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# Challenging the Hypothesis of *de novo* Biosynthesis of Bile Acids by Marine Bacteria

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**Bile acids are essential molecules produced by vertebrates that are involved in several physiological roles, including the uptake of nutrients. Bacterial isolates capable of producing bile acids *de novo* have been identified and characterized. Such isolates may provide access to novel biochemical pathways suitable for the design of microbial cell factories. Here, we further characterized the ability of *Maribacter dokdonensis*, *Dokdonia donghaensis*, and *Myroides pelagicus* to produce bile acids. Contrary to previous reports, we did not observe *de novo* production of bile acids by these isolates. Instead, we found that these isolates deconjugated the amino acid moiety of bile acids present in the growth medium used in previous reports. Through genomic analysis, we identified putative bile salt hydrolases, which could be responsible for the different bile acid modifications observed. Our results challenge the hypothesis of *de novo* microbial bile acid production, while further demonstrating the diverse capacity of bacteria to modify bile acids.**

**Keywords:** Bile acids, bile salt hydrolase, marine bacteria, bile acid modification, bile acid production

## Introduction

Bile acids are amphipathic molecules that aid the digestion and uptake of fatty acids and lipo-soluble vitamins in vertebrates [1]. The amphipathic nature is a result of the opposing hydroxyl radicals in the structure, therefore, acting as a detergent and helping solubilize hydrophobic compounds by the formation of micelles [2]. These molecules are synthesized *de novo* from cholesterol in the liver of various vertebrates and are further modified by bacterial species in the gut. The first and most important modification of bile acids, also known as the “gatekeeper of bile acid metabolism”, involves deconjugating the amino acid moiety from the steroid body,

which is performed by bile salt hydrolase (BSH) positive bacteria [3], allowing further metabolism of bile acids by other species. BSHs have been shown to be enriched in gut microbiome species; however, their presence in marine metagenomes have been functionally identified as well [4].

Reports of bacteria capable of producing bile acids were published by several groups (Table 1), some claiming that bile acids were synthesized *de novo* by their isolates. Bile acids are a product of a complex metabolic pathway in vertebrates, where at least 14 different enzymes are involved [5]. So far, there is no clear explanation of the beneficial role these molecules could have for free-living marine bacteria producing them nor their role in the environment.

Implications of microbial production of bile acids are of high biotechnological interest, as several diseases are influenced by endogenous levels of these molecules [6].

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**Table 1. Reported species capable of producing bile acids or bile acid derivatives.**

Strain	Isolated from	Condition	Media	Peptone	Reference
<i>Myroides odoratus</i>	Marine sample	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	10
<i>Myroides odoramitimus</i>	Marine sample	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	10
<i>Myroides pelagicus</i> SM1	Marine sample	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	10
<i>Dokdonia donghaensis</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Polaribacter dokdonensis</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Donghaena dokdonensis</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Maribacter dokdonensis</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Hahella chejuensis</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Rhodococcus marinonascens</i>	Sea water	Aerobic	Marine Broth 2216	5 g/l	11
<i>Penicillium</i> sp.	young stems of <i>Scurrula atroprupurea</i>	Aerobic	Glucose Peptone medium	10 g/l	17
<i>Streptococcus faecium</i>	Soil	Anaerobic	C-SPY	5 g/l	18
<i>Aeromicrobium halocynthiae</i>	<i>Halocynthia roretzi</i> (Marine ascidian)	Aerobic	A1+C Broth	4 g/l	22
<i>Psychrobacter</i> sp.	<i>Stelletta</i> sp (Marine ascidian)	Aerobic	Zobell 2216 Broth	5 g/l	23
<i>Hasllibacter halocynthiae</i>	<i>Halocynthia roretzi</i> (Marine ascidian)	Aerobic	A1+C broth	4 g/l	24

Bile acid variants have also proven to be therapeutic and are the base of different treatments to address pathologies affecting the liver and gallbladder [7, 8]. Thus, elucidating a microbial biosynthetic pathway could enable the development and implementation of sustainable bile acid production, without being limited by the supply of animal derived products.

In the present study, we investigate the capabilities of three previously characterized bile acid producing strains: *Maribacter dokdonensis*, *Dokdonia donghaensis* and *Myroides pelagicus* (*Myroides* SM-1). However, our observations indicate that bile acids are not produced by these bacteria but rather modified by the possible use of endogenous bile salt hydrolases.

## Materials and Methods

### Strains and culture conditions

Marine isolates *Maribacter dokdonensis* (DSM No. 17201) and *D. donghaensis* (DSM No. 17200) were ordered from DSMZ catalogue, *Myroides pelagicus* (KCTC No. 12661) was ordered from the Korean Collection for Type Cultures (KCTC). All marine strains were ordered as freeze-dried cultures and were reconstituted in the recommended media. Cultivations were carried out in Marine Broth (MB) Difco 2216 and modified citrate media [9, 10]. Strains were incubated at 30°C and 250 RPM in a shaking incubator. The identity of all

strains was confirmed by 16S Sanger sequencing, to rule out any contamination. *E. coli* TOP10 was acquired from Invitrogen and followed same culturing conditions.

### Fermentations

Fermentations were performed as previously described [10, 11]. A single colony was inoculated into 5 ml of MB or modified citrate media and was grown until saturation for 48 h. Saturated culture was then used to inoculate 250 ml of MB or modified citrate media in 1 L baffled shake flask. Culture samples were taken every 8 h for OD and total bile acid quantification. Fermentations were carried out in biological triplicates for all strains, including a negative control strain (*E. coli*). For modified citrate media fermentations, the presence of cholesterol was tested, in order to decipher whether bile acids were synthesized *de novo* using cholesterol. Stock concentration of cholesterol was dissolved in absolute ethanol and supplemented in the media at 1 g/l, according to previous study [10]. Same sampling strategy as marine broth was followed.

### Fluorometric quantification of total bile acids

Fluorometric quantification of total bile acids from media supernatants was performed using “Bile Acid Assay Kit” (Sigma-Aldrich) and following the manufacturer’s instructions. Biological triplicates were used, all samples were diluted (1:4) and processed simultaneously.

### LC-MS/MS quantification of bile acids

50  $\mu$ l of bacterial broth were extracted with 3 volumes of methanol containing deuterated internal standards ( $d_4$ -TCA,  $d_4$ -GCA,  $d_4$ -GCDCA,  $d_4$ -GUDCA,  $d_4$ -GLCA,  $d_4$ -UDCA,  $d_4$ -CDCA,  $d_4$ -LCA; 50 nM of each). After 10 min of vortex and 10 min of centrifugation at 20 000 g, the supernatant was diluted 1:50 in methanol:water [1:1]. Bile acids were analyzed using ultra-performance liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry (UPLCMS/MS) according to previous work [12]. Briefly, after injection (5  $\mu$ l) the bile acids were separated on a C18 column (1.7  $\mu$ , 2.1  $\times$  100 mm; Kinetex, USA) using water with 7.5 mM ammonium acetate and 0.019% formic acid (mobile phase A) and acetonitrile with 0.1% formic acid (mobile phase B). The chromatographic separation started with 1 minute isocratic separation at 20%B. The B-phase was then increased to 35% for 4 min. During the next 10 min the B-phase was increased to 100%. The B-phase was held at 100% for 3.5 min before returning to 20%. The total runtime was 20 min. Bile acids were detected using multiple reaction monitoring (MRM) in negative mode on a QTRAP 5500 mass spectrometer (Sciex, Canada).

### Identification of putative bile salt hydrolases

Putative BSHs were identified using the COG database [13] (COG3049), which has been associated with bile acid salt hydrolase [4]. For the genomes considered in this study, we extracted the ORFs using GenMarkS [14], ORFs were subsequently blasted against the bile acid salt hydrolase proteins using TBLASTN. Multiple alignment of the translated ORFs were performed using MUSCLE [15]. The Newick tree was generated from the alignment profiles via fasttree [16]. The tree figure generated via figtree (<http://tree.bio.ed.ac.uk/software/figtree/>).

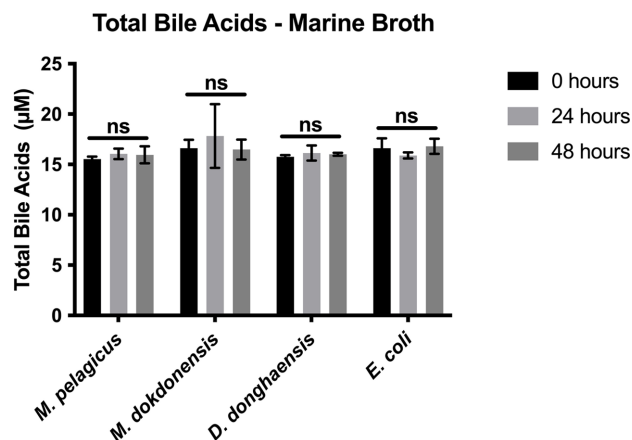
### Statistical analysis and software tools

Statistical analysis was carried out in GraphPad Prism 7 (USA. [www.graphpad.com](http://www.graphpad.com)). Figures were created using Biorender (BioRender.com).

## Results

### Undetectable bile acid production by bacteria in Marine Broth Difco 2216

For determining whether marine isolates *M.*

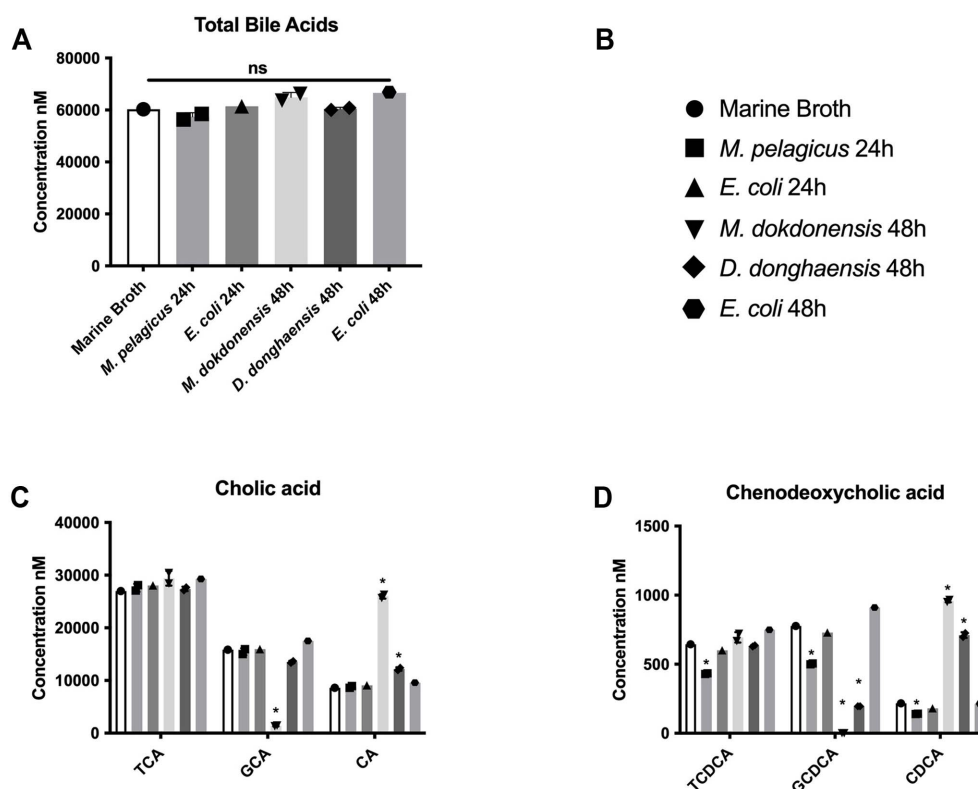


**Fig. 1. Fluorometric bile acid quantification from marine broth fermentations.** Each column represents the mean and error bars represent the standard deviation. Biological triplicates were analyzed for each strain. Results were compared to 0 h of each strain using Two-way ANOVA,  $p < 0.05$ .

*dokdonensis*, *D. donghaensis* and *M. pelagicus* had bile acid production capabilities, fermentations in MB broth were carried out, keeping careful similarity to the setup described in the original publications [10, 11]. Surprisingly, fluorometric quantification analysis of the supernatants from different time points (24 and 48 h) did not show any significant difference compared to the 0 h sample, among all the strains tested, including the negative control (Fig. 1). Interestingly, 0 hour samples from all strains contained high amounts of bile acids ( $\approx 15$   $\mu$ M), including the negative control, suggesting presence of bile acids in the initial culture media (Marine Broth Difco 2216). Furthermore, we observed no difference in terms of total bile acid concentrations among the strains, including our negative control (*E. coli*) (Fig. 1).

### Bile acids are not produced *de novo* from cholesterol

To decipher whether bile acids were produced *de novo* from cholesterol [10], marine strains were grown on modified citrate media supplemented with cholesterol [10]. From all the strains tested, only *M. pelagicus* and *E. coli* (negative control) were capable of growing in this media. The addition of cholesterol did not affect growth parameters significantly (Fig. S1). However, no bile acids were observed from any of the samples taken along the fermentation.



**Fig. 2. Quantification of total and primary bile acids using LC-MS/MS.** (A) Total bile acids. (B) Legends for the different data shown. (C and D) Conjugated and unconjugated profiles of primary bile acids, cholic and chenodeoxycholic acid. Taurocholic acid (TCA), glycocholic acid (GCA), cholic acid (CA), taurochenodeoxycholic acid (TCDCA), glycochenodeoxycholic acid (GCDCA), chenodeoxycholic acid (CDCA). Each column represents the mean and error bars represent the standard deviation. Biological duplicates were analyzed for each marine strain, only one replicate was analyzed for *E. coli* and marine broth samples. All comparisons were made against MB broth, Two-way ANOVA,  $p < 0.05$ .

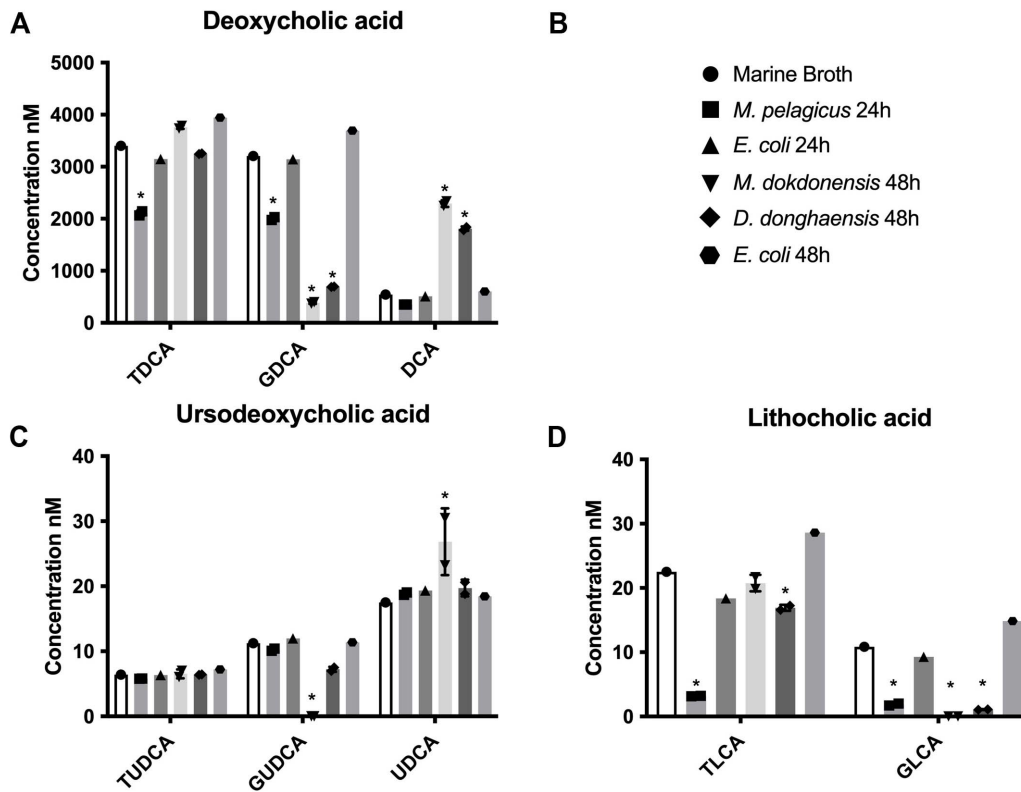
### Marine Isolates deconjugate bile acids present in Marine Broth

In order to analyze the bile acid profiles of the different samples and compare to previous reports [10, 11], samples were analyzed using liquid chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS). No significant difference was observed in the concentration of total bile acids, validating previous bile acid quantification by fluorometric analysis (Fig. 2A). Even though no production of bile acids took place, modification of these molecules was variable among the marine strains investigated. *M. dokdonensis* showed the most activity hydrolyzing amide bonds from glycine conjugates of primary (Figs. 2C–D) and secondary bile acids (Figs. 3C–D). *D. donghaensis* and *M. pelagicus* were also capable of performing this modification. On the other hand, taurine conjugates did not seem to be greatly

affected by *M. dokdonensis* and *D. donghaensis*, with the exception of taurochenodeoxycholic acid, in which *D. donghaensis* was able to deconjugate roughly 25%. *M. pelagicus*, on the contrary, had activity against most of these conjugates. None of the strains tested seemed to be able to deconjugate taurocholic acid, a comprehensive overview of all modification can be seen in Table 2. In the case of *M. dokdonensis* and *D. donghaensis*, the decrease in conjugated bile acids correlates to the increase of the deconjugated fractions, validating the bioconversion of these molecules.

### Putative bile salt hydrolases identified in marine isolates

To determine whether the deconjugation of bile acids observed could be a result of endogenous bile salt hydrolases, bioinformatic analysis was performed. Six different putative bile salt hydrolases (BSH)s homologs



**Fig. 3. Quantification of secondary bile acids using LC-MS/MS.** (A, C and D) Conjugated and unconjugated profiles of secondary bile acids, deoxycholic, ursodeoxycholic and lithocholic acid. (B) Legends for the different data shown. taurodeoxycholic acid (TDCA), glycodeoxycholic acid (GDCA), deoxycholic acid (DCA), tauroursodeoxycholic acid (TUDCA), glyoursodeoxycholic acid (GUDCA), ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA), tauroolithocholic acid (TLCA), glycolithocholic acid (GLCA). Each column represents the mean and error bars represent the standard deviation. Biological duplicates were analyzed for each marine strain, only one replicate was analyzed for *E. coli* and marine broth samples. All comparisons were made against MB broth, Two-way ANOVA,  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 2. Deconjugation capacity of marine bacteria.**

Bile acid	Specie	Deconjugation of glycine conjugate (%)	Deconjugation of taurine conjugate (%)
Cholic acid	<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	91.28	0
	<i>D. donghaensis</i>	14.69	0
	<i>M. pelagicus</i>	2.29	0
Chenodeoxycholic acid	<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	99.99	0
	<i>D. donghaensis</i>	74.86	1.79
	<i>M. pelagicus</i>	35.32	32.93
Deoxycholic acid	<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	88.02	0
	<i>D. donghaensis</i>	78.39	4.45
	<i>M. pelagicus</i>	37.58	38.11
Lithocholic acid	<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	100	7.81
	<i>D. donghaensis</i>	90.06	25.89
	<i>M. pelagicus</i>	17.17	85.90
Ursodeoxycholic acid	<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	100	0
	<i>D. donghaensis</i>	35.69	0
	<i>M. pelagicus</i>	8.8	9.8



**Table 3. Putative BSH genes identified in marine isolates.**

Species	Putative BSH accession	Reference BSH accession	Species	AA identity (%)	E-value
<i>D. donghaensis</i>	NZ_CP015125.1	YP_006258575.1	<i>Solitalea canadensis</i> DSM 3403 ( <i>Sphingobacteriaceae</i> )	46.215	1.03e-87
<i>M. pelagicus</i>	NZ_WMJY01000026.1	YP_004317200.1	<i>Sphingobacterium</i> sp. 21 ( <i>Sphingobacteriaceae</i> )	55.620	1.48e-149
<i>M. pelagicus</i>	NZ_WMJY01000026.1	YP_004580371.1	<i>Lacinutrix</i> sp. 5H-3-7-4 ( <i>Flavobacteriaceae</i> )	56.262	0
<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	NZ_FNTB01000001.1	YP_004163530.1	<i>Cellulophaga algicola</i> DSM 14237 ( <i>Flavobacteriaceae</i> )	36.250	1.79e-06
<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	NZ_FNTB01000001.1	YP_004163530.1	<i>Cellulophaga algicola</i> DSM 14237 ( <i>Flavobacteriaceae</i> )	34.940	5.10e-07
<i>M. dokdonensis</i>	NZ_FNTB01000001.1	YP_004163530.1	<i>Cellulophaga algicola</i> DSM 14237 ( <i>Flavobacteriaceae</i> )	40.789	1.97e-09

were identified in total (Table 3). Only one putative BSH gene was identified in *D. donghaensis*, while two and three were identified in *M. pelagicus* and *M. dokdonensis*, respectively. Reference genes with highest similarity to the identified putative BSHs included BSHs from soil, fresh and marine water environments, found in isolates of *Sphingobacteriaceae* and *Flavobacteriaceae*. Lowest and highest identity (34.9% and 56.2) were observed for a putative BSHs from *M. dokdonensis* and *M. pelagicus*, respectively.

## Discussion

Numerous studies have reported production of bile acids and derivatives by marine bacteria (Table 1), and a fungal specie [17]. Surprisingly, there has not been follow up studies trying to identify and uncover the bacterial or fungal biosynthetic routes for producing these metabolites, even though this would have important relevance in the biotechnological and biomedical fields.

The production of bile acids compromises a lengthy and complex pathway, which is both energy demanding and toxic to some extent, due to the production of hydrophobic molecules with surfactant properties. The fact that there might be organisms capable of this significant sacrifice would be possible, only if the advantages of producing such molecules are substantially higher for their survival or for competing in their given environment. Many theories have been formulated in order to

explain the production of these molecules by these species, mostly relating to availability of insoluble carbon sources [11], competitive inhibition and symbiotic relations with insects and fishes [10]. However, there has not been any study up to date confirming these mechanisms.

Data from our study shows no significant increase of bile acids compared to marine broth alone. Intriguingly, most of the studies mentioned do not measure total bile acids from marine broth Difco 2216 alone, assuming bile acids come only from the different bacterial species. Nevertheless, having bile acids in culture media is not uncommon, considering the different components used in the formulation and their origin. Most probably, bile acids identified here derive from the peptone fraction (Fig. S1). Further communication with the supplier confirmed that the composition of the Marine Broth Difco 2216 has not changed over the last 20 years and that the source of peptone is bovine and porcine. With regards to modified citrate media fermentations and *de novo* bile acid biosynthesis from cholesterol by *M. pelagicus* [10], we believe that the bile acids seen by the authors, most probably, come from contamination by the inoculum fraction used, possibly done in Marine Broth. Further investigation of additional strains was thought to be irrelevant, as most studies have used media composed of peptone or used Marine Broth Difco 2216 for their respective experiments.

While we did not observe *de novo* bile acid production,

bile acid modification capabilities were present in all strains, accounting for the deconjugation of taurine and glycine from the bile acid body. It is likely that different bile acid profiles observed in previous studies could be a result of differential BSH substrate preference, depending on the strain used. In addition, the lack of total bile acid quantifications, accounting for other types of bile acids, can easily give rise to an inadequate assessment, concluding that bacterial species have different bile acid production profiles.

Bacterial species investigated in this study showed capabilities to de-conjugate mostly the glycine fraction of primary and secondary bile acids. Our results (Tables 2 and 3) indicate that this activity might be attributed to endogenous bile salt hydrolases (BSH)s. A previous study has shown that BSHs are highly abundant and diverse in metagenomic samples from different environments, including marine sources [4]. Furthermore, BSHs have been studied in detail in probiotic strains, as it appears to be an important factor for determining colonization capability in the gut environment [19]. Up to date, there is no concrete piece of evidence outlining the role of BSHs in free living bacteria, however, studies have pointed out their close similarity, in terms of sequence identity and enzymatic activity, to penicillin V acylases (PVA) [11, 20]. PVAs have been identified in free living bacteria and are thought to be related to pathways involved in catabolism and assimilation of aromatic compounds [21]. Further investigation is required to confirm whether the identified genes are in fact BSHs, being catalytically active against conjugated bile acids, and to decipher their primary substrate preference.

Having dissected the different articles showing bile acid production in bacteria, and taking together the data generated in this study, it is unlikely that bile acids are synthesized *de novo* by previously reported marine bacteria isolates. The source of the different bile acids identified seem to be from the peptone fraction present in the culture media used (Marine Broth Difco 2216). Furthermore, differences in bile acid profiles observed among the different isolates reported in the literature could be a result of the preference of their native BSHs, steroid degrading pathways, novel bile acid modifying enzymes and the narrow selection of bile acids used as standards in their respective analytical methods.

Further investigation is still required in order to properly decipher the role of novel BSHs in marine bacteria and their ecological importance.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no financial conflicts of interest to declare.

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