

PHYSIOLOGY OF DIGESTION IN THE
MACROPODINE MARSUPIALS

A thesis submitted for the degree
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by

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PREFACE

The studies presented in this dissertation were completed by the author while a postgraduate student in the Department of Biochemistry and Nutrition, the Faculty of Science, the University of New England, Armidale, N.S.W., Australia. Assistance given by other persons is indicated in the text or in the list of acknowledgements. All references cited are included in a bibliography. The work is otherwise original.

* * *

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
PREFACE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
GENERIC AND COMMON NAMES OF MACROPODINE MARSUPIALS	xvii
SUMMARY	xviii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 The research topic	2
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	4
2.1 Anatomy of the digestive tract	4
2.1.1 Anatomy of the stomach	4
2.1.2 The large intestine	7
2.2 Passage of digesta through the digestive tract	7
2.2.1 Pattern of excretion of the marker	8
2.2.2 Validity of the stained hay particle technique	10
2.3 Food intake and digestion	11
2.3.1 Intake requirements	11
2.3.2 Digestibility of dry matter and fibre	12
2.4 Microbial digestion in the stomach	14
2.4.1 Stomach microorganisms	14
2.4.2 The stomach environment	15
2.4.3 Microbial activity in the stomach	15
a) Volatile fatty acid production	15
b) Ammonia	16
c) Gas production	17
2.4.4 Microbial protein production	18
2.5 Summary	18

CHAPTER	Page
3 MATERIALS AND METHODS	20
3.1 Capture, care and maintenance of animals	20
3.2 The experimental diets	21
3.2.1 Chopped lucerne hay	21
3.2.2 <u>Phalaris aquatica</u>	23
3.3 Experimental feeding and collection procedures	23
3.4 Sedation, anaesthesia and surgery	25
3.4.1 Sedation and euthanasia	25
3.4.2 Surgical anaesthesia and techniques	26
3.5 Analytical methods	27
a) Dry matter, organic matter and gross energy	27
b) Total nitrogen	28
c) Ammonia N	28
d) Urea N	28
e) Chromium sesquioxide (Cr_2O_3)	28
f) Volatile fatty acids	29
g) Soluble and structural carbohydrates	29
h) Lipid and silicon content of the diets	29
i) Gas analyses	29
j) ^{51}Cr -EDTA and ^{103}Ru -P	30
k) ^{14}C urea and tritiated water	31
l) ^{14}C labelled volatile fatty acids	31
m) ^{15}N analysis	31
4 OBSERVATIONS ON THE ANATOMY OF, AND DISPERSION OF CONTRAST MEDIUM IN, THE DIGESTIVE TRACT OF MACROPODINES	33
4.1 Introduction	33
4.2 Materials and methods	34
4.2.1 Anatomy	34
4.2.2 Dimensions and capacities of the digestive tract	35
4.2.3 Radiology	35
4.3 Results	36
4.3.1 Stomach anatomy	36
a) Topography of the stomach	37
b) The mucosal surface of the stomach lumen	42

4.3.2	Stomach structure of <u>M. robustus</u> <u>robustus</u> , <u>T. billarderi</u> and <u>T. stigmatica</u>	48
4.3.3	Stomach structure of <u>Me. rufa</u> , <u>W. bicolor</u> , <u>M. rufogriseus</u> and <u>M. parma</u>	51
4.3.4	The large intestine	52
4.3.5	Physical dimensions of the digestive tract	53
4.3.6	Radiological observations	54
	a) Dispersion of contrast medium in the stomach	57
	b) Dispersion of contrast medium in the large intestine	62
	c) Contractions of the stomach wall	62
4.4	Discussion	63
4.4.1	Stomach structure of the Macropodine	63
	a) The forestomach epithelia	65
4.4.2	Proportions of the digestive tract	66
4.4.3	Mixing and flow of digesta within the stomach	67
4.5	Conclusion	68
5	THE FLOW OF DIGESTA ALONG THE DIGESTIVE TRACT	69
5.1	Introduction	69
5.2	Materials and methods	70
5.2.1	Experiment 1	70
5.2.2	Experiment 2	71
5.2.3	Experiment 3	71
5.2.4	Analytical procedures	72
5.2.5	Calculations	72
5.2.6	Statistical analyses	74
5.3	Results	74
5.3.1	Experiment 1	74
	a) Kinetics of the fluid marker	77
	b) Kinetics of the particulate marker	81
	c) Differential flow of the two markers	81
	d) Food intake	82

CHAPTER	Page
5.3.2 Experiment 2. Kinetics of the two markers in the intestine	82
5.3.3 Experiment 3. Flow of digesta along the digestive tract	84
5.4 Discussion	88
5.4.1 Validity of the dual phase marker technique	88
5.4.2 The pattern of appearance of the markers in the faeces	89
a) Differential flow of the two markers	89
b) Transit time	90
c) The rate constants	91
5.4.3 Stomach structure and flow of digesta	92
a) The sheep	92
b) The macropodines	93
5.5 Conclusion	95
6 THE APPARENT DIGESTION OF A DRIED AND A FRESH HERBAGE DIET, AND THE DYNAMICS OF ^{14}C -UREA AND WATER METABOLISM	97
6.1 Introduction	97
6.2 Materials and methods	98
6.2.1 Experiments 4a, 4b; the balance experiments	98
6.2.2 Experiments 5a, 5b; ^{14}C -urea and THO metabolism	99
6.2.3 Calculations	100
a) Urea metabolism	100
b) THO metabolism	102
6.2.4 Statistical analyses	103
6.3 Results	104
6.3.1 Balance experiments	104
a) Intake and digestion of chopped lucerne hay	104
b) Intake and digestion of <u>Phalaris</u>	106
c) Comparison of the two diets	106
d) Nitrogen intake, excretion and balance	106
6.3.2 Urea metabolism	107
a) The chopped lucerne hay diet	107

CHAPTER	Page
b) The <u>Phalaris</u> diet	110
c) Effect of diet on urea metabolism	110
6.3.3 Intake and metabolism of water	113
a) Experiment 5a	113
b) Experiment 5b	115
c) Effect of diet on water metabolism	115
6.4 Discussion	116
6.4.1 Digestion of lucerne in sheep and macropodines	116
a) Digestion of dietary fibre	116
6.4.2 Digestion of <u>Phalaris</u> in <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u>	118
6.4.3 Validity of the ¹⁴ C-urea and THO techniques	119
6.4.4 Nitrogen and urea metabolism	121
6.4.5 Water and THO metabolism	122
6.5 Conclusion	122
7 DIGESTION IN THE STOMACH AND IN THE INTESTINE	124
7.1 Introduction	124
7.2 Materials and methods	125
7.2.1 Experimental procedure	125
7.2.2 Analyses	127
7.2.3 Calculations	127
7.3 Results	128
7.3.1 The pH and concentrations of VFA, urea and ammonia in digesta fluid	128
a) pH	128
b) VFA	128
c) Urea	132
d) Ammonia	135
7.3.2 Intake and apparent digestion in the digestive tract	135
a) Apparent digestion in the stomach	135
b) The pattern of apparent digestion in the stomach	138
c) Digestion in the intestine	144
7.4 Discussion	144

CHAPTER	Page
7.4.1 Digestion in the macropodine stomach	144
a) The pattern of digestion	145
b) Comparison among the species	145
c) Digestion of dietary protein	146
d) VFA, ammonia and the flow of digesta fluid	146
7.4.2 Digestion in the intestine	147
7.5 Conclusion	147
8 MICROBIAL ACTIVITY IN THE FORESTOMACH	149
8.1 Introduction	149
8.2 Materials and methods	150
8.2.1 Measurement of VFA and ammonia production	150
a) Experiment 7. Production of VFA <u>in vitro</u> in <u>M. giganteus</u>	150
b) Experiment 8. Production of VFA and ammonia <u>in vitro</u> in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and sheep	151
c) Experiment 9. Estimation of VFA and ammonia production <u>in vivo</u>	152
8.2.2 Sampling of specimens in the field	154
a) Stomach microflora	154
b) Stomach gas samples	154
8.2.3 Analyses	155
8.2.4 Calculations	155
a) Rate of production of VFA <u>in vitro</u>	155
b) Production of VFA and ammonia <u>in vivo</u>	156
c) Incorporation of NH_3N into plasma urea N and ³ bacterial N	157
8.3 Results	158
8.3.1 Experiment 7	158
8.3.2 Experiment 8	160
a) Production of VFA <u>in vitro</u>	160
b) Production of ammonia <u>in vitro</u>	162
8.3.3 Experiment 9	162
a) Production of VFA <u>in vivo</u>	162
b) Production of ammonia <u>in vivo</u>	163

CHAPTER	Page
c) Transfer of ammonia N from the macropodine forestomach	166
8.3.4 Field observations	168
a) Stomach capacity and organic matter content of stomach digesta	168
b) Plasma urea, and ammonia and VFA in digesta fluid	169
c) Stomach microflora	169
d) Stomach gas composition	170
8.4 Discussion	172
8.4.1 Microbial production of VFA	172
8.4.2 Microbial production of ammonia	173
8.4.3 Irreversible loss of ammonia N from the forestomach	176
8.4.4 Stomach microbial activity in field macropodines	179
8.5 Conclusion	180
9 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	181
APPENDIX	188
REFERENCES	193

LIST OF FIGURES

(abbreviated titles)		Page
FIGURE		
2.1	Stomach of <u>Macropus giganteus</u>	5
4.1	External features of the stomach of <u>M. giganteus</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>T. thetis</u>	38
4.2.a	Stomach and intestine of <u>M. giganteus</u>	40
4.2.b	Caecum-proximal colon of <u>T. thetis</u>	40
4.3.a	Squamous epithelium in the stomach of <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	43
4.3.b	Cardiac glandular epithelium in the stomach of <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	44
4.4	The mucosal surface of the stomach of <u>M. giganteus</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>T. thetis</u>	45
4.5	Gastric sulcus of the pouch young <u>M. giganteus</u>	47
4.6	The stomach of <u>M. robustus robustus</u>	49
4.7	The stomach of <u>T. billarderi</u>	50
4.8	Left lateral (diagrammatic) view of the stomach <u>in situ</u> (<u>M. giganteus</u>)	56
4.9	Schematic presentation of the dispersion of contrast medium in the macropodine stomach	58
4.10	Dispersion of contrast medium in the stomach of <u>M. giganteus</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u>	60
4.11	Dispersion of contrast medium in the stomach of <u>T. thetis</u>	61
4.12	Schematic presentation of the contractions of the forestomach wall	64
5.1	Experiment 1. The pattern of excretion of $^{51}\text{Cr-EDTA}$ and $^{103}\text{Ru-P}$ in the faeces, of sheep and four species of macropodines, after a single oral infusion	75
5.2	Experiment 1. Mean cumulative percentage recovery curves of $^{51}\text{Cr-EDTA}$ and $^{103}\text{Ru-P}$ for sheep and macropodines	79
5.3	Experiment 2. The pattern of excretion of $^{51}\text{Cr-EDTA}$ and $^{103}\text{Ru-P}$ in the faeces of <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u> after a single infusion into the hindstomach	83
6.1	Experiment 5.14. The pattern of urinary excretion of $^{14}\text{C-urea}$ and THO in one <u>T. thetis</u> and one <u>M. eugenii</u> after a single intramuscular injection	101

FIGURE		Page
6.2	Experiment 5. Urea metabolism in <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u> . Regression relationships between : nitrogen intake and urea entry rate; nitrogen intake and urea excretion rate; nitrogen intake and urea degradation rate	111
7.1	Schematic representation of regions of the macropodine digestive tract, the sites sampled, and the notation used for the tabulated results	129
7.2	Experiment 6. The apparent flow (g/d) of; (a) organic matter, (b) acid-detergent fibre, (c) crude protein, (d) total soluble sugars, along the stomach of <u>M. giganteus</u>	140
7.3	Experiment 6. The apparent proportion remaining (%) of the digestible component of dietary constituents flowing along the stomach of <u>M. giganteus</u>	142
8.1	Schematic representation of the production, absorption and flow of VFA (mM/d) in the stomach of <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>T. thetis</u>	174
8.2	Schematic representation of the irreversible loss and net flow of ammonia N in the stomach of <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>T. thetis</u>	177

LIST OF TABLES

(abbreviated titles)

TABLE		PAGE
2.1	Dry matter intake and excretion times in three species of macropodines and sheep fed chopped lucerne hay <u>ad libitum</u>	9
2.2	Dry matter intake and apparent digestibility of dry matter and fibre in macropodines and sheep fed chopped lucerne hay	13
3.1	Chemical composition of the two experimental diets and composition of the mineral/vitamin mix	22
4.1	The relative capacities and dimensions of regions of the digestive tract of <u>M. eugenii</u> , <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	55
5.1	Experiment 1. Transit times, 10%, 50% and 90% excretion times and half-times for $^{51}\text{Cr-EDTA}$ and $^{103}\text{Ru-P}$ in sheep and macropodines	78
5.2	Experiment 2. 'Kinetics of digesta flow in the intestine of <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u>	85
5.3.a	Experiment 3. Dry matter intake and water intakes, flow of the fluid and the particulate phases of digesta along the digestive tract, and dry matter content of digesta in <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u>	86
5.3.b	Experiment 3. Means of the half-time for each marker in the three main regions of the stomach, and the caecum-proximal colon, and retention time in the colon of <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u>	87
6.1	Experiment 4. Intake and digestion in sheep and three species of macropodines fed chopped lucerne hay, and in two species of macropodines fed fresh <u>Phalaris</u> grass	105
6.2	Experiment 4. Nitrogen intake, excretion and retention in sheep and three species of macropodines fed chopped lucerne hay, and in two species of macropodines fed fresh <u>Phalaris</u> grass	108
6.3	Experiment 5. Nitrogen intake and ^{14}C -urea kinetics in <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u> fed chopped lucerne hay and fresh <u>Phalaris</u> grass	109
6.4	Experiment 5. Intake and excretion of water and body water kinetics in <u>T. thetis</u> and <u>M. eugenii</u> fed chopped lucerne hay and fresh <u>Phalaris</u> grass	114

TABLE		PAGE
7.1	The pH of digesta in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	130
7.2	The concentration of total VFA ($\mu\text{M/ml}$) in digesta fluid in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	131
7.3	The proportions (%) of the individual volatile fatty acids in digesta fluid from the forestomach and the caecum-proximal colon of <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	133
7.4	The concentrations of urea-N (mg N/100 ml) in plasma and digesta fluid in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	134
7.5	The concentration of ammonia N (mg N/100 ml) in digesta fluid in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	136
7.6	Experiment 6. Intake and the apparent digestion of dietary constituents in the digestive tract of <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u> ,	137
7.7	Experiment 6. The apparent flow of organic matter (g/d) along the stomach of <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and <u>M. giganteus</u>	139
8.1	Experiment 7. Production of VFA <u>in vitro</u> in the forestomach and the caecum-proximal colon of <u>M. giganteus</u>	159
8.2	Experiment 8. Production of VFA and NH_3 <u>in vitro</u> in the forestomach of <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and sheep.	161
8.3	Experiment 9. Production of VFA <u>in vivo</u> in <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and sheep	164
8.4	Experiment 9. Net production of ammonia N in the forestomach of <u>T. thetis</u> , <u>M. eugenii</u> and sheep	165
8.5	Experiment 9. The transfer of ammonia N from the macropodine stomach	167
8.6	The composition of forestomach gas and pH of forestomach digesta fluid in macropodines shot in the field	171

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	-	acid-detergent fibre
CP	-	crude protein
CPC	-	caecum-proximal colon
^{51}Cr -EDTA	-	^{51}Cr complex of ethylenediaminetetra-acetic acid
d	-	day
DC	-	distal colon
DE	-	digestible energy
DM	-	dry matter
DOM	-	digestible organic matter
ET	-	excretion time
g	-	gram
h	-	hour
HS	-	hindstomach
I.L.	-	irreversible loss
k	-	fractional, rate constant
kgW^x	-	body weight, in kilograms, raised to the power of x.
l, ml	-	litre, millilitre
μCi	-	microcurie
min	-	minute
mM, M	-	millimoles, moles
N	-	nitrogen
NAN	-	non-ammonia nitrogen
OM	-	organic matter
RT	-	retention time
^{103}Ru -P	-	^{103}Ru Ruthenium-labelled tris (1,10-phenanthroline)-ruthenium II chloride
s.e.	-	standard error
SFS	-	sacciform forestomach
SI	-	small intestine
$T_{\frac{1}{2}}$	-	half-time of a marker
TFS	-	tubiform forestomach
THO	-	tritiated water
TT	-	transit time
(U- ^{14}C)	-	uniformly labelled compound
VFA	-	volatile fatty acids

GENERIC AND COMMON NAMES OF MACROPODINE MARSUPIALS

<u>Macropus eugenii</u>	-	tammar wallaby
<u>M. giganteus</u>	-	eastern grey kangaroo
<u>M. parma</u>	-	parma wallaby
<u>M. parryi</u>	-	whiptail wallaby
<u>M. robustus cervinus</u>	-	western euro
<u>M. robustus robustus</u>	-	eastern wallaroo
<u>M. rufogriseus</u>	-	red-necked wallaby
<u>Megaleia rufa</u>	-	red kangaroo
<u>Petrogale penicillata</u>	-	brush-tailed rock-wallaby
<u>Setonix brachyurus</u>	-	quokka
<u>Thylogale billarderi</u>	-	red-bellied pademelon
<u>T. stigmatica</u>	-	red-legged pademelon
<u>T. thetis</u>	-	red-necked pademelon
<u>Wallabia bicolor</u>	-	swamp wallaby
<u>Dorcopsis luctuosa</u>	-	New Guinea wallaby
<u>Dendrolagus spp.</u>	-	tree kangaroos
<u>Largorchestes spp.</u>	-	hare-wallabies
<u>Onychogalea spp.</u>	-	nailtail wallabies

SUMMARY

The macropodines (kangaroos and wallabies) are herbivorous marsupials with a digestive system comparable to the ruminants. Ingested food is subjected to extensive microbial fermentation and modification in a capacious forestomach and secondary fermentation occurs in the caecum-proximal colon. The macropodine stomach is essentially a long tubular structure, markedly different to that of the ruminants, and relationships between stomach structure and digesta flow have not been previously investigated. Similarly, little is known of the mode of microbial activity in the forestomach and quantitative estimates of the extent of microbial fermentation have not been reported.

The present comparative study was undertaken to examine some of these aspects of the physiology of fermentative digestion in three macropodine species; Thylogale thetis (red-necked pademelon), Macropus giganteus (eastern grey kangaroo) and Macropus eugenii (tamar wallaby). These species represent adaptation to widely different habitats. Reference was also made to other macropodine species and some direct comparisons were made with sheep.

1. Differences in structural features and dimensions of the stomach occurred among the three species and were defined. Radiographic techniques were used to determine the initial dispersion pattern of orally infused contrast medium in the forestomach of adult animals. This varied among the three species and was related, in particular, to the position of the cardia and the degree of development, or absence, of a gastric sulcus (oesophageal groove).

2. The dynamics of flow of the fluid and particulate phases of digesta along the digestive tract of the three species were defined. The pattern of flow

of digesta through the macropodine stomach was very different to that observed in sheep and defined as tubular flow. Ingested food entering the cranial regions of the stomach slowly traversed the length of the forestomach but total mixing of forestomach contents did not occur. In addition, the fluid phase of digesta traversed the forestomach more rapidly than the particulate phase but this was not due to preferential retention of larger dietary particles. A similar pattern of digesta flow was observed in both T. thetis and M. eugenii when fed either chopped lucerne hay or fresh Phalaris aquatica grass.

3. Parameters of intake and digestibility were measured in all three species, and sheep, fed chopped lucerne hay and in T. thetis and M. eugenii fed fresh Phalaris. All species were similar in efficiency of utilisation of acid-detergent fibre but less efficient than the sheep. M. eugenii maintained nitrogen balance on a much lower ad libitum intake of diet than observed in the other species.

4. The dynamics of ^{14}C -urea and tritiated water (THO) metabolism were examined in T. thetis and M. eugenii. In both species a similar proportion of urea was recycled to the digestive tract and degraded by microorganisms. This was observed on both diets. However, THO turnover was faster in T. thetis and independent of diet. Collectively, the results suggested that M. eugenii may have a lower standard metabolic rate than T. thetis, rather than a more efficient mode of fermentative digestion.

5. Quantitative estimates of the partitioning of digestion in the stomach and intestine were measured in the three species fed chopped lucerne hay. Apparent fermentation of dietary constituents in the forestomach were extensive and similar in all three species and comparable to published estimates for the sheep. A

pattern of decreasing rate of apparent digestion of dietary constituents along the length of the forestomach was defined and related to the tubular pattern of digesta flow. Among the three species, minor differences in the extent of digestion in different regions of the forestomach were related to stomach structure.

6. Estimates of microbial activity in the forestomach were obtained by in vitro and in vivo techniques. Microbial production of volatile fatty acids and ammonia and incorporation of ammonia nitrogen into bacterial protein were measured in vivo in T. thetis and M. eugenii fed chopped lucerne hay. Estimates were similar for both species. The efficiency of microbial utilisation of dietary organic matter and nitrogen was similar in both species and although comparable to published estimates for the ruminants, the mode of microbial activity in the macropodine forestomach is very different.