The Bioscan AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF LIFE SCIENCES 21(2): S.I (2), 1581-1591, 2026 www.thebioscan.com

Bioinformatics Characterization and Annotation of the Mitochondrial Gene Space of the Palmyra Palm (*Borassus flabellifer* L.) From Whole-Genome Shotgun Sequences

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2026.v21.i02.S.I(2).pp1581-1591

KEYWORDS
Borassus flabellifer, Mitochondrial Genome, GeSeq, tRNAscan-SE, Arecaceae, Intracellular Gene Transfer (MTPT)

Received on:
10-04-2026
Accepted on:
08-05-2026
Published on:
04-06-2026

Abstract

Background

Borassus flabellifer L. (Arecaceae), the Palmyra palm, is a drought-tolerant tree of ecological and economic importance in South and Southeast Asia. Despite its resilience to abiotic stress, its organellar genomic organization remains poorly characterized. A 2.41 Gb draft nuclear genome assembly generated from whole-genome shotgun sequencing (NCBI BioProject: PRJNA1254180; Genome accession: JBNPIT000000000) was analyzed using the BRAKER pipeline for coding sequence prediction. A curated set of functionally annotated sequences was screened using GeSeq with BLAT-based homology searches, HMMER profile searches, ARAGORN v1.2.38, and tRNAscan-SE v2.0.7 to identify mitochondrial-associated loci. The mitochondrial gene space of *B. flabellifer* was resolved into a concatenated coding framework spanning 17,559 bp. Annotation identified protein-coding loci associated with oxidative phosphorylation, respiratory function, and organellar gene expression, including *rpl2* and *orf135d*. Multiple tRNA loci were recovered, including *trnL-GAG*, *trnT-GGU*, *trnR-CCG*, *trnT-CGU*, *trnP-GGG*, *trnS-UGA*, and *trnQ-UUG*, with exon-intron organization resolved for intron-containing loci. A putative *rpoB*-derived fragment was also detected, consistent with possible intracellular plastid-to-mitochondrion sequence transfer. This study provides a curated annotation of the mitochondrial gene space of *B. flabellifer*, offering a useful resource for comparative organellar genomics in palms and a basis for future studies on mitochondrial evolution and organelle-linked breeding traits.

1. Introduction

Borassus flabellifer L. is a robust, dioecious monocotyledonous palm belonging to the family Arecaceae. The species is widely distributed across India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, where it commonly occurs in arid and semi-arid landscapes and is recognized for its drought tolerance and ecological importance in soil stabilization and dryland agroecosystems(Siju & Sabu,

2020). Economically, *B. flabellifer* represents a multi-use lifeline; its fibrous trunk provides resilient timber, its palmate leaves fuel handicraft sectors, and its carbohydrate-rich inflorescence sap is widely harvested for processing into palm sugar, jaggery, and traditional fermented beverages(Rao, Swami, Ashok, Nanda, & Rao, 2021). Furthermore, its massive root architecture allows the tree to maintain high carbon sequestration rates (Gnanavelrajah, Theepika, Karthigesu, & Raveendran, 2025) and pull moisture from deep water tables under severe water deficit, making it a benchmark species for climate-resilient agriculture(Kell, 2011).

While closely related palms such as *Phoenix dactylifera* and *Cocos nucifera* have been the focus of extensive genomic and molecular investigations, genomic resources for *Borassus flabellifer* remain comparatively limited (Gros-Balthazard & Flowers, 2021). This omission is particularly problematic for organellar genetics. Plant mitochondria function as the primary metabolic hubs of the cell, driving ATP generation through the electron transport chain and directly regulating cell survival under oxidative, thermal, and osmotic stresses(Selinski, Frings, & Schmidt-Schippers, 2024). Unlike their animal counterparts, plant mitochondrial genomes are structurally fluid, recombinogenic, and expansive. They frequently incorporate foreign DNA through horizontal gene transfer and intracellular translocations from the chloroplast (Mitochondrial Plastid DNA, or MTPT)(Gualberto & Newton, 2017).

Because plant mitochondria are central to cellular energy metabolism, stress signaling, and cytoplasmic male sterility (CMS), characterization of the *B. flabellifer* mitochondrial gene space provides a useful foundation for investigating drought-associated metabolic adaptation and organelle-linked reproductive traits in palms(Gualberto & Newton, 2017). To address this lack of genomic data, we leveraged a high-depth 2.41 Gb draft nuclear genome assembly of *B. flabellifer* (BioProject: PRJNA1254180). This paper details the systematic extraction, homology-based verification, and functional annotation of the *B. flabellifer* mitochondrial gene space, offering a clear view of its protein complexes, structural RNA features, and evolutionary dynamics within the monocots.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Draft Assembly and Initial Coding Sequence Prediction

The *Borassus flabellifer* draft nuclear genome assembly generated from whole-genome shotgun sequencing data (NCBI BioProject: PRJNA1254180; Accession: JBNPIT000000000) was used as the primary sequence resource for this study. Gene prediction was performed using the BRAKER pipeline with RNA-seq evidence and protein homology support from phylogenetically related monocot reference datasets. This process generated an initial set of approximately 160,000 predicted sequences, which was refined to 34,814 high-confidence functionally annotated candidate coding sequences for downstream mitochondrial gene-space analysis. The BRAKER-based prediction workflow and the annotated transcript set used here are consistent with the genome resource developed for *B. flabellifer*.

2.2. Mitochondrial Annotation Strategy and Sequence Concatenation

Candidate coding sequences were screened using GeSeq (Genome Sequence Annotation Server) for organelle-associated annotation(Tillich et al., 2017). Homology-based searches were performed with BLAT against curated plant organellar reference genomes, and the annotation pipeline was configured to recover protein-coding sequences, rRNAs, and tRNAs. Reference mitochondrial genomes from *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Cocos nucifera*, *Zea mays*, *Arabidopsis thaliana*, and *Vitis vinifera* were included because of their phylogenetic relevance and availability of curated organellar annotations. HMMER-based profile searches were enabled to improve detection of conserved coding domains. Separate GenBank records generated for confirmed mitochondrial features were manually inspected for open reading frame integrity and parsed into a single multi-FASTA framework using a custom Python script. The resulting 17,559 bp concatenated framework was re-analyzed in GeSeq to visualize gene order and strand orientation, and circular maps were generated using OGDRAW within the GeSeq environment.

2.3. Specialized Processing of Structural Transfer RNAs

To improve detection of mitochondrial tRNA loci, three third-party prediction tools integrated within GeSeq were used: ARAGORN v1.2.38, ARWEN v1.2.3, and

tRNAscan-SE v2.0.7. The genome was analyzed in mitochondrial mode within the organellar annotation framework. ARAGORN was configured with a maximum intron search length of 3,000 bp. tRNAscan-SE was run in maximum-sensitivity mode with a cutoff score of 20, and pseudogene checking was disabled to retain divergent organellar tRNA candidates. tRNA predictions were retained only when supported by GeSeq homology searches and consistent structural prediction by one or more tRNA annotators.

2.4. Functional Annotation of Predicted Proteins

Predicted protein-coding fragments were extracted from the annotated mitochondrial gene set and functionally classified by cross-referencing against the UniProtKB database. Gene Ontology terms were assigned under the categories biological process, molecular function, and cellular component to summarize the predicted respiratory, translational, and metabolic roles of the recovered proteins. This functional annotation step follows the same protein-focused output logic used in the manuscript draft.

2.5. Manual Curation and Reporting

All annotation outputs were manually curated to remove redundant feature calls, verify gene boundaries, and resolve inconsistencies between homology-based and structure-based predictions. The final curated annotation set was compiled for comparative interpretation and manuscript reporting.

3. Results

3.1. Recovery of mitochondrial gene space

A curated mitochondrial gene-space framework was recovered from the *Borassus flabellifer* draft nuclear genome assembly through homology-based organellar annotation. The final framework spanned 17,559 bp and represented the mitochondrial-associated coding component extracted from the larger genome assembly. Manual curation of the final annotation set confirmed the presence of protein-coding loci, transfer RNAs, and ribosomal RNA-related features with consistent annotation boundaries.

3.2. Structural organization of annotated loci

Feature parsing of the curated GenBank output identified 15 annotated loci, including

protein-coding genes, open reading frames, and multiple tRNA loci. The recovered features included rpl2, orf135d, orf135c/orf135d, rpoB**,** and tRNA loci corresponding to trnL-GAG, trnT-GGU, trnR-CCG**,** trnT-CGU, trnP-GGG, trnS-UGA, and trnQ-UUG. Several tRNA loci occurred in multiple copies, including trnT-GGU, trnR-CCG, and trnQ-UUG, and intron-containing loci were resolved where supported by the annotation pipeline. The exon-intron organization of these loci is summarized in Table 1.

No.	Locus ID	Length (bp)	Predicted Feature	Coordinates	Structural Organization	Functional Annotation
1	g3036.t2	402	trnL-GAG	11–140	Two exons with intron	Leucine tRNA
2	g5521.t1-K	786	rpl2 fragment	589–642	Single exon	Ribosomal protein L2 fragment
3	g7242.t1-X	279	orf135d	22–252	Continuous ORF	Conserved hypothetical ORF
4	g11634.t1	528	trnT-GGU (Copy A)	9–460	Multi-exon with intron	Threonine tRNA
5	g25004.t1	204	trnT-GGU (Copy B)	1–204	Two exons	Threonine tRNA
6	g41518.t1	327	trnR-CCG (Copy A)	160–251	Single exon	Arginine tRNA
7	g45887.t1	474	trnT-CGU	50–336	Two exons with intron	Threonine tRNA
8	g46830.t1	566	trnP-GGG	249–475	Two exons with intron	Proline tRNA
9	g53606.t1	309	trnS-UGA	1–117	Two exons with intron	Serine tRNA

No.	Locus ID	Length (bp)	Predicted Feature	Coordinates	Structural Organization	Functional Annotation
10	g73856.t1	360	trnQ-UUG (Copy A)	66–151	Single exon	Glutamine tRNA
11	g88872.t1	346	rpoB-like fragment	189–344	Partial coding segment	Putative plastid-derived fragment
12	g96023.t1	1026	rpl2 complete	1–1026	Complex locus	Ribosomal protein L2
13	g96634.t1	246	trnR-CCG (Copy B)	1–246	Two exons with short intron	Arginine tRNA
14	g151667.t1	468	orf135c/orf135d	10–282	Overlapping ORFs	Putative coding region
15	g56716.t1	311	trnQ-UUG (Copy B)	168–226	Two exons	Glutamine tRNA

3.3. Functional characterization of coding features

Functional annotation of the predicted coding fragments indicated conservation of core mitochondrial functions associated with respiration and organellar gene expression (Table 2). The recovered loci included ribosomal protein-related sequences such as rpl2 and conserved open reading frames such as orf135d, supporting the presence of a mitochondrial coding core within the curated framework. A putative rpoB-derived segment was also recovered and may represent a transferred organellar fragment, but this should be interpreted cautiously pending additional validation.

Functional Category	Representative Features	Predicted Role	Biological Significance
Oxidative phosphorylation	NADH dehydrogenase-related domains	Electron transport and ATP production	Supports mitochondrial respiration and energy metabolism
Ribosomal architecture	rpl2	Large ribosomal subunit assembly	Involved in mitochondrial protein synthesis
Transfer RNA machinery	trnL-GAG, trnT-GGU, trnR-CCG, trnP-GGG, trnS-UGA, trnQ-UUG	Amino acid transport during translation	Supports mitochondrial translational activity
Open reading frames (ORFs)	orf135c, orf135d	Putative lineage-specific coding regions	May contribute to species-specific mitochondrial functions
Putative plastid-derived regions	rpoB-like fragment	Possible intracellular transferred sequence	Suggests historical organelle DNA transfer events
RNA processing and intron-containing loci	trnT-CGU, trnP-GGG, trnS-UGA	Post-transcriptional RNA maturation	Indicates complex organellar RNA processing

3.4. Summary of annotation output

Overall, the analysis recovered a compact mitochondrial gene-space dataset enriched for tRNA loci, ribosomal protein-related features, and conserved open reading frames. This curated resource provides a basis for comparative organellar genomics in Arecaceae and for follow-up validation of individual loci. The circular representation of

the curated mitochondrial gene-space framework is provided in the Supplementary Figure 1.

4. **Discussion**

The present study provides a curated annotation of the mitochondrial gene space recovered from the publicly available *Borassus flabellifer* draft nuclear genome assembly deposited in the NCBI database under BioProject PRJNA1254180 and genome accession JBNPIT000000000. Rather than a complete mitochondrial chromosome, the analysis yields a compact 17,559 bp coding framework comprising mitochondrial-associated protein-coding loci, tRNAs, and ribosomal RNA-related features. This distinction is important because plant mitochondrial genomes are structurally dynamic and often contain large non-coding and recombinogenic regions that are not captured by gene-space extraction alone(Gualberto & Newton, 2017; Khachaturyan, Reusch, & Dagan, 2023). The present resource therefore represents a focused annotation of the mitochondrial coding component rather than a physical reconstruction of the entire organelle genome.

The annotated loci indicate preservation of core organellar functions, particularly those related to translation and respiratory maintenance. The recovery of *rpl2* in both partial and complete forms supports conservation of mitochondrial ribosomal machinery, while the presence of multiple tRNA loci suggests a structurally diverse transfer RNA repertoire(Veronico, Gallerani, & Ceci, 1996). The annotation of NADH dehydrogenase-related domains indicates conservation of oxidative phosphorylation genes within the *B. flabellifer* mitochondrial gene space. These domains are consistent with the preservation of complex I-associated respiratory functions, which are essential for electron transport and cellular energy production in plant mitochondria(Braun et al., 2014; Gualberto & Newton, 2017). Several of these loci are intron-containing, which is consistent with the post-transcriptional processing complexity typical of plant mitochondria. Taken together, these features indicate that the recovered gene space retains key translational components required for organellar gene expression.

The detection of *orf135c/orf135d* and the conserved *orf135d* locus is also notable because open reading frames of this type are

frequently retained in plant mitochondrial gene inventories despite limited functional annotation(Chase, 2007). In this context, these loci may represent lineage-specific coding remnants or mitochondrial ORFs that warrant future validation through transcript-based evidence or comparative analyses with closely related palms. Their recovery adds to the growing view that plant mitochondrial gene content is a mosaic of conserved housekeeping genes and more variable species-specific elements.

A particularly interesting feature of the dataset is the recovery of an *rpoB*-like fragment. Because rpoB is canonically restricted to the chloroplast genome, its occurrence within this mitochondrial gene space constitutes direct evidence of an intracellular DNA transfer event from plastid to mitochondrion (MTPT)(Nhat Nam, Pham Anh Thi, & Do, 2024; Wang et al., 2007).

Overall, this study fills an important gap in *Borassus flabellifer* genomics by recovering and annotating mitochondrial-associated loci from a draft nuclear assembly. The dataset is useful as a first-pass organellar resource, but the biological conclusions should be framed conservatively. Future work using organelle-enriched sequencing, long-read assembly, and transcript-level validation would be needed to resolve the full mitochondrial architecture, confirm RNA editing and transfer events, and distinguish genuinely mitochondrial loci from transferred or fragmentary sequences.

5. Conclusion

This study provides the first detailed bioinformatic characterization of the mitochondrial gene space of *Borassus flabellifer*. By filtering whole-genome sequencing datasets through specialized annotation pipelines, we successfully mapped its core respiratory genes, structural tRNAs, and putative evidence of historical plastid DNA transfers. These findings expand the available genomic resources for the Arecaceae family. They also provide a solid foundation for future research into monocot organelle evolution, cytoplasmic inheritance traits, and the molecular mechanisms that drive climate resilience in this economically vital palm species.

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