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1 Detection of *Lotmaria passim* in honeybees from Emilia Romagna (Italy) by cultural method

2

3 Cecilia Rudelli, Gloria Isani, Giulia Andreani, Perla Tedesco\*, Roberta Galuppi

4 Department of Veterinary Medical Sciences, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, via

5 Tolara di sopra 50, Ozzano dell'Emilia, 40064 Bologna, Italy

6 \*Corresponding author: perla.tedesco@unibo.it

7

8 Abstract:

9 *Lotmaria passim* is considered an emerging field of study in honeybee pathology, since it can  
10 threaten the health of the colony leading to a higher mortality rate. However, there is a lack of  
11 knowledge regarding the diffusion of this trypanosomatid in Italy. In this study, we highlight the  
12 presence of *L. passim* in the province of Bologna through its culture isolation from honeybee guts  
13 and microscopic observation.

14

15 Keywords: *Apis mellifera*, *Lotmaria passim*, trypanosomatid, cultural method, morphological  
16 identification, honeybee pathogens

17

18 1. Introduction

19 The family Trypanosomatidae (Euglenozoa, Kinetoplastea) consists of 25 genera with a wide host  
20 range, including vertebrates and insects (Maslov et al., 2013; Kostygov et al., 2021). Until a few  
21 years ago, in honeybee, the report of monoxenous trypanosomatids in the digestive system was  
22 limited to only two species: *Leptomonas apis* Lotmar 1946, no longer reported, and *Crithidia*  
23 *mellificae* Langridge & McGhee, 1967. The presence of trypanosomatids in *Apis mellifera* has been  
24 increasingly recognized, in particular after the description of the species *Lotmaria passim* (Schwarz  
25 et al., 2015), which nowadays is considered as the most widespread bee trypanosomatid all over the  
26 world (Arismendi et al., 2016; Stevanovic et al., 2016; Vargas et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019  
27 Castelli et al., 2019; Ribani et al., 2021; Michalczyk & Sokół, 2022). It has been suggested that  
28 trypanosomatids infestation could be related to an impairment of bee immune system, a nutritional  
29 deficit and an alteration of bee behavior ( Buendía-Abad et al., 2022; Gómez-Moracho et al., 2020;  
30 Liu et al., 2020; Lukeš et al., 2018); however, the details of the pathogenic effects are still not fully  
31 understood.

32 Recently, studies have begun to deepen the interaction of *L. passim* with other well-known bee  
33 pathogen: Arismendi et al. (2020) have explored the possible synergic effect on the survival of  
34 honeybees infected at the same time by *Nosema ceranae* and *L. passim*; Quintana et al. (2021) have

35 reported the finding of *L. passim* in the mite *Varroa destructor*, while Nanetti et al. (2021) in  
36 *Aethina tumida*. Despite its wide range of distribution, there is a lack of knowledge about the real  
37 diffusion in the bee colonies of *L. passim*, and in particular few studies have evaluated its  
38 distribution in Italy (Bordin et al., 2022; Cilia et al., 2022; Ribani et al., 2021).  
39 At present, methods based on DNA assay are the most used to detect the presence of *L. passim*  
40 (Arismendi et al., 2016; Castelli et al., 2019; Cilia et al., 2022; Michalczyk & Sokół, 2022;  
41 Stevanovic et al., 2016), and few publications have reported the isolation of the parasite directly  
42 from the honeybee's intestine (Schwarz et al., 2015; Buendía-Abad et al., 2021; Ribani et al., 2021).  
43 In the present preliminary study, we aimed to detect the presence of trypanosomatids in *A. mellifera*  
44 from different apiaries of Emilia-Romagna region (Italy) through its direct isolation from the  
45 intestine of single honeybees and microscopic observation.

46

## 47 2. Material and Methods

48 Five apiaries have been included in this study: four (A, B, C, D) belonging to the same beekeeper  
49 are in three municipalities of the province of Bologna, and one belonging to a different beekeeper in  
50 the province of Rimini. The apiaries A and B are in the suburban area of Bologna (54 m above sea  
51 level), the apiary C is located in Argelato (25 m a.s.l.), a town rich of cropland, while the apiary D  
52 is located in Pianoro (200 m a.s.l.), surrounded by semi-intensive vineyards. The last is an organic  
53 apiary in the municipality of Montescudo (province of Rimini, 209 m a.s.l.) in an area characterized  
54 by semi-intensive cultivations. All the samples were collected in spring and summer 2022.

55 From each apiary of the province of Bologna, 6 colonies were selected, and 15 honeybees were  
56 sampled from each colony, while in the apiary of the province of Rimini 3 colonies were selected  
57 and 21 honeybees were sampled from each one. The specimens were collected from the external  
58 frames in all the colonies investigated. The search for intestinal flagellates was performed on single  
59 guts sampled from each honeybee using the culture method previously reported (Ribani et al.,  
60 2021). Briefly, the gut of each honeybee was dipped and grinded in 0.5 mL of supplemented DS2  
61 medium and incubated at 26 °C. Wet mount slides with 10 µL of each culture were observed with  
62 light microscope at 3 and 7 days after the incubation, to verify the presence of free active  
63 flagellates. Some cultures were maintained by subculture steps every 4–10 days in fresh medium  
64 (ratio 1:5).

65 Morphological observation insights and image acquisition were performed on some positive  
66 cultures, in May-Grunwald Giemsa stained slides, at 400 × and 1000 × magnification through Leica  
67 DMLS light microscope (Leica, Wetzlar, Germany), equipped with a digital camera Nikon DS-Fi2  
68 with imaging software NIS Elements 4.10.01 (Nikon, Tokyo, Japan). The scanning electron

69 microscopy (SEM) analysis was also performed as follows: pelleted cells were fixed with 3%  
70 glutaraldehyde in phosphate buffer (for 2 h at room temperature, then overnight at 4 °C), washed  
71 three times in PBS, dehydrated in a graded ethanol series and dried with hexamethyldisilazane.  
72 Subsequently, samples were mounted on aluminum stubs, sputter coated with gold-palladium using  
73 a SC7620 Mini Sputter Coater (Quorum Technologies) and observed using a Phenom XL G2  
74 Desktop SEM operating at 10 kV. Axenic cultures of reference strains of *C. mellifica* (ATCC  
75 30254) and *L. passim* (Ribani et al., 2021) maintained on the same medium at the same condition of  
76 incubation were used for morphological comparisons.

77

### 78 3. Results and Discussion

79 To microscopical examination, the presence of trypanosomatid flagellates was observed in several  
80 cultures of bee gut, mostly after 7 days of incubation. Overall, of the 360 bees analyzed from the  
81 Bologna province, 81 (22.5%) were positive for flagellates in culture [CI 95%; 18.19 - 26.81]. The  
82 total positivity rate was similar to the ones of each apiary (Table 1). No positivity occurred in the  
83 samples from the province of Rimini.

84

85

Apiary	n. examined colonies from each apiary	n. examined honeybees for each colony	average number of positive honeybees for each colony (min-max)	number of honeybees for each apiary	positive honeybees for each apiary (number and %)	confidence interval IC 95%
Bologna A	6	15	3.5 (2-5)	90	21 (23.3%)	14.6 – 32.0
Bologna B	6	15	3.5 (0-7)	90	21 (23.3%)	14.6 – 32.0
Bologna C	6	15	2.6 (0-10)	90	16 (17.7%)	9.8 – 25.3
Bologna D	6	15	3.8 (0-9)	90	23 (25.5%)	16.5 – 34.5
Rimini	3	21	0	63	0	0

86

87 Table 1. Maximum and minimum number of honeybees positive to flagellate morphologically  
88 identified as *Lotmaria passim* for each apiary, positivity frequencies and confidence interval in the  
89 apiaries.

90

91 Morphological observations performed either in wet slides or in slides stained with May Grunwald-  
92 Giemsa showed predominant elongated and tear-drop shaped cells typical of a promastigote  
93 morphotype. The cells narrowed posteriorly to a short caudate (tail-like) extension, often with a  
94 characteristic “nose” of the posterior end (Figure 1A, B, and C), consistent with the description of

95 *L. passim* ( Schwarz et al., 2015; Ribani et al., 2021; Buendía-Abad et al., 2022). These  
96 characteristics were confirmed by SEM observation of some specimens. Moreover, in wet mounts,  
97 these trypanosomatids were actively moving. The morphology observed in the isolates, also in wet  
98 slides, clearly differed from that of a *C. mellificae* strain (ATCC 30254) grown in the same culture  
99 medium and incubation temperature (Figure 1- D, E, and F), used as a control. Moreover, *C.*  
100 *mellificae* showed much slower movements. Therefore, we can assume that the isolates observed in  
101 the present study can be attributable to *L. passim*.

102 To date, prevalence studies available in the literature have been carried out using molecular  
103 methods such as PCR (Bartolomé et al., 2018; Bordin et al., 2022; Stevanovic et al., 2016), or real  
104 time PCR (Arismendi et al., 2022; Cilia et al., 2022; Vajnovic et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2018) that  
105 quantified the parasitic load of *Lotmaria* on pools of bees. To our knowledge, no study evaluated  
106 the frequency of positive subjects within an infected colony. This information could be useful to  
107 better understand the degree of the parasite's diffusion among cohabiting bees, and to define in  
108 more detail the sample size needed to evaluate the presence/absence of the parasite. Moreover,  
109 albeit time consuming, isolation methods allow to observe the presence of living flagellates,  
110 amplifying their number (observation after 7 days gave us the highest number of positives), thus  
111 allowing to verify the actual colonization of the bee intestine and to obtain strains which could be  
112 further studied.

113 In the present paper, *L. passim* was absent in the bees of the organic apiary from the province of  
114 Rimini, while it was observed in all four apiaries tested in the province of Bologna. This high  
115 frequency may be due to the fact that these latter apiaries were held by the same beekeeper, who is  
116 used to exchange frames and brood between colonies. A wide variability was observed among the  
117 colonies of the same apiary, from negative ones to colonies with up to 66.6% of positive bees. This  
118 variability could explain the failure to find positive apiaries in Emilia Romagna by Cilia et al.  
119 (2022) by PCR on pools of ten bees from each colony. Differently, Ribani et al. (2021) reported in  
120 the same region a percentage of 88% of honey samples from different apiaries positive to *L. passim*  
121 DNA, suggesting a high diffusion of the parasite in the region.

122 Due to the limited number of colonies analyzed in the present study, it would not be appropriate to  
123 consider the results indicative of the prevalence of *L. passim* in the apiaries of Emilia-Romagna.  
124 Nevertheless, the current study provides evidence of the presence of bees actually colonized by this  
125 trypanosomatid in this region, and underlines the need for a deeper investigation regarding the  
126 epidemiology of this flagellate in Italy.

127

128 Declarations of interest: none.

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223 Figure captions:

224 Figure 1: Wet slides (A, D), May Grunwald-Giemsa-stained slides (B, E), and SEM (C, F) images  
225 from cell cultures on Insectagro DS2 medium of a field isolate of *Lotmaria passim* (A, B, C) and  
226 *Crithidia mellificae* ATCC 30254 (D, E, F). Bar = 10 micron (A-D and F) and 15 micron (C).

227