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A one health approach to investigating an outbreak of alimentary tick-borne encephalitis in a non-endemic area in France (Ain, Eastern France): a longitudinal serological study in livestock, detection in ticks, and the first TBE virus isolation and molecular characterization

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1 **A one health approach to investigating an outbreak of alimentary tick-borne encephalitis in a**
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4
5 Gaëlle Gonzalez^{1*#}, Laure Bournez^{2*#}, Rayane Amaral Moraes¹, Marine Dumarest¹, Clémence Galon³,
6 Fabien Vorimore⁴, Maxime Cochin⁵, Antoine Nougairède⁵, Catherine Hennechart-Collette⁷, Sylvie
7 Perelle⁷, Isabelle Leparc-Goffart^{5,6}, Guillaume André Durand^{5,6}, Gilda Grard^{5,6}, Thomas Bénet⁸,
8 Nathalie Danjou⁹, Martine Blanchin⁹, Sandrine A Lacour¹, Franck Boué², Guillaume Chenut¹⁰,
9 Catherine Mainguet¹⁰, Catherine Simon¹⁰, Laurence Brémont¹⁰, Stephan Zientara¹, Sara Moutailler³,
10 Sandra Martin-Latil⁷, Nolwenn M Dheilly^{1*}, Cécile Beck^{1*} and Sylvie Lecollinet^{1,11,12*}.

11 * These authors contributed equally to this work.

12 # Corresponding authors.

13

14 ¹ Anses, INRAE, Ecole Nationale Vétérinaire d'Alfort, UMR VIROLOGIE, Laboratoire de Santé
15 Animale, Maisons-Alfort, F-94700, France

16 ² Anses, Nancy Laboratory for Rabies and Wildlife, , CS 40009, F-54220 Malzéville, France

17 ³ Anses, INRAE, Ecole Nationale Vétérinaire d'Alfort, UMR BIPAR, Laboratoire de Santé Animale,
18 Maisons-Alfort, F-94700, France

19 ⁴ Laboratory for Animal Health, Bacterial Zoonosis Unit, ANSES Maisons-Alfort, Paris-Est University,
20 94706 Paris, France

21 ⁵ Unité des Virus Émergents (UVE: Aix-Marseille Univ-IRD 190-Inserm 1207-IHU Méditerranée
22 Infection), F-13000 Marseille, France

23 ⁶ French National Reference Centre for Arbovirus, Armed Forces Biomedical Research Institute, F-
24 13000 Marseille, France.

25 ⁷ Université Paris-Est, ANSES Laboratory for Food Safety, F-94700 Maisons-Alfort, France.

26 ⁸ Santé Publique France, French public health Agency, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional office, F-69418
27 Lyon, France

28 ⁹ ~~NOTE: This preprint reports new research that has not been certified by peer review and should not be used to guide clinical practice~~
Regional Health Agency (Agence régionale de Santé) Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, F-69000, Lyon, France

29 ¹⁰ Local Health Authority, Ain county (Direction Départementale de la Protection de la Population de
30 l'Ain), F-01000, Bourg-en-Bresse, France

31 ¹¹ Current position CIRAD, UMR ASTRE, F-97170 Petit Bourg, France.

32 ¹² Current position ASTRE, CIRAD, INRAE, Univ Montpellier, F-34000 Montpellier, France.

33

34

35 **Abstract**

36 Tick borne encephalitis virus geographic range and human incidence is increasing throughout Europe,
37 putting a number of non-endemic regions and countries at risk of outbreaks. In spring 2020, there was
38 an outbreak of TBE in Ain, Eastern France, where the virus had never been detected before. All patients
39 but one had consumed traditional unpasteurized raw goat cheese from a local producer. We conducted
40 an investigation in the suspected farm using an integrative One Health approach. Our methodology
41 included (i) the detection of virus in cheese and milk products, (ii) serological testing of all animals in
42 the suspected farm and surrounding farms, (iii) an analysis of the landscape and localisation of wooded
43 area, (iv) the capture of questing ticks and small mammals for virus detection and estimating enzootic
44 hazard, and (v) virus isolation and genome sequencing. This approach allowed us to confirm the
45 alimentary origin of the TBE outbreak and to witness in real time the seroconversion of recently exposed
46 individuals and the excretion of virus in goat milk. In addition, we identified a wooded focus area where
47 and around which there is a risk of TBEV exposure. We provide the first TBEV isolate responsible for
48 as a source of dietary contamination in France, obtained its full-length genome sequence, and found that
49 it does not cluster very closely neither with the isolate circulating in Alsace nor with any other isolate
50 within the European lineage. TBEV is now a notifiable human disease in France, which should facilitate
51 surveillance of TBEV incidence and distribution throughout France.

52 Introduction

53 Tick-borne encephalitis (TBE), caused by tick-borne encephalitis virus (TBEV) is the most
54 important tick-borne zoonotic disease in Europe and Asia from a medical perspective (Süss 2011).
55 Indeed, even though TBEV infection in humans often causes unspecific febrile symptoms and remain
56 un-noticed, it can result in severe neurological diseases including encephalitis, meningitis, and
57 meningoencephalitis, with frequent incomplete recovery and more rarely death (Bogovic, Lotric-Furlan
58 et al. 2010, Kohlmaier, Schweintzger et al. 2021). TBEV is a positive-sense, single-stranded RNA virus
59 of the genus *Flavivirus*, family *Flaviviridae* that circulates preferably among ticks of the genus *Ixodes*
60 and small mammals, but large mammals and migrating birds also contribute to the virus geographic
61 distribution and dispersion (Labuda, Kozuch et al. 1997, Randolph, Miklisová et al. 1999, Waldenström,
62 Lundkvist et al. 2007, Lindquist and Vapalahti 2008, Gunnar, Gunnar et al. 2009, Jaenson, Hjertqvist et
63 al. 2012, Tonteri, Jokelainen et al. 2016, Paulsen, Stuen et al. 2019). TBE results most often from tick
64 bites, however cases can also result from consumption of unpasteurized milk or dairy products from
65 infected cows, goats and ewes (Gresíková, Sekeyová et al. 1975, Holzmann, Aberle et al. 2009, Balogh,
66 Ferenczi et al. 2010, Cisak, Wójcik-Fatla et al. 2010, Caini, Szomor et al. 2012, Hudopisk, Korva et al.
67 2013, Markovinović, Kosanović Ličina et al. 2016, Brockmann, Oehme et al. 2018, Dorko, Hockicko
68 et al. 2018, Ilic, Barbic et al. 2020, Chitimia-Dobler, Lindau et al. 2021). Indeed, ruminants are also
69 infected when bitten by an infected tick. Even if they remain asymptomatic, virus excretion in milk has
70 been reported for cows, sheep, and goats (Gresíková, Sekeyová et al. 1975, Balogh, Ferenczi et al. 2010,
71 Cisak, Wójcik-Fatla et al. 2010, Caini, Szomor et al. 2012). Pasteurization prevents TBEV transmission
72 through inactivation of virus infectivity (Rónai and Egyed 2020). The increasing geographic range of
73 TBEV, and its patchy distribution around local foci puts an increasing number of countries at risk of
74 sporadic occurrence of TBEV infections that can be both difficult to diagnose and to prevent (Blaskovic
75 1967, Deviatkin, Kholodilov et al. 2020).

76 TBEV is endemic throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and has so far been detected in
77 twenty-seven European countries. In the past decades, TBE human incidence has been increasing in
78 several European countries (ECDC 2012, ECDC 2018), with new foci detected in the UK (Holding,
79 Dowall et al. 2020) and Netherlands (Jahfari, de Vries et al. 2017) and TBEV areas expanding in

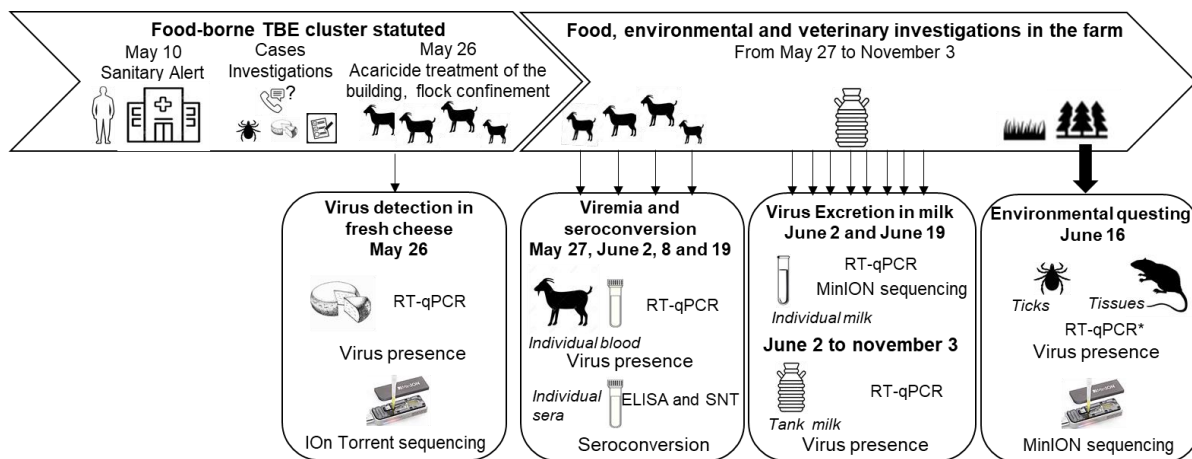
80 previously unaffected areas (Daniel, Danielová et al. 2004, Lukan, Bullova et al. 2010, Donoso Mantke,
81 Escadafal et al. 2011, Martello, Mannelli et al. 2014, Brabec, Daniel et al. 2017, Rieille, Klaus et al.
82 2017, Hellenbrand, Kreusch et al. 2019, Alfano, Tagliapietra et al. 2020). These observations associated
83 to evidence of a recent increase of TBEV diversity in Europe suggest that TBEV may be regarded as an
84 emerging disease (Deviatkin, Kholodilov et al. 2020). France is located on the border of the known
85 distribution of TBEV in Europe and very few human cases are usually diagnosed annually, mainly in
86 the Alsace region (about 10-30 cases per year, 0.5/100,000 inhabitants), based on suspect clinical
87 presentation and on the detection of TBEV-specific antibodies (Hansmann, Pierre Gut et al. 2006, Herpe,
88 Schuffenecker et al. 2007, Donoso Mantke, Escadafal et al. 2011, Velay, Solis et al. 2018).

89 Herein, we report the first outbreak of alimentary TBEV in France and describe the investigation
90 that was conducted within the suspected farm and surrounding area. In April 2020, an outbreak of
91 encephalitis and meningo-encephalitis occurred in the Ain department (Eastern France) where TBEV
92 had never been detected before and a sanitary alert was decreed on May 10. Within a month,
93 epidemiological investigation evidenced that 43 TBE patients with encephalitis, meningo-encephalitis
94 or flu-like symptoms but one had consumed unpasteurized goat cheese or “faisselle” coming from a
95 single local producer (REF TWIN PAPER). The suspected goat flocks were rapidly confined into stall,
96 unpasteurized goat cheese production was stopped, raw cheese produced before the alert were
97 withdrawn from commercial markets, and an investigation was conducted within the farm. We
98 confirmed the alimentary transmission by demonstrating the presence of TBEV in a batch of cheese,
99 and in goat milk. We also monitored the serological status and virus excretion in milk of the animals
100 after control measures had been established, and demonstrated their efficacy, since no TBEV infection
101 have been reported later than early June. We assessed enzootic hazard for animal exposure through tick
102 bite measured as the density of infected ticks in the pasture and in the neighbour woodland. The full-
103 length virus genome sequence was obtained from milk, cheese and tick samples allowing the virus
104 molecular characterization, and an isolate was obtained. Finally, we assessed TBEV seroprevalence in
105 surrounding farms, to evaluate whether TBEV had been silently established in the area or not.

106 **Material and methods**

107 An overview of the timeline of sampling collections is provided in Figure 1.

108



109

110 Figure 1. Timeline of the food, environmental and veterinary investigations and sampling scheme,
111 April- November 2020

112

113 Cheese sampling

114 Cases investigations performed by the French public health Agency pointed out that one case still had
115 cheese from the suspected farm at home at the time of the investigation. This fresh cheese was produced
116 on April 28. The Ain local authorities recalled cheese produced at the suspected farm. Five samples
117 from the batch produced on April 28 and 74 from other batches were sent to the National Reference
118 Centre (NRC) for Arboviruses for screening of TBE genome. Confirmation was conducted at the Food-
119 safety national reference laboratory, ANSES, Maisons-Alfort.

120

121 Serum, blood, milk and tick sampling

122 From animals at the suspected farm

123 The farm suspected to be the source of the infection included 56 dairy goats, three dairy cows and four
124 suckling cows grazing on the same pasture. When the epidemiological investigation led to determine
125 that this farm was strongly suspected to be the source of the human contamination, all goats and dairy
126 cows were confined into the stall and cows were treated against ticks on May 26, 2020. Acaricide
127 treatment of the flock buildings was also carried out. Serum and blood samples were collected as follows
128 (Figure 1). On May 27, serum samples were collected from 30 goats. On June 2, 8 and 19, serum and
129 blood samples were collected from all 56 goats of the farms. Serum samples were collected on the three

130 dairy cows on June 2 and on the four suckling cows between July and August 2020. In addition, tank
131 milk samples from goats and dairy cows were collected every week from June 2 to November 3.
132 Individual milk samples were collected from the 55 lactating goats on June 8 and 19. In March 2021, a
133 follow-up serological study was carried out on the entire goat herd among which 35 individuals were
134 identical to 2020. Milk and sera were stored at 4°C and blood samples were stored at -20°C until use.

135 *From animals in surrounding farms*

136 In order to characterize the geographic distribution of the TBEV infections among the surrounding
137 farms, one hundred and forty-two animals from five farms – two goat farms, one dairy cow farm and
138 two suckling cow farms – from which the animals have grazed in pastures located less than 2 km away
139 from the infected farm's pasture were investigated for the presence of TBEV antibodies. Serum samples
140 of all animals available at the time of sampling were collected between June and August 2020.

141 *Collect of questing ticks*

142 Questing ticks were counted and collected from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m on June 16, 2020 by dragging a 1-m²
143 white blanket. The pasture was divided into 5 geographic areas in which a total of 29 sub-areas was
144 defined according to the habitat types: wooded areas (3 sub-areas), wooded edge of the meadow
145 (meadow-forest or meadow-wood ecotones, 5 sub-areas), hedgerows along the edge of the pasture or
146 within the pasture (7 sub-areas), meadow between 3 and 10 meters away from the forest edge (4 sub-
147 areas) and from the hedgerows (4 sub-areas), meadow more than 10 meter from the edge (6 sub-areas).
148 The adjacent forest was divided into 3 sub-areas. The sampling scheme differed according to the sub-
149 areas, with more effort made in wooded areas in order to collect more ticks for TBEV analysis. A total
150 of twenty-eight 10-meters-long transects were carried-out in either forest (18 transects) and wood (10
151 transects) sub-areas. In addition, the edge of the meadow and hedgerows was continuously checked for
152 tick presence and individuals were collected every 20-meters-long transects. Within the meadow, five
153 20-meters-long transects were realized. Because the dragging method is more appropriate for estimating
154 the density of questing nymphs than those of larvae and adults, only the density of questing nymph per
155 sub-area was estimated by evaluating the number of ticks collected per 100m² and its mean per habitat
156 type was calculated.

157 We calculated that, for an estimated virus prevalence in nymphs of 0.2%, it would be necessary to collect
158 and test for TBEV presence in a minimum of 1000 nymphs in order to have a 95% chance to detect the
159 virus (Cannon 2001). Given that previous estimates of TBEV prevalence in the French endemic region
160 (Alsace) ranged from 0.03 to 0.3% in nymphs, and from 0.6 to 0.8% in adults (Perez-Eid, Hannoun et
161 al. 1992, Bestehorn, Weigold et al. 2018, Bournez, Umhang et al. 2020), we conducted an additional
162 collect of ticks in the forest to reach that critical minimum number. Back in the laboratory, ticks were
163 identified to the genus level based on their morphology (Pérez-Eid 2007). All questing nymphs and
164 adults were washed in 70% ethanol, rinsed twice in distilled water, dried, and stored at -80°C until used
165 for TBEV detection.

166

167 *Small mammal trapping and sampling of feeding ticks*

168 For three consecutive nights from June 15 to 18, 2020, two hundred small mammal live-traps (14 X 14
169 Ugglan special no. 3, Grahnbab, Sweden) were set up every 10 meters along the pasture and within the
170 wooded area of the pasture. Traps were baited with carrots and sunflower seeds. Caught animals were
171 euthanized and identified at the genus level. Spleen and brain of small mammals were collected and put
172 in nitrogen container until storage at -80°C in the laboratory.

173 All efforts were made to minimize animal suffering. The species captured during this study are not
174 protected in France nor included in the International Union for Conservation Nature Red List of
175 threatened species and, therefore, no special authorization was needed for trapping, according to French
176 law. Animal trapping took place with permission from the landowners.

177 Ticks feeding on trapped animals were removed and identified to the genus level based on their
178 morphology (Pérez-Eid 2007). Potential undetected ticks were collected by removing the skin of the
179 animals and storing them in individual bags for 48 hours to let the ticks detach.

180

181 **Laboratory analyses**

182 *Serological tests*

183 Antibodies against flaviviruses were detected using a multi-species commercial competitive
184 enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (cELISA; ID Screen® West Nile Competition, ID Vet,
185 Montpellier, France) based on purified whole WNV antigen for the detection of antibodies directed
186 against the envelope E protein common to all flaviviruses. Although this ELISA test is designed for
187 WNV detection, it can be used for the detection of TBEV antibodies because of the high cross-reactivity
188 among flaviviruses (Rushton, Lecollinet et al. 2013, Beck, Desprès et al. 2015, Beck, Fritz et al. 2016,
189 Bournez, Umhang et al. 2019, Reusken, Boonstra et al. 2019). The test was performed according to the
190 manufacturer's instructions. The interpretation was modified for sera close to the doubtful and negative
191 thresholds, with extension of the doubtful interval, to ascertain the detection of sera with low-TBEV
192 antibody levels by ELISA and then increase sensitivity. The sample was considered positive if < 40%;
193 doubtful between 40% and 72% and negative if > 72%.

194 In-house IgM-capture enzyme immunoassay (MAC-ELISA) with whole inactivated TBEV was
195 performed as previously described (Peyrefitte, Pastorino et al. 2005) on all 30 goat sera sampled on May
196 27, 2020. MAC-ELISA was performed using rabbit anti-goat IgM antibodies (Bethyl Laboratories, Inc,
197 USA).

198 Samples with positive and doubtful results in ELISA were then tested for the presence of specific
199 neutralizing antibodies against TBEV by micro virus neutralization tests (MNTs, strain Hypr, Genbank
200 ID U39292.1) as described in Beck et al. (2015) (Beck, Desprès et al. 2015). A serum sample was
201 considered positive for TBEV if cells were protected at least at the serum dilution 1:20.

202 *RNA extraction and real-time TBEV qRT-PCR*

203 *qRT-PCR tests on fresh cheese*

204 Cheese suspected to be infected with TBEV were stored at -80°C until analysis. The National Reference
205 Centre for Arboviruses carried out TBEV genome screening following the protocol bellow (**REF TWIN**
206 **paper**). Dissolution of nearly 5g of fresh or drier cheese was performed in PBS. Homogenization steps
207 were achieved to complete the process. RNA extraction was carried out using the QIAmp Viral RNA
208 Mini Kit (Qiagen, Paris, France) according to manufacturer instructions. Five microliters of the eluted

209 RNA were used to execute a quantitative RT-PCR with primers and probe targeting TBEV genome
210 (sequences available on request) using the SuperScript™ III Platinum™ One-Step qRT-PCR
211 amplification kit (ThermoFischer, Paris, France) on LightCycler® 2.0 Instrument (Roche Life Science,
212 Germany).

213 Confirmation of TBEV-infected cheese was conducted at the Food-safety national reference
214 laboratory, ANSES, Maisons-Alfort. The method used to recover TBEV from fresh cheese was based
215 on the use of proteinase K as previously described in Martin-Latil et al. (2017) (Hennechart-Collette,
216 Martin-Latil et al. 2017). After enzymatic digestion, total nucleic acid extraction was carried out using
217 the NucliSENS® easyMAG™ platform, according to the manufacturer's instructions (bioMérieux).
218 Primers and probe used to detect TBEV by RT-qPCR have been already described in the literature by
219 Gondard et al (2018).

220 *qRT-PCR tests on goats, cows and small mammal samples*

221 Goat and dairy cows tank milks, goat individual milk samples, goat or cows EDTA blood, and the spleen
222 and brain of small mammals suspected to be infected with TBEV were stored at 4°C (milk), -20°C
223 (EDTA blood) or -80°C (organs) until analysis. RNA extraction was performed using the MagVet™
224 Universal Isolation kit (Lifetechnologies, France) on the King Fisher automat (ThermoFisher Scientific,
225 France). Five microliters of each RNA extracts were subjected to qRT-PCR with primers and probe
226 targeting the NS5 gene described in (Gondard, Michelet et al. 2018) using the AgPath-ID™One-Step
227 RT-PCR Reagents kit (Lifetechnologies) and cycling conditions as followed: reverse transcription for
228 10 min, 45°C; denaturation of cDNA 10 min at 95°C and 45 cycles of 15 sec at 95°C and 1 min at 60°C.
229 The detection limit of the qRT-PCR, that is the lowest number of copy genome detected for a known
230 dilution in 95% of cases, performed on goat milk samples was estimated at 1.10e4 TCID50/ml
231 corresponding to a Ct value of 34.

232

233 *qRT-PCR tests on questing ticks and descriptive analysis of TBEV infection in ticks*

234 Questing ticks were analysed to detect TBEV RNA. Adult ticks were analysed individually and nymphal
235 ticks were analysed in pools of 30 ticks maximum per sub-area. RNA were extracted using the

236 Nucleospin RNA II extract kit (Macherey-Nagel, Düren, Germany) as described in (Bournez et al.,
237 2020) and were screened for TBEV by q RT-PCR targeting the NS5 as described in (Gondard, Michelet
238 et al. 2018). Because TBEV infection prevalence in ticks is lower than 1% in endemic regions of France,
239 prevalence in nymphs was expressed as the minimum infection rate per 100 tested (MIR), based on the
240 assumption that a single tick was positive within a positive pool. We calculated the overall MIR of
241 TBEV in nymphs and TBEV prevalence infection in adults and their 95% CIs were calculated following
242 a binomial distribution. We estimated the density of infected nymphs per habitat by multiplying the %
243 MIR by the mean density of questing nymphs per habitat.

244

245 *Virus isolation from contaminated milk and infected ticks*

246 Contaminated milk (500 µL) or tick grindings (100 µL/homogenates) positive for TBEV were diluted
247 in serum-free DMEM culture medium and inoculated in a T25 flask seeded with Vero NK cells (ATCC:
248 CCL81™) 24 h earlier, and washed with DMEM before inoculation. Following an incubation time of
249 1h30 at 37°C with 5% CO₂, cells were washed twice with phosphate buffered saline (PBS), and
250 complete medium (DMEM+ 1% penicillin- streptomycin+ 1% sodium pyruvate + 5% fetal calf serum)
251 was added. The cells were observed every day from day 3 to day 7 post-infection (pi). As soon as
252 cytopathic effects (CPE) were detected, the supernatant was collected, clarified and stored at -80 °C.
253 RNA extraction was performed using the MagVet™ Universal Isolation kit (Lifetechnologies, France)
254 on the King Fisher automat (ThermoFisher Scientific, Paris, France). RNA extracts were subjected to
255 TBEV RT-qPCR as described above to confirm TBEV detection.

256

257 *Full-length TBEV genome assembly performed from contaminated milk and infected ticks*

258 Full-length virus genome sequencing was conducted on cDNA obtained from contaminated milk and
259 infected ticks. Multiplex primers were designed using Primal scheme (<http://primal.zibraproject.org>)
260 with default parameters. A multifasta file with reference genomes NC_001672.1, KF151173.1,
261 MG589938.1, KC835596.1, MK801808.1, MK801803.1, MG210948.1, KX966399.1 and KP716974.1
262 was used to generate primers. Their sequences are listed in Table 1 (Supplementary data)

263 (scheme.primer.tsv). A multiplex PCR method for targeted enrichment was adapted for library
264 preparation and MinION sequencing of TBEV genome as previously described for Zika (WHO Control
265 Reference 11474/16) and Chikungunya viruses (PEI N11602) in (Quick, Grubaugh et al. 2017).
266 Sample barcoding was performed with 14 barcodes (NB01 to 14) with the native barcoding genomic
267 DNA protocol using the ligation sequencing kit SQK-LSK109 (Oxford Nanopore technologies, Oxford,
268 UK) and the Native barcoding expansion kits EXP-NBD104 and EXP-NBD114 (Oxford Nanopore
269 technologies, Oxford, UK). Two barcodes were assigned per sample, depending on the pool of primers
270 used (either pool 1 or 2) (Supplementary data Table 2). A Flongle flow cell FLO-FLG001 was used for
271 sequencing (Oxford Nanopore technologies, Oxford, UK).
272 FAST5 reads were base-called offline using guppy_basecaller v5.0.7. from Oxford Nanopore
273 (<https://nanoporetech.com>). Subsequent FASTQ files were demultiplexed using guppy_barcode using
274 the --trim-barcodes flag. 25 nucleotides were trimmed at both 5' and 3' ends in resulting FASTQ files
275 to remove primers and with a maximum length of 700 bp using NanoFilt v2.6. The sequences obtained
276 with the two barcodes corresponding to a unique sample were concatenated into one FASTQ file. Each
277 file were mapped to the reference NC_001672.1 using minimap2 v2.20 (Li 2018). Consensus FASTA
278 files were generated after 4 error correction steps including three polishing steps of racon v1.4.20
279 (<https://github.com/isovic/racon>) and one polishing step with medaka v1.4.3
280 (<https://github.com/nanoporetech/medaka>). Trimmed reads were mapped back to the assembly using
281 minimap2 and coverage statistics were calculated on the sorted BAM file using SAMtools v1.12 (Li and
282 Durbin 2009). Multiple alignments of the nucleotide sequences were performed using the ClustalW
283 algorithm to extract a high quality full-length genome sequence.

284 *Full-length TBEV genome assembly performed from contaminated cheese*

285 Full-length virus genome sequencing was conducted on cDNA obtained from contaminated cheese
286 using the ProtoScript® II Reverse Transcriptase kit (New England Biolabs) with 50µM random
287 hexamers (Invitrogen) (7:1 ratio) for 5 minutes at 65°C (Bournez, Umhang et al. 2020). The full-length
288 genome was amplified (multiplex PCR) with Q5® High-Fidelity 2X Master Mix kit (New England
289 Biolabs) and a set of primers designed using the 'Primal Scheme' program
290 (<http://primal.zibraproject.org/>) (Quick, Grubaugh et al. 2017). The list of primers used for sequencing

291 is presented in supplemental table 3. Sequencing analysis was performed using the S5 Ion torrent
292 technology v5.12 (ThermoFisher Scientific) as previously described (Driouich, Moureau et al. 2019).
293 The consensus sequence was obtained after a trimming step of reads (reads with quality score < 0.99,
294 and length < 100bp were removed and the thirty first and thirty last nucleotides were removed from the
295 reads). Mapping of reads to a reference (determined following blast of De Novo contigs) was realized
296 using CLC genomics workbench software v.20 (Qiagen). A *de novo* contig was also generated to ensure
297 that the consensus sequence was not impaired by the reference sequence. For genomic regions for which
298 no sequence was obtained using this approach, cDNA was also generated and amplified using the
299 SuperScript™ IV One-Step RT-PCR System kit following the supplier's recommendations (Invitrogen).
300 PCR mixes (final volume 50µl) contained 3µl of cDNA, 2.5µl of each primer (final concentration of
301 0.5µM), and 25µl of 2X Platinum™ SuperFi™ RT-PCR Master Mix. Amplification was performed with
302 the following conditions: 50s at 50°C, 2min at 98°C, then 40 cycles of amplification (10s at 98°C, 10s
303 at 66°C, 30s at 72°C) and a final extension of 5min at 72°C. PCR products were verified by gel
304 electrophoresis and pooled. Sequencing analysis was performed as described above. The consensus
305 sequence was obtained using the reads from both runs as described above.

306 *Phylogenetic analyses*

307 The novel reference genome sequence was aligned against the known TBEV viral diversity. Nucleotide
308 and protein percentage of identity were calculated with Clustal Omega (Madeira, Park et al. 2019).
309 Phylogenetic analysis were conducted on the full-length open reading frame. Phylogenetic tree were
310 then inferred using the maximum likelihood method implemented in PhyML (version 3.0) (Lefort,
311 Longueville et al. 2017) using the best-fit model and best of NNI and Subtree Pruning and Regrafting
312 (SPR) branch swapping. Support for nodes on the trees were assessed using an approximate likelihood
313 ratio test (aLRT) with the Shimodaira-Hasegawa-like procedure. Trees generated using the Neighbor-
314 Joining and Maximum Likelihood methods implemented in MEGAX gave identical results.

315

316 **RESULTS**

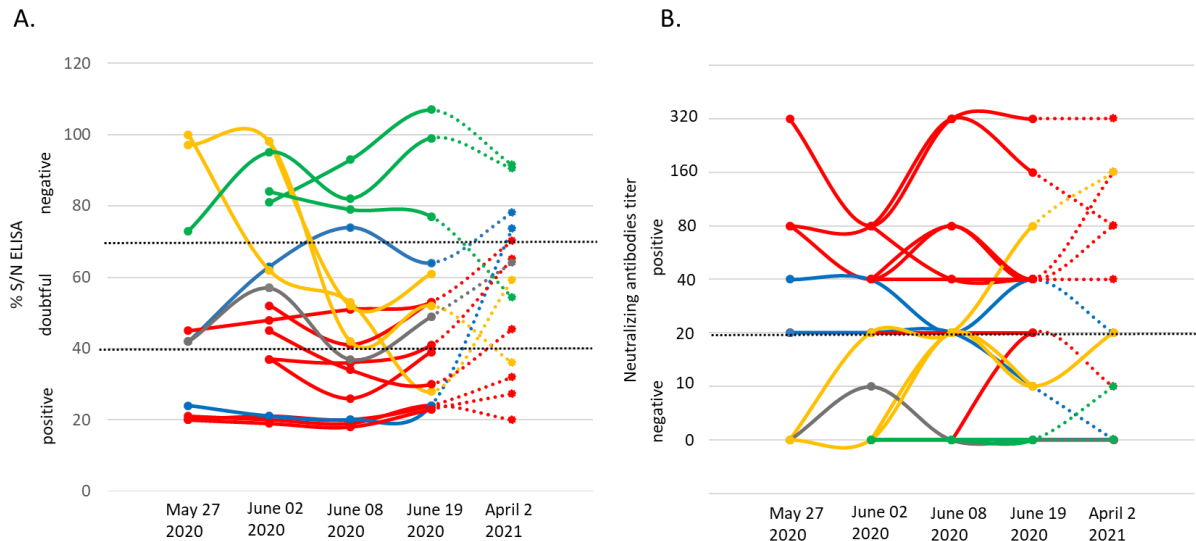
317 **TBEV detection in fresh cheese produced in the suspected farm**

318 On June 2, the NRC Arbovirus detected one cheese TBEV positive over seventeen (REF TWIN paper).
319 This cheese produced on April 28 was collected on May 26 in a patient home during the investigation
320 time. The local authorities suspected a food-borne source of contamination as patients developed
321 meningo-encephalitis and all consumed goat cheese produced in the same farm. The presence of TBEV
322 genome was confirmed by the ANSES food-safety laboratory (Maisons-Alfort). The food-borne origin
323 of TBEV contamination was therefore confirmed. On July 10, seventy-four cheese given by the producer
324 were analysed and virus genome was detected in six of them.

325

326 **TBEV infection and exposure in suspected farm livestock**

327 IgG and IgM antibodies against TBEV were detected using ELISA tests (Igs competition and IgM
328 capture), and MNT. On May 27, six goats over thirty were TBEV-seropositive as assessed with
329 competition ELISA and MNT. One of them had anti-TBEV IgM antibodies. The following weeks, after
330 their placement in a stable to prevent further tick bites, all 56 goats were tested for a complete assessment
331 of TBEV exposure rate. Eleven goats were TBEV-seropositive on June 2 (20%) (with one
332 seroconversion in the 30 goats collected the 27th of May) and 13 (23%) on June 9 (with two more
333 seroconversions) (Figure 2). Goat seroconversions were confirmed by MNT (Figure 2, Table 1 and
334 supplementary data). Overall, ELISA and MNT results agreed, with the exception of a single individual
335 that appeared positive based on ELISA competition but did not develop neutralizing antibodies (Figure
336 2). The seroconversion of three goats between May 27 and June 9 indicates that infection occurred very
337 recently. Yet, none of the animals had high viremia given that all qRT-PCRs conducted on blood
338 samples were negative (collected on June 2, 9 and 19). ELISA competition conducted in 2021, about
339 one year after the initial infection, showed a decrease in IgG levels for most seropositive individuals
340 (10/13) but the level of neutralizing antibodies remained high. Two individuals that were TBEV-
341 seropositive in 2020 turned negative based on competition ELISA in 2021, and one of those had no
342 remaining neutralizing antibodies according to MNT (Figure 2).



343

344 Figure 2: IgG levels (A) and micro-neutralization antibody levels (B) in goats on four dates in 2020
345 (May 27, June 02, June 08 and June 19) and on April 2, 2021. The threshold levels applied are indicated
346 as dashed lines. We provide examples of seronegative individuals (green), and show results for the
347 individual that returned seropositive via ELISA competition, but returned negative neutralizing antibody
348 titre (grey), the three individuals that seroconverted after May 27 (yellow), the eight seropositive
349 individuals (red) and the two individuals that returned negative IgG competition results in 2021 (blue),
350 one of which maintains neutralizing antibodies.

351

352 Within the same farm, one of the three dairy cows and two on the four suckling cows, which had grazed
353 in the same or in the adjacent pasture as the goats, were TBEV seropositive. No virus genome was
354 detected in the blood of these animals.

355

356 TBEV detection in goat milk at the suspected farm

357 The presence of TBEV genome was detected in the tank of goat milk collected on June 2, but it was
358 absent in the tank of cow milk. The virus was not detected in either tanks thereafter (between June 8 and
359 November 3). The presence of TBEV was tested in the milk of individual goats collected on June 8 and
360 June 19. TBEV genome was detected in the milk of three goats on June 8 (23% of the thirteen
361 seropositive animals) indicating that they continued excreting viruses 14 days after their confinement;

362 two individuals were TBEV-seropositive on May 27 and one seroconverted between June 2 and 8. On
363 June 19, all individual milk samples returned negative results.

364

365 Table 1. Summary of the test results carried out on serum and milk samples collected from the goats of
366 the suspected farm. Serum samples were initially tested by a competitive ELISA, then positive and
367 doubtful ELISA samples were tested by specific-TBEV virus micro-neutralization tests (MNT). A
368 serum sample was considered TBEV-seropositive when MNT was positive. *Two goats were MNT
369 negative at one of these two dates but considered TBEV positive because clearly positive by MNT on
370 2020/06/02 (see [supplementary data](#)). Moreover, both of them excreted TBEV in the milk.

371

372

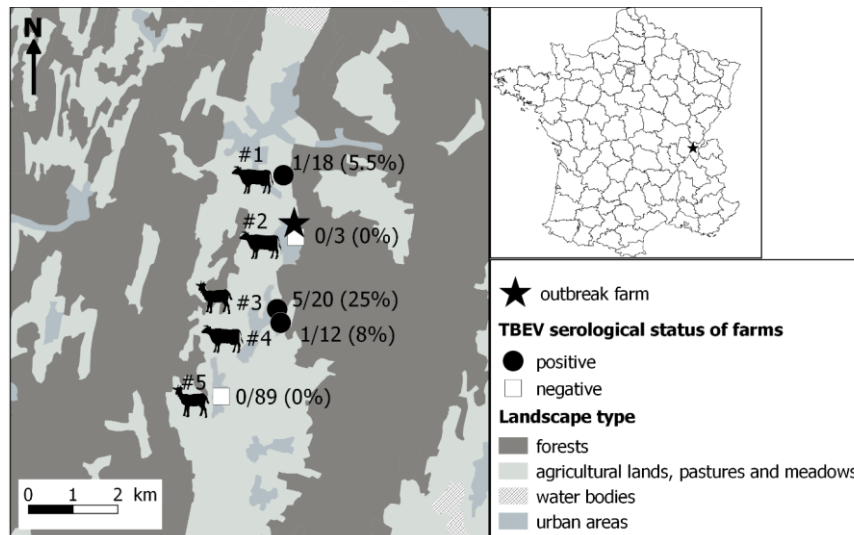
Date	Serum tested by serological tests			Individual milk tested by qRT-PCR			Tank milk tested by RT-PCR	
	No.	No. TBEV positive	% TBEV- positive	No	No. TBEV positive	% TBEV- positive	yes/no	Ct value
27/05	30	6	20	0			no	
02/06	56	11	20	0			yes	35
09/06	56	13*	23	55	3	5.5	yes	neg
23/06	56	13*	23	55	0	0	yes	neg
07/07	0			0			yes	neg
15/07	0			0			yes	neg
28/07	0			0			yes	neg
04/08	0			0			yes	neg
11/08-03/11	0			0			yes	neg
2021	53	8	15	0			no	

373

374 Seroprevalence survey in surrounding farms

375 Within a couple of kilometres away from the suspected farm, five farms, hosting cows and goats were
376 identified and sera from all individuals were collected and processed as above. Few seropositive animals
377 were found in three of the five farms, with one to five seropositive animals and a TBEV seroprevalence
378 ranging from 5.5% to 25% (Figure 2, Table 2). Animals from the suspected farm, and from farms #1
379 and #3 within which seropositive animals were found, have all grazed in meadows located in close

380 proximity to the same forest (Figure YY). In farm #4, a single 10 year-old cow was TBEV-seropositive
381 and it was not possible to trace back where the cow had grazed in the past.
382



383
384 Figure 3. Localisation of the farm responsible for the tick-borne encephalitis cluster through alimentary
385 route (star) and results of the serological survey conducted in surrounding farms. Serum sample were
386 first tested by a competitive ELISA, then positive and doubtful ELISA samples were tested by specific-
387 TBEV virus micro-neutralization tests (MNT). A serum sample was considered TBEV-seropositive
388 when MNT was positive. Dairy cows, suckling cows, goats, suckling cows and goats were found in
389 farms #1 to #5, respectively.

390 **TBEV presence in ticks and rodents within and around the pasture**

391 The goats have grazed in only one pasture adjacent to the dairy cow farm. Half of the goat pasture was
392 a wooded area, which was in continuity of a large mixed deciduous and coniferous forest dominated by
393 beech trees.

394 *Detection of TBEV in ticks*

395 A total of 120 larvae, 907 nymphs, 27 females and 31 males of questing *Ixodes* spp. and 1 female of
396 *Dermacentor reticulatus* were collected within the pasture and in the adjacent forest. Within the pasture,
397 ticks were only found in the wooded area, along the wooded edge and hedgerow and in the meadow
398 situated less than 10 m away from the forest edge. The density of questing *Ixodes* spp. nymphs was the
399 highest in the forest with a mean of 71.5 nymphs/100 m², then in the wooded areas and in the wooded

400 edge of the pasture with a mean of 24-32 nymphs/100 m² and finally in the meadow with a mean of 4.5
401 nymphs/100 m² (Table 2).

402 Two pool of nymphs - from the forest and from the meadow located between the wooded area of the
403 pasture and the forest - and one male from the forest were subsequently tested positive for TBEV RNA.
404 Overall, the MIR was 0.22% (IC_{95%} : 0.03 – 0.80%) in nymphs and the infection rate was 1.8% (IC_{95%} :
405 0.1 – 9,9%) in adults. The estimated density of infected nymphs was the highest in the forest with 0.15
406 infected nymphs / 100 m², then in the wooded area and in the wooded edge of the pasture with 0.05-
407 0.06 infected nymphs / 100 m².

408

409

410 Table 2. Number of questing ticks collected and mean density per habitat.

Habitat	No. sub-areas	Sampled surface (m ²)	No. nymphs	No. female	No. male	Density of nymphs (/100 m ²)	
						mean	Range
Forest	3	540	382	10	20	71.5	64.2-81.3
<i>additional collection</i>	/	/	285	7	5	/	/
Pasture							
- wooded area	3	300	105	6	3	31.7	20.0-50.0
- wooded edge	5	400	94	2	2	24.0	5-56.7
- hedgerows	7	870	4	0	0	0.3	0-1.1
- meadow between 3 to 10m from the wooded edge	4	530	35	2	1	4.5	0-8.8
- meadow between 3 to 10m from the hedgerow	4	400	2	0	0	0.3	0-1.1
- meadow >10m from the edge	6	600	0	0	0	0	0

411

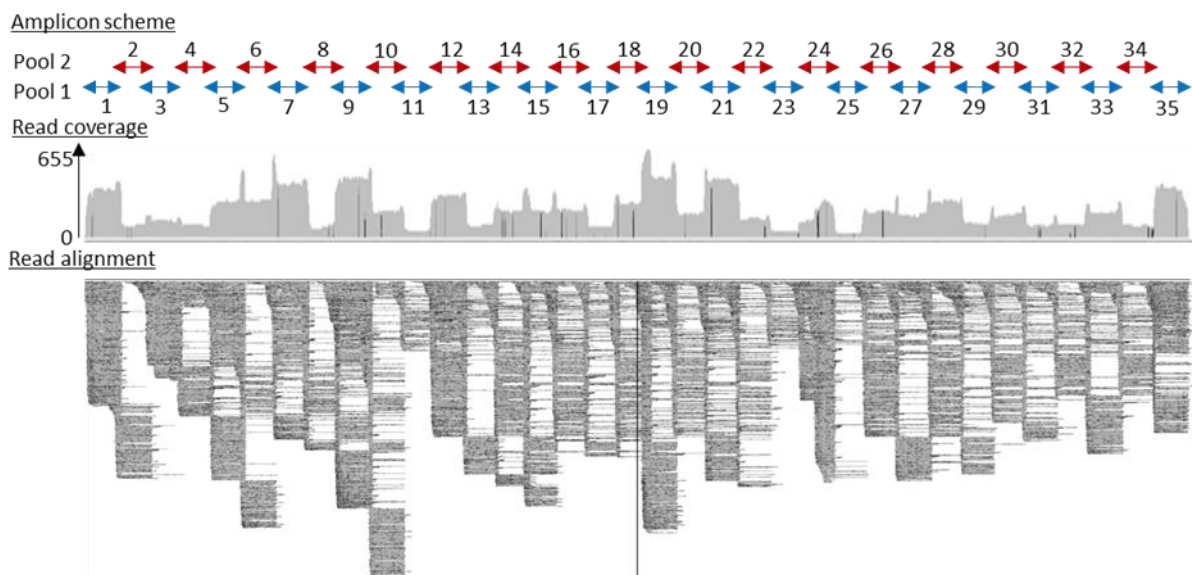
412 *Absence of TBEV in captured small mammals*

413 In addition, small mammals were caught around the pasture to assess TBEV presence. In total, ten small
414 mammals were captured: nine shrews (*Sorex* spp.) and one bank vole (*Myodes glareolus*). Only the bank
415 vole was captured at the edge of the forest. Larvae of *Ixodes ricinus* were observed respectively on the
416 bank vole (five larvae) and on two shrews (two larvae). All animal organs (spleen and brain) were
417 negative to TBEV as assessed by qRT-PCR.

418

419 **Phylogenetic analysis**

420 Three RNA samples extracted from two TBEV-positive pools of nymphs and one TBEV-positive male
421 tick and RNA samples obtained from three individual infected-goat milks were subjected to sequencing.
422 Our amplicon-based sequencing protocol allowed us to successfully sequence TBEV genome from RNA
423 extracted from milk and ticks (Figure 4). The full-length genome sequence obtained from milk and ticks
424 was similar to the full-length genome obtained from the contaminated cheese collected during the
425 investigation led by local authority agency. Sequences obtained from the milk sample and the virus
426 isolate obtained from ticks were 100% identical except for single nucleotide insertions and deletions
427 that are most likely due to sequencing errors.



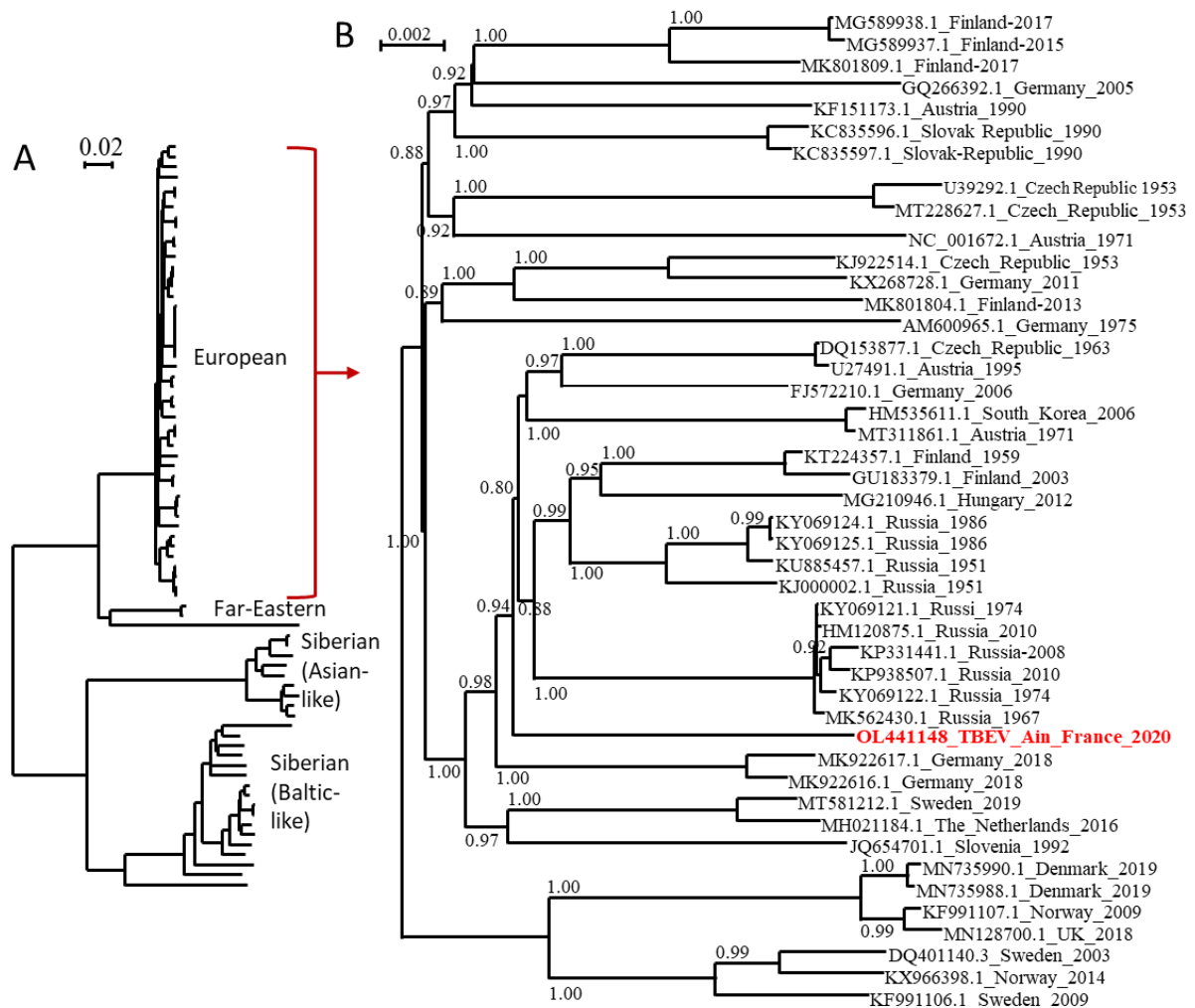
428

429 Figure 4: Full-length TBEV genome sequence (GenBank accession number: OL441148) was obtained
430 from sequencing 35 overlapping amplicons in two multiplex reactions. Read coverage varied along the
431 sequence length, but a full-length genome sequence was successfully recovered.

432

433 The full-length genome of the new viral strain was sequenced and compared to previously characterized
434 TBEV genome sequences. The TBEV_Ain_France_2020 had limited homology (98.4% identity) to the
435 partial NS5 of the TBEV from the Alsace region (AF0910) (Supplementary data). The nucleotide
436 sequence presents 98.8% identity to the same partial NS5 and between 98 and 98.07% identity to the
437 full-length genomes of TBEV isolates detected in Russia, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and the

438 Netherlands with the most ancient isolate dating from 1951 in Russia. The polyprotein sequence
 439 presented up to 99.30 % and 99.24% identity to MK922616 and MK922617 isolated from ticks collected
 440 in the German federal state of Lower Saxony in 2018. Our phylogenetic analyses confirmed that
 441 TBEV_Ain_2020 (OL441148) belongs to the European subtype (TBEV-Eu3) and is most closely
 442 related to TBEV strains recently isolated in bordering countries and Eastern Europe (Figure 5).



443
 444
 445 Figure 5: Phylogenetic tree of TBEV complete open reading frames available in GenBank and the
 446 TBEV-Ain-France-2020 obtained in the present study (marked red) using all sequences (A) or those
 447 corresponding to the European subtype only (B). The two trees were inferred in PhyML using the LG
 448 substitution model. Branch points indicate that results of Shimodaira-Hasagawa branch test > 0.8. Scale
 449 bar shows the number of nucleotide changes. Virus isolate names are given as follows: accession number
 450 from NCBI_ country name_year.

452 Discussion

453 Food-borne TBE outbreaks had been reported in several central endemic European countries at a regular
454 frequency, in particular in countries where the consumption of traditional raw milk products is popular
455 (Kerlik, Avdičová et al. 2018). France is on the border of TBEV geographic range and cases resulting
456 from tick bites are reported very occasionally. The first occurrence of TBE-food borne outbreak in
457 France in 2020 has led to an unexpected high number of cases: 43 patients have developed clinical
458 symptoms compatible with TBE, and all but one had consumed raw goat milk and/or cheese products
459 originating from a single producer, while 41 cases could be confirmed ([REFERENCE AUTRE PAPIER](#)
460 [HUMAIN](#)). A health alert was triggered within a month after the first patient showed symptoms and an
461 in depth investigation of TBEV presence was conducted in the farm suspected to be the source of
462 contamination and in animals in surrounding farms. We applied a “one health” approach, combining
463 environmental, veterinary, virology and food microbiology approaches to identify the origin of infection
464 and provide a range of epidemiological information of significance to public health decision makers.
465 We characterized the TBEV strain circulating in Ain, detected viral genome presence in a batch of
466 cheese, goat milk and in questing ticks, demonstrated recent infection of goats, assessed the enzootic
467 hazard for TBEV exposure and we identified a wooded TBEV-focus area. This integrative investigation
468 provides information that would allow the farmer and authorities to assess the risk of infection and
469 develop control measures.

470 The initial investigation of seroprevalence (23%) in goat flock at the suspected farm reveals that
471 the animals had been moderately exposed to the virus these past few years. In neighboring areas where
472 TBEV is endemic such as Switzerland and Germany, seroprevalence varies from 1 to 80% with a median
473 range values of 10-20% (calculated from (Klaus, Beer et al. 2012, Klaus, Ziegler et al. 2014, Rieille,
474 Klaus et al. 2017, Casati Pagani, Frigerio Malossa et al. 2019)). Seroconversion results, presence of IgM
475 antibodies and detection of the virus genome in milk indicate that infection was very recent for half of
476 the animals that had been exposed to the virus (6 animals over 13). IgM were detected in one individual.
477 Three individuals seroconverted after entering the stable, indicating that TBEV infection occurred a few
478 days before they entered the stable. Indeed, seroconversion in goat and sheep occurs in 6 to 10 days
479 (Van Tongeren 1955, Klaus, Ziegler et al. 2014, Paulsen, Stuen et al. 2019). One of these individuals,

480 and two others excreted viruses in the milk 14 days after entering the stable. These results also support
481 a recent infection given that virus excretion in goat and sheep milk is detected from 2 to 23 days after
482 infection (Gresikova 1958, Gresíková, Sekeyová et al. 1975, Balogh, Ferenczi et al. 2010, Balogh,
483 Egyed et al. 2012). So far, information is relatively scarce on the infection dynamics in ruminants,
484 especially in naturally infected animals. Our investigation confirmed long-lasting excretion of the virus
485 in milk in naturally infected goats since three individuals excreted the virus into milk for over 14 days
486 post-infection. The date of the seroconversion of the additional seven TBEV-seropositive goats and two
487 cows from the same farm is unclear. Previous studies suggest that TBEV-antibodies may persist up to 6
488 years, but the level of IgG produced decreases overtime (Klaus, Ziegler et al. 2014, Klaus, Ziegler et al.
489 2019). In agreement, even though the level of neutralizing antibodies remain high a year later, we
490 observed a decrease in the level of IgG detected by ELISA. Thus, the high level of IgG as measured by
491 ELISA competition indicates that the remaining animals have been likely infected or re-infected by the
492 virus in 2020. Since no virus excretion have been observed in five experimentally pre-immunized goats
493 (Balogh, Egyed et al. 2012) only naïve individuals would have excreted TBEV in milk. The high recent
494 infection rate among naïve individuals of the flock would explain the high virus load detected in tank
495 milk in June. Milk and cheese viral load was determined using a genome quantification assay, whereby
496 milk sample concentration was estimated based on Ct threshold values derived from measurements of
497 serial dilutions of infectious TBE viral particles with known concentrations (from 10^8 to 10^3
498 TCID₅₀/mL). We evaluated a minimal detection of infectious viral particle at 10^4 TCID₅₀/mL of milk
499 and 10^5 TCID₅₀/ mL after dissolution of 2.5g of cheese. In ticks, the mean viral copy number lies
500 between 2×10^2 to 4.8×10^3 RNA copies per sample (Liebig, Boelke et al. 2020, Liebig, Boelke et al.
501 2021). Our data confirmed the high virus load detected in tank milk. Moreover, the virus was detected
502 in seven cheese (over 91 tested). Among them, one contaminated cheese was produced on April 28. This
503 is outstanding especially when we consider that cheese were kept during several days at 1-5°C by
504 consumers or producers before being analysed, which may have reduced persistence of TBEV load and
505 hence its detection.

506 The high recent infection rate of the goat flock suggests regular contact between TBEV-infected ticks and
507 goats in spring 2020, when ticks started to be active. We found infected questing nymphs and adults in
508 the wooded edge of the pasture (in the meadow between the pasture wood and the forest) and in the
509 forest nearby. With a MIR of 0.22% (IC_{95%} : 0.03 – 0.80%) in nymphs and an infection rate of 1.8%
510 (IC_{95%} : 0.1 – 9.9%) in adults, it appears that TBEV is well established in the forest near the pasture.
511 Indeed, while the densities and prevalence of infected questing ticks may not be deemed exceptionally
512 high compared to what is seen in endemic countries (Süss 2011), it is similar to the highest values
513 observed in an endemic foci in Alsace region, East France (Bournez, Umhang et al. 2020). Since we
514 captured few adult ticks (probably because the dragging method is not well suited to capture this stage),
515 the density of infected adults was estimated with a low precision and might be higher than those observed
516 in Alsace. We did not detect TBEV-RNA in small mammals trapped in the pasture, but we probably
517 missed infected individuals since we only trapped few rodents. Indeed, the year 2020 was probably a
518 low-phase of usual yearly-fluctuating rodent population. Overall, the results suggest that the presence
519 of a large wooded area within the pasture frequently used by goats as a shelter as well as of a long
520 pasture-forest edge where tick densities are relatively high have likely favoured the contacts between
521 goats and TBEV-infected ticks. The forest may also represent a source of frequent introduction of
522 infected ticks into the pasture through the movements of tick-feeding hosts.

523 This cluster surprised by its location: it occurred in the Ain department in France where TBEV
524 human cases had never been reported. Our investigation in surrounding farms also revealed that TBEV
525 was also present in various pastures surrounding the same single forest where we found infected ticks
526 over at least two kilometers. In three of these farms, seroprevalence varied between 5.5% and 25%. With
527 the exception of one individual (for which it was not possible to track back the pasture in which it had
528 grazed), all seropositive animals had likely grazed within pasture adjacent to the same forest. These
529 results indicate that the virus is well established in the area and probably in a larger extent in Ain
530 department. Because of the absence of an active TBEV surveillance system assessing its distribution in
531 France and potential misleading of TBE diagnosis, it is impossible to conclude whether the presence of
532 TBEV in the department is ancient or whether it was recently introduced. In addition, diagnosis of

533 human TBE cases was initially delayed as TBE serology was not systematically researched among
534 patients presenting with meningitis or meningoencephalitis. Similarly, the presence of TBEV in centre
535 France, in Loire and Haute-Loire departments, detected for the first time in 2017 and 2018 (Herpe,
536 Schuffenecker et al. 2007, Velay, Solis et al. 2018) is impossible to date. Given the life-cycle of ticks
537 with generally one meal per stage per year, we can only presume that TBEV-infected ticks have been
538 present in the environment for at least one or two years before the occurrence of human cases. Evidence
539 suggest that the geographic range of TBEV is currently expanding in Europe, especially in Western and
540 Northern Europe (Csángó, Blakstad et al. 2004, Donoso Mantke, Escadafal et al. 2011, Rieille, Klaus et
541 al. 2017, Andersen, Larsen et al. 2019, Casati Pagani, Frigerio Malossa et al. 2019, Smura, Tonteri et
542 al. 2019, Alfano, Tagliapietra et al. 2020, Ullrich, Schranz et al. 2021) and this might have occurred in
543 France as well. For instance, a recent expansion of TBEV in higher altitudes, other previously unaffected
544 areas or ancient affected areas has been observed in several France's neighbouring endemic countries,
545 including Germany (Dobler, Erber et al. 2019, Hellenbrand, Kreusch et al. 2019), Switzerland (Rieille,
546 Klaus et al. 2017, Casati Pagani, Frigerio Malossa et al. 2019, Desgrandchamps D. 2021) and Italy
547 (Alfano, Tagliapietra et al. 2020). The virus was also detected for the first time in the UK in 2018
548 (Holding, Dowall et al. 2020) and in the Netherlands in 2015 (Jahfari, de Vries et al. 2017). TBEV
549 expansion is believed to be driven by climate, landscape and anthropogenic changes (Randolph 2010,
550 Jaenson, Hjertqvist et al. 2012, Holding, Dowall et al. 2020). Moreover, the first occurrence of TBEV
551 in new areas in France since 2017 might be the results of exceptional high densities of infected ticks
552 these past five years in endemic areas, which may have led to higher dispersal rates of infected ticks into
553 new areas. Indeed, although TBE human incidence usually exhibit significant oscillations over time, in
554 2016-2020, it was persistently high in numerous endemic countries of Western and Central Europe
555 (Germany, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy) including France (Dobler, Erber et al. 2019).
556 This may partly be caused by high densities of infected ticks during those years. A high density of
557 infected ticks during several years in endemic areas may increase the frequency of medium or long
558 distance movements of infected ticks on their host (birds, cervids) and led to more successful
559 introduction of the virus into new areas. Alternatively, it is also possible that TBEV has been circulating
560 in Ain department, undetected, for decades and the 2020 outbreak could be the result of suitable

561 conditions for its detection. Indeed, TBE cases are likely underdiagnosed in France given that human
562 clinical cases are rare and local clinicians are unfamiliar with the disease (infection often asymptomatic,
563 not yet notifiable disease in April 2020, low virus circulation, few TBEV foci, few human visits in
564 infected areas) (Dollat, Bellanger et al. 2021). The year of 2020 was exceptional with a very high human
565 incidence observed in numerous endemic European countries. In Switzerland and Germany, the notable
566 increase of TBE cases observed in spring 2020 was partly associated to higher recreational activities in
567 risky endemic areas around people home during the Covid-19 containment measures (Steffen,
568 Lautenschlager et al. 2020, Ullrich, Schranz et al. 2021). In France, the Covid-19 containment measures
569 may have also indirectly increase the consumption of local products and hence the emergence of a cluster
570 of food-borne TBE cases in a restricted geographical area that was easier to detect. However, this was
571 not the solely factor and an upsurge of infected ticks densities in 2020 likely have contributed to human
572 incidence's rise. Indeed, models forecasting the human TBE incidence based on demographic
573 parameters, large-scale atmospheric circulation patterns, the fructification of the European beech (*Fagus*
574 *sylvatica*) two years prior, and the national TBE vaccination coverage, already predicted an increase in
575 TBE incidence in 2020 in Germany, Switzerland and Austria (Rubel and Brugger 2020, Rubel and
576 Brugger 2021). In Germany, an unusually high density of infected adult ticks has also been observed in
577 2020 in some places (PROMED 2020).

578 We provide the first TBEV isolate responsible for as a source of dietary contamination in France, which
579 will facilitate experimental studies. The genome sequences obtained were used to conduct phylogenetic
580 analyses using the complete open reading frame. We revealed that the TBEV_Ain_France_2020
581 belonged to the European TBEV subtype but are distantly related to the strain circulating in the Alsace
582 region and to other isolates from Europe, the closest relatives being isolates from Germany, Austria,
583 Czech Republic, The Netherlands and Russia. The distinct genome of the French isolate would tend to
584 indicate that this isolate has not recently spread to France, but has remained undetected and evolved
585 locally for some time. Further studies in the department and neighbouring region are needed and are
586 being set up to further characterize the focus-specific genetic diversity of TBEV and to confirm or
587 disprove the ancient origin of this isolate, as well as the geographical extension.

588 In conclusion, the cluster of TBE alimentary cases in Ain was unexpected and surprised clinicians and
589 local health authorities given the number of infected patients. The high recent infection rate of the goat
590 flock probably led to a high virus load in tank milk in April and May, and facilitated infection by
591 consumption of raw cheese. In addition, the Covid-19 containment measures in spring 2020 may have
592 also indirectly increase the consumption of local products and hence the risk of food-borne TBE cases.
593 The Ain outbreak also highlighted the need for improving surveillance, detection and prevention of TBE
594 in France. Clearly, a better understanding of TBEV distribution in France, of local virus dynamic, and
595 of food-borne contamination with a better identification of raw milk products being at risk is needed to
596 better adapt surveillance and prevention measures. This is all more important that France produces each
597 year 40,000 tonnes of raw milk-products and cheese and the local production and consumption of
598 traditional delicacies is increasing. TBEV is now a notifiable disease in France, which will facilitate the
599 systematic report of human cases and improve sensitizing medical communities for diagnostic in
600 humans showing encephalitis in France. In endemic regions and those surrounding affected areas,
601 patients with meningitis and encephalitis in the absence of other etiological diagnosis should to be more
602 systemically screened for TBEV infection (Herpe, Schuffenecker et al. 2007, Velay, Solis et al. 2018,
603 Botelho-Nevers, Gagneux-Brunon et al. 2019, Blanchon, Boulanger et al. 2020). Surveillance could also
604 include serological testing for anti-TBEV antibodies in blood of animals or in milk tank to allow early
605 detection of virus foci (Imhoff, Hagedorn et al. 2015, Rieille, Klaus et al. 2017, Wallenhammar,
606 Lindqvist et al. 2020, Bauer, Könenkamp et al. 2021). Finally, in focus areas, TBEV virus vaccination
607 in humans could be used to prevent tick bite or alimentary contamination (Chernokhaeva, Rogova et al.
608 2018, Kubinski, Beicht et al. 2020, Chitimia-Dobler, Lindau et al. 2021).

609

610 **Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest**

611 No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

612 **Acknowledgments**

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615 and Dr Decroix.

616

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