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Discovery of 3-Formyl-Tyrosine Metabolites from Pseudoalteromonas tunicata through Heterologous Expression

Leah C. Blasiak and Jon Clardy*
Department of Biological Chemistry and Molecular Pharmacology, Harvard Medical School, 240 Longwood Ave, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Received November 18, 2009; E-mail: Jon_Clardy@hms.harvard.edu

While chemists have long admired the remarkable and useful set of molecules biosynthesized by bacteria, sequenced bacterial genomes, which now appear at the rate of ∼20/month, reveal that we actually know shockingly little about the repertoire of bacterially produced small molecules. Cryptic metabolites, molecules whose existence can be inferred from gene sequences but which have never been seen in the laboratory, greatly outnumber known metabolites.1–3 As a result, the discovery of cryptic molecules in genomes and their production in the laboratory constitute a major research effort. Most studies have focused on the nonribosomal polypeptide synthetase (NRPS), polyketide synthase (PKS), or NRPS-PKS hybrid pathways, as their large size and repeating motifs make them easier to identify and analyze. Smaller pathways employing less familiar biosynthetic strategies are easy to miss in genome annotations, and small molecules made by these pathways are doubly cryptic because they are detected neither in genome annotations nor in the laboratory. These metabolites likely possess new molecular templates and biological activities. This report describes the search that led to the discovery of previously cryptic metabolites that contain an unusual tyrosine-related amino acid (1 and 2) from Pseudoalteromonas tunicata.

We and others recently noted the ability of ATP-grasp-type ligases—enzymes that catalyze condensation reactions by activating a carboxyl group as a mixed phosphoric acid anhydride in primary metabolism—to catalyze the formation of amide bonds in idiosyncratically biosynthesized small molecules. Known examples include amide bond formation in the posttranslational modification of the ribosomally synthesized molecules microviridin4,5 and bacilysin6 and the amide bonds formed between nonproteogenic amino acids in the dapdiamides.7 Sequence-based searching for homologous ATP-grasp enzymes led to a promising biosynthetic gene cluster in the marine gammaproteobacterium Pseudoalteromonas tunicata D2, a model organism for microbial interactions on marine surfaces and a known producer of a variety of antimicrobial and antifouling compounds.8

To identify the products of the ATP-grasp containing gene cluster, the predicted operon was PCR amplified from genomic DNA, cloned into an inducible bacterial expression vector (pET-Duet-1), and transformed into Escherichia coli. Culture supernatants were fractionated and analyzed for the production of new compounds by LC/MS and comparison to an empty vector control (Figure 1a). Two new clone-specific peaks with molecular ions m/z 311 and 210 and absorption peaks at 340 nm were observed in aqueous culture extracts. The corresponding compounds were isolated and identified as 3-formyl-L-tyrosine-L-threonine dipeptide (1) and 3-formyl-L-tyrosine (2) by a combination of 1D and 2D NMR including gCOSY, gHSQC, and gHMBC experiments (see Supporting Information). The molecular formula of 1 was determined to be C14H19N2O6 by high resolution ESI-QToF-MS with [M+H]+ m/z 311.1232 (calc. m/z 311.1243). HMBC and COSY correlations defined the 3-formyl tyrosine as the N-terminal amino acid of dipeptide 1, and this linkage was verified by the ESI-LCQ-MS/MS ion fragmentation pattern. Optical rotation showed that 2 was the L-enantiomer,9 and the absolute configuration of 1 was determined by acid hydrolysis and Marfey’s derivatization of the resulting amino acids.
After discovery of these compounds through heterologous expression, we returned to the native organism to find conditions under which 1 and 2 could be produced. We detected 1 and 2 (~1:2 ratio) in aqueous extracts of _P. tunicata_ liquid marine broth cultures (see Supporting Information), and their identities were confirmed by LC/MS and comparison to authentic standards (identical retention times, UV−vis spectra, and molecular ion m/z values).

We initially flagged the _fty_ (formyl tyrosine) cluster for further study because of the ATP-grasp enzyme FtyB, which is homologous (30% identity) to an ATP-grasp-type amide ligase in daptomycin biosynthesis (DdaF). When a construct lacking FtyB was expressed in _E. coli_ only 2 was observed in culture extracts by LC/MS and extracted ion traces, suggesting FtyB catalyzes amide bond formation between 2 and L-threonine to yield 1 (Figure 1a). To test this hypothesis, a version of FtyB with an N-terminal His6 tag was cloned, expressed, and purified from _E. coli_ (see Supporting Information). FtyB activity was demonstrated using an LC/MS based assay and α-phthalaldehyde (OPA) derivatization of substrates and products. FtyB ligates L-Thr and 2 in an ATP-dependent fashion to produce 1 (Figure 1b).

A bioinformatic analysis of the remaining enzymes in the cluster suggests they are involved in the production of 2, the formylated tyrosine. FtyE and FtyF are closely related to GriC and GriD (39% from _Streptomyces griseus_).13,14 FtyE/F could generate the formyl group based on sequence similarity to yeast COQ4 (27% identity), a protein implicated in ubiquinone biosynthesis but with no known enzymatic activity.15

While the order of the proposed biosynthetic reactions remains unclear, bioinformatic analysis of the _fty_ cluster suggests it contains the necessary elements for constructing 3-formyl-tyrosine. Detailed biochemical investigation of the pathway is under way.

In summary, using a newly discovered role for ATP-grasp enzymes as a search strategy for cryptic metabolites led to the discovery of compounds 1 and 2. Placing their biosynthetic cluster in an alternative and genetically manipulable host facilitated both the production and detection of these compounds as well as a preliminary interrogation of the individual biosynthetic genes. The particular pathway found, the _Fty_ pathway, also indicates that newly discovered biosynthetic clusters will in turn suggest other genes, such as FtyD and the FtyE/F pair, that can serve as the basis for additional searches. A bioinformatic search for clusters containing both FtyE and FtyF homologues revealed >20 unannotated clusters as well as clusters for phenazine (EhpF/G from _Erwinia herbicola_16) and thienamycin (ThnN/O from _Streptomyces cattleya_).17

Most cryptic metabolites are cryptic because their production is regulated, not constitutive, and their discovery leads to new questions about the regulation of their production and their biological function. In this regard, it is worth noting that compounds 1 and 2 exhibited no antimicrobial activity in agar diffusion assays against _E. coli_, _Bacillus subtilis_, or _Saccromyces cerevisiae_ at doses up to 20 μg/disk. However, similar synthetic compounds have shown antihypertensive and appetite suppressant activities.9

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