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Genomic scale analysis of lateral gene transfer in Apicomplexan parasites: insights into early eukaryotic evolution, host-pathogen interaction and drug target development

Lucia Peixoto* and David S Roos

Address: Department of Biology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Email: Lucia Peixoto* - luciap@sas.upenn.edu

* Corresponding author

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The protozoan phylum Apicomplexa is comprised of >5000 species, including *Toxoplasma gondii* (a prominent opportunistic infection in AIDS), and the Plasmodium parasites responsible for malaria. Complete genome sequences are now available for several apicomplexan species, including both *T. gondii* and *Plasmodium falciparum*, making it possible to exploit comparative phylogenomic tools for insight into adaptations associated with intracellular parasitism, and in order to identify targets for therapeutic development. These parasites harbor a novel organelle, the 'apicoplast', which was acquired by endosymbiotic capture of a eukaryotic alga, and thus provides a dramatic example of lateral gene transfer (LGT). In order to determine the overall impact of LGT, we have employed phylogeny reconstruction to detect transfers on a genomic scale. Trees have been constructed for all genes in the *Toxoplasma* and *Plasmodium* genomes, and compared with a whole genome species tree derived from 55 taxa represented in the orthologous protein database OrthoMCL-DB [1]. Non-apicomplexan specific ortholog groups containing 4 to 100 sequences were examined, pruning outlying species based on their degree of connectivity to the group as a whole, and robustness of the resulting tree.

A pilot study based on intensive manual curation of *T. gondii* genes coding for metabolic enzymes estimates that ~15% of these genes were acquired by LGT. Turning to the entire parasite genome(s), Horizstory software identifies 1552 groups where *T. gondii* gene placement contrasts with the species tree, and 1520 instances of potential LGT involving *P. falciparum*. In order to identify the most probable LGT events, we developed a strategy that ranks the probability of LGT based on the taxonomic consistency of results for sibling species within the tree, and bootstrap support for the relevant internal node(s). This 'LGTsmart' strategy yields a ranked list of probable lateral gene transfer events (Figure 1) including 226 high confidence events that occurred at different times during the course of apicomplexan evolution. Many of these transfers involve genes exhibiting phylogenetic affinity with plants, consistent with the algal origin of the apicoplast endosymbiont. Additional, more recent, transfers appear to have a bacterial origin, and both classes of genes include promising targets for drug development. Interestingly, we also detected LGT of metazoan-like genes, possibly acquired through interaction with the host during adaptation to the parasitic lifestyle.

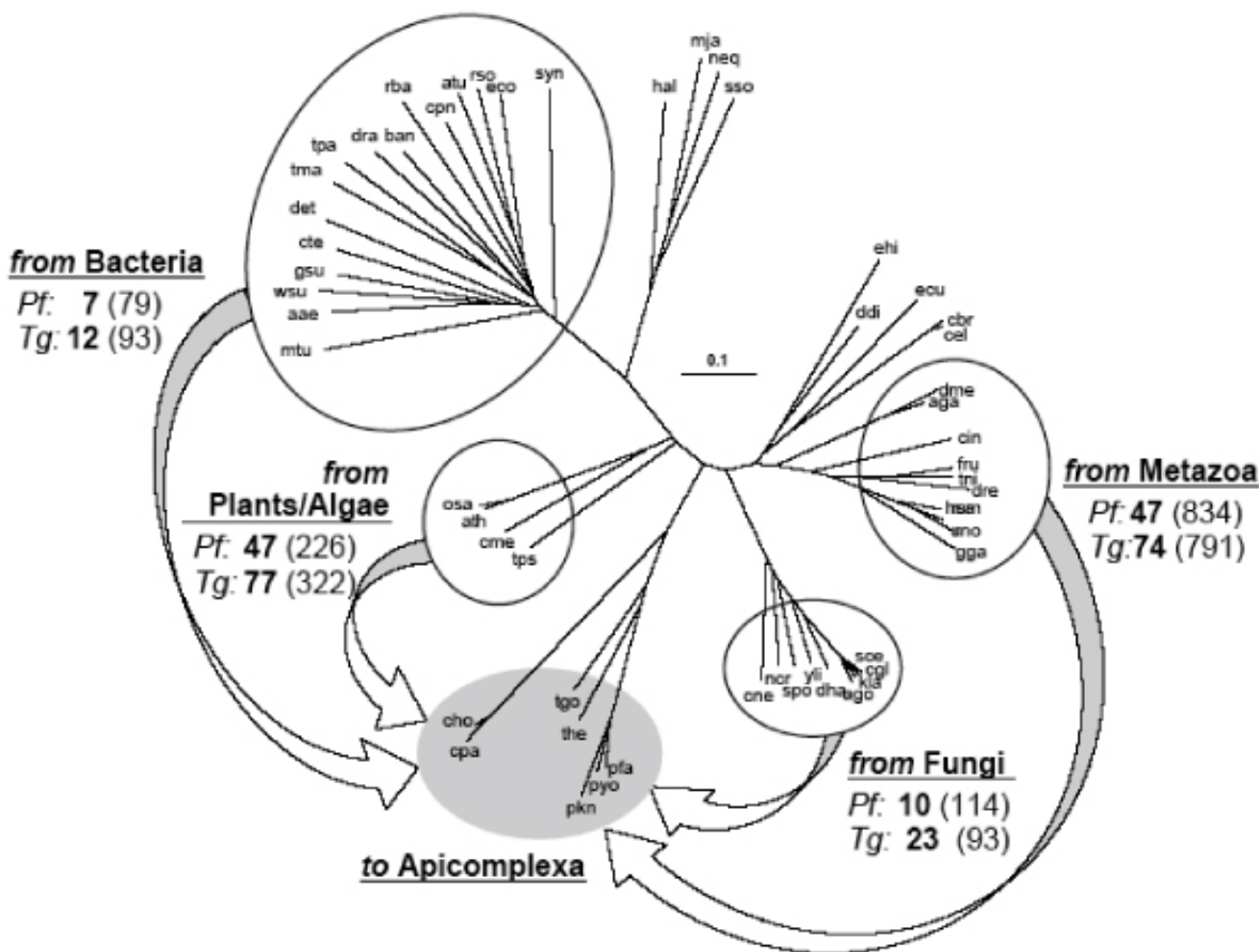


Figure 1

Probable source of transfer events identified by the LGT smart algorithm. Parentheses indicate possible LGT events for each source clade; bold indicates high confidence transfers.

References

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