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Volume III

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GENERAL CONTENTS

Volume I

1. Reaction Centers From Purple Bacteria 1
2. Photosystem II 209
3. O₂ Evolution 675

Volume II

4. Prokaryotic Antennae Systems 1
5. Eukaryotic Antennae Systems 209
6. Photoinhibition 349
7. Photosystem I 523
8. Structure, Function and Dynamics of the Thylakoid Membrane 715

Volume III

9. H⁺ ATPases 1
10. Cytochrome B/C₁ and B/F Complexes 221
11. Rubisco 323
12. Structure, Function and Regulation of Photosynthetic Genes 423
13. Biosynthesis and Assembly of the Photosynthetic Apparatus 653
14. Chloroplast Differentiation 827

Volume IV

15. Respiration and Photosynthesis 1
16. Regulation of Chloroplast Metabolism 111
17. Adaptation Mechanisms 291
18. CO₂ Concentrating Mechanisms 433
19. Stress and Photosynthesis 549
20. Photosynthesis in Nature 821

CONTENTS TO VOLUME III

General Contents	V
Contents Volume III	VII
Preface	XIX
Acknowledgements	XXI
Organizing Committees	XXIII
Opening Speech	XXV
9. H ⁺ -ATPases	
Molecular Evolution of Proton-ATPases H. Lill, N. Nelson	1
Crystallization of the Functional β Subunit from CF ₁ -CF ₀ W.D. Frasch, J.P. Green	9
Uni-Site Catalysis by the Reconstituted ATP Synthase from Chloroplasts P. Gräber, P. Fromme, U. Junesch	15
Light-Driven Inorganic Pyrophosphate Synthesis in Phototrophic Bacteria P. Nyrén, B.F. Nore, G.F. Salih, Å. Strid	23
Exafs Analysis of the Structure of Mn.Nucleotide Bound to Latent and Activated CF ₁ -ATPase C. Carmeli, A. Lewis, A.T. Jagendorf	29
On the Structure of the ATP-Synthase from Chloroplasts B. Böttcher, U. Lücken, E.J. Boekema, P. Gräber	33
Uni-Site ATP Hydrolysis Catalyzed by the ATP-Synthase from Chloroplasts A. Labahn, P. Gräber	37
Isolation of the Catalytic (β) Subunit of the Chloroplast ATP Synthase in a Hydrolytically Active Form S. Nadanaciva, D.A. Harris	41
Isolation of an Active β Subunit from Chloroplast CF ₀ F ₁ -ATP Synthase S. Avital, Z. Gromet-Elhanan	45
Properties of the Beta Subunit of the Chloroplast ATP Synthase D. Mills, M.L. Richter	49
Dissociation Subunit III from Chloroplast ATP Synthase after Modification with EITC E.C. Apley, R. Wagner	53

VIII

Identification of C-Terminal Residues of CF ₁ δ as Part of the Epitope of Inhibiting Antibodies W. Finke, R.J. Berzborn	57
Identical Topography of Subunit of CF ₀ II and CF ₀ I in Spinach Chloroplasts Suggests Similar Function: Binding of CF ₁ J. Otto, R.J. Berzborn	61
Study of the Simultaneous Binding of ADP and ATP on Coupling Factor CF ₁ by a Modification of the Hummel and Dreyer Method G. Berger, G. Girault, J.-M. Galmiche	65
pH-Dependent Changes in ATP and ADP Affinity for the Tight Nucleotide-Binding Site of the Chloroplast Coupling Factor CF ₁ A.N. Malyan, O.I. Vitseva	69
Properties of the Nucleotide-Binding Sites on Isolated CF ₁ H. Sakurai, T. Hosoda, T. Hisabori	73
Characterization of Nucleotide Binding Sites on Isolated Chloroplast ATPase by Modification with 7-Chloro-4-Nitro-Benzofurazan S. Bickel-Sandkötter, P. Strümper	77
Cation Channels by Reconstitution of CF ₀ CF ₁ and by Subunit III of CF ₀ G. Althoff, G. Schönknecht, H. Lühring, E. Apley, R. Wagner, W. Junge	81
Correlation Between Buffering Capacity and Proton Efflux in Bacterial Chromatophores M.P. Turina, G. Venturoli, B.A. Melandri	85
Diurnal Pattern of Chloroplast Coupling Factor Oxidation Kinetics in Leaves of Intact Sunflower D.M. Kramer, A.R. Crofts	89
Single Channel Proton Currents in CF ₀ CF ₁ Proteoliposomes R. Wagner, E.C. Apley, W. Hanke	93
The Effect of Pyridine on the Onset Lag of Photo-Phosphorylation: No Evidence for "Localized Coupling" A. Borchard, W. Junge	97
Studies on the Role of Thylakoid Membrane-Localized Protons in ATP Synthesis L. Youze, M. Zhengping, W. Shaolong	101
ATP Synthesis by Isolated Chloroplast Coupling Factors, Induced with pH-Shift M.G. Goldfeld, V.D. Mikoyan	105
Non-Linear Effects at Phosphorylation Induced by Acid-Base Shift in Thylakoid Membranes M.G. Goldfeld, I.I. Lobysheva, V.D. Mikoyan	111
$\Delta\mu\text{H}^+$ -Dependent Activation of the Thylakoid H ⁺ -ATPase and Initiation of Catalysis D. Lohse, H. Strotmann	121
The H ⁺ /ATP Coupling Ratio at the H ⁺ -ATP-Synthase of Spinach Chloroplasts is Four B. Rumberg, K. Schubert, F. Strelow, T. Tran-Anh	125
A Possible Mechanism for ATP Synthesis and ATP Hydrolysis by the F ₀ F ₁ ATPase of Chloroplasts J. Schumann	129
The Single Channel Conductance of CF ₀ G. Althoff, H. Lill, W. Junge	133

A Voltage-Dependent Chloride Channel in the Thylakoid Membrane G. Schönknecht, R. Hedrich, W. Junge, K. Raschke	137
Two Types of Deactivation Procedures for the Thiol-Modulated Chloroplast ATP-Hydrolase P. Biaudet, F. Haraux, H. Strotmann	141
Kinetic Control of Coupling Factor Activity D.R. Ort, P.A. Grandoni, K. Oxborough	145
ATP-Synthesis and ATP-Hydrolysis in Well-Coupled Proteoliposomes Incorporating Rhodospirillum Rubrum F ₀ F ₁ L. Slooten, S. Vandenbranden	149
Does the Chloroplast ATPase have a Variable Affinity for ADP? Y. de Kouchkovsky, T. Bizouarn, F. Haraux	153
Functional Studies on the Reaction Pattern of the H ⁺ -ATP-Synthase in Spinach Chloroplasts F. Strelow, T. Tran-Anh, B. Rumberg	157
Inhibition of ATP Hydrolysis in Isolated Chloroplasts by Lipophilic Tertiary Amines and the Mechanism of 'Selective Uncoupling' H. Laasch, J. Schumann	161
The Characterization of a Potent, Naturally Occurring, ATPase Inhibitor (SIF) Isolated from the Halotolerant Algae <i>Dunaliella</i> S. Selman-Reimer, B.R. Selman	165
Isolation, Purification and Characterization of Coupling Factor ATPase from <i>Anacystis nidulans</i> H. Nemoto, Y. Ohta, T. Hisabori, K. Shinohara, H. Sakurai	169
F ₀ F ₁ -ATPase Content in Chromatophores of Rhodospirillum Rubrum and Stoichiometry of Oligomycin Binding B. Norling, Å. Strid, C. Tourikas, P. Nyrén	173
Intrinsic Uncoupling of the F ₀ F ₁ -ATPase Dependent on What Divalent Cation is Used Å. Strid, P. Nyrén	177
The Purified F ₁ -ATPase of <i>Rhodopseudomonas blastica</i> is a Ca ⁺⁺ -ATPase Å. Strid, P. Nyrén	181
Membrane Properties of <i>Rhodopseudomonas palustris</i> K. Knobloch, B. Pirner, H. Müller	185
Transcription of Genes Coding for Subunits of the F ₀ Membrane Sector of ATP Synthase in <i>Rhodospirillum rubrum</i> G. Falk	189
Expression of the Chloroplast <i>atpB</i> Gene of <i>Chlamydomonas reinhardtii</i> in <i>E.coli</i> S. Blumenstein, S. Leu, E. Abu-Much, D. Bar-Zvi, N. Shavit, A. Michaels	193
Some Similarities and Differences Between Bacterial Chromatophore, Spinach Chloroplast and Yeast Mitochondrial Inorganic Pyrophosphatases M. Baltscheffsky, A. Pramanik, M. Lundin, P. Nyrén, H. Baltscheffsky	197
Distribution of Inorganic Pyrophosphatase (PPase) Activity in Chloroplasts H. Baltscheffsky, A. Pramanik, M. Lundin, B. Andersson	201
Generation of Membrane Potential from Different Energy-Linked Reactions in Photosynthetic Bacteria B.F. Nore, Y. Sakai, M. Baltscheffsky	205

X

Determination of the Intracellular Concentration of Inorganic Pyrophosphate in <i>Rhodospirillum rubrum</i> G.F. Salih, P. Nyrén	209
The Slow P515 Signal in Relation to the Status of Innermembrane Proton Domains J.J.J. Ooms, P.H. van Vliet, W.J. Vredenberg	213
Proton Efflux and Phosphorylation in Flash Groups P. Bogdanoff, P. Gräber	217
 10. Cytochrome B/C ₁ and B/F Complexes	
The Chloroplast <i>b</i> Cytochromes: Crosslinks, Topography, and Functions W.A. Cramer, P.N. Furbacher, A. Szczepaniak, G.-S. Tae	221
Molecular Basis of Resistance to Inhibitors of the Cyt BC ₁ Complex in Photosynthetic Bacteria F. Daldal, M.K. Tokito	231
Electron and Proton Transfer Mechanisms of the <i>bc</i> ₁ and <i>bf</i> Complexes: A Comparison P.R. Rich	239
Electron Transfer Between Primary and Secondary Donors in Photosynthetic Bacteria: Evidence for "Supercomplexes" P. Joliot, A. Vermeglio, A. Joliot	247
Topography of the Chloroplast Cytochrome <i>b</i> ₆ A. Szczepaniak, W.A. Cramer	255
Characterization of the Polypeptide Components of the Cytochrome BC ₁ Complex of <i>Rhodobacter sphaeroides</i> D.J. Purvis, R. Theiler, R.A. Niederman	259
Prediction of Structure for Cytochrome B from Sequence Data: What Information is Available from Sequence Comparison A.R. Crofts, C.-H. Yun, R.B. Gennis, S. Mahalingham	263
Characterisation of a Full-Length cDNA Clone Encoding the Pea Rieske Fe-S Protein: Import and Processing by Isolated Chloroplasts A.H. Salter, J.C. Gray	267
On the Site of Action of NQNO in the Cytochrome <i>b</i> ₆ - <i>f</i> Complex and the Question of Interheme Transfer P.N. Furbacher, M.E. Girvin, W.A. Cramer	271
Analysis of Cytochrome Absorption Changes in Spinach Chloroplasts E. Volz, B. Rumberg	275
Analysis of the Variability of the H/e Stoichiometry in Spinach Chloroplasts K. Schubert, F. Liese, B. Rumberg	279
A Q-Cycle Mechanism for Electron Transfer in Chloroplasts D.M. Kramer, A.R. Crofts	283
Operation of UQH ₂ : CYT C ₂ Oxidoreductase of <i>R. Sphaeroides</i> in the Steady State Y. Chen, A. Crofts	287
The Mechanism of Quinol Oxidation: Activation Barriers in UQH ₂ :CYT C ₂ Oxidoreductase Z. Wang, A.R. Crofts	291
Effect of Cations on Heat Stimulation of Photosystem I in Stroma Lamellae Preparations N. Boucher, J. Harnois, R. Carpentier	295

Altered Anionic Nature of Cytochrome F After Carboxypeptidase Treatment S.A. Molnar, E.L. Gross	299
Characterization of a Covalently Linked Plastocyanin-Cytochrome F Adduct L.Z. Morand, M. Frame, D.W. Krogmann, D.J. Davis	303
Chemical Modification of the Lysine Residues on Plastocyanin and the Effect of Cytochrome f E. Gross, A. Curtiss	307
Modeling of Electrostatic Effects in Plastocyanin S. Durell, E. Gross, J. Labanowski	311
Trimethylamine <i>N</i> Oxide Respiration of Aerobic Photosynthetic Bacterium <i>Erythrobacter</i> sp. OCh 114 H. Arata, M. Shimizu, M. Morita, K.-I. Takamiya	315
EPR Spectra of Cytochrome c549 of <i>Anacystis nidulans</i> C.W. Hoganson, G. Lagenfelt, L.-E. Andréasson, T. Vänngård	319
11. Rubisco	
The Active Site of Ribulose Bisphosphate Carboxylase/Oxygenase G. Schneider, Y. Lindqvist, T. Lundqvist	323
Rubisco: Subunits and Mechanism T.J. Andrews, M.R. Badger, D.L. Edmondson, H.J. Kane, M.K. Morell, K. Paul	331
Rubisco from <i>Amaranthus hypochondriacus</i> X.-Y. Wu, W. Gu, G.-Y. Wu	339
Function of Active-Site Residues of Ribulose-Bisphosphate Carboxylase/Oxygenase (Rubisco) F.C. Hartman, E.H. Lee, H.B. Smith	343
Total Synthesis of a Gene for the Mature Small Subunit of RuBisCO (<i>rbcS</i>) from Tobacco H.-B. Chen, J.-M. Weng, J.-S. Bao	347
Site-Directed Mutagenesis of Amino Acids Associated with the Active Site of Rubisco from <i>Anacystis nidulans</i> M.A. Parry, C.A. Kettleborough, N. Halford, A.L. Phillips, R. Branden, A.J. Keys	351
An Essential Arginine in the Large Subunit of Ribulose Bisphosphate Car- boxylase/Oxygenase Identified by Site-Directed Mutagenesis R.L. Haining, C.L. Small, B.A. McFadden	355
Photomodification of a Serine at the Active Site of Spinach RuBisCO by Vanadate S.N. Mogel, B.A. McFadden	359
Photoaffinity Labeling of the Rubisco Active-Site and Small Subunit with 8- Azidoadenosine 5'-Triphosphate M.E. Salvucci, B.E. Haley	363
<i>In Vitro</i> Studies on the Tendency of Large Subunit from Plant Rubisco to Form Incorrect Aggregations E. Rintamäki	367
Stopped Flow Kinetics of the Co ²⁺ -Activated Cyanobacterial RubisCO R. Brändén, N. Halford, A. Keys, M. Parry	371
Structural Investigations of D-Ribulose 1,5-Bisphosphate Carboxylase/Oxygenase from <i>Zea</i> Mays and Spinach J. Vater, L. Ren, J. Salnikow, P.M. Abuja, I. Pilz	373

XII

Immobilization as an Approach to Study the Quaternary Structure of Rubisco from Tobacco	377
L.-R. Li, R.-B. Xu	
Characterization of RuBP Carboxylase/Oxygenase of <i>N. Tabacum</i> by Inhibition of the Oxygenase Function by Means of Specific Antibodies	381
M. Beuttenmüller, C. Nespoulous, A. Radunz, G.H. Schmid	
Immunological Demonstration of Structural Differences of RuBP Carboxylase/Oxygenase in Mutants of <i>Nicotiana tabacum</i>	385
S. Georgi, A. Radunz, G.H. Schmid	
Immunogold Localization of Ribulose-1,5-Bisphosphate Carboxylase in Synchronized Cells of <i>Euglena gracilis</i> Z	391
T. Osafune, S. Sumida, A. Yokota, E. Hase	
A Specific Phosphatase for 2-Carboxyarabinitol-1-Phosphate in Leaves	395
A.J. Keys, A.H. Kingston-Smith, M.A.J. Parry	
Regulation of Rubisco Activity by Carboxyarabinitol-1-Phosphate and Elevated Atmospheric CO ₂ in Rice and Soybean Cultivars	399
G. Bowes, A.J. Rowland-Bamford, L. H. Allen, Jr.	
Transcriptional Regulation of Rubisco Gene Expression by CO ₂ in <i>Rhodospirillum rubrum</i>	403
X.-Y. Wu, Y. Xu, G.-Y. Wu	
Reactivation of Dark-Inactivated RUBP Carboxylase from <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> <i>in vitro</i>	407
J.K. Sainis, N. Jawali	
Red or Blue Light Induced Different Rubisco Small Subunits in Fern Gametophytes Affecting Carboxylation Rates	411
H. Eilenberg, S. Beer, S. Gepstein, N. Geva, A. Zilberstein	
Regulation of the Activity of Ribulose Bisphosphate Carboxylase by Light and CO ₂	415
J. Viil, T. Pämik	
The Role of the C-Terminus of the Large Subunit of Rubisco Investigated by Mutagenesis	419
B. Ranty, T. Lundqvist, G. Schneider, M. Madden, R. Howard, G. Lorimer	
12. Structure, Function and Regulation of Photosynthetic Genes	
Regulation of Plastid Transcription and RNA Accumulation During Barley Leaf Development	423
J.E. Mullet, J.C. Rapp, B.J. Baumgartner, T.B. Sexton, P.E. Gamble	
Molecular Basis of Plastome Mutations and Their Effects of Photosynthesis	429
R. Hagemann	
Structure and Expression of the Chloroplast and Nuclear Genes of the Sununits of Photosystem I in <i>Chlamydomonas reinhardtii</i>	437
J.D. Rochaix, L.G. Franzen, L. Carnot, M. Goldschmidt-Clermont, Y. Choquet, J. Girard-Bascou, P. Bennis	
Regulation of Cyanobacterial Gene Families Encoding Proteins of Photosystem II	445
S.S. Golden, M.R. Schaefer, S.A. Bustos, M.S. Nalty, D.-S.C. Cho	
Localization of the <i>Rhodobacter capsulatus</i> <i>bchCA</i> Operon Oxygen-Regulated Promoter	453
C.L. Wellington, J.J. Priatel, J.T. Beatty	
Genes for Photosystem II Polypeptides	461
J.C. Gray, A.N. Webber, S.M. Hird, D.L. Willey, T.A. Dyer	
Organization of Monocot and Dicot Chloroplast Genomes	469
M. Sugiura	

An Evolutionary Genetic Approach to Understanding Plastid Gene Function: Lessons from Photosynthetic and Nonphotosynthetic Plants J.D. Palmer, P.J. Calie, C.W. dePamphilis, J.M. Logsdon, Jr., D.S. Katz-Downie, S.R. Downie	475
Biogenesis of Photosystem II in C3 and C4 Plants – A Model System to Study Developmentally Regulated and Cell-Specific Expression of Plastid Genes P. Westhoff, H. Schrubar, A. Oswald, M. Streubel, K. Offermann	483
The Organization and Expression of Photosynthetic and Non-Photosynthetic Operons of <i>Euglena gracilis</i> Chloroplast DNA R.B. Hallick, D.A. Christopher, D.W. Copertino, R.G. Drager, L. Hong, K.P. Nelson, C. Radebaugh, J.K. Stevenson, N.J. Sleator, G. Yepiz-Plascencia	491
The Molecular Biology of Site-Directed Modification of Photosystem II in the Unicellular Cyanobacterium <i>Synechocystis</i> sp. PCC 6803 P. Ravnikar, I. Sithole, R. Debus, G. Babcock, L. McIntosh	499
Manipulating the Chloroplast Genome of <i>Chlamydomonas</i> – Molecular Genetics and Transformation J.E. Boynton, N.W. Gillham, E.H. Harris, S.M. Newman, B.L. Randolph-Anderson, A.M. Johnson, A.R. Jones	509
Structural Comparison Between <i>Rhodospirillum rubrum</i> Plasmid and Chloroplast DNA T. Kakuno, N. Ichimura, N. Kaino, T. Ideguchi, H. Namikawa, B.-H. Kim, H. Nishise, J. Yamashita, T. Horio	517
Cloning, Nucleotide Sequence and Expression of <i>Rhodobacter sphaeroides</i> γ Thioredoxin Gene S. Pille, A.M. Breton, F. Ampe, J.D. Clément-Métal	521
Nucleotide Sequence of the Genes Encoding the Two Major Proteins in the Cytoplasmic Membrane of <i>Synechococcus</i> PCC 7942 T. Omata, T. Ogawa, T.J. Carlson, J. Pierce	525
Chimeric Rescue of <i>Rb. capsulatus</i> Reaction Center Genes with Sequences from <i>Rb. sphaeroides</i> A.K. Taguchi, N.W. Woodbury, J.W. Stocker, S.G. Boxer	529
Analysis of Nitrate Reduction Genes in Cyanobacteria X. Andriessse, H. Bakker, G. van Arkel, P. Weisbeek	533
Structure of the Genes for LHC-II in Scots Pine (<i>Pinus sylvestris</i> L.) S. Jansson, P. Gustafsson, I. Virgin	537
Sequence Homology Between Light Harvesting Polypeptides of Plants and the Diatom <i>Phaeodactylum tricorutum</i> A. Manodori, A.R. Grossman	541
Molecular Studies of the Light Harvesting Complex of the Chromophytic Alga, <i>Pavlova lutherii</i> C.D. Scaramuzzi, R.G. Hiller, J. Speirs	545
Chloroplast Developmental-Stage Specific Controls on LHCP II Genes in Cultured Soybean Cells G. Erdős, H.-Q. Chen, D.E. Buetow	549
The Extended Family of Chlorophyll A/B-Binding Proteins of PSI and PSII E. Pichersky, B.R. Green	553
Identification of a <i>psbG</i> -Homologous Gene in <i>Synechocystis</i> sp. PCC6803 K. Steinmüller, L. Bogorad	557

XIV

Isolation and Sequence Analysis of the <i>PSBA</i> Gene from <i>Scenedesmus obliquus</i> C. Todd, B. Diner, J. Bowyer	561
Transcriptional Light Regulation of <i>psbA</i> Gene Expression in <i>Synechocystis</i> 6803 A. Mohamed, C. Jansson	565
Regulation of Translation of Two Chloroplast mRNA's by Thylakoid Membranes S. Leu, A. Michaels	569
Ferredoxin Promoter Elements in Transgenic Tobacco Plants S. Smeeckens, O. Vorst, P. Weisbeek	573
Structure of the Genes for Phosphoenolpyruvate Carboxylase and Pyruvate Pi Dikinase from Maize M. Matsuoka, M. Samejima	577
Requirement for Phosphoenolpyruvate Carboxylase in a Cyanobacterium I. Luinenburg, J.R. Coleman	581
The Glutamate 1-Semialdehyde Aminotransferase of Barley: Purification of the Protein, c- DNA Cloning, Sequencing and Characterisation of the mRNA B. Grimm, S.P. Gough, C.G. Kannangara	585
Photosynthetic Characterization of Mutants of <i>Zea Mays</i> Induced by the DNA Transposable Element, <i>Mutator</i> D. Miles, W. Cook	589
Transcription of Some Chloroplast Genes Could be Under Phytochrome Control: A Com- puter Prediction and Analysis of Light-Responsive Sequences V.E. Semenenko, D.A. Los	593
Variation in Chlorophyll Synthesis in Hexaploid Wheat D. Singh, K.C. Bansal, Y.P. Abrol	597
Genetic Control of Photosynthate Metabolism T.A. Dyer, C.A. Raines, M. Longstaff, J.C. Lloyd, S. Chao, P.J. Sharp, M.D. Gale, E.M. McMorrow, J.W. Bradbeer	601
In-Vitro Translation and Processing of Compartment-Specific Glucan Phosphorylase Isozymes from <i>Pisum Sativum</i> L. M. Steup, J. van Berkel, J. Conrads-Strauch	605
Characterization of a cDNA Clone for the <i>PsaE</i> Gene from Barley and Plasma Desorption Mass Spectrometry of the Corresponding Photosystem I Polypeptide PSI-E H.V. Scheller, J.S. Okkels, P. Roepstorff, L.B. Jepsen, B. Lindberg-Møller	609
Characterization of a cDNA Clone for the <i>PsaH</i> Gene from Barley and mRNA Level of PS I Genes in Light-Induced Barley Seedlings J.S. Okkels, H.V. Scheller, L.B. Jepsen, B. Andersen, B. Lingberg-Møller	613
Studies on the <i>psbH</i> , <i>woxA</i> , <i>ndhC</i> and <i>psbG</i> Loci in the Cyanobacterium <i>Synechocystis</i> 6803 S.R. Mayes, K.M. Cook, J. Barber	617
A Circular 73 KBP DNA from the Colourless Flagellate <i>Astasia longa</i> that Resembles the Chloroplast DNA of <i>Euglena</i> G. Siemeister, C. Buchholz, W. Hachtel	621
Expression of a Pea Gene for Ferredoxin-NADP ⁺ Oxidoreductase in Transgenic Tobacco Plants P. Dupree, J.C. Gray	625

Behavior of Chloroplast Nucleoids During the Cell Cycle of <i>Chlamydomonas reinhardtii</i> in Synchronized Culture	629
T. Ehara, Y. Ogasawara, T. Osafune, E. Hase	
Heat Shock Response in the Chloroplast Genome	633
A. Gnanam, S. Krishnaswamy	
Cloning of the <i>psbK</i> Gene from the Cyanobacterium <i>Synechocystis</i> 6803	637
Z.H. Zhang, S.R. Mayes, J. Barber	
Additivity in the Contribution to Herbicide Binding of Amino Acid Residues in the D1 Protein of Photosystem II	641
Y. Eisenberg, N. Ohad, A. Horovitz, J. Hirschberg	
Cloning and Functioning of Chloroplast Promoters in <i>E. Coli</i> and <i>Synechocystis</i>	645
D.A. Los, N.V. Lebedeva, I.V. Elanskaya, S.V. Shestakov, V.E. Semenenko	
Insertion of a Chloroplast <i>psbA</i> Gene Into the Chromosome of the Cyanobacterium <i>Synechocystis</i> 6803	649
T. Reiss, C. Jansson, L. McIntosh	
13. Biosynthesis and Assembly of the Photosynthetic Apparatus	
Structure of Targeting Peptides for Organellar Protein Import	653
G. von Heijne	
The Biogenesis and Assembly of the Major Antenna Complex of Photosystem II (LHCIIb) in Barley	661
S. Yalovsky, R. Nechushtai	
Transport and Processing of Cytoplasmically-Synthesised Thylakoid Proteins	665
R. Mould, P. Elderfield, J. Shackleton, C. Robinson	
Molecular Chaperones and Chloroplast Biogenesis	671
R.J. Ellis, S. van der Vies, S. Alldrick	
Influence of 5-Aminolevulinate and Complexing Agents Upon Chlorophyll Accumulation	679
U. Kittsteiner, A. Mostowska, H. Malinowski, W. Rüdiger	
Gabaculine Effect on Chlorophyll Accumulation in <i>Pinus nigra</i> Seedlings	683
G. Jelić, M. Bogdanović	
Evidence for a Light-Independent Chlorophyll Biosynthetic Pathway in Angiosperm Seeds Germinated in Darkness	687
H. Adamson, M. Lennon, K.-L. Ou, N. Packer, J. Walmsley	
Photochemical Ring-Opening in 20-Chloro-Chlorophylls	691
A. Struck, E. Cmiel, S. Schneider, H. Scheer	
The Synthesis of Radioactive Photoaffinity Labels Containing Magnesium Tetrapyrrole Intermediates of Chlorophyll and Bacteriochlorophyll Biosynthesis	695
W.R. Richards, A.K. Baggoo, A.J. Biro, R.C. Bhattacharjee, F.E. Hory, M.S. Kebire	
Inhibition of Carotenoid Biosynthesis and LHC II Assembly in Methyl Parathion Treated Wheat Seedlings	699
P.R. Anbudurai, P. Moorthy, M. Sivaguru, T. Balakumar, M.R. James, R. Santhanam	
Accumulation of Chlorophyll and LHCP mRNA in Etiolated Oat Leaves Upon Infiltration of Chlorophyllide	703
S. Schoch, U. Lempert, M. Schober, W. Rudiger	

The Coordination of Syntheses of Bacteriochlorophyll and Bacteriochlorophyll-Binding Proteins in <i>Rhodobacter Capsulatus</i> D.A. Young, B.L. Marrs	707
Physiological Factors Affecting the Accumulation of Plastocyanin, Cytochrome C-552, and a 30-kD Soluble Protein in <i>Chlamydomonas reinhardtii</i> G. Howe, S. Kutsunai, S. Merchant	711
Mechanism and Control of the Inactivation of Cyt b6/f Complexes During Gametogenesis in <i>C. reinhardtii</i> L. Bulté, F.-A. Wollman	715
Biosynthesis of Photosystem I and Cytochrome b6/f Complexes T. Takabe, T. Hibino, H. Ishikawa	719
Aspects of Assembly of Chlorophyll A/B-Protein Complexes J.K. Hooper, M.A. Maloney, D.B. Marks	723
Reconstitution of Chlorophyll A,B-Containing Complexes from LHCP Overproduced in Bacteria H. Paulsen, W. Rüdiger	727
Optimization of an Organelle-Free Processing Reaction for the Chlorophyll A/B Binding Protein Precursor M. Abad, S. Clark, G. Lamppa	731
Immunolocalization of LHCP II Apoprotein in the Golgi of <i>Euglena</i> T. Osafune, J.A. Schiff, E. Hase	735
Developmental Consequences of Chlorophyll Deprivation on the Light Harvesting System of Soybean R.L. Henry, M. Li, X. Cai, J.A. Guikema	739
Association of Extrinsic Proteases with Spinach Photosystem II Membranes T. Kuwabara, K. Shinohara	743
Developmental Gradients of Gene Expression in the Emerging Fourth Leaf of <i>Lolium temulentum</i> T.G.E. Davies, H.J. Ougham	747
Development of PS II Photochemistry after a Single White Flash in Etiolated Barley Leaves F. Franck	751
Photoreduction of the Protochlorophyllide Into Chlorophyllide in Etiolated Leaves and Cotyledons from <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> CV Commodore B. Schoefs, F. Franck	755
Purification and Characterisation of the Carboxyl-Terminal Processing Protease of the D1 Protein of Photosystem II from <i>Scenedesmus obliquus</i> and <i>Pisum sativum</i> J. Packer, M. Taylor, C. Gerrish, J. Bowyer	759
Purification and Properties of a Thylakoidal Enzyme of Spinach Involved in the Processing of D1 Protein of PS II Reaction Center N. Inagaki, S. Fujita, K. Satoh	763
Nuclear-Coded Subunits of PSI in <i>Nicotiana</i> J. Obokata, K. Mikami, N. Hayashida, M. Sugiura	767
Light-Induced Accumulation of PS II Proteins and Expression of Oxygen Evolution Activity in <i>Euglena</i> A. Mizobuchi, H. Hiramatsu, Y. Yamamoto	771

The Development of the Photosynthetic Apparatus in <i>Phaseolus Vulgaris</i> L. and <i>Nicotiana Tabacum</i> L.. Methodological Aspects of the Electron Transport R. Valcke, K. van Loven, S. Beinsberger, H. van Onckelen, H. Clijsters	775
Transporting Proteins into the Thylakoid Lumen K. Ko, A.R. Cashmore	779
Experiments to Incorporate in-vitro Synthesized Photosystem I Components into Thylakoids of the Barley Mutant <i>viridis</i> - <i>zb63</i> P. Brandt, G. Høyer-Hansen, D. von Wettstein	783
Absorbance Changes at 520 NM Induced by 700 NM Light in Shortly Preilluminated Etiolated Bean Leaves M. Bertrand, F. Franck, E. Dujardin	787
Protein Synthesis in Chloroplasts E. Breidenbach, R. Blättler, A. Boschetti	791
Variation in Net Photosynthesis, Rubisco Activity and Chloroplast Ultrastructure Among Somatic Hybrids of <i>Solanum tuberosum</i> and <i>S. brevidens</i> E. Pehu, A. Nummi, M.A.J. Parry	795
Amphipathic β -Sheet Domains in Chloroplast Transit Peptides W.A. Cramer, J.W. Shiver, P.N. Furbacher, K. Keegstra	799
Control of Thylakoid Growth Termination J.H. Argyroudi-Akoyunoglou, G. Tzinas	803
δ -Aminolevulinate (ALA) Synthesis in <i>Synechococcus</i> 6301: Requirement for tRNA ^{Glu} and Pyridoxamine Phosphate A.D. Bull, V. Breu, A.J. Smith, C.G. Kannangara	807
Synthesis and Assembly of a Chloroplast ATP Synthase Subunit in vitro A. Michaels, D. Weinberg, S. Leu	811
Specificity of <i>in vitro</i> Import in Spinach Leaf Mitochondria and Chloroplasts J. Whelan, C. Knorpp, M.A. Harmey, E. Glaser	815
NADPH: Protochlorophyllide Oxidoreductase in Barley (<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>) Seedlings G.E. Savchenko, L.M. Abramchik, E.A. Klyuchareva, M.T. Chaika	819
Protein Import Into Chloroplasts of <i>Chlamydomonas reinhardtii</i> C. Gabai, S. Leu, D. Ish-Shalom, I. Ohad, A. Michaels	823
 14. Chloroplast Differentiation	
Biosynthesis of Chloroplast Carotenoids G. Britton	827
Spectral Properties and Molecular Structure of Protochlorophyll, Protochlorophyllide and Chlorophyllide-A Forms in Models and in Isolated Etioplast Membrane Fragments B. Böddi	835
The Phase Structure of Galactolipids and Their Role in the Formation of the Prolamellar Body E. Selstam, I. Brentel, G. Lindblom	843
Separation of Stromal, Thylakoid, Inner and Outer Envelope Membrane Proteins of Spinach Chloroplasts into Hydrophilic and Hydrophobic Fractions N. Dumont, P.-A. Siegenthaler	849

XVIII

Aerobic and Anaerobic Photosynthesis and Bacteriochlorophyll Formation in <i>Rhodobacter sulfidophilus</i> Y. Shioi, M. Doi	853
Plastidic Isoprenoid Synthesis Changes from an Autonomous to a Division-of-Labor Stage During Chloroplast Maturation A. Heintze, P. Hoppe, P. Hagelstein, J. Görlach, G. Schultz	857
Low Temperature Effect on PCR and Chlorophyll Accumulation in Rye Seedlings M. Krol, N.P.A. Huner	861
Regulation of Plastid Gene Expression During Fruit Ripening in Tomato. Gene and Transcription Map of the Plastid Chromosome M.R. Marano, N. Carrillo	865
Structure and Regulation of a Rapidly Light Induced Nuclear Encoded Thylakoid Protein U. Kühne, U. Cronshagen, F. Herzfeld	869
Light and Substrate Control of Radish 5-Aminolevulinate Dehydratase C. Huault, S.J. Tchuinmogne, J.D. Blondel, A.P. Balangé	873
Development of Photosynthetic Apparatus in Callus Cultures Derived from a C ₄ Plant Maize S. Roy, A. Kumar	877
Diversity of the Pathways from Protochlorophyllides to Chlorophylls A and B K. Kotzabasis, H. Senger	881
Protochlorophyllide Reduction and Pyridine Nucleotide Redox State During Greening of Protoplasts and Etioplasts from <i>Avena sativa</i> L. G. Peine, K. Bahnsen, G. Walter, P. Hoffmann	885
Index of Names	889

PHOTOCHEMICAL RING-OPENING IN 20-CHLORO-CHLOROPHYLLS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chlorophyll (Chl) derivatives are readily and regiospecifically chlorinated at C-20, the free methine-bridge next to the reduced ring D (1-3). The interest in chlorinated chlorophylls has recently been renewed after their isolation from extracts of various green plants, algae and cyanobacteria (4-9) and a suggested relation to photosystem I of oxygenic photosynthesis (4, 5). This relation, and hence the involvement in photosynthesis, has been met with criticism and now been disproved (8, 10-12).

The status of 20-chloro-chlorophylls as natural pigments is still under debate (8, 12). During a systematic investigation of the chemistry of chlorinated chlorophylls, we have now observed a photochemical degradation of these pigments leading eventually to open chain tetrapyrroles, e.g. bile pigments. This raises the possibility that chlorinated chlorophylls may be components of plant tetrapyrrole degradative pathways, on which very little is known to date (13, 14).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Pigments: 20-chloro-pheophorbides of the a-series have been synthesized by the method of (2) from the respective pheophorbides (6). Insertion of magnesium was done according to (15).

Photochemistry: A solution of the pigments in acetone (5-10 μ M) was irradiated with white light (150 W cold light source, 2 cm distance, ambient temperature). The reaction was followed spectrophotometrically. After conversion to the intermediate ($\lambda_{\max} \approx 686$ nm), the solution was kept in the dark for 24 hrs and then worked up. Products were isolated by chromatography on silica gel.

¹*H-nmr spectra of the photoproduct:* A solution of 20-Cl-chlorophyll a (I) was irradiated in the nmr tube in acetone-d₆. Spectra were recorded at increasing irradiation times up to a total of 20 min.

3. RESULTS

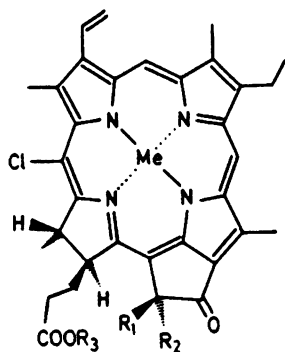
Irradiation of 20-chloro chlorophyll a in acetone results in the progressive formation of a red-shifted pigment. In the difference spectrum, pronounced extrema are observed at 432 and 667 nm (-) and 686 nm (+), with a small net increase in oscillator strength in the red spectral region, and a decrease in the Soret region. If the solution is kept in the dark afterwards, the red-shifted absorption of the photoproduct disappears, with a concomitant broad absorption increase in the 500-600 nm region. The oscillator strength of the red band (Q_y) is decreased during this reaction. The spectroscopic changes upon treatment of other 20-chloro-chlorophylls were similar. By contrast, demetalated chlorinated pheophorbides, showed only a slow, irreversible bleaching.

Chromatography of the final product mixture yielded a blue pigment showing under neutral conditions a weak, broad absorption in the red spectral region, and more intense band around 320 nm, and no fluorescence. With acid, the red absorption band is reversibly increased, and shifted from 590 to 696 nm, this form is very weakly fluorescent. The pigment is unstable towards prolonged exposure to alkaline conditions.

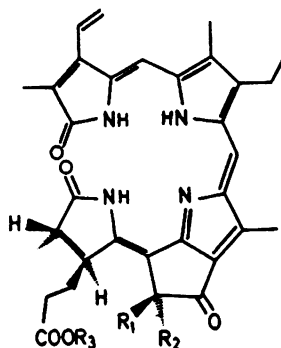
The formation of the intermediate photoproduct was followed by *in situ* proton nmr spectroscopy. The most informative changes occurred in the low-field region, where all signals of the photoproduct are shifted to higher fields.

4. DISCUSSION

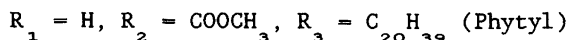
Structure of products: From its absorption properties, the photoproduct still appears to be a cyclic-conjugated tetrapyrrole. The nmr spectrum indicates a reduced ring-current. Since only two methine signals appear in both the educt and the photoproduct, the C-20 position lacks a hydrogen substituent in the product, too. The spectra are compatible with a 20-oxonia-chlorophyll (17).



I



II



The final product of the subsequent dark reaction is a bile pigment. The reversible changes upon protonation show the absence of a Mg-ligand, and the wavelength maxima are indicative of a dihydrobilindione (18). The spectral data are compatible with the bilin (II) obtained previously (19) in a non-photochemical reaction from chlorophyll. The ring-opening of oxa-porphyrins to bilins is well documented (20).

The only other photochemical reaction converting a chlorin to an open-chain tetrapyrrole, is the photooxygenation of the bacteriomethylpheophorbides *c* and *e*, which are methylated at C-20 (21,22). The common structural feature of the latter and the 20-chloro-chlorophylls is the presence of a bulky substituent at the C-20 methine bridge, which may be responsible for the facilitated cleavage at this bridge. A noticeable difference is that in the 20-chlorinated pigments, the Mg-complexes are the reactive species, and the metal-free pheophorbides are unreactive; the situation is just opposite in the 20-methylated-pigments.

Significance to chlorophyll breakdown: Several pigments of the cyclic tetrapyrrole-type have been identified in ageing or darkened photosynthetic organisms, including chlorophyllides lacking the esterifying C-17⁴ alcohol, pheophorbides lacking the central Mg, pyro-compounds lacking the 13⁷ carbomethoxy-group, and pigments showing a combination of the above modifications (see 13, 14). It is unclear at present if any of them are intermediates of natural chlorophyll breakdown, e.g. in leaves before shedding in the fall. There is no chemical evidence which qualifies these pigments as intermediates preparing the macrocycle for degradation, because they are chemically or photochemically at least as stable as the parent chlorophylls, and are highly fluorescent and hence potential sensitizers for photodynamic damage.

Chlorinated chlorophylls would principally offer certain advantages. Their fluorescence yield is lower and we have now demonstrated their easy photodegradation. Chlorination is thus a chemically reasonable, preparatory step for further degradation, and chlorinating enzymes are well known from several sources (23). We, therefore, suggest to keep looking for such pigments *in situ* in spite of their negative correlation with PSI. Since chlorine-containing compounds are abundant in marine plants (24), chlorination may also be involved in the generation of bile pigments involved in bioluminescence (25).

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