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- vivo efficacy of imipenem against Mycobacterium abscessus 2
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Mycobacterium abscessus pulmonary infections are treated with a macrolide (clarithromycin or azithromycin), an aminoglycoside (amikacin), and a β-lactam (cefoxitin or imipenem). The triple combination is used without any β-lactamase inhibitor despite production of the broad spectrum β-lactamase Bla_{Mab}. We determine whether inhibition of Bla_{Mab} by avibactam improves the activity of imipenem against M. abscessus. Bactericidal activity of drug combinations was assayed in broth and in human macrophages. The in vivo efficacy of the drugs was tested by monitoring the survival of infected zebrafish embryos. The level of Bla_{Mab} production in broth and in macrophages was compared by qRT-PCR and Western blotting. The triple combination of imipenem (8 or 32 µg/ml), amikacin (32 μg/ml), and avibactam (4 μg/ml) was bactericidal in broth (< 0.1% survival) achieving a 3.2 or 4.3 Log₁₀-reduction in the number of cfus at 72 h, respectively. The triple combination achieved significant intracellular killing with a bacterial survival rate of 54% and 7% for the low (8 µg/ml) and high (32 µg/ml) dosage of imipenem, respectively. In vivo inhibition of Bla_{Mab} by avibactam improved the survival of zebrafish embryos treated with imipenem. Expression of the gene encoding Bla_{Mab} was induced (20-fold) in the infected macrophages. Inhibition of Bla_{Mab} by avibactam improves the efficacy of imipenem against *M. abscessus* in vitro, in macrophages, and in zebrafish embryos indicating that this β -lactamase inhibitor should be clinically evaluated. In vitro evaluation of imipenem may underestimate the impact of $Bla_{\mbox{\scriptsize Mab}}$ since production of the $\beta\mbox{-lactamase}$ is inducible in macrophages.

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In the context of cystic fibrosis, Mycobacterium abscessus has emerged in recent years as an important opportunistic lung pathogen increasingly responsible for mortality (1-5). These infections are extremely difficult to treat and to eradicate as M. abscessus is naturally resistant to most antibiotics, including antituberculous agents (6, 7). The recommended treatment for pulmonary infections relies on combination of a macrolide (clarithromycin or azithromycin), an aminoglycoside (amikacin) and an intravenous β-lactam (cefoxitin or imipenem) for at least 12 to 16 months (6, 8). Resistance to macrolide, present in 40 to 60% of the isolates (9), leads to a cure rate of only 25-40% (88 to 95% for macrolide-susceptible isolates). Cefoxitin and imipenem, are the most active β-lactams in spite of moderate in vitro activity with minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs50%) of 32 and 16 µg/ml, respectively (10).

We have previously shown that production of a broad-spectrum β -lactamase, Bla_{Mab} , is a major determinant of β -lactam resistance in M. abscessus (11, 12). In contrast to the β lactamase BlaC from M. tuberculosis, Bla_{Mab} is not inactivated by clavulanate, sulbactam and tazobactam since these inhibitors are hydrolyzed by the β -lactamase. However, Bla_{Mab} is efficiently inhibited by avibactam (12), a β-lactamase inhibitor approved by the FDA in 2014 (13, 14). Deletion of the gene encoding Bla_{Mab} or chemical inhibition of the β -lactamase activity by avibactam extend the spectrum of β -lactams active against M. abscessus, as previously shown for an extensive evaluation of the amoxicillin-avibactam combination (12).

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Recently, we have reported that the killing of M. abscessus by the combination of imipenem and amikacin is significantly higher against a Bla_{Mab}-deficient mutant than against the parental strain (15). In macrophages, the difference was even more pronounced since a 100-fold reduction in intracellular bacteria was observed for the Bla_{Mab}-deficient mutant whereas the combination was only bacteriostatic for the wild type strain (15). Together, the

90 91 Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France).

results obtained with the Bla_{Mab} -deficient mutant indicated that the production of the β lactamase may limit the efficacy of imipenem, despite the fact that this drug is used in the absence of a β -lactamase inhibitor in the recommended treatment of pulmonary infections due to M. abscessus. In this study, we have evaluated whether BlaMab inhibition by avibactam could potentiate the effects of imipenem in vitro, in macrophages, and in zebrafish embryos. The latter model has been developed to assess the in vivo activity of antibiotics against M. abscessus (16). Unexpectedly, we found that the production of Bla_{Mab} has a greater impact on the activity of imipenem in macrophages than in in vitro cultures, prompting us to determine and compare the level of Bla_{Mab} production in planktonically- and intracellularly-growing M. abscessus.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

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smooth (S) or rough (R) morphotype and their respective β-lactamase-deficient derivatives (\Delta bla_Mab) (12) were grown in Middlebrook 7H9 broth (BD-Difco, Le Pont de Claix, France) supplemented with 10% (vol/vol) oleic acid, albumin, dextrose, catalase (OADC; BD-Difco) and 0.05% (vol/vol) Tween 80 (Sigma-Aldrich) (7H9sB) at 30°C with shaking (150 rpm) (17). Antibiotics. Amikacin was provided by Bristol-Myers Squibb (Rueil-Malmaison, France) and imipenem by Mylan (Saint-Priest, France). Avibactam was provided by AstraZeneca. Water was the solvent for preparing stock solutions, which were freshly prepared for each experiment and filtered using sterilized 0.22 µm polycarbonate syringe filter (Millipore,

Bacterial strains and growth conditions. M. abscessus CIP104536 (ATCC19977) with a

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Time-kill assay. Bottles of 20 ml of 7H9sB containing imipenem, amikacin, and avibactam alone or in combination were inoculated with exponentially-growing bacteria of M. abscessus CIP104536 S (7 x 10^6 cfu/ml) and incubated with shaking (150 rpm) at 30°C for 72 h. Bacteria were enumerated at 0, 48, and 72 h by plating serial dilutions prepared in sterile saline solution on lysogeny broth (LB) plates. Plates were incubated for 4 days at 30 °C. The detection limit was 2 Log₁₀ cfu/ml. Experiments were performed in triplicate.

Activity of imipenem alone or in combination with amikacin and avibactam in THP-1 macrophages. The activity of antibiotics was studied as previously described (15). Briefly, THP-1 cells were seeded into 24-well plates (5 x 10⁵ cells per 1-ml well), differentiated for 24 h and infected with M. abscessus CIP104536 S at a multiplicity of infection of 10 for 3 h. Imipenem (8 and 32 μg/ml), amikacin (8 μg/ml), and avibactam (16 μg/ml) alone or in combination were added to each well. Plates were incubated with 5% CO₂ at 37°C for 2 days. Macrophages were lyzed with deionized water. Dilutions were plated onto LB agar plates and cfus were enumerated after 4 days of incubation at 30 °C. Experiments were performed in triplicate.

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Determination of bla_{Mab} mRNA by qRT-PCR. Extraction of bacterial RNA from M. abscessus-infected macrophages was performed as previously described (18). Briefly, bacterial cells were harvested after different times post-infection, washed once with Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium alone, and resuspended in GTG 4M containing βmercaptoethanol. RNA was extracted and cDNA prepared as previously described (18). See Table S1 in the supplemental material for the sequence of the primers used for qRT-PCR. Controls without reverse transcriptase were done on each RNA sample to rule out DNA contamination (18). The sigA gene RNA was included as an internal control.

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Mouse anti-Bla_{Mab} antibodies. Purified Bla_{Mab} (12) was subcutaneously injected in five BALB/c mice (Janvier, France) (20 μg per mouse) with incomplete Freund's adjuvant (1/1, Vol/Vol) at D1, D28, and D57. One week after D28 and D57, blood samples were obtained from the retro-orbital plexus, centrifuged, and stored at -20°C until use. All procedures were performed according to the institutional and national ethical guidelines under Agreement 92-033-01 (Préfecture des Hauts-de-Seine, Boulogne-Billancourt, France).

Immunodetection of Bla_{Mab} in protein extracts. Bacterial pellets were obtained from M. abscessus grown in vitro and in human macrophages as previously described (18). Briefly, bacteria were resuspended in 5 ml of cooled PBS containing 1% triton for 5 min at room temperature. Then, 2.5 ml of cold PBS was added and the suspension was centrifuged at 2,500 x g for 15 min. Bacteria were resuspended in 0.5 ml Tris-Buffered Saline (TBS) and lyzed by sonication 3 × 30 s with 1 min cooling intervals on ice. After centrifugation at 14,000 x q for 10 min, protein concentration was determined using the Bradford assay with bovine serum albumin as the standard. Proteins in crude extracts (3 µg) were separated by 15% SDS-PAGE, transferred to nitrocellulose membrane (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA), and Bla_{Mab} was detected with the mouse anti-Bla_{Mab} antiserum (1/6,000). A peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-mouse antibody (IgG; 1/4,000) was used as the second antibody. Rat anti-KasA antibodies were used as a loading control (19).

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Evaluation of imipenem in a zebrafish model of M. abscessus infection. The zebrafish model of M. abscessus infection was used to assess the in vivo activity of imipenem alone or in combination with avibactam. TdTomato-expressing M. abscessus CIP104536 R derivative was injected in zebrafish embryos according to procedures described earlier (20). Briefly, systemic infections were carried by the injection of 150 cfus into the caudal vein of 30 h post-fertilization embryos. Infected larvae were exposed to various imipenem

concentrations (180 and 360 µg/ml) alone or in combination with avibactam 50 µg/ml. Drugcontaining water was renewed daily for 5 days from day 1 to day 6 post infection. The viability of infected embryos was evaluated daily by assessment of cardiac activity. Zebrafish experiments were conducted in accordance with the guidelines from the European Union for handling of laboratory animals (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/chemicals/lab_animals/home_en.htm) and approved by the Direction Sanitaire et Vétérinaire de l'Hérault et Comité d'Ethique pour l'Expérimentation Animale de la Région Languedoc Roussillon under the reference CEEA-LR-1145. Statistical analysis. The Mann-Whitney U test and the Kruskall-Wallis test were used to

compare the intracellular activity of antibiotics. For the zebrafish infection model, experiments were performed at least in triplicate. Data from the replicates were pooled for construction and comparison of survival curves. Efficacy of imipenem alone or in combination with avibactam was compared using the log-rank test. All statistical analyses were performed with EPI Info™ software version 7.1.3 (Centers for Disease Control and prevention, Atlanta).

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RESULTS

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In vitro killing of M. abscessus CIP104536 S by imipenem alone or in combination with amikacin and avibactam. Imipenem was tested at 8 μg/ml and 32 μg/ml, doses that correspond to concentrations equal to 4 and 16 fold the MICs of the drug against M. abscessus CIP104536 S (15). Amikacin was tested at 4 fold the MIC (32 μg/ml). Avibactam

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Reductions in the Log₁₀ of cfus of M. abscessus CIP104536 S were observed for imipenem at 8 μ g/ml, tested alone (1.7 Log_{10}) or in combination with amikacin (2.3 Log_{10}) or avibactam (1.9 Log₁₀) (Fig. 1A) (See Table S2 in the supplemental material for statistical analysis). The triple combination of imipenem-amikacin-avibactam was bactericidal (less than 0.1% survival), achieving a 3.2 Log₁₀-reduction in the number of cfus. The triple combination was more active than imipenem plus avibactam (3.2 versus 1.9 \log_{10} -reduction; P < 0.05) but the difference with imipenem plus amikacin was not significant (3.2 versus 2.3 Log₁₀-reduction; P = 0.12). Increasing the imipenem concentration from 8 μg/ml (Fig. 1A) to 32 μg/ml (Fig. 1B) moderately increased the activity of imipenem alone (1.7 versus 2.2 Log₁₀-reduction), of imipenem combined with amikacin (2.3 versus 2.7 Log₁₀-reduction), and of imipenem combined with avibactam (1.9 versus 2.3 Log₁₀-reduction) but none of these differences were statistically significant. Imipenem at 32 µg/ml combined with amikacin and avibactam was the most active drug combination achieving a 4.3 Log₁₀-reduction. Intramacrophage activity of imipenem alone or in combination with amikacin and

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was tested at 4 μg/ml, as used for susceptibility testing in Enterobacteriaceae (21, 22).

avibactam. THP-1-derived macrophages were infected with M. abscessus CIP104536 S, exposed to various drugs for 2 days, and surviving bacteria were enumerated by plating serial dilutions of macrophage lysates (Fig. 2) (See Table S3 in the supplemental material for statistical analysis). In the absence of antibiotic, M. abscessus CIP104536 S grew in macrophages, leading to a 100-fold increase in the number of cfus at 2 days. Imipenem at 8 μg/ml (Fig. 2) partially prevented intramacrophage growth of M. abscessus CIP104536 S (4.5versus 100-fold increase in cfus; P < 0.05). Amikacin was also active (8-fold increase in cfus; P < 0.05). The combination of imipenem and amikacin was not more active than imipenem alone (4.5- versus 5.0-fold increases in cfus, respectively; P = 0.51). In contrast, avibactam

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improved the activity of imipenem preventing intracellular proliferation of M. abscessus CIP104536 S (1.1- versus 4.5-fold increases in cfus; P < 0.05). The combination of imipenem (8 µg/ml), amikacin, and avibactam was the only combination that reduced the number of intracellular bacteria (fold change of 0.54). This value was significantly different from that obtained with imipenem combined with avibactam (0.54 versus 1.1; P < 0.05). Increasing the concentration of imipenem from 8 µg/ml to 32 µg/ml improved the activity of the drug tested alone (4.5- versus 1.6-fold change in cfus), and in combination with amikacin (5.0versus 1.1-fold change), avibactam (1.1- versus 0.1-fold change), and amikacin and avibactam (0.54- versus 0.07-fold change). The latter differences were significant (P < 0.05). In conclusion, avibactam significantly improved the activity of imipenem when tested both with and without amikacin. Significant intracellular killing was obtained with the double and triple combinations involving imipenem at 32 µg/ml and avibactam with or without amikacin.

Bla_{Mab} is produced at a high level within macrophages. The expression of bla_{Mab} was investigated at both the transcriptional and translational levels in M. abscessus grown in vitro or proliferating in infected macrophages. Quantitative RT-PCR analyses indicated that growth of M. abscessus within macrophages led to a twenty-fold increase in the relative abundance of the bla_{Mab} transcript in comparison to planktonic cultures performed in vitro in 7H9B medium (Fig. 3A). Western blot analysis confirmed that Bla_{Mab} is produced at a higher level in macrophages (Fig. 3B).

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Avibactam increases the efficacy of imipenem in the zebrafish model of M. abscessus infection. The Zebrafish model of M. abscessus infection (16) was used to assess the in vivo efficacy of imipenem following inhibition of ${\rm Bla}_{\rm Mab}$ by avibactam (Fig. 4). Although imipenem alone was active, avibactam further increased larval survival (P < 0.05 for both tested

concentrations of imipenem). These results indicate that production of Bla_{Mab} during infection impairs the efficacy of imipenem and that chemical inhibition by avibactam overcomes the deleterious effect of the β -lactamase.

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DISCUSSION

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Here, we assessed whether the inhibition of the β-lactamase Bla_{Mab} by avibactam improves the efficacy of imipenem against M. abscessus. The impact of the β-lactamase inhibitor was assessed in vitro and in infected macrophages by determining the killing activity of various drug combinations. Avibactam was also investigated by monitoring the survival of infected zebrafish embryos treated with imipenem alone or in combination with the inhibitor. In macrophages, avibactam significantly improved the activity of imipenem in all drug combinations tested, which included two dosages of imipenem with or without amikacin (Fig. 2). Imipenem combined with avibactam and amikacin was highly active in macrophages, leading to 93% intracellular killing at the highest dose. In the zebrafish model, imipenem alone increased the survival of the embryos as previously reported (16) and the efficacy of the drug was significantly improved by avibactam (Fig. 4). Amikacin could not be tested in this model due to its toxicity during larval development (data not shown). Time-kill curves showed that the triple combinations of imipenem (8 and 32 μg/ml), avibactam, and amikacin were bactericidal (less than 0.1% survival; Fig. 1A and 1B). These associations were the most active although statistical analysis did not demonstrate a significant impact of avibactam. The bla_{Mab} transcript was 20-fold less abundant in M. abscessus proliferating in planktonic cultures than in infected macrophages (Fig. 3). Thus, the high-level of production of Bla_{Mab} in the infected macrophages, which was confirmed by Western blot analysis, may account for

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the fact that avibactam has a greater impact on the efficacy of imipenem intracellularly than in vitro. The induction of bla_{Mab} in macrophages indicates that the in vitro evaluation of imipenem may underestimate the impact of the β -lactamase Bla_{Mab}. Of note, there is only a two-fold difference in the MIC of imipenem against the Bla_{Mab}-deficient mutant of M. abscessus and the parental strain (23).

Two β-lactams, cefoxitin and imipenem, are recommended for the treatment of pulmonary infections due to M. abscessus (8). Currently, there is no recommendation for the preferential use of one these drugs. We have previously shown that BlaMah hydrolyzes imipenem with a moderate but significant catalytic efficacy (3 x 10⁴ M⁻¹ s⁻¹) (11). Bla_{Mab} is 4,000-fold less active for the hydrolysis of cefoxitin. The low efficacy of hydrolysis of cefoxitin by Bla_{Mab} is likely to be irrelevant since the killing curve assay did not reveal any difference in the activity of cefoxitin, alone or in combination with amikacin, against a Bla_{Mab}-deficient mutant of M. abscessus and the parental strain (15). In this study, we have shown that imipenem is highly active in macrophages, but this requires combination with avibactam due to the induction of bla_{Mab}. Together, these data indicate that imipenem is intrinsically more active than cefoxitin although this difference is compensated by the higher hydrolysis of imipenem by the β -lactamase Bla_{Mab} .

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The assessments of the efficacy of drug combinations in vitro (Fig. 1), in macrophages (Fig. 2), and in the zebrafish (Fig. 4) indicate that the triple combination of avibactam, imipenem, and amikacin should be clinically evaluated, particularly in infections due to clarithromycin-resistant M. abscessus, which are often not cured by the recommended treatments (7, 24-26). Unfortunately, avibactam is currently manufactured in combination with ceftazidime, which has no activity against M. abscessus (12). Formulation of avibactam

- 258 independently from any β -lactam partner would be necessary to provide cystic fibrosis
- 259 patients with an access to the avibactam-imipenem-amikacin combination.

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with the β -lactamase inhibitor avibactam (AVI, 16 $\mu g/ml$) and amikacin (AMK, 8 $\mu g/ml$)

against M. abscessus CIP104536 S. Intracellular bacteria were enumerated and the fold

change in cfus was determined between days 0 and 2 post-infection. Bars represent standard deviations.

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FIG 3 Production of Bla_{Mab} in vitro and in macrophages. (A) Quantification of bla_{Mab} by qRT-PCR. RNA was isolated from wild-type strain CIP CIP104536 (S) grown in vitro in 7H9 medium for 48 h or in human J774 macrophages for 24 h, 48 h, 72 h, and 96 h. The sigA rRNA was used as an internal standard. The values are the ratio of intramacrophage to in vitro growth. Results are expressed as means +/- standard deviations from three experiments performed in triplicate. Bars represent standard deviations. (B) Immunodetection of Bla_{Mab}. Protein extracts were prepared from wild-type strain CIP CIP104536 (S) and its Δbla_{Mab} derivative grown in vitro in 7H9 medium for 48 h or in human J774 macrophages for 1 h, 24 h, and 48 h. Proteins (3 µg) were separated by 15% SDS-PAGE. Immunodetection was performed with a mouse immune serum specific for Bla_{Mab} and a peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-mouse antibody. Immuno-detection of KasA was used as a loading control.

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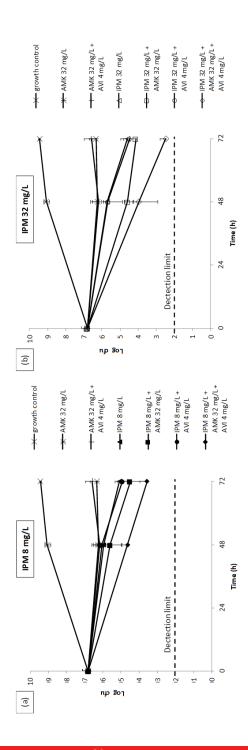
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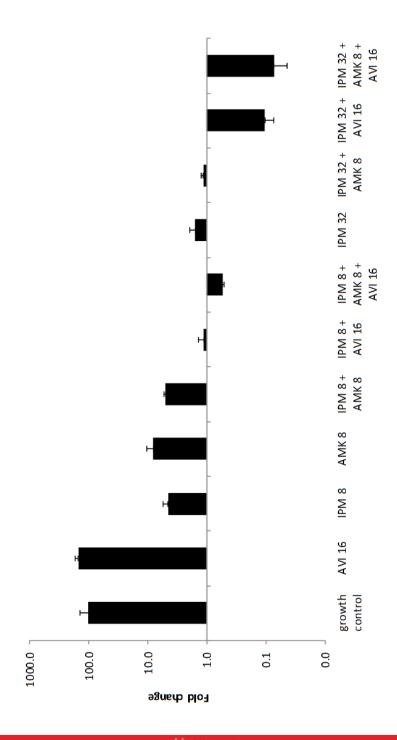
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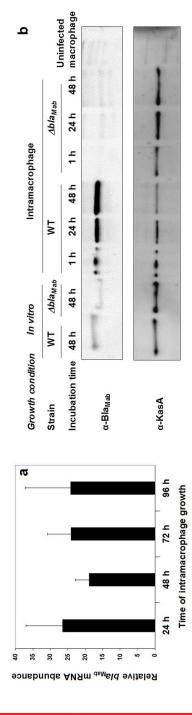
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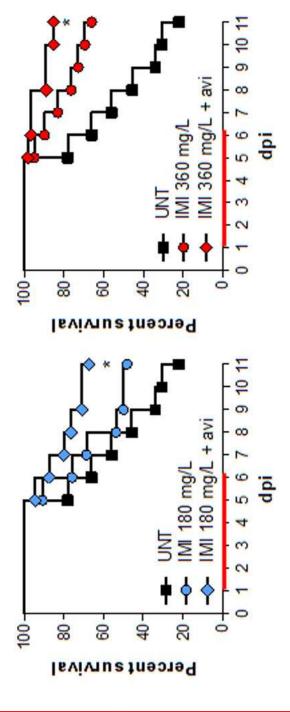
FIG 4 Efficacy of imipenem alone or in combination with avibactam in zebrafish embryos infected by M. abscessus CIP104536 R expressing TdTomato. Embryos (60/300 per group) were infected at 30 h post fertilization and exposed to imipenem (IMI) from day 1 to day 6 post infection (dpi) at two concentrations (180 and 360 μg/ml, panels A and B, respectively) alone or in combination with avibactam at 50 μg/ml (AVI). Control animals were left untreated (UNT). The survival of animals was monitored each day post infection and the results were expressed as the % of the larval survival. *P < 0.05.







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