Current Biology 19, 423-429, March 10, 2009 © 2009 Elsevier Ltd All rights reserved DOI 10.1016/j.cub.2009.01.054

Report

AvrPtoB Targets the LysM Receptor Kinase CERK1 to Promote Bacterial Virulence on Plants

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Summary

Plant innate immunity relies on a set of pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) that respond to ligands known as pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) [1-3]. To overcome such immunity, phytopathogenic bacteria deliver virulence molecules called effector proteins into the plant cell that collectively promote pathogenesis [4-7]. The vast majority of PRRs controlling PAMP-triggered immunity (PTI) and the mechanisms used by specific effectors to suppress these pathways are mostly unknown. Here, we show that the Arabidopsis LysM receptor kinase CERK1 [8, 9], which is critical for chitin elicitor signaling and resistance to fungal pathogens, plays an essential role in restricting bacterial growth on plants. This is supported by the fact that CERK1 is a target of the bacterial type III effector protein AvrPtoB, which blocks all defense responses through this receptor. AvrPtoB ubiquitinates the CERK1 kinase domain in vitro and targets CERK1 for degradation in vivo. We show that CERK1 is a determinant of bacterial immunity, but its contribution is overcome by bacteria expressing AvrPtoB. Our results reveal a new pathway for plant immunity against bacteria and a role for AvrPtoB E3-ligase activity in suppressing PTI.

Results and Discussion

The first event in active recognition of plant pathogens by their hosts is elicitation of host pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) by conserved pathogen-derived molecules called pathogenassociated molecular patterns (PAMPs). Elicitation of PRRs induces a variety of host responses, including activation of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs), evolution of a burst of reactive oxygen species (ROS), activation of defense gene induction, deposition of callose into cell walls, and functional immunity through undefined mechanisms [1-3]. The paradigm for PAMP-triggered immunity (PTI) is perception of bacterial flagellin protein through an induced receptor complex composed of the leucine-rich repeat (LRR) receptor kinases FLAGELLIN-SENSING 2 (FLS2) and BRI1-ASSOCIATED KINASE 1 (BAK1) [10, 11]. Pathogens secrete effector proteins to inhibit signaling events and enhance virulence; for example, the bacterial pathogen Pseudomonas syringae pv. tomato DC3000 (Pto DC3000) secretes some 30 effectors into the cell via a specialized type III secretion apparatus [5]. FLS2 and

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BAK1 contribute to PTI and congruently are targeted by the bacterial effectors AvrPto and AvrPtoB [12, 13]. However, whereas BAK1 is a common component of multiple PRR pathways [10, 11], FLS2 functions specifically as the flagellin receptor and, hence, comprises a minor component of PTI against bacteria. Thus, there is an important need to identify BAK1-independent PTI pathways and the effectors that target them.

Recognition of the fungal PAMP chitin by the Arabidopsis receptor kinase CHITIN ELICITOR RECEPTOR KINASE 1 (CERK1) [8, 9] is independent of BAK1 or related molecules (Figure S1 available online). In a screen to find bacterial effectors capable of suppressing PAMP signaling, we identified several that are capable of suppressing chitin responses, including AvrPtoB of Pto DC3000 (Figure S2). Despite the fact that chitin is a component of fungi, related molecules such as the cell wall component peptidoglycan are known in bacteria, and we hypothesize that some of these may act as PAMPs on plant cells. Suppression of this pathway by several effectors implies that it is an important target of pathogenic bacteria. To test the range of defenses suppressed by AvrPtoB, we examined PAMP-triggered defense responses in transgenic Arabidopsis plants expressing avrPtoB from an inducible promoter (line JR13). Treatment of these plants with flg22 peptide (containing the active epitope of flagellin) or chitin elicited the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), induction of defense gene expression, and deposition of callose into cell walls (Figures 1A, 1B, 1C, and S3). Typically, chitin elicitation induced weaker activation of defense responses compared to flg22 treatment. All of these responses were suppressed efficiently by prior induction of the avrPtoB transgene with dexamethasone, but not by treatments of the leaves with a mock solution (Figures 1A, 1B, and 1C). Furthermore, chitin-induced activation of MAPKs, one of the earliest signaling events upon PAMP treatment, was also abolished by AvrPtoB (Figure S4). Thus, AvrPtoB abrogates a broad range of BAK1-independent defenses at a very early point after chitin perception.

The receptor kinase CERK1 is essential for chitin signaling in Arabidopsis and contains three extracellular LysM carbohydrate-binding motifs and an intracellular protein kinase domain [8, 9]. We reasoned that broad suppression of defenses implies that AvrPtoB might target CERK1 directly. To test this, we examined the ability of AvrPtoB to interact with the CERK1 kinase domain in a yeast two-hybrid assay. As controls for specificity, we included the kinase domains of three receptor kinases involved in PTI (EF-Tu receptor [EFR] [14], FLS2, and BAK1) and two with roles in plant development (BRASSINOSTEROID-INSENSITIVE 1 [BRI1] [15] and CLAVATA 1 [CLV1] [16]). As a positive control, we included the Pto kinase, which is a known AvrPtoB interactor [17]. Only CERK1 and Pto interacted with AvrPtoB in these experiments (Figure S5). In addition, the unrelated effector AvrPto did not interact with CERK1 (Figure 2A). We did not detect AvrPtoB interaction in yeast with the BAK1 and FLS2 kinase domains, respectively, although it was recently reported that both full-length proteins coimmunoprecipitate with AvrPtoB [13, 18]. It is possible that additional regions of the BAK1 and FLS2 cytoplasmic domains are required for the AvrPtoB

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Figure 1. Suppression of Chitin-Induced Defenses by AvrPtoB

(A) ROS burst in transgenic *Arabidopsis* JR13 (Dex:*avrPtoB*) plants upon water, 100 nM flg22, or 100 µg/ml chitin treatment. Plants were treated with dexamethasone to induce the transgene or in a mock solution. Error bars represent SEM. Statistical significance compared to mock-induced plants (p \leq 0.01) is indicated by asterisks.

(B) Quantitative RT-PCR analysis of defense gene expression 60 min after treatment with water, 100 nM flg22, or 100 μ g/ml chitin in transgenic *Arabidopsis* JR13 (Dex:*avrPtoB*) plants, with or without *avrPtoB* induction. Error bars represent SEM. Statistical significance compared to mock plants ($p \le 0.01$) is indicated by asterisks.

(C) Callose deposition in transgenic *Arabidopsis* JR13 (Dex:*avrPtoB*) plants treated with buffer, 2 μ M flg22, or 100 μ g/ml chitin, with or without *avrPtoB* induction. Numbers show quantification of callose deposits (callose dots/cm²) with PDQuest. Means ± SEM are shown.

The results shown in (A)–(C) are representative of at least three independent experiments.

interaction. These results indicate CERK1 as a likely target of AvrPtoB for suppression of chitin perception.

AvrPtoB is a modular protein with separable subdomains [19, 20]. In tomato, residues 1–307 confer virulence to *Pto*



Figure 2. AvrPtoB Interacts with the LysM-Receptor Kinase CERK1

(A) Yeast two-hybrid assays showing CERK1 and Pto interaction with AvrPto, AvrPtoB, AvrPtoB^{F479A}, AvrPtoB₁₋₃₈₇, and AvrPtoB₁₋₃₀₇ as indicated. Empty vectors (EV) were included as negative controls. Yeast growth on SD/-Leu/-Trp media confirms the presence of both vectors for protein expression. Growth on SD/-Leu/-Trp/-His indicates protein-protein interaction.

(B) AvrPtoB E3-ligase mutants do not suppress chitin responses. AvrPtoB and derivatives or empty vector (EV) were expressed transiently in transgenic 11C *N. benthamiana* leaves and assayed for the ROS burst after treatment with water, 100 nM flg22, or 100 μ g/ml chitin. Error bars represent SEM. Statistical significance compared to EV (p \leq 0.01) is indicated by asterisks. The results shown are representative of four independent experiments.

(C) Western blot showing accumulation of AvrPtoB protein forms in (B).

DC3000 infections, whereas the N-terminal 307 and 387 residues are sufficient for interaction with the Pto and Fen kinases, respectively [21]. The C-terminal region (residues 400–550)

encodes a ubiquitin E3-ligase domain that promotes Fen degradation. In Arabidopsis, residues 1-387 are sufficient to coimmunoprecipitate with and inhibit BAK1 [13]. To determine the requirements for AvrPtoB interaction with CERK1, we introduced constructs encoding AvrPtoB₁₋₃₀₇, AvrPtoB₁₋₃₈₇, and the E3-ligase-deficient mutant AvrPtoB^{F479A} into yeast. All forms interacted with CERK1, indicating that the E3-ligase domain was dispensable for the interaction. In addition, AvrPtoB1-307 bound to CERK1 (Figure 2A). Despite the different techniques used, this may suggest a structural difference in the interactions between AvrPtoB and BAK1 or CERK1, respectively (Figure 2A) [13]. To extend these observations, we examined whether the ability of AvrPtoB fragments to bind CERK1 was correlated with suppression of chitin-induced defense responses. We first investigated the molecular basis of chitin perception in Nicotiana benthamiana, a species that allows facile transient gene expression assays [22]. We identified a tomato cDNA (TC177084) from the TIGR database (http:// biocomp.dfci.harvard.edu/tgi/) with 70% nucleotide identity to AtCERK1 within a region encoding the kinase domain. Primers designed from this sequence were used to amplify a homologous cDNA from N. benthamiana that we designated NbCerk1 (Figure S6A). Silencing of this gene in N. benthamiana plants with a tobacco rattle virus (TRV) vector [23] specifically reduced NbCerk1 mRNA levels, but not those of NbBak1 or NbFls2, and abolished chitin-induced ROS production (Figures S6B and S6C). Chitin responses were restored in the silenced plants by transient expression of AtCERK1, demonstrating that the loss of chitin responsiveness in the silenced plants was due to the loss of the orthologous NbCerk1 gene (Figure S7). AtCERK1 was not silenced by VIGS with NbCerk1 because the genes lack regions of 21 contiguous identical nucleotides [24]. We transiently expressed AvrPtoB, AvrPtoB^{F479A}, AvrPtoB₁₋₃₈₇, or an empty vector control in transgenic N. benthamiana plants expressing the tomato Prf gene (line 11C [25]) because, unlike wild-type [21], it does not trigger cell death in response to AvrPtoB^{F479A} or AvrPtoB₁₋₃₈₇ (data not shown). Expression of AvrPtoB or any of its derivatives completely suppressed flg22-induced ROS, as reported by others [13, 21]. Interestingly, only full-length AvrPtoB, but not the 1-387 or F479A derivatives, fully suppressed chitin-induced ROS (Figures 2B and 2C). However, some reduction of chitin-induced ROS in the presence of AvrPtoB^{F479A} or AvrPtoB₁₋₃₈₇ was observed, compared to the empty vector treatment. It is possible that AvrPtoB N-terminal residues may partially inhibit CERK1 kinase activity. These data show that interaction with CERK1 is not sufficient for full suppression of signaling and reveal a novel role for the AvrPtoB E3-ligase domain in suppression of PTI.

We hypothesized that AvrPtoB might ubiquitinate CERK1 to promote its degradation and suppress host immunity. Posttranslational modification of proteins with ubiquitin is frequently a signal for degradation of the modified protein within the cell. Ubiquitination assays that use purified recombinant proteins confirmed that AvrPtoB ubiquitinated Fen kinase, but not Pto kinase, as expected [21]. The CERK1 kinase domain was also ubiquitinated by AvrPtoB in these experiments (Figure 3A). To test whether AvrPtoB targets CERK1 for degradation in vivo, we analyzed CERK1 protein levels in transgenic JR13 *Arabidopsis* plants expressing *avrPtoB* (Figure 3B). CERK1 protein diminished after 12 hr of AvrPtoB expression and was undetectable by 48 hr, whereas levels were unchanged in mock-induced controls. The flagellin receptor FLS2 was not degraded in these experiments. To test whether CERK1 disappearance required AvrPtoB E3 ligase activity, we coexpressed AtCERK1 with AvrPtoB or AvrPtoB^{F479A} in *N. benthamiana* leaves. CERK1 protein was detectable in the presence of AvrPtoB^{F479A}, but not AvrPtoB, indicating that degradation occurs in vivo in an E3-ligase dependent manner (Figure 3C). Degradation mediated by AvrPtoB was specific because levels of Fen kinase, but not the receptor kinase BAK1, were reduced in its presence (Figure S8). A small AvrPtoBdependent reduction in FLS2 levels could be consistently observed in this experiment. Overall, the data indicate that AvrPtoB degrades CERK1 in an E3-ligase-dependent manner.

Ubiquitinated cytosolic proteins are often degraded by the 26S proteasome, whereas membrane-bound proteins may be degraded through the lysosome in mammals, and vacuoles may be degraded in yeast and plants [26]. To identify the major CERK1 degradation pathway, we blocked protein degradation by using the proteasomal inhibitor MG132 or the vacuolar-type H⁺-ATPase inhibitor Bafilomycin A1 [27]. In AvrPtoB coexpression experiments in N. benthamiana, CERK1 was detected only in the presence of Bafilomycin A1, indicating that degradation may occur in the vacuole (Figure 3D). In contrast, Fen protein was detected only in the presence of MG132, consistent with proteasomal degradation as previously described [21] (data not shown). Targeting of host membrane proteins to the vacuole for degradation is a common strategy used by animal viruses [28] but is novel for type III effectors of phytopathogenic bacteria.

The data above suggest a novel role for CERK1 in bacterial immunity. To test this, we assayed bacterial growth on two Arabidopsis backgrounds containing T-DNA insertions in the CERK1 gene. These mutants, designated Col-0 cerk1-2 and Ws-4 cerk1-3, did not accumulate CERK1 protein (Figures 4A and 4B). We infected Arabidopsis plants by spray inoculation of Pto DC3000 bacteria onto leaves. This mimics natural infection conditions and is one of the most sensitive techniques to assess plant susceptibility to bacterial pathogens [2, 29]. The Ws-4 line is a natural fls2 mutant, so a Col-0 fls2 T-DNA insertion mutant was added to the study for direct comparison. Infections with Pto DC3000 showed greater symptom development on both Col-0 cerk1-2 and Ws-4 cerk1-3 plants compared to the respective wild-type lines (Figure 4C). Disease symptoms due to CERK1 mutation were particularly severe in the Ws-4 background and pronounced on younger leaves. We measured bacterial growth on each line 2 days after inoculation (Figure 4D). The data indicate approximately equal contributions of FLS2 and CERK1 to immunity. Growth of this strain was further enhanced on Ws-4 cerk1-3 relative to Ws-4, consistent with the absence of both FLS2 and CERK1 receptors in this line. Accordingly, a nonpathogenic Pto DC3000 strain containing a mutation in the hrcC gene required for effector secretion (Pto DC3000 hrcC) showed enhanced growth on both Col-0 cerk1-2 and Ws-4 cerk1-3 plants, demonstrating a role for CERK1 in PAMP perception (Figure 4D). Overall, we show an important role for CERK1 in restricting bacterial growth, similar in magnitude to the contribution of FLS2.

We next analyzed the ability of AvrPtoB to counter CERK1mediated defense during bacterial infections. We compared bacterial replication on Ws-4 or Ws-4 *cerk1-3* plants infected with *Pto* DC3000 or on an isogenic strain lacking the *avrPtoB* gene (*Pto* DC3000 \varDelta *avrPtoB*) [30]. Whereas, in Ws-4 plants, *Pto* DC3000 \varDelta *avrPtoB* growth was restricted by one log (cfu/cm²) compared to *Pto* DC3000, both strains grew to similar levels on Ws-4 *cerk1-3* plants (Figure 4E). The data show that AvrPtoB overcomes CERK1-mediated resistance and that



Figure 3. AvrPtoB Ubiquitinates and Degrades CERK1 in a Vacuole-Dependent Manner

(A) In vitro ubiquitination assays with recombinant E1 ubiquitin-activating and E2 ubiquitin-conjugating enzymes, ubiquitin (Ub), GST-AvrPtoB, and His-tagged fusion proteins as indicated. CERK1-His, Fen-His, and AvrPtoB were detected as polyubiquitinated [$-(Ub)_n$] proteins with α -His and α -AvrPtoB antibodies.

(B) Expression of AvrPtoB in Arabidopsis triggers a reduction in CERK1 levels. Immunoblots to detect CERK1, FLS2, and AvrPtoB accumulation were performed in transgenic Arabidopsis JR13 (Dex:avrPtoB) plants after mock or DEX treatment.

(C) CERK1 degradation is dependent on AvrPtoB E3-ligase activity. Immunoblots showing AtCERK1 accumulation in the presence of AvrPtoB or AvrPtoB^{F479A} when coexpressed transiently in *N. benthamiana*.

(D) AvrPtoB degrades CERK1 in a vacuole-dependent manner. As in (C), after treatment with 100 µM MG132 or 300 nM Bafilomycin A1 (BAF).

The results shown in (A)–(D) are representative of at least three independent experiments.

CERK1 is an important AvrPtoB target in vivo. We further studied whether CERK1 contributes to nonhost resistance to P. syringae pv phaseolicola (Psp) RW60. This strain was previously shown to overcome nonhost resistance on Arabidopsis Ws-3 plants only when expressing the avrPtoB gene [31]. Psp RW60 grew poorly on Ws-4 plants, but growth was increased by about one log (cfu/cm²) when expressing avrPtoB compared to the same strain containing an empty vector construct (Figure 4F). Strikingly, Psp RW60 growth returned to wild-type levels when avrPtoB carried the F479A mutation, consistent with a key role for E3-ligase activity in suppression of CERK1. Growth promotion due to avrPtoB was abolished on Ws-4 cerk1-3 plants, where Psp RW60 expressing EV, avrPtoB, or avrPtoB^{F479A} grew to similar levels (Figure 4F). Finally, we examined whether CERK1 was degraded by AvrPtoB in vivo after bacterial infections on Col-0 plants. CERK1 levels were strongly reduced in total plant extracts upon Pto DC3000 infiltration after 24 hr and absent after 36 hr, whereas infiltration of buffer or Pto DC3000 hrcC did not cause a major change. Interestingly, CERK1 levels were also reduced after challenge with Pto DC3000 \arr PtoB, but this was delayed relative to Pto

DC3000 infections (Figure 4G). We also observed a slight but consistent reduction in FLS2 levels in leaves infiltrated with *Pto* DC3000 after 36 hr as reported recently [18]. The results are consistent with a role for the AvrPtoB E3-ligase domain in pathogenesis but suggest that AvrPtoB is not the only *Pto* DC3000 effector that targets CERK1.

Our data reveal that, in addition to its demonstrated role in innate immunity to fungal pathogens, CERK1 acts as a BAK1-independent receptor kinase controlling bacterial immunity in *Arabidopsis*. Consistent with a fundamental role in plant innate immunity, CERK1 is targeted by AvrPtoB for degradation and likely by other bacterial type III effectors as well. AvrPtoB has emerged as a kinase suppressor with broad roles in repression of innate immunity [13, 17, 18, 21]. AvrPtoB directly targets the kinase domains of FLS2, BAK1, CERK1, Fen, Pto, and probably others [13, 18] by using a bipartite strategy. The N-terminal region specifies a kinase interaction domain that may target the catalytic cleft directly [13, 32]. This is true for all known kinase-AvrPtoB interactions, with possible roles in inhibition of kinase activity. Second, as shown here and elsewhere, the E3 ligase domain is of variable



Figure 4. CERK1 Is a Determinant of Bacterial Immunity

(A) CERK1 gene model showing cerk1-2 and cerk1-3 T-DNA insertion sites.

(B) Immunoblot to detect CERK1 protein in wild-type and mutant Arabidopsis lines.

(C) Disease symptoms on Ws-4 and Ws-4 *cerk1-3* plants after spray inoculation with *Pto* DC3000 bacteria at 10⁸ colony forming units ml⁻¹ (cfu/ml). Pictures were taken 3 days after inoculation. Plants show representative symptoms of five independent experiments.

(D) Growth of *Pto* DC3000 and *Pto* DC3000 *hrcC* on wild-type and mutant *Arabidopsis* plants 2 days after spray inoculation as in (C). Error bars indicate SEM. Statistical significance compared to wild-type ($p \le 0.05$) is indicated by asterisks. The results are representative of five independent experiments.

(E) AvrPtoB overcomes CERK1-mediated resistance. Growth of Pto DC3000 and Pto DC3000 $\Delta avrPtoB$ on Ws-4 and Ws-4 cerk1-3 spray inoculated as in (C). Error bars indicate SEM. Statistical significance compared to Pto DC3000 (p \leq 0.01) is indicated by asterisks. The results are representative of five independent experiments.

(F) AvrPtoB E3-ligase activity is required to enhance virulence in *Arabidopsis*. Growth of *Psp* RW60 carrying an empty vector (EV), *avrPtoB*, or *avrPtoB*^{F479A} on Ws-4 and Ws-4 *cerk1-3* plants 3 days after syringe inoculation with 2×10^7 cfu/ml bacteria. Error bars represent SEM. Statistical significance compared to *Psp* RW60 EV infection ($p \le 0.05$) is indicated by asterisks. The results are representative of four independent experiments.

(G) Pto DC3000 infection triggers CERK1 degradation. Immunoblots showing CERK1, FLS2, and AvrPtoB accumulation in Col-0 leaves after buffer, Pto DC3000 hrcC, Pto DC3000, or Pto DC3000 $\Delta avrPtoB$ infiltration. This experiment was repeated three times with similar results.

importance in physical removal of the targeted kinase. Together, these mechanisms provide a strategy for kinase deactivation with inbuilt redundancy. Importantly, all eukaryotic Ser-Thr and Tyr protein kinases have a generalized fold and are monophyletic [33]. Within plants, the RLK/Pelle gene family, which includes the known targets of AvrPtoB, makes up 60% of kinases and is the predominant form of receptor kinases in the *Arabidopsis* genome [34]. Thus, there are many more potential targets of AvrPtoB within plants. In addition, the previous model, in which recruitment of the E3 ligase domain as a specific evolutionary response to recognition of the AvrPtoB N-terminal domain by tomato Fen [21], does not hold, given an expanded view of possible AvrPtoB targets in all facets of immunity. The example of AvrPtoB may hint at a bacterial strategy for pathogenicity in which the host plasma membrane proteome is targeted somewhat unspecifically by type III effectors, but this remains to be investigated.

Interestingly, AvrPtoB deletion mutants that bind FLS2 but cannot associate with BAK1 do not suppress flg22 responses [13]. This suggests that suppression of flg22 recognition by truncated AvrPtoB forms occurs through BAK1 inhibition rather than via the FLS2 receptor itself. Suppression of BAK1 by AvrPtoB probably occurs by inhibition of kinase activity and may have broad effects through the multiple BAK1-dependent PAMP-signaling pathways [13]. Supporting the role for AvrPtoB E3-ligase activity on PTI suppression, FLS2 was recently shown to be targeted for ubiquitination and degradation by AvrPtoB [18]. This mechanism is apparently redundant with BAK1 inhibition for suppression of flagellin responses. Because of this redundancy, it is so far unclear whether FLS2 degradation is necessary for inhibition of the recognition complex by AvrPtoB. Conversely, degradation was clearly required for CERK1 inhibition. Interestingly, although only fulllength AvrPtoB could suppress chitin-induced ROS completely, some reduction could be observed in the presence of the F479A and 1–387 derivatives. This is suggestive of inhibition of CERK1 kinase activity, at least in these effector overexpression experiments.

Although bacteria do not contain chitin per se, similar carbohydrate-based structures are present in periplasms, biofilms, and secretomes of Pseudomonad bacteria [35-37] and constitute potential ligands for the three modular LysM domains of CERK1. Fascinatingly, CERK1 is highly related to Nod factor receptors from Lotus and Medicago [38], which function as entry receptors in symbiotic interactions with rhizobial bacteria [39, 40]. This evolutionary relatedness suggests a legumespecific recruitment and functional diversification of CERK1like PRRs for fundamentally opposed plant-bacterial interactions [38], which may have originated from related bacterial ligands. Alternatively, CERK1 may act as an auxiliary of multiple PRRs, analogous to the requirement for BAK1 for signaling by FLS2 and other receptors [10, 11]. Indeed, direct binding of chitin to CERK1 has not yet been demonstrated. Identification of the PAMP conferring CERK1-mediated resistance will provide conclusive insights.

Supplemental Data

Supplemental Data include Supplemental Experimental Procedures and seven figures and can be found with this article online at http://www.current-biology.com/supplemental/S0960-9822(09)00626-5.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Cyril Zipfel for critical reading and helpful comments. We thank Ben Schwessinger and Kee Sohn for materials provided. We also thank Gregory Martin for the *Pto* DC3000 Δ avrPtoB strain. This work was supported by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

Received: December 4, 2008 Revised: January 14, 2009 Accepted: January 19, 2009 Published online: February 26, 2009

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