

1 ***Enterococcus faecium* genome dynamics during long-term asymptomatic**
2 **patient gut colonization**

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15

16 **Abstract**

17

18 **Background**

19 *E. faecium* is a gut commensal of humans and animals. In addition, it has recently
20 emerged as an important nosocomial pathogen through the acquisition of genetic
21 elements that confer resistance to antibiotics and virulence. We performed a whole-
22 genome sequencing based study on 96 multidrug-resistant *E. faecium* strains that
23 asymptotically colonized five patients with the aim to describe the genome
24 dynamics of this species.

25

26 **Results**

27 The patients were hospitalized on multiple occasions and isolates were collected over
28 periods ranging from 15 months to 6.5 years. Ninety-five of the sequenced isolates
29 belonged to *E. faecium* clade A1, which was previously determined to be responsible
30 for the vast majority of clinical infections. The clade A1 strains clustered into six clonal
31 groups of highly similar isolates, three of which entirely consisted of isolates from a
32 single patient. We also found evidence of concurrent colonization of patients by
33 multiple distinct lineages and transfer of strains between patients during
34 hospitalisation. We estimated the evolutionary rate of two clonal groups that colonized
35 a single patient at 12.6 and 25.2 single nucleotide polymorphisms
36 (SNPs)/genome/year. A detailed analysis of the accessory genome of one of the clonal
37 groups revealed considerable variation due to gene gain and loss events, including the
38 chromosomal acquisition of a 37 kbp prophage and the loss of an element containing
39 carbohydrate metabolism-related genes. We determined the presence and location of
40 twelve different Insertion Sequence (IS) elements, with IS*Efa*5 showing a unique
41 pattern of location in 24 of the 25 isolates, suggesting widespread IS*Efa*5 excision and
42 insertion into the genome during gut colonization.

43

44 Conclusions

45 Our findings show that the *E. faecium* genome is highly dynamic during asymptomatic
46 colonization of the patient gut. We observe considerable genomic flexibility due to
47 frequent horizontal gene transfer and recombination, which can contribute to the
48 generation of genetic diversity within the species and, ultimately, can contribute to its
49 success as a nosocomial pathogen.

50 **Background**

51

52 In recent decades, *Enterococcus faecium* has emerged as an important multidrug-
53 resistant nosocomial pathogen. It is a major cause of hospital-acquired infections such
54 as bacteraemia, urinary tract infection and endocarditis [1–4]. Furthermore,
55 enterococcal infections contribute to patient mortality, increased length of hospital stay
56 of patients and higher healthcare costs [5]. Infections caused by *E. faecium* are difficult
57 to treat due to the large repertoire of acquired antibiotic resistance determinants, of
58 which vancomycin resistance is arguably the most problematic [6, 7].

59

60 The species *E. faecium* consists of distinct subpopulations or 'clades' [8–10]. A deep
61 phylogenetic split distinguishes clades A and B from each other [11], with clade B
62 containing most human commensal isolates. Clade A was further sub-divided in clade
63 A1 and A2 [8]. Clade A1 contains the vast majority of strains isolated from clinical
64 settings, and overlaps with the previously identified *E. faecium* sub-population Clonal
65 Complex 17 [9, 12]. The polyphyletic clade A2 is enriched for strains that were isolated
66 from domestic animals and livestock [8, 10]. While vancomycin resistance can be
67 found among strains from both clade A1 and clade A2, clade A1 strains are almost
68 always resistant to ampicillin, while strains from other clades are mostly ampicillin-
69 susceptible [12].

70

71 *E. faecium* is a genetically dynamic organism with an open pan-genome [8, 13, 14].
72 Genomic changes in *E. faecium* are mostly driven by recombination and horizontal
73 gene transfer (HGT), rather than by mutation [15]. Due to frequent HGT, *E. faecium*
74 strains that have highly similar core genomes can have substantial differences in their
75 accessory genomes [8, 14, 16]. Insertion Sequence (IS) elements are abundant in *E.*
76 *faecium* genome [16]. IS elements are short transposable segments of DNA that can

77 have an important role in shaping a bacterial genome. Insertion events can lead to
78 disruption of promoters, coding sequences or operon structures. In addition, they can
79 catalyze genomic rearrangements including deletions, inversions, and duplications in
80 bacterial genomes [17]. Complete genome sequences revealed that dozens of IS
81 elements are scattered around the chromosome and plasmids of clinical *E. faecium*
82 isolates [18, 19]. A number of IS elements, most notably IS16, are associated with
83 clade A1 strains and have been hypothesized to contribute to the adaptation of *E.*
84 *faecium* to the hospital environment [8, 16].

85

86 Patients that have been hospitalized for prolonged periods of time are potential
87 reservoirs for drug-resistant *E. faecium* strains. Generally, infection by *E. faecium* is
88 preceded by asymptomatic gut colonization by a resistant clade A1 strain [20, 21].
89 Patients that have been colonized by *E. faecium* can contaminate both their immediate
90 surroundings and healthcare workers, leading to outbreaks [21, 22]. The ability of *E.*
91 *faecium* to survive on inanimate objects creates an environmental reservoir of
92 multidrug-resistant strains in hospital wards and makes outbreaks with *E. faecium* a
93 challenge to control [23].

94

95 Recent studies have used whole-genome sequencing (WGS) to trace transmission
96 events of *E. faecium* between patients in hospital wards and between hospitals [10,
97 24, 25]. Recently, the relatedness of *E. faecium* strains from bloodstream infections,
98 the gut and the immediate environment of four patients that were hospitalized for up to
99 two months was studied using WGS [21]. Here, we present an analysis of the genome
100 dynamics of vancomycin- and ampicillin-resistant *E. faecium* during asymptomatic gut
101 colonization of five patients for periods ranging from 15 months to 6.5 years. We
102 describe the evolutionary trajectories, including the roles of gene gain and loss events,
103 and IS-element excision and insertion that shape the genome of *E. faecium*.

104

105 **Results**

106

107 **Isolate collection and patient hospital stay**

108 This study used vancomycin- and ampicillin-resistant *E. faecium* (VRE and ARE,
109 respectively) isolates that were collected and stored in the period 2001 - 2008 as part
110 of routine diagnostics and infection prevention interventions at the University Medical
111 Center Utrecht, the Netherlands (figure 1). Analysis of the collected isolates with
112 anonymized patient data, showed that for five patients multidrug-resistant *E. faecium*
113 isolates were collected over a period of >1 year. We sequenced the genomes of 96
114 isolates, all of which were determined to be ampicillin-resistant using a previously
115 described method [26]. Using Abricate [27], we found that 38 and 21 isolates carried
116 the *vanA* or *vanB* operon. Further information on the antibiotic resistance profiles of
117 the strains sequenced in this study is provided in Supplementary Table 1. The time
118 span between the first and the last isolate collected from a single patient ranges from
119 15 months (patient B) to 6.5 years (patient C).

120

121 **Genetic diversity of *E. faecium* patient isolates**

122 To be able to place the collected isolates in the larger *E. faecium* population, we
123 created a SNP-based, recombination-filtered phylogenetic tree using the 96 genomes
124 sequenced in this study and 70 previously described *E. faecium* genome sequences
125 that represent the global *E. faecium* population [8]. This phylogenetic tree is based on
126 1448 core genes and a total of 77,909 SNPs. Out of the 96 patient isolates, 95
127 clustered into clade A1, a clade of hospital-associated *E. faecium* strains
128 (Supplementary figure 1). The remaining isolate clustered with strains that were
129 previously assigned to clade A2.

130

131 The relatively large diversity of the 70 publicly available *E. faecium* genome
132 sequences, limited the resolution of the phylogenetic relationships between the patient

133 isolates. We therefore created a second tree, with only the 95 clade A1 patient isolates
134 in this study, supplemented with 19 genome sequences of clade A1 strains that were
135 previously sequenced [8]. This tree was based on 1805 core genes, with 5092 SNPs
136 and allowed us to accurately interpret the similarities between the hospital isolates
137 (figure 2). The phylogenetic tree of the clade A1 strains revealed 6 groups of closely
138 related isolates. Three of these groups (1, 2 and 3) contained only isolates from a
139 single patient (A, B and D, respectively). While additional isolates of patients B and D
140 were present in other groups, patient A isolates clustered exclusively in group 1. In
141 group 4, isolates clustered closely together despite being from three different patients
142 (B, C and E). By analysis of dates and locations of hospitalization of these patients,
143 we found that patients B, C and E were simultaneously present in a hospital ward
144 (figure 1b), suggesting that we captured a small outbreak with this set of isolates.
145 Groups 5 and 6 are two small, highly similar clusters of isolates. The isolates in group
146 5 originate from 3 patients (C, D, E) which were isolated between October 2003 and
147 February 2004. In group 6, isolates from patients C and E that were isolated between
148 September 2007 and January 2008 cluster together. Both of these groups may thus
149 also reflect transmission of strains between different patients.

150
151 We also found that patients can be colonized by different populations of *E. faecium* at
152 the same time, as shown by the genetic diversity found in strains that were isolated on
153 the same date, e.g. those on 4 February 2004 (D_040204_23, D_040204_24 and
154 D_040204_25).

155
156 We determined whether a temporal signal is present in the *E. faecium* genome
157 sequences in each individual group. The temporal signal was defined using Path-O-
158 Gen [28], which plots the time at which each isolate was identified versus the distance
159 to the root of the tree. A temporal signal ($R^2 > 0.3$), was only found in groups 1 and 4.
160 Analysis by BEAST resulted in estimated mutation rates for groups 1 and 4 of $4.2 \times 10^{-$

161 6 (with 95% highest posterior density (HPD) of $[2.2 \times 10^{-6}, 6.3 \times 10^{-6}]$) and 8.4×10^{-6}
162 (with 95% HPD of $[4.7 \times 10^{-6}, 1.2 \times 10^{-5}]$) substitutions per nucleotide per year, being
163 equivalent to 12.6 (6.6 - 19.8) SNPs/genome/year and 25.2 (14.1 - 36.0)
164 SNPs/genome/year, respectively. The lack of temporal signal in groups 2, 3, 5, and 6
165 is likely caused by the relatively low number of strains in these groups. Because all
166 group 1 isolates originate from the same patient, they provide a unique opportunity to
167 study the genome dynamics of *E. faecium* during long-term asymptomatic patient gut
168 colonization. Hence, we focused further analyses on the strains from this group.

169

170 **The accessory genome of group 1 strains**

171 A total of 74 orthologous genes (OGs) were found to be differentially present in the
172 genomes of the group 1 isolates (figure 3a). Hierarchical clustering showed that most
173 of the OGs were part of larger groups of OGs that showed the same presence-absence
174 pattern across the genome sequences, suggesting that they are genetically linked.
175 Further analysis revealed that the clustered OGs were co-located on contigs.

176

177 The two largest variably present clusters are phage-related OGs (cluster 1), and OGs
178 related to carbohydrate metabolism (cluster 2). Cluster 1 contains 24 OGs, of which
179 10 are annotated as being hypothetical proteins. The annotations of the remaining
180 genes suggested a phage origin of this element as they included tail and terminase
181 protein-encoding genes (figure 3a). Cluster 2 comprised several genes that are related
182 to carbohydrate transport. Neither of the clusters contained genes related to
183 antimicrobial resistance.

184

185 When aligning these gene clusters to the original collection of 166 genomes (96
186 genomes sequenced in this study and 70 genomes representing global *E. faecium*
187 diversity) using BLAST, we find that they are mostly found in the newly sequenced
188 isolates (Supplementary figure 1), with cluster 1 being found in 42 genomes, of which

189 38 were sequenced as part of this study. Cluster 2 was present in 28 genomes, of
190 which 26 were sequenced here.

191

192 To further investigate the genetic linkage of these variably present clusters in the
193 accessory genome of group 1 strains, we fully sequenced the genome of isolate
194 A_020709_82, combining Illumina reads with long reads generated via Oxford
195 Nanopore's MinION platform to complete the genome assembly. The A_020709_82
196 strain has most of the genes of the accessory genome that are variably present among
197 group 1 strains, including the two largest groups of OGs. The A_020709_82 strain has
198 a chromosome of 2,740,566 nucleotides and 4 plasmids, ranging in size from 222 kbp
199 to 4 kbp (figure 3b). By mapping all the differentially present OGs onto the
200 A_020709_82 reference genome sequence, we found that the clustered OGs were
201 located in close proximity to one another in the chromosome. A third, smaller variably
202 present cluster consisting of 4 OGs, was found to be representing a 4.1 kbp plasmid
203 that is lost in its entirety in 4 of the isolates, in a presence/absence pattern unrelated
204 to that of the two larger clusters. To assess whether the differences in accessory
205 genome sequences influence the fitness of the 25 group 1 isolates, we determined
206 their *in vitro* maximum growth rates but found no statistically significant differences
207 between the strains with different accessory genomes (Supplementary Figure 2).

208

209 **Dynamics of IS elements in a clonal *E. faecium* population**

210 We identified 12 different IS elements in the genome of A_020709_82. To identify the
211 diversity and location of IS elements in the other strains from group 1, we used
212 ISMapper [29] with the A_020709_82 genome as a reference and the sequencing
213 reads of the other genomes in group 1 (figure 4). The positions of two IS elements
214 (IS16 and IS6770) are fixed in all 25 isolates. The IS-element ISEfa5 exhibited a
215 particularly large diversity, having between 17 and 27 copies per genome. Twenty-four
216 out of the 25 isolates in group 1 have a unique pattern, suggesting frequent excision

217 and integration events of this IS element. The remaining 9 IS elements showed an
218 intermediate amount of diversity.
219

220 **Discussion**

221

222 In this study, we use a collection of *E. faecium* carriage strains that were isolated from
223 patients that were repeatedly admitted to a hospital over a time period ranging from 15
224 months to 6.5 years. Out of 96 isolates, 95 clustered to the hospital-associated A1
225 clade, which is expected given their source as ampicillin-resistant clade A1 strains
226 cause the majority of hospital-acquired infections, and are rarely carried by humans in
227 community settings [8, 30]. The patients likely acquired these isolates during their
228 hospital stay and were carriers for extended periods of time. Previous work has shown
229 that ampicillin-resistant *E. faecium* clones can persist in the gut microbiota for several
230 months after discharge from hospital [31], during which time further spread can occur.

231

232 The mutation rate we find in both the clonal group 1 and non-clonal group 4 (12.6 and
233 25.2 substitutions/genome/year, respectively) are in line with previously described
234 values for similar *E. faecium* populations [13, 32]. Others have described rates of up
235 to one order of magnitude higher [8, 21, 25]. This difference is postulated to be caused
236 by increased genetic drift within patients along with a limited time for purifying selection
237 to act on a population, leading to the incomplete removal of strains with mildly
238 deleterious mutations [21, 33]. Our group 1 estimation in particular can be assumed to
239 be a better approximation of the background mutation rate of *E. faecium* given their
240 clonality, the absence of enterococcal disease in the source patient, and the longer
241 time over which they were collected. However, it is also possible that the large
242 differences in the mutation rate of different *E. faecium* clones reported in literature are
243 a true biological signal. As in the Gram-negative gut commensal *E. coli*, *E. faecium*
244 clones with a higher mutation rate may be able to more rapidly adapt to novel
245 environments while negatively impacting their transmissibility and ability to recolonize
246 similar hosts [34].

247

248 The pangenome of *E. faecium* has previously been determined to be essentially open,
249 meaning that it can easily acquire novel genes by horizontal gene transfer [8, 14]. This
250 ability to acquire DNA was recently vividly illustrated by the description of a bovine *E.*
251 *faecium* strain that had acquired a gene cluster encoding a botulinum-like neurotoxin
252 [35]. In group 1 strains we observed a number of gene gain and loss events. The
253 earliest isolates in group 1 carry a gene cluster that is predicted to be involved in
254 carbohydrate metabolism, while later strains lose this element and acquire a phage.
255 Five isolates carry both the phage element and the carbohydrate metabolism gene
256 cluster, which shows that carriage of both elements is not mutually exclusive. While we
257 did not observe differences in the *in vitro* growth rates of strains with different
258 combinations of the carbohydrate metabolism and phage element, their presence
259 might affects the strains' fitness in colonizing gut of this patient. It is possible that the
260 changes in the accessory genome allow the clone to optimally adapt to colonize in the
261 context of the patient's gut microbiota.

262

263 As described in previous studies, there is an abundance of IS elements in the *E.*
264 *faecium* genome [16]. We find that some IS elements, such as IS256, IS6770 and the
265 clade A1-associated IS16 [8], show little to no variation in insertion location and number
266 in the genomes of patient A isolates. IS16 was previously proposed to confer a degree
267 of genomic flexibility to the hospital-adapted sub-population of *E. faecium* that could
268 contribute to its success as a nosocomial pathogen[16]. However, the fixed position of
269 IS16 in the group A isolates appears to contradict a major role for this IS element in
270 shaping the *E. faecium* genome. It may be more likely that IS16 has entered the *E.*
271 *faecium* population when the hospital-adapted sub-population (clade A1) first emerged
272 and has since been spreading vertically in this population. Conversely, we find a large
273 number of IS*Efa*5 copies in the genome of group 1 strains and evidence for frequent
274 excision and insertion events. IS*Efa*5 was first described as part of Tn1546-like
275 elements, which are responsible for VanA-type vancomycin resistance, in South

276 American *E. faecium* isolates [36, 37], but it was later found in European [38] and
277 Australian strains [39] as well. In the whole genome sequence of strain Aus0085 25
278 copies of *ISEfa5* were found [39]. Its high copy number in *E. faecium* strains and the
279 evidence provided in this study for frequent integration and excision events, suggests
280 that *ISEfa5* may be contributing significantly to the genomic flexibility of the species.

281

282 Our observation that patients can be colonized by multiple strains simultaneously is in
283 line with previous studies [21, 33, 40]. Concurrent colonization by multiple clones can
284 have an important impact on infection prevention efforts if only single colonies are
285 selected for further typing. Potentially pathogenic or multidrug-resistant strains can
286 then be inadvertently missed, leading to the erroneous reconstruction of transmission
287 networks. When isolates are missed, transmission networks may also be
288 reconstructed erroneously [21], making outbreak control more challenging. This is
289 illustrated by the small outbreak we detected in our dataset, where patients B, C and
290 E appear to be colonized by isolates with high inter-patient similarity, as well as more
291 different ones. Sampling and typing of multiple colonies when performing screening for
292 colonization by multi-drug resistant *E. faecium* is thus required to capture the full within-
293 patient diversity of this organism. In addition, the use of metagenomic shotgun
294 sequencing, combined with tools to reconstruct microbial genomes and resolve strains
295 [41] may become a useful alternative to culture-based approaches to determine the
296 presence of different *E. faecium* clones in the gut microbiome.

297

298 **Conclusions**

299

300 Our findings show that the *E. faecium* genome is highly dynamic during asymptomatic
301 colonization of the patient gut. We demonstrate *E. faecium*'s remarkable genomic
302 flexibility, which is characterized by frequent gene gain and gene loss due to horizontal
303 gene transfer and recombination and the movement of IS elements. The ability of *E.*
304 *faecium* to rapidly diversify may contribute to its success as a nosocomial pathogen as
305 it allows clones that circulate in a hospital to rapidly optimize their ability to effectively
306 colonize individual patients that may differ in their underlying illnesses, antibiotic
307 therapy and composition of the gut microbiota. Improving our understanding of the
308 mechanisms that underpin this trait is crucial for combating the issues related to the
309 emergence of multidrug-resistant *E. faecium* as an important nosocomial pathogen.

310

311 **Methods**

312

313 **Strain collection**

314 Ninety-six *E. faecium* strains were isolated from five patients during routine diagnostic
315 screenings at the University Medical Center Utrecht, a tertiary care facility in Utrecht,
316 the Netherlands, as part of routine screening for colonization by multidrug-resistant *E.*
317 *faecium* [26, 42]. Patients were screened for carriage of multidrug-resistant *E. faecium*
318 by culturing rectal swabs in Enterococcosel broth (Becton Dickinson) supplemented
319 with aztreonam (75 mg/liter) at 37°C. If the cultures exhibited black colorization within
320 48 h, the broth was streaked on an Enterococcosel Agar plate (Becton Dickinson),
321 supplemented with aztreonam and vancomycin (25 mg/liter) or with aztreonam and
322 ampicillin (16 mg/liter) and incubated at 37°C for 48 h. Black colonies formed by Gram-
323 positive cocci were subjected to multiplex PCR to detect vancomycin resistance genes
324 and the *esp* gene, as well as additional antibiotic susceptibility testing. If a vancomycin-
325 and/or an ampicillin-resistant isolate was found during a screening, this isolate was
326 subsequently stored at -80°C. These patients were selected due to their relatively high
327 number of available screening isolates (between 17 and 25 per patient). One patient
328 (patient C) was admitted to the hospital for recurring abscesses on the upper leg, the
329 other four patients were admitted for (hemo)dialysis procedures. None of the patients
330 were diagnosed with enterococcal infections.

331

332 **Growth curves and maximum growth rate**

333 A BioScreen C instrument (Oy Growth Curves AB) was used to measure bacterial
334 growth. One colony was picked per strain and grown overnight in Brain Heart Infusion
335 (BHI) broth at 37°C with shaking at 200 rpm, then diluted to an initial optoical density
336 at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀) of 0.1 in BHI. The cultures were incubated in triplicate in the
337 Bioscreen C system at 37°C with continuous shaking, and absorbance at 600 nm (A₆₀₀)
338 was recorded every 15 min for 9 hours. The growth rates (μ) were calculated using

339 $\mu = \frac{\ln(A_2) - \ln(A_1)}{(t_2 - t_1)}$, where t_x signifies a time point and A_x the associated A_{600} at this time
340 point. The maximum growth rate (μ_{max}) was determined for each individual experiment
341 by taking the highest μ over the course of the growth.

342

343 **DNA isolation, genome sequencing and assembly**

344 Genomic DNA of all strains was isolated from overnight cultures in Brain Heart Infusion
345 broth, incubated at 37°C with shaking at 200 rpm, using the Wizard Genomic DNA
346 purification kit (Promega). Library preparation for sequencing was done using the
347 Nextera XT kit and 150 nucleotide paired-end sequencing was performed by
348 Edinburgh Genomics on an Illumina HiSeq 2500. An additional 70 publicly available *E.*
349 *faecium* genomes, described in [8], were also included in our analyses and were used
350 to represent the global diversity of the species *E. faecium*. The Nesoni (version 0.122)
351 tool [43] was used to remove adapter sequences and homopolymers, and to trim low-
352 quality bases in sequence reads that had a quality score below 10. If more than half of
353 a read was composed of low-quality bases, the read was discarded. The SPAdes
354 assembler (version 3.1.0) [44] with *--careful* option and with k-mer sizes of 21, 31 and
355 41 was used for genome assembly. From the resulting contigs, those with less than
356 10-fold nucleotide coverage, as well as those smaller than 500 bases were discarded.

357

358 Assembly quality was checked using QUAST [45] and contigs not originating from
359 bacteria (presumably due to low-level contamination of datasets with eukaryotic reads)
360 were identified by aligning to NCBI GenBank database using BLASR+ (version 2.2.29)
361 [46] and were removed.

362

363 The genome of strain A_020709_82 (GenBank accession number CP018128) was
364 sequenced to serve as a reference for the analysis of the accessory genomes and
365 distribution of IS elements in the genomes of the strains in group 1. DNA was prepared

366 as described above, and then prepared for sequencing according to the Genomic DNA
367 sequencing for the MinION device protocol (Oxford Nanopore Technologies, March
368 2016). From the obtained Pre-Sequencing Mix, approximately 60ng was loaded on a
369 R7.3 flowcell and sequenced using an Oxford Nanopore MinION MkI instrument, which
370 was run for a total of 48 hours with a Pre-Sequencing Mix top up (~60ng) at the 24-
371 hour mark. A total of 18,629 high-quality two-directional (2D) reads were produced for
372 a total of ~127 million bases. Poretools [47] was used to extract a fasta-format file
373 containing the reads. A hybrid assembly using these reads combined with 2 x 150 bp
374 HiSeq 2500 Illumina reads was then generated using SPAdes 3.7.0 [44] with the --
375 nanopore option.

376

377 **Genome annotation and clustering of orthologous proteins**

378 We annotated the genome assemblies of all 166 isolates included in this study by using
379 the Prokka [48] annotation tool (version 1.10) with its default parameters. To create
380 clusters of orthologous proteins, the amino acid sequences of all genes in the 166
381 genomes were aligned against themselves using BLAST+ (version 2.2.29) [46].
382 Orthologous genes were identified with orthAgogue (version 1.0.3) [49] using the bit
383 score information from the BLAST alignments, where aligned sequence length
384 between two genes should at least be half of the size of the longer gene. Orthologous
385 genes were grouped into OGs using the MCL algorithm (version 12-135) with the
386 inflation parameter of 1.5 [50].

387

388 **Phylogenetic analyses**

389 We generated core genomes by concatenating the sequences of OGs that were
390 present once in all genomes. To prevent bias in our data created by recombination, we
391 filtered the core genomes to identify putative recombination regions using the Gubbins
392 recombination filtering tool (version 1.3.4) [51]. We then used the SNPs in the core
393 genome located outside of the identified recombination regions to create two

394 phylogenetic trees: one for all 166 strains (96 patient isolates and 70 publicly available
395 genomes), and one for the 114 clade A1 strains (95 patient isolates and 19 clade A1
396 isolates as defined in [8]), using FastTree2 (version 2.1.7; double precision mode
397 enabled) [52]. We used a GTR substitution model for nucleotide sequences with a
398 Gamma site evolutionary rate correction and 1000 bootstrap samples to estimate the
399 support for bifurcation points.

400

401 We observed 6 different groups of strains among newly sequenced 96 strains based
402 on their similarity in the tree of 114 clinical isolates. Each of these 6 groups was then
403 analyzed separately. For each group of strains, OG clustering as well as recombination
404 filtering was applied as described above. However, instead of using SNPs, a
405 concatenated core genome containing all the core genes that are outside of
406 recombination regions were used to obtain more accurate branch lengths and better
407 estimates of time divergence in phylodynamic analysis [53].

408

409 **Estimation of mutation rates**

410 To further analyze the evolutionary dynamics of each group of strains, we first checked
411 for the presence of sufficient temporal signal ($R^2 > 0.30$) using Path-O-Gen (version
412 1.4pre) [28]. We then used the BEAST molecular evolutionary analysis tool (version
413 1.8.2) [54] only for those groups that had a sufficient level of temporal signal.

414

415 We used jModelTest2 [55] to identify the substitution model and site heterogeneity
416 model, and to estimate the proportion of invariant sites, the transition/transversion ratio
417 and the shape parameter of the Γ distribution. Five different clock models (strict,
418 exponential, log-normal, fixed and random) and three different demographic models
419 (constant, log-normal and Bayesian-skyline plot) were used in the BEAST analysis.
420 These different models were analyzed with 100 million Markov chain Monte Carlo

421 (MCMC) simulations with 10 million burn-ins, where sampling was done after every
422 10,000 simulations. The best model among these 15 models (5 clock models x 3
423 demographic models) was selected using path sampling (PS) and stepping-stone
424 sampling (SS) model selection algorithms with one million simulations and 100 path
425 steps, where logs after every 1000 simulations were screened as described previously
426 [56]. Maximum clade credibility (MCC) tree was generated using TreeAnnotator using
427 the median heights of trees [54]. The estimated prior values by jModelTest2 for
428 substitution and heterogeneity models were HKY and I+G for both groups. The rest of
429 the estimated coefficients were the same with the exception of the
430 transition/transversion ratio being 6.79 and 3.88 for group 1 and 4, respectively. The
431 best BEAST model for group 1 isolates was a lognormal relaxed clock (lognormal) with
432 a constant coalescence model (lognormal-constant) based on SS model selection, and
433 a lognormal relaxed clock with a Bayesian skyline (BS) coalescence model (lognormal-
434 BS) based on the PS model selection. Although the SS model selection method is
435 generally more accurate than the PS model selection method [57], we chose the
436 lognormal-BS as the BS coalescence model had higher effective sample size values
437 than the constant model; and the difference between lognormal-constant and
438 lognormal-BS models was negligible. For group 4 strains, the best BEAST model was
439 the lognormal relaxed clock with an exponential coalescence model according to both
440 the SS and PS model selection methods.

441

442 **Analysis of accessory genome**

443 Besides core-genome based analysis, we studied the differential presence of
444 accessory genes within the six groups. When an OG was either present in less or
445 absent in more than 90% of the strains in the group, it was included in the accessory
446 genome. In addition to the annotation information, we also considered on which contigs
447 differentially present genes were located in order to identify potential genetic links.
448 Thus, we aligned the corresponding contigs of each differentially present gene against

449 the GenBank database using BLAST+ (version 2.2.29+) [46] to identify putative mobile
450 elements on which the variably present genes were located. We aligned differentially
451 present genes of group 1 to the A_020709_82 reference genome and visualized
452 location of these genes on the reference using Circos (version 0.69) [58]. The two
453 largest clusters were aligned to all 166 genomes using BLAST+ (version 2.2.29+) [46]
454 to determine the presence/absence of these regions in *E. faecium*. Abricate [27] was
455 used to determine the presence of antimicrobial resistance determinants in the
456 assembled genomes.

457

458 **Gain and loss of insertion sequences**

459 We used ISMapper [29] to find gain and loss of insertion sequence elements (IS
460 elements) among group 1 strains, which solely includes isolates from the same patient
461 (patient A). Sequences of IS elements were found by uploading the complete genome
462 sequence of the A_020709_82 reference strain at the ISfinder [59] website. Sequences
463 of the identified IS elements were used in ISMapper together with the sequence reads
464 from patient isolates. The genome of the patient A strain A_020709_82 was used as a
465 reference to which reads were aligned, positions of IS elements were ordered
466 regarding their positions in the reference genome.

467

468

469

470 **List of abbreviations**

471

472 SNPs: single nucleotide polymorphisms

473 IS: insertion sequence

474 HGT: horizontal gene transfer

475 WGS: whole genome sequencing

476 ARE: ampicillin-resistant *E. faecium*

477 VRE: vancomycin-resistant *E. faecium*

478 HPD: highest posterior density

479 OGs: orthologous genes

480 BHI: Brain Heart Infusion

481 OD₆₀₀: optical density at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀)

482 A₆₀₀: absorbance at 600 nm (A₆₀₀)

483 μ : growth rate

484 μ_{max} : maximum growth rate

485 MCMC: Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC)

486 PS: path sampling

487 SS: stepping-stone sampling

488 MCC: maximum clade credibility

489 BS: Bayesian skyline

490 ENA: European Nucleotide Archive

491 ICU: Intensive Care Unit

492

493 **Declarations**

494

495 Ethics approval and consent to participate

496 Strains were isolated as part of routine diagnostic procedures during a VRE outbreak.

497 This aspect of the study did not require consent or ethical approval by an institutional

498 review board.

499

500 Consent for publication

501 Not applicable

502

503 Availability of data and material

504 Short read data for the 96 genomes sequenced in this study are available at the

505 European Nucleotide Archive (ENA), accession number PRJNA344739. The long-read

506 sequence dataset used for the assembly of the genome of strain A_020709_82 is

507 available at ENA, accession number CP018128.

508

509 Competing interests

510 The authors declare that they have no competing interests

511

512 Funding

513 This work was supported by a grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific

514 Research (VIDI: 917.13.357) and a Royal Society Wolfson Research Merit Award to

515 W.v.S. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision

516 to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

517

518 Authors' contributions

519 W.v.S. designed the study. A.T. provided the strains. J.R.B., J.B., M.R.C.R. performed
520 data analyses. J.R.B., J.B., R.J.L.W., and W.v.S. wrote the manuscript. All authors read
521 and approved the final manuscript.

522

523 Acknowledgements

524 The authors wish to thank Mick Watson (Edinburgh Genomics, University of
525 Edinburgh) for generating the Illumina sequence data used in this study.

526

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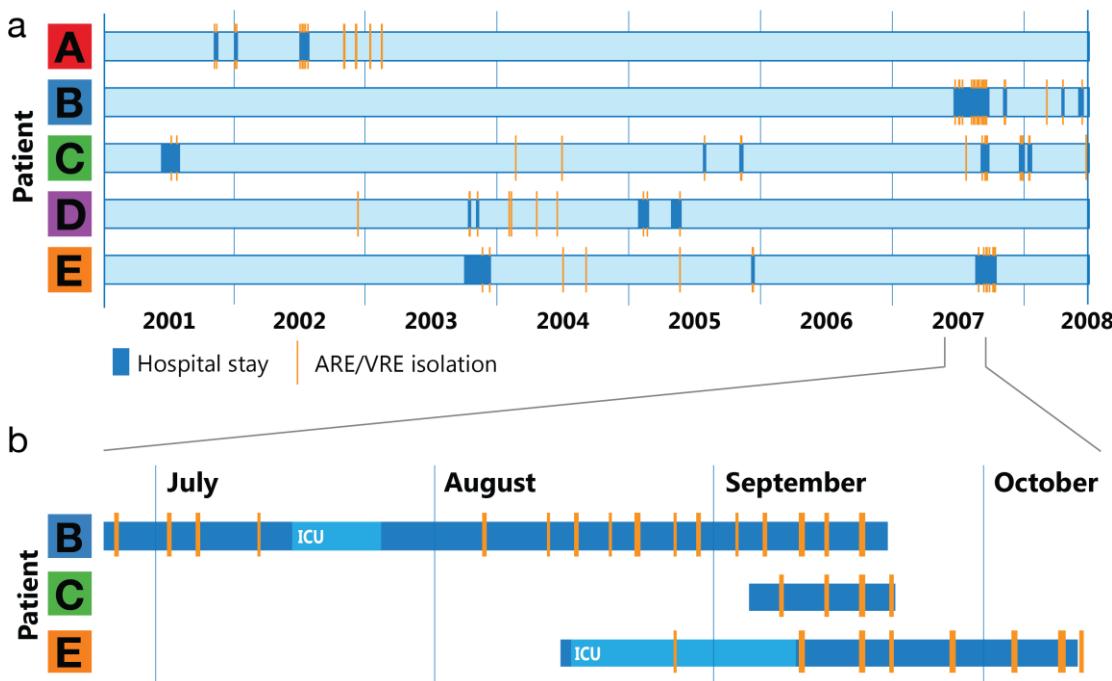
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699 **Figures**

700

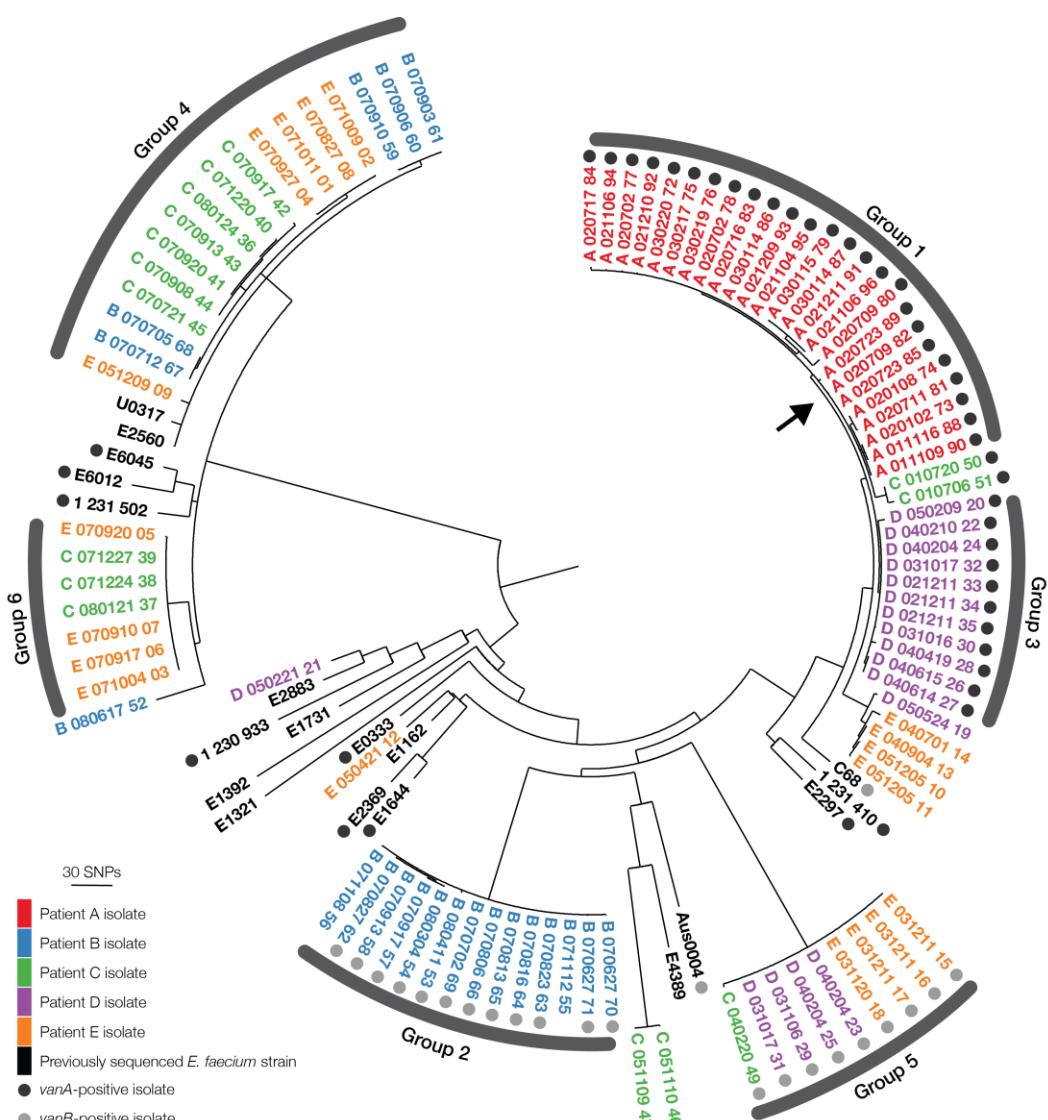


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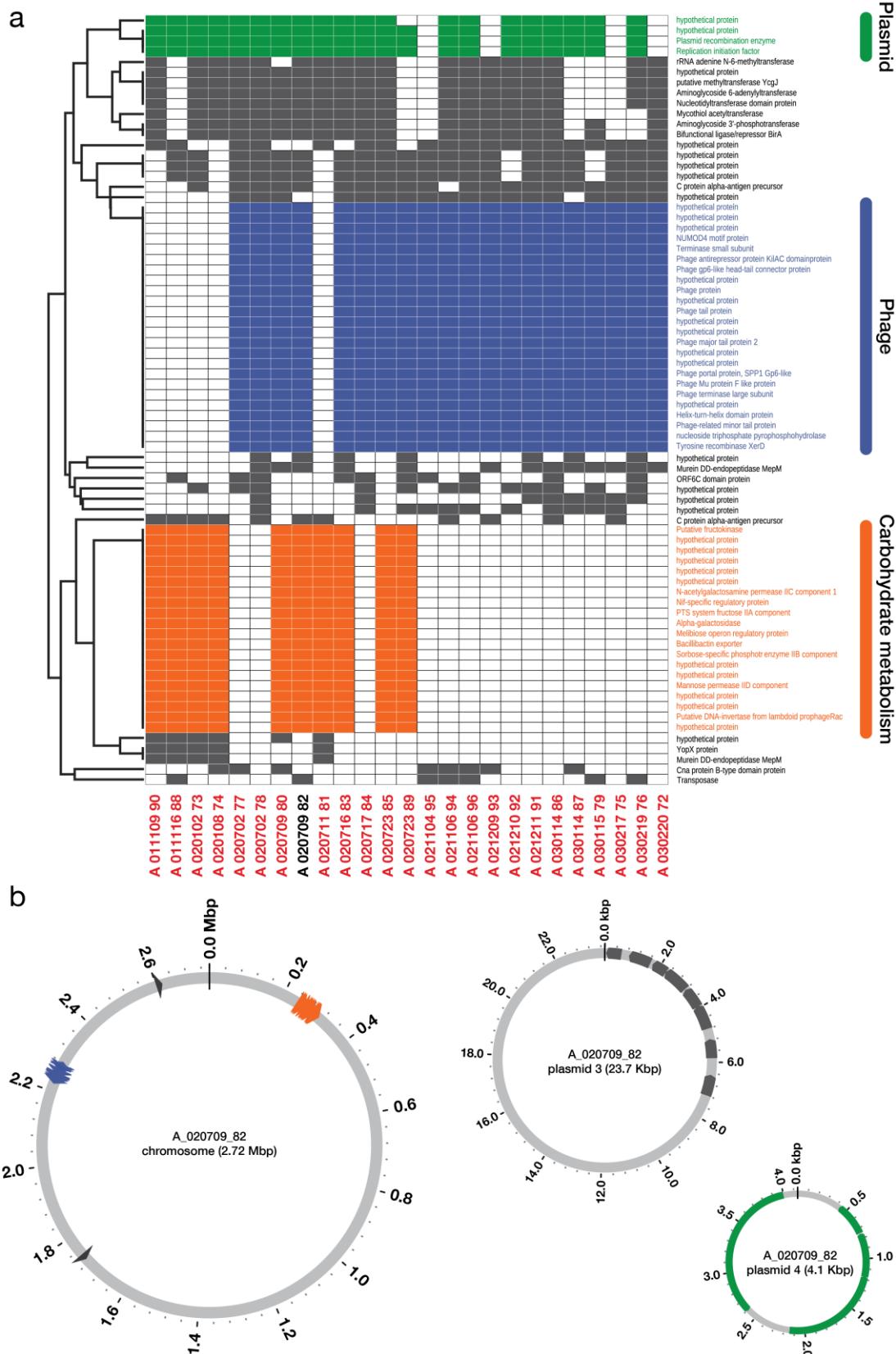
702

703 **Figure 1:** (a) Timeline of hospital stay for 5 patients (A-E) and the time points at
704 which multi-drug-resistant *E. faecium* strains were isolated during routine screening
705 between 2001 and 2008. (b) Detail for patients B, C, and E, showing the overlap in
706 their hospital stay in 2007 and the associated ARE/VRE isolations. Dark blue: patient
707 hospital stay; orange: ARE/VRE-positive screening; ICU: patient in an intensive care
708 unit. If an isolation time point does not overlap with hospital stay, the screening was
709 performed at home as part of outbreak control studies.

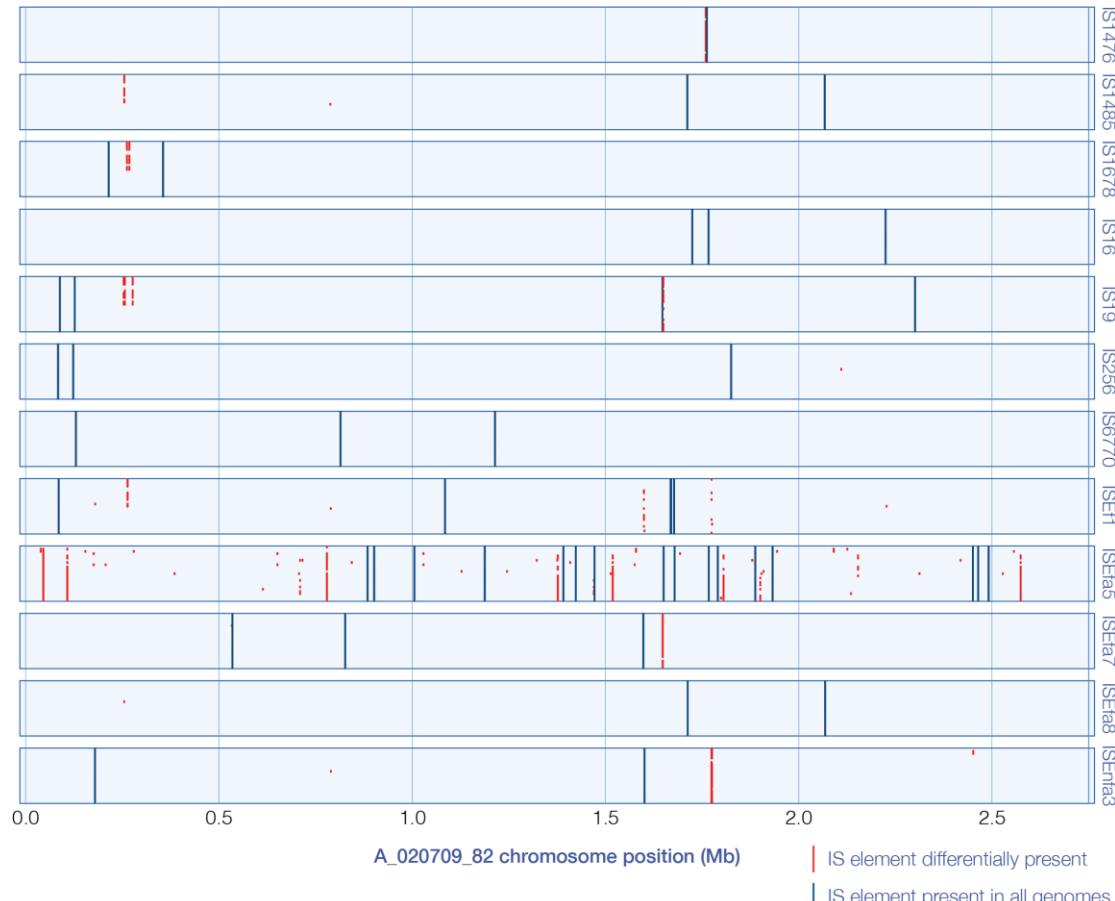
710



711
712 **Figure 2:** Phylogenetic tree of clade A1 isolates. This maximum-likelihood tree
713 includes 95 of the 96 genome sequences generated in this study and 19 publicly
714 available *E. faecium* genome sequences. The core genome alignment consisted of
715 2,295,725 nucleotides. The position of strain A_020709_82 is marked with an arrow.
716 The genome of this isolate was sequenced and assembled to completion using a
717 combination of short- and long-read sequencing for use as a reference genome in
718 further analyses. Genome sequences are coded as follows: the letter represents the
719 patient, the six number code represents the date of isolation in year-month-day
720 format, the final number is the unique identifier for each genome sequence. Colours
721 indicate the patient this isolate was taken from. Black and gray marks indicate the
722 presence of the *vanA* or *vanB* vancomycin resistance operon in the genome,
723 respectively.
724



727 **Figure 3:** The accessory genome of group 1 isolates. (a) Plot showing the
728 differentially present genes in the different isolates, ordered chronologically. Colours
729 indicate gene clusters that are variably present or absent and are annotated on the
730 basis of their predicted function or origin. (b) The differentially present genes mapped
731 onto the A_020709_82 genome, with colours corresponding to gene clusters in panel
732 a. Chromosome and plasmid sizes not shown to scale.
733



734
735
736 **Figure 4:** Variable presence of IS elements in a clonal population of *E. faecium*
737 during asymptomatic gut colonization. Overview of the different IS elements found in
738 the genomes of the 25 clonal patient A isolates, plotted on the chromosomal
739 sequence of isolate A_020709_82. A total of 12 different IS elements are found in this
740 group. Blue marks indicate the presence of that IS-element in all isolates. Red marks
741 indicate that the IS element is present in the indicated isolate, but not in all isolates.
742 Each row of an individual IS element represents a single isolate, with the oldest
743 isolate on top and the newest at the bottom.