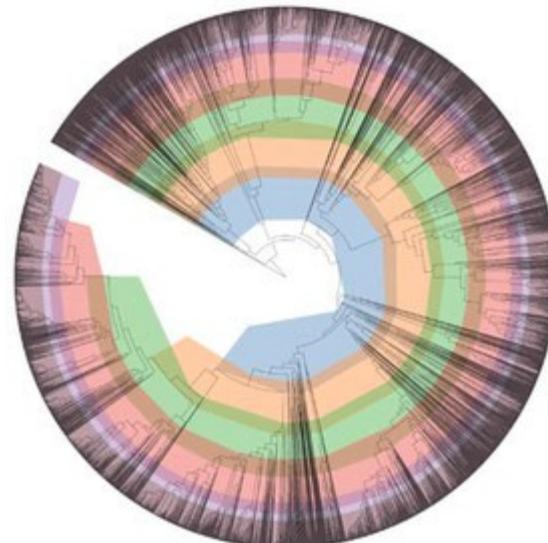


ENVIRONMENTAL METAGENOMICS

Physalia course, online, 13-17 October 2025

Introduction to metagenomics

Nikolay Oskolkov, Group Leader of Metabolic Research Group at LIOS, Riga, Latvia
Samuel Aroney, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Queensland University of Technology



Physalia
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NB: original course material courtesy:
Dr. Antti Karkman, University of Helsinki
Dr. Igor Pessi, Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE)

What is a metagenome?

Marchesi and Ravel *Microbiome* (2015) 3:31
DOI 10.1186/s40168-015-0094-5



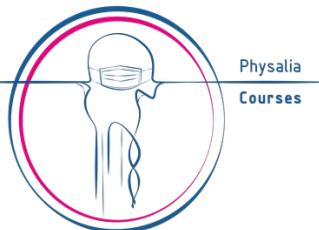
Microbiome

EDITORIAL

Open Access

The vocabulary of microbiome research: a proposal

Julian R. Marchesi^{1,2} and Jacques Ravel^{3,4*}



A **metagenome** is a collection of genomes or genes from the members of a microbiota. A **microbiota** is an assemblage of microorganisms present in a defined environment. A **microbiome** refers to an entire habitat, including the microorganisms, their genomes, and the surrounding environmental conditions.

What is metagenomics?

"This collection is obtained through shotgun sequencing of DNA extracted from a sample (**metagenomics**) followed by mapping to a reference database or assembly, followed by annotation."

Marchesi & Ravel 2015, "The vocabulary of microbiome research"

JOURNAL OF BACTERIOLOGY, Feb. 1996, p. 591-599
0021-9193/96/504.00+0
Copyright © 1996, American Society for Microbiology

Vol. 178, No. 3

Characterization of Uncultivated Prokaryotes: Isolation and Analysis of a 40-Kilobase-Pair Genome Fragment from a Planktonic Marine Archaeon

JEFFEREY L. STEIN,^{1*} TERENCE L. MARSH,² KE YING WU,³ HIROAKI SHIZUYA,⁴ AND EDWARD F. DELONG^{3*}

Molecular biological access to the chemistry of unknown soil microbes: a new frontier for natural products

Jo Handelsman¹, Michelle R Rondon¹, Sean F Brady², Jon Clardy² and Robert M Goodman¹



meta | genome
“beyond the genome”

“[cloning of environmental DNA into *E. coli* for phenotype screening] has been made possible by advances in molecular biology and Eukaryotic genomics, which have laid the groundwork for cloning and functional analysis of the collective genomes of soil microflora, which we term **the metagenome of the soil**”



Metagenomics is the ultimate way to study microbial communities

Community structure

Who is present and in what abundances?

Do communities sampled from different locations share similar composition and structure?

Microbial
communities

Interaction and communication

Are organisms competing with one another?

Do they act as partners?

Which proteins and metabolites are signalling molecules?

Diversity and dynamics

How many types of organisms are present?

How are they distributed?

In what ways do they change over time?

Ecosystem function

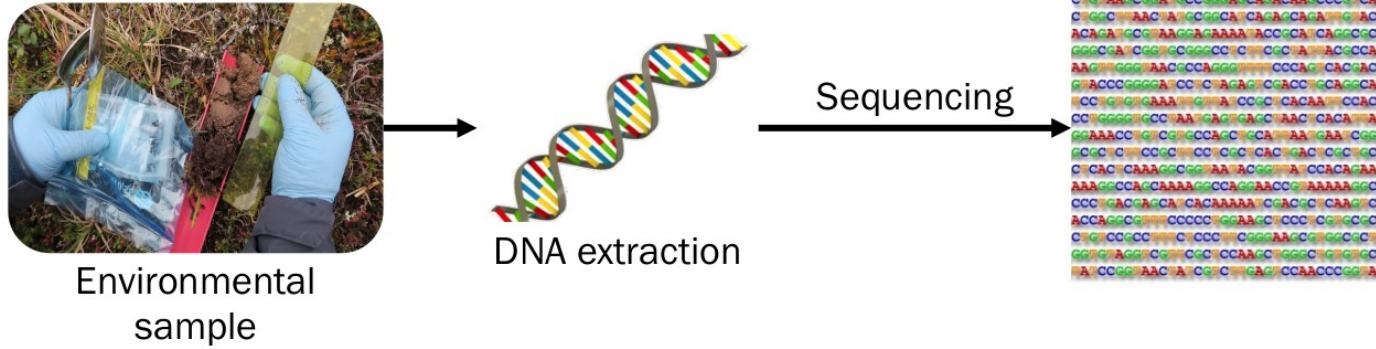
What types of functional genes are present?

Which of these genes are being expressed?

How does this change under different conditions or over time?

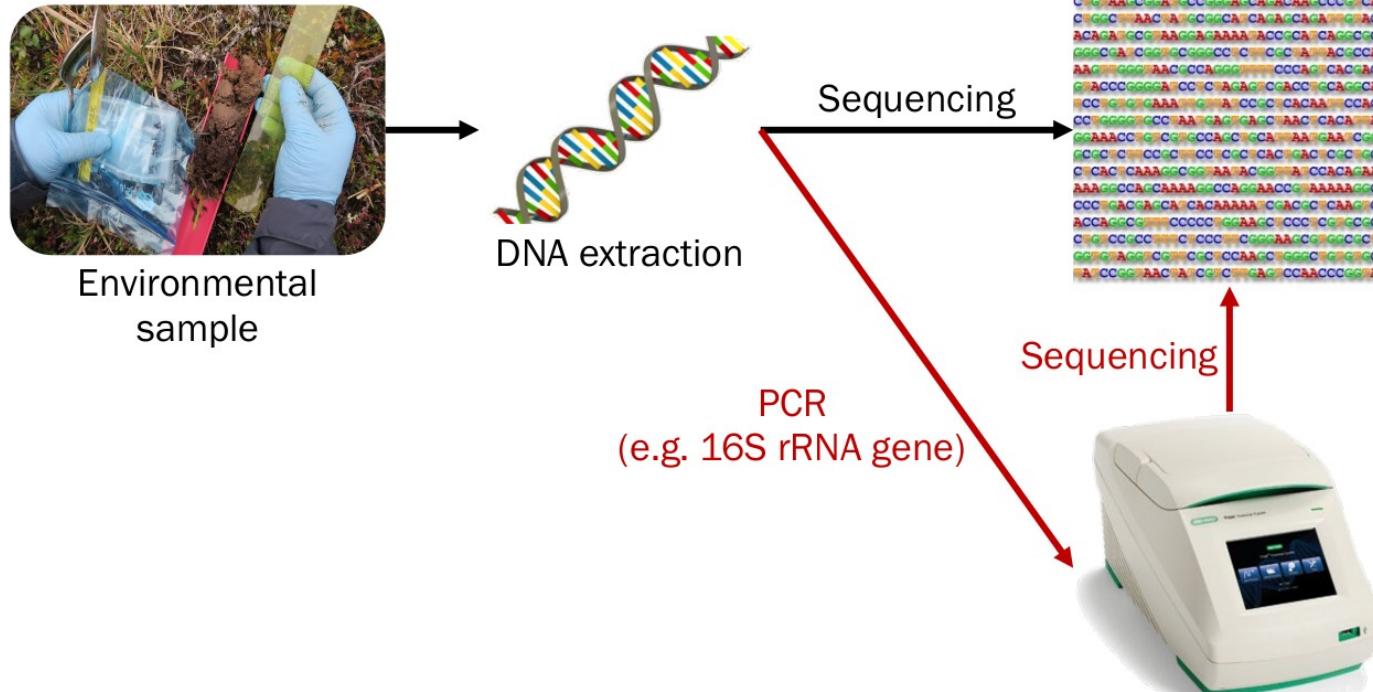


What is metagenomics?

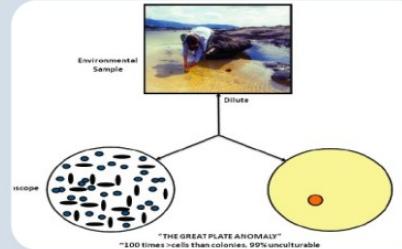
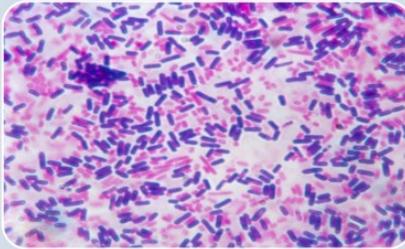
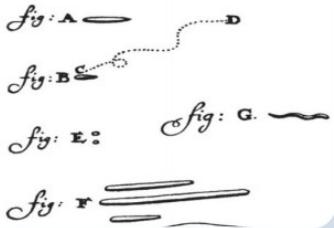


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What is NOT metagenomics?



Microbiology and technology go hand in hand



1670's

First observation
of microbes
under the
microscope

1880's

Development of
the Gram staining
method

First isolation of a
bacterium in solid
media

1980's

The Great Plate
Count Anomaly

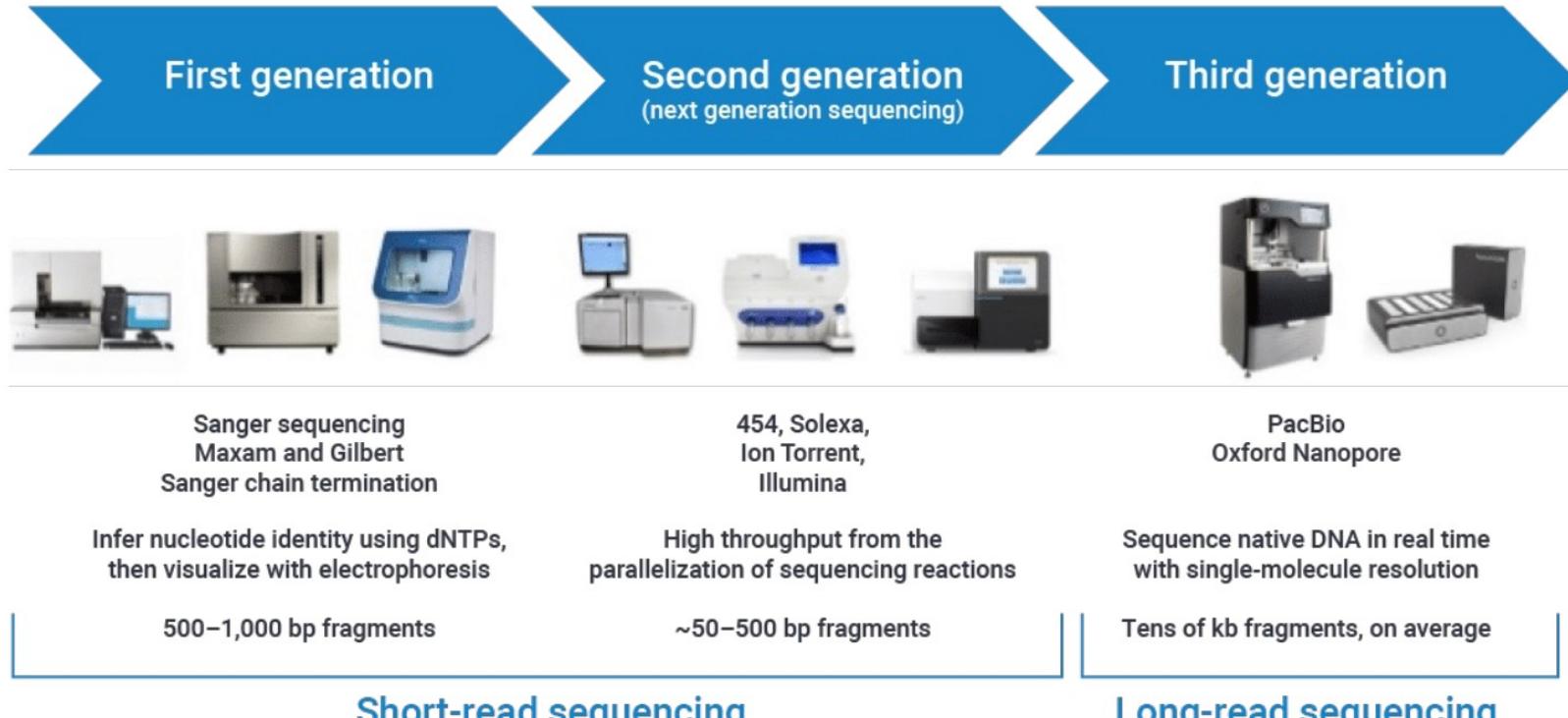
First culture-
independent
studies

2000's

Advent of high-
throughput
sequencing



Metagenomics vs. sequencing technologies



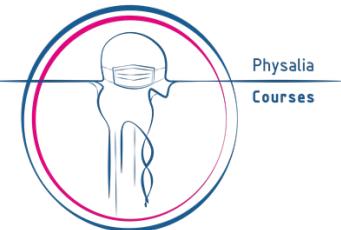
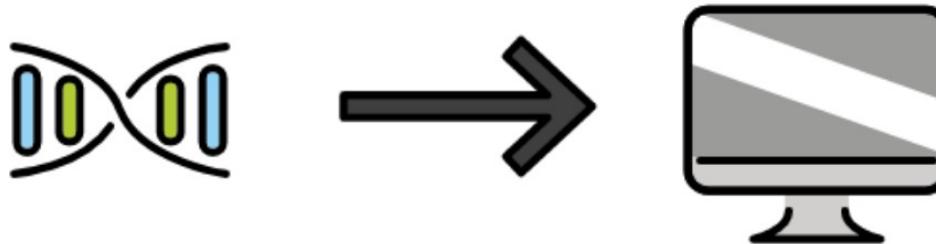
www.pacb.com/blog/the-evolution-of-dna-sequencing-tools/

What is Sequencing?

Converting the chemical nucleotides of a DNA molecule

to

ACTG on your computer screen

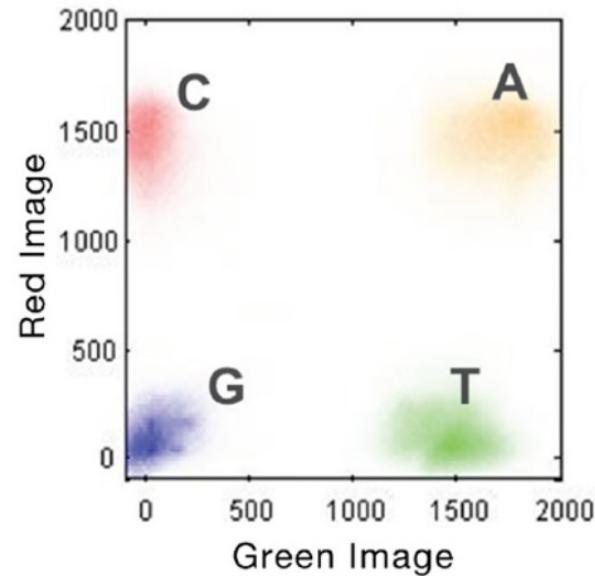


How does it work?

Replicate a strand, but add complementary fluorophore-modified nucleotide, one colour per base

T C A G

Fire mah lazer , and record the colour!
Rinse and repeat!



FASTQ File

Example (files can be gigabytes in size!)

```
@K00233:37:HGHLYBBXX:3:1101:2646:1121 1:N:0:NACGCATC+NGCTGGTG
NCGCATGAGCCGCCTGTATCAGGCCTGATCGGCCGGCATTGCAGTTGGATAGATGGGGAGCACACGTCTG
+
#A7F<<GG<JFJFJJJJFFJJJJJAFFJFJJJJFJAFFFJAJFJJ<FJJJJFFF<FFA--FFFJJJJ
@K00233:37:HGHLYBBXX:3:1101:4655:1121 1:N:0:NACGCATC+NGCTGGTG
NATGCATGACAGGAGGTGAGGGCATTTCAGATTTCAGGCTGCGACCTTGAGCATTTGCCGTTCCAGCAC
+
#GG-<FFFF7JFF7JJJJFJJ<JJJJJA7FJJJJJJFF<JFF<J7-<FJJJJFJFFJJGGGGFFJJ--AJAJJ
```

@ <read id, e.g. machine ID, location on flowcell> <extra metadata>
<DNA sequence; Note: N = base couldn't be called!>
+ <a separator>
<base quality scores for each nucleotide in sequence>

Quality score:

```
!"#$%&' ()*+,.-./0123456789:;<=>?@ABCDEFGHIJ
0.2.....26...31.....41
```

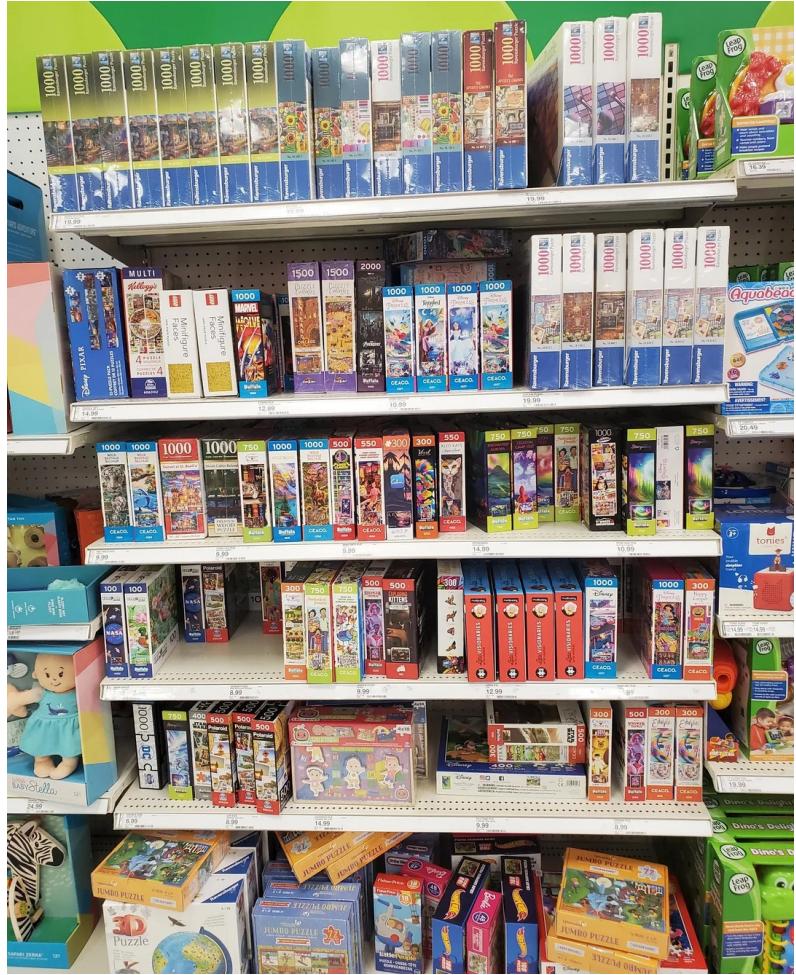
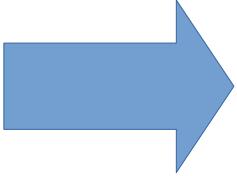


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Sequenced genome is a collection of bits of puzzle to be organized



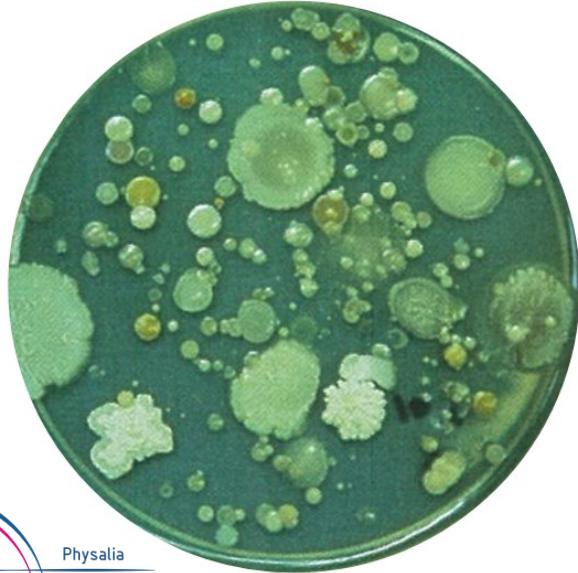
From single genome to metagenome



Who's there?

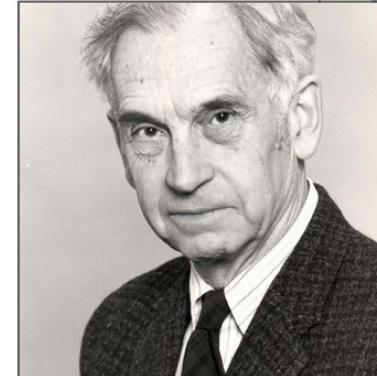
At a most basic level, the first question we usually ask in metagenomics is “Who’s there?”

What is a microbial species?



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Ernst Mayr
Biological Species
Concept, 1942

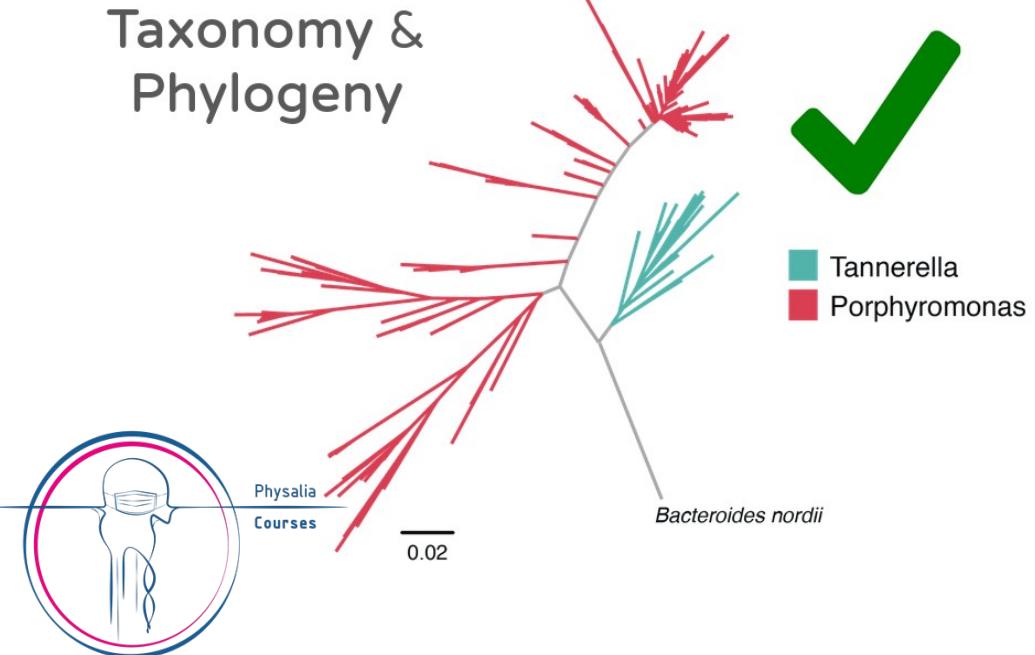


Ernst Mayr ~ Jared Diamond
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Who's there?

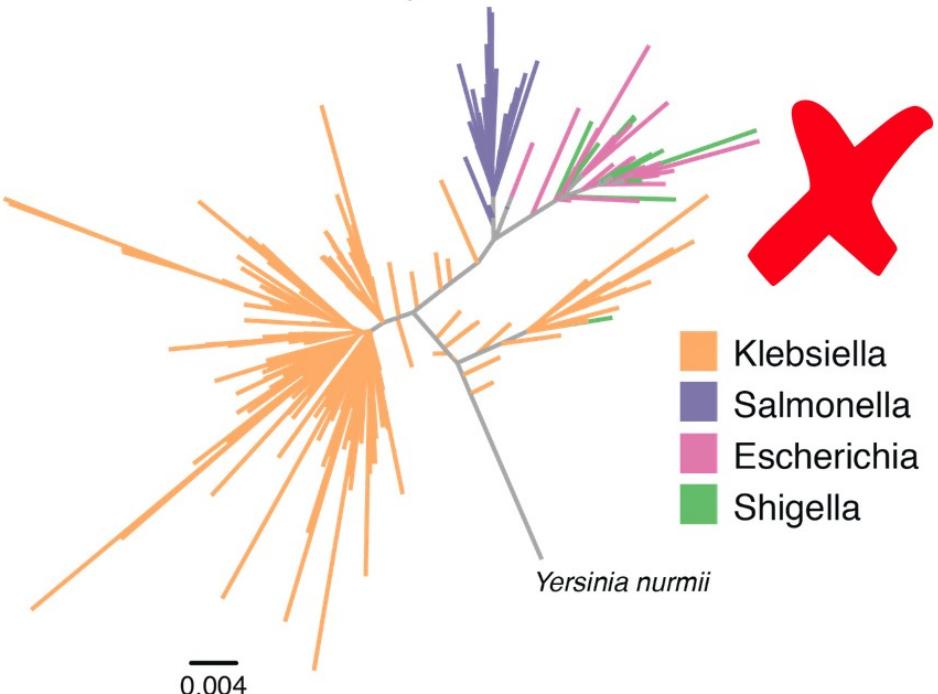
At a most basic level, the first question we usually ask in metagenomics is “Who’s there?”

What is a microbial species?



Taxonomy: classification or categorization of organisms into groups (taxa)

Phylogeny: evolutionary history of a set of taxa

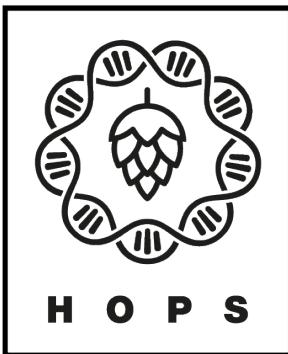


Typical analysis methods used in metagenomics

1) Alignment:



BWA
stands for
Burrows Wheeler Aligner
 Abbreviations.com



2) Classification:



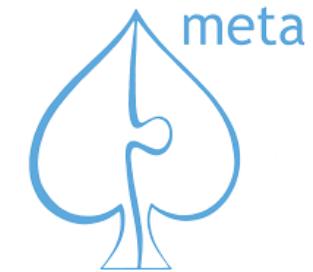
Centrifuge

MetaPhlan

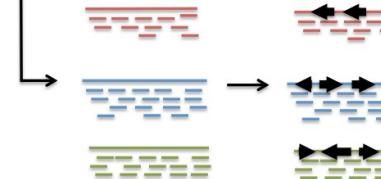
Clark

Reference based:
assume similarity to reference

3) De-novo assembly:



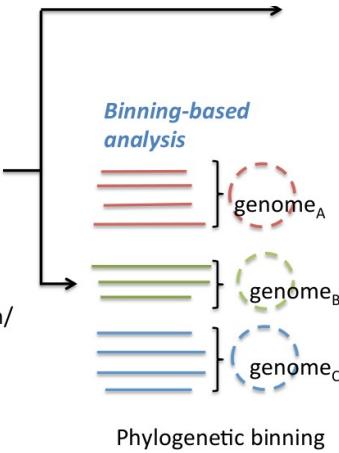
>seq1
GCCGTAGTCC...
>seq2
...



Assembly

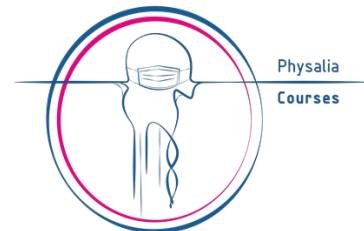
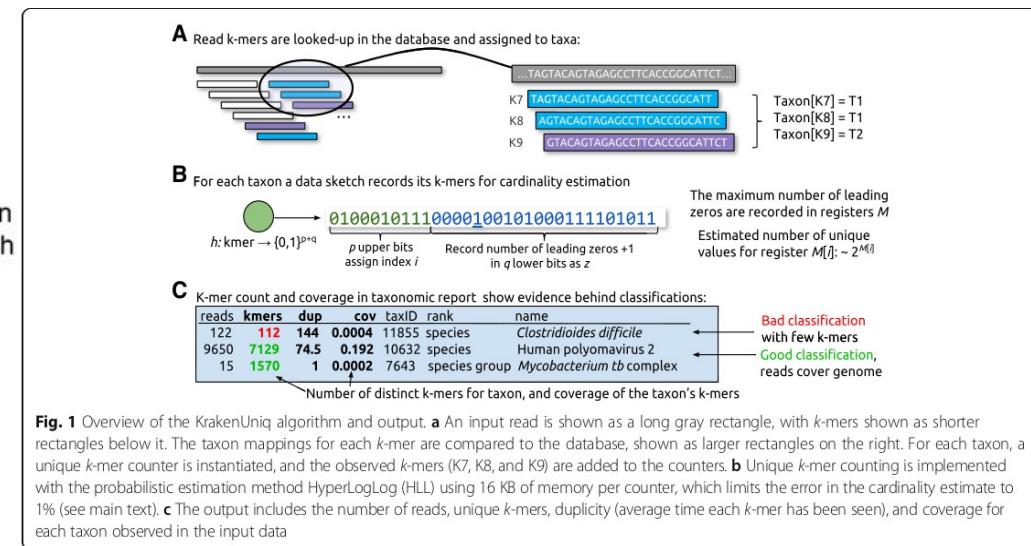
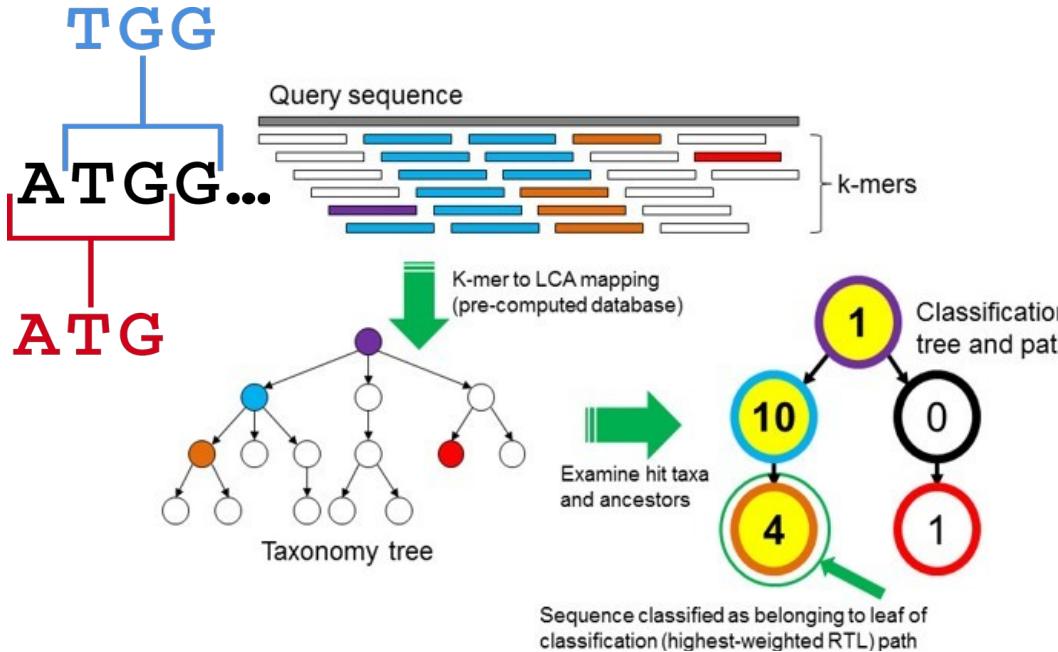
Assembly-based
analysis

gene prediction/
annotation



Reference free:
unbiased but challenging

K-mer based taxonomic profiling: Kraken family of tools



Advantage of classification over alignment: speed, Kraken2 is very fast!

Coverage vs. depth vs. breadth of coverage

Reference genome

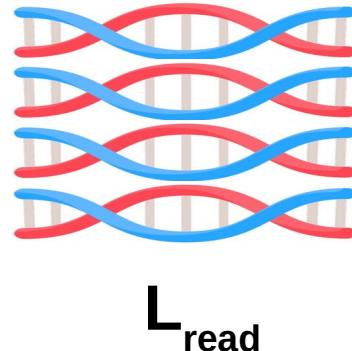
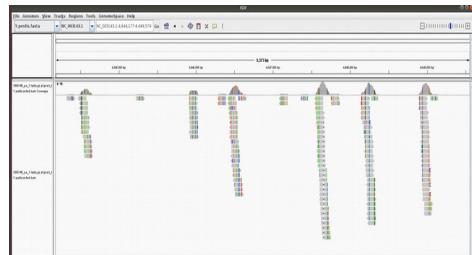
A)

GCTACGATCTTAGCTTAGCTGGGATCTGAATTCTCATCTCGGAT

$$L_{\text{genome}} = 4 * L_{\text{read}}$$



Organism
NOT
detected



Reference genome

B)

GCTACGATCTTAGCTTAGCTGGGATCTGAATTCTCATCTCGGAT

$$L_{\text{genome}} = 4 * L_{\text{read}}$$



Organism
detected



L_{read}



L_{read}



L_{read}

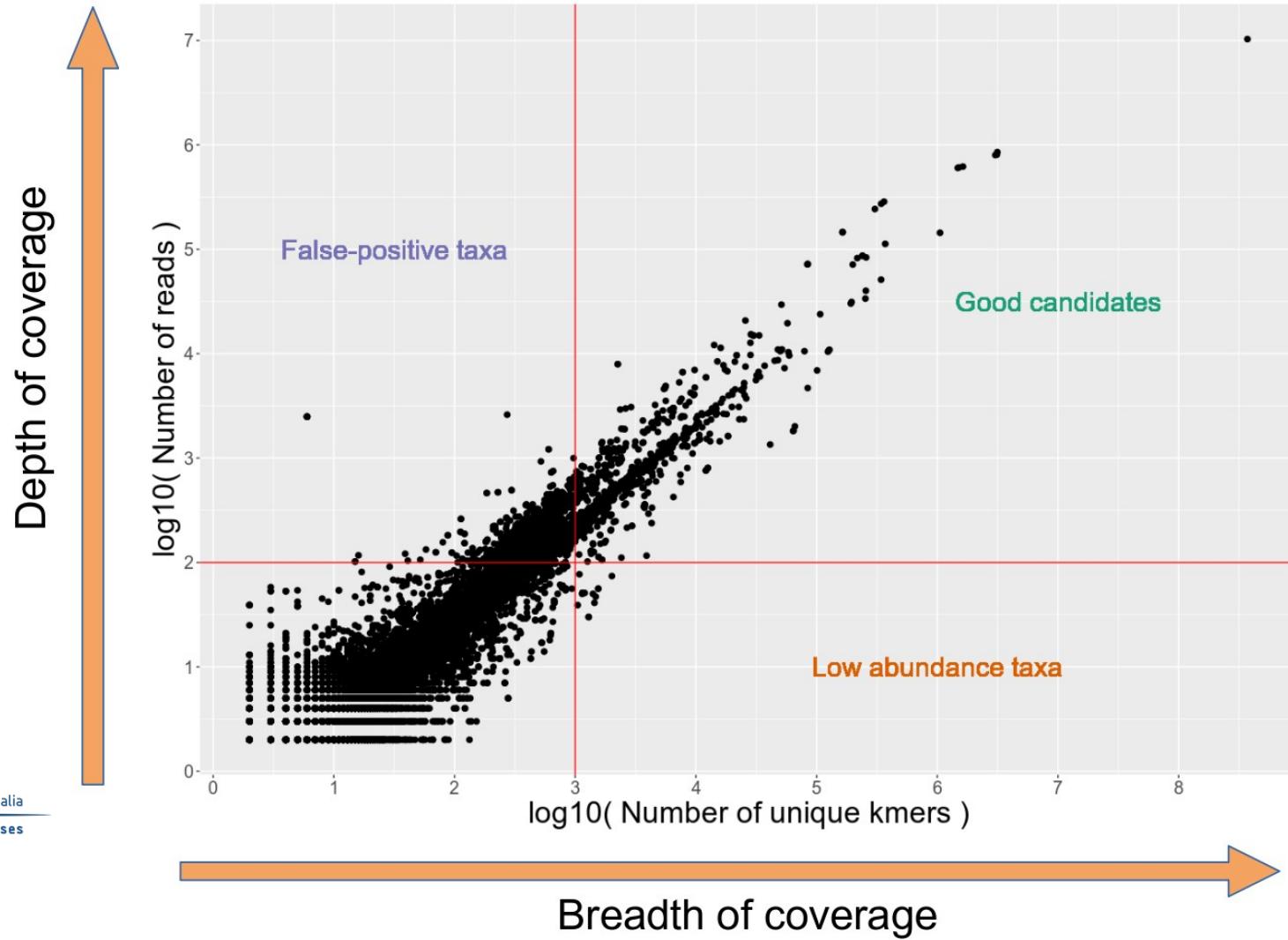


L_{read}

Both A) and B) have identical depth of coverage:
 $\text{Coverage} = (N_{\text{reads}} * L_{\text{read}}) / L_{\text{genome}} = (4 * L) / (4 * L) = 1X$



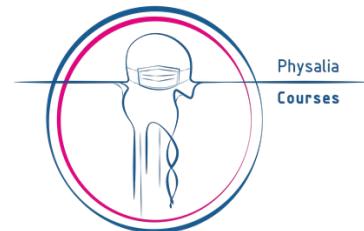
Filtering Kraken output with respect to depth and breadth of coverage



DATABASES!

DATABASES!

DATABASES!



Pochon et al. *Genome Biology* (2023) 24:242
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13059-023-03083-9>

METHOD

Genome Biology

Open Access

aMeta: an accurate and memory-efficient ancient metagenomic profiling workflow

Zoé Pochon^{1,2†}, Nora Bergfeldt^{1,3,4‡}, Emrah Kirdök⁵, Mário Vicente^{1,2}, Thijssen Naidoo^{1,2,6,7}, Tom van der Valk^{1,4}, N. Ezgi Altıntışık⁸, Małgorzata Krzewińska^{1,2}, Love Dalén^{1,3}, Anders Götherström^{1,2†}, Claudio Mirabello^{9†}, Per Unneberg^{10†} and Nikolay Oskolkov^{11†} 

[†]Zoé Pochon, Nora Bergfeldt, Anders Götherström, Claudio Mirabello, Per Unneberg, and Nikolay Oskolkov shared authorship.

[‡]Correspondence:
Nikolay.Oskolkov@biol.lu.se

^{1,2}Department of Biology,
Science for Life Laboratory,
National Bioinformatics
Infrastructure Sweden, Lund
University, Lund, Sweden
Full list of author information is
available at the end of the article

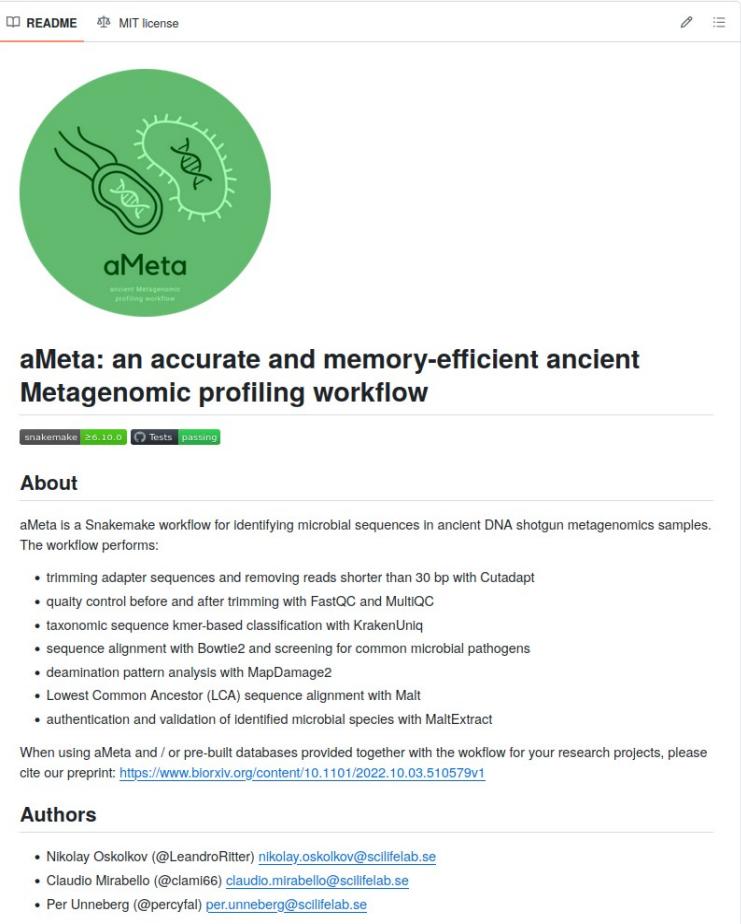
Abstract

Analysis of microbial data from archaeological samples is a growing field with great potential for understanding ancient environments, lifestyles, and diseases. However, high error rates have been a challenge in ancient metagenomics, and the availability of computational frameworks that meet the demands of the field is limited. Here, we propose aMeta, an accurate metagenomic profiling workflow for ancient DNA designed to minimize the amount of false discoveries and computer memory requirements. Using simulated data, we benchmark aMeta against a current state-of-the-art workflow and demonstrate its superiority in microbial detection and authentication, as well as substantially lower usage of computer memory.

Keywords: Ancient metagenomics, Pathogen detection, Microbiome profiling, Ancient DNA

Background

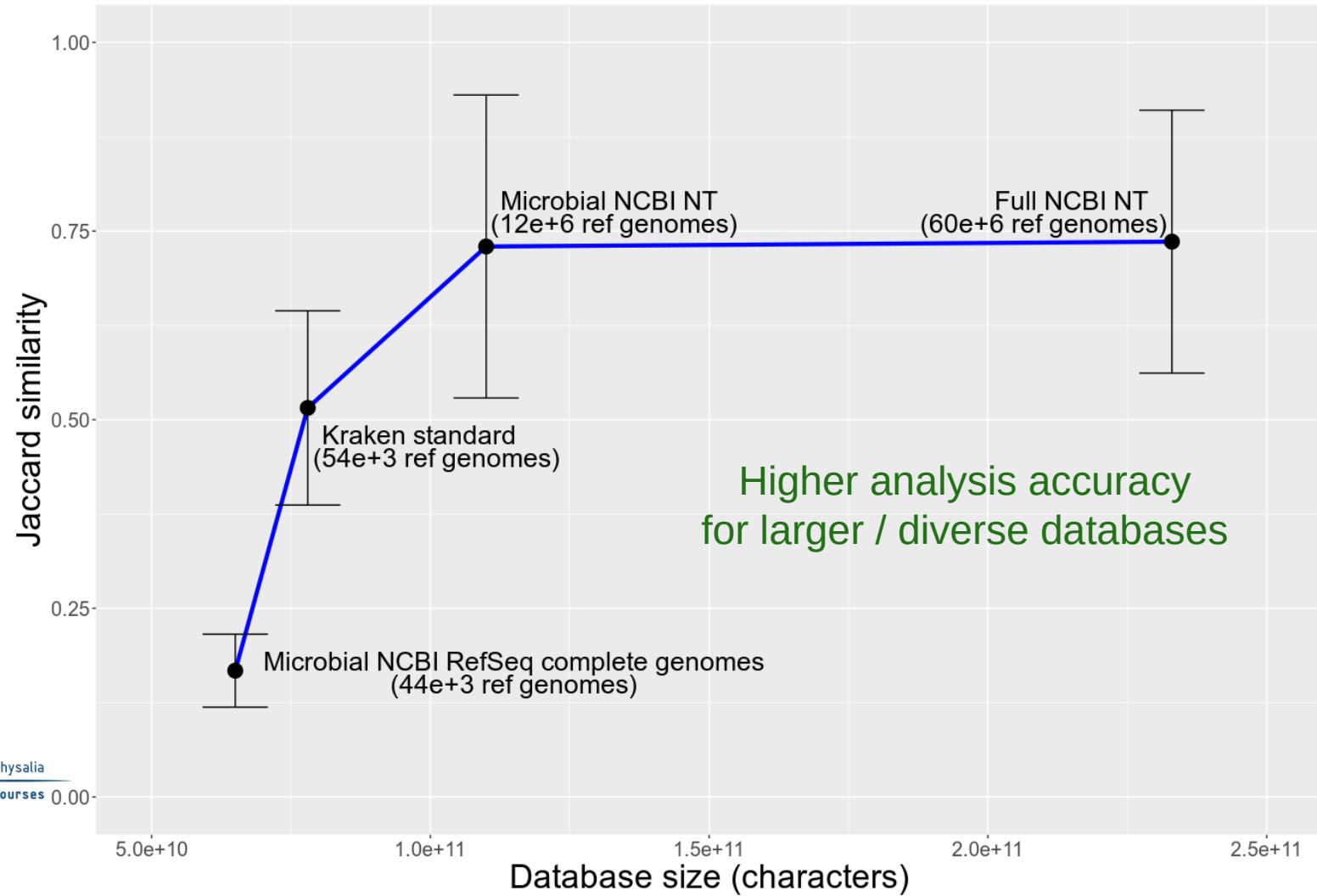
Historically, ancient DNA (aDNA) studies have focused on human and faunal evolution and demography, extracting and analyzing predominantly eukaryotic aDNA [1–3]. With the development of next-generation sequencing (NGS) technologies, it was demonstrated that host-associated microbial aDNA from eukaryotic remains, which was previously treated as a sequencing by-product, can provide valuable information about ancient pandemics, lifestyle, and population migrations in the past [4–6]. Modern technologies have made it possible to study not only ancient microbiomes populating eukaryotic hosts, but also sedimentary ancient DNA (sedaDNA), which has rapidly become an independent branch of palaeogenetics, delivering unprecedented information about hominin and animal evolution without the need to analyze historical bones and teeth [7–12]. Previously available in microbial ecology, meta-barcoding methods lack validation and authentication power, and therefore, shotgun metagenomics has become the *de facto* standard in ancient microbiome research [13]. However, accurate detection,



<https://github.com/NBISweden/aMeta>



Why large databases are important for accurate taxonomic profiling



Host removal is a good precaution in microbiome research

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Article | Published: 11 March 2020

RETRACTED ARTICLE: Microbiome analyses of blood and tissues suggest cancer diagnostic approach

Gregory D. Poore, Evgenia Kopylova, Qiyun Zhu, Carolina Carpenter, Serena Fraraccio, Stephen Wandro, Tomasz Koscielak, Stefan Janssen, Jessica Metcalf, Se Jin Song, Jad Kanbar, Sandrine Miller-Montgomery, Robert Heaton, Rana McKay, Sandip Pravin Patel, Austin D. Swafford & Rob Knight 

Nature 579, 567–574 (2020) | [Cite this article](#)

107k Accesses | 675 Citations | 979 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

 This article was [retracted](#) on 26 June 2024

 This article has been [updated](#)

Abstract

Systematic characterization of the cancer microbiome provides the opportunity to develop techniques that exploit non-human, microorganism-derived molecules in the diagnosis of a major human disease. Following recent demonstrations that some types of cancer show substantial microbial contributions^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10}, we re-examined whole-genome and whole-transcriptome sequencing studies in The Cancer Genome Atlas¹¹ (TCGA) of 33 types of cancer from treatment-naïve patients (a total of 18,116 samples) for microbial reads, and found unique microbial signatures in tissue and blood within and between most major types of cancer. These TCGA blood signatures remained predictive when applied to patients with stage Ia–IIC cancer and cancers lacking any genomic alterations currently measured on two commercial-grade cell-free tumour DNA platforms, despite the use of very stringent decontamination analyses that discarded up to 92.3% of total sequence data. In addition, we could discriminate among samples from healthy, cancer-free individuals ($n = 69$) and those from patients with multiple types of cancer (prostate, lung, and melanoma; 100 samples in total) solely using plasma-derived, cell-free microbial nucleic acids. This potential microbiome-based oncology diagnostic tool warrants further exploration.

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Associated content

RETRACTED ARTICLE: AI finds microbial signatures in tumours and blood across cancer types

Nadim J. Ajami & Jennifer A. Wargo

Nature News & Views | 11 Mar 2020

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[Biological relevance of microorganism profiles](#)

[Measuring and mitigating contamination](#)

[Predictions using microbial DNA in blood](#)

[Validating microbial signatures in blood](#)

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'All authors agree' to retraction of Nature article linking microbial DNA to cancer

A 2020 paper that claimed to find a link between microbial genomes in tissue and cancer has been retracted following an analysis that called the results into question.

The paper, “Microbiome analyses of blood and tissues suggest cancer diagnostic approach,” was published in March 2020 and has been cited 610 times, according to Clarivate’s Web of Science. It was retracted June 26. The study was also key to the formation of biotech start-up Micronoma, which did not immediately respond to our request for comment.

Rob Knight, corresponding author and researcher at the University of California San Diego, also did not immediately respond to our request for comment.

In October 2023, *mBio*, a journal from the American Society for Microbiology, published “Major data analysis errors invalidate cancer microbiome findings.” The paper pointed out several major flaws in the earlier article by Knight’s group.



Strengths and weaknesses of read-based metagenomics

Comprehensiveness	Can provide an aggregate picture of community function or structure, but is based only on the fraction of reads that map effectively to reference dbs
Community complexity	Can deal with communities of arbitrary complexity given sufficient sequencing depth and satisfactory reference database coverage
Novelty	Cannot resolve organisms for which genomes of close relatives are unknown
Computational burden	Can be performed efficiently, enabling large meta-analyses
Genome-resolved metabolism	Can typically resolve only the aggregate metabolism of the community, and links with phylogeny are only possible in the context of known reference genomes
Expert manual supervision	Usually does not require manual curation, but selection of reference genomes to use could involve human supervision
Integration with microbial genomics	Obtained profiles cannot be directly put into the context of genomes derived from pure cultured isolates

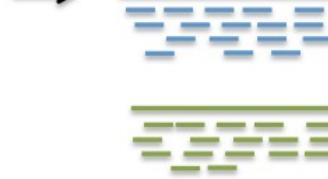
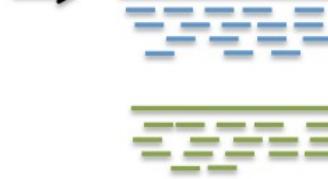
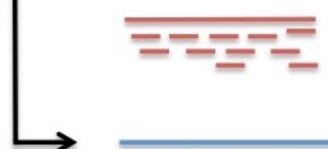


*Read-based
analysis*

Summary metagenome analysis strategies

Functional/taxonomic annotation
directly on reads (often partial genes)

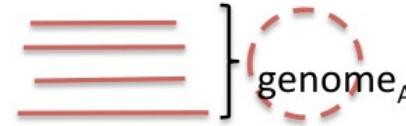
```
>seq1  
GCCGTAGTCC...  
>seq2  
...
```



Assembly

gene prediction/
annotation

*Binning-based
analysis*



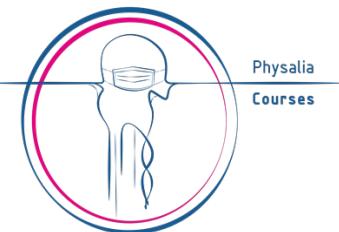
Phylogenetic binning

*Assembly-based
analysis*



Strengths and weaknesses of assembly-based metagenomics

Comprehensiveness	Can construct multiple whole genomes, but only for organisms with enough coverage to be assembled and binned
Community complexity	In complex communities, only a fraction of the genomes can be resolved by assembly
Novelty	Can resolve genomes of entirely novel organisms with no sequenced relatives
Computational burden	Requires computationally costly assembly, mapping and binning
Genome-resolved metabolism	Can link metabolism to phylogeny through completely assembled genomes, even for novel diversity
Expert manual supervision	Manual curation required for accurate binning and scaffolding and for misassembly detection
Integration with microbial genomics	Assemblies can be fed into microbial genomic pipelines designed for analysis of genomes from pure cultured isolates



Popular de-novo assemblers for short Illumina reads

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Bioinformatics, Volume 31, Issue 10, May 2015, Pages 1674–1676, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btv033>

Published: 20 January 2015 Article history ▾

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Abstract

Summary: MEGAHIT is a NGS *de novo* assembler for assembling large and complex metagenomics data in a time- and cost-efficient manner. It finished assembling a soil metagenomics dataset with 252 Gbps in 44.1 and 99.6 h on a single computing node with and without a graphics processing unit, respectively. MEGAHIT assembles the data as a whole, i.e. no pre-processing like partitioning and normalization was needed. When compared with previous methods on assembling the soil data, MEGAHIT generated a three-time larger assembly, with longer contig N₅₀ and average contig length; furthermore, 55.8% of the reads were aligned to the assembly, giving a fourfold improvement.

Availability and implementation: The source code of MEGAHIT is freely available at <https://github.com/voutcn/megahit> under GPLv3 license.

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metaSPAdes: a new versatile metagenomic assembler

Sergey Nurk^{1,4}, Dmitry Meleshko^{1,4}, Anton Korobeynikov^{1,2} and Pavel A. Pevzner^{1,3}

+ Author Affiliations

Corresponding author: sergeynurk@gmail.com

✉ These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract

While metagenomics has emerged as a technology of choice for analyzing bacterial populations, the assembly of metagenomic data remains challenging, thus stifling biological discoveries. Moreover, recent studies revealed that complex bacterial populations may be composed from dozens of related strains, thus further amplifying the challenge of metagenomic assembly. metaSPAdes addresses various challenges of metagenomic assembly by capitalizing on computational ideas that proved to be useful in assemblies of single cells and highly polymorphic diploid genomes. We benchmark metaSPAdes against other state-of-the-art metagenome assemblers and demonstrate that it results in high-quality assemblies across diverse data sets.

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