A Dynamic Zinc Redox Switch*

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Ana Mirela Neculai‡§, Dante Neculai‡§, Christian Griesinger‡, Julia A. Vorholt‡, and Stefan Becker‡¶**

From the ‡Department for NMR-based Structural Biology, Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry, Am Fassberg 11, 37077 Göttingen, Germany and §Laboratoire des Interactions Plantes Microorganismes, INRA/CNRS, 31326 Castanet-Tolosan, France

The crystal structures of glutathione-dependent formaldehyde-activating enzyme (Gfa) from Paracoccus denitrificans, which catalyzes the formation of S-hydroxymethylglutathione from formaldehyde and glutathione, and its complex with glutathione (Gfa-GTT) have been determined. Gfa has a new fold with two zinc-sulfur centers, one that is structural (zinc tetracoordinated) and one catalytic (zinc apparently tricoordinated). In Gfa-GTT, the catalytic zinc is displaced due to disulfide bond formation of glutathione with one of the zinc-coordinating cysteines. Soaking crystals of Gfa-GTT with formaldehyde restores the holoenzyme. Accordingly, the displaced zinc forms a complex by scavenging formaldehyde and glutathione. The activation of formaldehyde and of glutathione in this zinc complex favors the final nucleophilic addition, followed by relocation of zinc in the catalytic site. Therefore, the structures of Gfa and Gfa-GTT draw the critical association between a dynamic zinc redox switch and a nucleophilic addition as a new facet of the redox activity of zinc sites.

The redox activity of sulfur ligands in zinc sites, known as zinc redox switch, is a basic principle to control protein function in redox biology (1). It involves the reversible oxidation and reduction of the cysteine ligands bound to the redox-inert zinc ion. The concept has been developed and proved to control mechanisms to maintain zinc homeostasis in the cell, to induce conformational changes in proteins resulting in their active, functional form, and in activation or inactivation of enzymes (2). The zinc redox switch mechanism is linked to the binding and release of zinc and involves oxidants such as nitric oxide and GSSG (3–5).

A generally accepted model for the zinc redox switch involving glutathione is the release of zinc upon disulfide bond formation between a glutathione and a zinc-coordinating thiol, known as the “cysteine switch” mechanism (6). To gain new insights into this partnership we advocate in the following the example of a formaldehyde-converting zinc enzyme that uses glutathione as co-substrate. This zinc enzyme employs a dynamic Zn-S redox switch, crucial to an essentially nucleophilic addition. This means that a cysteine switch step takes place during each turnover of the enzyme. On the contrary, zinc redox switches investigated thus far precede as singular events subsequent reactions, hence having a trigger function for these reactions without being mechanistically involved in them any more.

Because of its toxic nature, formaldehyde needs to be efficiently metabolized. In most organisms this is achieved through the GSH-linked oxidation pathway. Its first step is the formation of the S-hydroxymethylglutathione adduct by reaction of formaldehyde with the SH group of glutathione (7). Subsequently, S-hydroxymethylglutathione is oxidized by glutathione-dependent formaldehyde dehydrogenase, a class III alcohol dehydrogenase (8). Finally S-formylglutathione hydrolase regenerates glutathione and releases formate (9), which can be oxidized in some organisms to carbon dioxide.

The adduct formation as the first step of the glutathione-linked formaldehyde oxidation is usually an uncatalyzed reaction in vivo (10). However, in the methylotrophic α-proteobacterium Paracoccus denitrificans, an enzyme was identified that allows for an increased turnover compared with the uncatalyzed reaction (11). This enzyme, a 21-kDa protein, was named glutathione-dependent formaldehyde-activating enzyme (Gfa). Gfa shows high sequence homology to putative proteins from a number of proteobacteria (see supplemental Fig. 1) (11). It contains clustered cysteine residues, opening the possibility that the protein might contain zinc binding sites. This raised the questions of whether and, if so, how a catalytic zinc center might be functionally involved in the formation of S-hydroxymethylglutathione.

To address these questions, we determined the crystal structures of both unliganded and glutathione-bound enzyme (Gfa-GTT), as well as the structure from crystals of Gfa-GTT soaked with formaldehyde. The structure of Gfa encloses two zinc sites and turns out to have a new fold. Soaking crystals of this intermediate with formaldehyde results in the reconstitution of the holoenzyme structure. Based on these observations, we suggest a mechanism for the nucleophilic addition that places a dynamic zinc redox switch at the core of the enzymatic reaction.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Protein Expression and Purification—The gene gfa from P. denitrificans was amplified by PCR from genomic DNA and cloned into a modified PET16b vector containing a TEV cleavage site. This expression construct was transformed into the Escherichia coli strain

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** To whom correspondence should be addressed. Tel.: 49-551-201-2222; Fax: 49-551-201-2202; E-mail: sabe@nmr.mpihpc.mpg.de.

1 The abbreviations used are: Gfa, glutathione-dependent formaldehyde-activating enzyme; Gfa-GTT, Gfa-glutathione complex; Gfa-GTT-FOR, Gfa-GTT complex soaked with formaldehyde; r.m.s.d., root mean square deviation; SAD, single-wavelength anomalous dispersion.
BL21(DE3). Protein expression was carried out at 23 °C after induction with 0.5 mM isopropyl-1-thio-β-D-galactopyranoside. Cells from 750 ml of expression culture were harvested 8 h after induction and suspended in 40 ml of lysis buffer (20 mM Tris, pH 7.9, 0.5 M NaCl, 10 mM imidazole, 0.5 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride). The His<sub>16</sub>-tagged Gfa fusion protein was purified by standard methods using nickel-nitri-
triacetic acid resin and TEV protease for cleaving of the His<sub>10</sub> tag. The final purification was performed by gel filtration on a Superdex 75HR 3/10 column, which was also used to transfer the protein to the final buffer for crystallization and storage (20 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 100 mM NaCl, 0.5 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride). The final yield of purified Gfa was typically 30 mg from 750 ml of culture. For crystallization, the purified Gfa was concentrated to 9 mg/ml. Se-Met-labeled Gfa was overexpressed in minimal media supplemented with seleno-methionine according to the EMBL protein expression protocol (http://www.embl-heidelberg.de) and purified according to the established protocol.

**Crystallization and Data Collection—** Crystals of *P. denitrificans* Gfa were obtained using vapor diffusion by mixing 2 μl of concentrated protein solution with 2 μl of reservoir solution (2–2.1 M (NH₄)₂SO₄, 4% polyethylene glycol 400, and 0.1 M HEPES, pH 7.4). They grew within 3–4 days as overlapping plates with dimensions of 0.5 × 0.3 × 0.05 mm. For crystallization of the Gfa-glutathione complex, the reduced form of the protein incorporating labeled Se-Met. Selenium positions have been solved by SAD phasing from monoclinic crystals grown using the program SOLVE (2). The final yield of purified Gfa was 40 ml of lysis buffer (20 mM Tris, pH 7.9, 0.5 M NaCl, 10 mM imidazole, 0.5 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride). The His<sub>16</sub>-tagged Gfa fusion protein was purified by standard methods using nickel-nitri-
triacetic acid resin and TEV protease for cleaving of the His<sub>10</sub> tag. The final purification was performed by gel filtration on a Superdex 75HR 3/10 column, which was also used to transfer the protein to the final buffer for crystallization and storage (20 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 100 mM NaCl, 0.5 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride). The final yield of purified Gfa was typically 30 mg from 750 ml of culture. For crystallization, the purified Gfa was concentrated to 9 mg/ml. Se-Met-labeled Gfa was overexpressed in minimal media supplemented with seleno-methionine according to the EMBL protein expression protocol (http://www.embl-heidelberg.de) and purified according to the established protocol.

**RESULTS**

**Overall Structure and Zinc Binding Sites—** The structure of Gfa was solved to a resolution of 2.35 Å by SAD (19) (supplemental Table I). The 4 monomers in the asymmetric unit clearly form 2 homodimers. The size of the dimer interface is 890 Å² and is equally made by polar and hydrophobic interactions, whereas the interface between the two dimers covers only 60 Å². Dimer formation in solution was confirmed by gel filtration chromatography and dynamic light scattering measurements (data not shown). Because no major difference was observed between the 2 dimers (r.m.s.d. 0.59 Å for the Ca atoms), we have focused our discussion on a single dimer (Fig. 1). Gfa forms a globular structure with a new fold (no matches with the DALI server (20)). Thus Gfa and its so far identified sequence orthologs (supplemental Fig. 1) form a new structural family.

The main topological feature of this structure is an extremely twisted mixed eight-stranded β-sheet (see supplemental Fig. 2). Within this β-sheet, the strands β<sub>3</sub>, β<sub>6</sub>, and β<sub>7</sub> form a sandwich with another triple stranded mixed β-sheet (β<sub>3</sub>, β<sub>6</sub>, and β<sub>7</sub>). The interconnection between the sheets is mediated by four 3<sub>10</sub> helices (α<sub>2</sub>, α<sub>4</sub>, α<sub>6</sub>, and α<sub>9</sub>) and two α-helices (α<sub>5</sub>, α<sub>7</sub>). Helices α<sub>5</sub> and α<sub>7</sub> form a small antiparallel bundle and are packing against helix α<sub>6</sub> of the opposite monomer, thus constituting a major portion of the interface between the monomers. The structure of each monomer is completed by another short α-helix, α<sub>1</sub> (at the N termini), which faces α<sub>10</sub>, α<sub>6</sub>, and α<sub>9</sub> (at the C termini). The novelty of this 3<sub>10</sub>/β structure resides in the exclusive combination of antiparallel β-sheets with a relatively high number of 3<sub>10</sub> helices (4), a rare occurrence in known protein structures because of unfavorable energetics. The sandwich arrangement of the β-strands is further buttressed by a tetrahedral zinc coordinated by the side chains of Cys-33, Cys-35, Cys-101, and Cys-104 (see supplemental Fig. 3). It appears...
that this zinc atom has only a structural role. A second zinc ion stabilizes a large hairpin loop that connects β3 and β4 via residues Cys-54, Cys-56, and Cys-59 (Fig. 2a). The presence of zinc as the coordinated metal in Gfa has been proven by its absorption edge in the x-ray fluorescence spectrum (data not shown). Although the structural zinc is fully occupied in all monomers, the occupancy of the second zinc site was refined to 0.6. Because of its apparently labile coordination environment, this zinc site was a candidate for the catalytic function of Gfa. Similar examples, as far as the coordination sphere is concerned, have been reported (21). The three cysteine residues create a nearly planar arrangement with the zinc, resulting in S-Zn-S angles of ~120°. Electron density of water as a fourth ligand could not be identified. The nearest water molecule is 4.2 Å away from the catalytic site, and the orientation does not comply with tetrahedral geometry. The distance between the zinc ions in the monomers is 19.6–19.9 Å. Structurally there are no indications for functional interactions between them.

Although the resolution of the structure does not allow definite statements about the type of coordinated cysteines (as thiols or thiolates) at the catalytic zinc site, the involvement of the sulfur atoms in a network of H bonds is important in defining its mechanistic aspects. Hence, the three Cys side chains are at donor-acceptor distances of 3.1–3.7 Å (see supplemental Table I) with the main chain amides of Lys-58, Cys-56, and Gly-55 and the Nη2 of Arg-98, as well as with the hydroxyl group of Ser-68 (Fig. 2a). The existence of a so-called “outer coordination sphere” that contains Arg and Ser biases us toward the stabilization of thiolate moieties with lowered pKa (22).

Glutathione Binding—To investigate the glutathione interaction with the presumed catalytic zinc center, Gfa was crystallized with an excess of reduced glutathione (1:20 (mol/mol) Gfa:GTT). In this structure glutathione formed a disulfide bond to Cys-56, completely displacing the catalytic zinc (Fig. 2b). In all four monomers the electron density for glutathione is well defined (Fig. 2b), whereas density for the displaced zinc could not be identified anywhere near the catalytic site. There are no major conformational differences among the amino acids forming the binding pocket of glutathione except for Cys-56, in which the side chain reorients to bridge to the cysteinyl residue of glutathione, and for Lys-58, in which the side chain anchors the glutathione by forming a salt bridge with the glycinyl moiety of glutathione (Fig. 2b). The other key residues for glutathione binding are functionally conserved within the group of Gfa orthologs and other glutathione-binding proteins (Fig. 2b) (23). The glutathione pocket seems to be preexistent in the monomer, the dimer formation having probably only a stabilizing role. The H-bonding network around thiolate moieties described for Gfa is maintained also for Gfa-GTT (Fig. 2, a and b).

The overall location of glutathione, very exposed to the solvent region, is reminiscent of the structures of glutathione transferases (24), but except for the cysteine-glutathione disulfide bridge, no functional connotations can be drawn between them.

The Gfa-Glutathione Complex Reacts with Formaldehyde—When crystals of Gfa-GTT were soaked with formaldehyde, the Fo - Fc difference map allowed the identification of clear pos-
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The structural identification of the Gfa-GTT intermediate combined with the inspection of the structure of Gfa allow formulating a hypothetical coupled reaction mechanism (Fig. 3). According to this mechanism it is actually the oxidized form of glutathione (GSSG) that reacts with Cys-56 to form the disulfide-bonded Gfa-GTT intermediate, in which zinc cannot be located either within or outside of the catalytic site.

Interestingly, the longest H-bond within the network of H-bonds involving the cysteines at the catalytic site is the one of Cys-56 to the main chain amide of Lys-58 (3.6–3.8 Å). Hence, Cys-56 is the least stabilized, relative to the other two cysteines by coordination to zinc, and thus energetically is most suitable to react with glutathione.

It can be hypothesized that the displaced zinc is coordinated to the reduced form of glutathione, because zinc is always associated in vivo with another cellular ligand and is never transferred as the free zinc ion (26). The presence of other ligands like water and possibly histidine in the zinc coordination sphere cannot be excluded. We postulate that this zinc complex, for which the exact stoichiometry is unknown at this stage, acts as a scavenger for the formaldehyde present in solution (Fig. 3, Stage II → Stage III). This would provide an explanation for another previously proposed role of Gfa as a formaldehyde scavenger (11). In this mixed complex the carbonyl bond of formaldehyde as well as the sulfinyl bond of reduced glutathione are polarized and thus activated for the final nucleophilic addition, resulting in the formation of S-hydroxymethylglutathione, the relocation of zinc in the catalytic site, and the regeneration of oxidized glutathione. The oxidized glutathione can be fed back into the catalytic cycle (Fig. 3, Stage III → Stage I).

Redox activity of sulfur ligands has been recognized as an important feature of zinc proteins, creating an oxidoreductive environment in which the ligands, but not the metal, are oxidized and reduced with concomitant release and binding of zinc (1, 4). It was also found in other proteins, that the presence of a redox agent such as glutathione influences the zinc transfer, with the ratio of reduced and oxidized glutathione playing a critical role in the complete displacement of zinc (27).

DISCUSSION

The structural identification of the Gfa-GTT intermediate associated to the postulated small molecule intermediates (inner circle). Stage II represents the initial situation, with Gfa in the presence of oxidized and reduced glutathione. Stage I represents the products of the reaction between Gfa and glutathione: the intermediate with dislocated zinc (Gfa-GTT) and the Zn-glutathione complex of unknown composition (m = 1 or 2), which subsequently scavenges formaldehyde. In this zinc complex the carbonyl bond of formaldehyde, as well as the sulfinyl bond of reduced glutathione, is polarized and thus activated for the final nucleophilic addition. For simplicity, only one variable has been chosen to describe the coordination number of zinc, taking into account the multiplicity of ligands (L) possibly bound to it (e.g. His, H₂O). The whole ensemble (Stage III) undergoes the transformation.

![Diagram](image-url)

Fig. 3. a, time-resolved, three-stage catalytic cycle of Gfa. The outer circle presents the two structurally characterized intermediates that are associated to the postulated small molecule intermediates (inner circle). Stage I represents the initial situation, with Gfa in the presence of oxidized and reduced glutathione. Stage II represents the products of the reaction between Gfa and glutathione: the intermediate with dislocated zinc (Gfa-GTT) and the Zn-glutathione complex of unknown composition (m = 1 or 2), which subsequently scavenges formaldehyde. In this zinc complex the carbonyl bond of formaldehyde, as well as the sulfinyl bond of reduced glutathione, is polarized and thus activated for the final nucleophilic addition. For simplicity, only one variable has been chosen to describe the coordination number of zinc, taking into account the multiplicity of ligands (L) possibly bound to it (e.g. His, H₂O). The whole ensemble (Stage III) undergoes the transformation.

![Diagram](image-url)
The displacement of zinc by binding of glutathione to a cysteine residue of the catalytic site turns the catalytic zinc center into a highly dynamic zinc redox switch, where zinc moves in a ping-pong fashion between its coordination site and a dislocated state forward and backward. In the dislocated state zinc exerts its actual catalytic function by activating coordinated formaldehyde and glutathione for the nucleophilic addition. Thus a dynamic zinc redox switch actually serves as the piston for the catalyzed nucleophilic addition. The perpetual large motions of zinc, which are implied in this mechanism, might be the rate-limiting step of the reaction and the reason for the low turnover number of Gfa. It has also been shown in the past that this reaction is strongly pH-dependent (11). The involvement of the glutathione redox system, the ratio of oxidized and reduced glutathione being pH-dependent, delivers an explanation for this observation. The dimensions of the catalytic site easily allow the accommodation of a number of glutathione molecules, an essential requirement for the postulated mechanism (see supplemental Fig. 5).

An alternative explanation for the activity of Gfa would be a mechanism similar to the one of alkyltransferases, such as MtaA or betaine-homocysteine S-methyltransferase (28, 29). The postulated role of zinc in these enzymes is that of a Lewis acid that binds the thiol substrates as thiolates and thus activates the thiol group to be alkylated. In the light of this mechanism the Gfa-GTT substrate would have to be considered an oxidative artifact of our crystallization conditions; but the fact that zinc is recoordinated upon the reaction of Gfa-GTT with formaldehyde clearly demonstrates that Gfa-GTT is a central intermediate of the nucleophilic addition catalyzed by Gfa. Therefore a mechanism similar to that of the alkyltransferases seems improbable.

Zinc redox switches described so far are single turnover events. For example, in the chaperone Hsp33 of E. coli, activation by displacement of zinc results in the formation of two intramolecular disulfide bonds and refolding of the monomeric protein, which can then dimerize and thus create the hydrophobic surface essential for functioning as a chaperone in protein folding (30, 31). In cellulose synthase, dimerization of the subunits occurs through the intermolecular disulfide bond formation after zinc release (32). Also in enzymes, single turnover displacement or binding of zinc has been found to inactivate or trigger enzyme activity. In betaine-homocysteine S-methyltransferase, the zinc displacement is followed by formation of a disulfide bond between two of three cysteines (29), resulting in inactivation. Zn-replete enzyme is reactivated. In NO synthase, the release of the zinc bridging the two monomers through oxidation of its thiolate ligands causes uncoupling of NO synthesis (33). But even in this case there is no highly dynamic redox switch operating as found for Gfa. In contrast the mechanism of zinc release in Gfa is intrinsically a multi-turnover event, because the formation of each single S-hydroxymethylglutathione molecule is concomitant with a dislocation and relocation cycle of zinc at the catalytic site.

In essence, the combined structures of the Gfa holoenzyme, its glutathione-bound form, and the structure obtained upon soaking Gfa-GTT crystals with formaldehyde allow for the first time an insight into a dynamic zinc redox switch and deliver the first structural proof of this redox principle. It remains to be seen whether this dynamic redox switch is confined to the new structural family of proteobacterial proteins to which Gfa belongs or whether it might also be identified in enzymes from other kingdoms of life.

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