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## Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation

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Faten Mrad, Mouldi Saidi, Haïtham Sghaier

### ► To cite this version:

Houda Trifi, Afef Najjari, Wafa Achouak, mohamed Barakat, Kais Ghedira, et al.. Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation. *Genomics*, 2019, 112 (1), pp.981-989. 10.1016/j.ygeno.2019.06.014 . cea-02327690

**HAL Id: cea-02327690**

**<https://cea.hal.science/cea-02327690>**

Submitted on 24 Oct 2019

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## Manuscript Details

<b>Manuscript number</b>	GENO_2019_16
<b>Title</b>	Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation
<b>Short title</b>	Metataxonomics of phosphogypsum: insights for its bioremediation
<b>Article type</b>	Research Paper

### Abstract

Phosphogypsum (PG) is an acidic by-product from the phosphate fertilizer industry and it is characterized by a low nutrient availability and the presence of radionuclides and heavy metals which pose a serious problem in its management. Here, we have applied Illumina MiSeq sequencing technology and five bioinformatics pipelines to explore the phylogenetic communities in Tunisian PG. Taking One Codex as a reference method, we present the results of 16S-rDNA-gene-based metataxonomics abundances with four other alternative bioinformatics pipelines (MetaGenome Rapid Annotation using Subsystem Technology (MG-RAST), mothur, MICrobial Community Analysis (MICCA) and Quantitative Insights into Microbial Ecology (QIIME)), when analyzing the Tunisian PG. Importantly, based on 16S rDNA datasets, the functional capabilities of microbial communities of PG were deciphered. They suggested the presence of PG autochthonous bacteria recoverable into (1) removal of radioactive elements and toxic heavy metals (2) promotion of plant growth (3) oxidation and (4) reduction of sulfate.

<b>Keywords</b>	Bioremediation; Functional prediction; Illumina Miseq sequencing; Microbial community; Phosphogypsum
<b>Taxonomy</b>	Genetics, Bioinformatics, Ecology, Microbiology
<b>Manuscript category</b>	Methods Paper
<b>Corresponding Author</b>	houda TRIFI
<b>Corresponding Author's Institution</b>	National Center for Nuclear Sciences and Technology (CNSTN), Sidi Thabet Technopark
<b>Order of Authors</b>	houda TRIFI, afef najjari, Wafa ACHOUAK, Mohamed Barakat, Kais Ghedira, Faten MRAD, Mouldi SAIDI, Haïtham SGHAIER
<b>Suggested reviewers</b>	Maria Costa, Talitha Santini, Feth el Zahar Haichar, Noha Youssef

## Submission Files Included in this PDF

### File Name [File Type]

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## Cover letter

Houda TRIFI

National Center for Nuclear Sciences

and Technology (CNSTN), Sidi Thabet, Tunisia

00216 25 867 494

[trifi.houda@gmail.com](mailto:trifi.houda@gmail.com)

Dear Editor,

I am pleased to submit an original research article entitled "Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five Bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation" by Trifi H, *et al*; to be considered for publication in *Genomics journal*. I hereby certify that this paper gives detailed picture and new information regarding the phylogenetic characterization of bacterial communities on phylum, class, order, family, genus and species levels in Tunisian phosphogypsum (PG) using Illumina MiSeq sequencing technology and five bioinformatics pipelines. We deciphered in this study indigenous bacteria which possess different traits such as multi-resistance to heavy metals, resistance to ionizing radiation, plant growth promoting capacities and the ability to oxidize or reduce sulfate compounds which provided a basis for exhaustive research leading to the development of an efficient tool for PG bioremediation. Our manuscript creates a paradigm for future studies of the eventual use of bacterial communities of PG in its bioremediation.

This study has not been duplicated publication or submission elsewhere, and if accepted, it will not be published elsewhere, including electronically in the same form, in English or in any other language, without the written consent of the copyright-holder. The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the publication of this article, and they have participated in the study and concur with the submission and subsequent revisions submitted by the corresponding author.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best Regards,

## Highlights

- The microbial communities of phosphogypsum (PG) were investigated using Illumina MiSeq.
- Five bioinformatics pipelines were used to analyze bacterial diversity of PG.
- The major phyla in Tunisian PG is Proteobacteria.
- The functional capabilities of microbial communities of PG were deciphered.
- Bacteria genera with bioremediation traits were detected in PG dumps.

# **Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation**

## **Abstract**

Phosphogypsum (PG) is an acidic by-product from the phosphate fertilizer industry and it is characterized by a low nutrient availability and the presence of radionuclides and heavy metals which pose a serious problem in its management. Here, we have applied Illumina MiSeq sequencing technology and five bioinformatics pipelines to explore the phylogenetic communities in Tunisian PG. Taking One Codex as a reference method, we present the results of 16S-rDNA-gene-based metataxonomics abundances with four other alternative bioinformatics pipelines (MetaGenome Rapid Annotation using Subsystem Technology (MG-RAST), mothur, MICRobial Community Analysis (MICCA) and Quantitative Insights into Microbial Ecology (QIIME)), when analyzing the Tunisian PG. Importantly, based on 16S rDNA datasets, the functional capabilities of microbial communities of PG were deciphered. They suggested the presence of PG autochthonous bacteria recoverable into (1) removal of radioactive elements and toxic heavy metals (2) promotion of plant growth (3) oxidation and (4) reduction of sulfate.

# **Metataxonomics of Tunisian phosphogypsum based on five bioinformatics pipelines: Insights for bioremediation**

Houda TRIFI<sup>1,2§\*</sup>, Afef NAJJARI<sup>3,§</sup>, Wafa ACHOUAK<sup>4</sup>, Mohamed BARAKAT<sup>4</sup>, Kais GHEDIRA<sup>5</sup>, Faten MRAD<sup>6</sup>, Mouldi SAIDI<sup>1</sup>, Haïtham SGHAIER<sup>7,8\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laboratory of biotechnology and nuclear technology (LR16CNSTN01), National Center for Nuclear Sciences and Technology (CNSTN), Sidi Thabet Technopark, 2020, Tunisia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Sciences of Bizerte, Carthage University, 7021 Jarzouna, Tunisia

<sup>3</sup>Université de Tunis El Manar, Faculté des Sciences de Tunis, LR03ES03 Microorganismes et Biomolécules Actives, 2092, Tunis, Tunisia.

<sup>4</sup>Lemire, Laboratory of Microbial Ecology of the Rhizosphere and Extreme Environment, CEA Cadarache 13108 Saint Paul Lez Durance, France

<sup>5</sup>Laboratory of Bioinformatics, Biomathematics and Biostatistics - LR16IPT09, Institut Pasteur de Tunis, Université de Tunis el Manar, Tunis, 1002, Tunisia

<sup>6</sup>Tunisian Chemical Group, Route de Gabes Km 3.5, BP “3018”, Sfax, Tunisia

<sup>7</sup>Laboratory of Energy and Matter for Development of Nuclear Sciences (LR16CNSTN02), National Center for Nuclear Sciences and Technology (CNSTN), Sidi Thabet Technopark, 2020, Tunisia

<sup>8</sup>Associated with Laboratory of Biotechnology and Nuclear Technology (LR16CNSTN01) & Laboratory of Biotechnology and Bio-Geo Resources Valorization (LR11ES31), Sidi Thabet Technopark, 2020, Tunisia

§: Both authors contributed equally to this work. \*Corresponding authors.

trifi.houda@ gmail.com; [sghaier.haitham@gmail.com](mailto:sghaier.haitham@gmail.com).

Number phone: 0021625867494

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6

7 <sup>1</sup>Laboratory of biotechnology and nuclear technology (LR16CNSTN01), National Center for  
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14 <sup>5</sup>Laboratory of Bioinformatics, Biomathematics and Biostatistics - LR16IPT09, Institut  
15 Pasteur de Tunis, Université de Tunis el Manar, Tunis, 1002, Tunisia

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21 Laboratory of Biotechnology and Bio-Geo Resources Valorization (LR11ES31), Sidi Thabet  
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23 §: Both authors contributed equally to this work. \*Corresponding authors.

24 trifi.houda@ gmail.com; sghaier.haitham@gmail.com.

25 **Abstract**

26 Phosphogypsum (PG) is an acidic by-product from the phosphate fertilizer industry and it is  
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32 bioinformatics pipelines (MetaGenome Rapid Annotation using Subsystem Technology (MG-  
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39 **Keywords:** Bioremediation; Functional prediction; Illumina Miseq sequencing; Microbial  
40 community; Phosphogypsum.

## 41 **1. Introduction**

42 During recent decades, the microbial communities in mine tailings have attracted a  
43 considerable interest from many microbiologists [1; 2; 3]. Extreme tailing environments are  
44 ideal targets for the study of microbial diversity and how microbial communities respond to  
45 environmental changes [4]. Unlike the widespread idea about the negative effect of pollution  
46 on biodiversity; microbial communities in mine site can be greater than thought. For instance,  
47 an acidic and heavy metal contaminated mine can harbor rare and extremophile  
48 microorganisms involved in the biogeochemical cycles in this site. In fact, these species may  
49 be used in bioremediation processes of other contaminated soils [5].

50 Phosphogypsum (PG) is composed of over 90% of calcium sulfate and lower percentages of  
51 silica, aluminum, phosphate, and fluoride [6]. Depending on the origin of the phosphate ores,  
52 PG contains variable amounts of some impurities such as naturally occurring radionuclides  
53 and heavy metals [7]. The stack of PG increases during the manufacture of phosphoric acid,  
54 which makes its disposal an environmental concern.

55 Bioremediation could be used as an innovative PG management strategy. It is based on the  
56 use of living organisms, especially microorganisms, to degrade or detoxify the environmental

57 contaminant as a safe and low-cost alternative [8]. However, the optimization of  
58 bioremediation strategies is dependent on knowing and characterizing the *in situ* microbial  
59 community. Indigenous bacteria able to remain active within the contaminant, can be  
60 identified and potentially targeted for bioremediation [9].

61 Recently, the application of next generation sequencing technologies such as Illumina Miseq  
62 has allowed to generate gigabases of high-quality raw data at low cost [10]. Metataxonomics  
63 is a high-throughput process used to identify microorganisms within a complex environment  
64 and create a metataxonomic tree in order to make taxonomic inferences [11]. Metagenomic  
65 analysis of nucleic acids was a powerful approach to capture the entire spectrum of microbial  
66 communities including both cultivable and uncultivable microorganisms as well as some rare  
67 species [12].

68 The microbial diversity of Tunisian PG has been poorly understood. Recently, one paper has  
69 studied the most important phyla of microbial communities in Tunisian PG using QIIME [13],  
70 but there have been no additional reports of these communities. This study, therefore,  
71 represents the first observation of the microbiology of PG using Illumina MiSeq approach and  
72 five bioinformatics pipelines. It provides an evaluation of the potential applications of the  
73 microbial communities of PG in bioremediation processes.

## 74 **2. Materials and methods**

### 75 **2.1 Site description and sample collection**

76 Sample collections were conducted in March; 2012 from the PG piles in accordance with  
77 Smith et al. [14] sampling guidelines. PG dumps are located near to the fertilizer industry in  
78 Sfax, Southeastern Tunisia. This region is characterized by a semi-arid to arid climate with an  
79 annual precipitation of around 237.8 mm. The Sfax plant (SIAPE factory) stockpiles contain  
80  $\approx$ 30 million tons of PG covering more than 48 ha and measuring more than 50 m height [13].

81 The 10 cm of sediment layer was collected with sterile spatulas and spoons, and homogenized  
82 in a pre-sterilized aluminum pan. Multiple aliquots of samples were placed into 50 mL  
83 polypropylene tubes and were stored on ice until analysis prior to microbial analyses, while  
84 others were dried for the determination of soil chemical properties and radionuclides content.  
85 PG pH was determined using a glass combination electrode with a PG: water ratio of 1:2.5.  
86 The physico-chemical characteristics of PG were determined using Analyzer and Inductive  
87 Coupled Plasma Optical Emission Spectrometry (ICP-OES) in National Institute for Research  
88 and Physicochemical Analysis (INRAP) in Tunisia. Gamma spectrometry was used for the  
89 determination of radionuclides containing in the sample. Radioactivity measurements were  
90 done in National Center for Nuclear Sciences and Technology (CNSTN) in Tunisia.

## 91 **2.2 DNA Extraction**

92 DNA samples were extracted according to the method of He et al. [15] with some  
93 modification. 10 g of PG was mixed with 13.5 mL of DNA extraction buffer (100 mM Tris–  
94 HCl [pH 8.0], 100 mM sodium EDTA [pH 8.0], 100 mM sodium phosphate [pH 8.0], 1.5 M  
95 NaCl, 1% hexadecylmethylammonium bromide) and 10 mL of proteinase K (10 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>) in  
96 centrifuge tubes by horizontal shaking at 200 rpm for 30 min at 37°C. After the shaking  
97 treatment, 1.5 mL of 20% dodecyl sulfate sodium (SDS) was added, and the samples were  
98 incubated in a 65°C water bath for 2 h with gentle end-over end inversions every 15–20 min.  
99 The supernatants were collected after centrifugation at 6,000 g for 10 min at room  
100 temperature and transferred into 50 mL centrifuge tubes. The soil pellets were extracted two  
101 more times by adding 4.5 mL of the extraction buffer and 0.5 mL of 20% SDS, vortexing for  
102 10 s, incubating at 65°C for 10 min, and centrifuging as before. Supernatants from the three  
103 cycles of extractions were combined and mixed with an equal volume of chloroform–  
104 isopentanol (24:1, v/v). The aqueous phase was recovered by centrifugation and precipitated  
105 with 0.6 volume of isopropanol at 4°C for 1 h. The pellet of crude nucleic acids was obtained

106 by centrifugation at 16,000 g for 20 min at 4°C, washed with a cold 70% ethanol, and  
107 resuspended in sterile deionized water. DNA concentration and quality were assessed based  
108 on spectral absorbance at 260 nm wavelength and absorbance ratios of 260/280 nm, using a  
109 NanoDrop Spectrophotometer (NanoDrop Technology, USA). DNA samples were preserved  
110 at –80°C until further processing.

### 111 **2.3 Amplification of 16S rRNA Genes**

112 DNA samples were subjected to high throughput sequencing (HTS) by Illumina MiSeq  
113 technology, according to Illumina recommendations (16S Meta-genomic Sequencing Library  
114 Preparation, Part #15044223\_B) With the V3 chemistry (2 x 300 bp). V3-V4 domain of 16S  
115 rRNA was amplified with tagged primers 16S rRNA Fwd primer [3'-  
116 CCTACGGGNGGCWGCAG-5'] and 16S rRNA Rev primer [3'-  
117 GACTACHVGGGTATCTAATCC-5']. The tagged primers structure was 5'-N<sub>2-4</sub>X<sub>6</sub>P<sub>n</sub>-3',  
118 with "N<sub>2-4</sub>" were random bases, "X<sub>6</sub>" were 6-bases tag and "P<sub>n</sub>" was specific primer. The  
119 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) mix contained 1 µg of template DNA, 10 µL of 5X Taq  
120 reaction buffer, 1 µM of each primer, 200 µM dNTPs, and 1.25 units of Taq polymerase in a  
121 50 µL reaction. The amplification procedure was as follows: an initial denaturation step at  
122 95°C for 2 min, and 35 cycles of denaturing at 95°C for 1 min, annealing at 53°C for 1 min,  
123 and extension at 72°C for 1 min, followed by a final extension step at 72°C for 5 min.

### 124 **2.4 Bioinformatics and statistical analysis**

125 The raw data generated from Illumina MiSeq technology run was processed and analyzed  
126 with One Codex, using default parameters, and also, for comparison purposes, following the  
127 pipelines of MG-RAST [16], mother [17], MICCA [18] and QIIME [19]. The merged file  
128 contained 16,803 sequences totaling 7,639,017 base pairs with an average length of 455 bps.  
129 The same generated merged FASTQ file was used as input for all five pipelines on or after

130 August 2017. Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) were calculated at phylum, order, family,  
131 genus and species levels. Taxa with relative abundance higher than 1% were retained for  
132 statistical analysis.

### 133 **2.4.1 One Codex**

134 In this work, first, we used the One Codex data platform [20] for the taxonomic assignment of  
135 datasets because of the following advantages: (1) it exhaustively compares input samples  
136 against a database of thousands of whole microbial genomes, numbering approximately  
137 40,000 bacteria, viruses, protists, archaea and fungi (<https://onecodex.com/>) in seconds [21]  
138 (2) it has best-in-class detection accuracy providing results with 0.00% false positives [22]  
139 and (3) it has the highest degree of sensitivity and specificity compared to other methods, both  
140 when detecting well-characterized organisms as well as "taxonomically novel" species [20].  
141 For the metataxonomic analysis of the merged file, One Codex, used an assignment-first  
142 approach. First, for the taxonomic assignment, all reads were compared to One Codex  
143 database by checking for exact k-mer matches. Afterwards, based on those comparisons, the  
144 lowest taxonomy possible to each read was assigned. Then, for taxonomic binning, reads were  
145 gathered into various taxonomic units based on their annotations [20; 21] Metataxonomic  
146 results were obtained as an overview, charts, phylogenies and tables.

### 147 **2.4.2 MG-RAST: MetaGenome Rapid Annotation using Subsystem Technology**

148 The merged file was uploaded to MG-RAST [16] for sequence analysis. The analysis  
149 generated by the MG-RAST automated processing pipeline (<http://metagenomics.anl.gov>) is  
150 as follows: Reads were given a taxonomic classification using the 'Best Hit Classification'  
151 option in MG-RAST, a maximum E-value cut-off of  $1e-05$ , a % identity threshold of 60, a  
152 minimum alignment length of 15 bp and a minimum abundance set to 1. Best Hit  
153 Classification reports the highest scoring annotation(s) for each read. MG-RAST uses the

154 BLAT (BLAST-like alignment tool) [23] algorithm for the computation of similarities and to  
155 identify rDNA sequences by searching a reduced rDNA database. The UCLUST algorithm  
156 [24] is then used to cluster identified rDNA sequences. Representative sequences of each  
157 cluster were then used to realize taxonomic assignments using the RDP database [25].

### 158 **2.4.3 Mothur**

159 Merged FASTQ file was quality-filtered and analyzed using mothur version 1.39.5, following  
160 the MiSeq Standard Operating Process pipeline [26]. Briefly, contigs were screened to  
161 remove sequences that did not align to Silva V4 database [27]. Duplicate sequences were  
162 merged followed by the alignment to a reference database (SILVA 123). Chimeric sequences  
163 were removed by using UCHIME algorithm [24]. Taxonomic classification was done based  
164 on Ribosomal Database Project (RDP) trainset 14 and using the RDP Naïve Bayesian  
165 Classifier [28]. Abundance was expressed as a percentage with respect to the total number of  
166 sequences in the sample.

### 167 **2.4.5 MICCA**

168 Processing the analysis of amplicon metagenomic datasets with micca software pipeline  
169 combines the following steps. First, the primers from both ends of merged FASTQ file were  
170 trimmed using trim command in the MICCA software package. Second, the quality of  
171 trimmed sequences was filtered using micca filter according to the maximum allowed  
172 expected error. Third, filtered sequences were classified into OTUs based on the *de novo*  
173 greedy clustering. Each representative sequence of generated OTUs was classified based on  
174 the RDP classifier [28]. Abundance was expressed as a percentage with respect to the total  
175 number of sequences in the sample.

176

177

## 178 **2.4.6 QIIME**

179 The Merged FASTQ file was quality-filtered and analyzed using QIIME v.1.9.0 pipeline [19].  
180 Sequences with an average Phred quality score < 25 were discarded. Chimeric sequences  
181 were identified using USEARCH [24] implemented in QIIME's pipeline using the reference  
182 mode against the SILVA LTP database (release 119) [29]. OTUs were clustered with QIIME's  
183 *de novo* OTU-picking pipeline using UCLUST [24] and rdp methods with Naive Bayes  
184 classification [28]. Representative sequences for each OTU were classified taxonomically  
185 using BLAST [30] against SILVA LTP database (release 119). Abundance was expressed as a  
186 percentage with respect to the total number of sequences in the sample.

## 187 **2.5 Diversity comparisons and statistical analysis**

188 Alpha-diversity metrics, corresponding to variables describing diversity within the sample  
189 (Good's coverage, Shannon diversity and Simpson indexes), was computed at a genus level.  
190 Each pipeline (mothur, MICCA and QIIME) was used to calculate diversity measures.

## 191 **3. Results and Discussion**

### 192 **3.1 Assignment of metataxonomic datasets, comparison of bioinformatics pipelines and** 193 **taxonomic signature**

194 When analyzing 16S rDNA gene sequencing data from complex ecological niches, like PG,  
195 careful consideration of sources of bias affecting each tool is required. The performance of  
196 One Codex was confirmed by Lindgreen et al. [22] as previously indicated in this paper.  
197 Taxonomic binning *via* One Codex allowed the assignment of the prevalent OTUs ( $\geq 1\%$  of  
198 the community) to four phyla which are Proteobacteria (46.76%), Actinobacteria (18.45%),  
199 Firmicutes (15.11%) and Bacteroidetes (2.68%). The most frequent detected classes  
200 comprising 36.4% of the proteobacterial phylotypes were, in order of abundance:

201 Gammaproteobacteria (15.74%), Alphaproteobacteria (14.07%) and Betaproteobacteria  
202 (6.59%).

203 The results of One Codex were compared with four bioinformatics pipelines, MG-RAST,  
204 mothur, MICCA and QIIME as well as with previously published data (Figure 1, Table 2,  
205 Supplementary File 1). Among the 16,803 reads of the merged file, 98.19, 97.79, 99.45,  
206 97.73 and 99.34% were classified using the One Codex, MG-RAST, mothur, MICCA and  
207 QIIME tools, respectively (Supplementary File 1). Inspection of rarefaction curves  
208 (Supplementary File 1) showed that they tended to asymptotes, thereby arguing for high  
209 sequence coverage, a conclusion strongly supported by reference to Good's coverage metric  
210 (Table 1). Indeed, estimation of the coverage provided by our metataxonomic data set showed  
211 that One codex and mothur pipelines gave a good coverage with 99.19 and 99.00%,  
212 respectively. Shannon's diversity and Simpson indices are presented in Table 1.

213 Taking One Codex as a reference method, we also showed that the four other bioinformatics  
214 pipelines did not detect taxonomic units (*e.g.*, species) in similar abundances. Also,  
215 differences were observed at different level (Table 2, Supplementary File 1). Differences at  
216 the class and genus levels are shown in Figure 1. Moreover, in comparison with the reference  
217 method, these four tools (MG-RAST, mothur, MICCA and QIIME) either misidentified many  
218 phyla, classes, orders, families, genera and species that were not truly present (false positives)  
219 or wrongly indicated that they are absent (false negatives) (Figure 1, Table 2, Supplementary  
220 File). However, it was observed that One Codex and QIIME produced comparable results  
221 (Table 2, Supplementary File 1).

222 In addition, many parameters can explain the difference between the study of Zouch et al. [13]  
223 and our results (Table 2), including the DNA extraction method, 16S rDNA region targets and

224 the spatiotemporal sampling data. Moreover, these differences may be attributed to used  
225 taxonomical classification algorithms and reference databases [31].

### 226 **3.2 Characteristics of Tunisian PG, functional predictions and insights for** 227 **bioremediation**

228 Fertilizer manufacturing industries release obvious sources of heavy metal and radionuclides  
229 with severe impact on the environment. In Tunisia, one of the main phosphates producing  
230 countries in the world, the phosphate fertilizer industries produce 10 Mt/year PG [32].  
231 Tunisian PG is heavily polluted with heavy metals and radionuclides (Table 3). In order to  
232 develop effective bioremediation strategies for these contaminants, the composition of  
233 microbial communities in PG needs to be better understood. Therefore, a legitimate question  
234 is to ask whether the composition of the core microbiome of Tunisian PG accords very closely  
235 with its characteristics.

236 In this study, based on a reference method, One Codex, 193 species were detected  
237 (Supplementary File 1). One Codex result indicated that Tunisian PG does not contain neither  
238 high abundance (> 25% of classified reads) nor medium abundance (5–25% of classified  
239 reads) microorganisms. However, it contains five low abundance (1–5% of classified reads)  
240 bacteria, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Empedobacter falsenii* (1.95%), *Geobacillus*  
241 *thermoleovorans* (1.3%), *Polaromonas* sp. EUR3 1.2.1 (1.27%) and *Clostridium bifermentans*  
242 (1.02%).

243 One codex analysis showed that PG was dominated at the phylum level by Proteobacteria  
244 (46.76% of classified reads). In more detail, Proteobacteria-related sequences were composed  
245 of five classes: Gammaproteobacteria, Alphaproteobacteria, Betaproteobacteria,  
246 Deltaproteobacteria and Epsilonproteobacteria an order from the highest to the lowest  
247 (Supplementary File 1). Proteobacteria are often shown to be predominant in various acidic

248 environments such as mine tailings, comprising up to 70% of 16S rRNA gene clone library  
249 sequences [33; 34]. They are well-known to survive in oligotrophic environments, nitrate  
250 reduction and metal resistance and they are able to reduce uranium. These characteristics were  
251 frequently presented in Gammaproteobacteria [9; 35] which were detected as the dominant  
252 class in this study.

253 Actinobacteria were the second most dominant phylum with a representative major order  
254 (*Micrococcales*) and major family (*Micrococcaceae*) (Supplementary File 1). Members of this  
255 phylum are ubiquitously distributed in different habitats, including metal-rich, acidic  
256 ecosystems. Their metabolic versatility and resilience to harsh environments have been also  
257 reported in mining-related areas [36]. Indeed, Actinobacteria have a range of mechanisms for  
258 dealing with heavy metal resistance [37]. They have been widely used in bioremediation such  
259 as biotransformation, biodegradation and other purposes [38]. El Baz et al.[39] showed that  
260 Actinobacteria might be a good tool which can be used in a bioreactor configuration to treat  
261 metal contaminated wastes prior to discharge into the environment.

262 Firmicutes was the third dominant phylum (Supplementary File 1). Members of this phylum  
263 occupy a wide range of habitats and can be either beneficial or detrimental in diverse settings  
264 [40] and they have an important role in industrial and clinical aspect [41].

265 Concordantly, Proteobacteria, Actinobacteria and Firmicutes were mainly detected in mine  
266 tailing with low pH, intense weathering and iron precipitations [1; 42]. They are known to be  
267 resistant to heavy metal toxicity and adapted for growth in low nutrient environments [35].

268 Deeper genus-level sequencing revealed that the majority of bacteria in PG can contribute to  
269 the different biotechnological treatment of PG. The dominant bacteria genera were related to  
270 *Arthrobacter* (13.25%), followed by the genera *Paracoccus* (12.32%), *Pseudomonas* (6.7%)  
271 and *Staphylococcus* (3.63%) (Supplementary File 1). These genera have already been detected

272 in various environments contaminated with chemicals and heavy metal such as mine dumps,  
273 sometimes as dominant populations. They have metabolically versatile and diverse  
274 degradative capabilities and potential applications for bioremediation [43; 44; 45; 46].

275 Resolving metataxonomics data at the species level has great potential for deciphering  
276 functional profiles within an ecological niche. These predictions suggested the presence of  
277 PG-native strains valorisable into (1) removal of radioactive elements and toxic heavy metals  
278 (2) promotion of plant growth (3) oxidation and (4) reduction of sulfate (Figure 2).

279 Many of detected strains in this study (Supplementary File 1) were isolated previously in  
280 uranium (U) mine, and they are well-known for precipitation or reduction of U and other  
281 radionuclides such as *Geobacter* sp. [3], *Idiomarina* sp. [47], *Clostridium* sp. [35]. The ability  
282 of *Lactobacillus* sp. to remove U from aqueous solution was reported by Tsuruta [48]. The  
283 removal of radioactive elements and toxic heavy metals from contaminated sources is a  
284 worthwhile priority for environmental protection initiatives. Therefore, researchers have  
285 concentrated on accumulation of U by microorganisms that can leach you from ore in mine  
286 soil [49; 50]. These microorganisms from U deposits can be used as adsorbing agents for the  
287 removal of nuclear elements which may be present in mine tailings [48]. The isolation of  
288 these bacteria from a radioactive environment is very encouraging due to the possibility of  
289 their being used in the radionuclide bioremediation process.

290 Importantly, although PG is a radioactive environment, we detected the presence of ionizing  
291 radiation sensitive bacterial species such as *Corynebacterium* sp., *Acinetobacter baumannii*,  
292 *Acinetobacter haemolyticus*, *Bacillus subtilis*, *Bacillus cereus* and *Bacillus megaterium*  
293 (Figure 2). This can be explained based on previous findings that radioresistant microbial  
294 cells may protect their radiosensitive neighboring species (even from a different phylum)  
295 from high-level ionizing radiation [51]. Moreover, the Comparison of the concentration of  
296 radionuclides found in this study with others carried out worldwide as reported by Ajam et al.

297 [32] showed that the radioactivity of  $^{226}\text{Ra}$  in the Tunisian PG (200.58 becquerel / kilogramme  
298 (Bq/Kg)) is lower than those in other PG (Morocco, 1420 Bq/kg; Florida, 1120 Bq/kg).

299 Concentrations of metal(loid)s in Tunisian PG (Table 3), particularly Sr, Zn and Cd, are  
300 higher than those indicated in the environmental quality standard for agricultural applications  
301 in Quebec [52]. Cd is one of the most phytotoxic metals especially in acidic soil with low  
302 CEC and can cause agricultural yield reduction, contamination of the food crops [53].  
303 Different bacterial species detected in Tunisian PG (Supplementary File 1) have been  
304 characterized in extremely acidic areas characterized by low nutrient and high levels of heavy  
305 metals like *Ralstonia* sp. [35; 54], *Corynebacterium* sp. [55], *Comamonas* sp. [56] and  
306 *Pseudomonas* sp. [43] (Figure 2).

307 PG dumps are subjected to water erosion and wind dispersion representing a source of  
308 contamination for nearby communities [57]. Numerous investigations have focused on the  
309 search for a new way to restore mine areas by the creation of a vegetation cover which assure  
310 long-term metal stabilization. Another method to valorize PG is its use as a fertilizer in  
311 agricultural crops. In this study, different isolates were characterized by their plant growth  
312 promoting traits as well as their resistances to various heavy metals (Figure 2) and may be  
313 excellent candidates of bio-inoculants for enhancing the phytomanagement strategies of PG.  
314 Among these isolates, *Bradyrhizobium* sp., a plant growth promoting rhizobacterium (PGPR)  
315 used in the phytostabilization of heavy metals and to increase plant yield and nitrogen uptake  
316 [58]. Other species in Tunisian PG (Supplementary File 1) can also resist to the toxicity of  
317 heavy metals and promote plant growth (Figure 2) via various mechanisms such as secretion  
318 of phytohormones (auxins), siderophores, ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ), 1-aminocyclopropane-1-  
319 carboxylate (ACC) deaminase and solubilization of inorganic phosphate: *Delftia* sp. [59],  
320 *Achromobacter* sp. [60], *Flavobacterium* sp., *Shingomonas* sp. [61], *Psychobacter* sp. [62],  
321 *Rhizobium* sp. [63], *Planococcus* sp. [64], *Mesorhizobium* sp. [65], *Paenibacillus* sp. [66],

322 *Jeotgalicoccus* sp. [67], *Acinetobacter* sp. [68], *Pelomonas* sp. [69], *Burkholderia* sp. [70],  
323 *Rhodococcus* sp. [71], *Chryseobacterium* sp. [72], *Bacillus* sp. [73], *Methylobacterium* sp.  
324 [67], *Stenotrophomonas* sp. [74], *Massilia* sp. [75], *Kribbela* sp. [76].

325 Another strategy for PG bioremediation is the use of sulfate-oxidizing bacteria (SOB) and  
326 sulfate-reducing bacteria (SRB) which well-known as good candidates for PG  
327 biotransformation [77; 78]. SOB play an important role in detoxifying their environments,  
328 and they can increase the availability of sulphate ( $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ) for plant absorption which will  
329 improve plant growth and agricultural production [79]. SOB not only oxidized sulfur, but they  
330 may also oxidize iron (Fe) and glucose as an energy source and considered as mixotrophs.  
331 This sulfur and Fe oxidation ability enables them to use for extraction of metals from low-  
332 grade ores where the ferric Fe act as an oxidizing agent [80]. Furthermore, SRB may reduce  
333 sulfate from PG into hydrogen sulfide. Thereafter,  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  may be oxidized into sulfuric acid by  
334 sulfide-oxidizing bacteria to be possibly reused in the fertilizer industry to produce  
335 phosphoric acid. Moreover,  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  produced by SRB may react with different with certain  
336 dissolved metals, such as copper (Cu), Fe and Zn, forming insoluble precipitates [81]. For  
337 instance, Martins et al. [78] showed the ability of SRB to remove Cu, Zn and Fe from the  
338 sample. In this respect, biotechnological process based on SRB and SOB activity may be  
339 considered as environmentally friendly for the treatment of metal-rich PG waste.

340 In accordance with the elevated sulfur concentration in PG, we detected SOB and SRB in this  
341 study (Figure 2). The sulfur-oxidizing *Pseudomonas* sp., *Stenotrophomonas* sp.,  
342 *Achromobacter* sp., *Thiokalvibrio* sp., *Methylophilus* sp., *Sedimenticola* sp., *Thiomicrospira*  
343 sp., *Corynebacterium* sp., *Achrobacter* sp. and the sulfur-reducing *Geobacter* sp., *Clostridium*  
344 sp. *Desulfotomaculum* sp. represented approximately 7.15 and 0.02%, respectively, of PG  
345 community, suggesting that the oxidation-reduction of sulfurous compounds may occur in the  
346 harsh conditions of PG.

347 The knowledge and detection of indigenous bacteria which possess different bioremediation  
348 traits such as multi-resistant heavy metals/radionuclides PGPB with the capacity to oxidize or  
349 reduce sulfate compounds provided a basis for exhaustive research leading to the  
350 development of an efficient tool to detect, stabilize or remove heavy metals and radionuclides  
351 with the ability to improve plant yield in extreme environments like the PG. For example,  
352 *Pseudomonas* sp. and *Stenotrophomonas* sp. were SOB isolated from acid mine drainage [80],  
353 they exhibited resistance to high concentrations of metalloids [82; 83]. Besides, they are able  
354 to secrete phytohormones, siderophores and solubilize inorganic phosphate [74; 84].

#### 355 **4. Conclusion**

356 In conclusion, using the high throughput Illumina sequencing technique and one reference  
357 method (One Codex) with four alternative bioinformatics pipelines (MG-RAST, mothur,  
358 MICCA and QIIME), provided a detailed picture and new information regarding the  
359 phylogenetic characterization of bacterial communities on phylum, class, order, family, genus  
360 and species levels in Tunisian PG. In light of *in silico* results of PG metataxonomics  
361 generated using these five bioinformatics pipelines, the Tunisian PG is a mesmerizing  
362 repository of metal-tolerant, radioresistant, PGP, SO and SR bacteria. However, clearly, when  
363 analyzing 16S RDNA gene sequencing data from complex ecological niches, like PG, the use  
364 of a reference method and careful consideration of sources of bias affecting each alternative  
365 method are required. This work will improve our knowledge of bacteria suitable to be used in  
366 PG bioremediation, as well as bioprospecting of enzymes and biotechnological compounds  
367 hidden in PG.

#### 368 **Acknowledgements**

369 This work was performed under the auspices of the Tunisian National Center for Nuclear  
370 Sciences and Technologies (CNSTN) in collaboration with the CEA, France. It was supported

371 by grants from the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and from  
372 Laboratory of Microbial Ecology of the Rhizosphere and Extreme Environment (CEA,  
373 France); without this generous and strong assistance, this study could not have been  
374 undertaken.

375 Supplementary data of this work can be found in the online version of the paper.

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## Figure captions

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680 **Figure 1:** (A) Taxonomic identities at the class level of PG as determined *via* Illumina MiSeq  
681 16S rDNA gene amplicon sequencing and classification against the One Codex reference tool.  
682 (B) Box-and-whisker plots comparing 16S-rDNA-gene-based metataxonomics abundances  
683 for taxonomic units at the class level when analyzing PG using the One Codex, MG-RAST,  
684 mothur, MICCA and QIIME tools. (C) Taxonomic identities at the genus level of PG as  
685 determined *via* Illumina MiSeq 16S rDNA gene amplicon sequencing and classification  
686 against the One Codex reference tool. (D) Box-and-whisker plots comparing 16S-rDNA-  
687 gene-based metataxonomics abundances for taxonomic units at the genus level when  
688 analyzing PG using the One Codex, MG-RAST, mothur, MICCA and QIIME tools. The  
689 classes and genera shown are those that were >1% of the community.

690 **Figure 2:** Phylogenetic tree representing PG-native strains valorizable into (1) removal of  
691 radioactive elements and toxic heavy metals (2) promotion of plant growth (3) oxidation and  
692 (4) reduction of sulfate. Histograms indicate reads' percentage for each species as determined  
693 by the One Codex reference tool. See text for details.

694

695 **Table 1:** Observed generic OTUs (0.03 cutoff) and Shannon's diversity indices at the genus  
 696 level.  
 697

Analysis method	Good's library coverage (%)	Observed OTUs	Shannon's diversity index (H)
One Codex	98.19	128	3.90
MG-RAST	98.04	83	ND
mothur	99	135	3.92
MICCA	33	66	4.24
QIIME	76	249	5.77
QIIME [13]	ND	224	4.51

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700

701 **Table 2:** Major phyla, classes, orders, families, genera and species of Tunisian PG based on  
 702 One Codex, as a reference method, and four other pipelines (MG-RAST, mothur, MICCA and  
 703 QIIME).

	One Codex	MG-RAST	mothur	MICCA	QIIME	QIIME [13]
<b>Phylum</b>	Proteobacteria (46.76%)	Firmicutes (24.03%)	Proteobacteria (50.48%)	Proteobacteria (48.24%)	Proteobacteria (41.21%)	Proteobacteria (70%)
<b>Class</b>	Actinobacteria (18.27%)	Bacilli (23.76%)	Gammaproteobacteria (27.95%)	Gammaproteobacteria (29.75%)	Actinobacteria (37.34%)	Gammaproteobacteria (≈55%)
<b>Order</b>	Micrococcales (13.55%)	Bacillales (23.22%)	Pseudomonadales (15.85%)	Bacillales (23.8%)	Bacillales (17%)	ND
<b>Family</b>	<i>Micrococcaceae</i> (13.41%)	<i>Micrococcaceae</i> (11.82%)	<i>Pseudomonadaceae</i> (13.76%)	<i>Micrococcaceae</i> (16.24%)	<i>Micrococcaceae</i> (26.997%)	ND
<b>Genus</b>	<i>Arthrobacter</i> (13.25%)	<i>Bacillus</i> (15.61%)	<i>Pseudomonas</i> (4.58%)	<i>Arthrobacter</i> (12.88%)	<i>Arthrobacter</i> (20.5%)	<i>Desulfobacterium</i> (1.74%)
<b>Species</b>	<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> (2.9%)	<i>Bacillus cereus</i> (10.91%)	<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i> (1.068%)	<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> (2.71%)	<i>Acidithiobacillus albertensis</i>  (13%)	ND

704 Abundance is expressed in parentheses.

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706

707 **Table 3:** Chemical composition and radioactivity of Tunisian phosphogypsum (PG).

<b>Composition</b>	<b>PG</b>
pH	3.36
Calcium (Ca)	20.73%
Sulfur (S)	11.193%
Phosphate (P)	0.62%
Iron (Fe)	0.022%
Magnesium (Mg)	0.018%
Strontium (Sr)	646.33 ppm
Zinc (Zn)	113.65 ppm
Cadmium (Cd)	20.19 ppm
Nickel (Ni)	5.20 ppm
Copper (Cu)	4.56 ppm
<sup>214</sup> Pb	210.86±1.70 Bq/kg
<sup>226</sup> Ra	200.58±2.46 Bq/kg
<sup>214</sup> Bi	190.31±1.78 Bq/kg
<sup>238</sup> U	93.92±15.54 Bq/kg
<sup>228</sup> Ac	28.49±4.42 Bq/kg
<sup>232</sup> Th	28.49±4.92 Bq/kg
<sup>212</sup> Pb	27.50±2.44 Bq/kg
<sup>40</sup> K	12.94±10.40 Bq/kg

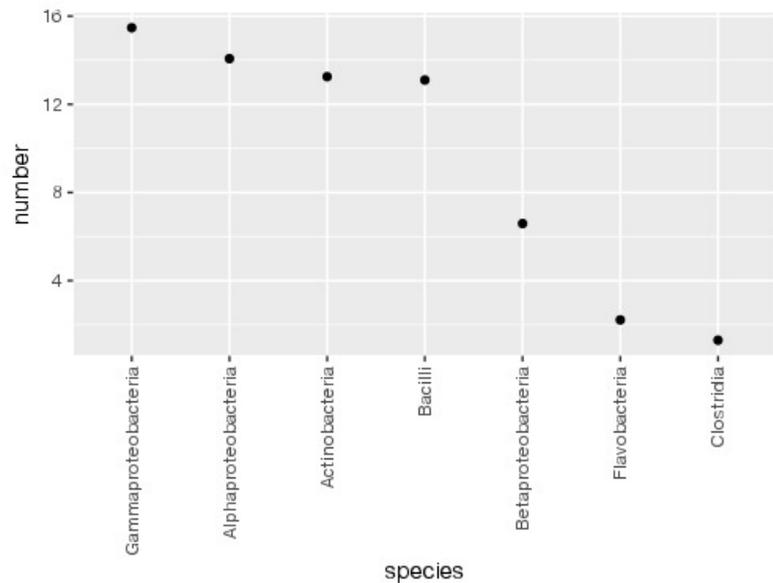
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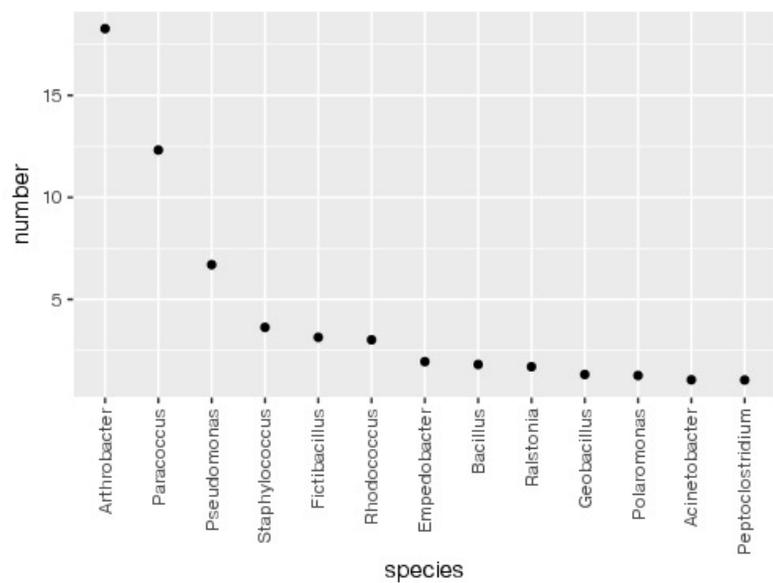
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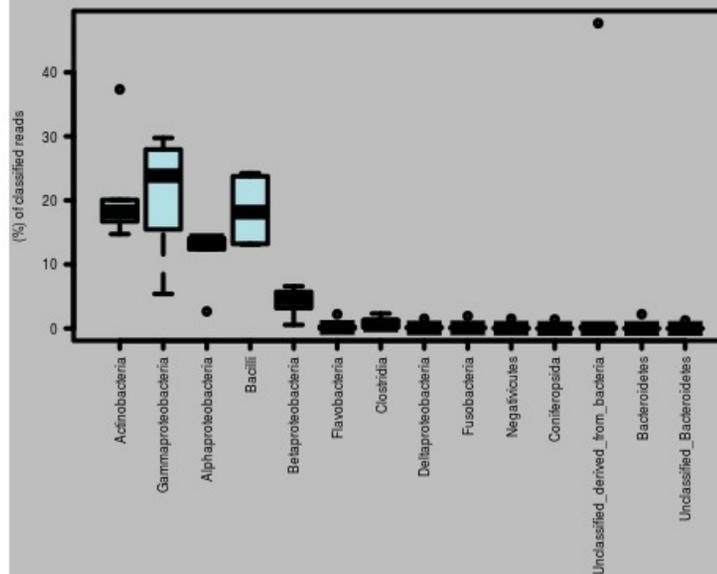
OneCodex Class distribution



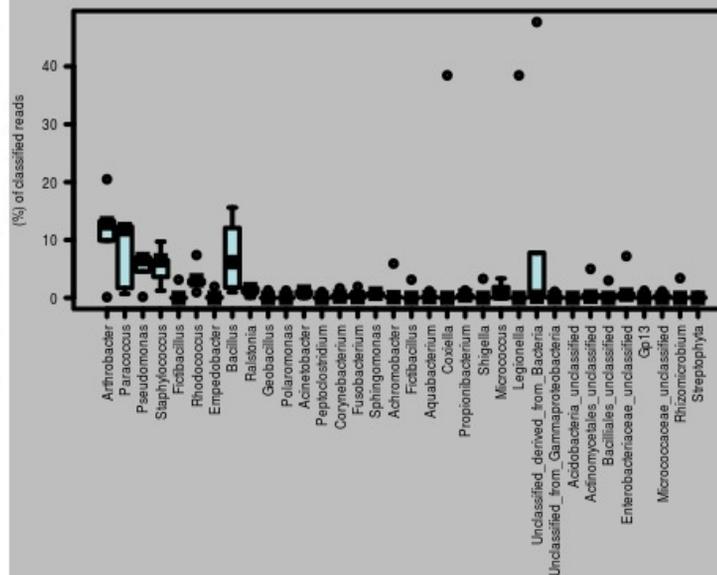
OneCodex Genus distribution



Bacterial Class distribution using the 5 tools



Bacterial Genus distribution using the 5 tools





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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the publication of this article, and they have participated in the study and concur with the submission and subsequent revisions submitted by the corresponding author.