Isolation and Characterization of Novel Iron-Oxidizing Bacteria That Grow at Circumneutral pH

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A gel-stabilized gradient method that employed opposing gradients of Fe2+ and O2 was used to isolate and characterize two new Fe-oxidizing bacteria from a neutral pH, Fe2+-containing groundwater in Michigan. Two separate enrichment cultures were obtained, and in each the cells grew in a distinct, rust-colored band in the gel at the oxic-anaerobic interface. The cells were tightly associated with the ferric hydroxides. Repeated serial dilutions of both enrichments resulted in the isolation of two axenic strains, ES-1 and ES-2. The cultures were judged pure based on (i) growth from single colonies in tubes at dilutions of 10−7 (ES-2) and 10−8 (ES-1); (ii) uniform cell morphologies, i.e., ES-1 was a motile long thin, bent, or S-shaped rod and ES-2 was a shorter curved rod; and (iii) no growth on a heterotrophic medium. Strain ES-1 grew to a density of 108 cells/ml on FeS with a doubling time of 8 h. Strain ES-2 grew to a density of 5 × 107 cells/ml with a doubling time of 12.5 h. Both strains also grew on FeCO3. Neither strain grew without Fe2+, nor did they grow with glucose, pyruvate, acetate, Mn, or H2S as an electron donor. Studies with an oxygen microelectrode revealed that both strains grew at the oxic-anaerobic interface of the gradients and tracked the O2 minima when subjected to higher O2 concentrations, suggesting they are microaerobes. Phylogenetically the two strains formed a novel lineage within the γ Proteobacteria. They were very closely related to each other and were equally closely related to PWB OTU 1, a phylotype obtained from an iron-rich hydrothermal vent system at the Loihi Seamount in the Pacific Ocean, and SPB OTU 1, a phylotype obtained from permafrost soil in Siberia. Their closest cultivated relative was Stenotrophomonas maltophilia. In total, this evidence suggests ES-1 and ES-2 are members of a previously untapped group of putatively lithotrophic, unicellular iron-oxidizing bacteria.

The role that prokaryotes play in the oxidation of ferrous iron at near-neutral pH has been enigmatic for both geochemical and microbiological reasons. From a geochemical perspective it is often noted that at a pH of ≥5, Fe2+ will rapidly and spontaneously oxidize to Fe3+ (4). In fully aerated freshwater at pH 7, the t1/2 of Fe2+ oxidation is <15 min (30). Under these conditions Fe-oxidizing prokaryotes may find it difficult to compete with the chemical oxidation. From a microbiological perspective, the most pervasive problem has been the inability to isolate or study prokaryotes in the laboratory that are capable of conserving energy from iron oxidation at circumneutral pH under oxic conditions. This problem is reinforced by the fact that environments with high iron concentrations are characterized by the remains of a few morphologically distinct “iron bacteria,” such as the sheaths of Leptothrix ochracea and the stalks of Gallionella ferruginea, but otherwise appear largely devoid of microbial cells when viewed by light microscopy (6, 11).

To begin to understand the relevancy of microbial iron oxidation, it is most important to consider the niche where high concentrations of Fe2+ undergo oxidation. Generally these environments occur where water is moving from an anoxic to anoxic zone. As a result of Fe reduction in the anoxic region the water can become highly charged with Fe2+, and when the Fe2+ is exposed to air ocherous mats, or loose aggregations of filamentous coated with iron hydroxides, may form. Since these occur at anoxic-oxic transition zones, the oxygen concentrations can be very low, i.e., <10% of ambient, aerated water. At these concentrations the chemical oxidation of Fe(II) is significantly slower than it is in fully aerated water (21). It is in just this kind of environment that G. ferruginea thrives. To date, this stalk-forming organism is the only aerobic, neutralophilic iron-oxidizer that has been obtained in either purified enrichments or pure culture in the laboratory, where it grows at very low oxygen tensions in opposing gradients of oxygen and Fe2+ (15). There is both strong circumstantial evidence and accumulating biochemical evidence that this microbe can grow lithotrophically on iron and fix CO2, although it appears capable of limited mixotrophic growth as well (13, 14). One of the most visible tenants of iron seeps, L. ochracea leaves behind copious amounts of Fe hydroxide-encrusted, refractile tubular sheath material, most of which is vacant of cells. Despite its striking visual appearance at these sites, L. ochracea has never been isolated from them, although it has been speculated that this organism may be a lithotroph. Recent discoveries now make it important to distinguish between anoxic and oxic Fe oxidation. It has been demonstrated that anoxic phototrophic bacteria can oxidize the oxidation of Fe2+ to Fe3+ (3, 31), and still more recently, a thermophilic archaeum, Ferroglobus placidus, was isolated that can couple Fe2+ oxidation to N2O reduction for growth at neutral pH (12). A recent study of a microbial iron mat in Denmark revealed that there were up to 109 cells/ml of mat material (6). Most of these were nonappendaged, unicellular microbes intimately associated with the oxides. They were only visible when stained with a DNA-binding fluorescent dye, acridine orange, and viewed by epifluorescence microscopy. This explained why cursory examination of these samples by phase-contrast micros-
copy revealed a paucity of cells. Laboratory microcosm studies using material collected at this site revealed that the microbes catalyzed up to 80% of the Fe oxidation (7). Ferrous iron stimulated growth of the microorganisms, including *L. ochrocea* and *Gallionella*, in the microcosms; however, as in the mat itself, the numerically dominant microbes were unicellular, nonappended organisms. These results suggested that while classic iron bacteria such as *Leptothrix* and *Gallionella* were important in laying down the matrix of the mat, there was an even larger population of unicellular prokaryotes that might be playing a key role in iron oxidation.

The work in the present study describes a new gradient method for cultivating Fe-oxidizing prokaryotes and describes two new bacteria isolated from a groundwater-fed iron seep that appear to grow optimally on ferric iron. These new isolates are obligate aerobes and do not produce stalks or sheaths and thus they may represent a portion of the numerically dominant population of microbes that have been observed in other iron-oxidizing communities.

(A portion of this work has been presented previously [8].)

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Source.** The source material for enrichments was groundwater from a base-ment tile drain in East Lansing, Mich. The drain was 70 cm deep by 40 cm wide and was filled to a water depth of approximately 50 cm. Nearly the entire water column was filled with a loose amorphous, rust-colored flocculent material. The pH of the water was 7.1; the temperature was approximately 10°C, and the water contained 3 to 12 μM Fe²⁺. The flow rate was quite slow, barely visible to the eye. Samples of the iron oxides were collected into sterile glass vials on two separate occasions and used as the source for enrichments.

**Gradient method for isolation and enrichment.** Enrichments were carried out in opposing gradients of oxygen and Fe²⁺ that were established in 60- by 15-mm screw-cap glass tubes by using a technique modified from that originally described by Kucera and Wolfe (20) for the enrichment of *Gallionella*. The tubes had a plug of either Fe₂ or FeCO₃ overlaid with a semisolid mineral salt–bicarbonate-buffered medium and a headspace of air. The Fe₃ was prepared according to Hanert (15); FeCO₃ was prepared according to Hallbeck et al. (14).

**Overlayer.** The overlayer was 70 ml, sodium bicarbonate and vitamins were added as described previously (6). A sample of the Fe oxides was diluted into a known amount of a solution of 0.25 M hydroxylamine–0.25 M HCl. After 1.5 to 2 h of incubation at 30°C with gentle agitation, a subsample of the reduced oxides was diluted into ferrozine and the absorbance of the resulting colored product was measured at 562 nm (29).

**Microelectrode measurements.** Clark-type oxygen microelectrodes (28) were constructed in our laboratory (2). The microelectrodes were mounted in a motorized micromanipulator (World Precision Instruments, Sarasota, Fla.), and the tip was lowered into the gel in the gradient tube at increments ranging from 50 to 250 μM. The progress of the electrode tip was monitored with a stereomicroscope to determine precisely when it contacted and pierced the bacterial bands that formed in the gradient tubes. The oxygen microelectrode was calibrated in a picomammeter (Diamond-General, Ann Arbor, Mich.) and the current output was recorded on a strip chart recorder.

**TEM.** When cells were grown in agarose, they were concentrated by centrifugation, the gel was dissolved with the cells, and the gel was dissolved in a mixture of sodium oxalate and sodium bicarbonate, and the gel was added to a tube. The tube was incubated at 37°C and spun at the maximum setting for 5 min. A 1:1 portion of this work has been presented previously (8). The supernatant was discarded, the agarose plug, and the gel from the tube. Cell counts were performed by adding a solution of 0.0005% acridine orange and counting all the cells in 15 microscope fields at ×1,000 magnification with an epifluorescence microscope (Optiphot; Nikon) (6). For the determination of total amount of Fe oxidized, an aliquot of the sand mixed with the material was removed from the original mixed sample and placed in an Eppendorf tube and frozen at −20°C for later analysis.

To determine whether the isolates could carry out the reduction of the Fe oxides that they formed, the growth bands from several growth tubes per isolate were harvested and washed once by centrifugation in PO₄ buffer. The material was placed in vials containing anaerobic medium and incubated as described previously (6).

**Fe₃ Determination.** Total Fe concentration was determined as described previously (6). A sample of the Fe oxides was diluted into a known amount of a solution of 0.25 M hydroxylamine–0.25 M HCl. After 1.5 to 2 h of incubation at 30°C with gentle agitation, a subsample of the reduced oxides was diluted into ferrozine and the absorbance of the resulting colored product was measured at 562 nm (29).

**Phylogenetic analysis.** Each strain was grown in four large vials. After 10 to 14 days of growth, a sterile pipette was used to remove as much of the agarose that overlaid the growth band as possible without disturbing the band itself. The gel which included the growth band was placed into sterile, plastic 15-ml screwcap test tubes. These were heated at 70°C in a water bath for 12 min to melt the agarose and then quickly transferred into a clinical centrifuge at room temperature of 37°C and spun at the maximum setting for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded, the tight pellet of iron oxides and cells in each tube was resuspended in 100 to 200 μl of deionized water, and the samples were pooled. The pooled sample was placed in a filter-sterilized, 10-ml Eppendorf tube, and 0.5 M oxalic acid (filter sterilized) was added in a ratio of 2:1 (final oxalic acid concentration, 0.33 M). This mixture was incubated at 30°C on a table top incubator shaker set at 150 rpm for 20 min, during which time the sample turned from deep red to a light brown. The oxalate was removed by centrifugation (10 min, 7,700 × g; Sorvall RC-5 centrifuge). Often after this first reduction the cell pellet was still dark brown due to the presence of residual Fe oxide, and the oxalic acid treatment was repeated. Based on visual inspection this removed additional oxides but there was always a small amount of oxide that remained with the pellet. Following the second reduction, the cell pellet was washed twice in 15 ml of deionized water, transferred to an Eppendorf tube, and washed two more times in 1.5 ml of deionized water. After the final spin, the supernatant was removed and the pellet was stored at −20°C until it was used for DNA extraction.

The extraction of genomic DNA and PCR amplification of small-subunit (SSU) rRNA gene products from each strain were described elsewhere (24). The extracted DNA was used as a template for PCR reaction. The primers used in the reaction were 27F (5′-AGAGTTTGATCCTGGCTCAG-3′) and 1492R (5′-GGTTACCTTGTTCAGACTT-3′). The PCR cycling conditions were as follows: 1 cycle of 95°C for 15 min followed by 35 cycles of 94°C for 30 s, 55°C for 30 s, and 72°C for 1 min, and a final extension at 72°C for 7 min. The PCR products were separated by 1.5% agarose gel electrophoresis and stained with ethidium bromide. The complete sequences, in both directions, of representative bacterial SSU rRNA gene products from each strain were as described elsewhere (24). Phylogenetic trees were constructed by using jumbled orders for the addition of taxon.
and allowed for the global swapping of branches option. Using these parameters, the search for an optimal tree was repeated until the best log likelihood score was reached in at least three independent searches. Bootstrapping methods were conducted so that node reproducibility for the overall tree topology could be estimated (10). Bootstrapping occurred 100 times with the jumbled addition of taxa, and the search for an optimal tree was repeated until the best log likelihood score was reached in at least two independent searches each time.

Nucleotide sequence accession number. The SSU rRNA sequences representing strains ES-1 and ES-2 have been submitted to GenBank and have been assigned accession no. AF012541.

RESULTS

Enrichment and isolation. The most striking feature of the groundwater from the tile drain source was the high density of flocculant iron hydroxides. When these flocs were stained with acridine orange and viewed by epifluorescence microscopy it was evident that they harbored a large population of prokaryotic cells of diverse morphology (results not shown). While evidence for both the sheaths characteristic of L. ochracea, and the stalks characteristic of Gallionella, were visible, it appeared that most of the oxides were amorphous and that these harbored the largest populations of unicellular bacteria. This was quite similar to what has been seen in other high iron environments (11).

On two occasions, 6 weeks apart, enrichments were done by inoculating Fe gradient tubes with the Fe flocculant-containing water. In both cases, 24 to 48 h after inoculation, a zone of cell growth visible by the appearance of reddish-brown iron oxides began forming. During this initial period the oxides were often distributed in a flare-like pattern spreading out from the point of inoculation in the center of the tube. Over the next 48 to 72 h these patterns typically coalesced into a discrete, rust-colored band at an intermediate distance between the FeS plug in the bottom of the tube and the air interface at the surface of the gel (Fig. 1). Once a stable band had formed, usually within 4 to 6 days, it was subsampled and diluted into a new gradient tube. At dilutions of 10⁻⁷ or 10⁻⁸, cell growth began from individual colonies within the tubes; those tubes that initiated growth from between one to three colonies were chosen for further passage. After two or three passages of cells from the tube with the highest dilution, the cultures were assessed for purity by repeated passage in Fe gradient tubes and visual inspection by light microscopy. In addition, material was streaked onto plates of R2A medium to check for the presence of heterotrophs. The cultures were deemed pure if there was no growth on the R2A plates and if the cells associated with the iron oxides were of uniform morphology. In one case a heterotrophic, rod-shaped bacterium was still present after several high-dilution transfers; however, by subsampling and diluting the iron-oxidizing bacterium in the early stages of growth it was possible to rid the culture of this heterotroph. Ultimately, each of the initial enrichments yielded a pure culture of a morphologically unique iron-oxidizing microorganism (Fig. 2). These were designated isolates ES-1 and ES-2. Both isolates have been deposited with the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC) (ES-1, ATCC 700298; ES-2, ATCC 700299).

Flares or bands of oxides did not appear in gradient tubes to which either no inoculum or 1 mM sodium azide was added or in which the inoculum was pasteurized at 70°C for 20 min prior to inoculation. Instead, over several days the gel turned uniformly reddish orange as the Fe²⁺ released from the FeS plug was chemically oxidized by oxygen (Fig. 1).

Microscopy. Light microscopy revealed that the highest densities of cells for both isolates were associated with the Fe oxide matrix (Fig. 2). Both strains were motile, and in young cultures it was common to see free swimming cells that appeared unencumbered by Fe oxides. The number of motile, free-swimming cells appeared to decrease with the age of the culture. Isolate ES-1 (Fig. 2A) was a bent or helical-shaped rod. Isolate ES-2 (Fig. 2B) was a shorter bent rod that was often U-shaped. Light microscopy revealed no visibly obvious differences in the morphologies of the Fe oxides precipitated by the two strains.

Electron microscopy revealed that Fe oxides were tightly associated with the cell walls of both isolates (Fig. 3). It also appeared that the Fe oxides that formed around the cells were very fine-grained and amorphous in the sense that well-defined capsules of Fe oxides were not observed. The presence of the iron did appear to impede the diffusion of the TEM fixatives to the cells; even with extra-long fixative times it was difficult to get good enough fixation to assess cell wall structure, and this was especially true for strain ES-1. The diameter of strain ES-1 was 0.32 μm; the diameter of strain ES-2 was 0.73 μm.

Growth. The growth curves of strains ES-1 and ES-2 are shown in Fig. 4 and 5, respectively. ES-1 grew on FeS with a doubling time of approximately 8 h. The addition of acetate to the growth medium did not appear to stimulate the growth of ES-1 above that of Fe²⁺ alone. When ES-1 was grown in the presence of agarose alone it did not show any sign of growth (Fig. 4). When it was grown in the presence of acetate, pyruvate, or glucose without added iron, there was no visible sign of growth, nor was there any sign of oxygen consumption in tubes containing these carbon sources when oxygen profiles were measured with an oxygen microelectrode (results not shown). This was also true for tubes which had a reduced [O₂] in the headspace. ES-1 also appeared to grow well on FeCO₃, although actual growth rates and doubling times were not calculated. ES-1 did not grow on Mn²⁺ or sulfide. On one occasion it did show some growth on thioulate, but we were unsuccessful in repeating this.

Strain ES-2 grew on FeS with a doubling time of approximately 12.5 h and had a comparable doubling time when grown on FeCO₃ (Fig. 5). It too did not grow with acetate, pyruvate, or glucose as a C source, nor did it show any indication of oxygen consumption in the presence of these substrates. ES-2 also did not grow on Mn²⁺, sulfide, or thioulate. The cell yield of ES-2 was not as high, 5 × 10⁷ cells/ml, as that of ES-1, which reached a cell density of 10⁹ cells/ml. Both strains required vitamins for growth; when the vitamins were omitted.
their growth diminished markedly after two or three transfers. If bicarbonate was omitted from the medium and 10 mM HEPES (N-2-hydroxyethylpiperazine-N’-2-ethanesulfonic acid) buffer was substituted as a buffer at pH 6.5, it also appeared that the growth of the strains was diminished, as judged by the slower than normal formation of a growth band. Strain ES-2 appeared to be more adversely affected by the absence of bicarbonate than strain ES-1; however, these effects were not quantitated for either organism.

The total amount of Fe oxidized was similar in inoculated versus uninoculated tubes, suggesting that the amount of Fe^{2+} released into the medium was similar in both cases. Measured at a time scale of days, there did not appear to be major differences between the rates of abiotic and biotic Fe oxidation (results not shown). The difference in the oxidation rates, as stated above, was that in inoculated tubes all the iron oxidation occurred in a very localized zone where the cells were growing. Neither of these strains showed any evidence for Fe reduction when grown anaerobically in the presence of acetate or succinate.

**Oxygen microelectrode measurements.** Tubes inoculated with either strain ES-1 or ES-2 had steeper oxygen gradients than did the corresponding uninoculated gradient tubes (Fig. 6). The growth bands for both ES-1 and ES-2 defined the oxic-anoxic interface in their respective gradient tubes in that when the tip of the microelectrode penetrated the bottom of the growth zone, no O_2 was detected. In uninoculated control tubes, the O_2 profile extended all the way down to the FeS layer (Fig. 6). These results suggested that both these strains are microaerophiles. To demonstrate this further, some tubes were resealed after the first O_2 profile was made and were incubated for another 24 h. During this time a new band of iron oxidation appeared below the first band, and a second oxygen profile showed that a new oxic-anoxic interface had formed right at this lower band (Fig. 7). Apparently, the O_2 in the headspace was partially depleted due to growth of the bacteria. Exposure to the air replenished the O_2 in the headspace, which caused it to diffuse further into the gel, and the microbes tracked the O_2 to a new minimum, where they established a new oxic-anoxic interface.

**Phylogeny.** The two strains, ES-1 and ES-2, had identical SSU rRNA gene sequences, placing them into the same phylootype. Phylogenetically, they fell within a novel lineage of the γ subclass of the Proteobacteria (Fig. 8). What was most striking was their close relationships with the environmental phylootypes PV_B OTU 1 (24, 25) and SP_B OTU 1 (27), which were detected at deep-sea hydrothermal vents and ancient Siberian permafrost sediments, respectively. The former site, Loihi Sea-
FIG. 3. Transmission electron micrographs of thin sections of ES-1 (A) and ES-2 (B). Note the differences in cell shape of the two isolates but also the similarities in the morphologies of the Fe oxides and the close association of the oxides with the cells.
mount, is a low-temperature hydrothermal vent system that is characterized by a high output of Fe$^{2+}$. Large accumulations of amorphous iron hydroxides precipitate in the vicinity of the vents, including the morphotypes of sheathed and stalked iron oxidizers (18). The closest-known relative to this lineage is Stenotrophomonas maltophilia, a ubiquitous free-living bacterium isolated from aquatic habitats but more often associated with soils and especially the plant rhizosphere (17).

**DISCUSSION**

**Growth on iron.** The iron-oxidizing isolates ES-1 and ES-2 represent a new phenotypic group of unicellular, microaerobic bacteria that appear to harness energy from the oxidation of Fe$^{2+}$ to Fe$^{3+}$ for growth at circumneutral pH. Both of these strains grew in a gel-stabilized, bicarbonate-buffered, mineral salts medium and oxidized iron at the oxic-anoxic interface in opposing gradients of Fe$^{2+}$ and O$_2$. Neither strain grew by utilizing organic substrates in the absence of iron, and their growth on iron was not stimulated by the presence of acetate. The results suggest that these organisms are true or obligate lithotrophs, unable to utilize reduced organic carbon compounds as an energy source. In growth tubes, all the iron oxidation occurred within a narrow band at the oxic-anoxic transition zone, which was a niche created by the bacteria consuming the O$_2$ diffusing down from the headspace and the Fe$^{2+}$ diffusing up from the FeS or FeCO$_3$ layer. By comparison, in uninoculated tubes or tubes containing metabolic poisons, abiotic Fe oxidation occurred throughout most of the agarose layer. It does remain to be shown that these microbes are autotrophs. While this would seem the most likely explanation given that the only organics present in the growth medium were vitamins and trace contaminants in the electrophoresis-grade agarose, definitive proof of chemolithoautotrophic growth awaits demonstration of uptake of radiolabeled $^{14}$CO$_2$ and/or demonstration of enzymatic activities of a CO$_2$ fixation pathway.

The energetics of growth on iron are complicated by the effects that both pH and the different chemical states of Fe have on the reaction. At circa pH 2, where *Thiobacillus ferrooxidans* grows optimally, the complete reaction for Fe oxidation is generally stated as follows: $2$Fe$^{2+} + 0.5$O$_2 + 5$H$_2$O $\rightarrow 2$Fe(OH)$_3$ + 4H$^+$, which is exergonic with a $\Delta G^\circ = -8.6$ kcal mol$^{-1}$ (5), barely enough energy to produce an ATP. However, as Widdel et al. (31) have pointed out, at a pH of 6 or 7, the Fe$^{2+}$ may be in the form of either dissociated Fe$^{2+}$ or FeCO$_3$ (siderite), and upon oxidation, the Fe$^{3+}$ will all almost instant-

![Image](https://example.com/image1.png)

**FIG. 4.** Growth curves for strain ES-1 on FeS (■), FeS plus 5 mM acetate in the overlayer (○), and agarose alone (▲). The panel on the left shows cell growth, and the panel on the right shows accumulation of total Fe in the overlayer during growth on FeS alone. The error bars represent standard deviations from the means.

![Image](https://example.com/image2.png)

**FIG. 5.** Growth curves for strain ES-2 on FeS (■), 10 mM acetate without FeS (●), and agarose alone (▲). The panel on the left shows cell growth, and the panel on the right shows accumulation of Fe in the overlayer during growth on FeS. The error bars represent standard deviations from the means.

![Image](https://example.com/image3.png)

**FIG. 6.** Oxygen microelectrode profiles in gradient tubes of pure cultures of ES-1 and ES-2. Tubes inoculated with cells in which a growth plate had formed are represented by circles, and uninoculated tubes that were incubated for the same amount of time as the inoculated tubes are represented by squares. The horizontal lines are included to indicate the position of each growth plate relative to the oxygen concentration.

![Image](https://example.com/image4.png)

**FIG. 7.** Migration of cell band in response to oxygen. An initial oxygen profile was determined on day 6 (○), and the tube was resealed and incubated for another 24 h. On day 7 a new band appeared below the first band. The day 7 oxygen profile (■) indicated that the oxygen minimum now corresponded exactly to the position of this new band.
ly form an insoluble amorphous hydroxide, e.g., Fe(OH)₃ or FeOOH. This results in the product of the oxidation being rapidly and continuously removed from solution. At pH 7 the redox potential of the couples for ferric hydroxide formation from either the siderite, Fe(OH)₂ + HCO₃⁻/FeCO₃ (E°ₐ = +0.200 V), or the completely dissociated form of Fe²⁺, Fe (OH)₂ + Fe²⁺ (E°ₐ = −0.236 V), are substantial compared to the redox couple of O₂/H₂O (E°ₐ = +0.810 V) (31). Thus, Fe²⁺ oxidation coupled to O₂ respiration can generate a significant redox potential (30). Indeed, this is the interpretation of the energetics of growth on Fe that explains why anoxic phototrophic bacteria are able to couple the oxidation of Fe²⁺ to Fe³⁺ as an electron donor for anoxygenic photosynthesis (3, 31). In addition, the complete oxidation of 1 mol of Fe²⁺ to FeOOH or Fe(OH)₂ yields 2 mol of H⁺. If this reaction occurs in close proximity to the cell wall, as TEM evidence suggests, then these H⁺ may be available to contribute to the ΔpH of the proton motive force.

**Taxonomy and comparison with other Fe oxidizers.** The taxonomic characteristics of strains ES-1 and ES-2 are summarized in Table 1. Besides having a different morphology, strain ES-1 tolerated more mesophilic temperatures than ES-2 and it had a more rapid doubling time on FeS. Both the morphological and phylogenetic evidence indicate that these isolates are not closely related to the more commonly recognized iron bacteria *G. ferruginea* and *L. ochracea*. Isolates ES-1 and ES-2 are unicellular and produce neither stalks nor sheaths; instead these microbes appear to encapsulate themselves in a coating of amorphous iron hydroxides. In this regard, they are similar to members of the *Siderocapsaceae* family. This ill-defined group contains four genera, *Siderocapsa*, *Naumanniella*, *Siderococcus*, and *Ochrobium*, consisting of 18 species (16). The species descriptions are based primarily on the morphology of the oxide coatings that form around the cells. Based on enrichment studies, this group is thought to be predominantly heterotrophic; however, none of these organisms have been maintained in pure culture so both their physiological and taxonomic status are virtually unknown. Morphologically the strain ES-2 does bear a resemblance to *G. ferruginea*, although it tends to be more U-shaped compared to the classic description of *G. ferruginea* as a bean-shaped cell. It has been reported that when grown at a pH of >6, *G. ferruginea* does not form a stalk. When ES-2 was grown at a pH as low as 5.4, stalk formation was not observed.

It is noteworthy that the main difference in the enrichments for *Gallionella* and for isolates ES-1 and ES-2 is the addition of a gel-stabilizing agent to the growth medium for the latter. To our knowledge, the prolific growth of nonappendaged, unicellular iron oxidizers has not been observed in *Gallionella* enrichments, and our attempts to culture ES-1 or ES-2 under the liquid-only conditions used for *Gallionella* were unsuccessful. In a nonstabilized or low-viscosity liquid environment the dense, Fe-encrusted cells would descend out of the anoxic-oxic transition zone to the anoxic FeS or FeCO₃ layer and be physically separated from their electron acceptor, O₂. However, the presence of an agarose gel or a high-viscosity polymer (PVP) reduces or entirely eliminates the gravitational effect, and thus the cells can maintain their position and establish an optimum niche at the oxic-anoxic boundary. It is also important to note that cell numbers obtained in the gel-stabilized growth tubes are nearly 2 orders of magnitude greater than those of *G. ferruginea* grown in liquid gradient tubes.

**Phylogenetically, ES-1 and ES-2 are very closely related to**

### Table 1. Characteristics of Fe-oxidizing strains ES-1 and ES-2

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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<th>ES-2</th>
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<td><strong>Phylogeny</strong></td>
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<td>γ <em>Proteobacteria</em></td>
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<sup>a</sup> Doubling time in hours.<br><sup>b</sup> Growth on thiosulfate was detected on one occasion but this result could not be repeated.<br><sup>c</sup> ND, not detected.
one another, but again they do not share a close relationship with *Gallionella*, which is a member of the β subdivision of the *Proteobacteria*. What is remarkable is that they are closely related to the PVB OTU 1 SSU rDNA phylotype that was described by Moyer et al. (24) from a hydrothermal vent system at the Loihi Seamount near Hawaii. This site is characterized by large accumulations of precipitated Fe hydroxides that contain the morphological remains of Fe bacteria (9, 18).

**Physiology and ecology.** The isolation and initial characterization of these iron oxidizers raises many intriguing questions about both their metabolic capabilities and their distribution in Fe-2-rich environments around the world. As mentioned above, a systematic study of an iron seep in Denmark revealed up to 10^9 cells/ml of mat material. Most of these cells were unicellular, and several different morphologies were evident. We have also recently isolated another strain of iron-oxidizing bacterium in a 10^-7 dilution tube from an iron seep in a Michigan wetland. This strain is morphologically distinct from ES-1 and ES-2; however, based on sequence analysis of the 16S rRNA gene, it too shares a common phylogeny with ES-1 and ES-2 (9). Thus, three enrichments with exactly the same selection and from similar environments have yielded three microbes that have unique phenotypes yet which share a close phylogenetic relationship. Furthermore, we have recently been successful at enriching Fe oxidizers with similar growth characteristics to ES-1 and ES-2 from low-temperature hydrothermal vent systems in the Pacific Ocean that are enriched in Fe-2. These strains obligately require a marine salts solution for growth. In total, these results suggest that the importance of unicellular, nonappended Fe-oxidizing microbes in high iron environments may be much greater than had previously been realized.

Another interesting question concerning these microbes is how they cope with encasing themselves in an insoluble iron oxide matrix. Once encrusted in the oxides are they entombed or do they have a mechanism of escape? Preliminary evidence suggests that both ES-1 and ES-2 produce an extracellular matrix, and it is in this matrix that precipitation of the iron oxide matrix occurs. However, if portions of the biosphere were partially oxygenated, the presence of microaerophilic iron-oxidizing bacteria could have contributed to the formation of BIFs. In fact, if some BIFs formed in the deep sea, well below the photic zone, as has been suggested (1), then microaerophilic iron oxidizers might provide a more tenable biological means of oxidation in these environments.

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**References**

12. Hafenbradl, D., M. Keller, R. Dirmeier, R. Rachel, P. Rofnagel, S. Burgraff, H. Huber, and K. O. Stetter. 1996. Ferroglobus placidus gen. nov., sp. nov., a novel hyperthermophilic archaea that oxidizes Fe(II) as an energy source have been described. The best-studied member of this group is *T. ferrooxidans* (5). In environments at a more neutral pH, the role microbes play in the oxidation of ferrous iron has largely been overlooked for reasons stated in the introduction. This is also despite the fact that over the last decade it has become apparent that the reduction of ferric iron coupled to anaerobic respiration is a very important microbial process that can significantly affect the structure of microbial ecosystems in groundwaters and sediments (22). Wherever biologically generated ferrous iron encounters an aerobic environment a potential habitat for iron-oxidizing bacteria is created. In turn, by producing amorphous, poorly crystalline Fe hydroxides, these iron-oxidizing microbes create an excellent substrate for Fe-reducing prokaryotes to utilize under anoxic conditions (6). Thus, it is possible that Fe oxidation and reduction could form a relatively tightly coupled cycle.

Finally, the recent discovery of Fe-oxidizing photosynthetic bacteria in anaerobic sediments has led to an elegant argument suggesting that these microbes could provide a biological explanation for the banded iron formations (BIFs) laid down in the Archean and early Proterozoic eras (3, 31). The crux of this argument is whether the earth’s atmosphere was completely reducing or whether it contained small amounts of oxygen at the time BIFs formed between 1.8 and 3.85 billion years ago. If the atmosphere was completely reducing, then anoxogenic iron-oxidizing phototrophs would have been favored as a means of biological deposition of iron oxide layers. However, if portions of the biosphere were partially oxygenated, the presence of microaerophilic iron-oxidizing bacteria could have contributed to the formation of BIFs. In fact, if some BIFs formed in the deep sea, well below the photic zone, as has been suggested (1), then microaerophilic iron oxidizers might provide a more tenable biological means of oxidation in these environments.