



Morphology of Microorganisms and Systematics of Prokaryotes

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Abstract

Microorganisms are integral to ecological systems and biochemical cycles, occupying nearly all environments on Earth. Among them, prokaryotic organisms—bacteria and archaea—exhibit structural simplicity yet vast diversity, influencing fields from agriculture to biotechnology. Their morphological features, including shape, size, and motility, inform their classification and ecological roles. Despite advancements in microbial genetics and classification, challenges remain in fully elucidating evolutionary relationships and unifying microbial taxonomy. This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the external morphology of microorganisms, the structural components of prokaryotic cells, and the systematic differences between bacteria and archaea. Key findings include the structural roles of the cell wall, flagella, capsules, and genetic material in prokaryotes, alongside their physiological adaptability. The classification of prokaryotes into systematic categories based on molecular and phenotypic traits is discussed, particularly the significance of 16S rRNA analysis. The article highlights the role of advanced genetic tools, such as nucleotide composition analysis and DNA hybridization, in distinguishing microbial species. It also emphasizes the unique molecular characteristics of archaea, which exhibit traits common to both prokaryotes and eukaryotes. Understanding the morphology and classification of prokaryotes is crucial in medical microbiology, biotechnology, and ecological studies. This foundational knowledge supports the effective use of beneficial microorganisms while mitigating the risks posed by pathogenic species.

Keywords: Microorganisms, morphology, prokaryotes, bacteria, archaea, external structure, cell wall, systematics.

Introduction

Microorganisms are tiny organisms only visible through a microscope and are found in nearly all parts of the biosphere[1]. Their morphology — external structure — plays an important role in understanding their ecological adaptability and functional traits. Prokaryotes are microorganisms that lack a nucleus and other membrane-bound organelles, mainly including bacteria and archaea[2]. Their classification is based on genetic, biochemical, and morphological characteristics.

Microorganisms (from Greek mikros — small, bios — life) can exist as single-celled organisms or cell colonies. They include bacteria, actinomycetes, yeasts, viruses, molds, microscopic algae, etc.

They are divided into prokaryotes (without a nucleus) and eukaryotes (with a membrane-bound nucleus). Microorganisms are widespread in nature — in soil, water, plant debris, etc. For instance, 1 gram of soil may contain 2–3 billion microorganisms. They vary in size from a fraction of a micron to several microns[3].

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive approach based on a review and synthesis of relevant microbiological literature, including academic textbooks, internationally recognized taxonomic frameworks, and online educational resources. Primary emphasis was placed on analyzing the external morphology of prokaryotic microorganisms—specifically bacteria and archaea—through the examination of cell shape, structure, motility, and wall composition[4]. Data from classical microbiology sources such as *Brock Biology of Microorganisms*, *Prescott's Microbiology*, and *Tortora's Microbiology: An Introduction* were used to inform comparative analysis of bacterial and archaeal classifications. Morphological characteristics such as the presence of flagella, capsule formation, and spore production were investigated alongside cytoplasmic components like ribosomes, vacuoles, and storage granules. Systematic classification was addressed using binary nomenclature based on the International Code of Bacterial Nomenclature, integrating D.H. Bergey's division system and 16S rRNA gene sequence data to distinguish bacterial and archaeal lineages. The study also incorporated historical perspectives and philosophical frameworks dating back to Jain and early scientific traditions to contextualize the evolution of microbial understanding[5]. Furthermore, the taxonomic relevance of nucleotide composition and DNA hybridization techniques was highlighted to illustrate modern molecular approaches to microbial identification. Online repositories and digital learning platforms supplemented the research, offering access to updated classification schemes and visuals supporting structural interpretation[6]. Through these methods, the article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of prokaryotic morphology and taxonomy for educational and research-oriented audiences in microbiology and related disciplines[7].

Results and Discussion

Their physiological-morphological features and life cycles differ. Most are unicellular, while some, like molds, have multicellular filaments (mycelia). While typically chlorophyll-free, some contain bacteriochlorophyll or chlorophyll. They reproduce by division, budding, or forming spores and conidia[8]. Some are pathogenic. Microorganisms play a key role in nutrient cycles in nature, breaking down organic matter into minerals that plants can use. Nitrogen-fixing microorganisms and root nodule bacteria convert atmospheric nitrogen into usable forms. They also contribute to phosphorus, nitrogen, carbon, sulfur, and iron cycles and enrich soil through their life processes[9].

Figure 1 displays a microscopic view of *Clostridium botulinum*, a rod-shaped, spore-forming bacterium known for producing botulinum toxin. The image shows numerous bacilli (rod-like bacteria) scattered across the visual field, stained to enhance contrast and highlight the uniformity of their cylindrical shapes. *Clostridium botulinum* cells are typically arranged individually or in short chains, and some may appear slightly curved. The bacterium thrives in anaerobic conditions and plays a role in soil ecology, although it is more famously known as the causative agent of botulism — a rare but serious paralytic illness. This illustration serves to support the article's discussion of

bacterial morphology and taxonomy, providing a concrete example of a pathogenic prokaryote with significant clinical and microbiological relevance[10].

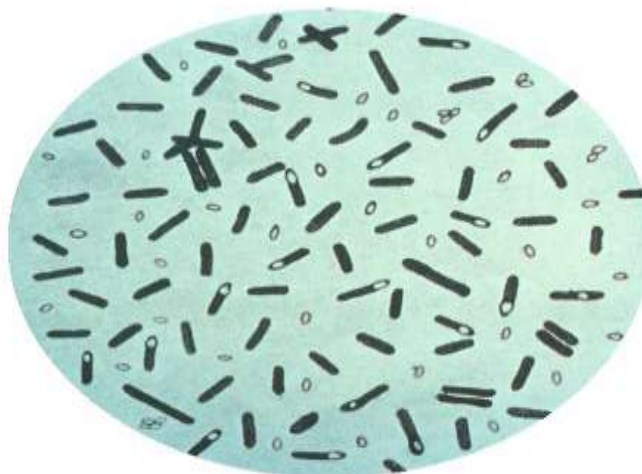


Figure 1. Clostridium botulinum

Historical Context

Microscopic organisms were speculated about long before their discovery in the 17th century[11]. In the 6th century BCE, Jain philosophers in India described tiny life forms called nigodas, believed to live everywhere, including in plants, animals, and humans. Mahavira, a Jain teacher, said that people destroy these life forms through everyday actions. Many Jains believe these teachings predicted the discovery of microorganisms.

Prokaryotes (Pro = before, karyon = nucleus) — organisms without a membrane-bound nucleus. Includes bacteria, cyanobacteria, and archaeobacteria[12]. Their genetic material (genophore) is attached to the cell membrane and lacks a defined nucleus. They don't undergo mitosis and lack organelles like chloroplasts, mitochondria, Golgi apparatus, etc. Their cell walls are made of peptidoglycan (murein), and their ribosomes are smaller than those of eukaryotes.

Prokaryotes can fix atmospheric nitrogen and are considered among the earliest life forms. Their classification considers shape, size, motility (flagella presence), capsule formation, endospore formation, Gram staining, metabolism, energy production, and interaction with the environment[13].

Structure of a Prokaryotic Bacterial Cell:

1. DNA in filament form
2. Ribosomes
3. Flagella
4. Mesosomes
5. Cell membrane
6. Cytoplasmic membrane
7. Glycogen granules
8. Volutin granules
9. Vacuole
10. Fat storage

Figure 2 illustrates the structural components of a typical prokaryotic bacterial cell. The cell is surrounded by a **cell wall**, which provides shape and rigidity, and a **cytoplasmic membrane** that regulates the exchange of substances. Internally, the cell contains **filamentous DNA** (nucleoid region) centrally located and not enclosed by a nuclear membrane. **Ribosomes** are scattered throughout the cytoplasm, serving as sites of protein synthesis. The diagram also highlights various **inclusion bodies** such as **glycogen and volutin granules**, used for storage. **Mesosomes**, infoldings of the plasma membrane, are thought to play roles in cell division and respiration[14].

External structures include **flagella**, which enable motility, and **fimbriae or pili**, which assist in attachment to surfaces and other cells. Some bacteria also possess a **capsule**, a protective outer layer that enhances resistance to desiccation and host defenses. This visualization serves as a foundational reference for understanding prokaryotic cell architecture, aiding in the identification and functional interpretation of bacterial components in microbiological research and education[15].

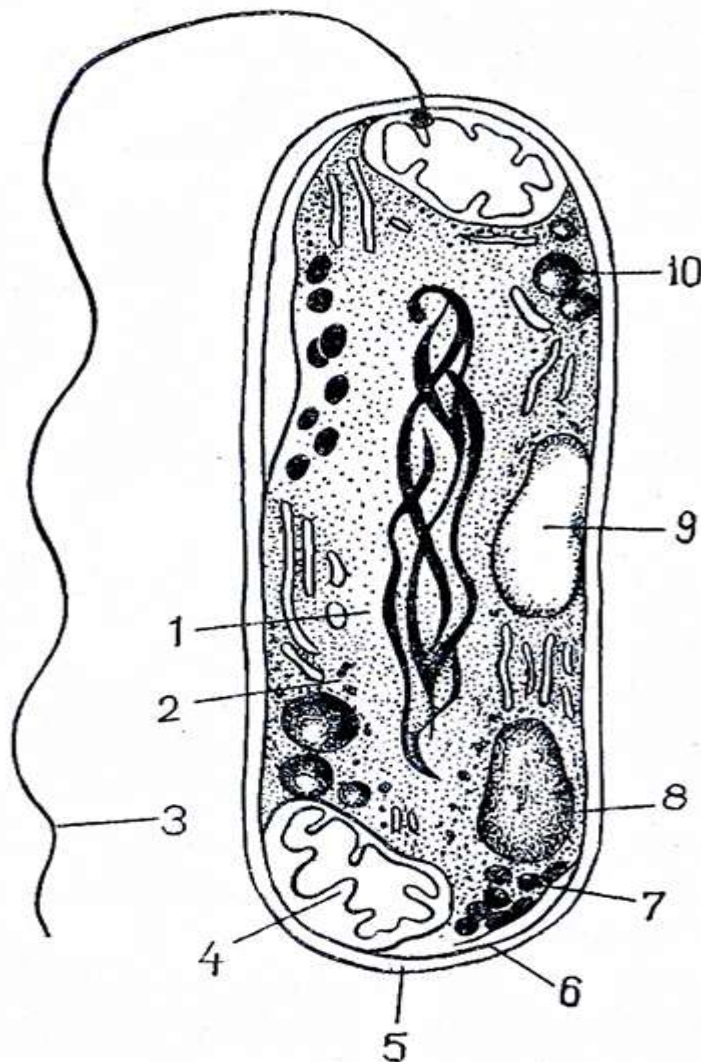


Figure 2. Prokaryotic bacterial cell

The cell is enclosed by a protective wall that maintains its shape (cocci, rods, spirilla, etc.) and allows selective permeability. Some bacteria develop a capsule under environmental stress, which protects against desiccation and helps in water regulation.

The presence of flagella is characteristic only of certain rod-shaped and spherical bacteria.

Spiral-shaped bacteria usually move through body movements, with wave-like undulations. Thanks to advances in molecular biology, it has become possible to study the genotypic characteristics of microorganisms. The nucleotide composition of microorganisms, including the ratio of purine and pyrimidine bases, is studied to identify differences between two groups of microorganisms.

The nucleic acids of microorganisms belonging to two different species can be hybridized, and the similarity of their nucleotide composition is examined. The characteristics of microorganisms have been studied, and their scientific names are given in Latin alphabet based on the binary nomenclature developed by the Cline laboratory. For example, the hay bacillus is called *Bacillus subtilis*.

Since January 1, 1980, microorganisms have been named according to the rules of the International Code of Bacterial Nomenclature. Based on shared characteristics, microorganisms are classified using taxonomic categories such as species, genus, family, order, class, division, and kingdom.

A species is a group of individuals with the same genotype and similar phenotype. They are divided into subspecies and variants. Due to insufficient information about the evolution and phylogeny of microorganisms in microbiology, their systematics is considered artificial and serves as an identifier for classifying microorganisms.

According to D.H. Bergey's (1984) data, the world of Prokaryotes is divided into four divisions. Prokaryotes are categorized into two major groups: bacteria and archaea. Their classification is based on molecular genetic analysis, particularly the sequence of 16S rRNA.

Bacteria are commonly found in ecological systems associated with humans, animals, and plants. They can be pathogenic or play beneficial roles (e.g., symbiotic bacteria). Archaea, on the other hand, tend to live in extreme environments (high temperature, acidity, salinity) and are considered closer to eukaryotes in many molecular aspects. Archaea include methanogens, halophiles, and thermoacidophiles.

Conclusion

The morphology of microorganisms plays an important role in understanding their ecological niche and physiological functions. In-depth study of prokaryotic systematics is of significant importance in microbiological research and practical fields such as medicine, agriculture, and industrial biotechnology. Such knowledge enables the effective use of microorganisms and helps minimize their harmful effects.

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