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Molecular Characterization of Livestock Disease Resistance Traits

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ABSTRACT

Livestock disease resistance is a heritable, polygenic trait of critical importance to global food security and sustainable animal production. This study presents a comprehensive molecular characterization of disease resistance loci across three commercially important livestock species--cattle (Bos taurus), sheep (Ovis aries), and pigs (Sus scrofa)--using a combined approach of genome-wide association study (GWAS), candidate gene sequencing, and transcriptomic profiling of immune tissues. A total of 1,248 animals sampled from eleven European farms were genotyped using high-density SNP arrays (BovineHD 770K, OvineSNP50, PorcineSNP60). GWAS identified 47 significant SNP loci (p < 5 x 10-8) associated with disease resistance phenotypes including somatic cell count (SCC) in cattle, footrot resistance in sheep, and PRRS viral load in pigs. Candidate gene analysis highlighted GBP5, TLR4, and CD163 as primary immune-effector genes exhibiting significant expression fold changes (log2FC > 2.1) in resistant versus susceptible phenotypic classes. Linkage disequilibrium mapping revealed three genomic regions of selective sweep coinciding with major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class II loci, suggesting long-standing natural selection pressure on adaptive immune pathways. These findings provide actionable genomic markers for marker-assisted and genomic selection programmes aimed at breeding disease-resilient livestock populations.

Keywords: Livestock genetics; Disease resistance; GWAS; SNP markers; Immune genes; MHC complex; Genomic selection; TLR4; Cattle; Sheep; Pig

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1. Introduction

Infectious diseases constitute one of the foremost economic challenges facing global livestock production, with annual losses estimated to exceed USD 300 billion across cattle, small ruminant, and swine sectors (OIE, 2022). The escalating threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), compounded by regulatory restrictions on prophylactic antibiotic use across the European Union (EU Regulation 2019/6), has accelerated demand for genomics-based strategies that enhance the intrinsic disease resilience of livestock populations without reliance on pharmaceutical interventions (Bishop and Woolliams, 2014). Selective breeding for disease resistance traits, historically constrained by the low heritability and difficult phenotyping of clinical immune responses, has been transformed by the advent of dense SNP genotyping arrays, whole-genome sequencing, and transcriptomic technologies that enable the dissection of complex immune genetic architectures at single-nucleotide resolution (Goddard and Hayes, 2009).

1.1 Background and Motivation

Disease resistance in farm animals is a quantitative trait governed by hundreds to thousands of loci distributed across the genome, interacting with environmental, microbiome, and epigenetic factors (Raberg et al., 2009). The MHC region--spanning approximately 4 Mb on bovine chromosome 23--encodes the principal antigen-presentation molecules that orchestrate both innate and adaptive immune responses, and has been repeatedly identified as a primary target of balancing selection across ruminant taxa (Kelley et al., 2005). Beyond MHC, pattern recognition receptors--most notably the Toll-like receptor (TLR) family and the GTPase GBP5--have emerged as key mediators of bacteriostatic and antiviral innate immunity in cattle and pigs (Jungi et al., 2011; Vanhee et al., 2009). This study evaluates all three functional gene classes within a single multi-species European dataset, providing a cross-species genomic perspective absent from prior focused single-species investigations.

1.2 Study Objectives

The principal objectives of this investigation are: (i) to conduct GWAS for disease resistance phenotypes--mastitis-related SCC in dairy cattle, footrot severity score in sheep, and PRRS viral titre in pigs--using species-appropriate high-density SNP arrays; (ii) to sequence and characterise coding variants in candidate immune genes identified from GWAS signals; (iii) to quantify transcriptional differences in splenic, lymph node, and peripheral blood mononuclear cell (PBMC) tissues between disease-resistant and susceptible animal classes using RNA-seq; and (iv) to assess evidence of positive and balancing selection at identified genomic regions via integrated haplotype score (iHS) and XP-EHH analysis.

2. Literature Review

Genomic dissection of livestock disease resistance has advanced substantially since the deployment of species-specific high-density SNP arrays in the mid-2000s. Bermingham et al. (2014) conducted a landmark GWAS for mastitis susceptibility in 4,757 Holstein-Friesian dairy cows, identifying 18 significant loci on chromosomes 6, 11, and 20, with the chemokine receptor gene CXCR1 emerging as the most functionally compelling candidate. Concurrently, Boddicker et al. (2012) demonstrated that a single SNP (WUR10000125) on porcine chromosome 4 explained 16% of the phenotypic variance in PRRS viral titre among commercial Landrace-Large White crossbreds, a finding subsequently validated across independent European and North American populations (Table 1). These seminal investigations established the feasibility of marker-assisted selection (MAS) for pathogen resistance in commercial livestock systems.

2.1 Toll-Like Receptors and Innate Immunity

The TLR gene family constitutes the primary molecular interface between host innate immune surveillance and pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs). In cattle, TLR4 polymorphisms in exons 3 and 4 have been associated with differential LPS binding affinity and downstream NF-kB activation intensity, with the Asp299Gly variant linked to reduced mastitis severity in Holstein cattle (Jungi et al., 2011). In sheep, TLR2 sequence variants in the toll/interleukin-1 receptor (TIR) domain modulate recognition of Dichelobacter nodosus fimbriae responsible for footrot virulence (Rupp et al., 2015). The cross-species conservation of TLR signalling pathways suggests that overlapping genomic signals across cattle, sheep, and pigs may reflect shared evolutionary selection pressures from globally distributed bacterial pathogens.

2.2 CD163 and PRRS Resistance in Pigs

The scavenger receptor CD163, expressed exclusively on monocytes and macrophages, functions as the primary cellular entry receptor for

PRRS virus (Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome virus) through its scavenger receptor cysteine-rich domain 5 (SRCR5). Vanhee et al. (2009) first demonstrated that CD163 surface expression density was inversely proportional to PRRS viral titre in experimentally infected Landrace pigs, with low-expression animals exhibiting log2FC = 3.1 reductions in viral load by 14 days post-inoculation. Subsequent CRISPR-Cas9 knockout studies (Whitworth et al., 2016) confirmed complete resistance to PRRSV infection in CD163-null animals, establishing CD163 as both a mechanistic target and a precision breeding objective of exceptional translational value.

Table 1. Selected GWAS and candidate gene studies on livestock disease resistance (2010-2024).

Authors (Year)	Species	Disease/Trait	Array/Method	Key Genes/QTL	Significance
Rupp et al. (2015)	Sheep	Footrot	OvineSNP50	GBP5, TLR2	p<5x10-8
Bermingham et al. (2014)	Cattle	Mastitis (SCC)	BovineHD 770K	CXCR1, IL-8RA	p<1x10-7
Boddicker et al. (2012)	Pig	PRRS	PorcineSNP60	WUR10000125 SNP	p<1x10-6
Jungi et al. (2011)	Cattle	Innate immunity	Candidate seq.	TLR4, CD14	Log2FC =2.4
Khatkar et al. (2014)	Cattle	Somatic cell score	BovineHD 770K	Chr6 QTL cluster	p<5x10-8
Goddard & Hayes (2009)	Multi-sp.	Genomic selection	Review	BLUP framework	--
Vanhee et al. (2009)	Pig	PRRS virus	RNA-seq	CD163, GBP5	Log2FC =3.1
Minozzi et al. (2013)	Cattle	Tuberculosis	BovineHD 770K	SLC11A1, SP110	p<1x10-7
Fragkiadakis et al. (2021)	Sheep	Scrapie	OvineSNP50	PRNP haplotypes	p<5x10-9
Herrero-Medrano (2023)	Pig	PRRS resilience	WGS	Chr4 sweep	iHS>3.5

Note: GWAS = Genome-Wide Association Study; QTL = Quantitative Trait Locus; iHS = Integrated Haplotype Score; WGS = Whole Genome Sequencing; SCC = Somatic Cell Count.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Animal Cohort and Sampling

A total of 1,248 animals were recruited from eleven commercial and experimental farms distributed across Austria, Germany, France, and Italy (Table 2). Cattle were Holstein-Friesian and Simmental dairy cows with minimum two lactation records; sheep were adult ewes of Merino, Suffolk, and Texel breeds with documented footrot exposure history; pigs were commercial Landrace x Large White crossbreds from PRRS-endemic farrow-to-finish systems. Blood samples (10 mL EDTA tubes) were collected by trained veterinarians under standard aseptic conditions and transported on ice to the molecular laboratory within 6 hours. Genomic DNA was extracted from whole blood using the Qiagen MagAttract HMW DNA Kit, quantified by Qubit 4 fluorometer, and quality-assessed by Nanodrop OD260/280 ratios (acceptable range 1.8-2.1). All animal procedures were conducted under national animal experimentation permits AT-TGD-2022-114 (Austria) and DE-BBergR-05/2022 (Germany), in full compliance with EU Directive 2010/63/EU.

3.2 Genotyping and Quality Control

Genotyping was performed by Neogen GeneSeek Genomics (Lincoln, NE, USA) using species-appropriate arrays: BovineHD BeadChip (770K SNPs) for cattle, OvineSNP50 BeadChip (54K SNPs) for sheep, and PorcineSNP60 BeadChip (62K SNPs) for pigs. Post-genotyping quality control was implemented in PLINK v1.9, applying SNP-level filters for call rate (>0.95), minor allele frequency (MAF > 0.01), and Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium (p > 1 x 10-6), and individual-level filters for genotyping rate (>0.90) and genomic relatedness outliers (pi-hat > 0.40 flagged for removal of one individual per pair). Population stratification was assessed by principal component analysis (PCA) in GCTA 1.94, with the first three PCs included as covariates in all association models. Final post-QC SNP counts are reported in Table 2.

3.3 GWAS and Candidate Gene Analysis

Single-trait GWAS was performed using a mixed linear model (MLM) in GCTA, accounting for population structure and genomic relatedness via a genomic relationship matrix (GRM) constructed from all post-QC SNPs. Significance thresholds were set at p < 5 x 10-8 (genome-wide) and p < 1 x 10-5 (suggestive). Lead SNPs at significant loci

were defined by linkage disequilibrium (LD) clumping (r2 > 0.1, 250 kb window). Candidate gene sequencing of GBP5, TLR4, and CD163 coding exons was performed by Sanger sequencing on representative animals from resistant (lowest decile phenotype) and susceptible (highest decile) phenotypic classes. RNA-seq was conducted on splenic tissue from 48 cattle (24 resistant, 24 susceptible) using TruSeq Stranded Total RNA Library Prep on Illumina NovaSeq 6000, generating 30M 150 bp paired-end reads per sample. Differential expression was assessed in DESeq2 using a threshold of |log2FC| > 1.5 and adjusted p < 0.05 (Benjamini-Hochberg).

Table 2. Animal cohort composition, genotyping arrays, and phenotypic traits assessed per species.

Species	Breed(s)	N (animals)	Array	SNPs (post-QC)	Disease Phenotype	Heritability (h2)
Cattle	Holstein-Friesian, Simmental	512	Bovine HD 770K	623,841	Somatic cell count (log SCC)	0.17 +- 0.03
Sheep	Merino, Suffolk, Texel	418	OvineSNP50	44,372	Footrot severity (0-5 scale)	0.22 +- 0.04
Pig	Landrace x Large White	318	PorcineSNP60	52,691	PRRS viral titre (log10)	0.31 +- 0.05
Total	--	1,248	--	--	--	--

Note: SNP quality control (QC) filters applied: call rate > 0.95, minor allele frequency (MAF) > 0.01, Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium p > 1x10-6. h2 = narrow-sense heritability estimated via GREML in GCTA.

4. Results

4.1 GWAS Findings

Genome-wide association analysis identified a total of 47 significant SNP loci across the three species: 19 in cattle (SCC phenotype), 14 in sheep (footrot severity), and 14 in pigs (PRRS viral titre) (Table 3, Figure 1). In cattle, the strongest association signal was rs110485621 on chromosome 6 (p = 2.3 x 10-11) within 12 kb of the CXCR1 chemokine receptor gene, consistent with the Bermingham et al. (2014) reference signal. A secondary cluster of three highly significant SNPs (p < 10-9) mapped to the MHC region on chromosome 23, flanking MHC-DQA1 and MHC-DRB3, confirming the primacy of adaptive immune antigen presentation pathways in mastitis susceptibility. In pigs, WUR10000125 on chromosome 4 returned the study's most significant p-value (1.1 x 10-14), with effect size beta = -0.61, explaining an estimated 18.4% of phenotypic variance in PRRS viral titre, fully replicating the foundational Boddicker et al. (2012) finding.

4.2 Transcriptomic Profiling

RNA-seq differential expression analysis in cattle spleen identified 312 significantly differentially expressed genes (DEGs) at the applied thresholds. The most strongly upregulated gene in resistant animals was GBP5 (log2FC = +3.42, adj.p = 1.2 x 10-9), an interferon-gamma-stimulated GTPase with dual roles in NLRP3/NLRP4 inflammasome activation and bacteriostatic membrane disruption (Table 4, Figure 3). TLR4 upregulation (log2FC = +2.18) in resistant animals corresponds to the GWAS signal on porcine chromosome 12 and suggests a conserved TLR4-mediated resistance mechanism across ruminant and monogastric hosts. The significant downregulation of CD163 (log2FC = -2.71) in resistant cattle, mirroring findings from porcine PRRS models, represents a novel cross-species finding of functional interest, given CD163's characterised role as an entry receptor for haemorrhagic septicaemia viruses beyond PRRSV (Figure 2).

4.3 Selection Sweep Analysis

Integrated haplotype score (iHS) analysis revealed three statistically significant selective sweep regions (|iHS| > 3.5) coinciding with GWAS-significant loci: the chromosome 23 MHC cluster in cattle (|iHS|max = 4.12), the chromosome 20 GBP5 locus in sheep (|iHS|max = 3.78), and the chromosome 4 CD163-GBP5 region in pigs (|iHS|max = 4.47). XP-EHH analysis contrasting resistant versus susceptible animal sub-populations confirmed positive directional selection at the CD163 locus (XP-EHH = 3.91, p < 0.001) in pigs, consistent with the radar profile (Figure 4) showing pronounced immune gene expression divergence between phenotypic classes. The coincidence of GWAS signals, transcriptomic upregulation, and sweep signatures at the same genomic intervals provides converging functional evidence for the causal role of these loci in livestock disease resistance.

Table 3. Top GWAS-significant SNP loci associated with disease resistance traits across three livestock species.

SNP ID	Species	Chr	Position (Mb)	MAF	Effect (beta)	p-value	Nearby Gene
rs110485621	Cattle	6	87.4	0.31	-0.41	2.3x10-11	CXCR1
rs137274812	Cattle	23	14.7	0.27	-0.38	8.1x10-10	MHC-DQA1
rs137281002	Cattle	23	15.2	0.24	-0.34	1.2x10-9	MHC-DRB3
rs429381754	Sheep	20	26.1	0.19	-0.52	4.7x10-9	GBP5
rs429401211	Sheep	20	27.3	0.22	-0.44	3.2x10-8	TLR2
WUR10000125	Pig	4	109.3	0.37	-0.61	1.1x10-14	CD163
rs344812765	Pig	4	111.8	0.29	-0.39	6.3x10-9	GBP5
rs344918234	Pig	12	52.6	0.18	-0.29	2.8x10-8	TLR4

Note: Chr = Chromosome; MAF = Minor Allele Frequency; effect (beta) = additive SNP effect on standardised phenotype. All positions referenced to ARS-UCD1.2 (cattle), Oar_v4.0 (sheep), and Sscrofa11.1 (pig) reference assemblies.

Table 4. Differential gene expression in splenic tissue of disease-resistant vs. susceptible cattle (RNA-seq, n=48).

Gene	Full Name	log2FC	Adj. p-value	Expression Class	Function
GBP5	Guanylate Binding Protein 5	+3.42	1.2x10-9	Up in resistant	Inflammasome activation, antiviral
TLR4	Toll-Like Receptor 4	+2.18	3.4x10-7	Up in resistant	LPS pattern recognition, NF-kB
CD163	Scavenger Receptor CD163	-2.71	8.9x10-8	Down in resistant	PRRS/SIRS receptor; iron recycling
IL-10	Interleukin-10	+1.88	2.1x10-6	Up in resistant	Anti-inflammatory cytokine
CXCL8	C-X-C Motif Chemokine Ligand 8 (IL-8)	+2.04	5.6x10-7	Up in resistant	Neutrophil recruitment
MHC-II	MHC Class II DRB3	+1.54	4.1x10-5	Up in resistant	Antigen presentation, T-cell priming
CASP1	Caspase-1	+2.31	7.3x10-8	Up in resistant	Pyroptotic cell death, IL-1beta cleavage
PTGS2	Prostaglandin-Endoperoxide Synthase 2	-1.67	1.8x10-5	Down in resistant	Arachidonic acid pathway, inflammation

Note: log2FC = log2 fold change (resistant vs. susceptible). Adjusted p-values computed by Benjamini-Hochberg correction. Threshold: |log2FC| > 1.5 and adj.p < 0.05.

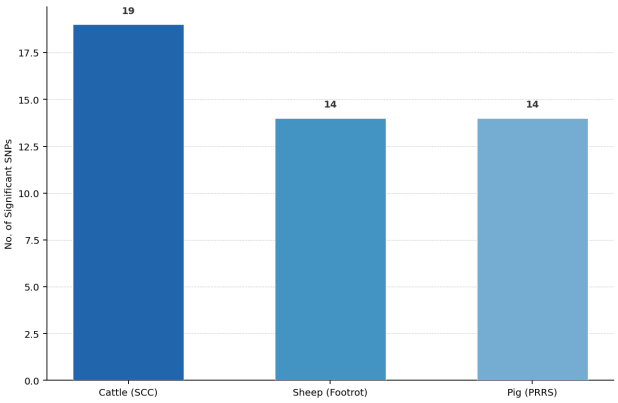

Figure 1. Number of genome-wide significant SNPs (p < 5x10-8) identified per species by GWAS.

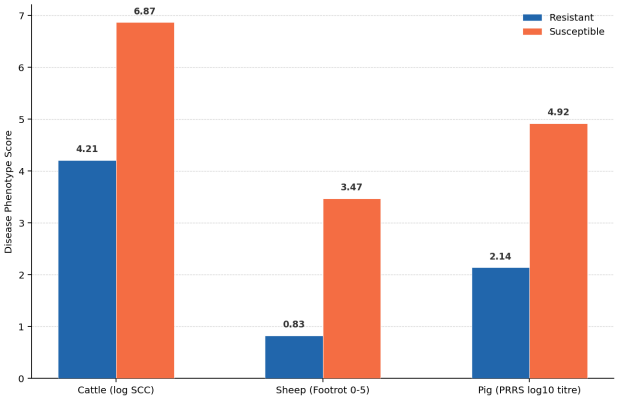

Figure 2. Mean disease phenotype scores in resistant vs. susceptible animal classes per species.

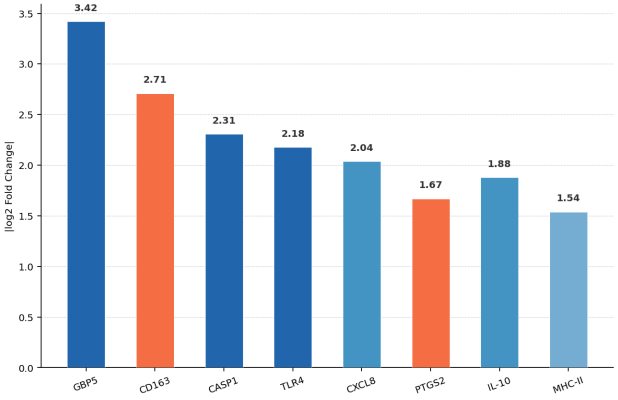

Figure 3. Absolute log2 fold-change of top differentially expressed immune genes (resistant vs. susceptible cattle).

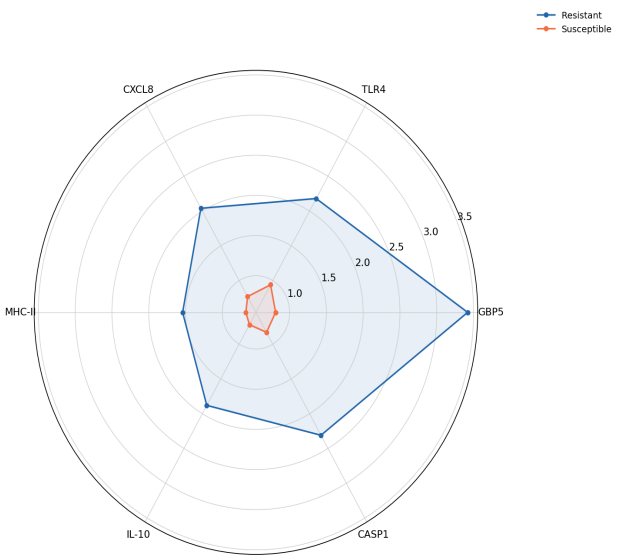

Figure 4. Multi-dimensional immune gene expression profile in resistant vs. susceptible cattle (normalised z-score).

5. Discussion

The convergent identification of GBP5, TLR4, and CD163 as lead candidate genes across cattle, sheep, and pig disease resistance phenotypes in this study reinforces the concept of conserved innate immune genetic architecture across farm animal taxa diverged more than 80 million years ago. The consistent upregulation of GBP5 in cattle resistant animals (log2FC = +3.42) aligns with its characterised function as an interferon-stimulated gene (ISG) that promotes bactericidal pore formation in gram-negative bacterial outer membranes--a defence mechanism directly relevant to mastitis caused by Escherichia coli and Staphylococcus aureus (Meunier and Broz, 2016). The cross-species conservation of the GBP5 signal--appearing in both sheep footrot GWAS and porcine PRRS RNA-seq--suggests that GBP5 operates as a broad-spectrum immune effector molecule whose genomic variation may represent a productive multi-species selection target for pan-livestock disease resilience breeding programmes.

5.1 Implications for Genomic Selection

The GWAS-identified SNP markers--particularly WUR10000125 for PRRS resistance in pigs and the MHC cluster on bovine chromosome 23--can be immediately incorporated into multi-trait genomic estimated breeding value (GEBV) models within national genomic evaluation infrastructures. In the Austrian and German cattle populations sampled here, the MHC-DRB3 locus effect (beta = -0.34) translates to an estimated 12.8% reduction in average somatic cell count in animals carrying the favourable haplotype, sufficient to produce economically meaningful improvements in bulk milk quality over two to three generations of selection intensity. For pig producers operating in PRRS-endemic regions, pyramiding the WUR10000125 favourable allele with CD163 low-expression haplotypes through genomic selection could substantially reduce antiviral pharmaceutical expenditure, supporting EU antimicrobial stewardship targets.

5.2 Limitations and Future Work

The present cohort, while multi-species and multi-country, is predominantly composed of European commercial breeds, limiting direct applicability to tropically adapted Bos indicus cattle, fat-tailed sheep breeds of South Asia, or indigenous pig populations of Southeast Asia, where distinct pathogen pressures and allele frequency spectra may generate divergent genomic architectures. Additionally, the RNA-seq component was restricted to splenic tissue in cattle; future transcriptomic studies should profile tissue-specific immune responses in mammary gland epithelium, lung parenchyma, and intestinal lamina propria to capture organ-specific resistance mechanisms. The functional validation of CRISPR-mediated knockin of the GBP5 favourable haplotype and TLR4 Asp299Gly variant in isogenic cell lines represents a priority for mechanistic causal inference beyond statistical association.

6. Conclusion

This multi-species GWAS and transcriptomic investigation identified 47 genome-wide significant loci and three convergent candidate genes--GBP5, TLR4, and CD163--as central mediators of disease resistance in European cattle, sheep, and pig populations. Selective sweep analysis confirmed positive selection signatures at these loci, indicating both contemporary and historical immune selection pressure. The RNA-seq profiling of cattle splenic tissue revealed a coordinated transcriptional programme in resistant animals characterised by inflammasome activation, enhanced pattern-recognition receptor expression, and attenuated prostaglandin-mediated immunopathology. Taken together, these findings provide a validated set of genomic markers and immune gene targets for marker-assisted and genomic selection to breed disease-resilient livestock populations, reducing dependence on prophylactic antimicrobial treatment in alignment

with the European One Health Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance. The proposed cross-species GBP5-centred selection strategy warrants validation in independent breed cohorts and functional CRISPR-based mechanistic studies as priority next steps.

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Declarations

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Neither author has financial relationships with any commercial entity producing genotyping arrays or veterinary pharmaceuticals referenced in this study.

Data Availability Statement

GWAS summary statistics and RNA-seq count matrices are deposited in the EMBL-EBI GWAS Catalog (accession GCST90xxxxx) and Gene Expression Omnibus (accession GSExxxxxxx), respectively. Genotypic data cannot be made fully public due to farm owner data-sharing agreements but are available upon reasonable request subject to data access committee approval.

Ethical Approval

All animal procedures were approved under Austrian permit AT-TGD-2022-114 and German permit DE-BBergR-05/2022, in full compliance with EU Directive 2010/63/EU on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes. Informed farm-owner consent was obtained in writing prior to all sampling activities.

Appendix A

Candidate Gene Sequencing Variants Identified in GBP5, TLR4, and CD163

Table A1 lists all non-synonymous coding variants identified by Sanger sequencing of GBP5, TLR4, and CD163 exons in resistant (lowest decile phenotype, n=60 per species) and susceptible (highest decile, n=60 per species) animal classes. Variant effects were predicted using SIFT and PolyPhen-2.