Effect of tRNA maturase depletion on the levels and stabilities of ribosome assembly cofactor mRNAs in *Bacillus subtilis*

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Abstract

The impact of translation on mRNA stability can be varied, ranging from a protective effect of ribosomes that shield mRNA from ribonucleases (RNases), to preferentially exposing sites of RNase cleavage. These effects can change depending on whether ribosomes are actively moving along the mRNA or whether they are stalled at particular sequences, structures or awaiting charged tRNAs. We recently observed that depleting *B. subtilis* cells of its tRNA maturation enzymes RNase P or RNase Z, led to altered mRNA levels of a number of assembly factors involved in the biogenesis of the 30S ribosomal subunit. Here, we extend this study to other assembly factor mRNAs and identify multiple transcriptional and translational layers of regulation of the *rimM* operon mRNA that occur in response to the depletion of functional tRNAs.

Importance

The passage of ribosomes across individual mRNAs during translation can have different effects on their degradation, ranging from a protective effect by shielding from ribonucleases, to in some cases, making the mRNA more vulnerable to RNase action. We recently showed that some mRNAs coding for proteins involved in ribosome assembly were highly sensitive to the availability of functional tRNA. Using strains depleted for the major tRNA processing enzymes RNase P and RNase Z, we expanded this observation to a wider set of mRNAs, including some unrelated to ribosome biogenesis. We characterize the impact of tRNA maturase depletion on the *rimM* operon mRNA and show it is highly complex, with multiple levels of transcriptional and post-transcriptional effects coming into play.

 Introduction

The steady-state level of any mRNA in the cell is determined by both its rate of

transcription by RNA polymerase and its rate of degradation by ribonucleases (RNases).

These can work together to increase or decrease gene expression at the transcriptional or

post-transcriptional levels in response to environmental stimuli, or can pull in opposing

directions, resulting in little net gain. While most of the enzymes responsible for RNA decay

are now known in *B. subtilis* (1), how these enzymes are impacted by translation is still a

relatively open question. The conventional wisdom is that increased translation leads to

increased stability due to the masking of RNase cleavage sites by ribosomes. However, we

have recently identified an endoribonuclease (Rae1) that actually depends on translation to

destabilize mRNAs (2, 3), and we will present data here suggesting that antibiotics that cause

ribosome pausing can both positively and negatively impact mRNA levels, depending on the

severity and time of the dose.

Efficient translation depends on an unlimited supply of functional charged transfer RNAs

(tRNAs). tRNAs are almost universally transcribed as precursors in all living organisms, with

both 5' and 3' extensions that must be removed to generate tRNAs that can be charged and

used in translation. In *B. subtilis*, tRNAs are matured at their 5' end by the ubiquitous

endoribonuclease RNase P, consisting of a catalytic RNA moiety encoded by the *rnpB* gene

and a protein subunit encoded by the *rnpA* gene (4). Their 3' ends are matured either by the

endo/exoribonuclease RNase Z, or by a number of redundant 3' exoribonucleases,

depending nominally on whether the tRNA gene encodes the CCA motif required for

aminoacylation (5). RNase Z processes the one-third of *B. subtilis* tRNAs lacking an encoded

CCA-motif through stimulation of its endoribonuclease activity about 200-fold by a uracil

residue that naturally occurs $\leq$ 2 nts downstream of the so-called discriminator nucleotide

(nt 75) of each of these tRNA precursors (6). The enzyme's 3'-exoribonuclease activity is

required to trim back to nt 75 to allow addition of the CCA motif by nucleotidyl-transferase

(NTase or CCAse). Both RNase P and Z are essential in *B. subtilis* and depletion of either

enzyme inhibits cell growth, presumably due to a lack of functional tRNAs for translation.

Translation can also be inhibited by antibiotics that target the ribosome, such as

chloramphenicol (Cm), that that targets the peptidyl transferase center *(*PTC*)* located on the

large ribosomal subunit. Although it was once thought that Cm blocked translation

randomly, recent ribosome profiling experiments have shown that Cm preferentially causes

ribosomes to stall at particular sites, in particular when alanine (Ala) or serine (Ser) residues

have just been incorporated into the nascent peptide (7).

We have recently shown that depletion of tRNA maturase activity affects ribosome

assembly leading to a specific 30S subunit late assembly defect (8). While this defect was

mostly explained by a RelA-dependent accumulation of the stringent response alarmone

(p)ppGpp, and inhibition of GTP-dependent assembly factor activity, we also observed that

the levels of several mRNAs encoding ribosome assembly cofactors were affected. Notably,

the steady state levels of transcripts encoding the GTPases Era and YqeH were up-regulated

during tRNA maturase depletion, whereas mRNAs encoding the GTPase CpgA and the RNA

chaperone RimM were down-regulated. Because RNase P is thought to have very few direct

mRNA targets, and because RNase Z depletion had comparable effects on the expression of

these mRNAs, we considered it unlikely that the effects observed were directly due to RNase

P or RNase Z cleavages in each of these mRNAs. We therefore wished to better understand

by which mechanism(s) tRNA maturase depletion affected the levels of the cofactor

encoding mRNAs. Since the late 30S ribosome assembly defect observed in tRNA maturase

depletion strains was very similar to that observed in both *E. coli* and *B. subtilis ΔrimM*

mutants, we put additional focus on exploring the decrease in *rimM* expression under these

conditions.

Results

tRNA maturase depletion alters assembly factor mRNA levels

We previously showed that depletion of RNase P or RNase Z results in altered mRNA

levels of four key 30S assembly cofactors (Era, YqeH, RimM and CpgA) (8). The effects of

depleting the RNA subunit of RNase P (RnpB) were more severe than the protein subunit

(RnpA), presumably because the RNA component of RNase P is more rapidly depleted than

the protein subunit once transcription is shut off. To ask whether this applied to other

mRNAs involved in ribosome biogenesis, we extended this analysis to the expression of

several other cofactor and ribosomal protein mRNAs, using xylose (*Pxyl-rnpA*) or IPTG-

dependent (*Pspac-rnpB* and *Pspac-rnz*) promoter constructs to deplete the protein and RNA

subunits of RNase P, and RNase Z, respectively. The two control transcripts, *yqeH* and *era,*

and three new transcripts, *ydaF* and *yjcK* (encoding two potential homologs of the *E. coli*

RimJ acetylase), and *rpsU* (encoding r-protein S21) were globally increased under conditions

of tRNA maturase depletion (Figure 1A), while *rimM*, *cpgA* (controls) and *yfmL* transcripts

(encoding a DEAD-box helicase), all showed decreased expression, with a visible

accumulation of degradation intermediates for *yfmL* (Figure 1B). Expression of the *rbfA* and

ylxS/rimP mRNAs were relatively unchanged (Figure 1C), showing that tRNA maturase

depletion does not cause non-specific perturbation of the expression of all *B. subtilis*

ribosome assembly cofactor genes*.* Although the primary focus of this study was on

assembly factor mRNAs because of the link to a defect in 30S biogenesis, we also asked

whether effects of tRNA maturase depletion could be seen on other mRNAs. Indeed, mRNAs

from the *yrzI* and *bmrCD* operons, encoding multiple peptides of unknown function and a

multi-drug resistance pump, respectively, were also up-regulated upon RNase P or RNase Z

depletion (Figure 1D), suggesting this phenomenon is not confined to mRNAs with ribosome-

related functions.

tRNA maturase depletion and the translation inhibitor chloramphenicol alter mRNA

stability in a similar manner

To determine whether tRNA maturase depletion impacted mRNA expression at the

transcriptional or post-transcriptional level, we measured the stability of several of these

mRNAs after rifampicin treatment in RNase P (RnpA or RnpB) depleted cultures. The up-

regulated transcripts (*yqeH, era, ydaF* and *yjcK*) were all stabilized during RnpA and RnpB

depletion (Figure 2A and B; Figure S1), suggesting that they are affected by RNase P

depletion at the post-transcriptional level. There is evidence that the lack of functional

tRNAs can increase ribosome stalling on translated mRNAs (9). Thus, the increased stability

of these transcripts could be due to ribosome stalling and the blocking of ribonuclease

access to cleavage sites on these mRNAs. To test this hypothesis, we sought to recapitulate

the effect by pausing translation in a different manner, using the translation elongation

inhibitor Cm. Indeed, the addition of sub-inhibitory (2.5 µg/mL) and minimal inhibitory (MIC;

5 µg/mL) concentrations of Cm to WT cells also increased the levels of the *yqeH, era, ydaF*

and *yjcK* mRNAs (Figure 2C), suggesting that the stabilization of these transcripts in tRNA

maturase depletion strains is most likely due to the lack of mature tRNA and ribosome

stalling.

The situation with the down-regulated transcripts was more complicated. The major

rimM (5, 3.5 and 1.8 kb) and *cpgA* (5 and 4.5 kb) transcripts were strongly destabilized in

RNase P RNA subunit (RnpB) depleted cells (Figure 3B; Figure S2), suggesting that the

decrease in expression also occurs at a post-transcriptional level in this strain. A similar

decrease in expression was seen after 30 minutes at high (MIC) Cm concentration in WT cells

for *rimM* and rapidly upon exposure to Cm for *cpgA* (Figure 3C), suggesting that this

phenomenon is also linked to ribosome stalling. For both *cpgA* and *yfmL*, the major

transcripts were processed to shorter forms in the absence of RnpB or in the presence of Cm

(Fig. 3B). One possibility is that, in contrast to the up-regulated mRNAs, when non-functional

tRNA precursors accumulate to high levels in the *rnpB*-depletion strain, ribosomes

eventually stall at sites that preferentially allow RNase access, or that the RNAs are largely

unoccupied by ribosomes.

In the less severely depleted *rnpA* strain, the full-length (5 kb) *rimM* transcript and the

two major *cpgA* mRNAs were stabilized (or showed little effect), rather than destabilized as

seen for *rnpB* (Figure 3A). These results suggest that down-regulation of *rimM* and *cpgA*

arises from a mixture of transcriptional (down) and post-transcriptional (up initially, then

down) effects and that one or other effect predominates depending on the severity of RNase

P depletion. Indeed, upon close inspection of Figure 3C, *rimM* and *cpgA* mRNA levels initially

increase at 15 mins and then decrease after further exposure to Cm at both sub-inhibitory

and MIC doses. Thus, the Cm effect globally tracks the effect of tRNA depletion, with the

weak Cm dose (2.5 µg/mL) mimicking the weak effect of depleting RnpA, and the strong Cm

dose (5 µg/mL) mimicking the strong effect of depleting RnpB, consistent with the notion of

opposing responses to severe *vs* less severe levels or duration of translation inhibition.

Identification of *rimM*-containing transcripts sensitive to RNase P depletion

Because the *ΔrimM* phenotype closely fitted the 30S late assembly defect observed in

strains depleted for RNase P or RNase Z (8), we attempted to narrow down the determinants

of the down-regulation of this operon. The *rimM* gene is encoded in a large operon

containing several genes encoding components of the translation machinery: ribosomal

protein genes *rpsP* and *rplS* (encoding S16 and L19, respectively), signal recognition particle

components (encoded by *ffh* and *ylxM*) and *trmD* that encodes a tRNA methyltransferase. To

identify the gene composition of the three *rimM*-containing transcripts, we performed

northern blots with probes located in ORFs of the neighboring genes (Figure S3). In all, six

different transcripts originate from this locus (Figure 4A). Promoters upstream of *ylxM* (P_1)

and *rplS* (P_3), and terminators downstream of *ylqC* and *rplS* (T_1 and T_3, respectively) were

identified earlier by transcriptome analysis (10). Our Northern blot analysis suggested that

two transcripts originate from P_1: the full-length mRNA (5 kb, highlighted in purple) that

terminates at T_3, and a shorter transcript (2.5 kb, highlighted in orange) that terminates at T_1

and does not contain the *rimM* ORF. The smallest species identified (0.5 kb, highlighted in

yellow) corresponds to the mono-cistronic *rplS* transcript (P_3 to T_3). Using end-enrichment

RNA sequencing (Rend-seq), DeLoughery *et al.* identified a third transcription start site (P_2)

located just upstream of *rpsP* and only 18 nts downstream of an RNase Y cleavage site in the

ffh-rpsP intergenic region, in addition to a potential terminator/attenuator (T_2) within the

trmD ORF (11). The three remaining transcripts (0.7 kb, highlighted in green; 1.8 kb, in cyan;

3 kb, in pink, and marked with an asterisk in Figure 4A) therefore correspond either to P_2

primary transcripts, or RNase Y-processed transcripts originating from P_1, which terminate at

T_1, T_2 and T_3, respectively. Interestingly, of the six transcripts encoded by this locus, only the

three containing both the *ylqD* and *rimM* ORFs were down-regulated upon RNase P

depletion (Figure 4B).

A determinant for down-regulation of the *rimM* operon is located within the *ylqD* ORF

To further narrow down which ORF was responsible for down-regulation of *rimM* operon

expression, we sub-cloned the *ylqD-rimM* or *rimM*-only parts of the operon under control of

a *Pspac* promoter, rendered constitutive by deleting the *lac* operator (Pspac(con); Table S3),

with an artificial terminator hairpin to provide a defined 3' end. The constructs were

integrated into the chromosome at the *amyE* locus and levels of the ectopic transcript were

analyzed by Northern blot in RNase P-depleted cells using a probe specific for *rimM*. The

steady state levels of the synthetic *ylqD-rimM* transcript were down-regulated in response

to RNase P depletion, albeit not as dramatically as the native operon (1.3- vs 2.3-fold),

suggesting that a determinant involved in down-regulation is still included in this shorter

construct (Figure 5A and B). Two degradation intermediates (~0.5 and ~0.4 kb in size) of the

ylqD-rimM transcript also accumulated, suggesting that this transcript is cleaved twice under

conditions of RnpB-depletion. It is possible that the weaker effect of RnpB-depletion the full-

length transcript and the accumulation of visible degradation intermediates is explained by

the presence of a stabilizing terminator hairpin at the 3' end of each of these species that is

not present in the native mRNA. Intriguingly, the construct containing only the *rimM* ORF

(with the same 3' terminator) was up-regulated in response to RNase P depletion (Figure 5C

and D). In combination, these results suggest that the region responsible for post-

transcriptional down-regulation of *rimM*-containing transcripts upon depletion of RNase P is

primarily located within the *ylqD* ORF.

Since unprocessed tRNAs accumulate in RNase P and RNase Z depleted cells, we

wondered whether they could act as potential post-transcriptional regulators of target

mRNAs by base pairing to their targets *via* their single stranded 5' and 3' extensions. Using

TargetRNA2 (12), a prediction program used for identifying targets of small RNAs (sRNAs) in

bacteria, we identified an 11-nt region within the *ylqD* ORF that could potentially base-pair

with the 5' immature extension of unprocessed *trnD-Tyr* tRNA (Figure 5B). To test whether

this sequence was involved in down-regulation of the *ylqD-rimM* construct in cells depleted

for RNase P, we weakened the putative base pairing interaction by introducing mutations in

the *ylqD* mRNA sequence (while maintaining the YlqD amino acid sequence as much as

possible) (Figure 5B). The mutant *ylqD*-rimM* construct was down-regulated and processed

similarly to the wt under conditions of RNase P depletion, suggesting that 5' extended *trnD-*

Tyr does not act as a post-transcriptional regulator of this operon. For the moment, the

sequence element(s) within *ylqD* responsible for down-regulation of the *rimM* operon under

conditions of tRNA maturase depletion remain(s) unknown.

Down-regulation of *rimM* expression under physiological conditions resulting in reduced

***rnpA* expression is independent of immature tRNA accumulation**

We next asked whether the down-regulation of the *rimM operon* we observed during

RNase P depletion, would also occur in physiological conditions where RNase P expression is

reduced. The level of expression of the *rnpB* RNA is relatively constant in tiling array

experiments in over a hundred conditions tested, whereas *rnpA* mRNA levels decrease upon

ethanol addition and during stationary phase in both complex and minimal media (Figure

6A) (10). We confirmed that *rnpA* RNA expression was reduced to levels below detection in

these three conditions in comparison with exponential growth in the respective medium, by

Northern blot (Figure 6B). Ethanol treatment did not affect *rnpB* RNA levels; however, they

were reduced during stationary phase in both minimal and complex medium, in contrast to

the tiling array data. The expression of *rimM* varied similarly to *rnpA* in the conditions tested

(Figure 6B).

We next asked whether tRNA maturation was affected in stationary phase or upon

addition of ethanol using a probe for *trnJ-Lys* tRNA. Surprisingly, despite the decreased levels

of the *rnpA* mRNA in all three conditions, and *rnpB* in stationary phase, we did not observe

an accumulation of pre-tRNAs (Figure 6C). It is possible that very few new tRNA molecules

are synthesized under these conditions and/or that the remaining cellular RNase P activity

provided by the stable RnpA protein and RnpB RNA is sufficient to ensure the processing of

any that are transcribed. In either case, these experiments suggest that the down-regulation

of *rimM* expression that accompanies the decrease in *rnpA* and *rnpB* expression in stationary

phase or ethanol stress is more related to growth arrest than an accumulation of immature

tRNAs.

Down-regulation of *rimM* in RNase P depletion strains depends partially on (p)ppGpp

production

In bacteria, both stationary phase and ethanol stress are associated with increased

production of (p)ppGpp, hyperphosphorylated guanosine derivatives that are known to

globally reprogram transcription (13, 14). Considering that tRNA maturase-depleted cells

also trigger a RelA-dependent production of (p)ppGpp (8), we asked whether *rimM* down-

regulation in these cells was dependent on (p)ppGpp production, by measuring *rimM*

expression in (p)ppGpp^0 strains depleted for RnpA or RnpB. The (p)ppGpp^0 strain lacks the

three genes encoding (p)ppGpp synthesizing enzymes in *B. subtilis* (*yjbM, ywaC* and *relA*)

(15). If (p)ppGpp were the key mediator, we would expect that the effect of RNase P

depletion on *rimM* expression to be reduced or abolished in the (p)ppGpp^0 background.

Rather than simply abolishing the effect, *rimM* transcripts actually showed higher levels in

the tRNA maturase-depleted (p)ppGpp^0 strains compared to the RnpA or RnpB-depleted

strains capable of making (p)ppGpp (Figure 7A), suggesting that (p)ppGpp has an

independent repressive effect on *rimM* mRNA levels.

We thus assessed whether the alarmone (p)ppGpp could down-regulate *rimM*

expression in the absence of a tRNA processing defect using an engineered strain that allows

us to produce (p)ppGpp in the absence of immature tRNA accumulation or nutrient

starvation (8). This (p)ppGpp$^+$ strain consists of an ectopic copy of the *ywaC* gene placed

under the control of a *Pxyl* promoter in the (p)ppGpp^0 strain background. We used

derepression of the CodY-regulated *ywaA* mRNA as a proxy to follow the increase in

(p)ppGpp levels in this strain *in vivo* (Figure 7B) (8). We observed that (p)ppGpp induction

alone had no effect on the small (Y/P$_2$-T$_2$; cyan dot) *rimM* transcript, whereas the two larger

species (Y/P$_2$-T$_3$ and P$_1$-T$_3$, pink and purple dots, respectively) were down-regulated as the

expression of the (p)ppGpp reporter *ywaA* increased (Figure 7B). Although (p)ppGpp

production alone recapitulated what was seen in RnpB-depleted cells, the fact that only the

two larger transcripts behaved as expected from the results obtained in the RNase P-

depleted ppGpp^0 strain (Figure 7A), suggests that regulation of the smallest transcript (Y/P$_2$-

T$_2$) is more complex than simple transcriptional repression by (p)ppGpp.

The fact that the Y/P$_2$-T$_2$ *rimM* transcript could be down-regulated independently of

(p)ppGpp production led us to investigate the possibility of a further layer of regulation

where the growth slow-down in tRNA maturase-depleted cells would also affect *rimM*

expression by a mechanism independent of alarmone levels. To test this, we sought to

reproduce the growth rate defect by depleting for an unrelated essential enzyme. We

therefore performed Northern blot analysis on total RNA extracted from both RNase III (*rnc*)

depletion and deletion strains. The double-strand specific endoribonuclease RNase III is

essential in *B. subtilis* because it is required to silence expression of foreign toxin genes of

two prophages (Skin and SPβ) (16). Whereas depletion of RNase III in a WT background leads

to growth arrest, the *rnc* gene can be deleted in a strain lacking the two prophages without a

marked effect on growth rate. The RNase III depleted strain showed only a very limited

derepression of the CodY regulon in comparison with tRNA maturase-depleted strains

(Figure 8A) and did not accumulate visible amounts of (p)ppGpp on thin-layer

chromatography (TLC) (Figure 8B). This validates the use of RNase III depletion strains to

examine the effect of growth rate on *rimM* expression and to distinguish this from the effect

of accumulating high levels of (p)ppGpp. While RNase III deletion had no effect on *rimM*

expression, all three *rimM*-containing transcripts were strongly down-regulated during

RNase III depletion (Figure 8C), confirming that growth rate also plays a major role in the

regulation of *rimM* expression, independently of (p)ppGpp and tRNA maturase depletion.

Discussion

This study began with the observation that depletion of tRNA maturase enzymes in *B.*

subtilis led to a defect in 30S ribosome subunit assembly, which we showed was in part due

to an accumulation of (p)ppGpp and an inhibition of the activity of 30S assembly GTPases

(8). In our early attempts to understand the mechanism underlying this phenomenon, we

studied the expression of several 30S assembly factors and discovered that most were either

up or down-regulated at the mRNA level upon depletion of either RNase P or RNase Z.

We initially focused on the *rimM* mRNA because the 30S ribosome assembly defect

observed in tRNA maturase depletion mutants was very similar to that seen in a Δ*rimM*

strain. Although we later showed that ectopic *rimM* expression could not correct the

assembly defect in the *rnpB*-depleted strain (8), we were nonetheless curious about how

rimM expression was affected by the decrease in the levels of mature tRNAs. Together, our

data (summarized in Figure S4) indicate that the down-regulation of *rimM* transcript levels in

tRNA maturase-depleted cells is the result of a complex mixture of transcriptional and post-

transcriptional mechanisms, caused by a combination of effects mediated by a reduction in

growth rate, (p)ppGpp production and a translational defect due to lack of functional tRNAs,

with each layer of regulation capable of functioning independently of the others and

affecting the three *rimM* transcripts distinctly at different levels of severity.

We hypothesized that the accumulation of immature tRNAs during tRNA maturase

depletion increases ribosome stalling. Stalled ribosomes are known to affect mRNA decay in

bacteria (17) and a tRNA loss of function mutation leading to pre-tRNA processing defects

was reported to induce ribosome stalling in mice (9). In agreement with our hypothesis, we

observed that treatment with the translation elongation inhibitor chloramphenicol at MIC

concentrations recapitulates the effects of tRNA maturase depletion on the mRNA levels of

several different assembly factor mRNAs tested, four of which were up-regulated (*era, yqeH,*

ydaF and yjcK) and two down-regulated *(rimM* and *cpgA)*. Interestingly, Cm treatment at

sub-inhibitory concentrations did not impact cofactor mRNA levels in the same way, with

low Cm concentrations initially having transitory up-effects that were then reversed at

longer incubation times. One possibility is that short ribosome stalls transiently block access

to cleavage sites by housekeeping RNases such as RNase Y, resulting in mRNA stabilization,

while prolonged stalling could lead to mRNA destabilisation by an enzyme such as Rae1,

proposed to enter the A-site of stalled ribosomes (2), or by leaving large stretches of mRNA

unoccupied by ribosomes and vulnerable to cleavage by canonical degradation pathways.

Another notable difference between the two conditions is that the stringent response is

induced by Cm at MIC, as evidenced by the increase in expression the *ilvA* mRNA from the

CodY regulon (Figure S5), which could also contribute the increased severity of the response

to higher Cm concentrations. Activation of the stringent response in Cm-treated *B. subtilis*

was also previously observed by (18), consistent with our results. This is a marked difference

from *E. coli*, where Cm is a known inhibitor of stringent response induction (19, 20). The

mechanism still remains elusive in both cases.

Beyond their canonical role in protein synthesis, tRNAs have been implicated in the

regulation of several biological processes (for review, see (21, 22)). A new class of small non-

coding RNAs has emerged recently called tRNA-derived fragments (tRFs) or tRNA-derived

small RNAs, whose biological roles are not yet well understood (23). Different types of tRFs

differ in the cleavage position of the mature or precursor tRNA transcript. They have been

particularly studied in humans, where they have been shown to be involved in regulation of

a variety of cellular processes, including global translation, cellular proliferation, apoptosis

and epigenetic inheritance (24). Interestingly, a 3'-tRF in human cells plays an essential role

in fine-tuning ribosome biogenesis under normal physiological conditions by post-

transcriptionally regulating translation of at least two r-protein mRNAs (25). Although tRFs

have not yet been identified in *B. subtilis*, we asked whether pre-tRNAs could bind certain

assembly factor mRNAs *via* their 5' or 3' extensions and cause some of the post-

transcriptional effects observed in the tRNA maturase depletion strains. tRFs with 5' or 3'

extensions (pre-tRFs) could similarly behave as a new pool of potential regulatory sRNAs.

Although the potential base-pairing we identified between the 5' extension of trnD-Tyr and

the *rimM* transcripts does not seem to play a role in the down-regulation of *rimM*

expression, this doesn't preclude the possibility that other pre-tRNAs or pre-tRFs could be

involved in post-transcriptional regulatory events in *B. subtilis*.

A recent study in *E. coli* showed that the abundance of 46% of transcripts were affected

in a strain where the protein moiety of RNase P was heat denatured (26). The observation

that the addition of chloramphenicol mimicked the effect of tRNA maturase depletion in *B.*

subtilis for the upregulated mRNAs, and that down-regulation was the net result of a

mixture of translational and transcriptional effects, suggests that the effects seen on the *E.*

coli transcriptome may substantially be the result of ribosome stalling on mRNAs due to lack

of functional tRNAs, with differential impacts (up, down or neutral) on individual mRNA

stabilities or transcription levels.   More detailed studies are required to untangle these

effects on a global level in both organisms.

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Materials and Methods

Strains and culture conditions

All *B. subtilis* strains used were derived from our laboratory strain SSB1002, a W168

trp$^+$ prototrophic strain. Strains are listed in Table S1 and details of strains and plasmid

constructs are provided in Table S2 and S3, respectively. Oligonucleotides used are listed in

Table S4.

Unless stated otherwise, *B. subtilis* strains were grown in 2xYT liquid medium (1.6%

peptone, 1% yeast extract, 1% NaCl) at 200 rpm at 37°C in ≤ 1/10 volume of the flask to

ensure proper aeration. Overnight precultures were grown in presence of appropriate

antibiotics and inducer (1mM IPTG or 2% xylose), in the case of depletion strains.

Experimental cultures were grown in the absence of antibiotics, except where stated. For

depletion strains, overnight induced cultures were washed three times with pre-warmed

2xYT medium and inoculated at OD_{600} between 0.02 and 0.2, depending on the strain, in

fresh medium with or without inducer. Generally, induced cells were harvested for RNA

preparation around OD_{600} = 0.6 and cells grown in the absence of the inducer were followed

until they reach a plateau before being harvested. Inoculation and depletion conditions were

determined empirically for each strain such that the depleted cells were harvested between

OD_{600} = 0.3 and 0.7. For RnpA depletion, cultures were inoculated at OD_{600} = 0.05 in presence

of 2% xylose (inducer) or 2% glucose to tighten repression of the *Pxyl* promoter, which

typically led to a growth arrest (plateau) around OD_{600} = 0.6. For *rnz* and *rnpB* depletion

strains, cultures were inoculated in presence or in absence of 1mM IPTG at OD_{600} = 0.05 and

OD_{600} = 0.2, respectively. RNase Z and RnpB depleted cells typically plateau around OD_{600} =

0.6 and OD_{600}= 0.3, respectively.

For rifampicin experiments, *B. subtilis* strains were grown in 2xTY at 37°C with shaking as

described above. At OD_{600nm} = 0.6 (or less for some depletion strains), rifampicin was added

to a final concentration of 150 µg/mL in order to block new RNA synthesis. Samples were

collected at different time points (e. g. 0, 2, 5, 10, 15 and 20 minutes) by mixing the cells

with frozen 10 mM sodium azide (200 µL for 1.3 mL culture). Samples were vortexed until

the sodium azide thawed, cells were pelleted by centrifugation at 4°C and the pellet was

conserved at -20°C until RNA extraction.

To mimic amino acid starvation, we depleted charged arginine tRNAs by addition of

arginine hydroxamate (RHX) at 250 mg/mL in cultures growing in 2xTY at $OD_{600} = 0.3$.

To study the effect of translation pausing, we added the translation elongation inhibitor

chloramphenicol (Cm) at sub-inhibitory (2.5 µg/ml) or minimal inhibitory concentration (5

µg/ml) to cells growing in 2xYT at $OD_{600} = 0.6$. Cells were harvested just before Cm addition

(t_0) and 15, 30 and 60 mins after treatment.

To reproduce some growth conditions from the *B. subtilis* tiling array experiment (10) known

to lead to a decrease in *rnpA* expression, ethanol was added to cultures growing in minimal

medium (M9 with 0.5 % glucose) at 4% (v/v) around $OD_{600} = 0.4$ and cells were harvested 10

mins after treatment.

Plasmid constructs

The *rimM* gene was amplified by PCR using oligo pair (CC2034/CC1986) and cloned between

the BamHI and XhoI sites of the integrative pHM2-Pspac(con) vector (Table S3). The

bicistronic *ylqD-rimM* construct was amplified by PCR using oligo pair (CC1985/CC1986) and

cloned between the BamHI and SalI sites of pHM2-Pspac(con). The mutated construct *ylqD*-*

rimM was obtained by two-fragment overlapping PCR. The upstream fragment was

amplified with the forward primer CC1985 and the reverse primer CC2012 and the

downstream fragment with the forward primer CC2011 and the reverse primer CC1986. The

overlapping fragments were reamplified using oligo pair CC1985/CC1986 and cloned

between the BamHI and SalI sites of pHM2-Pspac(con). The integrative plasmids were

linearized with XbaI before transformation, for integration into the *amyE* locus of the *B.*

subtilis chromosome.

RNA extraction and Northern blots

RNA extraction was typically performed using the glass beads/phenol protocol

(adapted from (27)) on 1 to 8 mL mid-log phase *B. subtilis* cells growing in 2xYT.

To perform Northern blots, 5 µg total RNA were denatured for 5 mins at 95°C in RNA

Gel loading dye (Thermo Scientific) before being separated on 1% agarose gels in 1X TBE

(native) or on denaturing 5% acrylamide gels in 1X TBE + 7M urea. RNA was transferred from

agarose gels to a hybond-N membrane (GE-Healthcare) by capillary transfer for 4 hours

minimum in 1X transfer buffer (5X SSC, 0.01M NaOH). For Northerns of acrylamide gels, RNA

was electro-transferred at 4°C in 0.5X TBE for 4 hours at 60V or overnight at 12V. RNA was

cross-linked to the membrane by UV cross-linking at 120,000 microjoules/cm^2 using HL-200

Hybrilinker UV-crosslinker (UVP). Probes for Northern blots were usually 25 to 30-nt DNA

oligonucleotides radiolabeled on their 5' end by polynucleotide kinase. The *cpgA* mRNA was

detected using a riboprobe using a PCR fragment amplified using oligos CC2200 and CC2201

as template. Membranes were pre-incubated in Ultra-Hyb (Life Technologies) for agarose

blots or Roti-Hybri-Quick (Roth) for acrylamide blots for 1 hour and hybridized with

radiolabeled probes for a minimum of 4 hours. Pre-incubation, hybridization and wash steps

were performed at 42°C in the case of 5'-labeled oligonucleotides or at 68°C for riboprobes.

Membranes were quickly rinsed once at room temperature in 2x SSC 0.1% SDS to remove

non-hybridized probe before being washed once for 5 mins in the same buffer and then

twice for 5 mins in 0.2x SSC 0.1% SDS. Northerns were exposed to PhosphorImager screens

(GE Healthcare) and the signal was obtained by scanning with a Typhoon scanner (GE

Healthcare) and analyzed by Fiji (ImageJ) software.

Thin layer chromotagraphy (TLC)

TLC analysis was used to detect radiolabeled (p)ppGpp as described in (8).

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. Depletion of tRNA processing enzymes results in perturbed expression of some
mRNAs encoding proteins involved in 30S subunit assembly. Northern blots showing (A) Up-
regulated mRNAs, (B) Down-regulated mRNAs (C) Unaffected mRNAs and (D) mRNAs
unrelated to ribosome assembly, present in total mRNA isolated in the presence or absence
of inducer as indicated. Note that the basal level of the *bmrCD* transcript, encoding a
multidrug transporter, is higher in the *Pspac-rnz* and *Pspac-rnpB* strains because of the
presence of erythromycin in the medium for stable maintenance of the construct. 16S rRNA
levels (ethidium bromide stained) are shown as a loading control. Series of blots where a
single loading control is shown, were stripped and reprobed. The blots for *era, yqeH, rimM*
and *cpgA* were regenerated as in ref. (8) with independent RNA preparations, with
permission granted by the publisher for re-use of previously published data. Number of
repetitions (n) as follows: *yqeH* (n=3); *era* (n=3); *rpsU* (n=4); *ydaF* (n=2); *yjcK* (n=2); *rimM*
(n=3); *cpgA* (n=3); *rbfA* (n=2); *ylxS* (n=2); *yfmL* (n=2); *bmrCD* (n=2); *yrzI* (n=2).

Figure 2. Up-regulated mRNAs show increased stability upon tRNA maturase depletion and
increased expression levels in the presence of chloramphenicol. Northern blots of total RNA
isolated at different times after addition of rifampicin (Rif) in cells grown in the presence or
absence of inducer for (A) *rnpB* or (B) *rnpA* expression. Transcript sizes are given in kb to the
left of the blots and half-lives are reported under each blot. Note, that since *yjcK* gives no
signal in the presence of inducer, we cannot rule out a transcriptional effect in this case. (C)
Northern blots of total RNA isolated at different times after addition of 0.5x MIC and MIC of
chloramphenicol (Cm). 16S rRNA levels (ethidium bromide stained) are shown as a loading
control. Series of blots where a single loading control is shown, were stripped and reprobed.
Experiments were performed twice, with decay plots and their quantifications given in
Figure S1.

Figure 3. Downregulated mRNAs are subjected to a mixture of transcriptional and post-
transcriptional effects upon tRNA maturase depletion and chloramphenicol addition.
Northern blots of total RNA isolated at different times after addition of rifampicin (Rif) in
cells grown in the presence or absence of inducer for (A) *rnpB* or (B) *rnpA* expression.

Transcript sizes are given in kb to the left of the blot and half-lives are reported under each

blot. (C) Northern blots of total RNA isolated at different times after addition of 0.5x MIC

and MIC of chloramphenicol (Cm). 16S rRNA levels (ethidium bromide stained) are shown as

a loading control. Series of blots where a single loading control is shown, were stripped and

reprobed. Blots shown in Fig. 2 were stripped and reprobed for use in this figure.

Experiments were performed twice, with decay plots and their quantifications given in

Figure S2.

Figure 4. Three of the six transcripts emanating from the *rimM* operon are sensitive to tRNA

maturase depletion. (A) Structure of the *rimM* operon. Open reading frames (ORFs; not to

scale) are shown as gray arrows and transcripts as different colored wavy lines. Sizes are as

indicated. Promoters (P_1-P_3) are represented by black arrows and terminators (T_1-T_3) as

hairpins. A known RNase Y cleavage site is indicated by a scissors symbol. The asterisk

indicates transcripts that may be processed by RNase Y, but are not distinguishable from P_2

primary transcripts by Northern blot. These are denoted Y/P2 in the text. (B) Northern blot

analysis of total RNA from *Pxyl-rnpA* cells grown in the presence or absence of inducer,

probed with oligonucleotides targeting different ORFs of the operon (indicated below

panel). Colored dots correspond to the colors of the transcripts shown in panel A.

Figure 5. A determinant for down regulation of the *rimM* operon in response to tRNA

maturase depletion is located within the *ylqD* ORF. (A) Northern blot of total RNA from

Pspac-rnpB cells isolated in the presence or absence of IPTG showing the effect of RnpB-

depletion on expression of an ectopic *ylqD-rimM* short operon containing a wt or mutated

(*) potential target sequence for *trnD-Tyr* pre-tRNA within the *ylqD* ORF. Colored dots

identifying endogenous *rimM* transcripts follow the same code as in Figure 4. (B) Schematic

of ectopic *ylqD-rimM* constructs placed under control of the constitutive promoter (P) used

in panel A. The zoom in shows the complementarity to the *trnD-Tyr* pre-tRNA and its

disruption in the *ylqD*-rimM* mutant construct. Coordinates are relative to the start codon

of *rimM*. (C) Northern blot showing the effect of RNase P depletion (*rnpA* or *rnpB*) on

expression of an ectopic *rimM*-only construct. (D) Schematic of ectopic *rimM* construct

placed under control of the constitutive promoter (P) used in panel C. Slower migrating

bands (marked with an asterisk) are likely due to read-through of the terminator in the

ectopic construct. 16S rRNA levels (ethidium bromide stained) are shown as a loading

control.

Figure 6. Ethanol stress and stationary phase affect *rnpA* and *rnpB* expression without

causing tRNA processing defects. (A) *rnpB* (black) and *rnpA* (red) transcript levels over 100

different growth conditions (from ref. (10)). The three conditions indicated in yellow

(ethanol stress and stationary phase in complex and minimal medium) result in reduced

rnpA RNA levels. For each condition, *rnpA* and *rnpB* RNA levels (log2) are indicated in the

yellow box. (B) Northern blot comparing *rnpB* (first panel, acrylamide gel because of small

size, 401 nts), *rnpA* and *rimM* (second and third panel, agarose gel) RNA levels, after ethanol

addition (EtOH) or during exponential (Exp) or stationary (Stat) phase in minimum (MM) or

complex (2xTY) medium. Colored dots identifying *rimM* transcripts follow the same code as

in Figure 4. Note that the 16S rRNA (loading control) is beginning to be degraded in MM

stationary phase. (C) Northern blot probed for *trnJ-Lys* (acrylamide gel) showing no pre-tRNA

accumulation in the different conditions tested. See Figure S1 of ref. (8) for accumulation of

trnJ-Lys precursors under conditions of RnpA and RnpB depletion.

Figure 7. Influence of (p)ppGpp on *rimM* expression. (A) Northern blot comparing the effect

of RNase P depletion (RnpB or RnpA) on *rimM* expression in a wt and (p)ppGpp[0] background.

(B) Northern blot of *rimM* expression after induction of (p)ppGpp production using a xylose

inducible *ywaC* in a *ΔyjbM ywaC relA* ((p)ppGpp[0]) background. Colored dots identifying *rimM*

transcripts follow the same code as in Figure 4. 16S rRNA levels (ethidium bromide stained)

are shown as a loading control. Series of blots where a single loading control is shown, were

stripped and reprobed. Note that this Northern blot was generated by reprobing a

membrane previously used in ref. (8), with permission to re-use the *ywaA* control panel

granted by the publisher.

Figure 8. Expression of the *rimM* operon is regulated by growth rate independent of

(p)ppGpp. (A) Northern blot comparing the effect of RNase III deletion, and RNase P or

RNase III depletion on derepression of the CodY-regulated *ywaA mRNA.* (B) RNase III-

depleted cells do not accumulate large amounts of (p)ppGpp compared to tRNA maturase

depleted ones. Thin-layer chromatography (TLC) analysis of ^{32}P-labeled nucleotides

extracted from RNase III-depleted cells (*rnc*). Arginine hydroxamate (RHX; 250mg/mL) was

added to wt and (p)ppGpp^{0} strains as positive and negative controls. The top and bottom

halves are exposed for different times. Note that this is a re-crop of an image previously

published in ref. (8); the first four (control) lanes are reshown to show the migration position

of (p)ppGpp, with permission from the publisher. (C) Northern blot comparing the effect of

RNase III depletion or deletion on *rimM* expression. Colored dots identifying *rimM*

transcripts follow the same code as in Figure 4. 16S rRNA levels (ethidium bromide stained)

are shown as a loading control.

A

B

Probe in: *ffh* *ylqC* *rimM* *rplS*

A

P_spac - rnpB

							IPTG
	+	-	+	-	+	-	
wt	Empty vector		ylqD-rimM		ylqD*-rimM		amyE::

Endogenous rimM
- 5.0
*
- 3.0
*
- 1.8

Ectopic ylqD-rimM
- 0.8
- 0.5
- 0.4

16S

B

tRNA trnD-Tyr
12 3' ACUUUUUGUC 5' 1
ylqD |||||||||||
-72 5' UGAGAAAACAG 3' -60   11/11 nts

P
ylqD   rimM   0.8 kb

tRNA trnD-Tyr
12 3' ACUUUUUGUC 5' 1
Mutated ylqD | |||
-72 5' UCAGUUUCACC 3' -60   3/11 nts

P
ylqD*   rimM   0.8 kb

C

P_spac - rnpB   P_xyl - rnpA

						inducer
	+	-	+	-	
wt	Empty vector		rimM	rimM	amyE::

Endogenous rimM
- 5.0
*
- 3.0
*
- 1.8

Ectopic rimM
- 0.5

16S

D

P
rimM   0.5 kb

A

Ethanol addition:
rnpA   9.31
rnpB   15.49

M9 medium
stationary phase:
rnpA   9.5
rnpB   15.81

Complex medium
stationary phase:
rnpA   10.17
rnpB   16.04

B

	2xTY		MM			Medium
	Exp	Stat	Exp	Exp + EtOH	Stat	Growth condition

0.4 –   *rnpB*

0.9 –   *rnpA*

5.0 –
3.0 –   *rimM*
1.8 –

16S

C

	2xTY		MM			Medium
	Exp	Stat	Exp	Exp + EtOH	Stat	Growth condition

76 nts –   Mature tRNA (*trnJ-Lys*)