

Gene cluster conservation provides insight into cercosporin biosynthesis and extends production to the genus *Colletotrichum*

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Species in the genus *Cercospora* cause economically devastating diseases in sugar beet, maize, rice, soy bean, and other major food crops. Here, we sequenced the genome of the sugar beet pathogen *Cercospora beticola* and found it encodes 63 putative secondary metabolite gene clusters, including the cercosporin toxin biosynthesis (*CTB*) cluster. We show that the *CTB* gene cluster has experienced multiple duplications and horizontal transfers across a spectrum of plant pathogenic fungi, including the wide-host range *Colletotrichum* genus as well as the rice pathogen *Magnaporthe oryzae*. Although cercosporin biosynthesis has been thought to rely on an eight-gene *CTB* cluster, our phylogenomic analysis revealed gene collinearity adjacent to the established cluster in all *CTB* cluster-harboring species. We demonstrate that the *CTB* cluster is larger than previously recognized and includes cercosporin facilitator protein, previously shown to be involved with cercosporin autoresistance, and four additional genes required for cercosporin biosynthesis, including the final pathway enzymes that install the unusual cercosporin methylenedioxy bridge. Lastly, we demonstrate production of cercosporin by *Colletotrichum fioriniae*, the first known cercosporin producer within this agriculturally important genus. Thus, our results provide insight into the intricate evolution and biology of a toxin critical to agriculture and broaden the production of cercosporin to another fungal genus containing many plant pathogens of important crops worldwide.

natural product | perylenequinone | secondary metabolism | cercosporin | *Cercospora*

Among the most speciose genera in all of Fungi are the *Cercospora* (1). First described in 1863 (2), the genus has sustained a long history, largely due to notoriety as the causal agent of leaf spot diseases in a wide range of plants, including agriculturally important crops such as sugar beet, soybean, maize, and rice that together account for hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue annually to growers worldwide (3–8). Although *Cercospora* spp. share several characteristics associated with pathogenicity, such as penetration through natural openings and extracellular growth during the biotrophic stage of infection, most rely on the production of the secondary metabolite (SM) cercosporin (1) to facilitate infection (9, 10). Studies spanning nearly 60 y have made cercosporin a model perylenequinone (11), a class of SMs characterized by a core pentacyclic conjugated chromophore that gives rise to its photoactivity. When exposed to ambient light, cercosporin is a potent producer of reactive oxygen species in the presence of oxygen (12), with a quantum efficiency of >80% (13). This small molecule is lipophilic and can readily penetrate plant leaves, leading to indiscriminate cellular damage within minutes of exposure (14).

Indeed, cercosporin is nearly universally toxic to a wide array of organisms, including bacteria, mammals, plants, and most fungal species, with the key exception of cercosporin-producing fungi, which exhibit cercosporin autoresistance. To date, cercosporin has been reported to be produced only by *Cercospora* spp., with the single exception of the brassica pathogen *Pseudocercospora capsellae* (15). However, *Pseudocercospora* and *Cercospora* are phylogenetically closely related, residing in a large clade within Mycosphaerellaceae (16).

In contrast to the large body of information on cercosporin biology spanning several decades (17, 18), the cercosporin toxin

Significance

Species in the fungal genus *Cercospora* cause diseases in many important crops worldwide. Their success as pathogens is largely due to the secretion of cercosporin during infection. We report that the cercosporin toxin biosynthesis (*CTB*) gene cluster is ancient and was horizontally transferred to diverse fungal plant pathogens. Because our analyses revealed genes adjacent to the established *CTB* cluster with similar evolutionary trajectories, we evaluated their role in *Cercospora beticola* to show that four are necessary for cercosporin biosynthesis. Lastly, we confirmed that the apple pathogen *Colletotrichum fioriniae* produces cercosporin, the first case outside the family Mycosphaerellaceae. Other *Colletotrichum* plant pathogens also harbor the *CTB* cluster, which points to a wider role that this toxin may play in virulence.

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biosynthesis (*CTB*) gene cluster was only recently resolved in *Cercospora nicotianae* (19). The keystone enzyme for cercosporin biosynthesis, CTB1, bears all the hallmarks of an iterative, nonreducing polyketide synthase (PKS) (20). Using *CTB1* as a point of reference, the complete *C. nicotianae* *CTB* gene cluster was determined to consist of eight contiguous genes, of which six are believed to be responsible for cercosporin assembly (*CTB1*, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7) (19, 21). The zinc finger transcription factor CTB8 coregulates expression of the cluster (19), while the major facilitator superfamily transporter CTB4 exports the final metabolite (22). Downstream of the *CTB* cluster are two ORFs encoding truncated transcription factors, while loci designated as *ORF9* and *ORF10* upstream of the *CTB* cluster are not regulated by light and are not believed to encode proteins with metabolic functions (19). Consequently, the clustering of eight genes with demonstrated coregulation by light that are flanked by ORFs with no apparent role in cercosporin biosynthesis has suggested that cercosporin production relies on the eight-gene *CTB* cluster (19). In this study, we used an evolutionary comparative genomics approach to show that the *CTB* gene cluster underwent multiple duplication events and was transferred horizontally across large taxonomic distances. Since these horizontal transfer events included genes adjacent to the canonical eight-gene *CTB* cluster, we used reverse genetics to show that the *CTB* cluster includes additional genes in *Cercospora beticola*, including one gene that was previously shown to be involved with cercosporin autoresistance (23) and four previously unrecognized genes involved with biosynthesis. The *CTB* cluster was found in several *Colletotrichum* spp., and we confirmed that the apple pathogen *Colletotrichum fioriniae* can also produce cercosporin. As all earlier understanding of cercosporin biosynthesis has been unwittingly limited by a truncated set of genes in *Cercospora* spp., the full dimension of the gene cluster provides deeper insight into the evolution, biosynthesis, and dissemination of a fungal toxin critical to worldwide agriculture.

Results

SM Cluster Expansion in *C. beticola*. *C. beticola* strain 09-40 was sequenced to 100-fold coverage and scaffolded with optical and genome maps, resulting in 96.5% of the 37.06-Mbp assembly being placed in 12 supercontigs, of which 10 are assumed to be chromosomes. Despite their ubiquitous presence in nature and cropping systems, genome sequences of *Cercospora* spp. are not well represented in public databases. Therefore, to aid comparative analysis within the *Cercospora* genus, we also sequenced the genome of *Cercospora berteroae* and reassembled the genome of *Cercospora canescens* (24) (SI Appendix, Table S1). To identify gene clusters responsible for biosynthesis of aromatic polyketides in *C. beticola*, we mined the genome to identify all SM clusters (25) and compared these with predicted clusters in related Dothideomycetes. The *C. beticola* genome possesses a total of 63 predicted SM clusters of several classes, representing an expanded SM repertoire with almost twice the number as compared with closely related Dothideomycetes fungi, which average 34 SM clusters (SI Appendix, Table S2 and Dataset S1). Notably, *C. beticola* encodes 23 candidate nonribosomal peptide synthetase clusters, which is considerably higher than most Dothideomycetes fungi, which have an average of 13 (26). To identify the *C. beticola* PKS cluster responsible for cercosporin biosynthesis, we compared the sequence of the *C. nicotianae* *CTB* cluster (19) with predicted PKS clusters of *C. beticola*. To fill in sequencing gaps between genes in the *C. nicotianae* *CTB* cluster, we sequenced the genome of *C. nicotianae*, which showed that *C. beticola* PKS CBET3_00833 (*CbCTB1*) and flanking genes (CBET3_00830 – CBET3_00837) were ~96% identical to *C. nicotianae* *CTB1* to *CTB8*, and all genes were collinear, strongly suggesting that this region houses the *CTB* cluster in *C. beticola* (SI Appendix, Fig. S1).

Repeated Duplication and Lateral Transfer of the Cercosporin Biosynthetic Cluster. To study the evolutionary relationships of *C. beticola* PKSs, we conducted large-scale phylogenomic analyses that included various previously characterized PKSs from selected species (27). Because resolving orthologous relationships among PKSs can predict the type of SM that will be synthesized, we first built a phylogenetic tree of the conserved core β -ketoacyl synthase domains of each PKS that resulted in separating PKS enzymes into four major groups (SI Appendix, Fig. S2A). Among the eight *C. beticola* nonreducing PKSs, phylogenetic analysis revealed significant similarity among *CbCTB1*, CBET3_10910-RA, and CBET3_11350-RA, which cluster at the base of the cercosporin clade (SI Appendix, Fig. S2B). Interestingly, genes flanking CBET3_10910-RA, but not CBET3_11350-RA, were also strikingly similar to *CbCTB* cluster genes (Fig. 1). Consequently, we hypothesized that the CBET3_10910 SM cluster is the result of a *CTB* cluster duplication. Since duplicated SM gene clusters appeared to be relatively rare in fungi (28), we investigated the origin and specificity of the *CTB* cluster and the putative duplication by searching for *CbCTB1* homologs against a selected set of 48 published Ascomycetes proteomes (SI Appendix, Table S3) representing a diverse group of fungal orders. We identified *CbCTB1* orthologs in the *Cercospora* spp. *C. berteroae* and *C. canescens* and confirmed its presence in *Cladosporium fulvum* (27) and *Parastagonospora nodorum* (29). Surprisingly, seven additional orthologs were identified in Sordariomycetes species (*Colletotrichum orbiculare*, *Colletotrichum gloeosporioides*, *C. fioriniae*, *Colletotrichum graminicola*, *Colletotrichum higginsianum*, and *Magnaporthe oryzae*), as well as one within Leotiomycetes (*Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*) (SI Appendix, Fig. S3A), representing diverse taxa harboring *CTB1*. Analysis of sequence identity showed that intraspecies (*CbCTB1* to CBET3_10910-RA) sequence identity (45%) was lower than the interspecies [e.g., *CbCTB1* and *C. fulvum* CTB1 (Clafu1_196875)] sequence identity (55%) (SI Appendix, Table S4), suggesting that the *CTB1* duplication event occurred before Dothideomycetes speciation.

To develop a “phylogenetic roadmap” that may explain *CTB1* evolution, we used the process of “reconciliation” that takes into account both species and gene histories (30). Although not conclusive, reconciliation considers the costs of evolutionary events (i.e., gene duplications, transfers, and/or losses) to explain the most parsimonious evolutionary route to the present scenario (31). Reconciliation of the species tree (SI Appendix, Fig. S4) with the *CTB1* protein tree revealed that the predicted evolutionary history of *CTB1* can be characterized by four duplications, three

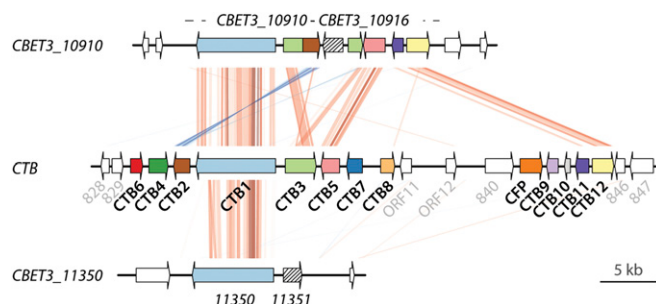


Fig. 1. The cercosporin biosynthetic cluster is duplicated and maintained in *C. beticola*. CBET3_10910 and flanking genes are syntenic with the *CTB* cluster (CBET3_00833 and flanking genes) in *C. beticola*. Alignment lines correspond to DNA fragments exhibiting significant similarity when the genomic regions comprising the gene clusters are compared with tBLASTx. Direct hits are displayed in red, whereas complementary hits are in blue. The intensity of the alignments represents the percentage similarity ranging from 23 to 100%. Genes flanking CBET3_11350-RA were not syntenic with *CTB* cluster genes.

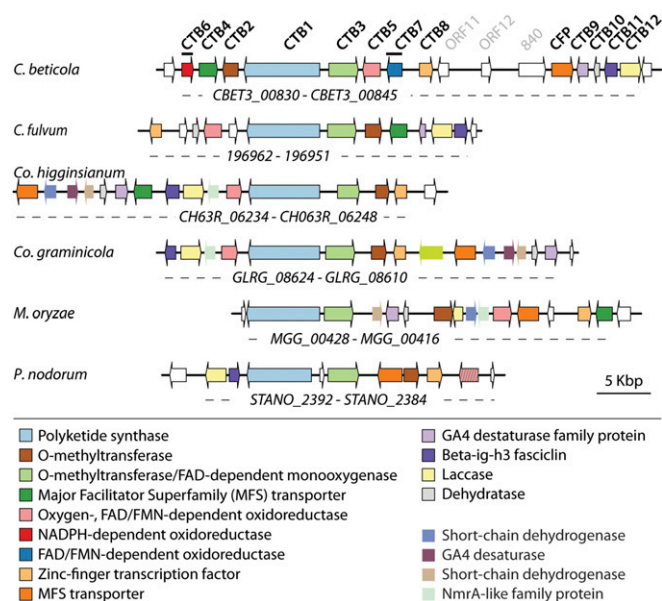


Fig. 3. Synteny and rearrangements of the conserved *C. beticola* cercosporin biosynthetic cluster. The cercosporin biosynthetic cluster in *C. beticola* (top line) and flanking genes are conserved in *C. fulvum*, *C. higginsianum*, *C. graminicola*, *M. oryzae*, and *P. nodorum*. For all species, the displayed identifiers are transcript IDs, and the corresponding sequences can be retrieved from JGI MycoCosm or ORCAE. *CTB* orthologs are colored relative to the *C. beticola* *CTB* cluster genes; the color key and annotated functions are highlighted below the *CTB* cluster graphic. *Cercospora*-specific *CTB* genes *CTB6* and *CTB7* are underlined.

Constrained topologies in which we force either a monophyletic origin of all Dothideomycetes proteins or a monophyletic origin of all Sordariomycetes proteins were significantly worse than trees without such constraint (SI Appendix, Table S6). Thus, the comparative topology tests support the previously determined topologies, which suggest horizontal cluster transfer.

CTB Genes Essential for Cercosporin Biosynthesis. To confirm individual gene contributions for cercosporin production, we generated single-gene deletion mutants of all candidate genes from *CBET3_00840* to *CBET3_00846* and tested their ability to produce cercosporin. Initial assays of selected mutants showed that cercosporin production in $\Delta CBET3_00844$ and $\Delta CBET3_00845$ mutants was abolished, while $\Delta CBET3_00842$ mutants accumulated only a red, cercosporin-like metabolite that migrated differently in potato dextrose agar (PDA) culture plates and TLC (SI Appendix, Fig. S8). To provide more definitive analyses of cercosporin production, HPLC profiles were obtained from all candidate *CTB* gene mutants and compared with WT cercosporin (Fig. 5A). Unlike other analyzed mutants, $\Delta CBET3_00840$ and $\Delta CBET3_00846$ produced compounds with HPLC profiles like cercosporin (Fig. 5A), suggesting that these genes are not involved with cercosporin biosynthesis. Together, these results corroborate our hypothesis that the *CTB* cluster extends to at least *CBET3_00845* at the 3' side and includes four additional *CTB* biosynthetic genes, as well as *CbCFP*. Consequently, we propose naming genes *CBET3_00842*, *CBET3_00843*, *CBET3_00844*, and *CBET3_00845* as *CTB9* to *CTB12*, respectively (SI Appendix, Table S7).

Precercosporin Isolation and Characterization. To characterize the red metabolite that accumulated in the $\Delta 842/CTB9$ and $\Delta 843/CTB10$ mutants (Fig. 5A and SI Appendix, Fig. S8), an ethyl acetate extract of the collected mycelia was analyzed by reverse-phase HPLC. At 280 nm, a single peak was observed in both

mutant extracts with identical retention times and UV-Vis spectra (Fig. 5). This peak was compared with a reference sample of cercosporin produced by wild-type *C. beticola*. The retention time of this peak was shorter than that of cercosporin, suggesting a more polar metabolite. Comparison of the UV-Vis spectra (Fig. 5 B–D) of the unknown compound and cercosporin revealed nearly identical chromophores, suggesting close structural relation. The exact mass of the metabolite from the mutants was determined ($\Delta 842/CTB9$: m/z 537.1762, $\Delta 843/CTB10$: m/z 537.1757, $[M+H]^+$), consistent with the elemental composition $C_{29}H_{28}O_{10}$. This mass is 2 Da greater than that of cercosporin (+2 hydrogens), which led to a proposed structure for precercosporin (2) (Fig. 6). Alternative hydroquinones of cercosporin could be excluded simply on the basis of the UV-Vis spectral information and chemical instability. The presence of a free phenol in precercosporin in place of the unusual seven-membered methylenedioxy of cercosporin is consonant with the red shift of the long wavelength (λ_{max}) and the shorter HPLC retention time.

To firmly support the tentative structure of precercosporin, the crude extract of $\Delta 842/CTB9$ was further purified by reverse-phase HPLC. To obtain sufficient material for 1H -NMR analysis, extractions were performed quickly and in low light and reduced temperature to slow apparent polymerization of precercosporin. The relative instability of precercosporin compared with cercosporin suggests a possible role for the methylenedioxy bridge in overall stability. Immediately evident from the 1H -NMR spectrum (SI Appendix, Fig. S9A), apart from its overall similarity to that of cercosporin itself, was not only the absence of the methylenedioxy singlet at δ 5.74 diagnostic of cercosporin but also the appearance of a new methoxyl signal at δ 4.28 and a phenol at δ 9.25. Consistent with the new asymmetry in precercosporin, two strongly hydrogen-bonded *peri*-hydroxy groups could be seen far downfield at around 15 ppm, and two aryl hydrogens were observed at δ 6.92 and δ 6.87. That these latter resonances are observed only in pairs (as are the two side-chain methyl doublets at around 0.6 ppm) and the other signals are doubled implies that precercosporin is formed as a single atropisomer having a helical configuration likely identical to that of cercosporin, although it is conceivable that *CTB9* or *CTB10* sets the final stereochemistry.

^{13}C -NMR spectroscopy data were obtained by growing a larger number of PDA plates of $\Delta 842/CTB9$ supplemented with 2 mM $[1-^{13}C]$ -sodium acetate and 2 mM $[2-^{13}C]$ -sodium acetate to equally enrich all polyketide-derived carbons ($\sim 3\%$ per site). Working quickly to isolate and purify precercosporin in low light and low temperature as described earlier, both 1D and heteronuclear single quantum coherence spectra of precercosporin were acquired (SI Appendix, Fig. S9 B and C). As seen in the 1H -NMR spectrum, breaking the symmetry of cercosporin was evident in the observation of all 29 carbons in the ^{13}C -NMR

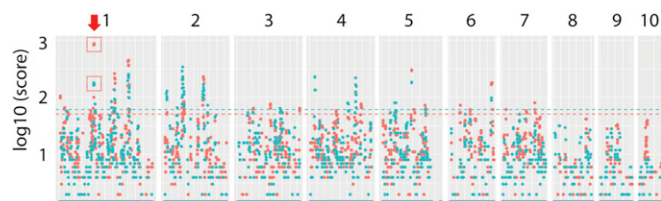


Fig. 4. *CTB* cluster microsynteny conservation segregates from the genome-wide average. The genome-wide, gene-by-gene microsynteny between *C. beticola* and *C. gloeosporioides* (depicted in red) and between *C. beticola* and *M. oryzae* (in blue) across the 10 assembled *C. beticola* chromosomes is shown. Each dot represents one *C. beticola* gene and its respective microsynteny score. The red arrow indicates the position of the *CTB* cluster on chromosome 1 and coincides with high microsynteny in both *C. gloeosporioides* and *M. oryzae*. The dashed lines represent the 99th quantile of the microsynteny scores for both comparisons independently.

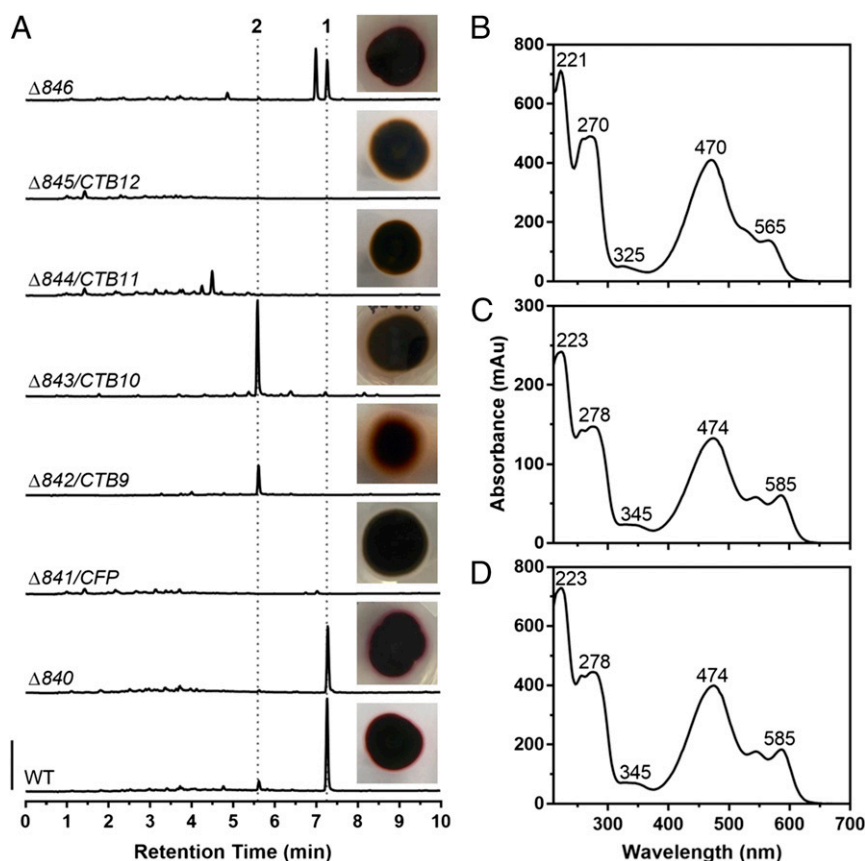


Fig. 5. Analysis of cercosporin production in *CTB* mutants of *C. beticola*. Site-directed knockout mutants in genes *CBET3_00840*, *CFP* (*CBET3_00841*), *CTB9* (*CBET3_00842*), *CTB10* (*CBET3_00843*), *CTB11* (*CBET3_00844*), *CTB12* (*CBET3_00845*), and *CBET3_00846* were assayed for cercosporin production by HPLC. Cercosporin extracted from *C. beticola* strain 10-73-4 (WT) was used as a positive control. (A) 280 nm HPLC chromatograms and images of representative colonies for each knockout. (Scale bar, 250 mAu.) Cercosporin (1) and precercosporin (2) peaks are indicated by dashed lines. (B–D) UV-Vis spectra from wild-type *C. beticola* (7.25-min peak in B), *C. beticola* Δ *CTB9* (5.36-min peak in C), and *C. beticola* Δ *CTB10* (5.36-min peak in D) were extracted from 280 nm HPLC chromatograms. Wavelengths of relevant UV maxima are indicated.

spectrum, which notably revealed three methoxyl groups and diagnostic doubling of all resonances, save two overlapping pairs of signals. This behavior is fully in accord with the assigned structure of precercosporin.

Identification of Cercosporin from *C. fioriniae*. Because our initial phylogenomic analyses suggested that several *Colletotrichum* spp. harbored *CTB* clusters (Figs. 2 and 3), we questioned whether the *CTB* cluster can be found in additional *Colletotrichum* spp. *CTB* protein orthology analysis revealed that 8 of the 13 *Colletotrichum* spp. hosted at Ensembl Fungi (<https://fungi.ensembl.org/index.html>) encode a similar set of *CTB* proteins as observed in *C. higginsianum* (*SI Appendix, Table S8*). These eight species are plant pathogens of crops such as apple, safflower, melon, and cucumber; a variety of *Brassica* and cereal crops; as well as various tree species (40–46) (*SI Appendix, Figs. S10 and S11 and Table S8*). Remarkably, many species have lost several *CTB* genes, such as the endophyte *Colletotrichum tofieldiae*, which has lost the cluster entirely (*SI Appendix, Figs. S10 and S11 and Table S8*).

Earlier reports suggested the production of a red pigment by some *Colletotrichum* spp. such as the apple pathogen *C. fioriniae* (47, 48); therefore, we questioned whether the red pigment was cercosporin. As a first step, two *C. fioriniae* strains (HC89 and HC91) from our collection that were previously isolated from apple were assayed for cercosporin production using the KOH assay (49). No cercosporinlike pigment was observed in the

medium under the same conditions that stimulate cercosporin production in *C. beticola*. Since epigenetic modifiers have been used to induce production of SMs in fungal species (50, 51), we considered whether this strategy could be used to induce cercosporin production in *C. fioriniae*. Medium augmented with the histone deacetylase inhibitor trichostatin A (TSA) (50) induced

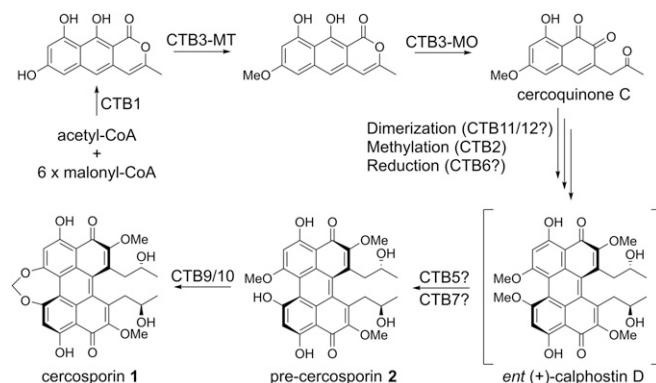


Fig. 6. Proposed biogenesis of cercosporin. Tentative proposal for biosynthesis of cercosporin (1), incorporating biosynthetic genes identified in this study. Intermediates in brackets are logically inferred and have not been directly observed. MO, monooxygenase; MT, methyltransferase.

To assess whether *C. fioriniae* produces cercosporin during apple infection, apples were inoculated with the pathogen, and tissue samples were collected every other day from 1 to 14 d postinoculation. Regardless of time point or extraction methodology, we were unable to detect cercosporin from infected apple. However, by infiltrating apples with defined amounts of cercosporin, we determined that the isolation efficiency is ~5% (*SI Appendix, Figs. S12 and S13*). Consequently, any cercosporin produced by *C. fioriniae* during infection is likely rapidly bound or modified by apple tissue such that its recovery by extraction is poor and below our level of detection by HPLC or ESI-MS. To provide additional support for the involvement of cercosporin in *C. fioriniae* infection, we infiltrated cercosporin into apple fruit and visually compared the phenotype of the infiltrated apple to *C. fioriniae*-infected apple. At 5 d postinfiltration/inoculation, cercosporin-infiltrated apple exhibited similar symptomology as *C. fioriniae*-infected apple (*SI Appendix, Fig. S14*). We also quantified expression of *CTBI* using qRT-PCR since it is highly expressed during cercosporin biosynthesis and is the first committed step in the pathway (21). In concordance with earlier results where no cercosporin was detected from cultures grown in vitro in the absence of TSA, we likewise did not detect *CTBI* expression from this source (*SI Appendix, Fig. S15*). However, *CTBI* was found to be induced ~11.9-fold in in vitro cultures with TSA and 2.5-fold in apple samples harvested 14 d postinoculation (*SI Appendix, Fig. S15*). Because amplification products were designed to span introns, amplicons were sequenced and verified to be derived from cDNA.

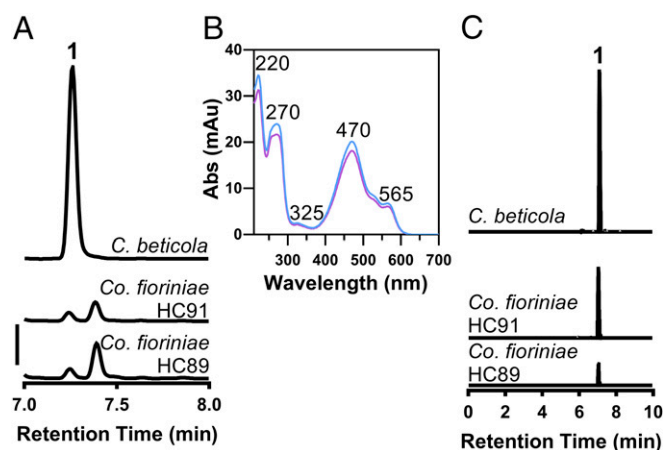


Fig. 7. HPLC and UPLC-ESI-MS analysis of *C. fioriniae* strains. (A) HPLC chromatograms at 280 nm of wild-type *C. beticola* and *C. fioriniae* strains HC89 and HC91. (Scale bar, 100 mAu.) (B) UV-Vis spectra of cercosporin (7.25-min retention time) extracted from *C. fioriniae* HC89 (shown in blue) and HC91 (in purple). Wavelengths of relevant UV maxima are indicated. (C) Extracted-ion chromatograms (*m/z* 535.1604) obtained by UPLC-ESI-MS, demonstrating cercosporin production in *C. beticola* and *C. fioriniae* HC89 and HC91.

We also attempted to isolate cercosporin from *C. higginsiana*-infected *Arabidopsis* leaves, since previous studies indicated the distinct induction of this cluster from *in planta* appressoria [22 h postinoculation (hpi)] and the biotrophic phase of infection (40 hpi) but indicated repression during *in vitro* growth and the necrotrophic phase of infection (60 hpi) (43). Again, we were unable to detect cercosporin from infected *Arabidopsis* leaves regardless of the extraction methodology or time point after inoculation. Given the relatively low amount of fungal biomass associated with the early time points when the *CTB* cluster is induced during *Arabidopsis* infection, we hypothesize that the amount of cercosporin produced *in planta* is below our current limits of detection.

Discussion

Several hypotheses exist for the maintenance of SM biosynthetic genes as clusters. In one, unlinked SM pathway genes are at a greater risk for dissociation during meiotic recombination (52) or chromosomal rearrangements (53). Additionally, clustering may facilitate strict coordination of gene expression, which may be particularly important during the biosynthesis of SMs that have potentially toxic or chemically unstable intermediates to ensure their efficient conversion to final end products (54). Horizontal transfer and maintenance of the *CTB* cluster specifically among plant pathogens suggests that it was critical for disease development in diverse pathosystems, including rice blast caused by *M. oryzae* and various anthracnose diseases caused by *Colletotrichum* spp. on many different crops. The *CTB* clusters in *C. higginsianum* and *C. graminicola* were reported as one of the few SM clusters between these species that are microsyntenic (43). Moreover, O'Connell et al. (43) detected specific up-regulation of the *CTB* cluster in *C. higginsianum* during colonization of *Arabidopsis*. Indeed, 9 of 14 *C. higginsianum CTB* genes were among the top 100 most highly expressed genes in *planta*. Recent analysis of natural selection processes in *C. graminicola* identified orthologs of *CTB* genes *CTB1* and *CFP* among the ~80 genes undergoing significant positive selection (55), further suggesting a role in pathogenicity. Interestingly, the *CTB* clusters of *Colletotrichum* spp. and *M. oryzae* contain additional genes: two short-chain dehydrogenases, an additional desaturase, a ferric-chelate reductase, and an NmrA-like family protein, which has been reported (56) to act as negative transcriptional regulator.

The identification of cercosporin production in two isolates of *C. fioriniae* may have significant implications for the apple packing, storage, and processing industries. Bitter rot, caused by *Colletotrichum* spp., is one of the top pre- and postharvest pathogens of apple (57). This disease is a major problem for the apple industry because it limits fresh fruit in the field and during storage and has a quiescent stage, allowing decay to occur on seemingly high-quality apples, only to come out of storage rotten (57, 58). Hence, contamination of processed apple products with cercosporin could be a significant health hazard. For example, other fungal-produced toxins (e.g., patulin, citrinin, and penicillic acid) can contaminate processed apple products (59). Patulin, produced by *Penicillium* spp., is the most troubling because it is carcinogenic; consequently, the United States and Europe have strict patulin limits in fruit juices and processed pome-fruits products (59, 60). It may be necessary to will focus on the role of cercosporin production during the *Colletotrichum*-apple fruit interactions in addition to assaying processed fruit products made from apples with bitter rot symptoms to determine levels of the toxin in fruit. Although only *C. fioriniae* and *C. higginsianum* strains were analyzed for the ability to produce cercosporin, the identification of highly similar *CTB* clusters in other *Colletotrichum* spp. (SI Appendix, Figs. S10 and S11 and Table S8) suggests that cercosporin production may be widespread in this genus. Future studies directed toward analysis of *CTB* cluster expression among various *C. fioriniae* isolates and apple

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