Structural and functional diversity of type IV secretion systems

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Abstract

Considerable progress has been made in recent years in the structural and molecular biology of type IV secretion systems (T4SSs) in Gram-negative bacteria. The latest advances have substantially improved our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the recruitment and delivery of DNA and protein substrates to the extracellular environment or target cells. In this Review, we aim to summarize these exciting structural and molecular biology findings, and to discuss their functional implications for substrate recognition, recruitment and translocation as well as the biogenesis of extracellular pili. We also describe adaptations necessary for deploying a breadth of processes, such as bacterial survival, host–pathogen interactions, and biotic and abiotic adhesion. We highlight the functional and structural diversity of this extremely versatile secretion superfamily to function under different environmental conditions and in different bacterial species. Additionally, we emphasise the importance of further understanding the mechanism of type IV secretion, which will support us in combating antimicrobial resistance and treating T4SS-related infections.

[H1] Introduction

Type IV secretion systems (T4SSs) are a family of highly complex and versatile nanomachines that span the entire cell envelopes of Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria as well as Archaea [1-3] (Figure 1). They function in two main capacities, as DNA transfer (conjugation) systems or as protein effector translocators[4,5], generally mediating transfer of macromolecules by mechanisms requiring direct donor–target cell contact. A few systems have evolved the capacity to export DNA or protein substrates to the extracellular milieu, or to take up DNA from it. Many T4SSs also elaborate surface organelles such as conjugative pili or surface adhesins to promote attachment and biofilm formation, but there are also examples of T4SSs that seem to have lost the capacity to translocate substrates and instead function only in adhesion. Considering this enormous range of biological activities, the T4SSs are exceptionally important from a medical perspective. Accordingly, they are increasingly viewed as viable targets for therapeutic intervention to thwart the spread of conjugation-driven antibiotic resistance and infection by pathogens [6,7].

T4SSs in Gram-negative species are composed minimally of 12 core subunits that are generically termed VirB1 - VirB11 and VirD4 (Ref. [8]). Systems assembled only with the core VirB–VirD4 components are considered 'minimized', and many of these systems function as conjugation machines by delivering DNA substrates to target bacteria[9,10]. Over the course of evolution, T4SSs have acquired several additional protein components that are integrated into the core structure composed of VirB and VirD4 proteins. As a result, assembly of an expanded T4SS may require up to 25 different proteins [10,11]. Some of these expanded systems can mediate conjugative DNA transfer, but many have acquired new functionalities relating to translocation of effector proteins or toxins, with or without retention of the ancestral DNA transfer function[12,13].

In recent years, our understanding of the architectures and mechanisms of actions of T4SSs has increased substantially, most notably by implementation of state-of-the art microscopy techniques including cryo-electron microscopy (cryo–EM), cryo-electron tomography (cryo–ET) and fluorescence microscopy. These studies have enabled visualization of major machine subassemblies and conjugative pili at or near atomic resolution or fully intact T4SSs in the native context of the bacterial cell envelope at lower resolutions (Supplementary Table 1). Most exciting, a very recent study defined for the first time the architecture of a nearly completely intact minimised T4SS encoded by the conjugative plasmid R388 (Ref. [14]). There also has been considerable progress in defining the architecture and mechanisms of action of the VirD4 components of T4SSs; these ATPases have crucial roles in recruiting and coupling substrates to the translocation channel and hence are termed type IV coupling proteins (T4CPs). Finally, studies applying a combination of *in situ* cryo-ET and fluorescence microscopy have advanced our knowledge of T4SS assembly dynamics and spatial organization within intact cells.

This Review will primarily focus on the T4SSs found in Gram-negative bacteria, as they have been the most extensively characterized in terms of both structure and function. We will summarise the current knowledge of paradigmatic T4SSs functioning in these bacteria with a focus on their architectures and adaptations for specialised functions. We also update the reader on recent studies exploring the biogenesis pathways and spatial

localization of T4SSs, and we conclude with a brief review of progress toward developing small molecule inhibitors of T4SSs and manipulating these versatile nanomachines for novel therapeutic ends.

[H1] Architectures of minimised systems

Early biochemical studies supplied evidence that the VirB subunits VirB7, VirB9 and VirB10 assemble as a stabilizing structural scaffold for the T4SS; this scaffold ultimately was designated as the outer membrane core complex (OMCC)[8,15]. OMCCs are intrinsically stable and amenable to isolation for structural characterization. Accordingly, over a decade ago, high-resolution structures were presented for the OMCC associated with a minimized T4SS elaborated by the conjugative plasmid pKM101 ($T4SS_{pKM101}$)[16,17], and soon afterwards for several other OMCCs from minimized systems[18-21]. The most recent structure presented for the nearly intact T4SS encoded by plasmid R388 ($T4SS_{R388}$) now has provided important refinements of these earlier structures [14] (Figure 2a). The OMCC from the $T4SS_{R388}$ presents as a barrel-shaped structure of 130 Å in height and 185 Å in width. It is composed of an outer and inner layer that are designated as the O-layer and I-layer, respectively,. Remarkably, in contrast to the lower-resolution structures obtained previously, the new structure shows that the O- and I-layers have different symmetries (Figure 2a). The O-layer is made up of 14 copies of homologs of the VirB7 lipoprotein and C-terminal domains (CTDs) of the VirB9- and VirB10-like subunits. VirB7 anchors the OMCC to the outer membrane via its N-terminal lipid modification. The I-layer assumes a 16-fold symmetry, formed by copies of N-terminal domains (NTDs) of the VirB9 and VirB10 subunits. The C14:C16 symmetry mismatch between the O- and I-layers is accommodated by a unique configuration of two VirB9 and VirB10 subunits; while their NTDs insert in the I-layer, their CTDs do not form part of the O-layer [14] (Figure 2a). Importantly, the $VirB10_{CTD}$ of the O-layer contains a hydrophobic 2-helix bundle (termed the antennae projection) extending from the $VirB10_{CTD}$ β-barrel domains, and 14 of these bundles assemble to form a hollow pore through the outer membrane. This pore has a diameter of 32 Å at the extracellular entrance, which is proposed to expand further through a hinge-like conformational change between the antennae projection helices[14] to accommodate a growing pilus and substrate translocation. This mode of action is in line with earlier findings that VirB10 associated with the *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* VirB–VirD4 T4SS ($T4SS_{Agro}$) undergoes a conformational switch in response to sensing and transduction of intracellular signals to gate the outer membrane channel [22-25].

The phytopathogen *Xanthomonas citri* elaborates a T4SS whose constituent subunits are close homologs of components of the pKM101- and R388-encoded conjugation machines, but this system ($T4SS_{X.\ citri}$) functions as an interbacterial killing machine by delivering toxins to neighbouring bacteria[21]. Interestingly, the OMCC of the $T4SS_{X.\ citri}$ does not display a mismatch between the O- and I- layers as both assume a 14-fold symmetry [21]. It encodes a much larger VirB7 homologue with a pronounced C-terminal N0 domain [26], a feature also found in the Dot/Icm system ($T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$) encoded by *Legionella pneumophila* (see below)[27,28]. The N0 domain widens horizontally, giving rise to a flying saucer-shaped structure rather than the barrel-like structures of OMCCs from the $T4SS_{pKM101}$ and $T4SS_{R388}$ machines. Whether or how these structural variations contribute to the specialized function of the $T4SS_{X.\ citri}$ machine in interbacterial transmission of toxins is not yet known.

The nearly intact T4SS$_{R388}$ also details the organization of the inner membrane complex (IMC) and periplasmic stalk (Figure 2a). The stalk connecting the OMCC and IMC has an overall diameter of ~92 Å and length of 216 Å. The stalk consists of a pentamer of VirB5 subunits located proximally to the OMCC connected to a pentamer of VirB6 that inserts into the inner membrane by an N-proximal α-helix [14] (Figure 2a). Six knobs (or 'arches') composed of the C-terminal domains of VirB8 subunits surround the central stalk near the inner membrane. The architecture of the stalk is intriguing in view of prior evidence that the VirB5 subunit localizes at the tip of the T-pilus elaborated by the *A. tumefaciens* VirB/VirD4 system [29]. Moreover, the finding that the bulk of VirB6 resides in the periplasm completely revises our views of how VirB6 contributes to substrate translocation and pilus assembly. VirB6 subunits are highly hydrophobic, and previously were envisioned to adopt a polytopic topology in the inner membrane and form part of the inner membrane channel [1,30]. In the T4SS$_{R388}$ structure, the bulk of VirB6 is shown to assemble as a pentameric platform entirely in the periplasm while only one N-terminal hydrophobic domain made of two trans-membrane helices integrates in the inner membrane (Figure 2a). Thus, most of the hydrophobic domains of VirB6 subunits are shielded from the aqueous environment of the periplasm through extensive intersubunit contacts. It is also noteworthy that the pentameric symmetry of the VirB5–VirB6 stalk matches that of the conjugative pilus.

Using structural-complementarity simulations, the VirB2 pilin component of the conjugative pilus was successfully docked on the VirB6 platform, which led to a new model for how conjugative pili assemble (Figure 2b). Upon synthesis, pilin subunits integrate into the inner membrane, forming a pool for subsequent use in building the pilus[31] (Figure 2b, step 1). Co-evolution studies confirmed by site-directed mutagenesis identified one of the two trans-membrane helices as binding and recruitment site for the VirB2 pilin. Upon receipt of an unknown signal, five pilin subunits are extracted from the inner membrane into the periplasmic assembly site located in the interacting surfaces of the VirB6 and VirB5 proteins (Figure 2b, step 2). Through reiterative recruitment and extraction of pilins to the VirB6 platform, the pilus extends and displaces the VirB5 pentamer upwards and through the outer membrane to the extracellular milieu [14] (Figure 2b, step 3). The VirB5 pentamer remains at the tip of the pilus, where it binds specific receptors on the target cell surface or embeds directly into the target cell membrane [32] (Figure 2b, step 4). The role of VirB5 as an adhesin was initially speculated in 2008 (Ref. [31]), and subsequent evidence has been found in the Cag system. In this system, the functional orthologue of VirB5, termed CagL[33-35], has been shown to bind integrin on the human cell surface [32]. Furthermore, VirB5 has exhibited conformational changes similar to those observed in pore-forming proteins [13], suggesting potential structural parallels with the translocon pores of type III secretion systems.

The IMC of the T4SS$_{R388}$ is dominated by two concentric rings that extend into the cytoplasm (Figure 2a). These rings comprise a hexamer of dimers of the VirB4 ATPase [14]. The dimers are arranged so that one protomer forms the inner ring and the other forms the outer ring. Protomers of each dimer are connected by their NTDs, which also embed into the inner membrane. Additionally, the NTDs of protomers comprising the inner and outer hexameric rings form specific contacts with the VirB3 and VirB8 subunits, respectively. This interaction network

anchors the VirB4 hexamer of dimers in the inner membrane and potentially enables ATP-dependent structural changes [14] (Figure 2a).

Structures of the $T4SS_{pKM101}$ and of several mutant machines assembled within the cell envelope also were solved by *in situ* cryo-ET [36] (Figure 2a). Despite their lower resolutions, these structures revealed several distinctive features. For example, during assembly of the $T4SS_{pKM101}$, the outer membrane is extensively remodelled as evidenced by invagination of the outer leaflet and the absence of the inner leaflet of the OM at the machine - OM junction. The OMCC possesses a central chamber sufficiently large to accommodate a growing pilus as it extends from the stalk assembly platform. Most importantly, analyses of the IMCs from WT and mutant strains established that the VirB4 subunit assembles *in vivo* as a central hexamer of dimers at the channel entrance, and that neither of the VirB11 or VirD4 ATPases contribute to IMC densities [36] . These latter ATPases also were not visualized in the *in vitro* $T4SS_{R388}$ structure, but the VirB11–VirB4 interaction was characterised using computational methods and validated biochemically and by site-directed mutagenesis. VirB11 and VirD4 might dock transiently with the VirB channel in response to unknown signals [13].

[H1] Architectures of expanded systems

Expanded T4SSs are composed of up to 25 distinct proteins, encompassing the 12 core components of VirB and VirD4 along with additional protein subunits [10,11]. The most widely studied expanded systems are the F plasmid-encoded conjugative machine, and the *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm and *Helicobacter pylori* Cag effector translocator systems. Although detailed structures for the IMCs from these systems remain to be determined, near atomic resolution structures are now available for OMCCs from all three systems, F plasmid-encoded conjugative pili, and the $T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$ substrate recognition platform.

The OMCC associated with the F system is composed of the three core VirB components, VirB7-like TraV, VirB9-like TraK and VirB10-like TraB [15,37] (Figures 3a and 3b). It adopts a 'flying saucer' shape and is much larger than the OMCCs of the minimized conjugation machines, with a diameter of ~268 Å and width of 115 Å. The complex consists of concentric rings termed the outer and inner rings. The inner ring exhibits a 17-fold symmetry and is composed of seventeen CTDs of TraB and NTDs of TraV. The outer ring displays a 13-fold symmetry and is composed of 26 CTDs of TraV and 26copies of TraK (Figure 3a). The TraK subunits assemble as 13 dimers, with the CTDs of each dimer pair forming 13 elongated knobs that extend radially from the centre of the complex. The TraB and TraV proteins were observed to form flexible linkers connecting the symmetrically mismatched inner ring and outer ring. Structural flexibility imparted by the symmetry mismatch could account for the dynamic properties of the F pilus during extension and retraction. This ability could also be potentiated by a number of additional proteins present in the expanded F system compared to minimised conjugative systems, which are not capable of pilus retraction.

The *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm and *H. pylori* Cag systems function as effector translocators that aid in infection processes (Figure 1). The Dot/Icm system has the remarkable capacity to translocate at least 330 effector proteins, nearly 10 % of the proteome, into eukaryotic cells [28,38,39]. Effector translocation induces a myriad of physiological changes marked by conversion of human phagosomes into replication-permissive compartments called *Legionella*-containing vacuoles (LCV)[40]. The $OMCC_{Dot/Icm}$ has a highly complex organisation and is considerably larger (~420 Å in diameter) than that of the F system (Figure 3a). VirB7-like DotD, VirB9-like DotH, and VirB10-like DotG proteins form the structural scaffold, which is built upon by incorporation of other Dot/Icm-specific proteins including DotF, DotC, Dis1, Dis2 and Dis3 (Refs. [41,42]). The $OMCC_{Dot/Icm}$ has a three-layer topology with a disk-shaped outer membrane cap (OMC) of 13-fold symmetry, a proximal dome of 16-fold symmetry and a smaller periplasmic ring of 18-fold symmetry (Figure 3a). Distinct O- and I- layers reminiscent of the $OMCC_F$ are likely to be represented by the OMC and PR domains, respectively. In line with this proposal, VirB9-like DotH was observed to comprise both the OMC and periplasmic ring reminiscent of the architectures of the VirB9 counterparts in the F, pKM101 and R388 systems.

The Cag system of *H. pylori* secretes the oncoprotein CagA as well as several other nonproteinaceous substrates into human epithelial cells [43-45] (Figure 1). These $T4SS_{Cag}$-mediated functions induce pathological changes in epithelial cells that facilitate *H. pylori* infection of the gastrointestinal tract [46]. The $T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$ and $T4SS_{Cag}$ are the largest of the T4SSs characterized to date and both possesses some of the structural properties identified in the other systems. The mushroom-shaped $OMCC_{Cag}$ is 400 Å in width and 250 Å in height, and is composed VirB7-like CagT, VirB9-like CagX and VirB10-like CagY plus two system-specific proteins, Cag3 and CagM [47] (Figure 3a). The large size of the $OMCC_{Cag}$ is conveyed by the larger sizes of CagT, CagX and CagY relative to their VirB counterparts, and by incorporation of multiple copies of Cag3 and CagM in the structure. The $OMCC_{Cag}$ consists of an OMC with clear O- and I-layers. The OMC is made up of CagT, CagX, CagY, Cag3 and CagM, and the periplasmic ring composed of CagY and CagX. Portions of the periplasmic ring show structural resemblance to the I-layer of $OMCC_{X.\ citri}$ (Ref. [48]). Both the inner and outer regions of the OMC have a 14-fold symmetry, whereas the periplasmic ring assumes a 17-fold symmetry (Figure 3a). As shown for other VirB9 subunits, CagX forms contacts with both the OMC and periplasmic ring, thus bridging the symmetry mismatch between those two complexes [48]. Reminiscent of the F system, the observed asymmetries among OMCC substructures of the *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm and *H. pylori* Cag systems might have evolved to confer specialized functions, in these cases relating specifically to the infection process. OMCC structural flexibility might, for example, be needed to establish dynamic yet productive contacts with eukaryotic host cells or to coordinate the timing and delivery of substrates into the eukaryotic cell targets.

These expanded T4SSs also have been visualized by *in situ* cryo-ET in their native cellular contexts. Remarkably, F systems elaborate a presumptively quiescent translocation channel and three morphologically distinct platforms upon which the F pilus is docked[49] (Figure 3b). The channel, designated as the F1-channel complex, consists of the OMCC joined to the IMC by a periplasmic cylinder that is thicker and more pronounced than the thin periplasmic stalk of the $T4SS_{R388}$ (Figure 3b). The central hexamer of dimer configuration of the VirB4-like

TraC ATPase is readily visualized at the cytoplasmic entrance, reminiscent of the *in situ* $T4SS_{pKM101}$ and recent *in vitro* high resolution $T4SS_{R388}$ structures (Figure 2a). An F-pilus associated structure, termed the F2–channel–pilus complex, resembles the F1 complex but has the F pilus attached at the distal end of the OMCC (Figure 3b). The F1 and F2 complexes are postulated to correspond to the quiescent channel and active pilus-assembly factory involved in mate-seeking and mating. Two other F pilus-associated structures, designated as the F3–talk–pilus and F4–outer membrane-pilus complexes, consist of the F pilus attached respectively to a thin stalk density that spans the periplasm or a small outer membrane density without any underlying structure. The F3 and F4 complexes lack discernible channels for substrate transfer or pilus assembly, and accordingly are proposed to function exclusively as holding platforms for nonretractile F pili. These inert structures might contribute to nonspecific cell aggregation and biofilm formation or as decoys for bacteriophages that rely on F pilus retraction to gain access to the cell envelope [49].

Visualization of the *in situ* $T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$ structure revealed an OMCC with a 'Wi-Fi symbol'-like architecture of 400 Å in diameter whose assembly is dependent on the DotC, DotD, DotF, DotG and DotH subunits [50,51] (Figure 3c). The OMCC is connected to a cylinder with an outer diameter of ~20nm and a central lumen or channel of ~6 nm, which narrows to a diameter of ~10nm and a channel of ~3nm near the IM[51]. As with other T4SSs (Refs. [14,21,36]), at the cytoplasmic face of the IMC is the hexamer of dimer configuration of VirB4 ATPase (DotO). Remarkably, VirB11-like DotB, a second ATPase of this system, assembles as a hexamer that dynamically associates with the DotO inner hexamer by a mechanism dependent on cycles of ATP binding and hydrolysis (see below)[51]. Recently, another Dot/Icm system elaborated by *Coxiella burnetti* has been determined by a combination of cryo-ET and cryo-focused ion beam (cryo-FIB) milling to closely resemble that of *L. pneumophila* [52]. Interestingly, this study documented a correlation between assembly of the machinery and developmental transitions of *C. burnettii* cells during infection, which complements previous observations that reported a dependence of effector translocation by this T4SS on the progression of *C. burnetti* infection[53].

In the *in situ* cryo-ET map of the *H. pylori* Cag machine, the OMCC resembles the equivalent substructure solved at a higher resolution by cryo-EM [48,54-56]. Analyses of mutant machines confirmed that *in situ* assembly of the OMCC requires the Cag subunits CagX, CagY and CagM, and that CagT and Cag3 contribute to peripheral densities. Other noteworthy features of the *in situ* $T4SS_{Cag}$ machine include a hollow cylinder that extends across the periplasm, connecting the OMCC to the IMC. The IMC is architecturally more complex than the equivalent substructures of the F and Dot/Icm systems in having three concentric rings instead of two. A unique feature among T4SSs is that the extracellular domain of the CagY subunit of the $T4SS_{Cag}$ contains multiple binding sites for Toll-like receptor 5 (TLR5) and functions in regulating immune responses of the host[57]. The inner and middle rings correspond to the central and outer hexamers of VirB4-like CagE, but assembly of the outer ring is dependent on production of VirD4-like Cagβ[55]. VirB11-like Cagα associates at the base of the CagE central hexamer, but in contrast to the Dot/Icm system, Cagα seems to associate stably with CagE and not dynamically as a function of ATP binding and hydrolysis as shown for DotB[55] (Figure 3d). A comprehensive table that

summarises all available structures to date comprising both, the minimised and expanded systems is provided as Supplementary Table 1.

[H1] Other T4SS machine adaptations

Besides appropriating novel subunits for functional diversification, many T4SSs of both the minimised and expanded types have diversified through modifications of core VirB components. VirB2-like pilins or pili or associated surface adhesins have been adapted to enhance T4SS targeting to specific cell types (see below), whereas certain IMC or OMCC components have undergone modifications through acquisition of novel domains for broadened T4SS functionality (Figure 4). These modifications generally function to direct machine assembly at specific sites within the cell or coordinate T4SS localization or function with the cell cycle, or to promote attachment to specific target cells, as described in more detail in supplementary text box 1. Symmetry mismatches are likely to provide regions of mobility or flexibility between different protein complex layers or subassemblies. However, despite the presence of symmetry mismatch in several types of secretion systems, precisely how symmetry mismatch contributes to machine functions at mechanistic or structural levels have not been established for any characterized secretion system [10].

The VirB6 subunits are the most extensively modified of the IMC components. In many T4SSs, VirB6 subunits are composed predominantly of 5-7 hydrophobic domains that are likely to assemble as part of the central stalk structure, as demonstrated for the R388-encoded VirB6 subunit (Figure 1a). However, many VirB6 subunits termed 'extended-VirB6s' are considerably larger by virtue of the presence of one or more large central of C-terminal hydrophilic domains[1] (Figure 4). Remarkably, where characterized these hydrophilic domains contribute in distinct ways to establishment or inhibition of productive donor–target cell interactions. In F systems, a large ~600 residue C-terminal hydrophilic domain (CTD) of VirB6-like TraG is involved in entry exclusion, a process that blocks redundant DNA transfer between the donor cells. When donor cells form mating junctions with other donor cells, the CTD of TraG produced by one donor cell establishes contact with $TraS_F$, an inner membrane protein produced by the paired donor cell [58,59] . This contact is achieved either by extension of $TraG_F$ across the mating junction or by proteolytic cleavage and translocation of the CTD of $TraG_F$ through the $T4SS_F$ into the paired donor cell. In *Rickettsia spp*., multiple copies of extended-VirB6s are present with sizes ranging from 600 to over 1400 residues [60,61]. Large hydrophilic domains are surface displayed where they are implicated in promoting endosymbiotic or pathogenic relationships with eukaryotic target cells[62]. In the *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm system, VirB6-like DotA possesses multiple hydrophobic domains flanking a central hydrophilic domain. Although DotA associates with the inner membrane reminiscent of other VirB6 family members, it can also be exported in a Dot/Icm T4SS-dependent manner to the extracellular milieu where it forms ring-like oligomers whose functions are presently unknown [63].

All three of the core VirB components of OMCCs can be modified through acquisition of novel motifs (Figure 4). Although many VirB7-like lipoproteins are small (~50 residues) and resemble the archetypal *A. tumefaciens*

VirB7, many others are considerably larger (~160-300 residues) as shown for *H. pylori* CagT, *X. citri* VirB7 and *L. pneumophila* DotD [11,21,41,48] . In the *H. pylori* system, both CagX and CagY are considerably larger than their VirB9 and VirB10 counterparts. Indeed, in the case of CagY, only the extreme C-terminal region adopts the characteristic VirB10 β-barrel-domain folds that assemble as the central rings of OMCCs. A large middle repeat region (MRR) is composed of multiple repeats, which undergo extensive rearrangement during gene expression. These rearrangements yield many CagY variants that have been shown to regulate $T4SS_{Cag}$ function — positively or negatively — to maximize persistent infection [64-66].

[H1] VirD4 substrate recruitment and translocation

For most T4SSs, VirD4-like ATPases also known as type IV coupling proteins (T4CPs) [22,23,67] are responsible for substrate recruitment. T4CPs characteristically possess an N-terminal transmembrane domain (TMD) implicated in establishment of contacts with IMC components of cognate T4SSs. A conserved nucleotide-binding domain (NBD) is thought to provide the energy for early-stage substrate processing; for example, unfolding and opening of the channel for substrate transfer. Two sequence-variable domains, the all-alpha domain (AAD) and C-terminal domain (CTD) if present, contribute to substrate recruitment. An X-ray structure of R388-encoded TrwB, currently the structural archetype for T4CPs, showed that the NBD assembles as a homohexamer [68] (Figure 5a). This NBD architecture bears similarities to the FtsK and SpoIIIE families of DNA motor proteins involved in DNA translocation during cytokinesis [67]. The AAD sits at the base of the hexamer, optimally positioned for docking of secretion substrates. Indeed, evidence has now been presented for binding of AADs to secretion substrates in the *A. tumefaciens* and *Xanthomonas* VirB–VirD4 systems[69,70]. Protein substrates are recognised by the T4SS through conserved motifs called translocation signals. These highly specific signals encoded by the protein substrates are tailored for the timely engagement and controlled secretion by the T4S apparatus. Details on the different translocation signals associated with T4SS substrates can be found in the supplementary text box 2.

VirD4 homologues also interact with VirB11 ATPases [22,71,72]. VirB11 family members are structurally similar (Figure 5b) insofar as their NTDs and CTDs resemble each other and are connected by a flexible linker. VirB11 subunits assemble as homohexamers[73], and in this oligomeric state, the interdomain linkers facilitate fluent domain swaps without affecting hexamer assembly[74]. The VirB11, VirD4 and VirB4 ATPases act in concert to orchestrate pilus biogenesis and substrate transfer, although mechanistic details underlying this coordination of ATPase functions remain unknown [22,71,72,75,76]. The VirB11 ATPases are viable drug targets, as illustrated by an early report that small molecule inhibitors of VirB11-like Cagα blocks virulence of *H.pylori*[77].

In the *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm system, the CTD of VirD4-like DotL has a highly complex role in recruitment of its many protein effectors and their subsequent secretion through the $T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$ apparatus (Figure 5c). Although recruitment of various effectors to DotL can proceed independently of known associated chaperones, recruitment of others is strictly dependent on the IcmS and IcmW chaperones, with or without an additional

requirement for the LvgA chaperone[78-81]. DotL assembles as a hexamer, and associated with each of the six CTDs are various Dot adaptors including DotM, DotN, DotY, DotZ, IcmS and IcmW. The DotM adaptor itself also acts as a recruitment platform for the some of the IcmSW-independent effectors[82]. The six CTD-adaptor complexes together form a bell-shaped structure, termed the type IV coupling complex (T4CC), that extends into the cytoplasm and functions as the substrate recruitment platform (Figure 5c). The T4CC possesses at least two known effector binding-sites, one on DotM and a second strictly dependent on the IcmS and IcmW chaperones, with or without an additional requirement for the LvgA chaperone[78-81]. Through binding of distinct arrays of effectors based on their associations with different chaperones, the T4CC is envisioned to regulate substrate transfer during *L. pneumophila* infection[83-88].

In the *H. pylori* Cag T4SS, VirD4-like Cagβ is structurally similar to TrwB (Figure 5a); however its AAD contributes in a unique way to modulation of Cagβ function. In this system, two cytosolic proteins, CagF and CagZ, function together with Cagβ to recruit the CagA substrate to the $T4SS_{Cag}$. Prior work showed that CagF functions as a chaperone by binding a 100-residue region of CagA, whereas CagZ stabilizes Cagβ [89]. Recently, crystal structures presented for the Cagβ AAD–CagZ interaction led to a model whereby the CagZ–AAD contact maintains Cagβ in a monomeric state, thereby suppressing ATPase activity and rendering Cagβ inactive[90]. Upon receipt of an unknown signal, CagF binds and recruits CagA to Cagβ, resulting in release of CagZ and assembly of the Cagβ hexamer. This catalytically active form of Cagβ then unfolds and translocates CagA through the $T4SS_{Cag}$.

Among the conjugative T4SSs, T4CPs recruit a specialised DNA-processing complex called the relaxosome [5,91] (Figure 6a). In the well-characterized F system, the relaxosome is composed of four proteins assembled at the origin-of-transfer (*oriT*) sequence of the F plasmid. The largest relaxosome subunit, TraI relaxase (~200 kDa), possesses a trans-esterase domain that nicks and covalently attaches to the 5' end of the nicked DNA strand destined for translocation (T-strand). TraI also possesses a vestigial helicase domain that serves as an single-stranded DNA (ssDNA)-binding domain, an active 5' to 3' helicase domain, and a C-terminal domain that functions as a recruitment platform for the remaining relaxosome components[92,93]. Two other relaxosome components TraY and IHF cause conformational changes in the DNA topology that expose the nick (*nic*) site for cleavage by TraI. [94,95]. Finally, TraM is a homotetramer responsible for docking the DNA–relaxosome complex to the coupling protein TraD [96,97] (Figure 6a). On the DNA side, a pair of TraM tetramers recognise a particular DNA sequence known as *sbmABC* motifs within the *oriT* of the F-plasmid [98], resulting in up to six tetramers bound to one F plasmid. Each TraM tetramer is subsequently recognised by C-terminal tails of the hexameric TraD[96] (Figure 6a). This interaction ensures F plasmid docking and transfer while actively blocking translocation of a co-existing conjugative plasmid(s) through the F machine [84,97,98].

Remarkably, at this time there is little detailed structural information concerning the physical relationship between the T4CP and the T4SS channel. Consequently, the route or routes by which DNA and protein substrates are conveyed through T4SSs is not known, and two distinct translocation pathways have been envisioned (Figure 6). As illustrated for the $T4SS_{Dot/Icm}$ machine, upon recruitment of substrates to the DotL T4CC, the T4CC functions

in one of two ways, which ultimately dictates whether substrates are delivered in one or two steps across the entire cell envelope (Figure 6B). In the one-step translocation pathway[99], DotL is situated beneath or near the T4SS and, upon substrate engagement, the T4CC passes captured substrates to the base of the T4SS channel marked by the DotB and DotO hexameric ATPases. The DotL–DotB–DotO ATPase ternary complex then orchestrates substrate unfolding, dissociation of chaperones and/or adaptors, and delivery of the translocation intermediate into the channel for conveyance in one step through a channel that extends from the cytoplasmic face of the inner membrane to the cell exterior (Figure 6b). In the alternative two-step translocation model [99], DotL is situated in physical proximity to the T4SS. The T4CC captures and then shunts substrates directly into the lumen of the DotL hexamer (whose NTD spans the inner membrane) for delivery across the inner membrane. Once in the periplasm, in a second translocation reaction, substrates are recruited to and enter the T4SS channel for delivery to the cell surface [83,51,100] (Figure 6b). For reasons outlined in the next paragraph, we hypothesize that delivery of the F plasmid transfer intermediate follows the one-step pathway, whereby TraD docks at the base of the channel in complex with VirB4-like TraC [84] (Figure 6a).

In the absence of detailed structural information about the T4CP–T4SS connection, we currently favor the one-step pathway for DNA as well as protein substrates, given the potentially deleterious consequences (degradation, misfolding, misrouting and temporal disruption) encountered by ssDNA transfer intermediates or as many as several hundred effectors delivered into the bacterial periplasm via the two-step pathway. Early crosslinking studies in *A. tumefaciens* system also supplied experimental support for a one-step pathway. In those studies, DNA substrates of the VirB–VirD4 system were shown to engage in sequential order with ATPase subunits comprising the cytoplasm–inner membrane interface, then with components of the IMC, and finally with components of the OMCC and pilus [22,23,30,71,101]. Structural studies of the $T4SS_{R388}$ by negative stain-EM [102] and of the $T4SS_{Cag}$ by *in situ* cryo-ET [49] also have supplied evidence that T4CPs can associate with the VirB4 hexameric platform at the channel entrance, thus being optimally positioned to deliver captured substrates directly into the channel. While there are clear examples of T4SSs that utilize two-step translocation pathways to deliver substrates to the extracellular milieu [103] or to eukaryotic target cells [104], these systems lack VirD4 T4CPs and thus rely on alternative secretion systems for recruitment and translocation of substrates across the inner membrane.

[H1] Conjugative pili and target cell attachment

T4SSs elaborate various surface structures that have important roles in promoting donor–target cell contacts. Among these, conjugative pili are major contributors to the rapid and widespread dissemination of plasmids and other mobile elements, and their cargoes of antibiotic resistance determinants, among Gram-negative bacteria. High-resolution structures recently have been generated for several conjugative pili, including those produced by F plasmids (F pilus)[105,106], the *A. tumefaciens* VirB–VirD4 system (T pilus)[107-109] and IncN plasmid pKM101[108]. Throughout evolution, the relationships between hosts and pathogens have led to adaptations in T4SS-associated pili, resulting in more specialized functions. Using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not effective for

adhesion to distinct host-encoded receptors or different biotic and abiotic surfaces. As a result, pili and pilins have diversified to fulfil these functions. The supplementary text box 3 summarizes the diversification of pili and bacterial adhesins and their role in establishing close contacts with target cells.

Structurally, assembled pili differ in rotational raise of subunits (Figure 7a) and can display either a five-start helical symmetry, as shown for T- and N-pili and F-pili encoded by the classical F plasmid and F-like pED208, or a one-start symmetry as shown for another F-pilus encoded by pKpQIL or an Archaeal conjugative pilus[109]. The outer diameters of conjugative pili in Gram-negative species are 76 Å - 87 Å and inner lumens are 23 Å - 26 Å in width, whereas the archaeal pilus has an inner diameter of 16 Å (Figure 7b).

As noted earlier, pilin subunits accumulate in the inner membrane as a pool for recruitment to build the conjugative pilus upon receipt of an unknown signal. Intriguingly, structural studies of the conjugative pili have established that, during extraction from the inner membrane, pilins co-extract phospholipid molecules. In F systems, for example, TraA pilins co-extract phosphatidylglycerol molecules in a 1:1 stoichiometry (Figure 7C), resulting in assembly of the helical fiber with phosphatidylglycerol molecules lining the pilus lumen. These phosphatidylglycerol molecules impart an overall negative charge to the F pilus lumens[105,106]. The *A. tumefaciens* T pilus[108,109] and pKM101-encoded N pilus [108] share the general features first reported for F pili, but the lumens are lined with phospholipids with different head groups (Figure 7c). For N pili this results in an overall negative charge reminiscent of F pili[108], but for T pili the lumen has an overall positive charge. Another interesting difference is the presence of a kink between the first alpha helices of pilins comprising the T- and N- pili, which is absent in pilins associated with pili from expanded systems (Figure 7c; arrow). Why conjugative pili differ in phospholipid compositions and what is the significance of the kink between helices α1 and α2 is unknown, but it is reasonable to propose that these features impart biophysical properties of importance for specialized functions in different environmental conditions.

In support of this model, recent biophysical studies have demonstrated that F pili are extremely flexible and have spring-like properties with pronounced structural and thermochemical robustness. These properties are postulated to accelerate conjugation rates and biofilm formation by F-plasmid-carrying cells by allowing for effective function even in highly turbulent environments, such as those present in human gastrointestinal tracts [110]. This unique feature of F-pili might well be responsible for recent evidence that IncF plasmids are the most dominant types of conjugative plasmids present in enterobacterial isolates from humans and animals [111]. In contrast to F pili, other conjugative pili are generally shorter and more rigid and have not been shown to retract[112]. Because of their distinctive biophysical properties, these rigid pili are envisioned to readily break from the cell surface, accumulate in the milieu, and mediate nonspecific aggregation of donor and potential recipient cells, thus acting indirectly to facilitate propagation of mobile elements.

[H1] Conclusions and outlook

447 The remarkable recent progress in defining the architectures of T4SSs, both *in vitro* and *in situ*, confirms that the
448 functional diversity of these fascinating nanomachines is recapitulated at the structural level. Although there
449 clearly are emergent structural themes, most if not all T4SSs also have acquired systems-specific properties. This
450 is particularly evident with the expanded systems, which have appropriated components from unknown
451 ancestries that physically enlarge and add structural complexity to the T4SSs. The contribution of T4SS structural
452 diversity to their varied functions is still not fully understood. However, it is possible to speculate on potential
453 relationships. For instance, differences in pilin or adhesin subunits may result in variations in pilus biogenesis,
454 assembly and adherence properties. Another factor to consider is cargo recruitment, where structural
455 differences in the T4CP receptor or complex are likely to have evolved to specify restricted or expanded
456 substrate repertoires. Additionally, T4SS diversity at both the structural and functional levels are likely to have
457 evolved for recognition of specific host cell receptors, ultimately dictating the range of hosts that the T4SS can
458 target. Interestingly, DNA and protein substrates also have evolved a bewildering array of translocation signals
459 (supplementary text box 2), along with deployment of chaperones or adaptors, for docking with VirD4 substrate
460 recruitment platforms. In conjunction, VirD4 evolved to carry sequence-variable motifs or domains (for example,
461 AAD, CTD and T4CC) to specify and temporally regulate loading and delivery of substrates into the translocation
462 channel.
463
464 The T4SS field is well-poised to answer several long-standing questions. Most importantly, we still lack critical
465 information about the physical and functional relationship of the VirD4 T4CP with the cognate T4SS channel.
466 Also, what constitutes the translocation channel across the periplasm and the route of substrate transfer across
467 the entire cell envelope? At the cell exterior, how do mating junctions form, how are they physically configured,
468 and how do they dissociate after substrate transfer is completed? To what extent or for which systems do
469 conjugative pili routinely transmit DNA and protein substrates through their lumens? To address these
470 questions, a combination of structural analyses of mutant machines, fixed in their activated states or actively
471 engaged in substrate transfer, and other approaches such as correlative light and electron microscopy (CLEM)
472 offer considerable promise. Finally, and most central to this Review, how do the various T4SS structural
473 adaptations confer system-specific functions? A full answer to this question will be generated by widening the
474 current subjects of study to include the many other T4SSs functioning in diverse species of bacteria and archaea.
475
476 There is growing interest in translational initiatives aimed at blocking or repurposing T4SSs for therapeutic ends.
477 High-throughput screens are being used to identify small-molecule inhibitors, with goals of blocking conjugative
478 dissemination of antibiotic resistance or inhibiting effector translocation to suppress pathogenesis[6,7,113-120].
479 Structural advances of the different T4SSs summarized in this Review will continue to facilitate the rational
480 design of small molecules effective at blocking critical subunit–subunit interfaces. Conversely, as T4SSs are the
481 only bacterial secretion systems capable of delivering DNA or protein substrates to a wide range of target cell
482 types, these nanomachines are excellent delivery systems for therapeutic interventions. Indeed, the early
483 discovery of *A. tumefaciens*-mediated T-DNA transfer, along with the realization that any DNA of interest can be
484 substituted for oncogenic T-DNA, spawned an entirely new field of plant genetic engineering [121]. In recent years,

conjugation machines have been repurposed to deliver CRISPR–Cas9 systems to bacterial recipients to cure drug resistance plasmids or kill recipient cells harbouring CRISPR–Cas9 target sequences [122-125]. Very recently, bacterial donors engineered to surface display nanobodies were shown to selectively deliver DNA cargoes to recipient cells displaying the cognate antigens [126]. These types of translational advances set the stage for deployment of T4SSs for selective killing of bacterial targets or even of cancer cells.

In the 20 years since the state of knowledge of the fascinatingly versatile T4SSs was first reviewed[2], the field has made astounding progress in defining many T4SS structures and mechanisms of actions, and identifying the range of cellular consequences accompanying effector translocation. We fully expect the next 20 years to yield even more exciting fundamental and translational advances.

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Autor contributions

T.R.D.C, J.B.P. and P.J.C. wrote the article. T.R.D.C., J.B.P., P.J.C. and K.M. researched data for the article. K.M. made figures and table with contributions from T.R.D.C. and J.B.P. All authors reviewed and/or edited the manuscript before submission.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Supplementary information

Supplementary information is available for this paper at https://doi.org/10.1038/s415XX-XXX-XXXX-X

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Figure 1. The functional versatility of type IV secretion systems.

Various pathogenic bacteria and symbionts deploy type IV secretion systems (T4SSs) to deliver effector proteins, DNA–protein complexes or other macromolecules into eukaryotic or protozoan host cells. **a** |The T4SSs establishes contact dependent interkingdom interactions by injecting effectors directly into eukaryotic cells to promote bacterial intracellular survival and symbiosis. **b** | Many bacterial species and a few Archaea deploy a contact-dependent T4SSs for the delivery of DNA and toxins to other bacteria or Archaea. Various species in the *Xanthomonadales* instead deploy T4SSs for the contact-dependent delivery of protein toxins to kill other bacteria for niche establishment. **c** | Some bacteria can deploy T4SSs for the contact-independent uptake or release of DNA.

Figure 2. Structure of minimal type IV secretion system and pilus biogenesis mechanism model.

a | Global organisation to atomic details of the minimised R388-encoded type IV secretion system (T4SS). The entire cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) structure of the R388 T4SS is shown with half-left in cryo-EM density colored by sub-complexes (Electron Microscopy Data Bank (EMDB) entry 12707, EMDB 12708, EMDB 12709, EMDB 13767 and EMDB 12933) and half-right in ribbon and surface semi-transparent representation colored by

proteins (Protein Data Bank (PDB) identifier 7O3J, PDB ID 7O3T, PDB ID 7O3V, PDB ID 7Q1V and PDB ID 7OIU). At top-left corner, the cryo-ET of pKM101 T4SS density (EMDB 24098 and 24100) colored by sub-complexes is displayed to show that the structure of purified R388 T4SS is similar to the *in situ* T4SS structure. For each sub-complex, structure details, symmetry and membrane localisation are indicated. Black dashed lines demarcate the boundaries of the outer membrane and inner membrane. **b** | Model of pilus biogenesis mechanism. The T4SS is schematically represented in slice-view and colored by protein. Four states are shown: T4SS in similar state as observed by cryo-EM and shown in part a (1). The pilus biogenesis state with VirB11 bound at the bottom of VirB4; VirB2 is extracted from the inner membrane and recruited to VirB6 through the coordinated actions of the VirB4–VirB11 ATPases (2). As layers of VirB2 are recruited, the pilus grows from the VirB6 assembly sites and VirB5 remains at the pilus tip (3). As the pilus grows, the O-layer of the OMCC opens up and the pilus with VirB5 at the tip extends into the extracellular milieu to establish contact with potential recipient cells (4). Part a is adapted with permission from Ref 14.

Figure 3. Structural organisation of expanded type IV secretion system.

a | Three expanded type IV secretion system (T4SS) outer membrane core complex (OMCC) structures are shown. The OMCC of the F-plasmid (Protein Data Bank (PDB) identifier 7OKN and PDB ID 7OKO), *Legionella pneumophila* (PDB ID 7MUS) and *Helicobacter pylori* (PDB ID 6X6S and 6X6J) are shown in surface representation and colored in dark red, blue and green for the VirB7-, VirB9- and VirB10-like proteins, respectively, and in grey for other components. Notably, *L. pneumophila* and *H. pylori* OMCCs contain an outer membrane cap (OMC) and a periplasmic ring (PR). **b** | Cryo-tomography maps of the F-plasmid with and without pilus. The maps (Electron Microscopy Data Bank (EMDB) entry 9344 and 9347) are colored by subcomplexes (that is; green for the OMCC, red for the Stalk, yellow for the Arches, blue for the inner membrane complex (IMC) and grey for the pilus. The junction of the pilus and Stalk is not well defined. **c** | Cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-ET) map of the *L. pneumophila* T4SS (EMDB entry 7611 and 7612) colored as in b, in front and slice view. **d** | Cryo-ET of the *H. pylori* T4SS (EMDB entry 0634 and 0635) colored as in b, in front and slice view.

Figure 4. Examples of type IV secretion system subunit adaptations for functional diversification.

The R388-encoded type IV secretion systemT4SS is shown at left for reference. VirB5 subunits are deployed for binding of target-cell receptors; these subunits can localize at the tips of conjugative pili or on the bacterial cell surface. Some bacteria encode several copies of VirB2 or VirB5 subunits whose variable sequences are postulated to bind different target-cell receptors or contribute to evasion of the host immune system. Extended VirB6 carry large hydrophilic domains, several of which have been shown or are implicated in localizing at the cell surface to promote adhesion or immunomodulation, or blocking redundant plasmid transfer. F systems elaborate F pili that dynamically extend and retract to establish contacts with potential recipient cells at a distance. F systems also code for TraN subunits, whose extracellular domains interact with outer membrane proteins (OMPs) on recipient cells to promote F plasmid transfer and specify plasmid host range. Several T4SSs possess variant forms of the VirB7–VirB9–VirB10 core complex subunits, as exemplified for CagY in the *H. pylori* Cag system. The *H. pylori* system elaborates a conjugative pilus, which is decorated by other Cag subunits as well

as the CagA secretion substrate. Various T4SSs functionally interact with other surface adhesins, such as pKM101-encoded Pep or *H. pylori* OMPs, to promote target-cell binding.

Figure 5. Structure of VirD4- and VirB11-like ATPases.

a | Side and top view of two VirD4-like ATPase structures: TrwB from R388 plasmid (Protein Data Bank (PDB) identifier (ID) 1GKI) and Cagβ from *H. pylori* (PDB ID 8DOL). Structures are shown in ribbon representation and colored by monomer. **b** | Side and top view of two VirB11-like ATPase structures; DotB from *L. pneumophila* (PDB ID 6GEF) and Cagα from *H. pylori* (PDB ID 1NLZ). Structures are shown in ribbon representation and colored by monomer. **c** | Organisation and structure of type 4 coupling complex (T4CC) from *L. pneumophila*. The monomeric cryo- electron microscopy (cryo-EM) structure of the T4CC (PDB ID 6SZ9) is shown in surface representation and colored by protein: VirD4-like DotL in red), DotM in cyan, DotN in blue, DotZ in yellow, DotY in green, IcmS in pink and IcmW in purple. The module made up of the extreme C-terminus of ($DotL_{C\text{-}ter}$) and IcmSW is flexible, and its motion area is represented in mesh. Crystal structure of the $DotL_{C\text{-}ter}$–IcmSW module in presence of LvgA adaptor (orange) and VpdB substrate (black) is shown (PDB ID 7BWK). On the right, a model of the hexameric T4CC structure is shown in front and top views using the same color coding as in part c.

Figure 6. Models for substrates recruitment and transport through the type IV secretion system.

a | Conjugative type IV secretion system (T4SS) recruitment and secretion mechanism model. Silhouette of F-plasmid T4SS is shown in green. First, the DNA is processed by a relaxosomal complex made of TraM (green), TraY (turquoise), IHF (purple) and TraI (light brown). The relaxosome is recruited by $TraD_{VirD4}$ ATPase, which energizes the secretion of the TraI–ssDNA through the T4SS apparatus into the host. The relative position of $TraD_{VirD4}$ and the global organisation of the inner membrane complex (IMC) during DNA secretion is unknown. **b** | T4SS effector recruitment and secretion mechanism model. Silhouette of *L. pneumophila* Dot/Icm T4SS is shown in blue. The type IV coupling complex (T4CC) acts as a effector recruitment platform and is schematically represented and positioned beside the complex formed by the hexameric dimers of DotO and DotB, although its precise localisation is unknown. Effector proteins are captured by the T4CC at different binding sites and $DotL_{VirD4}$ energizes substrate translocation via one of two possible routes across the inner membrane. Route 1: The T4CC feeds substrates into the DotO–DotB energy centre at the base of the T4SS channel for transit in one-step across the entire cell envelope. Route 2: the T4CC feeds substrates into the lumen of the DotL hexamer for delivery across the inner membrane. In a second translocation step, substrates are recruited from the periplasm by the T4SS channel for passage to the cell surface and into target cells. Part b is adapted with permission from Ref. 28.

Figure 7. **Structure comparison between minimal, expended and archaea pilus.**

a | Side view of all known pilus structures. Pilus structures (Protein Data Bank (PDB) identifier (ID) 8EXH *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* T-pilus, PDB ID 8CW4 *Escherichia coli* N-pilus; PDB ID 5LER *E. coli* F-pilus*;* PDB ID 5LEG *Salmonella typhimurium* pED208; PDB ID 7JSV *Klebsiella pneumoniae* pKpQIL; PDB ID 8DFU *Aeropyrum pernix* CedA1 and PDB ID 8DFT *Pyrobaculum calidifontis* TedC) are in surface representation with one strand

colored in grey. **b** | Top view of pilus structures. Diameter and lumen sizes are indicated. **c** | For each pilus, one monomer of VirB2 with its lipid is shown in ribbon representation. Arrows in the minimised type IV secretion systems (T4SSs) highlight the presence of a 'kink', which is characteristic of this group. Parts a and b adapted with permission from Ref. 109.

Table of content:

In this Review, Costa and colleagues summarise the current knowledge of type IV secretion system (T4SS) functioning in Gram-negative bacteria, with a focus on their architectures and adaptations for specialised functions. They also explore the biogenesis pathways and spatial localization of T4SSs.

Glossary

Conjugative Pili:

Helical hair-like appendages formed by protein-phospholipid complexes that assemble on the surface of bacteria and can act as conduits for DNA transfer between donor and recipient bacteria.

Biotic and abiotic adhesion:

The attachment of microorganisms to living (biotic) or non-living (abiotic) surfaces, a process that typically facilitates biofilm formation, niche establishment, or infection.

Bacterial conjugation:

Type of horizontal gene transfer in bacteria where genetic material, such as plasmids containing genes for antibiotic resistance, is transferred from a donor bacterium to a recipient bacterium.

Effector:

Bacterial protein, often secreted through a dedicated secretion system, that interacts with and manipulates cellular processes within a host organism, promoting bacterial survival, colonization, or infection.

Cryo-electron microscopy (cryo–EM):

Electron microscopy imaging technique that involves freezing samples in vitreous ice to preserve their native state and is used to visualize the three-dimensional structure of biological molecules and complexes at near-atomic resolution.

Conjugative plasmid:

A type of a bacterial plasmid that encodes a conjugative machinery, through which the plasmid and its cargoes of antimicrobial resistance genes, virulence factors, or other fitness traits are delivered between bacterial cells.

Polytopic topology:

Protein structure that contains multiple transmembrane segments embedded in the cell membrane.

Co-evolution of proteins:
The reciprocal influence and evolution patterns between two proteins that interact or are dependent on each other for function, and have evolved in a coordinated, non-random manner reflecting their mutual adaptation over time.

Site-directed mutagenesis:
Molecular biology technique used to introduce specific nucleotide mutations into DNA sequences, with the purpose of studying their effects on protein structure and function.

Cryo-electron tomography (cryo–ET):
Specialized variation of cryo-EM that enables the visualization of large cellular components or organelles within their cellular environment.

Cryo-focused ion beam (cryo-FIB):
A technique used to prepare samples for cryo-electron microscopy by thinning frozen samples with a focused ion beam, leading to an improved signal-to-noise ratio and resolution in the imaging of biological samples.

Toll-like receptor:
A family of pattern recognition receptors (PRR) in the immune system that specifically recognize conserved patterns in pathogens and triggers an immune response.

Crosslinking:
Artificial formation of covalent bonds by a crosslinker between different molecules that interact or co-localize within a biological sample, with the common application of studying protein-protein or protein-ligand interactions.

Rotational raise:
Angle at which adjacent rings stack in helical assemblies, influencing the overall helical symmetry and packing of the structure.

Translocation signal:
Specific amino acid sequence that confers recognition of a protein as a substrate for a dedicated transport machinery for delivery to a specific cellular location, the extracellular milieu, or another bacterial or eukaryotic cell.

Correlative light and electron microscopy (CLEM):

Imaging technique that combines fluorescence microscopy and electron microscopy to correlate high-resolution structural information with specific molecular or cellular labelling in the same sample.

Nanobodies:

Single-domain antibody fragments derived from heavy-chain-only IgG antibodies that are naturally found in the Camelidae family, which includes camels, llamas, and alpacas.

Adhesins:

Proteins found on the surface of cells that facilitate attachment to other biotic or abiotic surfaces.

Biofilm:

An assemblage of bacteria on a biotic or abiotic surface, often with a defined architecture, that is embedded in an extracellular matrix typically composed of proteins, DNA, lipids and other biological molecules.

Relaxosome:

A complex of proteins responsible for specific nicking of the double-stranded DNA, unwinding of DNA strands and delivering the single-stranded DNA transfer intermediate to the type IV secretion apparatus prior to conjugation.