**Identification of novel toxin domains and characterization of a broadly distributed**

**family of lipid-targeting NlpC/P60**

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Running title: Novel toxin domains and lipid-targeting NlpC/P60

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**Abstract:** Bacterial warfare is a common and ancient phenomenon in nature, where bacterial species use strategies to inhibit the growth or kill competitors. This involves the production and deployment of antibacterial toxins that disrupt essential cellular processes in target cells. Polymorphic toxins comprise a group of offensive systems with a modular structure featuring a conserved N-terminal translocation domain fused to diverse C-terminal toxin domains. The continuous arms race in which bacteria acquire new toxin and immunity proteins to promote increased adaptation to their environment is responsible for the diversification of this toxin repertoire. Here, we deployed *in-silico* strategies to analyze 10,000 genomes and identify toxin domains secreted via the type VI secretion system of *Salmonella*. We identified and manually curated 128 candidates, which are widespread polymorphic toxins detected in a vast array of species and linked to diverse secretion systems. In addition, 45 previously uncharacterized toxin domains were identified. STox15 was among the most frequent candidates found in the dataset and was selected for in-depth characterization. STox15 is an antibacterial effector belonging to the NlpC/P60 papain-like fold superfamily with a permuted catalytic core typical of lipid-targeting versions rather than peptidases or amidases. Biochemical analysis with recombinant protein and lipidomics of intoxicated *Escherichia coli* revealed that STox15 displays phospholipase activity cleaving off acyl groups from phosphatidylglycerol and phosphatidylethanolamine. **Importance:** This work broadens our understanding of polymorphic toxin domains and provides the first direct characterization of a lipid-targeting NlpC/P60 domain in biological conflicts.

**Keywords:** Polymorphic toxins, bacterial toxins, NlpC/P60, phospholipase, acyltransferase.

**Introduction**

Competition is a fundamental biological process in nature, occurring both within

and between species that share a common environment. Bacteria actively participate in

these ecological battles employing a potent arsenal of toxins as their weaponry[1]. A

prominent mechanism for toxin delivery among Gram-negative bacteria is via the type 6

secretion system (T6SS)[2]. Phylogenetic analysis of T6SS components showed that there

are four types of T6SSs (T6SS[i-iv])[3-5], with the canonical T6SS[i] present in *Proteobacteria*

being further classified into six subtypes (i1, i2, i3, i4a, i4b and i5)[4,6,7]. The T6SS

functions in a contact-dependent manner and rely on the biochemical properties of

secreted effector toxins for its function[8]. These toxins frequently recombine and move

via lateral gene transfer, allowing them to be delivered by different secretion systems,

which warrants their name as polymorphic toxins[9]. During secretion via the T6SS,

toxins are loaded onto a spear-like structure formed by hexameric rings of Hcp proteins

capped by a spike comprising a trimer of VgrG sharpened by a PAAR protein[10].

Effectors are translocated into target cells either fused at the C-terminus of Hcp, VgrG,

and PAAR proteins (named specialized effectors), or associated with these proteins via

adaptors (cargo effectors)[11]. Antibacterial toxins are often paired with immunity

proteins that prevent self-intoxication, thus forming gene pairs that are frequently

located near structural components of the T6SS[8,12].

The protective role of the endogenous microbiota against *Salmonella* infection

has been recognized for years[13]; however, only recently have studies started to reveal

the mechanism by which the microbiota maintains gut homeostasis and promotes

colonization resistance[14]. Despite this understanding, there is a relative scarcity of

information about the direct antimicrobial mechanisms employed by commensals and

pathogens during these disputes for niche control[15]. T6SSs clusters are conserved across

several *Salmonella* spp., highlighting their importance to the fitness of these bacteria[16,17]. *Salmonella* spp. encode T6SSs in different pathogenicity islands (SPIs), which were acquired by distinct horizontal transfer events[16,17]. *S.* Typhimurium encodes a T6SS subtype i3 within SPI-6, which is important for interbacterial competition and gut colonization in mice[18,19]. There is limited information about the identity or mechanism of the T6SS effector repertoire that contributes to these phenotypes.

Here, we set out to identify the repertoire of T6SS effectors in a dataset of 10,000 *Salmonella* isolates utilizing a computational approach, followed by careful manual curation. Employing sensitive sequence and structure searches alongside comparative genomics, we identified 128 candidates, including 45 new toxin domains which were not recognized in publicly available databases, and are widespread among several species. This comprehensive analysis indicates that *Salmonella* T6SSs subtypes i3 and i1 are associated with antibacterial and anti-eukaryotic effectors, respectively. Furthermore, our findings reveal that each of the 149 serovars contained in the dataset harbors a unique combination of effectors, likely required for their specific ecological interactions. A detailed examination of a selected candidate (STox15) encoding a newly identified domain showed that it is an antibacterial effector belonging to the NlpC/P60 superfamily with a permuted catalytic core. STox15 displays phospholipase activity *in vitro* and its ectopic expression in target cells modifies the membrane composition. This study offers a comprehensive characterization of new toxins, especially the arsenal linked to T6SSs in *Salmonella*, identifying novel effector families and providing an in-depth analysis of a new protein family that specifically targets lipids.

**Results**

**Identification of the T6SS toxin repertoire within 10,000 *Salmonella***

**genomes**

T6SS effectors are often encoded in close genomic proximity to structural

components of the system[16,20,21]. To identify new effectors, we employed a "guilt-by-

association" approach, which relies on the conservation of genomic context and is a

powerful strategy for pinpointing new effectors[22]. We applied this methodology to a

dataset of *Salmonella* genomes (10KSG)[23] (Fig. 1A). First, we located and classified the

T6SS clusters using hidden Markov models (HMMs) from different sources[9,24-26]. We

collected 10 genes upstream and downstream of each locus encoding T6SS components,

referred to as genomic sites (Fig. 1A). A total of 42,560 genomic sites housing at least

one T6SS component were identified. We then applied a graph theoretic strategy

leveraging the Jaccard index for network construction[27], followed by the Louvain

algorithm[28] to automatically categorize genomic sites. Analysis resulted in five

categories: T6SS subtype i1, i2, i3, i4b, and orphan (Fig. 1A). Interestingly, we

observed mobility of the distinct subtypes among genomic sites and pathogenicity

islands, depending on the strain and/or serovar. Using tRNAs as markers to identify the

insertion sites[29], we found that subtype i3 (90%, 4929/5461 genomic sites) is mainly

located within SPI-6 and flanked by the aspartate tRNA (tRNA$^{Asp}$)[16], while subtype i1 is

not well conserved and found within SPI-19 associated with tRNA$^{Ala}$ (12%, 66/532

genomic sites)[16], and SPI-6 (3%, 18/532 genomes) flanked by tRNA$^{Asp}$ - most subtype

i1 could not be assigned to a specific location (82%, 437/532 genomic sites). These

results indicate that distinct T6SSs subtypes are inserted into different genomic sites

that are hot spots for horizontal transfer events, and the combination between the

insertion site and the introduced subtype varies according to the *Salmonella* strain and

serovar.

Next, we focused on identifying toxins using three strategies (Fig. 1D). First, we

located proteins containing N-terminal PAAR, VgrG and Hcp domains and additional

C-terminal domains with more than 50 amino acids. These C-terminal regions were

isolated and grouped (80% coverage and 1e-3 e-value). Second, we used the genomic

sites containing T6SS components and analyzed up to five genes upstream and

downstream via the software BastionX[30]. Third, we used amino acid sequences, HMMs

and PSSMs (position-specific scoring matrix) from SecReT6[31], Pfam[25], and Zhang, et

al. [9] to search the 10KSG dataset for previously described effectors. For candidates not

recognized by previously described models, we collected homologs from NCBI using 4

iterations of PSI-BLAST[32] and generated multiple sequence alignments and HMMs. We

then used a series of sequence and structure-based strategies to classify and annotate the

function of these candidates: i) profile-profile comparison methods such as HHsearch[33]

were used to detect distant homologs; ii) structural models were created using

Alphafold2[34] from multiple sequence alignments to perform searches in FoldSeek[35] and

DALI[36] against PDB[37] and AlphaFoldDB[38]; iii)  the structure-structure comparison

algorithm from FoldSeek was used to cluster groups of candidates. All information

collected was manually examined to establish the final domain annotation (Fig. 1D).

Candidates that displayed sequence or structural similarity to known toxin domains or

proteins of unknown function that displayed conserved genomic organization and/or

adjacent conserved putative immunity proteins across several species were maintained.

In total, we identified 128 groups of toxins (Table S1 and Fig. 1F). Eighty-three

were already described in public databases (e.g. Ntox47)[9,25], or represent individual

effectors that were experimentally characterized but for which HMMs have not been

produced and made available (e.g. TreTu)[21,39-54]. For the latter, the newly created

HMMs were named with a ".st" suffix (e.g. TreTu.st). In addition, 45 groups comprise

new toxin domains or highly divergent variations that were not detected by previously

published HMMs (Fig. 1E). This justified them being distinct groups requiring the

design of new HMMs. These groups of effectors were named STox followed by a

number (e.g. STox_1) (Table S1 and Fig. 1F). It is worth noting that these toxin

domains are widespread across several species and constitute polymorphic toxin

domains[9]. A few examples of species encoding each STox, together with the amino acid

sequence alignments and AlphaFold prediction can be found at

https://leepbioinfo.github.io/10ksgt6ss.

Inspection of genomic context across several bacterial species revealed that most

candidates exhibited a conserved adjacent gene coding for a predicted immunity

protein, thus suggesting antibacterial activity (83.6%, 107/128). Some effectors, which

lacked conserved immunity proteins, were predicted to display anti-eukaryotic activity

(12.4%, 14/128) (Table S1 and Fig. 1F). The analysis revealed a diverse array of

cellular targets and biochemical activities among the 128 toxin groups (Table S1 and

Fig. 1F). Notably, the activities of a few STox effectors could not be predicted

confidently and will require further analysis (Fig. 1F). Overall, these findings highlight

the significant diversity of toxins encoded by *Salmonella* and reveal an array of

effectors used in interbacterial competition and as virulence factors throughout a diverse

array of bacterial lineages.

***Salmonella* serovars encode diverse sets of toxins with target-specific**

**activities**

After classifying the subtypes and carefully identifying the effectors within the

10KSG dataset, we estimated the average number of effectors per genome to be $3.57 \pm$

$1.42$ for genomes encoding one T6SS cluster (Fig. 2A, blue), and $5.35 \pm 2.42$ effectors

for genomes containing two clusters (Fig. 2A, orange). It is worth highlighting that our

manual curation was very stringent, so these numbers might be underestimated.

The most frequent effectors detected within the dataset were the peptidoglycan-

targeting Tlde1[20] and Tae4[39]; followed by RNases Ntox47[55]; the metallopeptidase Tox-

HopH1; and ADP-ribosyltransferases TreTu[40] and STox_62 (Fig. 2B). Together, these

toxin domains constitute the core effectors in the 10KSG dataset. Next, we determined

the 5 most frequent effectors detected in each of the 149 *Salmonella* serovars (Fig. 1C

and Fig. S2). Serovars that predominantly encode subtype i3 harbor predominantly

antibacterial effectors, while serovars containing subtype i1 lack toxins targeting the

peptidoglycan and show toxins with anti-eukaryotic activity, such as peptidases and

pore-forming proteins (Fig. 2C). The core effectors of each serovar can be found in Fig.

S2. This data supports the classification of *Salmonella* T6SS subtype i3 as antibacterial

and subtype i1 as anti-eukaryotic (Fig. 2E). Notably, effectors encoded within or close

to T6SS structural clusters, show minimum overlap (Fig. 2F), thus suggesting an

evolutionary scenario where T6SS clusters are acquired alongside with associated set of

effectors and/or that certain subsets of effectors are preferably exchanged among

bacteria harboring similar T6SS subtypes.

Previous analysis of subtype i3 identified the insertion of three variable regions

between the structural genes (VR1-3) in which effectors are encoded[16] (Fig. 2G). Our

results indicate that VR1 and VR2 contain mainly toxins targeting the periplasm (e.g.

Tae2, Tae4, Tlde1, STox_15) whereas VR3 primarily houses toxins targeting the

cytoplasm (e.g. Ntox47, Tox-WHH, TreTu). The latter are typically associated with an

N-terminal PAAR domain and Rhs (Rearrangement hotspot) repeats, which assist in the

translocation across the bacterial inner membrane to reach the cytoplasmic targets[40,55-57]

(Fig. 2G). The position of effectors at the edge of the T6SS cluster and the domain

architecture containing Rhs repeats facilitate recombination events[55], leading to the

greater diversity of effectors observed at the VR3 (Fig. S1).

**STox15 has a permuted NlpC/P60 domain and is evolutionarily related to**

**enzymes targeting lipids**

Among the newly identified toxins, STox15 emerged as one of the most

abundant (Fig. 2B). To analyze whether STox15 and its associated downstream gene

(SImm15) form an effector and immunity pair, we cloned these genes in compatible

vectors under the control of different promoters and assessed toxicity upon expression

in *Escherichia coli*. STox15 is toxic in the periplasm but not in the cytoplasm of *E. coli*

and co-expression with SImm15 neutralizes the effect (Fig. 3B). Next, we performed

time-lapse microscopy to evaluate bacterial growth and morphology at the single cell

level. *E. coli* carrying the plasmid with SP-STox15 grew normally in d-glucose

(repressed conditions) (Movie S1); however, shortly after induction of SP-STox15 with

l-arabinose, cells began lysing (Movie S2). It was curious that cells lysed without losing

their rod shape, which suggests that the peptidoglycan was not affected (Fig. 3C). After

lysing, residual structures resembling the intact peptidoglycan sacculus remained (Fig.

3C), indicating that this is not the target of STox15. In addition, we noticed that the

cognate immunity protein SImm15 contains a conserved domain with two

transmembrane helices (Fig. S3), suggesting that the site of its neutralizing action

occurs at the cell membrane.

Although the STox15 domain was not identified by any of the HMMs deployed

in the initial steps of this study, subsequent HHpred analysis revealed a significant

probability of homology with DUF4105 and the effector TseH from *Vibrio cholerae*[45]

(data not shown), both of which are members of the NlpC/P60 superfamily[58,59]. This

superfamily was previously defined as encompassing four families, which are divided

into two higher-order groups (canonical and permuted)[58]. Members of the canonical

group (AcmB-like and P60-like) function as peptidases involved in peptidoglycan

hydrolysis[60], while permuted members (YaeF-like and LRAT-like) exhibit a circular

permutation in their catalytic core, creating a hydrophobic binding pocket that provides

specificity for lipids[61,62]. Closer inspection of the sequence and structure of STox15

revealed a circular permutation of the catalytic domain indicating that it belongs to the

permuted NlpC/P60 group (https://leepbioinfo.github.io/10ksgt6ss/)[58].

To predict the function of STox15, we sought to understand its evolutionary

relationship by constructing a phylogenetic tree using the sequences of STox15, TseH

and additional permuted members, such as LRAT and YiiX. The analysis revealed the

formation of five major clades including YiiX, LRAT, TseH, STox15 and DUF4105

(Fig. 3D, Table S2 and Table S3). Genomic context analysis predicted that proteins of

the STox15 clade are toxins deployed in biological conflicts (Fig. 3D and 3E).

Similarly, the TseH clade (Pfam DUF6695) displays genomic contexts indicative of

biological conflicts (Fig. 3D and 3E). The clades LRAT and YiiX harbor proteins

known to be involved in lipid metabolism: LRAT (lecithin:retinol acyltransferase) is an

enzyme present in mammals and involved in the transference of acyl groups from

phosphatidylcholine to all-trans retinol to produce all-trans retinyl esters that are storage

forms of vitamin A[63]; H-RAS-like suppressor (HRASLS) proteins are a group within

the LRAT family that display both acyltransferase and phospholipase A1/2 activities[64];

and YiiX-like family members from *Bacillus cereus* are active against lipids[62].

Interestingly, STox15 emerged as the sister clade of DUF4105 (Fig. 3D and 3E).

Our comparative genomics analysis revealed a recurring evolutionary pattern in which

DUF4105 domain-containing proteins are repeatedly displaced by apolipoprotein N-

acyltransferases (Lnt) across three distinct genomic contexts (Fig. 3E). Hence, we

proposed that DUF4105 could be working as an acyltransferase. Remarkably, DUF4105

was recently identified as the missing lipoprotein N-acyltransferase in *Bacteroides*[65],

which was named Lnb (N-acyltransferase in *Bacteroides*). These experimental results

confirmed our independent *in-silico* prediction for the function of DUF4105 and

provide two different lines of evidence leading to similar conclusions. It is noteworthy

that the DUF4105 clade identified in our analysis consists primarily, though not

exclusively, of *Bacteroides* species, with a branch enriched in Gram-positives like

*Firmicutes* (Fig. 3D). The list of homologs containing DUF4105 can be found in Table

S3C and S3D.

Multiple sequence alignments of each of the permuted clades including STox15

revealed the conserved catalytic His and Cys residues characteristic of the NlpC/P60

superfamily (Fig. 3F)[58]. Substitution of these residues for alanine (STox15$_{H43A}$ and

STox15$_{C151A}$) eliminated toxicity in *E. coli* (Fig. 3G). These findings collectively

confirm that the enzymatic function of the NlpC/P60 papain-like fold domain is crucial

for toxicity. Collectively, the periplasmic-acting phenotype of STox15, the presence of

a membrane-associated immunity protein and the fatty acyl linkage targeting activities

common in the permuted NlpC/P60 members strongly support a function for STox15 in

targeting membrane lipids.

**STox15 displays phospholipase activity and changes the membrane**

**composition of intoxicated cells**

To analyze the enzymatic activity of STox15, we incubated purified recombinant

protein (Fig. S4) with either purified phosphatidylglycerol (PG) 16:0-18:1 or

phosphatidylethanolamine (PE) 16:0-18:1 and analyzed the reaction product by HPLC

coupled to mass spectrometry (Fig. 4A and B). Results showed that STox15 has

predominantly phospholipase A1 activity and cleaves both PG and PE (a preference for

cleaving off the 16:0 acyl chain) as observed by the accumulation of 18:1

lysophospholipids (Fig. 4A and B).

Next, we set out to determine whether STox15 could cause changes in the

composition of phospholipids when ectopically expressed by target cells. *E. coli*

harboring the pBRA SP-STox15 plasmid were grown to $OD_{600nm}$ of 1.0 in the presence

of d-glucose (repressed), washed and resuspended in AB medium with l-arabinose to

induce the expression of the toxin. Total lipids were extracted and analyzed by UHPLC-

MS. We observed a general decrease in intact phospholipid forms in $STox15_{WT}$,

especially phosphatidylglycerol (PG), when compared with the catalytic mutant

$STox15_{C151A}$ (Fig. 4A and 4B). In addition, an increase in lysophospholipids forms -

either lysophosphatidylglycerol (LPG) or lysophosphatidylethanolamine (LPE) - and

free fatty acids (FFA) was detected in the wild-type (Fig. 4A and 4B).

Lysophospholipids possess amphiphilic properties and have an inverted cone-shaped

molecular structure that interacts with and modifies membrane properties (e.g.

curvature) similarly to detergents[66]. The accumulation of lysophospholipids on the

target cell membrane likely promotes the observed membrane disruption (Fig. 3C) due

to its detergent-like properties[67]. Collectively, these results confirm that STox15 targets

phospholipids similarly to other proteins possessing a permuted NlpC/P60 domain, and

that STox15 displays phospholipid-degrading activity. It remains to be determined

whether STox15 also possesses acyltransferase activity as reported for other permuted

NlpC/P60.

**Discussion**

Our comprehensive analysis of 10,000 *Salmonella* genomes has significantly

expanded the repertoire of polymorphic toxins, identifying 128 candidates, including 45

novel toxin domains. Our study employed a robust bioinformatic pipeline, integrating

classical methods with the latest structural bioinformatics techniques. The combination

of sensitive sequence and structure searches with comparative genomics provided a

comprehensive understanding of the identified toxin domains. In addition, the manual

curation of candidates ensured high confidence in our results, distinguishing our

approach from previous large-scale *in-silico* analyses. The identification of these novel

toxin domains builds upon the foundational work by Zhang et al.[9] and others[30,68-76],

which characterized the diversity of polymorphic toxin systems across bacterial

lineages. The identification of novel toxin domains highlights the constant evolutionary

arms race between bacteria, driving the diversification of toxin and immunity proteins.

This study not only broadens our understanding of toxin domains but also

provides the first direct characterization of a lipid-targeting NlpC/P60 domain. The

phospholipase activity of STox15, which cleaves acyl groups from phosphatidylglycerol

and phosphatidylethanolamine, underscores its role in membrane disruption during

bacterial competition. Interestingly, our phylogenetic analysis revealed an evolutionary

link between STox15 and a new family of lipoprotein N-acyltransferases in

*Bacteroides*, adding a new dimension to the functional diversity of these toxins.

Notably, one of the homologs of STox15 is TseH[45,77], which has been proposed to be an

endopeptidase due to its NlpC/P60 domain and similarity to the amidase Tse1[78,79].

However, unlike Tse1, TseH exhibits a permutation in its catalytic core[77]. This

permutation, along with its evolutionary relationship to STox15 and other permuted

NlpC/P60, suggests that TseH actual substrate might be an acyl group in phospholipids

rather than a peptide/amide bond. Exploring the potential acyltransferase activity of

STox15 and its homologs could reveal further biochemical diversity within the

NlpC/P60 superfamily.

In the context of *Salmonella* biology, the unprecedented diversity of T6SS

effectors presents numerous opportunities for new studies. Our findings reveal the

existence of a core repertoire of T6SS effectors for each serovar, suggesting that

*Salmonella* acquire and maintain effectors in response to specific environmental

pressures and contexts rather than accumulating an increasingly larger array of

effectors. Notably, we observed a higher number of effectors in serovars isolated from

environmental sources compared to those from patients, indicating that the number of

effectors increases in more diverse environments where there are potentially more

encounters with a variety of competitor species.

In conclusion, our comprehensive analysis has greatly enhanced the

understanding of toxins involved in bacterial competition and pathogenesis. The

identification of previously uncharacterized toxin domains highlights the potential for

discovering novel biochemical activities. This study provides a solid foundation for

future research into the complex dynamics of conflict systems and their implications for

bacterial ecology and pathogenesis.

**Methods**

**Comparative genomic analysis**

The .gff files from the genome assemblies retrieved from the 10KSG project[23]

were organized and stored in tabular format using Python scripts, based on the

Biopython[80] and pandas[81] libraries. Iterative searches were conducted using

Jackhmmer[82] with a 10e-6 e-value cutoff. Protein clustering was performed using

MMseqs[83] to remove redundancy (80% coverage and 70% identity) and form

homologous groups (80% coverage and e-value 10e-3). Multiple sequence alignments

were generated using the local-pair algorithm in MAFFT[84], and phylogenetic trees were

constructed using FastTree[85]. Domain identification and annotation was performed

using HMMsearch and HMMscan[82,86] and models from the databases Pfam[25],

TXSScan[24], and BastionHub[87]. Remote homology identification was performed using

HHpred[33] and FoldSeek.

**Bacterial strains**

A list of bacterial strains used in this work can be found in Table S4. Strains

were grown at 37 °C in Lysogeny Broth (10 g/L tryptone, 10 g/L NaCl, 5 g/L yeast

extract) under agitation. AB medium was used for lipidomics: 0.2% (NH4)2SO2, 0.6%

Na2HPO4, 0.3% KH2PO4, 0.3% NaCl, 0.1 mM CaCL2, 1 mM MgCl2, 3 μM FeCL3,

supplemented with 0.2% sucrose, 0.2% casamino acids, 10 μg/mL thiamine, and 25

μg/mL uracil. Cultures were supplemented with antibiotics in the following

concentration when necessary: 50 μg/mL kanamycin, 100 μg/mL ampicillin, and 50

μg/mL streptomycin.

**Cloning and mutagenesis**

All primers are listed in Table S4. STox15 and SImm15 were amplified by PCR

and cloned into pBRA vector under the control of $P_{BAD}$ promoter[88] with or without pelB

signal peptide sequence from pET22b (Novagen)[89]. SImm15 was cloned into pEXT22

under the control of $P_{TAC}$ promoter[90]. For protein expression and purification, STox15

was cloned into pET28a (Novagen), including a C-terminal Strep II tag. Point mutations

(STox15$_{H43A}$, STox15$_{C151A}$) were created using QuikChange II XL Site-Directed

Mutagenesis Kit (Agilent Technologies) or by splicing by overlap extension (SOE)

PCR. All constructs were confirmed by sequencing.

***E. coli* toxicity assay**

Overnight cultures of *E. coli* DH5α co-expressing effectors for cytoplasmic

(pBRA-STox15) or periplasmic (pBRA SP-STox15) localization and immunity protein

(pEXT22-SImm15) were adjusted to $OD_{600nm}$ 1, serially diluted in LB (1:4) and 5 μL

were spotted onto LB agar (1.5%) containing either 0.2% d-glucose or 0.2% l-arabinose

plus 200 μM IPTG, supplemented with streptomycin and kanamycin, and incubated at

37°C for 20 h.

**Time-lapse microscopy**

For time-lapse microscopy, LB agar (1.5%) pads were prepared by cutting a

rectangular piece out of a double-sided adhesive tape, which was taped onto a

microscopy slide as described previously[89]. *E. coli* DH5α harboring pBRA SP-STox15

was subcultured in LB (1:50) with 0.2% d-glucose until reaching $OD_{600nm}$ 0.4–0.6 and

adjusted to $OD_{600nm}$ 1. Cultures were spotted onto LB agar pads supplemented either

with 0.2% d-glucose or 0.2% l-arabinose plus antibiotics. Images were acquired every

15 min for 16 hr using a Leica DMi-8 epifluorescent microscope fitted with a DFC365

FX camera (Leica) and Plan-Apochromat ×63 oil objective (HC PL APO ×63/1.4 Oil

ph3 objective Leica). Images were analyzed using FIJI software (Schindelin et al.,

2012).

**Protein expression and purification**

*E. coli* BL21(DE3) carrying pET28a STox15$_{WT}$-Strep or STox15$_{C151A}$-Strep

were grown in 4 L of LB supplemented with kanamycin (37 °C, 180 rpm) until OD$_{600nm}$

0.7. Expression was induced with 1 mM IPTG for 16 hr at 16 °C. Cells were harvested

via centrifugation at 5000 *g* for 20 min, and pellets were resuspended in lysis buffer (50

mM Tris HCl pH 8.0, 350 mM NaCl, 45 mM β-mercaptoethanol, 5 mg/mL lysozyme,

10% glycerol) and lysed at 4°C using a sonicator. The lysate was centrifuged at 40,000

*g* for 45 min at 4°C. The supernatant was loaded onto a 1 ml StrepTrap HP column

(Cytiva) equilibrated in buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 350 mM NaCl, 10% glycerol).

The column was washed with 40 column volumes (CV) of wash buffer (50 mM Tris-

HCl pH 8.0, 1 M NaCl, 10% glycerol, 45 mM β-mercaptoethanol), followed by a

second wash with 12 CV (50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 1.5 M urea) to remove chaperonin

GroEL[91]. The column was subjected to a third round of washes with 40 CV of wash

buffer and eluted with 10 CV of elution buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0; 350 mM

NaCl; 10% glycerol; 50 mM biotin). Fractions were buffer exchanged (25mM Tris-HCl

pH 7.5, 100 mM NaCl, 5% glycerol) and concentrated using an Amicon of 30 kDa

(Sigma). Protein aliquots were snap-frozen until use.

***In vitro* phospholipase assay**

For *in vitro* enzymatic assay, phospholipids 1-palmitoyl-2-oleoyl-sn-glycero-3-

phospho-(1'-rac-glycerol) (PG 16:0-18:1) and 1-palmitoyl-2-oleoyl-sn-glycero-3-

phosphoethanolamine (PE 16:0-18:1) were purchased from Avanti Polar Lipids.

Substrates were resuspended and diluted in methanol to adjust the concentration of

aliquots. The methanol of each aliquot was dried under a nitrogen flow. A total of 1.2

mM of phospholipids (PG or PE) were resuspended in reaction buffer (25 mM Tris-HCl

pH 7.5, 100 mM NaCl, 0.5 mM CaCl$_2$, 0.5 mM MgCl$_2$, 180 mM sodium deoxycholate

and 0.5 mM DTT) and incubated with 0.8 mM of enzyme (STox15$_{WT}$ or STox15$_{C151A}$)

in a total volume of 100 µL for 2 h at 37°C under agitation (350 rpm). Lipids were

extracted by adding 830 µL of a mixture of MTBE/methanol/water (10:3:2.5, v/v/v),

followed by incubation under agitation for 1 h at room temperature. Samples were

centrifuged for 2 min at 220 $g$ and 350 µL of the top fraction was transferred to a new

tube, dried in a SpeedVac and stored at –80 °C until analysis.

For mass spectrometry analysis, samples were resuspended in 350 µL of

isopropanol and analyzed in a Shimadzu 8060 Triple Quadrupole Liquid

Chromatograph Mass Spectrometer. Samples (0.1-0.5 µL) were loaded into an Agilent

column C18 ZORBAX Eclipse Plus (4.6 x 150 mm, 5 µm, 400 bar) with a flow rate of

0.5 mL/min and an oven temperature of 40 °C. HPLC gradients were as described

below for lipidomic analysis. The phospholipids and lysophospholipids of interest were

analyzed in the multiple reaction monitoring (MRM) mode using m/z transitions,

collision energies (CE) and dwell times as shown in Table S5A. Data was acquired by

Shimadzu LabSolutions and processed in LabSolutions Browser. Graphs were plotted

using GraphPrism 5.

**Lipidomics of STox15-intoxicated *E. coli***

*E. coli* MG1655 containing the plasmids pBRA SP-STox15$_{WT}$ or SP-

STox15$_{C151A}$ were cultured in LB containing 0.2% d-glucose at 37 °C for 14 h. Cells

were subcultured in LB 0.2% d-glucose until an OD$_{600nm}$ of 1 and centrifuged (10 min,

2900 $g$, 30 °C). Cells were washed with 40 mL of preheated AB medium at 37 °C,

centrifuged (10 min, 2900 $g$, 30 °C), and resuspended in 5 mL of AB supplemented

with 0.2% l-arabinose to induce STox15 expression. Cells were incubated for 1 h at 37

°C with agitation (100 rpm). The cells were centrifuged (15 min, 2900 $g$, 4 °C) and

washed once with 1 mL of PBS pH 7.4. PBS was removed by centrifugation and the

cell pellet was stored at -80 °C until lipid extraction. A cocktail of class specific internal

standards was added to the cell mass prior to lipid extraction for subsequent

quantification and normalization (Table S5B). Total lipid extraction was performed

using an adapted version of the protocol described by Yoshida, et al. [92]. Briefly, cell

pellets were resuspended with 500 µL of cold methanol and 1 mL of MilliQ water and

transferred to glass tubes. A mixture of chloroform and ethyl acetate (4:1) was added,

followed by agitation for 1 min at 25 °C. Samples were centrifuged (2 min, 1500 $g$, 4

°C) and the lipid-containing phase (lower phase) was extracted and transferred to a new

glass tube that was dried under a nitrogen ($N_2$) flow until all solvent traces were

evaporated. Samples were stored at -80 °C until analysis.

Lipid extracts were diluted in 100 µL of isopropanol and analyzed using ultra-

high performance liquid chromatography (UHPLC Nexera, Shimadzu) coupled with an

ESI-Q-TOF mass spectrometer (Triple TOF 6600, Sciex) (UHPLC-Q-TOF/MS). 2 µL

of each sample were injected into the UHPLC-MS, and molecules were separated using

a CORTECS column (C18, 1.6 µm, 2.1x100 mm, Waters) with a flow rate of 0.2

mL/min and temperature set to 35 °C [93]. The mobile phases consisted of (A)

water/acetonitrile (60:40) and (B) isopropanol/acetonitrile/water (88:10:2). Ammonium

acetate at a final concentration of 10 mM was incorporated in both mobile phases A and

B for the negative ionization acquisition mode. The gradient elution used in the

chromatography was from 40 to 100% (mobile phase) B over the first 10 min; 100% B

from 10-12 min; 100 to 40% B for 12-13 and holding 40% B for 13-20 min. The

negative mode was utilized for the examination of phospholipids and free fatty acids.

MS and MS/MS data acquisition was performed using Analyst 1.7.1 software (Sciex).

Mass spectrometry data was inspected using PeakView 2.0 software (Sciex), and lipid

molecular species were manually identified with the help of an in-house manufactured

Excel-based macro. Lipid species were quantified using MultiQuant software (Sciex),

where the precursor ions areas were normalized by the internal standards for each class

(Table S5B).

**Data availability**

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper and

its Supplementary Information files or at https://leepbioinfo.github.io/10ksgt6ss/. All

data and code used for sequence and genome context analyses are available on a GitHub

repository at https://github.com/leepbioinfo/10ksgt6ss. The ROTIFER package can be

downloaded from the GitHub repository https://github.com/leepbioinfo/rotifer. The

contents of both repositories are made available under the Creative Commons

Attribution 4.0 International or the GNU Lesser General Public License (LGPL) v. 2.0.

We have also uploaded the GitHub data and code to Zenodo (DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.13845778).

**Author contributions**

G.G.N., R.F.S. and E.B.-S. conceived the study; G.G.N., S.S.-S., T.W.C.S. and

R.F.S. conducted bioinformatic analysis; S.S.-S., J.T.H., J.P.M., R.S.S. performed

experiments and analyzed data; B.M.P.-S., S.M., L.A. analyzed data and contributed

with discussions; G.G.N., R.F.S. and E.B.-S. wrote the manuscript with input from the

other authors.

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**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

**Figure legends.**

**Fig. 1: The T6SS effector repertoire within 10k *Salmonella* genomes.**

**(a)** Pipeline used for classification of genomic sites and T6SS subtypes. **(b)** Number of

genomes containing the different T6SS subtypes within the 10KSG dataset. **(c)**

Examples of the genomic organization of T6SS structural clusters from distinct

phylogenetic subtypes. **(d)** *In silico* strategies used for the identification and

classification of T6SS effectors. **(e)** Comparison of profile Hidden Markov Models

(pHMMs) of STox to published models of related families. Each circle corresponds to a

population of proteins detected by an STox model. The relative frequency of proteins

detected by an STox model compared to a reference model is shown on the horizontal

axis. The HMM divergence score is shown in the vertical axis. The blue-white-red color

scale of each dot represents the values for the Spearman correlation index between

STox and reference alignment scores for the same proteins. Yellow circles represent

STox models that detect proteins that are not recognized by previously existing models.

The radius of each circle is proportional to the total number of proteins detected only by

STox models. The regression line does not include the data points for the models

represented by yellow circles. **(f)** Schematic representation of the functional classes of

T6SS effector domains identified in the 10KSG distributed according to target cell type

(see the complete list in Table S1).

**Fig. 2: The diversity of *Salmonella* T6SS effectors and target-specific subsets.**

**(a)** Normal distribution and fitted curve showing the number of effectors per genome

(single cluster in blue and >2 clusters in orange). **(b)** The most frequent effectors

identified in the 10KSG dataset. Each bar represents the number of genomes encoding a

specific effector. Colors represent different biochemical activities, with light colors

representing orphan effectors while dark colors represent effectors encoded within the

structural cluster. **(c)** The five most frequent effectors encoded in different *Salmonella*

serovars (see Fig. S2 for all the 149 serovars). Colors indicate the effector activity as in

(b). **(d)** Schematic representation of the most common sets of effectors in genomes

encoding different T6SS subtypes. The number of genomes is indicated on the right.

Colors represent activity as shown in (b). **(e)** Pie chart illustrating the relative

proportions of effectors by activities encoded within the T6SS subtypes i3, i1, and i2.

**(f)** Venn diagram illustrating the proportion of overlap between effectors encoded

within each T6SS structural cluster (blue: i1; purple: subtype i2; red: subtype i3; and

green: orphan). **(g)** Schematic representation of the genetic organization of T6SSs

showing the position of variable regions in which the effector and immunity proteins are

encoded. Colors denote structural proteins forming the membrane complex (orange),

sheath and inner tube (light blue), baseplate and spike components (green). Effectors are

shown in red, and immunities in dark blue.

**Fig. 3: STox15 has a permuted NlpC/P60 domain that is required for toxicity.**

**(a)** Scheme of the genomic region encoding STox15 and SImm15 effector/immunity

pair (barcode FD01848827). **(b)** *E. coli* toxicity assay. Serial dilutions of *E. coli*

carrying pBRA and pEXT22 constructs, as indicated, were spotted onto LB agar plates,

and grown for 20 hr. Images are representative of three independent experiments. **(c)**

Time-lapse microscopy of *E. coli* carrying pBRA SP-STox15 grown on LB agar pads

containing either 0.2% d-glucose (repressed) or 0.2% l-arabinose (induced). Scale bar: 5

µm. Timestamps in hh:mm. **(d)** Maximum-likelihood phylogenetic tree of permuted

NlpC/P60 members. Dots represent the number of PSI-BLAST iterations required to

collect homologs and the red star marks the query: *S*. Oranienburg STox15 depicted in

(a). **(e)** Genomic organization of representatives from clades TseH and STox15 showing

the genes are encoded in the context of conflict systems, and DUF4105 showing context

of lipid metabolism. **(f)** Sequence logo from the enzymatic core of permuted NlpC/P60

from all clades shown in (d). The arrows indicate conserved His and Cys residues that

were mutated in (g). **(g)** *E. coli* toxicity assay. Serial dilution of *E. coli* containing

pBRA and pEXT22 constructs, as indicated, spotted onto LB agar plates and grown for

20 hr. Images are representative of three independent experiments.

**Fig. 4: STox15 has phospholipase A activity and changes the composition of target**

**cell membranes.**

**(a)** *In vitro* enzymatic assay with recombinant STox15 (red) or STox15$_{C151A}$ (blue)

incubated with different phospholipids (both 16:0-18:1 PG and PE) for 2 hr at 37 °C.

The amount of lysophospholipids produced was analyzed and quantified by HPLC-

MS/MS. **(b)** Quantification of the peak area of lysophospholipids normalized by the

intact substrate. Data corresponds to the mean $\pm$ SD. ***$p < 0.001$ and *$p < 0.01$, *ns* not

significant (Student's t-test). **(c)** UHPLC-MS total ion chromatogram showing the

profile of total lipids extracted from *E. coli* expressing STox15 (red) or STox15$_{C151A}$

(blue). **(d)** Heatmap plot of top 20 altered lipids of intoxicated *E. coli* lipidome. Results

display four biological replicates of each condition (WT or C151A) with the

quantification of lipids species (Tukey test; $p < 0.05$ FDR adjusted). Data were

expressed in nM mg of protein$^{-1}$ and normalized by log transformation (base 10) prior to

analysis. Red (up) and blue (down) bars represent changes in lipid species concentration

relative to the normalized mean. Letters differentiate between the isomers.

**Fig. S1: T6SS effector repertoire in the 10KSG dataset.** Each column indicates the

presence or absence of a toxin as identified by the models developed in this study. Lines

denote unique combinations of effectors. The histogram on the right shows the

frequency of genomes in the 10KSG dataset containing each specific repertoire. The

histogram at the bottom illustrates the frequency of genomes with at least one protein

identified by the above HMM model. Effector activities are color-coded as described in

Fig. 2B.

**Fig. S2: List of five most frequent T6SS effectors identified in each of the 149**

***Salmonella*** **serovars contained in the 10KSG dataset.** Colors indicate the effector

activity as in Fig. 2B.

**Fig. S3: SImm15 is a two-transmembrane helices protein. (a)** Sequence alignment of

SImm15 homologs with orange rectangles indicating predicted transmembrane helices.

Sequences are colored according to the Clustal X color scheme[94]. Consensus

abbreviations: h, hydrophobic (A, C, F, I, L, M, V, W, Y); l, aliphatic (L, I, V); a,

aromatic (F, W, Y); b, large residues (L, I, Y, E, R, F, Q, K, M, W); s, small residues

(A, G, S, V, C, D, N); u, tiny residues (G, A, S); p, polar residues (S, T, E, D, K, R, N,

Q, H, C); c, charged residues (D, E, H, K, R); +, positively charged residues (H, K, R);

−, negatively charged residues (D, E). (B) Transmembrane helix prediction for SImm15

using DeepTMHMM[95].

**Fig. S4: Recombinant protein purification used in enzymatic assay.** SDS–PAGE of

recombinant proteins during purification steps to obtain purified protein for enzymatic

assays. Affinity chromatography using Strep-Tactin sepharose to purify STox15

versions with C-terminus Strep-tag II: WT in (a) or C151A in (b). Recombinant proteins

were purified from the soluble fraction. An additional step of washing with 1.5M urea

was performed after the traditional washes to remove contamination with GroEL before

elution with biotin. Additional bands were identified by mass-spectrometry to confirm

identity. MK: marker; INS: insoluble; SOL: soluble; FT: flowthrough. GroEL:

chaperonin GroEL; Bccp: biotin carboxyl carrier protein; OmpF: outer membrane porin

F.

**Table S1. List of all T6SS toxin domains identified in this study in the 10K**

***Salmonella* genomes dataset.**

**Table S2. List of all homologs collected by JackHMMER searches and used to**

**build the phylogenetic tree shown in Fig. 3D.**

**Table S3. Genomic context of members of each permuted NlpC/P60 members**

**shown in Fig. 3D.**

**Table S4. List of strains, plasmids and primers used in the study.**

**Table S5. (a) MRM transition for LC-MS/MS method of lysophospholipids. (b)**

**Internal standards used for lipidomics analysis in negative mode.**

**Movie S1. Time-lapse microscopy of *E. coli* harboring pBRA SP-STox15 growing**

**in media supplemented with 0.2% d-glucose.** Timestamp in hh:mm. Scale bar: 5 μm.

**Movie S2. Time-lapse microscopy of *E. coli* harboring pBRA SP-STox15 growing**

**in media supplemented with 0.2% l-arabinose.** Timestamp in hh:mm. Scale bar: 5

μm.

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