Eco-Evolutionary Dynamics of Episomes among Ecologically Cohesive Bacterial Populations

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Published</td>
<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/mBio.00552-15">http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/mBio.00552-15</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>American Society for Microbiology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Final published version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessed</td>
<td>Sat Jun 24 13:36:40 EDT 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable Link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/97057">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/97057</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>Creative Commons Attribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed Terms</td>
<td><a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eco-Evolutionary Dynamics of Episomes among Ecologically Cohesive Bacterial Populations

Hong Xue, a, Otto X. Cordero, a Francisco M. Camas, c William Trimble, d Folker Meyer, d Julien Guglielmini, e,f Eduardo P. C. Rocha, e,f Martin F. Polz a

Parsons Laboratory for Environmental Science and Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA a; Department of Environmental Systems Science, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland b; Department of Biological Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA c; Mathematics and Computer Science Division, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois, USA d; Microbial Evolutionary Genomics, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France e, CNRS, UMR3525, Paris, France f

H.X. and O.X.C. contributed equally to this work.

ABSTRACT Although plasmids and other episomes are recognized as key players in horizontal gene transfer among microbes, their diversity and dynamics among ecologically structured host populations in the wild remain poorly understood. Here, we show that natural populations of marine Vibrioaceae bacteria host large numbers of families of episomes, consisting of plasmids and a surprisingly high fraction of plasmid-like temperate phages. Episomes are unevenly distributed among host populations, and contrary to the notion that high-density communities in biofilms act as hot spots of gene transfer, we identified a strong bias for episomes to occur in free-living as opposed to particle-attached cells. Mapping of episomal families onto host phylogeny shows that, with the exception of all phage and a few plasmid families, most are of recent evolutionary origin and appear to have spread rapidly by horizontal transfer. Such high eco-evolutionary turnover is particularly surprising for plasmids that are, based on previously suggested categorization, putatively nontransmissible, indicating that this type of plasmid is indeed frequently transferred by currently unknown mechanisms. Finally, analysis of recent gene transfer among plasmids reveals a network of extensive exchange connecting nearly all episomes. Genes functioning in plasmid transfer and maintenance are frequently exchanged, suggesting that plasmids can be rapidly transformed from one category to another. The broad distribution of episomes among distantly related hosts and the observed promiscuous recombination patterns show how episomes can offer their hosts rapid assembly and dissemination of novel functions.

IMPORTANCE Plasmids and other episomes are an integral part of bacterial biology in all environments, yet their study is heavily biased toward their role as vectors for antibiotic resistance genes. This study presents a comprehensive analysis of all episomes within several coexisting bacterial populations of Vibrioaceae from the coastal ocean and represents the largest-yet genomic survey of episomes from a single bacterial family. The host population framework allows analysis of the eco-evolutionary dynamics at unprecedented resolution, yielding several unexpected results. These include (i) discovery of novel, nonintegrative temperate phages, (ii) revision of a class of episomes, previously termed “nontransmissible,” as highly transmissible, and (iii) surprisingly high evolutionary turnover of episomes, manifest as frequent birth, spread, and loss.

Most studies on the diversity of plasmids and other episomes have focused on their role as major conduits for the spread of resistance and virulence genes in pathogenic bacteria (1, 2). Only recently have whole genome sequencing of microbial hosts and direct extraction of episomes from environmental samples provided a more unbiased glimpse at their large diversity (3–8). This has shown that, although plasmids are best known for their ability to self-transfer among hosts (9), such conjugative plasmids have recently been suggested to be relatively rare in Proteobacteria (3). Most plasmids have been categorized as mobilizable or nontransmissible since they contain only genes that enable them to hitchhike with a conjugative plasmid or have no recognizable transfer function (3). Much remains, however, to be learned about the ecological and evolutionary dynamics of these different types of plasmids in the wild, such as their host range, nucleotide and gene content variation, and frequency and persistence within host populations. Even less well studied are extrachromosomal temperate phages that replicate as plasmid-like structures during the lysogenic phase of their life cycle. Examples of such phage episomes are some Tectiviridae, which have been found as linear plasmids in Bacillus species (10), and phage N15, which is a relative of phage lambda (11). Interestingly, the role of these phages in the
spread of antibiotic resistance in *Escherichia coli* is currently being reevaluated, since a P1-like phage was found to carry an extended-spectrum β-lactamase (12) and a large-scale analysis of the episome content of antibiotic-resistant strains revealed several extra-chromosomal prophages (13). Because plasmid and phage episomes play roles as molecular symbions or parasites (14) and can mediate horizontal gene exchange (15), their biology must ultimately be studied in the context of the host populations they invade; however, this has remained difficult due to the dearth of suitable model systems of ecologically and genotypically well-constrained bacterial populations.

Here, we take a population-genomic approach to determine carriage of different types of episodes in a recently established model for ecologically and genetically cohesive bacterial populations, asking whether different episomal types (i) are associated primarily to host phylogeny or ecology, (ii) show evidence for distinct transfer (and loss) patterns, and (iii) display different microevolutionary patterns. We use marine bacteria of the family *Vibrionaceae* as our model for environmentally differentiated host populations. These have previously been identified as genotypic clusters with characteristic distribution among environmental samples from the same geographic location, suggesting that they partition resources in the coastal ocean by differential occurrence among the free-living and associated (with suspended organic particles and zooplankton) fractions of bacterioplankton (16–18). Many of these populations do, however, also cooccur on the surfaces and in the guts of filter-feeding and other marine animals (19), providing opportunity for transfer of episodes via occasional contact. Finally, recent analysis of recombination has indicated that these ecological populations display cohesive behavior in terms of gene flow, making it possible for adaptive genes to spread in a population-specific manner (20, 21). Because of these properties, these clusters are hypothesized to represent natural populations and provide a platform to study the diversity and dynamics of episodes.

To explore the diversity of episodes within host populations, we screened a large collection of ecologically characterized *Vibrionaceae* isolates obtained from the coastal ocean in the spring and fall of 2006 (16). We aimed at comprehensively sampling and sequencing all detectable episodes of different sizes to obtain a picture of their diversity as unbiased as possible. Episodes were analyzed in a comparative genomic framework, integrating this analysis with both phylogenetic and habitat information of the bacterial populations in order to identify differential associations and dynamics.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Detection and classification of episodes. We screened 660 *Vibrionaceae* isolates for the presence of episodes using multiple gel electrophoretic assays to resolve DNA of different sizes (see Materials and Methods). This identified 140 DNA bands distributed across 101 of the isolates and varying in size between 1 and 200 kbp. To further investigate these putative episodes, we excised all bands from gels and determined their sequence by the Illumina and 454 technologies. Although in many cases assembly produced single and frequently circular episodes (see Table S1 in the supplemental material), there were instances where several contigs resulted from a single band on electrophoresis gels. Because this may indicate incomplete assembly of a single episode or comigration of multiple, similarly sized episodes, we used additional information contained in the data to differentiate these possibilities. To test for multiple episodes per band, we developed a bioinformatics pipeline that considered whether (i) the combined length of the contigs considerably exceeded band size, (ii) some of the contigs had high similarity to episodes in other *Vibrionaceae* isolates, and (iii) coexisting contigs displayed substantially different coverage (see Materials and Methods). This method identified 187 putative episodes (here called “episodes” for simplicity). To classify these episodes into families, we (i) calculated pairwise similarity values by comparison of the nucleotide similarity among shared proteins (orthologs) normalized by the number of proteins of the larger of the two episodes and (ii) established clusters of episodes of high similarity using the orthoMCL (22) graph clustering algorithm (see Materials and Methods). This analysis enabled exploration of the episode eco-evolutionary dynamics among host populations.

**Association with host populations and lifestyle.** Comparison of episode incidence across the phylogeny of the *Vibrionaceae* hosts shows that (i) they are abundant in a few populations but relatively sparse in most (Fig. 1A) and (ii) their presence is correlated to host lifestyle across populations (Fig. 1B). For example, episodes were not detected in population no. 5 (*Vibrio* sp. F5), 7 (*Vibrio lageri*), 9 (*Vibrio breoganii*), and 10 (*Vibrio sp. F10), whereas episodes were present in all isolates of population no. 6 (*Vibrio* sp. F6) and 60% of the isolates in population no. 14 (*Vibrio kanaloae*). Whether these distribution differences are due to various degrees of selection for or against episodes within different populations, or due to greater transmission efficiency among some populations, is difficult to determine; however, a strong association of episodes with host lifestyle provides additional information. The *Vibrionaceae* populations display various degrees of free-living or associated existence (e.g., with organic particles, zooplankton). This is expressed in our data as the presence in one of four sequential size fractions, where the large-size fractions contain microbes attached to particles or organisms while the smallest-size fraction contains only unattached, free-living cells (16) (Fig. 1A). We tested whether episodes were enriched in one or more size fractions by calculating the phylogenetic correlation between episode carriage and the association to each of the size fractions (see Materials and Methods). Our approach controls for spurious correlations caused by phylogenetic clustering and calculates confidence intervals based on 100 bootstrap trees of the *hsp60* gene marker used to demarcate *Vibrio* populations. Surprisingly, this analysis showed episode-positive strains to be significantly and strongly biased for the <1-μm size fraction, corresponding to occurrence as free-living cells (Fig. 1B). This association counters the previous suggestion that particle-associated bacteria, which live in diverse and dense communities, are more prone to acquire mobile elements (23, 24). Acquisition of episodes could happen in animal guts within which most of the populations have the potential to encounter each other (19); however, it seems likely that the high incidence of episodes in free-living cells reflects stability within the host and/or environmental selection rather than high transmission.

**Episome categories.** Sequence annotation identified putative phages and plasmids as the two main episomal categories within the *Vibrionaceae* populations (see Table S1 in the supplemental material). The first was present at a surprisingly high level (22 of 187 episodes) and consisted primarily of two families when a cutoff of 70% sequence similarity was used to define episomal
FIG 1  Distribution of episomes on the *Vibrionaceae* phylogeny and relation to environmental metadata. (A) Phylogeny based on the *hsp60* protein-coding gene. *Vibrio* genotypes were isolated from size-fractionated seawater, and colored rings indicate the corresponding size fraction for each isolate (fraction labels in panel B). Dark bars indicate the presence of at least 1 episome. Populations boundaries are indicated by shaded areas, and the closest named species for each population are as follows: 1, *Enterovibrio calviensis*; 2, *Enterovibrio norvegicus*; 3, *Vibrio ordalii*; 4, *Vibrio rumoiensis*-like; 5, *Vibrio* sp. F5; 6, *Vibrio* sp. F6; 7, *Vibrio logei*; 8, *Vibrio fischeri*; 9, *Vibrio breoganii*; 10, *Vibrio* sp. F10; 11, *Vibrio splendidus* cluster 1; 12, *Vibrio* sp. F13; 13, *Vibrio* sp. nov.; 14, *Vibrio kanaloeae*; 15, *Vibrio cyclitrophicus*; 16 and 17, *Vibrio tasmaniensis*; and 18 to 25, *Vibrio splendidus*. Taxonomic assignments are as in reference 67 with the exception of population no. 12 and 13, which have been reassigned based on recent genomic comparisons. (B) Phylogenetic correlation between size fractions and presence of episomes. We calculate correlations on the phylogeny using a modified version of the phylogenetic contrast method (54), which allows us to estimate evolutionary linkage between traits (e.g., having an episome and association to one of the size fractions). The correlations are shown as frequency distributions because of the uncertainty in phylogenetic structure. Looking at the position of the distributions on the horizontal axis, we observe that episomes are strongly biased to occur in the free-living lifestyle (occurrence in the smallest-size fraction) and less in the large-size fractions.
Episomes carry a large number of different functions with possible host benefit and highlight the potential role of plasmids in horizontal transfer of a wide variety of genes. Among these are genes involved in the metabolism of amino acids (14 proteins) and carbohydrates (21 proteins) and stress response (21 genes). An example of a full pathway with potential host benefit is the detection of a siderophore gene cluster in a family of nontransmissible plasmids. Interestingly, we identified three 5S-rRNA and two tRNA genes. These are embedded in contigs that do not contain any additional ribosomal components and are only ~90% similar in sequence to the equivalents in their host strains, so that the detection of these informational genes is unlikely to be due to host chromosome contamination. Their presence therefore confirms previous findings that plasmids can occasionally contain rRNA genes (40, 41) and can act as transfer vehicles for genes that are thought to be only infrequently involved in exchange among distantly related organisms (42, 43).

Episome cooccurrences within hosts. Most host cells containing episomes harbored either a single (~60%) or two (~30%) episomes; however, several isolates contained a large number of episomes, and some of these represented unusual combinations (see Fig. S1B in the supplemental material). For example, annotation suggested that in strain FF472, a conjugative, two mobilizable, and four nontransmissible plasmids were present along with unknown plasmids in Proteobacteria (3). Nontransmissible plasmids displayed large size variation, from a few to over 100 kbp (with an average of ~20 kbp; see Fig. S1A), and were, with 62%, the dominant plasmid category, while conjugal and mobilizable plasmids occurred at 15% and 23%, respectively. This frequency distribution is fairly similar to the proteobacterial average, which is ~20%, 30%, and 50% for conjugal, mobilizable, and nontransmissible plasmids, respectively (3).

Genetic diversity. The episomes detected in this study carry a diversity of genes, albeit with 43% (2,043 ORFs), the largest portion are hypotheticals when annotated using both RAST (28) and the ACLAIME database (29) (see Materials and Methods). This is consistent with the notion that mobile elements are enriched in genes with poorly understood function (30, 31). The most important category of known functions is membrane transport, with 296, 70, and 10 genes annotated as members of T4SS, type 6 secretion systems (T6SS), and ABC transporters, respectively. As mentioned above, T4SS is most likely involved in conjugal transfer, and of the 27 T4SS detected, 19 were type F, 6 type T, and 2 type G. Conjugation systems of the F-type have thin, flexible pili that allow high frequency of conjugation in liquid media (32), while type T pili are rigid and are thought to perform better on surfaces (33), providing some indirect support for the biased occurrence (and potential transfer) of episomes among free-living hosts (Fig. 1B). On the other hand, T6SS can inject protein effectors into bacterial and eukaryotic cells and hence likely play a role in predation, pathogenesis, or predation defense (34). Finally, ABC transporters can catalyze translocation of a variety of molecules, including proteins, metabolites, and metals (35, 36). A further 178 proteins are involved in functions ascribed to plasmid maintenance, including 50 resolvases, 29 replicases, 91 partitioning systems, 41 toxin-antitoxin systems, and 17 restriction-modification systems. The large number of partitioning systems detected may indicate that more than half of the plasmids might be low copy number, since partitioning mechanisms are often absent from high-copy-number plasmids (37).

As in previous studies (15, 38, 39), general annotations indicate functions with possible host benefit and highlight the potential role of plasmids in horizontal transfer of a wide variety of genes. Among these are genes involved in the metabolism of amino acids (14 proteins) and carbohydrates (21 proteins) and stress response (21 genes). An example of a full pathway with potential host benefit is the detection of a siderophore gene cluster in a family of large, nontransmissible plasmids. Interestingly, we identified three 5S-rRNA and two tRNA genes. These are embedded in contigs that do not contain any additional ribosomal components and are only ~90% similar in sequence to the equivalents in their host strains, so that the detection of these informational genes is unlikely to be due to host chromosome contamination. Their presence therefore confirms previous findings that plasmids can occasionally contain rRNA genes (40, 41) and can act as transfer vehicles for genes that are thought to be only infrequently involved in exchange among distantly related organisms (42, 43).

Episomal family age versus size. Average percentage identities are calculated as a proxy for episome family age and plotted against the size of the element in base pairs. The size of the points indicates the number of members in each episome family, which ranges from 2 to 13. Colors indicate episome classification. The analysis shows that most episome families, irrespective of size, are evolutionarily young (little or no DNA divergence).

![Episomal family age versus size](image_url)
a phage (see Table S2 in the supplemental material). Another strain (FF112) contained a phage and two different types of conjugative plasmids. Finally, systematic exploration of cooccurrence patterns across host isolates did not suggest any obvious codependencies of episomes on each other, since many were also detected as single episomes and never in the same combinations in multiple hosts.

Inferred inheritance dynamics. Our data also allow estimation of the inheritance dynamics of episomes within and between populations. Considering the dominance of nontransmissible episomes among the Vibrionaceae populations and Proteobacteria in general (3), we were particularly interested in whether these plasmids are primarily vertically inherited and hence present in closely related isolates or whether there is evidence for their transfer among distantly related host populations. To differentiate these possibilities, we first classified episomes into families based on sequence similarity (Fig. 2; see Table S3 in the supplemental material) and then constructed a network visualizing the occurrence of these families on the phylogeny of their hosts (see Materials and Methods) (Fig. 3).

This analysis suggests that episomes have spread primarily by horizontal transmission rather than vertical inheritance (Fig. 3A). We identified 31 multimember families (with family size ranging from 2 to 13 members), while 94 episomes remained singletons, suggesting that there is a large pool of rare episomal types within these populations. In fact, low frequencies of genetic variants in a lineage are usually the result of recent introductions, suggesting that many of these elements have been recently transferred. Such transfers could originate from sporadic contact with other microbes on particles or guts of animals. Surprisingly, only a few families, most notably the two containing phage, have accumulated high nucleotide diversity, while most consist of highly similar elements with, on average, ≥98% nucleotide identity (Fig. 2).

Mapping the occurrence of these families onto the host phylogeny shows that the majority are distributed across distantly related hosts (overall gene content overlap of <40% [25]), implying that episomes have spread horizontally. This is the case for all phages, which may therefore possess broad host range, and, surprisingly, also for a large number of nontransmissible plasmids (Fig. 3A), whose horizontal transfer was previously suggested to depend on chance events and hence to be rare.

Further consideration of inheritance patterns of episomes suggests that many, but especially nontransmissible, plasmids are subject to rapid evolutionary turnover, i.e., they arise, spread, and are lost frequently. This conclusion is based on restricting the network analysis to families with high sequence similarity (≥97%) and reanalyzing their distribution. The resultant network shows that a very high percentage of episomes that have been transferred among Vibrionaceae populations are closely related (Fig. 3B). In fact, many of these have identical nucleotide sequences, suggesting that they have spread in a time frame that has not permitted the accumulation of nucleotide changes (Fig. 2).
This pattern is especially puzzling for “nontransmissible” plasmids and suggests that a currently unrecognized, direct transfer mechanism enables their rapid dissemination among bacterial populations. Several such mechanisms have been proposed. They include DNA vesicles (44, 45), nanotubes (46), natural transformation (47), and transduction (48).

Gene exchange among episomes. Because of the apparently rapid turnover of episomes, we investigated to what extent episomes themselves are evolutionarily stable entities by constructing a network of recently exchanged genes (Fig. 4A). To restrict the analysis to events of fairly recent transfer, we first clustered genes into closely related families (>97% in sequence identity) and then
determined how many episomes share these families. This shows a network that connects most episonal families by recent gene exchange with a hub of strongly connected conjugative plasmids at the center (Fig. 4A). Although these share many types of genes, T4SS appear most frequently shared. Strongly connected to this hub are many nontransmissible plasmids, while the remainder of episomes are relatively sparsely connected. Close inspection, however, reveals that, with the exception of phage, the limited number of connections has to be seen in the context of the small size of many mobilizable and nontransmissible plasmids. The fact that many of these small plasmids share only backbone genes at high nucleotide similarity, while having completely different functional gene content (Fig. S2), provides evidence for the rapid evolution of these elements consistent with the known modular rapid evolution of mobile genetic elements (49, 50).

Although episomes appear evolutionarily unstable and are subject to frequent reassembly of genes by recombination, the two phage, one conjugative, and two nontransmissible plasmid families are exceptions. We highlight the example of a family of large nontransmissible plasmids mentioned above (Fig. 4B) consisting of three modules. The first encodes a plasmid partition system (blue ORFs) that ensures reliable distribution to daughter cells. The function of the second module (orange) remains unidentified. The third module (green) encodes a protein complex that shares high sequence identity with siderophore biosynthesis genes from a previously characterized plasmid family from *Vibrio vulnificus* and *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* (51), suggesting that these genes are mobile among episomes. However, the nucleotide diversity of 93.5% across the plasmid family identified here suggests that the acquisition of the siderophore operon was a more ancient event and that these nontransmissible plasmids have persisted over longer evolutionary times than many of the other nontransmissible plasmids, which consist of clusters of highly identical genomes.

Gene gain or loss may also change one plasmid category into another and may, in part, explain the rapid evolutionary turnover of most plasmids. For example, episome m161 and m096 are conjugative plasmids that share almost all of the backbone genes (blue ORFs), which are responsible for self-transmission (Fig. 4C). They differ, however, in two relatively large regions, which are present in m161 but absent in m096. These regions are also shared by the nontransmissible plasmid m031, which is overall more similar to m161 except for the lack of genes responsible for conjugative transfer. This confirms the view that plasmid gene repertoires change rapidly (52, 53). It further suggests that nontransmissible plasmids may originate from loss of T4SS and relaxase genes.

**Conclusions.** Overall, our data reveal surprising results about the diversity and distribution of episomes among *Vibrio* populations. First, contrary to the expectation that, due to the requirement of cell-to-cell contact for transmission, plasmids should be preferentially associated with isolates recovered from surfaces, microcolonies, or biofilms (23, 24), we show that they are significantly enriched in free-living, planktonic cells. Second, our data suggest that plasmids previously categorized as nontransmissible are subject to high evolutionary turnover and transfer frequently among populations. It is therefore likely that a currently unrecognized transfer mechanism is at work. Candidates are transformation, conjugation by cointegration into a conjugative element, and packaging into phage or membrane vesicles. Regardless, we propose that the name “nontransmissible” should be abandoned. Third, the high incidence of putative temperate phages that appear to propagate as plasmids is unexpected. Although phages have previously been described in plasmid metagenomes (8), there was no indication that these might be temperate phages, as suggested here by the stable propagation in our isolates. Such plasmid-like temperate phages have been previously described in only a very small number of studies. Accordingly, the phages detected here appear novel. Their prevalence suggests a previously unanticipated important role in the marine environment. Finally, analysis of gene transfer among plasmids indicates that genes involved in plasmid maintenance and transfer are frequently exchanged, rapidly changing categorization of plasmids. This exchange also offers host strains a rich supply of external genetic materials that may allow the assembly of different functions on a backbone of plasmid functions perhaps adapted to specific host populations.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Isolation, sequencing, and assembly of episomes are described in the supplemental material.

**Phylogenetic correlation between size fractions and episome incidence.** To calculate the evolutionary linkage between traits (such as episome carriage), it is necessary to correct for the fact that traits are linked through a phylogeny and therefore not independently distributed. To obtain independently distributed variables, we calculated the frequency of association with episomes and with size fractions across all clades in the phylogeny and applied the phylogenetic contrast method (54) to remove phylogenetic autocorrelations. The resulting contrast vectors contain independently distributed variables (evolutionary transitions) associated to each branch of the phylogeny. We then used these vectors to calculate Spearman correlations between evolutionary transitions in frequency of episomes and in each of the size classes. Figure 1B shows the distribution of correlation values obtained from repeating this process for 100 bootstrap trees of the *hsph* gene used for phylogenetic analysis of populations.

**Annotation of proteins.** We annotated the ORFs and the corresponding function of the encoded proteins (in terms of FIGFAMS and Subsystems) using the RAST tools (28). Ten short bands for which no ORFs could be annotated were removed from any further analysis. From the total set of 5,938 proteins annotated in the remaining bands, we built families of protein orthologs using orthoMCL (22). Using Blast (55) (BLASTp with an E value of ≤1e−10), we compared the protein sequences in our set with those in the database of mobile elements ACLAME (v. 0.4) (29), which includes records for a total of 122,134 proteins from phage (23.1%), prophage (21.2%), and plasmid (55.6%) origin. This way, we labeled each protein as virus or plasmid associated.

**Identification of episomes from contigs and delineation of episonal families.** Because each band can, in principle, contain more than one independent episome, we developed a bioinformatics pipeline to differentiate episomes that were broken into multiple contigs from multiple episomes comigrating in a gel band (see Text S1 in the supplemental material). This pipeline also enabled identification of episome families distributed across different hosts. Briefly, we constructed a network of sequence similarity based on the gene content overlap across all contigs from all bands. To calculate the similarity measure between pairs of contigs, we normalized the DNA similarity to the size of the largest contig in order to give a maximum score only to perfect matches and not to nested pairs. We then applied the well-known MCL algorithm (56) to cluster contigs based on the patterns of connectivity in the network using a cutoff of 70% identity and an inflation parameter of 1.5. These clusters were taken as our initial episonal families.

We then focused on those pairs of contigs with nested similarity to improve the assembly of multicontig bands where the challenge was to differentiate single episomes broken into multiple contigs from multiple episomes comigrating in the same gel band. When two contigs from the
same band matched two different segments of one larger contig, we took this as evidence to support the consolidation of the two contigs into a single episome. The new putative multicontig episome was validated by this as evidence to support the consolidation of the two contigs into a same band matched two different segments of one larger contig, we took

Classification of episodes. Based on previous identification of broad categories of episomes, we searched our data for evidence of conjugative, mobilizable, and nontransmissible plasmids and of phage. To identify conjugative plasmids, we searched for cooccurrence of genes encoding the type IV secretion system (T4SS) and the relaxosome. Plasmids encoding both components were classified as conjugative, while plasmids encoding a relaxase only were classified as mobilizable. The episodes that did not encode either of these elements and could not be identified as phage (see below) were classified as putatively nontransmissible plasmids following the logic of Smillie et al. (3).

For plasmid identification, we used an update of the protein profiles used in reference 59. For conjugative plasmids, we first searched for matches to TraU/VirB4 from each of the mating pair formation (MPF) system families defined previously (27), since this is the only protein that is associated with all known T4SS (or at least the only sufficiently conserved in sequence). We then gathered all proteins found within a frame of −20/+20 ORFs around TraU/VirB to determine whether a functional T4SS was present. For each MPF type, we carried out similarity searches between all proteins and clustered them into families. These families were aligned, analyzed, and curated. We iterated based on criteria such as sensitivity and specificity and then made multiple alignments that were used to build protein profiles with HMMER (60, 61). This led to a database of protein profiles associated with conjugation that correspond in general to the known essential proteins in each system (albeit a few evolve too fast and give poor sequence similarity hits). The profiles were then searched using HMMER in the proteomes of all episomes.

For phage identification, we blasted the episome contigs against the ACLAME Database of Mobile Elements v. 0.4 (29) using BLASTp with an E value of ≤0.01 and coverage (ratio between the target and query lengths) of more than 0.5. Clusters are based on the findings in the entire replicon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation Biological Oceanography Program.

REFERENCES


