Ergasilid copepods in Africa: first application of next-generation sequencing and update on distribution and phylogenetic position of *Ergasilus kandti*, a parasite of cichlid fishes

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Abstract

Ergasilidae are a family of globally distributed copepods parasitizing freshwater fish. Despite their widespread occurrence and importance for nutrient cycles, their phylogeographic patterns are poorly understood, specifically in the African Great Lakes. Here, we aim to improve the knowledge about the species diversity of copepods infecting *Tylochromis polylepis*, an endemic cichlid fish species in Lake Tanganyika, and about the phylogenetic relationship of African ergasilids. We present the first record of *Ergasilus kandti* parasitizing the gills of *T. polylepis* in Lake Tanganyika proper identified through light microcopy and, for the first time for any ergasilid, confocal laser scanning microscopy. Morphological analyses showed variations in numbers of spines and setae of the swimming legs. Phylogenetic analyses based on ribosomal DNA fragments suggest two monophyletic groups of African ergasilids. However, the phylogenetic relationships of *Ergasilus* remain unresolved because of the insufficient resolution of these widely used phylogenetic markers. A comparison of ergasilid mitochondrial genomes highlights gene order stability and interspecific length variation in rrnL. We also provide the first complete ribosomal operon of any African ergasilid and the first whole genome sequencing reads of any ergasilid. This study presents the most extensive morphological and molecular characterization of an ergasilid species to date.

Keywords: NGS; confocal microscopy; Lake Tanganyika; phylogenetics; sequencing; *Tylochromis*

Introduction

Copepods are among the most abundant multicellular organisms on Earth (Humes, 1994; Walter & Boxshall, 2023). Small planktonic copepods (<1mm) play an important role in aquatic food webs as grazers of phytoplankton, predators of bacterioplankton and as prey for higher trophic levels (Turner, 2004). Parasitic copepods with their free-living larval stages constitute a major proportion of this abundance. Among these, Ergasilidae Burmeister, 1835 is one of most species-rich taxa containing 275 described species infecting mostly teleost fishes (Walter & Boxshall, 2023). Ergasilid copepods pursue a unique life cycle among copepods: they complete their first developmental stages (nauplius to adult) as plankton and after mating, only fertilized females infest a host for the final parasitic phase of the life cycle (Boxshall & Defaye, 2008). As fish is a crucial component of the human food industry, understanding their parasites is key for sustainable food production. Copepods can be serious pests in fish, e.g. *Lernaea cyprinacea* Linnaeus, 1758 and *Ergasilus sieboldi* von Nordmann, 1832, both of which may cause substantial mortality and commercial losses in fish aquaculture (Boxshall & Defaye, 2008). Copepods can also act as intermediate hosts for a variety of other parasite species such as human-infecting guineaworms (*Dracunculus medinensis* Linnaeus, 1758) and fish tapeworm (*Diphyllobothrium latum* Linnaeus, 1757). These examples highlight the importance of studying copepods, and specifically parasitic copepods, yet, despite this relevance, the diversity of parasitic copepods remains understudied (Bernot et al., 2021).

Ancient lakes are biodiversity hotspots, including a high species richness of copepods. Together with Lake Baikal with over 120 species (Boxshall et al., 1993), Lake Tanganyika in East Africa is a prime example with 69 copepod species reported to date (including 34 endemic species) (Boxshall & Strong, 2006). Lake Tanganyika is the longest (660km) and the second deepest (1436m) lake in the world (O'Reilly et al., 2003) with an exceptional level of endemism (~95%) of e.g. fishes, snails, and ostracods (Salzburger et al., 2014). These species-rich communities have often resulted from adaptive radiations, a rapid diversification event associated with adaptations to various available ecological niches (Schluter, 2000; Salzburger et al., 2014). The best-studied example of such a community in Lake Tanganyika are cichlid fishes (Cichlidae Bonaparte, 1835), which have become a model system for studying evolution and speciation (Salzburger et al., 2014; Salzburger, 2018; Ronco et al., 2020). Concerning parasitological research in Lake Tanganyika, the majority of studies focus on monogenean flatworm parasites infecting the gills of these cichlids (Vanhove et al., 2011; Rahmouni et al., 2017; Kmentová et al., 2021). Parasitic copepods occupy some of the same host organs as monogenean flatworms (e.g. fish gills) yet receive far less attention. Hitherto, 22 species of parasitic copepods belonging to Ergasilidae have been reported in the lake of which 12 species belong to the genus *Ergasilus* von Nordmann, 1832, (Oldewage & van As, 1988; Míč et al., 2023). Notably, copepods dominate the lake's zooplankton community whereas in most other lakes in East Africa cladoceran crustaceans are dominant, highlighting the importance of copepods to Lake Tanganyika's nutrient cycle and ecosystem functioning (Sarvala et al., 1999). Given the combination of free-living and parasitic life-stages in ergasilid copepods, knowledge on fish-copepod interactions, including parasitic relationships, are an essential step towards understanding lake-wide ecosystem dynamics. However, phylogeographic relationships of parasitic copepods are generally underexplored as only 3% of all copepod species have been examined in a molecular phylogenetic context and only seven out of 30 accepted genera of Ergasilidae (Bernot et al., 2021; Míč et al., 2023). Most of the molecular data on species of

Ergasilus were published by Song et al. (2008), in a first phylogenetic analysis of the family with most specimens sampled in China. The first molecular data of African ergasilids have been released for five species of the 22 so far reported in Lake Tanganyika (Míč et al., 2023) and one from Madagascar (Míč et al., 2024).

The cichlids of Lake Tanganyika all evolved from a common ancestor after the formation of the lake 9–12 Mya, except for two species: *Tylochromis polylepis* Boulenger, 1900 and *Oreochromis tanganicae* Günther, 1894. These last two colonized the lake only recently (510,000 years ago for *T. polylepis*), establishing themselves in an already mature adaptive radiation occupied by species with fine-tuned niche segregation (Koch et al., 2007). *Tylochromis polylepis* is less specialized and more of a generalist in ecological terms. The species is a bottom feeder, usually found on muddy and sandy bottoms close to the shore and river mouths (Koch et al., 2007) and feeding on gastropods, insect larvae and plant material (Lamboj, 2004). As *T. polylepis* appears as the 'odd one out' in a lake full of lineages that have undergone adaptive radiation, its parasites can serve as a model of understanding how the absence of ecological differentiation of host species affects their parasite fauna. To date, only four parasite species including three monogenean flatworm species [*Cichlidogyrus mulimbwai* Muterezi Bukinga, Vanhove, Van Steenberge & Pariselle, 2012, *C. muzumanii* Muterezi Bukinga, Vanhove, Van Steenberge & Pariselle, 2012, and *C. sergemorandi* Rahmouni, Vanhove & Šimková, 2018] (Muterezi Bukinga et al., 2012; Rahmouni et al., 2018) and a single copepod species (*Ergasilus kandti* von Douwe, 1912) have been reported to infect *T. polylepis*.

This study investigates the copepod diversity infecting *T. polylepis* in Lake Tanganyika, specifically *E. kandti*, a widely distributed species (Fig. 1, Supplementary Table S1). We provide a morphological comparison with other ergasilid species, including a detailed characterization of the exoskeleton using confocal laser microscopy, which is applied to ergasilids for the first time. We conduct phylogenetic analyses of all species of Ergasilidae of which molecular data are currently available. We also provide the first ergasilid whole genome sequencing reads [but see previous studies employing Sanger sequencing to obtain complete mitochondrial genome sequences, see Feng et al. (2016), He et al. (2023), and Hua et al. (2023)], and the first complete mitogenome sequence and ribosomal operon of any African ergasilid species.

Materials and methods

Morphological analysis

Copepod specimens (n=23) were collected from the gills of a single specimen of *T. polylepis*, bought from a fisherman at the market in Mpulungu, Zambia (-08.767, 031.117) on the 20th of September of 2019. Specimens were stored in 70% ethanol at 4°C. The samples were stained with Congo Red (1 mg/ml aqueous solution) for a minimum of 24 h at room temperature. The dye proved to be stable compared to other fluorescence dyes (Michels & Büntzow, 2010). Following the staining procedure, the samples were rinsed in deionized water for 30 min. The specimens were mounted on concave microscope slides (to prevent crushing by the cover clip) in glycerin. Copepod specimens were imaged with a confocal laser microscope (ZEISS LSM900) with an excitation of 561 nm, an emission at 570–670 nm, pinhole size of 1 AU (airy unit); laser intensity of 0,2%, 400x magnification; resolution of 512 x 512 px, bidirectional scanning, eight-fold averaging, 30 tiles, and Z-stack with interval of 1–1.12 µm. Tile images were stitched with the software ZEISS ZEN version 3.1 (Carl Zeiss,

Jena, Germany). Images were further processed in Fiji/ImageJ v1.54d (Schindelin et al., 2012). To adjust the contrast of dimmed regions of the image, the *StackContrastAdjustment* plugin was used (Čapek et al., 2006), followed by maximum-intensity projections for two-dimensional representation of the images and denoising. Specimens were identified to species level using a brightfield light microscope (Leica DM2500) based on the spine-seta formulae provided by Capart (1944) and additional characteristics listed in Schlebusch (2014).

DNA extraction and PCRs

DNA extractions were performed in a UV cabinet and all utensils were sterilized and UV–irradiated before usage. The extractions were completed with a slightly modified version of Kmentová et al. (2021), applying an extended enzymatic digestion period (55°C, 400 rpm, three hours) to digest the soft tissues of the specimen. Exoskeletons were removed after this digestion step. The exoskeletons were stained with Congo Red as mentioned above but mounted in glycerin on standard (non-concave) microscopic slides. For permanent storage, specimens were either mounted in glycerin in sealed 1.5-ml tubes or on in Euparal on microscopic slides. Voucher material was deposited in the collection of Hasselt University under accession numbers XXXXXXXX–XXXXXXXX.

The PCR reaction targeting a portion of the 28S rDNA region contained forward primer 28SF (5'- ACA ACT GTG ATG CCC TTA - 3') and reverse primer 28SR (5'-TGG TCC GTG TTT CAA GAC - 3') (Song et al., 2008). The PCR targeting a portion of the 18S rDNA region contained forward primer 18SF (5'- AAG GTG TGM CCT ATC AAC - 3') and reverse primer 18SR (5'- TTA CTT CCT CTA AAC GCT - 3') (Song et al., 2008). An identical master mix was used for both PCRs. It contained 1x PCR buffer, 0.2mM dNTPs, 0.5µM of each primer, 0.5U of Q5 polymerase, 2µl of DNA and ddH2O was added to bring the total volume to 25µl. The PCR conditions were set as follows: 5 min at 94°C; 35 cycles of 30 s at 94°C, 1 min. at 54°C, 1 min. at 72°C; a final elongation of 10 min at 72°C. Gel electrophoresis was used to check the PCR products for successful amplification. The PCR products were purified using a GeneJET PCR Purification Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Walton, MA, USA) and Sanger sequencing was outsourced to Macrogen Europe (Amsterdam, The Netherlands). Sequence quality was checked visually through the sequencing chromatograms. The 28S rDNA and 18S rDNA sequences were uploaded to GenBank and can be found under accession numbers xx-xx and xx-xx, respectively. We also attempted the amplification of a fragment of the cytochrome *c* oxidase subunit I gene (COI mtDNA) using a set of general invertebrate primers (Folmer et al., 1994; Nadler et al., 2006) previously applied successfully to ergasilids (Santacruz et al., 2020; Fikiye et al., 2023). However, none of these reactions were successful at the amplification stage, possibly due to age of the samples and the low primer specificity.

Whole-genome sequencing and assembly of ribosomal operon and mitogenome

The extracted genomic DNA of a single copepod individual was subjected to the generation of a genomic read pool. Library preparation and sequencing on the Illumina NovaSeq6000 platform (short-insert paired-end sequencing, 2x 150 bp configuration) were outsourced to Novogene Europe (Cambridge, UK). For the assembly of the ribosomal operon, raw reads were trimmed through Trimmomatic v0.39 (Bolger et al., 2014) using a sliding window approach (settings: *SLIDINGWINDOW:4:28 HEADCROP:5 MINLEN:100 ILLUMINACLIP:TruSeq3-PE.fa:2:30:10:2:True*). The quality of filtered reads was checked in FastQC v0.11.8

(Andrews, 2018). Reads of the ribosomal operon were baited through complete sequences of the full ribosomal operon of other copepod species (Ki et al., 2011; Weydmann et al., 2017) using *mirabait* in Mira V5rc1 (Chevreux B & Suhai, 1999). The operon was assembled *de novo* through Spades v3.15.2 (Prjibelski et al., 2020) with a range of Kmer lengths (21, 33, 55, 77, 99, and 127). The resulting assembly graphs were visualized in Bandage v0.8.1 (Wick et al., 2015). The resulting contigs were subjected to a BLAST search on NCBI GenBank to identify those belonging to a copepod. The selected contig sequence was then realigned to the bait sequences (see above) using MAFFT v.7.409 to locate the boundaries of the rDNA and transcribed spacer regions.

The mitogenome of *E. kandti* was assembled using raw reads and part of the cytochrome *c* oxidase subunit I mitochondrial DNA of *Ergasilus* sp. (GenBank accession number KU557411) as a seed in NOVOPlasty v4.3.1 with a k-mer length of 21, read length of 151 and insert size of 300. Results from the MITOS web server (code: invertebrate mitochondrial) (Bernt et al., 2013) were used for mitogenome annotation combined with the tRNAscan-SE (Lowe & Chan, 2016) and RNAfold (Lorenz et al., 2011) web servers to verify the tRNAcoding regions. The annotation was verified via a visualization of open reading frames and aligned with available ergasilid mitogenomes (*Ergasilus tumidus* - OQ596537, NC_073502; *Sinergasilus major* – OQ160840; *Sinergasilus polycolpus* – KR263117, EU621723, NC_028085; *Sinergasilus undulatus* – MW08064, NC_054173) in Geneious Prime 2023.2.1 (Auckland, New Zealand). The assembled mitogenome DNA sequence of *E. kandti* is available in the GenBank Nucleotide Database under the accession number XXXXX. Raw Illumina reads were submitted to SRA (accession numbers: XXXXX) under BioProject accession XXXXX.

Phylogenetic reconstruction

To infer the evolutionary history of *E. kandti*, we assembled multiple sequence alignments of partial 18S and 28S nuclear ribosomal DNA (18S and 28S rDNA) and the COI mtDNA combining sequences generated during this study with sequences accessed on NCBI GenBank (Table 1). Due to the close relationship of species belonging to Lernaeidae and Ergasilidae (Song et al., 2008; Kvach et al., 2021; Abdel-Radi et al., 2022), three representatives of Lernaeidae were chosen as outgroup. Sequences of three species of Mytilicolidae Bocquet & Stock, 1957 and two species of Myicolidae Yamaguti, 1936 were also added to the alignment because previous studies indicate close ties of these families with Ergasilidae (Khodami et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021). We aligned 18S and 28S rDNA sequences using *L-INS-i* in MAFFT v.7.409 (Katoh & Standley, 2013) and removed poorly aligned positions and divergent regions using the options for less stringent parameters (options: -b2=<*minimum*> -b3=10 -b4=5 -b5=h) in Gblocks v.0.91b (Talavera & Castresana, 2007). For COI mtDNA, sequences were aligned in MACSE v2.06 (Ranwez et al., 2011, 2018) using the algorithm *trimNonHomologousFragments*, *alignSequences*, and *TrimSequenceAlignment* under default parameters and with the Invertebrate Mitochondrial Code.

We estimated tree topologies through maximum likelihood (ML), Bayesian inference (BI), and maximum parsimony (MP) methods using IQ-Tree v2.2.26 (Minh et al., 2020), MrBayes v3.2.7 (Ronquist et al., 2012), and TNT v1.6 (Goloboff et al., 2008; Goloboff & Morales, 2023), respectively. Because of the minimal overlap in terms of species and specimens between the nuclear and mitochondrial loci, we opted to concatenate only the

18S and 28S rDNA and analyse the COI mtDNA separately. The alignments were partitioned by locus and, for COI mtDNA, by codon position. For ML and BI, we selected the substitution models for each partition according to the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) as suggested by ModelFinder in IQ-Tree (Kalyaanamoorthy et al., 2017) using partition merging (Chernomor et al., 2016) (Table 2). For ML analyses, we estimated branch support values using both ultrafast bootstrap approximation (UF-Boot) (Hoang et al., 2018) and Shimodaira–Hasegawa-like approximate likelihood ratio tests (SH-aLRT) (Guindon et al., 2010) with 10,000 replicates. To minimise false positives, UF-Boot was estimated by resampling partitions as well as sites within resampled partitions (Gadagkar et al., 2005; Seo et al., 2005). For BI analyses, model selection in ModelFinder was restricted to models implemented in MrBayes (Table 2). We used two runs and four chains of Metropolis-coupled Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) iterations with calculation conducted in parallel to increase speed (Altekar et al., 2004). We ran 20 million generations with a burn-in fraction of 0.25 and sampled the trees every 1000th generation. We checked convergence criteria by assessing the average standard deviation of split frequencies (<0.01 in all datasets) and the effective sample size (>200) using Tracer v1.7 (Rambaut et al., 2018).

For analyses in TNT, we used extended implied weighting (command *xpiwe*) (Goloboff, 2014) for different values of the concavity constant k (20, 21, 23, 26, 30, 35, 41, 48, 56). Extended implied weighting minimizes the impact of characters with missing data that are weighted artificially high in the original implied weighting method (Goloboff, 1993). For the rDNA data, we explored two weighting schemes proposed by Mirande (2019): all characters weighted separately (SEP) and all characters weighted according to the average homoplasy of the marker (BLK). For COI mtDNA, we tested an additional scheme: characters weighted according to the average homoplasy of their codon position (POS). Similar to Mirande (2009), we selected the k-value and weighting scheme that produced the most stable topology to compute a strict consensus tree. The distortion coefficient and subtree pruning and regrafting (SPR) distance were used as selection criteria by computing the similarity of each consensus tree to the others obtained under the different parameters (commands *tcomp* and *sprdiff*). MP tree searches involved rounds of tree fusing, sectorial searches, and tree drifting (Goloboff, 1999) under default settings and each round was stopped following three hits of the same optimum. Gaps were treated as missing data. As bootstrapping and jackknifing are reported to be distorted by differently weighted characters (Goloboff, 2003), branch support was estimated through symmetrical resampling (probability of change of 0.33) and values expressed as differences in frequencies (GC, "Groups present/Contradicted"). We considered a BI posterior probability ≥ 0.95, UF-Boot ≥ 95 and SH-aLRT statistic ≥ 80 (Hoang et al., 2018), and GC ≥ 0 as well-supported. Phylogenetic trees were visualized through R v4.3.2 (R Core Team, 2023) packages *ggplot2* v3.4.4 (Wickham, 2016) and *ggtree* v3.10.0 (Yu et al., 2017, 2018).

Results

Imaging and species identification

The collected specimens were identified as *Ergasilus kandti* based on characters observed through light and laser confocal microscopy (Fig. 2, 3). Congo red showed no signs of fading or bleaching several months after the initial staining and the multiple imaging sessions of up to 12 hours. All specimens presented characters associated with the genus *Ergasilus*, i.e. a short, drop-shaped body (Fig. 3a, c) with a sclerotized terminal

segment of the second antennae and a single point (Fig. 3e) (Kuchta et al., 2018). Furthermore, the specimens all presented a two-segmented exopod on the fourth leg (in contrast with the rest of the legs that all have three segmented exopods), which is also characteristic of species of *Ergasilus* (see Fryer, 1965). All of the specimens examined in detail (n=9) presented a combination of the following morphological characteristics specific to *E. kandti*: a five-segmented antennule (Fig. 2a and 3d), a furcal ramus that terminates in two very long setae and the presence of a fold/groove shaped like an inverted T on the carapace posterior to the eyespot (Fig. 3a). The furcal rami consist of two long, squared setae and two to three short setae (Fig. 3b).

Concerning the spine-seta formula, seven out of ten specimens were identical to the original description (Capart, 1944). Occasionally, slight variations were observed within our data, e.g. no setae were observed on the second segment of the endopodite of the third leg for a single specimen (see Supplementary Table S2) compared to two setae mentioned in the original description, which might be explained by damage caused during the mounting process. Notably, all species of *Ergasilus* have one or two setae on this leg segment. African congeneric species were ruled out through the comparison of their respective spine-seta formulas. *Ergasilus cunningtoni* Capart, 1944 and *E. macrodactylus* (Sars, 1909) have four (Sars, 1909; Capart, 1944) and *E. nodosus* Wilson, 1924 five setae on the third segment of the exopodite of the third leg (Wilson, 1924) compared to the six setae present in *E. kandti* (Fig. 2b) (van Douwe, 1912). Furthermore, *Ergasilus cunningtoni*, *E. lamellifer* Fryer, 1961, *E. latus* Fryer, 1960, *E. macrodactylus*, *E. megacheir* Sars, 1909, *E. mirabilis* Oldewage & van As, 1987, *E. caparti* Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023, *E. parvus* Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023, *E. parasarsi* Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023, and *E. sarsi* Capart, 1944 have a six-segmented antennule compared to a five-segmented one present in *E. kandti* (Fig. 2a, 3d). *Ergasilus kandti* differs from *E. flaccidus* Fryer, 1965 and *E. nodosus* by having a single segmented fifth leg, and from *E. inflatipes* Cressey, 1970 by not having plumose setae on the fifth leg.

DNA sequence assemblies

Through PCRs and Sanger sequencing, we obtained overall five rDNA sequences of three specimens of *E. kandti* (Table 1), the first from this species. Genomic DNA sequencing yielded 38,115,846 indexed paired-end reads. The complete ribosomal operon is 3,616 bp long (56.6%). The complete mitochondrial genome of *E. kandti* is 14,639 bp long (35.8 % GC) and includes 13 intron-free protein coding genes, 22 tRNA genes, and two genes coding for the large and small subunits of the mitochondrial rRNA (Fig. 5, Table 3). A comparison with the representatives of Ergasilidae with available mitogenomes, highlighted consistency in gene order. The length of rrnL in *Sinergasilus polycolpus* (Feng et al., 2016) appears to be shorter compared to the other species including *E. kandti* (668 bp *vs*. 878 bp).

Phylogenetic relationships

We applied maximum likelihood (ML), Bayesian inference (BI), and maximum parsimony (MP) analyses to a concatenated alignment of partial 18S rDNA and 28S rDNA sequences of ergasilids. These different analyses resulted in phylogenetic trees with congruent topologies. Therefore, only the ML tree is shown in Fig. 4. The resulting tree topology supports four clades within Ergasilidae including the three clades (Clade I–III) reported in previous studies (see Song et al., 2008). Furthermore, a fourth clade (Clade IV) includes all sequenced

African species of *Ergasilus* including the recently described ergasilid species namely *E. caparti*, *E. parvus*, *E. parasarsi*, *E. macrodactylus*, *E. megacheir*, and *E. kandti*, the Malagasy *Dermoergasilus madagascarensis* Míč, Řehulková, Šimková, Razanabolana & Seifertová, 2024 as well as the non-African species *E. sieboldi* von Nordmann, 1832 and *E. yaluzangbus* Kuang & Qian, 1985. Clade IV is subdivided into two well-supported groups: the African species of *Ergasilus* and the Asian species *E. yaluzangbus* on one hand and *D. madagascarensis* and *E. sieboldi* on the other. Our results also indicate that *Ergasilus* is rendered paraphyletic by *Dermoergasilus*, *Neoergasilus*, *Paraergasilus*, and *Sinergasilus*. Phylogenetic analyses (ML, BI, MP) of the COI mtDNA deviated from the rDNA-based topology, but support values were lower throughout, specifically for deeper nodes in the phylogeny (Supplementary Fig. S3).

Discussion

We investigated parasitic copepods infecting *Tylochromis polylepis* from Lake Tanganyika in East Africa, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, and with a so far understudied copepod diversity [but see Míč et al. (2023)]. A morphological examination based on light and confocal laser microscopy revealed that *T. polylepis* was infected by *Ergasilus kandti*. Our phylogenetic analyses based on three nuclear ribsosomal and one mitochondrial marker showed the existence of a clade including all African ergasilid copepods sequenced to date. Furthermore, our mitochondrial genome assembly highlighted interspecific length variation in rrnL. This study on *E. kandti* presents the most extensive morphological and molecular analysis of any ergasilid species to date.

The 'odd one out': the relationship of E. kandti *and* Tylochromis polylepis

Lake Tanganyika contains several examples of adaptive radiations, i.e. explosive speciation, including snails, fishes (Salzburger et al., 2014), and flatworms (Vanhove et al., 2015; Brand, 2023). The best-known examples are cichlid fishes with around 250 species (Ronco et al., 2020). However, *T. polylepis*, the host of *E. kandti*, is only a recent colonizer of Lake Tanganyika (Koch et al., 2007). The parasites of *T. polylepis* are, hence, of particular interest in terms of studying the effects of adaptive radiations on symbiotic relationships.

Prior studies suggest that ergasilid copepods often infect a broad array of host species, e.g. *E. sieboldi* is reported from 15 fish families (Walter & Boxshall, 2023). *Ergasilus kandti* appears to follow this trend. The species has previously been reported from Lake Tanganyika parasitizing *Limnotilapia dardennii* Boulenger, 1899, *Lamprologus lemairii* Boulenger, 1899, *Plecodus paradoxus* Boulenger, 1898, *Pseudosimochromis curvifrons* Poll, 1942, *Oreochromis* sp. (cited as *Tilapia* sp.), and *Oreochromis tanganicae* Günther, 1894 (Capart, 1944; Fryer, 1965). Our results, therefore, showcase that parasites can infect the cichlid radiation flock as well as a late arrival [see also *E. kandti* infecting *Oreochromis tanganicae* (Fryer, 1965)]. In contrast, no monogenean flatworms shared between *T. polylepis* and other cichlid species in the lake were reported so far (Muterezi Bukinga et al., 2012; Rahmouni et al., 2018; Cruz□Laufer et al., 2022). Furthermore, *E. kandti* has been reported from *T. polylepis* in the Malagarasi Delta (Tanzania) that borders the lake (Fryer, 1967). Therefore, our study provides the first record of *E. kandti* on *T. polylepis* in Lake Tanganyika itself. Nonetheless, the distribution range of *E. kandti* is not limited to Lake Tanganyika (Fig. 1) as it has also been reported infecting *Lates niloticu*s (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Bagrus bajad* (Fabricius, 1775) in Lake Albert (Fryer,

1965; Thurston, 1970), *Pterochromis congicus* (Boulenger, 1897) in Lake Tumba (Fryer, 1964), *Tylochromis bangwelensis* Regan, 1920 and *Tylochromis mylodon* Regan, 1920 in Lake Mweru (Fryer, 1967), *Citharinus citharus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1808), *Hemisynodontis* sp., *L. niloticus*, and *Synodontis membranaceus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1809) in the Black and White Volta confluence (Ghana) (Paperna, 1969), and *L. niloticus* in the River Niger (Capart, 1956; Fryer, 1968) and the Lower Nile (Fryer, 1968). This wide geographical range and host repertoire (Fig. 1, Supplementary Table S1) aligns with the low environmental specificity reported in other ergasilid copepods (Mathews et al., 2017; Fikiye et al., 2023).

Ergasilidae: clades and nomenclature

Due to the persistent lack of DNA sequence data inferring any biogeographical patterns in the evolution of ergasilid copepods has long been a challenge. As noted by Míč et al. (2023) and mentioned above, these data have a pronounced geographical bias as, until 2019, all molecular data until 2019 were from specimens collected in Asia. The phylogenetic relationships of ergasilid copepods remain generally poorly understood as only 11% (31, see Table 1) of described ergasilid species [275, see Walter & Boxshall (2023)] have been sequenced to date. Our study together with Míč et al. (2023) provide the first insight into the phylogenetic relationships of African species of *Ergasilus*. We also apply the first next-generation sequencing approach to a species from this group including a complete assembly of the mitogenome and nuclear ribosomal operon. The phylogenetic analyses suggest that ergasilid species reported from Lake Tanganyika including *E. kandti* form a monophyletic group (part of Clade IV, Fig. 4). No DNA sequences of other African species have been published, bar the recently described *Dermoergasilus madagascarensis*. This species is reported from Madagascar (Míč et al., 2024) and is more closely related to *E. sieboldi*, a species from Eurasia, suggesting that at least two lineages of ergasilids are present in Africa.

The systematic informativeness of morphological characters to distinguish lineages of Ergasilidae appears to provide mixed results. Several genera, each with their own set of diagnostic characters, including *Neoergasilus* Yin, 1956, *Paraergasilus* Markevich, 1937, and *Sinergasilus* Yin, 1949, are repeatedly confirmed as monophyletic groups (Song et al., 2008; Santacruz et al., 2020; Kvach et al., 2021; Míč et al., 2023, 2024). At the same time, these genera render *Ergasilus* a paraphyletic taxon as suggested in previous studies (Song et al., 2008; Santacruz et al., 2020; Kvach et al., 2021; Míč et al., 2023, 2024). Some species including *E. anchoratus* Markevich, 1946 and *E. wilsoni* Markevich, 1933 appear as sister taxa to *Sinergasilus* and *Paraergasilus* (Fig. 4), yet they were not placed in these genera by the authors erecting these genera, respectively. The nomenclatural history of the ergasilids further highlights the difficulty of creating generic diagnoses that allow to effectively distinguish groups. *Pseudergasilus* Yamaguti, 1936, *Trigasilus* Fryer, 1956, and *Ergasiloides* Sars, 1909 are three genera that were synonymized, *Pseudergasilus* and *Ergasiloides* with *Ergasilus*, and *Trigasilus* with *Paraergasilus*, after authors of subsequent publications found the diagnoses to be inadequate. *Pseudergasilus* was differentiated by having “thoracic segments that are distinctly segmented from each other” (Yamaguti, 1936), but Kim & Choi (2003) suggested that this difference was merely an artifact of the growth state of the copepods. *Trigasilus* was created by Fryer (1956). The author later admitted to not being aware of the original diagnosis of the genus (Markewitsch, 1937) but also remarked on the difference in the attachment sites (gill chamber *vs*. gills) and it should be noted that *Paraergasilus* (*Trigasilus*) *minutus* (Fryer, 1956) is the

only African representative of this genus.

Remarkable in the context of the present study, the genus *Ergasiloides* was created based on three species from Lake Tanganyika (*E. megacheir*, *E. macrodactylus*, and *E. brevimanus*), the two former of which form part of the Lake Tanganyika group (highlighted in bold as part of Clade IV, Fig. 4). The genus was synonymized with *Ergasilus* because Sars (1909) based his diagnosis on immature specimens according to Fryer (1965). However, Fryer also noted that species considered as members of *Ergasiloides* by Sars differed from other species of *Ergasilus* because adult females have two instead of three abdominal somites (or 'urosomes'), but opted to emend the generic diagnosis of *Ergasilus* to incorporate both this feature as well as the five-segmented antennule of *E. kandti* as he considered these characters mere 'anomalies' and variations to be expected for this group of parasites. The abdominal somites are indeed not fused in several species from Lake Tanganyika (highlighted in bold, Clade IV, Fig. 4), including *E. kandti* (van Douwe, 1912), *E. parasarsi*, and *E. parvus* (Míč et al., 2023), and a recent re-description also refutes this feature in *E. macrodactylus* (Míč et al., 2023). Nonetheless, our phylogenetic analysis (Fig. 4) suggests that if the genus *Ergasiloides* were to be re-established, it could be applied as name of the Lake Tanganyika group (part of Clade IV) as it was previously assigned to several of these species. However, this step would require the provision of a consistent generic diagnosis through a systematic revision.

A major knowledge gap also remains associated with the lack of molecular data across the geographical ranges of ergasilid species. We suggest that to understand the drivers of evolution of ergasilid copepods, these parasites need to be sampled across their geographical range. Specifically, *E. kandti* should be sampled in different water bodies and, specifically, hosts inside and outside of Lake Tanganyika. Furthermore, ergasilid copepods were suggested as bioindicators being sensitive to eutrophication and other processes derived from ecosystem degradation (Sasal et al., 2007). Therefore, studying temporal dynamics of ergasilid copepods, species combining both free-living and parasitic life stages, could be informative for ecosystem health assessment.

Conclusions

The East African lakes and, specifically Lake Tanganyika, are a biodiversity hotspot for many different vertebrate and invertebrate taxa. Despite this knowledge copepods, specifically parasitic species, are one of the most overlooked groups in these lakes. Unlike the molecular data, morphological analyses have long formed an integral part of characterizations of ergasilid species. However, previous studies have mostly applied light microscopy to highlight systematically informative characters. In recent decades, other imaging techniques have found their way into ergasilid research. For instance, several studies employed scanning electron microscopy to visualize the pathological alterations in host gill filaments and the feeding apparatus (Kilian & Avenant□Oldewage, 2013; Dos Santos et al., 2021; Avenant-Oldewage et al., 2024) as well as systematically informative characters on the legs (Murray et al., 2016). Confocal laser microscopy has been applied successfully to caligids, tisbids, calanids, centropagids, cyclopids, peltidiids (Buttino et al., 2003; Michels, 2007; Zirbel et al., 2007; Fitzer et al., 2012; Kaji et al., 2012), but this technique has remained absent from the ergasilid literature. Here, we applied confocal laser microscopy to ergasilid copepods for the first time using Congo Red as a fluorescent marker for the exoskeleton. Our study provides an insight of how upscaling both morphological characterization and molecular analyses using technological solutions applied for other copepods

and metazoan parasites can expand our knowledge on this key taxon. While the use of next-generation sequencing and confocal imaging is new to ergasilids and other copepods in East Africa, protocols can be transferred without facing major challenges. We encourage researchers to incorporate these tools into future studies on ergasilids worldwide.

Data availability. Parasite voucher material was deposited in the collection of Hasselt University under accession numbers XXXXXXXX– XXXXXXXX. The 28S rDNA sequences were uploaded to GenBank and can be found under accession numbers XXXXXXXX–XXXXXXXX. The mitogenome DNA sequence is available in the GenBank Nucleotide Database under the accession number xx. Raw Illumina reads were submitted to SRA (accession numbers: xxx) under BioProject accession XXXXXXXX. Raw image files, morphological data, and phylogenetic trees can be accessed at MorphoBank (DOI: XXXXXXXX).

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Author's contribution. DJ, NK, and AJCL conceptualized the study. NK, JV, and LM collected samples in the field. AJCL collected parasite specimens off the host gills. DJ prepared samples and conducted imaging and molecular analyses under supervision of NK and AJCL. NK and AJCL analyzed next-generation sequencing data. DJ and AJCL performed phylogenetic analyses. DJ, NK, and AJCL wrote the article with input from MPMV, JV and LM. All co-authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Competing interests. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical standards. Fieldwork was carried out with the approval of the competent local authorities under the permission of the Fisheries Department of Zambia and under a study permit issued by the government of Zambia (SP 008732).

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Tables

Table 1: Specimen data of copepods used for phylogenetic analyses including host species, GenBank accession numbers, and reference study.

				GenBank accession numbers			
Parasite species	**Host species**	**Family**	**Isolate**	18S rDNA	28S rDNA	COI mtDNA	**Reference**
Acusicola margulisae Santacruz, Morales-Serna, Leal-Cadín, Barluenga & Pérez-Ponce de León, 2020	*Amphilophus citrinellus* (Günther, 1864)	Cichlidae	513AcitAsL			MN854841.1	Santacruz et al. (2020)
A. margulisae	*A. citrinellus*	Cichlidae	770AcitAsL			MN854869.1	Santacruz et al. (2020)
A. margulisae	Not specified		824N	MN852694	MN852851.1		Santacruz et al. (2020)
A. margulisae	*Oreochromis* sp.	Cichlidae	496TilaAsL			MN854838.1	Santacruz et al. (2020)
A. margulisae	*Oreochromis* sp.	Cichlidae	580TilaAsL			MN854846.1	Santacruz et al. (2020)
A. margulisae	*Oreochromis* sp.	Cichlidae	752TilaAsL			MN854855.1	Santacruz et al. (2020)
Dermoergasilus madagascarensis Míč, Řehulková, Šimková, Razanabolana & Seifertová, 2024	*Paretroplus polyactis* Bleeker, 1878	Cichlidae		PP115568.1	PP115569.1		Míč et al. (2024)
Ergasilus anchoratus Markevich, 1946	*Tachysurus fulvidraco* (Richardson, 1846)	Bagridae	EAH	DQ107564	DQ107528		Song et al. (2008)
E. anchoratus	*T. fulvidraco*	Bagridae				MZ557411	Hua et al. (2023)
E. briani Markevich, 1933	*Misgurnus anguillicaudatus* (Cantor, 1842)	Cobitidae	EBN	DQ107572	DQ107532		Song et al. (2008)
E. caparti Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023	*Spathodus erythrodon* Boulenger, 1900	Cichlidae	SPER_67	OQ407469	OQ407474		Míč et al. (2023)

E. hypomesi Yamaguti, 1936	*Acanthogobius hasta* (Temminck & Schlegel, 1845)	Gobiidae	EHX	DQ107573	DQ107539		Song et al. (2008)
E. kandti van Douwe, 1912	*Tylochromis polylepis* (Boulenger, 1900)	Cichlidae	5	XXXXX	XXXXX	XXXXX	This study
E. kandti	*T. polylepis*	Cichlidae	5	XXXXX	XXXXX		This study
E. kandti	*T. polylepis*	Cichlidae	6	XXXXX	XXXXX		This study
E. kandti	*T. polylepis*	Cichlidae	13		XXXXX		This study
E. macrodactylus (Sars G.O., 1909)	*Gnathochromis permaxillaris* (David, 1936)	Cichlidae	GNPE_159	OQ407465.1	OQ407470		Míč et al. (2023)
E. megacheir (Sars G.O., 1909)	*Simochromis diagramma* (Günther, 1893)	Cichlidae	SIDI_EM2	OQ407466.1	OQ407471		Míč et al. (2023)
E. mirabilis Oldewage & van As, 1987	*Clarias gariepinus* Burchell, 1822	Clariidae	P38K-38VR	OR449753.1	OR449755.1	OR448769	Fikiye et al. 2023
E. mirabilis	*C. gariepinus*	Clariidae	P49K-72ZR	OR449754.1	OR449756.1	OR448770	Fikiye et al. 2023
E. parasarsi Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023	*Ophthalmotilapia nasuta* (Poll & Matthes, 1962)	Cichlidae	OPNA_99	OQ407467	OQ407473		Míč et al. (2023)
E. parasiluri (Yamaguti, 1936)	*Silurus asotus* Linnaeus, 1758	Siluridae	PPN	DQ107567	DQ107537		Song et al. (2008)
E. parasiluri	*T. fulvidraco*	Bagridae	PPH	DQ107568	DQ107536		Song et al. (2008)
E. parvus Míč, Řehulková & Seifertová, 2023	*S. erythrodon*	Cichlidae	SPER_70	OQ407468	OQ407472		Míč et al. (2023)
E. peregrinus Heller, 1865	*Siniperca chuatsi* (Basilewsky, 1855)	Sinipercidae	EPG	DQ107577	DQ107531		Song et al. (2008)
E. scalaris Markevich, 1940	*Pseudobagrus vachellii* (Richardson, 1846)	Bagridae	ESW	DQ107565			Song et al. (2008)

E. scalaris	*Tachysurus dumerili* (Bleeker, 1864)	Bagridae	ESC	DQ107566	DQ107538		Song et al. (2008)
E. sieboldi von Nordmann, 1832	*Perca fluviatilis* Linnaeus, 1758	Percidae	U_Jezu_9Erg	MW810238	MW810242		Kvach et al. (2021)
E. tumidus Markevich, 1940	*Acheilognathus taenianalis* (Günther, 1873)	Cyprinidae	ETP	DQ107569	DQ107534		Song et al. (2008)
E. tumidus	*A. taenianalis*	Cyprinidae	EXK	DQ107570	DQ107533		Song et al. (2008)
E. tumidus	*A. taenianalis*	Cyprinidae	EXM	DQ107571	DQ107535		Song et al. (2008)
E. wilsoni Markevich, 1933	plankton sampling		LEGO-POE014	KR048765.1	KR048843.1	KR049036.1	Baek et al. 2016
E. yaluzangbus Kuang & Qian, 1985	*Oxygymnocypris stewartii* (Lloyd, 1908)	Cyprinidae	EYJ	DQ107578	DQ107540		Song et al. (2008)
Lamproglena chinensis Yü, 1937	*Channa argus* (Cantor, 1842)	Channidae	LCW	DQ107553	DQ107545		Song et al. (2008)
L. clariae Fryer, 1956	*C. gariepinus*	Clariidae	UL241	OR242503.1	OR338196.1	OR232208.1	Rindoria et al. (2023)
L. clariae	*C. gariepinus*	Clariidae	UL242	OR242504.1		OR232209.1	Rindoria et al. (2023)
L. cleopatra Humes, 1957	*Labeo victorianus* Boulenger, 1901	Cyprinidae	UL237	OR242502.1	OR338170.1	OR232207.1	Rindoria et al. (2023)
L. orientalis Markevich, 1936	*Chanodichthys dabryi* (Bleeker, 1871)	Cyprinidae	LOQ	DQ107549	DQ107542		Song et al. (2008)
L. orientalis	*C. erythropterus* (Basilewsky, 1855)	Cyprinidae	LOH	DQ107551	DQ107541		Song et al. (2008)
L. orientalis	*C. mongolicus* (Basilewsky, 1855)	Cyprinidae	LOM	DQ107550	DQ107543		Song et al. (2008)
L. orientalis	*Squaliobarbus curriculus* (Richardson, 1846)	Cyprinidae	LOC	DQ107552	DQ107544		Song et al. (2008)

Lernaea cyprinacea Linnaeus, 1758	*C. erythropterus*	Cyprinidae	LCC	DQ107556	DQ107547		Song et al. (2008)
L. cyprinacea	*Cyprinus carpio* Linnaeus, 1758	Cyprinidae	LCE	DQ107555			Song et al. (2008)
L. cyprinacea	*Hemiculter leucisculus* (Basilewsky, 1855)	Cyprinidae	LCH	DQ107554	DQ107546		Song et al. (2008)
L. cyprinacea	*Opsariichthys bidens* Günther, 1873	Cyprinidae	LCM	DQ107557	DQ107548		Song et al. (2008)
Mytilicola intestinalis Steuer, 1902	*Mytilus edulis* Linnaeus, 1758	Mytilidae	Mi2	HM775187		HM775191.1	Elsner et al. (2011)
M. intestinalis	*M. edulis*	Mytilidae	Mo6	HM775188		HM775192.1	Elsner et al. (2011)
M. orientalis Mori, 1935	*Magallana gigas* (Thunberg, 1793)	Ostreidae	Mo10	HM775190		HM775196.1	Elsner et al. (2011)
M. orientalis	*M. gigas*	Ostreidae	Mo9	HM775189		HM775195.1	Elsner et al. (2011)
Neoergasilus japonicus (Harada, 1930)	*Lepomis gibbosus* (Linnaeus, 1758)	Centrarchidae	Babice2_3Neoerg	MW810236	MW810240		Kvach et al. (2021)
N. japonicus	*L. gibbosus*	Centrarchidae	Hvezda	MH167969	MH167967		Ondračková et al. (2019)
N. japonicus	*L. gibbosus*	Centrarchidae	Rohlik	MH167970	MH167968		Ondračková et al. (2019)
N. japonicus	*L. gibbosus*	Centrarchidae	U_Jezu_4_5Neoerg	MW810237	MW810241		Kvach et al. (2021)
N. japonicus	plankton sampling		LE080317-626			MZ964938	Vasquez et al. (2022)
N. japonicus	plankton sampling		LE080317-727			MZ964935	Vasquez et al. (2022)
N. japonicus	plankton sampling		LE080317-828			MZ964936	Vasquez et al. (2022)

N. japonicus	plankton sampling		LE080317-929			MZ964937	Vasquez et al. (2022)
N. japonicus	plankton sampling		LEGO-POE015	KR048752.1	KR048823.1	KR049037.1	Baek et al. (2016)
Ostrincola japonica Tanaka, 1961	plankton sampling		LEGO-POE023			KR049041.1	Baek et al. (2016)
Paraergasilus brevidigitus Yin, 1954	*C. carpio*	Cyprinidae	PBL	DQ107576	DQ107530		Song et al. (2008)
P. longidigitus Yin, 1954	*Abramis brama* (Linnaeus, 1758), *P. fluviatilis*, *Scardinius erythrophthalmus* (Linnaeus, 1758)	Cyprinidae, Percidae	Pahrbek_10_11_12_13Paraerg	MW810239	MW810243		Kvach et al. (2021)
P. medius Yin, 1956	*Ctenopharyngodon idella* (Valenciennes in Cuvier & Valenciennes, 1844)	Cyprinidae	PMC	DQ107574	DQ107529		Song et al. (2008)
P. medius	*Mylopharyngodon piceus* (Richardson, 1846)	Cyprinidae	PMQ	DQ107575			Song et al. (2008)
Pseudomyicola spinosus (Raffaele & Monticelli, 1885)	plankton sampling		LEGO-POE025	KR048751	KR048822.1	KT030282.1	Baek et al. (2016)
Sinergasilus major (Markevich, 1940)	*C. idella*	Cyprinidae	H1	OP076956.1		OQ160840.1	He et al. (2023)
S. major	*C. idella*	Cyprinidae	SMC	DQ107558	DQ107524		Song et al. (2008)
S. major	*Elopichthys bambusa* (Richardson, 1845)	Cyprinidae	SMG	DQ107560			Song et al. (2008)
S. major	*Silurus glanis* Linnaeus, 1758	Siluridae	PE2 - PE8	MZ047814	MZ047815		Dos Santos et al. (2021)
S. major	*Squaliobarbus curriculus* (Richardson, 1846)	Cyprinidae	SMCH	DQ107559			Song et al. (2008)
S. polycolpus (Markevich, 1940)	*Hypophthalmichthys molitrix*	Cyprinidae	SPL	DQ107563	DQ107525		Song et al. (2008)

	(Valenciennes, 1844)						
S. polycolpus	*H. molitrix*	Cyprinidae				NC_028085.1	Feng et al. (2016)
S. undulatus (Markevich, 1940)	*Carassius auratus* (Linnaeus, 1758)	Cyprinidae	SUJ	DQ107562	DQ107527		Song et al. (2008)
S. undulatus	*C. carpio*	Cyprinidae	SUL	DQ107561	DQ107526		Song et al. (2008)
S. undulatus	*C. carpio*	Cyprinidae				MW080644	Hua et al. (2021)
Therodamas longicollum Oliveira, Correa, Adriano & Tavares-Dias, 2021	*Leporinus fasciatus* (Bloch, 1794)	Anostomidae	Jarilandia	MW652731			Oliveira et al. (2021)
Trochicola enterica Dollfus, 1914	*Calliostoma zizyphinum* (Linneaus, 1758)	Calliostomatidae		AY627006			Huys et al. (2006)

Table 2: Best-fitting nucleotide substitution models for alignments of 18S rDNA, 28S rDNA, and each codon position of COI mDNA selected by ModelFinder for use in IQ-Tree and MrBayes.

Alignment	Base pairs	Model IQ-Tree	Model MrBayes
18S rDNA	1500	TIM3e+I+R2	SYM+I+G4
28S rDNA	754	GTR+F+I+G4	GTR+F+I+G4
COI mtDNA	1551	TIM2+F+G4	GTR+F+G4
		K3Pu+F+G4	F81+F+G4
		HKY+F+I+R2	HKY+F+G4

Table 3: Annotation table of the mitogenome of *Ergasilus kandti*.

Region	**Position**	**Length** (bp)	**Start/stop codon**	**Anticodon**
nad6	3,046 -> 2,567	480	ATA/TAG	
trnY	11,286 -> 11,343	58		GTA
trnL1	2,243 -> 2,185	59		CAG
trnS2	6,367 -> 6,424	58		AGT
trnL2	12,545 -> 12,485	61		TAA
trnR	14,002 -> 13,948	55		TCG
nad5	8,568 -> 10,268	1701		ATA
trnE	6,255 -> 6,316	63		TTC
cytb	12,480 -> 11,344	1137	ATC/TAA	
nad4L	2,574 -> 2,243	332	ATG/TAG	
nad4	12,564 -> 13,892	1329		ATA
trnF	8,566 -> 8,509	58		GAA
trnQ	10,322 -> 10,261	62		TTG
atp6	1,968 -> 1,285	684	ATG/TAG	
nad2	11,284 -> 10,325	960	ATA/TAA	
trnV	3,724 -> 3,667	58		TAC
trnA	14,122 -> 14,065	58		TGC
trnD	6,199 -> 6,256	58		GTC
nad1	7,529 -> 6,833	924	ATA/TAA	
trnN	6,482 -> 6,421	62		GTT
trnP	6,140 -> 6,202	63		TGG
trnI	14,063 -> 14,003	61		GAT
nad3	6,826 -> 6,488	339	ATA/TGA	
trnS1	6,366 -> 6,309	58		TCT
trnW	7,586 -> 7,527	60		TCA
cox1	4,527 -> 6,075	1549	ATA/ACT	
trnG	2,243 -> 2,185	59		TCC
trnT	14,358 -> 14,411	54		TGT
16S	1,093 -> 216	878		
12S	3,667 -> 3,047	621		
cox2	7,529 -> 6,833	697	TTG/TGA	
trnM	6,077 -> 6,139	63		CAT

trnH	14,180 -> 14,123	58		GTG
cox3	4,514 -> 3,735	780	ATA/TGA	
trnC	13,948 -> 13,891	58		GCA
trnK	2,115 -> 2,054	62		TTT
atp8	2,044 -> 1,961	84	ATA/TAG	

Figure captions

Fig. 1. Recorded locations of *Ergasilus kandti*. Geographical coordinates were estimated based on reports in the literature (i.e. geographical centers of lakes, approximate locations indicated in figures etc.) (see Supplementary Table S1). Borders indicate limits of freshwater ecoregions according to Thieme et al. (2005).

Fig. 2. Images obtained through light microscope. A. Five-segmented antennule. B. Setae of the third segment of the exopodite of the third leg.

Fig. 3: Confocal images of *Ergasilus* kandti. a: dorsal view with eyespot (circular cephalic structure) and characteristic groove in the shape of an inverse T (dotted line). b: detail of the furcal rami and the right legs, the small setae on the furcal rami are encircled in white. c: ventral view, four legs are counted as well as a one-segmented fifth leg. d: ventral view. e: detail of the five-segmented antennule. f: detail of the second antenna that is modified into graspers, the sclerotized terminal segment of the second antennae ends in a single point (upper part encircled).

Fig. 4: Maximum-likelihood phylogram of ergasilid copepods based on partial 18S and 28S rDNA sequences also including mytilicolid, myicolid, and lernaeid specimens as outgroup (used for rooting). Support is indicated at nodes with ultrafast bootstrap values (UFBoot) and Shimodaira–Hasegawa-like approximate likelihood ratios (SH-aLRT), followed by Bayesian posterior probabilities (PP), and GC values inferred through symmetric resampling (P□=□0.33) in parsimony analysis; asterisk (*) indicates low or moderate support below the threshold (UFBoot□<□95, SH-aLRT□<□80, PP□<□95, and GC < 0); black dots, internal nodes with strong support across all support values; labels in bold are species occurring in Lake Tanganyika; labels in grey refer to isolate numbers in Table 1. Clade numbering (I-III) follows Song et al. (2008), with Clade IV added in the present study. Scale bar: estimated number of substitutions per site.

Fig. 5: Mitochondrial genome of *Ergasilus kandti* with GC content (inner circle).

Supplementary files

Supplementary Table S1. Counts of spines and setae of specimens of *Ergasilus kandti* collected in the present study. Empty cells indicate missing data. Cells highlight in yellow indicate deviations from spine-seta formula of species.

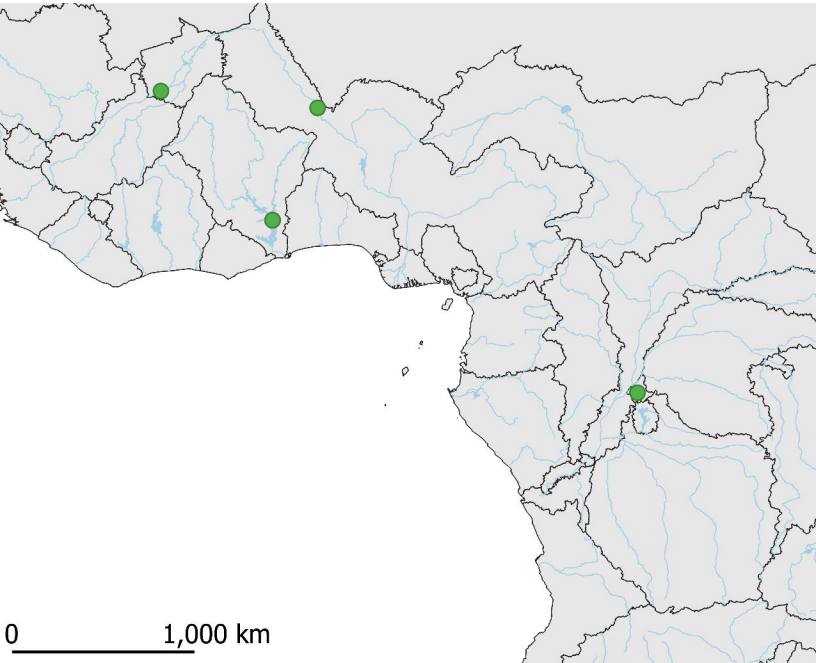
Host	Location	LAT	LON	Reference	Remarks
Citharinus citharus	Lake Volta, Black and White Volta confluence	7.626	0.109	Paperna (1969)	
Hemisynodontis sp.	Lake Volta, Black and White Volta confluence	7.626	0.109	Paperna (1969)	
Lates niloticus	Lake Volta, Black and White Volta confluence	7.626	0.109	Paperna (1969)	
Synodontis membranaceus	Lake Volta, Black and White Volta confluence	7.626	0.109	Paperna (1969)	
Lates niloticus	Gourao, Niger Basin	13.133	2.317	Capart (1956)	
Bagrus bajad	Lake Albert	1.819	31.326	Thurston (1970)	
in plankton	Lake Albert	1.683	30.917	van Douwe (1912)	geographical center of Lake
Lates niloticus	Lake Albert	1.819	31.326	Fryer (1965), Thurston 1970	
Lamprologus lemairii	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Fryer (1965)	geographical center of Lake
Limnotilapia dardennii	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Fryer (1965)	geographical center of Lake
Oreochromis tanganicae	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Fryer (1965)	geographical center of Lake
Plecodus paradoxus	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Fryer (1965)	geographical center of Lake
Pseudosimochromis curvifrons	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Capart (1944)	geographical center of Lake
Tilapia sp.	Lake Tanganyika	-6.100	29.500	Fryer (1965)	geographical center of Lake
Tylochromis polylepis	Lake Tanganyika	-8.767	31.117	this study	
Pterochromis congicus	Lake Tumba	-0.833	18.000	Fryer (1964)	
Lates niloticus	Lower Nile	9.372	31.547	Fryer (1968)	points on map
Tylochromis bangwelensis	Luapula River	-10.367	28.633	Fryer (1967)	RMCA museum records
Tylochromis myolodon	Luapula River, N'Kole	-9.430	28.530	Fryer (1967)	
Tylochromis polylepis	Malagarasi Delta	-5.233	29.783	Fryer (1967)	erroneously placed in Rwanda
Lates niloticus	River Niger	13.959	-5.366	Fryer (1968)	points on map
Tylochromis mylodon	Lake Mweru	-8.730	28.691	Fryer (1967)	

Supplementary Table S2. Counts of spines and setae of specimens of *Ergasilus kandti* collected in the present study. Empty cells indicate missing data. Cells highlight in yellow indicate deviations from spine-seta formula of species.

See attached Excel file

Supplementary Fig. S3. Maximum-likelihood phylogram of ergasilids copepods based on partial COI mtDNA sequences. Support is indicated at nodes with ultrafast bootstrap values (UFBoot) and Shimodaira–Hasegawa-like approximate likelihood ratios (SH-aLRT), followed by Bayesian posterior probabilities (PP), and GC values inferred through symmetric resampling (P□=□0.33) in parsimony analysis; asterisk (*) indicates low or moderate support below the threshold (UFBoot□<□95, SH-aLRT□<□80, PP□<□95, and GC < 0); black dots, internal nodes with strong support across all support values. Labels in grey refer to isolate numbers in Table 1. Scale bar: estimated number of substitutions per site.

See supplied figure file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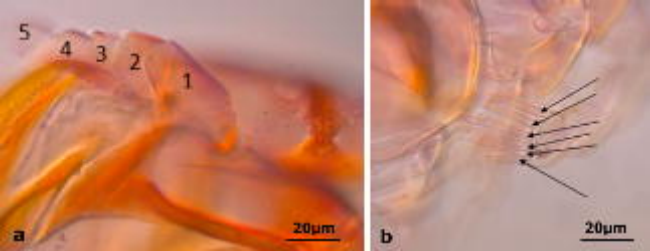
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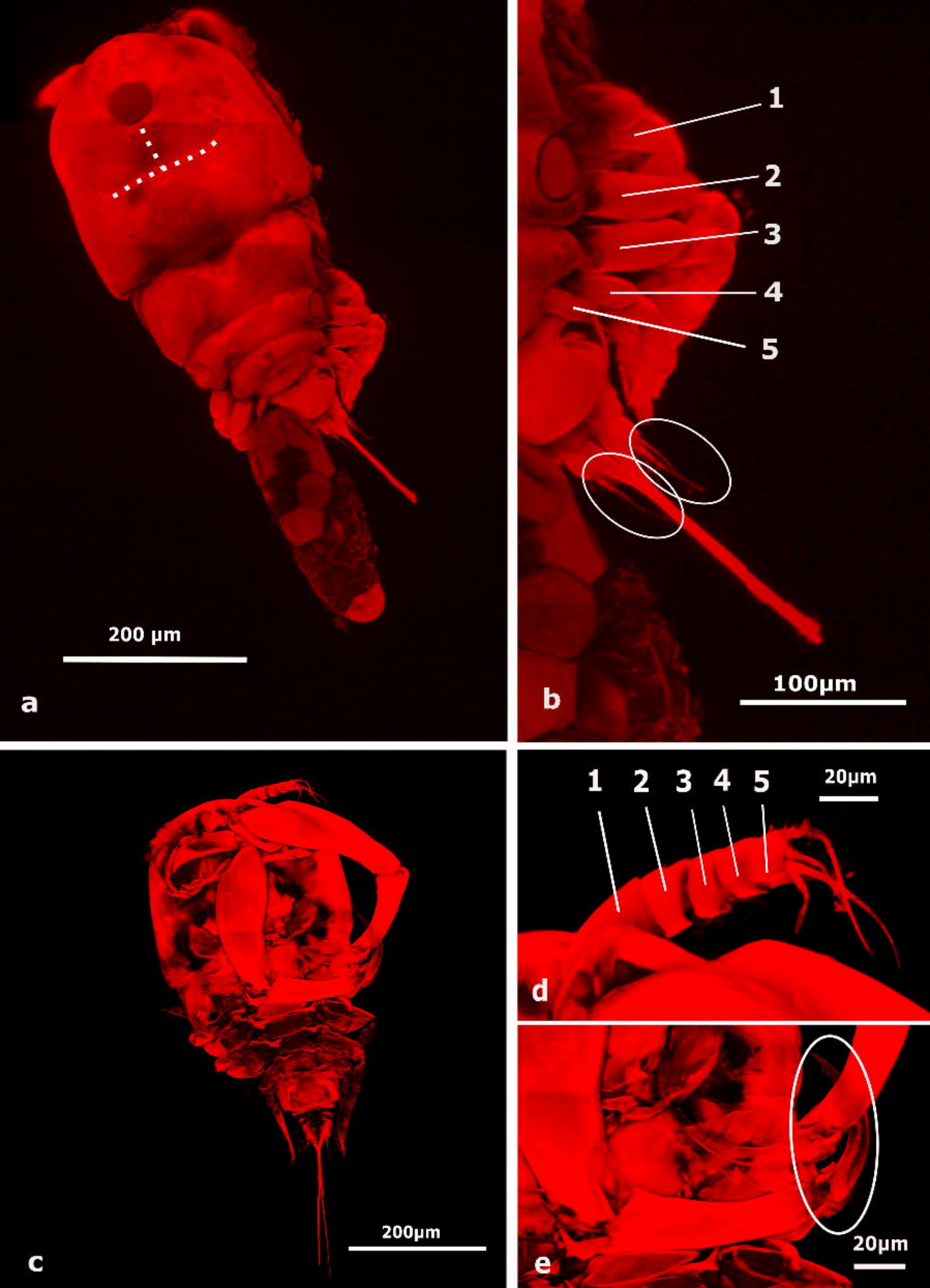
20µm
b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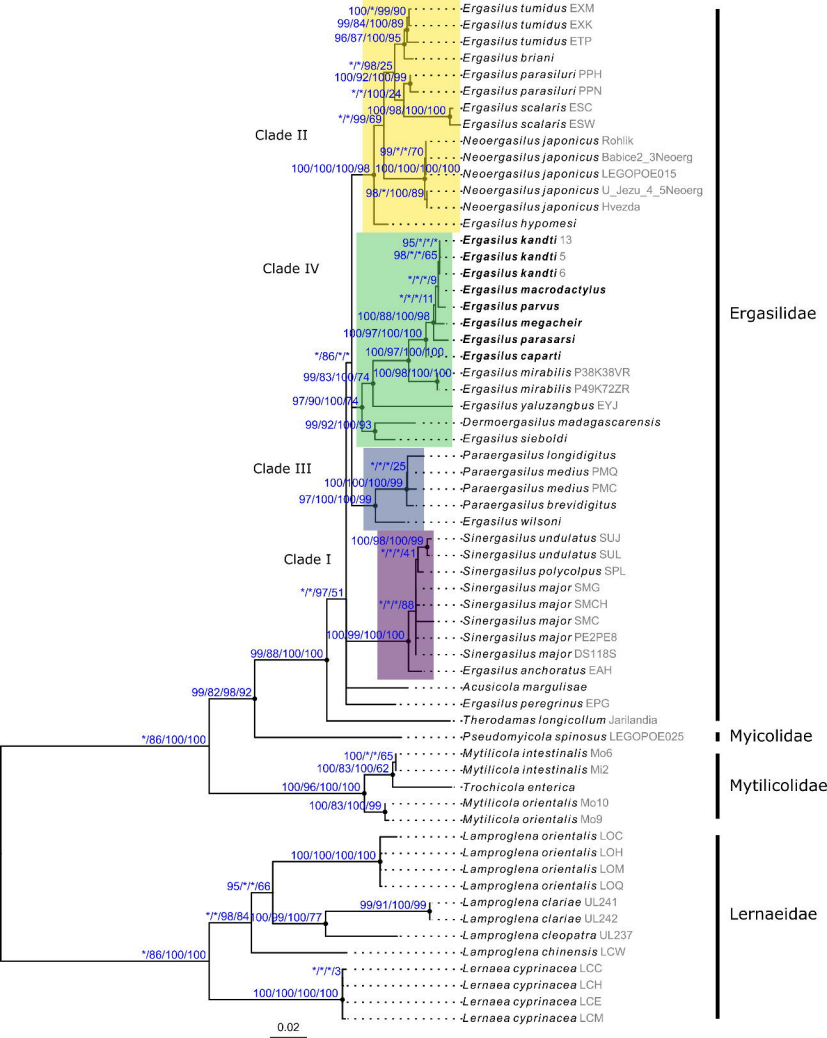
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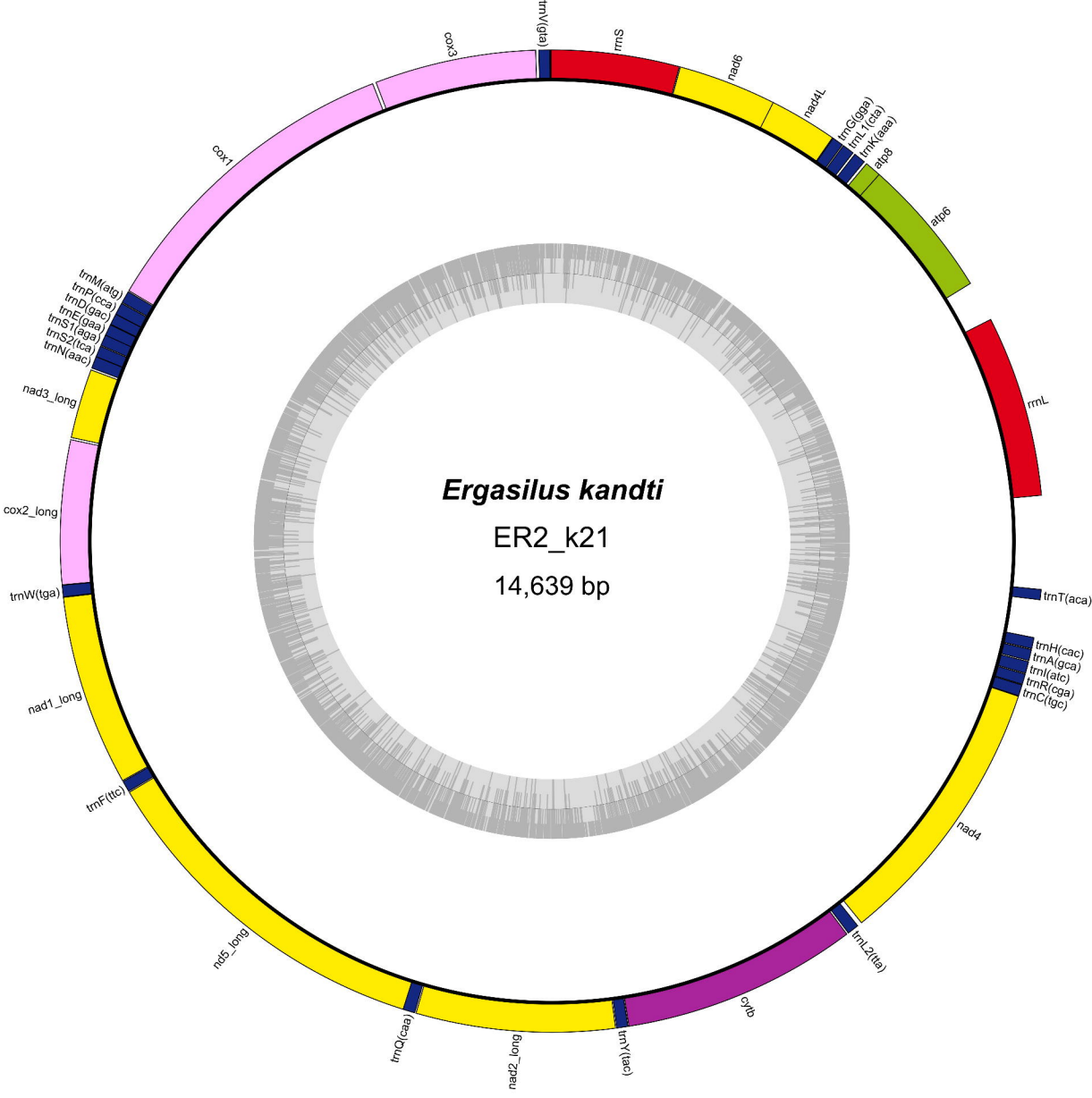

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other genes
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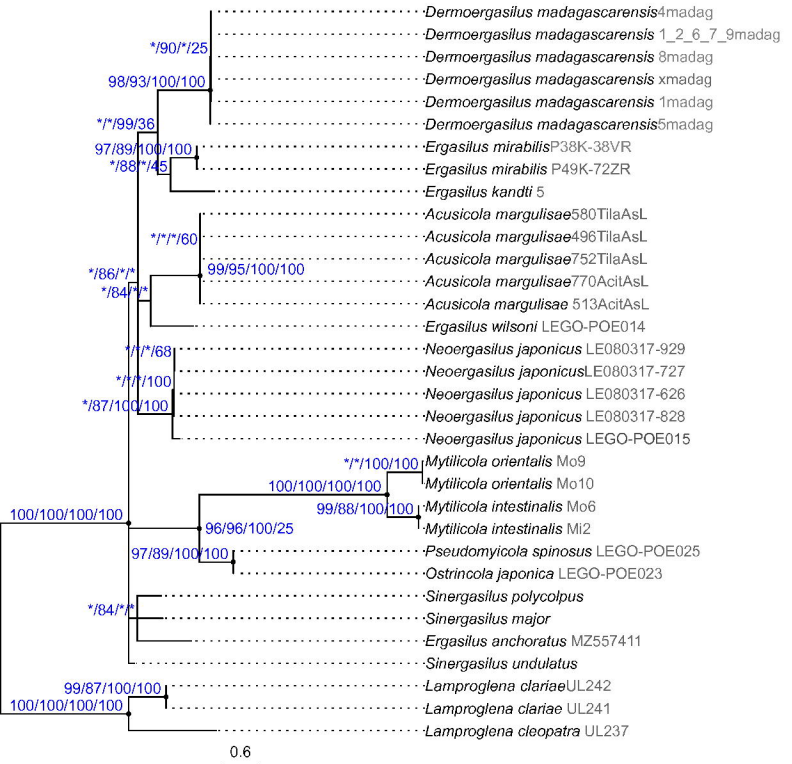
ribosomal RNAs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