

1 **ORPA: A Fast and Efficient Method for Constructing Genome-Wide**  
2 **Alignments of Organelle Genomes for Phylogenetic Analysis**

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14 **SUMMARY**

15       Creating a multi-gene alignment matrix for phylogenetic analysis using organelle genomes  
16 involves aligning single-gene datasets manually, a process that can be time-consuming and prone  
17 to errors. The HomBlocks pipeline has been created to eliminate the inaccuracies arising from  
18 manual operations. The processing of a large number of sequences, however, remains a time-  
19 consuming task. To conquer this challenge, we have developed a speedy and efficient method  
20 called ORPA. ORPA quickly generates multiple sequence alignments for whole-genome  
21 comparisons by parsing the result files of NCBI BLAST, completing the task in just one minute.  
22 With increasing data volume, ORPA's efficiency is even more pronounced, over 300 times faster  
23 than HomBlocks in aligning 60 high-plant chloroplast genomes. The tool's phylogenetic tree  
24 outputs demonstrate equivalent results to HomBlocks, indicating its outstanding efficiency. Due  
25 to its speed and accuracy, ORPA can identify species-level evolutionary conflicts, providing  
26 valuable insights into evolutionary cognition.

27

28 **KEYWORDS**

29 Organelle phylogenomics, Phylogenomic conflict, Efficient pipeline

30

## 31 INTRODUCTION

32 Phylogenetic trees utilizing organelle genomes are becoming indispensable in  
33 comparative genomics and systematics. They play a crucial role in elucidating the evolutionary  
34 relationships among species, particularly when incomplete lineage sorting obscures these  
35 relationships. This approach provides a broad perspective and facilitates a more accurate  
36 assessment of the phylogenetic relationships among species. It is a valuable tool for studying the  
37 complex evolutionary history of eukaryotic life (Li et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021).

38 Creating a precise multiple sequence alignment (MSA) is critical to constructing an  
39 accurate phylogenetic tree. This typically involves aligning single-copy genes beforehand and  
40 then concatenating them to form a super matrix. However, this can be laborious and error-prone,  
41 often requiring manual adjustments. To tackle this challenge, we previously introduced  
42 HomBlocks software (Bi et al., 2018), which enhances the accuracy and efficiency of MSA  
43 construction for organelle genome sequences by eliminating the need for manual operations.  
44 However, when dealing with a substantial number of sequences, HomBlocks may still struggle  
45 with processing speed, which remains unsatisfactory. To address this issue more effectively, we  
46 have developed an innovative approach called ORPA. This method ranks as the fastest software  
47 for constructing multi-sequence alignments (MSA) of organelle genomes and delivers  
48 exceptionally accurate results compared to HomBlocks. Our research findings offer compelling  
49 evidence that ORPA is a highly viable option for HomBlocks, ensuring superior speed and  
50 accuracy. Moreover, the ORPA can be employed in systematic investigations to promptly obtain  
51 precise evolutionary relationships among species, resulting in significant research discoveries  
52 such as species-level evolutionary conflicts.

53

## 54 **RESULTS**

### 55 **Comparison of tree topologies constructed from ORPA and HomBlocks sequence** 56 **alignment**

57 We evaluated the topological structures of phylogenetic trees constructed using ORPA  
58 and HomBlocks by employing the benchmark data used in the HomBlocks publication (Bi et al.,  
59 2018). As a direct comparison of the MSA results was impossible, we used this approach to  
60 observe similarities and differences between the two methods. The construction of phylogenetic  
61 trees was carried out using two approaches, the maximum likelihood method (RAxML  
62 (Stamatakis, 2014)) and Bayesian method (MrBayes 3.2.5 (Ronquist et al., 2012)).

63 In the first test dataset, we evaluated the performance of two software programs using a  
64 test dataset consisting of chloroplast genomes from 52 higher plants (Supplementary Table 1), as  
65 obtained from Zhang et al. (Zhang et al., 2016). Our results showed that the alignment lengths  
66 generated by ORPA and HomBlocks were 90,925 bp and 62,101 bp, respectively, with 8,270 bp  
67 and 8,404 bp of parsimony-informative sites. The resulting phylogenetic trees constructed from  
68 these two approaches exhibited identical topological structures with high support for all nodes  
69 except five (Fig. 2). For our second test dataset, we employed 36 mitochondrial genomes from  
70 Xenarthrans (Gibb et al., 2015) (Supplementary Table 2) to construct phylogenetic trees. Our  
71 comparative analysis of the resulting tree structures indicates that at non-100% support nodes,  
72 the support values from ORPA were slightly lower than those by HomBlocks. However, both  
73 methods exhibited a high degree of consistency in the overall topology of the phylogenetic tree  
74 (Fig. 3). These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of both approaches in generating reliable  
75 phylogenetic trees. Notably, all Multiple Sequence Alignment (MSA) constructions were  
76 accomplished within a time frame of less than 5 minutes using ORPA.

77           Moreover, we evaluated a set of higher plant mitochondrial datasets consisting of 18  
78 publicly accessible mitochondrial sequences (Supplementary Table 3). Comparative assessments  
79 of the resulting phylogenetic trees corroborated the dependability of the ORPA and HomBlocks  
80 software suites (Fig. 3a). Additionally, we showcased the distribution of multiple sequence  
81 alignment (MSA) derived from both tools aligning to a reference genome, and the findings  
82 highlighted a remarkable concordance between the two methods, except for a few dissimilarities  
83 at specific loci (Fig. 3b).

#### 84 **Comparing the Runtime of ORPA and HomBlocks**

85           To directly compare the runtime differences of ORPA and HomBlocks on the same  
86 dataset, we tested 60 higher plant chloroplast genomes (Supplementary Table 4). First, we  
87 constructed genome-wide alignments using ORPA based on these 60 chloroplast sequences and  
88 conducted Maximum likelihood tree reconstruction using IQ-TREE (Nguyen et al., 2014). Then,  
89 we sampled based on the topology of the tree and compared the runtime of ORPA and  
90 HomBlocks. The sampling range increased by 5 with each deepening of the evolutionary  
91 relationship (Fig. 5a). We ran ORPA and HomBlocks for each dataset and calculated their  
92 respective running times in minutes. Since ORPA typically runs quickly, we standardized the  
93 comparison to 1 minute. Additionally, we used the alignment results from each dataset to  
94 construct a fast ML tree using IQ-TREE and compared the resulting trees generated by the two  
95 tools. To display the differences in running time, we presented a bar chart (Fig. 5b). For the  
96 comparison of the resulting trees from each dataset, we expressed the results as a similarity  
97 percentage (Fig. 5b).

98           Figure 5b shows a significant increase in HomBlocks' runtime beyond 30 sequences,  
99 taking 313 minutes to complete the alignment process with 60 sequences. In contrast, based on

100 the same data source, ORPA can process faster than HomBlocks when the number of sequences  
101 exceeds 10. Additionally, the runtime of HomBlocks increases exponentially with the number of  
102 sequences, which could become more significant with datasets containing over 60 sequences.  
103 Conversely, the script runtime for ORPA remains unaffected by the number of sequences, except  
104 during the data preparation stage. This is mainly attributed to the utilization of BLAST as the  
105 kernel for the alignment process, which avoids the need for single-threaded sequence comparison.

106 This highlights ORPA's advantage over HomBlocks when dealing with a large number of  
107 sequences. Additionally, we conducted tree reconstructions for each pairwise test dataset and  
108 compared the ML tree topologies generated by ORPA and HomBlocks using treedist  
109 (<https://github.com/agormp/treedist>). Except for the comparison group with a sampling range of  
110 25, the similarity between the tree topologies is 91%, indicating almost identical phylogenetic  
111 tree topologies generated by ORPA and HomBlocks in the other 11 comparison groups. Our  
112 findings suggest that ORPA outperforms HomBlocks in terms of speed and accuracy, offering  
113 researchers a powerful tool for creating whole-genome alignments.

#### 114 **Using ORPA for rapid detection of systematic evolutionary conflicts**

115 Advancements in sequencing technology have led to the accumulation of a vast amount  
116 of organellar genome data. Effective utilization of this data has become a growing field of  
117 interest. This is especially important for newly sequenced data, as rapid confirmation of species'  
118 evolutionary relationships is crucial to verify sequencing accuracy. Additionally, constructing  
119 phylogenetic trees with speed and accuracy to investigate evolutionary conflicts is a key area of  
120 research in systematics biology. ORPA offers an elegant approach to achieving these goals. To  
121 provide a more comprehensive demonstration, we utilized 52 Lamiales chloroplast datasets as an  
122 example (Supplementary Table 5). We employed ORPA to build a multiple sequence alignment

123 of 101,454 characters, and constructed a corresponding phylogenetic tree to depict the  
124 evolutionary relationships. Figure 5 demonstrates that there are two apparent conflicts between  
125 the phylogenetic branches in regards to *Wightia speciosissima* and *Comoranthus minor*.

126 *Wightia speciosissima*, an angiosperm, has been assigned to a distinct family  
127 (Wightiaceae) by the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group IV (The Angiosperm Phylogeny, 2016). Its  
128 previous classification placed it within the Paulowniaceae family. However, analysis of its  
129 evolutionary branching suggests that it shares closer evolutionary relationships with the  
130 Phrymaceae family, thus representing a distinct lineage. This observation was also made by Xia  
131 et al (Xia et al., 2019). Their study on plant phylogeny utilized data from nine chloroplast genes  
132 and one mitochondrial *rps3* gene. Consequently, they advise against including *Wightia*  
133 *speciosissima* in the Paulowniaceae family and suggest that it may instead be a hybrid origin  
134 between early lineages of Phrymaceae and Paulowniaceae (Xia et al., 2019).

135 This phylogenetic tree also reveals the incongruity between the genus *Comoranthus* and  
136 *Schrebera* in terms of their phylogenetic relationships. *Schrebera* is found in Africa and India,  
137 while *Comoranthus* is only found in Madagascar and the Comoros Islands (Wallander et al.,  
138 2000). Both species have similar fruit morphology: capsules with a woody ovary, ruffled  
139 epidermis, and split in half when mature. They contain seeds and are suborbicular and pear-  
140 shaped (Engel, 1968). Our analysis of the evolutionary relationships among these studied  
141 species reveals a paraphyletic relationship, with *Comoranthus* found nested within *Schrebera*.  
142 This outcome is consistent with recent findings by Hong-Wa et al., who suggest the genera  
143 should be synonymized (Hong-Wa et al., 2023). Incorporating this finding into taxonomic  
144 classification will aid in a more accurate understanding of the evolutionary history of these plant  
145 groups.

146           In summary, ORPA has demonstrated considerable promise in the realm of systematic  
147 taxonomy, as demonstrated by the aforementioned use cases.

148

## 149 **EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

### 150 **Methods**

151           The framework of ORPA is written in Perl. As tools for aligning genomes, HomBlocks uses  
152 a method of identifying locally collinear blocks (LCBs), while the main difference with ORPA is  
153 its strategy of directly parsing the NCBI BLAST online tool results. By avoiding the need for  
154 software installation and various dependencies, this approach simplifies genome alignment for  
155 novices in the field of bioinformatics (Fig. 1). The core of ORPA is based on the widely-used  
156 BLAST tool (McGinnis et al., 2004), which offers significant improvements in the efficiency and  
157 speed of sequence alignments. Compared to HomBlocks, ORPA is able to construct alignment  
158 files within 5 minutes on average. In contrast, HomBlocks requires an increasing amount of  
159 processing time as the number of sequences being aligned grows due to the single-threaded  
160 operation of its core software, Mavue (Darling et al., 2004). Therefore, ORPA offers a more  
161 efficient and versatile alternative to HomBlocks.

162           ORPA also provides users with four trimming methods, namely Gblocks (Castresana, 2000),  
163 trimAl (Capella-Gutiérrez et al., 2009), Noisy (Dress et al., 2008), and BMGE (Crisuolo et al.,  
164 2010), which are same to those offered by HomBlocks. Importantly, users can directly use the  
165 output results from ORPA to facilitate the construction of a phylogenetic tree, thus streamlining  
166 the sequence alignment process.

### 167 **Implementation**



168 ORPA is a rapid tool for constructing multiple sequence alignments of organelles. It is a  
169 command-line tool and functional under any version of Linux without the need for external  
170 installation. The Perl source code of ORPA is freely available for download at  
171 <https://github.com/BGQ/ORPA.git>, and comprehensive documentation and tutorials can be  
172 found at <https://github.com/BGQ/ORPA.git>.

173

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180

## 181 **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

182 GQB and JBY conceived and designed the study. GQB and XXL collected data. GQB and XXL  
183 performed data analysis. GQB and JBY wrote the manuscript with other authors providing  
184 recommendations for modifications.

185

## 186 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

187 The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest associated with this work.

188

189 **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

190 The attached file contains a list of example data and organelle genome sequences that are  
191 referred to in the main body of this study.

192

193 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

194 Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article.

195 **Table S1.** Accession numbers of 52 higher plant chloroplast genomes from GenBank used in the  
196 first example dataset.

197 **Table S2.** Accession numbers of 36 xenarthrans mitochondrial genomes from GenBank used in  
198 the second example dataset.

199 **Table S3.** Accession numbers of 18 higher plant mitochondrial genomes from GenBank used in  
200 the third example dataset.

201 **Table S4.** Accession numbers of 60 higher plant chloroplast genomes from GenBank used in the  
202 fourth example dataset.

203 **Table S5.** Accession numbers of Lamiales chloroplast genomes from GenBank used in the fifth  
204 example dataset.

205

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254 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

255 **Fig. 1 Comparison of ORPA and HomBlocks efficiency in the conventional workflow for**  
256 **the phylogenetic tree construction of organelle genomes.**

257  
258 **Fig. 2 Comparison of topology between the HomBlocks tree (left) and the ORPA tree (right)**  
259 **of 52 higher plant chloroplast genomes.** The phylogenetic trees were constructed using  
260 maximum likelihood (ML) and Bayesian inference (BI) methods with the HomBlocks alignment  
261 (62,101 characters) and the ORPA alignment (90,925 characters), respectively. The support  
262 values inferred from RAxML (left) and Bayesian posterior probability (right) are indicated by  
263 the numbers on the nodes. Fully resolved nodes are not labeled with numbers. These results  
264 provide insights into the comparative performance of the two alignment methods for  
265 phylogenetic analysis of chloroplast genomes in higher plants.

266  
267 **Fig. 3 Topology comparison of two phylogenetic trees of 36 xenarthran mitochondrial**  
268 **genomes.** The HomBlocks tree (left) and the ORPA tree (right) were constructed using different  
269 alignment methods, one with 15,170 characters and the other with 8,696 characters. Maximum  
270 likelihood and Bayesian inference methods were used to construct the trees, and the support  
271 values derived from RAxML (left) and Bayesian posterior probability (right) are indicated by the  
272 numerical values on the nodes. Fully resolved nodes are unlabeled.

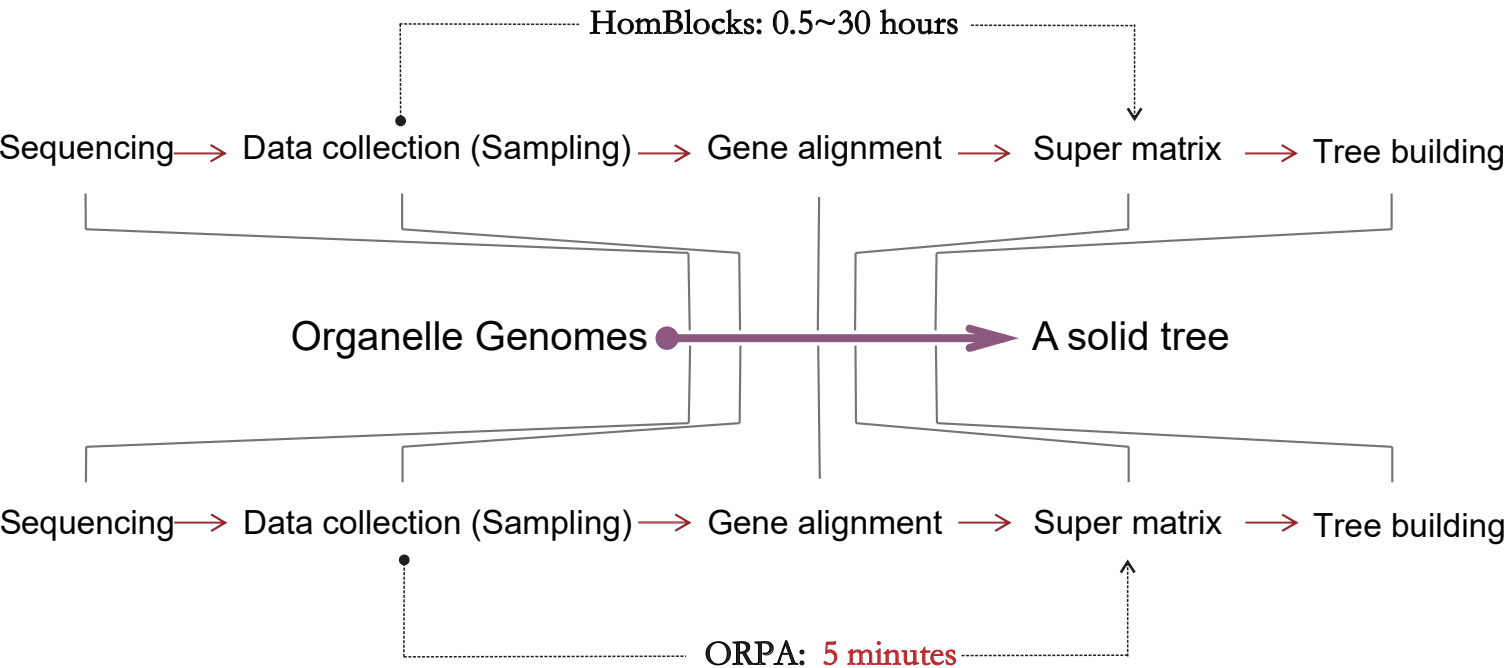
273  
274 **Fig. 4 Comparison of phylogenetic trees and alignment methods for 18 higher plant**  
275 **mitochondrial genomes. a,** Two phylogenetic trees of 18 higher plant mitochondrial genomes  
276 were constructed using ORPA and HomBlocks alignment methods, respectively. The trees were

277 constructed with maximum likelihood and Bayesian inference methods, and the support values  
278 derived from RAxML and Bayesian posterior probability are indicated on each node. Fully  
279 resolved nodes are unlabeled. **b**, Distributional differences of phylogenetic alignments obtained  
280 from ORPA and HomBlocks methods using *Ajuga reptans* as the reference sequence. The circos  
281 plot illustrates the differing sequence composition sites between the two methods, with green and  
282 gray dots indicating the variation between the alignments.

283  
284 **Fig. 5 Comparison of ORPA and HomBlocks runtime efficiency.** **a**, Comparison of runtime  
285 for 60 higher plant chloroplast datasets. A maximum likelihood tree shows the evolutionary  
286 relationship among 60 samples. Nodes with 100% support are unspecified, and other partially  
287 supported nodes are labeled with bootstrap and aLTR values. Sampling begins at the base of the  
288 tree and proceeds with increasing sample sizes of 5 until all data are used, resulting in a total of  
289 12 comparison groups. **b**, Comparison of ORPA and HomBlocks runtime. The sample size  
290 corresponds to the sampling range in Figure 5a. The percentage on the bar chart represents the  
291 similarity in systemic tree topology generated by the two software programs.

292  
293 **Fig. 6 Identification of species-level evolutionary conflicts using ORPA.** A total of 52  
294 Lamiales chloroplast trees were constructed using 101,544 characters from the ORPA alignment.  
295 Maximum likelihood and Bayesian inference methods were used to construct the trees, and the  
296 support values derived from RAxML (left) and Bayesian posterior probability (right) are  
297 indicated by numerical values on the nodes. Fully resolved nodes are indicated by red dots.  
298 *Wightia speciosissima*, which has a controversial position in Lamiales, is labelled in red. The  
299 morphology of four species from *Schrebera* and *Comoranthus* genera is shown on the right side

300 of the figure. Additionally, the results reveal a paraphyletic relationship, with *Comoranthus*  
301 *minor* nested within *Schrebera*, leading to the synonymization of these genera.

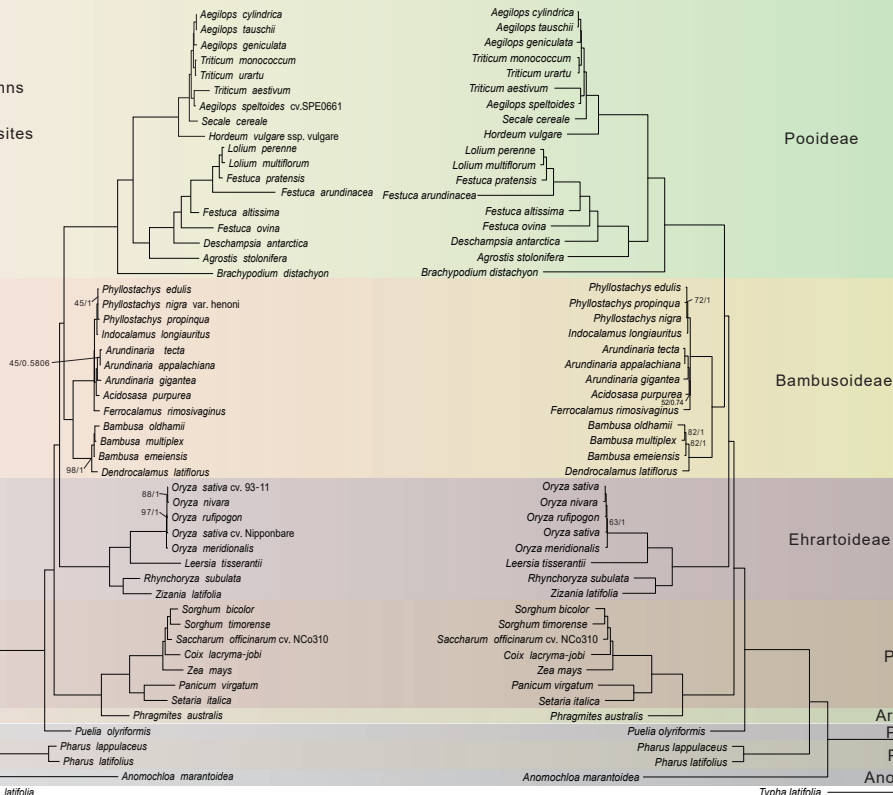


# HomBlocks

Alignment with 62,101 columns  
 5,824 distinct patterns  
 8,404 parsimony-informative sites  
 7,378 singleton sites  
 46,319 constant sites

# ORPA

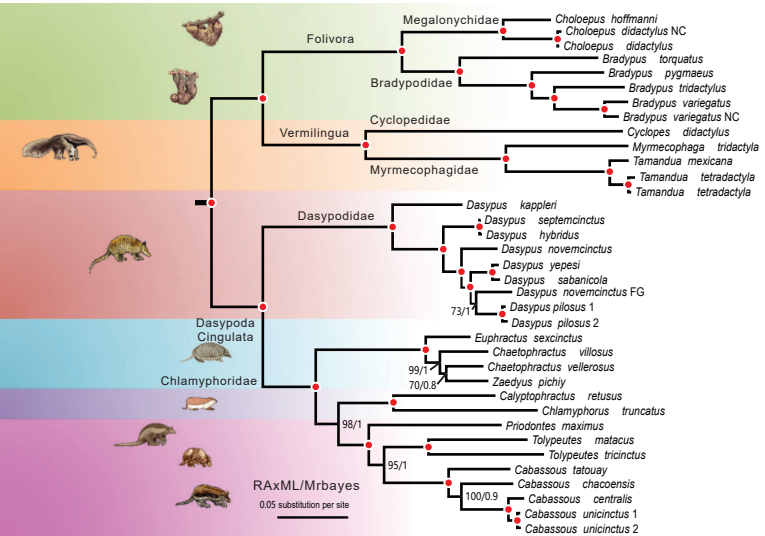
Alignment with 90,925 columns  
 5,459 distinct patterns  
 8,270 parsimony-informative sites  
 8,679 singleton sites  
 73,976 constant sites



Node supports  
 RAXML/Mrbayes

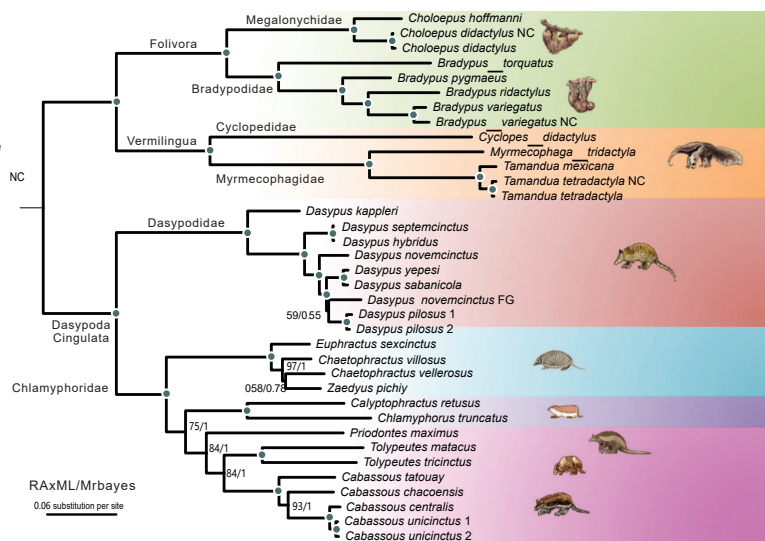


## HomBlocks



Alignment has 15,170 columns, 6,201 distinct patterns  
6,722 parsimony-informative sites, 919 singleton sites, 7,529 constant sites

## ORPA

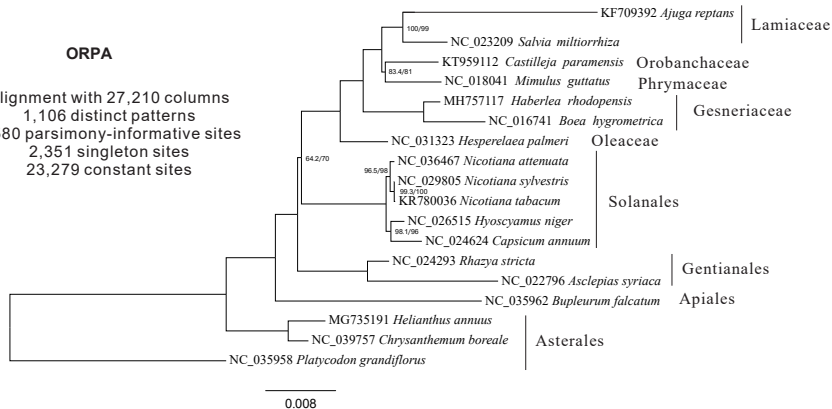


Alignment 8,696 columns, 2,891 distinct patterns  
3,015 parsimony-informative sites, 494 singleton sites, 5,187 constant sites

a

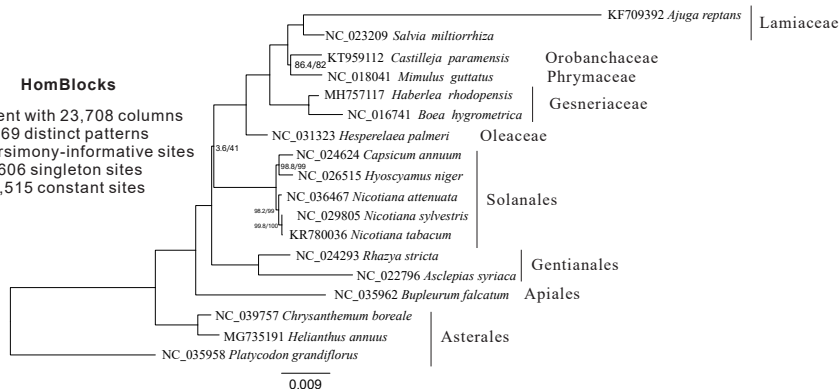
## ORPA

Alignment with 27,210 columns  
1,106 distinct patterns  
1,580 parsimony-informative sites  
2,351 singleton sites  
23,279 constant sites

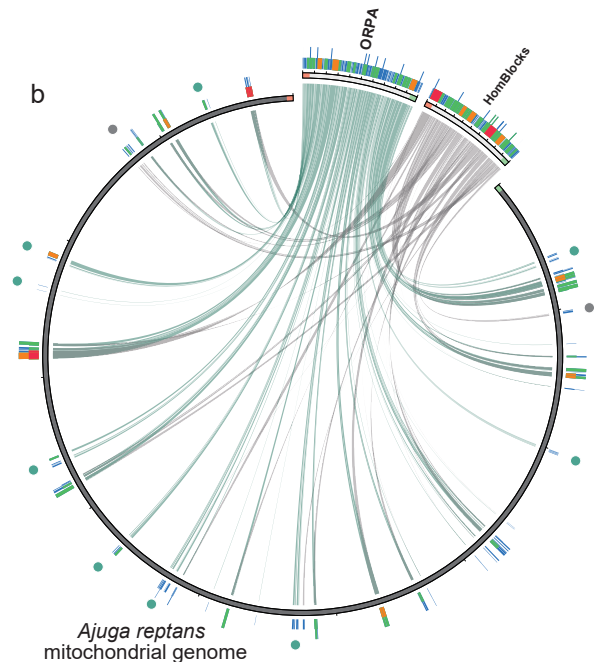


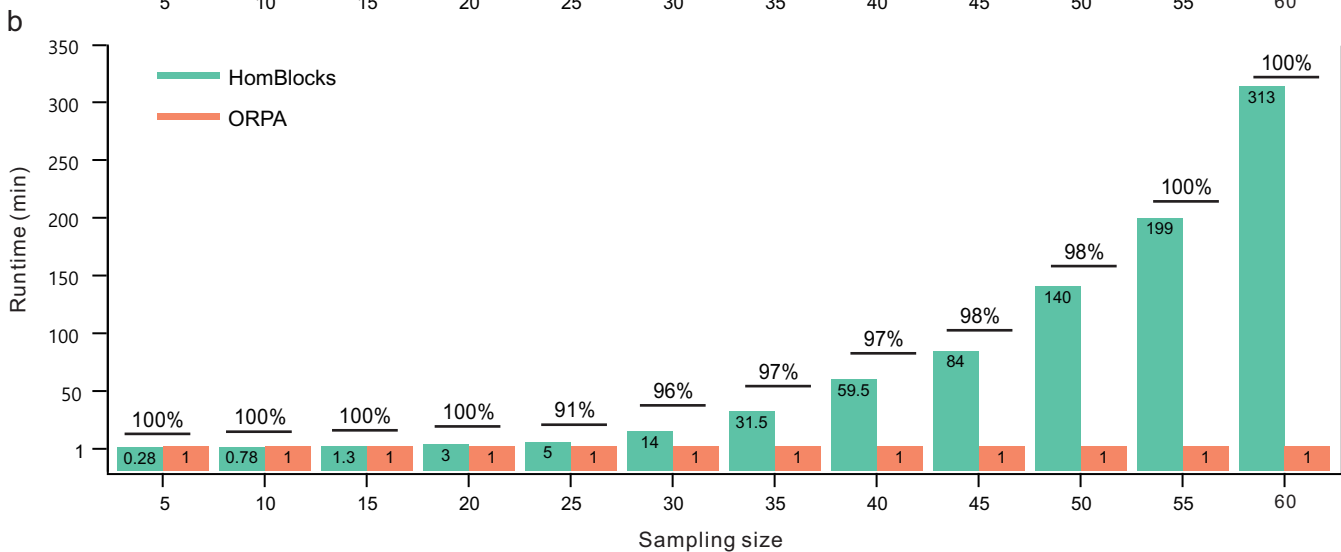
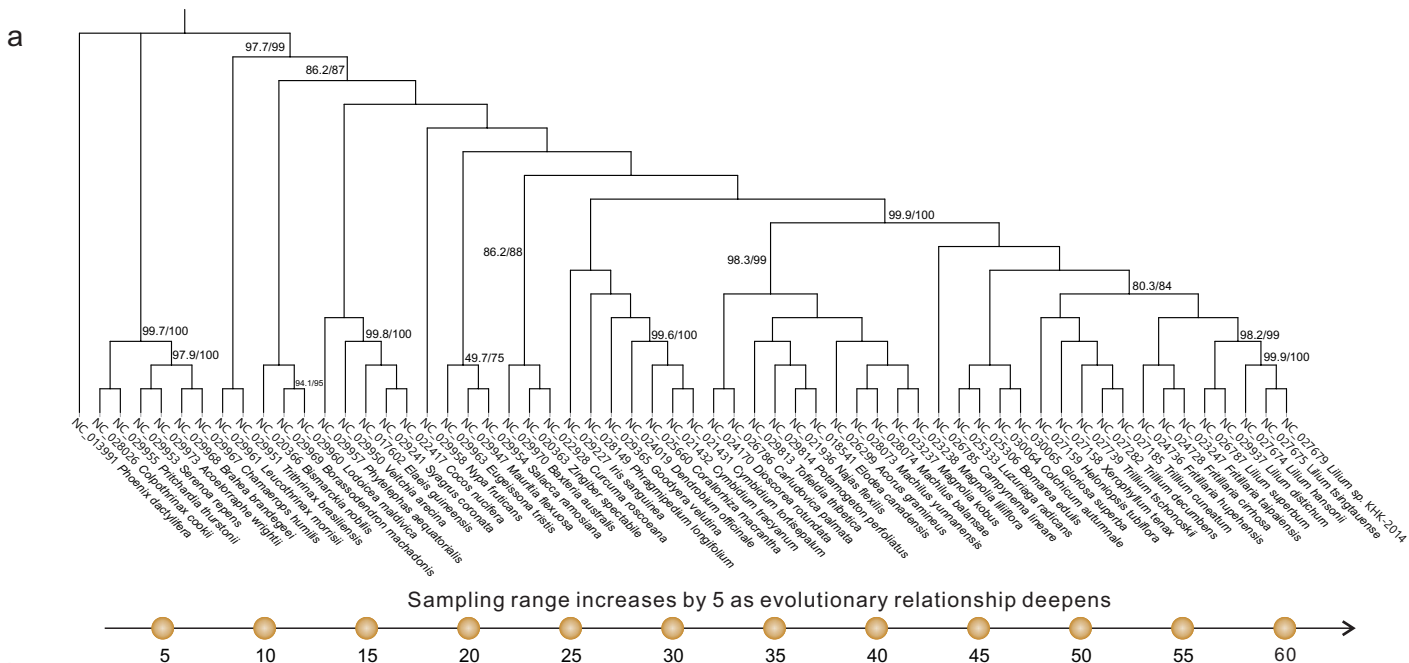
## HomBlocks

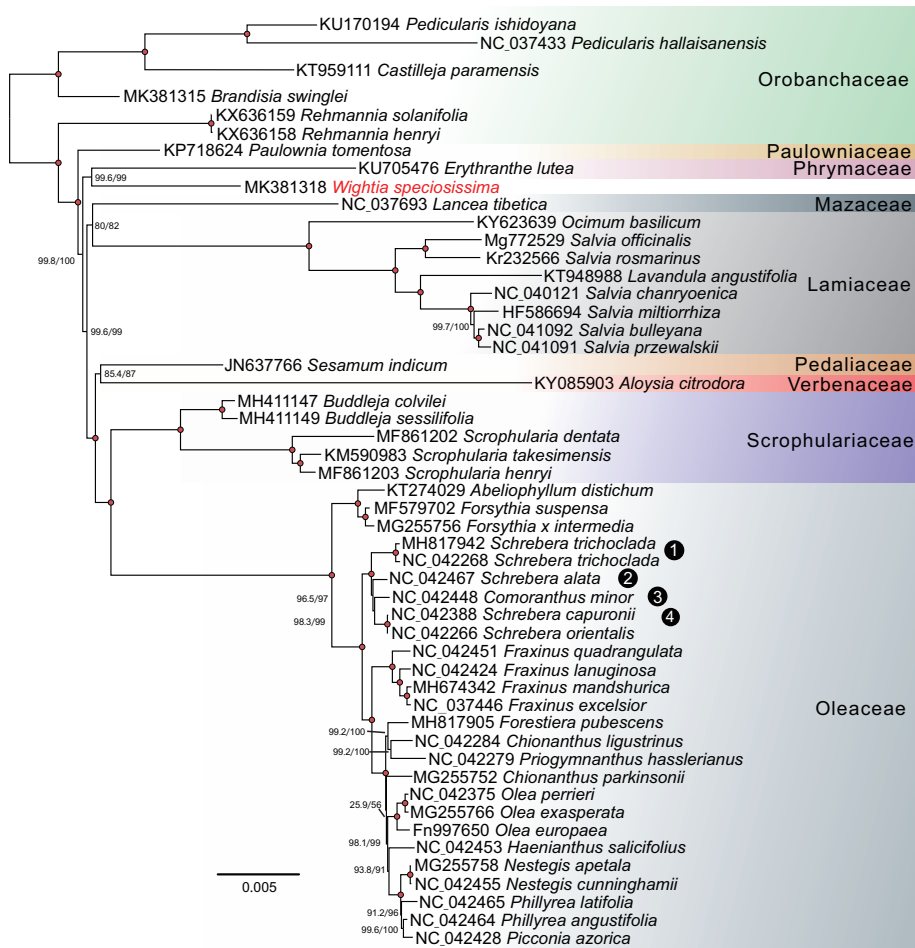
Alignment with 23,708 columns  
1,169 distinct patterns  
1,587 parsimony-informative sites  
2,606 singleton sites  
19,515 constant sites



b







*Schrebera trichoclada*



*Schrebera alata*



*Comoranthus minor*



*Schrebera capuronii*