Jatta Berberat Née Kurkijärvi

Quantitative Magnetic Resonance Imaging of Native and Repaired Articular Cartilage

An Experimental and Clinical Approach

Doctoral dissertation

To be presented by permission of the Faculty of Natural and Environmental Sciences of the University of Kuopio for public examination in Auditorium L21, Snellmania building, University of Kuopio on Tuesday 23rd September 2008, at 12 noon

Department of Physics and Institute of Biomedicine, Anatomy University of Kuopio
ABSTRACT

Degenerative joint diseases, such as osteoarthritis (OA), and trauma–based knee injuries damage the articular cartilage. Consequently, the joint function becomes impaired and severe pain decreases the quality of life of countless individuals. Quantitative magnetic resonance imaging (qMRI) is the only non-invasive technique available which can evaluate the structural and compositional properties of articular cartilage. In this study, three quantitative \(^1\)H NMR relaxation techniques were investigated \textit{in vitro} at 9.4 T using human and bovine cartilage and \textit{in vivo} at 1.5 T in orthopaedic patients.

In the present study, \(T_1\) and \(T_2\) relaxation times and Gd-DTPA\(^{2-}\)–enhanced MRI of cartilage (dGEMRIC) techniques were used to assess the ability of these techniques to probe the structural and mechanical properties across the cadaver human knee joint, and the results were compared with histological reference techniques (i.e. polarized light microscopy (PLM) and optical density (OD) microscopy) and mechanical testing. The reproducibility of \(T_2\) measurement \textit{in vitro} was examined in bovine articular cartilage. The structure of cartilage was studied with \(T_2\) in the presence of Gd-DTPA\(^{2-}\). The ability of native \(T_1\) to reflect tissue hydration was evaluated. Finally, the ability of \(T_2\) and dGEMRIC to evaluate \textit{in vivo} regeneration of cartilage tissue after autologous chondrocyte transplantation (ACT) was assessed in patients at 10–15 months after surgery.

MRI techniques reproduced satisfactorily the variations in mechanical properties in human tissue. The mean thicknesses of the different cartilage zones were consistent when determined from \(T_2\) and PLM profiles. The characteristic laminar cartilage structure, as detected consistently with PLM and \(T_2\), was preserved in the presence of Gd-DTPA\(^{2-}\). The reproducibility of \(T_2\) measurements was good. \(T_1\) relaxation rate displayed a high linear association with the cartilage water content. ACT grafts showed a general trend towards longer \(T_2\) values for bulk tissue as well as for the superficial and deep tissue as compared to the adjacent native cartilage. dGEMRIC detected no significant differences between the native cartilage and graft tissue.

The present results demonstrate that qMRI can serve as a biomarker for structural (collagen network architecture), compositional (\textit{i.e.} proteoglycan and water content) and mechanical (compressive stiffness) properties of articular cartilage. Further, by combining different quantitative magnetic resonance imaging techniques it is possible to achieve a comprehensive characterization of native cartilage and cartilage repair.

National Library of Medicine Classification: WE 103, WE 300, WE 304, WE 348, WN 185

Medical Subject Headings: Joint Diseases/diagnosis; Osteoarthritis/diagnosis; Cartilage, Articular; Magnetic Resonance Imaging; Contrast Media; Gadolinium DTPA; Biomechanics; Histology; Microscopy, Polarization; Transplantation, Autologous; Chondrocytes; Collagen; Proteoglycans
To my dearest Tarcis, Janina and Olivia
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Rothrist, Switzerland, September, 2008

Jatta Berberat
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>autologous chondrocyte transplantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADC</td>
<td>apparent diffusion constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BF</td>
<td>optical birefringence of polarized light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV</td>
<td>coefficient of variation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dGEMRIC</td>
<td>delayed Gadolinium Enhanced MRI of Cartilage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTI</td>
<td>diffusion tensor imaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM</td>
<td>extracellular matrix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDTA</td>
<td>ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETL</td>
<td>echo train length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCD</td>
<td>fixed charge density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Fourier transform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG</td>
<td>femoral groove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FID</td>
<td>free induction decay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLC</td>
<td>lateral condyle of femur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMC</td>
<td>medial condyle of femur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOV</td>
<td>field of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSE</td>
<td>fast spin echo sequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAG</td>
<td>glycosaminoglycans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gd–DTPA$^{2-}$</td>
<td>gadolinium diethylene triamine pentaacetic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$[\text{Gd–DTPA}]_b$</td>
<td>molar concentration of Gd–DTPA in bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$[\text{Gd–DTPA}]_t$</td>
<td>molar concentration of Gd–DTPA in tissue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPG</td>
<td>lateral patellar groove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACT</td>
<td>matrix–associated autologous chondrocyte transplantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR</td>
<td>magnetic resonance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRI</td>
<td>magnetic resonance imaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>magnetization transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>number of samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMR</td>
<td>nuclear magnetic resonance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OA</td>
<td>osteoarthritis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCD</td>
<td>osteochondritis dissecans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OD</td>
<td>optical density microscopy of Safranin–O stained PGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>statistical significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT</td>
<td>patella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>phosphate saline buffer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
<td>proton density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>proteoglycan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLM</td>
<td>polarized light microscopy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qMRI</td>
<td>quantitative magnetic resonance imaging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RF radio frequency  
ROI region of interest  
SD standard deviation  
SI signal intensity  
TE echo time  
TI inversion time  
TLP lateral tibial plateau  
TMP medial tibial plateau  
TR repetition time

$a_F$ optical constant
$A$ atomic mass number
$A_t$ absorbance
$b_F$ optical constant
$B$ magnetic field strength
$B_{ext}$ external magnetic field
$B_z$ magnetic field in z–direction
$B_0$ static magnetic field strength
$B_1$ rf–pulse field strength
$E$ energy between nuclei states
$E_{eq}$ Young’s modulus
$f_0$ Larmor frequency
$G_d$ dynamic modulus
$G_1$ storage modulus
$G_2$ loss modulus
$H_A$ aggregate modulus
$H_2O$ water content
$I$ intensity
$I_0$ initial intensity
$M_s$ quantum number corresponding to angular momentum operator
$M_x$ magnetization components along x–axis
$M_{xy}$ magnetization components along xy–plane
$M_y$ magnetization components along y–axis
$M_z$ magnetization components along z–axis
$M_0$ equilibrium magnetization vector
$k$ Boltzmann’s constant
$l$ optical path length
$N$ number of nuclei in the spin orientation
$r$ Pearson correlation coefficient
$R$ relaxivity
$R_1$  $T_1$ relaxation rate
$R_2$  $T_2$ relaxation rate
$s$  spin
$t$  time
$T_1$  spin–lattice relaxation time
$T_{1Gd}$  spin–lattice relaxation time in presence of Gd–DTPA$^{2-}$
$T_{1\rho}$  spin–lattice relaxation time in rotating frame
$T_{2Gd}$  spin–spin relaxation time in presence of Gd–DTPA$^{2-}$
$T_t$  transmittance
$T_2$  spin–spin relaxation time
$T'_2$  component of $T_2$ relaxation time induced by field inhomogeneities
$T^*_2$  total spin–spin relaxation time
$\alpha$  rotation angle of polarized light
$\gamma$  gyromagnetic ratio
$\epsilon$  axial strain
$\epsilon_l$  lateral strain
$\lambda$  wavelength
$\mu$  magnetic dipole moment
$\nu$  Poisson’s ratio
$\sigma$  stress
$\sigma_d$  dynamic stress
$\tau_c$  correlation time
$\omega_0$  angular Larmor frequency
$h$  Planck’s constant
$Z$  number of protons in a nucleus
LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following original articles referred by their Roman numerals:


The original articles have been reproduced with permission of the copyright holders. The thesis contains also previously unpublished data.
# Contents

1 Introduction 17

2 Articular cartilage 19
   2.1 Structure and composition ........................................ 19
   2.2 Mechanical properties of articular cartilage ................. 22
   2.3 Osteoarthritis ......................................................... 25
   2.4 Cartilage repair ......................................................... 27

3 MRI of articular cartilage 29
   3.1 Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) ............................. 29
   3.2 Relaxation ............................................................... 30
      3.2.1 Spin–lattice relaxation ($T_1$) ............................... 31
      3.2.2 Spin–spin relaxation ($T_2$) ................................. 32
   3.3 dGEMRIC ............................................................... 34
   3.4 Other quantitative MRI methods .................................. 35

4 Aims of the present study 39

5 Materials and methods 41
   5.1 In vitro experiments ............................................... 41
      5.1.1 Sample preparation .............................................. 41
      5.1.2 Mechanical measurements ..................................... 43
      5.1.3 MRI measurements ............................................... 44
      5.1.4 Polarized light microscopy .................................... 45
      5.1.5 Measurement of PG content ................................... 46
      5.1.6 Measurement of water content ................................. 47
   5.2 In vivo experiments .................................................. 47
      5.2.1 ACT patients ....................................................... 47
      5.2.2 MRI measurements ............................................... 48
5.3 Data analysis ................................................................. 50

6 Results ........................................................................... 53
6.1 Topographical variation of cartilage properties ............... 53
6.2 $T_2$ in the presence of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ .............................. 54
6.3 Native $T_1$ in cartilage .................................................. 55
6.4 Evaluation of cartilage repair .......................................... 57

7 Discussion ....................................................................... 61
7.1 MRI and structural/functional properties of native cartilage . 61
7.2 MRI and cartilage repair ................................................ 64

8 Conclusions ..................................................................... 67

References .......................................................................... 69

Appendix: Original publications ........................................... 91
Osteoarthritis (OA) causes pain and functional disability in countless individuals. OA disrupts the cartilage tissue, increases the water content in the tissue and thickens the subchondral bone [27]. These degenerative changes reduce cartilage stiffness, and impair the mechanical function of the joint [4].

Cartilage lacks the capacity to repair and heal the damage spontaneously. Therefore, early diagnosis of cartilage degradation is important in order to slow down OA progression and to reduce pain and other symptoms of the patients with suitable treatments. In trauma–based acute cartilage injuries, but not in OA patients, one treatment method is surgical cartilage repair.

Conventional methods, such as X–ray imaging of the joint and arthroscopy, are too insensitive to detect the early OA changes and the latter is invasive. Clinically, a non–invasive diagnostic technique is desirable that would permit the differentiation between different stages of cartilage generation with reproducible results. Furthermore, the ideal technique would be quick to perform and be inexpensive.

Macromolecular changes in tissues are reflected in the magnetic properties of water protons, and therefore magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) represents a non-invasive method to detect early changes in articular cartilage. In particular, $^1$H nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) relaxation properties provide multifaceted information about cartilage structure, composition and function [13, 64, 107, 134, 135, 189, 198].

In this thesis, high field MRI was used to extend the previous in vitro cartilage research, particularly aiming to apply and test quantitative MRI techniques in human articular cartilage and to elucidate variations in the properties of native and repaired human articular cartilage. Furthermore, different MRI techniques were used to assess their ability to probe the
structural and mechanical properties of human cartilage. The possibility to merge different quantitative MRI procedures into one contrast agent imaging session was also evaluated. The water content of articular cartilage was estimated by MRI. Finally, quantitative MRI methods were applied in vivo in patients undergoing cartilage repair.
2.1 Structure and composition

Our knee joints are subjected to very high mechanical loads, up to ten times one’s own body weight [129]. As the human knee joint may be exposed to one million cycles of loading per year [129], a complex interplay between structural, compositional and mechanical properties of cartilage tissue is needed to carry out this demanding mechanical task. This represents the main role in reducing the mechanical friction and minimizing stresses occurring during joint motion [28].

Articular cartilage, i.e. hyaline cartilage, has a smooth and glistening white appearance. There are no blood vessels or nerves in articular cartilage. Articular cartilage contains a solid matrix (i.e. chondrocytes, collagen and proteoglycan (PG)) and fluid (i.e. interstitial water and electrolytes) (figure 2.1, table 2.1). Chondrocytes are metabolically active and synthesize, organize and degrade matrix components. The collagen fibers resist tensile stresses, bind PGs and limit tissue swelling. About 90% of the collagen in articular cartilage is of type II, organized in a triple helix structure of three polypeptide chains [170]. These fibers have poor stretching properties, but the bending ability of collagen is excellent. Collagen fibers supplement the support structure of articular cartilage, and PGs and chondrocytes are bonded within the three-dimensional collagen matrix.

Proteoglycan chains form large aggregate molecules by linking themselves with hyaluronic acid through the link protein [130]. This aggrecan molecule contains laterally attached, electronegatively charged chondroitin- and keratan–sulfated glycosaminoglycan (GAG) chains. They attract water and sodium ions, causing an osmotic pressure that keeps the cartilage structure stable [66]. The charged groups, referred to as a fixed charge
Articular cartilage density (FCD), create also strong repulsive forces against each other [129].

The amount of interstitial water depends mainly on FCD (affected by PGs), swelling pressure (collagen–PG), the organization of collagen network and the mechanical strength of the collagen–PG solid matrix (table 2.2) [129]. A major fraction of the water is free to move, a small amount is contained in chondrocytes while 60-70% of water exists around proteoglycan aggregates [114, 130].

Articular cartilage is structurally inhomogeneous and can be divided into four different zones (figure 2.1). In the superficial zone, collagen fibers run parallel to the cartilage surface and the chondrocytes are flattened, water concentration is at its highest level and the proteoglycan content at its lowest level. In the intermediate zone, collagen fibers are randomly organized and the chondrocytes are round in shape. The water content and the chondrocyte concentration are lower than in the superficial zone. The proteoglycan content is higher than in the superficial zone. In the deep zone, collagen fibers run perpendicular to the articular surface and the chondrocytes are round and densely packed. The water content is its lowest and the proteoglycan content at its highest in this zone. Finally, the calcified cartilage (below the tidemark) links the cartilage to the subchondral bone. Hypertrophic chondrocytes are found in the calcified zone [25, 28, 129, 148].

The thickness of adult human cartilage typically varies between 2–5 mm, the thickness of the calcified cartilage and the subchondral plate in adult humans is ≈ 0.13 mm and ≈ 0.19 mm, respectively [82]. Furthermore, the structural architecture of articular cartilage is created by a synchronized process of tissue resorption and neoformation [81].

Table 2.1: Structure and content from the main components of articular cartilage [129] (↓ decrease; ↑ increase).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>water</th>
<th>collagen</th>
<th>proteoglycan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wet weight</td>
<td>60–85%</td>
<td>15–22%</td>
<td>4–7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dry weight</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>50–80%</td>
<td>5–10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diameter</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20–200nm</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>length</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10⁻⁸ – 10⁻⁶m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content in zones</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surface</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deep</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2.2: Macromolecular interactions in articular cartilage [129].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>collagen–collagen</th>
<th>PG–PG</th>
<th>collagen–PG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
<td>• covalent cross-link</td>
<td>• Repulsive forces between negatively charged GAGs</td>
<td>• non-covalent bonding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong></td>
<td>collagen network</td>
<td>• compressive stiffness</td>
<td>• PGs(−) interacting with collagen (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• stiffness</td>
<td>• Donnan osmotic pressure</td>
<td>• hyaluronates from aggregates interacts with collagen II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• strength</td>
<td>• retaining the molecules on the tissue</td>
<td>• swelling pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2 Mechanical properties of articular cartilage

Cartilage is an inhomogeneous, poroelastic material with nonlinear mechanical properties. The mechanical properties vary between species [8, 166], cartilage layers [186] and anatomical locations [86, 110]. Furthermore, the measurement direction affects the mechanical response, i.e. the mechanical properties are anisotropic [96]. The mechanical properties can be determined from the load–deformation behavior of the tissue. When
2.2 Mechanical properties of articular cartilage

the cartilage is loaded, flow of the interstitial fluid through the extracellular matrix creates a poroviscoelastic response. When the load is removed, the tissue restores its thickness and shape by resorption of the fluid. There is no fluid flow at mechanical equilibrium, and the load is controlled by the solid matrix. During instantaneous loading, elastic deformation without interstitial fluid flow takes place.

It has been shown that the collagen network is mainly responsible for the dynamic response under compression [98, 129], whereas PGs are responsible for the static compressive stiffness of cartilage [95, 129]. Due to tissue complexity, the nonlinear behavior of articular cartilage is most often numerically modeled by using finite–element analysis [46, 194].

Unconfined compression, confined compression and indentation measurements are used to study experimentally the mechanical properties of articular cartilage. Further, three experimental loading techniques are traditionally used: stress–relaxation, creep and dynamic loading (figure 2.2). In unconfined compression, cartilage without the subchondral bone is compressed between two smooth and rigid plates, and fluid flows only in the lateral direction. The stiff collagen structure in the superficial tissue allows a lesser lateral expansion as compared to the deeper parts of the cartilage. In confined compression, a sample with or without bone is placed in a rigid chamber and compressed with a porous filter. Fluid can only flow axially through the tissue surface into the filter. Under unloaded state, the swelling of PGs is limited by the elastic forces of the collagen network [121]. In the axial direction, compressive stiffness increases [186] and tensile stress decreases [2] towards the deep cartilage. Unconfined and confined compression measurements can be conducted only in the in vitro setting.

In unconfined compression, at equilibrium, Young’s modulus of isotropic elastic material is given by

\[ E_{eq} = \frac{\sigma}{\epsilon}, \]  

(2.1)

where \( \sigma \) is axial stress and \( \epsilon \) is axial strain in the solid matrix. In confined compression, the equilibrium modulus is called the aggregate modulus \( H_A \), related to \( E \) and \( \nu \):

\[ H_A = \frac{(1 - \nu)}{(1 + \nu)(1 - 2\nu)} E, \]  

(2.2)

where \( E \) is Young’s modulus and \( \nu \) is Poisson’s ratio. The complex dy-
Figure 2.2: (A) In a stress-relaxation experiment, the load (stress) is measured under a constant deformation (strain). (B) In a creep experiment, cartilage deformation (strain) is measured under constant load (stress). (C) In a dynamic loading experiment, the response of the tissue to cyclic deformation is measured.

The dynamic modulus of cartilage is given by

$$|G_d| = \sqrt{G_1^2 + G_2^2} = \frac{\sigma_d}{\epsilon},$$

where $\sigma_d$ is the dynamic stress, $G_1$ the storage modulus, proportional to the elastically stored energy, and $G_2$ is the loss modulus, i.e. the viscous energy lost in the loading process.

Indentation measurements can be conducted both in vitro and in vivo. Cartilage is compressed using an indenter, leading to fluid flow, both in axial and lateral directions. In this geometry, the thickness of the superficial zone and the transverse stiffness both play important roles in determining the mechanical response [97].

Typical values for Young’s modulus or aggregate modulus of the intact articular cartilage are 0.2–1.5 MPa [4, 7, 30, 36, 86, 90, 96, 98, 129, 196]. Poisson’s ratio varies between 0.00–0.43 [8, 36, 87, 96] and values for instantaneous or dynamic ($t \to 0$) modulus are around 1.5–20 MPa [30, 52, 98, 103, 149]. The values depend significantly on the species and the anatomical location of the tissue [8, 86, 110, 166].
Several theoretical models have been devised to predict the mechanical behavior of cartilage. Finite–element analysis (FE) offers the most realistic model for the nonlinear behaviour of articular cartilage. A single phasic elastic model assumes the material to be inhomogenous and elastic with constant mechanical properties, i.e. isotropic elastic material with uniform mechanical properties in all directions. In this model, only Young’s modulus and Poisson’s ratio are required to characterize the mechanical behavior of the material [75]. However, the complex nonlinear behavior of cartilage, structural and mechanical anisotropy make the modeling more challenging. The single phasic model is not very realistic, as cartilage consists of two phases.

The biphasic model includes the two phases of cartilage, i.e. solid and fluid. This is a more realistic presentation of cartilage since the motion of the interstitial fluid has a major impact on the viscoelastic behavior of articular cartilage. The linear isotropic biphasic model assumes the solid and fluid phases to be incompressible, the solid matrix being isotropic, homogenous and porous whereas the fluid phase is inviscid [128]. This is the most traditional model for characterizing the mechanical behaviour of articular cartilage. However, it fails to predict tensile behaviour [98] or short–term compressive behaviour in unconfined compression [37].

The transversely isotropic model takes into account the dynamic response better than the isotropic biphasic model [97]. This model can utilize one [195] to two [32] permeability coefficients and five elastic constants. Even though this model includes the parallel oriented collagen fibers in the superficial cartilage layer, it still fails to predict the compression–tension nonlinearity of the tissue.

In the fibril-reinforced poroelastic model, the role of the collagen fibers is considered to provide the stiffness in tension only. This takes into account the compression–tension nonlinearity and time–dependent deformation of the intrinsic viscoelastic matrix [112]. A biphasic model, where an ion phase is included, is called the triphasic model [171]. This includes tissue swelling, and in this model the stress, strain, ion concentrations, electric fields and flow fields can be defined [68–70].

2.3 Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a degenerative joint disease that in its more severe form disrupts the extracellular matrix. Mainly, it appears in patients over the age of 50 years, with the majority being women. In Finland, the ‘Health 2000’ study revealed that 16% of men and 32% of women are suffering from knee arthrosis at the age of 75–84 years [6]. In the United States,
2. Articular cartilage

approximately 135 000 procedures are done yearly to repair knee defects or to undertake total knee replacements [24]. Thus, OA is a significant health and economic burden to our society [199].

Cartilage has a poor spontaneous capacity to heal itself after an injury or disease [27]. The early stages of OA are often asymptomatic but later the clinical symptoms of OA include limitations of joint movements, deformation and effusion of the joint, pain and abnormal sounds from the joint (i.e. crepitation with motion). OA can be initiated by an injury, or it may arise after infection (i.e. osteoarthritis) or after metabolic and neurological disorders. OA can also occur spontaneously without any obvious reasons [27].

The earliest symptoms of OA, characteristics of early degeneration, include fibrillation of the collagen fibers, which starts on the articular surface and proceeds to the middle zone. There is also loss of PG aggregans, tidemark damage, the appearance of blood vessels from the subchondral bone and subchondral bone modifications [10, 25]. In X-ray images, the first sign are osteophytes. These changes lead to an increase in tissue permeability, water content and swelling of cartilage [113]. Concomitantly, the mechanical stiffness of articular cartilage becomes reduced. Nonetheless, this stage is normally asymptomatic for the individual, the cartilage surface seems still regularly glossy and no damage on the surface may be seen. Later, in advanced degeneration, due the changes in osmolarity and ionic charge, chondrocytes release mediators, stimulating metabolic response of cells, aiming to heal the cartilage. An expansion of aggregates and an increase in the water content occurs in the cartilage tissue and also the density of subchondral bone increases. At this stage, changes in glossiness and in the color of the cartilage surface may become apparent. Deep defects down to the subchondral bone can be seen [27]. In the third and final stage of OA, late degeneration, cartilage is fully destroyed, leaving only the thickened and dense subchondral bone for joint contact. The shape of the joint may change and other clinical symptoms, i.e. limping, pain, joint deformity and instability are typically encountered. The loss of cartilage leads to secondary changes in synovial tissue, ligaments, capsules, and joint muscles [27]. Decreased range of motion and muscle atrophy follow after reduced use of the joint.

The diagnostics of OA is usually carried out with X-ray imaging where joint space narrowing, subchondral bone sclerosis, cysts and osteophytes, i.e. typical symptoms of degenerated cartilage, can be observed. Unfortunately, the early stage of OA cannot been detected by X-ray evaluation. Another common diagnostic method is arthroscopic examination. One major problem of arthroscopy is its invasive nature. Furthermore, it is a
subjective examination and depends critically on the individual who performs the examination [23]. Although surface fibrillation and the general condition of the joint can be visually detected, the internal cartilage structure and modifications of the subchondral bone cannot be diagnosed.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a widely used non-invasive method to examine articular cartilage [62, 126]. The water content of the normal healthy articular cartilage tissue is 60-85% [129]. Since the early OA changes include an increase of the cartilage water content, MRI represents a potential method to detect the early stage of OA. Alterations on the subchondral bone may also be diagnosed [44, 190].

2.4 Cartilage repair

The only treatment for advanced osteoarthritis is prosthetic joint replacement. However, several methods have been introduced to attempt treatment of locally damaged cartilage. Unfortunately, none of these methods have been shown to produce hyaline tissue with a similar composition, structure or mechanical properties as native articular cartilage.

Drilling of the subchondral bone plate to stimulate the cells from the bone marrow to transform them into cartilage cells, was the first cartilage repair technique in humans which achieved satisfactory results [42]. Later, the drilling was changed to microfracture technique, which today is the most common technique in use to repair cartilage lesions [27, 169]. Mosaicplasty is a technique that has been introduced for smaller osteochondral defects [72, 73]. In mosaicplasty, osteochondral plugs are taken from the less weight-bearing peripheral joint surface and transferred to the corresponding holes in the lesion site. In the space between the plugs, fibrous cartilage takes place. Fresh osteochondral allografts can be used to replace large areas of bone and cartilage, and their use is the recommended treatment for young, active patients with large, traumatic osteochondral defects [67]. These grafts are difficult to obtain, which limits their use. More than ten years ago, soft tissue grafts, such as periosteal or perichondrial grafts were under intensive examination, but the results have been disappointing, and they are not in widespread clinical use [78, 139, 154]. Cell transplantations were introduced after the observation that the chondrocytes around the lesion were not able to move into the repaired area. Therefore, it was necessary to bring extra cells to produce matrix in the damaged area. Earlier, cultured autologous chondrocytes have been successfully isolated and transplanted in cartilage defects in rabbits [61].

The method most closely studied in this thesis work, autologous chondrocyte transplantation (ACT) (also known as Autologous Chondrocyte Im-
plantation (ACI)), was first used in human patients by Brittberg et al.[24]. In the study of Brittberg et al., a total of 23 patients with deep cartilage defects underwent ACT surgery, where autologous chondrocytes were cultured under laboratory conditions and injected into the cartilage lesion, covered with a periosteal flap. Three years (36 months) after the operation, 15 out of 16 femoral transplants and 1 out of 7 patellar transplants showed the appearance of hyaline cartilage. Subsequently, ACT has been studied and is now widely accepted as a beneficial cartilage repair technique [57, 119, 146, 147, 157, 184]. It is noted that chondrocytes can produce collagen type II in cell cultures, and biopsies have revealed hyaline–like cartilage or hyaline–fibrous cartilage in cartilage grafts [11, 76, 155].
3.1 Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR)

Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) is based on the interaction of a magnetic nucleus and its spin \( s \) with an external magnetic field, \( B_0 \). The focus in this work is on hydrogen (\(^1\text{H}\)), also referred to as the proton (since hydrogen nuclei contains a single proton). The spin of the nucleus is nonzero when the number of protons \( Z \) and/or the number on neutrons is odd.

The magnetic dipole moment, \( \mu \), has the direction of the \( B_0 \) field, giving the direction for the spinning motion of the nuclei. The nucleus can have \( 2s + 1 \) energy stages:

\[
E = -m_s \gamma \hbar B_0 = -m_s \hbar \omega_0, \tag{3.1}
\]

where \( m_s = -s, -s + 1, \ldots, s - 1, s \) and \( \hbar \) is Dirac’s constant. \(^1\text{H}\) has two possible energy levels: parallel (+1/2) or anti-parallel (−1/2) state with respect to the static field. The uneven distribution of the proton populations is given by the Boltzmann equation

\[
\frac{N_{-1/2}}{N_{+1/2}} = e^{-\Delta E/kT} = e^{-\hbar \omega_0/kT}, \tag{3.2}
\]

where \( N \) is the number of nuclei in the spin orientation, \( \Delta E \) is the energy difference between the states, \( T \) is the temperature and \( k \) is Boltzmann’s constant (1.38x10\(^{-23}\) J/K). As the spin of the hydrogen nucleus is (±1/2), it has only one quantized energy describing the transition between the states. Since there is a large number of a hydrogen nuclei in biological tissues, this is a perfect match for biological and medical MR applications. This large number of hydrogen nuclei in the tissue gives rise to the net magnetization \( M_0 \) along the \( B_0 \).
In a static $B_0$ field, nuclei will precess in the direction of the magnetic field at Larmor frequency given by

$$\omega_0 = \gamma B_0,$$  \hfill (3.3)

where $\gamma$ is a constant called the gyromagnetic ratio. For example, in water, the hydrogen proton has a value of $\gamma=2.68 \times 10^8 \text{ rad/s/T}$ or $42.6 \text{ MHz/T}$.

### 3.2 Relaxation

An additional quantum of energy can change the direction of the spin state of the nucleus away from the direction of the $z$–axis, provided that it is introduced with a frequency matching the Larmor frequency of the given nuclei. This is called a rf–pulse that induces a magnetic field, $B_1$. Applying $B_1$ for a duration $t$ will tilt the net magnetization $90^\circ$ ($\pi/2$ pulse), i.e. into the $xy$–plane, leading to zero magnetization in the direction of the $z$ axis. A pulse at the same power but duration $2t$ will rotate the magnetization by $180^\circ$ ($\pi$ pulse), i.e. it will invert the orientation of spin populations. The field in the $xy$–plane is described as

$$\overline{B_1} = B_1 (\cos \omega_0 t \hat{x} - \sin \omega_0 t \hat{y}),$$  \hfill (3.4)

inducing a time dependent behaviour of the net magnetization:

$$\frac{dM}{dt} = \gamma M \times \overline{B_{\text{ext}}},$$  \hfill (3.5)

where $\overline{B_{\text{ext}}} = \overline{B_0} + \overline{B_1}$. The different components of $M$ are given as

$$\frac{dM_x}{dt} = \gamma (M_y B_0 + M_z B_1 \sin \omega_0 t),$$  \hfill (3.6)

$$\frac{dM_y}{dt} = \gamma (M_z B_1 \cos \omega_0 t - M_x B_0),$$  \hfill (3.7)

$$\frac{dM_z}{dt} = \gamma (M_x B_1 \sin \omega_0 t + M_y B_1 \cos \omega_0 t).$$  \hfill (3.8)

After the rf–pulse, the excited spins will immediately start to arrange towards the equilibrium, a phenomenon called relaxation. The change in magnetization induces a current into the rf coil, producing a signal known as the free induction decay (FID). Since this is time dependent, the frequency distribution can be revealed using Fourier transform (FT). The recovery of magnetization is represented by the Bloch equations [19]

$$\frac{dM_{xy}}{dt} = -\frac{M_{xy}}{T_2},$$  \hfill (3.9)
3.2 Relaxation

\[ \frac{dM_z}{dt} = \frac{M_0 - M_z}{T_1}. \] (3.10)

The recovery in the z-axis direction is called longitudinal or spin–lattice relaxation, \( T_1 \), and the decay in the xy-plane is called transversal or spin–spin relaxation, \( T_2 \).

3.2.1 Spin–lattice relaxation (\( T_1 \))

Protons are in thermal contact with the lattice of their nearby atoms, and each proton will experience different magnetic field variations. In addition, the local magnetic fields created by rotation, translation and vibration of these atoms affect the field variations. After the 90° rf–pulse, the longitudinal magnetization evolves in an exponential manner, until the z-component of net magnetization is recovered. This can be derived from equation 3.10:

\[ M_z(t) = M_z(0)e^{-t/T_1} + M_0(1 - e^{-t/T_1}). \] (3.11)

The relaxation occurs when a component of the fluctuation frequency matches the nuclear Larmor frequency and stimulates a spin flip. The rate of field fluctuations is characterized by the correlation time \( \tau_c \). The relationship between \( T_1 \) relaxation rate and the frequency distribution of the molecular motion can be described as [26, 54]:

\[ \frac{1}{T_1} \propto B_{xy}^2 \tau_c \left( \frac{\tau_c}{1 + \omega_0^2 \tau_c^2} \right), \] (3.12)

where \( \omega_0 = 2\pi f_0 \) is the resonance frequency. The relaxation is most efficient when \( \tau_c = 1/\omega_0 \).

Inversion recovery is a technique for producing \( T_1 \) contrast, consisting of a combination of two rf–pulses. First, a \( \pi \)–pulse is introduced which inverts the equilibrium magnetization. Longitudinal magnetization now starts to increase and no transversal magnetization is created. The net magnetization vector will eventually return back to +z axis at a rate determined by \( T_1 \). Since the magnetization on z axis is not detectable, a \( \pi/2 \)–pulse is introduced to tip the longitudinal magnetization back to the xy–plane. Following the \( \pi/2 \)–pulse, the signal is given as [71]

\[ M_z(TI) = 0 \] (3.13)

\[ M_{xy}(TI) = M_0(1 - 2e^{-TI/T_1}), \] (3.14)

where TI is the time between the inversion pulse and the 90–degree pulse, \( i.e. \) inversion time, and \( M_0 \) is the net magnetization. The selection of TI
defines the amount of $T_1$–weighting in the registered signal. When this experiment is repeated with several $T_1$ values, $T_1$ can be determined using equation 3.14. The factor 2 in equation 3.14 assumes that the magnetization is at full inversion. This factor can also be fitted to account for inaccuracies in the inversion.

Previously, native $T_1$ relaxation time of cartilage has been shown to correlate with biomechanical parameters, degeneration stage, proteoglycan depletion [99, 135, 138, 175, 183] and $T_1$–weighted imaging has been used to evaluate repaired cartilage and cartilage lesions [35, 48, 49, 188]. In addition, $T_1$ has been claimed to be able to monitor the biophysical properties of engineered cartilage [120]. However, the relationship between $T_1$ and cartilage composition is not fully understood. It has been reported to be relatively constant throughout the tissue depths [122, 197], and to be isotropic, i.e. showing no orientational dependence [77].

### 3.2.2 Spin–spin relaxation ($T_2$)

In addition to the applied field, spins experience differences in the local field due to their mutual presence. This leads to different local precession frequencies. Energy exchange with the lattice is not involved. Due to the variations on the local magnetic field, the individual magnetic moments will gradually lose their phase coherence, leading to a dephasing of the net magnetization vector. This leads to a signal decay, known as spin–spin relaxation. Solving the equation 3.9, transverse relaxation is given by

$$M_{xy}(t) = M_{xy}(0)e^{-t/T_2}.$$  

(3.15)

The relationship between the relaxation rate $1/T_2 = R_2$ and spectral density is described as

$$\frac{1}{T_2} \propto B_z^2 \tau_c.$$  

(3.16)

As well as the dephasing of individual spins, there is also additional dephasing caused by field inhomogeneities. The total relaxation time ($T_2^*$) is a consequence of these terms given by

$$\frac{1}{T_2^*} = \frac{1}{T_2} + \frac{1}{T_2'},$$  

(3.17)

where $T_2'$ is the transverse relaxation due to the presence of field homogeneities causing a signal decay. This can be compensated with a method called the spin echo technique. This contains two rf–pulses, a $\pi/2$–pulse followed by a refocusing $\pi$–pulse. The first pulse tips the magnetization
3.2 Relaxation

into the xy–plane and the spins begin to dephase. After a time $\tau$, a second pulse reverses the spins in such a way that the spins earlier experiencing a positive phase now experience a negative phase, and vice versa. After the $\pi$–pulse, the spins begin to rephase creating an echo. The time from the $90^\circ$ pulse to the maximum intensity of the spin–echo is called the echo time, $TE=2\tau$. The detected magnetization is given by

$$M_{xy}(TE) = M_{xy}(0)e^{-TE/T_2}. \quad (3.18)$$

The $T_2$ relaxation time constant can then be determined from the signal intensity measurements with variable TE–times. When only one refocusing pulse is applied after excitation, the experiment is called a single echo spin echo sequence.

Rubenstein et al. reported the strong orientation dependence of $T_2$–weighted imaging in cartilage due to the oriented collagen structure [158]. Subsequently, $T_2$–weighted imaging has been often used to visualize the network arrangement within the cartilage layers, due to the magic angle effect [59, 65, 134, 198]. Depending on the cartilage orientation in $B_0$, the dipolar interaction within zones become altered, thus affecting $T_2$. This interaction is at its minimum at $54.7^\circ$, i.e. at the magic angle. This appears with high signal intensity in $T_2$–weighted images.

$T_2$ imaging has been used in knee MRI studies, concerning cartilage lesions where $T_2$ values of the focal cartilage defects were found to be higher than values in the adjacent cartilage [102]. Osteoarthritis studies noted that $T_2$ mapping of articular cartilage may reveal early cartilage lesions not visible with standard clinical MRI and may be useful in quantifying early OA related changes [74, 167]. ACT cartilage repair techniques have been studied with $T_2$ relaxation time by White et al. [193]. They showed that qualitative and quantitative $T_2$ mapping helped to differentiate hyaline cartilage from reparative fibrocartilage after cartilage repair. $T_2$–weighted imaging was reported to be unable to predict ACI graft histological features [174], whereas another study claims MRI to be a useful non–invasive tool for evaluating the morphologic status of osteochondral plug transfers [182].

Proton density or $T_2$ relaxation time measurements have also been speculated to reflect the water content in the tissue [106, 109, 162]. $T_2$ has also been proposed to depend on the level of PGs [150, 189]. $T_2$ has been related to the mechanical properties of articular cartilage, since it revealed a significant correlation with Young’s modulus and dynamic modulus [99, 135, 138, 189]. $T_2$ imaging has been also shown to be able to differentiate degeneration [138, 141], maturity [140], morphology [200] and topographical variations [135, 187] of cartilage samples.
3. MRI of articular cartilage

3.3 dGEMRIC

A contrast medium that is frequently used in MRI is a gadolinium complex with diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid (Gd-DTPA\(^{2-}\)), supplied in the form of dimethylglucamine salt. Free Gd\(^{3+}\) is very rare and toxic, and therefore it is necessary to bind it with a high stability constant chelate. The gadolinium atom carries seven unpaired electrons and hence is strongly paramagnetic, shortening the relaxation times \([47]\). Other important paramagnetic ions are chromium (Cr\(^{2+}\)), manganese (Mn\(^{2+}\) and Mn\(^{3+}\)) and iron (Fe\(^{2+}\)), often embedded in chelates when used in MR studies. The contrast agent concentration can be presented as

\[
[Gd−DTPA^{2−}] = \frac{1}{R} \left( \frac{1}{T_{1Gd}} - \frac{1}{T_1} \right),
\]

where \(R\) is the relaxivity of Gd–DTPA in \((mM^{-1}s^{-1})\), often expected to be the value of saline solution \([38]\), \(T_1\) and \(T_{1Gd}\) are the relaxation times without and with the contrast agent, respectively.

Bashir et al. measured the human cartilage GAG concentration with the gadolinium enhanced MRI of articular cartilage (dGEMRIC) technique \([13, 14]\). Since GAGs have negatively charged side groups, Gd\(^{-}\)DTPA\(^{2−}\) ions will be distributed in cartilage, reflecting the local GAG concentration, with higher concentrations in those areas with depleted GAGs and vice versa. The spatial contrast agent concentration is inversely related to GAGs, the main source of tissue FCD. Bashir et al. noted the connection between Gd-DTPA\(^{2−}\) and FCD \([13, 14]\):

\[
FCD = 2[Na^+]_{b} \left( \frac{[Gd−DTPA^{2−}]_t}{[Gd−DTPA^{2−}]_b} \right) - \sqrt{\frac{[Gd−DTPA^{2−}]_t}{[Gd−DTPA^{2−}]_b}},
\]

where \(t\) and \(b\) refer to tissue and bath, respectively.

The relaxivity differs between tissues and magnetic field strengths \([38, 165]\). The \(T_{1Gd}\) relaxation time is related approximately linearly with the GAG content of cartilage \([13, 14]\). Subsequently, dGEMRIC became a widely accepted and used method to measure cartilage GAGs \(in vivo\) \([12, 107, 115, 156, 173, 179]\) and \(in vitro\) \([9, 99, 125, 133, 179]\). dGEMRIC has been shown to predict the compressive stiffness of articular cartilage \(in vitro\) \([99, 135, 138, 159, 189]\). Protocol issues have been published \([29]\) and the technique has been used to evaluate the healing process and GAG content in ACT patients \([55, 184]\). The sensitivity of the dGEMRIC technique has been shown to be good in hip dysplasia and in OA studies it can identify poor candidates for a pelvic osteotomy and dGEMRIC values have correlated with pain and the severity of the dysplasia \([33, 91, 172]\).
Limitation in the accuracy of the dGEMRIC method was raised in a study where relaxivity was shown to be dependent on the macromolecular content [168]. However, cartilage was not studied.

Recently, Nieminen et al. suggested that it might be possible to combine the imaging sessions from $T_2$ and dGEMRIC [132]. Until now $T_2$ and dGEMRIC are being imaged in separate imaging sessions since Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ may affect native $T_2$ by offering an additional relaxation mechanism. The effect of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ was greater with high concentration and long $T_2$s while the deep tissue which have relatively low $T_2$s and [Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$] values was not significantly altered by Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ [132]. Finally, it has been shown that it is possible to obtain accurate morphological measurements of cartilage in the presence of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ and that morphological and dGEMRIC measurements may be combined in a single imaging session [43].

### 3.4 Other quantitative MRI methods

Spin–lattice relaxation in the rotating frame, $T_1$, relaxation, provides information about macromolecules with slow rotational motions. In this spin–lock method, spins are 'locked' in the xy–plane by applying a continuous rf–pulse. Magnetic moments are then precessed around the spin–lock field. During a spin–lock pulse, the magnetization relaxes towards equilibrium with the relaxation constant $T_1$. $T_1$ has been found to be sensitive to the cartilage PGs [1, 40, 41, 105, 144, 151, 152]. Relaxation mechanisms in the rotating frame in cartilage have also been investigated, revealing that $T_1$ is also dependent on the collagen orientation of the cartilage due to residual dipolar coupling [124].

*Magnetization transfer*, MT, involves the exchange of magnetization between bound (i.e. immobilized or adsorbed) water and protein protons. In a MT experiment, a long rf pulse is applied at the off–resonance frequency from the bulk water resonance, saturating the proton magnetization. When the components (i.e. water or protein protons) are saturated, the exchange of magnetization occurs until a steady state is achieved. A reduction of the signal intensity of the bulk water is then observed. In cartilage, collagen plays the main role in MT, since PGs make only a minor contribution to MT [63, 100, 101, 160, 185].

Diffusion is the random motion of the water molecules in the tissue. *Diffusion tensor imaging* (DTI) experiment is done by applying diffusion–sensitizing gradients and registering diffusion–related signal attenuation. The self–diffusion of the water protons characterised by a 3x3 tensor, describing both the magnitude and the direction of the diffusion in a 3–
dimensional space [15]. It has been shown that the DTI method can be used to measure diffusion anisotropy in human cartilage and that the direction of the maximum diffusion reflects the alignment of collagen fibers, i.e. motional anisotropy of water is a consequence of the attraction or binding water molecules by collagen [50]. Diffusion constants may also reflect structural degradation of the cartilage matrix. Apparent diffusion constant (ADC) has been shown to be sensitive to proteoglycan depletion [175] and may reflect the structural degradation of the cartilage matrix [123]. DTI has been studied in enzymatically degenerated bovine [116] and human [34] cartilage, indicating that GAG loss slightly increases the diffusion anisotropy and the ADC in the cartilage. However, no changes were noted in fractional anisotropy [34, 116].

The negatively charged side groups of GAGs attract sodium ions around them, assuring electroneutrality in the tissue. The early stage of OA is primarily associated with a loss of PGs, which leads to a decrease in the sodium concentration. Based on this, sodium has been used to reflect the PG depletion in the cartilage [21, 31, 108]. Shapiro et al. showed that sodium assessed accurately the FCD in articular cartilage [161]. Sodium MR imaging has also shown to represent a potential method for use as a quantitative diagnostic tool to measure changes in proteoglycan content in early-stage osteoarthritis [192].

Collagen fibers attract water molecules by inducing motional anisotropy. The signal of these water molecules can be effectively detected by the $^2$H spectroscopic imaging technique that is based on the distribution of the $^2$H quadrupolar splitting and further the spatial orientation of collagen fibers [88, 131, 163]. $^2$H spectroscopic imaging has been shown to be sensitive to the order and density of the collagen fibers in pig articular cartilage from birth to maturity [89]. The effect of load applied to the cartilage-bone plug has been monitored and the orientation and the degree of order of the collagen fibers at each spatial location on a cartilage plug has been estimated [164].

Since thinning in cartilage thickness is involved in OA, in vivo cartilage thickness and volume have been a subject of interest for clinicians. Females with a higher incidence of knee osteoarthritis (OA) than males have thinner cartilage and smaller joint surfaces, even after adjustment for height and body weight [142]. Nonetheless, it has been shown that thin cartilage does not predispose to OA [80]. In addition, the factors stimulating bone and cartilage growth may differ between the sexes [143]. The fat suppression gradient echo imaging offers the possibility to study cartilage morphometry. Building three–dimensional virtual computer presentations, it is possible to improve accuracy compared with two–dimensional
3.4 Other quantitative MRI methods

plane images [20, 22, 44, 45, 47, 56, 94, 104]. 3D imaging has also been successfully used to shorten the examination time in articular cartilage imaging [176], for monitoring the healing process of the lesion after surgical cartilage repair [178] and, together with dGEMRIC, to evaluate the relative glycosaminoglycan content of repair tissue after matrix–associated autologous chondrocyte transplantation (MACT) [178, 180], which is a three-dimensional biomaterial scaffold used as a carrier for chondrocytes. 3D imaging has also been used successfully in a fast semi–automated software method to segment the cartilage in knee MRI [39]. 3D MRI was shown to measure accurately and reliably small changes in cartilage volume ex vivo [85].

Normal tendons, ligaments and uncalcified fibrocartilage produce little or no signal and they appear dark with all pulse sequences caused by their short $T_2$s. With ultrashort TE (UTE), it is possible to identify in a specific manner, the calcified cartilage and uncalcified fibrocartilage [16, 181].
3. MRI of articular cartilage
Several quantitative magnetic resonance imaging techniques, based on $^1$H NMR relaxation properties, have been developed for the characterization of structure and composition of articular cartilage. The present study has applied qMRI techniques in an attempt to elucidate variations in properties of native and repaired cartilage in the animal and human joint, and in this way to evaluate the clinical applicability of quantitative MRI techniques. The aims of the present *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies were

1. to study the topographical variations of the cartilage MRI properties in the human knee joint and to relate $T_2$ relaxation time and dGEMRIC imaging techniques with the structural and biomechanical properties of human cartilage;

2. to study whether $T_2$ and dGEMRIC imaging techniques can be merged into one imaging session and be able to produce reliable quantitative information on the collagen structure of cartilage using $T_2$ relaxation time measurements in the presence of Gd-DTPA$_{2^{-}}$;

3. to study whether native $T_1$ relaxation time could serve as a biomarker to characterize the water content of articular cartilage;

4. to investigate the importance of combining $T_2$ relaxation time and dGEMRIC techniques to monitor the regeneration of cartilage tissue after ACT surgery.
4. Aims of the present study
Materials and methods

The present thesis consists of four independent studies (I-IV), three in vitro studies with cadaver human or bovine samples and one in vivo study in ACT patients. A summary of the methods used is presented in table 5.1.

5.1 In vitro experiments

5.1.1 Sample preparation

 Cadaver human samples

In studies I and II, left knees of human cadavers (n = 13, age 20–80 years) were obtained from Jyväskylä Central Hospital, Jyväskylä, Finland, with permission from the national authority (National Authority of Medicolegal Affairs, Helsinki, Finland, permission 1781/32/200/01). Knees were frozen post-mortem and, after thawing, full–thickness cartilage–bone cylinders (diameter = 16 mm, n = 78) with subchondral bone were drilled from nonarthritic knees at six anatomical locations: the latero–proximal patella (PAT), medial/lateral condyles of the femur (FMC/FLC), medial/lateral tibial plateaus (TMP/TLP) and the femoral groove (FG) (figure 5.1). One patellar sample was excluded because of cartilage degeneration. The samples (n = 77) were frozen at −20°C after immersing them in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS; Euroclone Ltd., Paignton–Devon, UK) containing enzyme inhibitors (5 mM ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) (Merck, Damstadt, Germany) and 5 mM benzamidine HCl (Sigma, St. Louis, MO)). Before the measurements, the osteochondral plugs were thawed, and smaller full–thickness cartilage disks (diameter = 4.0 mm) without subchondral bone were prepared with the use of a biopsy punch and a razor blade. Six anatomical sites were included in study I, whereas in study II knees without patellar samples were examined (n = 65).
Table 5.1: Materials and methods used in studies I–IV. All cartilage samples exhibited non–arthritic tissue. In studies I–II, samples were cadaver human cartilage, in study II, a part of the measurements and the whole study III were done with bovine cartilage samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Parameters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Cadaver human samples (n=77)</td>
<td>Magnetic resonance imaging</td>
<td>T1, T2, T1Gd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Magnetic resonance imaging</td>
<td>T2, T1, T1Gd, T2Gd, T1Gd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Cadaver human cartilage</td>
<td>Optical density measurements</td>
<td>H2O, T1, T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Bovine cartilage samples (n=20)</td>
<td>Magnetic resonance imaging</td>
<td>T1, T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>ACT patients (n=13) having lesion</td>
<td>Magnetic resonance imaging</td>
<td>T1, T2, T1Gd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1 In vitro experiments

For study II and III, intact bovine patellofemoral joints \((n = 8)\), were obtained from the local slaughterhouse (Atria Oyj, Kuopio, Finland). Cartilage plugs without subchondral bone (dia. = 4.0 mm, \(n = 24\) from patella (PAT, \(n = 8\) (study II); \(n = 4\) (study III)), lateral patellar groove (LPG, \(n = 4\), medial tibial plateau (TMP, \(n = 4\)) and femoral medial condyle (FMC, \(n = 4\)) were immersed in phosphate buffered saline (PBS, Euroclone, Pero, Italy) and frozen immediately at \(-20^\circ C\). Prior to experiments, all samples were thawed for a minimum for one hour in PBS.

5.1.2 Mechanical measurements

A custom–made mechanical tester with a high resolution (0.1 \(\mu m\)) actuator (PM500–1A; Newport, Irvine, CA), a force transducer (0.005 N resolution) (Sensotec, Columbus, OH), and custom–made software for measurement control and data acquisition (Lab–View; National Instruments, Austin, TX) was used for the biomechanical measurements (figure 5.2).
Young’s modulus was determined with a stepwise stress–relaxation technique (four steps, 5% strain up to a maximum strain of 20%) [96]. Dynamic modulus test was conducted using 1 Hz sinusoidal loading and a 1% strain amplitude [135].

Figure 5.2: Setup for mechanical testing of articular cartilage. To minimize the friction and to permit as free motion as possible between the sample and the metallic plates, synovial fluid was used to lubricate the interfaces.

5.1.3 MRI measurements

In studies I, II and III, articular cartilage samples were imaged with a 9.4 T Oxford 400 NMR vertical magnet and an SMIS console (SMIS Ltd., Surrey, UK) equipped with a 5–mm high–resolution transmitting/receiving spectroscopic volume coil (Varian Associates Inc., Palo Alto, CA) at 25°C. In $T_2$ measurements, the articular surface was oriented perpendicular to the static field in order to take advantage of the dipolar coupling in revealing the collagen arrangement with tissue depth. $T_2$ relaxation mapping was performed with a single echo spin echo sequence ($TR = 2500 \text{ ms}$, six $TE$s between 14 and 84 ms) with minimized sensitivity to diffusion [53].

In studies I and III, $T_1$ relaxation time mapping was conducted with a saturation recovery sequence ($TE = 14 \text{ ms}$, six $TR$s between 200–5000 ms). For studies I and II, the $T_1$ imaging was repeated for dGEMRIC ex-
5.1 *In vitro* experiments

Experiments after 2.5 hr equilibration in 1mM Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ (TR = 100–1500 ms).

For study II, $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ imaging was performed (*i.e.* $T_2$ mapping in the presence of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$). Depthwise $T_{1\text{Gd}}$, $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ profiles were calculated by averaging three pixels along the articular surface. $T_{1\text{Gd}}$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ were defined as described earlier (equation 3.19). The in–plane resolution was 39 $\mu$m across cartilage thickness with 1–mm slice thickness, with six signal averages, 10–mm FOV with 256 x 64 imaging matrix, TR = 1500 ms. The sequences used are presented in figure 5.3.

![Figure 5.3](image)

**Figure 5.3:** (A) Spin echo sequence, (B) fast spin echo sequence, (C) inversion recovery sequence, (D) inversion recovery fast spin echo sequence and (E) saturation recovery sequence used in the present studies.

5.1.4 Polarized light microscopy

The quantitative collagen fibril arrangement in cartilage was evaluated by PLM by analyzing the optical birefringence ($BF$) [5, 17]. Collagen has the capacity to rotate the plane of polarized light, *i.e.*

$$BF = \frac{\alpha \lambda}{\pi l} = \frac{\lambda}{\pi l} \arcsin \sqrt{\frac{I - a_F}{b_F I_0}},$$  

(5.1)
where $\alpha$ is the rotation angle of the polarized plane, $\lambda$ is the wavelength of monochromatic light, $l$ is the optical path length, $I$ is the intensity of emerging light, $I_0$ the intensity of light after the first polarizer, and $a_F$ and $b_F$ are optical constants.

Cartilage plugs were cut into two halves in a vertically randomized direction, fixed in formalin, decalcified, and embedded in paraffin. Later, the samples were cut into $5-\mu m$ sections. The sections were placed between the perpendicularly crossed polarizers under monochromatic light, with a $\lambda/4$ compensator in between the polarizers. The light transmitted through the system is dependent on the collagen fiber orientation, giving rise to an image. Polarized light microscopy (PLM) measurements were performed using a Leitz Ortholux BK–2 polarized light microscope (Leitz, Wetzlar, Germany), 6.3x magnifying strain–free objective, a cooled 12–bit CCD camera (SenSys, Photometrics, Tucson, AZ, USA), a monochromatic light source ($\lambda = 594 \pm 3$ nm) and a pair of motor–controlled crossed polarizers. Spatial resolution achieved was $8.9 \mu m$.

Low $BF$ refers to a tissue structure with a low degree of collagen fiber organization. This can typically been seen in the middle zone. High BF values reflecting the presence of organized collagen fibers are usually detected in the superficial and deep zones (figure 5.4).

$BF$ images were converted from grayscale microscopic images recorded from the cartilage surface to subchondral bone [5, 17]. Six independent sections were imaged and averaged from each sample to minimize the effect of sample–dependent variations. $BF$ profiles were further inverted and compared with the $T_2$ profiles. Degeneration and maturity of the samples [137] and static compression methods have been shown to affect on the angle of collagen fibers detected by the PLM method and the number of zones in articular cartilage [3].

### 5.1.5 Measurement of PG content

In study III, small pieces were cut from the edges of the MRI samples for Safranin–O–staining. These were embedded in paraffin and cut into $3-\mu m$ sections [145]. Optical density (OD) microscopy of Safranin O–stainings was performed to determine the PG content in the tissue. Safranin–O, a cationic dye, attaches itself to GAGs, and the OD is linearly related to the amount of fixed charges [92, 93]. The linear absorbance $A_l$ of a microscopic section can be calculated from

$$A_l = -\log(T_l),$$

where transmittance $T_l = I/I_0$ is the ratio of the transmitted and initial intensity of light. Linearity of $A_l$ and a correct filter set makes it possible
5.2 *In vivo* experiments

5.2.1 ACT patients

For study IV, patients \( n = 12, \text{ age } 37 \pm 8 \text{ years} \) with symptomatic local cartilage defects in the femoral condyle and/or trochlea underwent ACT
surgery. The study group consisted of patients with 13 lesions in FMC ($n = 6$), FLC ($n = 3$) and trochlea ($n = 4$). An osteochondritis dissecans (OCD) lesion was detected in four patients. Each patient underwent a two–step ACT procedure: an initial arthroscopic evaluation and a cartilage biopsy of a less–weight bearing healthy articular cartilage area [24]. Chondrocytes were isolated from the cartilage biopsy and the number of the chondrocytes was increased in a cell culture in laboratory conditions. After a few weeks, the chondrocytes were implanted via an injection underneath an autologous periosteal flap sutured over the debrided cartilage lesion [24, 119] (figure 5.6).

5.2.2 MRI measurements

The patients were examined at 10 to 15 months after the surgery by MRI at 1.5 T (GE Signa 1.5 T, Milwaukee, WI) using a quadrature transmit and receive imaging extremity coil. First a clinical MRI exam of the knee joint was conducted, including a PD–weighted fast spin echo (FSE) series with fat suppression in coronal ($TR = 3140$ ms, effective $TE = 25$ ms, echo train length (ETL) of 9, 256x224 imaging matrix, 0.63x0.71 mm in–plane resolution), sagittal ($TR = 3500$ ms, effective $TE = 41$ ms, ETL = 8, 256x256 matrix, 0.63x0.63 mm in–plane resolution) and axial directions ($TR = 2800$ ms, effective $TE = 25$ ms, ETL = 8, 256x224 matrix, 0.63x0.71 mm in–plane resolution), coronal PD–weighted FSE series without fat suppression ($TR = 2000$, effective $TE = 25$ ms, ETL = 8, 256x224 matrix, 0.63x0.71 mm in–plane resolution), coronal PD–weighted FSE series without fat suppression ($TR = 2000$, effective $TE = 25$ ms, ETL = 8, 256x224 matrix, 0.63x0.71 mm in–plane resolution).
5.2 In vivo experiments

Figure 5.6: Autologous chondrocyte transplantation. (A) Degenerate articular cartilage was removed (B), autologous periosteal flap was sutured over the debrided cartilage lesion and (C) chondrocytes were injected under it.

2500 ms, effective TE = 21 ms, ETL = 6, 256x256 matrix, 0.63x0.63 mm in-plane resolution). The field-of-view in PD-weighted images was 16–cm. A sagittal $T_1$-weighted spin echo series was conducted with TR = 600 ms, effective TE = 9 ms, 512x320 matrix, 32–cm FOV, 0.63x1.00 mm in-plane resolution. In every imaging series, the slice thickness was 3–mm.

After the clinical knee examination $T_2$ relaxation time mapping was performed. A series of sagittal and coronal single-slice FSE measurements from the center of the graft were conducted with varying echo times (TR = 2000 ms, six effective TEs between 18 and 110 ms, ETL = 9, 512x512 matrix, 16–cm FOV, 0.31x0.31 mm in-plane resolution, 3–mm slice).

Following the $T_2$, an intravenous injection of 0.2 mM/kg Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ (Schering AG, Berlin, Germany) was given to permit the dGEMRIC experiments. After a 2–h delay, the $T_1$ relaxation time was determined at the location of the $T_2$ measurement, using a series of single slice inversion recovery FSE measurements in the sagittal and coronal planes (TR = 1800 ms, ETL = 9, TE = 17 ms, seven TIs between 50 and 1650 ms, 512x512 matrix, 16–cm FOV, 0.31x0.31 mm in-plane resolution, 3–mm slice). Coronal $T_2$ and dGEMRIC data were available for nine grafts. The sequences in use are presented in figure 5.3.
5. Materials and methods

5.3 Data analysis

In study I, the non-parametric Friedman test and the Friedman post hoc test for several dependent samples were utilized in order to assess the topographical variations in MRI and biomechanical parameters (SPSS Software; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The Pearson’s linear correlation test was used to analyze the interrelationships between the MRI and biomechanical parameters. Bulk values of each parameter were calculated as the mean value of the profiles, whereas the surface values for MRI experiments consisted of the averages calculated from the 3x3 pixels on the cartilage surface.

Study II concentrated on the comparison of PLM– and $T_2$–profiles (figure 6.4). The profiles were equalized by downsampling the BF data to match the MRI resolution. A truncation from deep cartilage was performed to equalize the profile vector lengths [134]. A pixel–by–pixel analyzed linear Pearson correlation was performed between the resampled $1/BF$ profiles and surface-matched depthwise (from cartilage surface to subchondral bone) $T_2$ and $T_{2Gd}$ datasets for each sample, and for pooled data (SPSS software, SPSS inc., Chicago, IL). The Wilcoxon signed ranks test was used to compare the difference between $T_2$ and $T_{2Gd}$.

From $1/BF$ and $T_2$, the profiles thickness of histological zones were determined and compared. The zone–boundaries were determined for each rising/declining edge as the half–maximum value, a method adapted from Xia et al., 2001 [198]. A custom-made MATLAB program (MathWorks Inc., Natick, MA, USA) was used for the calculations. The Bland–Altman plot was used to assess the agreement of MRI and PLM techniques for the determination of the locations of the lamina boundaries [18]. The Kruskal–Wallis post hoc test was applied in order to investigate the significance of differences in zone thicknesses. To analyse the reproducibility of the measurements, the coefficient of variation (CV%) for depthwise and deep tissue data was calculated [58].

In study III, the depthwise MR and OD data were compared. In order to enable a sample–by–sample comparison, the profiles were linearly interpolated to 10 μm spatial resolution and truncated from the deep tissue to the shortest length. Bulk values of each parameter were calculated as the mean value of these profiles. Using the bulk values of the parameters and bulk water content, statistical comparisons between the different sites in the knee joint were conducted, applying Friedman post hoc test. Pearson’s linear correlation and the first order partial correlation test were used to demonstrate the associations between the parameters.

In study IV, $T_2$ relaxation time maps were calculated by means of a
mono–exponential two–parameter fitting in MATLAB (version 7.0.4, Mathworks Inc., Natick, MA) using all time points. \( T_1 \) relaxation time maps were calculated using a three–parameter fitting. Sagittal and coronal values were determined from the manually segmented full thickness ROIs, matched in location and size (area 6–9 mm\(^2\), mean 7±1 mm\(^2\)) from the central portion of the graft. Superficial and deep half of the tissue in each graft were also studied. Relaxation time values were similarly determined for control tissue, i.e. in the sagittal plane, the cartilage adjacent to the graft, with normal signal intensity, was chosen. In the proton density–weighted images, the grafts in the posterior part of the joint had anterior control ROIs, and the grafts positioned at the anterior part had a control ROI at the posterior part. In the coronal orientation, control ROIs were chosen from the respective site of the contralateral side of the joint. \( PD \)–weighted images were categorized based on the signal intensity as hypo–, iso– or hyperintense, as compared to the surrounding cartilage. Relaxation time values were compared with the non–parametric Wilcoxon’s signed ranks test (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The Pearson correlation coefficient was determined for \( T_2 \) and dGEMRIC values for control and graft tissue. A Kruskal–Wallis test was used to determine the dependence between the \( PD \)–weighted signal intensity and the quantitative MRI parameters of the grafts. Relaxation time values of grafts at different anatomical locations (i.e. femur and trochlea) were compared using the Mann–Whitney test.
5. Materials and methods
6.1 Topographical variation of cartilage properties

In study I, topographical biomechanical and MRI parameters were investigated to characterize the structural and functional properties of human articular cartilage. Statistically significant site-dependent differences ($p < 0.05$, Friedman post hoc test) were revealed in both the mechanical properties and the relaxation parameters of cartilage (figure 6.1). Statistically significant correlations ($r = 0.24 - 0.87$) were observed between the MRI and mechanical parameters in the human knee cartilage (figure 6.1). The highest value for Young’s modulus was recorded at FMC ($1.16 \pm 0.36$ MPa) and for the dynamic modulus at FLC ($10.04 \pm 3.69$ MPa), whereas the lowest values were found at PAT ($E_{eq} = 0.56 \pm 0.24$ MPa, $G_d = 4.47 \pm 2.22$ MPa). With respect to the MRI parameters, the longest $T_1$ relaxation time occurred at TLP ($1830 \pm 150$ ms), $T_2$ relaxation time at TMP ($37 \pm 7$ ms) and $T_{1Gd}$ time at FLC ($640 \pm 190$ ms). PAT cartilage exhibited the shortest $T_1$ ($1590 \pm 330$ ms) and $T_{1Gd}$ ($470 \pm 60$ ms) relaxation times and the FG cartilage displayed the shortest $T_2$ relaxation times ($30 \pm 4$ ms). The highest and lowest gadolinium concentrations were detected at PAT ($0.41 \pm 0.07$ mM) and at FMC ($0.30 \pm 0.10$ mM), respectively (figure 6.2).

In study III, significant variations ($p < 0.01$, Friedman post hoc test) were revealed for the $T_1$ bulk and OD values between the sample groups TMP–LPG, for the $T_2$ bulk and water content between the groups TMP–PAT (figure 6.3).
6.2 $T_2$ in the presence of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$

Average $T_2$ and $T_{2Gd}$ bulk relaxation times were 34.2 ± 5 ms and 33.7 ± 5 ms, respectively. Wilcoxon signed ranks test revealed no significant differences between bulk $T_2$ and $T_{2Gd}$ ($p < 0.26$). Bulk $T_{2Gd}$ relaxation time values correlated with $T_2$ values ($r = 0.73$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 65$).

Spatial $T_2$ and $T_{2Gd}$ maps were compared against PLM analysis. The mean thicknesses of superficial (i), intermediate (ii) and deep (iii) zones,
as determined from $T_2$, $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ and PLM profiles for all samples, were similar (table 6.1). Zone thicknesses defined from $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ profiles correlated significantly ($p < 0.01$) between the zones i ($r = 0.55$), ii ($r = 0.74$) and iii ($r = 0.95$), respectively (table 6.2). $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ relaxation time maps of intact human articular cartilage revealed the classical tri–laminar structure (figure 6.4).

6.3 Native $T_1$ in cartilage

In study II, the ability of MRI parameters to reflect water content was assessed. The water content showed a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.81$ and $r = -0.60$, $p < 0.01$) with $R_1$ and $R_2$ (figure 6.5). $T_1$ and $T_2$ relaxation rates were statistically interrelated ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.05$). After adjustment
6. Results

Figure 6.3: Topographical variations in the $R_1$ and $R_2$ relaxation times and water content of the bovine knee articular cartilage (mean ± SD).

Figure 6.4: The zone–boundaries determined for each rising/declining edge as the half maximum value, a method adapted from Xia et al., 2001. Zone–boundaries marked with dash line in (A) $T_{2\text{Gd}}$, (B) $T_2$ and (C) $1/\text{BF}$ profiles.

for OD, the first order partial correlation showed significant associations between water content and $R_1$ ($r = -0.48, p < 0.05$) or $R_2$ ($r = -0.50, p < 0.05$). After adjustment for water content, $R_1$ or $R_2$ did not show a significant association with OD.
Table 6.1: Mean values for zone thickness (i–iii) as detected with PLM or MRI (n = 65).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>$T_2$ (mm)</th>
<th>$T_{2Gd}$ (mm)</th>
<th>$1/BF$ (mm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>0.14 ± 0.06*</td>
<td>0.15 ± 0.07*</td>
<td>0.21 ± 0.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>0.58 ± 0.22</td>
<td>0.61 ± 0.23</td>
<td>0.59 ± 0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td>1.14 ± 0.50</td>
<td>1.10 ± 0.50</td>
<td>1.03 ± 0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*statistically significant differences (p<0.01) detected with Kruskall–Wallis post hoc test between groups 1–3 and 2–3 for zone i. For zones ii and iii, no significant differences were detected.

Table 6.2: Correlation coefficients for zone thickness between the different imaging techniques.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone i</th>
<th>Zone ii</th>
<th>Zone iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$T_2$ vs $T_{2Gd}$</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>0.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$T_2$ vs $1/BF$</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$T_{2Gd}$ vs $1/BF$</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*statistically significant differences, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, Pearson linear correlation.

Figure 6.5: Pearson linear correlations between water content and (A) $R_1$ or (B) $R_2$ on bovine articular cartilage.

6.4 Evaluation of cartilage repair

In study IV, the qMRI technique was evaluated to assess cartilage repair. All 13 ACT grafts had been filled by the repair sites equal to or above the level of adjacent native tissue. The matrix appeared homogenous and
lacked the laminar structure of control cartilage. There were also no discernible fissures between the repair and adjacent normal tissue (figure 6.6).

Bulk, superficial and deep graft tissue had significantly longer $T_2$ relaxation times in the sagittal plane, as compared to control tissue ($p < 0.001$, $p = 0.019$ and $p = 0.004$) (table 6.3). In the coronal plane, ACT grafts showed significantly longer $T_2$ values for bulk tissue as well as for the deep tissue ($p = 0.051$ and $p = 0.038$) (table 6.4). The superficial tissue revealed no significant differences in $T_2$ values. dGEMRIC values did not exhibit any significant differences in sagittal and coronal directions between graft or control tissue.

![Figure 6.6](image)

**Figure 6.6:** (A) $T_2$ map and (B) dGEMRIC ($T_{1Gd}$) map of an ACT patient. Control tissue is marked with a red arrow, the graft with a black arrow. In this particular patient, the graft shows a higher dGEMRIC value and the $T_2$ map shows higher $T_2$ values for graft when compared to control tissue.

**Table 6.3:** $T_2$ and dGEMRIC times of knee cartilage in the sagittal plane for ACT patients ($n = 13$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$T_2$ (ms)</th>
<th>dGEMRIC (s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>graft</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bulk</td>
<td>61 ± 8*</td>
<td>46 ± 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surf</td>
<td>61 ± 9*</td>
<td>51 ± 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deep</td>
<td>59 ± 10*</td>
<td>40 ± 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>graft</th>
<th>control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>437 ± 87</td>
<td>422 ± 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surf</td>
<td>413 ± 86</td>
<td>411 ± 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deep</td>
<td>458 ± 101</td>
<td>432 ± 78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*statistically significant differences in $T_2$ values detected with Wilcoxon signed ranks test between graft and control tissue in bulk ($P=0.001$), superficial ($P=0.019$) or deep ($P=0.004$) tissue. For dGEMRIC values, no significant differences were detected.
Table 6.4: $T_2$ and dGEMRIC times of knee cartilage in the coronal plane for ACT patients ($n = 13$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$T_2$</th>
<th>dGEMRIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>graft</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bulk</td>
<td>58 ± 8*</td>
<td>52 ± 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surf</td>
<td>60 ± 8</td>
<td>55 ± 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deep</td>
<td>60 ± 11*</td>
<td>48 ± 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*statistically significant differences in $T_2$ values detected with Wilcoxon signed ranks test between graft and control tissue in bulk (P=0.051) or deep (P=0.038) tissue. For dGEMRIC values, no significant differences were detected.
6. Results
7.1 MRI and structural/functional properties of native cartilage

dGEMRIC, $T_1$ and $T_2$ relaxation times revealed statistically significant topographical variations among different sites of the human and bovine joint. Although these differences were not always fully matched with the alterations in mechanical properties, the present data does indicate that quantitative MRI parameters are significantly associated with the mechanical properties of articular cartilage (I). The finding is in good agreement with the previous literature [9, 99, 135, 138, 159]. Considering the significant linear correlations between the MRI and mechanical parameters, the in vitro findings of MRI underline the potential of MRI as a biomarker for cartilage biomechanics.

dGEMRIC has proven to be a useful technique for estimating the PG concentration of articular cartilage, both in vitro and in vivo. However, at its best, MRI predicted less than 50% of the variations in compressive stiffness for pooled cartilage samples (I). This may in part be attributable to the heterogeneous sample material (varying age of patients) and the topographical differences in cartilage properties, but it also reflects the fact that the mechanical properties of cartilage in unconfined compression are not solely determined by the PGs but are also strongly affected by the content and organization of tissue collagen [95]. In addition, the limitations of dGEMRIC technique, i.e. the relaxivity value that is assumed to be constant through tissue depth and time of equilibration reached, may affect the correlation between the MRI and compressive stiffness. Further, certain joint areas may possess more uniform structural features than others, this possibly being controlled by the degree of local weight-bearing in the
area. Samosky et al. described a higher load response and dGEMRIC values in the submeniscal region than in the central region of the samples [159]. Also the correlations between $T_{1\text{Gd}}$ and the load response in the submeniscal area were higher than in the central areas of the samples.

This present study and previous work [138] suggests that simple bulk $T_2$ values do not adequately characterize the functional properties of the tissue, and hence more advanced analysis schemes for $T_2$ are required. In in vitro and in vivo imaging geometry, such differences in $T_2$ values may be caused in part by the varying orientation of the articular surface in the $B_0$ field due to the magic angle effect [127].

The depth–wise variation of both $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ were highly correlated with the collagen network architecture, as evaluated with PLM for normal articular cartilage (II). Zonal thickness values determined from MRI and PLM profiles agreed with each other. Although the contrast agent slightly modified the $T_2$–profile, as revealed by comparison of $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$–data, it had a minor impact on the structural information analyzed from the $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ profiles. As dGEMRIC serves as a noninvasive MRI technique to estimate cartilage proteoglycan content [14], it would be advantageous to merge both techniques into one imaging session. Earlier, Nieminen et al. proposed the use of a back–calculating method in vitro [132]. Van Breuseghem et al. applied this method in vivo, introducing a method to combine the imaging sessions which both simplified and made faster the clinical applicability [183].

When Gd-DTPA$^{2−}$ is present, $T_2$ is reduced more in the superficial than in deeper part of the tissue, creating a nonuniform weighting on $T_2$ maps of full thickness cartilage. This was verified in the present study. Further, the weakest correlation between $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ was established in the superficial lamina, the most thin and most prone lamina for positioning errors and partial volume effects. This assumption is supported by the finding that reproducibility of the $T_2$ measurements was weakest in the superficial lamina. While the current study involved intact cartilage, in pathological tissue the contrast agent concentration can reach elevated levels that may cause a significant shortening of $T_2$ [118].

In the present study, native $T_2$ relaxation times were generally short and occasionally the measurements resulted in a nonphysical result i.e. $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ was higher than $T_2$. Given the bell–shaped form of $T_2$ profiles, it is likely that an apparent increase in $T_2$ can inherently occur somewhere along the profiles, provided that the $T_2$ maxima of the two profiles are non–perfectly matched. Moreover, storage and handling of the samples may have an impact on the variations in $T_2$ and $T_{2\text{Gd}}$ results [51].
Back–calculation for correcting $T_{2Gd}$ was also performed, without this having any positive impact on the results. The constant relaxivity value throughout the tissue depth also raises the possibility for an error. However, the possible spatial mismatching of the MRI and PLM profiles is likely to present a more significant error factor. For degenerated, PG–depleted tissue with a pathologically high gadolinium concentration, back–calculation may be necessary or, alternatively, lower bath concentrations should be used [132].

Other possible error factors need also to be considered. In the microscopic studies, PLM analyses were conducted on the tissue adjacent to the MRI samples. This might also affect the results. Second, microscopic sections were prepared from osteochondral blocks whereas samples for MRI were detached from the underlying bone. This may give rise to constant swelling leading to imprecise profiling and zone matching. Third, PLM profiles consist of an average of six sections, resulting in tissue that might not be represented in $T_2$ or $T_{2Gd}$ profiles. Fourth, sample processing for PLM may involve cartilage shrinkage [79], which would impair the spatial matching of zones. Despite the limitations, the present results indicate that $T_2$ and Gd-DTPA$^{2−}$–enhanced imaging sessions can be combined, when focusing on the properties of intact cartilage.

Formerly, $T_1$ has been considered as non–specific for any cartilage macromolecules and it does not exhibit anisotropy in articular cartilage [77]. No association was found between the $R_1$ and PG content measured with OD, supporting the conclusion that native $T_1$ seems to be free from structural effects and, furthermore exhibits a primary correlation with water content in articular cartilage (III). Further, a monotonic increase of $T_1$ relaxation time with water content of gelatin and cotton phantoms [83] and various tissues from mice (fat, liver, spleen, kidney, tumor, fetus) [84] has been reported. $T_1$ has been shown to depend on the water content and is less independent of tissue type [84].

One limitation of the present study is the analysis of bulk values, because the cartilage water content depends significantly on the tissue depth [25, 153, 162]. Also, $T_1$ depends strongly on the field strength, and the suitability of $R_1$ as a water measure in lower field strengths needs to be studied. Further, a relatively small number of samples were analysed ($n = 20$), which may have had an impact on the correlation analyses. Finally, the relationship between relaxation rates and collagen content was not studied.

In the present study (III), $T_2$ relaxation rate correlated with the cartilage water content, which is in line with the previous studies where $T_2$–weighted imaging has been studied as a biomarker for cartilage water con-
tent [106, 109, 162]. However, the $T_2$ relaxation time is dependent also on the orientation of the collagen network through interactions between water bound and collagen fibrils, *i.e.* the magic angle effect [60, 136, 198]. The shape of a typical $T_2$ relaxation profile is not in agreement with the known depth–wise changes in water content, whereas the monotonically decreasing depth–wise $T_1$ resembles the characteristic water content profile [153]. Since native $T_1$ relaxation time measurements may be required for a reliable dGEMRIC experiment [188], the assessment of native $T_1$ alone can provide further aspect into such experiment as a surrogate marker for the water content.

Significant associations were observed between the various MR and compositional parameters, pointing to complex interactions between different constituents. Native $T_1$ relaxation time properties have also been shown not to correlate with the PG content [14]. The former findings between $T_1$ and mechanical properties [99, 135, 189] are likely explained by the observed dependence of $T_1$ on the cartilage water content.

### 7.2 MRI and cartilage repair

In the present study, the dGEMRIC values for repair and control tissue were similar. The results suggest that PGs are replenished to the level of adjacent native cartilage within one year. Previous studies have shown that ACT repair tissue can reach dGEMRIC values comparable to normal cartilage, evidence of proteoglycan replenishment [55, 184]. Occasionally, ACT grafts had a higher dGEMRIC index than control tissue, suggesting PG replenishment above the normal levels, or perhaps that the repair tissue differs from that of normal cartilage and consequently bias the dGEMRIC results. It is possible that these results are affected by the constant relaxivity value and/or native $T_1$ results reflecting the water content in the repair tissue.

$T_2$ relaxation time values were significantly higher for repair tissue than for native tissue. $T_2$ relaxation time of cartilage is typically short due to the effective dipolar interaction of collagen–associated water, and changes as a function of the collagen fibril arrangement in the static magnetic field [197]. Higher $T_2$ values in ACT repair tissue and the lack of the typical laminar appearance suggests that the collagen network lacks the classical three–dimensional structure of normal adult articular cartilage.

A recent study using an animal model for spontaneous cartilage repair showed significantly shorter $T_2$ relaxation times for fibrous repair tissue as compared to control tissue [132]. Quantitative $T_2$ mapping can also reveal differences in repair tissues formed after different surgical cartilage
repair procedures [191]. Trattnig et al. showed, that 19–24 months after the matrix-associated autologous cartilage transplantation (MACT) repair, tissue $T_2$ profiles normalized over time toward the control sites [177]. This is different to the present findings and gives rise to speculation that the repaired tissue produced by different surgical procedures may vary and different tissue types may be distinguished using $T_2$ mapping. The present results emphasize how dGEMRIC and $T_2$ can provide complimentary information on engineered cartilage and a more comprehensive characterization is possible by combining these two techniques.

The curvature of the joint surfaces and thereby the magic angle effect represent a possible source of error in the $T_2$ measurements when comparing sagittal $T_2$ values of the graft to the adjacent cartilage. Also the adjacent cartilage may have been affected during or after the implantation. To eliminate these possible effects, measurements in the coronal direction were also conducted to clarify these issues. This preliminary study was also limited by the number of patients examined.

The variations of the $T_2$ or dGEMRIC results in the sagittal and coronal directions point to errors in the slice positioning and/or compositional and structural variation in different parts of the grafts. Also, a multi–echo sequence might have produced a more accurate estimate of cartilage $T_2$ relaxation time than the fast spin–echo approach [111, 117]. Finally, histological control data is not available to verify the qMRI findings.

In summary, a combination of $T_2$ and dGEMRIC techniques can provide a more complete characterization of the repair tissue produced by ACT. If $T_1$ and $T_2$ measurements could be conducted simultaneously during the same imaging session in the presence of the contrast agent, this would further simplify the combination of the techniques and improve their clinical applicability.
7. Discussion
In the present study, qMRI methods have been used to characterize the structural and mechanical properties of native and repaired articular cartilage and validated against established reference methods, i.e. mechanical testing and histological methods. The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. MRI parameters ($T_1$, $T_2$, and particularly dGEMRIC) in human knee articular cartilage in vitro moderately reproduce the topographical differences in compressive moduli, and display significant linear correlations with the mechanical parameters. Thus, MRI may serve as a biomarker for cartilage biomechanics. MRI parameters can also reveal additional site-dependent differences that are not observed in evaluations of compressive properties.

2. Combining dGEMRIC and $T_2$ analyses, in the presence of Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$, it is possible to obtain PG and collagen related information on cartilage in a single MR imaging session. Gd-DTPA$^{2-}$ has a minor effect on $T_2$ relaxation time. However, the spatial variation of $T_2$ and the zonal information extracted from intact cartilage is highly comparable to the findings from native $T_2$ and PLM.

3. $T_1$ relaxation rate showed a significant linear relationship with the water content in cartilage, but was not associated with matrix PGs. The results suggest that $R_1$ could be used as an independent means of evaluating the water content in articular cartilage.

4. According to $T_2$ measurements, ACT repair tissue at 10–15 months after surgery, differs from the normal cartilage and probably lacks the distinctive collagen arrangement of native cartilage. According
to dGEMRIC, a varying degree of proteoglycan replenishment takes place. A combination of these two quantitative magnetic resonance imaging techniques permits a more comprehensive characterization of the degree of cartilage repair.


[64] W. Gründer, M. Kanowski, M. Wagner, and A. Werner. Visualization of pressure distribution within loaded joint cartilage by application
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