Symbiosis-Promoting and Deleterious Effects of NopT, a Novel Type 3 Effector of Rhizobium sp. Strain NGR234

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Establishment of symbiosis between certain host plants and nitrogen-fixing bacteria (“rhizobia”) depends on type 3 effector proteins secreted via the bacterial type 3 secretion system (T3SS). Here, we report that the open reading frame y4zC of strain NGR234 encodes a novel rhizobial type 3 effector, termed NopT (for nodulation outer protein T). Analysis of secreted proteins from NGR234 and T3SS mutants revealed that NopT is secreted via the T3SS. NopT possessed autoproteolytic activity when expressed in Escherichia coli or human HEK 293T cells. The processed NopT exposed a glycine (G50) to the N terminus, which is predicted to be myristoylated in eukaryotic cells. NopT with a point mutation at position C93, I205, or D220 (catalytic triad) showed strongly reduced autoproteolytic activity, indicating that NopT is a functional protease of the YopT-AvrPphB effector family. When transiently expressed in tobacco plants, proteolytically active NopT elicited a rapid hypersensitive reaction. Arabidopsis plants transformed with nopT showed chlorotic and necrotic symptoms, indicating a cytotoxic effect. Inoculation experiments with mutant derivatives of NGR234 indicated that NopT affected nodulation either positively (Phaseolus vulgaris cv. Yudou No. 1; Tephrosia vogelii) or negatively (Crotalaria juncea). We suggest that NopT-related polymorphism may be involved in evolutionary adaptation of NGR234 to particular host legumes.

In root nodules of legumes, symbiotic bacteria (“rhizobia” belonging to the Rhizobiales family) reduce \( \text{N}_2 \) gas into ammonia by the process termed nitrogen fixation. Nodule formation requires specific bacterial signals and determinants (12). Rhizobial nodulation factors (Nod factors) trigger various host responses, including root hair deformation, expression of symbiosis-related host genes, and cortical cell divisions resulting in nodule formation (31, 32). Host-specific nodulation depends also on surface carbohydrates, such as oligosaccharides released from exopolysaccharides, lipopolysaccharides, cyclic \( \beta \)-glucans, and K antigens (also named capsular polysaccharides). In Rhizobium sp. strain NGR234, for example, mutants that do not produce exo-oligosaccharides or flavonoid-inducible lipopolysaccharide are unable to establish symbiosis with various host plants (36, 48). In addition to these symbiotic determinants, host-specific nodulation depends on proteins secreted via a pilus-like secretory apparatus, the type 3 secretion system (T3SS) of NGR234. Recent data from various laboratories provide evidence that T3SSs of certain rhizobial strains modulate establishment of symbiosis and the efficiency of nitrogen fixation (14, 23, 25, 56).

T3SSs from pathogenic bacteria deliver effector proteins (type 3 effectors) into eukaryotic cells to manipulate the host metabolism, e.g., to suppress defense responses. Many reports indicate that type 3 effectors are virulence factors that play a key role in the pathogenesis of humans, animals, and plants (9, 20). On the other hand, eukaryotic host cells developed strategies to perceive type 3 effectors in order to “sense” the invading bacterium. In nonhost plants, specific resistance genes are essential for these recognition events, and a single type 3 effector may act as avirulence factor. As a result, nonhost plants induce a rapid hypersensitive reaction (HR) that prevents pathogen invasion and disease (1).

In response to host-derived flavonoids, rhizobia secret nodulation outer proteins (Nops) in a T3SS-dependent manner (see, for example, references 24, 37, 49, and 56). Mutant analysis indicated that specific Nops modulate the formation of nodules in certain host plants. Nops-dependent nodulation phenotypes have been described for the interaction between Sinorhizobium fredii USDA257 and soybeans. The genes determining cultivar-specific nodulation turned out to encode T3SS proteins (see, for example, references 25 and 29). In the closely related strain Rhizobium sp. strain NGR234, the ablation of Nops secretion may affect the nodulation of host legumes either positively or negatively (27, 45, 56). Nops of NGR234 are either extracellular components of the T3SS (13, 38, 39) or type 3 effectors secreted via the T3SS. Thus far, only NopL and NopP have been characterized as type 3 effectors of NGR234 (3, 4, 5, 27, 45).

More than a decade ago, sequencing analysis of pNGR234a, the symbiotic plasmid of NGR234, revealed that the open reading frame (ORF) y4zC displays similarities to genes belonging to the YopT-AvrPphB effector family (17). YopT (for Yersinia outer protein T), LopT (from Photobacterium luminescens), and AvrPphB (from Pseudomonas syringae pv. phaseolicola) are recently investigated representatives from this family. The proteins displayed protease activity, which depended on conserved amino acid residues (C/H/D catalytic triad). YopT from Yersinia spp. recognizes prenylated cysteine of Rhf family GTPases (RhoA, Rac1, and Cdc42) in human host cells and cleaved the proteins near their C termini. Cleavage resulted in the release of GTPases from membranes and caused cytotoxic effects, such as disruption of the actin cy-
toskeleton (41, 43). Similarly to YopT, LopT from *P. luminescens*, an insect-pathogenic bacterium living in symbiosis with nematodes, displayed activity on prenylated GTPases (8). AvrPphB from the plant pathogen *P. syringae* pv. phaseolicola is autoproteolytically processed (34, 41). The processed protein exposed an N-terminal glycan predicted for myristoylation, and accumulating data indicate that myristoylated type 3 effectors are targeted to plasma membranes (30, 51). In certain nonhost plants (*Arabidopsis*, tobacco, and beans), AvrPphB functions as avirulence protein and induced an HR (34, 41, 44, 50). In *Arabidopsis*, AvrPphB proteolytically cleaved the protein kinase PBS1. Cleaved PBS1 subsequently activated the disease resistance protein RPS5, which is required for HR induction (2, 42, 57).

We report here that the ORF y42C of NGR234 encodes a novel rhizobial type 3 effector (termed NopT for nodulation outer protein T). When expressed in *Escherichia coli* or human HEK 293T cells, NopT possessed autoproteolytic activity. Tobacco plants expressing *nopT* elicited an HR, whereas *Arabidopsis* plants transformed with *nopT* showed chlorotic and necrotic symptoms. Nodulation experiments with mutant strains indicated that *NopT* affected symbiosis either positively or negatively.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Expression of *nopT* constructs in *E. coli* and purification of recombinant protein. DNA of *nopT* (ORF y42C of *Rhizobium* sp. strain NGR234; accession no. U00808) was cloned into pET28b (Novagen), generating *E. coli* BL21(DE3) pET-nopT. Point mutation constructs pET-nopT-CYS pET-nopT-H205A and pET-nopT-D220A were generated by site-directed mutagenesis using pET-nopT as a template and DpnI for digestion of the amplification products. Constructs were verified by sequencing. *E. coli* strains were grown in Luria-Bertani (LB) medium containing 50 mg of kanamycin ml\(^{-1}\) to a density of \(A_{600} = 0.6\). Protein expression was induced with 1 mM IPTG (isopropyl-\(\beta\)-D-thiogalactopyranoside) at either 30 or 37\(^\circ\)C. Cells were harvested after 3 h, lysed in the 2\% sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) loading buffer, and separated by SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE). Proteins were visualized by Coomassie brilliant blue R-250 staining. Proteins were purified by nickel affinity chromatography according to the manufacturer’s protocols under denaturing conditions (Qiagen). Processing *NopT* (\(\sim\)24 kDa) was used for N-terminal sequencing by the automated Edman degradation method (Jiang Corp., Shanghai, China).

Bioinformatic and statistical analyses. NopT (ORF y42C) is listed in the MEROPS peptidase database (http://merops.sanger.ac.uk). The N-terminal sequence of processed *nopT* was analyzed with the MYR Prediction Server (http://mendel.imp.ac.at/myristate/SUPLpredictor.htm). *NopT* homologues were aligned with the CLUSTAL W algorithm. The unrooted radial tree was constructed with the MEGA3.1 program using the neighbor-joining method (26). Where indicated, data were statistically analyzed with the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test, which is suitable for unequal replications (PAST software; http://folk.uio.no/ohammer/past/).

Antiserum against NopT and Western blots. NopT protein (nonprocessed protein with a C-terminal His\(_6\) tag) was purified from *E. coli* BL21(DE3)/pET-nopT and used to immunize a New Zealand White rabbit. For Western blots, proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and then blotted onto nitrocellulose membranes (Schleicher & Schuell BiScience, Dassel, Germany). To detect NopT protein, the membranes were incubated with the antiserum raised against *NopT* (1:10,000 dilution) and then with a horseradish peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-rabbit immunoglobulin G antiserum (Boster, Wuhan, China). Immune blots were developed either with 3,3′-diaminobenzidine (Boster) or with ECL detection reagents (Amersham).

Construction of NGR234 mutant strains. For the construction of NGRnopT, an *HindIII* fragment containing *nopT* was cloned into pBluescript II KS (+). A spectinomycin-resistant *Sp\(^\circ\)*:: 

Transcriptional activation of *nopT*. The promoter region of *nopT* (1.2 kb) was cloned upstream of the promoterless gene of vector pRG960 (54), resulting in pRG-nopT. The plasmid was then mobilized into NGR234 and NGRnopT. Mobilization of pRG-nopT into NGR116 was confirmed by PCR with pRG960 specific primers. Where indicated, cultures (TY medium [6]) were induced with 1 \(\mu\)g ampicillin and cultured on a rotary shaker for 5 to 7 h. When stained with 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl-\(\beta\)-D-glucuronic acid (Xanthil), agrobacteria were cultured at 23\(^\circ\)C in Agrobacterium inoculation medium [10 mM MES (pH 5.6) containing 10.5 g of \(K_2\)HPO\(_4\) liter\(^{-1}\), 4.5 g of KH\(_2\)PO\(_4\) liter\(^{-1}\), 1 g of (NH\(_4\))\(_2\)SO\(_4\) liter\(^{-1}\), 0.5 g of sodium citrate liter\(^{-1}\), 1 mM MgSO\(_4\)\(_2\) liter\(^{-1}\), 1 g of glucose liter\(^{-1}\), 1 g of fructose liter\(^{-1}\), 1 ml of glycerol liter\(^{-1}\), and 50 mg of acetosyringone (Sigma) liter\(^{-1}\)] on a rotary shaker for 5 to 7 h. The bacteria were then collected by centrifugation and resuspended in infiltration medium (1/2 MS-MES; Duchaex, Harlem, The Netherlands) to reach an optical density at 600 nm of 1.0. Leaves from 3-week-old tobacco plants were infiltrated with a needleless syringe. Leaves were photographed 72 h postinfiltration. Agroinfiltration experiments were repeated at least three times with at least six leaves per experiment.

For transformation of *Arabidopsis thaliana* (ecotype Columbia), plants with flowers were dipped in a bacterial solution (optical density at 600 nm of 0.8) containing a *A. tumefaciens* strain EHA105 carrying pCAMBIA-nopT (or the empty vector), 5% (wt/vol) sucrose, and 500 \(\mu\)l of Silwet L-77 liter\(^{-1}\) (11). Plants (T1 generation) were selected on agar plates containing 50 \(\mu\)g of kanamycin ml\(^{-1}\) and then individually cultivated in 350-ml glass jars under similar conditions for 2 weeks. Transgenic plants selected on kanamycin plates showed GUS activity when stained with 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl-\(\beta\)-D-glucuronic acid.

For the expression of NopT in insect cells, HKE 293T (33) *nopT* was cloned into the pEGFP-C3 vector (Clontech), resulting in pEGFP-nopT. The protein purification experiment using the pEGFPC-nopT was performed in a similar way. HEK 293T cells were maintained in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum, 0.50 mg of penicillin ml\(^{-1}\) and 100 \(\mu\)g of streptomycin ml\(^{-1}\) at 37\(^\circ\)C in 5% CO\(_2\). Transfection of plasmid constructs (4 \(\mu\)g per 6 \(\times\) 10\(^5\) cells) was performed using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen).
with Lipofectamine 2000 according to the manufacturer’s instructions (Invitrogen).

Nodulation tests. Nodulation tests with beans (Phaseolus vulgaris cv. Yudou No. 1), Tephrosia vogelii, and Crotalaria juncea were performed according to previously described procedures (see, for example, reference 48). Briefly, seeds were surface sterilized and germinated on agar plates, and plantlets were transferred to sterilized 300-ml plastic jar units linked with a cotton wick (a mixture of vermiculite and expanded clay in the upper vessel; nitrogen-free nutrient solution in the lower vessel). Plants (1 plant per jar) were inoculated with bacteria (grown in TY medium, centrifuged, and resuspended in 10 mM MgSO4). Plants were cultivated at 26°C in a plant growth chamber and harvested at different times postinoculation. For determination of N contents, plant material was dried, pulverized, and analyzed with a CHNS analyzer (Elementar Analysensysteme, Hanau, Germany). All data are presented as means ± the SE (standard error).

RESULTS

The ORF y4zC is predicted to encode a protease. The symbiotic plasmid pNGR234a of Rhizobium sp. strain NGR234 possesses a T3SS gene cluster encoding a functional T3SS (17, 56). The ORF y4zC (encoding a putative protein with 262 amino acids; in the present study termed NopT) is separated from the T3SS cluster by ORFs encoding a putative unknown protein (y4yS), two ORFs (y4zA and y4zB), related to insertion sequences (transposase-related fragments), and an ORF with sequence similarities to serine/histidine decarboxylases (fz1). The short ORF y4zD, downstream of nopT, shows no similarities to sequences from other bacteria. The two following ORFs (fz4 and fz2) are putative insertion sequences (Fig. 1A).

FIG. 1. Characterization of nopT of Rhizobium sp. strain NGR234. (A) Genetic map of the T3SS gene cluster with the neighboring nopT (ORF y4zC) of pNGR234a (accession no. U00090). The promoter sequence of nopT contains a putative tts box. The nopT gene was mutated by insertion of Ω interposons at the restriction sites indicated (resulting in strains NGRΔnopT and NGRnopT). (B) Unrooted phylogenic tree of predicted NopT protein from NGR234 (accession no. AAB91961), predicted proteins from B. japonicum USDA110 (Blr2058, accession no. NP_768698; Blr2140, accession no. NP_768780) and recently characterized proteases from P. syringae pv. phaseolicola (AvrPphB, accession no. Q52430 [41]), Yersinia pestis (YopT, accession no. AL117189 [41]) and P. luminescens (LopT, accession no. AAQ018078 [8]). The horizontal bar represents a distance of 0.2 substitutions per site. (C) Multiple amino acid sequence alignment with conserved amino acid residues (catalytic triad C/H/D). Only conserved regions flanking the C/H/D residues are shown. Identical residues are in black and similar residues in gray.
FIG. 2. Purification, immunodetection, and T3SS-dependent secretion of NopT. (A) Expression and purification of recombinant NopT from *E. coli* BL21(DE3)/pET-nopT. Proteins from cells grown at 37°C were analyzed by SDS-PAGE. Lane 1, proteins from BL21(DE3)/pET-nopT; lane 2, proteins from BL21(DE3) carrying the empty vector pET28b; lane 3, purified NopT with a C-terminal His₆ tag after nickel affinity chromatography. (B) Western blot analysis with the rabbit serum raised against recombinant NopT. The antiserum recognized recombinant NopT in Western blot analysis with the rabbit serum raised against recombinant NopT. The antiserum recognized recombinant NopT. Lane 1, proteins from BL21(DE3)/pET-nopT; lane 2, proteins from BL21(DE3) carrying pET28b; lane 3, purified NopT with a C-terminal His₆ tag. (C) NopT of *Rhizobium* sp. strain NGR234 is secreted via the T3SS. Secreted proteins from culture supernatants (corresponding to ~100 ml of cell culture) of the indicated strains were subjected to Western blot analysis with the anti-NopT antibodies. Lane 1, NGRΔnopT; lane 2, NGRΔnopTnopT secreting full-length NopT (~30 kDa); lane 3, NGRΔrhcN; lane 4, parent strain NGR234; lane 5, NGRΔnopT secreting a truncated form of NopT (~20 kDa); lane 6, NGRnopB::uidA; lane 7, NGRΔnopL; lane 8, NGRΔnopTnopT secreting full-length and truncated NopT; lane 9, NGRpnopT.

e.g., *Mesorhizobium loti* MAFF303099, lacks genes homologous to *nopT*. As shown in Fig. 1C, the amino acid sequence of NopT contains conserved amino acid residues, which are predicted to be required for proteolytic activity (C/H/D residues; invariant catalytic triad in proteins belonging to the YopT-AvrPphB cysteine protease family) (41).

**NopT is secreted by the rhizobial T3SS.** To identify NopT protein secreted by *Rhizobium* sp. strain NGR234, we used an immunological approach. The sequence encoding NopT (786 bp) was cloned into pET28b, resulting in plasmid pET-nopT. When induced by IPTG, *E. coli* cells harboring this plasmid produced recombinant NopT protein with a C-terminal His₆ tag (~30 kDa) (Fig. 2A). The protein was purified by nickel affinity chromatography and then used to raise a rabbit serum against NopT. The antiserum recognized recombinant NopT from *E. coli* cells (Fig. 2B) and secreted NopT in culture supernatants of NGR234 (Fig. 2C). For comparison, we analyzed secreted proteins from two constructed mutant strains with Ω interposons in the *nopT* sequence (strains NGRΔnopT and NGRΔnopT; see Fig. 1A). NopT was not detected in the NGRΔnopT mutant, whereas NGRΔnopT T3SS-dependent transcriptional activation. To demonstrate flavonoid-dependent transcriptional activation of *nopT*, we cloned a 1.2-kb DNA fragment containing the putative promoter region of *nopT* upstream of a promoterless *gus* gene of vector pRG960 (resulting in pRG-nopT). The construct was then mobilized into wild-type NGR234 or NGRΔttsI (with mutated *ttsI* gene [56]). Rhizobial cultures were treated with the flavonoid apigenin, which stimulates transcription of *ttsI* in a NodD1-dependent manner (22). Cultures were harvested at the indicated time points and GUS activity was measured to assess the promoter activity of *nopT*. As shown in Fig. 3, GUS activity in NGR234 carrying pRG-nopT was significantly increased after application of apigenin. In the NGRΔttsI back-
The bioinformatic prediction that an additional band with an apparent molecular mass of 24 kDa. Western blot analysis with the anti-NopT antibodies indicated that the 24-kDa protein is a fragment of NopT (Fig. 5C). On the other hand, transformation with DNA encoding an inactive form of NopT associated with HR, DNA encoding an inactive form of NopT was released from EGFP-NopT, whereas no cleavage was observed for the same construct with a point mutation at position C93 of NopT (Fig. 4D).

To characterize processing of NopT in more detail, the 24-kDa fragment was purified from E. coli cells and then subjected to Edman sequencing. The obtained N-terminal sequence GCCA suggests that NopT was cleaved between M49 and G50. Since E. coli cells possess methionine aminopeptidase activity (18), it is also possible that NopT was first cleaved by on July 8, 2008

**NopT induces an HR in tobacco and chlorotic and necrotic symptoms in Arabidopsis plants.** Expression of type 3 effectors in plant cells is an experimental approach to test their function in planta. An Agrobacterium-mediated transformation system was used to transiently express full-length ntp under the control of the 35S promoter in tobacco (N. tabacum cv. Xanthi). With this agroinfiltiration method, the protein of interest is rapidly expressed in the infiltrated leaf area. Agroinfiltiration was performed on one side with A. tumefaciens EHA105 carrying pCAMBIA-nopT and on the other side with EHA105 carrying the empty vector pCAMBIA2301. Western blot analysis with anti-NopT antibodies showed expression of full-length NopT as early as 12 h postinfiltration (not shown). Tobacco cells expressing ntp turned grayish and rapidly died at about 2 to 3 days postinfiltration, whereas control regions infiltrated with A. tumefaciens carrying pCAMBIA2301 remained green (Fig. 5A). These findings indicate that NopT elicited an HR, a localized programmed cell death response.

We further studied the structural requirements of NopT for HR induction. To test whether proteolytic activity of NopT is associated with HR, DNA encoding an inactive form of NopT (C93 mutated to S) was cloned into pCAMBIA2301. Agroinfiltration with this plasmid did not elicit an HR, indicating that proteolytic activity is required for NopT-induced HR in tobacco leaves (Fig. 5B). Using a similar approach, an HR was induced by NopT lacking 49 N-terminal amino acid residues (Fig. 5C). On the other hand, transformation with DNA en-
expression of NopT in 10 lines was confirmed by Western blot analysis (data not shown). Compared to controls transformed with the empty vector, plants (T1 generation) transformed with pCAMBIA-nopT grew slower and developed gradually chlorotic and necrotic symptoms. Figure 5G shows representative plants (from six lines). Finally, growth was completely arrested, and all plants died about 1 month after germination. Since an HR is generally defined as rapid cell death, it can be concluded that NopT did not elicit an HR but rather induced cytotoxic effects in Arabidopsis (Fig. 5G).

**NopT is a host-specific determinant of symbiosis.** To explore the effects of NopT during symbiosis, nodulation assays were carried out with NGR234 and the constructed mutant strains. *C. juncea* is a host plant of NGR234, but effective nodulation of this legume is blocked by undefined T3SS proteins (27). Under our test conditions, NGR234 induced on *C. juncea* ineffective nodules, which were greenish or brownish. In addition to these ineffective nodules, a few pink nodules were formed that fixed nitrogen and consequently increased the plant’s biomass production. When challenged with NGRΔnopT, *C. juncea* formed significantly (*P < 0.05*) more nodules than the parent strain (Table 1). Moreover, the number of pink nodules per plant was strongly increased (NGRΔnopT, 5.5 ± 1.5; NGR234, 1.2 ± 0.5). Nodule biomass per plant was also elevated in plants infected with the mutant strain (Table 1). Similar nodulation data were obtained for *C. juncea* inoculated with the double mutant NGRΔnopLΔnopT (Table 1) and with NGRΔnopT and NGRΔnopLΔnopT, forming a truncated form of NopT (data not shown). Taken together, these findings indicate that NopT had a deleterious effect on the nodule formation of *C. juncea*.

*T. vogelii* is another host plant of NGR234, and nodulation experiments showed that a double mutant with deleted *nopL* and *nopT* genes induced fewer nodules than the parent strain (45). Compared to NGR234, *T. vogelii* inoculated with NGRΔnopT formed significantly fewer nodules (*P < 0.05*). The nodule biomass per plant was also reduced (*P < 0.05*). The double mutant NGRΔnopLΔnopT induced a similar nodulation phenotype on *T. vogelii* (Table 1). Together, these data indicate that NopT promoted the nodulation of *T. vogelii*.

We next inoculated *P. vulgaris*, since beans have been studied in the interaction with *Pseudomonas* strains secreting AvrPphB, a homolog of NopT (Fig. 1B). In *P. vulgaris* cv.

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<th>TABLE 1. Nodulation of <em>C. juncea</em> and <em>T. vogelii</em> inoculated with strains NGR234, NGRΔnopT, and NGRΔnopLΔnopT</th>
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*Plants (one plant per jar) were inoculated with the indicated strains.

The number of nodules (±1 mm) and the nodule dry weight (DW) were determined for each plant at the time of harvest (7 weeks postinoculation) (*n* = 12).
Plants developed well, and the total amount of nitrogen per plant was high (Fig. 6). These data suggest that NopT secreted by NGR234 attenuated negative effects of NopL in the interaction with cv. Yudou No. 1.

**DISCUSSION**

This study shows that *Rhizobium* sp. strain NGR234 secretes the protease NopT via its T3SS. Mutation of *nopT* in NGR234 abolished NopT secretion but did not affect the secretion of other Nops, such as NopL. This secretion pattern corresponds to NGR234 derivatives with mutated *nopL* or *nopP* genes, which also retained their ability to secrete Nops via a functional T3SS. Similar to NopT, NopL, and NopP are type 3 effectors that affected nodulation on certain legumes (3, 27, 45).

Our promoter analysis provided evidence that expression of *nopT* is induced in response to flavonoids in a *tsl*-dependent manner, suggesting that the predicted *tsl* box is functional. GUS activity with our pRG-*nopTp* construct was weak (Fig. 3) compared to other flavonoid-inducible promoters of NGR234 (data not shown). Accordingly, NGR234 secreted only low amounts of NopT protein, which were not detectable on SDS-PAGE gels. Nevertheless, using an antiserum raised against recombinant NopT from *E. coli*, we immunologically detected NopT when secreted proteins of NGR234 (corresponding to ~100 ml of culture supernatant) were highly concentrated. This approach seems to be more sensitive than mass spectrometric analysis of proteins from a two-dimensional gel, which has been previously used for the identification of Nops (37, 38, 49).

The present study demonstrates that *nopT* is a functional gene of the YopT-AvrPphB effector protease family. NopT expressed in *E. coli* displayed autoproteolytic activity, which depended on amino acids of the catalytic triad. Autocleavage activity has been reported for the *Pseudomonas* effector AvrPphB (34, 41), whereas no autoproteolytic activities have been described for the *Yersinia* effector YopT and the *Photobacterium* effector LopT. It is worth noting that only nonprocessed NopT was detected in rizobial culture supernatants (Fig. 2C), in transgenic tobacco leaves, as well as in *nopT* expressing *Arabidopsis* plants (data not shown). These results raise the question of whether autoproteolytic processing of NopT is an “artifact” of expression systems such as *E. coli*, and autocleavage of NopT remain to be elucidated.

Hence, cellular and environmental factors affecting stability and autocleavage of NopT remain to be elucidated.

Similar to AvrPphB, autoproteolytic processing of NopT resulted in an N-terminal glycine (**Fig. 2C**), in transgenic tobacco leaves, as well as in *nopT* expressing *Arabidopsis* plants (data not shown). These results suggest that NopT was either produced at low levels or rapidly degraded in legume host cells. Hence, cellular and environmental factors affecting stability and autocleavage of NopT remain to be elucidated.

This study shows that the YopT-AvrPphB effector protease family, NopT expressed in *E. coli* displayed autoproteolytic activity, which depended on amino acids of the catalytic triad. Autocleavage activity has been reported for the *Pseudomonas* effector AvrPphB (34, 41), whereas no autoproteolytic activities have been described for the *Yersinia* effector YopT and the *Photobacterium* effector LopT. It is worth noting that only nonprocessed NopT was detected in rizobial culture supernatants (Fig. 2C), in transgenic tobacco leaves, as well as in *nopT* expressing *Arabidopsis* plants (data not shown). These results raise the question of whether autoproteolytic processing of NopT is an “artifact” of expression systems such as *E. coli*, and neuronal changes in transgenic tobacco leaves is a human factor affecting stability and autocleavage of NopT remain to be elucidated.

**FIG. 6.** Nodulation of *P. vulgaris* (cv. Yudou No. 1) inoculated with NGR234, NGRΔnopT, and NGRΔnopLΔnopT. Plants were harvested 4 weeks postinoculation. The data indicate means ± the standard error (*n = 8*). Values topped by asterisks are statistically different compared to those from NGR234-inoculated plants (Kruskal-Wallis test; *P < 0.05*). (A) Aerial part of representative plants photographed at the time of harvest; (B) number of nodules (>1.5 mm) per plant; (C) dry weight (DW) of nodules per plant; (D) amount of nitrogen per plant as measured with the CHNS analyzer.
to those from Tampakaki et al. (50), who found that the myristoylation motif in AvrPphB was dispensable for effector action in bean cultivars carrying the R3 gene allele. Future studies are required to test whether NopT is myristoylated in legume cells and whether myristoylation of type 3 effectors is important for symbiosis with certain host plants.

The rapid HR of tobacco cells induced by expression of nopT was used in the present study to assess the activity of different mutant forms of NopT (Fig. 5). We found that the first 49 amino acids at the N terminus of NopT are dispensable for HR-inducing activity. Based on studies with type 3 effectors from pathogenic bacteria (see, for example, reference 46), we suggest that the N-terminal part of NopT is essential for secretion through the pilus of the rhizobial T3SS. Indeed, NGR81 nopT secreted a truncated form of NopT (Fig. 2C), indicating that the C-terminal part is not required for secretion. Similarly, a truncated form of the type 3 effector NopP was secreted by the T3SS of NGR234 (45).

NopT mutated in amino acid residues of the catalytic triad was inactive in inducing an HR in tobacco cells. This is similar to AvrPphB-induced HR in tobacco and certain Arabidopsis ecotypes, in which the HR directly depends on proteolytic cleavage of the protein kinase PBS1 by AvrPphB (42). In contrast to AvrPphB (44), NopT expressed in Arabidopsis did not elicit an HR but rather induced chlorotic and necrotic symptoms that resulted in growth arrest (Fig. 5G). This observation is in agreement with findings from Zhu et al. (58), who speculated that PBS1 was cleaved by AvrPphB but not by NopT.

The cytotoxic effects of NopT on Arabidopsis are reminiscent of those of YopT on mammalian host cells (21). YopT in human cells cleaved prenylated RhoA and other GTPases near their C termini, resulting in release of the GTPases from membranes and disruption of the cytoskeleton (43). We therefore performed similar experiments with membrane-bound GTPases from legumes and NopT. However, we were unable to demonstrate that prenylated GTPases from plants are substrates for NopT (W. J. Dai and C. Staehelin, unpublished data). We suggest that effector proteins from the YopT-AvrPphB family differ in their substrate specificity toward prenylated GTPases. These differences are supported by the finding that AvrPphB could not cleave prenylated RhoA (41) and that NopT expressed in HEK 293T cells, in contrast to YopT (21, 59), did not induce morphological alterations of the cell shape (images not shown). Hence, it remains an open question of whether NopT targets membrane-bound GTPases from plants.

The nodulation experiments of the present study demonstrate that NopT affected the potential of NGR234 to establish nitrogen-fixing symbiosis with various host plants, indicating that NopT is a type 3 effector involved in host-specific nodulation. Symbiosis-promoting effects of NopT, as measured by the number of nodules per plant, were found for P. vulgaris (cv. Yudou No. 1) and T. vogelii, suggesting that NopT plays a positive role during the early stages of nodule formation. This is in agreement with the measured nopT promoter activity, which was TssI dependent and induced by flavonoids within 24 h. On the other hand, the NGR234 nopT mutant induced more nodules in the interaction with C. junci. Thus, NopT is a “two-edged sword” that either improves or inhibits nodulation. This is similar to type 3 effectors from pathogenic bacteria that display either virulence or avirulence functions in plant-pathogen interactions (see, for example, reference 1). Based on these parallels, we suggest that certain legumes, such as C. junci, are unable to distinguish between rhizobial type 3 effectors and their related counterparts from pathogenic bacteria. In other words, rhizobial effectors might act as “avirulence proteins” in legumes carrying corresponding resistance genes. We hypothesize that the expression of nopT in NGR234 is an evolutionary adaptation to particular host legumes, which established improved symbiosis with rhizobial strains secreting a specific set of type 3 effectors. It is worth noting in this context that sequences homologous to nopT of NGR234 have been identified in the genome of B. japonicum USDA110 (Fig. 1B) but not in other rhizobial strains. Thus, nopT is a strain-specific type 3 effector, and it is tempting to speculate that nopT is derived from a pathogenic bacterium. The possibility of gene transfer is supported by the ORFs flanking the nopT sequence region, which display similarities to “mobility elements” (Fig. 1C).

Future experiments are required to study the function of mutated NopT proteins within nodules. Our complementation experiment with bacterial cultures demonstrated that the secretion of NopT was restored in NGRJnopTnopT (Fig. 2B). Complementation with this strain was not obtained in nodulation tests with T. vogelii and C. junci, however (data not shown). These findings are in agreement with nodulation data from Deakin et al. (13), who reported that NGR234 lost a plAFR6 construct in the absence of tetracycline. We conclude that complementation experiments with transconjugants harboring pノopT (or corresponding mutant constructs, e.g., pノopT with a C93S point mutation) cannot provide conclusive data with respect to the symbiotic role of NopT.

Nodule formation of legumes has been viewed as a “beneficial disease” (53) caused by a “refined pathogen” (15). Legumes may induce transient or localized plant-defense responses, especially during ineffective symbioses (see, for example, references 40, 47, and 55). The findings of the present study indicate that symbiotic rhizobia possess traits that resemble those from pathogenic bacteria. In addition to nopT, the symbiotic plasmid pNGR234a also harbors the ORFs yfI (homologous to NopM of S. fredii HH103[37]) and y4IO (belonging to the YopJ effector family). It would be interesting to examine the function of these ORFs during symbiosis.

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