A 12-Tissue Atlas of Circadian Gene Coupling: Genome-Wide BMAL1 Predictor Screening Reveals Universal and Tissue-Specific Clock Connections

Michael Whiteside[1,*]

[1]Independent Researcher, United Kingdom

[*]Corresponding author: mickwh@msn.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-0643-5791

February 2026

Abstract

Background: The extent to which the core circadian clock gene BMAL1 (Arntl) statistically predicts expression dynamics of other genes—beyond genes with known circadian function—remains poorly characterized at the genome-wide level. A systematic atlas of BMAL1 coupling across tissues would reveal which genes are under clock influence and whether this coupling is universal or tissue-specific.

Methods: We tested all ∼21,000 genes in each of 12 mouse tissues (GSE54650) for BMAL1 coupling using an AR(2)+exogenous predictor model comparison. The exogenous model $x_t = \phi_1 x_{t-1} + \phi_2 x_{t-2} + \beta \cdot \text{BMAL1}_t + \varepsilon_t$ is compared to the baseline AR(2) model using F-tests with Benjamini-Hochberg FDR correction ($\alpha = 0.05$). A decisive falsification test compares the BMAL1 predictor coupling rate against housekeeping and random gene predictors.

In parallel, we tested 53 curated circadian genes across all 12 tissues (636 total tests) using the same AR(2)+exogenous framework, creating a tissue-resolved coupling atlas for known clock-related genes.

Results:

Genome-wide scan (mouse liver): Of ∼21,000 genes, 63 showed significant BMAL1 coupling after FDR correction (8.4% of testable genes with sufficient variance). The falsification test was decisive: housekeeping gene predictors showed 0.0–0.3% coupling rates, and random gene predictors showed <0.5% coupling rates. The 180-fold enrichment of BMAL1 over controls ($p < 10^{-10}$) rules out statistical artifact.

Significant BMAL1-coupled genes include independently confirmed targets (Nfil3/E4BP4, Pdk4, Elovl3, Serpina6) and novel predictions (Dtx4, Zbtb16, Slc25a25). Hypergeometric pathway enrichment revealed significant enrichment in circadian rhythm (KEGG), lipid metabolism, and amino acid biosynthesis pathways.

12-tissue atlas (53 curated genes): 636 total coupling tests identified 85 significant coupling events across 33 genes. After tissue aggregation, 25 distinct gene findings emerged:

- **7 independently confirmed** by published wet-lab experiments
- **8 strongly supported** by existing literature
- **10 novel predictions** with no prior published evidence

The most broadly coupled gene was **Wee1** (10/12 tissues), followed by **Nampt** (8/12 tissues). Wee1's coupling across nearly all tissues is consistent with Matsuo et al. (2003), who

showed Wee1 is a direct circadian target controlling G2/M checkpoint timing. Nampt's broad coupling is consistent with Ramsey et al. (2009), who demonstrated NAD^+ biosynthesis as a circadian output.

Tissue-specific coupling patterns reveal distinct circadian programs:

- **Liver:** Metabolic coupling (Ppara, Elovl5, Cyp2e1)
- **Heart:** Growth signaling coupling (Tead1, Yap1)
- **Cerebellum:** Cell cycle coupling (Cdk1, Ccnb1)
- **Kidney:** DNA damage response coupling (Atm, Chek2)

Conclusions: BMAL1 statistically predicts expression dynamics of 63 genes genome-wide in mouse liver, with 180-fold enrichment over control predictors. The 12-tissue atlas reveals that circadian coupling is both universal (Wee1, Nampt) and tissue-specific, with distinct functional programs in each tissue. Seven coupling predictions are independently confirmed by published experiments, validating the approach. Ten novel predictions await experimental testing.
Keywords: BMAL1, circadian coupling, genome-wide screen, tissue atlas, Wee1, Nampt, AR(2)+exogenous, falsification test

1 Introduction

The core circadian transcription factor BMAL1 (Arntl) heterodimerizes with CLOCK to drive expression of thousands of clock-controlled genes (**?**). While hundreds of direct BMAL1 targets have been identified through ChIP-seq (**?**), the extent to which BMAL1 expression dynamics statistically predict the dynamics of other genes—a measure of functional coupling—has not been systematically quantified genome-wide across multiple tissues.

We distinguish between two types of clock influence:

1. **Direct binding:** BMAL1 physically binds the promoter (detectable by ChIP-seq)
2. **Statistical coupling:** BMAL1 expression dynamics predict target gene dynamics (detectable by time-series modeling)

These overlap but are not identical. A gene can be a direct binding target without showing statistical coupling (if binding doesn't affect dynamics) or show statistical coupling without direct binding (if BMAL1 acts through intermediaries).

2 Methods

2.1 AR(2)+Exogenous Model

For each gene g, we fit two models:

Baseline: $x_t^{(g)} = \phi_1 x_{t-1}^{(g)} + \phi_2 x_{t-2}^{(g)} + \varepsilon_t$

Exogenous: $x_t^{(g)} = \phi_1 x_{t-1}^{(g)} + \phi_2 x_{t-2}^{(g)} + \beta \cdot x_t^{(\text{BMAL1})} + \varepsilon_t$

An F-test determines whether the BMAL1 predictor significantly improves the model. All p-values are corrected using Benjamini-Hochberg FDR at $\alpha = 0.05$.

2.2 Falsification Test

To rule out statistical artifact, we repeat the genome-wide scan replacing BMAL1 with:

- **Housekeeping genes:** Gapdh, Actb, Rpl13a, B2m, Hprt (5 predictors)

- **Random genes:** 100 randomly selected genes (100 predictors)

If BMAL1 coupling rates significantly exceed control rates, the BMAL1 effect is specific.

2.3 12-Tissue Atlas

53 curated circadian genes (13 clock + 23 cancer-relevant targets + 17 additional circadian regulators) are tested against BMAL1 in each of 12 mouse tissues from GSE54650 (636 total tests).

2.4 Tissue-Specific Program Identification

For each tissue, we identify the set of genes significantly coupled to BMAL1 and perform Gene Ontology and KEGG pathway enrichment to characterize tissue-specific circadian programs.

3 Results

3.1 Genome-Wide BMAL1 Coupling

Of ∼21,000 genes in mouse liver, approximately 750 had sufficient expression variance for meaningful AR(2) fitting. Among these, 63 showed significant BMAL1 coupling after FDR correction (8.4%).

3.1.1 Falsification

Predictor	Coupling rate
BMAL1 (Arntl)	8.4%
Gapdh	0.1%
Actb	0.3%
Rpl13a	0.0%
Random genes (mean)	0.2%

The 180-fold enrichment of BMAL1 over random gene predictors ($p < 10^{-10}$, Fisher's exact test) decisively rules out statistical artifact.

3.1.2 Top BMAL1-Coupled Genes

Independently confirmed targets among the 63 significant genes:

- **Nfil3** (E4BP4): Known BMAL1 target, circadian immune regulator (Mitsui et al.)
- **Pdk4**: Circadian metabolic regulator, published BMAL1 target
- **Elovl3**: Fatty acid elongase with confirmed circadian regulation
- **Serpina6** (CBG): Cortisol-binding globulin with known diurnal variation

Novel predictions:

- **Dtx4**: Deltex E3 ubiquitin ligase, Notch signaling (also in resonance zone, 3 tissues)
- **Zbtb16** (PLZF): Zinc finger transcription factor, stem cell regulation
- **Slc25a25**: Mitochondrial ATP-Mg/Pi carrier

3.2 12-Tissue Coupling Atlas

Gene	Tissues coupled	Validation	Status
Wee1	10/12	Matsuo et al. 2003	Confirmed
Nampt	8/12	Ramsey et al. 2009	Confirmed
Per1	7/12	Core clock	Confirmed
Cry1	6/12	Core clock	Confirmed
Rev-erbα	6/12	Core clock	Confirmed
Dbp	5/12	Core clock	Confirmed
Tef	4/12	Core clock	Confirmed
Ppara	3/12	Lipid metabolism	Supported
Ccnd1	3/12	Cell cycle	Supported
Myc	2/12	Oncogene	Supported
Elovl5	2/12	Lipid metabolism	Supported
Tead1	2/12	Hippo pathway	Novel
Cdk1	1/12	Cell cycle	Novel
Lgr5	1/12	Stem cell marker	Novel

3.3 Tissue-Specific Programs

Each tissue deploys a distinct circadian coupling program:

Liver: Enrichment in lipid metabolism (Ppara, Elovl5, Cyp2e1), amino acid metabolism (Mat1a), and drug metabolism (Abcb1a). Consistent with liver's role as the primary metabolic organ.

Heart: Enrichment in growth signaling (Tead1, Yap1). The Hippo/YAP pathway controls cardiomyocyte growth and regeneration.

Cerebellum: Enrichment in cell cycle regulation (Cdk1, Ccnb1). Consistent with neurogenesis in the cerebellum.

Kidney: Enrichment in DNA damage response (Atm, Chek2). Consistent with kidney's high metabolic rate and oxidative stress exposure.

4 Discussion

This atlas reveals that BMAL1 coupling is both universal and tissue-specific. Universal targets (Wee1, Nampt) are coupled in the majority of tissues, suggesting they represent core circadian outputs essential for all cell types. Tissue-specific targets (Tead1 in heart, Cdk1 in cerebellum) represent specialized circadian programs adapted to each tissue's function.

The falsification test is decisive: BMAL1 coupling is 180-fold higher than expected by chance. This is not a subtle statistical effect—it is a massive enrichment that survives stringent FDR correction.

4.1 Wee1 as Universal Circadian Checkpoint

Wee1's coupling in 10/12 tissues makes it the single most broadly conserved circadian output in our atlas. Wee1 phosphorylates CDK1 to prevent premature mitotic entry, gating cell division to specific circadian phases (**?**). Its near-universal coupling suggests that circadian cell cycle gating is a fundamental function of the clock, not a tissue-specific program.

This has direct clinical relevance: Wee1 inhibitors (e.g., adavosertib) are in clinical trials for cancer. Our data predicts that Wee1 inhibitor efficacy should be strongly time-of-day dependent in nearly all tissues.

4.2 Limitations

1. Statistical coupling does not prove direct regulation
2. The 53-gene curated panel may miss important coupled genes
3. The genome-wide scan was performed only in liver; other tissues may show different coupling landscapes
4. FDR correction at $\alpha = 0.05$ may be too liberal for discovery claims

5 Data Availability

Complete coupling test results for all 636 gene-tissue pairs and all ∼21,000 genome-wide genes are provided as supplementary JSON files. Source data from GSE54650 is publicly available from NCBI GEO.

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