Comparison of vaccination protocols against

Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae during the gilt acclimation period

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29   **Keywords**

30   *Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae*; gilt acclimation; vaccination protocol; piglet colonization

31   **Abstract**

32   This study evaluated different gilt vaccination protocols against *Mycoplasma (M.)*

33   *hyopneumoniae* at acclimation and their effect on the genetic diversity. A total of 180 *M.*

34   *hyopneumoniae* naïve gilts were selected 1 week post-entry (wpe) at the acclimation barn

35   in a clinically affected *M. hyopneumoniae* farm. Gilts were distributed according to the

36   *M. hyopneumoniae* antibodies levels into three different vaccination schedules: A) four

37   doses of a *M. hyopneumoniae* commercial vaccine at 2, 4, 6 and 8 wpe; B) two vaccine

38   doses at 2 and 6 wpe and PBS at 4 and 8 wpe; and C) four PBS doses at the same wpe.

39   Detection of *M. hyopneumoniae* (rt-PCR) and antibodies (ELISA) were assessed in gilts

40   at 1, 14, 27 and 34 wpe and in 6 of their piglets at weaning. rt-PCR positive gilts were

41   detected at 14 wpe, being the proportion significantly lower in groups A and B (3/120,

42   3%) than C (27/60, 45%). Seroconversion was detected at 14 wpe, showing significant

43   differences in percentage of inhibition (PI) between groups A (median 4.9, range 3.1-

44   19.9) and B (5.5, 3.7-13.5), and C (14.3, 3.3-53.2). Gilts remained seropositive over the

45   study; significant differences in PI were detected between groups A and B versus C.

46   Piglets were rt-PCR negative; proportion of seropositive piglets coming from vaccinated

47   gilts was significantly higher than the non-vaccinated group. *M. hyopneumoniae*

48   characterization showed high variability. Hence, gilt vaccination with 2 or 4 doses

49   significantly decreased the pathogen infectious pressure, variability, and provided high

50   antibody levels to gilts and their offspring.

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1. Introduction

Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae (M. hyopneumoniae) is the primary agent of enzootic pneumonia (EP), a chronic respiratory disease that affects mainly growing and finishing pigs. This disease is an important concern to the swine industry due to economic losses generated by a reduction of performance and growth, as well as antimicrobial treatments and control/eradication costs (Thacker and Minion, 2012).

Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae is transmitted by direct contact between infected and susceptible animals (Maes et al., 1996). Since intrauterine infection has not been described, piglets are considered *M. hyopneumoniae*-free at birth. Hence, the first exposure to *M. hyopneumoniae* would occur during the lactation period when piglets are in contact with a shedding dam (Sibila et al., 2007). Taking into account that piglet colonization at weaning has been correlated with *M. hyopneumoniae* prevalence and severity of lung lesions in growing-finishing pigs (Fano et al., 2007; Sibila et al., 2007), a reduction of transmission between dams and offspring during the lactation period, together with the piglet vaccination, seem to be a key point for disease control. Additionally, bacterial shedding of gilts and young sows seems to be higher than that of older parity sows (Boonsoongnern et al., 2012). Thus, an adequate gilt acclimation focused on decreasing the bacterial shedding at first farrowing should aid in reducing piglet colonization at weaning age (Pieters and Fano, 2016).

Information on gilt acclimation practices is limited. In Europe, a previous study based on a survey identified the vaccination against *M. hyopneumoniae* as the acclimation strategy most used by the participants (Garza-Moreno et al., 2017). Likewise, *M. hyopneumoniae* gilt vaccination has been described as the most common practice in US (Fano and Payne, 2015). Recently, a review compared the acclimation practices carried

76   out in Europe and America (Mexico and USA), being vaccination the main strategy used

77   as well (Garza-Moreno et al., 2018).

78   Gilt vaccination schedules against *M. hyopneumoniae* can be variable among farms in

79   terms of number of administered vaccine doses and application timings. Thus, gilt

80   vaccination protocols based on multiple doses are becoming commonly used in some

81   parts of the world (Alfonso et al., 2004; Yeske et al., 2007; Garza-Moreno et al., 2018).

82   Nevertheless, no information regarding the efficacy of multiple gilt vaccination during

83   the acclimation period is available in the literature. Therefore, this study aimed to

84   compare different gilt vaccination schedules on the *M. hyopneumoniae* gilt

85   seroconversion and shedding at different times post-vaccination, as well as piglet

86   antibody detection and colonization at weaning. Moreover, this study also investigated

87   the potential effect of vaccination on the genetic diversity of *M. hyopneumoniae* within

88   the studied farm.

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90   **2.   Material and methods**

91   *2.1. Farm management and housing conditions*

92   A conventional *M. hyopneumoniae* positive, clinically affected (Garza-Moreno et al.,

93   2018) farrow-to-finish farm introducing external negative and own positive replacement

94   gilts was selected. The selected farm had a gilt development unit (GDU) for acclimation

95   with a duration approximately of 10 weeks, which followed all-in/all-out management

96   practices. After acclimation, external and own replacement gilt batches were moved to

97   oestrus detection and synchronization unit (DSU) and were allocated sharing pens (60

98   gilts per pen). At the DSU, gilt oestrus was synchronized and gilts were divided in

99   weekly batches of 90 gilts according to oestrus detection time. Gilts were artificially

100 inseminated at the second oestrus and pregnancy diagnosis was performed 4 weeks after

101 insemination. Once pregnancy was confirmed, pregnant gilts were moved to the gestation

102 unit and housed in pens (60 gilts/pen). Finally, one week previous to delivery, gilts were

103 moved to the farrowing units. In these facilites, with continuous flow and weekly batch

104 management, a total of 50 gilts and sows of different parities were housed.

105 2.2. *M. hyopneumoniae infectious status previous to the start of the study*

106 To confirm *M. hyopneumoniae* gilt infection during acclimation, laryngeal swabs (LS)

107 from a total of 20 gilts (10 gilts/batch) showing clinical signs of dry coughing from two

108 previous batches of own replacement (FS1 and FS2) were collected at 14 weeks post-

109 entry (wpe) in the GDU. In these samplings, 19 out of 20 (95%) gilts were *M.*

110 *hyopneumoniae* positive by real-time PCR (rt-PCR), being 10 out of 10 (100%) positive

111 gilts in FS1 and 9 out of 10 (90%) in FS2. The Ct values varied from 30.7 to 36.9 in FS1

112 and from 27.5 to 36.9 in FS2.

113 2.3. *Animal selection and study design*

114 Blood samples (BS) and LS from a total of 180 six month-old gilts coming from an

115 external *M. hyopneumoniae* negative farm were collected at 1 wpe at the GDU (Figure 1).

116 Laryngeal swabs and BS were tested for detection of the pathogen and the antibodies

117 against it, respectively. Afterwards, gilts were randomly divided into three groups (A:

118 four vaccine doses; B: two vaccine doses and C: no vaccinated) balanced according to *M.*

119 *hyopneumoniae* antibodies measured by ELISA percentage of inhibition (PI). Animals

120 received intramuscularly 2 mL per dose of a *M. hyopneumoniae* commercial vaccine

121 (Hyogen[®], CEVA Santé Animale, Libourne, Cedex, France), indicated for pigs from 3

122 weeks onwards, and/or 2 mL of phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) according to their

123 experimental group and time points (Table 1).

124   Gilts included in this study entered at the DSU splitted into two batches (n=90

125 each batch) separated by one week. Piglets were ear tagged at birth according to their

126 maternal treatment and cross-fostering was allowed only between sows within the same

127 treatment. One day prior to weaning, six randomly selected piglets per sow were

128 monitored and sampled. No antimicrobials against *M. hyopneumoniae* were administrated

129 to gilts and piglets under study.

130   Study procedures were approved by the Animal Experimentation Ethics

131 Committee of the Generalitat de Catalunya (*Departament de Territori i Sostenibilitat,*

132 *Direcció General de Polítiques Ambientals i Medi Natural*; Reference 9336).

133 *2.4. Sample collection and processing*

134 Blood samples and LS were collected from gilts at 1, 14, 27 and 34 wpe, and from 6

135 piglets of each of them at weaning (Figure 1). Once in the laboratory, blood was

136 centrifuged at 1500 *g* for 10 min at 4ºC and sera was aliquoted and stored at -20ºC until

137 used. Laryngeal swabs were re-suspended in 1 mL of PBS, vortexed, and stored at -20ºC

138 until DNA extraction was performed.

139 *2.5. Detection of M. hyopneumoniae-specific antibodies in serum*

140 Sera were tested in duplicate for the presence of antibodies against *M. hyopneumoniae* by

141 means of a commercial competitive ELISA (IDEIA™ *M. hyopneumoniae*, EIA kit,

142 Oxoid, Thermo Fisher Scientific, UK). ELISA results were expressed as percentage of

143 inhibition (PI). The PI was calculated considering the mean optical density (OD) of each

144 sample and the buffer control following the formula: % PI = 100*(mean sample OD/

145 mean buffer control OD). Samples with PI < 50% were considered to be positive,

146 whereas doubtful (PI from 50 to 64%) and negative samples (PI≥65%) were classified as

147 negative. PI median and ranges of tested samples were calculated.

148 *2.6. DNA extraction and M. hyopneumoniae detection by real time PCR*

149 DNA was extracted from 200 μL of LS suspension using MagMax™ DNA Multi-Sample

150 Kit (Life Technologies, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions, on the

151   BioSprint 96 workstation (Qiagen GmbH, Germany). Two different positive extraction

152   controls were used in each extraction: a LS spiked with *M. hyopneumoniae strain* 11

153   (ATCC®25095™) and a commercial internal positive control (Xeno™, included in

154   VetMax™-Plus qPCR Master Mix kit). Negative controls (PBS) were also included to

155   assess potential contamination during extraction.

156   Extracted DNA was tested by a commercial real time PCR (rt-PCR) for *M.*

157   *hyopneumoniae* detection: VetMax™-Plus qPCR Master Mix (Life Technologies, USA)

158   and VetMax™ *M. hyopneumoniae* Reagents (Life Technologies, USA), according to the

159   manufacturer's instructions. Rt-PCR runs were carried out in ABI PRISM® 7500

160   machine (Applied Biosystems, Singapore). The rt-PCR threshold was set at 10% of the

161   maximum fluorescence value of the commercial DNA positive control. Samples with

162   cycle threshold (Ct) values equal or lower than 40 were considered positive. Ct ranges

163   were calculated considering only rt-PCR positive samples.

164   *2.7. M. hyopneumoniae genetic variability*

165   Positive rt-PCR LS were genotyped by the Sanger sequencing method and the variable

166   number of tandem repeats (VNTR) of three loci (p97, p146 and h1) were counted.

167   Moreover, the reference strain (RF) 11 (ATCC® 25934™) was also included as technique

168   positive control. Primers used were previously described by Vranckx et al., (2011). These

169   three loci were individually amplified in a final volume of 50 μL. Reaction mixtures

170   contained 1X PCR Buffer, 1.5 mM $MgCl_2$, 0.2mM each deoxynucleotide triphosphate, 1

171   μL of each primer, 0.03U/μL U of GoTaq® G2 Flexi DNA Polymerase (Promega,

172   Madison, USA) and, finally, 6μL of extracted DNA dilution (1:10). Cycling conditions

173   were 4 min at 94°C, followed by 35 cycles of 30 s at 94°C, 30 s at 53°C and 30 s at 72°C,

174   then a final extension step of 7 min at 72°C. The typing PCR products were analysed by

175   electrophoresis on 2% agarose gel in Tris-Acetate-EDTA (TAE)-buffer and stained with

176   ethidium bromide. These PCR products were purified by ExoSAP-IT® (Isogen Life

177   Science, The Netherlands) according to manufacturer's instructions and sequenced using

178   a ABI PRISM 3130xl (Applied Biosystems, Singapore) genetic analyser.

179   Nucleotide sequences were aligned and translated to aminoacid sequences using

180   FingerPrinting II Informatix software (Applied Maths, Saint-Martens-Latem, Belgium).

181   VNTR per each locus were counted and a typing variant profile (TP) was assigned

182   according to the combination of the three loci. The TP was considered different when the

183   combination of VNTR per each locus was unique. A minimum spanning tree (MST) was

184   also constructed to visualize the similarity among TP.

185   *2.8. Statistical analyses*

186   Bivariate analysis using the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied for median comparison of PI

187   among gilt groups (A, B, and C) at different sampling points. The homogeneity of PI

188   values in each group through the study was evaluated by F values. The Chi square test

189   was used to evaluate the proportion of positive rt-PCR samples between treatments at

190   different sampling points. When significant results were obtained, *a posteriori* contrast

191   analysis 2 to 2 was performed. *Post hoc* pairwise comparisons were computed using

192   Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference. Additionally, a linear mixed model was used to

193   assess the effect of different gilt vaccination programs on piglet colonization and humoral

194   immunity at weaning, considering sow as a random effect. Statistical analyses were

195   performed with SAS v9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA). The significance level

196   was set to $p < 0.05$.

197

198   **3. Results**

199   *3.1 Detection of antibodies against M. hyopneumoniae in gilts and piglets.*

Studied gilts were seronegative at 1 wpe (Table 2, Figure 2). At 14 wpe all gilts with the exception of one in group C had seroconverted (179/180, 99.4%). By 27 wpe, the number of gilts were reduced from 180 to 152 (52, 49, and 51 gilts in groups A, B and C, respectively) since 28 gilts were culled (due to lack of pregnancy and lameness, mainly). From 146 gilts (49, 47, and 50 gilts in groups A, B and C, respectively) that reached one week prior to farrowing sampling (34 wpe), all vaccinated gilts (groups A and B) remained seropositive, whereas the percentage of non-vaccinated seropositive gilts was slightly lower (44/50, 88.0%). Statistical differences ($p<0.05$) in terms of proportion of seropositive gilts among vaccinated (A and B) and non-vaccinated (C) groups were detected at 27 and 34 wpe.

Mean PI values (±SD) for each group at different sampling time points are detailed in Table 2. The PI values were statistically different ($p<0.05$) between vaccinated (A and B) and non-vaccinated (C) groups at 14, 27 and 34 wpe (Table 2; Figure 2). Statistical differences ($p<0.05$) among all three groups (A, B and C) were detected in terms of PI at 14 wpe, showing differences between four and two vaccine doses. The *F* values showed statistical higher homogeneity of IP values (Figure 2) through this study in vaccinated group A (*F*=1.27) compared to group B (*F*=3.94) and C (*F*=5.49).

A total of 744 piglets (252 from gilts of group A [n=42], 252 from gilts of group B [n=42] and 240 from gilts of group C [n=40]) born to the 124 gilts that reached farrowing were sampled one day prior to weaning. The differences in the proportion of seropositive and PI of piglets from vaccinated and non-vaccinated gilts were statistically significant. Additionally, a higher number of seropositive piglets coming from gilts from group A was detected compared to the ones from group B (Table 2). A total of 229 piglets were seronegative (30.8%), where 23 (10%) of them came from seronegative non-

225   vaccinated sows (group C) and the remaining 206 (22 [9.6%], 52 [22.7%] and 132 [57.7

226   %] from groups A, B and C, respectively) came from seropositive sows (Table 2).

227   *3.2 M. hyopneumoniae detection in LS in gilts and piglets.*

228   *M. hyopneumoniae* positive *s*hedding gilts were detected at 14 and 27 wpe (Table 3). The

229   proportions of rt-PCR positive gilts at 14 wpe in vaccinated groups A (1/60, 1.7%) and B

230   (2/60, 3.3%) were significantly lower ($p<0.05$) compared to the non-vaccinated group C

231   (27/60, 45%). However, no statistical differences were found between vaccinated groups

232   (A and B) with different number of doses. The proportion of rt-PCR positive gilts was

233   reduced at 27 wpe and only one positive gilt (1/51, 2.2%) was detected in the group C.

234   Finally, none of the gilts was positive at 34 wpe for rt-PCR.

235   All LS samples from piglets (n=744) were negative for *M. hyopneumoniae* by rt-

236   PCR.

237   *3.3 Characterization of M. hyopneumoniae genotypes through the study*

238   All rt-PCR positive samples detected into previous batches (FS1=10 and FS2=19), 14

239   wpe (n=1 in group A, n=2 in group B and n=27 in group C) and 27 wpe (n=1 in group C)

240   were used for *M. hyopneumoniae* genetic characterization. From these 50 samples, 43

241   (86.0%) were successfully sequenced by the three selected loci (Table 4). Eleven

242   different genotypes were detected among samples. Five TP were detected in each batch

243   FS1 (n=20) and FS2 (n=19), although two variants (TP4 and TP5) were identified in both

244   batches. Three variants were detected at 14 wpe, being different from those detected in

245   previous batches (Table 4). No TP was able to be characterized from the positive gilt

246   from group A at 14 wpe. A minimum spanning tree was generated to show the genetic

247   variation over time (Figure 3).

248   Regarding VNTR per each locus, the P97 locus showed limited heterogeneity due to

249   the fact that only two VNTR (9 and 11 repeats) were identified (Table 4). The P146 locus

12

250 showed higher variability at FS1 and FS2, ranging from 38 to 47 and from 22 to 47

251 repeats, respectively. The VNTR of P146 at 14 wpe was homologous (20 repeats) in all

252 identified variants. For locus H1, the VNTR varied from 4 to 7 repeats.

253

254 **4. Discussion**

255 One of the key points to control EP within farms is the *M. hyopneumoniae* transmission

256 between the dam and her piglets. Since gilts are considered the main *M. hyopneumoniae*

257 shedders, acclimation strategies focused on reducing the bacterial shedding at first

258 farrowing have been proposed (Pieters and Fano, 2016). Vaccination has been determined

259 as the most used strategy for acclimation as well as elimination, although different

260 number of doses and application timings are being used (Garza-Moreno et al., 2018).

261 However, its effect on gilt shedding, humoral immune response, as well as the maternal

262 derived immunity transfer to piglets was not assessed in any of those studies. The number

263 of vaccine doses and the application timing that has been proposed in the past has been 2

264 doses at 1 and 3 wpe to GDU (Yeske, 2007), or 3 doses at 55 and 220 days of age of gilts,

265 and another last dose 2 weeks prior to farrowing (Alfonso et al., 2004). On the other

266 hand, the effect of sow vaccination against *M. hyopneumoniae* infection at 8 and 4

267 (Grosse Beilage and Schereiber, 2005), or 5 and 3 weeks prior to farrowing (Ruiz et al.,

268 2003; Sibila et al., 2008) has been evaluated. All the three studies agreed that sow

269 vaccination against *M. hyopneumoniae* enhanced levels of antibodies in vaccinated sows

270 as well as in their piglets. In addition, Ruiz *et al.* (2003) and Sibila *et al.* (2008)

271 concluded that sow vaccination could reduce, numerically, the prevalence of piglet

272 colonization, whereas Grosse-Beilage and Schereiber (2005) did not evaluate this

273 parameter. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to evaluate the effect of gilt

274   vaccination against *M. hyopneumoniae* using different vaccination programs during the

275   acclimation period on gilt shedding, and consequently, on piglet's colonization.

276   The current study used vaccination protocols based on multiple doses (four and

277   two) since a number of field studies have hypothesized that a high number of vaccine

278   doses could induce a strong immune response, reduce colonization, and better control the

279   disease (Alfonso et al., 2004; Yeske, 2007). The interval between the first and booster

280   vaccination in the present study was 2 weeks to complete the vaccination protocol within

281   a rather usual timing of acclimation at GDU (Garza-Moreno et al., 2017). In order to

282   minimize the effect of the previous humoral immune status, gilts were distributed into

283   three groups according to ELISA PI values at entry. At 14 wpe, all vaccinated gilts had

284   seroconverted, as expected with commercial vaccines. From the non-vaccinated group, all

285   gilts but one also seroconverted, indicating that *M. hyopneumoniae* natural exposure

286   occurred soon after entry. Significant differences of humoral responses in terms of PI

287   were detected between vaccinated and non-vaccinated groups at all sampling points, as

288   previously described by Kristensen et al. (2004) in sows. Interestingly, all vaccinated gilts

289   remained seropositive during all study duration. On the contrary, the proportion of

290   seropositive gilts in the non-vaccinated group decreased slightly over time (from 98% at

291   1 wpe to 88% in both 27 and 34 wpe). These findings suggest that vaccination may

292   provide a longer duration of humoral immunity compared to that of natural infection.

293   Furthermore, the statistically significant differences found between animals vaccinated

294   with four or two vaccine doses at 14 wpe suggests that repeated vaccination elicited

295   stronger immune response (lower PI). Indeed, PI values from vaccinated gilts with four

296   doses remained statistically more homogeneous (lower *F* values) than those vaccinated

297   with two doses followed by the non-vaccinated group, suggesting that vaccination helped

298   homogenizing the immune status of the studied population.

A significantly higher percentage of seropositive piglets at weaning from gilts vaccinated four or two times was detected compared to those from non-vaccinated gilts. This finding is in agreement with other studies in sows (Kristensen et al., 1981; Grosse Beilage and Schereiber, 2005), fitting with the hypothesis that vaccinated gilts show higher antibody levels against *M. hyopneumoniae* (lower PI) than non-vaccinated gilts in colostrum. Nevertheless, no statistical differences were identified between piglets coming from gilts from groups A and B, suggesting the passive humoral transfer might be fairly independent of 2 or 4 doses applied. Additionally, 206 seronegative piglets were from seropositive sows at 34 wpe. This fact could be explained by a poor colostrum intake (Quesnel, 2011) and/or the decay of *M. hyopneumoniae* maternal antibodies since previous studies reported a median half-live of maternally derived antibodies of 15 days and, therefore, the amount of transferred antibodies was dependent on the dam's serological status (Morris et al., 1995).

M. hyopneumoniae shedding was first detected at 14 wpe, with the proportion of shedding gilts significantly lower in the vaccinated than in non-vaccinated groups. This finding could be associated with the reduction of *M. hyopneumoniae* bacterial load by vaccination, as previously reported by Woolley et al. (2014). Moreover, an absolute reduction of shedding gilts was detected at 27 wpe in vaccinated groups, and only one non-vaccinated gilt was a shedder. *M. hyopneumoniae* was not detected in any studied group at 34 wpe. The fact that all gilts from the non-vaccinated group seroconverted indicates that *M. hyopneumoniae* infection occurred, and this probably took place in a relatively short period of time, since by 27 wpe only one gilt was detected as PCR positive. Taking this into account, gilts from this trial could have been naturally exposed to *M. hyopneumoniae* around 9-12 wpe, shortly after mixing them with the positive own replacement. The peak of shedding might have been reached at 14 wpe (5 weeks after this

324 exposure) and the complete cease of shedding would have occurred between 27 and 34

325 wpe (18-25 weeks after exposure). The duration of gilt shedding in this study seemed to

326 be shorter compared to a previous study that detected shedders up to 200 days post-

327 infection under experimental conditions (Pieters et al., 2009). The difference in the

328 duration of shedding may be explained by the lower *M. hyopneumoniae* load in naturally

329 infected gilts under field conditions compared to experimental conditions, where the

330 bacterial load administered endo-tracheally might be much higher. Moreover, given the

331 limited number of samplings over time of this study, the proposed timings about *M.*

332 *hyopneumoniae* infection dynamics within this breeding herd should be considered as an

333 estimation. Further research is needed to gain insight into infection dynamics of gilts

334 under field conditions.

335 Previous studies have suggested that *M. hyopneumoniae* piglet colonization at

336 weaning is correlated with respiratory disease and lung lesions at fattening stages (Fano

337 et al., 2007; Sibila et al., 2007). However, in the present field study, *M. hyopneumoniae*

338 gilt shedding one week prior to farrowing (34 wpe) was not detected by rt-PCR and all

339 piglets from vaccinated and non-vaccinated gilts were rt-PCR negative. Thus, association

340 between gilt shedding at farrowing and piglet colonization at weaning could not be

341 assessed. Obtained results are in agreement with previous studies with similar *M.*

342 *hyopneumoniae* infection dynamics in which piglets were also negative at weaning

343 (Takeuti et al., 2017a, 2017b).

344 Taking all these results together, the usage of two or four vaccination dose

345 protocols in gilts seemed to be effective strategies for decreasing *M. hyopneumoniae*

346 shedding and infectious pressure within a farm. Furthermore, results using four doses

347 were slightly better (from a numeric point of view) than using two doses regarding

348 ELISA results. Notwithstanding, these differences were only statistically significant in

349 terms of PI at 14 wpe, suggesting that vaccination with these two extra doses is not

350 apparently justified from an infection and seroconversion points of view. Moreover,

351 further studies are needed to compare these two doses with one dose.

352   The intra-farm genetic diversity of *M. hyopneumoniae* has been previously

353 described using different methods and bacterium loci and thus, results are diverse.

354 Several studies described a high intra-farm genetic diversity (Stakenborg., 2006; Nathues

355 et al., 2011; dos Santos et al., 2015; Tamiozzo et al., 2015; Michiels et al., 2017; Takeuti

356 et al., 2017a) whereas others concluded that the variability was limited within the same

357 farm (Stakenborg et al., 2005; Mayor et al., 2007, 2008; Vranckx et al., 2012; Charlebois

358 et al., 2014; Galina-Pantoja L. et al., 2016). Results from the current study showed high

359 *M. hyopneumoniae* variability within the farm. In the previous gilts batches (FS1 and

360 FS2), higher variability was detected compared to monitored gilts at 14 wpe. Despite

361 variants being different, similarity between TP 8 from FS2 and the more prevalent variant

362 at 14 wpe (TP 10) might indicate that TP 10 was the result of mutations for each loci

363 along this study. These findings are in agreement with previous reports that concluded

364 that Mollicutes can exhibit high mutation and recombination rates by modification of

365 environmental conditions (Razin et al., 1998). Furthermore, this similarity also suggests

366 that the source of infection of gilts included in the study at entry was the own

367 replacement (infected already based on data from FS1 and FS2) located in the same

368 GDU. Unfortunately, information about *M. hyopneumoniae* variants harboured by own

369 replacement over time was not assessed in the present study. Finally, analysing the

370 VNTR obtained per locus, results of P97 and P146 loci are in accordance with previously

371 published reports in which Spanish *M. hyopneumoniae* strains showed approximately 20

372 repeats in P97 and more than 30 repeats in P146 (dos Santos et al., 2015). No previous

373 data regarding VNTR for H1 are available.

374   In conclusion, the present study showed that *M. hyopneumoniae* gilt vaccination at

375   acclimation period significantly reduced the *M. hyopneumoniae* shedding of gilts at 14

376   wpe and increased antibody levels (low PI) of dams and their piglets. Since *M.*

377   *hyopneumoniae* shedding in gilts was not detected at 34 wpe, the lack of bacterial piglet

378   colonization was expectable. Despite the fact that *M. hyopneumoniae* vaccination does

379   not provide full protection, the infectious pressure within the gilt population of the

380   studied herd was significantly reduced. Gilt vaccination protocol with four doses showed

381   slightly better numerical results than the protocol with two doses during all study.

382   Therefore, these results suggested that the vaccination with two doses seems to be

383   sufficient to reduce the infectious pressure and to induce strong and humoral immune

384   response in gilts. Based on obtained results, a higher number of vaccine doses does not

385   seem to be justified. Finally, the characterization of *M. hyopneumoniae* strains confirmed

386   high genetic variability of this bacterium within the studied farm.

387

Tables

Table 1. Vaccination schedules against *M. hyopneumoniae* performed during the gilt acclimation period.

Group name	No. of gilts	Vaccine doses	Vaccination schedule			
			2 wpe	4 wpe	6 wpe	8 wpe
A	60	4	Hyogen®	Hyogen®	Hyogen®	Hyogen®
B	60	2	Hyogen®	PBS	Hyogen®	PBS
C	60	0	PBS	PBS	PBS	PBS

wpe: weeks post-entry; PBS: phosphate-buffered saline

Table 2. Proportion (%) of *M. hyopneumoniae* seropositive gilts and piglets and median (range) of percentage of inhibition (PI) at different sampling points.

Groups	1 wpe		14 wpe		27 wpe		Prefarrowing (34 wpe)		Piglets (at weaning)	
	Prop (%)	PI (Range)	Prop (%)	PI (Range)	Prop (%)	PI (Range)	Prop (%)	PI (Range)	Prop (%)	PI (Range)
A	0/60 0%[a]	67.1 (51.2-89.4)[a]	60/60 100%[a]	4.8 (3.1-19.8)[a]	52/52 100%[a]	6.8 (3.4-39.3)[a]	49/49 100%[a]	5.7 (3.6-17.8)[a]	230/252 91%[a]	15.5 (2.1-98.7)[a]
B	0/60 0%[a]	67.1 (50.6-85.5)[a]	60/60 100%[a]	5.5 (3.7-13.5)[b]	49/49 100%[a]	8.07 (2.8-22.4)[a]	47/47 100%[a]	6.2 (4.0-36.6)[a]	200/252 79%[a]	23.9 (2.0-94.3)[a]
C	0/60 0%[a]	66.9 (50.4-85.2)[a]	59/60 98%[a]	14.3 (3.3-53.2)[c]	45/51 88%[b]	31.7 (6.6-82.1)[b]	44/50 88%[b]	28.7 (5.0-61.8)[b]	85/240 35%[b]	27.3 (1.0-99.0)[b]
Total	0/180	-	179/180 (99.4)	-	146/152 (96.1)	-	140/146 (95.9)	-	515/744 (69.2)	-

wpe: week post-entry; *Prop*: Proportion; Range: minimum-maximum; Different superscripts within each column indicate significant differences among groups at different time points ($p<0.05$).

21

Table 3. Proportion (%) of *M. hyopneumoniae* rt-PCR positive gilts and piglets and Ct values at different sampling points of the study.

Groups	Sampling points									
	1 wpe		14 wpe		27 wpe		Prefarrowing (34 wpe)		Piglets (at weaning)	
	Prop (%)	Ct range (Max – Min)	Prop (%)	Ct range (Min– Max)	Prop (%)	Ct range (Max – Min)	Prop (%)	Ct range (Max – Min)	Prop (%)	Ct range (Max – Min)
A	0/60 0%[a]	NA	1/60 2%[a]	38.8-38.8 [a]	0/52 0%[a]	NA	0/49 0%[a]	NA	0/252 0%[a]	NA
B	0/60 0%[a]	NA	2/60 3%[a]	32.2-37.8[a]	0/49 0%[a]	NA	0/47 0%[a]	NA	0/252 0%[a]	NA
C	0/60 0% [a]	NA	27/60 45%[b]	29-1-38.7 [a]	1/51 2%[a]	37.5-37.5	0/50 0%[a]	NA	0/240 0%[a]	NA

wpe: week post-entry; *Prop*: Proportion; *Na:* Non-applicable; Different superscript within each column indicate significant differences among groups ($p<0.05$). Ct range has been calculated considering only rt-PCR positive animals.

Table 4. Variable number of tandem repeat (VNTR) profiles and typing profile (TP) in *M. hyopneumoniae* positive gilts using three loci.

| Sampling point	Number of gilts carrying the variant (%)	VNTR			TP	Group	
		P97	**P146**	**H1**		**Treatment**	**n**
FS1	1 (2.3)	11	38	6	1	NA	10
	1 (2.3)	11	42	6	2		
	2 (4.5)	11	45	6	3		
	5 (11.3)	11	46	6	4		
	1 (2.3)	11	47	6	5		
FS2	1 (2.3)	11	22	4	6	NA	9
	1 (2.3)	11	43	6	7		
	5 (11.3)	11	46	6	4		
	1 (2.3)	11	47	6	5		
	1 (2.3)	9	22	6	8		
14 wpe	1 (2.3)	9	20	4	9	C	1
	19 (43.2)	9	20	6	10	B	2
						C	17
	4 (9.0)	9	20	7	11	C	4
RF	1 (2.3)	14	21	10	RF	NA	1
Total	**44 (100.0)**	**NA**	**NA**	**NA**	**12**	**NA**	**44**

TP: Typing profile assigned*; wpe*: week post-entry; RF: Reference strain; *NA:* Non-applicable.
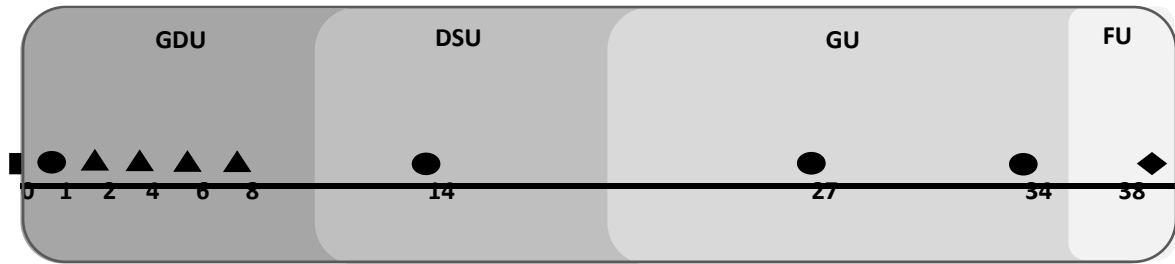
Figure 1. Study design, housing location and sampling points of gilts and piglets included in the study. Housing sites are gilt development unit (GDU), detection and synchronization unit (DSU), gestation unit (GU) and farrowing unit (FU). Shapes represent gilt vaccination (▲) and sampling points of gilts (●) at different weeks post-entry (wpe) into GDU indicated by numbers. Additionally, piglets (◆) were sampled at weaning (equivalent to 38 wpe of gilts).

1
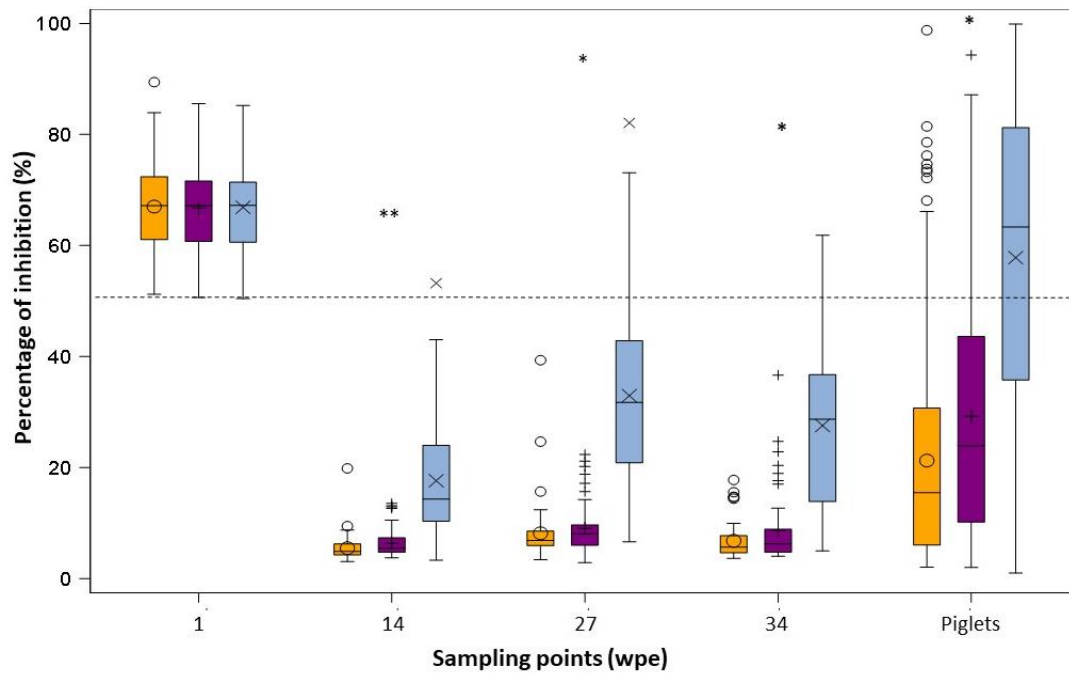
Figure 2. Percentages of inhibition (%) of gilts from groups A (■), B (■) and C (■) at 1, 14, 27
and 34 wpe; and from their piglets at weaning. Statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) were
observed between vaccinated (A and B) and non-vaccinated groups (C) (*) as well as among all
three groups (**). The discontinuous line represents ELISA seropositivity threshold.

6
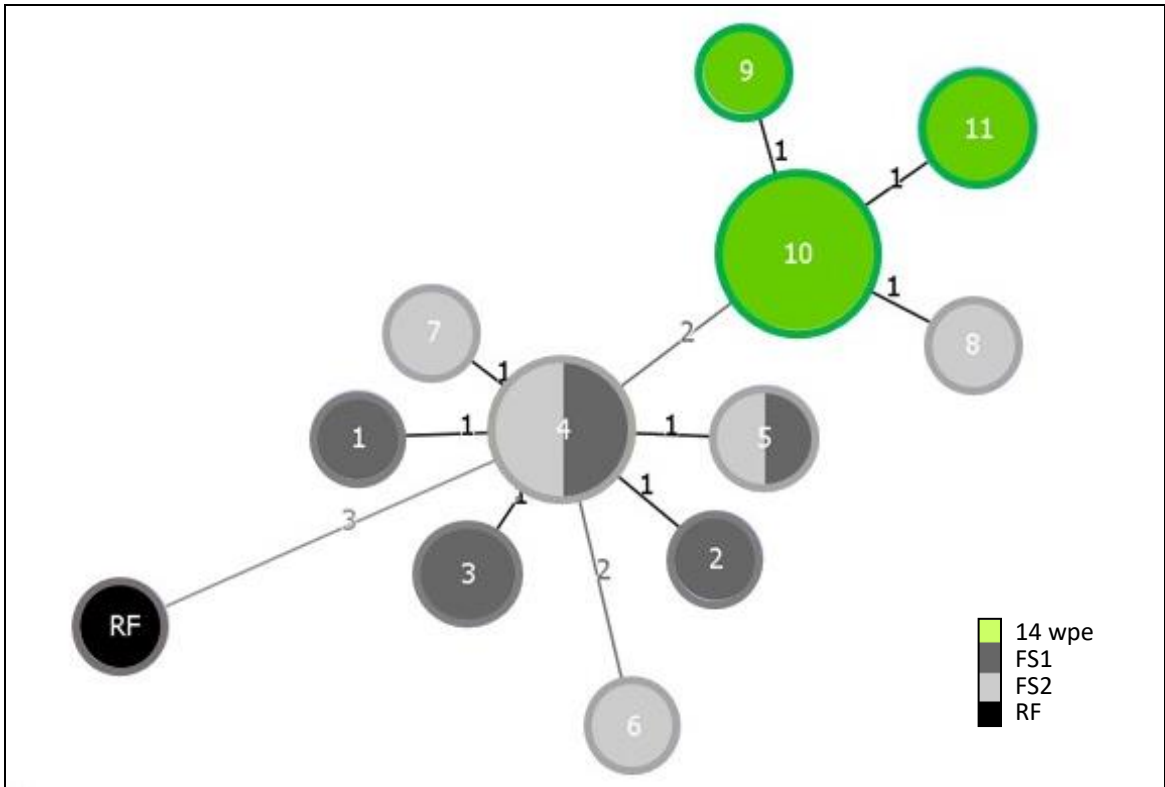
Figure 3. Minimum spanning tree showing different *M. hyopneumoniae* variant profiles detected. RF: Reference strain 11 used as technique control. Each circle represents a variant profile. The size of the circle is proportional with the number of samples belonging to each variant profile. Absolute distances among variant profiles are represented by link label.

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