Paradoxical β-lactamase activity of archaeal encoding enzymes

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Abstract

β-lactams targeting the bacterial cell wall are not efficient on archaea. Using phylogenetic analysis and common ancestor sequences for bacterial β-lactamases, we found serendipitously class B and class C-like β-lactamase genes in most archaea genomes. The class B β-lactamase appears to be highly conserved in archaea and to has been transferred in the bacterial genus *Elizabethkingia*. The experimentaly expressed class B enzyme from *Methanosarcina barkeri* was able to digest penicillin G and was inhibited by a β-lactamase inhibitor (i.e. sulbactam). The class C-like β-lactamase was more closely related to DD-peptidase enzymes than know bacterial class C β-lactamases. The use of these very conserved genes in this domain cannot be explored as a defense system against β-lactams but may be used to feed β-lactams as a source of carbon as shown in bacteria.

Introduction

Antibiotics are part of the microorganism's arsenal in their struggle to master microbial ecosystems (1). Most antibiotics are non-ribosomal peptides assembled by megaenzymes, the non-ribosomal peptide synthetases (NRPS) that have structural motifs which appear to be among the oldest of the living world (2, 3). As part of the Red Queen theory of evolutionary law (4), in the fight against β-lactam antibiotics that act on the cell wall, bacteria have developed enzymes hydrolyzing these molecules, the β-lactamases. These enzymes, acting as hydrolases, also have extremely archaic motifs (3). Four molecular classes (labelled A, B, C and D) are described todays (5). The three classes A, C, and D are characterized by a serine residue in their catalytic active site whereas the class B, metallo-β-lactamase enzymes, is characterized by zinc as an essential metal cofactor in their catalytic active site (5). The struggle between β-lactams and β-lactamases appears to be essentially limited to bacteria. In archaea microorganisms, it may be useless in this context as the antibiotic target in their cell wall is lacking (6, 7). In the current study, following a phylogeny analysis, we have investigated the presence of β-lactamase enzymes in archaeal species. The reconstruction of a common ancestor for β-lactamases easily identify β-lactamases in genomic databases and in most archaeal genomes. Here, we demonstrate that the gene annotated as a β-lactamase in an encoding enzyme which when expressed, exhibits a typical β-lactamase activity.

Results

Blast analysis of known bacterial β-lactamase genes such as class A (TEM-24, SHV-

12), class B (VIM-2, NDM-1), class C (CMY-12, AAC-1), and class D (OXA-23, OXA-58)

show no or insignificant results (% identity ≤ 24) against the NCBI archaeal database.

However, as described, ancestral sequences are capable of detecting remote homologous

sequences from published biological databases (8). Consequently, using constructed

phylogenetic trees (cf. suppl. figures) of the four bacterial β-lactamase classes, an ancestral

sequence for each class was inferred. From the four inferred ancestral sequences, homologous

sequences in the archaeal database were identified for the class B and C β-lactamases (**fig. S1**

and S2). No significant hits were obtained for the class A and D.

Archaeal Class B metallo-β-lactamase. An archaeal β-lactamase appeared highly

conserved in several classes of archaea including *Archaeoglobi, Methanomicrobia,*

Methanobacteria, Thermococci, Methanococci, Thermoplasmata and *Thermoprotei* (**fig. 1;**

Suppl. Table S1) (9). To evaluate these archaeal enzymes activity, the protein from

Methanosarcina barkeri (gi|851225341; 213 aa; 25.5 kDa)(**fig. 1** and **Suppl. Table S1**) was

experimentally tested. Protein alignment of this latter with known bacterial metallo-β-

lactamase proteins reveals conserved motifs/amino acids including Histidine118 (His118),

Aspartic acid 120 (Asp120), His196, and His263, markers of this metallo-β-lactamase class B

as previously described (10)(**fig. S3**). Three-dimensional (3D) structure comparison of this

enzyme with known and well characterized proteins in the Phyre2 investigator database

reveals 100% of confidence and 94% of coverage with the crystal structure of the New Delhi

metallo-β-lactamase 1 (NDM-1; Phyre2 ID: c3rkjA) (**Table S2**). To evaluate these archaeal

enzymes activity, the MetbaB protein from *Methanosarcina barkeri* was experimentally

tested. As expected, this enzyme exhibits a significant hydrolysis activity on nitrocefin (**fig.**

2A, 2B) (with determined kinetic parameters $k_{cat}=18.2\times10^{-3}$ s^{-1}, $K_M=820$ μM and resulting

k_{cat}/K_M=22.19 s^{-1}.M^{-1}) and on penicillin G, when measuring its complete degradation toward

a single metabolite i.e. benzyl penilloic acid within three hours (**fig. 2C**). As shown on **Suppl.**

Figure S4, the MetbaB activity was also evaluated in different pH and was optimal on

nitrocefin at pH 7.   Furthermore, to confirm the β-lactamase activity of this enzyme, the

combination of nitrocefin with β-lactamase inhibitor sulbactam (at 1 µg/mL) was tested. As

shown in **Figure 2A** (column 4), in the presence of sulbactam, no degradation of the

nitrocefin β-lactam could be detected, suggesting a complete inhibition of the archaeal β-

lactamase enzyme. This neutralizing activity was confirmed microbiologically on a

Pneumococcus strain highly susceptible to penicillin (MIC =0.012 µg/ml) and highly resistant

to sulbactam (MIC =32 µg/ml). Indeed, bacteria could grow in the presence of 0.1 µg/ml of

penicillin incubated with the archaeal β-lactamase, but not when sulbactam was added,

suggesting an inhibition of penicillin G enzymatic digestion (**fig. 2D**).

The antibiotic susceptibility testing of a recombinant *E. coli* mutant containing this

archaeal β-lactamase also revealed a reduced susceptibility to penicillin (from 1 µg/ml to 4

µg/ml) (data not shown). Interestingly, it appears that these archaeal β-lactamases are closely

related to bacterial enzymes known as "GOB" (AF090141), which are fully functional in vivo

and present in a single bacterial genus, namely *Elizabethkingia* (11, 12) (**fig. 1**). However, the

MBL protein sequences of this bacterial genus compared to those of archaea reveal low

similarities (less than 36%) and this therefore suggests an ancient HGT from an archaic

phylum to this bacterial group, which furthermore exhibited β-lactam hydrolysis activity,

previously considered to be fairly atypical for a bacterium (**Table S3**). Indeed, because

archaea are naturally resistant to ß-lactams, the role of these β-lactamases in these

microorganisms remains to be clarified, but the digestion of β-lactams by β-lactamases in

Archae to use it as a carbon source, as in bacteria, should be investigated (13).

Archaeal class C-like β-lactamases: Four significant sequences homologous to

bacterial class C β-lactamase sequences were identified in archaea database using the inferred

bacterial class C ancestor sequence (**fig. 3; Suppl. Table S1**). The phylogeny analysis shows

that this third-class C-like of β-lactamases appears to be a very old class, a putative new clade,

which cannot be identified without the reconstruction of the common ancestor (**fig. 3**). As

shown in this figure, this class C-like enzyme appears more closely related to DD-peptidase

enzymes than the known bacterial class C β-lactamases. Protein alignment reveals the same

conserved motifs ($S^{64}XXK$ and $Y^{150}XN$) identified in bacteria, the signature motifs of this

class C β-lactamase (**fig. S5**). The three-dimensional (3D) structure comparison of this

archaeal class C-like enzyme with known and well characterized proteins in the Phyre2

investigator database reveals 100% of confidence and 66% of coverage with the crystal

structure of the octameric penicillin-binding protein (PBP) homologue from *pyrococcus*

abyssi (Phyre2 ID: c2qmiH) (**Table S2**). Similarly, the identified archaeal enzyme of this

class C (gi|919167542) was also cloned in *E. coli* and found to be active in enzymatic level by

hydrolyzing the nitrocefin (data not shown). This enzymatic activity was also confirmed by

the kinetic assays showing the catalytic parameters kcat=9.67×10-3 s-1, Km=583.6 µM and

kcat/ Km=16.57 s-1.M-1, according to Michaelis-Menten equation fitting (R^2=0.984).

However, the β-lactams susceptibility testing of the recombinant *E. coli* strains harboring this

sequence reveals no reduced susceptibility as compared to the control *E. coli* strains.

Discussion

The archaea microorganisms, in which these β-lactamases were identified, are fully

resistant to β-lactam antibiotics. So far, β-lactamases have been described and considered as

one of the elements in the fight against β-lactams acting on the cell wall (14). Nevertheless,

given the well-known and documented natural resistance of archaea to β-lactam antibiotics, it

did not make sense to discover the existence of archaic β-lactamases in this microorganism

group. In this current study, we show that two classes of β-lactamases can be found in

archaea, especially in *Methanosarcina* species. These latter have the largest genomes in the

archaea kingdom because of a massive horizontal gene transfer (HGT) from bacteria (15).

The identified class B appears highly conserved in archaea, with a unique transfer event in

Elizabethkingia species whereas, the class C enzyme appears as a new clade and more closely

related to the DD-peptidase enzymes i.e. the penicillin binding proteins. So far, metallo-β-

lactamase enzymes in Archaea are essentially described with respect to their role in the DNA

and RNA metabolism (16, 17). Here, we show that these archaeal enzymes can hydrolyze also

β-lactam antibiotics, as known for bacteria, and are inhibited by β-lactamase inhibitors. So,

the role of β-lactamases in Archaea is not totally understood. Our findings suggest that

archaeal β-lactamases are as ancestral as those of bacteria, and HGT events have occurred

from archaea to bacteria. Moreover, we highlight here that the use of consensual ancestor

sequences from phylogenetic analyses, is an interesting approach to fish out remote

homologous sequences to known ones in any sequences database.

Finally, the existence of β-lactamases in the world of archaea is showing that β-

lactamases are not only a defense system against β-lactams. The use of antibiotics as a

nutriment sources for archaea as key to degrade β-lactam molecules and use them as carbon

sources as described in bacteria, is a plausible hypothesis (13, 18–20).

Materials and Methods

Sequence analysis:

A total of 1,155 amino acid sequences were retrieved (Class A: 620; B: 174; C: 151, and D: 210) from the ARG-ANNOT database (21). The phylogenetic trees were inferred using the approximate maximum-likelihood method in FastTree (22). For a detailed and comprehensive diversity analysis, a few sequences from each clade of the trees were selected as representatives of the corresponding clades (labeled in red in **fig. S1 and S2**).

The ancestral sequence was inferred using the maximum-likelihood method conducted by MEGA6 (23) software. Then, these ancestral sequences were used as queries in a BlastP (24) search ($\geq$ 30% sequence identity and $\geq$ 50% query coverage) against the NCBI-nr archaeal database. For Class C β-lactamase analysis, DD-peptidase sequences (penicillin binding proteins) were downloaded from the NCBI database. 2515 sequences were selected for local Blast analysis with the archaeal Class C-like β-lactamase used as query sequence (**GI: 919167542**). From this analysis, 24 DD-peptidase sequences were identified as homologous to the query and thus used for further phylogenetic tree analysis. The selected archaeal sequences were aligned with known bacterial β-lactamase sequences (representative sequences of a known clade from the guide tree) using the multiple sequence alignment algorithm MUSCLE (25) and the phylogenetic tree was inferred using FastTree (22).

Antibiotic susceptibility testing

The antibiotic susceptibility testing was performed on 15 antibiotics including ampicillin, ampicillin/sulbactam, penicillin, piperacillin, piperacillin/tazobactam, cefoxitin, ceftriaxone, ceftazidime imipenem, meropenem, aztreonam, gentamicin, ciprofloxacin, amikacin, and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (I2a, SirScan Discs, France). A filtred aqueous solution of each antibiotic was prepared anaerobically in a sterilized Hungate tubes at concentration of 5 mg/ml. Then, 0.1 ml of each one of these solutions was added to a freshly

inoculated culture tube containing 4.9 ml of the tested stain to obtain a final concentration of

100µg/ml for each antibiotic herein tested. The mixture of antibiotic and archaeal culture was

then incubated at 37°C and the growth of archaea was observed after 5 to 10 days incubation

depending on the tested strain. Control cultures without antibiotic were also incubated in the

same conditions to assess the strain growth and non-inoculated culture tubes were used as

negative control.

In vitro activity test:

Protein expression and purification: The selected beta-lactamases were optimized for

protein expression in *Escherichia coli* and synthesized by GenScript (Piscataway, NJ, USA)

and then cloned into the pET24a(+) expression vector. Recombinant β-lactamases were

expressed in *E. coli* BL21(DE3)-pGro7/GroEL (TaKaRa) using ZYP-5052 media. Each

culture was grown at 37°C until reaching an OD600 nm = 0.8, followed by addition of L-

arabinose (0.2% m/v) and induction with a temperature transition to 16°C over 20 hours. Cells

were harvested by centrifugation (5000 g, 30 min, 4°C) and the resulting pellets were

resuspended in Wash buffer (50 mM Tris pH 8, 300 mM NaCl) and stored at -80°C overnight.

Frozen cells were thawed and incubated on ice for 1 hour after adding lysozyme, DNAse I

and PMSF (Phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride) to final concentrations of, respectively, 0.25

mg/mL, 10µg/mL and 0.1 mM. Partially lysed cells were then disrupted by three consecutive

cycles of sonication (30 seconds, amplitude 45) performed on a Q700 sonicator system

(QSonica). Cell debris was discarded following a centrifugation step (10,000 g, 20 min, 4°C).

Recombinant β-lactamases were purified using Strep-tag affinity chromatography (Wash

buffer: 50 mM Tris pH 8, 300 mM NaCl and Elution buffer: 50 mM Tris pH 8, 300 mM

NaCl, 2.5 mM desthiobiotin) on a 5 mL StrepTrap HP column (GE Healthcare). Fractions

containing each protein of interest were pooled. Protein expression and purity were assessed

using a 10% SDS-PAGE analysis (Coomassie stain). Protein concentrations were measured

using a Nanodrop 2000c spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific).

β-Lactamase detection: Purified recombinant β-lactamases were submitted for a

BBL™ Cefinase™ paper disc test(26) (Becton Dickinson). All protein samples were adjusted

to a final concentration of 2 mg/ml. 15 µl of each recombinant β-lactamase were deposited

onto a paper disc impregnated with nitrocefin and incubated at room temperature. 15 µl of

extracted proteins from induced BL21(DE3)-pGro7/GroEL strain that did not contain any β-

lactamase genes, was used as negative control. When a change of color from yellow to red

was visible within 30 minutes of incubation, corresponding to the hydrolysis of the amide

bond in the beta-lactam ring of nitrocefin, it was considered that the tested fraction contained

an active β-lactamase enzyme. The hydrolysis of the nitrocefin and penicillin G in presence of

sulbactam, was also monitored using a Synergy HT microplate reader (BioTek, USA).

Reactions were performed at 25°C in a 96-well plate in PBS buffer and 5 % DMSO with a

final volume of 100 µl for each well. Time course hydrolysis of nitrocefin (0.5 mM) was

monitored for 10 minutes after adding 50 µL of previously prepared protein sample, with

absorbance at 486 nm. For the inhibition assay, active β-lactamases at a final concentration of

0.5 mg/ml were briefly incubated with 0.1 mM sulbactam. Negative controls with only

sulbactam in buffer and positive controls containing enzymes without any inhibitor were also

prepared. After adding 0.5 mM nitrocefin, its hydrolysis was monitored over time with

absorbance at 486 nm. Furthermore, the activity of MetbaB enzyme was evaluated at different

pH (between pH7 and pH10) using the same nitrocefin assay conditions.

β-lactamase kinetic characterization: Kinetic assays were monitored with a Synergy

HT microplate reader (BioTek, USA). Reactions were performed at 25°C in a 96-well plate

(6.2 mm path length cell) in buffer 50 mM Tris pH 8, 300 mM NaCl, 5% DMSO with a final

volume of 100 µl for each well. The time course hydrolysis of nitrocefin (ε486 nm = 20 500

M-1 .cm-1) with final concentrations varying between 0.05 and 1.5 mM was monitored for 10

minutes following absorbance variations at 486 nm, corresponding to the appearance of a red

product. Both enzymes were kept at a final concentration of 0.3 mg/ml for kinetic studies. For

each substrate concentration, the initial velocity was evaluated by Gen5.1 software. Mean

values obtained were fitted using the Michaelis-Menten equation on GraphPad Prism 5

software in order to determine catalytic parameters.

β-lactam hydrolysis monitored by Liquid Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (LC-

MS). Water and acetonitrile solvents were ULC-MS grade (Biosolve). Penicillin G and

sulbactam stock solutions at 10 mg/ml were freshly prepared in water from the corresponding

high purity salts (Sigma Aldrich). A 1X phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) solution at pH 7.4

was prepared in water from a commercial salt mixture (bioMerieux). Pure solutions of the

archaeal class B (MetbaB) β-lactamase enzyme was buffer-exchanged in PBS, and the

concentration was adjusted to 1 mg/ml. 30 μl was then spiked with penicillin G and sulbactam

at a final concentration of 10 μg/ml. Negative controls consisted of PBS spiked with penicillin

G and sulbactam Several solutions were prepared to measure metabolites at different

incubation times at room temperature. Each time point corresponded to triplicate sample

preparations. Then, 70 μl of acetonitrile was added to each sample, and tubes were vortexed

10 minutes at 16000 g to precipitate proteins. The clear supernatant was collected for analysis

using an Acquity I-Class UPLC chromatography system connected to a Vion IMS Qtof ion

mobility-quadrupole-time of flight mass spectrometer. For each sample, 5 μl stored at 4°C

was injected into a reverse phase column (Acquity BEH C18 1.7 μm 2.1x50 mm, Waters)

maintained at 50°C. Compounds were eluted at 0.5 ml/min using water and acetonitrile

solvents containing 0.1% formic acid. The following composition gradient was used: 10-70%

acetonitrile within 3 minutes, 95 % acetonitrile for a 1-minute wash step, and back to the

initial composition for 1-minute. Compounds were ionized in the positive mode using a

Zspray electrospray ion source with the following parameters: capillary/cone voltages 3

kV/80 V, and source/desolvation temperatures 120/450°C. Ions were then monitored using a

High Definition MS(E) data independent acquisition method with the following settings:

travelling wave ion mobility survey, 50-1000 m/z, 0.1 s scan time, 6 eV low energy ion

transfer, and 20-40 eV high energy for collision-induced dissociation of all ions (low/high

energy alternate scans). Mass calibration was adjusted within each run using a lockmass

correction (Leucin Enkephalin 556.2766 m/z). The Vion instrument ion mobility cell and

time-of-flight tube were calibrated beforehand using a Major Mix solution (Waters) to

calculate collision cross section (CCS) values from ion mobility drift times and mass-to-

charge ratios. 4D peaks, corresponding to a chromatographic retention time, ion mobility drift

time and parents/fragments masses, were then collected from raw data using UNIFI software

(version 1.9.3, Waters). As reported, penicillin G can be degraded in alkaline or acidic pH and

in the presence of β-lactamase into different metabolites, including benzyl penilloic acid or

benzylpenillic acid. A list of known chemical structures, including penicillin G and its

metabolites (27, 28), were targeted with the following parameters: 0.1 minutes retention time

window, 5 % CCS tolerance, 5 ppm m/z tolerance on parent adducts (H+ and Na+) and 10

mDa m/z tolerance on predicted fragments. Retention times and CCS values were previously

measured from penicillin G degradation experiments at pH 2 and pH 10 in order to perform

subsequent accurate structures screening. Detector counts of the targeted structures were then

collected for data interpretation.

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Author contributions:

D.R. conceived and designed the study. S.M.D., L.P., V.K., N.A, P.C, S.K., G.C-A., J.-M.R., B.L, P.P., and D.R. analysed and interpreted data. S.M.D., L.P., V.K., N.A, P.C, S.K., G.C-A., J.-M.R., B.L, P.P., and D.R. drafted the manuscript and/or made critical revisions. All of the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests:

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

Figure legends

Figure 1: Phylogenetic Tree of Class B β-lactamases from archaea and bacteria. Archaeal sequence colored in green is which expressed and experimentaly tested.

Figure 2: Characterization of the archaeal class B MBL (MetbaB) identified in *Methanosarcina barkerii*. (**A and B**): β-lactamase activity of the *M. barkeri* Class B MBL enzyme (MetbaB) on a chromogenic cephalosporin substrate (Nitrocefin). **A1 and A2** refer to the nitrocefin degradation test using the BBL™ Cefinase™ paper disc respectively at t=0 and t=30 min. **A3** refers to this same test performed in liquid medium in the absence of sulbactam while **A4**, with the addition of 1 µg/ml sulbactam, both after 30 minutes of incubation; (**B**) monitored nitrocefin degradation by following the absorbance at 486 nm over time in the presence and absence of the β-lactamase inhibitor. (**C**): LC/MS average relative response of screened metabolite compounds of penicillin G in the presence the *M. barkeri* Class B MBL enzyme monitored for three hours. Penicillin G (in orange) refers to the intact form of the antibiotic while penilloic acid (in purple) and penillic acid (in light blue) refer to the penicillin G metabolites. Penicillin G control in PBS did not show any degradation towards any metabolite (data not shown). (**D**), Microbiological test of the mixture of penicillin G (0.1 µg/ml) with the MetbaB enzyme in the presence and absence of sulbactam (15 µg/ml) on a *Pneumococcus* strain highly susceptible to penicillin G (MIC= 0.012 µg/ml) and highly resistant to sulbactam (MIC= 32 µg/ml). The halo around holes 1 and 5 reveals growth inhibition of the *Pneumococcus* strain. The absence of this halo around holes 2, 3, and 4 means no effect of the mixture on the *Pneumococcus* growth could be observed.

Figure 3: Phylogenetic Tree of Class C β-lactamases and DD-peptidases proteins (penicillin binding proteins). The class A β-lactamases is used as root.

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A

Negative control

MetbaB

1 2 3 4

B

Absorbance (486 nm) vs Time (h:mm)

— MetbaB
— MetbaB + Sulbactam
--- Buffer + Sulbactam

C

Relative Response (%) vs Time (h:mm)

— Penicillin G
--- Penilloic acid
--- Penillic acid

D

1 - Penicillin G alone
2 - Sulbactam alone
3 - MetbaB alone
4 - MetbaB + Penicillin G
5 - MetbaB + Penicillin G + Sulbactam