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The structure of an energy-coupling protein from bacteria, IIB cellobiose, reveals similarity to eukaryotic protein tyrosine phosphatases
Rob LM van Montfort¹, Tjaard Pijning¹, Kor H Kalk¹, Jonathan Reizer², Milton H S aier Jr ², Marjolein MG M Thunnissen³, George T Robillard¹ and Bauke W Dijkstra¹ *

Background: The bacterial phosphoenolpyruvate-dependent phosphotransferase system (PTS) mediates the energy-driven uptake of carbohydrates and their concomitant phosphorylation. In addition, the PTS is intimately involved in the regulation of a variety of metabolic and transcriptional processes in the bacterium. The multiprotein PTS consists of a membrane channel and at least four cytoplasmic proteins or protein domains that sequentially transfer a phosphoryl group from phosphoenolpyruvate to the transported carbohydrate. Determination of the three-dimensional structure of the IIB enzymes within the multiprotein complex would provide insights into the mechanisms by which they promote efficient transport by the membrane channel IIC protein and phosphorylate the transported carbohydrate on the inside of the cell.

Results: The crystal structure of the IIB enzyme specific for cellobiose, IIB cellobiose (molecular weight 11.4 kDa), has been determined to a resolution of 1.8 Å and refined to an R factor of 18.7% (Rfree of 24.1%). The enzyme consists of a single four-stranded parallel β sheet flanked by helices on both sides. The phosphorylation site (Cys10) is located at the C-terminal end of the first β strand. No positively charged residues, which could assist in phosphoryl-transfer, can be found in or near the active site. The fold of IIB cellobiose is remarkably similar to that of the mammalian low molecular weight protein tyrosine phosphatases.

Conclusions: A comparison between IIB cellobiose and the structurally similar low molecular weight protein tyrosine phosphatases provides insight into the mechanism of the phosphoryltransfer reactions in which IIB cellobiose is involved. The differences in tertiary structure and active-site composition between IIB cellobiose and the glucose-specific IIB glucose give a structural explanation why the carbohydrate-specific components of different families cannot complement each other.

Introduction
The phosphoenolpyruvate-dependent phosphotransferase system (PTS) is a major system for the uptake and concomitant phosphorylation of carbohydrates in Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria [1,2]. In contrast to other transport systems, the PTS uses phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP) rather than ATP as an energy source to drive translocation, and it chemically modifies its substrate by phosphorylation. Apart from carbohydrate transport, the PTS has crucial roles in the global regulation of cellular metabolism [3] and in chemotaxis towards its substrates [4].

The PTS is composed of the general proteins enzyme I (EI) and histidine containing phosphocarrier protein (HPr), and the carbohydrate-specific enzyme II complex (EII). EII usually consists of three functional domains, two cytoplasmic domains — IIA and IIB — and a transmembrane channel, IIC (Fig. 1). In an individual EII complex, these domains may be covalently linked in various ways, or they may exist as distinct proteins. For example in the mannitol-specific EII from Escherichia coli, the three functional domains are present on a single polypeptide chain [5], whereas in the cellobiose-specific EII, the three domains are present as three separate proteins [6,7].

Transfer of the phosphoryl group from PEP to the carbohydrate proceeds via a series of phosphoprotein intermediates (Fig. 1). In the first steps, the phosphoryl group is transferred from PEP to the IIA domain of the EII complex, via EI and HPr. IIA phosphorylates IIB, which in turn activates IIC-dependent carbohydrate transport across the cytoplasmic membrane with concurrent phosphorylation of
the carbohydrate [8]. The phosphorylated carbohydrate is released in the cytoplasm where it can be used as a first intermediate in bacterial metabolism.

To understand the mechanisms of carbohydrate transport and the regulatory processes in which the PTS is involved requires knowledge of the three-dimensional structures of its components. In recent years, detailed structural studies have been carried out on some PTS components, but for others only scarce or no structural information is available. For example, many attempts have been made to crystallize EI, but the N-terminal domain of the E. coli EI structure was only recently determined by X-ray crystallography [9]. In contrast, the phosphocarrier protein HPr has been studied in much greater detail, both by X-ray diffraction and by NMR. This has resulted in the determination of a number of structures of HPr proteins from different bacterial sources, and has provided an understanding of the molecular basis for the activities of HPr and its interactions with other proteins (for review, see [10]).

The structural characterization of EII complexes has proven difficult as a result of their complexity and the pronounced differences between them. On the basis of sequence comparisons, EII complexes have been divided into four families: the glucose–sucrose family, the mannose family, the mannitol–fructose family and the lactose–cellobiose family [1,2]. Sequence identities within one family are usually greater than 25% and a component of an EII complex can often be complemented by a homologous component from the same family without severe loss of activity. Between components of different families, however, the sequence similarities are mostly limited to the phosphorylation sites, and complementation by components from different families usually abolishes carbohydrate uptake and phosphorylation. This suggests that major structural and/or functional differences exist between members of the different EII families.

Structure determinations of the IIC domains have been hampered by the difficulties generally encountered in the structural analysis of membrane proteins. Most structural information is available for the cytoplasmic IIA domains. From the glucose–sucrose family X-ray and NMR structures are available of the glucose-specific IIA<sub>glc</sub> from E. coli [11,12] and from Bacillus subtilis [13,14]. Also, the X-ray structure of E. coli IIA<sub>glc</sub> complexed with glycerol kinase has been elucidated [15]. Recently the X-ray structure of the mannose-specific IIA domain was reported [16], and an NMR study has revealed the secondary structure of the mannitol-specific IIA domain (IIA<sub>mlt</sub>) from E. coli [17]. Progress has also been made for IIA domains in the fourth class, of which the lactose-specific IIA (<IIA<sub>lac</sub>) has been crystallized [18]. Indeed, the structural information now available for three of the four EII families shows that the structures of the IIA domains differ between families.

Structural detail on the IIB enzymes is rather limited, despite their essential role in the activation of carbohydrate transport by the IIC domains and subsequent phosphorylation of the transported carbohydrate. The only known three-dimensional structure of a IIB enzyme is the very recently solved NMR structure of the IIB<sub>glc</sub> [19]. It is composed of a single α/β domain with a topology that has so far been observed only for the small domain of the arginine repressor ArgR [20].

In this article, we describe the first X-ray structure of a IIB enzyme from the lactose–cellobiose family, the cellobiose-specific enzyme IIB (IIB<sub>cel</sub>). IIB<sub>cel</sub> is a protein of 106 amino acids (molecular weight 11.4 kDa). Like most other IIB enzymes, IIB<sub>cel</sub> is phosphorylated on a cysteine residue, but it is not covalently linked to the membrane-bound IIC channel. As is the case for the IIA domains of different families, the amino acid sequences of IIB<sub>glc</sub> and IIB<sub>cel</sub> are entirely different, as are their three-dimensional structures and the organization of their active-site residues.

Results and discussion

Protein structure

The IIB<sub>cel</sub> molecule comprises a single domain with approximate dimensions of 20×27×38 Å. Its structure is composed of a central four-stranded parallel open twisted β sheet, which is flanked by three α helices on the concave side and two on the convex side of the β sheet (Fig. 2). The β sheet is composed mainly of hydrophobic residues and its strand order is 2, 1, 3, 4. The structure contains two right-handed βαβ motifs. The first is formed by β1, α1 and β2, and the second of β3, α3 and β4. The phosphorylation site Cys10 [6] is located at the C-terminal end of the first β strand. Two strictly conserved residues that are probably important during catalysis are Tyr84, the sidechain of which points towards the phosphorylation site, and Gln59, which hovers...
above the active site with its sidechain in close proximity to the sulphur atom of the catalytic cysteine (Fig. 3). A large part of the active site is formed by the residues of the loop connecting the first β strand to the first α helix. The α helix points with its N-terminal end towards the active site. This suggests that the phosphocysteine intermediate can be stabilized by the macrodipole of the helix, as has been observed in many proteins that bind phosphate or sulphate moieties [21]. Although no significant sequence homology is apparent, the structure of IIBcel appears remarkably similar to tyrosine phosphatases.

**Figure 2**

The structure of IIBcel. (a) Stereoview of the Cα trace of IIBcel, with N and C termini and every tenth residue labeled. (b) Ribbon stereoview of the structure of IIBcel generated using the program MOLSCRIPT [46]. Strands are shown in blue, helices in turquoise and loops in light yellow. The catalytic Cys10 is shown in a ball-and-stick representation with the sulphur atom shown in yellow. The N and C termini are indicated.

**Figure 3**

Stereoview of the active site of IIBcel showing the putative P loop in red (color representation is the same as in Fig. 2). Cys10 is shown in ball-and-stick representation. Also shown are the conserved residues Pro58, Gln59 and Tyr84, with carbon atoms shown in light yellow, oxygen in red, nitrogen in blue and sulphur in yellow.
similar to the folds of the chemotaxis protein CheY [22], the recently solved IIA domain of the mannose-specific EII [16] and the low molecular weight protein tyrosine phosphatases (LMW PTPases) [23].

**Comparison with glucose-specific enzyme IIB, IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\)**

Structural information is now available on two different IIB enzymes, IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) and IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) (Fig. 4). IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) belongs to the glucose–sucrose family, whereas IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) is a member of the lactose–cellobiose family. IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) is a protein domain of 74 well defined residues [19], which is connected to the membrane-embedded IIC via a flexible linker region [24]. IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) is somewhat bigger (106 amino acids) and is a separate protein. IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) is composed of an antiparallel four-stranded \(\beta\) sheet packed with three \(\alpha\) helices on one side of the sheet. IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) contains a parallel four-stranded \(\beta\) sheet flanked with helices on both sides. The catalytic cysteine (Cys35) in IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) is located at the C-terminal end of the first \(\beta\) strand and is highly exposed to the solvent. Two arginine residues (Arg38 and Arg40) have been suggested to be involved in the stabilization of the thiolate form of the cysteine and in the stabilization of the negatively charged phosphocysteine intermediate. Moreover, they are both essential in the phosphoryltransfer from IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\) to the carbohydrate [19]. In contrast, the phosphorylation site of IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) (Cys10) is more buried and no positive charges are found in or near the active site. This suggests that activation and stabilization of the catalytic cysteine is different in IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) than in IIB\(^{\text{glc}}\), and supports the observation that the E\(\text{II}\) components of different families cannot complement each other.

**Comparison with bovine liver LMW PTPase**

A superimposition of IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) on the structure of bovine liver LMW PTPase [23] shows that, in particular, the central \(\beta\) sheets and the first \(\alpha\) helices superimpose very closely (Fig. 5). Both enzymes have reaction mechanisms that feature a phosphocysteine intermediate [25], and their catalytic cysteines are located in equivalent positions.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the catalytic properties of IIB\(^{\text{cel}}\) and the PTPase. The PTPase catalytic cysteine residue is part of the PTPase signature sequence Cys-X-X-X-X-X-Arg [25], which connects the first \(\beta\) strand to the first \(\alpha\) helix. This sequence forms the rigid phosphate-binding loop (P loop; Fig. 6a) that is stabilized by extensive interactions with surrounding residues. The cradle-like conformation of the loop is structurally conserved among the PTPase family [26]. The mainchain amide groups point towards the centre of the loop, which together with the conserved arginine of the signature sequence and the N-terminal end of the connected \(\alpha\) helix provide an excellent environment for binding the phosphate group of the substrate. Moreover, the positively charged P loop probably promotes stabilization of the negatively charged thiolate.
IIBcel contains an active-site loop similar to that of the PTPases, but it lacks the arginine of the signature sequence. In contrast to the PTPase loop, the IIBcel loop is completely exposed to the solvent and does not have the characteristic cradle conformation (Fig. 6b). Stabilization of the catalytic thiolate can only be provided by the backbone amide groups of Ser11 and Ala12 and the sidechain amide group of Gln59, but not by the macrodipole of the following helix as in the PTPases. In the crystal structure, the IIBcel loop is well ordered (Fig. 6c), and crystal contacts prevent the loop forming a conformation that allows positioning of the phosphocysteinyl intermediate in line with the axis of the α helix. One can argue, however, that the loop of the non-phosphorylated form of the protein in solution is able to adopt different conformations and that, upon binding to phosphocysteinyl-IIAcel, it becomes fixed in a cradle-like loop conformation that allows energetically favourable positioning of the phosphoryl group near the N terminus of the α helix. Indeed, the recently solved NMR structure of IIBcel (C10S mutant) shows an appreciable conformational flexibility in the loop, suggesting that it is disordered in solution [27].

Phosphotransfer reactions
In phosphorylase hydrolysis as well as in the PTS phosphotransfer reactions, the transfer of the phosphoryl group proceeds via an associative mechanism with a pentavalent phosphorous intermediate [28,29]. Usually, positively charged residues, often arginines, are important for the stabilization of this negatively charged reaction intermediate. For example, in the PTS, Arg17 of HPr is thought to stabilize the reaction intermediates in the phosphoryltransfer from E1 to HPr [9], and from HPr to IIAglc [30]. Also, the phosphoryltransfer from IIBglc to glucose seems to involve arginine residues (Arg38 and Arg40) of the IIB domain [19]. Moreover, stabilization of the intermediate in the PTPases is provided by the arginine in the signature sequence [31]. IIBcel lacks not only this residue but also any other positively charged residue that could fulfill this role in or near the active site. This suggests that in the phosphotransfer reactions between IIAcel and IIBcel, and between IIBcel and the translocated cellubiose, stabilization of the respective transition states is carried out by residues located on IIAcel and the membrane-bound IICcel, respectively. In this respect, it is interesting that it has been suggested that at least one histidine residue of IIAglc is required for transfer of the phosphoryl group from IIAglc to IIBglc [13].

In the first step of the reaction catalysed by the LMW PTPases, a strictly conserved aspartic acid protonates the leaving tyrosine. This aspartic acid residue, in its charged form, activates a water molecule required for the hydrolysis
of the phosphocysteinyl intermediate in the subsequent step [23,32]. Because phosphotransfer from IIB cel to cellobiose occurs only after translocation of the carbohydrate, the absence of an aspartic acid or equivalent residue in IIB cel may be a clever way to prevent premature hydrolysis of the phosphocysteinyl intermediate by an activated water molecule. Activation of the cellobiose C6-hydroxyl group is more likely to be mediated by the IIC domain, most probably by residues located in the loop between the putative transmembrane helices 4 and 5, which are known to be somehow involved in substrate binding and phosphorylation [33,34].

Similarity to periplasmic sugar-binding proteins

A structural alignment search using the program DALI [35] revealed not only the homology with CheY and the LMW PTPases but also a strong structural homology with the periplasmic sugar-binding proteins. These proteins consist of two similar domains separated by a deep substrate-binding cleft [36]. Superimposition of IIB cel on the N-terminal domain of the arabinose-binding protein (ABP) shows that the conserved Tyr84 in IIB cel is located just beneath the monosaccharide substrate complexed in ABP (Fig. 7). Since tyrosine residues are known to be involved in carbohydrate binding [37], and Tyr84 is within reach of the phosphoryl-binding site in IIB cel, it is enticing to assume that this residue is part of the recognition site for the IIC cel-cellobiose complex. Unfortunately, soaking studies with the product analogue glucose-6-phosphate destroyed the crystals. Experiments to try to overcome this problem are in progress.

Biological implications

The phosphoenolpyruvate-dependent phosphotransferase system (PTS) is a major system for the uptake of carbohydrates in bacteria; it is also intimately involved in metabolic and transcriptional regulation and in chemotaxis towards PTS substrates. The different functions of the PTS require a flexible system that is responsive to various signals, and this requirement is reflected in the complexity of the multiprotein PTS. To obtain a complete understanding of the mechanism of carbohydrate transport as well as the regulatory properties of the PTS, knowledge of the three-dimensional structures of its components is essential.

Key enzymes in the PTS are the IIB enzymes, which in their phosphorylated state activate the translocation of the carbohydrate by the membrane channel IIC protein. Moreover, the IIB enzymes phosphorylate the sugar moiety once it has crossed the cytoplasmic membrane. The crystal structure of IIB cellobiose, the IIB enzyme of the cellobiose-specific PTS, is composed of a central four-stranded parallel β sheet flanked by α helices on both sides. The structure of IIB cel has a striking resemblance to the fold of the low molecular weight protein tyrosine phosphatases (LMW PTPases), mammalian proteins that are involved in signal transduction pathways. Like IIB cel, these proteins feature a phosphocysteine intermediate in their reaction mechanism. A further class of proteins that shows a remarkable structural similarity to IIB cel is the class of the periplasmic sugar-binding proteins (PBPs). The structural similarity of IIB cel to LMW PTPases and
PBPs is intriguing given that IIB\textsubscript{cel} couples the phosphorylation cascade and sugar transport.

IIB\textsubscript{Cel} is the first member of the lactose–cellobiose PTS family for which the three-dimensional structure has been determined. It may serve as a model for other IIB enzymes of this family and their interactions with other PTS components. In contrast to most of the other IIB enzymes, IIB\textsubscript{Cel} is not covalently linked to the membrane-bound IIC\textsubscript{Cel}, so IIB\textsubscript{Cel} may prove to have additional, separate regulatory functions. Additionally, the absence of positively charged residues in or near to the PTS components suggests that EII enzymes of different families may differ in their detailed mode of action.

Materials and methods

Crystallization and data collection

The IIB\textsubscript{Cel} C10S-mutant was crystallized as described previously [38]. The crystals belong to the space group P2\textsubscript{1}, with cell dimensions a = 53.6 Å, b = 31.7 Å, c = 60.0 Å and \( \beta = 101.7^\circ \). The asymmetric unit contains two IIB\textsubscript{Cel} molecules. A native dataset to 2.6 Å (native 1) and all derivative data (see Table 1) were collected on a FAST area detector (Enraf Nonius, Delft, The Netherlands) connected to an Elliot GX 21 rotating anode generator, and reduced with the programs MADNES [39], XDS [40] and the software of the BIO/MOL package (protein crystallography group, University of Groningen). A 1.8 Å resolution dataset (native 2) was collected on the MAR Research image plate system at the X-31 beamline of the EMBL Outstation at DESY, Hamburg. This dataset was processed using XDS and the programs of the CCP4 suite [41] and was subsequently scaled to and merged with native 1 with the BIOMOL software (native 3).

Selenomethionine incorporation in IIB\textsubscript{Cel}

The methionine auxotrophic E. coli strain LE392 (PROMEGA, Madison, USA) was used for production and overexpression of [SeMet]IIB\textsubscript{Cel}. Isolation and purification of [SeMet]IIB\textsubscript{Cel} was carried out using a procedure similar to that for IIB\textsubscript{Cel}. Crystals could be grown using a strategy similar to that for the C10S mutant, although the optimal precipitant concentrations were considerably lower.

Multiple isomorphous replacement (MIR) analysis

The other heavy atom compounds were prepared by soaking the crystals in solutions of a standard mother liquor, containing 30% (v/v) PEG4000, 5% (v/v) 2-propanol, 25 mM NaCl, 50 mM BES/NaOH buffer (pH 6.5), 0.25% (v/v) glycerol, 0.5 mM NaN\textsubscript{3}, and saturated chloro-2,2′,6,2′′-terpyridine platinum(II)chloride (Pt), or 2,6 dichloro-mercury-4-nitrophenol (Hg1), or mercury-phenoxy-glyoxal (Hg2), or Hg2 and Hg1, or 3 mM K3UO2F5 (U). Heavy-atom parameters were refined with MLPHARE [41]. The final figure of merit was 0.82 for data to 3.5 Å. The MIR maps were further improved by solvent flattening and histogram matching, using DM [42], followed by 11 cycles of twofold NCS averaging at 3.5 Å with the programs of the DEMON suite [43]. The initial model was fitted to the density using O [44].

Table 1

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<th>Native 2</th>
<th>Native 3</th>
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<th>Pt/Hg2</th>
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<td>24.3</td>
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\*Heavy-atom derivatives: Pt: chloro-2,2′:6′,2′′-terpyridine platinum(II)chloride, Hg1: 2,6 dichloro-mercury-4-nitrophenol, Hg2: mercury-phenoxy-glyoxal, U: K3UO2F5, Se: [SeMet]IIB\textsubscript{Cel}.

Refinement and quality of the model

The model was subjected to simulated annealing refinement with X-PLOR [45]. This was followed by several rounds of positional refinement alternated with individual B factor refinement and manual rebuilding steps. The current model contains the two molecules in the asymmetric unit and 128 water molecules. Each monomer consists of residues 3 to 105. The model has been refined at 1.8 Å to an R factor of 18.7\%, \( R_{free} = 24.1\% \), with 94.3\% of the residues in the most favoured regions and 5.7\% in the additional allowed regions of a Ramachandran plot (Fig. 8). The root mean square (rms) deviations from ideality in bond lengths, angles and B factors are 0.009 Å, 1.68 Å and 1.79 Å\textsuperscript{2}, respectively. Recently, data have been collected for native IIB\textsubscript{Cel}, which revealed no difference other than the O\textsubscript{γ}/S\textsubscript{γ} substitution in the sidechain of residue 10.

Accession numbers

The coordinates of IIB\textsubscript{Cel} have been deposited in the Brookhaven Protein Data Bank with the entry code 1IIB.
Figure 8

Ramachandran plot of the refined model of IIBcel. Glycines are represented as triangles and squares represent all other residues. Disallowed, generously allowed, favorable and most favorable regions are indicated by progressively darker grey shading. The plot was calculated with the program PROCHECK [47].

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