The linkage between ribosomal crystallography, metal ions, heteropolytungstates and functional flexibility

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Crystallography of ribosomes, the universal cell nucleoprotein assemblies facilitating the translation of the genetic-code into proteins, met with severe problems owing to the large size, complex structure, inherent flexibility and high conformational variability of the ribosome. For the case of the small ribosomal subunit, which caused extreme difficulties, post-crystallization treatment by minute amounts of a heteropolytungstate cluster allowed structure determination at atomic resolution. This cluster played a dual role: providing anomalous phasing power and dramatically increased the resolution, by stabilization of a selected functional conformation. Thus, four out of the fourteen clusters that bind to each of the crystallized small subunits are attached to a specific ribosomal protein in a fashion that may control a significant component of the subunit internal flexibility, by “gluing” symmetrical related subunits. Here, we highlight basic issues in the relationship between metal ions and macromolecules and present common traits controlling in the interactions between polymetalates and various macromolecules, which may be extended towards the exploitation of polymetalates for therapeutic treatment.

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1. Introduction

Metalloproteins play key roles in many aspects of life. Metal ions are also contributing significantly to the activity and conformational stability of ribozymes. This review highlights yet another aspect of the border between inorganic chemistry and biology: the crucial contribution of the interplay between mono and divalent ions as well as post-crystallization treatment with metal clusters to ribosomal crystallography.

Ribosomes are giant ribonucleoprotein assemblies that translate the genetic code into proteins in all living cells. They are built of two subunits of unequal size that associate upon the initiation of protein biosynthesis to form a functional particle and dissociate once this process is terminated. Protein biosynthesis is performed cooperatively by the two ribosomal subunits. While elongation proceeds, the small subunit provides the decoding-center and controls translation fidelity, and the large one contains the site where peptide bonds are being formed. Hence, in addition to the intersubunit bridges that are built of flexible components of both subunits, the tRNA molecules are the entities combining the two subunits within the active ribosome. The elongation cycle includes decoding, peptide bond formation, the detachment of the P-site tRNA from the growing polypeptide chain, the release of a deacylated tRNA molecule and the advancement of the mRNA together with the tRNA molecules attached to it from the A- to the P- and then to the E-site, all driven by the GTPase activity of two G-protein factors.

Ribosomes from all kingdoms are composed of long RNA (rRNA) chains, accounting for 2/3 of their mass (apart from mitochondrial ribosome, where the ratio RNA/protein is somewhat different) and different proteins (r-proteins). The small and the large bacterial ribosomal subunits are of molecular weights of 0.85 and 1.45 Mega Dalton, respectively. The small subunit (called 30S in prokaryotes) contains an rRNA chain (called 16S) of ~1500 nucleotides and 20–21 r-proteins, and the large one (called 50S in prokaryotes) is composed of two rRNA chains (23S and 5S RNA) of about 3000 nucleotides in total, and 31–35 r-proteins, depending on the source. The recently determined crystal structures of ribosomal particles [1–5] and of their functional complexes (e.g. [6–10]) show that all ribosomes functions utilize primarily rRNA-mediated processes that may be assisted by r-proteins. They also indicate, mainly indirectly, that within the ribosome metal ions bind to both r-proteins subunit whereas the tRNA 3’ ends interact with the large subunit, where peptide bonds are being formed. Hence, in addition to the intersubunit bridges that are built of flexible components of both subunits, the tRNA molecules are the entities combining the two subunits within the active ribosome. The elongation cycle includes decoding, peptide bond formation, the detachment of the P-site tRNA from the growing polypeptide chain, the release of a deacylated tRNA molecule and the advancement of the mRNA together with the tRNA molecules attached to it from the A- to the P- and then to the E-site, all driven by the GTPase activity of two G-protein factors.

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and rRNA in a fashion similar albeit different to those seen in systems composed of either RNA or proteins.

2. Metal ions and the structure and function of RNA and protein – enzymes

A large repertoire of RNA structural motifs that typically sequester metal ions appears in ribozymes, namely catalytic RNA molecules [11–13], where they contribute to folding pathways and tertiary structure maintenance (as reviewed in [14]). In addition, although some ribozymes can utilize alternative catalytic mechanisms [15,16], in many cases ribozymes catalysis depends on metal ions (e.g. [17]) functioning as cofactors that are explicitly implicated in the chemical mechanism of the catalysis [18]. Examples are RNA polymerization [19,20], the aldol reaction [21], splicing [22], self-splicing, ligation, packing [23–27] and resolving ribozyme misfolding [28] and gene control utilizing riboswitches [29]. Nevertheless, even for RNA enzymes (e.g. group I and II introns) specific and non-specific interactions [30] of a few or many [31] monovalent cations and magnesium ions are mainly essential for adopting and maintaining the proper compact tertiary structures (e.g. [32,33]). Experimental and simulation results estab-

Fig. 1. Functional mobility of the ribosomal subunits: (a) the interface surfaces of the high resolution structures of the small (left) and the large (right) ribosomal subunits from Thermus thermophilus, T30S [2] and Deinococcus radiodurans, D50S [4], respectively, with their main structural regions. The approximate mRNA channel on the small subunit and the positions of the three tRNA sites on both subunits are shown, with a representative tRNA molecule placed between the two subunits, showing the regions interacting with each of the subunits. (b) An enlarged view of the small subunit indicating its functionally relevant motions (the two arrows), the position of the latch (indicated by L), participating actively in mRNA attachment; and the single RNA chain called neck (shown as “N”) that seems to act as the structural element facilitating the “head” motions, which involved in opening/closing the latch. The pink circle indicates the position that closes and opens during the latch motion, for creating a pore for the incoming mRNA. (c–e) rRNA backbone representation of the small subunit. The body, shown in red, is almost identical in all known crystal structures, whereas various “head” folds have been detected and are shown in different colors. (Red: the tungstenated T30S structure [2]; pink and wheat: the two traceable folds among the ensemble of conformations existing in the T30S low resolution crystals; cyan and green: the two conformations existing in the crystal of the entire ribosome from Escherichia coli, E70S [5]; gray and blue: the fold of functional complexes of the entire ribosome from T. thermophilus, T70S [9] and [10], respectively. The T30S non-tungstenated structure [3] is almost identical to that observed in [9], therefore is shown in gray). (d) Shows the assembly of structures observed in the low resolution crystal form of T30S. Inserted is the 7A resolution structure of T30S [75] that shows clearly the structural domains and the possible motions (indicated by arrows). The left red circle indicates the position of the latch and the right circle is positioned on the neck.
lished that the stability of large RNA ribozymes is largely deter-
mind by a combination of counter ion charges [34,35] that kinetic
intermediates regulate proper RNA folding [36] and that the pack-
ing efficiency of condensed cations depends on their excluded vol-
umes [37,38].

Metal ions bound to protein–enzymes are often involved in
zymatic catalysis and form part of the active site. They are in-
volved in a large range of activities, including catalysis, electron
transfer, energy reorganization, oxygen and carbon dioxide trans-
port, redox, polymerization and similar tasks. As such they play
key roles in all aspects of life, yielding numerous studies in bio-
organic chemistry, including medicinal chemistry (as reviewed in
[39]). Metal ion cofactors may appear either as isolated ions or
can be coordinated with either nonprotein organic compounds
(e.g. porphyrin in hemoproteins) or with protein side chains (e.g.
iron–sulfur clusters) and contrary to the limited repertoire of cat-
ions bound to ribozymes (magnesium, potassium, sodium, ammo-
nium, etc.), an impressive variety of metal ions are bound to
proteins. Some examples of metalloenzymes are nitrite reductase,
cytochrome oxidase, cytochrome ba3, azurin and other small elec-
tron transfer proteins that utilize cupric ferrous or ferric ions, other
proteins that utilize copper and iron, such as catalase, hemoglobin
and myoglobin; alcohol dehydrogenase, carbonic anhydrase, DNA
polymerase and matrix proteins that utilize zinc; glucose 6-phos-
phatase and hexokinase that unite magnesium; arginine (manga-
nese); urease (nickel); glutathione peroxidase (selenium); alcohol
dehydrogenase, and anti-HIV-1 and anti-tumor proteins MAP30
that contain manganese and zinc. Tungsten ions are less frequent
in metalloenzymes. They appear in transport proteins, or act as a
cofactor of Fe3S4 cluster, or participate in redox reactions or
contribute to shielding, mostly in hyperthermophilic enzymes
[40–44].

3. Metals and ribosomal flexibility

Mono and bivalent metal ions that are required for proper ribo-
somal activity [45,46], seem to maintain the active conformation
rather than catalyze the ribosomal main enzymatic activity, namely
peptide bond formation [47]. Specifically, ions are located in prox-
imity to various functionally relevant regions, or shown to stabilize
structurally sensitive regions, such as the intersubunit interface as
well as the kink in the mRNA path that is placed at the boundary
between the A and P sites, which prevents mRNA slippage [49].
Thus, the mono and divalent metal ions that are vital for ribosomal
function are actually stabilizing the functional conformations,
rather than contributing significantly to the enzymatic activity.

Despite the stabilization by mono and divalent ions, the ribo-
somes exhibit significant flexibility obtained by small and large
internal motions. Examples of global motion that could be impli-
cated from the high resolution structures include (a) the L1 stalk
sway that allows the release of the exiting tRNA [4], (b) the latch-
like mechanism that facilitates mRNA attachment and progression,
which results from a substantial platform-head concerted motion,
in which the entire subunit “head” seems to modulate between an
ensemble of conformations (Fig. 1) [2,4,5,9,10,48,49], (c) a ratchet-
like motion of the entire subunit [5] that can be associated with
the elongation cycle, in accord with previous cryo electron micro-
scopy observations [50] and (d) a conformational modulation facili-
tated partially by the non ribosomal elongation factor G [51].

4. The linkage between crystal quality and heteropolytungstate
clusters

The high resolution structures that emerged recently verify that
ribosomes are precisely engineered machines that utilize confor-
mational variability for optimizing their functional efficiency, but
interfere with obtaining well ordered crystals. Among all ribosomal
particles, the small subunit is the less suitable for crystallographic
analysis, owing to its inherent conformational dynamics. Indeed,
contrary to the marked tendency of large subunits to crystallize,
only one crystal form has so far been obtained from the small sub-
unit [52]. For example the crystals obtained from 70S ribosomes
that were assembled from purified subunits, were found to consist
solely of 50S subunits [53] whereas the supernatant of the crystal-
ization drop contained, instead of intact small subunits, its iso-
lated proteins and fragmented 16S rRNA chain. The low stability
of the small subunit appears to be the reason for the poor resolu-
tion (about 10 Å) of the early crystals of the small ribosomal sub-
units from Thermus thermophilus, T30S [54,55]. It also seems to
account for the unsuitability of the small ribosomal subunit cryo-
EM reconstructions for extracting initial phase sets, although sim-
ilar studies that were performed successfully for large ribosomal
subunits [56].

Neither of the ribosomal crystal types that diffract to molecular
resolution was obtained solely from purified ribosomal particles.
In all cases additives had to be used in various fashions. For example,
minute amounts of Cd2+ in the crystallizing droplet led to a signif-
icant gain in the internal order (i.e. from 6 to ~2 Å) of the crystals
of the large ribosomal subunits from Haloarcula marismortui, H50S,
which contain over 3 M of monovalent ions (K+, Na+) [57]. More
striking is the improvement of the resolution of the crystals of
T30S, from 7–9 to 3 Å, by post-crystallization treatments by min-
ute amounts (less than 10–5 micromolar) of a heteropolytungstate
cluster (see below and in [2].

Heteropolytungstates are of exceptional stability over a wide
range of pH and redox states and may be considered as nanoscale
magnets or function as catalysts in aqueous solutions [58–69].
Their effective phasing resolution in the absence of preferred ori-
entation is limited to 4–5 Å, even when sophisticated spherical
averaging techniques are being used [70]. Nevertheless, their
symmetrical compounds yielded derivatives of biological macro-
molecules that were found useful for phasing, particularly in sys-
tems possessing a high internal symmetry that could correlate
with that of the clusters [71,72]. Examples are [(W6O32)2(C6H6)6]3–,
which has trigonal symmetry and binds to the 3-fold axis and (NaPs8W4O17)– that possesses an internal 5-fold symmetry that
coincided with the 5-fold axis of the crystals of riboflavin
synthase [73].

In the absence of internal symmetry the heteropolytungstate
clusters bind to the ribosomal particles in non-specific manners,
hence they were initially useful for phasing at low resolution.
Among them, (NH4)6[(P2W7O24)OH2]4H2O (called here W18) was
found suitable for validating results obtained by electron micro-
copy combined with molecular replacement searches [74–77], or
by previous identification at low resolution of smaller heavy atom
targets (e.g. tetrakis(acetoxymercuri)-methane, called also
TAMM) bound to exposed sulfhydryls for localizing functional re-
gions (i.e. the mRNA 3’end) or selected ribosomal proteins (i.e.
S11 and S13) [78–81]. Later reports of compounds that generated
medium and low resolution phases in ribosomal crystals include
Na16[(O3PCH2PO3)4W12O36]40H2O, (Cs 7(P2W17O61Co(NC5H5))14–
H2O) and ((TMA)2Na2[Nb2W4O19]18H2O) [76].

Contrary to the non-specific or non-complete binding reported
above, post-crystallization treatment of T30S crystals by minute
amounts of W18 caused a dramatic improvement in the crystalline
order, expressed by increase in resolution from the initial 7–9 to 3 Å
[2,77,76], indicating firm and quantitative attachment to well
defined locations. Indeed, all of the fourteen clusters that bind to
a single T30S particle were detected in close proximity to ribo-
somal-proteins, making numerous interactions with various side chains (mainly positively charged) that are exposed on the proteins surfaces and/or positioned along flexible extended loops or terminus extensions (Fig. 2). In several cases the clusters trapped flexible protein termini that were found to be disordered in the non-tungstenated crystals in a manner that consequently influenced the rigidity of the rather flexible 30S ribosomal subunit (Figs. 2 and 3).

The post-crystallization treatment by minute amounts of W18 was performed under controlled heating, the common procedure for functional activation of ribosomal particles [45]. Nevertheless, the improvement in resolution was neither accompanied by alterations of the unit cell dimensions nor by crystal symmetry (a = b = 407 Å, c = 176 Å, P41212). However, data collected from the W18 treated crystals could not merge with data obtained from the native crystals, indicating that a major conformational rearrangement has occurred upon the W18 treatment, thus an apparent new crystal form [2] has been created. This indicates that although conformational changes are not routinely induced within crystals due to the limitation of the motion imposed by the crystal network, the T30S crystals not only tolerated but also benefited from the post-crystallization internal rearrangements.

All of the W18 clusters within the tungstenated crystals interact with ribosomal proteins, in positions that may significantly reduce the global mobility of the T30S particles within the crystal network. Among these, the interactions with protein S2 (Figs. 2 and 3) were found crucial for the increase in resolution. In both native and the tungstenated T30S crystals, pairing of T30S particles positioned across the crystallographic 2-fold symmetry axis is a main feature of the crystallographic network. However, in contrast to the tungstenated crystals, in the native crystals the inter particle contacts that are formed between the two particles across the symmetry axis relating them, the “head” of the 30S particles (Fig. 1) is still free to move [58].

Head motions have been shown to play an important role in ribosome function, as it was correlated with mRNA progression [4,5,9,48,49]. Protein S2 is located on the subunit periphery, opposite to the RNA feature that seems to facilitate the head motions called the “neck” or helix H28 (Fig. 3). The few interactions of protein S2 with this neck occur far from its flexible termini. Hence the four W18 clusters that bind to these termini are situated so that they cannot form any physical interaction with the neck or the head. However, the significant conformational changes (Fig. 2) in these termini that were caused by the binding of the cluster, and their proximity to the 2-fold symmetry axis (Fig. 3), fixed the flexible termini in an interwoven interaction network, which minimize the mobility of the entire vicinity. Thus, despite the large distance between the locations of the W18 clusters and the central feature acquiring head mobility, the extremely stable network of contacts around the crystallographic 2-fold symmetry axis limits head motions. Remarkably, this network of interactions remains in dissolved crystals, and therefore difficulties were encountered when attempting to fully dissolve the crystals and pairs of 30S particle could be seen by electron microscopy when inspecting the solution containing the dissolved crystals (Fig. 3). Importantly, structural analysis indicated that the native crystals contain more than two different head conformations (Fig. 1), whereas the tungstenated 30S particles are trapped at a specific conformation that was later found to mimic the conformation found in crystals of functionally active ribosomes [7,9,10] and small subunits [3] (Fig. 1). Likewise, one of the clusters bound to T30S fixes the conformation of the flexible termini of the r-protein S18 (Fig. 2) in a fashion mimicking its involvement in the binding of the C-terminal domain of initiation factor IF3 [53].

Resolution increase was also obtained by treating crystals of LDL receptor extracellular domain with a somewhat smaller heteropolytungstate cluster, namely (Na₅P₂W₁₇O₆₅) [83]. It appears

Fig. 2. (a) Typical heteropolytungstate interactions in both T30S and the LDL receptor extracellular domain. Note the similarity of the cluster “nests” created in the two systems. Also common is the high density of the tungsten clusters, which frequently appear very close to each other. (b) Examples for conformational alterations induced by the cluster binding in two r-proteins: S2 and S18. For comparison the structures of the same proteins in the non-tungstenated T30S [3] are also shown (in gold) in all the heteropolytungstate clusters are shown as groups of 12 [83] or 18 [2] red balls, according to the number of the W atoms in the respective cluster 9 (Na₅P₂W₁₇O₆₅ and (NH₄)₆(P₂W₁₈O₆₂)14H₂O). The LDL receptor extracellular domain is shown in metal blue. R-proteins S2 and S18 are shown in green in the tungstenated T30S [2] and in gold in the non-tungstenated T30S [3]. Amino acid numbering for proteins of T30S is according to E. coli. In items showing highly dense regions, the numbering was removed, for clarity. (b and c) show the structures of proteins S2 (b) and S18 (c) within the tungstenated [2] and non-tungstenated [3] T30S crystals. For both the main chain is shown (in green and gold, respectively). Note the marked difference in the conformation of the termini of protein S2. Also, note that all atoms of protein S18 are resolved in the tungstenated crystal, including those embracing the cluster, whereas over a dozen aminoacids are disordered in the non-tungstenated crystal. The all-atom presentation is also shown, for highlighting typical “nest” architecture.
that despite the significant differences between these two systems, namely a giant riboprotein complex vs. a single protein enzyme, both systems are utilizing comparable interactions in a similar mechanism, namely exploiting crystallographic symmetry for the trapping a specific conformation (Figs. 2 and 3). In the case of the W18 tungstenated T30S, alongside the improvement of the internal order, individual W atoms could be resolved and therefore all bound 252 W atoms, the 868 oxygens and 28 phosphorous atoms in the 14 bound clusters could be efficiently used for phasing [2]. In contrast, in studies performed independently on T30S crystals obtained under the same conditions, the related compound that was used for phasing, $\text{Li}_10(\text{P}_6\text{W}_{17}\text{O}_{61})$, led to reduction rather than increase of the resolution [82].

An additional metal compound that yielded a similar increase in resolution of crystals of the small subunit is Os-hexamine chloride [82]. This compound has been also used for improving the order of other RNA crystals [25,84], but contrary to the heteropolytungstates that bind to the surface and/or to flexible extension, loops and tails of proteins [2,83], Os-hexamine chloride interacts with RNA chains in a fashion that may increase their rigidity.

5. Conclusions

As an ion, tungsten does not exhibit exceptional affinity to proteins. In contrast, compounds containing negatively charged tungstate ions exhibit outstanding affinity to proteins, so that dense binding of a few clusters in close proximity is rather common (Figs. 2 and 3). There is a preference of the tungstate clusters to bind to positively charged side chains (i.e. lysines and arginines), but interactions with alamines, glutamines and leucines were also detected (Fig. 2). A marked tendency of long protein stretches to form multi-interactions “nests” that can embrace clusters has been observed in T30S as well as in the LDL receptor extracellular domain, which also packs as a dimer around a 2-fold symmetry axis and appears to be stabilized by the tungsten cluster [83] (Fig. 3). As the binding of W18 to protein S18 created a similar “nest” for accommodating the heteropolytungstate cluster, this mode of interactions represents a common trait. Therefore it is conceivable that the polymetalates that serve as therapeutical agents (e.g. [85]) including providing anti-tumor activity [86] interfering with virus replication by inhibiting viral DNA and RNA polymerases [87,88] interact with their target proteins in a similar manner.

Finally, we would like to note that this study gives us a great pleasure, as it combines the determination of the high resolution structure of the ribosome with the work of one of our most distinguished mentors, the late F. Albert Cotton, who dedicated over 5 decades of his life to tungsten and similar metals [89,90].

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