Optimization of Protease Secretion in *Bacillus subtilis* and *Bacillus licheniformis* by Screening of Homologous and Heterologous Signal Peptides

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Gram-positive bacteria of the genus *Bacillus* are industrially well-established microorganisms for the production of extracellular proteins. Due to the availability of relatively cheap large-scale production systems combined with the ability of bacteria to secrete up to 20 to 25 g/liter of a target protein into the growth medium, about 60% of commercially available enzymes are presently produced in *Bacillus* species (14, 28).

The closely related species *Bacillus subtilis* and *Bacillus licheniformis* are widely used as production hosts on an industrial scale, and, in contrast to the well-known production species *Escherichia coli*, they are free of endotoxin and have GRAS (generally regarded as safe) status. The complete genome sequences of strains *B. subtilis* 168 (1, 18) and *B. licheniformis* (isogenic to ATCC 14580) (26, 32) are available, greatly facilitating the construction of improved production strains.

The Sec pathway constitutes the main secretion pathway in *B. subtilis* and *B. licheniformis*. Proteins secreted via the Sec pathway are initially synthesized with an N-terminal hydrophobic signal peptide (SP) consisting of a positively charged N domain followed by a longer, hydrophobic H domain and a C domain consisting of three amino acids which form the signal peptidase recognition site (35). Targeting of a secreted protein to the membrane, the translocation process itself, and subsequent processing by a signal peptidase represent the major bottlenecks for efficient translocation and thus production of heterologous proteins (20).

SPs play a crucial role in the efficient translocation of secretory proteins by the Sec machinery. They interact with the SecA protein, the signal recognition particle (SRP), and the signal peptidase (16, 30). The interaction between the SP and the mature protein is known to influence protein export as well (9, 16, 17). Therefore, the choice of an efficient signal peptide for any given target protein is of utmost importance, and several approaches to identify efficient SPs for different target proteins were taken (2, 4, 6, 15, 21, 38).

Among the huge number of enzymes produced on a large scale by *Bacillus* species, proteases are important for diverse industrial applications (25), with subtilisins being used as additives in household detergents (22, 28). We have chosen as a model for secretion optimization the subtilisin “*Bacillus protease novo type*” (BNP”) from *Bacillus amyleoliquefaciens* ATCC 23844, a well-known enzyme belonging to the alkaline serine proteases (5).

We present a novel approach to improve the extracellular production of this protease using different *Bacillus* host strains. A total number of 393 SPs were fused to the target protein, with 173 SPs originating from *B. subtilis* (termed homologous SPs) and 220 SPs from *B. licheniformis* DSM13 (termed heterologous SPs). The fusion constructs were cloned and expressed in *B. subtilis*, and the resulting library was screened for extracellular protease activity.
**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains, plasmids, and cloning.** The bacterial strains and plasmids used in this study are listed in Table 1. *B. subtilis* TEB1030 was used as an expression host and for cloning and plasmid preparation. *B. licheniformis* H402 and MW3 were used as expression hosts. All DNA manipulations followed standard procedures (27).

**Media, growth conditions, and preparation of culture supernatants.** Bacterial strains were grown in LB medium (5 g yeast extract liter⁻¹, 10 g tryptone liter⁻¹, 10 g NaCl liter⁻¹, pH 7) at 37°C supplemented with 50 µg/ml kanamycin. Protease production was monitored on agar plates containing 1% (vol/vol) skim milk. For screening, the cultures were grown for 20 h at 37°C in deep-well microtiter plates (96 wells, 1 ml LB medium per well; Greiner Bio-One, Frickenhausen, Germany) using a microplate shaker (600 rpm; TiMix 5; Edmund Bühler GmbH, Hechingen, Germany). Culture supernatants were prepared by centrifugation (20 min, 3,200 × g, 4°C) and used immediately to determine proteolytic activity. Each strain was cultured 3-fold in parallel in 3 different wells. Cell-free culture supernatants were prepared by microfiltration (membrane filter, cellulose acetate/nitrate, pore size, 0.22 µm) and used for Western blot analysis. A comparison of proteolytic activities in culture supernatants prepared with and without microfiltration did not reveal any differences, thus indicating that the proteolytic activities could be assigned to cell-free, i.e., secreted, proteases.

**High-cell-density fermentation of *B. subtilis***. Fed-batch fermentations were performed for 48 h with a Laborfors fermentor (volume: 7.5 liter; Infors, Germany) using a high-cell-density cultivation process developed for *B. subtilis* (24). The dissolved oxygen level was set to 30 to 40%, and glucose was fed from a stock solution (500 g glucose/liter). The pH was adjusted by addition of 10% NH₃ buffer, pH 8.6, containing 1% Brij35 to a final concentration of 1.1 mM. Assays were performed with the same buffer in microtiter plates (96 wells, 250-µl reaction volume per well; Greiner Bio-One, Frickenhausen, Germany) at 30°C for 5 min. The amount of p-nitroanilide released was measured at 405 nm using a molar absorption coefficient of 8,480 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ (11). One unit is defined as the activity releasing 1 µmol of p-nitroanilide per minute. Clones showing high proteolytic activity in the culture supernatants were isolated and independently recultivated in microtiter plates (3-fold replicative determination). The amount of protease protein and proteolytic activity were determined by SDS-PAGE and Western blotting in culture supernatants of 35 clones with high extracellular proteolytic activity.

**Protein analysis and immunodetection of BPN.** SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis was performed using a 5% (wt/vol) stacking gel and a 15% separating gel (19). For Western blot analysis, 10 µl of culture supernatant was loaded on a gel and the separated proteins were subsequently blotted onto a polyvinylidene difluoride membrane (Sequiblot membrane; Bio-Rad, Munich, Germany) (12). BPN protein was detected with a rabbit polyclonal antiserum and horseradish peroxidase-labeled goat anti-rabbit secondary antibodies (Bio-Rad, Munich, Germany) using the ECL Western blot kit (Thermo Scientific).

**RESULTS**

**Design and construction of a signal peptide library consisting of Sec type signal peptides.** For optimization of heterologous protein export in different *Bacillus* expression strains, a signal peptide library consisting of 220 *B. licheniformis* SPs and 173 *B. subtilis* SPs was constructed. Subtilisin protease BPN from *B. amyloliquefaciens* ATCC 23844 (NCBI accession no. K02496.1) served as the secretion target, and *B. subtilis* was used as the expression host strain. DNA fragments encoding SPs were cloned upstream of BPN into plasmid pBSMul5, and the resulting library was screened for extracellular protease activity in *B. subtilis* as summarized in Fig. 1.

**Homologous and heterologous signal peptides significantly improve BPN export in *B. subtilis***. *B. subtilis* was transformed with the SP library as described above, and about 1,800 clones (4-fold oversampling) were tested for extracellular protease production on agar plates containing skim milk. About 900 clones formed a clear halo around the colony; they were cultivated in duplicate or triplicate in different microtiter plates, and proteolytic activities in the culture supernatants were determined, allowing identification of eight SPs which efficiently mediated secretion of BPN by *B. subtilis* (Fig. 2). SPs dBli00338 and sYbdN increased the extracellular level of BPN by about 7-fold compared to the *B. amyloliquefaciens* wild-type SP (Fig. 2). Characteristics of the best-performing SPs are...
shown in Table 2. Strikingly, we found that not only SPs from the homologous host *B. subtilis* but also SPs isolated from the heterologous host *B. licheniformis* efficiently mediated BPN\textsuperscript{’} secretion. In fact, *B. licheniformis* SP dBli00338 was among the most efficient SPs we have identified. *B. subtilis* clones expressing constructs with the benchmark SP, wtSP, and the best-performing SP, dBli00338, were also cultivated in a laboratory scale fermentor. BPN\textsuperscript{’} fused to SP dBli00338 was also efficiently secreted under the conditions of high-cell-density fed-batch cultivation. After 48 h of cultivation, proteolytic activities were 8.9 units/ml for wtSP (at a cell density corresponding to an optical density at 600 nm [OD\textsubscript{600}] of 68.3) and 59.7 units/ml for dBli00338 (OD\textsubscript{600} = 65.3), corresponding to a 6- to 7-fold increase of proteolytic activity in the culture supernatant (Fig. 3A), with a concomitant increase in extracellular protease protein (Fig. 3B and C).

Different SPs and expression hosts affect extracellular BPN\textsuperscript{’} levels. Next, we studied whether the best-performing constructs identified in *B. subtilis* would also mediate secretion in two distinct *B. licheniformis* strains of biotechnological relevance. As shown in Fig. 4, we chose three SP-BPN\textsuperscript{’} fusions with clearly different extracellular protein levels of BPN\textsuperscript{’}. We transformed these into *B. licheniformis* H402 and determined extracellular proteolytic activity and amount of BPN\textsuperscript{’} protein (Fig. 4).

SP dBli00338 produced a 9-fold increase of BPN\textsuperscript{’} secretion in *B. licheniformis* H402 compared to the wild-type SP of BPN\textsuperscript{’} based on extracellular proteolytic activity. For all constructs tested, levels of protein export of BPN\textsuperscript{’} were similar in both *B. subtilis* TEB1030 and *B. licheniformis* H402. These results prompted us to comparatively analyze the previously identified SPs in more detail. We additionally chose as an expression host *B. licheniformis* MW3, which is a variant of strain DSM13 and can easily be transformed. The eight best-performing SP-BPN\textsuperscript{’} fusions previously identified in *B. subtilis* were analyzed, together with two fusions which produced a significant decrease in extracellular BPN\textsuperscript{’}. Extracellular protease activities were compared to those detected in the screening host *B. subtilis* TEB1030 (Fig. 5A). The fusion sYdjM::BPN\textsuperscript{’} produced an approximately 3.5-fold increase of protease secretion in each of the three expression hosts, while dYdhT::BPN\textsuperscript{’} produced decreased export relative to the benchmark, wtSP::BPN\textsuperscript{’}, in both *B. licheniformis* hosts. The deviations of relative BPN\textsuperscript{’} export levels in the two *B. licheniformis* hosts with respect to *B. subtilis* levels were compared for 10 different SP-BPN\textsuperscript{’} fusions (Fig. 5B). Interestingly, the relative protein export levels of the analyzed SP-BPN\textsuperscript{’} fusions for both *B. licheniformis* strains were comparable to those observed in *B. subtilis*, with deviations of less than 20%. BPN\textsuperscript{’} fused to SP dYdhT from *B. licheniformis* represents a clear exception, showing in both *B. licheniformis*
strains an extracellular protease level 2-fold lower than that for
*B. subtilis* TEB1030 (Fig. 5B).

**DISCUSSION**

Bacteria belonging to the genus *Bacillus* represent the most
important strains for the industrial production of secreted pro-
teins (28). Hence, extensive research into the optimization of
protein secretion was performed in *Bacillus*, and several pat-
ents which address strategies to relieve bottlenecks for protein
secretion were filed (14, 20, 23). SPs from extracellular pro-
teins known to be secreted at high levels were identified and
modified, e.g., SPs from NprE and AprE (14, 23). Additionally,
homologous and heterologous SPs were tested in different
hosts (8, 36); however, only very few examples of heterologous
SPs producing significant increases in secretion efficiency have
been described (10).

Screening projects published to date have exclusively been
performed with SPs obtained from homologous hosts (4, 21,
38, 39). Here, we have used subtilisin *BPN'/H11032 from
*B. amyloliq-
ufaciens* as a model protein and have studied the influence of
homologous and heterologous SPs on export efficiency of
*BPN'/H11032 by using three different *Bacillus* strains.

A library consisting of about 400 different SPs fused to

![FIG. 2. SPs which produced the most efficient secretion of BPN', identified by screening in *B. subtilis* TEB1030. SPs originating from *B. licheniformis* DSM13 are labeled with the prefix “d,” and SPs from *B. subtilis* 168 are labeled with “s.” The extracellular enzyme activity obtained with the wild-type SP (wtSP) of BPN' was defined as the benchmark (100%, corresponding to 0.83 units per ml). Error bars indicate standard deviations between proteolytic activities detected for each construct in at least three independent cultivations.](http://aem.asm.org/)
subtilisin BPN' was constructed and tested by high-throughput activity screening of *B. subtilis* culture supernatants. Eight SPs were identified, with dBli00338 and sYbdN producing a 7-fold increase of BPN' activity in the culture supernatant compared to wild-type SP. The results obtained by SP screening in microtiter plates were confirmed for wtSP and SP dBli00338 by high-cell-density cultivation of *B. subtilis* in a 3-liter laboratory scale fermentor. Interestingly, our screen did not identify SPs from enzymes like AprE and NprE, which are known to be secreted at high levels. Instead, we predominantly identified SPs originating from so far uncharacterized so-called “Y” proteins. An analysis of the extracellular proteomes of *B. subtilis* (29) and *B. licheniformis* (34) for the presence of proteins carrying the SPs shown in Fig. 2 revealed a significant amount of secretion only for protein YbdN. All other proteins were present in only very small amounts or were not identified at all. It should be noted that, apart from SPs, additional effects like promoter strengths, gene regulation mechanisms, transcriptional and translational efficiencies, and protein folding also affect the amount of secreted proteins. We have also analyzed these secreted proteins with respect to their size, function, and pI, and we were unable to detect any significant similarities between them or between them and subtilisin BPN'. These results suggest that the general approach of choosing an SP from an efficiently secreted protein to direct secretion of another target protein is clearly not the best strategy. A detailed analysis of the eight best-performing SPs did not reveal any significant similarities with respect to charge of the N region, hydrophobicity, signal peptidase recognition site, or D score, as calculated with the SignalP prediction tool. Thus, high-throughput SP screening as described here is the method

**FIG. 3.** High-cell-density cultivation of *B. subtilis* TEB1030 carrying BPN' fused to SPs wtSP and dBli00338. Cells were grown in fed-batch mode in a fermentor (culture volume: 3 liters), and culture supernatants were analyzed for extracellular protease activity (A) and amount of extracellular protease protein (B and C) by SDS-PAGE and subsequent staining with Coomassie brilliant blue (B) and Western blotting using antibodies against subtilisin BPN' (C). The protein bands correspond to a molecular mass of 28 kDa, as deduced from positions of molecular weight standards (New England Biolabs [NEB]; broad range, 2 to 212 kDa, not shown) and thus correspond to the theoretical molecular mass of 27.6 kDa of mature BPN'.

**FIG. 4.** Extracellular activities (A) and amount of protein (B) determined by Western blotting of subtilisin BPN' in culture supernatants of screening host *B. subtilis* TEB1030 and expression host *B. licheniformis* H402. The protein bands correspond to a molecular mass of 28 kDa, as deduced from positions of molecular weight standards (NEB; broad range, 2 to 212 kDa, not shown) corresponding to the theoretical molecular mass of 27.6 kDa of mature BPN'. A *B. subtilis* strain with the vector encoding BPN' without SP served as a control. Error bars indicate the standard deviations of proteolytic activities detected for each construct in at least three independent cultivations.
of choice to quickly identify the most efficient SP for any protein to be secreted.

Another important aspect of this work relates to the fact that industrially relevant production strains are often not amenable to molecular manipulations, including DNA transformation (22, 37). Hence, the use of closely related but better-accessible strains may be required to accomplish high-throughput screening procedures. Therefore, we have determined the levels of extracellular proteases of different SP-BPN’ fusions, which were originally identified in B. subtilis, in the industrially relevant B. licheniformis strain H402 and in B. licheniformis type strain DSM13 (MW3). Interestingly, the majority of the SP-BPN’ fusions revealed comparable levels of extracellular protease in all three Bacillus expression strains. These results suggest that high-throughput prescreening in B. subtilis and subsequent transfer of the best-performing constructs into B. licheniformis for further testing should be performed. SPs interact with components of the Sec machinery, but it is also known that the interaction of SPs and the mature part of the secreted proteins influences the secretion efficiency (9, 16, 17). Although B. subtilis and B. licheniformis are closely related, significant differences in components of their Sec machineries and especially their signal peptides have been described (32, 33). Most of the constructs with different SPs showed similar relative protease export levels in different Bacillus hosts. However, the dYdhT::BPN’ fusion revealed a significantly decreased level of extracellular protease upon transfer into the B. licheniformis hosts, indicating that the efficiency of SPs can still not be predicted a priori.

In summary, we have demonstrated that both homologous and heterologous SPs, when fused to a given target protein, can produce significantly increased amounts of extracellular protein, which can easily be recovered from the culture supernatant. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that a genetically accessible host strain like B. subtilis can be used for a preliminary high-throughput screening of an SP library and that the best-performing SP fusions can subsequently be transferred into a production strain to improve protein export.

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REFERENCES


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