Temperature Inhibition of Siderophore Production in *Azospirillum brasilense*

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*Azospirillum brasilense* is a gram-negative, nitrogen-fixing soil bacterium that symbiotically associates with the roots of several cereal grasses and enhances their growth (6, 12). Although this microorganism has been identified mostly in tropical soils, it is unable to fix nitrogen at temperatures above 40°C (5). We have recently shown that, under conditions of iron limitation, this bacterium initiates biosynthesis of its siderophore, spirilobactin, and induces several new high-molecular-weight proteins in the outer membrane and a high-affinity transport system for iron mediated by spirilobactin (2, 3). Siderophores have been identified in a large number of microorganisms, and in a few cases, siderophore biosynthesis has been shown to be inhibited by elevated temperatures (4, 8–10, 13). As siderophore production is important to meet increased iron requirements (7), we have sought to explore a possible link between temperature inhibition of nitrogen fixation and iron assimilation. With this end in view, we have examined how the different components of the high-affinity iron transport system mediated by spirilobactin are affected by elevated temperatures in *A. brasilense*. The results of this study are described in this report.

*A. brasilense* RG used for these experiments was described earlier (11), and the bacterium was grown on fructose minimal medium (FMM) (3) without added iron (low iron) or with 36 μM FeCl₃ (high iron). In some experiments, the bacterium was grown in Luria broth-succinate medium (2). Spirilobactin was assayed by the method of Arnow (1, 3).

**Effect of temperature on growth and spirilobactin production.** The growth of *A. brasilense* RG in low-iron medium and the siderophore production of these cultures at 32 and 42°C are shown in Fig. 1. Practically no spirilobactin was observed in the cultures grown at 42°C. The possibility that spirilobactin itself was unstable at 42°C can be ruled out by the fact that the siderophore was found to be quite heat stable (at 45°C with a rotary evaporator) in our earlier studies (3). Although initial growth was better at 42°C, a drastic inhibition in growth occurred at the time when cultures at 32°C were beginning to produce spirilobactin, which seems to suggest that the growth inhibition at 42°C was due to the inability to produce spirilobactin and a consequent nonavailability of iron. To examine whether such a supposition was indeed valid, we examined the growth of *A. brasilense* at these two temperatures in high-iron medium. A much better growth of the cultures at 42°C was observed in the high-iron medium, compared to that observed in low-iron medium (Fig. 2). Such striking differences in growth between the high- and low-iron media were not observed in cultures grown at 32°C. This indicates that the availability of iron becomes a very critical requirement at 42°C. However, in the presence of high iron, the final growth of the cultures at 42°C was less than that of cultures grown at 32°C, although

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**FIG. 1.** Effect of temperature on growth and spirilobactin production of *A. brasilense* in low-iron medium. *A. brasilense* RG cells were grown overnight in FMM without iron, washed, and inoculated into the same medium (i.e., without FeCl₃) to a cell density of 0.1 OD₅₇₀ units. The cells were incubated with shaking at 32°C and 42°C. Spirilobactin production of these cultures at 32°C and 42°C was measured as described in the text.
the initial growth was better. While examining the supernatants in these high-iron cultures for spirilobactin, we observed that even in the presence of high iron, the cultures grown at 32°C produced a basal level of spirilobactin (15 nmol/ml). This is possible because of precipitation of iron after prolonged shaking in an aerobic atmosphere. Since cultures grown at 42°C were unable to produce even this basal level of spirilobactin, their growth rate diminished at the point where spirilobactin became necessary.

**Effect of temperature shift on spirilobactin production.** To investigate the nature of this inhibition of spirilobactin production at higher temperatures, we induced *A. brasilense* cells for spirilobactin production by growth in low-iron medium at 32°C; split the cultures into two flasks, and allowed growth in one flask to continue at 32°C while the temperature in the other flask was shifted to 42°C (Fig. 3). In the control cultures grown at 32°C, spirilobactin production increased along with growth until it reached a maximum value of 15 nmol of dihydroxybenzoic acid per ml of medium per unit cell optical density at 590 nm (OD<sub>590</sub>) and remained constant thereafter, indicating that these cells were continuously synthesizing spirilobactin at a constant rate. In the cultures grown where the temperature was shifted to 42°C, spirilobactin production continued further for 3 h (approximately 1 doubling time), after which the production eased completely although growth continued unaltered. This temperature shift experiment clearly indicates a temperature-dependent step or regulatory element in the biosynthesis of spirilobactin. In addition, the experiment also showed the ability of *A. brasilense* to grow continuously at 42°C in low-iron medium (measured up to approximately 4.0 OD<sub>590</sub>) when spirilobactin was available; in contrast, growth of the bacteria stopped completely in low-iron medium at 42°C at about approximately 1.6 OD<sub>590</sub> where spirilobactin production was not possible (Fig. 1).

To examine the ability of *A. brasilense* to transport iron complexed to spirilobactin at 42°C, cells were induced for the transport system at 32°C and transport was measured at different temperatures as described earlier (3). Transport activities at 32 and 42°C were found to be comparable, although the optimum temperature for transport was 35°C (Fig. 4).

We had earlier shown the induction of four high-molecular-weight (87K [87,000], 83K, 78K, and 72K) outer membrane proteins under conditions of iron limitation (2). Since spirilobactin production was inhibited at 42°C, it was of
interest to see whether these proteins were also affected. However, we observed no significant inhibition of the induction of production of these proteins when cells were grown at 42°C, compared with cells grown at 32°C (Fig. 5).

The results described here demonstrate that apart from its regulation by iron, siderophore production in A. brasilense was inhibited 20-fold by growth at higher temperatures. Furthermore, despite this very strong inhibition of siderophore production by temperature, the other components of the siderophore transport system, namely, the induction of the iron-regulated outer membrane receptor proteins and the transport of ferric spirilobactin, were not significantly affected by growth at these temperatures. The need for this additional temperature-dependent regulatory element in siderophore biosynthesis alone is unclear at this stage.

Our results constitute the first observation of temperature inhibition of siderophore production in a nitrogen-fixing microorganism and is of particular importance as this tropically located nitrogen-fixing soil bacterium cannot fix nitrogen at temperatures above 40°C (5). The possibility of a linkage in the regulatory elements of these two phenomena, however, awaits more detailed investigations.

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LITERATURE CITED


