

1    **Genome characterization of ‘*Candidatus Phytoplasma meliae*’ (isolate ChTYXIII)**

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28 **Abstract**

29 ‘*Candidatus Phytoplasma meliae*’ (subgroups 16SrXIII-G and XIII-C) has been reported in  
30 association to chinaberry yellowing disease in Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. In Argentina,  
31 this disease constitutes a major phytosanitary problem for chinaberry forestry production. To date,  
32 no genome information of this phytoplasma and others from 16SrXIII-group has been published,  
33 hindered its characterization at genomic level. Here we analyze the draft genome of ‘*Candidatus*  
34 *Phytoplasma meliae*’ strain ChTYXIII obtained from a chinaberry-infected plant using a  
35 metagenomics approach. The draft assembly consists of twenty-one contigs with a total length of  
36 751.949 bp. The annotation contains 669 CDSs, 34tRNA and one set of rRNA operons. Metabolic  
37 pathways analysis indicated that the ChTYXIII contains the complete core genes for glycolysis  
38 and functional sec system for translocation of proteins. The phylogenetic relationships inferred  
39 132 single copy genes (orthologues core) analysis revealed that ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ constitutes a clade  
40 closely related to the ‘*Ca. australiense*’ and ‘*Ca. P. solani*’. Thirty-one putative effectors were  
41 identified, among which a homologue to SAP11 was found and others that have only been  
42 described in this pathogen. This work provides relevant genomic information for ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’  
43 and constitutes the first genome described for the group 16SrXIII (MPV).

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58 **1. Introduction**

59 ‘*Candidatus Phytoplasma meliae*’ have been associated with the yellowing disease of China tree  
60 (*Melia azedarach*) (Chinatree yellows, ChTY) in Argentina (Fernández et al., 2016)  
61 (subgroup16SrXIII-G), Paraguay (Arneodo et al., 2005) (subgroup16SrXIII-G) and Bolivia  
62 (Harrison et al., 2003) (subgroup16SrXIII-C). Chinaberry plants affected by this phytoplasma  
63 develop characteristic symptoms, such as reduced leaf size and yellowing, witches’-broom and  
64 dieback. China tree mortality caused by ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ and Chinaberry tree decline phytoplasma  
65 (subgroup 16SrIII-B) (Galdeano et al., 2004) constitutes a serious phytosanitary problem, mainly  
66 in north-east region of Argentina, where this tree species is grown for furniture manufacturing  
67 (Arneodo et al., 2007, Fernández et al., 2015, 2016). The 16SrXIII group (*Mexican periwinkle*  
68 *virescence*, MPV) constitute a monophyletic clade (Figure 1) within twelve subgroups have been  
69 described so far (last one 16SrXIII-L) (Bongiorno et al., 2020). An interesting aspect of this group  
70 of phytoplasmas is their geographical distribution, which seems to be restricted to the American  
71 continent (Fernández et al., 2016; Pérez-López et al., 2016). In addition, only few host species  
72 have been associated to MPV group, among them strawberry (Jomantiene et al., 1998; Fernández  
73 et al., 2015; Pérez-López E and Dumonceaux 2016; Melo et al., 2018; Cui et al., 2019), potato  
74 (Santos-Cervantes et al., 2010), periwinkle (Lee et al., 1998), papaya (Melo et al., 2013), broccoli  
75 (Pérez-López et al., 2016) in addition to those already mentioned for ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ above.  
76 Thanks to the reduction in the cost of sequencing in the last ten years, phytoplasma sequencing  
77 projects have increased notably. Phytoplasmas have a unique biology and genomic knowledge  
78 allowed us to understand aspects of pathogenicity and evolution never before described (Oshima  
79 et al., 2004; Chung et al., 2013; Orlovskis et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021).  
80 Currently, no genomic data have been generated in any of the species that make up the MPV  
81 group, which makes it difficult to study the mechanisms associated with pathogenicity, evolution  
82 or their dispersion mediated by insects. In the present study, we report the draft genome of ‘*Ca.*  
83 *Phytoplasma meliae*’ strain ChTYXIII-Mo (subgroup 16SrXIII-G) obtained from infected  
84 chinaberries in Argentina. The goal of this work was to provide basic genomic information, in  
85 order to understand fundamental aspects of the evolution and pathogenicity of this phytoplasma  
86 and related phytoplasmas from MPV-clade.

87 **2. Materials and Methods**

88 **2.1 Plant samples**

89 “*Candidatus Phytoplasma meliae*” isolate ChTYXIII-Mo (KU850940) (Fernández et al., 2016)  
90 was maintained in greenhouses under controlled conditions and propagated in chinaberry tree  
91 plantlets by grafting. Total genomic DNA was extracted from infected midribs using DNeasy  
92 Plant Mini Kit (Qiagen, Germany) following the manufacturer instructions. Quality and quantity

93 controls were assayed by electrophoresis in 1% agarose gels and spectrophotometry (Nanodrop-  
94 1000).

95 **2.2 Library construction and sequencing**

96 Total DNA was used for construction of paired-end libraries (150bp) according to TruSeq™ DNA  
97 Nano protocol and sequenced in Illumina Novaseq platform (Macrogen, Korea). Quality of RAW-  
98 reads was checked using FastQC (<https://github.com/s-andrews/FastQC>) and then were trimmed  
99 with Trim Galore! (<https://github.com/FelixKrueger/TrimGalore>) applying default settings.

100 **2.3 Assembling and annotation**

101 A metagenomic-approach was implemented for assembling based on previous pipelines with  
102 some modifications (Music et al., 2019). Trimmed reads were assembled using Unicycler (Wick  
103 et al., 2017) (Bridging mode: normal, Spades correction and Pilon polish). Assembled contigs  
104 belonging to phytoplasmas were identified by BLASTx (E=1e-20, word size=11) against a local  
105 database constructed using the 34 phytoplasma genome sequences available from NCBI  
106 (txid33926). Trimmed reads were mapped using Bowtie2 v2.3.4.3 (defaults parameters)  
107 (Langmead et al., 2012) to phytoplasma-assigned contigs. An iterative process was used until the  
108 assembly was completed. Completeness of draft-assembly was estimated by CheckM v1.0.18  
109 (Park et al., 2015). The final draft genome was annotated using the NCBI Prokaryotic Genome  
110 Annotation Pipeline (Tatusova et al., 2016). KAAS-KEGG Automatic Annotation Server  
111 (<https://www.genome.jp/kegg/kaas/>) was used for functional characterization of protein coding  
112 regions and reconstruction of metabolic pathways.

113 **2.4 Identification of putative effector proteins**

114 Putative effector proteins were identified based in previous pipelines (Bai et al., 2006, Fernández  
115 et al., 2019, Music et al., 2019). Prediction of signal-peptide was conducted in Signal IP v5.0  
116 server (<https://services.healthtech.dtu.dk/service.php?SignalP-5.0>) and Music et al. (2019)  
117 criteria was implemented in order to define positive candidates. Proteins which passed this filter  
118 (peptide-signal+) were analyzed in TMHMM - 2.0 server  
119 (<https://services.healthtech.dtu.dk/service.php?TMHMM-2.0>) and those protein without any  
120 transmembrane helices domain after signal-peptide were selected (putative secreted proteins-  
121 PSP). PSP were analyzed in the Conserved Domains Database search tool  
122 ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/ Structure/cdd/wrpsb.cgi](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Structure/cdd/wrpsb.cgi), expect value = 0.01) and nuclear signal  
123 prediction was acceded using NLStradamus  
124 (<http://www.moseslab.csb.utoronto.ca/NLStradamus/>). The subcellular localization was accessed  
125 using the LOCALIZER (<http://localizer.csiro.au/>) and ApoplastP (<http://apoplastp.csiro.au/>)  
126 servers. The final set of proteins [signal peptide (+); trans- membrane domains outside SP (-)]

127 were analyzed by reciprocal BLASTp searches (E-value $\leq$ 1e-05) against aster yellows witches'-  
128 broom (AYWB) phytoplasma proteins (taxid:322098) for identification of SAPs homologs (Bai  
129 et al. 2009).

130 **2.5 Orthologues clustering and phylogenetic analyses**

131 Identifications of orthologous protein clusters were conducted using Orthofinder v2.5.2  
132 (<https://github.com/davidemms/OrthoFinder>). Genomes sequences of representative 'Ca.  
133 Phytoplasmas species were retrieved for Genbank (Table S1). For phylogenetic analyses,  
134 alignment of concatenated nucleotide sequences of single-copy core genes or single genes were  
135 constructed with MAFFT v7.450 using Geneious R.10 software (Biomatters Ltd., Auckland, New  
136 Zealand). Phylogenetic trees were constructed with IQ-TREE (<http://www.iqtreet.org/>)  
137 (substitution model: automatic, ultrafast bootstrap=1000).

138 **3. Results and discussion**

139 **3.1 Assembly and key features of *Ca. Phytoplasma meliae* draft genome**

140 The genome sequencing of 'Ca. Phytoplasma meliae' (strain ChTYXIII) generated  $\sim$  3.5Gbp of  
141 RAW reads (NCBI accession: PRJNA530090) providing a  $\sim$ 97X-fold coverage of draft genome,  
142 representing 21 assembled contigs totaling 751.949 bp (27.31% G+C) (Table 1). Since there are  
143 no previous estimations of chromosome size for any phytoplasmas belonging to the 16SrXIII  
144 group, we used CheckM software to evaluate the assembly quality based on the presence of  
145 conserved marker genes. According to this software, the completeness of this draft was 97.34%  
146 and possible contamination of 3.29%. Since, as has been discussed in previous works (Music et  
147 al., 2019), estimations are based on a small number of marker genes and there is little  
148 representation of phytoplasma genomes in current databases, these estimations have to be  
149 considered with caution. The 21 contigs composing the draft assembly ranged between 1.832 bp  
150 to 137693 bp (N50= 53.850). In the annotation process, 669 CDSs (full-length coding sequences)  
151 were identified, with 472 annotated as proteins with assigned function and 197 as hypothetical  
152 proteins, one operon for rRNA genes and 34 tRNAs (Table 1). Functional annotation of CDSs  
153 using BlastKOALA (<https://www.kegg.jp/blastkoala/>), assigned 387 of 669 CDSs (~58%) to  
154 orthologues in the KEEG database. From 299 KO categories, 240 were described with only one  
155 gene while the remaining 59 presented more than one copies representing 147 genes,  $\sim$  21% of  
156 total CDSs (49 KOs with 2 genes, 4 KOs with 3 genes, 3 KOs with 4 genes, 2 KOs with 5 genes  
157 each, and a single KO to which 15 different genes were assigned). The proportion of multicopy  
158 genes in the 'Ca. P. meliae' ChTYXIII genome ( $\sim$  21%) was higher than the observed in other  
159 related phytoplasmas as, 'Ca. P. solani' SA-1 (18.5%) (Music et al., 2019), 'Ca. P. asteris' strain  
160 AY-WB (10.2%), (Bai et al., 2006), OY-M (14.1%) (Oshima et al., 2004) or 'Ca. P. australiense'  
161 PAa (12.1%) (Tran-Nguyen et al., 2008). Multicopy genes in PMU-like regions and genome size

162 appear to be positively correlated to a broad host range in phytoplasmas (Music et al., 2019). This  
163 is in contrast to the fact that ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ has been only associated with two hosts, chinaberry  
164 (Harrison et al., 2003; Fernández et al., 2016) and plum (Bongiorno et al., 2020). However, the  
165 total number of hosts may have been underestimated, since there is little information regarding  
166 the presence of this phytoplasma in native species, i.e. weeds, and vector insects remain  
167 unknown.

### 168 **3.2 Metabolic pathways**

169 Within the three-major protein families in KEEG database, 184 CDS were assigned to  
170 *Metabolism*, 236 CDS to *Genetic Information Processing* and 54 were assigned to *Signaling and*  
171 *Cellular Processes* (Figure 2). Transporter membrane proteins plays fundamental roles in the  
172 phytoplasmas metabolism, allowing the incorporation of metabolites and contributing to protein  
173 secretion in the host cells cytoplasm. The ATP-binding cassette (ABC) transporters form one of  
174 the largest known protein families, and are widespread in bacteria, archaea, and eukaryotes. These  
175 proteins are best known for their role in the importation of essential nutrients and the export of  
176 toxic molecules, but they can also mediate the transport of many other physiological substrates  
177 (Davidson et al, 2008). Twenty eight genes from ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ genome have been described as  
178 the ABC-transporters (Table S2), including the complete pathway for spermidine/putrescine  
179 transport (potA, potB, potC and potD), lysine transport (lysX1, lysX2 and lysXY) and  
180 Zinc/Manganese/Iron (II) transport (troA, troC, troD, troB). Regarding to the protein translocation  
181 system (Sec system) we identified, *secA* (CHTY\_001675), *secE* (CHTY\_0002195), *secY*  
182 (CHTY\_000200), *ffh* (CHTY\_001830), *ftsY* (CHTY\_001825) and *yidC* (CHTY\_000350), *dnaJ*  
183 (CHTY\_000550), *dnaK* (CHTY\_000555) , *grpE* (CHTY\_000560) and *groEL* (CHTY\_001355)  
184 which suggests a functional sec systems in the ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’. Within the carbohydrate  
185 metabolism, the core module for glycolysis (genes *gapA*, *pyk*, *pgk*, *eno*, *tpiA* and *gpmI*) and  
186 pyruvate oxidation (genes *pdhA*, *pdhB*, *pdhD* and *aceF*) were found, which supports that ‘*Ca. P.*  
187 *meliae*’ could depends on glycolysis for energy generation. This pathway was described as the  
188 major energy-yielding pathway for phytoplasmas (Kube et al., 2012). In addition, the complete  
189 ORF for gene sucrose phosphorylase (*gtfA*, CHTY\_000510) was identified.

### 190 **3.4 Putative effectors**

191 In the draft genome of ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ we identified 31 proteins as putative secreted proteins  
192 (Table S3). BLASTp search against SAP-protein repertoire of AYWb phytoplasma (accession  
193 CP000061) showed the presence of putative orthologs for SAP72 (53.31%), SAP41 (52.29%),  
194 SAP21 (38.10%), SAP68 (76.00%), SAP67 (59.67%), SAP21 (38.10%) and SAP11 (50.00%).  
195 However, no homologues for SAP54, SAP05 and TENGU factor were identified. The SAP11  
196 homologue consisted of 116 aa (CHTY\_003225) with a predicted signal peptide domain (score=

197 0.98, position 1-32aa) and characteristic SMV signal (pfam12113, position 1-33aa/ E= 5.71e-08).  
198 Moreover, nuclear signal localization (position 35-49aa) and coiled-coiled (position 84-106aa)  
199 domains were predicted. These features are compatible with those described for the SAP11  
200 homologues in diverse phytoplasma taxons (Bai et al., 2009; Kakisawa et al., 2014; Anabestani  
201 et al., 2017; Saccardo et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2018). A phylogenetic analysis based on amino  
202 acidic sequence for SAP11-homologues grouped the putative SAP11 protein from 'Ca. P. meliae'  
203 within the SAP11 from 'Ca. P. mali' despite they are evolutionary distant taxons (Figure 3.a). We  
204 also found a conserved synthenia in the genomic context of SAP11 with homologous regions in  
205 the chromosome of 'Ca. P. asteris' AYWB and 'Ca. P. ziziphi' JWB (Figure 3.b) suggesting  
206 possible horizontal transfer. *A. thaliana* transgenic lines that express SAP11 have curly leaves  
207 and an increased number of axillary stems that resemble the witches' broom symptoms exhibited  
208 by AY-WB phytoplasma (Sugio et al., 2014). In greenhouse chinaberry plantlets infected by 'Ca.  
209 P. meliae' shows typical witches' broom symptoms while those infected with 'Ca. P. pruni' strain  
210 ChTDII (16SrIII-B) causes symptoms of yellowing and shortening of internodes but not witch's  
211 broom (Figure S1). These could suggest the presence of SAP11 homologue associated mechanism  
212 in the generation of witches' broom symptoms since no SAP11 homologues were described for  
213 ChTDIII phytoplasma (Fernández et al, 2020). A BLASTp search showed that 10 of 31 putative  
214 secreted proteins seem to be unique to 'Ca. P. meliae' since no homologs were found in the gene  
215 databank. For example, the putative protein (CHTY\_003505, 226aa) present a domain associated  
216 to the TIGR04141 family, which is commonly associated to mobilomes, Others secreted protein  
217 with interesting characteristics are the CHTY\_001115 (115aa), which presented a domain related  
218 to multidrug resistance efflux pump (cl34307) or CHTY\_002595 (227aa) with a peptidase related  
219 domain. The protein CHTY\_002535 (391aa) has a chloroplast predicted localization (score=  
220 0.991, position 105-125) and present a substrate-binding domain of an ABC-type  
221 nickel/oligopeptide-like import system (cl01709). These proteins constitute an interesting target  
222 of study as they can provide clues regarding the unique pathogenicity mechanisms of this  
223 pathogen.

### 224 3.5 Phylogenetic analyses

225 Comparative genomics based on orthologues identification between draft genomes of 'Ca. P.  
226 meliae' ChTYXIII and representative genome sequence of 11 'Ca. Phytoplasma species' (Table  
227 S1) and *A. palmae* (accession FO681347) reveals the presence of 132 single-copy genes common  
228 to all species. The phylogenetic tree based on DNA and aa concatenated sequence of 132 single-  
229 copy genes showed that ChTYXIII phytoplasma form a particular clade which is more closely  
230 related to the phytoplasmas of the group 16SrXII , 'Ca. P. solani strain SA-1, 284 , 231 and *Ca.*  
231 *P. australiense*' strain PAa and SLY (Figure 4). Similar topology was obtained when *secY* and  
232 *tufB* genes (single copy orthologs) were used (Figure S2). These results could suggest that the

233 ChTYXIII phytoplasmas, and the associated species within the 16SrXIII group (Figure 1), could  
234 have suffered an evolutionary divergence driven by their distribution restricted to the Americas.

235 **4. Conclusions**

236 This study describes the draft genome of ‘*Ca. Phytoplasma meliae*’ strain ChTYXIII. Functional  
237 analyses reveal the presence of genes related to processing and metabolism highly conserved  
238 among phytoplasmas. We have described numerous genes present in multicity despite the fact  
239 that it is a phytoplasma with few cited hosts. Effector proteins have also been identified that could  
240 be playing key roles in the regulation of pathogenicity mechanisms. Besides SAP11 homologue,  
241 other putative effector proteins with interesting characteristics were identified, at least from the  
242 bioinformatics analysis of their domains. The phylogeny inferred from a core of genes has shown  
243 that ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ constitutes a clade closely related to ‘*Ca. P. solani*’ and ‘*Ca. P. australiense*’.  
244 Genomic data obtained here provided new insight into the pathogenic mechanisms and  
245 evolutionary history in phytoplasmas from MPV-group.

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250 **Data availability**

251 RAW reads were deposited in NCBI Sequence Read Archive (SRA) under the accessions  
252 [PRJNA638346](#). The *de novo genome* draft assembly of ChTYXIII was deposited in GenBank  
253 under the accession [JACAOD000000000.2](#) (BioProject: [PRJNA63834](#), BioSample:  
254 [SAMN15186628](#)).

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409 **Figure Legends**

410 **Figure 1** Phylogeny of phytoplasmas from group MPV based in the analysis of 16Sr RNA  
411 sequence. The tree was inferred using the maximum-likelihood method. *Acholeplasma palmae*  
412 was used as an outgroup. The numbers on the branches are bootstrap (confidence >70%) values  
413 (expressed as percentages of 1000 replicates). The GenBank accession number for each taxon is  
414 given between parentheses and the 16Sr group/subgroup classification was also provided. MPV-  
415 clade is boxed with a dotted line and ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ strain sequenced in this study is in bold. R:  
416 reference strain .

417 **Figure 2** Bar chart representing the distribution of KEGG pathways associated with the draft  
418 genome of ‘*Candidatus Phytoplasma meliae*’ strain ChTYXIII. The KEGG pathways were  
419 assigned by annotating the protein coding genes using the KAAS (KEGG Automatic Annotation  
420 Server) web server.

421 **Figure 3** Analysis of ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ SAP11 homologue. A: phylogeny tree inferred from aa  
422 sequence of SAP11 homologues using Maximum-Likelihood algorithm (bootstrap 1000) (scale  
423 bar: number of substitutions per site. Predicted domains (Nuclear Signal, Signal Peptide) are  
424 highlighted with color boxes in the alignment. B: synthenic organization of contig ChTYXIII-17  
425 containing the SAP11 homologue. The genomic localization (start-end) is given below de ‘*Ca.*  
426 *P. specie*’ identification; SAP homologues are in red. Nucleotide sequence similarities between  
427 conserved regions are illustrated by different shades of gray colors

428 **Figure 4** Molecular phylogeny based on nucleotide sequences and amino acid of the core genes.  
429 *Acholeplasma palmae* was included as an outgroup to root the tree. The numbers on branches  
430 indicate the level of bootstrap support (1000 replicates). The scale bar represents the number of  
431 substitutions per site. The heatmaps on the right-hand side are colored based on sequence identity.

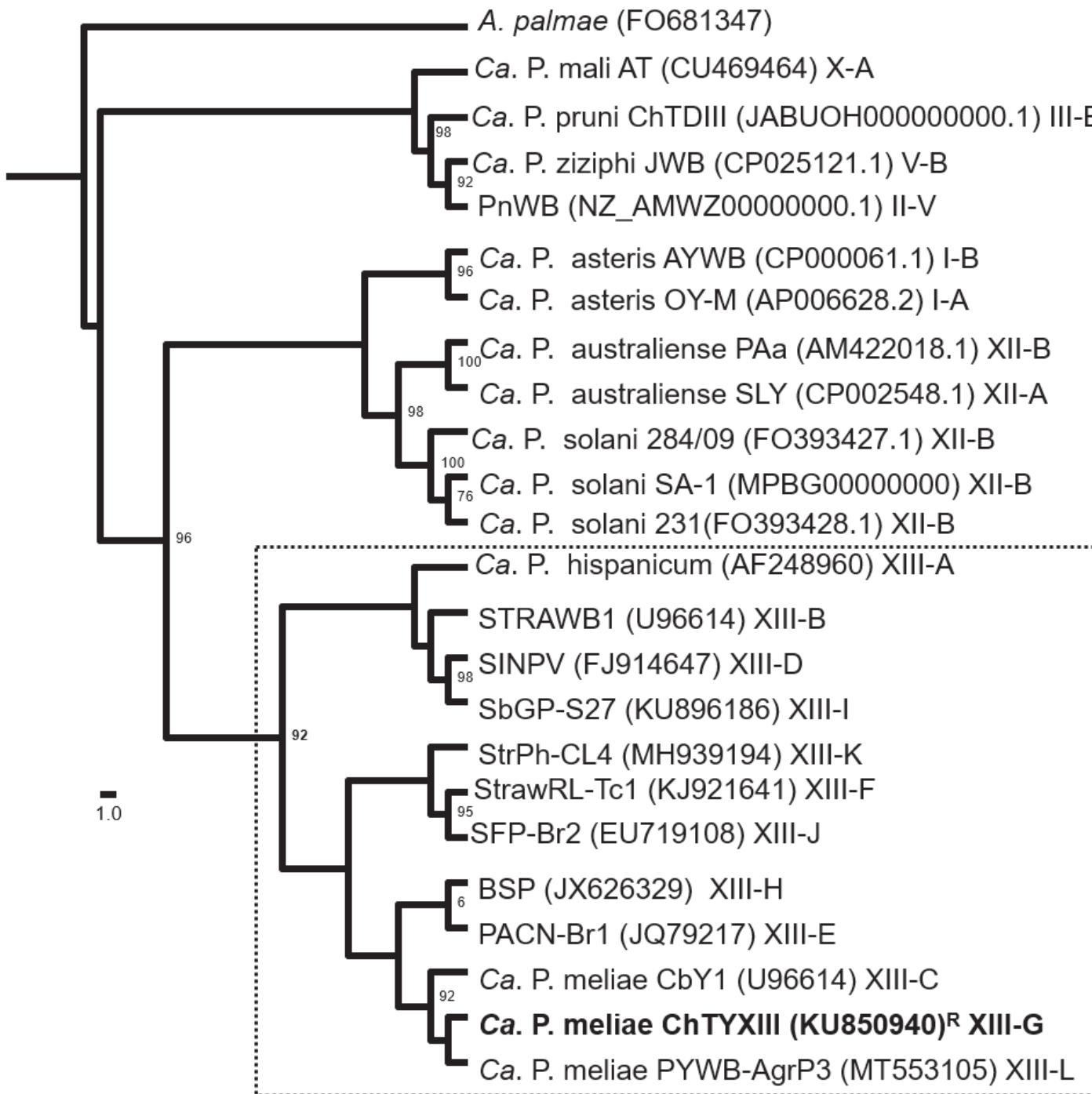
432 **Supplementary Material**

433 **Figure S1** Chinaberry plantlets infected with ‘*Ca. P. meliae*’ (ChTYXIII, 16SrXIII-G) and ‘*Ca.*  
434 *P. pruni*’ (ChTDIII, 16SrIII-B) showing symptoms of witches’ broom and leaf yellowing and  
435 internode shortening respectively.

436 **Figure S2** Molecular phylogeny based on nucleotide sequences of *secY* and *tufB* genes.  
437 *Acholeplasma palmae* was included as an outgroup to root the tree. The numbers on branches  
438 indicate the level of bootstrap support (1000 replicates). The scale bar represents the number of  
439 substitutions per site.

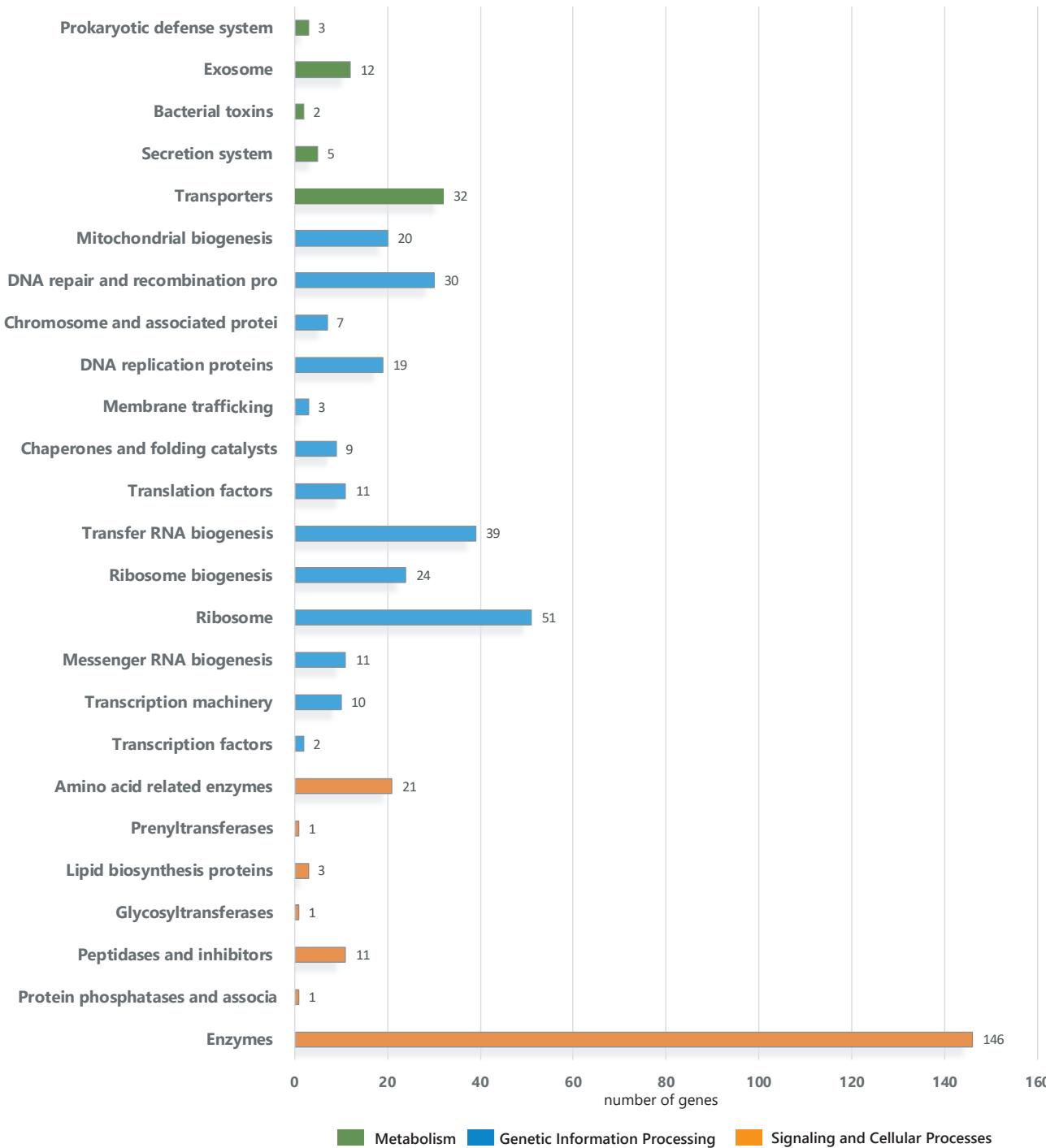
440 **Table S2** List of CDSs associated to carbohydrate metabolism (Glycolysis, Pyruvate oxidation,  
441 pyruvate , Starch and sucrose metabolism), ABC transporters and bacterial sec-secretion system

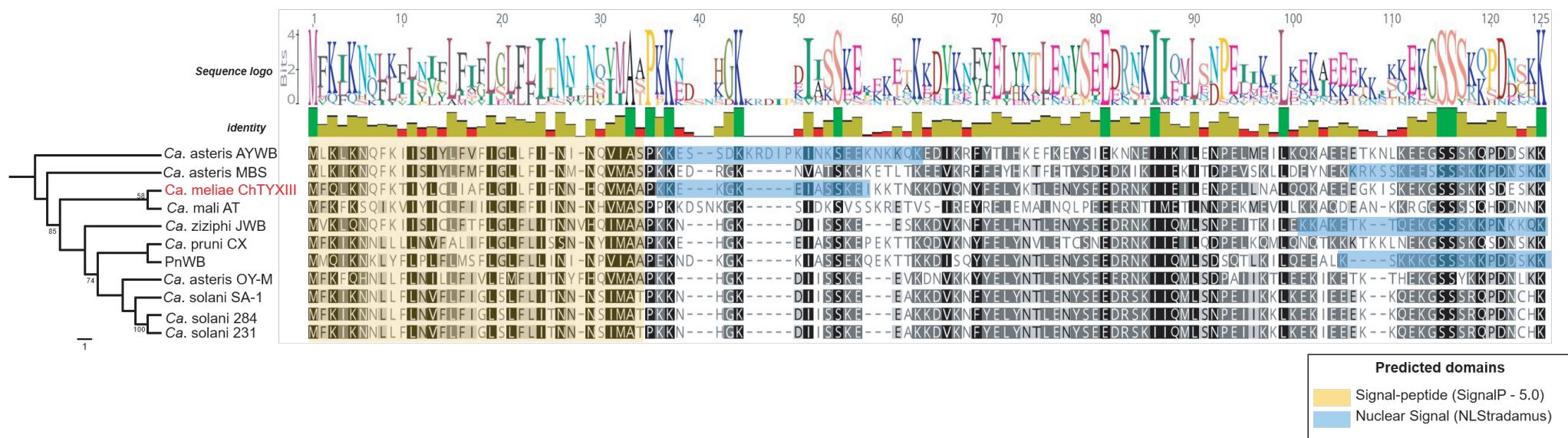
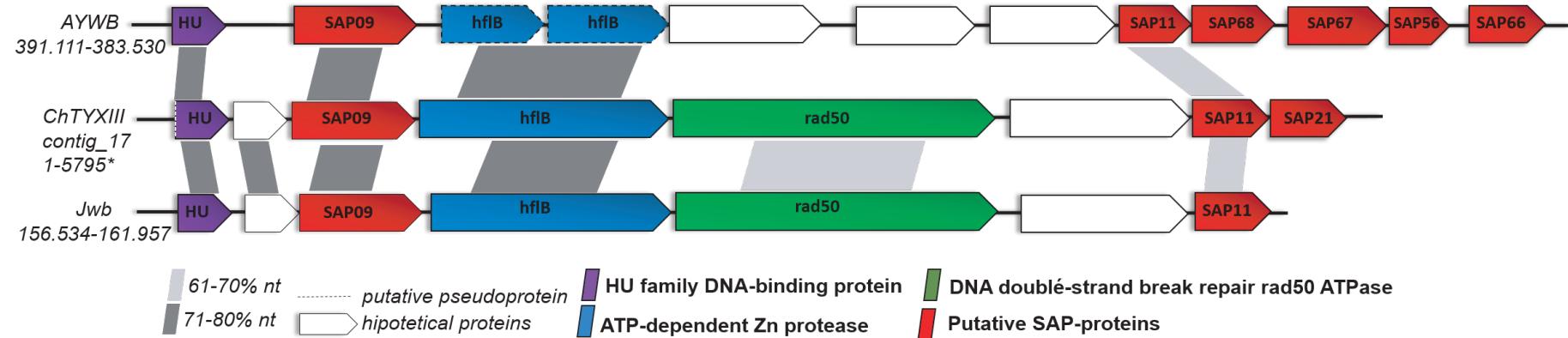
442 **Table S3** List of putative effector proteins in the '*Ca. P. meliae*' draft genome. a: presence of  
443 signal peptide (SignalP 5.0); b: localization of proteins to the plant apoplast (ApoplastP); c:  
444 subcellular localization prediction in plant cells (LOCALIZER); d: nuclear localization prediction  
445 signal (NLstradamus); e: conserved domain prediction (CDD, NCBI); f: annotation based on  
446 BLASTp analysis against '*Ca. Phytoplasma*' NCBI database; g: putative SAP homologue  
447 assignment based on protein homology against SAP repertoire of AYWB phytoplasma  
448 (CP000061.1) (Bai et al., 2009). \* putative proteins with no BLASTp-hit



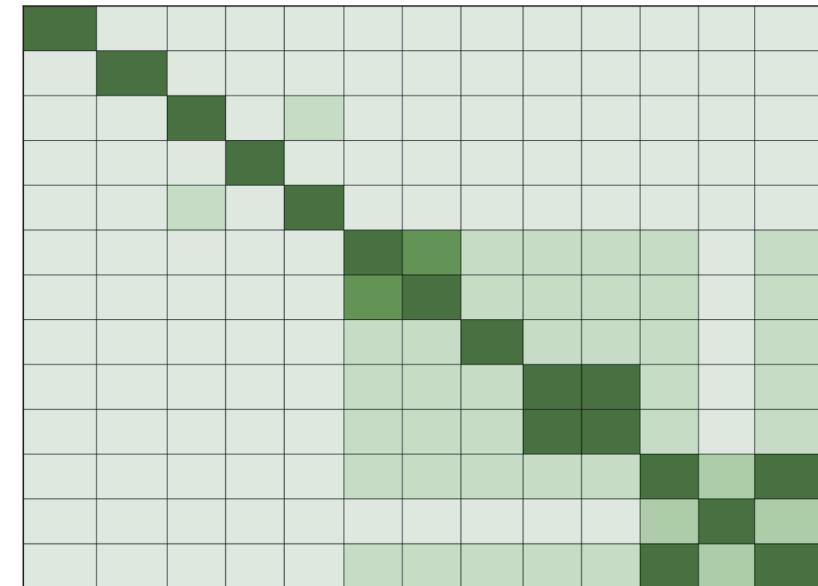
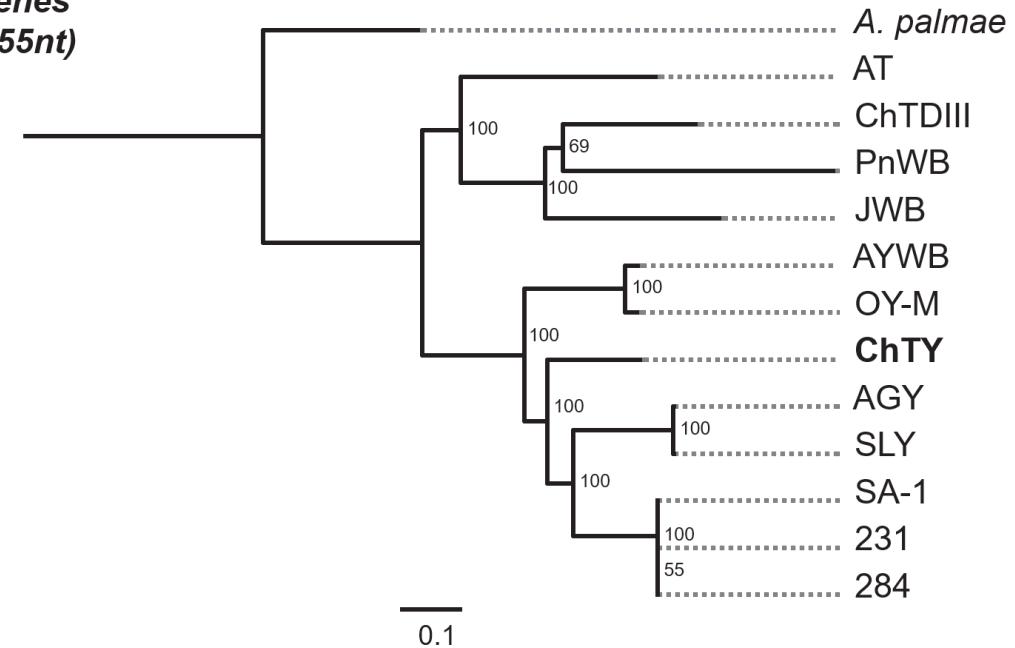
**MPV-group**

# KEEG Proteins families

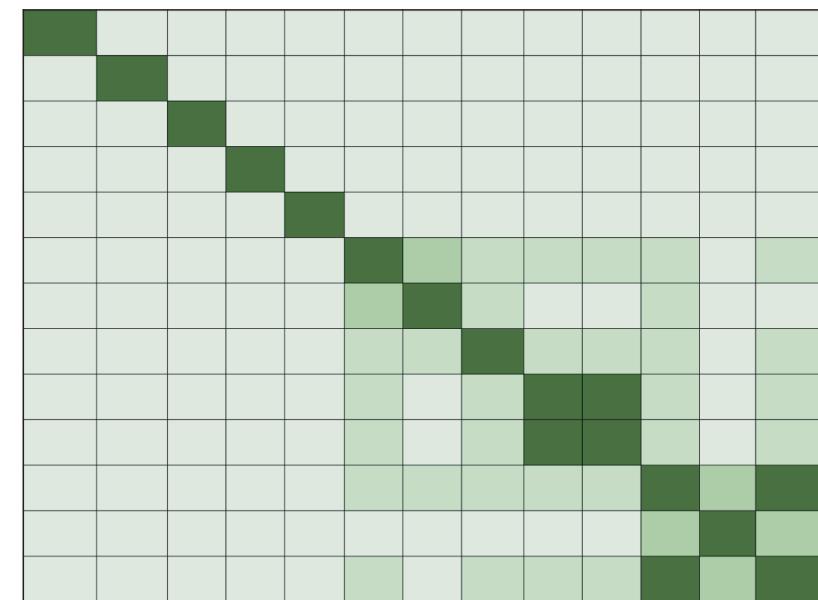
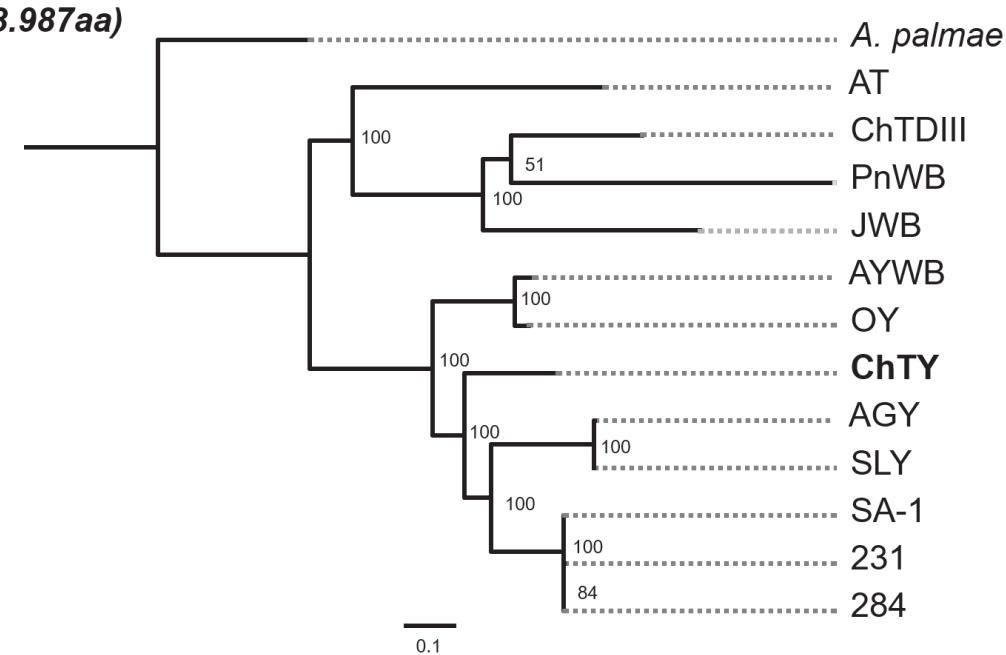


**A****B**

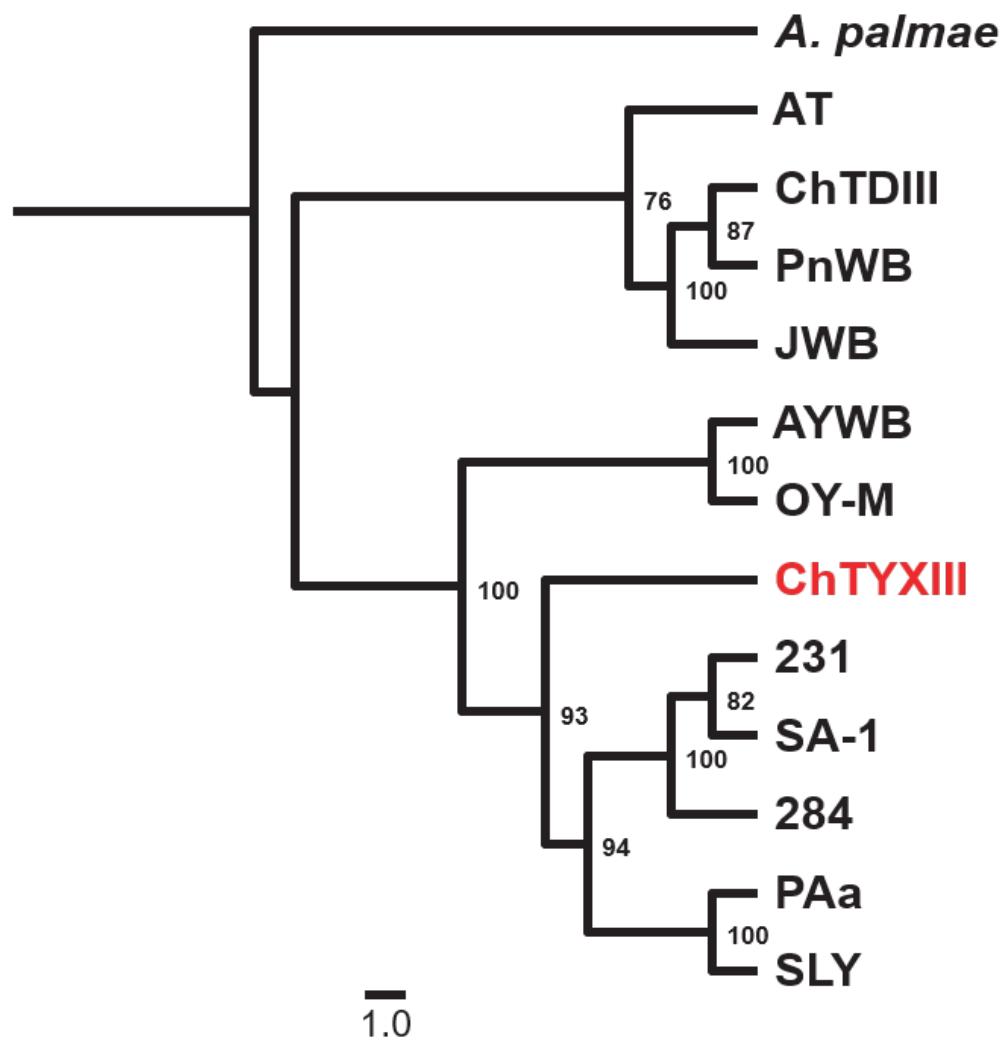
132 genes  
(132.255nt)



132 proteins  
(43.987aa)



*secY*



*tufB*

