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Modulatory effect of Andean blackberry polyphenols on genes related to antioxidant and inflammatory responses, the NLRP3 inflammasome, and autophagy

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#### 30 Abstract

BACKGROUND: The Andean blackberry (Rubus glaucus Benth) is one of Ecuador's iconic 31 32 berries that grows in its Andean region, of which a high anthocyanin content has been described. OBJECTIVE: The aim of the present study was to determine the chemical composition and anti-33 34 inflammatory potential of the Andean blackberry from Ecuador, with emphasis on its effects on NLRP3 inflammasome activation and autophagy processes. RESULTS: Andean blackberry 35 extracts were rich in hydroxycinnamates (coumaric acid and derivates), in addition to guercetin 36 37 and kaempferol as main flavonols. Cyanidin and its glycosides were identified as the main anthocyanins present. Andean blackberry extracts efficiently reduced oxidative stress markers in 38 the lipopolysaccharide-stimulated RAW 264.7 cells. The extract also caused a moderate decrease 39 in the expression of the pro-inflammatory and antioxidant genes NFkB1, TNF, IL-1, IL-6 and 40 NOS2 expression, while it significantly increased the mRNA levels of both SOD1 and NFE2L2 41 genes. Andean blackberry extracts significantly decreased the activation of the NLRP3 42 inflammasome complex, as well as p62 levels and the LC3I/LC3II ratio increased, suggesting a 43 direct action of Andean blackberry compounds on the inflammatory response and restoration of 44 45 the autophagy process. CONCLUSION: These results suggest the potential anti-inflammatory effect of Andean blackberry, through their ability to regulate genes related to the inflammatory 46 and antioxidant response, as well as modulate the activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome complex 47 and autophagy processes. 48

- 49
- 50 Keywords: Anthocyanins, Autophagy, Blackberries, Inflammation, NRLP3 inflammasome
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#### 55 1. Introduction

Current epidemiological evidence increasingly highlights the relationship between nutritional 56 patterns based on frequent consumption of fruits and vegetables with a low incidence of 57 noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases and 58 59 cancer [1]. All these pathologies have a common pathophysiological feature in their development and progression based on high production of pro-inflammatory mediators and are characterized by 60 excessive production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) with the consequent oxidative damage on 61 62 macromolecules and cellular structures [2]. Thus, the inhibition of the excessive inflammatory response and oxidative damage has been proposed as an alternative to minimize their damage. It 63 is in this context that a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, with its important contribution of 64 65 antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds, plays a fundamental role based mainly on the ability of these compounds not only to block the excessive circulating free radicals but also on 66 their biological effects that go beyond the simple antioxidant character [3]. Indeed, in the last 67 decades an increasing body of articles have described the anti-inflammatory 68 and immunoregulatory properties that polyphenols have on different pathways related to the 69 70 antioxidant response and, therefore, their contribution to protection against oxidative damage [4,5]. Within the polyphenols described with anti-inflammatory activity, anthocyanins (ACNs) 71 play a prominent role. Anthocyanins are natural phenolic pigments with broad and outstanding 72 73 biological activity. They have potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory activity, properties that have been closely related to other of their biological effects such as their antidiabetic and 74 anticancer activity, and their role in cardiovascular and neuroprotective prevention [6,7]. 75 Anthocyanins are widespread in the plant world, providing the characteristic red/blue colour to 76 various fruits, vegetables, flowers and leaves, and their content is influenced by various factors, 77 78 such as species, cultivars, climatic conditions and level of maturity [8], and others [9]. Among its natural sources, berries stand out (strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, blackcurrant, redcurrant, 79

and raspberries) for being a rich source of anthocyanins, with levels ranging from about 100 to
about 700 mg/100 g of fresh fruits [9].

82 The Andean blackberry (Rubus glaucus Benth) is one of Ecuador's iconic berries that grows wild or cultivated, isolated, dispersed or in groups with other plants in the Andean highlands of 83 84 Ecuador. They are traditionally collected and commercialized by the indigenous people of these regions [10] and they have become a popular fruit among the Ecuadorian population in general 85 consumed in the form of jams, wine, and boiled drinks such as the famous "Colada morada" 86 87 (purple strained) that is consumed in the day of the dead celebration [11]. Although several studies have highlighted the chemical composition and biological effects of blackberries from other 88 geographical regions [12-15], few studies have been developed in the case of the Andean 89 90 blackberry. Only a few investigations have described its chemical composition, evidencing its high anthocyanin content [16–18], as well as its biological properties, such as its ability to protect 91 against oxidative damage [19]. Thus, more studies are necessary to define its chemical 92 composition, as well as the biological effects and mechanisms that it uses to generate them, to 93 gradually determine its true health potential and therefore justifying its consumption. With this 94 95 background, in the present study we firstly determined the polyphenolic composition of the Andean blackberry fruit. In order to assess its anti-inflammatory effects, a murine macrophage 96 RAW 264.7 cells were used as an in vitro validation model both in the presence or absence of the 97 98 endotoxin lipopolysaccharide (LPS). The levels of the principal biomarkers related to oxidative damage and inflammatory markers were estimated together with the activity of the main 99 antioxidant enzymes. Finally, the expression of different genes related to antioxidant and 100 inflammatory response was also determined with the objective of discovering the possible 101 102 molecular pathways involved in the anti-inflammatory action of Andean blackberry. Finally, given 103 the importance of the NLRP3 inflammasome complex as an important mediator of inflammatory processes, we studied the effects of Andean blackberry compounds on its activation by using an 104 in vitro model of THP-1 human monocytes cells. At the same time, given the repairing effect of 105

the autophagy process and therefore its importance in cellular hemostasis, we also studied the effect of the polyphenols of this fruit on the activation of this process using this cellular model.

108 2. Material and methods

# 109 2.1. Chemical and reagents

All chemicals and solvents were of analytical grade. Solvents, lipopolysaccharides (LPS) from 110 Escherichia coli O55:B5, RPMI and 1640 Medium, fetal bovine serum, penicillin-streptomycin, 111 RIPA Buffer, hydrogen peroxide solution (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>), reduced glutathione (GSH), β-Nicotinamide 112 adenine dinucleotide 2'-phosphate reduced tetrasodium salt hydrate (NADPH), glutathione 113 peroxidase from bovine erythrocytes (GPx), L-glutathione reduced (GSH), glutathione S-114 transferase from equine liver (GST), 2-Thiobarbituric acid, malondialdehyde tetrabutylammonium 115 salt (MDA), 2,4-Dinitrophenylhydrazine (DNPH), guanidine hydrochloride, streptomycin, Tris-116 HCl, Triton<sup>™</sup> X-100, phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride, leupeptin and Bradford reagent were 117 purchased from Sigma-Aldrich Co. (St. Louis, MO, USA), while the 2'-7'-dichlorofluorescin 118 diacetate (DCFH) kit was purchased from Merck, Darmstadt, Germany. TRIzol<sup>™</sup> reagent, 119 Turbo<sup>™</sup> DNase and SuperScript III Platinum SYBR Green One-Step RT-qPCR kit were 120 purchased from Invitrogen Carlsbad, CA, USA) while specific monoclonal antibodies were 121 122 obtained from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Dallas, TX, USA). A cocktail of protease inhibitors (cOmplete Protease Inhibitor Cocktail) was purchased from Boehringer Mannheim (Indianapolis, 123 IN). The Immun-Star horseradish peroxidase (HRP) substrate kit was obtained from Bio-Rad 124 Laboratories Inc. (Hercules, CA, USA). 125

#### 126 2.2. Plant materials and sample preparation

127 Ripe Andean blackberries (*Rubus glaucus* Benth) fruits were harvested during the berries crop 128 season (October – December, 2018) from plants growing in the highlands of the province of 129 Tungurahua, located in the inter-Andean region of Ecuador at an altitude between 3000 and 3200 130 meters above sea level. Fruits were collected on two different occasions at random from different 131 plants based on a similar degree of ripeness and without blemishes or any signs of damage or

decay. Two batches of samples (~1kg) were collected on each occasion and the specimens were 132 identified using the reference vouchers for specimens deposited in the herbarium of the Jardín 133 Botánico de Quito, Ecuador. During collection time, the fruits were kept at 4°C protected from 134 135 light and transported to the laboratory the same day they were harvested. Afterwards, samples were cleaned, removing remains of leaves, stems and other residues, washed with distilled water 136 137 and allowed to dry on absorbent paper at room temperature and protected from light. Finally, fruits were frozen at -20 °C overnight and then freeze-dried, ground to a fine powder, and stored at 138 -20°C until analysis. 139

For chemical composition determination and in vitro assays, a polyphenol-rich extract was 140 obtained as previously reported [20]. Briefly, the fine powder of fruits (10g) was added to 100 mL 141 of the extraction solution consisting of methanol acidified with 0.1% HCl and Milli-Q water (80%, 142 v/v) and stirred overnight at 3–5°C. Then, the solution was centrifuged for 15 minutes at 4000g at 143 4°C and filtered through a 2.5 µm pore size Whatman<sup>®</sup> cellulose filter paper (Sigma-Aldrich Co., 144 St. Louis, MO, USA). The solid residues were washed with the extraction solution as many times 145 146 as necessary until no red colour was observed in the extracted solution. Finally, the resulting extraction solutions were combined, water was added, and the final solution was concentrated in 147 a vacuum rotary evaporator (~30°C) until obtaining a dry crude extract. 148

# 149 2.3. HPLC-DAD/ESI-MS<sup>n</sup> characterization of phenolic acids, flavonols and anthocyanins

150 The Andean blackberry crude extract (ABCext) was dissolved in 0.5 mL of 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid/acetonitrile (70:30, v/v), filtered through a 0.22 µm disposable LC filter disk for analysis by 151 HPLC and analyzed using double online detection by diode array spectrophotometry and mass 152 spectrometry (MS). The HPLC system consisted in a Hewlett-Packard 1200 chromatograph 153 (Hewlett-Packard 1200, Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA) equipped with a binary 154 155 pump and a diode array detector (DAD) coupled with an HP ChemStation (rev. A.05.04) data processing station coupled with an MS detector API 3200 Qtrap (Applied Biosystems, Darmstadt, 156 Germany) that was controlled by the Analyst 5.1 software. As stationary phase, an AQUA<sup>®</sup> 157

(Phenomenex, Torrance, CA, USA) reverse phase C18 column (5  $\mu$ m, 150 mm  $\times$  4.6 mm) 158 thermostated at 35°C was used. The solvents were: (A) 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid and (B) 159 acetonitrile. The elution gradient established was: isocratic 10% B for 3 min, 10–15% B in 12 min, 160 161 isocratic 15% B for 5 min, 15–18% B over 5 min, 18–30% B over 20 min, 30–35% B over 5 min, 162 and re-equilibration of the column to initial solvent conditions. The flow rate used was 0.5 mL/min. 163 For detection, the DAD was set using 520, 330 and 280 nm as preferred wavelengths, while the MS operated in the positive ion mode for the analysis of anthocyanins and in the negative mode 164 for the rest of the compounds, the spectra were recorded between m/z 100-1000. Zero grade air 165 served as the nebulizer gas (30 psi) and as turbo gas (400°C) for solvent drying (40 psi). Nitrogen 166 served as the curtain (20 psi) and collision gas (medium). Both quadrupoles were set at unit 167 resolution and EMS and EPI analyses were also performed. The EMS parameters were set as 168 follows: ion spray voltage -4500V, DP -50V, EP -6V, CE -10V and cell exit potential (CXP) -3V, 169 whereas EPI settings were: DP -50V, EP -6V, CE -30V and CES 10V. The individual phenolic 170 compounds were tentatively identified based on their UV and mass spectra, and comparison with 171 172 data reported in the literature, as well as with internal standards when available.

# 173 2.4. Evaluation of anti-inflammatory properties

# 174 2.4.1. Cell culture and treatments

Murine RAW 264.7 macrophage cell line was purchased from ATCC (ATCC-TIB71) 175 (Manassas, VA, USA) and maintained in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal 176 bovine serum and 1% penicillin-streptomycin antibiotics (100 IU/mL penicillin and 100 mg/mL 177 streptomycin) in a humidified atmosphere at 37°C with 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. For all the assays cells were used 178 between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> passage. The Andean blackberry crude extract (ABCext) was 179 180 resuspended in RPMI 1640 medium to achieve the final concentration of 80 µg/mL. RAW macrophages were treated with: (i) RPMI 1640 medium only (Ctrl group), (ii) lipopolysaccharides 181 (LPS) (Escherichia coli serotype 055:B5) at 1 µg/mL for 24h (LPS group), (iii) ABCext (80 182 183 µg/mL) for 24h (ABCext group), or (iv) LPS (1 µg/mL) for 24h and then ABCext (80 µg/mL) for another 24h (LPS/ABCext group), (*v*) ABCext (80  $\mu$ g/mL) for 24h and then LPS (1  $\mu$ g/mL) for another 24h (ABCext/LPS group) and (*vi*) ABCext (80  $\mu$ g/mL) + LPS (1  $\mu$ g/mL) for 24h (ABCext+LPS group). The appropriate dose/time combination of ABCext and LPS treatments was selected according to our previously reported studies using the same type of extract [19] as well as the same cell model according to the culture conditions in our laboratory [21].

#### 189 2.4.2. Measurement of intracellular ROS level

190 Intracellular reactive oxygen species (ROS) levels were determined using the 2'-7'dichlorofluorescin diacetate (DCFH) kit according to the manufacturer's instructions. RAW cells 191 previously treated under the same/above-mentioned conditions were incubated with 5 µmol/L of 192 DCFH at 37°C for 30 min in the dark at room temperature. Next, the fluorescence intensity was 193 read using a microplate reader (Thermo Scientific Microplate Reader, Multiskan<sup>®</sup>, Winooski, VT, 194 USA) at 485/530 nm excitation/emission wavelength. Total protein levels were determined by the 195 Bradford method [22] and results were expressed as arbitrary units of fluorescent intensity/µg cell 196 proteins. 197

# 198 2.4.3. Determination of antioxidant enzyme activities, biomarkers of oxidative damage in lipid

# 199 and proteins and nitrite production

After treatment, murine RAW cells were washed with PBS, incubated with RIPA buffer on ice 200 201 for 5 min and the obtained lysate was stored at -80°C until analysis. For the analysis of antioxidant enzymes, superoxide dismutase (SOD) was analyzed based on the inhibition of the formation of 202 NADHphenazine methosulphate-nitroblue tetrazolium (NBT) formazon by SOD [23]. Catalase 203 (CAT) was analyzed following the decomposition of hydrogen peroxide [24]. Glutathione 204 205 peroxidase (GPx) activity was determined according to the ability of GPx to remove H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> by 206 coupling its reduction to H<sub>2</sub>O with oxidation of reduced glutathione in the presence of NADPH [25]. Glutathione reductase (GR) activity was determined based on the capacity of GR to reduce 207 208 oxidized glutathione back to reduced glutathione (GSH), in presence of NADPH [26], while glutathione transferase (GST) activity was determined by measuring the content of dinitrophenyl 209

thioether produced by the conjugation of 1-chloro-2,4-dinitrobenzene (CDNB) with reduced 210 glutathione [27]. SOD and CAT activity were expressed as U/mg prot/min, GPx and GR activity 211 were expressed as nmole NADPH oxidized/mg prot/min, while GST activity was expressed as 212 213 nmol 1-chloro-2,4-dinitro benzene (CDNB)-reduced glutathione (GSH) conjugate/mg protein/min. Protein carbonyl content [28] and thiobarbituric acid-reactive substance (TBARS) 214 215 [29] were used as markers of protein and lipid oxidative damage, respectively and the results were expressed as nmol/mg protein for total protein carbonyl content, and nmol/100 mg protein for 216 217 TBARS levels. Nitrite oxide (NO) accumulation in cell culture media was determined by the Griess reagent system following the manufacturer's protocol and NO content was expressed as µM 218 219 of NaNO $_2/10^5$  cells.

# 220 2.4.4. RT-qPCR analysis of related genes to antioxidant and inflammatory responses

RNA from RAW cells was extracted using the TRIzol<sup>™</sup> reagent followed by DNase I treatment 221 to eliminate genomic DNA interference (Turbo<sup>™</sup> DNase kit) according to the manufacturer's 222 instructions. RNA concentrations and purity were determined using a NanoDrop 2000 223 Spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Reverse transcription and 224 225 subsequent quantitative real-time PCR were performed on a CFX96 Real-Time PCR Systems (Bio-Rad Laboratories Inc., Hercules, CA, USA) using the SuperScript III Platinum SYBR Green 226 One-Step RT-qPCR kit and 100 ng per RNA sample. cDNA synthesis was carried out for 3 minutes 227 228 at 50°C followed by an initial denaturation step at 95°C for 5 minutes. The cycling conditions comprised an initial denaturation step at 95°C for 5 min, followed by 40 cycles of: denaturation at 229 95°C for 30 s, primer annealing at 65°C for 30s and extension at 72°C for 30s, followed by a final 230 elongation step at 40°C for 1 min. For gene expression analysis primers for 10 different genes 231 associated with pro-inflammatory, anti-inflammatory, and oxidative stress responses designed 232 233 online with the NCBI Primer-BLAST tool were used (Table 1). Beta actin (ACTB) was used as a housekeeping gene. Finally, a melting curve analysis, whereby the qPCR products were run from 234

235 65°C to 95°C and an increment of 0.5°C for 0.05s per step, was used to verify specific product 236 formation. Relative gene expression analysis was calculated using the  $\Delta\Delta$ Ct method [30].

# 237 2.5. Assessment of inflammasome and autophagy activation

# 238 2.5.1. Cell culture and treatments

239 THP-1 cells, a monocyte isolated from peripheral blood from an acute monocytic leukemia patient, were purchased from ATCC (ATCC<sup>®</sup> TIB-202<sup>TM</sup>) (Manassas, VA, USA) and cultured in 240 RPMI media with 10% fetal serum and penicillin (100 U/ml)/streptomycin (100 µg/ml) at 37°C 241 242 under an atmosphere of 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. To determine the effects of the Andean blackberry crude extract (ABCext) on the LPS + ATP-induced inflammasome, the cells were divided into 3 groups: (i) 243 RPMI 1640 medium only (Ctrl group), (ii) LPS (Escherichia coli serotype 055:B5) at 500 ng/mL 244 245 LPS for 4h followed by stimulation with ATP (5 mM) for 6h (LPS+ATP group) and LPS (500 ng/mL) for 4h followed by ATP (5 mM) and ABCext (80 µg/mL) for 6h (LPS+ATP+ABCext 246 group). The appropriate dose/time combination of LPS and ATP treatments for inflammasome 247 activation was previously established by researchers at the Research Laboratory, Oral Medicine 248 249 Department, University of Seville, Seville, Spain [31]. Moreover, ABCext was established 250 according to preliminary dosage assays for protein expression induction (data not shown).

# 251 2.5.2. Western blotting

Whole cellular lysate from THP-1 cells was prepared by gentle shaking with a buffer containing 252 253 0.9% NaCl, 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.6, 0.1% triton X-100, 1 mM phenylmethylsulfonylfluoride and 0.01% leupeptin. The protein content was determined by the Bradford method [22]. 254 Electrophoresis was carried out in a 10-15 % acrylamide SDS/PAGE and proteins were transferred 255 to Immobilon membranes (Amersham Pharmacia, Piscataway, NJ, USA). Next, membranes were 256 washed with PBS, blocked over night at 4°C and incubated with the primary antibody solution 257 258 (1:1000) specific for the detection of the following proteins or multiproteic complexes: NLRP3 inflammasome, caspase 1, caspase 1 p20 unit (p20), interleukin 1 beta (IL-1 $\beta$ ), mature form of IL-259 1β (p17), the autophagy markers microtubule-associated protein light chain 3 (LC3I and LC3III) 260

and p62. Membranes were then probed with their respective secondary antibody (1:2500).
Immunolabeled proteins were detected by chemiluminescence method (Immun Star HRP substrate
kit, Bio-Rad Laboratories Inc., Hercules, CA, USA). Western blot images were quantified using

- 264 ImageJ software (see: <u>http://rsb.info.nih.gov/ij/download.html</u>).

# 265 2.6. Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out with SPSS v.24 software and the Jamovi built of R statistical language [32–34]. Median  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD) of three independent experiments are presented. Correlations between the different stimulation groups were processed using one-way ANOVA analysis and the Tukey post hoc test with a *p*<0.05 was considered statistically significant, with a *p*<0.01 being considered as highly significant.

# 271 **3. Results and Discussion**

### 272 **3.1.** Phenolic composition of Andean blackberries fruit

273 In this study, a hydroalcoholic extract obtained from Andean blackberries fruit was analyzed for its polyphenol composition by HPLC-DAD-ESI/MS<sup>n</sup>. Figure 1A shows representative HPLC 274 chromatograms of the polyphenol profile obtained at different  $\lambda$  (330 and 360 nm for phenolic acid 275 derivatives and flavonoids and 520 nm for anthocyanins), while Fig. 1B shows the specific profile 276 for anthocyanins and Fig. 1C, the specific profile of phenolic acids and flavonoids. On the other 277 278 hand, Table 2 compiles the tentative identity of the peaks, assigned based on their UV-Vis spectra, mass spectral data of their (pseudo)molecular ions and MS<sup>2</sup> fragmentation patterns. The detected 279 phenolic acids corresponded mainly to hydroxycinnamoyl derivatives, whereas the majority of 280 281 flavonoid peaks corresponded to the group of flavonols and anthocyanins. Hydroxycinnamates 282 here identified (coumaric acid and ferulic acid derivatives) have been previously reported in berries [4,13], similarly to quercetin and kaempferol which have been reported as the main flavonols 283 284 present in this fruit [13,18,35]. Among the anthocyanins reported in berries, cyanidin and its glycosides have been identified as the main form of this group of pigments [13,35] in fact, in our 285 study cyanidin was identified predominantly in its 3-form glycosidic and only two minor peaks of 286

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pelargonidin derivatives were detected. In this context, the chemical composition reported here 287 result crucial to justify part of the biological effects reported here below, as well as those 288 previously reported [35]. Hydroxycinnamates, for example, are among the most widely distributed 289 290 phenylpropanoids present in the insoluble-bound, conjugated-soluble and free forms in plants and render relevant antioxidant activity by their capacity to scavenge different free radicals (FR) such 291 292 as hydroxyl radical (HO<sup>•</sup>), superoxide radical anion (O<sub>2</sub><sup>-•</sup>), peroxyl radical (ROO<sup>•</sup>), peroxynitrite (NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>), singlet oxygen (<sup>1</sup>O<sub>2</sub>) and several organic radicals [36]. Coumaric acids have been reported 293 as an important antioxidant component in different berries [37], while in addition to its antioxidant 294 295 capacity, it has also been associated with antibacterial, anticancer, antihistaminic effects and an enhancement of ATP production [38]. Quercetin and kaempferol were also associated with 296 significant antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and antitumor effects [7,39], similar to anthocyanins 297 298 that have been widely studied for their powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects [7,35,40], antitumoral capacity [7,41], and protective effects against cardiovascular diseases 299 300 [5,7,42].

### 301 **3.2** Effects of Andean blackberry extract on radical levels, antioxidant enzyme and oxidative

# 302 biomarkers in LPS-stimulated cells

During inflammation, different macrophage subsets have a dual behavior: on one side, 303 304 macrophages displaying an M1 phenotype secrete pro-inflammatory cytokines and produce elevated amounts of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and nitric oxide (NO), enhancing the 305 inflammatory status of the immune response. On the other hand, alternatively activated M2 306 macrophages are involved in the inflammation resolution and tissue reconstruction, being 307 308 responsible for apoptotic and necrotic cell phagocytosis and secretion of anti-inflammatory, proangiogenic and profibrotic cytokines, such as interleukin 10 (IL-10), vascular endothelial 309 310 growth factors (VEGF) and transforming growth factor  $\beta$  (TGF- $\beta$ ), respectively. The excessive production of ROS and NO has been correlated with a chronic inflammation typical of some 311 diseases, including, for example, asthma, ulcerative colitis and rheumatoid arthritis [43]. 312

Therefore, it is very important to investigate the role that these mediators have on these processes, together with the effects of natural extracts in improving inflammation. In line with the above, this work analyzed the effect of ABCext on the intracellular production of ROS and NO in RAW 264.7 macrophages, as well as on a group of oxidative stress markers related to oxidative stress derived from the inflammatory response (Table 3).

318 Regarding ROS, LPS significantly (p < 0.05) increased the intracellular % of ROS up to 2.8 times compared to control cells, while the treatment with ABCext led to a slight decrease compared 319 320 to the control; in the combined treatments, we found that ABCext significantly (p < 0.05) decreased the intracellular ROS levels, in LPS/ABCext group, but especially in the ABCext/LPS group, 321 322 compared to LPS group, highlighting the protective effects of blackberry extract before the LPS damage (Table 3). The similar trend was found for NO production (Table 3), with the highest 323 values (p < 0.05) found in LPS group, the lowest (p < 0.05) in ABCext group and with the 324 pretreatment with ABCext the most effective (p < 0.05) compared to the other combined treatments. 325 326 Our results agree with previous data, which highlighted the ability of the main blackberry 327 compounds, such as anthocyanins, to decrease basal intracellular production of inflammatorybased ROS and NO as a predisposing factor for several noncommunicable chronic degenerative 328 diseases [6,44–46]. In fact, through different pathways, anthocyanins possess the ability to act as 329 330 reducing agents in the electron-transfer reaction pathway, donating electrons to the free radicals with unpaired electrons [47]. However, recent studies have shown that the biological activities of 331 anthocyanin also extend to other implicated pathways such as improvement of mitochondrial 332 function [48], immunomodulatory properties [49], regulation of lipid metabolism [50], as well as 333 mitochondrial biogenesis and functionality, modulation of intracellular ROS production and 334 335 regulation of antioxidant enzymes production involved in intracellular antioxidant defense [51].

Regarding the activities of the main antioxidant enzymes, in LPS treated cells, a significant (p<0.05) decrease in the activities of GPx, GR, GST, SOD and CAT was observed compared to the control group (Table 3), while in ABCext treated cells similar values with the control group

were measured. Interestingly, the pretreatment with ABCext (ABCext/LPS group) exerted a more 339 protective effect against LPS damage, compared to the LPS/ABCext and ABCext+LPS. The 340 effects of ABCext on ROS and NO levels, as well as on antioxidant enzyme activities, followed a 341 342 similar behavior to protein and lipid damage (Table 3). The highest values (p < 0.05) of the carbonyl group and TBARS were found in LPS group, while the lowest (p < 0.05) were measured in ABCext 343 344 group and in the ABCext/LPS group, confirming the efficacy of the ACNs-rich ABCext treatment in counteracting oxidative damage, as previously reported by our group in ANCs-rich extracts 345 346 from different red fruits [21,40].

# 347 3.2. Effects of Andean blackberry extract on the expression of proinflammatory and 348 antioxidant genes in LPS-stimulated RAW 264.7 cells

Given the direct effect of various natural compounds from, the same families as those reported 349 here on gene regulation beyond their antioxidant power [35,49,50], here we investigate the effect 350 of the ABCext on the expression levels of genes that codify for key proinflammatory and 351 antioxidant mediators in LPS-stimulated murine macrophages. Among the genes analyzed, we 352 353 observed some interesting changes in the expression profile of 7 of these important mediators (Fig. 354 2). More specifically, although the nuclear factor kappa B (NF $\kappa$ B) expression was relatively low, not allowing for statistically significant differences between the different stimulation groups to be 355 356 revealed, we observed that treating RAW cells with ABCext alone or with LPS and ABCext 357 simultaneously shows a tendency to lower NFkB expression compared with LPS-stimulated cells (Fig. 2A). In the same line, pretreating murine macrophages with ABCext before LPS stimulation 358 appeared to confer a protective effect though lower NFkB expression did not reach statistical 359 360 significance compared to LPS-stimulated cells.

On the other hand, the analysis for tumor necrosis factor (TNF) expression showed statistically significant differences between the different stimulation groups (p<0.05) (Fig. 2B). Additionally, we observed that mean TNF expression in both RAW cells treated first with LPS and then ABCext and cells treated first with ABCext and then LPS was almost half of the LPS-treated cells, although these values did not reach statistical significance, while stimulating RAW cells simultaneously
with LPS and ABCext did not change *TNF* expression compared with LPS stimulation alone.

Interestingly, similar expression patterns were found between the other two proinflammatory 367 cytokines, namely IL-1ß and IL-6 (Fig.2C and D, respectively). Indeed, for both genes codifying 368 369 for these cytokines, treating cells with ABCext alone lowered expression levels compared with 370 LPS-stimulated macrophages (p < 0.001) for each gene, respectively) as well as with constitutive expression levels. However, treating cells simultaneously with LPS and ABCext, first with LPS 371 372 and then with ABCext or first ABCext and then LPS did not manage to significantly lower the expression levels of either of these genes compared with the levels induced by LPS alone 373 374 stimulation (Fig. 2).

Nitric oxide synthase 2 (NOS2) expression exhibited a similar pattern whereby ABCextstimulated cells were found to significantly reduce NOS2 mRNA levels against LPS-treated cells (p<0.05) and even reach lower expression levels than in unstimulated cells (Fig. 2E). However, LPS appears to be a strong promotor of NOS2 activation as either of the treatments that involved LPS and ABCext were shown to induce similar NOS2 expression levels as the LPS alone condition.

Finally, NFE2L2 and SOD1 expression patterns were largely similar (Fig. 2F and G, 381 382 respectively). Treating RAW cells with LPS was shown to lower expression levels of both genes, 383 although the differences with basal expression levels did not reach statistical significance. However, treating cells with ABCext after LPS stimulation incremented the mRNA levels of both 384 genes reaching statistical significance for both superoxide dismutase (SOD1) and nuclear factor 385 386 erythroid 2-related factor 2 (NFE2L2) (p<0.05). Toll-like receptor (TLR) ligands like LPS and 387 cytokines like IFNG drive M1 polarization. The outcome of this stimulation is a significant increment in the expression of proinflammatory cytokines, such as IL-1B, IL-12, TNF, IL-6, 388 chemokines like IL-8 (CXCL8), MHC-II molecules and production of nitrous oxide and ROS. The 389 390 principal promoter of the aforementioned mediators is NFkB, a pivotal transcription factor that bridges TLR signalling and the expression of the whole armamentarium of molecules employed by classically activated macrophages [52] Indeed, LPS, a master activator of TLR4, induced overexpression of NF $\kappa$ B, TNF, IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, and NOS2, while slightly downregulating the expression of NFE2L2 that codifies for the NRF2 protein, a known regulator of anti-inflammatory, detoxifying and antioxidant responses [53].

396 Treatment with ABCext, whether before, after, or concomitantly with LPS, largely reversed the 397 LPS-induced upregulation of NFkB suggesting an important protective role for ABCext in 398 excessive inflammation, although generally low LPS-induced NFkB expression did not allow for statistical significance to be reached. Moreover, treating murine macrophages with ABCext before 399 400 or after LPS stimulation seemed to partially mitigate TNF, but not IL-18 or IL-6 upregulation (Fig. 2C and D, respectively). This finding implies that the expression of these proinflammatory 401 cytokines is either not exclusively NFkB mediated in RAW cells, as LPS-induced NFkB 402 expression levels suggest, or that these cells are so sensitive to LPS stimulation that even lower 403 concentrations of this ligand are needed to allow the full anti-inflammatory effect of ABCext to 404 405 be revealed. Additionally, the induction of NFE2L2 and SOD mRNA expression by ABCext in 406 RAW cells, especially if added after LPS stimulation, revealed a possible antioxidant role of this extract in an endeavour to minimize oxidative stress adverse effects. 407

408 Overall, gene expression analysis in stimulated RAW 264.7 cells strongly suggest an important 409 anti-inflammatory and antioxidant role of ABCext as previously has been demonstrated in ANCs-410 rich extracts from different fruits [15,48–50,54]. Nonetheless, the anti-inflammatory and 411 antioxidant effects of ABCext warrant further investigation in *in vivo* models and the exact 412 components exerting these effects need to be identified.

413

414 3.3 Effects of Andean blackberry extract on NLRP3 inflammasome and autophagy
415 process

Given the direct effect that molecular regulation has on the inflammatory response, and 416 therefore on the deleterious effects that it can produce, considering the results presented here, it is 417 imperative to know how the polyphenolic constituents of Andean blackberry can influence the 418 419 regulation of the response. With this aim, we set out to determine whether ABCext administration 420 can alleviate the inflammatory response by mediating regulation of the NLRP3 inflammasome 421 complex. For this, we used an in vitro model of THP-1 cells. Since NLRP3 activation requires two 422 signals, the priming, and the activation signal, we treated the cells with LPS and ATP, respectively 423 [55]. The NLRP3 inflammasome is the best characterized NOD-type receptors (NLR) which plays an essential role in the inflammation response. It is a multiprotein complex, also known as caspase-424 425 1 activation platform, which once triggered by pathogens, stress, or danger-signals, leads to the activation of caspase-1(CASP1) and thus to the maturation and secretion of interleukin 1 beta (IL-426 1β) and interleukin 18 (IL-18) which initiate the inflammatory signalling [56,57]. NLRP3 427 inflammasome plays a crucial role in the inflammation response maintaining the homeostasis by 428 429 repairing tissues, eliminating pathogens, and sensing and adapting stress levels. However, 430 dysregulation of its activation leads to a wide range of diseases such as metabolic, inflammatory, 431 cardiovascular, neurological and cancer. In addition, the ageing process is commonly accompanied by low grade sterile chronic inflammation, being NLRP3 inflammasome activated and thus leading 432 433 to the accumulation of pro-inflammatory mediators. This process is already known as inflaming [58,59]. For this reason, it is increasingly necessary to identify compounds, such as those present 434 in food, that target the inflammasome to improve our general health and well-being. 435

The treatment with LPS+ATP in THP-1 cells (LPS+ATP group) significantly increased (p<0.01) the expression levels of NLRP3 proteins (1.35 times), activated CASP1 (p20) (1.24 times) and activated IL-1 $\beta$  (p17) (0.65 times) compared to the control group (Ctrl group) (Fig. 3A), indicating that the NLRP3 inflammasome was triggered and therefore the inflammatory response was on. However, after treatment with ABCext (LPS+ATP+ABCext group), the levels of these proteins showed a significant decrease (p<0.01) (0.89 times for NLRP3 protein; 0.73 times

for activated caspase-1 (p20) and 0.95 times for activated IL-1 $\beta$  (p17) - compared to the group 442 treated with LPS and ATP (LPS+ATP group). These values are close to the basal levels, where, in 443 the case of activated IL-1 $\beta$  (p17), the levels decreased below the basal values of the control group 444 445 (Ctrl group) (Fig. 3A). In addition, our results showed that there is a downward trend in NFKB levels after treating the cells with ABCext (Section 3.2 of the Results and Discussion), which 446 447 correlated with the observed decrease in NLRP3 inflammasome and IL-1ß levels after the treatment with ABCext, since NFkB mediates their expression after the priming signal which in 448 our case is the LPS addition. These results are promising since they suggest a possible modulatory 449 effect of Andean blackberry polyphenols, more probably the anthocyanins, on the NLRP3 450 451 inflammasome complex, due to its ability to decrease its activation, as well as activated CASP1 and IL-1ß protein levels, evidencing its potential anti-inflammatory effects. In fact, several works 452 have already reported the modulating effect of polyphenols, as anthocyanins on the NLRP3 453 complex [60]. It was recently reported that anthocyanin extract from Purple Sweet Potato was able 454 to restrict NLRP3 inflammasome activation in alveolar macrophages infected with Klebsiella 455 456 pneumoniae [61]. On the other hand, the anthocyanins extracted from the petals of Hibiscus syriacus L. were able to inhibit NLRP3 Inflammasome in BV2 microglia cells by alleviating NFKB 457 and endoplasmic reticulum stress induced Ca<sup>2+</sup> accumulation and mitochondrial ROS production 458 459 [62]. In general, the anti-inflammatory molecular mechanisms of anthocyanins have been associated with some mechanisms, among which it is worth noting, and which are associated with 460 the results presented here: (i) their ability to suppress the activation of NF $\kappa$ B [63], and (ii) suppress 461 LRR, NACHT and PYD domains-containing protein 3 (NLRP3) inflammasomes by activation of 462 NRF2 and the thioredoxin-1/thioredoxin-interacting protein (Trx1/TXNIP) inhibitory complex 463 464 [64].

After NLRP3 activation, we observed a significant increase (p<0.01) in the levels of p62 and the LC3I/LC3II ratio in the LPS+ATP group, proteins that play a fundamental role in the autophagy process (Fig. 3B). It consists in a guided degradation of unnecessary or dysfunctional

cellular components such as misfolded proteins and dysfunctional organelles by a double 468 membrane vesicle, or autophagosome, and then delivered to the lysosomes for their degradation 469 [65]. High levels of p62 together with high levels of LC3I/LC3II ratio suggest an impairment in 470 471 the autophagy with the accumulation of non-degraded substrates. However, after treatment with 472 ABCext (LPS+ATP+ABCext group), the p62 levels showed a significant decrease (p < 0.01) and 473 the LC3I/LC3II ratio increase (p < 0.05), compared to the LPS+ATP group, indicating a restoration of the autophagy process (Fig. 3B). Autophagic dysfunction, as well as NLRP3 dysregulation, are 474 475 associated with ageing and age-related diseases. By treating the cells with ABCext after triggering the inflammatory response, we have observed a reduction in NRLP3 protein level which leads, 476 according to other studies [66-68], to a decrease in p62 and an increase in the LC3I/LC3II ratio, 477 restoring the autophagy flux. In light of these results the consumption of Andean blackberry 478 polyphenols, more probably the anthocyanins seem certainly promising to treat inflammatory-479 based and age-related diseases. The results presented here agree with several studies that have 480 481 demonstrated that anthocyanins from different natural sources induce autophagy [69,70]. More 482 recently it was demonstrated that anthocyanins from Sambucus canadensis could significantly reduce cell senescence and lens ageing by increasing autophagic and mitophagy flux and 483 enhancing mitochondria and cell renewal through the inhibition of the PI3K/AKT/mTOR 484 485 signaling pathway, which leads to attenuation of ageing [71].

# 486 4. Conclusions

According to the results presented here, it was possible to demonstrate a modulating effect of inflammation by the polyphenolic components of the Andean blackberry. This effect was not only due to its antioxidant capacity, evidenced in the improvement of markers of oxidative damage to cellular macromolecules, but also through its ability to regulate certain genes related to the antioxidant and inflammatory response. The components of the Andean blackberry showed a modulatory effect of the NLRP3 inflammasome complex, decreasing its activation, in addition to restoring the autophagy process, which suggests a direct action of Andean blackberry compounds

494	on the inflammatory response and restoration of the autophagy process. Our findings require								
495	further investigation, and more efforts in in vivo studies and intervention models evaluating the								
496	impact of Andean blackberry components on modulating inflammatory and antioxidant response								
497	and the direct involvement of the NLRP3 complex in these effects should be done.								
498	Conflicts of interest								
499	The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or persona								
500	relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.								
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507	Ecuador and the Universidad de Las Américas, Ecuador.								
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FIGURE CAPTION

714	Figure. 1	. HPLC chromatograms	of phenol	ic acid	derivatives	and f	lavonoid	profile i	n the	crude
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- 715 extract of Andean blackberry (ABCext). A, shows representative HPLC chromatograms of the
- polyphenol profile for phenolic acid derivatives and flavonoids recorded at 330 and 360 nm and
- for anthocyanins at 520 nm. B, shows the specific profile of anthocyanins (at 520 nm) and C, the
- 718 specific profile of phenolic acids and flavonoids (at 330 nm).

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Figure. 2. Expression of genes related to the inflammatory response and antioxidant response in RAW 264.7 murine macrophages treated with different combinations of ABCext and/or LPS. Data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SD. p<0.05, p<0.01, significant differences between the experimental groups.

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Figure. 3. Expression levels of the proteins studied. Data are expressed as mean values ± SD.
\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, significant differences between the experimental goups.</li>