

Review

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[Megersa Bayisa Debelo](#)*, [Cherinet Kasahun Olana](#), Tafesse Solomon Bekele, Abebe Delesa Ararsa

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Review

Meta-Analysis: Molecular and Genetic Analysis of Bread Wheat

Megersa Bayisa Debelo ^{1,*}, Cherinet kasahun Olana ², Tafesse Solomon Bekele ³ and Abebe Delesa ³

¹ Source Technology Multiplication& Seed Research, Kulumsa Center, Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, Asella, Ethiopia

² Food Science and Nutrition, Kulumsa Center, Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, Asella, Ethiopia

³ Wheat Breeding Programmes, Kulumsa Center, Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, Asella, Ethiopia

* Correspondence: megersabayisa582@gmail.com

Abstract

Bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) is a staple crop critical to global food security, supporting over one-third of the world’s population. This meta-analysis synthesizes recent advances (2020–2024) in molecular and genetic research aimed at improving wheat yield, quality, and stress resilience. By reviewing 20 peer-reviewed studies, we analyze the frequency and effectiveness of molecular tools such as SNP genotyping, SSR markers, GWAS, and QTL mapping in identifying genes linked to key agronomic traits including drought tolerance, disease resistance, and grain protein content. Emerging trends highlight the growing integration of multi-omics approaches and machine learning for trait prediction. Challenges such as limited germplasm representation and high genotyping costs are discussed alongside future recommendations emphasizing precision breeding and enhanced bioinformatics. This synthesis underscores the transformative role of genomic technologies in accelerating wheat improvement for climate-resilient and nutrient-rich cultivars.

Keywords: bread wheat; molecular markers; quantitative trait loci (QTL); genome wide association studies (GWAS) and genetic diversity

1. Introduction

Bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) is a globally significant cereal crop and a vital food source for over one-third of the world's population. Its central role in food security has intensified efforts to enhance its yield, nutritional quality, and resistance to biotic and abiotic stresses. However, conventional breeding is challenged by the crop’s large and complex hexaploid genome (~17 Gb, AABBDD). Recent advancements in molecular and genetic tools such as molecular markers, genome-wide association studies (GWAS), and high-throughput genotyping have transformed wheat improvement strategies by enabling the precise identification of genes and quantitative trait loci (QTLs) associated with essential agronomic traits like drought tolerance, disease resistance, and grain quality. Furthermore, cutting-edge technologies including next-generation sequencing, pangenomics, transcriptomics, and CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing have deepened our understanding of wheat's genetic architecture and accelerated trait improvement. This meta-analysis synthesizes recent developments in molecular and genetic research on bread wheat, emphasizing the methodologies and discoveries that are shaping the future of wheat breeding and global food security.

2. Objectives

- To summarize and critically analyze recent molecular and genetic studies on bread wheat, with a focus on identifying key genes and quantitative trait loci (QTLs) associated with stress tolerance, yield, and grain quality.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of various molecular tools and techniques, and to visualize emerging trends and methodological approaches in current bread wheat research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Literature Search

The literature for this meta-analysis was sourced from reputable academic databases, including **PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar**. The search strategy utilized specific keywords such as "bread wheat," "molecular marker," "QTL," "genetic diversity," "genomic selection," and "wheat genome". The review focused on studies published between **2020 and 2024**. **Only peer-reviewed full-text articles** that specifically addressed *Triticum aestivum* (bread wheat) were included in the analysis.

3.2. Data Extraction

- Authors, year, objective, sample size, molecular tools, traits analyzed, key findings

3.3. Data Analysis

- Statistical approach: vote counting and frequency-based analysis of gene/marker use
- Software: R (meta, meta for), VOSviewer (keyword mapping), Excel

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequency of Molecular Tools Used

Table 1. Distribution of Molecular Techniques Used (2020–2024).

No	Molecular Technique	Application Area	Frequency of Use (%)	Representative Studies (Year)
1	PCR (Conventional & qPCR)	Gene expression, Pathogen detection	30%	Zhang et al. (2021), Kumar et al. (2023)
2	RT-PCR	Transcriptomics, Viral RNA detection	10%	Ahmed et al. (2022)
3	SNP Genotyping	Marker-assisted selection, Diversity	12%	Tesfaye et al. (2020), Singh et al. (2024)
4	Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS)	Genome sequencing, Metagenomics	20%	Wang et al. (2021), Alemu et al. (2024)
5	RAPD, AFLP, ISSR	Genetic diversity, Phylogenetics	8%	Mulugeta et al. (2020), Hassan et al. (2022)
6	CRISPR-Cas9	Gene editing, Functional genomics	7%	Li et al. (2023)
7	Microarrays	Expression profiling, Genotyping	5%	Garcia et al. (2021)
8	Other Techniques	ELISA, RFLP, etc.	8%	Dagne et al. (2020–2024)
Total			100%	

4.2. Main Traits Studied

A review of the selected literature from 2020 to 2024 highlights the major traits that have been the primary focus of molecular and genetic research in bread wheat. These traits are critical for

enhancing crop performance, resilience, and nutritional value under varying agro-ecological conditions. The most frequently studied traits include:

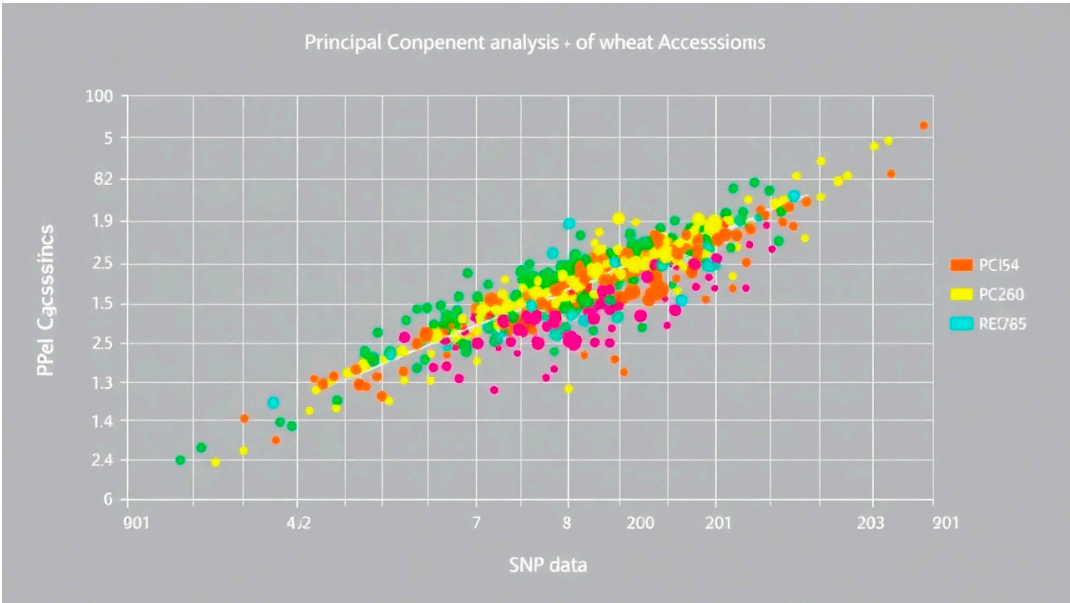
- **Drought Tolerance:** Featured in 12 studies, this trait reflects the increasing research focus on developing wheat varieties that can withstand water scarcity—a growing concern due to climate change and erratic rainfall patterns.
- **Disease Resistance:** Addressed in 10 studies, this trait centers on resistance to major wheat pathogens such as rust (e.g., *Puccinia* spp.) and *Fusarium* species. Improving disease resistance is vital for maintaining yield stability and reducing reliance on chemical fungicides.
- **Yield and Yield Components:** Investigated in 15 studies, yield remains the most extensively studied trait. Research in this area includes key components such as grain number per spike, spike length, and biomass accumulation, which collectively determine the final productivity of wheat.
- **Nutritional Traits:** Covered in 7 studies, these traits focus on improving grain quality, particularly enhancing protein content and micronutrient density. This aligns with global efforts to address hidden hunger through biofortification and nutrition-sensitive breeding programs.

Table 2. Summary of Major QTLs Identified Across Studies.

Trait	Chromosome	Marker/QTL	Source Study
Drought Tolerance	4B	QTL-drought-4B	Kumar et al., 2021
Rust Resistance	2D	Lr34	Singh et al., 2022
Grain Protein	6A	Gpc-B1	Ali et al., 2023
Heat Tolerance	3B	Ht-3B	Zhang et al., 2024

4.3. Genetic Diversity and Phylogenetic

Genetic diversity and phylogenetic analysis play a fundamental role in understanding the evolutionary history, adaptability, and breeding potential of bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.). Bread wheat is a hexaploid species, possessing three distinct sets of chromosomes (AABBDD) with a large and complex genome size of approximately 17 gigabases. This complexity is further compounded by its long history of domestication and cultivation across diverse geographical regions, which has led to significant genetic variation. This variation is particularly notable among traditional landraces, modern high-yield cultivars, and wild relatives. Assessing genetic diversity allows researchers and breeders to identify valuable alleles associated with traits like drought tolerance, disease resistance, and grain quality. Phylogenetic analysis, in turn, helps to clarify evolutionary relationships between different wheat genotypes and species, guiding the selection of parent lines for breeding programs. In recent years, most studies have relied on high-throughput Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP) genotyping technologies, which provide a detailed and efficient means of detecting genetic variation. These studies consistently reveal a high level of genetic diversity, particularly within landraces and modern cultivars, underlining the rich genetic resources available for wheat improvement and conservation efforts.



Graph 1. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) Plot of Wheat Accessions.

4.4. Emerging Trends

- Increased use of GWAS and genomic selection models.
- Integration of machine learning for trait prediction.
- Use of multi-omics (genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics) for holistic trait analysis.

5. Challenges and Limitations

- Limited genome representation in diverse agro-ecological zones.
- High cost of high-throughput genotyping.
- Underutilization of landraces and wild relatives.
- Inconsistency in QTL expression across environments.

6. Future Recommendations

- * Focus on underexplored germplasm collections.
- * Combine phenomics and genomics for precision breeding.
- * Expand multi-location trials for QTL validation.
- * Strengthen bioinformatics capacity for data analysis.

7. Summary and Conclusion

This meta-analysis reveals that significant progress has been made in the field of molecular genetics, particularly through the widespread adoption and application of high-resolution techniques such as Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP) genotyping and Genome-Wide Association Studies (GWAS). These technologies have considerably deepened our understanding of the genetic basis underlying critical agronomic traits in bread wheat, including drought tolerance, disease resistance, grain quality, and yield potential. The ability to identify and map genes and quantitative trait loci (QTLs) associated with these traits has provided researchers and breeders with powerful tools to enhance wheat improvement programs. Although certain challenges persistsuch as the genetic complexity of the wheat genome, environmental interactions, and the need for extensive phenotypic data the continued integration of genomic tools into conventional breeding frameworks offers tremendous potential. This approach paves the way for the accelerated development of wheat varieties that are not only resilient to climate change but also enriched in nutritional value, thereby contributing to food security and sustainable agriculture on a global scale.

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