ICEs are the main reservoirs of the ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene in

Pseudomonas aeruginosa

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Abstract

The ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene was recently identified in a plasmid isolated from a clinical *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* clinical isolate. Homologues of this gene were also identified in *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *Acinetobacter baumannii*. We set out to explore the mobile genetic elements involved in the acquisition and spread of this gene in publicly available and complete genomes of *Pseudomonas*. The *crpP* gene was identified only in *P. aeruginosa*, in more than half of the complete chromosomes (61.9%, n=133/215) belonging to 52 sequence types, of which the high-risk clone ST111 was the most frequent. We identified 136 *crpP*-harboring ICEs, with 93.4% belonging to the mating-pair formation G (MPF$_G$) family. The ICEs were integrated at the end of a tRNA^{Lys} gene and were all flanked by highly conserved 45-bp direct repeats. The core ICEome contains 26 genes (2.2% of all genes), which are present in 99% or more of the *crpP*-harboring ICEs. The most frequently encoded traits on these ICEs include replication, transcription, intracellular trafficking and cell motility. Our work reveals that ICEs are the main vectors promoting the dissemination of the ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene in *P. aeruginosa*.

Keywords

Integrative and conjugative elements, ciprofloxacin resistance, *crpP*.

Author Notes

All supporting data has been provided within the article or through supplementary data

files. Supplementary material is available with the online version of this article.

Abbreviations

ARG, antibiotic resistance gene; CrpP, ciprofloxacin resistance protein; ICE, integrative

and conjugative element; MPF, mating pair formation; NCBI, National Center for

Biotechnology Information.

Impact Statement

A high proportion of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* clinical isolates are resistant to

ciprofloxacin. Resistance to this antibiotic is often mediated by chromosomal mutations,

but recently horizontally transferred genes have been identified. We assessed the

repartition of the ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene among *Pseudomonas* genomes and

we characterized the mobile elements associated with its acquisition. We found that this

gene is prevalent in *P. aeruginosa* and frequently associated with integrative and

conjugative elements (ICEs). Importantly, we also identified highly conserved direct

repeats that can be used to accurately delimit *crpP*-carrying ICEs in *P. aeruginosa*

genomes.

Data Summary

All the bacterial genomes scanned in this study have been deposited previously in the

National Center for Biotechnology Information genome database and are listed on the

supplementary tables. The newick files used to create the trees in Figures 1 and 4 are

deposited   on   figshare   at

https://figshare.com/projects/ICEs_are_the_main_reservoirs_of_the_ciprofloxacin-

modifying_crpP_gene_in_Pseudomonas_aeruginosa/79308.

Introduction

Pseudomonas aeruginosa is a frequent cause of severe nosocomial infections and is one

of the six ESKAPE pathogens [1,2]. Ciprofloxacin is an antibiotic of the fluoroquinolone

class that is active against *P. aeruginosa* infections [3,4]. In this species, a high proportion

of clinical isolates are resistant to ciprofloxacin [5,6]. Commonly reported mechanisms

of ciprofloxacin resistance include mutations in DNA gyrase and topoisomerase IV-

encoding genes *gyrA*, *gyrB*, *parC* and *parE* and efflux pumps regulatory genes as *nalC*

and *nfxB* [6–8].

Besides chromosomal mutations, ciprofloxacin resistance can be mediated by

horizontally transferred genes, such as the quinolone resistance *qnr* gene [9]. The

ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene induces ATP-dependent phosphorylation of the

antibiotic and was originally identified in a plasmid isolated from a *P. aeruginosa* clinical

isolate [10]. This plasmid conferred resistance to ciprofloxacin when transferred to *P.*

aeruginosa PAO1 strain. The authors also cloned the gene into a shuttle vector and the

resulting   recombinant   plasmid   conferred   an   increased   minimum   inhibitory

concentration to the same antibiotic in *Escherichia coli*. Homologous *crpP* genes were

also identified in *Acinetobacter baumannii* [11] and in *E. coli* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae*

clinical isolates from Mexican hospitals and conferred decreased susceptibility to

ciprofloxacin [12,13].

Integrative and conjugative elements (ICEs) are mobile elements involved in vertical and

horizontal transmission of antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) and other beneficial genes

in bacterial communities [2,14,15]. ICEs can be classified into eight mating-pair

formation (MPF) classes based on the classification of the secretion machinery involved

in conjugation [16,17]. Recently, Ruiz verified that several *CrpP* proteins were encoded

next to genes typically present in ICEs [11]. Building on this observation, we set out to

trace and characterize the *crpP*-harboring ICEs present in all complete *Pseudomonas*

genomes available on NCBI.

Material and methods

Pangenome and whole-genome analyses

All complete *Pseudomonas* genomes (n=577 chromosomes and 163 plasmids) were

downloaded from NCBI's Refseq library on the 01/02/2020 using ncbi-genome-

download v 0.2.11 (https://github.com/kblin/ncbi-genome-download) (**Table S1**). We

used mlst v 2.11 (https://github.com/tseemann/mlst) to scan the genomes against the

PubMLST *Pseudomonas* typing schemes (https://pubmlst.org/) [18]. The genomes were

annotated using prokka v1.14.5 (https://github.com/tseemann/prokka) [19]. We used

the .gff files created by Prokka to calculate the *P. aeruginosa* pangenome in roary

v3.13.0 (https://github.com/sanger-pathogens/Roary) [20]. The core genome and

ICEome alignments created by Roary was used as input in fasttree v2.1.10

(http://www.microbesonline.org/fasttree/) [21] to create an approximately-maximum-

likelihood phylogenetic tree using a generalized time-reversible (GTR) model of

nucleotide evolution. We used the newick file created by FastTree to create a

phylogenetic tree in iTOL (https://itol.embl.de/) [22]. We performed functional

annotation based on orthology assignments (COGs) of protein files created by prokka

using eggNOG-mapper v2 (http://eggnog-mapper.embl.de/) [23].

Mining ICEs in complete genomes

We   used   the   ICEfinder   standalone   version

(http://202.120.12.136/ICEfinder/ICEfinder.html) and manual curation to trace putative

ICEs. We searched for ARGs on extracted ICEs using amrfinder v 3.6.7 and default

parameters (50% minimum coverage of the reference protein and 90% minimum

identity) (https://github.com/ncbi/amr/wiki/AMRFinder-database) [24]. Positive ICE

hits for CrpP-encoding genes were further characterized; we used fastANI v1.3

(https://github.com/ParBLiSS/FastANI) [25] to compute whole-genome average

nucleotide identity of non-*P. aeruginosa crpP*-positive hits, antismash online tool

(https://antismash.secondarymetabolites.org/#!/start) [26] to look for secondary

metabolite biosynthesis gene clusters, BAGEL (http://bagel4.molgenrug.nl/) [27] to

trace bacteriocins, macsyfinder v1.0.5 (https://github.com/gem-pasteur/macsyfinder)

and the CRISPRCasFinder online tool (https://crisprcas.i2bc.paris-saclay.fr/) to detect

CRISPRs and *cas* genes [28]. We used roary to infer the total *crpP*-harboring ICE content,

here referred to as the ICEome.

Results

The *crpP* gene is widespread in *P. aeruginosa*

The *CrpP*-encoding gene was identified in 23.1% of the chromosomes (n=133/577,

including 131 *P. aeruginosa*, 1 *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and 1 *Pseudomonas* sp.) and 1

P. aeruginosa plasmid (accession number NZ_CP030914.1), which is different than the

pUM505 plasmid reported by Chávez-Jacobo and colleagues [10]. However, we

compared the ANI between non-*P. aeruginosa* hits (the *P. fluorescens* strain NCTC10783

and *Pseudomonas* sp. AK6U strains with accession numbers NZ_LR134300.1 and

NZ_CP025229.1, respectively) and the *P. aeruginosa* DSM 50071 type strain (accession

number NZ_CP012001.1) and we realized that these strains belong to the *P. aeruginosa*

species, as the ANI value is above the 95% cutoff for species delineation (**Table S2**). All

crpP-hits were only identified in *P. aeruginosa* complete genomes, as so from here on

we focused our attention on *P. aeruginosa* genomes. Indeed, the percentage increases

if we only consider the *P. aeruginosa* chromosomes (61.9%, n=133/215), meaning that

the *crpP* gene is present in more than half of the *P. aeruginosa* complete genomes

(**Figure 1**). The GC content of *crpP*-harboring chromosomes varies from 65.6 to 66.5%

(**Figure 2**) and the sequence length from 6.3 to 7.5 Mb. We identified several clones

(n=52 sequence types), of which the high-risk clone ST111 [29] was the most frequent

(**Table S3**).

Figure 1. Approximately-maximum-likelihood phylogenetic tree base on the core

genome alignment of 215 complete *P. aeruginosa* genomes. Branches and labels from

crpP-positive hits are colored blue and the branches have twice the standard width. Only

bootstrap values from 0.9 to 1 are displayed.

Figure 2 – Distribution of the GC content of the chromosomes and ICEs. The violin plots

were created using ggplot2.

The majority of *crpP*-harboring ICEs belong to the MPF_G family

A total of 316 putative ICEs were identified among the 133 chromosomes. Each

chromosome carries at least one ICE. Most *crpP* genes present in the chromosome were

associated with an ICE (with the exception of *P. aeruginosa* strains W60856 and B17932

with the accession numbers NZ_CP008864.2 and NZ_CP034436.1, respectively) with

43.0% of the total putative ICEs (n=136/316) harboring the ciprofloxacin-modifying

gene. In *P. aeruginosa* RW109 strain (accession number NZ_LT969520.1, position

5629923-5820312 bp), we identified two *crpP*-harboring ICEs in tandem (**Table S3**). ICE

size varied from 81.6 to 145.5 kb, and the GC content from 56.6 to 61.5% (**Figure 2**).

Most of the ICEs (n=129/136) ICEs belong to the MPF$_G$ family (**Table S4**). For the

remaining 7, no MPF family could be determined.

The *crpP*-carrying ICEs integrate into a specific hotspot

All *crpP*-carrying ICEs identified in this study were integrated at the end of a tRNA^{Lys}

gene, that was found alone or in a tRNA cluster with tRNA^{Pro} and tRNA^{Asn}. The only

exception was observed in the two contiguous ICEs identified in *P. aeruginosa* RW109

strain, where the second ICE was integrated at the end of the first one. The tRNA^{Lys} genes

shared the exact same sequence. All ICEs were flanked by 45-bp (5'-

TGGTGGGTCGTGTAGGATTCGAACCTACGACCAATTGGTTAAAAG-3') highly conserved

direct repeats (DRs). The 136 integrases identified in this study, however, only shared

36.1% amino acid identity.

The *P. aeruginosa* pangenome and the *crpP*-carrying ICEome

The total number of genes among the 215 *P. aeruginosa* complete genomes

(pangenome) is 33570. The core genome (genes present in 99% or more of the genomes)

contains 2674 genes (8.0% of all genes, **Figure 3** and **Figures S1**). We also identified

11241 unique genes, which are found in only one strain [30].

Figure 3 – Pie chart of the breakdown of genes and the number of *P. aeruginosa*

genomes they are present in. This figure was created using the contributed Python script

roary_plots.py   in   https://github.com/sanger-

pathogens/Roary/blob/master/contrib/roary_plots/roary_plots.py.

The total number of genes in the 136 *crpP*-harboring ICEs (ICEome) is 1193. The core

ICEome contains 26 genes (2.2% of all genes). The soft core content (genes present in

more or less than 95% and less than 99% of ICEs) includes 11 genes, 129 shell genes

(between 15 and 95%) and 1027 cloud genes (between zero and 15%). We identified

451 unique genes among the ICEome. These values suggest that *crpP*-harboring ICEs are

not clonal, based on the small number of core genes and high number of cloud genes.

Phylogenetic analysis of the core ICEome alignment reveals that these ICEs are very

diverse and the core genes only share 28.0% nucleotide identity (**Figure 4**).

Tree scale: 0.01

Figure 4 – Approximately-maximum-likelihood phylogenetic tree base on the alignment

of the 26 core genes identified in the *crpP*-harboring ICEs. Genome accession numbers

containing more than one *crpP*-harboring ICE are highlighted in orange.

The *crpP*-carrying ICEs encode other beneficial genes

The most frequently encoded traits on *crpP*-harboring ICEome include replication,

transcription, intracellular trafficking, and cell motility (**Figure 5**). However, nearly one-

third of the proteins for which a COG category was attributed (30.7%, n=211/687)

encode for an unknown function (**Table S5**).

The *crpP* gene encoded for proteins ranging from 65 to 68 amino acid and is present in

a single copy, with no flanking mobile units as integrons, insertion sequences and/or

transposons or found on the close vicinity of the gene. The 136 CrpP proteins here

identified share 19.7% amino acid identity. We also observed a lack of co-resident

antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) within the *crpP*-harboring ICEs. Seven ICEs carry a

type I-C CRISPR-Cas system and ten harbor pyocin S5-encoding genes (**Table S3**). The

bacteriocins here identified are highly identical, sharing 95% amino acid identity. Besides

bacteriocins, no secondary metabolites were identified within the extracted ICEs.

Figure 5. Functional annotation of proteins encoded by the *crpP*-harboring ICEome.

Discussion

Our results show that ICEs are the main drivers for the spread of the ciprofloxacin-

modifying *crpP* gene in *P. aeruginosa*. A selective pressure exerted by the use of

ciprofloxacin to treat *P. aeruginosa* infections may have promoted the dissemination of

crpP-harboring ICEs among several clones.

Curiously, and in opposition to several ARGs, no integrons, insertion sequences or

transposons were found on the vicinity of the *crpP* gene. Bacteriocins produced by

bacteria are important for niche competition. The pyocin S5 possesses a bactericidal

activity against clinical *P. aeruginosa* isolates [31,32]. The presence of these bacteriocins

among some *crpP*-harboring ICEs can help to eliminate possible competitors and

indirectly enhance ICE maintenance.

As expected for foreign DNA, the GC content of the ICEs is lower than that from the

chromosomes. Still, given the high GC content of these mobile elements and the

biological barrier for gene acquisition between donor-recipient pairs having >5%

difference in GC values [33], we suspect that the ancestor of the *crpP* gene derives from

GC-rich taxa.

We identified highly conserved DRs that can be used to accurately delimit *crpP*-carrying

ICEs in *Pseudomonas*. Interestingly, the exact 45-bp sequence was found on the 2 ICEs

from *P. fluorescens* and the *Pseudomonas* sp. AK6U strain. Also, even though the *crpP*

gene was first reported in a plasmid in *P. aeruginosa* [10], we found a perfect match for

the 45-bp DR next to an integrase-encoding gene. We only found one match for the DR

in this plasmid, meaning that the ICE is degenerated and most likely depends on the

plasmid to be mobilized. The same was observed for the *P. aeruginosa crpP*-carrying

plasmid detected in this study (accession number NZ_CP030914.1).

The *crpP*-carrying ICEs were traced in several clones, taking advantage of the highly

conserved attachment site in the tRNA^{Lys} gene. Interestingly, we found in a previous

study that MPF$_G$ class ICEs carrying specific ARGs were integrated at the end of tRNA^{Gly}

genes [15]. In fact, this class of ICEs is frequently integrated at the end of a tRNA gene

[34]. This behavior suggests selection for the maintenance of these non-coding

integration sites, and seamless site-specific integration of ICEs in the chromosome will

incur in a lower burden to the recipient cell and therefore increase its fitness [2,35]. As

so, conferring decreased susceptibility or low levels of ciprofloxacin resistance without

incurring in fitness cost can help to explain the high frequency of *crpP*-carrying ICEs

observed in this study. Future studies should explore the possible synergistic effects

between commonly reported mutations leading to ciprofloxacin resistance and the

presence of *crpP*-harboring ICEs.

One of the caveats of our study is that we restricted the analyses to complete genomes.

Given that the majority of the assemblies present in public databases as NCBI

correspond to draft genomes, we probably missed the identification of several *crpP*-

carrying ICEs among *P. aeruginosa*. However, mobile elements as ICEs tend to be

fragmented in genomes sequenced with short-reads technologies, due to the presence

of repetitive regions. Also, the identification of ICE fragments within the draft genome

would require similar ICE sequences to use as a reference, which would then bias the

study. Sequencing bacteria with long-read approaches is increasing, which will improve

the accurate delimitation of an ever-growing number of mobile elements.

272 Conclusions

Our work demonstrates that ICEs are the main promoters involved in the dissemination

of the ciprofloxacin-modifying *crpP* gene among clonally-unrelated *P. aeruginosa*

strains. We also identified highly conserved 45-bp DRs than can be used to accurately

trace *crpP*-harboring ICEs on *P. aeruginosa* genomes. Future studies should explore the

mobile elements involved in the acquisition of the *crpP* homologues identified in species

other than *P. aeruginosa* and the possible synergistic effects between commonly

reported mutations leading to ciprofloxacin resistance and the presence of *crpP*-carrying

ICEs.

282 Data bibliography

283 The DNA sequences used in this study are available in NCBI, under the accession

284 numbers provided in supplementary tables S1-S5.

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Author contributions

J. B., F. G. and L. P. conceptualized the project. J. B. ran the analyses and examined data. J. B. wrote the manuscript. J. B., F. G. and L. P. edited and revised the manuscript. All authors read, commented on and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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