KIPEs3: Automatic annotation of biosynthesis pathways

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Abstract

Flavonoids and carotenoids are pigments involved in stress mitigation and numerous other processes. Both pigment classes can contribute to flower and fruit coloration. Flavonoid aglycones and carotenoids are produced by a pathway that is largely conserved across land plants. Glycosylations, acylations, and methylations of the flavonoid aglycones can be species-specific and lead to a plethora of biochemically diverse flavonoids. We previously developed KIPEs for the automatic annotation of biosynthesis pathways and presented an application on the flavonoid aglycone biosynthesis.

KIPEs3 is an improved version with additional features and the potential to identify not just the core biosynthesis players, but also candidates involved in the decoration steps and in the transport of flavonoids. Functionality of KIPEs3 is demonstrated through the analysis of the flavonoid biosynthesis in *Arabidopsis thaliana* Nd-1, *Capsella grandiflora*, and *Dioscorea dumetorum*. We demonstrate the applicability of KIPEs to other pathways by adding the carotenoid biosynthesis to the repertoire. As a technical proof of concept, the carotenoid biosynthesis was analyzed in the same species and *Daucus carota*. KIPEs3 is available as an online service to enable access without prior bioinformatics experience.

KIPEs3 facilitates the automatic annotation and analysis of biosynthesis pathways with a consistent and high quality in a large number of plant species. Numerous genome sequencing projects are generating a huge amount of data sets that can be analyzed to identify evolutionary patterns and promising candidate genes for biotechnological and breeding applications.

Background

Carotenoids and flavonoids are two important classes of plant pigments. Colorful flowers are often pigmented by one or both of these pigments. Flavonoids (anthocyanins) are known for blue, purple, red, and orange colors, while carotenoids can provide yellow, orange, and red pigmentation. Biological roles of carotenoids include photoprotection [1, 2], light capture [3], coloration of plant structures [4–6], and hormone precursors [7]. Therefore, carotenoids are considered part of the primary metabolism. In contrast, flavonoids are specialized plant metabolites that contribute to stress resilience and play important roles in the reproduction of many plants [8–10]. The biosynthesis of flavonoid aglycones [11, 12], the decoration with sugar and acyl groups [13–15], and the intracellular transport of flavonoids [16–18] have been reviewed elsewhere. The core of the flavonoid biosynthesis pathway is well conserved across land plant species, while the aforementioned decorating reactions are often species-specific. Glycosylation and acylation modify the properties of flavonoids, but specific properties depend on the added sugar moiety or acyl group. Glycosylation can enhance the anthocyanin stability [19–21] and be required for intracellular flavonoid transport [17, 18]. Acylation can also boost the stability of anthocyanins [22]. Applications of anthocyanins as food colorants rely on a high stability.

Biotechnological applications involving flavonoids are generally facilitated by knowledge about the genes involved in their biosynthesis. For example, such insights are crucial for the production of flavonoids in heterologous systems [23]. The flavonoid biosynthesis pathway is well studied in several model organisms and crops like *Arabidopsis thaliana* [18, 20], *Petunia hybrida* [11, 24, 25], *Antirrhinum majus* [26, 27], *Vitis vinifera* [28–30], and *Zea mays* [20, 31]. An ongoing challenge is the efficient transfer of this knowledge to other plant species. In fact, the functional annotation transfer challenge goes far beyond knowledge about the flavonoid biosynthesis. Plant genome sequences are becoming available with an increasing pace [32, 33], but the functional annotation is lacking behind. Automatic approaches for biological interpretation of these data sets are crucial to exploit the full value of genomic resources. There are several comprehensive databases collecting and sharing knowledge about plant metabolism e.g. The Plant Metabolic Network [34], Plant Reactome [35], and MetaCyc [36]. Tools like InterProScan5 [37], Blast2GO [38], KEGG Automatic Annotation Server [39], and Mercator4 [40] allow the assignment of certain annotation terms to input sequences. While these tools are able to annotate genome-scale data sets, they are less specific with respect to the assigned annotation. Researchers looking for a specific pathway could benefit from tools focusing on their pathway of interest.

Here, we present an updated approach for the automatic annotation of the flavonoid biosynthesis genes in any land plant species of interest based on prior knowledge about the pathway. We also demonstrate that this approach can be applied to other pathways by investigating the carotenoid biosynthesis genes in multiple land plant species. A web server makes this automatic annotation workflow available to the research community.

Materials and Methods

Validation of KIPEs3

A validation of KIPEs3 was based on *Arabidopsis thaliana* Nd-1 v1.0 [41], *Capsella grandiflora* v1.1 [42], *Daucus carota* v2.0 [43], and *Dioscorea dumetorum* v1.0 [44]. Identified candidates were manually inspected in a phylogenetic tree constructed by FastTree2 [45] based on alignments generated with MAFFT v7 [46].

Benchmarking of KIPEs3

The average run time of KIPEs3 per data set was assessed using a previously defined set of 121 plant species [47]. All these sequence files were retrieved from Phytozome [48]. The analysis was performed on coding sequences to represent transcriptome assemblies. Performance of KIPEs3 with FastTree v2.1.10 [45] was analyzed using default parameters. Run time and the number of sequences in the analyzed data sets were documented. Run times were measured for analyses with the construction of phylogenetic trees for all final candidate genes.

Results and Discussion

Extended bait sequence collection

The initial KIPEs version was exclusively focused on annotating the biosynthesis of flavonoid aglycones [12]. Now, KIPEs3 is able to identify additional candidates that are relevant for the decoration of flavonoid aglycones. The basis for the identification of candidates in new data sets are bait sequences that are previously characterized sequences from other species. The initial KIPEs bait sequence collection was extended by adding anthocyanidin 3-O glucosyltransferase (UGT79B2 and UGT79B3), anthocyanin 5-O-glucosyltransferase (UGT75C1), flavonoid 3-O-glucosyltransferase (UGT78D1 and UGT78D2), UGT72L1, UGT80B1/TT15, anthocyanin acyl transferase (AAT), anthocyanin O-methyl transferase (OMT), BAHD acyltransferase, glutathione S-transferase (GST)-like ligandins/TT19, TT10, anthocyanin transporting ABC transporter, anthocyanin and PA precursor transporting MATE, P_{3A}-ATPase AHA10/TT13, and GFS9/TT9 (**Table 1**).

Table 1: New flavonoid biosynthesis steps in the KIPEs3 repertoire. These steps were added during the development of KIPEs3. Steps of the core flavonoid aglycon biosynthesis were part of the initial KIPEs release [12]. Required bait sequences and related information are available via GitHub [49].

Name of the step	Label in KIPEs3	Representative sequence	Reference
anthocyanidin 3-O glucosyltransferase (UGT79B2 and UGT79B3)	A3GT	AT4G27560	[24]
anthocyanin 5-O-glucosyltransferase (UGT75C1)	A5GT	AT4G14090	[13]

flavonoid 3-O-glucosyltransferase (UGT78D2 and UGT78D1)	F3GT	AT5G17050	[13]
UGT72L1	UGT72L1	XP_013443944.2	[25]
UGT80B1/TT15	TT15	AT1G43620	[26]
anthocyanidin 3-O-glucoside coumaroyl CoA transferase	3AT	AT1G03940	[22]
anthocyanidin 5-glucoside malonyl CoA acyl transferase	5MAT	AT3G29590	[22]
anthocyanidin 3-glucoside malonyl CoA acyl transferase	3MAT	AAO12206.1	[27]
anthocyanin O-methyl transferase	OMT	VIT_01s0010g03510	[28]
glutathione S-transferase (GST)-like ligandins/TT19	TT19	AT5G17220	[29,30]
Flavonoid oxidase LAC15/TT10	TT10	AT5G48100	[31]
anthocyanin transporting ABC transporter	ABCC	AT2G34660	[32]
anthocyanin and PA precursor transporting MATE	MATE	AT3G59030	[33]
P_{3A}-ATPase AHA10/TT13	AHA10	AT1G17260	[34,35]
GFS9/TT9	TT9	AT3G28430	[36]

Major technical updates

The initial Python2 implementation of KIPEs [12] was converted into a Python3 implementation. Syntax changes and the replacement of modules were an integral part of this transformation process. This technical upgrade ensures that more users are able to run KIPEs without installing an outdated Python version. It is also important for long term preservation of KIPEs and to avoid security issues. While upgrading the code to the latest Python version, we also added new features.

The established KIPEs components form the basis of KIPEs3 starting with the identification of orthologs for all bait sequences in the new species of interest (**Figure 1**). Each step in the pathway (enzyme/gene) is represented by one FASTA file containing numerous bait sequences from different plant species. Each collection of bait sequences is used to identify orthologs, i.e. most likely candidates, in the species of interest. This approach is based on the established assumption that orthologs are likely to have the same function (see [12] for details). This identification of orthologs is now based on the widely used Python module dendropy [50]. However, KIPEs3 is not restricted to finding orthologs, but checks a larger set of homologs for their overall sequence similarity and the presence of functionally relevant amino acids. The function of an enzyme is not determined by overall sequence similarity, but can depend on a few essential amino acid residues.

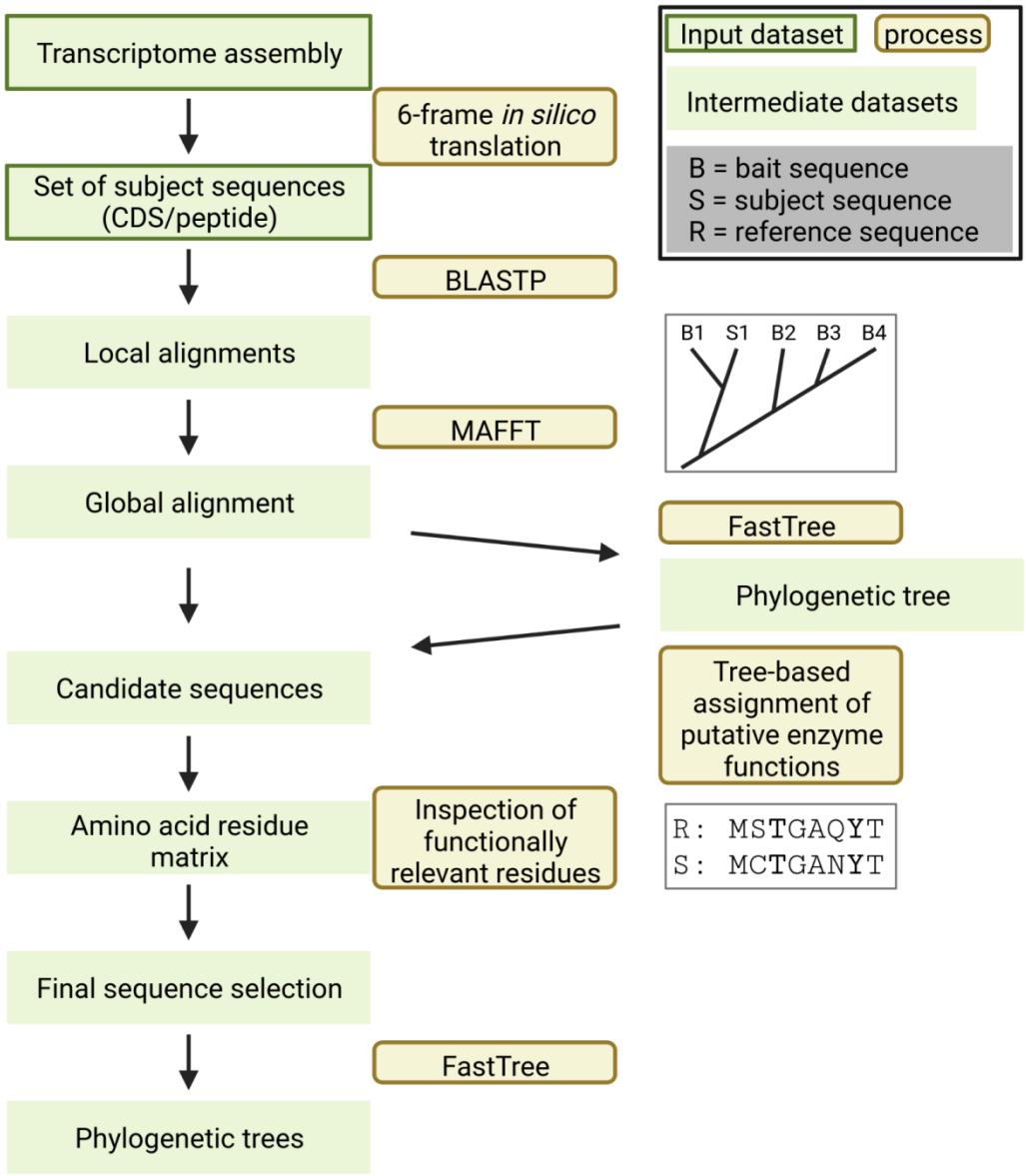

Figure 1: Simplified illustration of central KIPEs3 steps and functions that are included in the standalone and in the online version. Transcriptome or peptide sequences are supplied by the user. Initial candidates are identified by BLAST and checked through global alignments, phylogenetic trees, and the inspection of functionally relevant amino acid residues. Phylogenetic trees are constructed for all final candidates.

A new option allows users to provide expression data that are subjected to an all-vs-all co-expression analysis among the identified candidates. It is generally expected that genes associated with following or preceding steps of the same branch in a biosynthesis pathway show a similar expression pattern i.e. co-expression with other genes in this pathway branch. A strong co-expression value can further boost the reliability of identified candidates. KIPEs3 will produce a file that can serve as Cytoscape [51] input to

visualize the gene expression network (**Figure 2**). This co-expression feature can also help to identify the most important candidate if multiple close paralogs exist for a given function.

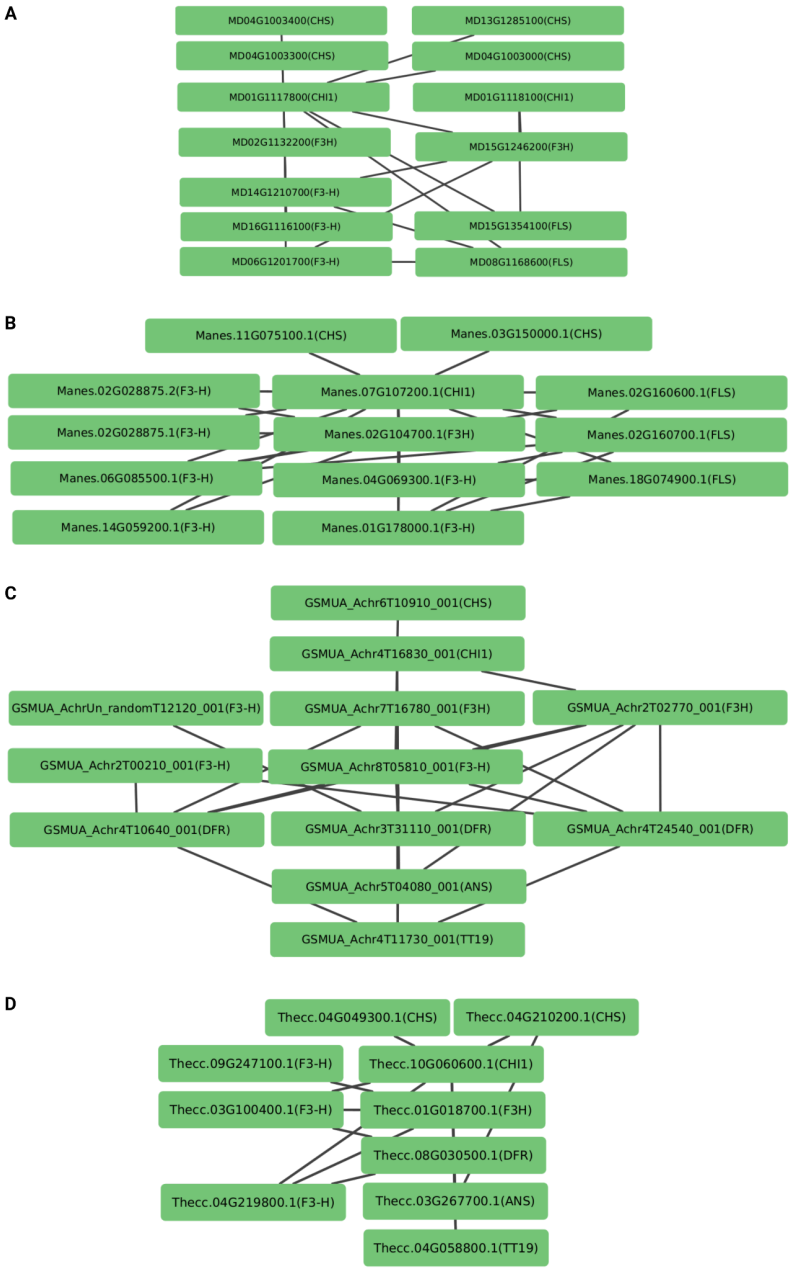

Figure 2: Visualization of co-expression networks via Cytoscape. Flavonol biosynthesis genes in *Malus domestica* (A) and *Manihot esculenta* (B) were analyzed based on coexpression. The anthocyanin biosynthesis genes were studied in *Musa acuminata* (C) and *Theobroma cacao* (D).

Many KIPEs users expressed an interest in phylogenetic trees that place the identified candidates in the context of previously characterized homologous sequences. These trees can help to explore the

relationships of multiple candidates to previously characterized bait or reference sequences. KIPEs3 can automatically construct trees of the identified candidates and the corresponding bait sequences for all steps in the pathway. This enables a manual inspection without the need for additional phylogenetic analyses. KIPEs3 generates files in the Newick format which can be visualized and modified for publication with established tools like FigTree or iTOL [52].

KIPEs is able to start with coding sequences or with peptide sequences. It is even possible to provide a genome sequence, but performing the gene prediction with dedicated tools is recommended for most applications. Generally, it is best to provide peptide sequences as this speeds up the analysis. Users define the type of input sequences that they are providing. Since this information might not always be accurate, an option was added to check if the provided sequences comprise amino acids or nucleotides. A warning is shown if the result of this analysis contradicts the sequence type set by the user. However, it remains unfeasible to distinguish a collection of coding sequences from a highly fragmented genome sequence assembly based on short reads. Therefore, it remains the users' responsibility to set the correct sequence type.

Given the power of modern hardware, the computational resources required for running KIPEs are neglectable. A single core and less than 2GB of memory are already sufficient for the analysis. The entire analysis is completed within minutes, but the precise run time depends on the specific settings and size of the analyzed data set (**Figure 3**). Especially large data sets can cause run times of about one hour, but most plant species can be analyzed in less than 20 minutes (**Figure 3A**). This run time analysis was performed on Phytozome data sets of a wide range of plant species to simulate a realistic application of KIPEs3.

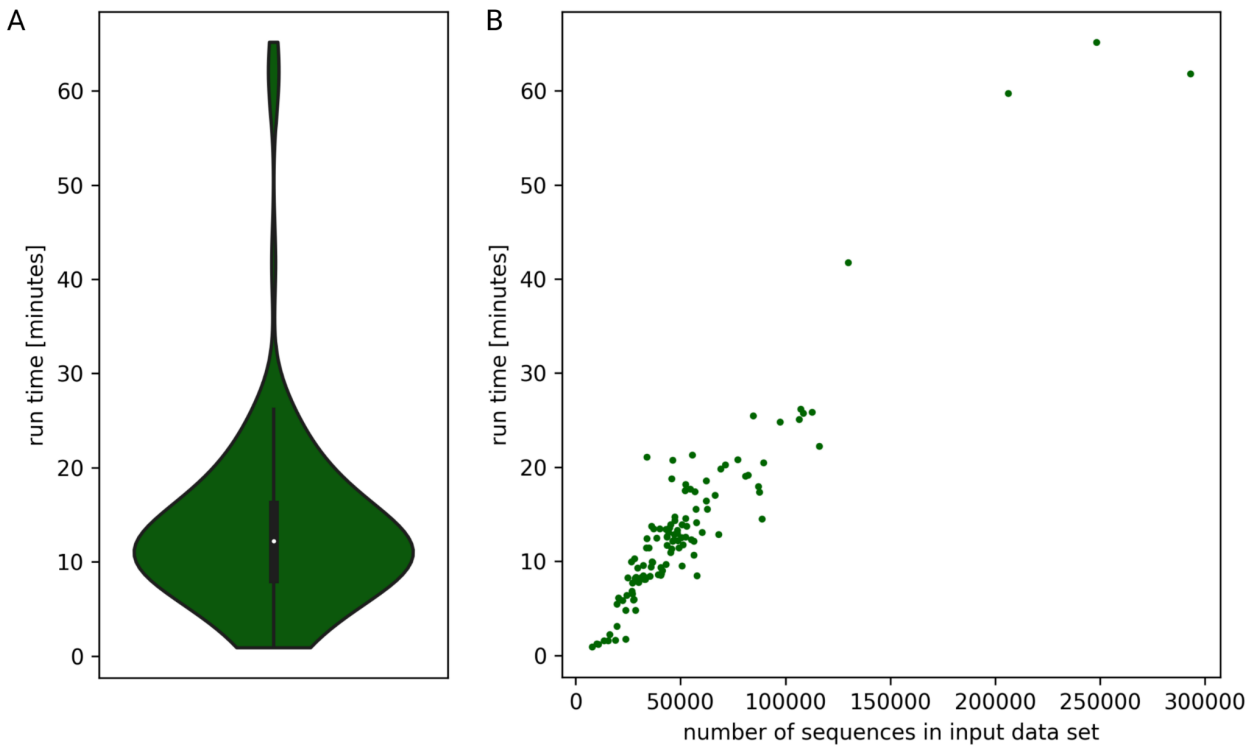

Figure 3: KIPEs3 run time analysis based on 121 Phytozome data sets (A) revealed that the run time is depending on the number of sequences in the input data set (B).

KIPEs3 is available as an online service

KIPEs3 is provided as an online service hosted on a webserver at TU Braunschweig [53]. Users can upload their FASTA files containing coding sequences or peptide sequences of a species. Bait sequence sets are stored on the server and can be directly used without the need to be manually uploaded by the user. Optional parameters are pre-configured to allow an automatic analysis with default settings, but can also be modified by the user through the web interface if necessary. Users may opt-in to receive email notifications once their analysis is finished and the results are available. Alternatively, users may choose to store a cookie to allow their browser to keep track of the progress. The archive provided for download includes all result files that users would get when running KIPEs3 locally.

The web server is implemented in Python3 using the Django web framework v4 [54]. Whenever a user uploads a file and submits a new job through the form on the website, the form data is sent to the server via an HTTP POST request and the file is temporarily stored on the server machine. The job is placed into a queue and executed as soon as there are enough free resources (disk space, memory and CPU cores) available. KIPEs3 and all its dependencies are installed on the server machine. The user is redirected to a page with a console showing the command that is executed and the program output is displayed in real time using XMLHttpRequests. All user supplied data are deleted from the server 48 hours after the job has been finished and the results have been downloaded.

Analysis of the flavonoid biosynthesis in *A. thaliana* Nd-1, *Capsella rubella*, and *Dioscorea dumetorum*

First, a technical check was performed by analyzing the flavonoid biosynthesis in the *A. thaliana* accession Niederzenz-1 (Nd-1). It is expected that orthologs of all characterized genes of the reference accession Columbia-0 (Col-0) are also present in Nd-1, while the sequences are slightly different from the bait sequences. All genes known in Col-0 were also discovered in Nd-1 (Additional file 1). Next, *Capsella grandiflora* was analyzed with KIPEs3 to show that the identification of flavonoid biosynthesis genes works also in species that are not represented in most of the bait sequence sets like *A. thaliana*. Genes present in *A. thaliana* were also discovered in the close relative *C. grandiflora* (Additional file 1). To demonstrate the potential of KIPEs3 to annotate the flavonoid biosynthesis in a distant relative of *A. thaliana*, the flavonoid biosynthesis of *Dioscorea dumetorum,* which belongs to the monocots, was analyzed (Additional file 1).

The new flavonoid biosynthesis pathway steps added to the repertoire of KIPEs3 include the diverse and promiscuous decoration enzymes like glycosyltransferases, acyltransferases, and methyltransferases. Since some of these steps might be species-specific, it is possible that some steps are missing in a given plant species of interest. This requires specific attention when interpreting the KIPEs3 results to avoid false positives. While the aglycon biosynthesis is highly conserved and catalyzed by well characterized enzymes, flavonoid decorating enzymes are less studied and show a high level of promiscuity [55–57]. This poses a challenge for the identification through sequence similarity. Little is known about the functionally relevant amino acids in the flavonoid decorating enzymes. In addition, this extension of the KIPEs3 flavonoid biosynthesis bait sequence sets is no longer restricted to enzymes, but also includes flavonoid transporters. They do not have an active center that could be composed of functionally relevant amino acids. This turns the reliable identification of transport-associated proteins into a remaining challenge.

Analysis of the carotenoid biosynthesis

A novel set of bait sequences was compiled to enable the annotation of the carotenoid biosynthesis with KIPEs3 (**Table 2**). The carotenoid biosynthesis is well studied in many plant species including *A. thaliana* [58]. The set of compiled bait and reference sequences was evaluated by running the annotation workflow on *A. thaliana* Nd-1, *Daucus carota*, *C. rubella*, and *D. dumetorum* (**Figure 4**; Additional file 2). *Daucus carota* carotenoid biosynthesis genes previously described in the literature [59] were recovered by KIPEs3 (Additional file 2). This supports the accuracy of the candidate gene identification.

Table 2: Carotenoid biosynthesis genes. [1]most likely non-functional [2]BCH duplication after monocot-dicot split

Name of the step	Representative sequence / Label in KIPEs3	Reference
Phytoene synthase (PSY)	AT5G17230	[60]
Phytoene desaturase (PDS)	AT4G14210	[61]
Zeta-carotene desaturase (ZDS)	AT3G04870	[62]
15-cis-zetra-carotene isomerase (ZISO)	AT1G10830	[63]
Carotenoid isomerase 1 (CRTISO1/CCR2)	AT1G06820	[64]
Carotenoid isomerase 2 (CRTISO2)[1]	AT1G57770	-
Lycopene cyclase (LCYB/CRTL-B)	AT3G10230	[65]
Lycopene cyclase (LCYE/CRTL-E)	AT5G57030	[66]
Beta-carotene hydroxylase 1 (BCH1/CHYB1/CHY1)	AT4G25700	[67]
Beta-carotene hydroxylase 2 (BCH2/CHYB2/CHY2)[2]	AT5G52570	[68]
Carotene beta-ring hydroxylase (CYP97A3/LUT5)	AT1G31800	[69]
Cytochrome P450 97B3 (CYP97B3)	AT4G15110	[70]
Carotene epsilon-monooxygenase (CYP97C1/CHYE/LUT1)	AT3G53130	[71]
Zeaxanthin epoxidase (ZEP/ABA1/NPQ2)	AT5G67030	[72]
Violaxanthin de-epoxidase (VDE/NPQ1)	AT1G08550	[72]
Neoxanthin synthase (NSY/ABA4)	AT1G67080	[73]

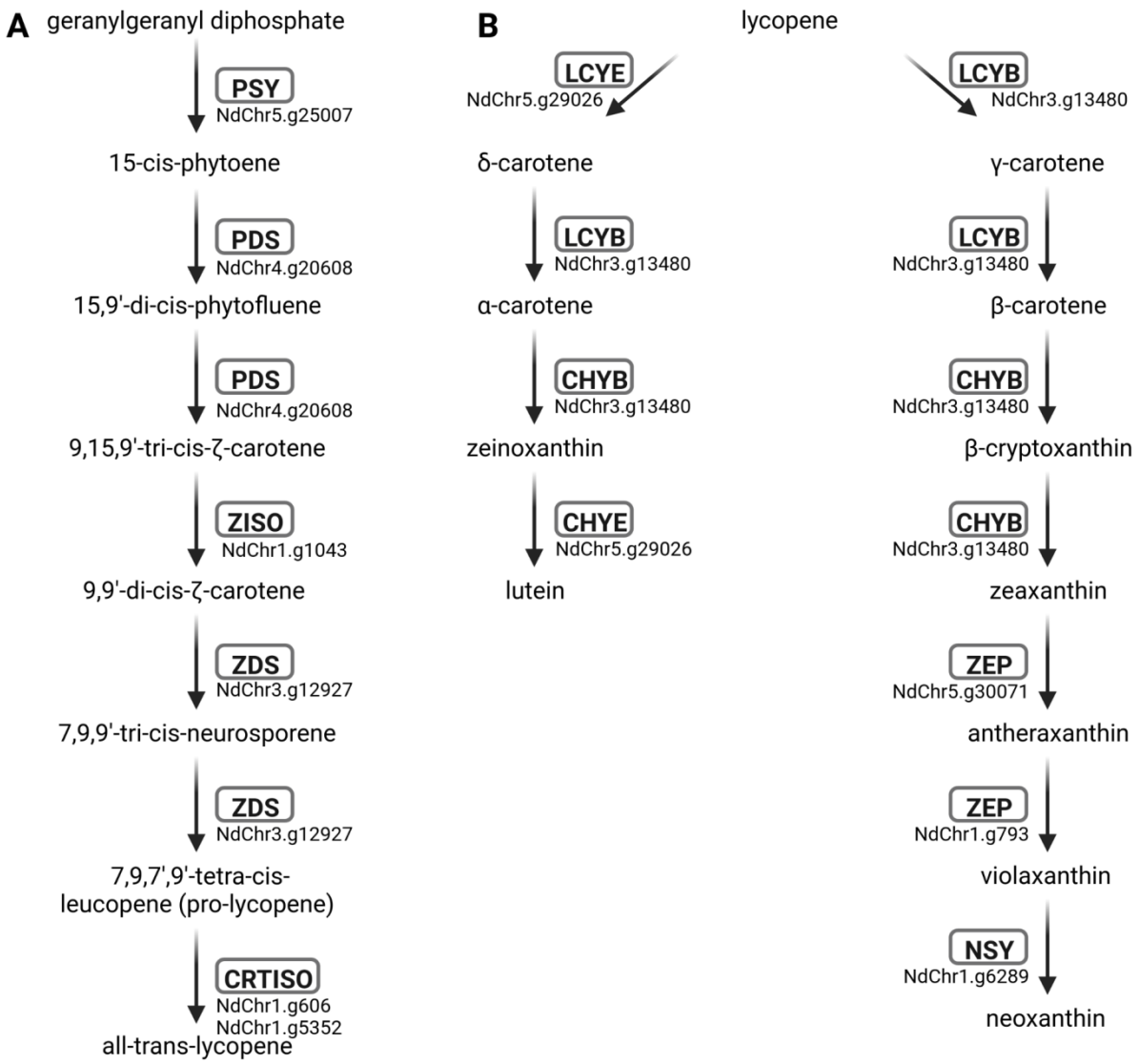

Figure 4: Carotenoid biosynthesis genes in *Arabidopsis thaliana* Nd-1. The carotenoid biosynthesis comprises a linear part (A) and a branching part (B).

Transcriptional regulation of biosynthesis pathways

Many plant biosynthesis pathways are regulated at the transcriptional level by members of large transcription factor families. Examples are the R2R3-MYBs and bHLHs that form complexes involved in the control of the flavonoid biosynthesis [74]. As we demonstrated previously, it is possible to analyze large gene families like MYBs and bHLHs with KIPEs [12]. However, KIPEs3 is optimized for the analysis of pathways that comprise genes with low copy numbers. Most structural genes in these pathways are part of a small gene family. Large gene families like the P450 cytochromes (CYPs) or 2-oxoglutarate dioxygenases (2-ODDs) comprise multiple smaller subfamilies with distinct biological functions. Only the individual subfamilies are relevant for the analysis with KIPEs3. Ideally, the application of KIPEs3 should

be restricted to the annotation of structural genes in a biosynthesis. While it is possible to investigate large transcription factor families, dedicated tools will perform better. Members of the MYB and bHLH gene families can be annotated by specific tools [47]. General phylogeny-based approaches can be deployed to study other involved transcription factor families [75, 76].

Conclusions

While the generation of high-quality genome sequences is turning into a routine task, the structural and especially the functional annotation of these sequences is an increasing challenge. The ability to annotate biosynthesis pathways beyond the flavonoid biosynthesis positions KIPEs3 as a versatile platform for functional annotation in projects focused on specialized metabolites. While we focused on plant metabolism in this study, KIPEs3 could also be applied for the investigation of non-plant organisms like fungi or bacteria. A sufficient amount of prior knowledge about the pathway in other species is the only requirement. The automatic annotation of biosynthesis pathways paves the way for comparative genomic studies that are looking for species-specific differences or intraspecific variation.

Availability and requirements

Project name: KIPEs3

Project home page: https://github.com/bpucker/KIPEs

Operating system(s): Linux (website is platform independent)

Programming language: Python3

Other requirements: BLAST, MAFFT, FastTree2, dendropy, scipy

License: GNU General Public License v3.0

RRID: SCR_022370

Data Availability

All data sets analyzed in this study are publicly available. Data sets generated as part of this study are shared via GitHub (https://github.com/bpucker/KIPEs). A docker image is available via DockerHub (https://hub.docker.com/r/bpucker/kipes).

Declarations

List of abbreviations

Not applicable

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Competing interests

AR has no competing interests. BP is head of the technology transfer center Plant Genomics and Applied Bioinformatics at iTUBS.

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Authors' contributions

AR developed the web server framework and contributed to the manuscript. BP designed the research, conducted experiments, wrote the first draft, and revised the manuscript.

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Additional files

Additional file 1: Results of the flavonoid biosynthesis analysis in *Arabidopsis thaliana* Nd-1, *Capsella rubella*, and *Dioscorea dumetorum*.

Additional file 2: Results of the carotenoid biosynthesis analysis in *A. thaliana* Nd-1, *Daucus carota*, *C. rubella*, and *D. dumetorum*.