Reclassification of seven honey bee symbiont strains as *Bombella apis*

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Abstract

Honey bees are important pollinators of many major crops and add billions of dollars annually to

the US economy through their services. Recent declines in the health of the honey bee have

startled researchers and lay people alike as honey bees are agriculture's most important

pollinator. One factor that may influence colony health is the microbial community. Although

honey bee worker guts have a characteristic community of bee-specific microbes, the honey bee

queen digestive tracts are colonized predominantly by a single acetic acid bacterium tentatively

named *Candidatus* Parasaccharibacter apium. This bacterium is related to flower-associated

microbes such as *Saccharibacter floricola,* and initial phylogenetic analyses placed it as sister to

these environmental bacteria. We used a combination of phylogenetic and sequence identity

methods to better resolve evolutionary relationships among *P. apium*, strains in the genus

Saccharibacter, and strains in the closely related genus *Bombella*. Interestingly, measures of

genome-wide average nucleotide identity and aligned fraction, coupled with phylogenetic

placement, indicate that many strains labeled as *P. apium* and *Saccharibacter sp.* are all the same

species as *Bombella apis.* We propose reclassifying these strains as *Bombella apis* and outline

the data supporting that classification below.

Key Words

Bacterial classification, honey bee, evolution, phylogenetics, average nucleotide identity

Introduction

The honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) is extremely important economically because of the pollination services it provides to numerous agricultural crops. As a result, there is increasing interest in determining how the microbiome supports and influences bee function. While a honey bee colony is made up of individuals with distinct roles, or castes, the majority of studies on bee microbiomes have focused on workers. The microbial community of worker bees consists of eight to ten core bacterial species (Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Martinson *et al.*, 2011; 2012; Moran, 2015; Moran *et al.*, 2012; Sabree *et al.*, 2012). The characterization of these groups led to speculation about their role in honey bee health and whether or not they provision nutrients (Moran, 2015) or assist in the breakdown of plant-derived carbohydrates, as is the case in other insect-microbe interactions (Douglas, 2013; Gündüz & Douglas, 2009; McCutcheon & Moran, 2007). There has also been speculation as to the role of the microbiome in resistance to pathogens, as microbial communities have been shown to protect the bumble bee (*Bombus terristris*) from the parasite *Crithidia bombi* (Koch & Schmid-Hempel, 2011). Honey bee-associated microbes interact with each other in diverse ways both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, suggesting that they may interact syntrophically within workers (Martinson *et al.*, 2012; Rokop *et al.*, 2015). While these studies focused on honey bee workers are intriguing, it is surprising that only recently was the microbiome of queen bees throughout development characterized (Tarpy *et al.*, 2015).

Interestingly, the microbial community associated with queen bees is vastly different than that of workers and comprises a large percentage of acetic acid bacteria, a group of bacteria present only at very small percentages in workers. One of the primary bacteria that differentiate queens from workers was tentatively named *Candidatus* Parasaccharibacter apium (Corby-Harris

et al., 2014). This bacterium is in the family *Acetobacteraceae* and occupies defined niches

within the hive, including: queen guts, nurse hypopharyngeal glands, nurse crops, and royal jelly,

and is only rarely found in high abundance outside of these areas (Anderson *et al.*, 2013;

Vojvodic *et al.*, 2013). Evidence suggests that it might play a role in protecting developing larvae

and queens from pathogens such as *Nosema* (Corby-Harris *et al.*, 2014; 2016). Given that this

bacterium makes up a large proportion of the queen gut microbiome, it is possible that it plays an

important role in queen nutrition, protection from pathogens, and possibly modulating queen

fertility, fecundity, and longevity (Anderson *et al.*, 2018).

We sought to determine the evolutionary relationships between strains of *P. apium*,

strains of the closely related genus *Saccharibacter,* and characterized sequences from strains of

the recently named genus *Bombella*, using previously published data (see Table 1 for information

on all genomes used in this study). Using a combination of phylogenetic and sequence similarity

methods, we found that many genomes labeled as *P. apium* or *Saccharibacter sp.* are actually the

same species as strains of the previously described species *Bombella apis.* We reclassify these

strains and outline the data supporting this reclassification below.

Materials and methods

16S rRNA phylogeny

To determine relatedness of the strains classified as *P. apium* and *Saccharibacter spp.*

compared to existing *Bombella* and *Saccharibacter* species, we compared 16S rRNA gene

sequences of these genomes to one another. We first downloaded all 16S sequences from NCBI

that were labeled as *Bombella, Parasaccharibacter,* or *Saccharibacter* (Table 1). We also

included *Gluconobacter oxydans* H24 for use as an outgroup. All sequences were aligned using

the SINA aligner (Pruesse *et al.*, 2012); parameters used were set using the --auto option. A

maximum likelihood phylogeny was constructed using RAxML with the GTRGAMMA

substitution model and 1000 bootstrap replicates (v8.2.11, (Stamatakis, 2006)). The final tree

was visualized using FigTree (v1.4.2, http://tree.bio.ed.ac.uk/software/figtree/).

Core ortholog phylogeny

To determine genome-wide phylogenetic relationships between strains, we clustered

genes from all genomes in Table 1 into orthologous gene clusters using OrthoMCL (v.2.0.9, (Li

et al., 2003)). Amino acid sequences were downloaded from NCBI and clustering was performed

using default OrthoMCL parameters. We then extracted single copy orthologs using a custom

Perl script (available at:

https://github.com/esmith1032/bombella_apis/blob/master/parse_ortho_out.pl). We constructed a

phylogeny using concatenated amino acid alignments of all single-copy orthologs. The amino

acid sequences were aligned using the MAFFT L-INS-I algorithm (v7.310, (Katoh *et al.*, 2002)),

and alignments were then concatenated, and used to construct a maximum likelihood phylogeny

using RAxML with substitution model PROTGAMMALGF and 1000 bootstrap replicates

(v8.2.11, (Stamatakis, 2006)). The final tree was visualized using FigTree (v1.4.2,

http://tree.bio.ed.ac.uk/software/figtree/).

Calculation of genomic similarity

To determine relatedness and proper species assignment, we calculated genome-wide

Average Nucleotide Identity (gANI) and aligned fraction (AF) for each pairwise comparison

using ANIcalculator (Varghese *et al.*, 2015). Predicted transcript sequences for each pairwise

comparison were passed to the software, which output gANI and AF in each direction for the

pairwise comparison. As gANI and AF can vary depending on the direction of comparison due to

differences in genome lengths, we report results for comparisons in both directions.

Results

16S rRNA gene phylogeny

To determine phylogenetic relationships of all genomes labeled *Parasaccharibacter*,

Saccharibacter, and *Bombella* on NCBI, we constructed a maximum likelihood phylogeny using

16S rRNA sequences (Figure 1A). This phylogeny indicates that the 16S sequences from the

following genomes are all very closely related and represent a single, distinct clade: *Bombella*

apis (16S sequence accession number: NR_157653.1), *Saccharibacter sp.* M18 (NCBI genome

accession number: GCA_002150105.1), *Saccharibacter sp.* 3.A.1 (GCA_002150125.1),

Saccharibacter sp. AM169 (GCA_0007235565.1), *P. apium* G7_7_3c (GCA_002079945.1), *P.*

apium A29 (GCA_002917995.1), *P. apium* B8 (GCA_002917945.1), and *P. apium* C6

(GCA_002917985.1). For simplicity, this clade will hereafter be referred to as the "clade of

interest". *P. apium* AS1 is not included in the clade of interest for reasons outlined below. The

relationships between sequences within the clade of interest are difficult to determine – as is

evidenced by the low bootstrap support for nodes within the clade – owing to the high degree of

similarity between the genomes. However, the phylogeny clearly places these accessions with *B.*

apis, and sister to *P. apium* AS1. It is interesting to note that, although the sequences all show

similar degrees of divergence from *B. intestini* and *B. apis*, bootstrap support is quite high for the

separation of *B. intestini* from the clade of interest (Figure 1A).

Core ortholog phylogeny

We used OrthoMCL (v2.0.9 (Li *et al.*, 2003)) to define clusters of orthologous genes

(COGs) using the *Parasaccharibacter*, *Saccharibacter*, and *Bombella* genomes listed in Table 1;

Gluconobacter oxydans H24 was used as an outgroup. In total, 2,214 COGs were defined, with

an average of 8.8 genes per COG. Of these, 1,259 COGs were present as single copies in every

genome in the analysis; these were then used to construct a core ortholog phylogeny (Figure 1B)

to better resolve phylogenetic relationships.

This core orthology phylogeny largely agrees with our 16S rRNA gene phylogeny with

one exception: the relationships of *B. intestini* and *P. apium* AS1 have switched such that *B.*

intestini is now sister to the clade of interest. Bootstrap support for the nodes in this tree are

much higher than in the 16S tree, but are still relatively low within the clade of interest.

However, bootstrap support among the nodes making up the main backbone of the tree are all

100, indicating very high support for the basal nodes (Figure 1B).

Calculation of genomic similarity

Given the discrepancy between nomenclature and the phylogeny (the placement of

"*Parasaccharibacter*" and "*Saccharibacter spp.*" within the *Bombella* group), and considering

the short branch lengths within the clade of interest, we calculated genome-wide Average

Nucleotide Identity (gANI) and aligned fraction (AF) to clarify species relationships. The

general criteria for two genomes to be considered the same species are AF > 0.6 and gANI >

96.5 (Varghese *et al.*, 2015). Using these criteria, all genomes within the clade of interest should

be considered the same species, and distinct from *B. intestini* and *P. apium* AS1 (Figure 2),

though part of the *Bombella* genus. Unfortunately, no genome has been published for *B. apis*.

However, the high degree of support for placement of the *B. apis* 16S rRNA gene sequence

within the clade of interest strongly suggests that the genomes within the clade of interest belong

to the same species and are all *Bombella apis* strains.

Discussion

Here, we used a combination of phylogenetic analysis (16S rRNA and core orthologs)

and calculations of aligned fraction and genome-wide average nucleotide identity to determine

relationships among symbionts of honey bees, bumble bees, and environmental bacteria. The

phylogenetic data largely agree with each other, and with the AF and gANI delimitations of

species. The combination of these data indicate that the genomic accessions GCA_000723565.1,

GCA_002079945.1, GCA_002917995.1, GCA_002917945.1, GCA_002917985.1,

GCA_002150105.1, and GCA_002150125.1 are all the same species, despite being named in

NCBI as various strains of *Parasaccharibacter apium* and *Saccharibacter sp.* Furthermore, 16S

rRNA sequence data indicates that these genomes are all very closely related to *Bombella apis*

and are likely the same species. Given that *P. apium* has been effectively but not validly

described (i.e. in accordance with IJSEM standards)(Corby-Harris *et al.*, 2016), while *B. apis* has

been validly described (Yun *et al.*, 2017), we propose renaming the above accession numbers to

reflect the proper genus and species assignment while maintaining their current strain

designations (see Table 1 for full genus, species, and strain designations). We also propose

renaming *P. apium* AS1 to *Bombella sp.* AS1.

Given the ever decreasing cost of genome sequencing and ever increasing number of

bacterial genomes being published, this study demonstrates the necessity for exercising caution

when 1) describing a new species and 2) assigning a new genome a genus/species designation. It

is becoming increasingly clear that 16S rRNA gene sequence data on their own, while useful

indicators of approximate phylogenetic placement of a bacterial strain, may not be sufficient for

accurate assignment of genus and species to a newly sequenced bacterial strain. Genome-wide

data, when available, should be used to determine appropriate genus and species assignments

(see Chun *et al.*, 2018).

Authors and contributors

Conceptualization: EAS and ILGN; Formal analysis: EAS; Writing – original draft: EAS;

Writing – review and editing: EAS, KEA, VCH, QSM, ILGN

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding information

EAS is supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative - Education and Workforce

Development project accession no. 1019114 from the USDA National Institute of Food and

Agriculture

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Amelia R. I. Lindsey, Delaney L. Miller, and Audrey J. Parish for helpful

feedback on drafts of this manuscript.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Maximum likelihood 16S rRNA gene phylogeny (A) and core ortholog phylogeny (B).

Accession numbers are given with current names in parentheses. Numbers at nodes represent

bootstrap support from 1000 bootstrap pseudoreplicates. The "clade of interest" is marked by a

purple dot.

Figure 2. Pairwise aligned fraction (A) and genome-wide average nucleotide identity (B) of all

strains used in this study. Accession numbers are given with current names in parentheses.

Colors in each cell scale with the metric. Aligned fraction scales from 0-100, while gANI scales

from 0-1. To be considered the same species, two genomes should have aligned fraction > 0.6

and gANI > 96.5 (Varghese *et al.*, 2015). Both metrics can vary depending on which genome is

considered the reference for alignment, and we made the calculations in both directions.

Genomes listed on the horizontal axis were considered as the reference for these calculations.

Tables

307   **Table 1. GenBank accession number, current name, isolation source, genome size, %GC,**

308   **and proposed new names of the strains used in this study.**

GenBank accession	Current name	Isolation source[1]	Genome size (Mbp)	%GC	Proposed new name
GCA_002079945.1	*Parasaccharibacter apium* G7_7_3c	*Apis mellifera* hindgut[a]	2.01	59.42	*Bombella apis* G7_7_
GCA_002917995.1	*Parasaccharibacter apium* A29	*Apis mellifera* larva[a]	2.01	59.39	*Bombella apis* A29
GCA_002917945.1	*Parasaccharibacter apium* B8	*Apis mellifera* larva[a]	2.01	59.38	*Bombella apis* B8
GCA_002917985.1	*Parasaccharibacter apium* C6	*Apis mellifera* larva[a]	2.01	59.38	*Bombella apis* C6
GCA_000723565.1	*Saccharibacter sp.* AM169	*Apis mellifera* stomach[b]	1.98	59.32	*Bombella apis* AM16
GCA_002150105.1	*Saccharibacter sp.* M18	*Apis mellifera* stomach[c]	2.01	59.35	*Bombella apis* M18
GCA_002150125.1	*Saccharibacter sp.* 3.A.1	Honey[c]	2.01	59.41	*Bombella apis* 3.A.1
GCA_002592045.1	*Parasaccharibacter apium* AS1	*Apis melliera* larva	1.85	52.64	*Bombella sp.* AS1
GCA_002003665.1	*Bombella intestini* R-52487	*Bombus lapidarius* crop[d]	2.02	54.94	N/A
GCA_000378165.1	*Saccharibacter floricola* DSM15669	Flower[e]	2.38	51.22	N/A
GCA_000311765.1	*Gluconobacter oxydans* H24	Industrial sample[f]	3.82	56.24	N/A

310   [1]Isoloation source references: [a]Corby-Harris & Anderson 2018, [b]Chouaia et al. 2014, [c]Veress et

311   al. 2017, [d]Li et al. 2016, [e]Jojima et al. 2004, [f]Ge et al. 2013

A

Aligned Fraction (AF)

B

gANI