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Insertion sequence driven evolution of the microbiota revealed by a novel metagenomics

pipeline

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Abstract

Insertion sequence (IS) elements are mobile genetic elements in bacterial genomes that support

adaptation. We developed a database of IS elements coupled to a computational pipeline that

identifies IS element insertions in the microbiota. We discovered that diverse IS elements insert

into the genomes of intestinal bacteria regardless of human host lifestyle. These insertions

targeted bacterial accessory genes that aid in their adaptation to unique environmental

conditions. Using IS expansion in *Bacteroides*, we show that IS activity leads to insertion "hot

spots" in accessory genes. We show that IS insertions are stable and can be transferred

between humans. Extreme environmental perturbations force IS elements to fall out of the

microbiota and many fail to rebound following homeostasis. Our work shows that IS elements

drive bacterial genome diversification within the microbiota and establishes a framework for

understanding how strain level variation within the microbiota impacts human health.

Introduction

Bacteria can rapidly evolve their genomes through the mobilization of genetic elements,

including bacteriophages (phages), plasmids, DNA inversions, and transposable elements (1-3).

Genetic rearrangements have a strong impact on bacterial fitness, influencing diverse

phenotypes including virulence, antibiotic resistance, interbacterial competition, and secondary

metabolism. For example, pathogenicity islands can distribute virulence traits to previously non-

pathogenic bacteria and DNA inversions can alter the expression of antibiotic resistance genes

(4, 5). Additionally, novel genetic traits such as metabolic and virulence genes are acquired by

bacteria through plasmid exchange, bacteriophage lysogeny, and conjugative transposition (6,

7). Thus, mobile elements actively drive bacterial adaptation and evolution.

Insertion sequence (IS) elements are small (~1 kB) simple transposons that are

common to bacterial genomes (8). IS elements are capable of self-mobilization by activating an

encoded transposase that recognizes sequence-specific inverted repeats at IS element termini.

IS transposases are diverse (9), and include enzymes with a DD(E/D) motif that support "copy-

and-paste" and "cut-and-paste" mechanisms or those with HUH nuclease chemistry which

transpose as ssDNA molecules at the replication fork (10-12). Gene expression and genome

fidelity can be modulated by IS activity in a variety of ways, including IS insertions into protein

coding regions inactivating genes, insertions into intergenic regions forming strong hybrid

promoters increasing gene expression, or recombination with other IS elements resulting in

large deletions (13-16). Additionally, IS elements can rapidly expand in bacterial genomes when

commensal bacteria transition to become pathogens (15, 17, 18). Thus, IS elements have a

profound impact on the evolution and physiological traits of bacteria (19).

Despite a deep knowledge of fundamental IS biology from diverse bacteria, we have a

rather rudimentary understanding of how these elements function in polymicrobial communities.

This knowledge is critical for deciphering how bacterial communities evolve in ecosystems such

as the human microbiota. A barrier to studying IS elements in complex environments results

from imperfect methodologies for measuring *in situ* IS dynamics. This stems from the poor

recovery of multi-copy genes with repetitive sequences by short-read assemblers, leading to

fragmented assemblies where IS elements are absent or become break-points between contigs

(20). Therefore, assembly-level analyses of IS elements from metagenomic datasets are often

underpowered. Despite these limitations, previous culture-based studies show that IS elements

are active in the human intestine. Sampling of *Bacteroides fragilis* isolates revealed the gain and

loss of IS transposases (21). Furthermore, IS elements were shown to rapidly expand in copy

number in the genome of *Escherichia coli* during intestinal colonization of mice, driving

increased virulence in a mouse model of Crohn's disease (22, 23). Recently, longitudinal

intestinal metagenomic samples from a single individual were sequenced using long DNA

fragment partitioning, producing higher quality assemblies compared to short-read

methodologies. This analysis revealed that *Bacteroides caccae* gained and lost numerous IS

insertions over the course of sampling (20). Finally, we previously utilized a targeted IS

sequencing approach to identify novel insertions of the IS element IS256 in intestinal

Enterococcus faecium populations isolated from an individual undergoing treatment with

multiple antibiotics (19). Antibiotic exposure was associated with increased abundances of

IS256 insertions in genes related to antibiotic resistance and virulence, suggesting that antibiotic

treatment drives IS-mediated pathoadaptation in the human intestine.

In this work, we developed an open-source IS database that greatly expands the

diversity of IS elements compared to current databases. We built a computational pipeline that

utilizes this database to find IS insertions in public metagenomic datasets. Our analysis reveals

widespread abundance and expansion of IS insertions in the human microbiota. We show that

IS insertions are transferable between individuals and are stable for years. Distinct families of IS

elements are favored for insertional activity within the microbiota and these preferentially insert

into specific classes of genes. Such genes are specific to distinct microbial taxa with an

overrepresentation within the *Bacteroidia* and *Clostridia*. Gene classes targeted by IS elements

are primarily metabolic, cell surface, and mobile genetic element genes. Using an *in vitro*

ISOSDB412 (IS4351) expansion model, we confirm that identical and related accessory genes

are preferentially targeted. Finally, we show that the stability of IS insertions is lost following

antibiotic perturbation and diet intervention. Following these alterations, new IS abundances and

insertion site locations arise. Together, this work establishes a framework for studying IS

elements within the microbiota and is the first step toward understanding how IS elements

contribute to the function of the microbiota that impacts human health.

Results

ISOSDB: a comprehensive open-source IS database

To facilitate the study of IS elements in bacterial genomes and metagenomic datasets,

we sought to build an updated and exhaustive IS database that can serve as an open-source

tool for the scientific community. Prior to our development of this database, the main repository

for IS elements was the ISFinder database (24). While ISFinder has served as a gold-standard

for the systematic naming of IS elements and their identification in single isolate genomes (25),

it is underpowered for high-throughput genomics. ISFinder lacks integration into downstream

tools that can facilitate in-depth analyses of IS elements, the entirety of the database cannot be

downloaded for personal use, and it relies solely on manual curation and submission of new IS

elements, decreasing the speed at which new IS elements can be reported. These are

drawbacks in the current genomic age, where the identification of IS elements from complex

datasets such as metagenomes would greatly improve our understanding of their function.

To address the need for an unrestricted open-access IS database to support genomic

research, we built the Insertion Sequence Open-Source Database (ISOSDB), which consists of

IS elements identified from 39,878 complete bacterial genomes and 4,497 metagenome

assembled genomes (MAGs) (26).These IS elements were identified using OASIS, a rigorously

tested IS identification tool that allows for the high-throughput analysis of multiple genomes (27).

IS elements were considered valid and included in ISOSDB if: (1) there were at least two copies

of the IS in a single genome, (2) it was flanked by terminal inverted repeats (IRs), and (3) has

significant nucleotide homology to an IS in ISFinder or has a putative transposase. Redundant

IS elements were deduplicated at 95% nucleotide identity. The resulting set of IS elements

totaled 22,713 distinct IS elements, an almost five-fold excess to the ISFinder database (Fig.

1A). We identified transposase amino acid homologs, in addition to nucleotide homology over

the whole sequence of an IS element, in the ISFinder database. 97.5% of the transposases

included in ISOSDB had protein homologs in ISFinder, but only 37.9% had nucleotide homologs

in ISFinder (Fig. 1B). The ISOSDB also has a wide range of transposases representing multiple

IS families and contains distinct clusters of IS elements at the nucleic acid and protein level (Fig.

1C-D & Table S1). In summary, the ISOSDB is an expansive, freely available database that

contains substantially improved IS diversity compared to current databases.

Development of an IS detection pipeline that uses ISOSDB

IS elements drive genomic diversity in almost all bacterial species (9, 28, 29). However,

a systematic method to identify novel IS insertions in complex microbial communities has not

been previously developed. This has precluded the study of IS biology in the microbiota at the

population scale. To obtain a deeper understanding of IS biology in the microbiota, we

developed the pseudoR pipeline that utilizes ISOSDB to identify IS insertions in previously

assembled genomic sequences. pseudoR is named for its ability to find IS inactivated

pseudogenes and is implemented in the R programming language. This pipeline is built for

fragmented, incomplete assemblies such as metagenomes. Our approach was inspired by

previous tools developed for the analysis of transposon insertions from eukaryotic (30) and

bacterial genomes (31, 32). These tools either require *a priori* knowledge of the target site

duplications which is often not consistent for IS insertions (33), use read pairing to infer IS

insertions which limits the data available to verify IS insertions, or require a matched reference

assembly.

The backbone of the pseudoR pipeline is a split read approach. First, reads are mapped

against assembled contigs and unmapped reads are binned as separate read files. These

unmapped reads are aligned against a database of IS terminal ends (150 bp on either end of an

IS) compiled from ISOSDB (Fig. S1). If an unmapped read has an IS termini, the termini is

trimmed and the remaining read is remapped against the assembled contigs. To ensure that

insertions are genuine, a minimum depth of four reads is required and these reads must include

at least one left and one right termini.

To compare between samples and multiple disparate assemblies, we built two modes

(multi and single). Multi-mode takes each sample and maps its reads against its own assembly.

These reads are then subsequently mapped against a deduplicated gene database built from all

assemblies in the dataset. Single-mode was developed to analyze time series datasets, where a

single assembly can be used for multiple samples (such as one from the start of the time

series).

IS insertions are widespread in the healthy human intestinal microbiota

We utilized the pseudoR pipeline to identify IS insertions in healthy human fecal

metagenomes by analyzing data from three geographically disparate studies: a survey of

healthy Italian adults ranging in age from 30-105 years old (ITA) (34), healthy individuals from a

Japanese colorectal cancer study (JPN) (35), and healthy rural Madagascan adults (MDG) (36).

Each study showed evidence of widespread IS insertion heterogeneity (Fig. 2A). Some

individuals had few detectable IS insertions while others had over 100 unique IS insertions (Fig.

2B). We used relative IS depth (IS depth divided by the sum of the IS depth and the depth of

reads that map to the insertion site without the insertion present) as a metric to report the

abundance of IS alleles. Most insertions had a relative IS depth between 10% and 100%,

demonstrating that the inserted allele exists in equilibrium with the wild type allele (Fig. 2A). We

next determined the bacterial taxa that underwent extensive IS insertional activity (Fig. 2C, Fig.

S2A). IS insertions were most abundant in the *Bacteroidia* and *Clostridia*. These two classes

make up the majority of the healthy intestinal microbiota (37) and the genera *Bacteroides*,

Phocaeicola, *Ruminococcus*, and *Blautia* accounted for the majority of IS element insertion

diversity (Fig. S2A). While *Bacteroidia* IS insertions were present across all studies, the IS

elements underlying these insertions varied between studies (Fig. 2D). Unique IS types for the

Bacteroidia included ISOSDB412 (IS30 family) insertions for ITA individuals, ISOSDB18121

(IS1380 family) insertions for JPN individuals, and ISOSDB33 (IS1182 family) insertions for

MDG individuals (Fig. 2D). Insertions in the *Bacteroidia* from JPN and ITA individuals were

formed from shared IS elements, including ISOSDB4584 (ISL3 family), ISOSDB634 (IS982

family), and ISOSDB445 (IS66 family), whereas the IS diversity in the *Bacteroidia* from MDG

individuals consisted of ISOSDB250 (IS66 family), ISOSDB426 (IS630 family), and ISOSDB45

(IS256 family) insertions. This suggests that regional differences contribute to IS element

content or activity that drives insertion events.

IS insertion types among the *Clostridia* were found across all three geographic

locations, with many more IS elements shared between JPN and ITA individuals (Fig. 2D).

Interestingly, the *Clostridia* shared three IS family types (IS982, IS66, and IS30) with the

Bacteroidia, yet the specific IS family members were different IS elements (Fig 2D). We

conclude from this data that although the IS sequence space of these two classes of bacteria

are unique, some IS families are shared and certain IS families may be more promiscuous.

MDG individuals, despite having similar numbers of IS insertions among their bacterial

communities (Fig. 2B), had relatively low abundances of IS insertions in *Bacteroides*,

Phocaeicola, Blautia, and *Bifidobacterium* and much higher abundance of IS elements

associated with pathobionts including *Escherichia* and *Prevotella* (Fig. S2A) (38-41). This is

supported by the presence of ISOSDB45 (IS256 family) insertions that are associated with

pathogenic bacteria (Fig. 2D) (19, 42-44).

IS elements can insert into coding sequences or intergenic regions of the genome which

can inactivate genes or influence the expression of adjacent genes (28). To measure IS

insertions in intragenic versus intergenic sites, we analyzed the precise positions of all IS

elements in ITA, JPN, and MDG individuals by comparing the number of intragenic insertions to

intergenic insertions on a per individual basis. We found that specific IS elements had

preference for intragenic or intergenic insertions (Fig. 2E). ISOSDB1159 (IS3 family),

ISOSDB805 (IS3 family), ISOSDB178 (ISAS1 family), and ISOSDB237 (IS4 family)

preferentially inserted into intergenic loci, while ISOSDB18121 (IS1380 family), ISOSDB445

(IS66 family), and ISOSDB412 (IS30 family) inserted more frequently into intragenic loci. These

data indicate that some IS elements are suited to diversify genomes through mutation whereas

others may preferentially insert adjacent to coding sequences to alter gene expression.

IS elements frequently insert into accessory genes important for bacterial adaptation

Having identified numerous IS insertions within predicted coding sequences, we

analyzed open reading frames (ORFs) carrying IS insertions, termed iORFs, in the ITA, JPN,

and MDG individuals. A deduplicated gene database of all predicted ORFs from the

metagenomes of each study were assessed for iORF's. iORF's with insertions from a single

individual were ~10-fold more abundant than iORFs with insertions from multiple individuals

(Fig. 3A). This demonstrates that intestinal metagenomic IS insertions have a high degree of

inter-individual variation. We next performed functional annotation of the iORF's and found five

broad categories that were shared between individuals and encompassed 20.7% of iORFs (Fig.

3B). Many iORFs were annotated as *susC*, *susD*, or *tonB* receptor genes in ITA and JPN

individuals. These genes encode high-affinity substrate-uptake receptors for carbohydrates and

cofactors (45, 46). *susC-D* homologs are frequently involved in the uptake of polysaccharides

used for metabolism, with *Bacteroidia* species containing many different *susC-D* homologs (45).

Mobilome genes, including transposases, integrases, prophages, and mobile element defense

genes, such as restriction modification systems, contained insertions in almost every individual

across all studies. Exopolysaccharide biogenesis genes, such as LPS modifying enzymes and

cell wall synthesis glycosyltransferases, were consistent IS element insertion targets. Cell wall

and membrane modifications are crucial for *in vivo* survival by avoiding host immunity and

during competition with other bacteria (47). Finally, antibiotic resistance genes frequently

contained IS insertions, including the genes *tetQ* and *ermF* in JPN and ITA individuals. IS

insertions were enriched in all functional categories except the EPS biogenesis genes, when

comparing the abundance of iORFs with all predicted protein coding sequences (Fig. 3C, Fig.

S2B). Together, these data show that genes involved in accessory metabolic functions,

antibiotic resistance, and genomic plasticity are common IS insertion targets.

We next asked if certain iORFs were shared between individuals from the three studies.

Although infrequent, a few iORFs were shared. 14% and 37% of ITA and JPN individuals,

respectively, had IS insertions in the gene *ermF*, a macrolide resistance gene, and 3.2% and

9.8% of ITA and JPN individuals, respectively, had IS insertions in *KAP*, a P-loop NTPase

predicted to be involved in phage defense (Fig. 3D) (48, 49). 7.9% and 6.1% of ITA and MDG

individuals, respectively, shared IS insertions in *shufflon*, a gene encoding an invertase that

regulates pilin phase variation (Fig. 3D) (50). We found that iORF functional classes were

conserved across diverse intestinal bacteria (Fig. 3E) yet the IS types responsible for these

insertions differed among the various classes of bacteria (Fig. 3F). This demonstrates that

although IS elements target similar genes within disparate bacteria, the types of IS elements

that promote these diversification events are specific to certain classes of bacteria.

Multiple iORF's were classified as transposases (Fig. 3B) and examples of IS elements

inserting in other transposases has been previously reported (51). In order to understand the

dynamics of IS insertions in other IS elements, we classified both the transposase iORF and the

IS forming the insertion by IS family (Fig. 3G). We found multiple examples of both self-targeting

(an IS inserting into a closely-related IS) and orthologous-targeting (an IS element inserting into

an unrelated IS). We found that IS families such as ISL3, IS4, IS110, and IS256 experienced

promiscuous insertion events. These results suggest that IS self- and orthologous-targeting

could be a mechanism to control IS mobilization of genetic traits.

IS* elements *provide mutational diversity to Bacteroides species

Genome wide mutagenesis of *Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron* (*Bt*) identified genes that

support adaptation to environmental pressures, including antibiotics, bile acids, and carbon

sources (52). We used this dataset to evaluate whether we could identify similar fitness

determinants as iORFs within intestinal *Bacteroides*. We searched our iORF database for

homologs to these fitness-associated ORFs from *Bt* and found multiple closely related iORFs

that likely influence *Bacteroides* fitness both positively and negatively (Fig. S3A). Examples

include iORFs that provide fitness advantages during growth in the presence of the antibiotics

doxycycline and vancomycin and during hyaluronic acid and glucosamine consumption (Fig.

S3A). Interestingly, we found iORFs associated with bacterial fitness during exposure to the

antipsychotic medication chlorpromazine (Fig S3A) which is associated with compositional

changes and antibiotic resistance of the microbiota (53-56). Additionally, we found multiple IS

insertions in homologs of the *Bt susC* gene BT1119 (Fig. S3B). Inactivation of BT1119

decreases fitness during growth on galacturonic acid (52).

Our *in silico* analysis shows that the intestinal *Bacteroidia* experience large-scale IS

mobilization into discrete groups of genes involved in carbohydrate utilization,

exopolysaccharide synthesis, and mobile genetic element interactions. To test if the activation

of an IS element leads to insertion into these classes of genes, we focused on ISOSDB412

(IS30 family member IS4351), an IS element is that is native to strains of *Bt* and *Bacteroides*

fragilis (*Bf*) (57). We transformed a low-copy number plasmid carrying an *ermF* cassette

disrupted by ISOSDB412 into *Bt* VPI-5482 and *Bf* NCTC 9343. These strains lack native copies

of ISOSDB412 which allowed us to study this IS element in the context of a genetic

arrangement that we found from our analysis of the microbiota. Following growth, we isolated

their genomic DNA and performed IS-Seq which enriches for ISOSDB412 amplicons to identify

their insertion locations (19). Both *Bt* and *Bf* strains carrying the ISOSDB412 plasmid obtained

numerous ISOSDB412 insertions throughout their genomes compared to controls that lacked

the ISOSDB412 plasmid construct (Fig. 4A, Fig. 4D). As predicted, ISOSDB412 insertions were

enriched in gene categories reflected from our findings from insertions from the human

microbiota (Fig. 4B, Fig. 4E). In *Bt*, ISOSDB412 insertions were enriched in *susC-D/tonB* and

EPS biogenesis genes, whereas *Bf* acquired an abundance of insertions in *susC-D/tonB* genes

despite a significantly lower number of ISOSDB412 insertion events compared to *Bt* (Fig. S4A).

Additionally, insertions were more frequently found in intragenic loci compared to intergenic loci,

confirming our findings from the intestinal microbiota (Fig. 4C, Fig. 4F). These results

demonstrate that IS elements can rapidly diversify *Bacteroidia* genomes.

Our discovery that IS insertions target accessory genes suggests that these IS insertions

inactivate genes that are currently dispensable for intestinal survival. To explore this, we

measured IS insertional dynamics in a nutrient-deplete environment with glucose as the sole

carbon source. We hypothesized that a lack of fiber and complex carbon sources, high levels of

glucose, and single sources of iron and nitrogen, would incentivize higher rates of IS insertions

to inactivate costly metabolic machinery needed for competition in complex nutritional

environments. We measured ISOSDB412 insertions from three *Bt* colonies after three

sequential passages in either complex media (BHIS) or minimal media (MM) (Fig. 4G, Fig. 4H,

Fig. 4I). We found that colonies passaged in MM had substantially more ISOSDB412 insertions

compared to BHIS-passaged colonies. Numerous insertions were found in the open reading

frame BT3642, a Na^+-dependent transporter (Fig. S4B) in MM colonies, but not in BHIS

colonies. This gene has been shown to be detrimental for growth in glucose minimal media (52).

Next, we measured ISOSDB412 abundance in *Bt* cells chronically infected with the

Crassvirales DAC15 or DAC17 (Fig. 4J, 4K, 4L). *Crassvirales* are bacteriophages that infect

Bacteroides species and are abundant in the human intestine (58). *Bt* cells become chronically

infected by these phages and shed them during growth (Fig. S4C). While DAC15 and DAC17

share 99.24% nucleotide identity over 98% of their genomes, DAC17 infection is associated

with an increased IS insertions genome-wide (Fig. 4J, Fig. 4K) which inserted into genes

involved in EPS biogenesis (Fig. 4L). Furthermore, almost all of the infected strains carried IS

insertions in the CPS3 locus (Fig. S4D), which is crucial for productive phage infection and likely

leads to phage resistance (59). Together, these results show that IS diversification of the *Bt*

genome is more prevalent under nutrient-limited conditions and during infection with intestinal-

resident phages. This indicates that IS activity supports *Bt* adaptation when faced with fitness

constraints.

Temporal monitoring of IS activity shows that IS insertions are maintained over time.

IS insertions were found in specific genetic loci coexisting with the wild type allele

lacking the IS insertion, indicating that both versions of the allele are maintained in equilibrium.

Previous work has shown that many phyla of intestinal bacteria harbor variable numbers of IS

insertions (60). To understand the temporal longevity of IS insertions in the microbiota, we

analyzed longitudinal fecal metagenomic samples from healthy individuals (61, 62). Using a set

of two individuals whose fecal samples were collected over the course of 76 and 91 weeks (61),

we measured the IS landscape of their microbiotas using pseudoR (Fig. 5A & Fig. S5). We also

analyzed longitudinal samples from an additional 10 individuals from a separate study (62) (Fig.

S6). For each individual, we used the assemblies from the first timepoint (indicated as week 0 in

Fig. 5A) as the reference for the pseudoR pipeline which was compared to all other time points

to assess the maintenance of ancestral IS insertions and acquisition of new IS insertions. We

found that many IS insertions are maintained for the entire time course and that some of these

insertions frequently went in and out of detection (Fig. 5A, Fig. S5-6). New insertions not

present at week 0 arose at almost every timepoint, with a variable number of insertions per

timepoint. New insertions were maintained for extended periods of time while others were only

detected at the initial timepoint. These results demonstrate that IS elements are stably carried in

the microbiota and are actively forming new insertions, similar to the accumulation of mutations

in laboratory-evolved strains (63-65).

Next, we analyzed whether the host's bacterial abundance accounts for the detection of

new IS elements (Fig. S7A). Increasing levels of an host bacterial IS elements could generate

higher sequencing read depth and more detection power for new IS insertions. For every

insertion not present at week 0, we compared the insertion site's read depth (a marker of host

abundance) to the maximum insertion site depth of all earlier timepoints (prior to the detection of

the insertion). Insertions with depths equal to or less than 200% of the previous maximum

insertion site depth were considered to arise from new insertional activity (Fig. S7B). We found

that the majority of new insertions could be accounted for as active IS insertions independent of

bacterial abundance (Fig. S7C).

Insertions across the time series included diverse IS families and were frequently

associated with the *Clostridia* and *Bacilli* (Fig. 5B, S5-6). Additionally, we observed that the rate

of new insertions per week for each individual ranged on average from around 1 to 10 new

insertions, assuming that. This value was calculated by dividing the number of new insertions

per timepoint by the number of weeks between the current timepoint and the previous timepoint.

We assumed a constant rate of transposition as has been used in previous studies (63, 64).

Intra- and inter-personal variations in this rate could be due to both variations in selective

pressures in the microbiota and technical variations, such as altered sequencing depth and

library diversity. We also found that the maintenance, loss, and gain of IS elements tracked with

common bacterial accessory genes that we established to be "hot spots" for IS insertions (Fig.

5C, Fig. 5D).

IS elements are efficiently transferred and maintained within new individuals

Having discovered that individual microbiotas have unique patterns of IS insertions, we

wanted to understand how the human host influences the dynamics of IS insertions within the

microbiota. To test this, we used pseudoR to profile the IS insertions during fecal microbiota

transplantation (FMT) where the microbiotas of FMT donors and recipients were longitudinally

sampled before and after fecal transplantation (61). We compared the IS insertional landscape

in both the donors and recipients using the assembly of the donor's transplanted microbiota as a

reference. Donor-derived communities harbored IS insertions that were stably maintained over

one year in the FMT recipients (Fig. 6A & Fig. S8). Insertions present prior to transplantation in

recipients were lost, but a minority returned at later timepoints. Recipients maintained

significantly less IS insertions that were present at week 0 compared to the donors (Fig. 6C), but

both donor and recipients had similar rates of new insertions (Fig. 6D). To understand if IS

insertional activity was similar between host and recipient, we compared the pattern of new

shared insertions in donors and recipients at all timepoints post transplantation (Fig. 6B & Fig.

S9). We found multiple instances of the same newly detected insertion arising in both donor and

recipients at the same timepoint. These results demonstrate that IS insertions can be stably

maintained in new hosts for extended periods of time and that new IS mobilization occurs at

similar rates and patterns in new hosts.

Antibiotics drive widespread loss of IS insertions within the microbiota

Considering IS insertions were found to persist for prolonged periods of time within the

microbiota and were portable between individuals, we wanted to know what would happen to IS

diversity if a stable community was disrupted. To test this, we analyzed the IS composition

before, during, and after broad spectrum antibiotic treatment (66). The metagenome of the

microbiota preceding antibiotic treatment was used as the reference for IS comparison using

pseudoR. As expected, antibiotic treatment caused a substantial loss of IS diversity, which was

not fully restored after treatment (Fig. 7A). The starkest example was sample ERAS10.

Extensive IS diversity was present at week 0 in ERAS10 before antibiotic treatment and by at

week 0.6 there were no detectable IS signatures nor did any of the original ISs return by week

26 post antibiotic therapy. To summarize these findings, we compared the rate of maintenance

of pre-antibiotic treatment insertions in individuals treated with antibiotics and those who were

not. Antibiotic treatment was associated with a significant decrease in the ability of the

microbiota to maintain IS insertions (Fig. 7D).

IS insertion into susC-D/tonB loci is associated with diet intervention.

Our analysis had identified *susC-D/tonB* genes as major targets for IS insertions,

suggesting that ISs can modulate carbohydrate metabolism in the *Bacteroidia* (Fig. 3), and we

showed in *Bt* that nutrient stress promotes insertions into predictable metabolic loci (Fig. 4).

Based on this data, we suspected that a radical diet intervention in humans would lead to a shift

in IS insertions in metabolic-associated genes such as *susC-D/tonB* loci. To test this hypothesis,

we analyzed the IS insertions in the intestinal microbiota of obese individuals before, during,

and after a year-long diet intervention (67). Participants in this study received a low-calorie

formula-based diet for 12 weeks, followed by a 6-week period of phasing out the formula diet for

solid food without changing total caloric intake, followed by a 7-week phase where caloric intake

was increased while preventing weight gain (68). We found that ancestral *susC-D/tonB*

insertions were frequently lost during the course of the diet study and new insertions in *susC-*

D/tonB genes arose after the diet intervention ended (Fig. 7C). Additionally, insertions arose in

the *susC-D/tonB* homolog BT1119 (Fig. 7D). Together, these results demonstrate that diet

alteration is associated with perturbations in IS insertions in *susC-D/tonB* genes.

Discussion

IS elements are fundamental to the evolution of bacterial genomes. Despite this, IS

diversity and function within polymicrobial communities is understudied. Here, we built a novel

computational pipeline for identifying IS insertions within complex metagenomic DNA

sequences. This pipeline, which we call pseudoR, relies on an open-source IS database

(ISOSDB), which vastly improves nucleotide diversity compared to current state-of-the-art

databases. Using pseudoR, we found that IS elements contribute to high levels of bacterial

genomic diversification within the microbiota, are maintained at specific loci for extended

periods of time, can be efficiently transferred between individuals, and experience fluctuations

within bacterial populations following perturbation. Together, these results demonstrate that IS

elements are important genetic elements that can dictate genotype diversity within the

microbiota.

Using previously published metagenomic datasets, we show that the majority of open

reading frames containing IS insertions (iORFs) are unique and not shared between individuals

(Fig. 3A). This is similar to the observation that polymorphism diversity in the human intestinal

microbiota is more likely to be unique than shared (69). Our work expands on this idea and

suggests that IS insertional diversity is a part of each person's "fingerprint" of microbial diversity.

iORFs were frequently annotated within five broad categories: *susC-D/tonB*, mobilome

genes, EPS genes, antibiotic resistance genes, and MGE resistance genes. Genes belonging to

these categories are considered accessory genes and are often non-essential. Interestingly,

genes regulated by DNA inversions, including phase variation, fall into similar functional

categories as those targeted by IS insertions (70, 71). This suggests that insertions and

inversions control gene expression of the microbiota to position bacteria for optimal adaptation.

Additionally, *susC-D/tonB* receptors are often targets of nucleotide evolution in the human

intestine, possibly to help gain new abilities based on substrate availability (21). In support of

this, a SusC epitope activates T cells to promote an anti-inflammatory IL-10 response in healthy

individuals and induces a pro-inflammatory IL-17A response in people with Crohn's disease

(72). This suggests that IS elements influence the immunomodulatory capacity of the

microbiota.

The microbiome of urban individuals is less-well suited to degrade diverse

polysaccharides compared to rural individuals (73). Here, we found that urban individuals (those

in the ITA and JPN cohorts) have extensive modulation of the microbiota with high rates of IS

insertions in *susC-D/tonB* genes, compared to individuals living in rural settings (MDG cohort).

This could partly be explained by in ITA and JPN individuals as they have a dominance of IS

insertions in *Bacteroides* and *Phocaeicola* species, while MDG individuals have limited

Bacteroidia IS insertions. However, we expect that the varied diet of MDG individuals, which

includes wild meat and plants (74), partially selects for a more diverse set of functional *susC-*

D/tonB receptors compared to individuals consuming an industrialized diet. Further work to

characterize IS insertions in individuals with rural lifestyles, such as the Hadza hunter gatherers

(75), will better demonstrate how IS elements impact nutrient acquisition.

iORFs were common among MGE resistance and macrolide resistance (*ermF*) genes

(76). Both of these classes of genes have been reported to be targets of IS inactivation (19, 33).

Since these are heterogenous populations that co-exist between genes carrying or lacking IS

insertions, we hypothesize that IS insertions in these genes helps maintain a low level of

population-wide MGE and antibiotic resistance and helps reduce the burden of expressing the

resistance gene. Such a "hedge betting" strategy would be advantageous upon antibiotic or

phage exposure where the population can regain resistance thorough selection of variants.

Prior to this study, it was not known how stable IS elements were in bacterial genomes

within host associated microbiotas. We found that specific IS insertions were detectable for just

under two years, demonstrating that IS insertions within specific genetic loci are often not

sanitized from the population. These findings are analogous to the discovery of nucleotide

polymorphism conservation within the microbiota (77). Additionally, we also established that IS

elements can be stably transferred between individuals. Donor-derived bacterial communities

have been shown to persist in recipients following FMT (78-80). We conclude that IS insertions

are stable in host associated microbiotas and may impart a minimal fitness cost to their bacterial

host.

Bacterial diversity frequently rebounds after antibiotic treatment (66, 81), but how

bacterial communities assemble at the strain level is more varied and includes widespread loss

of mutations and enrichment of others (82). We found that IS insertions were readily lost after

antibiotic treatment. Our results suggest that ISs can be viewed as strain-level features that are

more variable than taxonomic-level diversity following perturbation.

In summary, the development of a contemporary and stringently curated IS database,

combined with a streamlined computational approach to identify IS elements from metagenomic

data, has revealed novel insights into how IS elements shape the genomes of the microbiota

and sets the stage for exploring how specific IS variants in the microbiota influence human

health. However, a few limitations to the tools and study exist. First, delineation of IS insertion

sites between closely related strains is imperfect, thus insertions between very closely related

strains may group together and fail to resolve. Work from the intestinal microbiota has found

that most species are represented by one dominant strain and that these strains are stable over

long periods (83), suggesting that the insertion sites that we measured are from subpopulations

originating from single strains. Second, we do not understand how IS insertions influence the

fitness of the microbiota. We can begin to overcome this problem by assembling and assessing

Tn-Seq libraries of diverse intestinal bacteria under conditions relevant to the intestine and in

animal colonization experiments. Coupling such studies with pseudoR analyses of microbiota

datasets would begin to help determine what IS insertion sites are beneficial or detrimental to

commensal bacteria. Third, the pseudoR pipeline relies on assemblies containing some level of

wild type allele being measured in comparison to an IS insertion at that same allele. This limits

the detection of IS elements that assemble as part of the reference contig. Conceivably, an

inverse method to find wild type alleles in IS-allele assemblies can be built and be implemented

into a future release of pseudoR. Fourth, the single reference mode of pseudoR excludes

assemblies from later timepoints to prevent over-assembly and focuses the analysis on the

initial timepoint. This hinders our understanding of how IS elements are impacting the

microbiota not present at the initial timepoints.

METHODS

EXPERIMENTAL STRAINS

Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron VPI-5482, *Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron* VPI-5482 CPS3, and

Bacteroides fragilis NCTC 9343 were cultured as previously described (84, 85). Briefly, these

strains were grown in brain-heart infusion (BHI) broth (Becton Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ)

supplemented with 1 g/L cysteine, 5% w/v $NaHCO_3$, and 5 mg/L hemin (BHIS), Varel-Bryant

minimal media (86) supplemented with 28 mM glucose, or *Bacteroides* phage recovery medium

(BPRM) (87) at 37° C in a Coy Type A vinyl anaerobic chamber in an atmosphere of 5%

hydrogen, 20% carbon dioxide, and balanced nitrogen (Coy Lab Products, Grass Lake, MI). For

growth on solid-media we used BHI agar supplemented with 10% defibrinated calf blood

(Colorado Serum Company, Denver, CO). *Escherichia coli* S17-1 was grown in Lennox L broth

(Fisher Scientific, Hampton, NH) with aeration at 37° C. Tetracycline was used at 2 µg/mL,

gentamicin was used at 200 µg/mL, and ampicillin was used at 100 µg/mL.

QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Details of statistical analyses for specific figures can be found in the figure legends. All statistical

analyses were performed using Graphpad Prism, with the exception of Fisher's exact test which

was performed using R.

METHOD DETAILS

Creation of the ISOSDB

All genomes classified as "complete" in NCBI Assembly were downloaded on

05/08/2023 using bit v1.8.57 (88). IS elements were identified using OASIS (27). This program

uses annotated transposases as points for sequence extension and comparison to find

complete IS elements. Identified IS elements were filtered using the following criteria: 1) multiple

(minimum of 2) complete copies of the element must be present in at least one genome and 2)

the elements must contain identified inverted repeat sequences. To supplement these

genomes, we also identified IS elements in hybrid-assembled MAGs from a large human

intestinal microbiota study (26). These metagenomes were annotated with Prokka v1.14.6 (89),

processed as described above, and then combined with the IS elements identified from the

genomes from NCBI Assembly. Redundant IS elements in the final database were deduplicated

using CD-HIT-EST (90) with a 95% sequence cutoff and a word length of 9. IS element

homologs in ISFinder were found using either blastn (complete elements) with a minimum e-

value of 0.000001 and a minimum length of alignment of 224 bp or blastp (transposases) with a

minimum e-value of 0.000001 (91). To further confirm that IS elements in the ISOSDB are

legitimate, the transposases of IS elements that lacked nucleotide homology to IS elements in

ISFinder were profiled using InterProScan (92) and NCBI Conserved Domain Database (93)

using default settings. Putative transposases that lacked domains associated with transposases

(such as "DDE superfamily endonuclease", "Integrase core domain", and "Transposase") were

removed from the final ISOSDB. The ISOSDB and pseudoR pipeline is freely available at

https://github.com/joshuakirsch/pseudoR. Each IS element in this database is given a unique

numeric identifier. Clustering at the amino acid and nucleotide level was performed using

MMSeqs2 v15.6f452 (94) with coverage mode 0 and a minimum coverage of 80%.

pseudoR pipeline

To characterize IS elements and their insertion sites in metagenomic DNA sequences

we built the pseudoR pipeline. This tool relies on deeply-sequenced short read Illumina data

and can be used for both metagenomic and single isolate genome data.

For this study, reads were downloaded from NCBI SRA (95) using fasterq-dump v2.11.0

from these studies (34-36, 61, 66, 67). Study accession numbers are provided in the Key

Resources Table. Duplications, quality trimming, and read decontamination was performed

using programs from the BBTools software suite (96). PCR duplicated reads were removed with

clumpify.sh with the flag "subs=0". Adapter and quality trimming was performed with bbduk.sh

and human, mouse, and phi29 read contamination was removed using bbsplit.sh. Cleaned and

deduplicated reads were assembled into contigs using MEGAHIT v1.2.7 using the "meta-large"

preset (-k-max 127 -k-min 27 -k-step 10) (97). All contigs used in downstream analyses were

greater than 1 kB.

We built two modes for IS identification: single and multi mode. Single mode is primarily

used to identify IS insertions within the microbiota from longitudinal samples from the same

individual. In this mode, only the individual's starting timepoint assembly is used to find novel IS

insertions. This approach reduces the chance that meaningful information is lost during

clustering of multiple assemblies from multiple timepoints. The single reference mode can be

used for evolution studies where a single population is compared between different treatments.

Multi mode is used for comparing the insertional patterns between multiple individuals. When

using the multi reference mode, reads are first mapped against the sample's own assembly and

then remapped against a combined and deduplicated ORF database built from every sample's

assembly.

Before the pipeline was initially run, a database of IS termini was built by merging the

first and last 150 bp of each IS in the ISOSDB together and deduplicating these merged

sequences using CD-HIT-EST (90) with a minimum sequence identity of 90%. The merged

sequences were split into 150 bp sequences and a blastn database (91) was built from this

deduplicated dataset.

At the beginning of the pipeline, ORFs in assemblies are predicted using pprodigal.py (a

parallelizable wrapper of prodigal (98)) and deduplicated using dedupe.sh. Reads are aligned

first to the reference assembly using Bowtie2 (99). Any mapped read, including discordantly

mapped reads, are considered positive hits. Unmapped reads are collected and aligned to the

IS termini database using blastn and then filtered using a custom R script. This filtering script

ensures that the IS termini is properly positioned on the read such that the remainder of the

read is outside of the IS element. The IS termini are removed and the trimmed reads are then

re-mapped to the sample's assembly as unpaired reads using Bowtie2. Following this, the

original mapped reads and IS-termini trimmed reads are re-mapped against the deduplicated

gene database in nucleotide format.

Following read mapping completion in both single and multi mode, a custom R script is

used to identify DNA insertion sites with read mapping from both the left and right terminus of

the IS element at most 20 bp away from one another and this script compiles read abundances

for these regions. Mosdepth v0.3.3 (100) is used to determine the sequencing depth of the

uninserted allele for the loci described above. Seqkit v2.2.0 (101), samtools v1.6 (102), R,

ggplot2, tidyr, and MetBrewer are used for various computational tasks. Scripts to reproduce all

data analysis presented here are available in the GitHub repository.

DNA extraction and IS-Seq

Genomic DNA was extracted from 1.5 mL cultures of *Bacteroides* strains using the

Zymobionics DNA Miniprep kit (Zymo Research, Irvine, CA) and used as input for IS-Seq as

described previously (19). Briefly, NGS libraries were produced using the Illumina DNA Prep Kit

(Illumina, San Diego, CA) and amplified using ISOSDB412 IS-Seq Step1 and p7 primers for 13

cycles using Q5 Master Mix (New England Biolabs). The products of this reaction were

amplified with IS-Seq Step2 and p7 primers for 9 cycles using Q5 Master Mix and sequenced on

a Novaseq 6000 at Novogene (Sacramento, CA). R1 reads were binned and trimmed of the

ISOSDB412 terminus and adapters using cutadapt v1.1.18 (103). To remove PCR duplicates,

R2 pairs of R1 reads that contained the ISOSDB412 terminus were binned and deduplicated

using dedupe.sh from the BBTools suite with the flag minidentity=100. Deduplication of R2

reads ensures that each amplified read pair is a unique molecule, while maintaining read depth

information of the R1 (IS-amplified) read. This set of deduplicated R2 reads was re-paired to

trimmed R1 reads with reformat.sh from the BBTools suite and these pairs were aligned to the

host genome using Bowtie2. R1 read depth at each genomic position was calculated using

bedtools v2.30.0 (104) IS-seq reads can be found at the European Nucleotide Archive under

study accession number PRJEB66483.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. The ISOSDB: a database of diverse and complete ISs. (A) Number of unique IS

sequences in ISFinder and the ISOSDB. (B) Comparison of transposase (Tnp amino acid) and

nucleotide sequences of the full ISs from the ISOSDB to the ISs from ISFinder. (C) Numbers of

clusters of ORFs and full nucleotide sequences in the ISOSDB for a range of minimum

sequence identities. (D) Number of IS elements per IS family in the ISOSDB. Only families with

100 or more IS elements are shown.

Figure 2. IS insertions are abundant in intestinal bacteria. (A) Abundance of ISs from ITA,

JPN, and MDG individuals. Each data point represents one new insertion not found in the

reference assembly. The y-axis is the relative IS depth percentage (IS depth/ (WT allele depth +

IS depth)). (B) Number of insertions per sample shown in A. (C) IS insertions per bacterial class.

The intensity of each bar is proportional to the number of IS insertions. (D) IS insertions in

Bacteroidia and *Clostridia* bacteria organized by IS family. The intensity of each bar is

proportional to the number of IS insertions. (E) Preferential IS insertion in either intergenic (left

side, red) or intragenic (right side, blue) loci for highly abundant ISs (paired T test with FDR

multiple testing correction, maximum adjusted *p* value = 0.05). The difference between

intragenic and intergenic insertions individual IS elements was averaged between multiple

individuals and is shown on the X axis.

Figure 3. IS insertions are commonly found in bacterial accessory genes. (A) Number of

shared and unique iORFs within ITA, JPN, and MDG individuals. (B) Heatmap of IS insertions in

different gene functional categories. (C) Statistically significant enrichment of ISs in the

functional categories from B. White asterisks represent categories where the iORFs are over-

abundant compared to all genes and blue asterisks represent categories where the iORFs are

under-abundant compared to all genes (Fisher's exact test with FDR multiple comparison

correction, ***p < 10^{-25}, **p < 10^{-4}, *p < 0.05). (D) Location and relative IS depth in shared

iORFs. The location of the insertion (either above or below the gene representation) is

representative of the study. (E-F) Number of IS insertions in iORFs in the functional categories

in B from different bacterial classes (E) and IS families (F). (G) Rate of IS insertions in

transposases. Rectangles in the red dashed line are self-targets and rectangles outside of the

red dashed line are non-synonymous-targets.

Figure 4. ISOSDB412 insertion in *Bacteroides* species replicates findings from intestinal

metagenomic data. (A and D) Representative IS-Seq deep sequencing of ISOSDB412

insertions in *Bt* (A) and *Bf* (D). (B and E) Functional enrichment of ISOSDB412 insertions in *Bt*

(B) and *Bf* (E) (Fisher's exact test, *$p < 0.06$, ***$p < 0.001$). (C and F) ISOSDB412 insertions

were counted in intergenic and intragenic loci in *Bt* (C) and *Bf* (F) (paired T-test, *$p < 0.05$). (G)

Representative IS-Seq of ISOSDB412 insertions of *Bt* passaged in either BHIS or MM. (H)

Number of ISOSDB412 insertions in each condition in G (paired T test). (I) Number of

ISOSDB412 insertions in EPS biogenesis genes in G (paired T test). (J) Representative IS-Seq

of ISOSDB412 insertions of *Bt* chronically infected with DAC15 or DAC17. (K) Number of

ISOSDB412 insertions in each condition in J (unpaired T test, *$p < 0.05$). (L) Number of

ISOSDB412 insertions in EPS biogenesis genes in J (unpaired T test, *$p < 0.05$).

Figure 5. IS insertions are maintained in the intestinal microbiota for extended time

periods. (A) IS insertions are depicted as rectangles, with the color intensity proportional to the

relative IS depth percentage. Each insertion is unique based on insertion position and the same

insertions are aligned vertically. Orange-colored IS insertions are present at the first timepoint

(week 0), green IS insertions are new insertions not present at the initial timepoint, and blue IS

insertions are new insertions at timepoints after their first appearance. (B) Number of IS

insertions per timepoint for IS families (red) or taxonomic classes (blue). (C) Rate of new IS

insertions per week. (D) Dynamics of IS insertions over time for gene functional category iORFs.

Data from every individual was used for this figure. The legend for this panel is the same as in

A.

Figure 6. FMT transfer of IS insertions between donors and recipients. (A) Blue rectangles

are IS element insertions in donor samples and red rectangles are IS insertions in recipient

samples. The same insertions in donor and recipients are aligned vertically. Week 0 is the

transplanted fecal material. (B) Heatmap showing new IS insertions that were detected 2 weeks

after transplantation and are detected in both donor and recipient samples. (C) Loss of IS

insertions detected in the transplanted fecal material (week 0) from recipients (paired T test, **p

< 0.01). (D) Similar rates of new IS insertions are found in both donor and recipients (unpaired T

test. Outliers removed prior to this test using the ROUT method where Q = 1%).

Figure 7. Antibiotic treatment and diet intervention alters the IS insertional landscape.

(A) Heatmap showing IS insertion dynamics during antibiotic treatment. Only insertions in alleles

with less than or equal to 200% of the week 0 read depth are shown in this panel. Horizontal

black bars at the 0.6 Week timepoint are present in individuals who did not have an available

sample for this timepoint. (B) Antibiotic treatment significantly decreases the number of IS

insertions present following week 0 (unpaired T test, *** $p < 0.005$). (C) Dynamics of IS

insertions in *susCD/tonB* genes during the diet timecourse. Data from every individual was used

for this figure panel. (D) New *BT1119* IS insertions arise after the diet intervention has ended.

Wild type allele depth is shown as a black line and IS insertion allele depth is shown as a red

bar.

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