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Jaspers, Cornelia; Fraume, Sebastian; Arnold, A. Elizabeth; Miller, J. David; Bosch, Thomas; Voolstra, Christian R.

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1 **Resolving structure and function of metaorganisms through a holistic framework**
2 **combining reductionist and integrative approaches**

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4 **Cornelia Jaspers^{1,2}, Sebastian Fraune³, Consortium of Australian Academy of Science Boden Research**
5 **Conference Participants⁴, A. Elizabeth Arnold⁵, David J. Miller⁶, Thomas Bosch³, Christian R. Voolstra^{7*}**
6
7

8 ¹GEOMAR – Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel, Evolutionary Ecology of Marine Fishes,
9 Düsternbrooker Weg 20, 24105 Kiel, Germany

10 ²National Institute of Aquatic Resources, Technical University of Denmark, DTU Aqua, Kemitovet, Building
11 202, 2800 Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark

12 ³Zoological Institute, Kiel University, Am Botanischen Garten 9, 24118 Kiel, Germany

13
14 ⁴Detailed in Acknowledgements

15
16 ⁵School of Plant Sciences and the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, The University of
17 Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85719, USA

18
19 ⁶ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and Department of Molecular and Cell Biology, James
20 Cook University, Townsville, Queensland 4811, Australia

21
22 ⁷Red Sea Research Center, Division of Biological and Environmental Science and Engineering (BESE), King
23 Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), Thuwal, Saudi Arabia

24
25 **Corresponding Author*
26
27

28 **Keywords:** reductionism; integrative approach; holobiont; adaptation; model system; model organism
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30

31 **Abstract**

32 Current research highlights the importance of associated microbes in contributing to the functioning,
33 health, and even adaptation of their animal, plant, and fungal hosts. As such, we are witnessing a shift in
34 research that moves away from focusing on the eukaryotic host *sensu stricto* to research into the complex
35 conglomerate of the host and its associated microorganisms (i.e., microbial eukaryotes, archaea, bacteria,
36 and viruses), the so-called metaorganism, as the biological entity. While recent research supports and
37 encourages the adoption of such an integrative view, it must be understood that microorganisms are not
38 involved in all host processes and not all associated microorganisms are functionally important. As such,
39 our intention here is to provide a critical review and evaluation of perspectives and limitations relevant to
40 studying organisms in a metaorganism framework and the functional toolbox available to do so. We note
41 that marker gene-guided approaches that primarily characterize microbial diversity are a first step in
42 delineating associated microbes but are not sufficient to establish proof of their functional relevance. More
43 sophisticated tools and experiments are necessary to reveal the specific functions of associated microbes.
44 This can be accomplished through the study of metaorganisms in less complex environments, the targeted
45 manipulation of microbial associates, or work at the mechanistic level with the toolbox available in model
46 systems. We conclude that the metaorganism framework is a powerful new concept to help provide
47 answers to longstanding biological questions such as the evolution and ecology of organismal complexity
48 and the importance of organismal symbioses to ecosystem functioning. The intricacy of the metaorganism
49 requires a holistic framework combining reductionist and integrative approaches to resolve metaorganism
50 identities and to disclose the various roles that microorganisms play in the biology of their hosts.

51

52 **1. Introduction**

53 Recent years have brought a changing imperative in the life sciences, sparked by the revolution of genomic
54 tools for studying the molecular nature of organisms (McFall-Ngai et al., 2013; Bordenstein and Theis, 2015;
55 Bang et al., 2018). Contrary to the classical view that microbes are primarily pathogenic and disease-
56 causing, there is now a multitude of studies indicating that a host-specific microbiome provides functions
57 related to the metabolism, immunity, and environmental adaptation of their animal, plant, and fungal
58 hosts (Fraune et al., 2015; Moran and Yun, 2015; Roder et al., 2015; Hume et al., 2016; Mortzfeld et al.,
59 2016; Röthig et al., 2016; Araldi-Brondolo et al., 2017; Ochsenkühn et al., 2017; Shaffer et al., 2017; Ziegler
60 et al., 2017). Similarly, microbes have been found to be important for environmental sensing (Unabia and
61 Hadfield, 1999), inducing sexual reproduction in choanoflagellates (Woznica et al., 2017), and contributing
62 to developmental transitions (Leitz and Wagner, 1993; Webster et al., 2004). More recently, Rook et al.
63 (2017) proposed that life history traits such as developmental pace and longevity are in part determined by
64 the organism's microbial associations. It is becoming increasingly clear that animals, plants, and fungi
65 evolved within a microbial world and that such multicellular organisms rely on their associated microbes
66 for many aspects of their function, especially with regard to living in extreme environments such as deserts,
67 oligotrophic seas, or hydrothermal vents (Bang et al., 2018). However, even though a broader appreciation
68 of the importance of microbes has emerged, we still know comparatively little about the different niche
69 spaces (compartments) that multicellular hosts provide, how such niches determine microbiome
70 composition and function, and how the often-complex assemblages of microbes interact with one another
71 and their hosts in a mechanistic sense.

72
73 **2. The metaorganism concept and the challenges of metaorganism research**

74 To address such questions, scientists from diverse disciplines have converged on exploring microbiomes
75 associated with host organisms using a new conceptual framework – the metaorganism. The popularity of
76 the metaorganism framework has led to a proliferation of terms to describe the sum of the multicellular
77 host and its associated microorganisms (see Table 1). While the terms “metaorganism” and “holobiont”
78 generally have been used interchangeably, we propose that these terms be used to distinguish different
79 kinds of microbial associations. The term metaorganism is used herein to refer to the host organism and
80 those components of its associated microbiome to which function has been either ascribed or for which
81 there are reasonable grounds to suspect it; in contrast, the term holobiont is used in the more traditional
82 context of the entire diversity associated with a host organism (Table 1). In this context it is important to
83 note that, given the diverse disciplines studying metaorganisms, “function” is not defined strictly and often
84 is used with different meanings. In an evolutionary sense, for instance, any assigned microbial function may
85 imply a fitness effect on the host. In an ecological context, it may refer to the function of a microbe in the
86 context of the metaorganism and its role in the ecosystem, whereas in a genomic context, function may
87 refer to an actual expressed gene product or protein. Here, we refer to microbial function in the broad
88 context of a contribution (beneficial or detrimental) to the metaorganism. Importantly, even when a
89 microbial contribution to the host organism can be defined and is used to define the metaorganism
90 concept, a metaorganism (like a holobiont) is specific to a time and place and not static. As such, we must
91 acknowledge an uncertainty with regard to our ability to identify all functionally relevant microbes given
92 the temporal (‘fluidic’) nature of host-microbial interactions, as well as the possibility of competitive
93 exclusion of detrimental microbes by other associated microbes. To maintain clarity the term
94 “metaorganism” (or holobiont) should not be confused with what sociobiologists call a *superorganism* – a

95 term coined to describe the communities of social insects, such as leaf cutter ants or termites, and their
96 associated structures (Hölldobler and Wilson, 2009), which should not be used in the current context.

97 More broadly, the host-associated microbiome is central to the holobiont and metaorganism
98 concept. The microbiome consists of microorganisms or microbes such as bacteria, archaea, protists, and
99 fungi (while acknowledging the fact that some of these organisms, such as protists and fungi, themselves
100 can be considered hosts of other microorganisms), but also viruses (Grasis, 2017). As an example, the
101 *Hydra* metaorganism is composed of the animal host, a suite of bacteria, and associated viruses (Bosch and
102 Miller, 2016). In comparison, a coral metaorganism is not only composed of the animal host, a suite of
103 bacteria, fungi, and viruses (Knowlton and Rohwer, 2003; Bang et al., 2018), but also obligate intracellular
104 algal symbionts of the family Symbiodiniaceae (LaJeunesse et al., 2018).

105 Coral metaorganisms in particular highlight the importance of microbes to host function since they
106 enable their animal hosts to live in otherwise inhospitable environments (Muscatine and Porter, 1977; Bang
107 et al., 2018): export of photosynthates from micro-algal endosymbionts can provide up to 95% of the
108 energy requirements of the host coral. This allows corals to build – in oligotrophic seas – massive calcium
109 carbonate skeletons, the three-dimensional structures that form the foundations of reef ecosystems. Thus,
110 the symbiosis between Symbiodiniaceae and their coral hosts allows them to become the engineers of
111 entire ecosystems (Jones et al., 1994). In this way they serve in a similar role to plant metaorganisms in
112 terrestrial environments, where the capacity of root symbionts to improve the uptake of nutrients and
113 water, or of foliar symbionts to regulate ingestion by herbivores and pathogen infection, reflects how
114 microbes can change the capacity of hosts to colonize and flourish in the context of biotic and abiotic
115 challenges, thus shaping terrestrial, aquatic, and marine systems (Arnold et al., 2003; Friesen et al., 2011;
116 Ortiz et al., 2015; Pérez-Jaramillo et al., 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). Curiously enough however, the
117 ‘holobiont’ or ‘metaorganism’ terminology entered the botanical lexicon only recently (e.g., Cregger et al.,
118 2018). Together, these studies show that interactions between microbiomes and their hosts are
119 ecologically and evolutionarily powerful across the tree of life.

120 While in specific cases (such as the examples cited above) the evidence for the importance of the
121 associated microorganisms is compelling and the definition of a metaorganism might seem straightforward,
122 in the real world it is often much less clear which microorganisms are functionally important. The example
123 of the coral–Symbiodiniaceae partnership is obvious, in part because the algae live inside the cells of their
124 animal host, but for the majority of study systems the delimitation is not clearly defined. For example,
125 microbes associated with external surfaces could either interact functionally with their hosts or their
126 presence could simply be accidental. Associations can be transitory or long-term, with little evidence that
127 the duration of affiliation – especially for horizontally transmitted taxa – can be taken as a proxy for
128 functionality (even just temporarily “associated” microbes can be functionally consequential, as is the case
129 for pathogens). Also, microbes found on or within a host may be commensal with no clear function, or their
130 functional impacts may emerge only under particular stresses rarely encountered in the laboratory or *in*
131 *vitro*. For these reasons, there is an ongoing debate on how to discern these more or less integrated
132 associations of organisms, and where to categorize phenomena that are fundamentally gradational (Moran
133 and Sloan, 2015; Queller and Strassmann, 2016; Skillings, 2016; Doolittle and Inkpen, 2018; Rosenberg and
134 Zilber-Rosenberg, 2018). Host niche space, i.e. physical containment, offers an obvious first-order limit,
135 hence the focus on multicellular animal and plant hosts along with their contained microbiomes. Such
136 consortia are distributed pervasively across the tree of life: cellular endosymbionts, gut microbiomes,
137 endophytic fungi, nodule-contained rhizobia, and endohyphal bacteria are all relatively easy to define in

138 such terms, though even here the definition can be blurred when such organisms have extracellular/extra-
 139 host phases in their life cycle or can exist in some form outside the host body. More often than not,
 140 however, the challenge is more fundamental: to understand the functional roles of microbes and to define
 141 the metaorganism in a tractable and mechanistic way. We will discuss such criteria in more detail in the
 142 following, alongside an examination of the circumstances under which the metaorganism concept is useful
 143 and of the tools one should employ to study functional aspects of host-microbe associations.
 144

145 **Table 1: Terminology**

Term	Definition
Model organism	A species that has a range of characteristics that are particularly advantageous for studying a particular biological trait. For example, <i>Aplysia californica</i> is a well-studied model organism in neurobiology and neuroscience, due to its unusually large neurons (caused by polyploidy). Primary criteria for the selection of model organisms used to be ease of maintenance and experimental manipulation, but now often also include factors such as genome size and genetic tractability.
Non-model organism	Organisms that are not as widely studied and for which only a limited set of resources might be available. They may lack the features that make model organisms easy to investigate (e.g. they can be hard or expensive to grow in the laboratory, or may have long life cycles, low fecundity, or poor genetic tractability). In some cases, they simply do not have the long history of study that has provided the foundation for the choice of model organisms in certain disciplines. As model organisms represent only a very limited scope of the diversity and function in nature, the study of non-model organisms is relevant and important for understanding the possible inferences and limitations of model system studies and the ways in which model organisms can be used to interpret the ecology of species and their role in ecosystems.
Model system	A representative species for a particular discipline, but less popular, generalized, or developed than a model organism. For instance, the sea anemone <i>Aiptasia</i> is a model system for the coral-algal symbiosis that forms the basis of coral reef ecosystems.
Microbiome	The sum of microbes in a particular environment, organism, or part of an organism (e.g., the gut, the epidermis, the leaf). Commonly the term also refers to the entire collection of genes of all the microbes in a community.
Holobiont	The eukaryotic host with all external and internal associates. This multispecies consortium can include bacteria, archaea, protists, fungi, and viruses. All associated member species are considered, regardless of their being transient or permanent or whether they form a functional association with the host or other microbes or not.
Metaorganism	A metaorganism is the sum of a eukaryotic host and its associated species in a narrower context as compared to the holobiont, with the focus on those associates for which function, i.e. any form of contribution (beneficial or detrimental) to the metaorganism, is known or implied. The term metaorganism therefore has implications for the function of a holobiont in a given environment. The functional aspect depends on the identity, activity, and abundance of the associated partners. Likewise, whether a specific function/microbe is functionally relevant can depend on host developmental stage, age, reproductive state, or physiological condition.

	As such, a metaorganism (like a holobiont) is specific to a time and place, and not static.
Hologenome	The collective genomic content or genetic information encoded by the eukaryotic host and all the species associated with it. The hologenome concept often carries the controversial assumption that, to a significant extent, selection acts at the holobiont level, a view that is hotly debated.

146

147 **3. Perspectives and limitations of studying organisms in a metaorganism framework**

148 In a simple sense, metaorganisms may function as closely integrated ecosystems – specialized
 149 environments with community members that have direct and indirect impacts on one another. Such close
 150 coupling can make the exchange of information and materials more direct, rapid, and secure than in the
 151 outside world. As such, multicellular hosts can be thought of as modular systems, containing microbes of
 152 different types and properties and unique opportunities for material and informational exchange. Within
 153 ecosystems, certain roles or ecosystem functions can be provided by different members of the community.
 154 Similarly, in host organisms certain functions can be performed by different microbes that have converged
 155 mechanistically or otherwise to provide the same “ecosystem service”, as proposed by the “it’s the song
 156 not the singer” concept (Doolittle and Inkpen, 2018). However, unequivocal experimental evidence for
 157 widespread functional redundancy is missing to date in holobiont/metaorganism systems. Nevertheless,
 158 evolutionary theory highlights the importance of function rather than species identity *per se* – a concept
 159 also presented by the trait-based approach with regard to understanding ecosystem assemblage and
 160 function (Kjørboe et al., 2018). This framework argues for a functional understanding of microbiomes
 161 rather than one based on lineages or microbial identity alone.

162 Reflections on the functional aspects of microbiomes in the metaorganism often return to a central point –
 163 the evolutionary origins of such assemblages and their roles. Multicellularity arose relatively late during the
 164 history of Earth, emerging in a microbial world and providing novel substrates and interactions for diverse
 165 microbial lineages. Although difficult to reconstruct, the evolutionary origin of metaorganisms might be
 166 linked to a beneficial sub-contracted division of labor, potentially starting out from commensal
 167 coincidences that over time changed into mutually beneficial relationships. Once established, these novel
 168 relationships offered various advantages, such as free and reliable food delivery, protection from
 169 environmental stress, containment for collective digestion, infrastructure for large-scale transport, or a
 170 new apparatus for gas exchange. Such intimate cohabitation would then lead to the emergence of a
 171 metaorganism grade of organization as various metabolic tasks are taken over by associated microbes,
 172 often due to the superiority of microorganisms in metabolizing many kinds of substrates or their capacity
 173 for rapid adaptation via their extremely large population sizes or by means of horizontal gene transfer
 174 (Theis et al., 2016).

175 But it would be wrong to assume that just because associated organisms often play an important role in
 176 connection with their hosts, that this role is fundamental to the host's existence: current usage doesn't
 177 necessarily reflect evolutionary origins or essential association. Rather, in a world permeated by microbes,
 178 all organisms will by default be associated with microbes, and some of these may take on functions
 179 previously fulfilled by the host. However, the capacity to rapidly acquire novel functions may be central to
 180 the evolutionary history of metaorganisms, and indeed those we see today are the 'success stories' that
 181 may disproportionately bias us to think of microbial symbioses as central to host success. Instead, such
 182 associations may represent one of several potential optima, and certainly one of great impact – but not the

183 only solution, and not always as central to success as might be anticipated. Indeed, in nutrient-replete
184 situations mycorrhizal fungi can shift to playing a parasitic role, gaining more than they give (Schmidt et al.,
185 2011).

186 Yet it is unquestionable that microbes can be central to the origin of evolutionary innovations in
187 multicellular hosts. For instance, it was recently proposed that nervous systems evolved as much to control
188 associated microbes as to manage sensory inputs and muscle control (Klimovich and Bosch, 2018).
189 Likewise, innate immunity in invertebrates evolved not only to fight off detrimental microbes, but also to
190 recognize beneficial ones (Bosch, 2014; Rook et al., 2017). Challenging as it may be, we need to define
191 experiments and tools that can be used to disentangle such complex relationships and dependencies in
192 order to be able to differentiate between cause and consequence, and causation and correlation. At
193 present, diverse tools have been developed for the purpose of inferring function, and they increasingly
194 complement marker gene sequencing that defined the first phases of microbiome studies in host organisms
195 and other environments (Fig. 1).

196

197 **4. Experimental design considerations and functional tools**

198 **4.1. Marker gene approaches and their limitations**

199 What has led to the newly discovered importance of bacteria is our novel ability to sequence marker genes
200 and thus to estimate microbial diversity at an unprecedented depth and at decreasing costs, due to the
201 advent of next-generation sequencing (NGS) (Tringe and Hugenholtz, 2008). The use of 16S rRNA gene
202 sequencing for archaea and bacteria, alongside various other methods to describe eukaryotic microbial
203 diversity, has ushered in a new era of microbial identification without the limitations of culture-based
204 approaches. Before that, the description of bacteria associated with organisms and environments was
205 expensive, characterized by low throughput, and relied on labor-intensive cloning-and-sequencing
206 approaches. NGS approaches have revolutionized our understanding of microbial diversity and microbe
207 distribution across the local and global scales (Tedersoo et al., 2014; Davison et al., 2015; Delgado-
208 Baquerizo et al., 2018). The contemporary perspective is that bacteria (and often, other microbes as well)
209 can be found in all environments, even under conditions previously thought to be inhospitable, e.g., at
210 temperatures exceeding 80 °C (Stetter, 1996), at extreme salinity or at high concentrations of heavy metals
211 (Antunes et al., 2011). Along with this comes the notion that bacterial diversity is nearly inexhaustible;
212 indeed, a recent study estimated the total number of distinct microbial taxa to be approximately 1 trillion
213 (10^{12}) (Locey and Lennon, 2016). The problem is that characterizing microbial diversity using marker gene
214 approaches is straightforward enough, but that this kind of data is of limited value in terms of
215 understanding function; microbial taxa may turn out to be phylogenetically different although they have
216 the same function, or they may be phylogenetically similar but serve very different functions (Burke et al.,
217 2011).

218 Therefore, metagenome and metatranscriptome analyses are required in order to detect differences in the
219 presence of enzymes and pathways. Incorporating all genes and proteins allows to infer functional
220 redundancies and to inform functional redundancy vs. phylogenetic difference. Similarly, describing
221 microbial diversity using marker gene surveys provides no information on the location or association of the
222 respective bacteria within or on the host. As such, visualization of microbes in or on host organisms via
223 FISH, FISH-CLEM, CARD-FISH, SEM techniques, or *in vivo* labeling with fluorescent proteins (Hannig et al.,
224 2010; Neave et al., 2016; Araldi-Brondolo et al., 2017; Wein et al., 2018) can supplement
225 metagenome/metatranscriptome data in establishing function. Visual investigation further allows for

226 approximating microbial density ('carrying capacity'), which in itself can be an indication of the relative
227 importance of microbes. Estimates of carrying capacities can be rechecked by using targeted approaches
228 such as FACS, quantitative PCR, or counts of colony forming units (CFUs) (Wein et al., 2018). Further
229 evidence for a functional relationship might come from studying the metabolite exchange between
230 microbes and their hosts, e.g. via ToF- and NanoSIMS approaches that provide a currently unmatched
231 methodology for imaging and measuring the exchange of defined metabolites at the single-cell level
232 (Rädecker et al., 2018; Raina et al., 2018). These approaches are facilitated by the availability of cultured
233 isolates that allow for detailed characterization and manipulation, e.g., with reference genome sequencing
234 (Neave et al., 2014), elucidation of growth conditions, *ex situ* incubations (Cardenas et al., 2018), and
235 targeted functional activity testing (e.g., quorum sensing, quorum quenching) (Pietschke et al., 2017).
236 Lastly, the ability to conduct experiments with organisms that are largely (gnotobiotic) or completely
237 (axenic) devoid of microbes allows for detailed insights into the contributions of microbes to metaorganism
238 function (Fraune et al., 2015; Domin et al., 2018). In particular, the possibility of combining gnotobiotic
239 animals and cultured microbial isolates allows for re-colonization experiments that help to unequivocally
240 assign functions to specific microbes (Voolstra, 2013; Fraune et al., 2015; Domin et al., 2018) as well as to
241 determine the colonization dynamics of microbes (Domin et al., 2018; Wein et al., 2018), although
242 bacteria-bacteria interactions also need to be considered (Fraune et al., 2015; Li et al., 2015).
243 Despite the above considerations, marker gene sequencing approaches are currently *en vogue* due to their
244 ease and feasibility. They represent an imperfect but legitimate approach to characterizing microbial
245 diversity and community composition, but the step to inferring function remains to be taken. As such, 16S-
246 based surveys should only be considered the first step of many on the way to gaining a more
247 comprehensive understanding of the relationship between hosts and their associated microbes (Fig. 1).
248

249 **4.2. The importance of less complex environments and model systems**

250 The suite of approaches available for investigating function in bacteria-host associations (Fig. 1) highlights
251 the need for collaboration – the scale and breadth of such efforts means that they often are beyond the
252 scope of individual laboratories. One corollary of this is that real progress requires that researchers agree at
253 some level to focus on a limited set of organisms for which a range of such methods are available. The
254 selection of appropriate model systems should consider the complexity of the microbiome as well as the
255 ability to manipulate key associated microbes. In addition, there is a growing recognition of the importance
256 of non-bilaterian host organisms in metaorganism research. For instance, early-diverging metazoans such
257 as *Hydra*, *Nematostella*, and *Aiptasia* are all cnidarians and sister group to bilaterians. Consequently, their
258 phylogenetic position makes them ideal candidates to address questions regarding the evolutionary history
259 of animal metaorganisms, in general, and bilaterians, in particular, besides research investigating the
260 evolutionary origin of organismal processes and complexity.

261 In *Hydra*, bacteria colonize the mucus-like layer covering the ectoderm of the polyp and provide protection
262 for the metaorganism against fungal infections (Fraune et al., 2015). The use of gain-of-function and loss-
263 of-function approaches in *Hydra* has proven that these specific bacteria are selected by species-specific
264 antimicrobial peptides that are secreted by both epithelial cells (Franzenburg et al., 2013) and neurons
265 (Augustin et al., 2017). These facts have led to the hypothesis that both the innate immune system and the
266 nervous system have evolved to orchestrate multiple functions including host-microbiome interactions
267 (Bosch, 2013; Klimovich and Bosch, 2018). The isolation and development of genetically manipulated

268 variants in *Curvibacter* (Wein et al., 2018), the main colonizer of *Hydra*, now allows functional studies on
269 both the host and the bacterial symbiont.

270 In parallel with model systems and model organisms, non-classical model systems may be developed to
271 provide fundamental insights about ecologically important species that are otherwise hard to study or
272 expensive to maintain in laboratory settings. For instance, stony corals and the reef ecosystems they build
273 are in unprecedented decline due to local and global anthropogenic pressures, but they are also
274 intrinsically complex systems and thus hard to study (as outlined in Voolstra, 2013). By comparison, the sea
275 anemone *Aiptasia* is simple and inexpensive to rear, can establish symbioses with many of the same algal
276 endosymbionts (Hambleton et al., 2014), and associates with some of the same bacteria as corals do
277 (Röthig et al., 2016). Importantly, insights gained from such emerging model systems need to be confirmed
278 in ecologically relevant target species in their native environment. As an example, salinity-conveyed
279 thermotolerance and decreased bleaching (i.e., loss of algal endosymbionts) has recently been shown for a
280 group of symbiotic *Aiptasia* anemones (Gegner et al., 2017). Elucidation of the underlying mechanism
281 showed that the concentration of the oxygen-scavenging osmolyte floridoside, which is produced by the
282 algal endosymbionts, is increased at high salinity, and reactive oxygen species (ROS) leakage, one of the
283 hallmarks of coral bleaching, is reduced (Ochsenkühn et al., 2017). Thus, model systems can contribute to
284 understanding climate change effects, even before working directly with ecologically relevant species.

285

286 **5. Conclusion: reductionist and integrative approaches are needed to tackle the complexity of the** 287 **metaorganism**

288 The metaorganism framework challenges our understanding of self and non-self in some ways, particularly
289 with regard to extended phenotypes and the nature of selectable units (Rees et al., 2018), and raises the
290 question what level of reduced complexity or biological relevance may still be meaningful for experiments
291 and assessments of functional roles. Depending on the research question at hand, a decision needs to be
292 made whether the focus of the study should be on the target organism *sensu stricto* or whether
293 consideration of the extended metaorganism is warranted.

294 We suggest that both reductionist and integrative approaches are necessary for understanding the scope of
295 organism and metaorganism function (Fig. 2). While it is possible to understand many aspects of the
296 biology of an organism without considering its associated microbes, we will not be able to comprehensively
297 understand the biology of an organism in its ecosystem context without taking this factor into account.
298 That is to say, the study of metaorganisms (in their ecosystem context) can provide broader insights into
299 biological function than can be obtained by studying their individual components using a reductionist
300 approach. As such, developing a suite of metaorganism model systems is necessary for targeting
301 metaorganisms of ecological relevance, such as reef-building corals. Therefore, model systems such as
302 *Aiptasia* (Baumgarten et al., 2015) for studying the dinoflagellate–cnidarian endosymbiosis or
303 *Nematostella* (Fraune et al., 2016) for studying the function of bacteria are rapidly being developed in an
304 effort to understand the mechanistic underpinnings of reef-building corals in order to mitigate the loss of
305 global coral reef cover.

306 Even with the adoption of novel study species, model systems will continue to be an important tool. They
307 are chosen because they allow researchers to study a specific biological phenomenon or because they are
308 representative members of a particular lineage. However, when using model organisms or model systems
309 one still has to integrate all gained insights across a broader range of species in their native environments
310 and with their native ecological interactions. Every organism is unique, and insights from model organisms

311 – however useful those insights may be – can only be taken as rough guides as to how the organism of
312 interest functions. Finally, metaorganisms should be chosen based on their ecological impact. For instance,
313 the comb jelly *Mnemiopsis leidyi*, originally from the East coast of the Americas, is now found throughout
314 Western Eurasia (Jaspers et al., 2018) and is currently being developed as a model system to study the
315 biology and ecology of marine invasive species. Its vast expansion over the last decades led to strong
316 ecosystem impacts in invaded areas, such as a decrease in zooplankton standing stock, a decline in pelagic
317 fish recruitment, and oxygen depletion (Kideys, 2002). At present, the contribution of associated bacteria
318 to its invasion success is not yet known. However, its broad tolerance to abiotic factors (e.g., salinity level,
319 water temperatures), which characterizes many invasive species, might be in part attributable to
320 microbiome adaptation. Thus, understanding the factors which contribute to the success of non-indigenous
321 species from a metaorganism perspective holds great promise for understanding their differential success.
322 Taken together, the metaorganism perspective is a powerful new framework which may be used to address
323 long-standing biological questions such as the evolution and ecology of organismal complexity and the
324 importance of organismal symbioses to ecosystem function. At the same time, and despite the integrative
325 holistic view of organisms dictated by the metaorganism frontier, only reductionist approaches can
326 untangle the complexity of the metaorganism. Such reductionist approaches are urgently required to clarify
327 the nature of the interactions between microbes and their animal, plant, and fungal hosts.
328

329 **Author contributions**

330 Conceptualization by CJ, DM, TCGB, CRV. CRV and CJ wrote the manuscript, with contributions from SF,
331 AEA, DJM, TCGB. Figures 1 and 2 were conceived by CRV, with input from CJ and SF. All authors reviewed
332 and approved the final manuscript.

333

334 **Consortium of Australian Academy of Science Boden Research Conference Participants (in alphabetical**
335 **order)**

336 Maja Adamska (The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia); Tracy Ainsworth (James Cook
337 University, Townsville, Australia); Eldon Ball (The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia); Chloë
338 Boote (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); David Bourne (James Cook University, Townsville,
339 Australia); Nicholas J. Butterfield (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom); Cheong Xin Chan
340 (The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia); Ira Cooke (James Cook University, Townsville,
341 Australia); Peter F. Cowman (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); Aaron Darling (University of
342 Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia); Simon K. Davy (Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New
343 Zealand); Amin Mohamed (CSIRO, St. Lucia, Australia); Katharina Fabricius (Australian Institute of Marine
344 Science, Townsville, Australia); Sofia V. Fortunato (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); Alejandra
345 Hernandez (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); Mia Hoogenboom (James Cook University,
346 Townsville, Australia); Aurelie Moya (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); Lucia Pita (GEOMAR
347 Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research, Kiel, Germany); Mark A. Ragan (The University of Queensland,
348 Brisbane, Australia); Steven J. Robbins (The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia); Natalia R.
349 Andrade (ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Townsville QLD,
350 Australia); Kazuhiro Sakamaki (Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan); Verena Schoepf (The University of Western
351 Australia, Perth, Australia); Thorsten Seemann (The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia); Chuya
352 Shinzato (The University of Tokyo, Chiba, Japan); Jarosław Stolarski (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw,
353 Poland); Jan Strugnell (James Cook University, Townsville, Australia); Shunichi Takahashi (National Institute
354 for Basic Biology, Okazaki, Japan); Sen-Lin Tang (National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan); Nicole
355 Webster (Australian Institute of Marine Science, Townsville, Australia); Brooke Whitelaw (James Cook
356 University, Townsville, Australia); Hua Ying (The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia).

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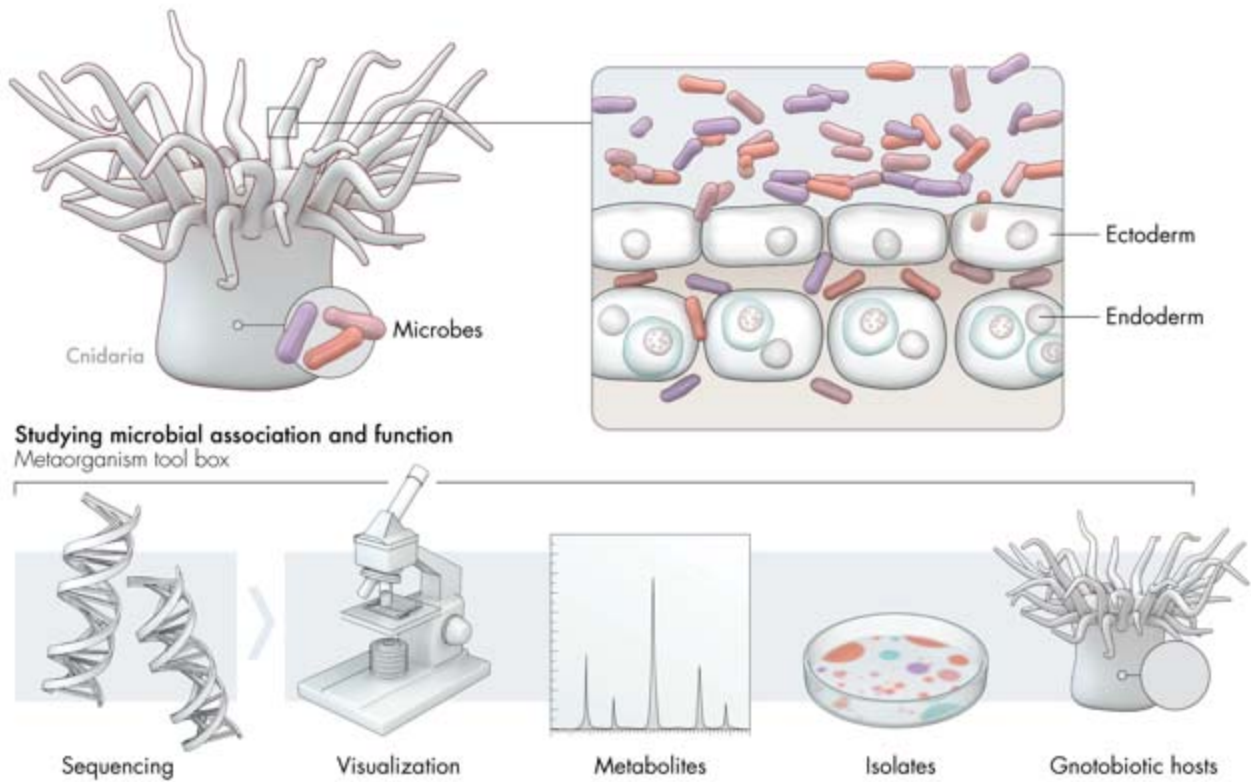
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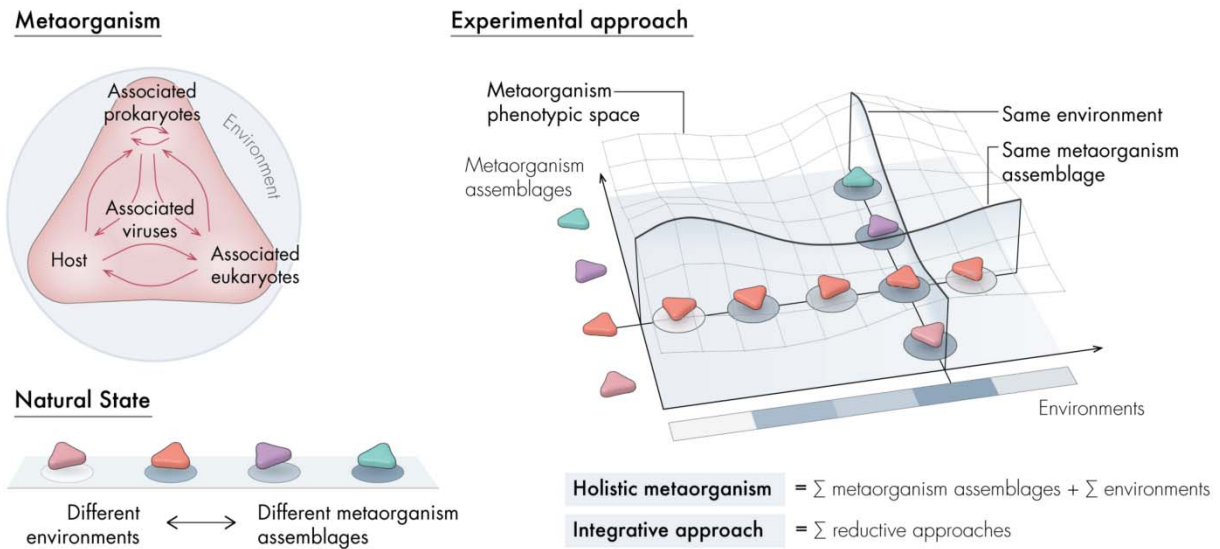
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Fig. 1. Microbes in and around us and the toolbox available to study them. The metaorganism framework highlights the functional dependence between eukaryotic hosts and their associated microbes. A diverse set of methods (the metaorganism toolbox) is available to study microbial association and function in order to complement any initial description of microbe diversity via marker gene sequencing.



555

556 **Fig. 2. The importance of reductive and integrative approaches for gaining a holistic understanding of the**
 557 **metaorganism.** The metaorganism is composed of the host and its associated eukaryotes, prokaryotes, and
 558 viruses that comprise a unit surrounded by a common environment. Notably, host-microbe associations are
 559 not static and may differ with regard to host developmental stage, age, reproductive state, or physiological
 560 condition. As such, different metaorganism assemblages may be found in different environments. This
 561 'fluidity' needs to be acknowledged in the experimental approach, where the complexity of the
 562 metaorganism is illustrated by its potential phenotypic space (square area), which is a function of the
 563 different environments (x-axis) and metaorganism assemblages (y-axis), i.e. microbes that the host
 564 associates with. Notably, different metaorganism assemblages in different environments display different
 565 fitness, which is denoted by peaks and valleys in the metaorganism phenotypic space. A reductionist
 566 approach can help divide this space into smaller 'slices' or 'units' by either considering the same
 567 metaorganism assemblage in different environments (moving along the x-axis) or by considering different
 568 metaorganism assemblages in the same environment (moving along the y-axis), and combinations thereof
 569 (moving diagonally). The intersection points of the x- and y-axes denote the host *sensu stricto*. The holistic
 570 metaorganism is elucidated by understanding the sum of all metaorganism assemblages in all habitable
 571 environments, and the integrative approach follows as the sum of all reductive approaches.

572