Characterization of the biofilm landscape of *Bacillus subtilis* by spatial microproteomics

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ABSTRACT

Bulk proteomics has been demonstrated to differentiate subpopulations within bacterial colonies, yet advanced analyses by mass spectrometry imaging (MSI) hold even greater promise for the future. This technology can enable high-throughput spatial phenotyping that can reshape biological discovery by providing visualization of components of various biomolecular mechanisms. With high mass resolving power and high spatial resolution analyses being routine, we can confidently enable intact protein imaging directly from samples with minimal preparation. Pairing those analyses with bulk experimental libraries can provide high confidence in annotations of post-translational modifications (PTMs) and truncations. Revealing PTM localization within the samples unlocks a direct window into unknown biology at the microscale. However, top-down proteomics (TDP) is not commonplace for microbial species, largely due to challenges in identifying detected peptides and proteins; considering the theoretical proteome of even the well-studied model bacterium *Bacillus subtilis* was only partially mapped recently. With little still known about the form and function of many of these proteins – let alone proteoforms, where PTMs and truncations of the same protein may possess unique physiological roles – there is a wealth of work to be done. Here we jointly apply TDP and MSI to describe the microscale spatial proteomic landscape within *B. subtilis* and further demonstrate the feasibility of detecting differentiated subpopulations through proteoforms across the biofilm landscape.

INTRODUCTION:

Bacillus subtilis biofilms form distinct spatial microenvironments where unique biological functions such as sporulation, colonization, and metabolite production are governed by underlying mechanisms.[1,2] The proteins within these biochemical mechanisms can be used as proxies to localize cellular phenotypes from the central core to the outer periphery of a colony.[3] Not only are these subpopulations spatiotemporally dynamic, but they directly result from differential genetic expression,[4] with mutations driving further heterogeneous responses.[5] Using *B. subtilis* as a model organism for biofilm development,[6] we conducted TDP and matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization (MALDI) mass spectrometry imaging (MSI) on thin sections of the biofilm to explore the intact protein landscape revealing differentiated

subpopulations.[7,8] While MSI has been broadly applied within microbiology for the detection

of primary and secondary metabolites, and highly abundant lipids.[9] The detection of intact

proteins distributions hold unique promise;[10] where species, subpopulations, and molecular

phenotypes can be identified by differentially abundant proteins within unique biochemical

mechanisms in a manner similar to spatial biotyping.[11]

Similar works have focused upon MALDI-MSI of small toxic peptides within *B. subtilis*

(e.g., sporulation delay protein, SDP; sporulation killing factor, SKF; and epipeptide, EPE),[12]

which traced cannibalistic cell-types in wild-type and knockout mutants. In addition to MALDI-

MSI mapping the localization of these cannibalistic toxins, further insight has been drawn into

the function and interdependence of these toxic peptides in the control of sporulation and

further biofilm development through genetic knockouts.[13] Demonstrating that in parallel

application MALDI-MSI is an enabling tool for microbiology, where the direct localization of

lipids, primary and secondary metabolites, and toxic peptides enhance more traditional

spectroscopy completed on cultured biofilms. Here, we demonstrate discovery-based efforts

for contextualization of spatial dependencies of intercellular and extracellular proteins,[14]

providing the location of larger abundant proteomic mechanisms responsible for cellular

differentiation and biofilm production.[10]

METHODOLOGY:

Thin Bacterial Biofilms Production for Imaging

For MALDI-MSI *B. subtilis* were cultured on MSgg growth medium as previously described,[2]

and a thin sectioning protocol was applied as described in greater depth elsewhere.[15,16]

Briefly, the biofilm agar blocks were quartered and transferred to molds (22-363-553, Fisher

Scientific). These molds were then snap frozen at -80 °C, overlaid with 4% (wt/vol) agarose

(Lonza Bioscience) and frozen at -80 °C for 15 min. Sectioning was completed as previously

reported using a Cryostar NX70 cryotome (Thermo Scientific, Runcorn, UK) and cross-sections

were taken at 20 μm thickness onto ITO slides (Bruker Daltonics, Bremen, DE). These sections

were stored at -80 °C until analysis.

Top-Down Proteomics of B. subtilis

For TDP, *B. subtilis* was cultured similarly to as previously described before on MSgg agar

plates.(1) After 48 hours of growth isolated *B. subtilis* colonies were scraped with a cell scraper

and collected in Eppendorf tubes. These tubes were subsequently frozen

and lyophilized. The lyophilized sample was bead beaten with a 3 mm tungsten carbide bead at

1,400 c.p.m. for 2 min using a HG-600 Geno/Grinder 2010 Tissue Homogenizer and

Cell Lyser (Cole Palmer, Metuchen, NJ), using cooled cryoblocks to inhibit sample

heating. Briefly, powdered sample was resuspended in Type 1 water and cold (−20 °C)

chloroform:methanol mixture (2:1, *v/v*) in chloroform-compatible 2 mL Sorenson MulTI

SafeSeal microcentrifuge tubes (Sorenson Bioscience, Salt Lake City, UT). The sample was vortex

mixed for 1 min, followed by incubation on ice for 5 min, then vortexed again for 1 min and

centrifuged at 10,000 g at 4 °C for 10 min. The top and bottom phases were discarded. The

remaining protein interlayer was washed with cold 100% methanol, vortexed, and centrifuged

for 5 min to pellet the protein. Supernatant was discarded. The protein interlayer was

resuspended in 8 M urea prepared in 50 mM ammonium bicarbonate (pH 8). Sample was

cleaned up using Amicon Ultra centrifugal filtration tubes, 100K followed by 10k molecular

weight cutoff (Millipore, Bedford, MA). Protein concentration was determined using a

bicinchoninic acid (BCA) assay (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) and samples were diluted

to 0.5 µg/µL in water with 0.1% FA.

Liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (LC-MS) was completed on both an Exploris 480

Orbitrap MS (Thermo Scientific, Bremen, DE) and a Lumos Tribrid Orbitrap MS (Thermo

Scientific, San Jose, CA) injecting protein onto a NanoAcquity (Waters, Millford, MA) with dual

pumps configuration. Binary solvents for mobile phase (MP) A and B were 0.2% formic acid in

water (MPA), and 0.2% formic acid in acetonitrile (MPB) for both pumps. The stationary phase

material for in-house packed reversed phase LC columns was C2 particle (SMTC2MEB2-3-300,

Separation Methods Technologies, Newark, DE). 10 µl injections were loaded onto a short trap

column (150 µm i.d., 5 cm long) and desalted with a flow of 3 µl/min with 5% MPB for 5 min.

Then the trap column was switched to the analytical column (100 µm i.d., 50 cm long) with flow

rate of 0.3 µl/min. Separation gradient started at 5% MPB to 15% MPB over 1 minute and was

linearly ramped to 90% MPB over 89 min.

The Exploris 480 Orbitrap MS (Thermo Scientific, Bremen, DE) was operated with the following

source parameters including a spray voltage of 2.2 kV, transfer capillary temperature of 275 °C,

and ion funnel RF amplitude set to 60%. The instrument was set to "intact protein" application

mode with standard pressures, and data was collected as full profile. MS1 acquisitions were

collected with 5 microscans at a mass resolution setting of 120k over a scan range of m/z 500 to

2000 with a normalized AGC target of 400%. Data dependent MS2 scans were collected with 2

microscans over a scan range of m/z 300 to 2000 with a normalized AGC target of 1000%. MS2

used a dynamic exclusion after 1 time over a duration of 40s with an isolation window of ±2

m/z with fragmentation by HCD at a fixed normalized collision energy of 35%.

The Lumos Tribrid Orbitrap MS (Thermo Scientific, San Jose, CA) was operated with the

following source parameters including a spray voltage of 2.2 kV, transfer capillary temperature

of 275 °C, and ion funnel RF amplitude set to 50%. The instrument was set to "peptide"

application mode with standard pressures, and data was collected as full profile. MS1

acquisitions were collected with 3 microscans at a mass resolution setting of 120k over a scan

range of m/z 400 to 2000 with a normalized AGC target of 200%. Data dependent MS2 scans

were collected with 1 microscans over a scan range of m/z 300 to 2000 with a normalized AGC

target of 500% and maximum injection time of 118 ms. MS2 used a dynamic exclusion after 1

time over a duration of 60s with an isolation window of ±1 m/z with fragmentation by HCD at a

stepped collision energy of 20V, 30V, and 40V.

MS instrument ".RAW" files were first converted into ".mzML" format with MSConvert before

processing with the open-search software TopPIC Suite (version 1.4.13).[17] For TopFD

deconvolution, a precursor window of 1 and 2 m/z corresponding to the Lumos and Exploris

respectively, error tolerance of 0.02 m/z, MS1 signal to noise ratio (SNR) of 3, MS2 SNR of 1,

maximum charge of 30, and maximum monoisotopic mass of 50,000 Da were applied. Specific

settings for the TopPIC search included an error tolerance of 15 ppm, PrSM cluster tolerance of

3.2 Da, FDR of 0.01, and a maximum and minimum unknown mass shift of ±500 Da, and a

maximum of one unknown mass shift.

Preparation for Spatial Proteomics

Slides were prepared for MALDI by vacuum desiccating at -15 inHg for 30 min with subsequent

washing in a two-part series for prior to matrix deposition. Washing was completed with

submersion in a solution of 70% ethanol for 30 sec, then submersion in a solution of 100%

ethanol for 30 sec. After which, the biofilms were then dried by a gentle stream of nitrogen for

30 sec. A M5 Sprayer (HTX Technologies, Chapel Hill, NC) was then used to spray the surface

with 5 crisscross (CC) passes of a solution of 5% acetic acid (v/v) in 50% ethanol with a flow rate

of 150 µL/min, a nozzle temperature of 30.0 °C, and the velocity set to 1,250 mm/min with 10

PSI of nitrogen gas to boost proteoform signal intensity.[18] A 5 s drying period was added

between each of the passes with a 3 mm track spacing, the same sprayer was then immediately

used to deposit 15 mg/mL 2,5-DHA in 90% acetonitrile with 0.2% TFA. Only the supernatant of

the dissolved matrix was sprayed after sonication and centrifugation. The flow rate of the

matrix was 150 µL/min with a nozzle temperature of 30.0 °C, and the velocity was set to 1,300

mm/min with 10 PSI of nitrogen gas. The matrix was applied with a 2 mm track spacing and a

crisscross pattern, and the matrix coverage was calculated to be 277 $\mu g/cm^2$. The matrix was

then recrystallized with 5% acetic acid solution (v/v) in water at 38.5 °C and dried for 3.5 min,

using an apparatus similar to that previously reported.[19]

MALDI Mass Spectrometry Imaging of Sectioned Biofilms

An elevated pressure (EP) MALDI source with an atmospheric pressure ionization inlet

(Spectroglyph, LLC, Kennewick, WA) was mounted on a research grade Q Exactive HF Orbitrap

MS (Thermo Scientific, Bremen, DE), this instrument was upgraded with ultrahigh mass range

(UHMR) boards and operated under custom privileges licenses. This platform is described in

greater depth elsewhere,[20] briefly, the MALDI source was operated at 7.8 Torr, with fore

vacuum of the spectrometer at 1.0 mbar, and an ultrahigh vacuum adjusted to 2.54e-10 mbar

with argon gas. Spectra were acquired over a *m/z* range of 2,000 to 20,000, and acquisitions

were carried out with preset resolution of 240k, resulting in a transient of 512 ms, and

observed mass resolving power of 45k at *m/z* 6,725. The laser diode of the Explorer One 349

nm Nd:YLF (Spectra-Physics, Milpitas, California) was set to output an average of 1.1 µJ/pulse at

1 kHz, and ion were accumulated for 500 ms – resulting in 500 laser shots per pixel. Imaging

was carried out at 20 µm spatial resolution, and the resultant desorption of the crater

measured by light microscopy was found to be roughly 12 μm × 15 μm, which did not

oversample the surface.

Visualization was completed with automatic import of the .RAW acquisition file and .xml of the

pixel coordinates into SCiLS Lab Pro (v.2021c, Bruker Daltonics, Bremen, DE). Ion images were

generated by extracting singular isotopic peaks for the proteoforms. For proteoform

assignments, an experimental library of proteoforms from TDP LC-MS/MS were used as custom

databases and isotopic profiles were manually matched and mass shifts annotated. Mozaic

(v.2023.4.0.b3, Spectroswiss, Lausanne, CH) was used to average the 34,698 acquisitions within

the MALDI-MSI experiment, after averaging the spectra was baseline corrected using the

model-free method with a median size of 250, and other default parameters for number of

points, sigma, iterations and level (11, 5, 1, 1). A developed package IsoMatchMS, was used to

generate candidate matches based on isotopic distribution matching, this package is explained

in greater depth elsewhere.[21] Briefly, an entire average of the acquisition file was exported as

a .mzML file after processing. This file was imported with annotations and accurate masses with

<5 ppm error were considered, and further filtering of the matches occurred with Pearson

correlation score of ≥0.7. Further manual verification of annotated and non-annotated

proteoforms were searched against multiple adducts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Through spatial proteomics we provide direct insights into differentiated

subpopulations. Previous analyses of these samples had identified distinct distributions of lipids

and surfactants,[2] and here an optimized sample preparation which included mild ethanol

fixation enabled the detection of intact protein distributions **(Figure 1a)**, and further desalting

was found to not be necessary unlike within mammalian and plant tissues previously analyzed

on this platform, or within colonies dried directly onto ITO slides and analyzed from the top

down [22]. Analyses of these samples were enabled by coupling a MALDI source to a research

grade UHMR HF Orbitrap MS,[18] this combination yields rich spectra with high intensities of

intact proteins and proteoforms, up to 20 kDa in mass **(Figure 1r)**, although the highest

detected species from the biofilm was roughly 13.5 kDa.[23] Subsequently, we performed semi-

automated annotation and evaluation of the proteomic spatial heterogeneity within the

biofilm. Overall, more than 285 unique isotopic envelopes from proteoforms were detected

(Figure 1r) and can be annotated via UniProt or experimentally generated TDP libraries –

enabling precise annotation of PTMs and truncations.[24] Manual validation was performed

after isotopic matching,[21] and sample-specific TDP libraries were imperative for the

successful annotation of ion images.

Of the proteoform distributions, characteristic toxic peptides (e.g., SDP) are seen within

the active interior of the biofilm **(Figure 1c)**,[25] while sporulating proteins **(Figure 1i, 1k, 1m)**

and further uncharacterized proteins **(Figure 1o, 1q)** were found within the outer periphery.

The presence of SDP **(Figure 1c)** in the central core of the colony can be indicative of

cannibalistic cells recycling older generations, but the absence within the outer periphery and

presence of characteristic sporulating proteins highly localized to the outermost periphery

(Figure 1i, 1k, 1m), suggests the biofilm is in early phases of sporulation. Stage V sporulation

protein S can be overcome by other proteins or mutation,[26] but through colocalization of

small acid-soluble spore (SASP) protein J **(Figure 1k)**, the presence of sporulated cells can be

confirmed where SASPs are roughly 20% of the outer spore coat of *B. subtilis.*[27] These

findings are supported by recent reports of cannibalistic toxins tend to prolong and delay

sporulation,[13] further demonstrating the utility of the detection of intact proteoforms for

spatial subtyping of populations.

TDP also detected sporulating delaying protein (SdpC) and immunity protein (SdpI)

(Supplementary Material), which offers immunity to cells through the sequestration of

SDP.[28] Demonstrating that tandem TDP of microbial colonies can complement MALDI-MSI

analyses with coverage of larger proteoforms. When paired with laser capture microdissection

(LCM), spatial/sub-sample specific proteoform information can be integrated readily.[29]

Additionally, if paired with fluorescence microscopy a robust multimodal pipeline to validate

subpopulations and phenotypes is created. Several ribosomal proteins, including large subunits

(Figure 1b, 1f, 1l, 1n) were also routinely annotated with initiator methionine truncations, and

small subunits **(Figure 1h, 1j)** were also located throughout the main body of the biofilm. The

broad detection of these ribosomal proteins lends credence to spatial biotyper analyses,[11]

where speciation and localization of microbial cultures is feasible based on proteomic

signatures. If these cocultured colonies of bacteria and fungi are analyzed, or when working

upon mutant knockouts or bioengineered strains, this information can be vital to understanding

intermicrobial colonization and organization while further informing upon the cellular

processes and phenotypes.

We identified dozens of isotopic signatures which are resolved being separated by only

a few hundred mDa throughout the mass range **(Figure 1s)**, highlighting the importance of

sample specific proteoform libraries and high mass-resolving power achievable with the Fourier

transform (FT)-MS instruments. While current applications were limited by incompatibility of

ITO glass slides and LCM-TDP workflows,[29,30] future works should leverage spatial LCM-TDP

with MALDI-MSI for proteoform-informed spatial proteomics.[24] For example, several

annotations would benefit from such serial analyses, such as the 7.1 kDa protein **(Figure 1q)**

annotated as either uncharacterized protein YhjA (O07555) with a putative disulfide, or

regulatory protein DegR (P68731) with higher mass error. While protein YhjA possesses a signal

peptide (AA 1-27) which is cleaved, and a high confidence disulfide link (C37↔C87) which was

annotated due to the mass shift, and is supported by AlphaFold structural predictions

(Supplementary Figure 1) even though it is not listed within UniProt.[31,32] Functionally, DegR

stabilizes DegU phosphorylation with links to increased protease activity,[33] and regulates

transition of motile cells to sessile forms.[10] While mass spectral error is higher than current

thresholds, this demonstrates the limits of high-resolution accurate mass isotopic pattern

matching. In either case, these links major mechanisms producing miner cells which degrade

extracellular biopolymers and peptides[34] and potential interactions with cannibalistic toxins

noted to prolong sporulation.[13] It should be noted DegR was not detected by TDP, possibly

due to analysis of a different culture or growth period, while other proteins such as DegV [35]

were identified **(Supplementary Material)**. Overall, these results demonstrate that advanced

measurement science is primed for future microbial applications and further use of this

instrumentation and pipeline can potentially unravel functions of many uncharacterized or

understudied proteins with proper experimental design.

CONCLUSIONS:

This study demonstrates that proteoform-informed spatial proteomics can resolve the

biochemical heterogeneity that governs microbial differentiation within *B. subtilis* biofilms. By

integrating MALDI-MSI with sample specific TDP libraries, we detected more than 285

proteoforms and revealed several distinct spatial distributions corresponding to cannibalistic,

sporulating, and metabolically active subpopulations. These results show that

proteoform-informed MSI can directly map functional microenvironments, offering mechanistic

insight into the temporal progression of biofilm development. While these experiments were

completed within a model system of *B. subtilis*, these methods for MALDI-MSI and TDP are

universal and can be broadly applied to any microbial system that can be cultured on solid

media. Additionally, while this is functionally limited to small proteoforms (< 20 kDa) for MALDI-

MSI, the information gathered at fine spatial resolutions significantly enhances our

understanding of the metabolic gradients and biomolecular mechanisms that shape community

structure. The ability to localize toxic peptides, sporulation-associated proteins, ribosomal

subunits, and uncharacterized proteins underscores the power of this approach to uncover

both known and previously unappreciated contributors to microbial physiology.

Figure 1. The sample preparation is outlined within **(a)** showing colonies grown on MSgg media which were further embedded and cryosectioned at 20 µm as outlined in **Supplementary Information** and described in depth elsewhere.[2] After sample preparation, ion images are shown for each proteoform, the name, UniProt accession ID, and amino acid sequence with modifications (if any) are reported. Theoretical and experimental *m/z* values of the highest abundance isotope with calculated error can be found within **Supplementary Information**. **(b)** Large ribosomal subunit protein bL34 (P05647), **(c)** sporulation delaying protein (SDP; O34344), **(d)** oxidized large ribosomal subunit protein bL34 (P05647), **(e)** DNA-binding protein HU 1 (P08821), **(f)** large ribosomal subunit protein uL30 (P19947;), **(g)** phosphorylated DNA-binding protein HU 1 (P08821), **(h)** small ribosomal subunit protein bS21 (P21478;), **(i)** small acid-soluble spore protein K (Q7WY75), **(j)** small ribosomal subunit protein bS20 (P21477), **(k)** small acid-soluble spore protein J (Q7WY58), **(l)** large ribosomal subunit protein uL29 (P12873), **(m)** stage V sporulation protein S (P45693), **(n)** large ribosomal subunit protein bL27 (P05657), **(o)** a 7.1kDa protein, which is either uncharacterized protein YhjA (O07555) with a disulfide at Cys37↔Cys87 resulting in a [-2.01565 Da] shift, or regulatory protein DegR (P68731) with larger error, **(p)** a 6.1kDa unannotated protein, and **(q)** a 12.4kDa unannotated protein. The average spectrum from MALDI-MSI **(r)** is shown from *m/z* 3000 to 17500, with the complexity shown within an inset zoom **(s)** of the spectrum from *m/z* 6971 to 6987. Three distinct isotopic signatures are contained within this region, resulting from complex ion adduct and PTMs. **SMART** annotation:[36] **S** (step size, spot size, total pixels) = 20 µm, 12 µm x 15 µm, 33084 pixels; **M** (molecular confidence) = MS1, <5 ppm; **A** (annotations) = MS1 matching from TDP LC-MS/MS; **R** (resolving power) = 48.6k at *m/z* 6725.4; **T** (time of acquisition) = 286 min.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The authors would also like to acknowledge Dr. Mikhail Belov at Spectroglyph, LLC as well as Dr. Gordon Anderson and Chris Anderson at GAA Custom Electronics, LLC for technical support for the MALDI source. We would also like to acknowledge Drs. Tobias Wörner, Kyle Fort, Maria Reinhardt-Szyba, and Alexander Makarov of Thermo Fisher Scientific for technical guidance and licensing of the instrument. We thank Dr. Matthew E. Monroe of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory for his assistance in depositing the raw proteomic data onto MassIVE. This work was

performed at the Environmental Molecular Science Laboratory (EMSL), a Department of Energy

(DOE) Office of Science User Facility sponsored by the Office of Biological and Environmental

Research. This expanded research on samples from EUP 51105

(doi.org/10.46936/expl.proj.2019.51105/60000139, E.A.S.) was funded by the intramural

program on project awards doi.org/10.46936/intm.proj.2019.51159/60000152 (W.K) and at

EMSL (grid.436923.9) operated under Contract No. DE-AC05-76RL01830.

COMPETING INTERESTS:

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT:

The data presented within this article is publicly available and was uploaded to MassIVE,

partner repository with the MassIVE accession: MSV000100434.

For now, manuscript reviewers can access the data via FTP using:

Server: massive-ftp.ucsd.edu

User: MSV000100434

Password: Spatial7303

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION (50 words):

The following is provided as supplementary information for this article includes: (1)

"Supplementary Information" outlining sample preparation, mass spectrometry methods, and

data analysis, supplementary figure S1, and a supplementary table of highlighted annotations,

and (2) "Supplementary Material" in an output table of the TDP results from both mass

spectrometry instruments used.

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a periphery   interior

biofilm
agar

periphery   interior

b P05647 · RL34_BACSU
Large ribosomal subunit protein bL34
AA 1-44
600 µm   0%   100%   426%

c O34344 · SDPC_BACSU
Sporulation delaying protein
AA 141-182 / Disulfide: Cys141↔Cys147
600 µm   0%   100%   395%

d P05647 · RL34_BACSU
Large ribosomal subunit protein bL34
AA 1-44 / Oxidized
600 µm   0%   100%   294%

e P08821 · DBH1_BACSU
DNA-binding protein HU 1
AA 1-92
600 µm   0%   100%   275%

f P19947 · RL30_BACSU
Large ribosomal subunit protein uL30
AA 1-44
600 µm   0%   100%   269%

g P08821 · DBH1_BACSU
DNA-binding protein HU 1
AA 1-92 / Phosphothreonine 4
600 µm   0%   100%   210%

h P21478 · RS21_BACSU
Small ribosomal subunit protein bS21
AA 2-57
600 µm   0%   100%   372%

i Q7WY75 · SSPK_BACSU
Small, acid-soluble spore protein K
AA 1-50
600 µm   0%   100%   255%

j P21477 · RS20_BACSU
Small ribosomal subunit protein bS20
AA 2-88
600 µm   0%   100%   352%

k Q7WY58 · SSPJ_BACSU
Small, acid-soluble spore protein J
AA 2-46
600 µm   0%   100%   360%

l P12873 · RL29_BACSU
Large ribosomal subunit protein uL29
AA 2-57
600 µm   0%   100%   229%

m P45693 · SP5S_BACSU
Stage V sporulation protein S
AA 1-86
600 µm   0%   100%   234%

n P05657 · RL27_BACSU
Large ribosomal subunit protein bL27
AA 10-94
600 µm   0%   100%   215%

o O07555 · YHJA_BACSU
Uncharacterized protein YhjA
AA 28-89 / Disulfide Cys37↔Cys87
600 µm   ppm   0%   100%   453%

p Unidentified protein
m/z_{obs} 6709.4106
600 µm   0%   100%   984%

q Unidentified protein
m/z_{obs} 12250.2816
600 µm   0%   100%   572%

r
6725.41926
RP = 48.6k

5869.85911
RP = 55.2k

4368.19359
RP = 67.3k

5253.02853
RP = 58.0k

7773.63228
RP = 51.1k

9886.30441
PR = 44.7k

12249.27928
RP = 41.9k

Intensity, a.u. x10⁷

m/z

s
m/z