha_2$ that differs significantly from zero confirms nonlinearity and the possible existence of a switch point (Eberhard and Gutierrez, 1991; Emlen and Wrege, 1992). The data for both *O. taurus* (horn height: $\alpha_2 = 32.89 \pm 14.82, \alpha_2 = 2.356, df = 147, p = .021$; Figure 2) and *B. bison* (horn height: $\alpha_2 = -12.86 \pm 2.55, \alpha_2 = 5.082, df = 92, p < .001$; pronotum width: $\alpha_2 = -12.58 \pm 2.55, \alpha_2 = 4.857, df = 92, p < .001$; Figure 3) showed significant deviations from linearity. Therefore, the data from both species was examined for the presence of a switch point, a pronotum width at which beetles switched from producing minor horns to major horns. This was accomplished by extending the partial regression equation to $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 (X - X^*) D + \beta_3 D + \epsilon$, where $Y$ = horn height, $X$ = pronotum width, $X^*$ is the proposed switch point where $D = 0$ if $X < X^*$, otherwise $D = 1$, $\beta_1$ are the regression coefficients, and $\epsilon$ is the random component with assumed normal distribution, mean zero, and a common variance (Eberhard and Gutierrez, 1991). To determine which switch point gave the best fit, 10 different hypothetical switch points were tested, ranging from 2.72 to 2.85 mm in *O. taurus* and from 5.4 to 6.2 mm in *B. bison*. These produced a range of adjusted $\hat{\alpha}$ values (*O. taurus*: .595–.642; *B. bison*: .58–.72) from which the pronotum width corresponding to the maximum $\hat{\alpha}$ value was taken as the most likely switch point. The highest adjusted $\hat{\alpha}$ occurred at a pronotum width of 2.783 mm in *O. taurus*, and ranged between 5.863 and 5.923 mm in *B. bison*. In *B. bison* the middle value of the adjusted $\hat{\alpha}$ range (5.895 mm) was used in subsequent tests for dimorphism.

Using the best switch point values for both *O. taurus* and *B. bison*, we tested the data to determine if the variation in horn size was continuous or discontinuous at the hypothetical switch point (null hypothesis: $\beta_3 = 0$) (Eberhard and Gutierrez, 1991). $\beta_3$ was found to be significantly $> 0$ in *O. taurus* (horn height: $\beta_3 = 0.94 \pm 2.54, \alpha_2 = 2.556, df = 147, p = 0.012$), demonstrating a discontinuity between male morphs at the switch point. $\beta_3$ in both horn height and pronotal horn height of *B. bison* did not differ significantly from zero (horn height: $0.07 \pm 0.05, \alpha_2 = 1.133, df = 92, p = 0.26$; pronotal horn height: $-0.08 \pm 0.09, \alpha_2 = 0.668, df = 92, p = 0.39$), which suggests that variation in these male traits were continuous rather than discontinuous.

Testing the change of linear slope of horn height versus pronotum width at the switch point confirms the existence of a significant switch point in *O. taurus* (null hypothesis: $\beta_3 = 0$; $\beta_3 = 5.24 \pm 0.90, \alpha_2 = 5.838, df = 147, p < 0.001$). As a result, *O. taurus* can be separated into two discrete male morphs, with males having a pronotum width $\geq 2.783$ mm being classed as major morphs and males with a pronotum width $< 2.783$ mm being classed as minor morphs. All subsequent analyses are based on these classifications. In contrast, *B. bison* males did not show two discrete male morphs but instead demonstrated a nonlinear, continuous relation between horn and body size.
and two right measures) and log transformed the product. The effectiveness of this scaling was confirmed by assessing the significance of the variance contribution due to individuals over the individual-by-side variance from mixed-model ANOVAs (Palmer and Strobeck, 1986). Although there was no relation between elytra length and FA in either morph (Table 2), for consistency we used the same scaling procedure throughout. Relative horn FA was greater in major males than in minor males (F_{ma,5} = 37.17, p < .001); the relative FA in elytra did not differ between morphs (F_{ma,5} = 1.13, p = .434).

We used the same scaling procedure for our between-trait comparisons. Relative FA was consistently greater in the horns of males than in their corresponding nonsexual traits (O. taurus majors F_{ma,9} = 355.09, p < .001; minors F_{ma,10} = 8.00, p < .001; male B. bison F_{ma,9} = 291.55, p < .001). The horns of male B. bison had greater relative FA than the homologous trait in females (F_{ma,10} = 552.99, p < .001). Moreover, the horns of females were no more asymmetrical than their hind tibia (F_{ma,10} = 1.56, p = .259; Table 2). The critical Bonferroni probability for the five variance ratio calculations performed using data for O. taurus (p_{ma} = .01) and three variance ratio calculations performed using data for B. bison (p_{ma} = .017) were greater than the individually significant probabilities in all cases.

**DISCUSSION**

The data presented here for O. taurus and B. bison are in agreement with the notion that sexually selected characters demonstrate higher levels of FA than do nonsexual traits (Manning and Chamberlain, 1995; Mailer, 1992; Mailer and Eriksson, 1994; Mailer; Mailer and Hoglund, 1991; but see Tomkins and Simmons, 1995). Mailer (1992) found similar patterns in his comparative study of beetle horns, where the levels of relative FA in horns were nearly six times as large as in nonsexual elytra. Mailer's (1992) analysis did not distinguish between measurement error and FA. Björklund and Merilä (1997) suggest that the estimates of FA in Mailer and Hoglund’s (1991) study of avian feather ornaments may be inflated by an average of 525%, so the differences observed between sexual and nonsexual traits may simply reflect the fact that sexual traits are harder to measure. However, after removing variance due to measurement error from our analysis, we still found that the levels of FA in beetle horns were considerably higher than in elytra. Disparate levels of FA in morphological traits have been proposed to reflect the different nature of selection operating upon them (Mailer, 1993a). Natural selection against FA in mechanically functional traits, such as elytra or legs, is expected to favor the action of genetic modifiers that canalize developmental processes and reduce phenotypic variance (Soulé, 1982; Soulé and Couzin-Roudy, 1982). Conversely, because secondary sexual traits are typically subject to strong directional selection, which disproportionately favors individuals with greater than average values, selection is expected to oppose genetic modifiers that canalize development, thereby increasing phenotypic variance and hence levels of FA (Mailer, 1993a).

Mailer (1992) concluded that beetle horns were an honest signal of male competitive ability because those individuals with large horns were also able to produce more symmetrical horns. In general, a negative relation between trait size and symmetry has been predicted for traits that honestly signal individual quality (Mailer, 1992; Mailer and Hoglund, 1991). However, our data provide no evidence for the honest signaling hypothesis within the species of horned beetles that we studied. In contrast to Mailer's (1992) comparative study, we found that for O. taurus there was a strong positive relation between horn size and FA for both major and minor morphs.

**Figure 3**

Relation between male body size and (a) paired head horn size and (b) pronotal horn size in Bubas bison.

**Patterns of FA**

Spearman rank correlations revealed a significant positive relation between absolute FA and horn size within both morphs of male O. taurus (Table 2). Similarly, a significant positive relation between FA and paired horn size was observed in female B. bison (Table 2). No significant relations between absolute FA and trait size were demonstrated in any of the other morphological traits examined (Table 2). The above analyses do not partition measurement error from FA variance. Mixed-model ANOVAs can be used to partition FA variance when comparing populations, but this method cannot provide measures of FA for among individual analyses (Mailer and Swaddle, 1997). Nevertheless, given significant repeatability of the signed FA measures (Table 1) and the calculation of mean values of absolute FA from repeated measures of all individuals, our analyses should provide reasonable approximations to the true relationships (see below).

We can control for measurement error in comparisons between samples. After partitioning measurement error variance, horn FA was greater in major male O. taurus than in minor males (F_{ma,6} = 8.54, p = .008; Table 2). This is consistent with our among-individual analysis, where FA increased with horn size. To control for allometric scaling of FA with horn size, we divided each of the left and right horn measures by the overall mean horn size (i.e., the mean of our two left
Thus, measures of absolute FA for small traits will be inflated by measurement error to a greater degree than those of large traits, so that a negative relationship between absolute FA and trait size may reflect size-dependent measurement error. Our observation of positive relationships between absolute FA and horn size in *O. taurus* are thus likely to be conservative because our estimates of absolute FA in small horns will be inflated by measurement error to a greater extent than our estimates of absolute FA in large horns. To our knowledge, no other studies have accurately assessed the effects of measurement error when examining patterns of FA with trait size.

In conclusion, although the patterns of FA observed in the sexual and nonsexual traits of *O. taurus* and *B. bison* are in general agreement with the predictions that naturally selected traits are typically more highly canalized during development, the patterns of FA in beetle horns are inconsistent with the honest signaling hypothesis (Moller, 1992, 1993a; Moller and Pomiankowski, 1993). Recent studies show that negative relations between trait size and FA can characterize bilaterally paired traits when asymmetry is not subject to sexual selection (Polak, 1997; Veiga et al., 1997). Conversely, traits that are both indicative of male quality and subject to sexual selection may not show the predicted negative relations (Kimball et al., 1997; Markow et al., 1996). Rowe et al. (1997) have shown that most studies supporting the notion that negative size-dependent asymmetry reflects individual quality in fact represent cases of antisymmetry rather than FA. Moreover, they note that, unlike antisymmetry, FA is unlikely to be a reliable signal because asymmetrical individuals will be common in classes of individuals in poor condition. The resolution of conflicting evidence clearly lies in a better understanding of the development and nature of the observed asymmetries in secondary sexual traits and a more accurate partitioning of measurement error from FA data.

We thank Dale Roberts and Mike Johnson for comments on an earlier version of the manuscript and Tom Stewart for Figure 1. Mats Björklund provided a critical review that greatly improved the manuscript, and we are especially grateful to Richard Palmer for statistical advice. L.W.S. was funded by a Senior Research Fellowship from the Australian Research Council.
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