Full Title: Quantitative trait loci (QTL) underlying phenotypic variation in bioethanol-

related processes in *Neurospora crassa*.

Short Title: Bioethanol QTL

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Keywords: Fungal breeding, bioethanol, QTL, natural variation

Abstract

Bioethanol production from lignocellulosic biomass has received increasing attention over the past decade. Many attempts have been made to reduce the cost of bioethanol production by combining the separate steps of the process into a single-step process known as consolidated bioprocessing. This requires identification of organisms that can efficiently decompose lignocellulose to simple sugars and ferment the pentose and hexose sugars liberated to ethanol. There have been many attempts in engineering laboratory strains by adding new genes or modifying genes to expand the capacity of an industrial microorganism. There has been less attention in improving bioethanol-related processes utilizing natural variation existing in the natural ecotypes. In this study, we sought to identify genomic loci contributing to variation in saccharification of cellulose and fermentation of glucose in the fermenting cellulolytic fungus *Neurospora crassa* through quantitative trait loci (QTL) analysis. We identified one major QTL contributing to fermentation of glucose and multiple putative QTL's underlying saccharification. Understanding the natural variation of the major QTL gene would provide new insights in developing industrial microbes for bioethanol production.

Introduction

Fermentation of cellulosic biomass by microorganisms is a complex process requiring

coordinated regulation of multiple pathways, including production and secretion of at

least three distinct classes of catabolic enzymes (cellulase, hemicellulase, and lignin

peroxidase enzymes), transport of substrates into the cell, followed by catabolism and

fermentation of the resultant monomeric C5 and C6 sugars. Identification of organisms

efficient in all requisite processes has been a major limitation toward realizing the vision

of the consolidated bioprocessing (CBP) of biomass to ethanol for fuels [1–4]. While

many researchers attempt to engineer existing strains by introducing the genes for

pathways lacking in the given organisms, success has been limited due to the increased

physiological burdens imposed by genetic manipulation. There is also a growing concern

that genetic manipulations that are effective in laboratory strains may not be translatable

to more robust strains used in industry [3, 5]. There are, however, organisms that already

possess the genetic elements needed to perform all of the requisite processes, such as the

model filamentous fungus *Neurospora crassa* [9].

These types of native microorganisms present excellent potential sources of useful

industrial enzymes and products. Breeding has proven to be a reliable method for

manipulating genomes to select for desired traits, as evidenced by the successes of plant

breeding [6]. Selective mating has long been used in plant breeding to improve traits

ranging from fruit size and yield to appearance or flavor [7, 8]. Recently, selective

breeding has also been used in fungi in attempts to select for increased saccharification

and fermentation potential [9].

The advent of computational tools such as genome-wide association studies

(GWAS) and quantitative trait loci (QTL) analysis have had drastic impacts on how plant

geneticists design new lineages with improved traits and qualities [10]. GWAS and QTL

analysis are computational tools for investigating the genetic elements underlying

quantitative traits. Unlike qualitative traits such as color, which are inherited discretely

and exhibit discontinuous variation, quantitative traits exhibit continuous variation and

cannot be discretely grouped [10]. GWAS and QTL use polymorphic genetic markers to

predict the extent to which a given genetic locus contributes to observed variation in

quantitative traits, such as plant height, and researchers have been able to use genetic

methods to identify combinations of desired alleles in individuals that are then used for

breeding, known as marker assisted selection (MAS).

QTL analysis and MAS have revolutionized plant genetics and should be equally

useful for improvement of quantitative traits in fungi, such as saccharification and

fermentation of cellulose. While a wealth of information is available on the effects of

gene deletions or overexpression of cellulolytic enzymes or fermentation pathways, there

have been no studies to characterize the variation resulting from allelic variation in

populations [11–18, 18, 19]. While gene deletions and overexpression studies can

implicate genetic elements in these processes, these manipulations increase cellular

burden due to unknown pleiotropic effects, and multiple manipulations can result in

compounding deficits [3, 5, 20].

The inherent complexity of lignocellulose metabolism allows for abundant

sources of variation that will affect CBP performance. Understanding how allelic

variation attenuates performance will lead to a more robust understanding of cellulose

metabolism and identify superior combinations of alleles for trait enhancement for CBP.

To this end, we chose to perform QTL analysis on a laboratory generated population of

the model filamentous fungus *Neurospora crassa*. 111 offspring and two parental strains

were genotyped by sequencing, evaluated for their ability to decompose cellulose and

ferment glucose, and subjected to QTL analysis. A major QTL was identified for

fermentation and multiple putative QTL's were identified for saccharification of

cellulose.

Materials and methods

Strains

Parental strains (FGSC2223 and FGSC4825) from the Fungal Genetics Stock Center

(FGSC) [26], and their cross progeny (designated as the N6 population) were grown from

long-term stock prior to each experiment on Vogel's minimal media slants (1X Vogel's

Salts, 2% Sucrose, 1.5% Agar, pH 5.8). Spore suspensions in High Glucose Liquid Media

(HGLM) (1X Vogel's salts, 2% glucose, 0.5% L-Arginine, pH 5.8) were used to generate

mycelial mats in petri plates, which were used to generate replicate mycelial pads for

each experiment using a bore punch.

Enzyme activity assay

A modified FPA assay was performed using 96-well plates as described by Camassola

and Dillon, in which secreted protein extracts were taken from wells in 6-well plates

containing 1% CMC broth (1X Vogel's salts, 1% CMC) 4 days after inoculation with 10

gauge mycelial pads [27]. Culture broth containing secreted enzyme was filtered and

centrifuged at 13.2k rpm to remove any fungal cells or debris. 50μL of supernatant was

added to 100μL of 50mM sodium acetate buffer pH 5.6 in a 96-well deep-well plate,

which was then equilibrated to 50°C for 5 min in a hot-water bath. A 5mg strip of

Whatman Grade No. 1 filter paper was submerged in the solution, and the plate was

incubated at 50°C for 60 min. After 60 min, 300μL of 3,5-dinitrosalicylic acid (DNS)

Reagent was added to stop the enzymatic reaction and visualize glucose equivalents. The

plate was incubated at 100°C for 10 min to develop color, then transferred to an ice bath

to stop color development. 100μL of Enzyme/DNS mixture was transferred to a clear-

bottom assay plate, diluted with 200μL of deionized H_2O, and absorbance was measured

at 545 nm. The concentration of reducing equivalents released was determined with

standard curves generated with glucose standards of known concentration. All samples

were performed in biological triplicates. The activity could not be quantified in

conventional Filter Paper Units because of the low concentration of secreted enzymes.

Therefore, these results were presented in the form of the concentration of reducing

equivalents released in each aliquot.

121   Fermentations and ethanol quantification

To characterize fermentation of glucose among the lab generated N6 first filial (F1)

generation and the parental strains (FGSC 2223 and FGSC4825), fermentation was

carried out in a 96-well format in deep-well plates. Replicates for each strain were

collected from mycelial mats grown from spore suspension in high glucose liquid media

(HGLM) with a 6 gauge punch and inoculated into 750μl of HGLM (2% glucose), sealed

with aluminum ThermowellTM seals, and allowed to ferment for 7 days in 12:12

Light/Dark conditions at 25°C. All samples were performed in biological quadruplicate.

After fermentation, 600 μL of media was recovered and cell debris was removed by

sequential centrifugation at 13.2k rpm for 5 min. The recovered supernatant was

aliquoted into HPLC vials for ethanol analysis by HPLC. HPLC quantitation was

performed using a Varian ProStar HPLC with a Varian ProStar Autosampler and a

Varian 356-LC Refractive Index Detector. An isocratic elution was used with an Agilent

Hi-Plex H^+ (300 mm x 7.7 mm ion-exchange column) with 5mM H_2SO_4 at a flow rate of

0.7 ml/min at 60°C. The concentration of ethanol present was determined from a standard

curve based on ethanol standards with a known concentration.

138   Qualitative Trait Loci (QTL) Analysis

To investigate the underlying sources of variation in saccharification and fermentation, a

qualitative trait loci (QTL) analysis was performed using R to identify candidate genes

contributing to the observed variation. 113 strains from a previously genotyped

population (N6 population) were screened for saccharification and fermentation as

previously described and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP's) were used to generate

a linkage map for QTL Analysis. Briefly, 50,000 SNP markers were filtered to 146

evenly distributed informative markers using Python and later Excel. First, all markers

that were not polymorphic between parents were removed, followed by any markers in

which one of the two parents was missing data. The resulting 4900 markers were

formatted for Excel for further filtering. Chi-square tests were performed for each marker

and those markers with unequal segregation among progeny (>20% disparity) were

removed, followed by markers with >10% missing data among progeny. The filtered

genotype data was combined with phenotype data from FPA and glucose fermentation

assays and formatted for R-QTL. The formatted data was imported into R-QTL as and

the create map function was used to generate a linkage map from a physical map based

on recombination frequencies. Markers were then hand curated to generate a linkage map

for all 7 chromosomes (Linkage groups) of *Neurospora crassa* with approximately 22

evenly spaced markers per chromosome.

After generating a linkage map for the N6 population, QTL scans were performed

for each phenotype. Composite interval mapping (CIM) was used to scan for single

QTL's using the maximum likelihood (em) , Haley-Knott regression (hk), and multiple

imputation (imp) methods in the R-QTL package, allowing for up to 4 covariate markers

within a 20-marker window. Likelihood odds ratio (LOD) thresholds were generated for

95% and 90% confidence intervals for each method based on 1000 permutations of the

data. Putative QTL were designated as major QTL if they explained greater than 10% of

the observed variation [28]. Peak marker positions for each chromosome (based on LOD

score) were used to identify linkage blocks between flanking markers to identify

chromosomal regions containing the suspected QTL, according to their physical

positions. These chromosomal regions were searched in the Fungi Database

(FungiDB.org) to identify all genes within the region to find candidate genes contributing

to the observed variation.

Results

To test if there exist a natural variation of the bioethanol-related processes in one

mapping population N6, we performed a QTL analyses in N6. Significant variation was

observed among the N6 population for both saccharification of cellulose and

fermentation of glucose (Fig 1). Both traits demonstrated transgressive segregation, with

21 or 58 of 111 offspring outperforming the more proficient parent and 66 or 33 of 111

underperforming the lesser parent in the FPA assay or fermentation of glucose,

respectively.

Fig 1. Natural variation in cellulolytic activity and fermentation among the N6

population. Significant variation was observed for saccharification of cellulose (left axis)

and fermentation of glucose (right axis) among the N6 population (ANOVA $p=3.99 \times 10^{-33}$

and $p=8.75 \times 10^{-17}$ respectively). Red bars represent mean and 95% confidence interval of

the mean.

Due to the low level of recombination from only 1 meiotic event in a single cross,

generating a map with evenly spaced markers required filtering a large number of

polymorphic markers, reducing the power of QTL analysis. A linkage map based on

recombination frequencies was generated from a physical map of SNP markers with

approximately 22 evenly spaced markers on each of *N. crassa's* 7 chromosomes (Fig 2).

Fig 2. Linkage map of SNP markers for the N6 population. A linkage map created in

R-QTL from physical marker positions, with approximately 22 evenly distributed

markers per chromosome. Locations and distance are measured in centimorgans (cM).

A major QTL region contributing to variation in fermentation was identified on

Linkage Group (LG) I (361 Genes - 160 Annotated, 142 Hypothetical, 59 Unspecified)

within a 90% confidence interval (CI) (p-value=0.075) (Fig 3). Additionally, minor

QTL's were observed for fermentation on LG IV (344 Genes - 158 Annotated, 134

Hypothetical, 52 Unspecified), LG VI (62 Genes - 28 Annotated, 32 Hypothetical, 2

Unspecified), and LG VII (77 Genes - 30 Annotated, 37 Hypothetical, 10 Unspecified),

however, none of these were above the LOD threshold for 90% CI.

Fig 3. QTL analysis of Fermentation of Glucose to Ethanol by the N6 population.

Composite Interval Mapping single-QTL scan for fermentation of glucose using linear

regression (EM Algorithm). The x-axis is a measure of the logarithm of the odds ratio

(LOD). Blue line represents 90% confidence interval.

Using the fitqtl function, it was observed that the 4 QTL markers account for

~26% of the observed variation in fermentation of ethanol. The QTL on LG I accounts

for 13% of the observed variation, while QTL on LG IV, VI and VII account for 4, 7, and

6% of the variation, respectively. Interestingly, marker segregation analysis revealed that

the parental genotypes contributing to greater ethanol production varied between

markers, with parental genotype A accounting for higher production at marker Nc-M878

on LG I and genotype B accounting for higher production at marker Nc-M4092 on LG VI

(Fig 4A and B).

Fig 4. Phenotype Segregation at QTL Markers for Fermentation. A) Phenotype

segregation at the QTL marker on LG I according to genotype. B) Phenotype segregation

at the QTL marker on LG VI according to genotype.

Of particular interest in the linkage block in LG I, indicated by QTL analysis for

fermentation, was a cluster of annotated glycolytic enzymes, sugar transporters, enzymes

involved in alternate fates of pyruvate, including lactate dehydrogenase enzymes, and

components of energy production machinery (Table 1). Alternatively, the only annotated

gene of interest from the QTL on LG VI was another sugar transporter, *sut-7*.

Table 1. Candidate QTL genes for ethanol fermentation.

Gene ID	Gene Name	Description	Linkage Group	Location
NCU00629	emp-3	6-phosphofructokinase	I	CM002236: 7,764,287 - 7,768,767 (-)
NCU00575	gki-2	glucokinase-2	I	CM002236: 7,953,683 - 7,958,506 (-)
NCU00742	glp-1	glycerol-3-phosphate dehydrogenase	I	CM002236: 7,360,766 - 7,362,918 (+)
NCU00720	tca-17	L-lactate dehydrogenase	I	CM002236: 7,427,034 - 7,428,944 (+)
NCU00775	tca-6	isocitrate dehydrogenase subunit 1	I	CM002236: 7,214,344 - 7,217,183 (-)
NCU00780	ldh-4	lactate dehydrogenase-4	I	CM002236: 7,202,837 - 7,204,284 (+)
NCU00606	null	short-chain alcohol dehydrogenase	I	CM002236: 7,858,582 - 7,859,522 (-)
NCU00801	cdt-1	MFS lactose permease, Sugar (and other) transporter	I	CM002236: 7,121,829 - 7,125,021 (-)
NCU00821	sut-15	sugar transporter-15	I	CM002236: 7,056,000 - 7,058,684 (-)

| NCU00809 | sut-26 | sugar transporter-26 | I | CM002236: 7,088,949 - 7,091,552 (+) |
| NCU05627 | sut-7 | sugar transporter-7 | VI | CM002241: 1,275,879 - 1,278,130 (-) |

Similarly, multiple QTL were observed for saccharification on LG II (184 Genes -

84 Annotated, 64 Hypothetical, 36 Unspecified), LG IV (184 Genes - 74 Annotated, 72

Hypothetical, 38 Unspecified), and LG VI (144 Genes – 44 Annotated, 54 Hypothetical,

16 Unspecified), although none were above the LOD threshold for 90% CI (Fig 5).

Combined, the putative QTL account for 19.5% of the total variation observed in

saccharification of cellulose. The major QTL on LG II accounts for 11% of the observed

variation, while minor QTL on LG VI and VI account for 4.6% and 5.7%, respectively.

Fig 5. QTL analysis of Saccharification of Cellulose by the N6 population. Composite

Interval Mapping single-QTL scan for FPA assay using linear regression (EM

Algorithm). The x-axis is a measure of the logarithm of the odds ratio (LOD).

Marker segregation analysis at QTL markers on LG II and LG IV revealed that

genotype B was the main contributor to increased potential for saccharification of

cellulose (Fig 6A and B). From this finding, we chose to investigate the potential for

epistatic interactions among the QTL markers for saccharification of cellulose using

R/QTL's Scantwo function. Scantwo analysis revealed that the QTL marker on LG II

(Nc-M1321) exhibited strong interactions with markers across all chromosomes, with the

strongest interactions with the adjacent marker on LG II and the putative QTL marker on

LG IV (Nc-M2984) (Fig 7A). Marker interaction plots demonstrated that the genotype B

specific increases in FPA activity only held for the interactions between QTL markers on

LG II and LG IV, but not with the interactions between adjacent markers on LG II (Fig

7B and C).

Fig 6. Phenotype Segregation at QTL Markers for Saccharification. A) Phenotype

segregation at the QTL marker on LG II according to genotype. B) Phenotype

segregation at the QTL marker on LG IV according to genotype.

Fig 7. Saccharification QTL Marker Interactions. (A) Scantwo QTL analysis for

epistatic marker interactions. Heatmap legend represents logarithm of the odds ratio

(LOD) scores for marker interactions. (B) Average phenotypes according to genotype at

sequential markers on LG II [Marker Nc-1321 is QTL marker on LG II]. (C) Average

phenotypes according to genotype at QTL markers on LG II and LG IV. Colors represent

genotype at marker indicated in legend, while letters on x-axis indicate genotype at

marker indicated on x-axis title. Error bars represent standard deviations.

Among those genes within the QTL regions for saccharification there were some

glucanase and xylanase enzymes, and transcription factors, which may have a role in

sensing or degrading cellulose. However, two major regulatory genes of interest were

also identified, *vib-1* and *xlr-1*, on LG II and LG IV respectively (Table 2).

Table 2. Candidate QTL genes involved in saccharification of cellulose.

Gene ID	Gene Name	Description	Linkage Group	Location
NCU03725	vib-1	VIB-1, variant 1	II	CM002240: 2,215,819 - 2,219,221 (+)
NCU06971	xlr-1	transcriptional activator xlnR	IV	CM002239: 4,706,112 - 4,709,560 (-)
NCU01050	gh61-4	endoglucanase II	II	CM002240: 2,769,232 - 2,770,004 (+)
NCU03641	gh3-1	Beta-glucosidase 2, variant 1	II	CM002240: 1,920,114 - 1,923,804 (+)
NCU01059	gh47-3	glycosyl hydrolase family 47 protein	II	CM002240: 2,790,429 - 2,792,645 (-)
NCU01050	gh61-4	endoglucanase II	II	CM002240: 2,769,232 - 2,770,004 (+)
NCU03657	gh63-1	mannosyl-oligosaccharide glucosidase, variant 1	II	CM002240: 1,992,478 - 1,995,662 (+)
NCU01080	gh64-1	glucanase B	II	CM002240: 2,848,665 - 2,850,629 (-)
NCU06961	gh28-2	Exopolygalacturonase	IV	CM002239: 4,669,933 - 4,671,737 (+)
NCU07326	gh43-6	hypothetical protein	IV	CM002239: 4,359,254 - 4,361,686 (-)
NCU07005	gh76-9	glycosyl hydrolase family 76-9	IV	CM002239: 4,865,028 - 4,867,282 (-)
NCU07269	gh92-2	alpha-1,2-mannosidase	IV	CM002239: 4,569,439 - 4,572,146 (-)

Discussion

In current study, we have identified that there exists a substantial variation in bioethanol-

related traits in the mapping population, N6. We also identified few major candidate

genes contributing to the observed variation, including the clustered glucose metabolism

genes on LG I for fermentation, and transcriptional regulators *vib-1* and *xlr-1* on LG II

and LG IV, respectively, for saccharification. The clustering of glucose metabolism genes

on LG I makes identification of candidate genes for further analysis more complicated,

requiring gene expression analysis for identification of those genes within the region that

are differentially regulated and contributing to the observed variation in ethanol

fermentation potential. While it is possible that an increased rate of glycolysis is

responsible for increased fermentative capacity, the presence of lactate dehydrogenase

enzymes within the QTL regions could present an alternative answer, with decreased

lactic acid fermentation resulting in increased rates of ethanol fermentation.

The presence of major metabolic regulators within QTL regions for

saccharification provide more promising QTL candidate genes. The first major gene of

interest for saccharification of cellulose is the transcription factor, vegetative

incompatibility blocked-1 (*vib-1*), located on LG II, which is involved in sensing carbon

starvation and signaling for induction of the cellulolytic response [21]. The second major

gene of interest for saccharification of cellulose indicated is the xylose degradation

regulator (*xlr-1*) located on LG IV, as it is involved in induction of the hemicellulose

response, and regulation of cellodextrin transporters and cellulose degradation regulator

clr-1, along with *vib-1*, identified in the putative QTL on LG II [12, 22].

Although *xlr-1* has not been shown to directly bind to promoters for cellulase

enzymes, it has been implicated in cellulase production. In transcriptional analyses, two

independent groups demonstrated that *xlr-1* knockouts have reduced hemicellulase and

cellulase production [12, 17]. ChIP-seq experiments further revealed that although *xlr-1*

does not directly bind to cellulase promoters it does bind to the promoter of transcription

factor *clr-1*, a major regulator of cellulase expression, and can be found bound to targets

in conjunction with *clr-1* and/or *clr-2* [12]. Furthermore, *xlr-1* is involved in the

regulation of *vib-1*, which in turn further regulates expression of *clr-1* [12]. Similarly, Cai

et al., demonstrated that *xlr-1*, not *clr-1/2*, is required for expression of cellodextrin

transporter-2 (*cdt-2*), which is involved in sensing cellulose in the environment as well as

transmembrane transport [23]. *Cdt-2* has been implicated as a major cellodextrin importer

for facilitating induction of the cellulase response, as cellulase production and growth on

cellulose are significantly reduced in *cdt-2* knockouts [23, 24]. Overexpression of *cdt-2*

has also been shown to increase cellulase and hemicellulase production under cellulose

and xylan conditions [23]. These data suggest pleiotropic or epistatic roles for *xlr-1* as a

key component for cellulase production through its role in regulating of *vib-1* and *cdt-2*

for carbon sensing and cellulase induction, *clr-1* for inducing the cellulolytic response via

clr-2, and the co-regulation of genes targeted by *clr-1/2*.

Among other filamentous fungi, *xlr-1* orthologues (*xlnR/xyr-1*) have been shown

to directly regulate cellulase expression alongside hemicellulase, although this role has

been lost in *Neurospora* [12, 15, 17, 18, 25]. However, a vestige of this role may be

evident in *xlr-1*'s indirect role in the response to cellulose through its regulation of

critical genes involved in sensing cellulose in the environment, especially through *vib-1*,

clr-1, *cdt-2* and major facilitator superfamily (MFS) sugar transporters. While RNA-seq

and ChIP-seq experiments have previously been employed to decipher the role of *xlr-1* in

N. crassa, these studies have used knockout and overexpression strains that share the

same genetic scaffold as the wild type reference. Similar studies using diverse natural

strains may demonstrate that differential expression of *xlr-1* leads to differences in

cellulolytic potential or illustrate potentially disparate roles arising from allelic variation

at the *xlr-1* locus or its targets.

Allelic variation in lignocellulose degradation regulators and their target genes

may provide unique insights into the lignocellulose response of *N. crassa*. Transcriptomic

profiling and expression analysis may reveal differential interactions between *xlr-1* and

its' targets, resulting in differential enzyme induction and degradation of cellulosic

substrates. Furthermore, expression QTL (eQTL) analysis would be important for

discerning the pleiotropic effects of *xlr-1* from its epistatic effects. Understanding the

implications of allelic effects on lignocellulose metabolism should allude to elite

genotypes for further enhancement and possible industrial applications in bioethanol

production.

Acknowledgements

338   The authors thank Drs. Sunil Shende and Charot Rodeget for curating Python scripts,

339   critical reading and insightful comments.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Supporting Information

435   **S1 File. N6_QTL_Data.** This .csv file contains genotype and phenotype information

436   used for QTL analysis in R, using the R-qtl package.

437   **S2 Text. N6 QTL script for analysis in R.** This file contains R script used for QTL

438   analysis in R, using the R-qtl package.

Figure1

Figure2

Figure3

Figure4

Figure5

Figure6

A

B Marker Interaction

C Marker Interaction

Figure7