Sequencing of IncX-plasmids suggests ubiquity of mobile forms of a biofilm-promoting gene cassette recruited from Klebsiella pneumoniae

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Published in:
PLOS ONE

DOI:
10.1371/journal.pone.0041259

Publication date:
2012

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
**Sequencing of IncX-Plasmids Suggests Ubiquity of Mobile Forms of a Biofilm-Promoting Gene Cassette Recruited from *Klebsiella pneumoniae***

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**Abstract**

Plasmids are a highly effective means with which genetic traits that influence human health, such as virulence and antibiotic resistance, are disseminated through bacterial populations. The IncX-family is a hitherto sparsely populated group of plasmids that are able to thrive within Enterobacteriaceae. In this study, a replicon-centric screening method was used to locate strains from wastewater sludge containing plasmids belonging to the IncX-family. A transposon aided plasmid capture method was then employed to transport IncX-plasmids from their original hosts (and co-hosted plasmids) into a laboratory strain (*Escherichia coli* Genehogs®) for further study. The nucleotide sequences of the three newly isolated IncX-plasmids (pLN126_33, pMO17_54, pMO440_54) and the hitherto un-sequenced type-plasmid R485 revealed a remarkable occurrence of whole or partial gene cassettes that promote biofilm-formation in *Klebsiella pneumonia* or *E. coli*, in all four instances. Two of the plasmids (R485 and pLN126_33) were shown to directly induce biofilm formation in a crystal violet retention assay in *E. coli*. Sequence comparison revealed that all plasmid-borne forms of the type 3 fimbriae encoding gene cassette *mrkABCDF* were variations of a composite transposon Tn6011 first described in the *E. coli* IncX plasmid pOLA52. In conclusion, IncX-plasmids isolated from *Enterobacteriaceae* over almost 40 years and on three different continents have all been shown to carry a type 3 fimbriae gene cassette *mrkABCDF* stemming from pathogenic *K. pneumoniae*. Apart from contributing general knowledge about IncX-plasmids, this study also suggests an apparent ubiquity of a mobile form of an important virulence factor and is an illuminating example of the recruitment, evolution and dissemination of genetic traits through plasmid-mediated horizontal gene transfer.

**Introduction**

Plasmids are autonomously replicating extra-chromosomal elements that are ubiquitous within most studied natural microbial communities and clinical pathogens. Apart from encoding specific ‘selfish’ traits that ensure continuing and stable propagation, most studied plasmids have been found to carry genetic payloads that provide certain adaptive advantages, in effect compensating for the metabolic burden they impose upon the host [1]. As a consequence, plasmids are often found to contribute significantly to the accretion and dissemination of genes providing hosts with clinically relevant traits in the form of antimicrobial resistance or virulence, which potentially facilitate or aggravate infections. Accordingly, several of the members of the family Enterobacteriaceae such as *Klebsiella*, *Proteus* and uropathogenic strains of *Escherichia coli* (UPEC), are able to produce surface structures (fimbriae) that promote attachment to epithelial cells as well as adhesion to many types of abiotic surfaces [2]. In particular, they cause problems with keeping abiotic surfaces sterile in hospital settings, leading to conditions such as urinary tract infections (UTI) [3]. As surface structures like fimbriae and conjugal pili are essential in the establishment of these kinds of bacterial plaques or biofilms, the occurrence of biofilm promoting genes on mobile genetic elements [4,5] represent an alarming development in need of close monitoring.

In order to appreciate the extent with which genes such as these are spread throughout bacterial communities, a good understanding of the basic genetic framework that governs the dynamics of gene accretion and dissemination is vital [1]. The type of plasmid that carries such adaptive genes can for example greatly determine the range of bacterial hosts to which these potentially harmful genes can be spread.

Plasmids have traditionally been divided into discrete groups (families) based on the inability of closely related plasmids to propagate stably within the same bacterial strain [6,7], which is why these groups are commonly referred to as incompatibility (inc) groups (e.g. IncP, IncI, IncF, IncX, IncN, IncW etc.). The IncX group is a relatively poorly studied group of plasmids that has mostly been associated with members of the family Enterobacteriaceae residing within the guts of animals [8,9]. This group, however, had until recently not received much attention with respect to the kinds of adaptive loads they can carry, but genetic analysis of the IncX plasmid pOLA52 (GenBank accession number NC_010378.1), revealed a number of surprising traits that were in all likelihood recruited directly from the chromosome of *Klebsiella pneumoniae*.
These included the two composite transposons Tn6010 and Tn6011 which confer wide-spectrum multidrug resistance through a large resistance nodulation-division (RND) type efflux pump and type 3 fimbriae-mediated biofilm formation, respectively [10–12].

In an effort to locate and characterize more plasmids from the IncX group without specific regard to the carriage of genetic payloads, we applied a replicon-centric screening method to a large number of wastewater isolates, which resulted in the capture of three novel IncX-plasmids.

All captured IncX-plasmids were genome sequenced and analysed. The IncX group has so far only been characterized as containing two distinguishable subgroups, IncX1 and IncX2 represented by the plasmids R483 and R6K, respectively. The IncX2 prototype R6K was sequenced at the Sanger Institute in 2006 (sequence in un-annotated form is available at http://www.sanger.ac.uk/Projects/Plasmids/), while the R485 plasmid was sequenced in this study.

The plasmids investigated in this study were shown all to contain genes related to biofilm promotion. These results indicate that a specific biological link exists between biofilm promoting gene cassettes and the IncX group of plasmids.

Materials and Methods

Bacterial Strains and Growth Conditions

All strains of Enterobacteriaceae (including E. coli GeneHogs®) were grown at 37°C in LB broth, MacConkey agar (DIFCO) without supplements or on LB agar supplemented with antimicrobial agents in the following concentrations: Ampicillin (Ap) 70 μg ml⁻¹, Kanamycin (Km) 50 μg ml⁻¹, Streptomycin (Sm) 100 μg ml⁻¹.

Screening of Wastewater MacConkey Isolates for Plasmids with IncX-type Replicons

Wastewater was sampled from two Danish water treatment plants (WWTPs). One sample (Mølleåværket, Lyngby DK - 55°48’38”N, 12°32’23”E) was taken from the primary sedimentation tank of the WWTP, while another was taken from the secondary sedimentation tank of the WWTP, while another was taken from the activated sludge basin (Lynetten, Copenhagen DK - 55°41’44”N, 12°36’59”E).

From each wastewater sample 1 mL was diluted in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) to a factor of 10⁶ and plated out on LB agar. Sample lysates were made by transferring 10 μl aliquots to a PCR multiwell plate and subjected to a PCR cycle consisting of three rounds. Freeze cultures were also made from these colonies with ddH₂O. Sample lysates were made by transferring 10 μl aliquots to a PCR multiwell plate and subjected to a PCR cycle consisting of three rounds. Freeze cultures were also made from these colonies with ddH₂O.

Plasmids with IncX-type Replicons

The plasmids investigated in this study were shown all to contain genes related to biofilm promotion. These results indicate that a specific biological link exists between biofilm promoting gene cassettes and the IncX group of plasmids.
pMO440_54 were deemed to be identical, pMO440_54 was not uploaded to the database.

Sequence Analysis
Putative coding regions were located with PRODIGAL [15]. Overall gene annotations were performed in Artemis. Nucleotide sequence and protein homology was performed with the BLAST program [16] against the GenBank databases. BLASTX searches were also used to look for small or disrupted coding sequences. Insertion sequences within the nucleotide sequence were located by using IS FINDER (http://www-is.biotoul.fr/). The program TMHMM [17] was used for predicting transmembrane-helices in selected protein sequences.

Biofilm Formation Assay
The ability of Escherichia coli Genehogs containing plasmids R485, pLN126_33, pMO17_54 and pMO440_54 to promote biofilm formation was based on quantification of attached cells by use of crystal violet (CV) as described previously [10]. Single colonies of each strain were transferred from LB plates to 3 ml of M9 minimal medium containing selective antimicrobial agents where required, and incubated at 37°C ON. Aliquots of 20 μl of ON culture of each strain were transferred to flat bottomed microtiter plate wells (in four replicates) containing 180 μl M9 minimal medium, and plates were closed with lids, sealed with parafilm and incubated at 37°C ON with agitation at 250 rpm. Staining and quantification of attached cells was performed as previously described [9], using an EL 340 microplate reader (Bio-Tek Instruments, Winooski, Vermont) for absorbance measurements at 595 nm. Absorbance measurements of wells containing only M9 minimal medium were used as a baseline.

Results and Discussion
Selection-independent Isolation of IncX-replicon Plasmids from WWTPs
Wastewater is an abundant source of gut microbes, including those belonging to the family Enterobacteriaceae. Nine hundred and sixty wastewater isolates able to grow on rich bile-salts medium (MacConkey) were screened for the presence of IncX-replicons using primers specific to the replication initiation gene pir of pOLA52 (the IncX1 group), and the well-studied pir gene from R6K (IncX2 group).

A total of 3 strains out of 960 were found to be IncX1-positive while no strains where found to be IncX2-positive. Although the sample size is relatively small, the ubiquity of IncX1 type plasmids, as opposed to IncX2, correlates well with at least 7 occurrences of identical homologues of the pOLA52 pir gene, but only one occurrence of the IncX2 type (from R6K itself) within the GenBank nucleotide database.

A preliminary screening for antibiotic resistance revealed that 80% of the WWTP isolates conferred resistance towards ampicillin and 29% conferred resistance towards streptomycin (only 4% conferred resistance towards both). None of the IncX1-positive strains, however, were shown to confer resistance towards either of these antimicrobial agents.

Sequencing of the 16S rRNA regions of the three IncX1-positive strains and subsequent classification using the Ribosomal Database Project Naive Bayesian Classifier [19] confirmed that all three strains came from within the Enterobacteriaceae. All IncX-positive isolates were assigned to the mixed-genus class Escherichia/Shigella with a posteriori probability of 1.0 (i.e. 100% confidence). The phylogenetic distance to the Shigella flexneri reference sequence was shown to be infinitesimally smaller than to E. coli in all three instances (not shown). Thus, the three strains will in following be referred to as Shigella sp.

Plasmid Carriage
Plasmid profiles of the three IncX-positive strains Shigella sp. LN126, Shigella sp. MO17 and Shigella sp. MO440, revealed a remarkable presence of extrachromosomal elements (Fig. 1a). In addition to a recurring band normally consisting of shared chromosomal DNA, each of the plasmid purifications contained between 15–20 bands, hinting at the presence of several different extra-chromosomal elements of various sizes in all three strains.

All three IncX1-replicon containing plasmids were successfully transferred from their host strains and other extra-chromosomal elements into E. coli GeneHogs®, by using the TAPC method described in the materials & methods section. Subsequent localization of IncX1-positive transformants was done through a progressive PCR screening procedure similar to the one used for screening of WWTP isolates (Fig. 1b). Thirteen IncX1-positive Entranceposon derivatives out of 100 where found from the Shigella sp. MO17 transformants, while only 1 in 500 and 1 in 620, were found from the Shigella sp. MO440 and LN126 transformants, respectively. Thus, it appears that the overall plasmid carriage can dramatically affect the outcome of this procedure. A described below, the two plasmids pMO17_54 and pMO440_54 were revealed to be identical, and the large difference in the occurrence of the IncX-positive Entranceposon derivatives is therefore remarkable. Since each replicon within a strain is a potential recipient of the Entranceposon, a high occurrence of small high copy number plasmids will most likely come to dominate the fraction of Entranceposon derived transformants. If one specifically aims at capturing larger plasmids with TAPC, we suggest including measures to reduce the number of small high copy number plasmids before random Entranceposon insertions are performed.

Nevertheless, TAPC screening seems to be a viable technique for capturing specific plasmids from culturable environmental isolates that contain numerous extra-chromosomal elements, although the approach still has room for improvement.

Sequence Analysis of Captured IncX-replicon Plasmids and R485
The four sequences consisted of circular plasmids of 54, 54, 33 (thus, pMO17_54, pMO440_54 and pLN126_33), and 61 kilobases (kb) in size, respectively, and were therefore within the normal size-range reported for IncX-plasmids (30 kb–80 kb). The inserted Entranceposon was excised from the finished sequences of pLN126_33, pMO17_54 and pMO440_54. The base composition of the plasmids were all in the 45–50% GC-content range, consistent with most reported Enterobacteriaceae genomes [20]. Comparison of the sequences of pMO17_54 and pMO440_54 revealed enough nucleotide similarity to conclude that they were identical (except for the inserted Entranceposon which was removed from the finished sequence). Therefore, in the following sections, these two plasmids will be referred to collectively as pMO17/440_54 unless otherwise stated. A graphical representation of the sequenced plasmids from this study is presented in Fig. 2.

pMO17/440_54
Annotation revealed a total of 71 putative protein-coding regions. The plasmid appeared highly mosaic in nature, with almost 27% of the plasmid being made up of insertion sequences (IS), transposons or fragments thereof. Furthermore, several
regions displayed dramatic fluctuations in GC content, which also points towards a sequence of a highly composite nature.

**Plasmid maintenance regions.** About 22% of the plasmid consisted of two regions with high homology to maintenance regions (backbones) of the IncX-plasmid pSE34 (0–7.4 kb) and the IncFII-plasmid pO26-L (48.3–53.2 kb), respectively. The IncX-backbone region contained proteins related to the familiar PI encoding gene _par_ [4], (which in the following will be named _repX_ so as to be more consistent with the naming of most other plasmid replicates), stability determinants in the form of a _parFG_ partitioning locus characterized in the plasmid TP228 [21], and the _stbDE_ plasmid addiction locus, characterized previously in R485 [22]. The upstream region of the _repX_ gene, which is normally dedicated to replication initiation control in the form of iteron repeats [23], showed that a 77 bp deletion had reduced the normal number of five iteron to just one, and thus represented a substantially truncated replicon. Furthermore, the plasmid sequence did not show obvious signs of the secondary or tertiary replication origins that are normally associated with plasmids of the IncX group [24]. The replication initiation gene _repX_ was not immediately followed by the _bas_ and _dhp3_ genes, as in most other described IncX-plasmids [4,5,24]. Instead, _repX_ was followed by a ~300 bp intergenic region and a gene (_repX2_) which also encoded a putative replication initiation protein. A homology search revealed that the second protein was a divergent homologue (47% similarity) of the PI protein of IncX-plasmid p2ESCUM, which shows slightly closer similarity to the IncX2 replicon of the _E. coli_ plasmid R6K. Rather curiously, the whole IncX-backbone region was surrounded by IS26-elements, meaning that this backbone region in effect could constitute a small mobile element in the form of a composite transposon.

The IncFII-replication region only contained a single protein-encoding gene with an identifiable function. This was the antisense-RNA controlled replication initiation gene _repFII_ characterized in plasmids like R1 [25].

A region (27.3–30.8 kb) contained a pseudo-gene with significant (E = 2e-65) blastx homology to a replication initiation protein from the _E. coli_ plasmid pMG828-2 (GenBank ID: DQ995352), making it likely that this region previously functioned as a plasmid replicon. The replicon mosaic-like structure observed in the pMO17/440_54 plasmid may indicate that some plasmids, over time, can host several different replicons depending on the flow of foreign insertions, recombinations, and various intra- or extracellular selective pressures.

**Horizontal transfer.** Uncharacteristically for such a large plasmid [26], pMO17/440_54 did not contain any identifiable genes directly related to horizontal dissemination. The absence of genes encoding anything resembling mobilization relaxases or type IV secretion systems [27] would indicate that the plasmid is neither conjugative nor mobilizable. This was consistent with the fact that mating experiments failed to produce any transconjugants with the Enteropepsin derivatives, although this could also have been caused by the disruption of vital transfer functions by the Enteropepsin itself as in the case with pLN126_33 (see below). The presence of the hypothesized mobilization auxiliary gene _dhp3_ gene on the plasmid and the cognate long inverted repeat containing an origin of transfer (_oriT_), however, could indicate that pMO17/440_54 might be indirectly mobilized by the presence of the TaxC relaxase encoded by another plasmid. A similar phenomenon can also be observed in the IncX-replicating _E. coli_ plasmid pMccC7-H22 [28], which lacks an identifiable relaxase, but also still contains the replicon associated _oriT_.

**Genetic load regions.** The parts of pMO17/440_54 predicted to provide the host with adaptive traits, consisted of two inserted regions surrounded by IS-elements. One was a region (8.5–14.0 kb) in which a possible drug resistance mechanism was located, and the other (42.1–45.9 kb) encoded proteins associated with biogenesis of type 1 fimbriae.

The region containing a putative resistance mechanism did not display close nucleotide homology to any known genomic
Figure 2. Sequence Maps. Graphical representation of the annotated IncX-type plasmids, pLN126_33, pMO17/440_54 and R485. The central diagrams represent the %GC content. Black pins represent the insertion points of the Entranceposon derivatives. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0041259.g002
sequence. This region was however found to encode an AraC-like transcription regulator, two putative catabolic proteins and two putative membrane-spanning components. One of the putative enzyme encoding genes was discovered to encode a predicted beta-lactamase fold type protein. The second gene encoded a predicted protein resembling a group of uncharacterized isochorismatase-like proteins that could possibly be related to pyrazinamidases. These enzymes are known for their ability to degrade pyrazinamide (PZA) used in treatment against *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infections [29].

The two encoded membrane-proteins were predicted to contain 9 and 12 transmembrane helices (TMH), respectively. The second, larger protein, showed significant homology to the large and diverse group of major-facilitator superfamily (MFS) permeases, making it likely that the two membrane proteins constituted a multi-drug efflux mechanism [30]. Although there was considerable genetic evidence pointing towards an antimicrobial resistance mechanism within this region, drug resistance beyond ampicillin and streptomycin (against which neither *Shigella* sp. MO17 or *Shigella* sp. MO440 conferred resistance) was not investigated any further in this study.

The second putative genetic load region displayed over 99% sequence homology to a section of *E. coli* ATCC 8739 which contained a predicted type 1 fimbrial biogenesis cassette. The corresponding region in pMO17/440_54 was flanked by IS1-elements, and had therefore most likely been lifted from *E. coli* by the incorporation of these elements (thus forming a composite transposon). However, the transported fragment did not contain all the necessary components for complete fimbrial biogenesis via the chaperone-usher pathway [31]. Most notably, the gene encoding the large Usher-protein homologue (FimD), had been heavily truncated, while a putative FimA component was completely lacking. The cassette still encoded a predicted surface protein (consistent with the adhesin component of type 1 fimbrial systems), and a FimC chaperone-homologue. The downstream region of the putative biofilm biogenesis genes, encode a predicted inner membrane protein with 3 TMH’s but did not show homology to known fimbrial components.

**pLN126_33 and R485**

Plasmids R485 and pLN126_33 were found to contain 81 and 45 putative protein coding sequences, respectively. Compared to the highly mosaic pMO17/440_54 they were considerably simpler in structure, although, similarly, both backbone regions have been compromised by the insertion of transposable elements.

**Plasmid maintenance regions.** In both cases, the plasmids contained regions dedicated to replication via the IncX-mechanism, although the π/RepX protein in R485 diverged considerably from the pOLA52 equivalent, instead showing 100% homology to the π protein of the plasmid pMAS2027 (GenBank ID: FJ666132). Furthermore, they also harboured the associated stability determinants in the form of the parFG partitioning and stbDE stability loci, as described in the previous section.

The sequence divergence observed between the repX genes of pOLA32 and R485 raises the question these two plasmids should be assigned to the same IncX1 group [4]. However, we believe that this discussion, albeit important, is outside the scope of this study.

**Horizontal transfer.** Both pLN126_33 and R485 encoded regions with close resemblance to the pOLA52 mob region, responsible for DNA transfer and replication (Dtr) [32]. The region consists of a relaxases/nickase encoded by the taxC gene and an accessory protein encoded by the taxA gene. Furthermore, both plasmids harboured the two oriTs contained within long inverted repeats (LIRs), where one is located near the taxC gene and the other is located close to the repX gene. Two oriTs have so far been recognized as a unique characteristic of conjugative IncX-plasmids. A third gene ddp3 (which has also been linked to the Dtr mechanism) was located near the second oriT in both plasmids. The plasmid R485 has previously been investigated for its ability to conjugate [33], and here it was observed that R485 conjugation on solid surfaces was massively favoured over liquid media (surface-obligatory). This was in contrast to the related IncX plasmids R6K and TP228, which only displayed a preference towards solid surfaces (almost a thousand fold less than R485).

Unfortunately, in the only recovered Enterococcus derivative of pLN126_33, the transposons was inserted directly into the taxG-gene, meaning that the plasmids mobilization capabilities could not be investigated experimentally.

**Genetic load region.** A large (36.4–51.7 kb) inserted genetic load segment, which disrupted the topB gene (normally encoding a topoisomerase) in R485, was apart from some rep and tra elements, found to contain a cassette encoding dihydropteroate synthase (EC 2.5.1.21) in the form of the *sulf* gene and an 80% C-terminal truncated phosphoglucosamine mutase via the *glmM* gene. Dihydropteroate synthase is the target for the sulfonamide group of antimicrobial agents, which block the tetrahydrofolate synthesis pathway in bacteria. The presence of the *sulf* gene on R485 is therefore in all likelihood the mechanism by which the plasmid confers sulfonamide resistance [34].

In addition, the inserted region also contained an *arsRHSB* operon that in all likelihood encodes an arsenic/arsenate resistance mechanism [35] a type of resistance not previously been described in R485.

Surprisingly, the type 3 fimbrial cassette previously characterized in both pOLA52 and the conjugative plasmid pMS2027 isolated from uropathogenic *E. coli* (UPEC) were found also to be present in both R485 and pLN126_33 (Table 1) [4,10,36]. In fact, the only clearly adaptive load present on pLN126_33 seems to be the *mrkABCDF* cassette. Since only the UPEC strain was specifically selected for its ability to produce biofilm, it is quite remarkable that this cassette was found on in three otherwise unrelated studies. The presence of the *mrkABCDF* cassette on the R485 plasmid also explains the previous observations made by Bradley et al. that R485 confers two different types of surface pili. By deduction, the two types of pili observed were the IncX-pili (thick rigid) and the type 3 fimbriae (thin flexible), respectively [6,33].

As was the case with pOLA52 and its Tn6011I transposon, the cassettes were all flanked by IS-elements and displayed very high homology to the *Klebsiella pneumoniae* MGH 75878 mrkABCDF cassette [4]. Sequence comparison revealed two 9 bp (in-frame) deletions within the fimbrial cassette of R485, which were shared with the pMAS2027 cassette and a unique 12-bp deletion, but otherwise the sequences contained few single-nucleotide polymorphisms compared to the pOLA52 or *K. pneumoniae* MGH 75878 cassettes. The inserted fragments were not flanked by identical IS-elements at the mrkF end (Fig. 3), possibly indicating a history of gradual shaping of the cassette through progressive invasions of new IS-elements closer and closer to the encoding genes. Interestingly, the pLN126_33 plasmid, which was isolated 35 years later than R485 [37], contained the longest of the putative *K. pneumoniae* fragments. The R485 fragment was identical to the
pMAS2027 fragment with respects to the flanking IS-elements, but
the both R485 and pMAS2027 contained indels not present in the
other plasmid. The pLN126_33 cassette also encodes a highly
truncated gene from the downstream region of mrkJ. In K.
pneumoniae this region contains the mrkJ control cassette [38,39],
where mrkJ encodes an EAL-domain phosphodiesterase shown to
regulate expression of mrkABCDF through cleavage of the
signalling molecule cyclic-di-GMP [40]. The existence of three
different lengths of mobile mrkABCDF cassettes suggests a general
course of evolution for adaptive loads that result from the
recruitment of chromosomal gene cassettes. We speculate that
this recruitment would start with a long genomic fragment being
captured by the random incorporation of IS-elements, which
subsequently find their way into the communal gene pool [1].
Over time, redundant parts of the gene cassettes are gradually lost
by the constant incorporation of new IS-elements. Only those
insertions that do not disrupt the adaptive phenotype of the
transported cassette would be allowed to survive through natural

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0041259.t001

Table 1. Reported occurrences of type 3 biofilm promoting IncX-plasmids.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plasmid</th>
<th>Size (kb)</th>
<th>Host Strain</th>
<th>YOI</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Sample type</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pOLA52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Escherichia coli</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Swine Manure</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pLN126_33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Shigella sp. LN126</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Wastewater</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R485</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Morganella morganii M203</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>UTI patient</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pMAS2027</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Escherichia coli MS2027</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>UTI patient</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Biofilm Induction

The presence of type 3 fimbriae encoding cassettes on plasmids
pLN126_33 and R485, and the truncated type 1 fimbriae-type
cassette on pMO17/440_54, respectively, prompted a closer
examination of the biofilm promoting capabilities of these
plasmids. All plasmids (hosted in E. coli GeneHogs®) were
therefore tested for their ability to enhance biofilm formation in
microtitre wells, in a CV retention assay previously used to
measure biofilm promotion in pOLA52 (Fig. 4). Both R485 and
pLN126_33 displayed at least a 20-fold increase in biofilm
formation compared to the plasmid-free strain and the Usher
protein-disrupted mrkC mutant of pOLA52. Interestingly, there
was a significant difference between pLN126_33 and R485, where
R485 seemed capable of inducing biofilm formation more
efficiently than pLN126_33. Compared to the pOLA52 plasmid,
however, both the plasmids R485 and pLN126_33 promoted
biofilm formation at a significantly reduced rate.

Both of the plasmids pMO440_54 and pMO17_54 were unable
to enhance biofilm formation when compared to both the control
strain (not carrying any plasmids) and the mrkC disrupted clone of

Figure 3. Fimbriae encoding gene cassettes. (top) The different versions of the mrkABCDF cassette and their flanking IS elements as they are arranged on plasmids pOLA52, R485, pMAS2027 & pLN126_33, compared to the corresponding chromosomal region of K. pneumoniae MGH 78578. (bottom) A similar comparison between the inserted region of plasmids pMO17/440_54 and the corresponding E. coli region that contains a putative type 1 fimbrial biogenesis cassette.

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0041259.g003
pOLA52. Since the cassette in the two plasmids were not intact, when compared with the E. coli genome from which they had most likely been captured, this does not seem surprising. It therefore remains an open question which selective advantage the presence of this partial type 1 fimbrial cassette provide their host with, if any.

Concluding Remarks

Plasmids belonging to the IncX group have until recently received little attention with respects to the range of adaptive genes that they are able to transport between members of the Enterobacteriaceae. The recent advances in sequencing technologies have now drastically improved the speed with which plasmids can be sequenced once they have been isolated enabled us to characterize several such plasmids in a single study. In order to procure a diverse range of new IncX plasmids for sequencing, a replicon-centric method of plasmid capture (TAPC) was used that allowed the isolation of naturally occurring plasmids from strains of bacteria containing high numbers of different plasmids, without prior antibiotic selection. Although the approach only led to the isolation of three IncX plasmids, of which two turned out to be identical, the method nevertheless is an effective supplement to methods such as exogenous plasmid isolation, that are dependent on a functional conjugation apparatus and specific selection pressures.

Several studies have so far reported the existence of conjugal plasmids that carry with them the ability to promote cell attachment and biofilm formation on abiotic through the formation of surface fimbriae [4,36,41,42]. In the majority of cases these plasmids have been reported from within the Enterobacteriaceae, and within plasmids belonging to incompatibility groups (IncA, IncX) that normally thrive within this family. Comparative studies indicate that the mrkABCDF cassette has most likely migrated from pathogenic K. pneumoniae, who derive much of their virulence from their ability to form biofilm, onto several IncX plasmids either by multiple capture events, or by proliferation of a specific gene cassette in the form of a composite transposon such as Tn6011. The IncX plasmids therefore seem particularly capable of facilitating the spread of this cassette to strains of E. coli, which in effect will raise the virulence of receiving strains considerably. It is interesting to note that a specific association seems to exist between the mrkABCDF cassette and IncX-replicon plasmids containing whole or partial PilX-type T4SSs even though plasmids have come from vastly different sources and locations (Table 1). This either indicates that the IncX-replicon plasmids are particularly well suited to carry the mrkABCDF cassette, or that its presence somehow augments already-encoded functions on the IncX-backbone. Although one study pointed to a lacking ability of IncX T4SSs to promote biofilm on their own [5], there still seems be enough reason to further investigate the interplay between components of the mrkABCDF cassette and the PilX-type T4SSs.

A previous study of pOLA52 for example hinted that the Tn6011 transposon dramatically enhances conjugation. Several studies have indicated that just by maintaining high conjugation frequencies a plasmid can stably propagate within bacterial communities [43–45]. Hence, genes such as the mrkABCDF cassette, that enhance conjugation frequencies indirectly by promoting biofilm formation will automatically become advantageous for the plasmid that carry them, underlining the interconnection between plasmids and biofilm formation [46].

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Sarah Bentzon-Tilia and Michael Peter Baunsgaard for excellent technical assistance during the screening of isolates.

Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: AN MB LHH SJS. Performed the experiments: AN MB LHH. Analyzed the data: AN MB. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: AN MB LHH SJS. Wrote the paper: MB AN LHH SJS.
References