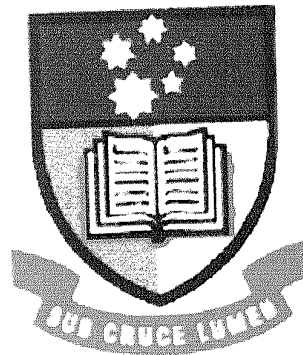




**Isolation and characterisation of novel
non-ribosomal peptide synthetase genes from the entomopathogenic
Xenorhabdus bovienii T228**

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Abstract

Xenorhabdus spp. are entomopathogenic bacteria grouped within the family Enterobacteriaceae. These bacteria exhibit a colony pleiomorphism, termed phase variation in which phase 1 and phase 2 forms differ in expression of a variety phenotypic characteristics. The main aim of this thesis was to identify and characterise genes involved in the expression of phase variant characteristics. A secondary aim was the construction of a RecA mutant of *X. bovienii* to facilitate genetic complementation analysis and the introduction of foreign DNA. This construct was also used to determine a possible role for *recA* in phase variation and virulence.

The *recA* gene of *Xenorhabdus bovienii* was cloned and sequenced. Phylogenetic analysis of *recA* sequence data confirmed the placement of *Xenorhabdus* within Enterobacteriaceae. A *recA* insertion mutant of *X. bovienii* was constructed using allelic exchange mutagenesis. The *recA* mutant displayed phase variation and did not show any differences in expression of the phase dependent characteristics phospholipase C, lipase, haemolysin, protease, antimicrobial activity or Congo Red binding. No differences in the virulence of *X. bovienii*, or the *recA* mutant, for *Galleria mellonella* were observed. These results suggest *recA* is unlikely to be involved in phase variation, or the expression of phase dependent characteristics.

Transposon mutagenesis was used to identify regions of the *X. bovienii* chromosome involved in expression of phase variant characteristics. Five transposon insertion mutants showing a disruption in the expression of phospholipase C, Congo Red, haemolytic and antimicrobial activity were further characterised. *X. bovienii* chromosomal DNA flanking each transposon insertion was mapped, cloned and sequenced. Three transposon insertion mutants; XB26(20), XB29(45) and XB34(45) inserted into a common 15,582 bp region of DNA showing significant homology at the amino acid level to non-ribosomal peptide synthetases (NRPSs). Two partial open reading frames (ORFs) (*xpsD* and *xpsC*) and two complete ORFs (*xpsA* and *xpsB*) were identified. ORF *xpsD* is 653 bp and shows significant homology at the amino acid level to ATP-binding cassette transporters required for the secretion of NRPSs pyoverdine and syringomycin. 788 bp downstream of *xpsD*, ORF *xpsA* has the potential to encode a protein of 1089 amino acids with a predicted *Mr* value of 122,980. 37 bp downstream of *xpsA*, ORF *xpsB* has the potential to encode a 3316 amino acid protein with a predicted *Mr* value of 368,263. The stop codon (ATGA) of *xpsB* overlaps the initiation codon (ATGA) of the 1177 bp ORF *xpsC*. ORFs *xpsA*, *xpsB* and *xpsC* are predicted to have an operon arrangement. BLASTX analysis of the *xpsABC* region shows

homology at the amino acid level to NRPSs such as the plant toxin syringomycin (*Pseudomonas syringae* pv. *syringae*) (Guenzi *et al.*, 1998), tumor suppressing cryptophycins (*Nostoc* sp. GSV224) (Subbaraju *et al.*, 1997) and the peptide antibiotic tyrocidine (Mootz & Marahiel, 1997b). The portion of *X. bovienii* NRPS identified to date is predicted to activate the amino acids serine, 6-*N*-hydroxylysine and glutamine. On the basis of this analysis, this NRPS is predicted to be a siderophore antibiotic.

To investigate regulation of the *X. bovienii* NRPS an *xpsA-lacZ* transcriptional fusion was constructed and introduced into the *X. bovienii* chromosome by transposon mutagenesis. Over a 96 hr incubation period the level of β -galactosidase activity increase 2 - 3 fold in *X. bovienii* broth cultures. This is in comparison to an *E. coli* based *xpsA-lacZ* construct, where levels of β -galactosidase activity remained constant over the 96 hr incubation period. These results suggest the expression of *X. bovienii* NRPS may be linked to a cell density dependent mechanism. The levels of β -galactosidase expression in *xpsA-lacZ* transcriptional fusion mutant cultures did not change when cultures were grown in 20% (v/v) conditioned culture medium. This result suggests a quorum sensing mechanism similar to that observed in *Serratia liquefaciens* (Lindum *et al.*, 1998) is not involved in expression of *X. bovienii* NRPS. Attempts to detect XpsA expression in *X. bovienii* whole cell lysates using an XpsA antiserum were unsuccessful, and this may reflect an extremely low level of XpsA expression.

To determine a function for *X. bovienii* NRPS, inframe deletion mutants in *xpsA*, *xpsB* and *xpsAB* were constructed by allelic exchange mutagenesis. Culture supernatants were tested for cytotoxic activity against cultured Schneider's cells. Also, whole bacterial cells were injected into *Galleria mellonella* to assess subsequent haemocyte damage by transmission electron microscopy. No significant difference in cytotoxic activity was observed between wild type and inframe deletion mutant strains.

The antimicrobial activity of phase 1 *X. bovienii* and in-frame deletion mutant supernatants against the indicator organism *M. luteus* was tested using a microtitre tray bioassay. Surprisingly, both the single and double in-frame deletion mutants showed a greater level of antimicrobial activity than the wild type *X. bovienii* supernatant. This result may be explained by the modular nature of NRPS. Deletion of one or more modules may result in production of a modified antimicrobial peptide. However, this observation can only be resolved by purification of the bioactive peptide and structural comparison of the wild type and mutant derived compounds in the absence of other background bacterial compounds.

Part 1

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Statement	iii
Abbreviations	iv
Note	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Quotation	ix

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Classification	1
1.2.1	Reclassification of <i>X. luminescens</i>	2
1.3	Placement of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> within Enterobacteriaceae	5
1.3.1	Reasons for and against placement of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> within Enterobacteriaceae	5
1.4	Basic biology of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> spp.	6
1.5	Lifecycle of the bacteria and nematode symbiotic complex	7
1.5.1	Entry of the symbiotic complex into the insect haemocoel	7
1.5.1.1	Insect physical and behavioral barriers to nematode infection	10
1.5.1.2	<i>Heterorhabditis</i> and <i>Steinernema</i> display different mechanisms for invasion of insect haemocoels	10
1.5.2	Release of bacterial into the insect host haemocoel	11
1.5.3	The role of antimicrobial agents in maintenance of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> monoxenies after insect host death	11
1.5.3.1	Antimicrobial agents expressed by <i>Xenorhabdus</i>	12
1.5.3.1.1	Xenorhabdins	12
1.5.3.1.2	Xenocoumacins	15
1.5.3.1.3	Indole derivatives	15
1.5.3.2	Antimicrobial agents expressed by <i>Photorhabdus</i>	15

	1.5.3.2.1	Hydroxystilbenes	15
	1.5.3.2.2	Non-ribosomal peptide synthetases (NRPSs)	16
	1.5.3.3	Bacteriocins (Defective Phages)	17
1.5.4	Evidence against antimicrobial compounds produced by <i>Xenorhabdus</i> having a role in prevention of secondary invasion of insect carcasses by contaminating bacteria		20
1.5.5	Re-association of the symbiotic complex		22
	1.5.5.1	Specificity of bacteria/nematode symbiotic interaction	22
1.5.6	Transmission of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> spp.		23
	1.5.6.1	Establishment of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> in the nematode intestine	26
	1.5.6.1.1	Host-symbiont specificity in Steinernematidae	26
	1.5.6.1.2	Host-symbiont specificity in Heterorhabditidae	26
1.6	Insect defence mechanisms		27
	1.6.1	Timing of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> release into the insect haemocoel	28
	1.6.2	Insect opsonin mediated immunity	28
	1.6.3	Nematode interaction with insect haemolymph	28
	1.6.4	Insect inducible antibacterial peptide mediated immunity	29
	1.6.5	<i>Xenorhabdus</i> interactions with insect haemolymph	29
	1.6.5.1	<i>Xenorhabdus</i> lipopolysaccharide (LPS)	30
	1.6.5.2	Inhibition of prophenoloxidase cascade	31
1.7	Current Field Use		33
	1.7.1	Entomopathogenic nematode application to crops	33
1.8	Molecular manipulation of <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> spp.		35
	1.8.1	Transformation	35
	1.8.2	Conjugation	36
	1.8.3	Transduction	37
1.9	Phase Variation		37
	1.9.1	The role of phase variation and significance of P2 bacteria	38
	1.9.2	Differences in nutrient assimilation by phase variants	41
	1.9.3	Nematode preferential selection of P1 bacteria	41
	1.9.4	Induction and repression of phase variation by environmental signaling	42

1.9.5	The molecular basis of phase variation in both <i>Xenorhabdus</i> and <i>Photorhabdus</i> spp.	42
1.9.5.1	Plasmid based regulation of phase variation	43
1.9.5.1.1	Megaplasmids	43
1.9.5.2	Regulation of phase variant characteristics by post-translational modifications	44
1.9.5.2.1	<i>P.luminescens</i> lipase (<i>lip-1</i>)	44
1.9.5.2.2	<i>P.luminescens</i> protease	44
1.9.6	The proposed role of repressor molecules in phase variation	45
1.9.6.1	Regulation of the <i>P.luminescens lux</i> operon by a proposed repressor	46
1.9.6.2	Identity of the <i>lux</i> operon repressor	47
1.9.7	Homoserine lactone autoinducers	47
1.9.7.1	<i>N</i> - β -Hydroxybutanoyl homoserine lactone (HBHL) autoinducer	48
1.9.7.2	Experimental evidence for a homoserine lactone autoinducer using the <i>V. harveyi lux</i> operon	48
1.9.8	Repression or induction of the <i>lux</i> operon	49
1.9.9	Independent regulation of a collection of phase variant characteristics	49
1.10	Project Aims	50

Chapter 2 Materials and Methods

2.1	Bacterial strains and plasmids	52
2.2	Bacterial growth media	52
2.3	Maintenance of bacterial strains	67
2.4	Animals	67
2.5	Chemicals and reagents	67
2.6	Enzymes and antibodies	68
2.7	DNA extraction procedures	68
2.7.1	Plasmid DNA isolation	68
2.7.2	Preparation of bacterial genomic DNA	70
2.8	Analysis and manipulation of DNA	70
2.8.1	DNA quantitation	70
2.8.2	Restriction endonuclease digestion of DNA	70

2.8.3	Agarose gel electrophoresis of DNA	70
2.8.4	Determination of restriction fragment size	71
2.8.5	Extraction of DNA fragments from agarose gels	71
2.8.6	Dephosphorylation of DNA using shrimp alkaline phosphatase (SIP)	71
2.8.7	End-filling of linear DNA by T4 polymerase	72
2.8.8	<i>In vitro</i> cloning	72
2.9	Construction of uni-directional deletions of cloned DNA	72
2.9.1	Plasmid pCT406 and pCT407 top strands	73
2.9.2	Plasmid pCT406 complementary strand	73
2.9.3	Plasmid pCT407 complementary strand	73
2.10	High efficiency electrotransformation of <i>E. coli</i>	74
2.10.1	Preparation of competent cells	74
2.10.2	Electroporation procedure	74
2.11	Bacterial conjugation	74
2.12	Non-radioactive probe construction	75
2.12.1	Labeling of double stranded DNA	75
2.12.2	End labeled oligonucleotide probe	75
2.12.3	Digoxigenin labeling of DNA probes using PCR	75
2.13	Southern hybridisation	76
2.13.1	Southern transfer	76
2.13.2	Hybridisation	76
2.13.2.1	Double stranded DNA probes	76
2.13.2.2	Oligonucleotide probes	76
2.13.2.3	Detection	77
2.14	Oligonucleotide synthesis	77
2.15	Polymerase Chain Reaction	77
2.15.1	Standard PCR reaction conditions	77
2.15.2	Rapid screening of chromosomal mutations and plasmid libraries	84
2.15.3	Plasmid Assisted PCR Rescue (PAPCR)	84
2.15.3.1	PCR amplification of 5' <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i> DNA	84
2.15.3.2	PCR amplification of 3' <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>xpsC</i> DNA	86
2.16	Sequence analysis	86
2.16.1	Dye-primer sequencing	86
2.16.2	Dye-terminator sequencing	87
2.17	Analysis of sequence data	87

2.18	RNA Analysis	88
2.18.1	RNA extraction	88
2.18.2	RNA quantitation	88
2.18.3	Primer extension analysis	88
2.18.3.1	Oligonucleotide labeling	88
2.18.3.2	Primer extension reaction	89
2.18.4	Northern Analysis	89
2.18.4.1	DNA probe preparation for use in Northern hybridisation analysis	89
2.18.4.2	Separation of RNA on denaturing agarose gels	89
2.18.4.3	Northern transfer	90
2.18.4.4	Hybridisation	90
2.18.4.5	Detection	90
2.18.5	Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)	90
2.19	Isolation of XpsA expressed in <i>E. coli</i>	91
2.19.1	Construction of plasmids for over-expression of XpsA	91
2.19.2	Over-expression of XpsA	91
2.20	Preparation of whole cell lysates	91
2.21	Sodium dodecyl sulphate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE)	92
2.22	Purification of truncated XpsA	92
2.23	Production of antisera against unprocessed <i>X. bovienii</i> T228 XpsA	93
2.24	Western Immunoblotting	93
2.25	Rearing of <i>Galleria mellonella</i> larvae cultures	94
2.26	LD ₅₀ analysis of <i>X. bovienii recA</i> mutants for <i>G. mellonella</i>	94
2.27	UV sensitivity studies	95
2.28	Recombination proficiency assay to demonstrate RecA function	95
2.29	Antimicrobial bioassays	95
2.30	Transmission Electron Microscopy studies of haemocytes from <i>G. mellonella</i> infected with <i>X. bovienii</i> XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388	96
2.31	Schneider's cell cytotoxicity assays	97
2.32	β -galactosidase assays	98
2.32.1	β -galactosidase activity using conditioned growth media	99

Chapter 3 Analysis of the role of RecA in *X. bovienii* phase variation

3.1	Introduction	100
3.2	Results	101
3.2.1	Cloning and sequence analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i>	101
3.2.1.1	Generation of degenerate oligonucleotides for the amplification of an internal <i>recA</i> sequence	101
3.2.1.2	Identification of <i>recA</i> DNA sequence located 5' and 3' of the 363bp <i>recA</i> internal fragment	103
3.2.1.3	Plasmid Assisted PCR Rescue (PAPCR) to identify DNA sequences 5' of <i>recA</i>	103
3.2.1.4	Analysis of the <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i> gene sequence	109
3.2.1.5	Phylogenetic analysis of <i>recA</i> from <i>Xenorhabdus</i> spp.	111
3.2.2	Assessment of <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i> function in <i>E. coli</i>	111
3.2.2.1	Recombination proficiency assay to demonstrate RecA function	111
3.2.3	Construction of a <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i> insertion mutant	113
3.2.3.1	Construction of a suicide delivery vector for allelic-exchange mutagenesis	116
3.2.3.2	Confirmation of a kanamycin-resistance gene cartridge insertion into <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i>	116
3.2.3.3	Theoretical expression of a truncated RecA by <i>X. bovienii</i> XB001	120
3.2.4	Complementation analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>recA</i> insertion mutant XB001	120
3.2.5	Phenotypic comparison of <i>X. bovienii</i> T228, XB001 and XB002 with respect to <i>recA</i> function	126
3.2.5.1	Expression of phase dependent phenotypic characteristics by the <i>recA</i> insertion mutant (XB001) and the <i>recA</i> complemented strain (XB002)	126
3.2.6	Analysis of virulence of <i>recA</i> mutants for <i>Galleria mellonella</i>	127
3.3	Discussion	129

Chapter 4 Transposon mutagenesis of *X. bovienii* T228, and identification of non-ribosomal peptide synthetase (NRPS) homologous DNA

4.1	Introduction	134
4.2	Results	136
4.2.1	Construction of a <i>X. bovienii</i> mini-Tn5 Km based transposon mutant bank	136
4.2.1.1	Conjugal transfer of pUTKm into <i>X. bovienii</i> T228	136
4.2.1.2	Southern hybridisation analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> mini-Tn5 Km insertion mutants	136
4.2.2	Characterisation of mini-Tn5 Km induced transposon insertion mutants of <i>X. bovienii</i> T228	140
4.2.2.1	Phenotypic characterisation of <i>X. bovienii</i> transposon insertion mutants	140
4.2.2.2	Southern hybridisation analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> mini-Tn5 Km insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45), XB33(21), XB34(45) and XB41(23)	142
4.2.3	Identification of <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA flanking transposon insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45), XB33(21), XB34(45) and XB41(23)	142
4.2.3.1	Cloning of <i>X. bovienii</i> chromosomal DNA flanking transposon insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45), XB33(21), XB34(45) and XB41(23)	142
4.2.3.2	Sequence analysis of mini-Tn5 Km	145
4.2.3.3	Identification and cloning of <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA flanking mini-Tn5 Km	147
4.2.4	Analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA flanking clones pCT401, pCT402, pCT403, pCT404 and pCT405	155
4.2.4.1	BLASTX 2.1.1 analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA sequence flanking clones pCT401, pCT402, pCT403, pCT404 and pCT405	155
4.2.4.2	Mapping of transposon insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45) and XB34(45)	156
4.2.5	Nucleotide sequence analysis of pCT400	157

4.2.5.1	Confirmation pCT400 and pCT403 are from the same mini-Tn5 Km insertion located in XB34(45)	159
4.2.5.2	BLASTX 2.1.1 analysis of <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA distal to the mini-Tn5 Km insertion cloned into pCT400	160
4.2.5.3	Restriction enzyme and nested deletion analysis of pCT400	160
4.2.5.4	Identification of DNA sequence junctions between pCT406, pCT407 and pCT403a	163
4.2.5.5	Analysis of pCT403 O end DNA sequence	163
4.2.5.6	Plasmid Assisted PCR (PAPCR) to generate further non-ribosomal peptide synthetase homologous sequence	163
4.2.6	Preliminary analysis of compiled nucleotide sequence data from pCT400, pCT403 and pCT408	172
4.2.6.1	Partial ORF <i>xpsD</i>	172
4.2.6.2	ORFs <i>xpsA</i> , <i>xpsB</i> (complete) and <i>xpsC</i> (partial)	172
4.2.6.3	Mapping transposon insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45), XB33(21), XB34(45) and XB41(23) to the 15,582 bp <i>X. bovienii</i> nucleotide region	179
4.3	Discussion	179

Part 2

Chapter 5 Computer analysis of the 15.5 kb region of DNA encoding a putative non-ribosomal peptide synthetase from *X. bovienii* T228

5.1	Introduction	184
5.2	Results	184
5.2.1	Gene organisation and general features	184
5.2.1.1	Comparison of the mol% (G+C) of <i>X. bovienii</i> <i>xpsABC</i> and <i>xpsD</i> with the <i>P. syringae</i> syringomycin synthesis and export region	199
5.2.1.2	Analysis of nucleotide regulatory sequences flanking <i>xpsABC</i> and <i>xpsD</i>	199
5.2.1.3	Northern hybridisation analysis to determine the <i>xpsABC</i> operon transcript size	203
5.2.2	Analysis of DNA translation products	207
5.2.2.1	Comparison of partial ORF <i>xpsD</i> to sequences contained within protein databases	207
5.2.2.2	Comparison of ORF XpsA, XpsB and XpsC polypeptides to sequence contained within protein databases	210
5.2.3	Organisation of the XpsA, XpsB and XpsC polypeptide modules and domains	214
5.2.3.1	Alignment of XpsA, XpsB and XpsC domain core sequences with the published core consensus sequence	214
5.2.4	Predictive, structure-based modelling of amino acid recognition by the XpsA and XpsB NRPS A domains	219
5.2.4.1	Alignment of XpsA and XpsB module adenylation domains with the adenylation domain of GrsA	224
5.2.4.2	BLAST analysis of the XpsA and XpsB adenylation domain signature sequences	224
5.2.5	Hydrophobicity analysis and amino acid composition of <i>X. bovienii</i> XpsA M1, XpsB M1, XpsB M2, XpsB M3 and other serine activating domains	227

5.2.5.1	Module hydrophobicity analysis	227
5.2.5.2	Module amino acid composition analysis	231
5.2.6	Phylogenetic analysis of the <i>X. bovienii</i> NRPS operon	231
5.3	Discussion	239

Chapter 6 Regulation of expression of the non-ribosomal peptide synthetase gene *xpsA*

6.1	Introduction	246
6.2	Results	247
6.2.1	PCR amplification of RP4 <i>mob</i> and subsequent cloning into transcriptional fusion vector pMU575	247
6.2.1.1	Conjugal transfer of pCT410.1 from <i>E. coli</i> SM10 λ <i>pir</i> to <i>X. bovienii</i>	251
6.2.2	Transfer of an <i>xpsA-lacZ</i> transcriptional fusion into <i>X. bovienii</i> T228 facilitated by mini-Tn5 <i>xylE</i>	252
6.2.2.1	PCR amplification and cloning of the <i>xpsA</i> promoter region	252
6.2.2.2	Cloning the <i>xpsA-lacZ</i> transcriptional fusion into mini-Tn5 <i>xylE</i>	255
6.2.2.3	Mobilisation of pCT414 from <i>E. coli</i> SM10 λ <i>pir</i> to <i>X. bovienii</i> T228 by conjugal transfer	258
6.2.2.4	Confirmation of an <i>xpsA-lacZ</i> insertion in XB414.1, XB414.2 and XB414.3	261
6.2.3	Influence of culture conditions on expression of <i>xpsA-lacZ</i> fusions by XB414.1, XB414.2 and XB414.3	265
6.2.3.1	Refinement of β -galactosidase assay conditions	265
6.2.3.2	Growth of wild type <i>X. bovienii</i> , XB414.1, XB414.2 and XB414.3 on Luria bertani medium (LB) and <i>Xenorhabdus</i> minimal medium (XMM) and expression of the <i>xpsA-lacZ</i> fusions	268
6.2.3.3	β -galactosidase expression by XB414.1, XB414.2 and XB414.3 at different cell culture densities over a 96 hr time period	271

6.2.3.4	β -galactosidase expression by XB414.1, XB414.2 and XB414.3 at different initial cell culture densities over a 96 hr time period in 20% (v/v) conditioned LB broth	273
6.2.4	Translation of XpsA	273
6.2.4.1	Construction of XpsA expression vectors pCT445 and pCT446	275
6.2.4.2	Over-expression of XpsA in <i>E. coli</i> BL21	275
6.2.4.3	Detection of XpsA in <i>X. bovienii</i> T228	280
6.3	Discussion	283

Chapter 7 Construction and analysis of *X. bovienii* non-ribosomal peptide synthetase in-frame deletion mutants

7.1	Introduction	289
7.2	Results	290
7.2.1	Construction of the <i>xpsA</i> in-frame deletion mutant XB6246	290
7.2.1.1	Cloning of DNA generated by PCR amplification of <i>X. bovienii</i> chromosomal DNA, using oligonucleotide pairs P6054/P6247 and P6246/P6256	290
7.2.1.2	Construction of plasmid pCT421 and pCT422	291
7.2.1.3	Construction of <i>xpsA</i> deletion mutant XB6246	295
7.2.2	Construction of the <i>xpsB</i> in-frame deletion mutant XB3444	298
7.2.2.1	Cloning of DNA generated by PCR amplification of <i>X. bovienii</i> chromosomal DNA, using oligonucleotide pairs P6248/P6257 and P5292/P6249	298
7.2.2.2	Construction of plasmids pCT423 and pCT424	301
7.2.2.3	Construction of plasmids pCT425, pCT426 and pCT427	301
7.2.2.4	Construction of <i>xpsB</i> deletion mutant XB3444	304
7.2.3	Construction of the <i>xpsA/xpsB</i> double in-frame deletion mutant XB92388	309
7.2.3.1	Construction of plasmids pCT430 and pCT431	309

7.2.3.2	Construction of plasmids pCT432, pCT433 and pCT434	314
7.2.3.3	Construction of <i>xpsA/xpsB</i> double deletion mutant XB92388	317
7.2.3.4	Summary of modules and domains deleted in XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388	320
7.2.4	Phenotypic characterisation of deletion mutants XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388	320
7.2.4.1	Expression of phase dependent characteristics by XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388	325
7.2.4.2	Quantitation of XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388 antimicrobial activity against <i>M. luteus</i>	329
7.2.4.3	<i>In vivo</i> effects of <i>X. bovienii</i> T228, XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388 on <i>Galleria mellonella</i> haemocytes	332
7.2.4.4	Cytotoxicity of <i>X. bovienii</i> T228, XB3444, XB6246 and XB92388 culture supernatants for Schneider's cells	335
7.3	Discussion	335

Chapter 8 General Discussion

8.1	Introduction	345
8.2	RecA is not required for <i>X. bovienii</i> phase variation	345
8.3	Transposon mutagenesis of <i>X. bovienii</i> T228 and identification of non-ribosomal peptide synthetase (NRSP) homologous DNA	347
8.4	Sequence analysis of 15,582 bp of cloned <i>X. bovienii</i> chromosomal DNA identifies ORFs <i>xpsA</i> , <i>xpsB</i> , <i>xpsC</i> and <i>xpsD</i>	347
8.5	<i>X. bovienii</i> NRPS is predicted to encode a siderophore antibiotic	348
8.6	Motifs found in XpsD suggest an ABC transport function	349
8.7	<i>X. bovienii</i> NRPS transcription is cell culture density dependent	350
8.8	XpsA levels could not be detected using α -XpsA antisera	351
8.9	Antimicrobial activity of <i>X. bovienii</i> NRPS	352

Appendices

Appendix A: <i>X. bovienii</i> DNA sequence flanking transposon insertion mutants XB26(20), XB29(45), XB33(21), XB34(45) and XB41(23).	355
Appendix B: Listing of adenylation modules used for phylogenetic analysis.	357
Chapter 9 Bibliography	363