Found in Space: Nanopore long reads enable the first complete genome assembly of a

Malaysian *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* isolate bearing the pVa plasmid associated with acute

hepatopancreatic necrosis disease

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Abstract

Using Nanopore long reads, the genome of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* MVP1, isolated from a

shrimp aquaculture pond, was assembled into 3 complete circular contigs consisting of

chromosome 1, chromosome 2 and the pVa plasmid. This plasmid contains the *pirAB^{vp}* genes

that are implicated in shrimp Hepatopancreatic Necrosis Disease(AHPND). Polishing of the long

read assembly with Illumina short reads was necessary to remove indel errors. Surprisingly,

despite its relatively small size, the complete assembly of the pVa plasmid could not be

achieved using Illumina reads due to the presence of identical repetitive elements flanking the

binary toxin genes leading to multiple contigs. Whereas these regions were fully spanned by

the Nanopore long reads resulting in a single contig. In addition, alignment of Illumina reads to

the complete genome assembly indicated there is sequencing bias as read depth was lowest in

low-GC genomic regions. Comparative genomic analysis revealed the presence of a gene

cluster coding for additional insecticidal toxins in chromosome 2 of MVP1 that may further

contribute to host pathogenesis pending functional validation. Scanning of all publicly available

V. parahaemolyticus genomes revealed the presence of a single AinS-family quorum-sensing

system in this species that can be targeted for future microbial management.

Introduction

  Vibrio parahaemolyticus is a marine gram-negative *Enterobacteriaceae* that has been recognized as an important pathogen affecting commercially-relevant shrimp species such as the giant tiger prawn (*Penaeus monodon*) and the Pacific white shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*) [1-3]. In recent years, *V. parahaemolyticus* has been linked to the Acute Hepatopancreatic Necrosis Disease (AHPND) [4, 5]. An AHPND-causing *V. parahaemolyticus* isolate is thought to produce a homolog of the insecticidal *Photorhabdus* insect-related (Pir) binary toxin that induces prolonged damage to the shrimp tissue [2]. AHPND preferentially affects shrimp post-larvae or juveniles with nearly 100% mortality rate within 30-35 days of post-stocking [6]. Studies suggested that AHPND originated from China in 2009 and subsequently spread to South East Asia [7]. In Malaysia, AHPND was first reported in 2011 where it still persists in shrimp farms [8].

  The implementation of effective microbial management in aquaculture requires genomic surveillance data that can provide accurate information regarding the geographical origin, virulence factors and antibiotic resistance of a sequenced microbial strain [9]. In Malaysia, this remains challenging due to the paucity of available genomic resources for the relevant pathogens. To date, a majority of the microbial genomic studies in Malaysia consist of single draft genome reports mostly focusing on clinical pathogens without substantial comparative genomics [10-13]. However, recent years have seen a modest increase in the number of studies with more comprehensive sequencing dataset and analysis [14-16]. For example, Yan *et al* sequenced and assembled the draft genomes of 40 Malaysian *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* isolates associated with shrimp aquaculture and performed comparative genomics of more than Asian 100 *V. parahaemolyticus* genomes from public databases. *In-silico* multi-locus sequencing typing and phylogenomic analyses indicate that several Malaysian *V. parahaemolyticus* isolates belong to previously undescribed sequence types and genomic lineages [17] and recommended further studies be undrtaken.

  The *pirAB*^*vp* genes coding for AHPND-causing binary toxins are localized on a 70-kb pVa plasmid [2]. Surprisingly, despite the small size of the plasmid relative to the chromosomal genome, a complete *de novo* assembly of the pVa plasmid using Illumina-only short reads has not been achieved to date. Recent studies suggested that this is due to the presence of repetitive elements on the pVa plasmid that are longer than the Illumina read length [18]. As a result, *pirAB*-containing contigs that were assembled from Illumina reads are generally short

with limited gene content, precluding detailed analysis of the *pirAB* gene neighbourhood and

their stability in the plasmidome[19]. *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* isolate MVP1 is one of the first

pirAB^{Vp} -harboring *V. parahaemolyticus* isolated from Malaysia to have its genome sequenced[11].

Isolate MVP1 was previously sequenced on a Illumina MiSeq followed by *de novo* genome

assembly using the SPAdes assembler. While the *pirAB^{vp}* genes could be identified in the draft

genome, the assembly was problematic as these were localized on a short contig flanked by

small fragments of a transposase gene.

Recent years have seen the democratization of long-read sequencing enabled by

Nanopore technology. In contrast to another popular long-read sequencing platform, PacBio,

Nanopore sequencing requires minimal lab footprint and very low capital investment.

Importantly, it is the first sequencing technology that allows native sequencing thus eliminating

sequencing bias associated with the activity of *Taq*-polymerase. Long reads have been utilized

for *de novo* genome assembly in two distinct ways. First, long reads can be used directly in

genome assembly followed by polishing with Illumina short reads to improve consensus

accuracy[20]. An alternative approach utilizes long-reads to reorder and link contigs that were

initially assembled from Illumina reads[21, 22]. While the final assembly produced with this hybrid

approach is highly accurate, the contiguity of the assembly is dependent on the quality of the

initial Illumina assembly[23].

Leveraging on the availability of Illumina dataset for isolate MVP1, we aimed to improve

on the original genome assembly[11] through the addition of 40× Nanopore read coverage. We

first performed a Nanopore-led assembly using the long-read Flye assembler[24] followed by

polishing with Illumina reads. In addition, we generated a hybrid assembly using Unicycler

assembler[23]. Although both methods produced a complete circular pVa plasmid sequence with

intact *pirAB^{vp}*, complete chromosome assembly was only achieved with the Nanopore-led Flye

assembly. This superior assembly provide new insight into the genomic features of *V.*

parahaemolyticus MVP1 and will allow a greater understanding of host pathogenicity through

comparative genomic analysis with selected *V. parahaemolyticus* isolates.

<u>Materials and Methods</u>

Nanopore sequencing

Sample collection, gDNA isolation and Illumina sequencing of *V. parahaemolyticus* isolate

MVP1 have been previously reported[11]. For Nanopore sequencing, 1 µg of unfragmented gDNA

was processed using the now obsolete Nanopore SQK-NSK007 library preparation kit.

Sequencing was subsequently performed on an R9 flowcell attached to a MinION device for 48

hours. Base-calling of the produced raw fast5 files used Guppy v3.1 (high accuracy mode).

De novo genome assembly and genome polishing

Illumina-only assembly and hybrid assembly incorporating high-quality (q>7) Nanopore long

reads were performed using Unicycler v.0.4.7 [23]. Only contigs equal or larger than 1,000 bp

were retained for subsequent analyses. A long-read only *de novo* assembly was also performed

with Flye v2.4.2 utilizing similar Nanopore sequencing data[24]. Illumina polishing of the Flye

assembly used the unicycler polish tool in Unicycler v.0.4.7 that performed multiple rounds of

bwa-mem-based Illumina read alignment to the assembly followed by polishing with Pilon

v1.22[25]. Genome completeness was assessed with BUSCO v3 (Gammaproteobacteria odb9)

based on the predicted whole proteome from each genome assembly [26, 27].

Genome annotation and comparisons

Automated annotation of the whole-genome was carried out using the NCBI Prokaryotic

Genome Annotation Pipeline (PGAP)[28]. The translated coding sequences generated from

PGAP were subject to additional functional annotation using InterProScan. Intra-chromosomal

structural variations and sequence similarity were visualized with BLAST ring image generator

(BRIG) using the blastN (e-value = 0.001 cutoff). Sequencing depth was also calculated in

BRIG based on the BAM alignment file generated from the bwa-mem mapping of Illumina

paired-end reads to the whole-genome[29].

Identification and phylogenetic analysis of LuxM, OpaM and AinS proteins

Vibrio proteins containing the InterPro signature IPR035304 corresponding to the AinS-family N-

acyl-homoserine-lactone autoinducer synthase were downloaded from the uniprot database [30]

on the 7th of November 2019 and clustered at 98% amino acid identity cutoff using cd-hit v4.6 [31].

The protein clusters were subsequently aligned with mafft v7.31 [32]("--maxiterate 1000 –

localpair" setting) followed by maximum likelihood tree construction using FastTree v2.1 [33].

Calculation and visualization of pairwise protein sequence divergence used SDTv1.2 [34]. In

addition, to confirm the absence of the LuxI-type autoinducer synthase homolog in the *Vibrio*

parahaemolyticus proteomes, additional domain search specifically for PF00765 (LuxI

autoinducer synthase domain) was performed followed by subsequent InterProScan validation

as previously described [35].

Results and discussion:

Chromosomal assembly enabled by Nanopore long reads

A total of 231 megabases of Nanopore data contained in 30,315 reads (N50 = 10,908 bp) were

produced from a single Nanopore MINION run on the discontinued R9 flowcell. The base-called

Nanopore fastq file has been deposited in the SRA database under the accession code

SRX6759854. An initial Unicycler assembly using previously generated Illumina reads

(SRX6759853) yielded a relatively fragmented genome (198 contigs; N50 length = 54,109 bp).

Supplementing the assembler with approximately 40 x coverage of Nanopore long reads led a

substantial improvement in the Unicycler assembly contiguity (9 contigs; N50 length =

1,738,848 bp). Of the 9 assembled contigs, one of them was flagged as "complete" with a contig

length of 70kb. On the other hand, the Flye assembly using only Nanopore reads produced 3

contigs all flagged as "complete and circular". Despite generating the most contiguous

assembly, the initial Flye assembly has the worst BUSCO score with 37.4% BUSCO single-copy

and 45.1% fragmented BUSCO genes. Polishing of the Flye assembly with Illumina paired-end

reads restored the genome completeness to a level that is comparable to the hybrid and

Illumina-only assemblies (Table 1). The high percentage of fragmented genes in long-read-only

assembly is usually a result of erroneous frameshifts from indel sequencing errors in the long

reads[20]. Although higher coverage of long read may lead to an increase the consensus

accuracy, this wil unlikely that of Illumina-polished assembly due to systematic errors. As a

result, polishing of long-read assembly using Illumina short reads can be considered as a cost-

effective but less convenient approach for producing highly accurate and contiguous microbial

genome assembly.

Reduced Illumina sequencing depth in several low-GC genomic regions

169 The alignment of Illumina reads to the final chromosomal assembly revealed substantial lower i

170 sequencing depths in genomic regions with low GC-content (<30%) (Figure 1). Some of these

171 regions are unique to MVP1 and may risk being over looked in the Illumina-only assembly at

172 lower sequencing coverage. For example, less than 5x sequencing depth was observed in the

173 region 3,240 to 3,280 kb that contain various putative carbohydrate metabolism genes that are

174 unique to isolate MVP1 in this current genomic comparison. The incorporation of PCR during

175 library preparation is known to reduce the representation of high-AT genomic regions due to the

176 polymerase amplification bias towards GC-balanced fragments[36]. Reduced Illumina sequencing

177 depth in high-AT genomic regions affecting biological interpretation has also been reported in

178 several crustacean mitogenomic libraries as both the phylogenetically informative control region

179 and 16S rRNA genes are relatively AT-rich[37, 38]. Depending on the amount of DNA available for

180 sequencing, a few modifications to the Illumina library preparation step can be considered such

181 as PCR-free preparation for sample with high starting DNA (> 100 ng) and reduced PCR cycle

182 coupled with higher (>100× genome coverage) sequencing depth for samples with low starting

183 DNA.

186 **Multiple localization of IS5 family transposase genes in the complete genomes of pVa-**

187 **carrying *V. parahaemolyticus***

189 In the Illumina-only assembly, the pVa plasmid was assembled into 3 contigs (Contig24: 63.4

190 kb, Contig164: 3.4kb; Contig198: 1 kb). Contig198 contains a 921-bp gene that codes for an

191 intact IS5 family transposase and could be aligned equally well to two genomic regions flanking

192 the *pirAB^{Vp}* genes in the complete plasmid assembly (Figure 2). This observation can be

193 explained by the inability of Illumina reads to fully span the repeats thus causing them to be

194 collapsed into a single contig. As a result, the localization of *pirAB^{Vp}* on the pVa plasmid cannot

195 be confirmed from an Illumina-only assembly. In contrast the entire *pirAB^{Vp}* genes and their

196 flanking transposase genes were fully covered by a number of Nanopore long reads enabling

197 the complete assembly of the pVa plasmid in addition to supporting the localization of *pirAB^{Vp}*

198 genes on the pVa plasmid. Nanopore read depth compared to the Illumina one, is relatively

199 even across the aligned genomic region, which consistent with the absence of PCR bias in the

200 Nanopore library preparation.

201   The minor structural variations previously reported in *pirAB^{Vp}* -containing region suggest

202 that these genes are not stably maintained and are prone to transposition mediated by the

flanking IS5 family transposase genes[39]. Interestingly, the localization of this IS5 family

transposase gene is not specific to just the pVa plasmid. Local nucleotide similarity search of

this transposase gene against the complete MVP genome revealed three additional perfect hits

(100% query coverage and 100% nucleotide identity) in each of the chromosomal genome

(Figure 1). The localization of these additional IS5 family transposase in both chromosome 1

and chromosome 2 further raises the possibility of the IS5 transposase-flanked *pirAB^Vp* genes

being integrated into the chromosomal region[40, 41].

Structural variations in the MVP1 genome

Chromosome 2 of Isolate MPV1 consists of a 160 kb genomic region that is mostly absent in

five out of six pVa plasmid-harboring *V. parahaemolyticus* isolates included in this comparative

genomic analysis. Functional annotation of the genes located in this region revealed two gene

clusters that may further contribute to host pathogenicity in addition to the binary Pir-like toxins

on the pVa plasmid. The first gene cluster located from 1,822,499 to 1,836,895 bp in

chromosome 2 consists of three relatively large genes (Gene Locus Tag: BSR23_26145,

BSR23_26150 and BSR23_26155) coding for another type of putative insecticidal toxins.

Functional annotation using InterProScan revealed the presence of protein domains commonly

associated with the toxin-complex (Tc) toxins (Figure 3). In addition, protein modeling also

indicated their high structural homology to their respective homologous toxin components

(Supplemental Files 1-3). In *Xenorhabdus nematophilus*, the three toxin components formed a

native toxin complex and the ingestion of this complex led to growth inhibition of two different

insect larvae, *Helicoverpa zea* and *Heliothis virescens* [42]. In addition, further tests showed that

the native toxin complex is capable of binding to solubilized gut membranes of *H. zea* larvae in

addition to inducing pore formation in black lipid membranes [42]. Given the functional

resemblance of such toxins to the Pir-like binary toxins, the presence of all three genes coding

for the complete set of insecticidal Tc toxins in *V. parahaemolyticus* may contribute to mortality

without AHPND lesions in shrimps as previously reported [43].

Interestingly, isolate MVP1 also harbor a *fuc* operon that is not commonly present in

members of this species (Supplemental Table 1). The presence of this operon in MVP1

translates into the genomic potential for the internalization of fucose for incorporation into the

capsular polysaccharides or bacterial glycoproteins. While it is also possible that the *fuc* operon

may contribute to improved utilization of fucose as an energy source, Williams *et al* did not

observe a greater capacity to utilize fucose in an EMS-causing *V.parahaemolyticus* isolate 13-
028/A3 [44].

High prevalence and divergence of the LuxM/OpaM/AinS family autoinducer synthesis
proteins among *Vibrio* spp.

NCBI annotation of MVP1 proteome revealed the presence of only the LuxM/OpaM-type AHL
synthase. An in-house HMMsearch for the LuxI autoinducer synthase domain (PFAM signature:
PF00765) in the MVP1 proteome also did not reveal significant hits, indicating that MVP1
employs a single system for the biosynthesis of AHL signal. Additional uniprot query search of
"PF00765 AND Vibrio parahaemolyticus" on 14th November 2019, showed only one positive hit
across all currently available *V. parahaemolyticus* proteomes. However, further investigation of
the positive hit, AAY51_09590, revealed that this belonged to a *Citrobacter* spp. previously
misclassified as *V. parahaemolyticus* [45]. In contrast, *V. harveyi* was shown to utilize at least two
quorum-sensing systems e.g. LuxI that synthesizes 3-oxo-C6-HSL and the AinS that
synthesizes C8-HSL [46]. Despite being classified as members of the same family for sharing the
similar protein domain signature, AinS exhibited a substantially lower pairwise amino acid
divergence (~ 30%) in comparison to LuxM and OpaM. By rooting the LuxM/OpaM phylogenetic
tree with the AinS from *Allivibrio fischeri* as the outgroup, we observed a strongly supported
monophyletic cluster consisting of the functionally validated LuxM and OpaM in addition to their
homologs from other *Vibrio* spp (Figure 4A). The pairwise amino acid identity among members
in this LuxM/OpaM clade averages around 50% (Figure 4B), consistent with the relatively short
branch length among members of the clade.
259   In the Indian white shrimps (*Fenneropenaues indicus*), the co-injection of a pathogenic
V. parahaemolyticus strain DHAP1 and purified recombinant AHL lactonase, AiiA, reduced
Vibrio viable counts and biofilm development in the shrimp intestine, suggesting the role of AHL-
mediated quorum-sensing system in host colonization [47]. While the presence of intact *opaM* in
several sequenced *V. parahaemolyticus* isolates supports their ability to accumulate AHL and
engage in quorum-sensing activity, this is best validated using a simple biosensor or LC/MS
approach that can not only verify the AHL producing phenotype but also provide insight into the
structural diversity of AHL signals [48-50]. Furthermore, elucidating the role of *opaM* in mediating
host colonization and pathogenesis among AHPND-causing *V. parahaemolyticus* via
transposon mutagenesis will be instructive.

Conclusions

Using approximately 40× genome coverage of Nanopore long reads, we produced the first

chromosome-scale genome assembly of a Malaysian *pirAB*^{Vp}-bearing *V. parahaemolyticus*

isolate. Although the genome completeness of the initial Flye assembly was relatively poor,

polishing of the genome assembly with Illumina reads improved its completeness to a level that

is comparable to a high-quality microbial genome assembly. Structural variations identified from

genomic comparisons provide new insights into the genomic features of *V. parahaemolyticus*

MVP1 that may be associated with host colonization and pathogenicity.

Data Availability

The complete genome of Vibrio parahaemoyticus MVP1 has been deposited in NCBI GenBank

under the accession number CP04321-CP043423. Raw Illumina reads and basecalled

Nanopore Reads have also been deposited in NCBI Sequence Read Archive under the

BioProject PRJNA355061.

Table 1. Statistics and BUSCO completeness assessment of the *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*

MVP1 assembly

Assembler (input data)	Genome Length (bp)	GC%	# contigs	N50 (bp)	BUSCO (gammaproteobacteria_odb9, n=452)			
					Single-copy	Duplicated	Fragmented	Missing
Unicycler (Illumina)	5,167,326	45.47%	198	54,109	98.9	0.9	0.2	0
Unicycler (Hybrid)	5,378,063	45.34%	9	1,738,848	98.9	0.9	0.2	0
Flye (Nanopore)	5,405,284	45.23%	3	3,456,517	37.4	0	45.1	17.5

Flye+Pilon (Nanopore+Illumina)	5,389,211	45.30%	3	3,446,010	99.1	0.7	0.2	0

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Genomic comparisons of pVa plasmid-harboring *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*. Left, *V.*
parahaemolyticus MVP1 chromosome 1 compared against 5 other *V. parahaemolyticus*
chromosome 1. Right, *V. parahaemolyticus* MVP1 chromosome 2 compared against 5 other *V.*
parahaemolyticus chromosome 2. The innermost rings show GC content while the second
innermost rings show Illumina sequencing depth along the genome (blue). The remaining rings
indicate BLAST comparisons of other V. parahaemolyticus genomes against MVP genome
assembly. Arrows indicate genes of interest and were labeled with the predicted protein names.

Figure 2. Alignment of Illumina-assembled contigs, Illumina and Nanopore reads to the
annotated *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* MVP1 pVa plasmid sub-region containing the *pirAB*[Vp] genes.
Direction of arrow in the annotation indicates transcription orientation. Blue and red arrows in
the Nanopore read alignment indicate forward and reverse strands, respectively.

Figure 3. InterProScan identification of conserved protein domains in the putative toxin complex
family proteins coded by three linked genes located on Chromosome 2 of *Vibrio*
parahaemolyticus MVP1.

Figure 4. (A) Maximum likelihood tree depicting the evolutionary relationships of AinS-like family
protein clusters among *Vibrio* spp. Number after the "=" sign in each tip label indicates the
number of proteins represented by the cluster. Node were colored according to the SH-like local
support values and branch lengths indicate number of substitutions per site. (B) Pairwise
identity matrix of the identified AinS-like family proteins in *Vibrio* spp.

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BSR23_26145 Chromosome 2: 1,821,846-1,822,496

Detailed signature matches

IPR022385	Rhs repeat-associated core

▶

IPR041508	Toxin complex C-like repeat

▶ (TE_toxin_rep)

no IPR	Unintegrated signatures

▶
▶ (FAMILY N...)
▶ (PRO...)

BSR23_26150 Chromosome 2: 1,824,874-1,829,145

Detailed signature matches

IPR018003	Insecticidal toxin complex/plasmid virulence protein

▶ PF03538 (VRP1)

IPR041079	Neuraminidase-like domain

▶ PF18413 (Neuraminidase)

IPR041568	TcA receptor binding domain

▶ PF18518 (TcA_RBD)

IPR040840	Tc toxin complex TcA, C-terminal TcB-binding domain

▶ PF18276 (TcA_TcB_BD)

BSR23_26155 Chromosome 2: 1,829,195-1,836,895

Detailed signature matches

IPR003284	Salmonella virulence plasmid 65kDa B protein

▶ PR01341 (SALSPVBPROT)
▶ PF03534 (SpvB)

IPR022045	Insecticide toxin TcdB middle/N-terminal

▶ PF12256 (TcdB_toxin...)

IPR022044	Insecticide toxin TcdB middle/C-terminal

▶ PF12255 (TcdB_toxin...)

no IPR	Unintegrated signatures

▶ SSF69318 (Integrin ...)