

## Original Research Article

# Isolation and Phenotypic Characterization of Lytic Bacteriophage with Activity Against *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*

### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** To perform the isolation and phenotypic characterization of bacteriophage with lytic activity against *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. To demonstrate that this type of viral agent can be isolated from the environment and used for the biocontrol of resistant bacterial types, such as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.

**Study design:** This study was an experimental study.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted at, Bacteriology and Mycology Laboratory in the Veterinary Hospital at the School of Agricultural Sciences, Innovation and Business of the University of Passo Fundo (ESAN/UPF) and Center for Diagnosis and Research in Animal Health of the University of Passo Fundo (CDSA/UPF), between April 2022 and June 2022.

**Methodology:** Samples of untreated water were inoculated with the host bacterium strain *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 in an enriched media. After the incubation period in, a phage filtrate was obtained by centrifugation followed by filtration. We verified the presence of bacteriophages using spot test and we carried out its purification by the method of sterile toothpick plate transfer on bacterial overlay semi-solid agar. Amplification was performed using an SM buffer elution procedure to produce a stock of viral material. Through assays in Petri dishes with bacterial overlay, we performed titration and phenotypic characterization regarding the lysis spectrum and efficiency of phage infection in the host.

**Results:** We managed to isolate a morphologically characterized lytic bacteriophage with approximately 1 mm of diameter, high clarity in the inhibition area, the presence of halo and well-demarcated edges. The bacteriophage, named as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* Phage UPF\_PaBP1, demonstrated the infection capacity of the target bacteria in all tested dilutions and a stock preparation with a titre of  $6.5 \times 10^8$  PFU/ml was obtained for future use.

**Conclusion:** The isolated phage showed strong lytic activity against the bacterial host, a finding that nourishes our expectations regarding the use of this phage as a biocontrol agent and phage therapy.

**Keywords:** Bacteriophages; *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*; biocontrol; antimicrobials, phage therapy; lytic phage.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The bacterium *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (*P. aeruginosa*) makes a group of multidrug resistant bacteria named under the acronym “ESKAPE” along with five other bacteria: *Enterococcus faecium*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Acinetobacter baumannii* and *Enterobacter spp.* The pathogens of the ESKAPE group are associated with an increase in mortality rates and treatment costs related to health [1,2,3].

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies this bacterium as a pathogen of critical priority, which is the highest priority among the three urgency categories for development of new antibiotics (critical, high and medium). High resistance rates are reported worldwide [2, 4, 5]. The ability of *P. aeruginosa* to induce a broad spectrum of infections, which are usually difficult to treat, is directly related to the fact that this pathogen has several resistance mechanisms. In addition, inappropriate use of antimicrobials is also an aggravating factor for the development of antimicrobial resistance among pathogens, further limiting the arsenal of viable therapeutic options [6,7,8].

Faced with this worrying scenario, great efforts have been made to search for new therapeutic agents that can replace conventional antimicrobials or, at least, reduce the development of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to them [9, 10, 11]. Since bacteriophages (viruses that infect bacteria) are species-specific, they represent an interesting alternative for biocontrol. Also called phages, bacteriophages are recognized as the most abundant biological entity on the planet [12, 13, 14]. Phages depend on the presence of the bacterial host for their survival and replication, being able to replicate through two distinct cycles: the lysogenic cycle and the lytic cycle. In the lytic cycle, the phage infects and leads to host cell lysis (cell disruption), rapidly, showing higher replication rates [15, 16].

The administration of phage to lyse a bacterial pathogen that is causing an infection is called phage therapy. The phages listed for therapy are those that have the characteristic of lytic cycle replication [17, 18, 19]. The utilization of lytic phages provides not only the eradication of target pathogens due to their bactericidal action, but is also effective in preventing the development of resistance [20, 21]. In addition, high phage specificity avoids side effects by not interfering with populations of bacteria that make up the natural microbiota. They also feature multiplicity in place infections, that is, they multiply naturally in the presence of the host, which would reduce or eliminate the need for repeated doses [22, 23].

Bacteriophages can be used in a variety of bacterial eradication strategies. As they are ubiquitous, phages comprise a large repertoire of therapeutic possibilities, with numerous viral entities and phage combinations still unexplored [24, 25, 26]. In this context, we propose to isolate bacteriophages from environmental matrices (non-treated effluent and raw lake water) with activity against the bacterium *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. The use of phages as a therapeutic tool in the treatment of infections represents an alternative approach to the use of conventional antimicrobials, especially with multidrug-resistant bacteria [17, 18, 19].

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

We used the methodology of Azeredo (2014) for the isolation and amplification of bacteriophages [27].

### 2.1 Host Bacteria

For the isolation and characterization of bacteriophages, we used as host bacterium the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC) standard strain 27853 of *P. aeruginosa*, obtained from the bacteriology library of the Laboratory of Bacteriology and Veterinary Mycology of the Veterinary Hospital (HV) of the School of Agricultural Sciences, Innovation, and Business of the University of Passo Fundo (ESAN - UPF).

### **2.1.1 Reactivation, Purity Confirmation and Enrichment**

The bacteria were reactivated by inoculating 10 µl of the stock containing *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 to 4 ml of Brain Heart Infusion (BHI), a non-selective enrichment broth and incubated at  $37 \pm 1$  °C for 24 h. Afterward, we performed seeding on cetrimide agar (selective medium), we incubated for 24 h at  $37 \pm 1$  °C and performed the gram staining and biochemical tests to confirm the purity of the isolate. After reactivation and confirmation of purity, we inoculated *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 in 3 ml of Tryptic Soy Broth (TSB) broth and incubated for  $37 \pm 1$  °C overnight for use at the later stages.

### **2.1.2 Search for Prophages**

To avoid false positive results due to the presence of lysogenic bacteriophages, the host bacterium (*P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853) was tested for the presence of prophage in its DNA. We prepared Petri dishes with a thin layer of Trypticase Soy Agar (TSA). The plates with TSA agar were dispensed with 5 ml of Molten Top-Agar (MTA), a semi-solid agar composed of TSB and agar (15 g of TSB and 3 g of agar in 500 ml of water distilled), previously inoculated with 100 µl of *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853. After solidification of the overlay, we pipetted 10 aliquots of 10 µl of the inoculum with the same bacteria from the overnight growth in the TSB. We waited for the complete drying of aliquots and the plates were incubated for 24h at  $37 \pm 1$  °C. After the incubation period plates were read and no areas of lysis were observed, confirming the absence of prophage in the bacteria and suitability for use as a host in the isolation of bacteriophages.

## **2.2 Source of Bacteriophage Isolation**

As a source for the isolation of bacteriophages, we collected samples from two collection points. A sample (200 ml) was collected from the inlet tank of the Effluent Treatment Station (ETE) of the UPF sewage network and the other sample (200 ml) was collected from raw water from a lake, also located in the UPF.

### **2.2.1 Enrichment and purification of the bacteriophage isolation source**

To remove the solids in coarse suspension, we centrifuged 140 ml of each collected sample, separately, in 4 vials (35 ml each) in a refrigerated centrifuge at 4°C at 5000 revolutions per minute (rpm) for 20 minutes. For each of the samples, we performed a pre-filtration of the supernatant using a membrane filters of polyethersulfone (PES) of 0.45 µm porosity, for sample clarification, removing solids, smaller suspended cells, and most prokaryotic cells. We collected the respective filtrates in sterile flasks and transferred 100 ml of the filtrate in flasks containing 100 ml of double strength TSB. We immediately added 50 µl of the bacteria host *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 to the flask of the TSB overnight and incubated under agitation at 120 rpm for 24 hours at  $37 \pm 1$  °C for removal of aliquots, and we reincubated for up to 48 h. After these incubation periods, we performed a new centrifugation at 4 °C with a rotation of 5000 rpm for 20 minutes and two steps of filtration: the first, with PES membrane filters with a porosity of 0.45 µm; and the second with PES membrane filters with a porosity of 0.22 µm, for bacteria removal sample remnants.

## **2.3 Isolation of bacteriophages**

### **2.3.1 Verification of the presence of bacteriophages in samples**

To confirm the presence of bacteriophages in the samples, we performed a spot test, *i.e.*, a plate assay using a semi-solid agar overlaid with *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853. For this, Petri dishes containing TSA agar were prepared with a bacterial overlay (5 ml of MTA inoculated with 100  $\mu$ l of the bacteria). The plate was inoculated with the 10  $\mu$ l of the filtrate with the aid of a micropipette. We deposited 10 drops (spot) of 10 of the filtrate on one plate. To verify the formation of lytic areas in the bacterial overlay, the plate was incubated the plate at  $37 \pm 1$  °C after complete drying of the drops. The visual inspection was performed after 6, 18 and 24 hours, to check the presence or absence of clear areas (bacterial lysis), which indicate the presence of bacteriophages.

### **2.3.2 Plaque purification**

After confirming the presence of lysis zones, procedures were initiated to isolate and purify bacteriophages from the samples. For that, we use two different methods. In one of the methods, from the previous step (spot test), we collected the center of the lysis zones with the aid of a sterile toothpick and inoculated it by stinging in semi-solid agar with a bacterial overlay of *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853. We spread the inoculum on the Petri dish with the aid of sterile strips of paper with changing the strip at each line, and playing the previous track. The second methodology was performed using the filtrate of the sample, soaked in a strip of sterile paper, striated over the entire area of the semi-solid agar with a bacterial overlay of *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853, changing the strip every line and playing the previous track. This method is useful when it is not possible to proceed immediately using the spot test board.

Both techniques' plates were incubated for 24 hours at  $37 \pm 1$  °C. Petri plates with lysis areas were selected considering the phenotypic characteristics of the clear area (plaque) in terms of size (in mm), halo (presence or absence) and appearance (clear or cloudy). With the aid of a sterile wooden toothpick, we transferred the selected phages again individually to a new TSA plate with bacterial overlay, with the aid of a toothpick and sterile paper, as previously described, and incubated at  $37 \pm 1$  °C for 24 hours. That procedure was repeated until all bacteriophage plaques were uniform, to guarantee the purity of the isolated phage.

## **2.4 Amplification of bacteriophages**

We performed amplification to create a stock solution of the isolated bacteriophage, producing a viable amount for use in future trials. The production technique used was the stock preparation from a single lysis plate and elution. We selected three phage plaques from the isolation step, which were collected with a sterile toothpick stick and inoculated by sting, individually, in ten plates of TSA, previously prepared with a bacterial overlay of *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853. Sterile paper strips were used to spread the phages throughout the Petri dish, this time without changing the strip of paper to each line, to guarantee maximum replication of bacteriophages. We incubated at  $37 \pm 1$  °C for 18-24 h and, after the incubation period, 5 ml of SM buffer was added to each plate (5.8 g NaCl; 2 g MgSO<sub>4</sub>; 50 ml of Tris/HCl ph 8.8; 1 l of distilled water) a solution buffer used in bacteriophage storage. We incubated the plates containing SM buffer under stirring at 50 rpm at 4°C for 5 h. We collected the SM Buffer in sterile vials, centrifuged at 4 °C at 5000 rpm for 20 minutes, filtered the supernatant and stored it in sterile bottles.

## **2.5 Titration of bacteriophages in UFP**

For the titration of bacteriophages in Plaque Forming Units (PFU) we performed serial dilution from the stock solution. For the dilution, we prepared homogenization of 100 µl of phage stock in 900 µl of SM buffer ( $10^{-1}$  dilution) in sterile Eppendorf, and so on successively, up to  $10^{-10}$  dilutions. On TSA plates we added 5 ml of MTA and 100 µl of *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 grown overnight in TSB. In addition to these, we added 100 µl of each dilution of bacteriophages, individually. After drying, the plates were incubated at  $37 \pm 1$  °C for 24 h, and we performed the counting of lysis plates for titration in Forming Units of Plates per milliliter (PFU/ml), according to the equation:

$$\text{Phage titre (PFU/ml)} = \frac{\text{Number of lysis plates} \times \text{Dilution factor}}{\text{Phage sample volume (ml)}}$$

## 2.6 Phenotypic characterization

### 2.6.1 Lytic Spectrum

The characterization of the lytic spectrum of the isolated bacteriophage was carried out from the visual analysis of the morphology of the lytic plaques obtained in the phage isolation step. The areas of lysis were described regarding the size of the lysis plaques (in mm), halo (presence or absence), appearance (clear or cloudy) and edge demarcation characteristic (well-demarcated or poorly demarcated).

### 2.6.2 Infection Efficiency

The infection efficiency assay is intended to verify the amount of phage capable of infecting (lyse) the host bacterium (*P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853), using different dilutions performed from the stock solution. Petri dishes with TSA agar with overlay bacteria were divided into eight equal parts. Each quadrant received an aliquot of 10 µl of each dilution ( $10^{-1}$  to  $10^{-8}$ ), incubate for 24 h at  $37 \pm 1$  °C and check for the presence or absence of lysis in each inoculated dilution. The infection efficiency rating is instituted according to the magnitude of the lysis verified on visual inspection, in the scores: are high when areas of total lysis were verified, moderate when verified the presence of plaques individual, low when there are few individual plates and null when there are no areas whitening [28].

## 3. RESULTS

### **3.1 Verification of the presence of bacteriophages in the sample, isolation of bacteriophages and purification of phage plaques**

The assay to verify the presence of bacteriophages was positive only for the sample collected from the effluent and was negative for the sample collected in the lake, after incubations of 24 h and 48 h. The readings taken after 6 hours of incubation did not show lytic areas. With 18 h of incubation, we verified the appearance of lysis areas in all inoculum points, only from the effluent filtrate. The 24-hour reading did not show a change from the one performed at 18 hours. After thirteen purification steps, performing the selection of the phage plate, transferring with a toothpick and spreading with the use of paper strips, it was possible to obtain lysis plates with a single morphological pattern. The isolated bacteriophage was named *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* Phage UPF\_PaBP1.

### **3.2 Amplification and titration in PFU/ml of the isolated bacteriophage**

We produced approximately 50 ml of bacteriophage stock solution in the SM buffer in the amplification step, and stored it in sterile flasks at -80 °C so that it can be used in trials and future work. The aliquots were kept at 4 °C to continue the experiment's tests. The stock solution had a titration of  $6.5 \times 10^8$  PFU/ml.

### **3.3 Phenotypic characterization**

#### **3.3.1 Lytic Spectrum**

Phage UPF\_PaBP1 phage lysis plates showed the following characteristics morphological features: approximate size of 1mm; the presence of a halo (ranging from 0.5 – 1.5 mm, depending on incubation time and phage titer); clear appearance, demonstrating 100% of transparency; and regular edges of well-demarcated feature. Plates incubated for a time equal to or greater than 24 hours and with a lower phage titer in the dilution, showed larger halos than those incubated for up to 18 hours and with a higher titer of phage in the dilution. The characteristics of the bacteriophage lytic plaque can be seen in figure 1 and halo size variation can be seen in figure 2.



**Fig. 1. Morphological characteristics of the lysis plaque formed by the UPF\_PaBP1.**

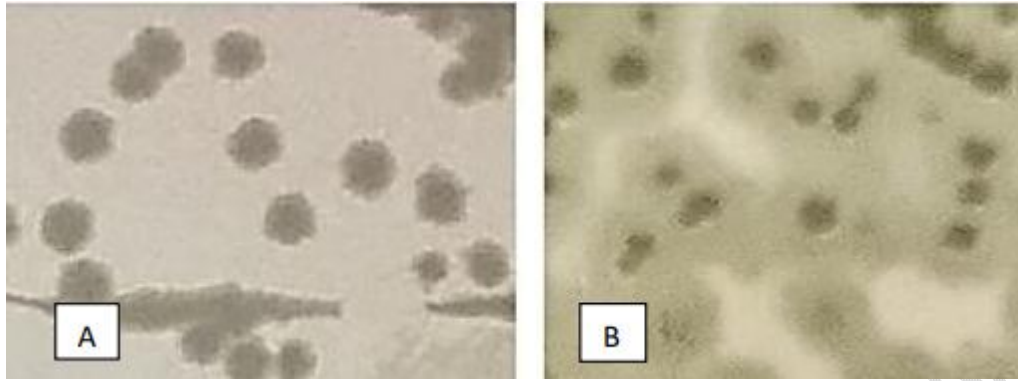


Fig. 2. Halo size variation. 2A. Halo  $\leq 0.5$  mm. 2B. Halo  $\geq 1.5$  mm.

### 3.3.2 Infection efficiency

In the plate assay to evaluate the infection efficiency of Phage UPF\_PaBP1, we observed plaque formation at all dilutions (figure 3). From  $10^{-1}$  dilution to  $10^{-3}$ , we classified the phage's ability to infect as high, as it presents 100% lysis in the area where the bacteriophage solution was deposited, also advancing with 100% lysis in regions beyond the inoculation area. The  $10^{-4}$  dilution was classified as moderately high, as we visualized an area with 100% lysis and an area that advanced beyond the point of inoculation with the formation of isolated phage plaques. We classify the  $10^{-5}$  dilution as moderate-low, as we only visualized the formation of isolated phage plaques in the area and beyond the aliquot deposit area. Dilutions  $10^{-6}$ ,  $10^{-7}$  and  $10^{-8}$  were classified as low-null, by the verification of a few phage plaques in the aliquot deposit area.

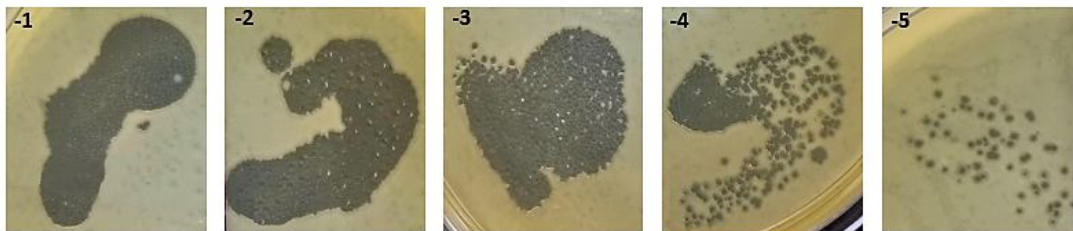


Fig 3. Bacteriophage infection efficiency at different dilutions.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Bacteriophages are the most abundant biological entities on the planet, being more numerous than the bacteria themselves. It is estimated that there are about  $10^{32}$  bacteriophages on the Earth, of varied morphological types. Phages co-exist and co-evolve with their host bacteria for about 3 to 4 billion years. We propose to isolate bacteriophages with lytic potential against *P. aeruginosa* due to the ubiquitous character and pathogenicity of this bacterium [29, 30, 31].

For the isolation of bacteriophages, we selected two collection sources: effluent water untreated and raw lake water, as bacteriophages are often isolated from aquatic

environments. Phages can also be isolated from sites in which their hosts, which varies depending on the bacterial species [30, 31, 32]. *P. aeruginosa* is a ubiquitous free-living bacterium, often found in natural waters (such as rivers and lakes). Its presence occurs both in waters rich in nutrients, such as sewage, as well as in nutrient-poor waters. The presence of *P. aeruginosa* in drinking water is less recurrent and is generally associated with the formation of biofilms in plumbing, for example. Despite being considered ubiquitous, *P. aeruginosa* is much more abundant in environments with intense human contact and less in untouched environments, being thus, it can be said that *P. aeruginosa* prevails in places correlated to human activity [32, 33].

In our work, we were able to isolate a bacteriophage from the sample collected from effluent. We could not demonstrate the presence of bacteriophages in the sample collected from the lake. As both samples were processed concomitantly, using the same conditions of processing and storage, we ruled out the possibility of technical failure in the procedure. We believe that this finding is due to the fact already described in the literature, that lytic phages dominate waters rich in nutrients (effluent, as an example) and waters poor in nutrients are dominated by lysogenic phages [34]. The verification of the presence of lysogenic phages in a sample is not always possible from the plaque assay, as the formation of lysis plaques occurs much less markedly than for lytic phages or may not occur at all. For confirmation of the presence of plate-tempered phages, it is indicated that the host cells are exposed to stressors, such as radiation and antibiotics, to induce the release of virions [35].

The bacteriophage isolated from the effluent sample showed a characteristic of lytic replication, due to the formation of clear areas on the agar, called "plaques" of bacteriophage. Plaques are described as clear circular areas of reduced turbidity, present in bacterial overlays, which form as a result of bacterial lysis induced by virion propagation [36]. Lytic replication cycle bacteriophages have plates with typically clear morphology. In contrast, cloudy plaques may indicate the presence of lysogenic (tempered) bacteriophages in the sample. In addition, the high turbidity on plaques can also be the result of old bacterial cultures [37]. The bacteriophage isolated in this study, however, showed 100% clarity in the bacterial overlay, indicating the occurrence of lytic bacteriophage.

We obtained bacteriophage plaques approximately 1 mm in diameter. Plates phages of different sizes and morphologies are frequently described in the literature. The plaque evaluation is important because they represent an indicator of the viability of the phage. Plates of 1 mm in diameter are recurrently classified as small plates. Bacteriophage plaques  $\geq 4$  mm in diameter are considered large plaques. It is important to emphasize that the size of the bacteriophage plaque is not related to greater or lesser capacity for infection, but to the structural characteristics of the bacteriophages. Bacteriophages with a large capsid (head) tend to form lytic plaques smaller, while bacteriophages with smaller heads tend to form larger lytic plaques. We believe that the bacteriophage isolated in this work belongs to the first group [37].

The isolated bacteriophage showed high clarity in the area of phage plaque formation and managed to infect its host in all dilutions, with effective infection high, visually, up to  $10^{-4}$  dilution. In addition, the presence of a halo was also observed. Halo is the description for the region that forms around a lithic slab that is less turbid than the bacterial overlay and more turbid than the lytic plaque area [36]. The halos are formed by the action of depolymerases,

enzymes that degrade important components of the biofilm matrix and capsule constituents. Depolymerase is a phage by-product that has a bactericidal effect and can be used in antibacterial strategies. The size of the halo formed by the action of depolymerase tends to increase with incubation time [38, 39, 40]. We noticed this tendency of halo formation and increase in plates incubated for a long time equal to or greater than 24 hours.

We believe that the relative titer phage:bacterium also exerted an influence on the size of the halo, because in plates with a lower titer of phage in relation to the host, we noticed the formation of larger halos. It is worth noting that depolymerases degrade bacterial exopolysaccharides when there is no further propagation of the bacteriophage [40]. Therefore, we hypothesized that the higher the titer of bacteria, the sooner the propagation of phages ceases and the action of depolymerases begins, which would explain the higher halo the lower the phage titer, since in these plaques the depolymerases would act, consequently, for a longer time against bacterial cells. This hypothesis, however, needs confirmation through testing and further investigation. In any case, verifying the presence of the depolymerase enzyme is a finding that further reinforces our expectations about the use of this bacteriophage as an antimicrobial agent.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A bacteriophage with action against the bacterium *P. aeruginosa*, which is named *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* Phage UPF\_PaBP1, was successfully isolated in this study. Through the trials performed in vitro, we found that Phage UPF\_PaBP1 is a virulent bacteriophage and showed strong lytic activity against the bacterial host used in the isolation (*P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853). These findings nourish our expectations regarding the use of this phage as a biocontrol agent in vivo infections, the environment, and in food. With the phenotypic and biological characteristics of the phage described, we can explore other properties of this bacteriophage and use it in countless assay in future.

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