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Letter to the Editor

Gene Size Reduction in the Bacterial Aphid Endosymbiont, *Buchnera*

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Aphids that feed solely on phloem sap, a diet poor in nitrogenous compounds, harbor intracellular bacteria of the genus *Buchnera* in specialized cells, called bacteriocytes, within their body cavities (Buchner 1965). *Buchnera* are members of the *Enterobacteriaceae* (Munson, Baumann, and Kinsey 1991), and they are transmitted to successive host insect generations via oocyte reinfection (Buchner 1965). Congruent host/bacterium phylogenies suggest that this symbiotic association developed 200–250 MYA (Moran and Baumann 1994), and it is now so close that neither partner could survive independently (Houk and Griffith 1980).

The work of Moran (1996) and Brynnel et al. (1998) demonstrated that several *Buchnera* genes exhibit accelerated rates of sequence evolution and comparatively low ratio of synonymous-to-nonsynonymous substitutions for the coding sequences. These findings were attributed to an increased rate of nonsynonymous substitutions, resulting from the population dynamics of *Buchnera* combined with a mutational bias toward A+T. *Buchnera* populations are isolated within the bacteriocytes and experience recurrent bottlenecks during transmission from one host generation to the next, leading to low recombination frequencies between individuals (Moran 1996).

The genome of *Buchnera* contains about 30% G+C (Ishikawa 1987). Most intracellular symbiotic or parasitic bacteria seem to accumulate AT bases in their genomes (reviewed in Heddi et al. 1998). The most striking example is perhaps that of *Mycobacterium leprae.* This bacterium is the only obligate intracellular species of the GC-rich *Mycobacterium* group, characterized by 16S rDNA gene sequences between 56.5% and 59.6% GC, and it is also the most AT-rich species of the genus (56.5%). AT accumulation in obligate intracellular symbiotic or parasitic bacteria could result from an AT mutational bias in conjunction (or not) with the relaxation of selective pressure due to intracellular habitat (Heddi et al. 1998).

The *Buchnera* genome is extremely small, 657 kb compared with 4–5 Mb in related free-living *Enterobacteriaceae* (Charles and Ishikawa 1999). This seems to be a common characteristic of many intracellular symbiotic bacteria, like the endosymbionts of the paramecium or the weevil (Soldo, Brickson, and Larin 1983; Charles et al. 1997). Parasitic bacteria also share small genomes of about 1–2 Mb (Herdman 1985). This finding was recently confirmed by genome sequencing projects (reviewed at the following url: www.tigr.org). The stable, protected intracellular environment with no direct interspecies competition may abolish selection pressure on many of the genes implicated in highly integrated and regulated metabolic pathways, some of which are subsequently deleted (Maniloff 1996; Mushegian and Koonin 1996; Razin 1997). Bacteria tend to lose genetic information corresponding to disused metabolic pathways, probably because DNA accumulation slows the population growth rate (Stouthamer and Kooijman 1993). However, it is still not clear whether the genome shrinking also affects coding sequence length or whether or not AT bias is linked to the deletion process.

Deletion mechanisms were analyzed mostly in eukaryotes. Petrov and Hartl (1998) have suggested that genome reduction in some *Drosophila* species may be due to rampant deletions of DNA in regions which are not subject to selective pressure. Other authors assume that organisms with smaller genomes have shorter introns (Duret, Mouchiroud, and Gautier 1995; Hughes and Hughes 1995). Oliver and Marin (1996) suggested that gene length evolution in bacteria could be driven by base composition. Stop codons are AT-rich (i.e., TAG, TAA, and TGA), so stop codon density in AT-rich organisms may be higher than that in GC-rich organisms. For instance, *Escherichia coli* genes were found to be longer than those of *Haemophilus influenzae*, and the shortest genes within each species (*E. coli*, *Bacillus subtilis*, and *H. influenzae*) have the highest AT content (Oliver and Marin 1996).

In this work, we analyzed the deletion mechanisms within the *Buchnera* genome using a sample of 85 protein genes (19 were partial sequences) and their corresponding orthologs in *E. coli* (4.64 Mb, 52% GC) and *H. influenzae* (1.83 Mb, 38% GC), extracted from the GenBank database (May 1, 1998). The *Buchnera* sequences are those of *Buchnera aphidicola* from the aphid *Schizaphis graminum* and of *Buchnera* sp. from *Acyrthosiphon pisum.* The difference between the sequences of these two *Buchnera* species (2.3% divergence in the 16S rDNA gene sequence) was assumed to be small compared with the divergence between *Buchnera* and *E. coli* or *H. influenzae* (9.5% and 14.9% divergence, respectively).

Direct comparison of the complete gene sequences of *Buchnera* and the corresponding orthologous sequences in *E. coli* showed that the *Buchnera* genes were significantly smaller (Wilcoxon signed-ranks test, $P = 0.003$). The mean difference (d) was 8.5 ± 3.3 bp per

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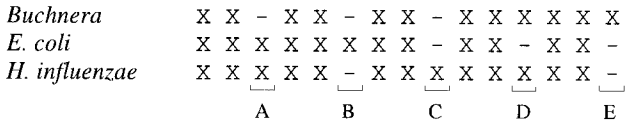

FIG. 1.—Determination of the deletion number in *Buchnera* and *Escherichia coli* sequences. X represents one DNA base (A, T, G, or C). There were five possible configurations (A, B, C, D, and E), but deletions were only scored when the configuration A (deletion in *Buchnera*) or D (deletion in *E. coli*) was found. B and E were considered to be insertions into the sequences of *E. coli* and *Buchnera*, respectively, rather than double deletions. C can be considered either as a deletion that occurred in the sequence of the common ancestor of *Buchnera* and *E. coli* (a non-symbiotic event) or as an insertion in the sequence of *Haemophilus influenzae.*

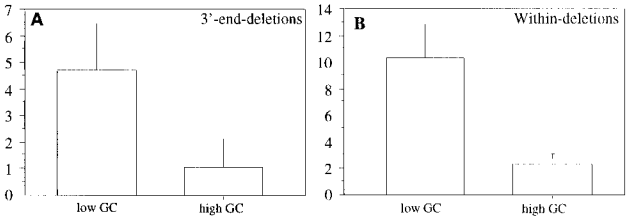

FIG. 2.—Analysis of 3′-end deletions (*A*) and within-sequence deletions (*B*) in *Buchnera* genes. The gene sample was split into two groups of equal size: AT-rich ($GC_{12} < 37.5\%$) and GC-rich genes ($GC_{12} > 37.5\%$). Variances were found to be equal in *A* and unequal in *B*, and the mean differences were significant (*t*-test, $P = 0.05$ and $P = 0.01$ in A and B, respectively). Upper bars represent standard errors.

kb of *Buchnera* gene. *Buchnera* genes were also smaller than those of *H. influenzae.* However, this difference was not significant ($P = 0.13$, $d = 5.3 \pm 6.4$ bp/kb), probably because gene shortening also occurred in *H. influenzae*, characterized by a small AT-rich genome (1.83 Mb, 38% GC) (Oliver and Marin 1996).

In order to determine if deletions occur preferentially at the 3′ end (Oliver and Marin hypothesis) or within sequences (bias in deletion versus insertion rate), we analyzed separately 3′-end deletions and within-sequence deletions in *Buchnera* genes. The 3′ ends of *Buchnera* genes seem to have undergone more deletions than the 3′ ends of *E. coli* genes ($P = 0.01$, $d = 2.8 \pm 1.0$ bp/kb). The difference between *Buchnera* and *H. influenzae* 3′-end lengths was not significant ($P = 0.34$, $d = 1.0 \pm 0.9$ bp/kb).

The within-sequence deletion and insertion ratios were calculated using the interface program JaDis (Gonçalves et al. 1999). This program allows discrimination between insertion and deletion events based on phylogenetic relationships between *Buchnera, E. coli,* and *H. influenzae* (fig. 1). In *Buchnera*, the mean deletion ratio was 6.8 ± 1.5 deletions/kb, with a mean deletion size $s = 7.7 \pm 1.0$ bp (two or three amino acids). The mean insertion ratio was estimated to be 3.6 ± 1.2 insertions/kb ($s = 5.9 \pm 0.9$ bp), giving a net ratio of 3.2 ± 1.9 deletions/kb. As alignments were performed with amino acid sequences and translated afterward, indel sizes are always multiples of 3 bp. However, visual inspection of our data set revealed that single-base indels, which would have generated ''out-of-phase'' stretches before being restored by a compensatory deletion/insertion event, seem to be very rare. The corresponding values were also calculated for the *E. coli* genes. The mean deletion rate was 2.59 ± 0.7 deletions/kb ($s = 5.5 \pm 1$ bp), and the mean insertion rate was 3.07 ± 0.2 insertions/kb ($s = 11.4 \pm 4.5$ bp), indicating a net ratio of 0.48 ± 0.7 insertions/kb. The latter result indicates that gene lengthening in *E. coli* does not seem to have occurred via insertion accumulation since the divergence with *Buchnera.*

Figure 2*A* and *B* suggests that both 3′-end deletions and within-sequence deletions in *Buchnera* may be longer in the AT-rich genes than in the GC-rich genes. These results may be explained by the high correlation between GC contents and evolutionary rates (data not shown), with the less conserved genes being the most AT-rich genes in *Buchnera.* Similar findings have been reported for eukaryotes, for which pseudogenes are shorter and have higher AT contents than their functional homologs (Graur, Shuali, and Li 1989; Gu and Li 1995).

Taken together, these results imply that *Buchnera* genes accumulate both deletions and AT bases in their sequences. Nevertheless, gene shortening cannot account for genome reduction in *Buchnera*, and as in other symbiotic or parasitic bacteria, whole genes or even chromosome regions have probably been deleted, resulting in the drastically reduced number of genes in these bacteria. The *Buchnera* genome (657 kb) has shrunk about 86% compared with the *E. coli* genome (Charles and Ishikawa 1999), and deletion bias can only account for 0.8% of this. Actually, deletion accumulation probably reflects defective DNA synthesis and repair mechanisms in the bacterium, resulting from low recombination frequencies (Muller's ratchet), as previously suggested by Moran (1996). Indeed, it is hard to believe that single deletions (corresponding to <0.0005% genome size reduction) could confer any decisive selective advantage on individuals within the small populations of *Buchnera.*

Oliver and Marin (1996) observed that AT-rich genes are shorter than GC-rich ones in bacteria. We have demonstrated here that stop codon density (i.e., AT bias) may not be the sole neutral factor governing gene size variation in bacteria and that gene shortening may result from a combined effect of AT bias (3′-end deletions) and deletion bias (within-sequence deletions), both enhanced by the relaxation of the selective pressure due to the intracellular habitat of *Buchnera.*

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