

# The retaining Pse5Ac7Ac pseudaminyltransferase KpsS1 defines a new glycosyltransferase family (GTXXX)

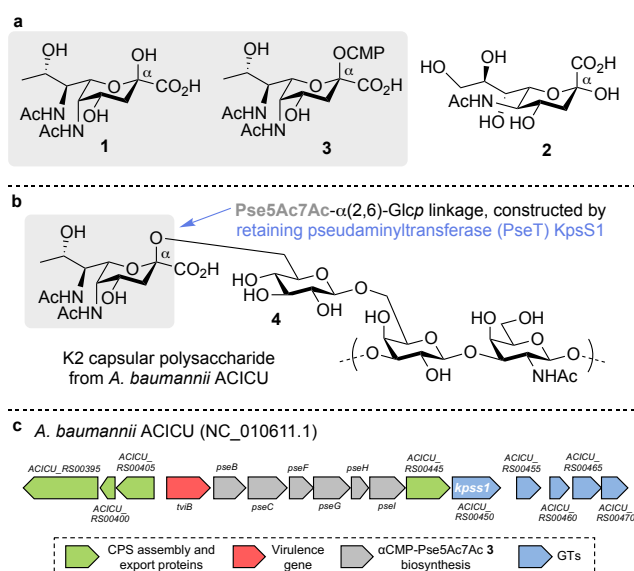
In memory of Professor Paul A. Clarke

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**Abstract:** Cell surface sugar 5,7-diacetyl pseudaminic acid (Pse5Ac7Ac) is a bacterial analogue of the ubiquitous sialic acid, Neu5Ac, and contributes to the virulence of a number of multidrug resistant bacteria, including ESKAPE pathogens *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Acinetobacter baumannii*. Despite its discovery in the surface glycans of bacteria over thirty years ago, to date no glycosyltransferase enzymes (GTs) dedicated to the synthesis of a pseudaminic acid glycosidic linkage have been unequivocally characterised *in vitro*. Herein we demonstrate that *A. baumannii* KpsS1 is a dedicated pseudaminyltransferase enzyme (PseT) which constructs a Pse5Ac7Ac- $\alpha$ (2,6)-GlcP linkage, and proceeds with retention of anomeric configuration. We utilise this PseT activity in tandem with the biosynthetic enzymes required for CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac assembly, in a two-pot, seven enzyme synthesis of an  $\alpha$ -linked Pse5Ac7Ac glycoside. Due to its unique activity and protein sequence, we also assign KpsS1 as the prototypical member of a new GT family (GTXXX).

The biological roles of glycoconjugates containing the non-mammalian nonulosonic acid sugar 5,7-diacetyl pseudaminic acid (Pse5Ac7Ac) **1** (Figure 1a) and its analogues, is an underexplored area of glycoscience.

Pse sugars are bacterial analogues of the ubiquitous sialic acid sugar *N*-acetyl neuraminic acid (Neu5Ac) **2**,<sup>[1]</sup> and are present within the lipo- (LPS) and capsular polysaccharides (CPS), and linked to the surface of flagella in a number of pathogenic bacteria.<sup>[2]</sup> These include *Campylobacter jejuni*,<sup>[3]</sup> *Helicobacter pylori*,<sup>[4]</sup> *Shigella boydii* (a cause of dysentery),<sup>[5]</sup> *Aeromonas caviae* (a causative agent of diarrhoea in children),<sup>[6]</sup> and multidrug resistant ESKAPE pathogens *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*,<sup>[5, 7]</sup> and *Acinetobacter baumannii*,<sup>[8]</sup> which are emerging causes of hospital acquired infections.<sup>[9]</sup> Tantalisingly, disruption of Pse biosynthesis in a number of these bacteria results in drastically reduced virulence through loss of flagella.<sup>[6, 10]</sup> In addition, *in vivo* experiments also suggest that Pse-glycosylated flagella can bind to Siglec-10, a cell surface sialic acid binding protein, and induce an anti-inflammatory response.<sup>[11]</sup> These studies therefore validate Pse bacterium



**Figure 1.** a. Structure of the bacterial sugar Pse5Ac7Ac **1** (depicted in  $\alpha$  anomeric configuration), nucleotide activated glycosyl donor  $\alpha$ -CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac **3**, and ubiquitous sialic acid sugar Neu5Ac **2** (depicted in  $\alpha$  anomeric configuration). b. Structure of the K2 capsular polysaccharide from *A. baumannii* ACICU, containing a Pse5Ac7Ac- $\alpha$ (2,6)-GlcP linkage. c. Genetic islands encoding *A. baumannii* ACICU KL2 capsular polysaccharide (CPS) biosynthesis and assembly genes. Islands contain genes for biosynthesis of **3** (grey), CPS repeat unit assembly and export (green), virulence genes (red) and glycosyltransferases (GTs, blue).

glycosylation as a *bona fide* target for therapeutic intervention in the ongoing battle to overcome antimicrobial resistance.

Although the enzymes required for the biosynthesis of cytidine-5'-monophosphate (CMP)-Pse5Ac7Ac **3** (Figure 1a), the glycosyl donor utilised by glycosyltransferase enzymes (GTs) in Pse glycosylation, have been well characterised.<sup>[12] [13]</sup> To date no GTs dedicated to the construction of the Pse glycosidic linkage have been unequivocally identified, despite elegant *in vivo* studies.<sup>[14]</sup> Herein we present the first *in vitro* evidence of Pse glycosylation by a dedicated GT, the pseudaminyltransferase (PseT) KpsS1 from *A. baumannii*.

*A. baumannii* is a Gram-negative opportunistic bacteria that is listed as a critical-priority pathogen by the World Health Organisation due to the emergence of strains that are resistant to all commercially available antibiotics.<sup>[9]</sup> The CPS of *A. baumannii* is a major virulence factor<sup>[15]</sup> and a number of strains have been shown to incorporate Pse glycans into their capsule, including highly virulent *A. baumannii* strain ACICU, which bears a K2 type CPS repeat unit **4** (Figure 1b), reportedly encoded within >10% of deposited *A. baumannii* genomes.<sup>[8b]</sup> NMR characterisation of **4** had previously identified the presence of a terminal Pse5Ac7Ac attached to a glucopyranoside through an  $\alpha$ (2,6)-linkage.<sup>[8b, 8c]</sup> This *axial*  $\alpha$ -Pse5Ac7Ac glycosidic linkage is in contrast to the presentation of Neu5Ac **2** in nature, which exists exclusively linked to other glycans through an *equatorial*  $\alpha$ -linkage<sup>[1]</sup> (note for Pse5Ac7Ac glycosides:  $\alpha$  = axial and  $\beta$  = equatorial linkages,

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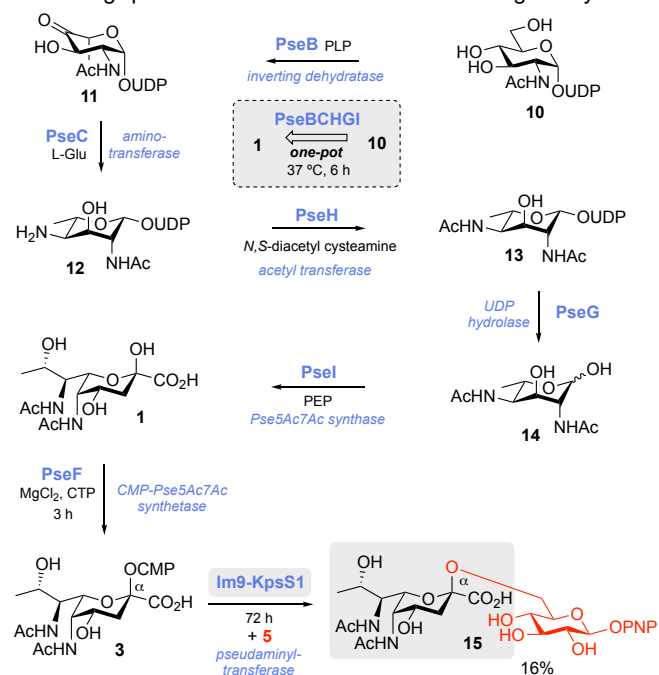
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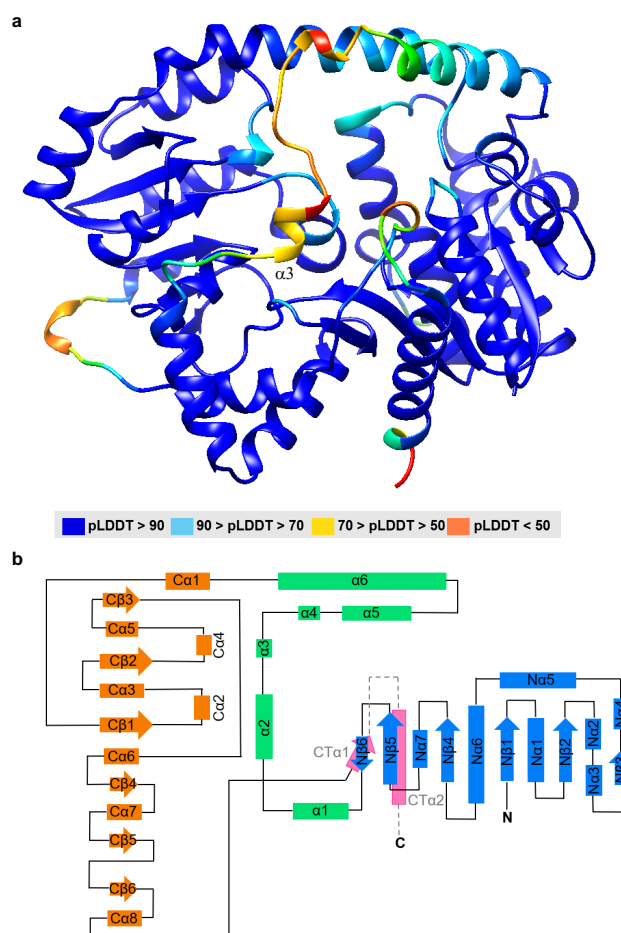
Although these enzyme activity assays provided evidence of turnover, the limited availability of pure CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac **3** donor restricted the scale on which these reactions could be performed and precluded NMR characterisation of the products. This was required to unequivocally assign the stereochemistry of the glycosidic linkage formed and therefore whether KpsS1 was indeed a retaining glycosyltransferase enzyme. We therefore chose to scale up the enzymatic glycosylation using Glc acceptor **5** to yield enough disaccharide product for full characterisation, and comparison to the unambiguous assignment of the Pse5Ac7Ac- $\alpha$ 2,6-Glcp linkage in **4**.<sup>[8c]</sup> To achieve this, we reconstituted the biosynthetic pathway for production of CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac **3** *in vitro* (Scheme 1).<sup>[21]</sup> Starting from 30 mg of UDP-GlcNAc **10**, using the five biosynthetic enzymes from *C. jejuni*, PseB, C, H, G and I and required co-factors, we synthesised Pse5Ac7Ac **1** in one pot in 6 h, with negative ion ESI LCMS confirming product formation and no remaining biosynthetic



intermediates **11-14**. To this reaction mixture we then added the CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac synthetase PseF from *A. caviae*,<sup>[22]</sup> CTP and MgCl<sub>2</sub> for 3 h until CMP-Pse5Ac7Ac **3** was observed. Finally, acceptor **5** and Im9-KpsS1 were then added to the reaction mixture before incubation for a further 72 h, when all donor was consumed. From this tandem seven enzyme two-pot synthesis the desired Pse5Ac7Ac- $\alpha$ 2,6-PNP- $\beta$ -dGlc<sub>p</sub> disaccharide **15** was synthesised in 16% yield. The stereochemistry of the newly formed glycosidic bond was unambiguously assigned as  $\alpha$  based on the 0.54 ppm difference between the  $\delta$  values of the Pse5Ac7Ac H<sub>3ax</sub> and H<sub>3eq</sub> protons in 700 MHz <sup>1</sup>H-NMR analysis (reported as 0.55 ppm in the characterisation of repeating unit **4** at 600 MHz).<sup>[8c, 23]</sup> Thus providing unequivocal evidence that KpsS1 acts as a retaining pseudaminyltransferase.

Whilst the mechanism employed by inverting sialyltransferases has been well studied,<sup>[24]</sup> the retaining mechanism utilised by KpsS1 is an intriguing open question that is difficult to determine without in depth structural characterisation

of the active site. However, the overall high per-residue confidence (pLDDT) scores in KpsS1's AlphaFold model make it a suitable foundation from which to base preliminary mechanistic hypotheses. This model predicts KpsS1 adopts a GT-B fold<sup>[25]</sup> comprised of two  $\beta/\alpha/\beta$  Rossmann domains linked by a flexible  $\alpha$ -

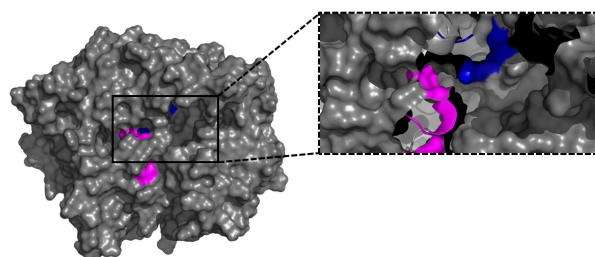


**Figure 3.** a. AlphaFold prediction for KpsS1 coloured by per-residue confidence score (pLDDT) with  $\alpha$ 3 highlighted. b. Topology of KpsS1.  $\alpha$ -helices are depicted as rectangles,  $\beta$ -strands as lines.

helix rich region (Figure 3a-b). A DALI<sup>[26]</sup> search against the PDB using this model returned two retaining  $\beta$ -Kdo transferases, KpsC from *E. coli* (GT107 family),<sup>[14]</sup> and WbbB from *Raoultella terrigena* (GT99 family).<sup>[17]</sup> Structural studies of both KpsC and WbbB suggest that an internal return S<sub>N</sub>i mechanism,<sup>[25]</sup> often proposed for retaining GTs, is unlikely for these enzymes due to narrow active sites.<sup>[14,17]</sup> Moreover the presence of an indispensable Asp residue in a conserved QXXXD motif in the active site of both enzymes, raised the possibility of a double displacement mechanism,<sup>[25]</sup> a hypothesis recently reinforced by trapping of mutant Kdo-WbbB/KpsC (QXXXD) covalent enzyme intermediates.<sup>[27]</sup> Although analysis of the KpsS1 sequence revealed an equivalent QNGLD motif, it also confirmed the presence of an extended H(F/Y)HPE motif, similar to an invariant HP motif in the retaining  $\beta$ -Kdo-transferases,<sup>[17a,28]</sup> a CMP-binding motif also highly conserved in inverting sialyltransferases.<sup>[24]</sup> This H(F/Y)HPE motif, alongside a unique PDYM motif also not present in the GT99 and GT107  $\beta$ -Kdo-transferases, were both found to be highly conserved in putative KpsS1 PseTs returned in a BLASTp<sup>[29]</sup> search (Supplementary Figure 16), including from

other *A. baumannii* strains (Supplementary Figure 14). These include KpsS1<sub>KL23</sub> which shares 84% sequence identity to KpsS1,<sup>[8c]</sup> KpsS2<sub>KL33</sub> which is predicted to form the same  $\alpha(2,6)$ -linkage to a  $\beta$ -D-Glcp as KpsS1, and KpsS2<sub>KL42</sub> from the *A. baumannii* LUH5550 K42 gene cluster,<sup>[30]</sup> which likely utilises CMP-Pse5Ac7Hb as a donor, a Pse sugar modified with (*R*)-3-hydroxybutanoyl group at N7. Conversely, the CPS of *A. baumannii* RBH4 K6 contains an equatorial  $\beta(2,6)$ -Pse5Ac7Ac linkage, and notably *kpsS1* is replaced in this KL6 capsule locus by a sequence with similarity to characterised inverting sialyltransferases.<sup>[31]</sup> A webFlaGs<sup>[32]</sup> search, which identifies putative orthologues to inputted sequences based on shared sequence identity and genomic context, also returned a number of putative PseT sequences from more divergent bacterial species (Supplementary Figure 13) in which both the H(F/Y)HPE and PDYM motifs were highly conserved (Supplementary Figure 15). Notably, the KpsS1 AlphaFold model lacks confidence in a short, loop embedded  $\alpha 3$  helix (Figure 3a), indicative of a flexible region, which covers a large cavity in the enzyme where these conserved motifs are clustered (Figure 4), potentially highlighting their positioning in a conformationally flexible active site.

In conclusion, we have unequivocally established that *A. baumannii* ACICU KpsS1 is a PseT enzyme. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first example of dedicated PseT activity *in vitro*. Additionally, as a result of the functional studies on the Im9-KpsS1 enzyme, a Pse5Ac7Ac- $\alpha 2,6$ -PNP- $\beta$ -DGlcp disaccharide **15** was synthesised in a tandem two-pot enzymatic process using



**Figure 4.** A surface view of the AlphaFold model depicting a solvent-accessible large cavity (dark grey) with the positioning of the H(F/Y)HPE (blue) and PDYM (pink) motifs highlighted.

seven enzymes, confirming that KpsS1 is also a retaining PseT. Although full elucidation of the nature of this retaining mechanism will likely require structural and biochemical studies using Pse-based probes, this study confirms that KpsS1 defines a new GT family (GTXXX) which includes homologous proteins with conserved sequence motifs that are early candidates for mechanistic exploration.

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