# The novel bis-1,2,4-triazine MIPS-0004373 demonstrates rapid and potent activity against all blood stages of the malaria parasite

**Running Title:** Activity profiling of triazine antimalarial

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## ABSTRACT

Novel bis-1,2,4-triazine compounds with potent *in vitro* activity against *Plasmodium falciparum* parasites were recently identified. The bis-1,2,4-triazines represent a unique antimalarial pharmacophore, and are proposed to act by a novel, but as-yet-unknown mechanism of action. This study investigated the activity of the bis-1,2,4-triazine, MIPS-0004373, across the mammalian lifecycle stages of the parasite, and profiled the kinetics of activity against blood and transmission-stage parasites *in vitro* and *in vivo*. MIPS-0004373 demonstrated rapid and potent activity against *P. falciparum*, with excellent *in vitro* activity against all asexual blood stages. Prolonged *in vitro* drug exposure failed to generate stable resistance *de novo*, suggesting a low propensity for the emergence of resistance. Excellent activity was observed against sexually-committed ring stage parasites, but activity against mature gametocytes was limited to inhibiting male gametogenesis. Assessment of liver stage activity demonstrated good activity in an *in vitro P. berghei* model, but no activity against *P. cynomolgi* hypnozoites or liver schizonts. The bis-1,2,4-triazine, MIPS-0004373, efficiently cleared an established *P. berghei* infection *in vivo*, with efficacy similar to artesunate and chloroquine, and a recrudescence profile comparable to chloroquine. This study demonstrates the suitability of bis-1,2,4-triazines for further development towards a novel treatment for acute malaria.






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## INTRODUCTION

Malaria is a parasitic disease caused by infection of red blood cells with the *Plasmodium* parasite. More than 40% of the world's population live in malaria endemic areas and each year there are over 200 million reported cases of malaria. Over 400,000 of these cases result in death, placing malaria as one of the most significant human parasitic diseases (1). Artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs) are currently the first line treatments for malaria. Whilst these drug combinations initially displayed a high level of efficacy (2), there have been increasing reports of ACT resistance in South-East Asia over the last decade (3). Since very few novel antimalarial compounds have reached clinical approval in recent times, the increase in parasite resistance to current first line treatments highlights an urgent need for the discovery of new antimalarial medicines (4).

The successful development of a new antimalarial will require the drug to demonstrate excellent efficacy, minimal toxicity, low cost, and a lack of cross resistance to existing drugs (5). Furthermore, a recent shift in focus from malaria control to total eradication highlights the necessity for alternative antimalarials with specific activity profiles. New drugs for the treatment of clinical symptoms of blood-stage malaria infection, relapsing malaria, severe malaria or mass drug administration for treatment and transmission blocking are required. Strategies for chemoprevention in endemic areas or chemoprotection for migratory populations as well as outbreak prevention are required. To facilitate the efficient development of drug candidates, the Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV) have outlined desired target candidate profiles (TCPs) for new antimalarials (Table 1) (4).

These target candidate profiles provide guidance regarding the assessment of drug efficacy, pharmacokinetics and toxicity before a compound is progressed towards clinical trials. Ideal requirements of novel antimalarials include potent and rapid clearance of blood stage parasites, suitability as a component of a combination therapy, pharmacokinetics that

provide therapeutic blood concentrations for an extended period after a single oral dose, a low toxicity profile, absence of detrimental drug-drug interactions with relapse prevention or transmission blocking molecules, and minimal risk of developing resistance. In addition, activity against other stages of the parasite lifecycle would be an attractive feature to provide the opportunity for prophylactic or transmission-blocking activity.

The bis-1,2,4-triazines represent a new class of antimalarial compounds with potent activity against *P. falciparum* that were identified by screening of chemical libraries (6). These compounds, based on a bis-1,2,4-triazine dimer core structure, are currently undergoing optimization by iterative rounds of medicinal chemistry and *in vitro* testing in order to improve potency, selectivity and metabolic stability. A lead triazine dimer MIPS-0004373 (**Fig. 1**) was shown to be highly active *in vitro* against *P. falciparum* with single-digit nanomolar activity and up to several thousand-fold lower toxicity to mammalian cells, thus demonstrating excellent selectivity (6, 7). Furthermore, it was shown to be equipotent against chloroquine and artemisinin resistant laboratory strains of *P. falciparum*, and field isolates of *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* (8). Pharmacokinetic studies revealed rapid microsomal clearance and low exposure *in vivo*. Nevertheless, excellent *in vivo* activity was observed in the *P. berghei* murine malaria model Peters 4-day test (8), with a 50% effective dose ($ED_{50}$) of 1.47 mg/kg/day for four days in suppressing the development of blood asexual stages of the rodent malaria. The mechanism of action of the bis-1,2,4-triazines is not known, and their unique structure, compared to other known antimalarials, suggests that these compounds may act via a novel target.

In this study, MIPS-0004373 was profiled to determine its *in vitro* activity throughout the parasite lifecycle and *in vivo* radical cure efficacy in the *P. berghei*-murine model. Stage specificity within the asexual *P. falciparum* lifecycle, induction of parasite dormancy,



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transmission blocking ability, liver stage activity and *in vivo* potency were evaluated. We demonstrated MIPS-0004373 to be active against all blood stages of the *P. falciparum* asexual lifecycle and limited (predominantly early) stages of the sexual lifecycle, with a fast onset of action *in vitro* and excellent *in vivo* activity in the modified Thompson test for the radical cure of *P. berghei*. The bis-1,2,4-triazine compound offers great promise for further optimization towards the development of a new medicine for the treatment of symptomatic malaria with potential for transmission blocking activity.

## RESULTS

**MIPS-0004373 is highly active against all blood stages of the asexual lifecycle of *P. falciparum*.** The *in vitro* stage specific activity of MIPS-0004373 was determined in each of the three stages of the intra-erythrocytic *P. falciparum* asexual lifecycle using a pulsed-exposure format (9). Synchronized ring (3-6 h postinvasion; P.I.), trophozoite (30-36 h P.I.) or schizont (36-40 h P.I.) stage parasites (3D7) were subjected to 5 h drug pulses, washed to remove the triazine compound, and returned to standard culture conditions for a further 48-72 h before determination of growth inhibition utilizing the SYBR Green I assay. MIPS-0004373 exhibited potent activity against all parasite stages throughout the asexual lifecycle of *P. falciparum*, displaying $IC_{50}$ values below 100 nM (Fig. 2a). The highest potency was observed in trophozoite stage parasites ($IC_{50}$ = 28 nM), although the difference in $IC_{50}$ values between rings, trophozoites and schizonts was not significant ($P > 0.05$). This similar level of activity exhibited by MIPS-0004373 across the asexual blood stages differentiates the bis-1,2,4-triazines from the clinically used artemisinin- and quinoline-based antimalarials that exhibit more potent activity against the trophozoite and schizont stages (10).

The potent activity of MIPS-0004373 against trophozoites exposed to a 5 h drug pulse ($IC_{50}$ = 28 nM) compared favorably to chloroquine ($IC_{50}$ = 165 nM) (Fig. 2b), despite similar

activity reported from a standard 72 h assay (6). This suggests a rapid onset of action, which was confirmed by the observation of substantial activity after only 1 h of bis-1,2,4-triazine exposure ($IC_{50}$ = 170 nM) (Fig. 2b).

**The bis-1,2,4-triazine inhibits progression from ring to trophozoite stage.** The activity of MIPS-0004373 across all stages of the asexual lifecycle and the rapid onset of action prompted the microscopic assessment of parasite growth over the 48 h lifecycle. Tightly synchronized ring stage *P. falciparum* (3D7; 3 h P.I.) were subjected to a 5 h drug pulse at 120 nM (equivalent to twice the $IC_{50}$ of 5 h drug pulse against ring stage parasites), drug was washed out and growth assessed via thin cultured film microscopy at regular time points throughout the remainder of the lifecycle. The addition of MIPS-0004373 had no immediate effect on the size or morphology of ring stage parasites when compared to the DMSO vehicle control (Fig. S1). Differences between treated and untreated parasites only began to appear as the parasites transitioned into the trophozoite stage. At 16-18 h post addition of MIPS-0004373 (19-21 h P.I.), the triazine-treated parasites demonstrated a condensed morphology. While untreated parasites continued to progress through their asexual lifecycle, drug treated parasites showed no further progression.

**High bis-1,2,4-triazine concentrations arrest ring stage development *in vitro*.** The young ring stage (>95% ~0-5 h P.I.) parasite cultures of the *P. falciparum* W2 laboratory line (parasitemia 0.75- 1.2%) were exposed to either high concentrations of MIPS-0004373 (1200 nM or 150x $IC_{90}$) or dihydroartemisinin (DHA) (700 nM) for 6 h. The same DHA concentration and exposure time have been used in the previously published ring stage survival assay (RSA) (11, 12). The *P. falciparum* W2 line is artemisinin-sensitive and fast

156 growing with parasites completing the asexual cycle within 36-40 h (13) and our observation,
157 as opposed to 48 h cycle for *P. falciparum in vivo* or freshly adapted to cultured field isolates.
158 Parasite morphology and recovery after exposure to MIPS-0004373 was evaluated
159 using cultured film microscopy and flow cytometric analysis, using either SYBR Green or
160 Rhodamine 123 dyes, and compared to those after exposure to dihydroartemisinin (DHA)
161 (700 nM) as the reference compound (14). Exposure to MIPS-0004373 arrested progression
162 of rings in a manner similar to what has been previously observed after exposure to DHA
163 (12). Microscopic examination of MIPS-0004373- and DHA-treated cultures revealed similar
164 parasite morphology, with the majority of rings appearing pyknotic with condensed nuclei in
165 the absence of cytoplasm (Fig. S2). Twenty-four hours after the start of the experiment, a
166 small number of parasites demonstrated a morphology consistent with the dormant rings
167 defined by Tucker et al. (15), accounting for 2.5 ± 0.7% for MIPS-0004373 and 4.0 ± 0.0%
168 for DHA of the total number of ring stage parasites present on the slide. The first growing
169 trophozoites in DHA- and MIPS-000437-treated cultures were detected by cultured film
170 microscopy at 72 h after starting the experiments.
171 In addition to cultured film microscopy analysis, the growth of parasites in untreated
172 controls and cultures exposed to DHA or MIPS-0004373 was followed using flow cytometric
173 analysis of SYBR-Green and Rhodamine 123-stained parasites, with the results of one
174 representative experiment shown in Fig. 3 and Figs. S3 and S4). Twenty-four hours after the
175 start of the experiment the live parasites (Rhodamine 123 stained) in DHA- and MIPS-
176 0004373-treated cultures declined to 0.03 ± 0.01% and 0.11 ± 0.01%, respectively (Fig. 3)
177 compared to 0.95% ± 0.00% in untreated control cultures. Note that the flow cytometric
178 analysis of SYBR-Green stained parasites revealed a significant fraction of MIPS-0004373-
179 treated rings “shifted” to the left in comparison to that in DHA-treated rings, indicative of a

greater decrease in fluorescence of SYBR-Green (DNA-binding dye) stained rings, presumably, resulting from DNA degradation (Fig. S3).

The parasitemia in treated cultures remained low at 48 h at a value of 0.04% ± 0.01% for both DHA- and MIPS-0004373-treated cultures. Note that by 48 h parasitemia in the W2 line fast growing control cultures reached 7.1%, as judged by microscopy and Sybr-Green, including 1.5% of infected RBC harboring trophozoite stage parasites (Fig S3), thus confirming progression through the 2$^{nd}$ asexual cycle. Note that the "live" parasite numbers were lower, presumably, because of stress on parasites caused by high parasitemia. By 72 h, the W2 line control cultures "crashed", which resulted in a further reduction in live parasites detected by Rhodamine 123-staining (Fig. S4). A small increase in "live" parasites was detected in cultures exposed to the drugs at 72 h: 0.10 ± 0.01% and 0.07 ± 0.00% in DHA- and MIPS-0004373-treated cultures, respectively. During the 168 h of follow-up, more growing parasites were observed in both drug treated cultures, however, the recovery of MIPS-0004373-treated cultures was delayed by at least 24 h in comparison with the DHA-treated cultures (Fig. 3).

Treatment of the W2 line cultures with D-sorbitol at 32 h after the start of the experiment, when the majority of W2 control parasites were at late trophozoite and early schizont stage, was used to ascertain if the observed recovery was due to dormant parasites resuming growth or those, which did not become dormant and continued to grow despite DHA or MIPS-0004373 treatment. The application of D-sorbitol in this study was similar to the removal of growing parasites by passaging through magnetic columns (12). The delay in recovery of parasites in cultures exposed to DHA and MIPS-0004373 and subsequently treated with D-Sorbitol, in comparison to those that were not treated, suggest that there were some parasites that were not killed or arrested and continued to grow after drug exposure. In parasite cultures that were treated with D-sorbitol, parasite recovery was delayed by 24 h in

205 DHA-treated cultures (from 72 to 96 h) and by 48 h in MIPS-0004373-treated cultures, from
206 72 to 120 h (Fig 3).
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208
209 **Attempts to generate bis-1,2,4-triazine resistance *in vitro* were unsuccessful.** Compounds
210 that rapidly generate resistance-conferring mutations in *Plasmodium* are not ideal clinical
211 candidates. Determining the onset of resistance, and potential resistance mechanisms, are
212 important considerations in drug development. Four independent attempts were made to
213 generate resistance to the bis-1,2,4-triazine compound, whereby *P. falciparum* cultures were
214 exposed to MIPS-0004373 over a 3 to 12 month period. The first two attempts subjected 3D7
215 strain parasites to low levels (1x $IC_{50}$) of MIPS-0004373 (5 nM) and the $IC_{50}$ was monitored
216 weekly. The first experiment resulted in no significant change in $IC_{50}$ over a four month
217 period, and parasites were unable to tolerate higher bis-1,2,4-triazine concentrations. In the
218 subsequent attempt it appeared that all parasites died within the first month of bis-1,2,4-
219 triazine exposure (5 nM), and no live parasites were recovered after two more months of
220 continuous culture. In the third attempt to generate resistance, a ramp-up method was
221 employed (16) using the chloroquine resistant Dd2 strain. Initially, parasites were subjected
222 to a 2x $IC_{50}$ concentration of MIPS-0004373 (Dd2 $IC_{50}$: 9 nM) and monitored daily by
223 Giemsa stained blood films. After three consecutive days of treatment, cultures reached a
224 parasitemia of ~1% (starting parasitemia ~4%), and required four days of compound-free
225 media to repopulate each test flask before the next round of MIPS-0004373 exposure. This
226 cycle continued for 27 days, after which cultures could tolerate a 3x $IC_{50}$ concentration of
227 MIPS-0004373 as determined by fractional increases in daily parasitemia while under
228 compound pressure. Over a 6 month course of resistance selections, the maximum treatment
229 concentration used was 4x $IC_{50}$ (occurring five times), which coincided with a significant

decrease in parasitemia. Bulk cultures were evaluated for resistance by dose response assays ($IC_{50}$) every 2-3 weeks. However, no stable change to the $IC_{50}$ of MIPS-0004373 was observed. The fourth attempt used a similar step-wise method, starting with a different Dd2 clone and a 1x $IC_{50}$ concentration ($IC_{50}$: 13 nM), with 10% concentration increments when tolerated (Fig. S5). Again, no significant increase in $IC_{50}$ of MIPS-0004373 was observed for any of the three replicate flasks over the 12 month period, with the $IC_{50}$ values remaining within 30% of the initial clone. The maximum treatment concentration which allowed recovery (after significant parasite killing) was 2.8 x $IC_{50}$ (37 nM), indicating that none of these attempts were successful at generating bis-1,2,4-triazine-resistant parasites.

In addition, no substantial increase in $IC_{50}$ was observed when one of the drug selected lines (attempt 4, rep2) was tested in a ring stage survival assay (Fig S5F). In this assay of 0-3 hour post infection rings, an $IC_{50}$ of 240 ± 18 nM was observed for a 6 hour pulse of MIPS-0004373 compared to the parental Dd2 strain 128 ± 23 nM. This average 1.89-fold decrease in activity is comparable to that observed for a standard 48 h assay. Furthermore, no obvious difference in maximal killing was observed at high doses, indicating that no unique ring-stage resistance - such as that associated with artemisinins - was observed for MIPS-00034373.

To detect variants that may have evolved over the treatment period, four clones from each of the three flasks from the third attempt were isolated and sent for whole genome sequencing. While there were no common mutated genes observed across all clones, it was notable that many of the mutations occurred in genes encoding nuclear proteins involved in epigenetic processes, such as the histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SET2 (PF3D7_1322100) (Table 2, Supplementary Dataset 1).

**MIPS-0004373 displays limited transmission blocking potential with greatest potency against male gametocytes.** The activity of MIPS-0004373 against the sexual stages of the *P. falciparum* lifecycle was assessed to determine the transmission-blocking potential of the bis-1,2,4-triazine. The compound was tested for speed of action against gametocytes, stage-specific inhibition of gametocytes and inhibition of female and male gamete formation. The speed of action of bis-1,2,4-triazines against gametocytes at various stages of development was analysed using the luciferase time to kill assay. Ring stage (day 0) and mature stage V (day 12) $NF54^{Pfs16}$ strain gametocytes were incubated with MIPS-0004373 for 6 h (ring stages only), 24 h, 48 h and 72 h (Fig. 4), followed by measurement of luciferase activity as previously described (17, 18). This activity was then confirmed using the imaging-based stage-specificity study, by incubating ring stage (day 0), early stage (day two), late stage (day eight) and mature stage (day 12) gametocytes with the compound for 48 h, followed by imaging of the plates as previously described (19). MIPS-0004373 displayed potent inhibition of sexually-committed ring stage parasites with an $IC_{50}$ below 22 nM in both the luciferase and imaging assays. This indicates similar potency to that observed for artemisinin and methylene blue, and greater activity than chloroquine against sexually-committed rings (Fig. 4a).

The bis-1,2,4-triazine showed a fast onset of action, with killing observed after just 24 h treatment against both ring stage and mature gametocytes. However, as gametocytogenesis progressed, MIPS-0004373 showed a gradual decrease in activity. This was confirmed by the imaging stage assay where MIPS-0004373 activity was highest up to stage II of gametocytogenesis, with an $IC_{50}$ of 5.6 nM. The activity then declined as gametocytogenesis progressed, a 9-fold lower $IC_{50}$ of 49 nM was observed against stage IV gametocytes (Fig. 4b). The luciferase assay confirmed the reduced potency of MIPS-0004373 against stage IV parasites ($IC_{50}$ = 200 nM). Mature stage V gametocytes appeared largely insensitive to the

compound with an $IC_{50}$ >5 µM after a 48 h incubation period. When tested in the acridine orange female gamete formation assay (16), the compound did not inhibit the formation of female gametes up to a concentration of 20 µM.

The stage-specific activity of MIPS-0004373 was confirmed using the gametocyte high-content imaging assay (20). Here, efficacy against specific stages of intraerythrocytic gametocytes was determined after a 72 h incubation with MIPS-0004373, using puromycin and DMSO as the positive and negative control, respectively. This assay confirmed potent activity against younger gametocytes, with >80% reduction in stage I-III counts at MIPS-0004373 concentrations above 154 nM (Fig. S6). The broadened concentration response slope in stages IV-V suggest waning sensitivity to mature forms. Interestingly, significant activity was still observed against mature gametocytes (stage V) with an $IC_{50}$ of 255 ± 169 nM in this assay; however, a bottom plateau in the dose-response curve was missing, with maximal gametocytocidal effect (100% inhibition) resulting only at 12.5 µM. This remains significantly less potent than the 1 µM threshold that is commonly used to signify gametocytocidal activity.

The activity of the bis-1,2,4-triazine on male and female late stage gametocytes was tested using the dual gamete formation assay (21, 22). It has previously been shown that male gametocytes are more susceptible to a wide range of antimalarial compounds compared to female gametocytes (21). Furthermore, the ratio of gametocytes is generally female-biased (~3-5 females : 1 male), meaning non-sex specific assays may miss compounds that specifically inhibit male gametocytes or male gamete formation. MIPS-0004373 showed low micromolar activity in the male exflagellation assay (3.9 µM) and very slight activity against female gametocytes (>25 µM) (Fig. 5). Complete parasite inhibition was achieved at the highest concentration of 25 µM for male gametocytes, demonstrating weak activity against the male transmission-specific forms of the parasite.



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**Liver stages demonstrate species-specific susceptibility to bis-1,2,4-triazine treatment.** The activity of MIPS-0004373 was also assessed in the *P. berghei* liver stage assay, adapted from Swann *et al.* (20), which is based on the murine *P. berghei* species transfected to express firefly luciferase. This assay allows for the identification of compounds with activity against sporozoite infection of liver cells as well as those that decrease the viability of liver schizonts. MIPS-0004373 demonstrated potent liver stage activity in this assay ($IC_{50}$ 199 nM, 95% CI: 146.5 – 267.2 nM), with 100% parasite inhibition observed at ≥ 5.55 µM (Fig. 6A). A counterscreen with uninfected HepG2 cells was simultaneously performed to measure the potential cytotoxicity of MIPS-0004373 on host liver cells, using puromycin (5 µM) and DMSO (0.5%) as positive and negative controls, respectively. Compounds with 10-fold or greater potency against *P. berghei* liver stage development versus uninfected HepG2 cells can be considered to be specific for the parasite. The average $IC_{50}$ of MIPS-0004373 in HepG2 was 4.27 ± 0.099 µM (Fig. 6A), suggesting the potent activity against *P. berghei* exoerythrocytic forms is not a function of host cell toxicity.

To further investigate liver-stage activity, the *in vitro P. cynomolgi* liver stage culture platform (21) was utilized to determine the activity of MIPS-0004373 in a primate malaria model, closely related to *P. vivax*. *P. cynomolgi* is one of the few parasite species that produces hypnozoites, analogous to *P. vivax*. Previous work has found that two populations of parasites could be identified from primate livers infected with *P. cynomolgi*, small forms that resemble hypnozoites and large forms that resemble developing liver stage schizonts (21). MIPS-0004373 showed no activity against either *P. cynomolgi* small or large liver stage forms, even at the highest tested concentration of 10 µM (Fig. 6C).

The *in vitro* antimalarial activity profile of MIPS-0004373 that was generated in this study covers various stages of the complex *P. falciparum* lifecycle. This compound

represents an exciting new antimalarial series with potency in all asexual blood stage parasites (Table 3i) and a potential to evaluate future analogues for liver stage and transmission blocking activity (Table 3ii).

**MIPS-0004373 effectively clears *P. berghei* infection *in vivo*.** The *in vivo* efficacy of MIPS-0004373 was evaluated in the modified Thompson test (25) over a dose range of 2 to 64 mg/kg/day for 3 days against an established murine infection of *P. berghei*. The bis-1,2,4-triazine was well tolerated in mice up to the targeted dose of 64 mg/kg/day for 3 days with no observed physical adverse events such as loss of mobility, poor posture and ruffled fur coat. MIPS-0004373 cleared a mean starting *P. berghei* parasitemia of 2.14% (range: 1.02% to 3.26% for the three groups of mice treated with 64 mg/kg/day of the bis-1,2,4-triazine) in about 3 days, which was similar to the speed of action of chloroquine but slightly slower than that of artesunate given the same dose of 64 mg/kg/day for 3 days (Table 4). Lower doses of MIPS-0004373 did not clear the *P. berghei* infections. Daily monitoring of the mice after parasite clearance revealed recrudescences to occur at about day 5 in animals treated with artesunate. In contrast, mice treated with either MIPS-0004373 or chloroquine recrudesced about 8 days after commencement of treatment. Of note, one mouse with a parasitemia of 1.9% before commencement of treatment with 64 mg/kg/day of MIPS-0004373 was still blood film negative at day 31 of follow-up and was deemed to have been cured of the *P. berghei* infection. These findings show that the efficacy of MIPS-0004373 in the modified Thompson test is comparable to chloroquine and provides evidence that MIPS-0004373 has a killing effect similar to both artesunate and chloroquine.

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356

357 **DISCUSSION**

358 The management of malaria currently relies heavily on the use of ACTs for the treatment of
359 acute falciparum malaria. Recent reports of resistance to ACTs such as dihydroartemisinin-
360 piperaquine (26, 27), have emphasized the need to discover new antimalarial medicines with
361 novel mechanisms of action. Excitingly, some novel antimalarial chemotypes have recently
362 entered clinical trials. However, the drug development process is well known to be plagued
363 by attrition, which combined with the inevitable development of antimicrobial resistance,
364 highlights the need to discover and develop new antimalarial chemotypes. In addition, the
365 push towards an elimination and eradication agenda for malaria has gained momentum in
366 recent years, and these ambitious goals will require a range of antimalarials with activity
367 against different stages of the parasite in order to effectively eliminate the spread of disease.
368 The MMV has outlined a range of target candidate profiles with lists of requirements that are
369 necessary to address these specific needs, as described above (Table 1).

370 *In vitro* activity assays identified MIPS-0004373 to be fast acting and potent against
371 all three studied stages of the parasite asexual lifecycle. Importantly, the excellent potency
372 observed against all asexual stages differentiates the bis-1,2,4-triazines from other currently-
373 used antimalarials, providing a potential alternative to artemisinins and an advantage over the
374 currently used quinoline-based compounds (10). The combined potent activity of MIPS-
375 0004373 against ring stage asexual parasites and early stage gametocytes is distinct from
376 currently approved antimalarials and suggests that bis-1,2,4-triazines act by a different
377 mechanism of action. Attempts to generate robustly resistant parasites in order to study
378 potential mechanisms of action and resistance were unsuccessful, though the identification of
379 multiple mutations in epigenetic genes in the parasite clones exposed to MIPS-0004373 over

a 6-month period could provide some general clues to the pathway(s) involved in the triazine parasite-killing mechanism. It is possible that the observed mutations provide additional tolerance to the compound without conferring a true resistance phenotype as detected by standard dose-response methods. Alternative approaches are necessary to fully elucidate the mode of action. Nevertheless, the inability to select for robust resistance against this potent bis-1,2,4-triazine compound (MIPS-0004373) after >2 years of cumulative exposure is a promising attribute for future clinical development and usage (16). It has been shown previously that fast acting compounds have a lesser tendency for developing *de novo* resistance. Sanz *et al.* observed a positive correlation between fast onset of action and the inability to generate resistance (16, 28). This agrees with the results that were observed for MIPS-0004373 in the activity assays. Fast acting compounds have many benefits including rapid clearance of parasites, the ability to alleviate symptoms quickly and as mentioned, limiting the development of resistance (16). It has also been suggested that the nature of the target may be responsible for cases where resistance could not be generated, for example the target gene having mutational flexibility or the possibility that the compound inhibits several targets (16).

When tested in the rodent *P. berghei* modified Thompson test for radical cure, MIPS-0004373 was as potent as artesunate and chloroquine in clearing an established infection of *P. berghei* by 72 h after commencing oral treatment with 64 mg/kg/day over 3 days. Recrudescence occurred around 8 days after the commencement of MIPS-0004373 treatment, which is comparable to chloroquine, but demonstrates a killing effect similar to both artesunate and chloroquine . This extended activity of MIPS-0004373 is somewhat surprising given that pharmacokinetic studies have shown that MIPS-0004373 is rapidly cleared *in vivo (8)*, and may implicate prolonged exposure of an active metabolite, and/or superior reduction of parasitemia immediately following drug exposure. Interestingly, although the *in vitro* ring

stage survival assay revealed the presence of some rings with morphology that may indicate the induction of dormancy, similar to those observed following DHA treatment, it did demonstrate a longer time to recrudescence for MIPS-0004373 compared to DHA, which may suggest more efficient parasite killing by MIPS-0004373 even after a short 6 h period of exposure. Overall, the kinetics of antiparasitic activity *in vitro* and *in vivo*, and the inability to select for resistance *in vitro* (to date), support further development of the bis-1,2,4-triazine series to identify a lead candidate for the treatment of symptomatic malaria (TCP-1).

MIPS-0004373 displayed no activity against dormant liver stage, *P. cynomolgi* hypnozoites, and is therefore not suitable for relapse prevention (TCP-3). The *in vitro* infection of rhesus hepatocytes by *P. cynomolgi* sporozoites is considered the gold standard for measuring hypnozoite inhibition. However, the disadvantage of this method is the species difference of parasite and host cells. MIPS-0004373 also showed no activity against hepatic schizonts in the *P. cynomolgi* assay, but revealed an $IC_{50}$ of 199 nM against *P. berghei* liver stages. This may indicate species-specific differences in susceptibility of the liver stage parasites, or may suggest activity against the process of invasion and initial infection of hepatocytes in the *P. berghei* model, but inability to clear established infection in the *P. cynomolgi* model. It would be highly beneficial to discover an attractive TCP-4 molecule that displays activity against hepatic schizonts, or casual liver-stage activity, in order to provide chemoprotection. Whilst the lack of activity against *P. cynomolgi* liver stages indicates that the current series of bis-1,2,4-triazines are not suitable as a TCP-4 molecule, further investigations of the chemoprotective potential of this series are warranted. New assays have been developed recently for the analysis of the liver stages of malaria, such as micropatterned primary human hepatocyte co-cultures (29), and it is anticipated that the next generation of bis-1,2,4-triazines could be tested in these alternative assays to further interrogate the liver-stage activity in different parasite and host cell models.

MIPS-0004373 displayed potent activity against sexually-committed ring stage parasites, similar to that observed for artemisinin and methylene blue (**Fig. 4)**, and was more active than chloroquine. The bis-1,2,4-triazine demonstrated a fast onset of action against both ring stage and mature gametocytes, with growth inhibition observed after 24 h treatment. The observed onset of action is similar to that of artemisinin and methylene blue, suggesting MIPS-0004373 has activity against sexual stage parasites that is comparable to the current first line treatments. The inhibition of late stage gametocytes is a requirement of TCP-5 molecules in order to prevent transmission from the human host to the mosquito vector. Based on this criterion, MIPS-0004373 cannot be classified as a TCP-5 molecule, but the low level of activity suggests that further optimization may lead to the discovery of bis-1,2,4-triazine analogues that adequately target this stage. It has been shown that multiple compounds display far greater activity against male stage V gametocytes compared to female gametocytes (21), and MIPS-0004373 follows this trend. It appears that enhanced activity against mature female gametocytes is needed for the bis-1,2,4-triazines to effectively block transmission (TCP-5).

This study has demonstrated the suitability of bis-1,2,4-triazine antimalarials to be further investigated for clearance of asexual blood-stage parasitemia (TCP1). Further advancement of the bis-1,2,4-triazine series will focus on optimization of the pharmacokinetic and toxicity profile, while maintaining the excellent anti-parasitic potency. The stage-specific and sex-specific activity against gametocytes, and the species-specific activity against liver-stage schizonts, should be re-assessed with the next-generation of bis-1,2,4-triazines to determine whether preventative or transmission-blocking activity is feasible with this pharmacophore. It will be important to investigate the mechanism of action by which bis-1,2,4-triazine compounds inhibit *P. falciparum* parasite growth, as the identification of the protein target will allow for structure-based design, and for optimal

455 selection of combination regimens to be developed for future clinical usage.

456 Overall, the bis-1,2,4-triazine compounds have the potential to be further developed for
457 the treatment of uncomplicated malaria. Their fast onset of action against all asexual blood
458 stages, sustained suppression of parasitemia *in vivo* and the inability to easily select for
459 resistance are all attractive properties of these bis-1,2,4-triazine compounds.

460

461 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

462 **Culturing and tight synchronization of parasites.** Asexual *P. falciparum* 3D7 parasites
463 were cultured under standard conditions (30) with minor modifications, using RBCs
464 (Australian Red Cross Blood Service) at 2% hematocrit in modified RPMI 1640 medium
465 (10.4 g/L), HEPES (5.94 g/L), hypoxanthine (50 mg/L), $NaHCO_3$ (2.1 g/L) and Albumax (5
466 g/L) at 37°C under a defined atmosphere (Carbogen: 95% $N_2$, 4% $CO_2$, 1% $O_2$). Parasites
467 were routinely synchronized with 5% (wt/vol) D-sorbitol (31). Synchronization and
468 parasitemia were assessed by light microscopic evaluation of Giemsa-stained thin blood films
469 (>500 parasites counted per slide) and the hematocrit determined by counting cells with a
470 Brightline counting chamber hemocytometer (LW scientific).

471 To generate tightly synchronized 3D7 parasites (32), multiple rounds of sorbitol
472 treatments were performed. Cultures were tightly synchronized to a 2- to 3-h window with
473 two sorbitol treatments performed within 14- to 16-h of each other. When mature schizonts
474 began to burst and the ring:schizont ratio was greater than 2:1 a third sorbitol treatment was
475 performed.

476

477 **48 h growth inhibition assay using SYBR Green I.** The antimalarial activity of the bis-
478 1,2,4-triazine compound was determined using a standard drug sensitivity assay (33) by
479 exposing parasites to a drug dilution series (concentrations ranging from 0.25 nM to 200 nM)

for 48 h in a 96-well plate format. Briefly, stock solutions of the test compounds prepared in DMSO (1 mM) were first diluted with complete RPMI medium and then serially diluted with medium in a flat-bottomed 96-well plate to achieve a final volume of 50 µL in each well. An equal volume of parasites was then added to each well to achieve a final parasitemia of 0.5-1% and hematocrit of 2% in 100 µL of culture medium. Samples maintained under lethal MIPS-0004373 drug pressure (>200 nM) for 48 h acted as the control for 100% parasite killing and infected RBCs incubated without drug acted as the control for 100% parasite growth. Parasite cultures were incubated for 48 h at 37ºC under an atmosphere of 1% $O_2$, 5% $CO_2$ and 94% $N_2$.

After the 48 h incubation period, parasite drug susceptibility was assessed by the SYBR green assay, as previously described (33). Briefly, the culture medium in each well was refreshed and 100 µL of lysis buffer containing 0.1 µL/mL of SYBR Green I was added. The contents of the well were mixed until no RBC sediment remained and the plates were incubated for 1 h in the dark at room temperature. Fluorescence was then measured on an EnSpire Plate Reader (Perkin Elmer) with excitation and emission wavelengths of 485 nm and 530 nm, respectively, and a gain setting of 50 (33, 34). Data analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism (San Diego, CA) software by plotting the fluorescence values against the logarithm of the drug concentration and normalizing by the mean fluorescence intensities for the 100% growth and killing control wells. Curve fitting was performed using the sigmoidal 4 parameter logistic regression (4PL) function to determine the drug concentration that produced 50% growth inhibition ($IC_{50}$) relative to the drug-free control wells. Experiments were performed with triplicate technical replicates in at least two independent experiments.

504 ***In vitro* stage-specificity assays for asexual blood stage *P. falciparum*.** The drug pulse
505 parasite viability assay method was adapted from a previously described method (9). Drug
506 stocks were prepared in fresh RPMI medium and serially diluted with complete RPMI
507 medium in round bottom 96 well microtiter plates. Cultures were adjusted to achieve 1-2%
508 and final hematocrit of iRBCs and uRBCs adjusted to 0.2%. Plates were then incubated for 1
509 h or 5 h at 37 ºC under an atmosphere of 1% $O_2$, 5% $CO_2$ and 94% $N_2$. Following the 5 h
510 drug incubation period, cultures were washed three times with 200 µL of complete medium.
511 Cultures were then incubated at 37ºC under an atmosphere of 1% $O_2$, 5% $CO_2$ and 94% $N_2$
512 until assessment of parasitemia (~48 h for trophozoite and schizont stage assays, and slightly
513 longer, ~72 h, for ring stage assays to ensure highly sensitive analysis of mature parasites at
514 the time of assessment). Samples maintained under lethal MIPS-0004373 drug pressure
515 (>200 nM) for 48 h acted as the 100% parasite killing control and iRBCs incubated without
516 drug compound acted as the 100% growth control. After lysis, well contents were transferred
517 to a flat bottom 96 well plate for measurement of fluorescence with SYBR green I as
518 described above.
519
520 **Microscopic assessment of growth.** Synchronized ring stage (3 h P.I.) *P. falciparum* were
521 treated with MIPS-0004373 (120 nM) or vehicle (DMSO) control, and incubated for 5 h at
522 37ºC under an atmosphere of 1% $O_2$, 5% $CO_2$ and 94% $N_2$. Following the 5 h drug incubation
523 period, cultures were washed three times with complete medium. Cultures were then
524 incubated at 37ºC under an atmosphere of 1% $O_2$, 5% $CO_2$ and 94% $N_2$ until assessment of
525 parasitemia. Growth assessment was performed at 10, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, and 42 h post
526 drug addition, by Giemsa staining and light microscopy.
527

**Ring stage survival assay and dormancy assessment.** *P. falciparum* W2 parasites were maintained as described above and routinely synchronized with D-sorbitol. For the dormancy experiments, an additional synchronization with heparin was carried out prior to the experiment (35). Heparin (Pfizer, Australia) was added to culture (2 U/mL of culture) at late trophozoite to early schizont stage to prevent newly-released merozoites from invading RBCs. When cultures reached mature schizont stage, they were centrifuged at 500 × *g* for 5 min, resuspended in complete medium and incubated at 37°C at 90% $N_2$, 5% $CO_2$, 5% $O_2$ for an additional 3 h. Following incubation, the cultures were treated with D-sorbitol to remove remaining schizonts. This process resulted in highly synchronous cultures, typically >95% of parasites at the early ring stage (≤ 3 h P.I.).

Young ring (0-3 h P.I.) parasite cultures (3 mL or 6 mL) at 0.75–1.2% parasitemia and 4% hematocrit were exposed to MIPS-0004373 (1200 nM; ~150x $IC_{90}$ for W2) and to the reference drug DHA (stock prepared to 1 mM in 100% methanol) at 700 nM; for 6 h under normal growth conditions. The concentration of DHA (700 nM) used in the present study was in accord with dormancy studies of the W2 *P. falciparum* strain as previously described by Teuscher *et al*. (12) and Witkowski *et al*. (36). Following incubation, the drugs were removed by three washes with medium, resuspended in the original volume of complete medium and incubated at 37°C under normal growth conditions. Three experiments were performed. In the second and third experiments, parasite cultures were split in halves with one half (3 mL) treated with 5% D-sorbitol for 5 min at 30 h from the beginning of drug exposure and the other half left untreated. The D-sorbitol exposure ensures the removal of those parasites that had not become dormant but continued to grow. After sorbitol treatment, the cultures were plated in triplicates into the 96-well plates and monitored for parasite growth by microscopy and flow cytometry for 7–8 d. For flow cytometry analysis, samples (in triplicates) were stained with either the fluorescent nucleic acid intercalating dye, SYBR Green (Invitrogen,

Australia) or the mitochondrial vital dye Rhodamine 123 and then quantified by flow cytometry (FC500; Beckman Coulter, Australia). SYBR Green preferentially binds to parasitic nucleic acids and is a measure of parasitic growth but it does not allow for the distinction between dead and growing parasites. In contrast, the uptake of Rhodamine 123 is dependent on the negative mitochondrial membrane potential and is indicative of parasite viability (37).

Ring stage survival assays for MIPS-0004373-selected strain (resistance attempt 4, replicate 2; Fig S5F) and the parent $Dd2_{clone2}$ strain were completed in tandem as described above with minor modifications. Briefly, segmented schizonts were magnet harvested and left to invade fresh uRBCs before treatment with 5% (w/v) D-sorbitol 3 hours later to achieve cultures containing only young (0-3 h P.I) ring stage parasites. Cultures at 1% parasitaemia and 2% hematocrit were exposed to a dilution series of MIPS-0004373 starting at 700 nM for 6 h under normal growth conditions. Following incubation, the drug was removed by three washes with medium, resuspended in the original volume of complete medium and incubated at 37°C under normal growth conditions for a further 66 h. After which, the activity ($RSA_{0-3h}$ survival rate (%)) was analyzed using the SYBR Green I assay as described above. Three experiments were performed with two technical replicates.

**Method for development of resistance.** In the first two attempts, 3D7 strain parasites were continually subjected to low levels (1x $IC_{50}$) of MIPS-0004373 (5 nM). Parasite cultures were maintained as described above, and the activity ($IC_{50}$) was monitored weekly (if parasites were present) using the SYBR Green I assay described above. Selections occurred over 91 and 125 days. When parasites were growing well under these conditions a separate dish was prepared with drug concentration increased to 10 nM, however, parasites did not survive after three lifecycles in these conditions.

In the third and fourth attempts, three independent replicates of a clonal *P. falciparum* Dd2 parent population (~$1x10^9$ parasites per replicate) were subjected to increasing concentrations of MIPS-0004373. Cultures were tracked daily by Giemsa stained blood films, and maintained using similar methods to those outlined for 3D7 above. When parasitemia fell below 1-1.5%, cultures were treated with compound-free media and allowed to recrudesce. In order to measure for resistance in each replicate, MIPS-0004373 was tested in dose response as previously described (38). In the third attempt, the primary exposure started at 2x $IC_{50}$ ($Dd2_{clone1}$ $IC_{50}$: 8.75 ± 2.8 nM) and never exceeded 4x $IC_{50}$ over 186 days. In the fourth attempt, the primary exposure started at 1x $IC_{50}$ ($Dd2_{clone2}$ $IC_{50}$: 13 nM) and never exceeded 2.8x $IC_{50}$ over 365 days. After termination of the selection experiment, four clones were isolated from each of three flasks through limiting dilution and sent for whole genome sequencing.

**Whole genome sequencing and analysis.** Genomic DNA (gDNA) was obtained from MIPS-0004373 selected parasite samples (four clones isolated from each of three flasks in the third attempt described above) by washing infected RBCs with 0.05% saponin and isolating using the DNeasy Blood and Tissue Kit (Qiagen) following standard protocols. Sequencing libraries were prepared by the UCSD Institute for Genomic Medicine (IGM) Genomics Center using the Nextera XT kit (Cat. No FC-131-1024, Illumina) with 2ng input gDNA and standard dual indexing. Libraries were sequenced on the Illumina HiSeq 2500 (PE100, RapidRun mode) to an average of 49x mean whole genome coverage (Table S1). Raw sequencing data were deposited to the NCBI Sequence Read Archive under accession PRJNA748017.

Sequencing reads were aligned to the *P. falciparum* 3D7 reference genome (PlasmoDB v13.0) and pre-processed following a previously described pipeline (39).

Mutations were called using GATK HaplotypeCaller, filtered by quality according to GATK recommendations (40, 41), and annotated with SnpEff (42). Finally, mutations that were present in both the compound-exposed clones and the non-exposed Dd2 parent line were removed so that mutations in the final variant calling dataset were only retained if they arose during the course of treatment with MIPS-0004373.

**Luciferase gametocyte assay (time to kill study) and AO female gamete formation assay.** *P. falciparum* 3D7A and NF54$^{Pfs16}$ asexual stages were grown in RPMI 1640 supplemented with 25 mM HEPES, 5% AB human male serum, 2.5 mg/mL Albumax II, and 0.37 mM hypoxanthine. Gametocytes were obtained by standard induction methods, described earlier (43). Gametocytes at various stages of development were exposed to the experimental compound in 384-well luciferase (Optiplate, PerkinElmer) or imaging (CellCarrier, PerkinElmer) microplates as previously described (17-19, 44). Artemisinin, chloroquine, dihydroartemisinin, methylene blue, puromycin, pyronaridine, and/or pyrimethamine were used as reference compounds. Puromycin 5 µM and 0.4% DMSO were used as positive and negative controls, respectively. A 10 mM stock solution of the compound in 100% DMSO was diluted in water (1:25) and culture (1:10) to a final DMSO concentration of 0.4%. Chloroquine stock solution was prepared in water and diluted as the other compounds. All the compounds were tested in either 16-concentration or 21-concentration full dose-response, using three concentrations per log dose. All sample and control wells contained the same final amounts of solvents. Plates were incubated with compounds at 90% $N_2$, 5% $CO_2$, 5% $O_2$. Readout data were normalized to positive and negative controls to obtain % inhibition data, which were then used to calculate $IC_{50}$ values, through a 4-parameter logistic curve fitting function in GraphPad Prism.

628 The compound was tested for speed of action against gametocytes at different times
629 of development. Ring stage and mature stage V *P. falciparum* NF54$^{Pfs16}$ gametocytes on day
630 0 and day 12 of gametocytogenesis, respectively, were incubated with compounds for 6 h
631 (ring stages only), 24, 48 and 72 h. After the incubation, the luciferase activity was measured
632 as previously described (17, 18). A 0 h-incubation luciferase artifact test was also carried out
633 on sexually-committed rings to rule out an artifactual direct inhibition of the luciferase
634 enzyme. In addition, the compound was tested for female gamete formation by exposing
635 mature stage V gametocytes on day 12 of gametocytogenesis to the compound for 48 h,
636 followed by staining with acridine orange and activation with xanthurenic acid, as previously
637 described (19). The experiment was carried out in two independent experiments, each
638 consisting of two replicates.
639
640 **Gametocyte high-content imaging assay.** Stage specific gametocytes were generated using
641 previously described methods (20). Briefly, 100 mL asexual blood stage cultures of *P.*
642 *falciparum* NF54 were grown to 7-10% parasitemia following a triple synchronization with
643 5% (w/v) D-sorbitol. To induce gametocyte formation, cultures were given 50% spent media
644 for 24 h, followed by daily fresh complete media changes thereafter. Post induction, media
645 was supplemented with 50 mM N-acetyl glucosamine (NAG) for 9 days to prevent reinvasion
646 of asexual stage parasites. 48 h post induction, magnetically activated cell sorting (MACS)
647 was performed followed by sorbitol synchronization the next day. Cultures were followed by
648 daily blood film to determine quantity and maturation of gametocytes. To perform the dose
649 response assay, 50 nL of test compounds (12.5 to $2.12x10^{-4}$ µM) were first pre-spotted into
650 black clear bottom 384-well plates (Greiner) using an acoustic transfer system (ATS)
651 (Biosero). Stage specific gametocyte cultures were diluted to 0.50% gametocytemia using
652 serum-free screening media at 1.25% hematocrit, of which 40 µL were dispensed per well.

NAG was added (50 mM) to screening assays containing gametocyte stages I-IV, but not stage V. Breathable metal lids were used to cover the plates, which were incubated at 37ºC for 72 h under low oxygen conditions. A solution of MitoTracker® Red CMXRos (2.5 µM) (Life Technologies) and saponin (0.13% w/v) (ACROS Organics, cat. No 419231000) was prepared in screening media, and 10 µL was added to each plate well post incubation. Plates were reincubated at 37ºC for 90 min to allow for complete lysis. Test plates were then sealed with adhesive aluminum lids. Images were acquired using an Operetta high content imaging system (PerkinElmer), and image analysis was handled by the onboard Harmony software. All assays were conducted in biological duplicate. Data were normalized against controls, and nonlinear regression analysis was performed in Prism 7 (GraphPad Software, La Jolla, CA) to determine $IC_{50}$s (log inhibitor versus normalized response – variable slope).

**Dual gamete formation assay.** MIPS-0004373 and Gentian Violet (positive control) were plated onto 384 well plates in dose response using a Tecan D300e Digital Dispenser. The *P. falciparum* Dual Gamete Formation Assay was performed as described by Delves *et al.* (22). Briefly, gametocyte cultures of NF54 strain *P. falciparum* parasites were initiated at 1% ring parasitemia and culture medium changed whilst maintaining parasites and medium at 37°C at all times. On day 14 after induction, when male stage V gametocytes showed high levels of exflagellation when induced, 50 µL of culture at 12.5 million cells per mL (approx. 2-4% gametocytemia) was dispensed into each well of compound-treated plates at 37°C. Gametocytes were incubated with compounds for 48 h before gametogenesis was induced by briefly cooling the plate at 4°C and by the addition of ookinete medium containing xanthurenic acid and a Cy3-conjugated antibody specific for Pfs25. Exflagellation was read 20 min after induction by automated brightfield microscopy and exflagellation centres identified using custom automated software. Afterwards, the plate was maintained at 26°C in

678 the dark to allow emerged female gametes to express the surface marker Pfs25. 24 h later,
679 female gametes were detected by automated fluorescence microscopy and quantified by
680 custom automated software. Inhibition of male and female gametogenesis was calculated
681 with reference to positive (12.5 µM Gentian Violet) and negative (DMSO) controls using the
682 following formula:

683 % inhibition = 100 – (((TEST COMPOUND-POSITIVE CONTROL)/(NEGATIVE
684 CONTROL-POSITIVE CONTROL)) x 100)

685 Compounds were tested in four independent replicates.

686

687 ***P. cynomolgi* liver stage assay**. For each batch of *P. cynomolgi* sporozoites required, one
688 rhesus macaque was infected with blood stage parasites, mosquitoes were fed at the
689 appropriate time point and monitored for infection rate (24). Sporozoites were harvested from
690 *P. cynomolgi* infected mosquitoes, around 16 days after the infected blood meal. *In vitro*
691 infections of primary rhesus hepatocytes with *P. cynomolgi* sporozoites (spz) were performed
692 according to Zeeman *et al.* (24). At day six post infection (P.I.) the assays were fixed and
693 stained with anti *P. cynomolgi*-Hsp 70 rabbit antiserum and a FITC-labeled secondary
694 antibody (Goat-anti-rabbit). Plates were analyzed with the Operetta high content imaging
695 system, differentially counting hypnozoites and developing EEFs, based on parasite size (24).

696

697 ***P. berghei* liver stage assay.** Cell maintenance and liver stage activity was evaluated using
698 methods previously described (23). Briefly, $3x10^3$ HepG2-A16-CD81$^{EGFP}$ cells were plated
699 per well (5 µL) of 1536-well, white, opaque-bottom plates (ref# 789173-F, Greiner Bio-One)
700 in DMEM (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, USA) (supplemented with 10% FCS, 0.29 mg/mL
701 glutamine, 100 units penicillin, and 100 µg/mL streptomycin). Cells were allowed to adhere

for 2-4 h before test compounds were added (50 nL/well) in dose response titrations (50 – $2.82x10^{-4}$ µM) using a Gen 4 Acoustic Transfer System (Biosero) for an 18 h pre-incubation. Atovaquone (1 µM) and puromycin (5 µM) were used as positive controls for infected and cytotoxicity plates, respectively. DMSO (0.5%) was used as the negative control in all plates. The next day, *P. berghei*-ANKA-GFP-Luc-$SM_{CON}$ sporozoites were dissected from infected *Anopheles stephensi* mosquitoes, purchased from the insectary core at New York University. Parasite yields were quantified by phase contrast microscopy, and diluted to 200 sporozoites/µL in media (supplemented with 5x penicillin and streptomycin to inhibit contamination from mosquito debris). 5 µL of this solution was dispensed (final well volume 10 µL) into each well of an infected plate from a single tip bottle valve liquid handler (GNF), followed by a 3 min centrifugation (Eppendorf 5810 R) at 330 x *g* and low brake. The addition of hepatocytes and compounds were identical for plates evaluating cytotoxicity (uninfected), with a final 5 µL of clean media added to each well (final well volume 10 µL). All plates were incubated at 37ºC (5% $CO_2$) and high relative humidity to mitigate media evaporation from wells.

After a 48 h incubation, infected plates were inverted and spun at 150 x *g* for 30 s to remove media. BrightGlo (Promega) was then added (2 µL) to each well using a MicroFlo liquid handler (BioTek). Immediately after the addition, plates were gently tapped to ensure the reagents made contact with the cells before bioluminescence was read using an EnVision Multilabel plate reader (PerkinElmer). CellTiter-Glo (Promega) was first diluted 1:1 before it could be used to quantify bioluminescence in the cytotoxicity assay. Uninfected plates were inverted and spun as before, prior to dispensing 2 µL of diluted CellTiter-Glo in each plate well. Plates were gently tapped and left for 10 min before reading with an EnVision Multilabel plate reader.

For both infected and uninfected assays, $IC_{50}$s were calculated by normalizing data to controls before fitting a nonlinear regression model (log inhibitor versus normalized response – variable slope) using Prism 7 (GraphPad Software, La Jolla, CA).

***In vivo* efficacy of MIPS-0004373 in the modified Thompson test.** Animal Resources Centre (ARC, Perth, Western Australia) female mice (aged 5-7 weeks old, mean body mass of 28.4 ± 1.9 g) in groups of six were infected with $2 \times 10^6$ *P. berghei* ANKA strain-infected RBCs on day 0 (D0). By D+3 P.I., parasitemia was typically about 1-3%. The MIPS-0004373 treated groups were administered two-fold increases in MIPS-0004373 dose (e.g., 2 to 64 mg/kg/day). The reference drugs, artesunate and chloroquine were used to gain an insight into the performance of the modified Thompson test at an oral dose of 64 mg/kg/day. MIPS-0004373 and artesunate were prepared in Milli-Q water containing 10% ethanol and 10% Tween 80. Chloroquine was dissolved in Milli-Q water. The drugs were administered via oral gavage on days D+3, D+4 and D+5 post-infection at 24 h intervals. Blood samples for flow cytometry and thin blood films were taken daily for 9-10 days and then twice weekly thereafter until the end of the test on day +31.

The degree of infection (i.e., parasitemia) was determined by flow cytometry (FC500; Beckman Coulter) using acridine orange as the nucleic acid stain as described by Hein-Kristensen *et al.* (45) with quality assurance using microscopy. The blood samples for flow cytometry and preparation of thin blood films were collected by clipping the mouse's tail tip with a scalpel blade and milking a drop of blood (about 20 µL). The thin blood film slides were stained with Giemsa for microscopy analysis. For the assessment of radical cure in the modified Thompson test, recurrence of *P. berghei* infection was tabulated for 31 days, at which time all mice surviving that were blood film negative were deemed cured.

**Ethical approval.** All rhesus macaques (*Macaca mulatta*) used in this study were captive bred for research purposes and were housed at the BPRC facilities under compliance with the Dutch law on animal experiments, European directive 2010/63/EU and with the 'Standard for humane care and use of Laboratory Animals by Foreign institutions' identification number A5539-01, provided by the Department of Health and Human Services of the USA National Institutes of Health (NIH). The BPRC is an AAALAC-certified institute. Prior to the start of monkey experiments, protocols were approved by the local independent ethical committee, according to Dutch law. The procedures used for the *in vivo* efficacy studies in mice were in accordance with the Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes. The ethical approval to conduct tolerability and efficacy study of MIPS-0004373 in the *P. berghei*-mouse model using the modified Thompson test was approved by the Defence Animal Ethics Committee, Australian Defence Organisation (approval numbers: 3/2014, 03/2015 and 02/2016).

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**Tables:**

**TABLE 1.** Summary of MMV target candidate profiles (TCPs) for new antimalarial medicines (4).

| Profile | Intended use |
|---|---|
| TCP-1 | Molecules that clear asexual blood-stage parasitemia |
| TCP-3 | Molecules with activity against hypnozoites (mainly *P. vivax*) |
| TCP-4 | Molecules with activity against hepatic schizonts |
| TCP-5 | Molecules that block transmission (targeting parasite gametocytes) |
| TCP-6 | Molecules that block transmission by targeting the insect vector (endectocides) |

**TABLE 2.** Select coding mutations identified in Dd2 parasites exposed to MIPS-0004373 for 6 months. The full set of mutations are provided in Supplementary Dataset 1.

| Flask | Clone Name | Gene ID | Gene Description | Mutation Type | Amino Acid Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | A9 | PF3D7_0510100 | KH domain-containing protein | Disruptive inframe deletion | Ser2328_Gly2332del |
| | | PF3D7_1471600 | conserved *Plasmodium* protein, unknown function | Missense | Asp987Tyr |
| | B3 | PF3D7_1322100 | histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SET2 | Nonsense | Leu884* |
| | D1 | PF3D7_0609200 | citrate synthase-like protein | Missense | Asn39Tyr |
| | | PF3D7_1322100 | histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SET2 | Nonsense | Leu884* |
| | H8 | No coding mutations of interest | | | |
| 2 | D3 | PF3D7_1462400 | conserved *Plasmodium* protein, unknown function | Nonsense | Tyr2603* |
| | D12 | PF3D7_1008100 | PHD finger protein PHD1 | Missense | His1762Tyr |
| | | PF3D7_1456500 | STAG domain-containing protein | Missense | Thr66Ala |
| | | PF3D7_1462400 | conserved *Plasmodium* protein, unknown function | Nonsense | Tyr2603* |
| | F8 | No coding mutations of interest | | | |
| | H1 | PF3D7_1459200 | WD repeat-containing protein | Frameshift | Val359fs |
| 3 | B11 | PF3D7_1322100 | histone-lysine N- | Nonsense | Leu884* |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | methyltransferase SET2 | | |
| | C9 | PF3D7_1205500 | zinc finger protein | Missense | Trp678Leu |
| | F1 | No coding variants of interest | | | |
| | H6 | PF3D7_1322100 | histone-lysine N-methyltransferase SET2 | Nonsense | Leu884* |

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970 **TABLE 3.** Summary of MIPS-0004373 activity across the complex *P. falciparum* lifecycle.

971 **i.** $IC_{50}$ data of asexual staged parasites from liver and blood cycles **ii.** $IC_{50}$ data of sexual

972 stages.

| **3i** | **Summary of MIPS-0004373 activity of asexual stage *P. cynomolgi*, *P. berghei* or *P. falciparum* (nM)** | | | | | **Fig#** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Liver stage | Ring | Trophozoite | Schizont | Asynchronous stages | |
| ***P. cynomolgi* (hypnozoite inhibition)** | >10 000 | | | | | 6A |
| ***P. berghei* 48 h $IC_{50}$ survival assay** | 199 (46.5-267.2)* | | | | | 6B |
| ***P. falciparum* 3D7 1 h pulse $IC_{50}$ survival assay** | | | 171 ± 62 | | | 2B |
| ***P. falciparum* 3D7 5 h pulse $IC_{50}$ survival assay** | | 61 ± 29 | 28 ± 8, 32 ± 11 | 56 ± 3 | | 2A, 2B |
| ***P. falciparum* 3D7 48 h $IC_{50}$ survival assay** | | | 4 ± 1 | | | 2B |
| ***P. falciparum* 3D7 72 h $IC_{50}$ survival assay** | | | | | 8 ± 4 | Ref (6) |

973 Values show the mean ± SD of at least three biological replicates with at least two technical

974 repeats. *95% confidence interval.

| **3ii** | **Summary of MIPS-0004373 activity of sexual stage *P. falciparum* (nM)** | | | | | | **Fig #** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Committed ring | Stage II gametocyte | Stage IV gametocyte | Mature stage V gametocyte | Male | Female | |
| **NF54 24 h time to kill assay** | 3 ± 1 | | | >1000 | | | 4A |
| **NF54 48 h time to kill assay** | 8 ± 3 | | | 4514 ± 1635 | | | 4A |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **NF54 72 h time to kill assay** | 22 ± 5 | | | 1997 ± 1335 | | | 4A |
| **72 h NF54 high content imaging assay** | 5 ± 0.1 | 6 ± 1 | 49 ± 15 | 255 ± 169 | | | 4B |
| **Dual gamete formation assay** | | | | | 3903 ± 184* | > 25 000* | 5 |
| **AO female gamete assay** | | | | | | >20 000 | |

Data shows the means ± SEM of two biological replicates with two technical replicates.

*Mean ± SD of one biological experiment with four replicates.





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977

978 **TABLE 4.** *In vivo* efficacy of MIPS-0004373, artesunate and chloroquine against established

979 *P. berghei* infection in the modified Thompson test.

| | Dose<br>64 mg/kg/day x 3 | Experiment 1. | Experiment 2. | Experiment 3. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Starting parasitemia*<br>(%) for treatment at D0<br>(mean: range) | | 1.68<br>(0.54-3.26) | 1.68<br>(1.43-2.13) | 1.65<br>(1.02-2.23) |
| Day of parasite clearance after starting treatment | MIPS-0004373 | D+3 | D+4 | D+2 |
| | Artesunate | D+3 | D+2 | D+2 |
| | Chloroquine | D+3 | D+3 | D+3 |
| Day of recrudescence after starting treatment | MIPS-0004373 | D+8 | D+7 | D+8 |
| | Artesunate | D+5 | D+5 | D+4 |
| | Chloroquine | D+8 | D+8 | D+8 |

980 *****Mean (range) parasitemia values based on flow cytometry for the drug treated and vehicle

981 control groups of mice. N = 6 mice per group.

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985 **Figure Legends**

986

987 **Figure 1:** The representative bis-1,2,4-triazine, MIPS-0004373

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**Figure 2:** *In vitro* assessment of stage-specificity and rate of action of MIPS-0004373 against the 3D7 strain of *P. falciparum*. **A**. Asexual blood stage $IC_{50}$ values for MIPS-0004373 against early ring stages (3-6 h P.I.), trophozoites (30-36 h P.I.) and schizonts (36-40 h P.I) after a 5 h pulse. **B**. $IC_{50}$ values for MIPS-0004373 (black bars) and chloroquine (grey bars) after 1, 5 and 48 h drug pulses against *P. falciparum* trophozoites (30-36 h P.I.). Graphs show the mean ± SD, n = 5.

**Figure 3:** Live parasite dynamics following 6 h exposure to MIPS-0004373 or DHA. The live *P. falciparum* W2 parasites were detected by staining with Rhodamine 123. At 32 h after the commencement of the experiment, the cultures were split and one half was treated with 5% sorbitol (designated as W2 Control/Sorb, MIPS-0004373/Sorb and DHA/Sorb, whereas the other half was left untreated (designated as W2 Control, MIPS-0004373, DHA). Means ± SD based on two independent experiments, each consisting of triplicate replicates.

**Figure 4:** Activity and speed of action of MIPS-0004373 against gametocytes. **A**. Sexually-committed rings (SCR) and mature stage gametocytes (MSG) were exposed to the compound for 24, 48 or 72 h and gametocyte inhibition was analysed by luciferase activity. $IC_{50}$ curves for MIPS-0004373 (red), methylene blue (blue), puromycin (green), chloroquine (yellow) and artemisinin (pink). Puromycin was included as the positive control. Two independent experiments, each consisting of two replicates. **B**. The bis-1,2,4-triazine potently inhibits sexually-committed rings, although it has low activity on mature gametocytes. $IC_{50}$ curves for sexually-committed rings (green), day two early stage gametocytes (blue), day eight late stage gametocytes (black), and day 12 MSG (red). Data shows the means ± SEM of two biological replicates with two technical replicates.

**Figure 5:** Bis-1,2,4-triazine activity in late stage male and female gametocytes. $IC_{50}$ curves for **A.** the control compound, Gentian Violet, and **B.** MIPS-0004373 in male gametocytes (blue) and female gametocytes (red). Data shows the means ± SD of one biological experiment with four replicates.

**Figure 6:** *In vitro* chemoprotective effect of MIPS-0004373 against liver stage parasites. **A**. Freshly dissected *P. berghei* sporozoites expressing luciferase were dispensed onto HepG2 hepatocytes pretreated with increasing concentrations of MIPS-0004373. Activity was determined from the bioluminescence of viable parasites after a 48 h incubation, during which MIPS-0004373 (black circle) acted in a dose dependent manner. Average survival (%) of extra-erythrocytic forms (EEFs) is shown against atovaquone (1 µM; purple dashed line) and DMSO (0.5%; blue dashed line). **B.** Uninfected HepG2 hepatocytes showed susceptibility to MIPS-0004373 (black circle) at ≥ 5.55 µM, but remain largely insensitive at concentrations relevant to antimalarial effect. Average HepG2 survival (%) is shown with puromycin (5 µM; green dashed line) and DMSO (0.5%; blue dashed line). These data represent three biological replicates against *P. berghei* liver stages and four biological replicates in the HepG2 cytotoxicity evaluation (error bars = SEM). **C.** Three point 10-fold dilution series (0.1, 1, and 10 µM) for MIPS-0004373 activity against *P. cynomolgi* liver stage cultures. The percentage of untreated control is shown as a function of test compound concentration. Differential counting of schizonts and hypnozoite forms was performed based on size and number of parasite nuclei. The results of three assays are shown. KAI407 is included as a positive control known to have a liver stage activity profile similar to that of primaquine (24), and the untreated samples are vehicle controls (DMSO). Small liver stage forms are represented by the dark bars and large forms by the light bars.

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