

Degradation of hydroxyhydroquinone by the strictly anaerobic fermenting bacterium *Pelobacter massiliensis* sp. nov.

Sylvia Schnell, Andreas Brune, and Bernhard Schink

Lehrstuhl Mikrobiologie I, Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Auf der Morgenstelle 28, W-7400 Tübingen, Federal Republic of Germany

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Abstract. A new rod-shaped, gram-negative, non-spore-forming, strictly anaerobic bacterium (strain HHQ7) was enriched and isolated from marine mud samples with hydroxyhydroquinone (1,2,4-trihydroxybenzene) as sole substrate. Strain HHQ7 fermented hydroxyhydroquinone, pyrogallol (1,2,3-trihydroxybenzene), phloroglucinol (1,3,5-trihydroxybenzene) and gallic acid (3,4,5-trihydroxybenzoate) to 3 mol acetate (plus 1 mol CO₂ in the case of gallic acid) per mol of substrate. Resorcinol accumulated intermediately during growth on hydroxyhydroquinone. No other aliphatic or aromatic substrates were utilized. Sulfate, sulfite, sulfur, nitrate, and fumarate were not reduced with hydroxyhydroquinone as electron donor. The strain grew in sulfide-reduced mineral medium supplemented with 7 vitamins. The DNA base ratio was 59% G + C. Strain HHQ7 is classified as a new species of the genus *Pelobacter*, *P. massiliensis*. Experiments with dense cell suspensions of hydroxyhydroquinone- and pyrogallol-grown cells showed different kinetics of hydroxyhydroquinone and pyrogallol degradation, as well as different patterns of resorcinol accumulation, indicating that these substrates are metabolized by different transhydroxylation reactions.

Key words: Hydroxyhydroquinone — Anaerobic degradation — *Pelobacter massiliensis* sp. nov. — Trihydroxybenzenes — Aromatic compounds

The three trihydroxybenzene isomers occur with different abundancies in nature. Pyrogallol and its derivatives are major products of lignin degradation (Young and Frazer 1987), occur in tannins of gall nuts and lichens, are intermediates in the synthesis of phytohormones, and are secondary metabolites of many plants and fruits (Beyer and Walter 1988). Phloroglucinol is a structural component of flavonoid compounds and anthocyanins, and an inter-

mediate in anaerobic pyrogallol degradation by *Pelobacter acidigallici* (Samain et al. 1986) and *Eubacterium oxidoreducens* (Krumholz et al. 1987). Free hydroxyhydroquinone occurs in the marine sponge *Axinella polycapella*; its presence there is attributed to its antibacterial and antifungal effect (Cimino et al. 1974; Wratten and Meinwald 1981). Intermediate accumulation of hydroxyhydroquinone was reported for aerobic degradation of phloroglucinol by *Fusarium solani* (Walker and Taylor 1983) and by *Penicillium simplicissimum* (Patel et al. 1990), and for anaerobic phloroglucinol breakdown by *Rhodocyclus gelatinosa* (formerly *Rhodopseudomonas gelatinosa*, Evans 1977). Obligately anaerobic bacteria utilizing hydroxyhydroquinone are so far unknown. In this study we describe the enrichment and isolation of strictly anaerobic bacteria with hydroxyhydroquinone as sole carbon and energy source.

Material and methods

Sources of organisms

Strain HHQ7 was isolated from an enrichment culture with hydroxyhydroquinone inoculated with black sediment from Etang de Prevost, a salt marsh near Marseille, France. Other enrichments were performed with anorganic-rich black sediment from Rio de la Pergola, a canal in Venice, Italy.

Media and growth conditions

Anaerobic, defined mineral media of various salinities were prepared as described by Widdel and Pfennig (1984), using trace element solution SL10a (Widdel 1986), 2 ml per l medium. Selenite-tungstate solution was added to a final concentration of 20 nM each. Six-vitamin solution, vitamin B₁₂ and substrates were filter-sterilized and added to the autoclaved medium before inoculation. Utilization of substrates was tested in 20 ml screw cap tubes, following growth by turbidity measurements at 450 nm in a Spectronic 20 photometer (Milton Roy, Rochester, NY, USA). All growth tests were carried out at least in duplicate at 30°C in the dark unless otherwise indicated. Aerobic growth was tested in tubes containing complex me-

dium with 1% agar. Fermentation stoichiometries were determined using 0.5 l infusion bottles sealed with rubber septa and gassed with N_2/CO_2 (90/10, v/v). Optical density and the concentrations of hydroxyhydroquinone, acetate, and resorcinol were measured at regular time intervals. Growth yield was determined in 11 batch cultures (Widdel and Pfennig 1981).

Isolation and purity control

Pure cultures were obtained by repeated application of agar dilution series as described by Widdel and Pfennig (1984). Purity was checked microscopically and by testing aerobic and anaerobic growth in complex media (AC-medium, Difco Laboratories, Detroit, Mich., USA, and in a medium containing 0.1% yeast extract, 5 mM fumarate, 5 mM pyruvate, 3 mM glucose with or without 4 mM hydroxyhydroquinone added).

Gram staining was performed according to Magee et al. (1975) with *Acetobacterium woodii* NZva16 and *Escherichia coli* K12 as references.

Pigment analysis

For detection of cytochromes, redox difference spectra of cellfree extracts were recorded using an Uvicon 860 spectrophotometer (Kontron, Zürich, Switzerland).

Experiments with dense cell suspensions

Cells were grown in 100 ml infusion bottles under N_2/CO_2 and harvested in the late exponential growth phase by centrifugation in the culture bottles at $3000 \times g$ for 20 min. Cells were washed once and resuspended to a final density of $625 \mu g \text{ protein} \cdot \text{mg}^{-1}$ in 50 mM N_2 -sparged sodium phosphate buffer, pH 7.0, containing the same amounts of NaCl and $MgCl_2$ as the medium to prevent lysis. Assays were performed in N_2 -gassed vials with butyl rubber septa at room temperature. The reaction mixture consisted of cell suspension (250 μg protein), substrate, and N_2 -gassed sodium phosphate buffer, in a final volume of 2 ml. All additions and samples were handled with gas-tight Unimetrics microliter syringes to prevent access of air. Samples (100 μl) were taken at regular intervals, injected into 400 μl of 0.1 M H_3PO_4 , and kept on ice to be analyzed within 1 h.

Chemical analyses

Aromatic compounds were analyzed with a high-pressure liquid chromatograph equipped with a reverse phase (C_{18}) column (Brune and Schink 1990). A mobile phase consisting of 100 mM ammonium phosphate buffer, pH 2.6, and varying amounts of methanol were used. Acetate and other volatile fatty acids were assayed by gas chromatography (Dehning et al. 1989). Sulfide formation was analyzed according to Cord-Ruwisch (1985). Formation of nitrite from nitrate was assayed following azo dye formation with sulfanilic acid and α -naphthylamine (Procházková 1959). Protein was determined according to the method of Bradford (1976) with bovine serum albumin as standard.

Results

Enrichments and isolation of pure cultures

Enrichment cultures with sediment samples from Etang de Prevost in saltwater medium containing 10 mM sulfate

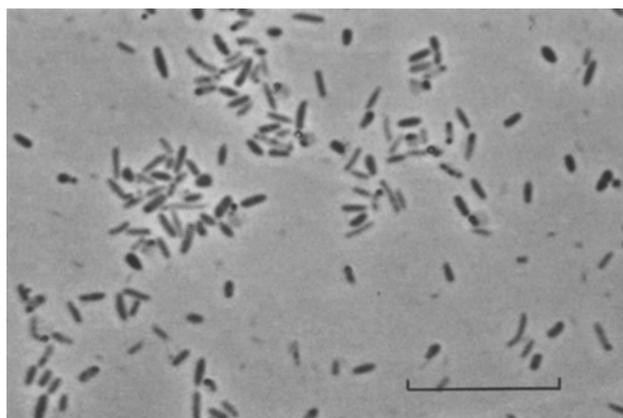


Fig. 1. Phase-contrast photomicrograph of strain HHQ7. Bar: 10 μm

and 1 mM hydroxyhydroquinone showed sulfide production after 3 months. Repeated addition of 1 mM hydroxyhydroquinone increased the sulfide concentration. After four transfers, flocs of bacteria were observed, consisting mainly of thin rods and short thick rods. The suspension was homogenized and agar dilution series were prepared with 2 mM hydroxyhydroquinone and 10 mM sulfate. Yellowish-brown satellite colonies developed around yellowish-white central colonies. The former consisted of short thick rods and could not be isolated with hydroxyhydroquinone and sulfate. However, they grew well with acetate and sulfate, and strongly resembled the typical acetate-degrading sulfate reducers of the genus *Desulfobacter*. The thin rods of the central colonies were isolated from subsequent agar dilution series with 2 mM hydroxyhydroquinone and 10 mM sulfate, but were shown not to form sulfide from sulfate during growth on hydroxyhydroquinone. Strain HHQ7 was maintained in pure culture for further studies.

Other enrichments with 1 mM hydroxyhydroquinone and 10 mM sulfate, inoculated with mud from Venice, produced sulfide and yielded morphologically similar bacteria as described above.

Morphology

Figure 1 shows a photomicrograph of strain HHQ7 grown with hydroxyhydroquinone. The thin rods ($0.4-0.5 \mu m \times 0.7-1.5 \mu m$) were frequently irregular in length, width, and refractility when grown on this substrate. On pyrogallol, phloroglucinol, and gallate, the rods were more regular and thicker. Motility was observed occasionally in young cultures. The cells tended to grow on the glass surface of the culture bottles. Strain HHQ7 stained gram-negative; endospores were never observed.

Physiological and nutritional properties

Strain HHQ7 grew in saltwater medium as well as in brackish medium. No growth occurred in freshwater me-

Table 1. Compounds tested as possible growth substrates for strain HHQ7. Substrate concentrations in mM are given in parentheses

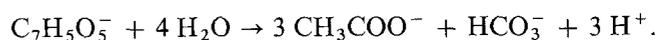
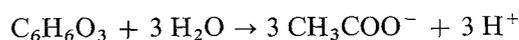
<i>Substrates supporting growth:</i>	
Hydroxyhydroquinone (4), pyrogallol (4), phloroglucinol (4), gallic acid (4).	
<i>Substrates not supporting growth:</i>	
Phenol (1), catechol (1), resorcinol (2), hydroquinone (2), <i>o</i> -cresol (1), <i>m</i> -cresol (1), <i>p</i> -cresol (1), benzoate (2), 2-hydroxybenzoate (2), 3-hydroxybenzoate (2), 4-hydroxybenzoate (2), 2,3-dihydroxybenzoate (2), 2,4-dihydroxybenzoate (2), 2,5-dihydroxybenzoate (2), 3,5-dihydroxybenzoate (2), 2,6-dihydroxybenzoate (2), 2,3,4-trihydroxybenzoate (2), phenylacetate (2), 3,4,5-trimethoxycinnamate (2), vanillate (2), quinate (2), cyclohexanecarboxylate (2), <i>m</i> -inositol (2), cyclohexanol (2), cyclohexanone (2), phenylalanine (2), tyrosine (2), tryptophan (2), aniline (1), 2-aminobenzoate (2), 3-aminobenzoate (2), 4-aminobenzoate (2), methanol (5), ethanol (5), lactate (5), pyruvate (5), 3-hydroxybutyrate (5), malonate (5), succinate (5), fumarate (5), glutarate (5), malate (5), L-tartrate (5), citrate (5), glycollate (5), glyoxylate (5), crotonate (5), ethyleneglycol (5), glycerol (5), glucose (10), fructose (10), mannose (10), xylose (10)	

dium or in saltwater medium supplemented with additional NaCl (400 mM) and MgCl₂ (25 mM). No growth was found in complex medium under aerobic or microaerobic conditions. Addition of yeast extract, pig manure filtrate, bovine rumen fluid or a mixture of fatty acids (Widdel 1980) did not enhance growth rate or growth yield. Hydroxyhydroquinone, pyrogallol, phloroglucinol, and gallic acid were the only substrates utilized by strain HHQ7. Hydroxyhydroquinone or pyrogallol at concentrations above 4 mM retarded growth significantly. The maximum substrate concentration tolerated was 8 mM hydroxyhydroquinone or pyrogallol, causing a lag phase of 3 days. No other substrates, including other aromatic compounds, mono- and dicarboxylic acids, alcohols and sugars, were utilized (Table 1). Neither ni-

trate (5 mM), sulfate (10 mM), sulfite (3 mM), thiosulfate (6 mM), sulfur, nor fumarate (10 mM) was used as electron acceptor during degradation of hydroxyhydroquinone. No growth occurred below 20°C or above 40°C. Growth was fastest at 30°C; the respective doubling times were 50 h with hydroxyhydroquinone and 36 h with pyrogallol as substrate. The pH range of growth was pH 6.5 to 7.8, with an optimum at pH 7.2.

Stoichiometries and growth yields

Strain HHQ7 degraded hydroxyhydroquinone, pyrogallol, phloroglucinol and gallic acid to 3 mol acetic acid per mol of substrate (Table 2), according to the following equations:



Small amounts of resorcinol, in addition to acetate, were produced only during growth on hydroxyhydroquinone, but not on the other substrates. Figure 2 represents the typical time course of hydroxyhydroquinone fermentation by strain HHQ7, showing a transient accumulation of resorcinol. For growth on hydroxyhydroquinone, a molar growth yield (Y_s) of 3.9 g/mol hydroxyhydroquinone was determined. Y_s for the other substrates were calculated using the OD/dry cell matter correlation determined on hydroxyhydroquinone. The respective values are 5.5, 7.4, and 8.6 g · mol⁻¹ for phloroglucinol, pyrogallol, and gallic acid.

Pigments and DNA base composition

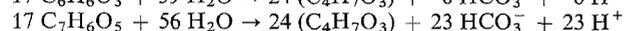
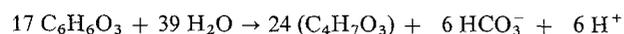
Redox difference spectra of dithionite-reduced minus air-oxidized cell extracts showed no pigments absorbing in the range of 350–650 nm (with a protein content of about 0.5 mg/ml), thus providing no indication for the

Table 2. Fermentation balances for growth of strain HHQ7 on trihydroxybenzenes and gallic acid

Substrate	Amount of substrate consumed (mmol)	Acetate produced (mmol)	Resorcinol produced (mmol)	Dry cell matter formed ^a (mg)	Substrate assimilated ^b (mmol)	Substrate dissimilated (mmol)	Carbon recovery (%)
Hydroxyhydroquinone	0.97	2.74	0.023	2.7	0.018	0.929	98
	1.84	5.40	0.045	7.4	0.051	1.744	103
	2.90	8.45	0.063	11.7	0.080	2.757	102
	3.95	10.83	0.083	15.2	0.104	3.763	96
Phloroglucinol	3.16	8.59	—	17.3	0.119	3.040	94
Pyrogallol	3.92	10.75	—	28.9	0.199	3.721	96
Gallic acid	3.82	10.26	—	32.8	0.225	3.595	95

^a Calculations are based on a correlation of OD with dry cell matter determined during growth on hydroxyhydroquinone

^b Substrate consumed for cell matter synthesis was calculated by the following equations:



6.87 mmol trihydroxybenzenes or gallic acid were assimilated into 1 g of dry cell matter

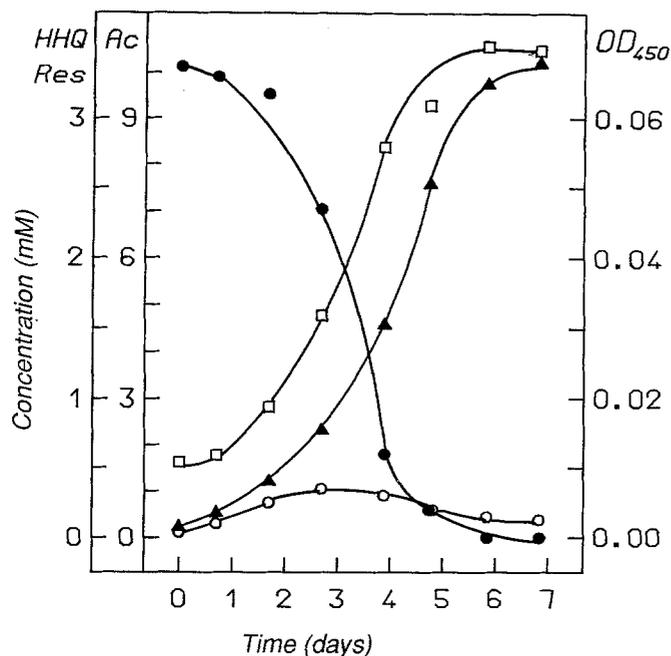


Fig. 2. Time course of hydroxyhydroquinone fermentation by strain HHQ7. (●) Hydroxyhydroquinone (HHQ), (□) optical density, (▲) acetate (Ac), and (○) resorcinol (Res)

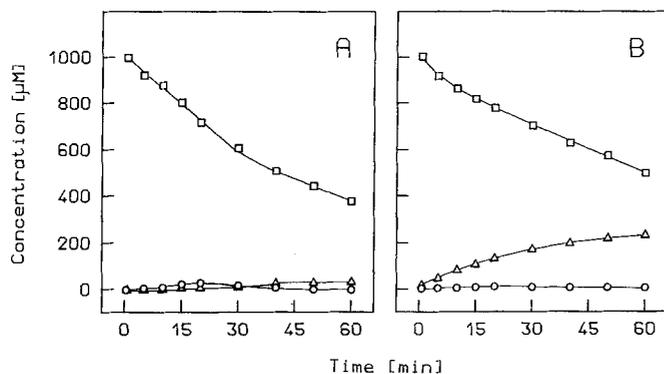


Fig. 3. Degradation of hydroxyhydroquinone (□) by dense cell suspensions of strain HHQ7, grown on hydroxyhydroquinone (A) or pyrogallol (B). (○) Phloroglucinol, (Δ) resorcinol. Protein concentration in both assays was $125 \mu\text{g} \cdot \text{ml}^{-1}$

presence of cytochromes. The G + C content of the DNA was $59 \pm 2 \text{ mol}\%$ as determined by the thermal denaturation method (Marmur and Doty 1962).

Experiments with dense cell suspensions

Substrate degradation was studied in dense cell suspensions. While cells grown on hydroxyhydroquinone degraded hydroxyhydroquinone without significant accumulation of aromatic metabolites, pyrogallol-grown cells converted hydroxyhydroquinone to resorcinol at a 2:1 ratio (Fig. 3). Another significant difference between hydroxyhydroquinone- and pyrogallol-grown cells be-

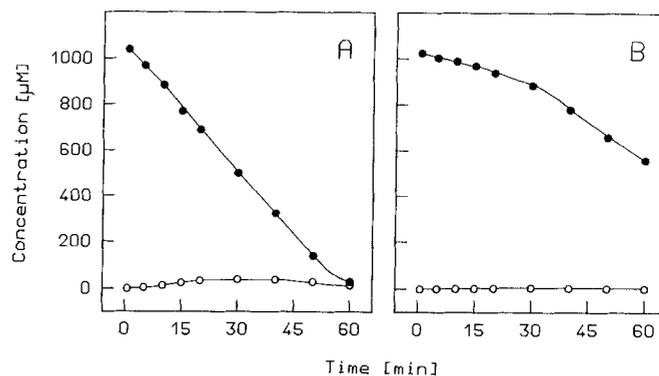


Fig. 4. Degradation of pyrogallol (●) by dense cell suspensions of strain HHQ7, grown on hydroxyhydroquinone (A) or pyrogallol (B). (○) Phloroglucinol. Protein concentration in both assays was $125 \mu\text{g} \cdot \text{ml}^{-1}$

came evident during pyrogallol degradation (Fig. 4): Hydroxyhydroquinone-grown cells degraded pyrogallol immediately, while pyrogallol degradation by pyrogallol-grown cells was reproducibly biphasic. After an initial lag phase that varied in length with different cell extracts, the rate of pyrogallol consumption increased approximately threefold. Small amounts of phloroglucinol accumulated under both conditions.

Discussion

Physiology

Strain HHQ7 is the first obligately anaerobic bacterium known to grow with hydroxyhydroquinone as sole energy and carbon source. It degrades hydroxyhydroquinone fermentatively to 3 acetate; small amounts of resorcinol are produced. At this stage of the investigation we cannot explain why the resorcinol formed as an intermediate or by-product of the hydroxyhydroquinone degradation is at least partially reutilized by growing cultures, while resorcinol alone is not metabolized by strain HHQ7. The only other substrates used by strain HHQ7 are pyrogallol, phloroglucinol, and gallic acid. In this respect, strain HHQ7 strongly resembles *P. acidigallici*, but differs in its additional ability to degrade the third isomer of trihydroxybenzene, hydroxyhydroquinone.

These findings prove the existence of a new degradative capacity in anaerobic bacteria; the question arises how hydroxyhydroquinone is shuttled into the catabolic sequences of trihydroxybenzene fermentations.

Earlier investigations on the transformation of pyrogallol to phloroglucinol by *P. acidigallici* described a novel transhydroxylation reaction transferring a hydroxyl group from a hydroxyl donor (1,2,3,5-tetrahydroxybenzene) to pyrogallol, thus forming the product phloroglucinol and regenerating the cosubstrate (Brune and Schink 1990). The enzymatic activity in cell extracts of this bacterium proved to be relatively unspecific; several di- and trihydroxybenzenes could replace the physiological hydroxyl donor or acceptor molecule, but transhy-

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