MICROBES AND EVOLUTION
The World That Darwin Never Saw

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ASM Press
Washington, DC 20036
Contents

Contributors ix

Preface xiii

Introduction Darwin and Microbiology 1
Roberto Kolter and Stanley Maloy

Chapter 1 Evolution in Action: A 50,000-Generation Salute to Charles Darwin 9
Richard E. Lenski

Chapter 2 Minimal Genomes and Reducible Complexity 17
Andrés Moya

Chapter 3 Lady Lumps’s Mouthguard 25
Jessica Green

Chapter 4 Trying To Make Sense of the Microbial Census 31
Mitchell L. Sogin

Chapter 5 The View from Below 37
Margaret Riley and Robert Dorit

Chapter 6 Running Wild with Antibiotics 43
Roberto Kolter

Chapter 7 Antibiotic Resistance 49
Diarmuid Hughes

Chapter 8 Bacteria Battling for Survival 59
Thomas M. Schmidt
Contents

Chapter 9  Phage: An Important Evolutionary Force 65
             Darwin Never Knew  
             Forest Rohwer

Chapter 10  The Struggle for Existence: Mutualism 71
             Paul E. Turner

Chapter 11  The Secret Social Lives of Microorganisms 77
             Kevin R. Foster

Chapter 12  Microbes and Microevolution 85
             Evgeni Sokurenko

Chapter 13  Unnecessary Baggage 93
             Stanley Maloy and Guido Mora

Chapter 14  Bacterial Adaptation: Built-In Responses and Random Variations 99
             Josep Casadesús

Chapter 15  The Impact of Differential Regulation on Bacterial Speciation 109
             Eduardo A. Groisman

Chapter 16  An Accidental Evolutionary Biologist: GASP, Long-Term Survival, and Evolution 115
             Steven E. Finkel

Chapter 17  How Bacteria Revealed Darwin’s Mistake (and Got Me To Read On the Origin of Species) 123
             John R. Roth

Chapter 18  The Role of Conjugation in the Evolution of Bacteria 133
             Fernando de la Cruz

Chapter 19  Do Bacteria Have Sex? 139
             Rosemary J. Redfield

Chapter 20  Better than Sex 145
             Harald Brüssow
Contents

Chapter 21  Darwin in My Lab: Mutation, Recombination, and Speciation  151
Miroslav Radman

Chapter 22  Sexual Difficulties  159
Howard Ochman

Chapter 23  Unveiling Prochlorococcus: The Life and Times of the Ocean’s Smallest Photosynthetic Cell  165
Sallie W. Chisholm

Chapter 24  Deciphering the Language of Diplomacy: Give and Take in the Study of the Squid-Vibrio Symbiosis  173
Margaret McFall-Ngai and Ned Ruby

Chapter 25  The Tangled Banks of Ants and Microbes  181
Cameron R. Currie

Chapter 26  Microbial Symbiosis and Evolution  191
Nancy A. Moran

Chapter 27  Coevolution of Helicobacter pylori and Humans  197
Martin J. Blaser

Chapter 28  The Library of Maynard-Smith: My Search for Meaning in the Protein Universe  203
Frances H. Arnold

Chapter 29  In Pursuit of Billion-Year-Old Rosetta Stones  209
Dianne K. Newman

Chapter 30  The Deep History of Life  217
Andrew H. Knoll

Chapter 31  A Glimpse into Microevolution in Nature: Adaptation and Speciation of Bacillus simplex from “Evolution Canyon”  225
Johannes Sikorski
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>On the Origin of Bacterial Pathogenic Species by Means of Natural Selection: A Tale of Coevolution</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippe J. Sansonetti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>The Evolution of Diversity and the Emergence of Rules Governing Phenotypic Evolution</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul B. Rainey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>The Christmas Fungus on Christmas Island</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anne Pringle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>A New Age of Naturalists</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rachel A. Whitaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>The Ship That Led to Shape</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin D. Young</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Postphylogenetics</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W. Ford Doolittle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Irreducible Complexity? Not!</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David F. Blair and Kelly T. Hughes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Many Challenges to Classifying Microbial Species</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephen Giovannoni</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Preface

The idea of putting together a collection of essays on the general topic of microbes and evolution began to take shape during an American Academy of Microbiology colloquium in Seattle, WA, in February of 2007. Not that the topic itself was discussed at the colloquium; rather, like so many ideas, this one emerged during informal discussions over drinks and in good company. At the time there were plans afoot worldwide as to how to celebrate, in 2009, the 200th anniversary of Darwin’s birth and 150th anniversary of the publication of On the Origin of Species. We felt that organizing a colloquium on microbial evolution at the Galapagos Islands—which indeed took place in 2009—would be a fitting tribute to the role that microbes have played in our understanding of the evolutionary process.

From the concept of the colloquium, a second idea emerged quite naturally. We should ask fellow scientists to write short, personal essays about their work. The essays would clearly manifest the investigators’ enthusiasm for their work and the impact of microbes on our understanding of evolution. Moreover, because we wanted to reach a broad audience, we insisted that the essays be written in a way that would make them accessible to the general public, lacking the typical scientific jargon that sometimes makes books about science impenetrable to non-experts.

Of course, going from idea to concrete results takes time and great effort from many individuals. We were fortunate that these ideas were first voiced in the presence of Carol Colgan, then Director of the American Academy of Microbiology. Her great excitement for supporting these projects was critical to get them off the ground. Jeff Holtmeier, then Director of ASM Press, helped greatly during the early stages of planning the essay collection. Once we had the essays...
in hand, Michael Goldberg, ASM’s Executive Director, and Patrick Lacey, Editor of ASM’s magazine Microbe, had the idea of publishing some of the chapters in Microbe, a step that was very useful in bringing attention to the forthcoming collection. We are much indebted to Christine Charlip, current Director of ASM Press, and Ellie Tupper, Senior Production Editor, for their invaluable assistance in putting the finishing touches on the project.

Finally and most importantly, we are grateful to our many colleagues who agreed to step off the beaten path of scientific writing and compose these personal perspectives on their work.

Roberto Kolter and Stanley Maloy
April 2012
INDEX

A
Actinobacteria, 74, 184, 189
Adaptability
    horizontal gene transfer and, 88
    human analogy, 87–88
    mutations and, 88–91
Adaptation
    of Bacillus simplex from
      “Evolution Canyon,” 225–231
    bacterial shape and, 265
    preadaptation, 100, 102
Adaptive immune system, 259–260
Adaptive radiations, 242–245
Addiction modules, 134
Agrobacterium, megaplasmids of, 137
Agrobacterium tumefaciens, 136
Altruism, 78, 80–81, 83
Amanita muscaria, 251–254
Amigoni, David, 263–264
Amino acids
    essential, 194
    produced by Buchnera, 194–195
Amplifications, 127, 128
Animal-microbe associations, 173–180
Antibiotic resistance, 49–58
    β-lactamases, 54
    biofilms and, 79
    current state of, 57–58
    drug-focused mechanisms, 54–55
    drug efflux, 55
    drug inactivation, 54
    drug influx, 55
    fitness increase in resistant bacteria, 52
    genetic pathways for evolution of, 51
    horizontal gene transfer and, 51, 52, 54–57
    in methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), 44, 49, 54
    natural, 51
    to polymyxin B, 111–112
    rapid evolution of, 45–47
    “Red Queen effect,” 45
    selection for, 52–53
    spread by transmissible plasmids, 133
    in Streptococcus pneumoniae, 49, 53
    target-focused mechanisms, 53–54
    drastic alteration of target, 53
    mutation of target, 53
    protection of target, 53–54
    replacement of target, 54

Downloaded from www.asmscience.org by
IP: 54.70.40.11
On: Sat, 17 Aug 2019 06:42:42
Antibiotics
altruism-inhibiting, 82–83
annual production of, 46
broad-spectrum, 40–41
described, 50
ecological role of, 47
history of, 44, 46
mechanism of action, 50
produced by Pseudonocardia,
184, 185, 187
rate of discovery of new, 46–47
role as transcription modulators, 41
spectrum of activity, 51
Antivirulence genes, 237, 238
Ants, symbiosis and, 73–74, 182–189
Aphids, 20, 110, 194–196
Aquiflex aeolicus, 19
Archaea, 6, 33, 61, 256, 257, 270
Aristotle, 263
Arsenic, 210–211, 212
Arsenic trisulfide, 210–211
Artificial breeding, within-species variations and, 85–86
The Art of Scientific Investigation (Beveridge), 71
Asexual reproduction, 140, 159–160
Aurora, Rajeev, 285
Avery, Oswald, 234
Avidians, 15
aas locus, 246–248
Azam, Farooq, 65

B
Bacillus anthracis, 82
Bacillus simplex, 227–231
Bacteria; see also specific species
ability to spread, 87
generation time, 160
genome plasticity, 103–104
life cycle phases, 115–116
mutualism, 74–76
phage-driven evolution of microbial hosts, 69
phage-encoded toxin genes, 68
robustness of, 99–102
shapes, 264–267
size of, 160
Bacterial adaptation, 99–106
Bacterial populations, heterogeneity in, 102–103
Bacteriophage, 65–69
chimeras, 66
of Corynebacterium diphtheriae, 234
cyanophage, 68
global virome, 66–69
infection of bacterial starter cultures in milk fermentation, 148
integration into host chromosome, 148
metagenomics, 67, 68, 69
number per milliliter of seawater, 65
phage-driven evolution of microbial hosts, 69, 148–149
prophage content of pathogens, 148–149
of Shigella, 237–238
toxin genes, 67–68, 234
transduction and, 162
Bacteriocins, 38–40
Banded iron formations, 221
Barghoorn, Elso, 219
Base substitutions, 127
Bass-Becking, Lourens, 26, 87
Baumann, Paul, 178
β-Lactamases, 54, 82
β-Lactams, 54
Beveridge, W.I.B., 71
Binary fission, 13, 119, 148
Binominal system, 283
Biodiversity
biogeography of microbial life, 25–30
map of, 6, 7
microbial census, 31–36
Biofilms, 79–81
Biogeochemical cycles, 31
Biogeography
of *Amanita muscaria*, 252–253
Darwin and, 26, 241–242, 252, 255
dispersal and, 252–253, 258
of microbial life, 25–30, 257–259
Bioluminescent bacteria, 175–179
Biomarkers, 213–214
Biosignature, 212
Biotechnology, 211
Bistability, 102–103
BLAST, 285
Bonen, Linda, 270
Borges, Jorge Luis, 203
Botstein, David, 66
Breitbart, Mya, 68
*Buchnera*, 20–23, 110, 194–196, 239

C
cadA gene, 238
Cadaverine, 238
Cairns, John, 105, 125–127, 129–130
*Calyptogena okutanii*, 20
Cambrian period, 218, 242, 245
“Candidatus Korarchaeum cryptofilum,” 19–20
“Candidatus Pelagibacter ubique,” 19
“Candidatus Phytoplasma asteris,” 19–20
Casas, Veronica, 68
Castenholz, Richard, 281, 286
Cell, minimal, 17, 18
Cell cycle, bacterial, 101–102
Cell division
binary fission, 119
natural selection favoring, 80
Cell morphology, bacterial, 264–267
Chisholm, Sallie, 68
Chlorophyll b, 167
Chloroplasts, ancestry of, 167, 192–193, 270
Christian beliefs, 225–226
Christmas Island, 252–254
Ciprofloxacin, 54
Citrate, metabolism by *E. coli*, 15–16
Classification, 281–296
Coevolution
cheaters and, 200
Darwin’s tangled bank and, 188
described, 188
*Helicobacter pylori* and humans, 197–202
pathogenic species, 233–240
COINS (conjugation inhibitors), 137
Collector curves, 34, 35
Colony
bacterial, 62
“morphotypes,” 117–118, 243, 244
Communities, competition and cooperation in bacterial, 38–41
Community assembly, spatial theory of, 29
Competition, 243
Competitive-Exclusion Principle, 74
Complexity, reducible, 17–23
Comte, Auguste, 78
Conjugation, 56, 133–138, 160–161, 283
conjugative plasmids, 133–134
efficiency and promiscuity of, 136
inhibitors of, 137
interkingdom, 136
in *Shigella*, 236–237
“shoot and pump” model, 135
steps in, 135
Copy number
of genes, 127, 128
plasmid, 134
*Corynebacterium diphtheriae*, 234
Coupling protein, 135
CRISPRs, 69
Cross-feeding, 74–75
Crossover, 152
Cyanobacteria, 220, 221
biomarkers of, 213–214
chloroplast origin and, 270
Cystic fibrosis, 90
D
Dairy microbiology, 148
Dallinger, Rev. William, 10
Darwin, Charles
  on ants and aphids, 73
  on barriers between populations, 257
  biogeography and, 26, 241–242, 252, 255
  on descent with modification, 267
  on disuse, 93
  on divergence, 255
  diversity of life and, 241–242
  endemism and, 242
  fossils and, 218
  Galapagos Islands and, 1, 2, 242
  natural selection, 10, 94, 123–125, 242
  natural variation and, 123
  ongoing nature of evolution, 9–10
  On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, 9, 10, 26, 72, 73, 78, 93, 123–124, 145–147, 181, 218, 233, 255, 263
  spatial scaling of evolutionary diversity, 28
  on species interaction, 182
  stress-induced mutation, 124–125, 126–127, 130
  “tangled bank,” 181, 188, 189
  trade-offs, 62–63
  tree of organisms, 146, 152
  The Voyage of the Beagle, 1, 263–264
  on worker sterility, 78
  Yale Center for British Art 2009 exhibit, 72
Darwin Awards, 205
Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life (Dennett), 203
Davies, Julian, 136
Dehalococcoides sp., 19
Delbrück, Max, 11, 12
Dennett, Dan, 203
Descent with modification, 72, 267
Deubiquitinases, 239, 240
De Varigny, Henri, 10
Differential regulation, impact on barriers between populations, 257
biogeography and, 26, 241–242, 252, 255
on descent with modification, 267
Diversity
  by adaptive radiations, 242–245
  ecological opportunity and, 243
Divinyl chlorophyll, 167
DNA
  as food, 141–143
  methylation, 152–153
  mismatch repair, MutHLS-mediated, 105, 154–155
selfish, 285
DNA damage
  from bile salts, 101
  SOS regulon and, 100, 101
DNA polymerases
  alternative, 104–105
  error-prone, 101, 104–105
DNA replication
  blockage by fluoroquinolones, 104
  errors during, 119
  flexibility in, 101–102
DNA sequencing, next generation, 35
DNA topoisomerases, 54, 104
DNA transfer, 141, 153; see also specific mechanisms
  as bacterial sex, 160–162
  effect on phylogenetic classification attempts, 162–163
DNA uptake, 141–143
by Helicobacter pylori, 199
Dobzhansky, Theodosius, 45, 225, 233
Dogs, within-species variations in, 85
Domains of life, 61, 256
Dominguez Bello, Maria Gloria, 199
Drug efflux, 55
Drug inactivation, 54
Drug influx, 55
Duplications, 127, 128

E
Earth, age of, 218
Ecological opportunity, 243
Efficiency and power, trade-off between, 63
Efflux systems, 55
Ehrlich, Paul, 234
Endemism, 242
Endosymbionts
    Buchnera, 20–23, 110, 194–196, 239
    mitochondria and chloroplasts, 191–193
    reduced genomes of, 18, 20, 193–194, 239
Enteric bacteria, 109–112
Enterobacteriaceae, 109–110
Epigenetic switching, 102
Epigenetic variation, 102
    preadaptation of bacterial populations by, 102
Epithelia, colonization by microbes of, 173–174
Escherichia coli
    cell attachment protein, 90
    colony morphotypes, 117–118
    cross-feeding in, 75
    differences from Salmonella, 110
    flagella, 275
    genome size, 118
    mobilome of, 133
    in Muta-Flor capsules, 87
    mutations in, 11–16, 152–153
    “pathovars,” 236
    polymorphic populations in selection experiments, 74, 75
    recombination, rate of, 153
    recombination with Salmonella genome, 155
reproductive accuracy, 119
reproductive rate of, 116
shape mutants, 266
spontaneous mutation, rate of, 153
strain differences in genomes, 153
urinary tract infections, 90
variability in ability to cause disease, 86–87
Escovopsis, 184, 185, 187–188
Euprymna scolopes, 175–179
“Everything is everywhere” hypothesis, 26, 27
Evolution
    in action, 9–16
    directed, 207
    macroevolution, 86
    microevolution, 85–91, 225–231
    modular, 66
    mosaic, 66
    in nonbiological systems, 150
    phage-driven evolution of microbial hosts, 69, 148–149
    repeatability of, 245–246
    “replaying the tape,” 121, 245
    trade-offs, 62–63
Evolutionary diversity, metrics for quantifying, 28–29
“Evolution Canyon,” 227–231
Exb proteins, 278
Experimental Evolution (de Varigny), 10
Extinction, 200, 259
Extremophiles, 257

F
Falkow, Stanley, 235
Fatty acid analysis of cell membranes, 229–230
Finches, Galapagos, 2–3, 62–63, 242
Fisher, R.A., 284
Fission; see Binary fission
“Fitness” in microbial world, 62, 63
Flagella
  of Buchnera aphidicola, 20–23
  complexity of, 275–280
  motility by, 79
  in pathogenic species, 238
Fluoroquinolones, 104
Food, DNA as, 141–143
Formal, Sam, 236
Fossil record, 13, 218
Fossils, 217–222
  age estimation by radioactive decay, 218
  Darwin and, 218
  microscopic, 218–219
  molecular, 213, 214, 219
  morphological, 212
  stromatolites, 220
  trilobites, 218
Fox, G.E., 33
Fuhlrott, Johann, 145, 146
Fungi
  Amanita muscaria, 251–254
  symbiosis with ants, 73–74, 182–189
G
Galapagos Islands, 1, 2, 63, 242
GASP (growth advantage in stationary phase), 115–121
Gastric cancer, 197
Gause, Georgii, 74
Gause’s Law, 74
Gedankenexperiment, 245
Gene-inactivation experiments, 18
Gene mixing, 139–1144
Gene networks, 100, 101
Generation time, 160
Gene reduction, in pathogens, 237, 238, 239
Genes
  copy number changes, 127, 128
  essential, 18, 20
  number in mitochondria, 193, 195–196
  pseudogenes, 94–97, 238
  selfish, 66, 67
Genetic architecture, influence on evolution of, 246, 248–249
Genetic barriers, 153–154, 257
Gene transfer; see DNA transfer
Genome
  minimal, 17–23
  phage, 66
  plasticity of bacteria, 103–104
  reduction in endosymbionts, 18, 20, 193–194, 239
  size of symbionts, 195–196
Genomic islands, 136–137
Geobiology, 209–214
Goldenfeld, Nigel, 260
Gould, Steven Jay, 121, 245
Grinsted, John, 135
Growth advantage in stationary phase (GASP), 115–121
Guilds, 38, 39, 41
Gut bacteria, mutualism in, 75
H
Hacker, Jörg, 235
Haeckel, Ernst, 3
Haemophilus influenzae, DNA uptake by, 143
Haldane, J.B.S., 282
Hallucinogenic fungus, 252
Haloarchaea, 270
Hardin, Garrett, 80
Hatful, Graham, 66
Hawaiian bobtail squid (Euprymna scolopes), 175–179
Helicase II, 154–155
Helicobacter pylori, 197–202
Hendrix, Roger, 66
Henson, Jim, 49–53
Heterogeneity in bacterial populations, 102–103
History of life, 217–223
Horizontal gene transfer, 162, 272; see also Conjugation;
  Transduction;
  Transformation
  antibiotic resistance, 51, 52, 54–57
  bacterial adaptability and, 88
gene acquisition by, 95, 110–113
as mechanism for species formation, 136
of plasmids, 136
rate of, 103
regulation of genes acquired by, 112–113
virulence and, 235
Hornets, 77
Host range, effect of pseudogenes on, 95–97
“Host specificity” genes, 95
Hugenholtz, Phil, 69
Humans coevolution of Helicobacter pylori and humans, 197–202
population growth, 80
Huxley, Julian, 11
Hybridization, 179–180; see also Symbiosis
Hybrids, interspecies, 154–155
Hypermutable bacterial lineages, 104

I
Ig nicoccus hospitalis, 19
Immunity, 234
Immunity protein, 39
Infectious Multiple Drug Resistance (Falkow), 235
Injectisome, 279, 280
Innate immune defense mechanisms, 238
Insects, social, 77–78
Intelligent design, 23
Introns, 285
Iron formations, banded, 221
Irreducible complexity, 23, 275, 278, 280

J
Jacob, François, 240
Japanese pinecone fish, 177
Joyce, Gerald, 65
“Junk” DNA, 113–114

K
Karl, Dave, 178
kcp locus, 237
Kimura, M., 284
Kingdoms, 3, 4, 256
Kirschner, Denise, 198, 200
Klebsiella, 188
Kolter, Roberto, 116
Kropotkin, Prince Piotr Alexeyevich, 78–79

L
lac duplication, 129–130
Lake Louise, 217
Last Universal Common Ancestor (LUCA), 272
Lateral gene transfer, 272; see also Horizontal gene transfer
Lawrence, Jeff, 66
Lazar, Sara, 117
Leaf-cutter ants, 183, 185
Lenski, Richard, 155–157
Leprosy, 235–236
Leucine, 196
Lewis, I.M., 11
LexA repressor, 100
Library analogy, 203–207
Life, minimum requirements for, 17–18
Life cycle phases, bacterial, 115–116
Lipids, 213, 214, 219
Listeria monocytogenes, 90
Long-term stationary phase, 115–116
Low-abundance taxa, 34–35
Lowenthal, David, 214
Luria, Salvador, 11, 12
Lynch, Michael, 285

M
MacLeod, Colin, 234
Macroevolution, 86
Macrophages, 149
survival of bacteria within, 90
Malthus, Reverend Thomas, 72
Mann, Nick, 68
Margulis, Lynn, 270
Mar regulon, 101
Marshall, Barry, 197
Maurelli, Tony, 237
Maynard Smith, John, 273
Maynard-Smith library, 203–207
McCarty, Maclyn, 234
Mendel, Gregor, 145, 146
Messenger RNA (mRNA), 4, 60, 100
Metabolic diversity, 212
Metabolism, microbial, 210–214
Metagenomics, 272, 282
Meth/chnikof, Elie, 234
*Methanococcus aeolicus*, 19
*Methanococcus jannaschii*, 285
Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), 44, 49, 54
Methylation of DNA, 152–153
Meyer, Ernst, 153
Microbes
  - age of origin of, 212–213
  - numbers of, 31, 32
  - Microbial census, 31–36
  - Microbial diversity, 26–29
    - enormity of, 36, 256
    - environmental samples, 33–35
    - geographic barriers and, 257
    - natural distribution of, 256
    - rare biosphere, 35, 36
  - The Microbial World, 269
Microevolution, 85–91, 225–231
  - adaptive mutations, 88–91
  - described, 86
  - horizontal gene transfer and, 88
Mismatch repair, MutHLS-mediated, 105, 154–155
Mitochondria, 191–193
Mobilome, 133, 138
Modular evolution, 66
Molecular phylogenetics, 33
Monera, 3, 6
Monod, Jacques, 91
Morin, James, 176
Morphotypes, 117–118, 243, 244, 282
Mosaic evolution, 66
MotA/MotB proteins, 278
mRNA (messenger RNA), 4, 60, 100
MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), 44, 49, 54
Mueller’s ratchet, 97
Muta-Flor, 87
Mutation
  - adaptive, 88–91
  - amplifications, 127, 128
  - of antibiotic target, 53
  - by Avidians, 15
  - beneficial, 119–120, 124
  - biodiversity and, 32
  - deleterious, 119
  - from DNA replication error, 119
  - duplications, 127, 128
  - effect on protein, 206
  - fluorescent monitoring of, 151–152
  - GASP (growth advantage in stationary phase), 118–120
  - hypermutable bacterial lineages, 104
  - large-effect, 126, 130
  - in mitochondrial genes, 193
  - neutral, 94
  - origins of, 124
  - pathoadaptive, 89
  - pseudogenes, 94–97
  - random, 94, 125, 126
  - reading frame changes, 127
  - in rRNA-encoding gene, 60
  - small-effect, 127–131
  - spontaneous, 94
  - transitions, 127
  - variation in mutation rates, 104–105
Mutation rate, 159
  - in *Escherichia coli*, 153
  - selection effect on, 124, 125, 128–129
  - for small-effect mutations, 127–128
  - variation in mutation rates, 104–105
  - *mut* deficient strains, 156
MutL, MutS, and MutH, 105, 153–154
Mutualism, 71–76, 182–189; see also Symbiosis
“descent with modification” quote, 267
“disuse” quote, 267
ongoing nature of evolution, 9–10
“tangled bank” quote, 181
opportunistic pathogens, 73
Origin of transfer (oriT), 134, 135
Orpiment, 210–211
Overlap, bacterial robustness and, 101
Oxygen
ancient Earth and, 221–222
from photosynthesis, 211, 213–214
Parasites
of ant-tended fungus gardens, 184–189
obligate, 99
Parasitism, 72–73
Partition systems, 134
Pathogenicity islands, 235, 237
Pathogens
adaptive mutations, 88–91
differences between Salmonella and E. coli, 110
horizontal gene transfer and, 88
host range of, 95–97
opportunistic, 73
origin of species by means of natural selection, 233–240
phage-encoded toxin genes, 68
prophage content of, 148–149
trait acquisition by conjugation, 138
PCR for DNA amplification from environmental samples, 33, 35
Penicillin binding proteins (PBPs), 53

N
Nash, John, 200
Nash equilibrium, 200–201
Naturalist (Wilson), 1–2
Naturalists, 255–261
Natural selection
cheaters, 200
Darwin and, 10, 94, 123–125, 242
library analogy, 204–205
mutations and, 123–125
pathogenic species origin by means of, 233–240
sexual reproduction and, 140
Nealson, Ken, 177
Negative hypothesis, 278
Neutral mutation, 94
Neutral variation, 285
Nevo, Eviatar, 227
Next generation DNA sequencing technology, 35
Niche specificity, 243
Noise, molecular, 102
Nostoc, 286

O
Ochman, Howard, 110
ompT gene, 237
On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (Darwin), 72–73, 123–124, 145–147, 233, 263
on ant-aphid interaction, 73
on artificial selection, 10
on biogeography, 26, 255
Closing passage, 9

P
Pace, Norman, 6, 33, 256, 270–271, 272
Parasites
of ant-tended fungus gardens, 184–189
obligate, 99
Parasitism, 72–73
Partition systems, 134
The Past Is a Foreign Country (Lowenthal), 214
Pathogenicity islands, 235, 237
Pathogens
adaptive mutations, 88–91
differences between Salmonella and E. coli, 110
horizontal gene transfer and, 88
host range of, 95–97
opportunistic, 73
origin of species by means of natural selection, 233–240
phage-encoded toxin genes, 68
prophage content of, 148–149
trait acquisition by conjugation, 138
PCR for DNA amplification from environmental samples, 33, 35
Penicillin binding proteins (PBPs), 53
Index

Penicillins, 54
Peptic ulcer disease, 197
Perfection, 285
Phage; see Bacteriophage
Photobacterium leiognathi, 176
Photosynthesis
  appreciation of, 165–166
  oxygenic, 211, 213–214
Phylogenetics, 269–273
Phylogenetic trees
  Darwin’s tree of organisms, 146, 152
  Tree of Life, 27, 146, 150, 256, 269, 271–272
Phylogeny, described, 33
Phylotypes, 34, 35
Phylotyping, 271, 273
Phytoplankton
  cell size, 166
  photosynthesis by, 166
  triggering blooms of, 171
Picrophilus torridus, 19
Pigeons, 191
Pilus, 161
Plaque, 79
Plasmids, 56, 271
  chromosome integrated, 136
  conjugative, 133–138
  copy number, 134
  mobilizable, 134
  origin of transfer (oriT), 134
  R388, 135–137
  role in adaptation, 103
  size of, 134
  stability determinants, 134
  transmissible, 133–134
  virulence, 236–237, 239
Plasticity, bacteria genome, 103–104
Polymerase chain reaction (PCR),
  for DNA amplification
    from environmental samples, 33, 35
Polyorphic populations in
  selection experiments, 74, 75
Polymyxin B, 111–112
Polyunsaturated fatty acids, as
  inhibitors of conjugation, 137
Population genetics, 226, 272
Power and efficiency, trade-off
  between, 63
Preadaptation, 100, 102
Privileged niches, 199
Prochlorococcus, 165–171
  discovery of, 166–167
  diversity of strains, 168, 169, 170
  “ecotypes,” 168
  genome sequence, 168–169
  number of genes, 169
  number of organisms, 166
  P. marinus, 19
  pan genome, 169–170
  psbA genes, 68
Prophage, 148–149
Proteins
  directed evolution, 207
  Maynard-Smith library analogy, 204–207
  psbA genes, 68
Pseudogenes, 94–97, 238
Pseudomonas aeruginosa, 82, 89–90
Pseudomonas fluorescens, 243–248
Pseudonocardia, 184–187, 189
Q
  Quinolone antibiotics, 54
Quorum sensing, 81
R
  Radioactive decay, fossil age
    estimation by, 218
  Radioisotopes, 270
  Random chance, role in evolution, 93–94
  “Rare biosphere,” 35, 36
  Raymond, Percy, 218
Reading frame changes, 127
RecA recombinase, 154–155
Recombination, 141, 272, 273
  fluorescent monitoring of,
    151–152
  inter-“species,” 273
  interstrain, 273
meiotic, 284
prevention of interspecies, 154
rate in *Escherichia coli*, 153
sex as, 283
“Red Queen effect,” 45
Reducible complexity, 17–23
Redundancy, bacterial robustness and, 101
Regulator proteins, 111–113
Regulatory circuits, 100, 111–112
Regulatory RNAs, 114
Reichelt, John, 178
Relative abundance, 34
Relaxase, 135
Reproductive isolation, 153–154
Resistance; see also Antibiotic resistance to bacteriocins, 39–40
Restriction endonucleases, strain-specific, 199
*Rhizobium*, megaplasmids of, 137
Ribosomal oligonucleotide cataloging, 269
Ribosomal RNA (rRNA), 4–5, 60; see also rRNA gene sequences
Ribosomes, 4–5, 60, 63
Rifampin, 53
RNA messenger RNA (mRNA), 4, 60, 100
regulatory RNAs, 114
ribosomal RNA (rRNA), 4–5, 60
RNA polymerase gene, mutation in, 53
Roller derby, 25, 29–30
Rose, George, 285
Roseophage SIO1, 66
Roux, Emile, 234
RpoS-dependent stress response, 104–105
rRNA gene sequences, 270
of environmental samples, 33–35, 270–271
evolutionary comparisons from, 60–61
expense of sequencing, 34
molecular phylogenetics, 33
next generation DNA sequencing technology, 35
sequence alignment, 5
Ruby, Ned, 176
*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, 155
*Saccharomyces paradoxus*, 155
*Salmonella enterica*, 82
differences from *E.coli*, 110
DNA repair in, 101
flagella, 275, 277
Mar regulon, 101
recombination with *Escherichia* genome, 155
serovar Typhi, 94–97
serovar Typhimurium, 94–97, 277
SAR11, 284
Sedimentary rocks, 217, 219–221
Segall, Anca, 66
Selection effect on mutation rate, 124, 125, 128–129
nonlethal selection regime, 126
SeqA protein, 152
Sequence alignment, of ribosomal RNA (rRNA) genes, 5
Serotypes, evolution of, 238
Sex, bacterial, 133, 139–144, 146–147, 159–163
Sexual reproduction, 139–144, 283
as motor for genetic diversity in a population, 147
Shapes, bacterial, 264–267
*Shigella*, 87, 236–239
Siderophores, 38
Silencing, 113
Small-effect mutations, 127–131
Smith, John Maynard, 200
Social insects, 77–78
Sociality in microbes, 78–83
Sogin, Mitchell, 271
SOS regulon/response, 100, 101, 104
SoxRS regulon, 101
Spatial distribution of genome size of symbionts, biodiversity, 25–26, 28–29
Spatial theory of community assembly, 29
Speciation, 151–157, 284
of Bacillus simplex from “Evolution Canyon,”
horizontal gene transfer and, 136
impact of differential regulation on, 109–114
Species
biological definition, 147, 283
challenges to classifying microbial, 281–286
diversity with bacterial, 147
terspecies reproductive barriers, 153–154
nature of bacterial, 55–56, 57
number of named bacterial, 147
Species-area relationship, 27
Species concept, sexuality linked to, 147
Species richness, 27–28
Spencer, Herbert, 78
Spiegelman, Sol, 269
Squid-Vibrio symbiosis, 175–179
Stars, 31
Stewart, William, 44
Streptococcus pneumoniae, 49, 53
Streptococcus pyogenes, 148–149
Streptococcus thermophilus, 148
Stress-induced mutation, 124–125, 126–127, 130–131
Stress response, RpoS-dependent, 104–105
Stromatolites, 220
Sulfolobus, 257–260
Sulfur, 213, 220, 221, 222
Sullivan, Matt, 68
Symbiosis, 173–180
of Amanita muscaria, 252
ant-microbe, 182–189
aphid-Buchnera, 20, 110, 194–196
evolution and, 191–196
as evolutionary innovation, 189
gene loss and, 193–194
genome size of symbionts, 195–196
mitochondria and chloroplasts, 191–193
squid-Vibrio, 175–179
Synechococcus, 166, 167
Systematics, 270

T
Taylor, John, 257
Thiothrix, 283–294
Thymidylate synthase gene, 285
Tol proteins, 278
Toxin, phage-encoded, 68
Toxin-antitoxin systems, 134
Trade-offs, 62–63
“Tragedy of the commons,” 80
Transcription factors, 111–113
Transduction, 56, 162, 283
Transformation, 56, 162, 283
Transitions, 127
Translation, 63
Tree of Life, 27, 146, 150, 256, 269, 271–272
Trilobites, 218
Tryptophan, 195, 196
Tuberculosis, 53, 90
Tyler, Stanley, 219
Type III secretion system, 237–240
Type IV secretion system, 135, 137
Typhoid fever, 94, 235

U
Universal tree of life, 5
Ureaplasma urealyticum, 20
UvrD, 154–155

V
vacA gene, 199
Vancomycin, 54
Variation, heritable, 152
Vibrio cholerae, 82
chromosome 2 of, 137
Vibrio fischeri, 175–179
Virchow, Rudolf, 146
“Virome,” 66–69
Virulence genes, 110
Virulence plasmids, 236–237, 239
Viruses; see also Phage
  absence from tree of life, 150
  global virome, 66–69
  infecting Prochlorococcus, 170
  infection of bacterial starter cultures in milk fermentation, 148
  metagenomics, 67, 68, 69
  number in biosphere, 73
  as obligate parasites, 73
  of Sulfolobus, 259–260
  uncultured, 67
von Behring, Emil, 234
The Voyage of the Beagle (Darwin), 1, 263–264

W
  Wallace’s line, 253
  Warren, Robin, 197
  Wilson, Edward O., Naturalist, 1–2
  Woese, Carl, 3–5, 6, 12, 32, 33, 60–61, 165, 256, 260, 269–271
  wsp locus, 246–248

Y
  Yeast, interspecies hybrids, 155
  Yersin, Alexandre, 234
  Young, Dick, 176, 178