Selective of the Yersiniabactin Synthetase Adenylation Domain in the Two-Step Process of Amino Acid Activation and Transfer to a Holo-Carrier Protein Domain†

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ABSTRACT: The adenylation (A) domain of the Yersinia pestis nonribosomal peptide synthetase that biosynthesizes the siderophore yersiniabactin (Ybt) activates three molecules of L-cysteine and covalently aminoacylates the phosphopantetheinyl (P-pant) thiol on three peptidyl carrier protein (PCP) domains embedded in the two synthetase subunits, two in cis (PCP1, PCP2) in subunit HMWP2 and one in trans (PCP3) in subunit HMWP1. This two-step process of activation and loading by the A domain is analogous to the operation of the aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases in ribosomal peptide synthesis. Adenylation domain specificity for the first step of reversible aminoacyl adenylate formation was assessed with the amino acid-dependent [32P]-PPi-ATP exchange assay to show that S-2-amino-3-butyrate and Δ-chloro-L-alanine were alternate substrates. The second step of A domain catalysis, capture of the bound aminoacyl adenylate by the P-pant-SH of the PCP domains, was assayed both by catalytic release of PPi, by covalent aminoacylation of radiolabeled substrates on either the PCP1 fragment of HMWP2 or the PCP3-thioesterase double domain fragment of HMWP1. There was little selectivity for capture of each of the three adenylates by PCP3 in the second step, arguing against any hydrolytic proofreading of incorrect substrates by the A domain. The holo-PCP3 domain accelerated PPi release and catalytic turnover by 100-200-fold over the leak rate (<1 min⁻¹) of aminoacyl adenylates into solution while PCP1 in trans had only about a 5-fold effect. Free pantetheine could capture cysteinyl adenylate with a 25-50-fold increase in kcat while CoA was 10-fold less effective. The Km of free pantetheine (30-50 μM) was 3 orders of magnitude larger than that of PCP3-TE (10-25 μM), indicating a net 10⁴ greater catalytic efficiency for transfer to the P-pant arm of PCP3 by the Ybt synthetase A domain, relative to P-pant alone.

Nonribosomal peptide synthetases (NRPSs)† (1-3) are large, multifunctional, multidomain proteins or protein complexes that biosynthesize many medicinally important compounds [bacitracin (4), penicillin (5), vancomycin (6)] as well as a number of iron-chelating bacterial virulence factors, among them enterobactin from E. coli (7), mycobactin from M. tuberculosis (8), pyochelin from P. aeruginosa (9), and yersiniabactin from Y. pestis (Figure 1A) (10). We have been studying this last compound, a siderophore from the plague-causing bacterium, and its nonribosomal synthesis by three proteins, YbtE, HMWP2, and HMWP1 (Figure 1B).

From study of both the yersiniabactin structure and the domain organization of the three proteins, we have predicted that yersiniabactin is assembled from salicylic acid, three cysteines (cyclized to form two thiazolines and a thiazolidine), and malonic acid. Methylation and an imine reduction complete the necessary chemical steps (10). Thus far, we have managed to express large, functional fragments of HMWP2 and have demonstrated that these fragments can synthesize both the first thiazoline ring (11) as well as the second and third as the bis-heterocycle (12).

NRPSs follow the thiotemplated model for peptide synthesis (13). In this model, carrier protein domains are first posttranslationally modified by attachment of a coenzyme A-derived phosphopantetheine to a specific serine side chain in the carrier protein domain by a dedicated phosphopantetheinyl transferase (PPTase) (14). The resulting free thiol is then aminoacylated with the correct amino acid monomer by an adenylation (A) domain. Biosynthesis then proceeds along the synthetase in the N-to-C direction, with interspersed condensation (C) or cyclization (Cy) domains responsible for linking downstream monomers to the growing, upstream chain, each tethered through a thioester bond to the carrier protein domains (15).

Of principal importance to the understanding of NRPSs is the nature of their selectivity and specificity that results in efficient (~100 min⁻¹ for enterobactin (7)) production of the specific product of correct sequence. Not only is it an understanding of NRPS specificity important in studying the natural systems, but with growing interest in constructing novel NRPSs for “combinatorial biosynthesis” (16), such an

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Abbreviations: NRPS, nonribosomal peptide synthetase; HMWP, high molecular weight protein; CoA, coenzyme A; A, adenylation domain; PPTase, phosphopantetheinyl transferase; P-pant, 4′-phospho pantetheine; ACV, 6-(L-α-aminoacylpentyl)-L-cysteinyl-β-valine; AARS, aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase; PPi, inorganic pyrophosphate; PCP, peptidyl carrier protein domain; TE, thioesterase domain; PNP, calf spleen purine nucleoside phosphorylase; PPi-ase, bakers’ yeast inorganic pyrophosphatase; MESG, 2-amino-6-mercapto-7-methylpurine ribonucleoside; DTI, dithiothreitol; TCEP, tris(carboxyethyl)phosphine.
understanding is essential for creating unnatural systems. The
adenylation domains must select the appropriate amino acid
monomer from the cellular pool, activate it with ATP, and
transfer the enzyme-bound, activated species to the phos-
phopantetheine (P-pant) tether. (C) Ybt synthetase fragments used in this
study, and the process of posttranslationally introduced the P-pant
prosthetic arm by a phosphopantetheinyl transferase (PPTase) and
coenzyme A. The asterisk indicates Ser1977Ala mutation that
prevents P-pant attachment to the PCP2 domain.

Figure 1: (A) Structure of yersiniabactin (Ybt). (B) Domain
organization of the three proteins of adenylbactin synthetase:
YbtE, HMWP2, and HMWP1. (A = adenylbactin, ArCP = aryl
carrier protein, Cy = cyclization, PCP = peptidyl carrier protein,
KS = β-ketoacyl synthase, AT = acyltransferase, MT = methyl-
transferase, KR = ketoreductase, ACP = acyl carrier protein,
TE = thioesterase.) Numbers indicate amino acid residues. Each
carrier protein domain is depicted with the appropriate monomer
thioesterified to its posttranslationally introduced phosphopan-
teine (P-pant) tether. (Ybt synthetase fragments used in this
study, and the process of posttranslationally introduced the P-pant
prosthetic arm by a phosphopantetheinyl transferase (PPTase) and
coenzyme A. The asterisk indicates Ser1977Ala mutation that
prevents P-pant attachment to the PCP2 domain.

The specificity of aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases toward
amino acids and tRNAs has been well studied, while the
emptied, and the cycle can begin again.

Figure 2: Comparison of the analogous two-step processes of
amino acid activation and transfer by NRPS adenylation domains
and aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (AARS). (A) The A domain first
activates a specific amino acid in an ATP-dependent manner as
the enzyme-bound aminoacyl adenylate. A holo-PCP domain is then
aminoacylated on its P-pant thiol. Although the PCP is depicted as
a separate protein fragment, the most common NRPS architecture
has the PCP fused immediately downstream of its paired A domain.
(B) The AARS also activates a specific amino acid as the aminoacyl
adenylate, but transfers the activated species to a hydroxyl group of
its cognate tRNA.

of activating domains have typically been assayed by amino
acid-dependent [32P]-pyrophosphate exchange into ATP, an
assay used extensively to probe selectivity of AARS (18).
Classically, this exchange assay has been utilized not only
to show selectivity in aminoacyl-AMP formation by AARS
but also as the first step in establishment of hydrolytic editing
and double sieving proposals to account for error-correcting
and fidelity-checking steps detected in some AARS (18). The
PPi-ATP exchange, however, measures only the first stage
of A domain action, up to and including reversible formation
of aminoacyl-AMP in the A domains’ active sites, but not
the second catalytic step involving transfer of the activated
amino acid onto a nucleophilic cosubstrate. In contrast
to the tRNA synthetases where the cosubstrate tRNA is a
diffusible substrate and the aa-tRNA a releasable, soluble
coproduct, the cognate step in NRPS domain catalytic action
is typically an intramolecular, stoichiometric self-acylation
of an adjacent PCP and thus is more difficult to evaluate for
specificity and rate of transfer. It has remained unclear
whether there is any selectivity or editing in the second step
of A domain function by nonribosomal peptide synthetases,
either for hydrolytic correction of aminoacyl adenylates or
for aminoacyl-S-PCP misacylations, in analogy to two
proofreading mechanisms of AARSs (19, 20).

In this study, we address subunits 1 and 2, known
perversely as HMWP2 and HMWP1 (HMWP = high
molecular weight protein), respectively, of yersiniabactin
(Ybt) synthetase. In an unusual NRPS organization in this
assembly line, there is only a single A domain, t-cysteine-
specific, that services three PCP domains, known as PCP1,
PCP2, and PCP3, that act as the thiol waystations for the
cysteine monomers that are precursors to the three
thiazoline/thiazolidine heterocycles in the siderophore. Two
of the PCP domains (PCP1 and PCP2 in subunit HMWP2)
are in cis while the third is in trans (PCP3 in subunit
HMWP1) to the A domain. We have directly assayed the
Ybt A domain, expressed conveniently in the 1–1491 residue
fragment of HMWP2 (J1), for specificity both in the amino
acid-activating first half-reaction and in the aminoacyl-AMP
transfer to several pantetheinyl thiol groups in the second
half-reaction. This second half-reaction is assayable both by
transfer of a radioactive amino acid into covalent acyl-S-
PCP attachment and also by a continuous PP, release assay. Since aminocyl-AMPs are tightly sequestered in A domain active sites in the absence of specific thiol nucleophilic cosubstrates, the acceleration of PP\textsubscript{r} release by holo-PCPs allows distinction between specific aminocyl-5-PCP formation and slow, adventitious capture of aa-AMP molecules that have “leaked” from A domains into solution.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Reagents.** S-2-Aminobutyric acid, β-chloro-l-alanine, pantetheine, coenzyme A, l-cysteine, and ATP were purchased from Sigma/Aldrich. [1-14C]-l-2-Aminobutyric acid (15.6 mM, 7.6 Ci/mol) was purchased from ICN. [35S]-l-Cysteine (10 μM, 1075 Ci/mmol) and sodium [32P\textsuperscript{-}]-pyrophosphate (534 μM, 19 Ci/mmol) were purchased from NEN. Pantetheine stocks were prepared by reducing pantetheine with 1.5 equiv of tris(carboxyethyl)phosphine (TECP). 2-Amino-6-mercaptop-7-methylpurine ribonucleoside (MESG) was synthesized from 2-amino-6-chloropurine ribonucleoside according to published procedures (21). The UV absorbance spectrum of synthesized MESG was identical to a published spectrum of synthesized 5-PCP (21). Phosphate-free, calf spleen purine nucleoside phosphorylase (PNP) and baker’s yeast inorganic pyrophosphatase (PP\textsubscript{r}-ase) were purchased lyophilized from Sigma and stored as 0.01 unit/μL stocks in 75 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 10 mM MgCl\textsubscript{2}. Sfp, a phosphopantetheinyl transferase from Bacillus subtilis, has been described previously (14). Competent *E. coli* strain BL21(DE3) and the pET22b expression vector were purchased from Novagen. Competent *E. coli* strain DH5α was purchased from GibcoBRL. Restriction endonucleases and T4 DNA ligases were obtained from New England Biolabs. Pfu DNA polymerase was purchased from Stratagene.

**Methods.** Standard recombinant DNA techniques were performed as described (22). Preparation of plasmid DNA, gel purification of DNA fragments, and purification of PCR products were performed using QIAprep plasmid miniprep kits, QIAquick gel extraction kits, and QIAquick DNA purification kits, respectively (Qiagen). PCRs were carried out with Pfu polymerase, according to its supplier’s instructions. Oligonucleotide primers were purchased from Integrated DNA Technologies, and DNA sequencing was performed on double-stranded DNA by the Molecular Biology Core Facilities of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Boston, MA).

**HMWP2 1–1491.** The cloning, overexpression, and purification of the 1–1491 amino acid fragment of HMWP2 have been described previously (11). This fragment includes the domains ArCP-Cy1-A-PCP1. HMWP2 1–1491 bears a hexahistidine affinity tag at its C-terminus.

**HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A).** The cloning, overexpression, and purification of the 1383–2035 fragment of HMWP2, with a Ser to Ala mutation at position 1977 have been described previously (12). This fragment includes the domains PCP1-Cy2-PCP2, with PCP2 inactivated by mutation of Ser1977, the point of phosphopantetheine attachment, to Ala. HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A) has a hexahistidine tag at its C-terminus.

**Cloning, Overexpression, and Purification of PCP3-TE.** The *Y. pestis* irp1 gene fragment corresponding to the 40.3 kDa C-terminal 356 amino acids of HMWP1 (residues 2808–3163) was amplified from pSDR498.4 (Robert D. Perry, unpublished plasmid) by PCR, employing the forward primer 5′-GAATTCCATATGCCCCGCTGATGCCC and the reverse primer 5′-CCACCGCTCGAGTAACGTTGTTCTCGGTGTTGTG. After restriction digestion, this PCR product was ligated to the Ndel/XhoI sites (underlined above) of pET22b to give pET22b-PCP3TE. This plasmid directs production of PCP3-TE as a histidine tag fusion with amino acid sequence LEHHHHHHH appended to the C-terminus. The fidelity of the pET22b-PCP3TE insert was confirmed by DNA sequencing.

For overexpression and purification of apo-PCP3-TE, cultures of *E. coli* strain BL21(DE3) transformed with pET22b-PCP3TE (2 × YT media, 50 μg/mL ampicillin) were grown at 37 °C to an optical density (600 nm) of 0.7 and then induced with 1 mM isopropyl-β-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG) and incubated at 15 °C. Cells were harvested after 4 h, and the cell paste was resuspended in buffer A (20 mM Tris-CI, pH 7.9, 0.5 M NaCl). Cells were lysed by passage through a French pressure cell at 15 000 psi twice, and the lysate was clarified by centrifugation (95000g) for 30 min. Protein was purified from the lysate by nickel chelation chromatography over 4 mL of Ni−NTA superflow resin (Qiagen). Fractions containing protein were determined by SDS−polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS−PAGE) and then pooled and dialyzed against 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 2 mM DTT, 10 mM MgCl\textsubscript{2}, 0.1 mM EDTA, and 10% glycerol. Concentration of the purified apo-PCP3-TE was determined spectrophotometrically at 280 nm using the calculated extinction coefficient of 58 690 (M−cm)\textsuperscript{-1}. The yield after purification was 3 mg/L.

Overexpression and purification of holo-PCP3-TE followed the above procedures except that *E. coli* strain BL21-DE3) was transformed with both pET22b-PCP3TE and pREP4-Sfp (Mohamed A. Marahiel, unpublished plasmid). The plasmid pREP4-Sfp was derived from pREP4 (Qiagen) by insertion of the sfp gene (PPTase from *Bacillus subtilis*). Cultures of this *E. coli* strain after IPTG induction coexpressed apo-PCP3-TE and Sfp, and the purified PCP3-TE is thus obtained in holo-form since apo-PCP3TE was modified by coexpressed Sfp in vivo. Complete phosphopantetheinylation was verified by attempted incorporation of [3H]-coenzyme A into holo-PCP3-TE by Sfp in vitro, and by mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF and electrospray ionization methods) of PCP3-TE.

**ATP−PP Exchange Reactions.** Reactions were carried out at 30 °C in 100 μL total volume and contained 75 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 10 mM MgCl\textsubscript{2}, 5 mM DTT, 3 mM ATP, 150 mM HMWP2 1−1491, 1 mM [32P\textsuperscript{-}]-pyrophosphate, and varying concentrations of amino acid substrate. The reactions were initiated by addition of [32P\textsuperscript{-}]-pyrophosphate, allowed to proceed for 6−8 min, and then quenched by addition of a charcoal−pyrophosphate−perchloric acid mixture [1.6% (w/v) activated charcoal, 4.46% (w/v) tetrasodium pyrophosphate, 3.5% perchloric acid in water]. The charcoal was then pelleted by centrifugation, washed twice with the quench mixture without added charcoal, and then resuspended in 0.5 mL of water and submitted for liquid scintillation counting.

Reactions were typically performed in duplicate. The amount of bound radioactivity was converted into reaction velocity using the specific activity of the [32P\textsuperscript{-}]-pyrophosphate. The
velocity was plotted against substrate concentration and fit to the Michaelis–Menten equation.

**Amino Acid-Dependent ATP Usage by Apo-HMWP2 1–1491.** A coupled, continuous, spectrophotometric assay for inorganic pyrophosphate was employed (24–26). Reactions were carried out at 30 °C in 150 μL total volume in a quartz cuvette and contained 75 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 10 mM MgCl2, 200 μM MESG, 0.15 unit of PNP, 0.15 unit of PP_i-ase, 2 mM ATP, either 5 mM L-Cys or 10 mM β-Cl-L-Ala or 10 mM S-2-aminobutyrate, and varying concentrations of HMWP2 1–1491. Reactions were initiated by addition of the amino acid substrate after a 10 min incubation to allow for inorganic pyrophosphate was employed (24°). Reactions were carried out at 30 °C.

75 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 10 mM MgCl2, 1 mM TCEP, 20 mM apo-HMWP2 1–1491, 2 mM ATP, 100 μM [35S]-L-Cys under otherwise identical conditions.

**RESULTS**

**PCP3-TE Subcloning, Overexpression, and Purification.** The 40.3 kDa, two-domain PCP3-TE protein fragment represents the C-terminal 356 amino acids (2808–3163) of HMWP1. It contains the third carrier protein domain PCP3-TE and HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A). To determine the extent of conversion of PCP3 and PCP1 to their aminoacylated forms by the adenylation domain acting in trans, incorporation of [35S]-L-Cys and [1-14C]-L-/D-2-aminobutyric acid was measured. Reactions (100 μL) contained 75 mM, Tris pH 7.5, 10 mM MgCl2, 1 mM TCEP, 310 nM apo-HMWP2 1–1491, 5 μM PCP substrate, 5 mM ATP, and 250 μM [35S]-L-Cys or 312 μM [1-14C]-L-/D-2-aminobutyric acid. HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A) reactions contained in addition 100 μM CoA and 133 nM Sfp and were allowed to incubate at room temperature for 30 min to ensure phosphopantetheinylation prior to labeled amino acid addition. As a further check on the extent of in vivo phosphopantetheinylation of PCP3-TE, an identical set of reactions was performed with the addition of 100 μM CoA and 133 nM Sfp. All reactions were incubated at 30 °C for 90 min before workup as above for the radioactive incorporation assay. Percent modification of PCP1 and PCP3 was calculated from the specific activity of the amino acid used and the concentrations of the protein substrates.
incorporation both with and without additional, in vitro phosphopantetheinylation with CoA and Sfp. We measured stoichiometries of 32% and 33% for [1-14C]-2-aminobutyric acid incorporation without and with in vitro phosphopantetheinylation, respectively. The corresponding stoichiometries for [35S]-L-Cys were 21% and 20%.

**ATP–PP Exchange Reactions of the Ybt Synthetase A Domain.** To assess the adenylation domain specificity in the first step of amino acid activation, a number of natural and unnatural amino acids were employed as substrates in the ATP–PPi exchange reaction as catalyzed by HMWP2 1–1491. In addition to the natural substrate L-cysteine, three other amino acids gave a positive signal: S-2-aminobutyric acid, β-chloro-L-alanine, and (very weakly) L-serine, while D-cysteine, β-fluoro-L-d-alanine, L-vinylglycine, L/D-allylglycine, 2,3-diaminopropionic acid, O-methyl-β-d-serine, 3-mercaptopropionic acid, thiolactic acid, and L/D-isoserine were all inactive. The kinetics for cysteine-dependent ATP–PPi exchange have been measured previously (11), so S-2-aminobutyrate and β-chloro-L-alanine were subjected to the same set of experiments, while L-serine was not pursued further. The data are shown in Figure 3. While the catalytic efficiency for activation of the two substrates is down, approximately 40-fold and 10-fold respectively, from that of cysteine, the exchange reaction was still robust. For S-2-aminobutyrate, this decrease in catalytic efficiency represents a 2-fold decrease in $k_{cat}$ and a 20-fold increase in $K_m$. Likewise, for β-chloro-L-alanine, we observed a 3-fold decrease in $k_{cat}$ and a 3-fold increase in $K_m$. Since the $k_{cat}$ for this exchange process includes both forward steps and back-reaction of [32P]-PPi, with the aa-AMP, it is unclear if the close correspondence in $k_{cat}$ reflects some common rate-determining step (e.g., pyrophosphate release rate). Neither of these amino acids is proteinogenic, and thus neither is expected to present significant in vivo competition for L-cysteine in A domain activation.

**Amino Acid-Dependent ATP Consumption by Apo-HMWP2 1–1491.** A continuous, coupled spectrophotometric assay was used to measure ATP usage by HMWP2 1–1491 (eq 1). This assay employs inorganic pyrophosphatase to hydrolyze PPi (resulting from ATP cleavage) into phosphate. Purine nucleoside phosphorylase (PNP) then binds phosphate and uses it to cleave 2-amin-6-mercaptop-7-methylpurine ribonucleoside (MESG) into ribose 1-phosphate and 2-amin-6-mercaptop-7-methylpurine, which has an absorbance maximum at 360 nm. Increases in $A_{360}$ over time can be related to increases in PPi production through a standard curve constructed from known PPi concentrations versus $A_{360}$. Such a curve gave a molar extinction coefficient (ε) of 17 600 (M cm)$^{-1}$, in good agreement with the 19 500 (M cm)$^{-1}$ measured previously (26). The relationship between $A_{360}$ and PPi concentration was found to be linear between 0 and 24 µM PPi.

Rates of ATP usage by apo-HMWP2 1–1491 were then measured using this assay. In the presence of ATP but absence of amino acid, there should be no release of PPi. However, there was small but measurable ATPase activity (∼1 min$^{-1}$) which was traced to the protein stocks, and which we ascribed either to a contaminating nonspecific ATPase or to MESG lysis. In the presence of an activatable amino acid but absence of an acceptor cosubstrate (e.g., a holocPCP domain) for the adenylation domain, HMWP2 1–1491 should only activate the amino acid substrate, and the resulting aminoacyl-AMP should remain tightly bound in the A domain active site. Any net catalytic ATP use in the presence of amino acid substrate indicates that the A domain is losing the activated aa-AMP to adventitious water in the active site or by escape into solution. These data are shown in the first row of Table 1. The apo form of HMWP2 1–1491 consumes ATP at a slow but steady rate of 0.14 min$^{-1}$ in the presence of 5 mM L-cysteine. While this rate increases to 0.35 and 0.21 min$^{-1}$ in the presence of 10 mM S-2-aminobutyrate or β-chloro-L-alanine, respectively, all three rates are slow, on the order of 600-fold below $k_{cat}$ for ATP–PPi exchange for the alternate substrates, and 2700-fold below $k_{cat}$ for L-cysteine. First, these results validate the expectation that the thermodynamically activated aa-AMPs are sequestered in this A domain’s active site and only slowly dissociate. Second, these slow rates give assurance that higher measured rates of ATP consumption in the presence of a thiol acceptor cosubstrate, reported below, will not be due to unspecified “leakiness” of the A domain.

**Amino Acid-Dependent ATP Usage by Holo-HMWP2 1–1491.** Since the Ybt A domain is being assayed in the...
context of a neighboring PCP1 domain, embedded in cis in a downstream location in the 1–1491 fragment of HMWP2 [the shorter 1–1061 fragment failed to support ATP–PP\textsubscript{i} exchange (11)], rates of ATP usage were also measured for holo-HMWP2 1–1491, with the PCP1 domain phosphopantetheinylated in vitro by Sfp, in the presence of all three amino acids. In these experiments, it was anticipated that the A domain will activate the amino acid, transfer the adenylate to the adjacent PCP1 (Figure 1C), activate another equivalent of amino acid, and then wait, having run out of acceptor substrate to which to transfer. Data are shown in Table 1. Steady-state ATP consumption rates are roughly doubled over apo-HMWP2 1–1491, but are still low overall, with a net ATPase activity of less than one catalytic event per minute per A domain. Assuming that the A domain “leakiness” remains the same in apo- vs holo-enzyme (and is not allosterically increased by assembly line backup), this increase in rate could be ascribed to hydrolysis/thiolysis of the PCP1-attached aminoacyl thioester and subsequent reloading by the A domain. To check whether thiolysis rates, and thereby, ATP usage, could be increased by external thiols, 5 mM dithiothreitol (DTT) was added to another set of these reactions and the PP\textsubscript{i} release measured, as shown in Table 1. Rates are again increased, although modestly: DTT can accelerate net ATPase activity over the holo-1–1491 rate by 2-fold for the different amino acid substrates. The acceleration is thus measurable, but DTT has little effect on hydrolysis/thiolysis of PCP-attached thioesters in this system.

Transfer of Activated Amino Acids to Acceptor Cosubstrates: PCP3-TE. Having established ATP consumption in the absence of an acceptor thiol cosubstrate, and in the presence of one (PCP1-P-pant-SH) linked to the A domain in cis, we next examined the effect of addition of an HS-P-pant substrate in trans. PCP3-TE represents the C-terminal fragment of HMWP1, a natural substrate for HMWP2’s adenylation domain. When holo-PCP3-TE was added to HMWP2 1–1491, l-cysteine, and ATP in the spectrophotometric assay, a dramatic acceleration in ATP hydrolysis was observed. By varying the concentration of PCP3-TE, from 0 to 35 μM, Michaelis–Menten kinetics could be measured; kinetics were also determined for S-2-aminobutyrate and β-chloro-l-alanine. These data are plotted in Figure 4A. First, the accelerations in ATPase activity are dramatic, with rates of 86–195 min\textsuperscript{-1} at saturation, reflecting more than 100-fold increases over ATPase rates in the absence of holo-PCP3-TE. Second, while there is about a 2-fold difference in the \( k_{\text{cat}} \) and \( K_m \) values among the three amino acid substrates, the catalytic efficiencies (\( k_{\text{cat}}/K_m \)) are very similar, suggesting that transfer kinetics of an activated aminoacyl-AMP to the P-pant-SH of the cognate PCP3 acceptor cosubstrate are largely independent of the identity of the particular amino acid, once it has been converted into the aminoacyl-AMP. A rate of 100–200 min\textsuperscript{-1} may represent the chemical step for this A domain’s second half-reaction.

Radioactive Amino Acid Transfer to PCP3-TE. To ensure that the thiol cosubstrate acceleration of the A domain’s amino acid-dependent ATPase cleavage rate was indeed reflecting an acceleration of aa-AMP transfer, covalent aminoacylation of PCP3-TE was measured directly. The kinetics of amino acid transfer for HMWP2 1–1491 to PCP3-TE were measured in a \( ^{35}\text{S} \)-l-cysteine incorporation assay, in which the PCP3-TE acquires a covalently attached radioactive amino acid label. Initial velocities of transfer were measured by scintillation counting of TCA-precipitated enzymatic reactions, since the Cys-S-P-pant linkage on PCP3-TE is acid-stable. Two sets of reactions were performed: one with purified, holo-PCP3-TE from coexpression of Sfp, and one with in vitro phosphopantetheinylated PCP3-TE (Figure 4B). Because the assay requires \( ^{35}\text{S} \)-l-Cys of high specific activity to achieve a good signal in the precipitated \( ^{35}\text{S} \)-l-Cys-PCP3-TE, Cys concentrations of \( \leq 100 \) μM were used, leading to apparent \( k_{\text{cat}} \) values of 48 min\textsuperscript{-1} (in vitro P-pant) and 61 min\textsuperscript{-1} (in vivo P-pant). For reasons not yet clear, the in vivo phosphopantetheinylation of PCP3-TE gave a \( K_m \) of 40 μM for holo-PCP3-TE while the in vitro posttranslational priming of apo- to holo-PCP3-TE gave a \( K_m \) of 8.3 μM.

Stoichiometries of Covalent Aminocacylation of Holo-PCP3-TE and HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A). To eliminate the possibility that the difference in apparent \( K_m \)’s measured above arose from different stoichiometries of phosphopan-
Selectivity of Ybt Synthetase Adenylation Domain

Biochemistry, Vol. 39, No. 9, 2000 2303

FIGURE 5: (A) l-Cys transfer kinetics from HMWP2 1–1491 to HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A), representing PCP1, measured in the pyrophosphate release assay. Severe substrate inhibition above 5 μM was observed. The general substrate inhibition equation (27) was used to fit the data points, but only a lower limit for $k_{cat}$ (≥2 min$^{-1}$) could be determined. This rate is some 50–100-fold below $k_{cat}$ for transfer to PCP3-TE. (B) Schematic of the transfer.

FIGURE 6: Substrate transfer kinetics from HMWP2 1–1491 to pantetheine. (A) Transfer kinetics for the three activated amino acids, measured in the pyrophosphate release assay. Catalytic efficiencies are some 10-fold below that observed for PCP3-TE. (B) Schematic of the transfer.

how much of the holo-PCP3-TE structure was necessary to observe accelerated transfer of the aminoacyl-AMPs sequenced in the A domain of HMWP2 1–1491, pantetheine and CoA were tested in the same assay as above. Pantetheine and CoA represent different forms of the “prosthetic arm” that constitutes the nucleophilic moiety of the carrier protein domains. The data of Figure 6A show pantetheine was a recognizable mimic of the pantetheinyl arm of holo-PCP3, with accelerations of 30–80-fold ($k_{cat} = 20–37$ min$^{-1}$) with the three aminoacyl-AMPs. These $k_{cat}$ values are 3–7-fold below the accelerations effected by PCP3-TE, but at greatly elevated $K_m$’s, about 3000-fold higher. Finally, CoA was tested as a specific thiol cosubstrate in this experiment with l-cysteine; its $k_{cat}$ of 0.9 min$^{-1}$ (Figure 7A) was detectably above the leak rate, but only 3–4-fold above, while the $K_m$ was 10-fold below that of pantetheine. This demonstrates clearly that there is specificity for the surface presenting the pantetheinyl-SH to this A domain.

DISCUSSION

NRPSs assemble their peptide natural products by a thiotemplating process (13), in which adenylation domains select and activate amino acid monomers as aminoacyl carrier protein domains (PCP). Condensation or cyclization domains are then responsible for linking these monomers together, most often in an amide bond, before the mature product is released from the final, most downstream PCP by the C-terminal thioesterase domain. An archetypal NRPS has repeating modules of (C-A-PCP)-, domain triads, with each A domain responsible for loading its adjacent PCP with the correct monomer and each C domain acting to link the growing chain on the upstream PCP with the monomer on the downstream PCP. In such a system, PCP acylation (by
The catalytic efficiencies of $S$-2-aminobutyrate and $\beta$-chloro-$L$-alanine for Ybt A domain-catalyzed ATP exchange were down by approximately 40- and 10-fold, respectively, relative to $L$-cysteine. Although $k_{\text{cat}}$ values were not reported for the ATP-P$P_i$ exchange reaction of the ACV synthetase $A_{\text{Cys}}$ domain, apparent $K_m$'s of 0.21 mM for cysteine, 0.8 mM for $L$-allylglycine, and 2.8 mM for $L$-vinylglycine (28) can be compared favorably to the values for the Ybt A domain in Figure 3. As noted above, neither $L$-allylglycine nor $L$-vinylglycine were substrates for the Ybt A domain. It should also be noted that even though $S$-2-aminobutyrate and $\beta$-chloro-$L$-alanine are readily activated, neither would present competition for cysteine in vivo.

The continuous, coupled enzyme assay used here to measure pyrophosphate release as a proxy for ATP consumption during amino acid activation and transfer was originally developed to measure inorganic phosphate (21), but has also been applied to pyrophosphate release (25), in particular the activity of aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (26). We first applied this assay to amino acid-dependent ATP consumption by the adenylation domain in the absence of a P-pant-SH acceptor cosubstrate. We found very low rates of “leakage” of the aminoacyl-AMP across the three substrates (Table 1), indicating that the adenylation domain is quite good at retaining the bound intermediate and that ATP cleavage is tightly coupled to the two-step process of substrate activation and transfer. [The structural basis for aa-AMP binding has been examined in the context of the published crystal structure of the Phe-activating A domain of gramicidin-S synthetase (17, 29).] Substrate activation by the enterobactin synthetase system has also been examined (30), and it was found that leakage rates for EntE [$2,3$-dihydroxybenzoate (DHB) activating] are 10-fold higher for salicylate than for DHB. Notable in the Ybt system is the only modest increase in leakage rates for alternate substrates, in contrast to EntE; EntE appears to retain its unnatural substrates less well than HMWP2 does. Studies on the leakage rates of HMWP2 1–1491 as compared to those of the full-length, 230 kDa protein await purification of the latter.

Additional leakage rates have been measured for the intact trimodular ACV synthetase of *Acremonium chrysogenum*, a 420 kDa NRPS (31). The basal rate of ATPase activity (no amino acid substrate) was reported as 0.7 min$^{-1}$, and single additions of $L$-alaninate (0.8 min$^{-1}$), cysteine (2.6 min$^{-1}$), and valine (1.8 min$^{-1}$) show similar low leakage rates of the bound aminoacyl-AMPs. The net Cys-dependent ATPase rate of 1.9 min$^{-1}$ for the $A_{\text{Cys}}$ domain of ACV synthetase is roughly 10-fold higher than the analogous Cys-dependent rates for the Ybt A domain (Table 1).

Examination of holo- vs apo-HMWP2 1–1491 allowed evaluation of the effect of a stoichiometric amount of in *cis* P-pant-SH acceptor [on the PCP1 domain (Figure 1C)] on rates of aa-AMP transfer from the A domain (Table 1). This holo-enzyme should stoichiometrically load the adjacent PCP1 (11), but after this initial burst of ATP consumption (not measured here), steady-state PP$i$ release should return to the amino acid-dependent leakage rate. The 2-fold increase in ATP hydrolysis that we measure could be attributed to a slow hydrolysis of the PCP1-aminoacyl thioester and subsequent reloading or to some doubling of the leakage rate of aa-AMP from the adjacent A domain in solution. This rate was increased another 2-fold upon addition of 5 mM DTT, but again, the absolute rates are low, under 1 min$^{-1}$. These results indicate that hydrolysis or thiolysis does not

![Figure 7: (A) $L$-Cys transfer kinetics from HMWP2 1–1491 to CoA, measured in the pyrophosphate release assay. Catalytic efficiency is some 4 x 10$^4$-fold below that observed for PCP3-TE. (B) Schematic of the transfer.](image-url)
contribute significantly to ATP consumption and that the aa-AMPs are effectively sequestered from bulk solvent and from nonspecific thiols. In contrast, it was reported for ACV synthetase that added DTT (8 mM) “significantly” increased ATP consumption (31). Measurement of the in cis rate of aa-AMP transfer to the P-pant-SH moiety of PCP1 would require rapid quench methods as it is complete within a few seconds (data not shown).

With these rates of ATP consumption for apo- and holo-HMWP2 1–1491 established, we turned to in trans HS-P-pant acceptor cosubstrates. PCP3-TE, a 40 kDa fragment of the 350 kDa HMWP1, which is naturally loaded in trans by HMWP2, dramatically increased ATP turnover in the assay. By measuring initial velocities as a function of PCP3-TE concentration, Michaelis–Menten kinetics for PCP3-TE were measured with all three amino acid substrates, establishing saturation and specific recognition of P-pant-SH in the PCP3 context with a \( K_m \) of 10–26 \( \mu \)M (Figure 4A). At saturation, the cysteinyl, \( \beta \)-chloroalanyl, and 2-aminobutyryl transfers were within 2–3-fold (86–195 min\(^{-1}\)), a very small range for these three different amino acids. These measurements of both steps of an A domain’s catalytic activities, aminoacyl-AMP ligation and then aa-AMP transfer, indicate that selectivity in NRPS monomer activation and loading occurs in the choice of amino acid in step 1 by the adenylation domain, and the identity of the acceptor substrate in step 2, but is independent of the amino acid adenylate in this second step. If this is generalizable to other A domains of NRPSs, it would suggest only minimal editing and fidelity controls after aa-AMP formation, in contrast to some of the AARS.

For example, both the Val-RS and the Ile-RS can activate incorrect amino acids (Thr and Val) as their adenylates, albeit at lower catalytic efficiencies that for their natural substrates. However, both possess editing functions that hydrolyze the misacylated Thr-tRNA\(^{\text{Val}}\) or the misactivated Val-AMP, respectively, in the presence of their cognate tRNAs, and thus dramatically lower the rate of misincorporation into proteins (19, 20). Both of these editing functions trade unproductive ATP consumption for higher accuracy. In essence, Val-RS and Ile-RS become ATP hydrolases in the presence of their cognate tRNAs and an incorrect, alternate amino acid. In the Ybt system, given that both the natural Cys-AMP and the misacylated \( \beta \)-chloro-\( \text{Ala-AMP} \) and 2-aminobutyryl-AMP are released/hydrolytically edited at the same slow rates in both apo- and holo-HMWP2 1–1491, this argues against fidelity checks after aa-AMP ligation both in the A domain active site and during second-step transfer to the HS-P-pant moiety of PCP1. If there were editing of misactivated or misacylated substrates by the A domain, one would expect to observe significantly higher ATP hydrolysis rates by holo-HMWP2 1–1491 in the presence of \( \beta \)-Cl-Ala and 2-aminobutyrate. For comparison, the cysteinyl-tRNA synthetase also catalyzes ATP–PP exchange in the presence of 2-aminobutyrate, but the relative \( k_{\text{cat}}/K_m \) is \( 3 \times 10^{-6} \) of the value for cysteine. Notably, Cys-RS lacks an editing function because it does not have a close competitor for binding in vivo (32).

The amino acid and PCP3-TE acceptor cosubstrate dependencies for A domain catalytic hydrolysis of ATP to AMP and PP\(_i\) reported above are interpreted as evidence for multiple cycles of aa-AMP formation and transfer by the A domain to the P-pant thiol on PCP3. This transfer was validated in two ways. First, the stoichiometries of aminoacylation by \(^{\text{[35S]}}\)-L-Cys and by [1-\( ^{14} \text{C} \)]-\( \text{L-} \)2-aminobutyrate were measured. The A domain was able to achieve loading stoichiometries of 21% and 32% for these two substrates for PCP3-TE. Exposure of in vivo phosphopantetheinylated PCP3-TE to an additional Sp and CoA in vitro did not change these stoichiometries significantly (20% and 33%, respectively), indicating that coexpression of Sp reliably yields holo-PCP3-TE. Very similar aminoacylation stoichiometries (19% and 30% by \(^{\text{[35S]}}\)-L-Cys and by [1-\( ^{14} \text{C} \)]-\( \text{L-} \)2-aminobutyrate, respectively) were obtained for the in trans modification of PCP1 of HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A) fragment. Why these loading stoichiometries vary and do not reach 100% is unclear, but the data do demonstrate that covalent loading of both a natural and an unnatural amino acid substrate is possible. Second, aminoacyl-S-PCP3 formation was established with the rates of transfer of \(^{\text{[35S]}}\)-L-Cys (Figure 4B). Rates of 50–60 min\(^{-1}\) are lower than the rates of 86–195 min\(^{-1}\) measured in the PP\(_i\) release assay. While these could reflect some significant diversion of the increased aa-AMP release flux to water rather than to PCP3-TE (i.e., an uncoupling of ATPase activity from aminoacyl-S-PCP formation), it is more likely that the 50–60 min\(^{-1}\) rates, measured with \(^{\text{[35S]}}\)-L-Cys, \( \sim 100 \mu \text{M} \), are subsaturating (\( K_m \) for Cys = 650 \( \mu \text{M} \)) and the true \( k_{\text{cat}} \) for aa-AMP transfer is thus underestimated in the radioactive incorporation assays. The preferred substrate for testing the specificity of rate acceleration in the PP\(_i\) release assay is apo-PCP3-TE; however, we have found (Z.S. and C.T.W., unpublished observations) that during \( \text{E. coli} \) expression some percentage of apo-protein is phosphopantetheinylated by native PPTases, and thus rigorously apo-carrier protein domains are difficult to obtain.

The poor behavior of HMWP2 1383–2035 (S1977A), a PCP1 construct, is in contrast to that of PCP3-TE. The former exhibited severe substrate inhibition in the PP\(_i\) release assay (Figure 5A), such that a \( K_m \) could not be determined and only a lower limit (2 min\(^{-1}\)) could be set for \( k_{\text{cat}} \). [Similar substrate inhibition has been noted earlier in the PPTase-catalyzed phosphopantetheinylation of various PCPs (8, 22, 33).] The reasons for this are unclear; it is possibly an artificial consequence of the presence of another unit of PCP1 on the 1–1491 fragment, or of the in trans interaction of two domains (A and PCP1) that normally interact in cis. A more desirable A domain fragment (1–1382) that does not have PCP1 in cis was not used because of inferior activity. The conclusion that can be drawn, however, is that the A domain clearly differentiates between holo-PCPs in the kinetics of aminoacyl transfer.

We then turned to the specificity for recognition of the HS-pantetheinyl arm that is used to capture the aa-AMPs bound in the A domain. First, one can look at free pantetheine vs the pantetheinyl-containing coenzyme A. Pantetheine is the diphospho arm of a holo-PCP while CoA-SH has a 3,5′-ADP instead of the P-pant-Ser-PCP. When pantetheine was tested as a substrate for HMWP2 1–1491, \( k_{\text{cat}} \) values for transfer were up 30-fold, and saturation was detected although binding was poor with \( K_m \)’s of 34–56 mM (Figure 6A). Fixing the pantetheinyl arm on its natural PCP3 domain cosubstrate lowered \( K_m \)’s by 3 orders of magnitude, demonstrating a dramatically improved recognition for P-pant presentation by a folded carrier protein domain. The \( k_{\text{cat}} \)
values for PCP3-TE were up 3–7-fold over pantetheine, and the 195 min$^{-1}$ for L-Cys may be a limiting value for the Cys-AMP capture by the thiol of the P-pant prosthetic group. When CoA was tested, it was only 4-fold above background for Cys-AMP release, 25-fold below pantetheine, and 200-fold below PCP3-TE transfer rates (Figure 7A). Since the thiol reactivity for all three substrates is equivalent, the 3′,5′-ADP moiety of CoA must present an electrostatic or steric impediment to transfer. The net effect of anchoring the P-pant thiol to a specific PCP rather than to 3’-ADP is scavenging of aa-AMPs slowing leaking into solution, as opposed to a specific, and perhaps vestigial, binding site for a pantetheinyl arm.

In summary, the covalent aminoacylation of holo-carrier domains in NRPSs appears to involve two levels of A domain specificity: first, amino acid selection for activation as the aminoacyl adenylate; and second, transfer of the adenylate to a phosphopantetheinyl thiol on a specific PCP. Unlike some AARSs, we found no evidence for an editing mechanism in the Ybt A domain; unnatural activated substrates do not induce a higher ATP hydrolysis rate than the natural L-cysteine, nor are there appreciable differences among the transfer rates of the three substrates accepted by the A domain. The A domain can also transfer to pantetheine and coenzyme A, but at much lower catalytic efficiencies, indicating that attachment of the P-pant arm on a specific PCP is critical for efficient aminoacylation.

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