The *Vibrio* Type III Secretion System 2 is not restricted to the *Vibrionaceae* and

encodes differentially distributed repertoires of effector proteins

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ABSTRACT

Vibrio parahaemolyticus is the leading cause of seafood-borne gastroenteritis worldwide. A distinctive feature of the O3:K6 pandemic clone, and its derivatives, is the presence of a second, phylogenetically distinct, Type III Secretion System (T3SS2) encoded within the genomic island VPaI-7. The T3SS2 allows the delivery of effector proteins directly into the cytosol of infected eukaryotic cells to subvert key host cell processes, critical for *V. parahaemolyticus* to colonize and cause disease. Furthermore, the T3SS2 also increases the environmental fitness of *V. parahaemolyticus* in its interaction with bacterivorous protists; hence it has been proposed that it contributed to the global oceanic spread of the pandemic clone. Several reports have identified T3SS2-related genes in *Vibrio* and non-*Vibrio* species, suggesting that the T3SS2 gene cluster is not restricted to the *Vibrionaceae* and can mobilize through horizontal gene transfer events. In this work, we performed a large-scale genomic analysis to determine the phylogenetic distribution of the T3SS2 gene cluster and its repertoire of effector proteins. We identified putative T3SS2 gene clusters in 1130 bacterial genomes from 8 bacterial genera, 5 bacterial families and 47 bacterial species. A hierarchical clustering analysis allowed us to define 6 T3SS2 subgroups (I-VI) with different repertoires of effector proteins, redefining the concepts of T3SS2 core and accessory effector proteins. Finally, we identified a subset of T3SS2 gene clusters (subgroup VI) that lack most T3SS2 effector proteins described to date and provided a list of 10 novel effector candidates for this subgroup through bioinformatic analysis. Collectively, our findings indicate that the T3SS2 extends beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family and suggest that different effector protein repertoires could have a differential impact on the pathogenic potential and environmental fitness of each bacteria that have acquired the *Vibrio* T3SS2 gene cluster.

DATA SUMMARY

1. All genome sequences used in this study were downloaded from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) RefSeq or GenBank databases (See **Table S1** for accession numbers).

2. Files for the T3SS2 reconstructed phylogenetic tree (Newick tree and MSA fasta file), hierarchical clustering data analysis file from MORPHEUS, **Table S1** with genome accession numbers and all the data of the absence/presence of T3SS2-related components, and **Table S2** with the prediction of novel effector proteins are available as part of the online Supporting Dataset at the Zenodo data repository (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7016552). The T3SS2 phylogenetic tree can be interactively visualized in https://itol.embl.de/tree/19016190125374711626959067#

INTRODUCTION

Vibrio parahaemolyticus is a Gram-negative bacterium that resides in marine and estuarine environments [1, 2]. In 1996, a pandemic clone of the O3:K6 serotype emerged and spread around the globe, becoming the leading cause of seafood-borne gastroenteritis worldwide [3]. Whole-genome sequencing of the pandemic strain RIMD2210633 revealed the presence of a novel Type III Secretion System (T3SS2) encoded within an 80-kb genomic island on chromosome 2, known as the *V. parahaemolyticus* pathogenicity island 7 (VPaI-7) [4]. While all *V. parahaemolyticus* strains encode a T3SS on chromosome 1 (T3SS1), only *V. parahaemolyticus* strains derived from the pandemic clone harbor the phylogenetically distinct T3SS2 [4].

T3SS are complex nanomachines that enable Gram-negative bacteria to deliver proteins, known as effectors, directly from the bacterial cytosol into the cytosol of eukaryotic cells [5, 6]. The translocation of effectors into target cells enables bacteria to subvert a wide variety of host cell functions [7–9]. In addition, the specific repertoire of proteins delivered to infected cells determines which cellular networks are subverted by the bacterium and ultimately influence the outcome of the infection [5, 6, 10]. In this context, even closely related T3SSs can have different repertoires of effector proteins due to horizontal gene transfer (HGT) and/or genomic rearrangement events [11, 12]. A recent global survey described that T3SS are widely distributed among Gram-negative bacteria, identifying 174 nonredundant T3SS from 109 distinct bacterial genera [13]. T3SS have been classified in 13 (I-XIII) major categories based on sequence divergence of T3SS core components [13].[13]According to this study, the *Vibrio* T3SS1 is part of category Ib, and the T3SS2 is the founding member of the T3SS phylogenetic category X [13].

Currently, the T3SS2 is considered the main virulence factor of *V. parahaemolyticus*. Studies in animal models of infection revealed that, while the T3SS1

plays a minor role during infection, the T3SS2 is essential for the enterotoxicity and the

development of the clinical signs of the disease [14–17]. Therefore, the T3SS2 is

considered the major virulence factor of pandemic *V. parahaemolyticus* [18]. The gene

expression of the T3SS2 gene cluster is induced by bile salts [19, 20] through a regulatory

network involving the VtrA, VtrC, and VtrB proteins [19, 21, 22] and the T3SS2 function

requires host cell-surface fucosylation for efficient delivery of effector protein into infected

cells [23]. Notably, the importance of the T3SS2 goes beyond increasing the pathogenic

potential of pandemic strains, as the T3SS2 increases the environmental fitness of *V.*

parahaemolyticus by promoting bacterial survival against predatory amoeba [24].

Phylogenetic analysis based on the amino acid sequence divergence of T3SS

structural components has identified two distinct lineages of the T3SS2, known as

phylotypes T3SS2α and T3SS2β [25, 26]. T3SS2α and T3SS2β gene clusters share a

similar genetic organization and a subset of effector proteins (**Fig. 1**) [18]. A more recent

study has proposed an additional category within T3SS2β, known as T3SS2γ [27]. The

T3SS2γ is very similar to the T3SS2β gene cluster but has some gene content differences,

such as the presence of a *tdh* gene inserted within the T3SS gene cluster [27] (**Fig. 1**).

Most of our knowledge of the T3SS2 comes from studies of the T3SS2α of *V.*

parahaemolyticus strain RIMD2210633 and the T3SS2α of *V. cholerae* strain AM-19226

(reviewed in [18, 28]). In this context, 15 different T3SS2 effector proteins have been

identified, of which only 5 (VopZ, VopV, VopG, VopL and VgpA) are shared between *V.*

parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 and *V. cholerae* AM-19226 [29–43]. These 5 effectors

are therefore called core effector proteins, while the remaining 10 are known as accessory

effector proteins [18, 29, 39]. While useful, this classification has the limitation of

comparing the distribution of effector of only 2 *Vibrio* strains of the same T3SS2 phylotype.

The T3SS2 gene cluster is not restricted to *V. parahaemolyticus* as similar T3SSs

have been found in other species such as non-O1/non-O139 *V. cholerae*, *V. mimicus* and

V. anguillarum [25, 44–47]. Furthermore, several reports have identified the presence of

one or more T3SS2-related genes in strains of bacterial genera other than *Vibrio*, including

Aeromonas [48], *Grimontia* [20], *Photorhabdus* [49, 50], *Providencia* [51] and *Shewanella*

[29, 50]. Altogether, these reports suggest that the presence of T3SS2 gene clusters

extends beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family and could have spread through HGT events.

Nevertheless, these correspond to isolated observations performed in a limited number of

strains and bacterial genomes. Therefore, the overall taxonomic and phylogenetic

distribution of the T3SS2 and its effector proteins in bacterial genomes is currently

unknown.

To address this issue, in this study, we performed a large-scale bioinformatic

analysis to gain insight into the phylogenetic distribution of the T3SS2 gene clusters,

including effector proteins. Our analysis identified 1130 bacterial genomes encoding

putative T3SS2 gene clusters distributed over 47 different bacterial species from 8

bacterial genera. In addition, we classified these T3SS2s into 6 different subgroups in

terms of the repertoire of effector proteins they possess. Our work provides evidence that

the T3SS2 extends beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family and that acquisition of both the T3SS2

and different repertoires of effector proteins could have an impact on the pathogenic

potential and environmental fitness of these bacteria.

Impact Statement

One of the distinctive features of the O3:K6 pandemic clone of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* is the presence of a phylogenetically distinct Type III Secretion System (T3SS) known as T3SS2. T3SS are complex nanomachines that allow the delivery of effector proteins directly into the cytosol of eukaryotic cells to manipulate different cellular functions. The *Vibrio* T3SS2 is the major virulence factor of the pandemic clone and a pivotal contributor to the pathogenesis and environmental fitness of the bacterium. Several studies have identified the T3SS2 gene cluster in other bacterial species beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family, suggesting that this T3SS can be mobilized through horizontal gene transfer events. In this work, we performed a phylogenetic distribution analysis of the T3SS2 gene cluster in publicly available bacterial genome sequences. We identified putative T3SS2 gene clusters in 1130 bacterial genomes from 47 different bacterial species from 8 genera and 5 bacterial families. Furthermore, we classified these T3SS2s into 6 different subgroups (I-VI) in terms of their repertoire of effector proteins. Our findings indicate that the T3SS2 is not restricted to the *Vibrionaceae* family and suggest that different effector protein repertories could have a differential impact on the pathogenic potential and environmental fitness of all the identified bacteria that have acquired this T3SS2.

149   **METHODS**

151   ***In silico* identification and analyzes of T3SS2 loci and components**

152   To identify putative T3SS2 loci, the amino acid sequence of the VPA1338 (SctN)

and VPA1339 (SctC) proteins of *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 were used as queries

in BLASTp [52], to perform analyses using publicly available bacterial genome sequences

of the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database (February 2021). A

cut-off of 70% identity and 80% sequence coverage threshold were used to select for

positive matches. All genome sequence assemblies with positive hits were downloaded

from the NCBI RefSeq or GenBank databases (See **Table S1** for accession numbers and

metadata) and used to build local BLAST databases. To identify the remaining 35 T3SS2-

related components in these 1130 genomes, the nucleotide and aminoacid sequences of

each component (**Table S2**) were used as queries for either tBLASTx or BLASTp

analyzes, respectively. A 50% identity and 80% sequence coverage threshold were used

to select for positive matches. A threshold lower than the first screen was used to identify

components which might have a higher sequence divergence. For comparative genomic

analysis, nucleotide sequences were visualized and analyzed by the Artemis version 18.1

[53], the Artemis Comparison Tool (ACT) release 6 [54], the multiple aligner Mauve [55]

and Easyfig v2.2.2 [56]. For the hierarchical clustering analysis, a presence/absence

matrix of each T3SS2 component was constructed for each bacterial genome (**Table S1**)

and uploaded as a *csv* file to the online server of the Versatile matrix visualization and

analysis software MORPHEUS (one minus Pearson correlation, average linkage method)

(https://software.broadinstitute.org/morpheus). The hierarchical clustering data analysis file

from MORPHEUS is available as part of the online Supporting Data at the Zenodo data

repository (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7016552). The presence and absence of each

identified component were visualized as a colored matrix generated in GraphPad Prism

version 9 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, California, USA).

T3SS2 phylogenetic analyses

For T3SS phylogeny analysis, the 1130 concatenated SctN and SctC amino acid

sequences were aligned with ClustalW using the Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis

(MEGA) software version 7.0 [57]. The phylogenetic tree was built from the alignments

obtained from MEGA by performing a bootstrap test of phylogeny (1000 replications) using

the Maximum-Likelihood (ML) method with a Jones-Taylor-Thornton (JTT) + CAT

correction model using FastTree2 (Galaxy Version 2.1.10+galaxy1) [58] in the Galaxy

platform (https://usegalaxy.org/) [59]. For the taxonomic phylogenetic analysis, a 16S RNA

phylogenetic tree was constructed. The 16S rRNA DNA sequence of each bacterial

species was obtained from the NCBI database and aligned with ClustalW using the

Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis (MEGA) software. The phylogenetic tree was

built from the 16s rRNA DNA alignment by performing a bootstrap test of phylogeny

(ultrafast bootsrap, 1000 replications) using the ML method using IQ-Tree [60](Galaxy

Version 2.1.10+galaxy1). The phylogenetic trees were further visualized and edited to

include important metadata with iTOL [61]. Files for the T3SS2 reconstructed phylogenetic

tree (Newick file) is available as part of the online Supporting Data at the Zenodo data

repository (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7016552). The T3SS2 phylogenetic tree can be

interactively visualized in https://itol.embl.de/tree/190161901253747116269599067#.

Identification of novel T3SS2 effector candidates

Each Open Reading Frame (ORF) within the predicted T3SS2 gene clusters of

Subgroup VI (including 1 kb upstream and downstream of the first and last predicted

component, respectively) was analyzed by means of the EffectiveDB [62], Bastion3 [63]

and BEAN2.0 [64] pipelines to identify potential T3S signal sequences. ORFs with positive

hits in at least one of these pipelines was further analyzed to predict putative functional

domains with the InterProScan [65] and NCBI-CDD [66]. Prediction of other secretion

signals such as for the Sec or TAT systems were analyzed with SignalP 6.0 [67]. Finally,

each ORF was also analyzed by the structure-based homology tool HHpred [68]. Multiple

sequence alignments were performed by MAFFT [69] and T-Coffee Expresso [70] and

visualized by ESPript 3.0 [71].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

T3SS2 gene clusters extend beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family

We screened all publicly available bacterial genomes in the NCBI database to identify the full breadth of bacterial species harboring putative T3SS2 gene clusters. First, we performed BLASTp analysis in search for homologs of the VPA1338 (SctN) and VPA1339 (SctC) proteins of *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 . SctN and SctC were chosen as they are two of the most conserved T3SS structural proteins and are often used for phylogenetic clustering and classification of T3SSs [13, 72]. SctN is part of the ATPase complex and SctC is part of the export apparatus [18]. We used stringent cut-offs to avoid identifying homolog proteins from phylogenetically close T3SSs (≥70□% of identity and ≥80□% of coverage). Our analysis identified the presence of VPA1338 and VPA1339 homologs in 1130 bacterial genomes (**Fig. 2** and **Table S1**).

To determine if these 1130 bacterial genomes could encode complete T3SS2 gene clusters, we further screened each genome for the presence of the 37 T3SS2-related components previously identified in *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 (T3SS2α), *V. parahaemolyticus* MAVP-R (T3SS2β) and *V. cholerae* AM-19226 T3SS2α (**Table S1**). These include ORFs encoding 16 structural proteins, 15 bacterial effector proteins, 3 regulatory proteins (VtrA, VtrB, and VtrC), and each of the 3 hemolysins linked to T3SS2 gene clusters (TDH$_{Vp}$, TRH$_{Vc}$ and TRH$_{Vp}$). Most of the 1130 bacterial genomes (1106) encoded each of the T3SS structural genes suggesting that they most likely harbor complete T3SS2 gene clusters. The exception were 24 *V. anguilarum*, 1 *V. ordalii* and 1 *V. cholerae* genomes that only possess 8, 3 and 7 of the 16 T3SS2 structural components, respectively (**Table S1**). This was not unexpected as it has been previously reported that some *V. anguillarum* strains lack most of the T3SS2 structural components due to a large internal deletion of the T3SS2 gene cluster [73], suggesting that these strains do not

encode functional T3SS2s.

Taxonomic distribution analysis identified putative T3SS2 gene clusters in 47

bacterial species from 5 distinct families (*Aeromonadaceae*, *Shewanellaceae*,

Yersiniaceae, Morganellaceae and *Vibrionaceae*) and 8 bacterial genera (*Aeromonas,*

Shewanella, Yersinia, Providencia, Photorhabdus, Photobacterium, Grimontia and *Vibrio*)

(**Fig. 2**). In some genus, we identified multiple species harboring putative T3SS2 gene

clusters while in other genus we could identify as little as one bacterial species harboring

T3SS2 gene components (**Fig. 2**). In terms of bacterial species, the genus *Vibrio*

contained the largest number of different species harboring putative T3SS2 gene clusters

(31 species), followed by *Shewanella* (5 species), *Photorhabdus* and *Providencia* (each

with 3 species), *Yersinia* (2 species) and the *Photobacterium*, *Grimontia,* and *Aeromonas*

each with a single species. Finally, our analysis did not identify bacterial strains harboring

more than one T3SS2 gene cluster within their genomes. Interestingly, several of these

T3SS2 were identified in recently isolated and/or classified *Vibrio* and *Shewanella* species,

including *V. paracholerae* [74] , *V. tarriae* [75], *V. tetraodonis* [76], *S. oncorhynchi* [77] and

S. psychropiezotolerans [78] (**Fig. 2** and **Table S1**).

Considering the total number of genome assemblies available in the NCBI

database, putative T3SS2 gene clusters were more frequently identified in bacterial

genomes from the *Grimontia* (55%), *Photorhabdus* (7.8%), *Vibrio* (6%) and *Shewanella*

(1.8%) genus. With a lower frequency in genomes from the *Providencia* (0.6%),

Photobacterium (0.3%), *Aeromonas* (0.1%) and *Yersinia* (0.1%) genus (**Fig. 2** and **Table**

S1). While this suggests that the T3SS2 is overrepresented in some bacterial lineages, it

could also reflect potential sequencing biases in terms of the diversity of bacterial

genomics sequences deposited in the NCBI database (e.g. clinical versus environmental

and different geographical origins).

Interestingly, most of the different bacterial species identified to harbor putative

T3SS2 gene clusters can be found in aquatic habitats, suggesting that acquisition and

transfer of the T3SS2 actively occur in this environment. Among the exceptions was the

identification of T3SS2 gene clusters in genomes of strains of the *Photorhabdus* genus

(**Fig. 2** and **Table S1**). Bacteria from the genus *Photorhabdus* comprise different bacterial

species that are important insect pathogens, including some that can also cause human

disease [79]. Wilkinson et al.[49], previously identified a T3SS2 gene cluster in the

genome of *Photorhabdus asymbiotica* strain ATCC43949. Our analysis expanded this

finding by identifying complete T3SS2 gene clusters in different strains of *P. australis*, *P.*

heterorhabitis and *P. asymbiotica* species (**Fig. S1** and **Table S1**). Every T3SS2 gene

cluster identified is inserted in the exact genomic location compared to the *P. laumondii*

strain TT01 genome, as previously reported for *P. asymbiotica* strain ATCC43949 [49]. We

also identified T3SS2 gene clusters in 1 strain of *Y. kristensenii* and 2 strains of *Y.*

enterocolitica (**Fig. 2** and **Table S1**). Interestingly, while *Y. enterocolitica* can be found in

aquatic environments, the 2 strains with putative T3SS2 gene clusters were isolated from

wild ungulate carcasses and belong to the highly virulent biotype 1B [80].

Altogether, the taxonomic distribution of T3SS2 gene clusters in bacterial genomes

indicates that this secretion system is not restricted to the *Vibrionaceae* family suggests

that T3SS2 gene clusters can mobilize through HGT events among environmental

bacteria. In support of this notion, it has been shown that under laboratory conditions

naturally competent T3SS-negative *V. cholerae* strains can acquire and integrate the T332

gene cluster into their chromosomes suggesting that transfer of this gene cluster might

occur in natural environments [81].

The T3SS2β phylotype is most abundant and divergent than the phylotype T3SS2α

The T3SS2 is divided into two major phylotypes known as T3SS2α and T3SS2β

[18], and an additional subcategory within T3SS2β known as T3SS2γ [27]. To determine

the distribution of T3SS2α, T3SS2β and T3SS2γ, among the 1130 T3SS2s identified, we

performed a phylogenetic analysis using concatenated SctN and SctC aminoacidic

sequences. We also included the concatenated SctN and SctC sequences of the

Agrobacterium radiobacter K84 and *Rhizobium etli* CIAT 652 T3SSs, which are

representatives of T3SS category XI, the closest phylogenetic category to the *Vibrio*

T3SS2 [13]. The phylogenetic clustering analysis showed that all the 1130 putative

T3SS2s grouped closely together while the T3SS of *A. radiobacter* K84 and *R. etli* CIAT

652 cluster in a more distant branch (**Fig. 3**), supporting the notion that all the 1130 T3SS

identified in this work correspond to bona fide T3SS2s.

To classify these T3SS2 in terms of phylotypes (α or β), we used the previously

classified T3SS2α of *V. cholerae* AM-19226 and *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 and

the T3SS2β of *V. parahaemolyticus* MAVP-Q and MAVP-R strains to identify the major two

branches that separate these two phylotypes (**Fig. 3**). Our analysis also revealed that

36,7% (n= 415) of the identified T3SS2s belonged to phylotype T3SS2α and 63,3% (n=

715) to phylotype T3SS2β. The phylogenetic analysis also revealed that the greater

sequence divergence was observed within the T3SS2β phylotype (**Fig. 3**).

As mentioned above, recent reports have created a subcategory within T3SS2β of

V. parahaemolyticus known as T3SS2γ (based mainly on the presence of both the *tdh* and

trh genes) [27]. To determine the percentage of T3SS2γ gene clusters within the T3SS2β

family, we performed a gene content analysis based on the definition of T3SS2γ gene

clusters proposed by Xu et al., [13]. The analysis identified that 40,5% (n= 280) of T3SS2β

gene clusters could be classified as T3SS2γ. Notably, the presence of T3SS2γ did not

cluster to any major clade of the T3SS2 phylogenetic tree (**Fig. 3**), supporting the notion

that T3SS2γ is not a third T3SS2 phylotype but rather a subcategory within T3SS2β.

Taxonomic distribution analysis identified the presence of T3SS2α and/or T3SS2β

in strains of each of the 5 bacterial families (**Fig. 2 and Fig. 3**), with no clear

overrepresentation of any phylotype within a particular bacterial family. Nevertheless,

T3SS2β was present in a more significant number of different bacterial species (41 out of

47) in comparison to T3SS2α (20 out of 47 species) (**Fig. 2**). Finally, the T3SS2γ

subcategory was identified solely in *V. parahaemolyticus* strains which agree with previous

reports [27]. Since many *V. parahaemolyticus* strains which harbor T3SS2 gene clusters

are related to the RIMD2210633 pandemic clone, we analyzed the distribution of T3SS2

phylotypes among different *V. parahaemolyticus* Sequence Types (STs). Our analysis

showed that T3SS2α was overrepresented in *V. parahaemolyticus* strains from ST3 (44%),

ST120 (11,5%), ST189 (7%) and ST332 (16,4%) while the T3SS2β was overrepresented

in strains from ST3 (11,5%), ST36 (25,2%) and ST631 (7,5%) (**Fig. S2**).

T3SS2 gene clusters share a high degree of synteny

To gain insight into the genomic context of the identified T3SS2 gene clusters, we

performed a comparative genomic analysis between the T3SS2 gene cluster of *V.*

parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 and representative strains of 74 non-*Vibrio* bacterial

species (**Table S1**) with complete or almost complete bacterial genomes (large enough

contigs to allow a comparative analysis). Notably, there was a high gene synteny between

the T3SS2 gene cluster of *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 and the gene clusters of

bacterial species of different genera (e.g., *Providencia, Photobacterium, Grimontia* and

Photorhabdus) (**Fig. 4A, Fig. 4B, Fig. 5A** and **Fig. S1**). In each of the T3SS2 gene

clusters identified in *Grimontia hollisae* strains, a large gene encoding a putative adhesin

(SiiE-like adhesin) is encoded in the middle of the T3SS2 gene cluster (**Fig. 5A**). A high

gene synteny was also observed between the T3SS2 gene clusters with a lower sequence

identity, such as the gene clusters of *Aeromonas* sp. DNP9 and *Yersinia enterocolitica*

Y1Wildboar1B (**Fig. 4C**).

For *Vibrio* species, we also analyzed the genome location of these T3SS2 gene

clusters. In addition to the described chromosomal location of T3SS2 within VPAI-7 of *V.*

parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 [4], we identified a T3SS2 gene cluster within the

plasmid of a recently sequenced *V. meditterranei* strain 117-T6 (CP033579) [82] (**Fig. 5A**).

Another interesting observation was the presence of a T3SS2 gene cluster inserted right

next to a T3SS1 gene cluster in *V. campbellii* strain UMTGB204. In this strain both T3SSs

are inserted within the vicinity of the same serine tRNA (**Fig. 5B**), in which the T3SS1 of *V.*

parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 is located.

Hierarchical clustering analysis identifies 6 subgroups with different repertoires of

effector proteins

While phylogenetic analysis of T3SSs using core structural components provides

insight into the evolution of T3SSs, the acquisition, transfer, or loss of accessory and

effector encoding genes provides an additional layer of complexity to the evolution of these

systems [11, 13, 72]. To gain further insight into this diversity, we performed a hierarchical

clustering analysis of 37 T3SS2-related genes in the 1130 bacterial genomes (**Fig. 6**). For

the analysis of the effector proteins, we included each T3SS2 effector described for either

V. parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 or *V. cholerae* AM-19226 [18]. The hierarchical

clustering analysis allowed us to identify 6 major subgroups (I to VI) with similar gene

content profiles (**Fig. 6A** and **Table S1**).

Most structural components were highly conserved in all subgroups, except for the

hydrophilic translocator VopW of subgroups I and VI, the structural component SctS and

the VocC chaperone of subgroup II, and the VopB2 and VopD2 translocon proteins of

subgroup VI (**Fig. 6A**). While it is possible that these gene clusters do not encode such

components, the inability to identify these components could be due to the lower

sequencing coverage (<68X) of most of these bacterial genomes. The *vtrA*, *vtrB,* and *vtrC*

genes, which encode the regulatory complex that induces the expression of T3SS2 gene

clusters in response to bile [19, 22], were also highly conserved, except for subgroups III

and VI, where many bacterial strains harbored divergent homologs of VtrA and VtrC (**Fig.**

6A).

Since most structural genes were highly conserved across all genomes, the

hierarchical clustering analysis mainly classified each T3SS2 based on the repertoire of

effector proteins identified. As shown in **Fig. 6B**, each T3SS2 subgroup was enriched in a

distinct set of effector proteins and associated hemolysins. While most subgroups were

enriched for a combination of 10-12 different T3SS2 effectors (subgroups I to V), subgroup

VI was vastly underrepresented in terms of the presence of known effector proteins. This

subgroup was primarily enriched in the VgpA effector protein, lacking most other known

T3SS2 effector proteins. The presence of VgpA homologs in each subgroup supports this

effector´s critical role in T3SS2 function [39, 43]. As expected, the current phylotype

classification (T3SS2α versus T3SS2β) was a poor predictor of the presence/absence of

individual effector proteins (**Fig. 6A** and **B**), highlighting the utility of a gene-content

classification scheme.

Interestingly, most T3SS2 subgroups were enriched for genomes of particular

bacterial species (**Fig. 2** and **Table S1**): i) Subgroup I included strains from 5 different

bacterial species (*P. damselae*, *V. cholerae*, *V. mimicus, V. parahaemolyticus*, and *V.*

tarriae.); ii) Subgroup II included strains only from *G. hollisae* species; iii) Subgroup III

included *V. parahaemolyticus* strains exclusively; iv) Subgroup IV included strains from 3

species (*V. cholerae*, *V. mimicus* and *V. parahaemolyticus*); v) Subgroup V included

strains from 6 species (*V. parahaemolyticus*, *V. cholerae*, *V. diabolicus*, *V. mimicus, V.*

paracholerae and *Vibrio sp.*); and subgroup VI harbored the most diverse set of bacterial

species with a total of 42 bacterial species (**Fig. 2**). Subgroup VI was also the only

subgroup with bacterial strains beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family. Finally, while no T3SS2

subgroup was exclusive to a particular T3SS2 phylotype some subgroups were indeed

overrepresented by different phylotypes. Subgroups I, III and IV were overrepresented in

strains from the T3SS2α phylotype, while subgroups II, V and VI were overrepresented in

strains from the T3SS2β phylotype (**Fig. 3** and **Table S1**). Finally, every *V.*

parahaemolyticus strain of the T3SS2γ subcategory clustered within subgroup V (**Table**

S1).

394   Altogether, the hierarchical clustering analysis suggests that T3SS2s have

395   acquired a diverse set of effector proteins which could ultimately impact on the contribution

396   of each T3SS2 to the pathogenic potential and environmental fitness of different bacterial

397   strains.

399   **T3SS2 subgroup VI encodes 10 novel effector candidates**

400   As mentioned above, the T3SS2 gene clusters of subgroup VI stand out as they

are the most taxonomically diverse (**Fig. 2**) and lack most of the known T3SS2 effector

proteins (**Fig. 6**). The high degree of synteny of these gene clusters to the T3SS2 gene

cluster of *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 (**Fig. 4 and Fig. S1**) and their distribution in

the T3SS2 phylogenetic tree (**Fig. 3**) suggests that these are not part of a phylogenetically

distinct T3SS2, but rather have a different set of effector proteins. To test this hypothesis,

we analyzed the vicinity of the T3SS2 gene cluster from 1 strain of each species of

subgroup VI (**Table S1**) and performed bioinformatic analysis to identify putative T3SS2

effector candidates. We analyzed each ORF of these T3SS2 clusters based on 4

approaches, including: i) identification of putative T3SS secretion signals by T3SS effector

prediction pipelines (BEAN2.0, Bastion3 and EffectiveDB); ii) bioinformatic analysis to

identify conserved functional domains (InterProScan, NCBI-CDD); iii) sequence identity to

known T3SS effector proteins of other bacterial species (BLASTp, amino acid sequence

identity >40%); and iv) functional predictions via remote homology searches using the

HHpred pipeline.

Our analysis identified a set of 10 novel effector candidates that harbored putative

T3SS secretion signal sequences and putative functional domains present in known T3SS

effector proteins. These included putative ADP-ribosyltransferases, tyrosine

phosphatases, glycosyltransferases and Rho-activating proteins (**Table 1, Fig. 7** and **Fig.**

S3). In addition, 5 of these ORFs encode homologs of known T3SS effector proteins or

toxins such as the effector proteins OspC1, AoPH and VopC of *Shigella flexneri*,

Aeromona hydrophila and *V. parahaemolyticus* respectively (**Table 1, Fig. 7** and **Table**

S2). The 10 effector candidates identified were present in diverse bacterial species of the

T3SS2 subgroup VI, except for the putative tyrosine phosphatases (DYE18_RS08865)

that also was identified in *Grimontia hollisae* strains of T3SS2 subgroup II (**Fig. 7** and

Table S2).

Interestingly, one candidate (BCT80_RS20435) harbored a predicted GDSL lipase

domain (IPR001087) and a 22,4% amino acid sequence identity to the VPA0226 protein of

V. parahaemolyticus (**Fig. S4**). VPA0226 is a secreted lipase required for *V.*

parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 to egress from the infected cell. Notably, in *V.*

parahaemolyticus VPA0226 is not secreted by the T3SS2 but rather by the T2SS [83].

Unlike VPA0226, analysis of BCT80_RS20435 showed no detectable T2SS or TAT

secretion signal (**Fig. S4**).

Overall, our analysis suggests that subgroup VI encodes a subset of novel T3SS2

effector proteins. Further work is needed to confirm that each candidate corresponds to

T3SS2 effector proteins.

Revisiting the current classification of core and accessory T3SS2 effector proteins

Recently, Matsuda et al. [18] proposed a classification of T3SS2 effector proteins

based on the presence of these effectors in *V. parahaemolyticus* and *V. cholerae.*

Effectors present in both *V. cholerae* and *V. parahaemolyticus* are known as core

effectors, and those present in either *V. cholerae* or *V. parahaemolyticus* have been called

accessory effector proteins. While useful, this classification relies on analyzing only two

strains of two bacterial species.

To revisit this classification, we analyzed the presence/absence of each T3SS2

effector protein in the 47 bacterial species in which we have identified putative T3SS2

gene clusters. As shown in **Fig. S5**, only VgpA was present in at least one strain of most

bacterial species (except for *Y. enterocolitica* and *Y. kristensenii* strains). The high

prevalence of this effector protein could be explained by its additional structural role [39].

Another effector, VopT, was identified exclusively in *V. parahaemolyticus* strains. The

remaining 13 T3SS2 effector proteins were present at various degrees with no

overrepresentation in any bacterial species. Altogether, our data show a wide distribution

of T3SS2 effector proteins in different bacterial species and that there is no clear

correlation between the number of bacterial species that harbor a particular effector

protein, which is the basis of the current classification scheme. We argue that a better

alternative is to classify T3SS2s based on the repertoire of their effector proteins in the

context of all identified T3SS2 loci in bacterial genomes (subgroups I-VI).

Nevertheless, such a classification scheme is not without limitations. First, we

believe that for such a classification scheme to be useful a larger dataset of T3SS2-

positive bacterial genomes beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family are needed, to fully grasp the

diversity of this system. Second, a large fraction of these genomes would need to be of

high quality to avoid sequence coverage bias. And finally, an inherent limitation is that this

classification scheme could turn out to be dynamic, as it may change over time if novel

effector encoding genes are acquired through HGT or if some are lost due to genomic

rearrangements.

It has been shown that genes encoding bacterial effector proteins can be acquired

through HGT and that can also further evolve through terminal reassortment and

pseudogenization events [11, 12, 84–86]. This supports the notion that different repertoires

of effector proteins will be selected by different bacterial species in terms of their

contribution to their adaptation to different ecological niches. In this context, it could be

possible that different T3SS2 positive bacterial strains use different effector protein

repertoires (subgroups I-VI) to differentially interact with environmental eukaryotic hosts

which ultimately would impact on their pathogenic potential.

CONCLUSION

The acquisition and transfer of T3SS gene clusters can potentially increase the

virulence and the environmental fitness of the recipient bacteria. In this context, it has

been proposed that the acquisition of the T3SS2 gene cluster by *V. parahaemolyticus* was

a crucial factor in the global spread and increased pathogenic potential of the O3:K6

pandemic clone and its derivatives. In this study, we performed a genome-wide analysis to

determine the phylogenetic distribution of the *Vibrio* T3SS2 gene cluster in public genome

databases. Our analysis revealed that T3SS2 gene clusters extend beyond the

Vibrionaceae family, share a high degree of synteny and that it is possible to categorize

T3SS2 in 6 different subgroups (I-VI) in terms of their repertoire of effector proteins.

Notably, it is plausible to think that acquisition of the T3SS2 gene cluster by HGT events in

each of the bacteria identified in this study could increase their human pathogenic potential

and environmental fitness, just as it has been proposed for the *V. parahaemolyticus*

pandemic clone. Finally, since the repertoire of T3SS effector proteins delivered to the

target cells ultimately defines the cellular outcome of an infection, we believe that future

studies should focus on testing the contribution of each repertoire of T3SS2 effector

proteins to the pathogenic potential and environmental fitness of these bacterial species.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Carlos J Blondel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation,

Visualization, Resources, Data curation, Writing-Original Draft and review and editing.,

Funding acquisition, Supervision and Project administration.

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Tables

Effector Candidate	Length (aa)	T3SS effector prediction	Functional domain Prediction	Similarity to known T3SS effectors or toxins
OA39_RS25565	317	1,2,3,4	Tyrosine phospatase (IPR029021)	ND
ECB94_RS27680	409	1,2,3,4	CNF1 Rho-activating domain (IPR008430)	27,7% identity to VopC (blastp, 3e-48 Evalue)
ECB94_RS27290	478	1,2,3,4	Shigella flexneri OspC (IPR010366)	49.9% identity to OspC1 (blastp, 5e-153 Evalue)
Ppb6_RS09600	472	1,3,4	ADP-ribosylation (SSF56399)	ND
CGJ34_RS08520	320	1,3,4	Glycosiltransferase (IPR029044)	Similarity to Lgt1 toxin (HHpred, 2.4e-16 Evalue)
A9G06_RS19230	425	1,2	ADP-ribosylation (SSF56399)	ND
CGJ46_RS22230	403	1,4	ADP-ribosylation (SSF56399)	ND
BCT80_RS20435	400	1	GDSL lipase (IPR001087)	22,4% identity to VPA0226 (blastp, 3e-18 Evalue)
DYE18_RS08865	401	1,5	Tyrosine phosphatase SptP/YopH (IPR003546)	61.2% identity to AopH (blastp, 1e-119 Evalue)
HUW04_RS16370	283	1,5	Rho GTPase-activating domain (IPR000198)	ND

517 **Table 1.** Prediction of T3SS effector candidates within the T3SS2 subgroup VI.

518 Representative ORFs for each prediction are shown with the results of different prediction

519 software (1: BEAN2.0; 2: BastionX; 3: EffectiveT3; 4: EffectiveCCBD; 5: EffectiveELD), the

520 identification of putative functional domains (InterproScan), and the amino acid sequence

521 identity to known T3SS effector proteins from other organisms. ND, not determined.

 FIGURE LEGENDS

Fig. 1. The T3SS2 is divided into two major phylotypes T3SS2α and T3SS2β, and a

subcategory within T3SS2β known as T3SS2γ. Schematic depiction of a comparison of

the T3SS2 gene clusters in *V. cholerae* AM-19226, *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633, *V.*

parahaemolyticus MAVP-R, and MAVP-Q. tBLASTx alignment was performed and

visualized using Easyfig. Genes encoding different components are highlighted in color.

Fig. 2. The T3SS2 extends beyond the *Vibrionaceae* family. Identification and

taxonomic distribution of T3SS2 gene clusters in bacterial genomes. The presence of

T3SS2 gene clusters from phylotypes T3SS2α, T3SS2β and different subgroups are

shown for each taxonomic category (color-coded). The numbers correspond to the total

numbers of bacterial genomes within each taxonomic category that harbor a putative

T3SS2 gene cluster. In parenthesis the number of genomes lacking most T3SS2 structural

components is shown. Maximum-likelihood phylogenetic tree was built from the alignments

of 16S RNA DNA sequence from each representative bacterial specie with a bootstrap test

of phylogeny (1000 replications) with IQ-Tree and visualized by iTOL. For each bacterial

genus the percentage of T3SSS-positive bacterial genomes from the total NCBI database

is shown.

Fig. 3. Phylogenetic analysis of the identified T3SS2s. Maximum-likelihood

phylogenetic tree built from the alignments of concatenated SctN and SctC amino acid

sequences with a bootstrap test of phylogeny (1000 replications) with a Jones-Taylor-

Thornton (JTT) correction model and visualized by iTOL. The presence of hemolysis and

subgroups are shown as colored strips. T3SS2α and T3SS2β are shown in red and blue

branches, respectively. The bacterial strains of representative T3SS2α and T3SS2β gene

clusters are also highlighted in red and blue color, respectively.

Fig. 4. T3SS2 gene clusters share a high degree of synteny. Schematic depiction of a

comparison of the T3SS2 gene clusters in *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 in

comparison to the gene clusters of strains of *Providencia* (A), *Photobacterium* (B) and

Aeromonas, and *Yersinia enterocolitica* strains (C). tBLASTx alignments were performed

and visualized using Easyfig. Genes encoding T3SS-related genes are highlighted in blue.

Fig. 5. Distinctive genomic locations of T3SS2 gene clusters. (A) Comparison of the

T3SS2 gene cluster in *V. parahaemolyticus* RIMD2210633 with the T3SS2 gene cluster

encoded in *V. mediterranei* 116-T6 plasmid and the T3SS2 gene cluster of *G. hollisae*

NCTC11640. tBLASTx alignmens was performed and visualized using Easyfig. (B)

Schematic depiction of a comparison of the T3SS1 and T3SS2 gene clusters inserted in

the vicinity of the serine tRNA in *Vibrio campbellii* strain UMTGB204. BLASTn alignments

was performed and visualized using Easyfig. Genes encoding T3SS-related genes are

highlighted in blue.

Fig. 6. Hierarchical clustering analysis of T3SS2-related genes identifies 6 distinct

subgroups. (A) Clustering analysis was performed using Versatile matrix visualization and

analysis software MORPHEUS (one minus Pearson correlation, average linkage method).

Boxes representing genes not detected, detected, or detected but divergent (less than

70% amino acid sequence identity with at least 80% sequence coverage) are colored in

grey, blue or red, respectively. An asterisk highlights the group of *V. anguillarum* genomes

that only harbored a limited number of T3SS structural components. (B) Comparison of the

frequency of detection of T3SS2 effector proteins, toxins and regulators between each

T3SS2 phylotype and subgroup. Frequencies are color-coded and expressed as
percentages.

Fig. 7. T3SS2 Subgroup VI encodes 10 novel effector candidates. Taxonomic
distribution of each predicted effector protein identified in bacterial genomes. The numbers
correspond to the total numbers of bacterial genomes within each taxonomic category that
harbor a novel effector candidates. Schematic representation of novel candidate
highlighting the presence of predicted functional domains in different colors is shown
below.

Table S1. Table with information regarding the presence/absence and hierarchical
clustering analysis of T3SS2 components in the bacterial genome sequences (including
accession numbers).

Table S2. Table with information regarding the novel putative effector candidates.

Fig. S1. Gene synteny between the T3SS2 gene clusters of *V. parahaemolyticus*
RIMD2210633 and the identified T3SS2 gene clusters of *Photorhabdus* species. tBLASTx
alignments were performed and visualized using Easyfig. Genes encoding T3SS-related
genes are highlighted in blue.

Fig. S2. Distribution of *V. parahaemolyticus* Sequence Types (STs) in terms of the
presence of T3SS2α or T3SS2β gene clusters.

Fig. S3. Genetic context of novel effector candidates in representative T3SS2 gene
clusters. The T3SS2 gene clusters are shown in blue and each novel effector candidate is

highlighted in red.

Fig. S4. Multiple sequence alignment of the amino acid sequence of the predicted effector

BCT80_RS20435 and the secreted lipase VPA0226 and the *Salmonella* T3SS effector

protein SseJ. The alignment was performed using T-Coffee Expresso and visualized by

ESPript 3.0. Amino acids within a red background correspond to positions with 100%

identity; amino acids with a yellow background correspond to positions with >70% identity

SignalP analysis shows that BCT80_RS20435, unlike VPA0226, does not harbor Sec or

TAT secretion signals.

Fig. S5. Distribution of T3SS2 effector proteins among bacterial species. The distribution

matrix shows the detection of each effector protein in at least one bacterial strain in red.

The phylogenetic tree is the same tree as Fig 2.

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T3SS2 gene cluster

V. cholerae AM-19226 T3SS2α

V. parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633 T3SS2α

V. parahaemolyticus MAVP-R T3SS2β

V. parahaemolyticus MAVP-Q T3SS2γ

VopZ · VopV · VgpA · VopL · VopG

100%
40%

Core effector proteins
Structural components
Hypothetical proteins
Accesory effector proteins
DDE-type integrases
ISVpa3-like elements
TDH
TRH
VtrA/C/B
Urease genes

Category XI

Category X

Tree scale: 0.1

T3SS2β

V. parahaemolyticus MAVP-Q

V. parahaemolyticus MAVP-R

V. cholerae AM-19226

T3SS2α

V. parahaemolyticus RIMD2210633

Subgroup | T3SS2γ | TRH | TDH

Subgroups (Hierarchical clustering)
- I
- III
- V
- II
- IV
- VI

Hemolysins
- TDH
- TRH Vc
- TRH Vp

T3SSβ subgroup
- T3SS2γ

bootstrap
- 0.8
- 0.85
- 0.9
- 0.95
- 1