

# Current Research in Photosynthesis

Volume II

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## PHYCOCYANIN WITH MODIFIED CHROMOPHORES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Phycocyanin plays an important role in collecting light energy and transferring it to the reaction center (1,2). *In vivo*, this chromoprotein is highly aggregated as part of the phycobilisomes (3-5). *In vitro*, in buffers of low ionic strength, the phycobilisomes dissociate. Under these conditions, phycocyanin of *Mastigocladus laminosus* is aggregated to ring-shaped trimers ( $\alpha\beta$ ). The  $\alpha$ -subunit carries one ( $\alpha$ -84) the  $\beta$ -subunit two covalently linked cyanobilin-chromophores ( $\beta$ -84 and  $\beta$ -155) (6,7). These trimers are generally associated with linker-peptides, which can principally function as structural elements, as "terminators" of antenna rod building, but are also involved in fine tuning of the chromophore spectra for optimum energy transfer (3-6). In order to investigate the role of individual chromophores in energy transfer, we are modifying distinct chromophores within energy transferring chromophore ensembles. During such studies, we have now found that chromophore modifications have also a profound influence on protein-chromophore interactions and chromoprotein aggregation. It is this aspect which is presented here.

## 2. MATERIAL and METHODS

Phycocyanin was isolated according to ref. 8. Subunits were prepared via isoelectric focusing under denaturing, anaerobic conditions (9).

*Chromophore modifications:* 1) **Reduction with borohydride** (modified from ref. 10). A solution of PC or isolated subunits (chromophore concentration 7-21  $\mu$ M, 0.9M potassium phosphate, pH 7, 8M urea) was treated with NaBH<sub>4</sub> (170 mM). After complete reduction (spectrum,  $\approx$ 45 min) excess reductant was destroyed by glucose. For reoxidation experiments, the samples (100mM potassium phosphate, pH 7, containing 70% ammonium sulfate to prevent protein degradation) were allowed to stand at room temperature in the dark for up to nine days. This was followed by recombination (if not yet done), denaturation (8M urea in 100mM potassium phosphate, pH7) and renaturation as described below. 2) **Photobleaching** of the  $\alpha$ -subunit (8  $\mu$ M protein, 100 mM phosphate, 8M urea, pH 7.5) was

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carried out with 350 nm light over four periods of 30 min each (11).

3) **Indirect chromophore modification** was done by titration of trimeric phycocyanin ( $\alpha\beta$ )<sub>3</sub> with PCMS (para-chloro-mercury-benzenesulfonate) in a 1.1-1.2 fold excess (12).

**Recombination:** Isolated subunits were modified and then hybridized with the respective "partners" by dialysis of combined samples containing 5 mM mercaptoethanol, against 100mM potassium phosphate, pH 7, 25°C over night, and then with new buffer at 4°C for 5hrs. In control experiments, PC was modified *in toto*. Linker-peptide preparations were also added in some experiments. The modification and recombination products were tested by UV-vis-absorption, SDS-PAGE, sedimentation behaviour (13) and (in some cases) gel-filtration on sephadex-G-75 (Serva, Heidelberg). The chromoprotein bands (which were distinct by their color) were marked and quantitated by absorption spectroscopy.

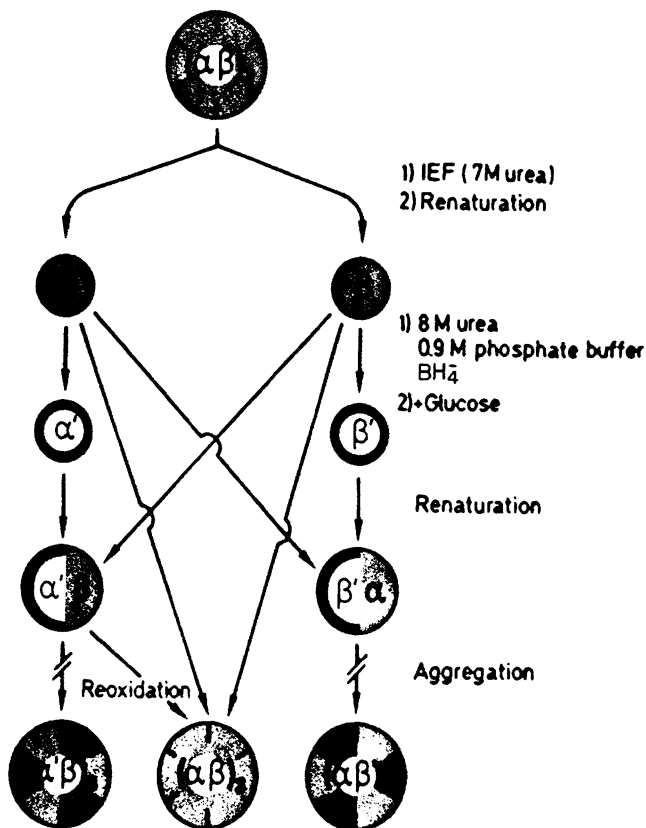
concentration of chromophores ( $\mu$ M)	0.025	0.05	0.09	0.12	0.2	0.39
<b>sedimentation</b>						
phycocyanin	93/7	-	-	12/88	8/92	-
phycocyanin + PCMS	92/8	68/32	52/48	45/55	32/68	16/84
<b>gel-filtration</b>						
phycocyanin	-	-	-	2/98	-	-
phycocyanin + PCMS	-	-	-	>4/<96	-	-

**Table 1:** Influence of the protein-bound mercurial PCMS on the monomer/trimer ( $\alpha\beta$ )<sub>1</sub>/ $(\alpha\beta)$ <sub>3</sub> equilibrium of phycocyanin. Comparison of two different methods of determination.

### 3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The bilin chromophores of either the  $\alpha$ - or the  $\beta$ -subunit of phycocyanin, or both, were (photo)chemically modified and recombined with the respective missing subunits. The modifications consisted of photo-bleaching, or reduction of the verdin- to rubin-type chromophore(s). It was not possible to obtain trimeric phycocyanin ( $\alpha\beta$ )<sub>3</sub> from such modified preparations by the recombination procedures used, irrespective of the modification being done with PC *in toto*, or with isolated subunits which were then recombined with the complementary subunit containing unmodified chromophores. All products are at most dimeric aggregates (Fig. 1). Also, addition of a functionally active linker peptide (22 kDa), which

in unmodified samples stabilized trimeric aggregates, did not yield trimers containing rubin type chromophores. Control experiments showed, that this was not due to any irreversible modification on the peptide chain. They were based on the fact that the reduced chromophore(s) were not stable over longer periods of time under aerobic conditions, but rather reoxidized to the native dihydrobilin chromophores. Aggregate analysis of such reoxidation products obtained and with hybrids containing a reduced  $\alpha$ -subunit, showed that reoxidation leads to reformation of trimers (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** Scheme of the modification procedure at phycocyanin with borohydride.  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are the subunits, "prime" indicates reduced chromophores; IEF = isoelectric focusing; for more details see text.

While the chemical modifications tested prevent trimer formation completely, modification with PCMS has only a moderately destabilizing effect on aggregation. The reagent binds to the single free cysteine of phycocyanin, near the  $\beta$ -84-chromophore and quite close to the monomer-monomer ( $\alpha\beta$ )-( $\alpha\beta$ )<sub>1</sub> contact region (7). In the concentration range where the "natural" pigment contains both monomers ( $\alpha\beta$ ) and trimers ( $\alpha\beta$ )<sub>3</sub>, the monomer portion is increased in PCMS titrated samples. This can be concluded from both the sedimentation runs and the gel filtration experiments (Table 1). However, in all tests it was found that the monomer concentration was higher in the sedimentation than in the gel-filtration experiments, which might be a high pressure effect. The desaggregating effect of modified chromophores is reminiscent of the situation in phycoerythrocyanin, where a reversible photochemical reaction of the violobilin-chromophore leads to a reversible modulation of the aggregation (see poster Siebzehnrübl et al.).

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