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Section a Physics, Physical Chemistry, Cosmic Physics

> Section b Inorganic and Organic Chemistry

133

135

137

138

140

143

150

158

. .

Contents

1

11

20

46

49

57

93

97

101

125

Contents of Number 1/2

Original Communications

H. Zehner, E. Westhof, W. Flossmann, and A. Müller, Formation of H-Addition Radicals in Adenine Derivatives: Part II

U. F. Thomanek, F. Parak, and B. Wintergerst, The Active Center of Methemoglobin Hb(H₂O) Investigated by Mössbauer and Susceptibility Experiments . U. P. Fringeli, The Structure of Lipids and Proteins Studied by Attenuated Total Reflection (ATR) Infrared Spectroscopy. II. Oriented Layers of a Homologous Series: Phosphatidylethanolamine to Phosphatidylcholine

W. Steglich, A. Thilmann, H. Besl, and A. Bresinsky, Pigments of Fungi, 29. 2,5-Diarylcyclopentane-1,3diones from Chamonixia caespitosa (Basidiomycetes) (In German)

B. V. Burger, Maritha le Roux, C. F. Garbers, H. S. C. Spies, R. C. Bigalke, K. G. R. Pachler, P. L. Wessels, V. Christ, and K. H. Maurer, Studies on Mammalian Pheromones, II. Further Compounds from the Pedal Gland of the Bontebok (Damaliscus dorcas dorcas)

H. Röper, Analytical Investigations of the Defensive Secretion from Peripatopsis moseleyi (Onychophora) (In German)

H. Röper and K. Heyns, Trace Analysis of p-Benzoquinone and Hydroquinone Derivatives by Gas-Liquid Chromatography and Gas-Liquid Chromatography/Mass-Spectrometry. Identification of Defensive Secretion Components from European Julids (In German) . .

H. Schiechl, Preparative Isolation of Protein III of the Human Erythrocyte Membrane (In German) . .

O. Oster and G. Buchlow, Purification of Histone F3 by Covalent Chromatography H.-J. Lach and P. Böger, Isolation and Some Molecular

Properties of Plastidic Algal Cytochrome b-559 W. Trowitzsch and H. Sahm, On Amino Acid Antago-

- nists: β -Diketoesters and Their Corresponding γ -Enolethers (In German) .
- G. Dietz, Chr. Woenckhaus, R. Jaenicke, and I. Schuster. Modification of Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate Dehydrogenase from Rabbit Skeletal Muscle by [3-(3-Bromoacetylpyridinio)-propyl]-Adenosine Pyrophosphate (In German)
- R. K. Sinha, P. Talapatra, A. Mitra, and S. Mazumdar, Renaturation of Alkali-Denatured T7 DNA Molecules Complexed with Ethidium Bromide H. W. Heger and H. W. Peter, Effects of Phospholipids in the Action of Acetyl-CoA Carboxylase from Rat Liver F. J. Fehrenbach and H. Eibl, Interaction of Streptolysin-O with Natural and Artificial Membranes . . . I. Fry, G. Papageorgiou, E. Tel-Or, and L. Packer, Reconstitution of a System for H, Evolution with Chloro-
- 110 plasts, Ferredoxin, and Hydrogenase G. H. Schmid, H. List, and A. Radunz, Inhibition of Photosystem II-Reactions in Blue-Green Algae by the 118 Antisera to Lutein and Neoxanthin

.

K. G. Götz and S. Götz, Normal Development of the

Fruitfly Drosophila in VLF Magnetic Fields (In Ger-

man)

and Its Adsorption by Glassware and Plastics K.-U. Sewe and R. Reich, The Effects of Molecular

Polarization on the Electrochromisms of Carotenoids. 61 II. Lutein-Chlorophyll Complexes: The Origin of the Field-Indicating Absorption-Change at 520 nm in the

67 Membranes of Photosynthesis 161 H.-U. Meisch, J. A. Schmitt, and W. Reinle, Heavy

D. W. Lübbers, N. Opitz, P. P. Speiser, and H. J. Bis-

son, Nanoencapsulated Fluorescence Indicator Mole-

cules Measuring pH and pO₂ Down to Submicroscopi-

cal Regions on the Basis of the Optode-Principle . .

J. G. R. Elferink, Fluorescence and Membrane-Action

W. Ch. Choi and W. Nagl, Ribosome Crystals in the

B. Sprey, G. Gliem, and A. G. S. Jánossy, Changes in

the Iron and Phosphorus Content of Stroma Inclusions

during Etioplast-Chloroplast Development in Nicotiana

K. Burger and R. Süßmuth, Prophage Induction by

Alkylating Ethyl Methylaminosulfonate

Contents of Number 3/4

K. Atallah, P. Rauschenbach, H. Simon, F. Berthold,

and W. Kolbe, Determination of the Liquid Scintil-

lation Counting Efficiency of ³H and/or ¹⁴C Labelled

Samples Independently of the Degree of Colour and/or

J. Rieser, A. Höckendorf, G. Abou-Elenien, and K.

Wallenfels, Chemical and Biochemical Characterization

of a-Benzyl-a-bromo-malononitrile (BBMD) as Oxi-

Ch. Giese, K. D. Spindler, and H. Emmerich, The Solu-

bility of Insect Juvenile Hormone in Aqueous Solutions

Oocyte of Gerris najas (Heteroptera)

- 72 Metals in Higher Fungi. Cadmium, Zinc, and Copper (In German) 172. . . . 75
- Y. Solberg, Studies on the Chemistry of Lichens, XVI. Chemical Investigation of the Lichen Species Alectoria ochroleuca, Stereocaulon vesuvianum var. pulvinatum 78
- 182 and Icmadophila ericedorum . . H. Kneifel, I. Rolle, and B. Paschold, Amines of Unicellular Green Algae, III. Identification of Homologues of Spermidine in the Green Alga Scenedesmus acutus 276-3a (In German) 190 85
 - H. P. Siebertz and E. Heinz, Labelling Experiments on the Origin of Hexa- and Octa-decatrienoic Acids in 193 Galactolipids from Leaves
 - M. Ilyas, O. Seligmann, and H. Wagner, Biflavones from the Leaves of Araucaria rulei F. Muell. and a
 - Survey on Biflavanoids of the Araucaria Genus . . 206 A. Geller and J. Berghäuser, The Preparation of Three
 - Dehydrogenases and Two Kinases from Pig Heart by 210 a Single Procedure (In German) . . . A. Schmidt, Protein-Catalyzed Isotopic Exchange Re-219
 - action between Cysteine and Sulfide in Spinach Leaves G. F. Wildner and J. Henkel, Temperature Dependent Conformation Changes of Ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate Carboxylase Studied by the Use of 1-Anilino-8-naph-226 thalene Sulfonate
 - G. Kahl and M. Wechselberger, Activation of Chromatin-Bound DNA-Dependent RNA Polymerase (E.C. 2.7.7.6) in Plant Storage Tissue Slices 229

Notes

of Tetracaine .

Original Communications

Chemical Quenching

dizing Agent (In German)

H. K. Lichtenthaler and H. K. Kleudgen, Effect of the Herbicide San 6706 on Biosynthesis of Photosynthetic Pigments and Prenylquinones in <i>Raphanus</i> and in	0.04	H. Harms, W. Dehnen, and W. Mönch, Benzo(a)pyrene Metabolites Formed by Plant Cells H. Kayser, Metabolites of β , β -Carotene in the Stick	321
Hordeum Seedlings	236	Insect, Carausius morosus Br.: Compounds with 2-One and 3,4-Didehydro-2-one Structure	327
in Man	241	Histidine Residues of Aminoacylase by Photooxidation and by Reaction with Diethylpyrocarbonate W. Kördel and F. Schneider, Renal Aminoacylase, a	337
gulation and Characterization of L-Serine: Pyruvate Aminotransferase in Rat Liver Cytosol and Mitochon- dria	249	Zinc Enzyme	342
K. Kaminski, Photosynthetic Control in Chloroplasts Suspensions Frozen in Liquid Nitrogen in the Presence of Glycerol	254	in the Blue-Green Alga Anacystis nidulans: Evidence for the Involvement of a Thylakoid-Bound L-Amino Acid Oxidase	345
D. Hoffmann, R. Thauer, and A. Trebst, Photosynthe- tic Hydrogen Evolution by Spinach Chloroplasts Coupled to a <i>Clostridium</i> Hydrogenase	257	R. Lüderitz and JH. Klemme, Isolation and Charac- terization of a Membrane-Bound Pyruvate Dehydro- genase Complex from the Phototrophic Bacterium	
Chr. Giersch, A Kinetic Model for Translocators in the Chloroplast Envelope as an Element of Computersimu- lation of the Dark Reaction of Photosynthesis	263	Rhodospirillum rubrum (In German)	351
G. H. Schmid, A. Radunz, and W. Menke, Localization and Function of Cytochrome f in the Thylakoid Mem- brane	271	sides. I. Phrenosine at 23 °C and 66 °C H. Bleuel, G. Wiedner, and D. Schubert, Variability of Conductivity Changes in Black Phosphatidylserine	362
FU. Beil, D. von Chak, W. Hasselbach, and HH. Weber, Competition between Oxalate and Phosphate during Active Calcium Accumulation by Sarcoplasmic		Membranes Induced by Proteins from Erythrocyte Membranes	375
Vesicles	281	R. T. C. Huang,, Transfer of Glycolipid between Mem- branes of Tissue Culture Cells, Using Dansylcerebro- side as a Model	379
H. Stocker and H. Wanner, Long Chain Alkanes and Alcohols from the Leaf Waxes of Different <i>Coffea</i> Spe- cies (In German)	288	H. Craubner, F. Koenig, and G. H. Schmid, Molecular Weight and the Dodecyl Sulphate Binding of a Thyla- koid Membrane Polypeptide Involved in a Reaction on the Oxygen-Evolving Side of Photosystem II	384
D. J. Robeson and J. B. Harborne, Pisatin as a Major Phytolexin in <i>Lathyrus</i>	289 290	G. Harnischfeger and R. Schopf, A Fluorescence Meth- od for Measuring the Retention of Coupling Factor (CF_1) in Reconstitution Experiments of Photophos- phorylation	392
Y. Solberg, Studies on the Chemistry of Lichens, XV. New Synthetic Nitrogen-Derivatives of Pulvinic Acid. G. Seibert, B. Schöbel, and R. K. Zahn, The Separa- tion of High and Low Molecular Weight RNA by Pre- cipitchicar with N Cottal NN N trimethed armonium	292	phorylation R. Schopf and G. Harnischfeger, Studies on the Reten- tion of CF_1 with or without Induced ATPase Activity by Pyrophosphate Treated Thylakoids and Its Relation to the Regeneration of Photophosphorylation	398
cipitation with N-Cetyl-N,N,N-trimethyl-ammonium- bromide	294	O. Schmut, H. Katschnig, and M. Zirm, Investigations of Body Fluids with Low Protein Content by the Com- bination of Micro-Disc-Electrophoresis and Electro-	
tiana tabacum L. var. Xanthi	297	immunodiffusion (In German)	405 409
(BLV)	301	S. Erhan, L. D. Greller, and B. Rasco, Evolution of the Transfer RNA Molecule	413
Cobitidae) (In German)	305	JP. Liautard, D. Tromm, and K. Köhler, Isolation of Messenger Ribonucleoproteins from HeLa Cells by Affinity Chromatography on Poly (U) Sepharose	419
scurus (GUENTHER, 1861 (Teleostei, Ophicephali- dae) (In German) L.J. Adam, H. Dahmen, and P. Fastrich, Oscillatory	307	A. R. Trim, J. R. O. Dawson, P. E. Dickerson, F. Sakai, J. W. Watts, W. Hirst, and R. A. Cox, A Method for the Purification of Large Quantities of Bio-	
Nervous Response and Transient Vibration (Ear of <i>Locusta migratoria</i> Acrididae, Insecta) J. Haupt, Preliminary Report on the Mating Behaviour of the Primitive Spider <i>Heptathela kimurai</i> (Kishida)	309	logically Active Ribonucleic Acid Components from Cowpea Chlorotic Mottle Virus, a Multicomponent Plant Virus	424
(Araneae, Liphistiomorphae)	312	Nucleic Acid, XII. Ca^{2+} or Ba^{2+} -Facilitated Transfection of Cell Envelope Mutants	429
Contents of Number 5/6 Original Communications		P. Mascheck, Kl. Scheller, and P. Karlson, Changes in Gene Expression during Larval Development of <i>Calliphora vicina</i> Induced by Ecdysterone	434

.

Notes

P. Fähnrich and L. Chenaux, Studies on Carotenoids		of
in Gametangia and Spores of Allomyces arbuscula		К.
(In German)	442	Li
Mohamed A. El-Ansari, Moheb S. Ishak, Ahmed A.		gr
Amed, and Nabiel A. M. Saleh, Flavonol Glycosides of		Ŵ
Carya pecan and Casuarina equisetifolia	444	In
J. L. Ingham and P. M. Dewick, Isoflavonoid Phyto-		sc
alexins from Leaves of Trifolium arvense	446	H.
J. L. Ingham, Medicarpin as a Phytoalexin of the		of
Genus Melilotus	449	tu
K. Dettner and G. Schwinger, High 3-Indoleacetic Acid-		in
and Phenylacetic Acid Concentrations in the Pygi-		ph
dial Glands of Water Beetles (Ditiscidae) (In German)	453	D.
PJ. Enzmann and H. Rehberg, The Structural Com-		tic
ponents of Hog Cholera Virus	456	tre
H. Schwarz, HJ. Thiel, and W. Schäfer, Spontaneous		tic
Leukemia of AKR Mice. Successful Passive Immuni-		C.
zation with Goat Antibodies against Isolated Glyco-		St
protein gp71 of Friend Leukemia Virus (In German)	459	Bi
F. Schlecht, Electron-Microscope Study of the Peritro-		Α.
phic Membrane in Phyllopoda (Crustacea) (In Ger-		Μ
man)	462	th
G. Wiedenmann, Weak and Strong Phase Shifting in		R
the Activity Rhythm of Leucophaea maderae (Bla-		co
beridae) after Light Pulses of High Intensity	464	G
Kl. Vogt, Ray Path and Reflection Mechanism in Cray-		to
fish Eyes	466	C
R. Wehner and I. Flatt, Visual Fixation in Freely Fly-		Ċ
ing Bees \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots	469	K
		SV

Contents of Number 7/8

Original Communications

M. Wenzel, R. Herken, and W. Klose, Biochemistry of Metallocenes, II. Organ-Distribution and Thymus Affinity of Cinnamoyl-[¹⁰³Ru]Ruthenocene (In German) J. Kopoldová and Št. Hrnčíř, Gamma-Radiolysis of 473 Aqueous Solution of Histidine 482 B. Czochralska, H. Fritsche, and D. Shugar, Photochemically Reversible Dimer Electroreduction Product of 2-Oxopurine 488 • • E. Wünsch, G. Wendlberger, A. Hallet, E. Jaeger, S. Knof, L. Moroder, R. Scharf, I. Schmidt, P. Thamm, and L. Wilschowitz, Total Synthesis of Human Big Gastrin I and the 32-Leucine Analogue (Preliminary Communication) (In German) 495 F. Parak, U. F. Thomanek, D. Bade, and B. Wintergerst, The Orientation of the Electric Field Gradient 507 Tensor in CO-Liganded Myoglobin . H. Scheer and W. Kufer, Studies on Plant Bile Pigments, IV: Conformational Studies on C-Phycocyanin from Spirulina platensis 513 W. Steglich and L. Zechlin, Pigments of Fungi, XXXII. 3-Methylriboflavine from Panellus serotinus (Agari-520 cales) (In German) P. Renz, R. Wurm, and J. Hörig, Nonenzymatic Transformation of Riboflavin into 5,6-Dimethylbenzimidazole 523 H. Lüdemann and E. Westhof, Conformations of the Nucleoside Analogs Formycin, 2-Azaadenosine, and 528 A. Cascino, Sucrose Gradient Analysis: Computer Simulation and Measurement of the Parameters Involved in the Sedimentation of DNA Molecules 539 A. Fink and G. Hotz, Immunological Reaction of UV-Induced Radiation Damage in Coliphage DNA . . 544

R. Jeck, The Properties of $[\omega \cdot (3 \cdot Acetylpyridinio) \cdot n \cdot$	
alkyl]Adenosine Pyrophosphates, Structural Analogs	
of the Coenzyme NAD (In German)	550
K. Sauber, R. Müller, E. Keller, J. Eberspächer, and F.	
Lingens, Degradation of Antipyrin by Pyrazon-De-	
grading Bacteria (In German)	557
W. Kuhnz and H. Rembold, Application of Lathanide	
Induced Shifts in Proton Magnetic Resonance Spectro-	
scopy of Juvenile Hormones	563
H. B. Leising and D. O. Schachtschabel, Stimulation	
of Tyrosinase Activity and Melanin Formation of Cul-	
tured Melanoma Cells by Serum Deprivation Alone or	
in Combination with Dibutyryl Cyclic AMP and Theo-	
phylline	567
phylline	
tion and the Crystal Structure of Lipids I. An Elec-	
tron Diffraction Study of Tripalmitin and Conforma-	
tionally Fixed Analogs	573
C. Gebhardt, H. Gruler, and E. Sackmann, On Domain	
Structure and Local Curvature in Lipid Bilayers and	
Biological Membranes	581
A. Radunz, Binding of Antibodies onto the Thylakoid	
Membrane. II. Distribution of Lipids and Proteins at	
the Outer Surface of the Thylakoid Membrane	597
R. Schopf, The Degree of CF ₁ Release and the Re-	
constituting Capacity of the Depleted Membranes	600
G. Vierke and P. Struckmeier, Binding of Copper(II)	
to Proteins of the Photosynthetic Membrane and its	
Correlation with Inhibition of Electron Transport in	
Class II Chloroplasts of Spinach	605
KP. Heise and G. Krapf, Comparison of Lipid Bio-	
synthesis of Normal and Dark Kept Spinach Leaves in	
Photosynthetically Active Light	611
S. Saphon and A. R. Crofts, Protolytic Reactions in	
Photosystem II: a New Model for the Release of Pro-	
tons Accompanying the Photooxidation of Water	617
M. Saleemuddin, U. Zimmermann, and F. Schneeweiß,	
Preparation of Human Erythrocyte Ghosts in Isotonic	
Solution: Haemoglobin Content and Polypeptide Com-	
position	627
U. Yamaguchi-Koll, K. J. Wiegers, and R. Drzeniek,	
Dissociation and Reassociation of Poliovirus, II. Pro-	
tein Components Obtained by Urea Treatment of the	
Virus Particle	632
G. S. Dogra, G. M. Ulrich, and H. Rembold, A Com-	
parative Study of the Endocrine System of the Honey	<u> </u>
Bee Larvae under Normal and Experimental Conditions	637

Notes

L. Sportelli, H. Neubacher, and W. Lohmann, On the	
Influence of Aromatic Residues on the Interaction of	
Copper (II) with Small Peptides Containing Aromatic	
Amino Acids: ESR and Optical Studies	643
J. Marañon and O. M. Sorarrain, The Adenine and	
Thymine Molecules. Some Excited Singlet and Triplet	
Levels of the Normal and Tautomeric Forms	647
H. Esterbauer and E. Schwarzl, Aerobic Oxidation of	
p-Hydroquinone by Horse Radish Peroxidase in the	
Presence of a Thiol and $MnCl_2$	650
K. Bürcky, Gibberellin Activity of Different Antheridio-	
genes in the Dwarf Pea Bioassay (In German)	652
G. Reimer and D. Drahovsky, Chromosomal Structures	
of Pseudomonas testosteroni. IV. Effect of Testo-	
sterone on RNA-Synthesis (In German)	654
R. T. C. Huang, Artificial Phospholipid and Glyco-	
lipid Particles, Visualization of Their Structure by	
Fluorescence Markers and Some Biological Properties	
Expressed by These Particles	656

v

T. M. Maida, Microvillar C	Prientation in	the Re	tina of	
a Pierid Butterfly				660
W. C. Gordon, Microvillar	Orientation	in the	Retina	
of the Nymphalid Butterfly				662

Contents of Number 9/10

Original Communications

M. A. Haleem and K. D. Parker, Studies on the Heli-665 by Parallel and Antiparallel Layers in Disordered Stacking and Statistical Layer Shifts for α -Chitin . 669 D. A. Adamiak, W. Saenger, R. Kinas, and W. J. Stec, X-Ray-Diffraction Study and Determination of Absolute Configuration of the Anticancer Drug S(-)-Cyclophosphamide (Endoxan, Cytoxan, NSC-26271). H. Lotter, A. Jones, and M. Sturm, X-Ray Structure 672 Analysis of Mezerein from Daphne mezereum L. (In German) 678 H. E. Marcolin, R. Reschke, and A. Trautwein, Investigation of the Recombination Kinetic of Photodissoziated Myoglobin-CO at Low Temperatures by Mössbauer Spectroscopy (In German) 683 H. Röper and K. Heyns, On the Problem of Dimethylnitrosamine Formation from Tetracycline-Derivatives by Nitrosation Reaction in Acidic Medium (In German) 696 G. Grimmer and H. Böhnke, Investigation on Drilling Cores of Sediments of Lake Constance. I. Profiles of the Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (In German) 703 J. A. Schmitt, H.-U. Meisch, and W. Reinle, Heavy Metals in Higher Fungi, II. Manganese and Iron (In 712 German) H. Rimpler and I. Christiansen, Tectograndinol, a New Diterpene from Tectona grandis L. fil. (In German) 724 T. Hirata and T. Suga, Biologically Active Constituents of Leaves and Roots of Aloe arborescens var. 731 natalensis . . . J. Jacob and U. Green, Composition of the Ventral Gland-Pad Sebum from the Mongolian Gerbil, Meriones unguiculatus 735 A. Keim, Electrophoretic Analyses of the Crop Contents of Helobdella stagnalis (L.) (Hirudinea) . . . 739 R. Jonak, Ch. M. Lapière, A. Meinel, H. Nemetschek-Gansler, Th. Nemetschek, and H. Riedl, Structure and Mechanical Propertiel of Dermatosparactic Collagen 743 (In German) Ch. Gähwiller, C. von Planta, D. Schmidt, and H. Steffen, Size, Structure, and Dynamics of Bile Salt/Leci-748 thin Mixed Micelles (In German) L. Bornmann and B. Hess, Interaction of Cibacron 756 Dyes with Dehydrogenases and Kinases . . . A. M. Relimpio, Structure and Anticholinesterase Activity of Series of Ethyl Substituted Phenyl Methylphos-760 nhonates M. H. Saylor and R. L. Mansell, Hydroxycinnamoyl: Coenzyme A Transferase Involved in the Biosynthesis of Kaempferol-3-(p-coumaroyl Triglucoside) in Pisum 765 sativum J. Frey, W. Kördel, and F. Schneider, The Reaction of Aminoacylase with Chloromethylketone Analogs of 769 Amino Acids H.-H. Hamm and W. Seubert †, On the Mechanism of Inactivation and ATP-Dependent Reactivation of 777 Rat Liver Tyrosine Aminotransferase . . . K. Okabe, Properties of Ribulose Diphosphate Carboxylase/Oxygenase in the Tobacco Aurea Mutant Su/ 781

J. Köhrle, J. Lüstorff, and E. Schlimme, P ¹ , P ⁵ -Bis-(5'- adenosyl) pentaphosphate: Is this Adenylate Kinase In-	
hibitor Substrate for Mitochondrial Processes? 78	86
J. D. Schwenn and B. Depka, Assimilatory Sulfate Re-	
duction by Chloroplasts: The Regulatory Influence of	
	92
C. Buschmann and H. K. Lichtenthaler, Hill-Activity	
and P700 Concentration of Chloroplasts Isolated from	
Radish Seedlings Treated with Indoleacetic Acid,	
	98
B. Huchzermeyer and H. Strotmann, Acid/Base-Induced	
Exchange of Adenic Nucleotides on Chloroplast Cou-	
	03
S. Saphon and A. R. Crofts, The H^+/e Ratio in	00
	10
F. Koenig, W. Menke, A. Radunz, and G. H. Schmid,	10
Localization and Functional Characterization of Three	
Thylakoid Membrane Polypeptides of the Molecular	
	17
B. Rauch, D. v. Chak, and W. Hasselbach, Phosphory-	
lation by Inorganic Phosphate of Sarcoplasmic Mem-	
	28
H. K. Samanta and S. B. Bhattacharjee, Thymineless	
	35
H. A. B. Linke, Growth Inhibition of Glucose-Grown	00
	39
G. F. Grossi, G. Cesareni, and F. Liello, Development	•••
of Phage Populations in a Bacterial Culture: a Mathe-	
	44
R. Figueroa, A. Sepúlveda, M. A. Sato, and J. Tohá,	••
	50
H. Stieve, M. Bruns, and H. Gaube, Ability to Light-	••
Induced Conductance Change of Arthropod Visual	
Cell Membrane, Indirectly Depending on Membrane	
Potential, during Depolarization by External Potas-	
	55
	-

Notes

J. Marañon and O. M. Sorarrain, The Tautomeric Con-	
formers for the Molecules of Guanine and Cytosine.	
Some Remarks about Their Stability	870
D. A. Alizade and K. Gaede, Chirality of the Hydrogen	
Transfer to NAD Catalyzed by (3R) Hydroxybutyrate	
Dehydrogenase from Pseudomonas lemoignei	874
H. J. Lach and P. Böger, Some Properties of Plastidic	
Cytochrome b-563	877
H. E. A. Schenk and J. Hanf, Thioacylamides and	
Thioacylureas as Inhibitors of Photosystem II (In	
German)	880
HJ. Thiel, C. Bergholz, H. Beug, F. Deinhardt, H.	
Schwarz, and W. Schäfer, Isolation of the Major Glyco-	
protein (gp70) of Simian Sarcoma Virus (SSV-1/	
SSAV-1) in Preparative Quantities	884
R. C. Hardie, Electrophysiological Properties of R7	
and R8 in Dipteran Retina	887

Contents of Number 11/12

Original Communications

V. N. Babin, E. B. Zavelovich, and Yu. A. Belousov,	
The Effect of Water on Proton Transfer in Pyrazole .	891
R. Stolarski, M. Remin, and D. Shugar, Studies on	
Prototropic Tautomerism in Neutral and Monoanionic	
Forms of Pyrimidines by Nuclear Magnetic Resonance	
Spectroscopy	894
H. H. Mantsch and O. Bârzu, Anomalous Base-Stacking	
of the N ₁ -Oxide of AMP	901

HJ. Breter, The Quantitative Determination of Me- tabolites of 6-Mercaptopurine in Biological Materials. IV. An Improved Separation Method for Twentytwo	
Compounds Related to Purine and 6-Thiopurine Me- tabolism Using High-Pressure Liquid Cation-Exchange	
Chromatography	905
H. J. Schmidt, U. Schaum, and J. P. Pichotka, The Influence of Mode and Intensity of Homogenization on the Absolute Value and Stability of Oxygen Consump-	
tion of Guinea Pig Liver Homogenates (In German) .	908
G. Müller, Pollution Research on Dated Sediment Cores from Lake Constance. II. Historical Evolution of Heavy Metals — Relationship to the Evolution of	
Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (In German) .	913
G. Müller, Pollution Research on Dated Sediment Cores from Lake Constance. III. Historical Evolution of N- and P-Compounds — Relationship to the Development	
of Heavy Metals and Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocar-	000
bons (In German)	920
sium Specific Ionophore from Streptococcus faecalis .	926
G. Metz, R. Marx, and K. H. Röhm, The Quaternary	
Structure of Yeast Aminopeptidase I. 1. Molecular	000
Forms and Subunit Size	929
Structure of Yeast Aminopeptidase I. 2. Geometric	
Arrangement of Subunits	938
S. Postius and F. Schneider, Multiple Effects of Amo-	
barbital on Ehrlich Ascites Tumor Cells. Inhibition of Pyruvate Dehydrogenase	944
W. Tinschert and L. Träger, Evidence for an 4-Ene-3-	/11
oxosteroid-5 α -reductase and Δ^4 - Δ^5 -Ketosteroid Isomer-	
ase Activity in Extracts of Streptomyces hydrogenans	949
K. Alef and JH. Klemme, Characterization of a Sol-	
uble NADH-Independent Nitrate Reductase from the Photosynthetic Bacterium Rhodopseudomonas capsu-	
1 4	954
G. Muckle and W. Rüdiger, Chromophore Content of	
C-Phycoerythrin from Various Cyanobacteria	957
G. Renger and G. H. Schmid, On the Correlation be- tween the Amplitude of the Electrochromic Absorption	
Changes and the Number of Bulk Pigments	963
G. F. W. Searle, A Chloroplast Photosystem 2 Reac-	
tion Resistant to Salicylaldoxime	968

J. Kiefer and B. Laske, Protein Synthesis and Amino Acid Pools in Irradiated Yeast Cells	973
Rösel, Sensory Efficacy of Alkyl-Branched Pheromone	
Analogues in Noctuid and Tortricid Lepidoptera	979
W. Hasselbach and A. Migala, Calcium Gradient De-	
pendent Pyrophosphate Formation by Sarcoplasmic	
Vesicles	992
G. Wiedner, G. Wilhelm, G. Jureit, and Z. Bojadžijev,	
Calcification of a Native Collagen Membrane	997
S. Erhan, Origins of the First Cell. A New Model for	
the Spontaneous Formation of the First Living Cell	
Based on a Novel Approach	1003

Notes

]]	H. W. Ludwig, 99.26 per cent Water Content in the Fresh-Water Medusa <i>Craspedacusta sowerbii</i> E. Wollenweber, Chalcones and Dihydrochalcones as Constituents of Fern Farina (Genera <i>Cheilanthes</i> and	1011
1	Notholaena) (In German)	1013
]	G. J. Niemann, Flavonoids and Related Compounds in Leaves of Pinaceae. II. <i>Cedrus atlantica</i> c. v. Glauca . J. L. Ingham, Phytoalexins of Hyacinth Bean (Lablab	1015
,	niger)	1018
] 2 1]	M. Dizdaroglu, D. Schulte-Frohlinde, and C. v. Sonntag, y-Radiolyses of DNA in Oxygenated Aqueous Solu- tion. Structure of an Alkali-Labile Site H. C. Heinrich, J. Brüggemann, E. E. Gabbe, M. Glä- ser, F. Icagic, and E. Pape, Correlation between Diag-	
1]	nostic ⁴⁹ Fe ⁵⁺ -Absorption and Serum Ferritin Concentra- tion in Man M. Popescu, J. Löhler, and F. Lehmann-Grube, Infec-	1023
]	tious Lymphocytes in Mice Persistently Infected with Lymphocytic Choriomeningitis Virus G. Erler and U. Thurm, A Simplified Method for Re- cording Receptorpotentials and Nervous Impulses of	1026
	Insect Epidermal Mechanoreceptors (In German)	1029
-	Erratum	1031
5	Subject Index	1033
	Authors Index	1053

Conformational Studies on C-Phycocyanin from Spirulina platensis

Hugo Scheer and Werner Kufer

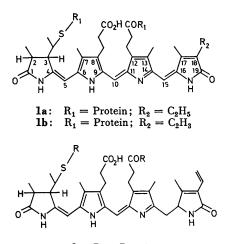
Institut für Botanik, Universität München

(Z. Naturforsch. 32 c, 513-519 [1977]; received April 25, 1977)

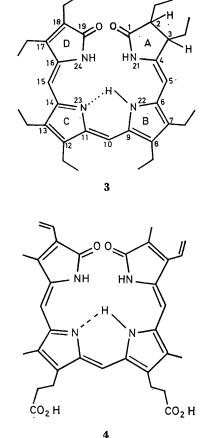
Bile Pigments, Protein Interaction, Conformation, Denaturation

The chromophore-protein interactions of C-phycocyanin (C-PC) from Spirulina platensis have been studied by following the partial and complete denaturation with UV-Vis spectroscopy. From comparison with published MO calculations, an elongated conformation of the chromophore is suggested for native C-PC, a cyclic one for denatured C-PC. By means of partial denaturation, a stepwise unfolding of the protein has been demonstrated. The presence of at least two sets of spectroscopically different chromophores is suggested from the partial denaturation and low temperature experiments.

Phycocyanins and phycoerythrins are photosynthetic light harvesting pigments of blue-green, red and cryptophytan algae, which contain bile-pigment chromophores covalently bound to proteins². The absorption of the various types of these pigments cover the spectral range between about 500 and 670 nm practically completely. In spite of this spectral variety, however, the phycobiliproteins contain with only few exceptions just two chemically distinct chromophores: the blue phycocyanobilin (1a) and the red phycoerythrobilin (2)^{*, 2, 3}. Uninfluenced by the protein, the free bases of the two chromo-



2: R = Protein



^t The terms phycocyanobilin and phycoerythrobilin are used for compounds with the molecular structure of **la** and **2**, which are characterized by a substituted ethylgroup at C-3. For a critical discussion, see ref. 2.

Reprint requests should be sent to Dr. Hugo Scheer, Institut für Botanik, Menzinger Straße 67, D-800 München 19. phores absorb around 600 and 530 nm, respectively, in the visible spectral region, and around 350 and 320 nm in the near UV. The spectra of the free chromophores are quite dissimilar to those of the native pigments, too, in terms of intensity and shape of the two main absorption bands (vide infra), and of their fluorescence. The specific chromophoreprotein interactions which underly these profound optical changes are hitherto only little understood.

These interactions render the chromophore an intrinsic and sensitive indicator for the state of the biliproteins. Qualitatively, this built-in probe has been widely used to test any alterations of biliproteins during their isolation and purification. Brown et al.⁴ have demonstrated, that the renaturation of allophycocyanin subunits, depending on the buffer system used, yields pigments absorbing at either 650 nm (like allophycocyanin) or 620 nm (like C-PC). The influence of protein aggregation and isotope substitution on the chromophore absorption has been studied by several groups ^{2, 3, 5-9}. The rearrangement of the protein induced by the initial photochemical reaction of the chromophore is also believed to be responsible for the sequence of intermediates identified during the phytochrome (1b = P_r) interconversions ^{10, 11}.

The influence of the protein moiety in biliproteins can be abolished completely by denaturation with 8 M urea, 6 M guanidinium chloride, or heat. Spectral comparison of the thus exposed chromophores with free bile pigments of known structure has been widely used as a sensitive and very mild method to obtain structural information on biliproteins which are less accessible or unstable ^{12, 13}.

To obtain more detailed information on the chromophore-protein interaction, we have studied by UV-Vis spectroscopy the controlled (partial) denaturation and renaturation of C-phycocyanin (C-PC) from Spirulina platensis. To exclude aggregation effects, these studies were performed under conditions where C-PC is monomeric 5^{-9} . Spectra have been measured in the range between 320 and 700 nm. Thus, spectral changes have not only followed for the long wavelength band of the chromophore, but also for the less studied short wavelength band. The results indicate a stepwise denaturation of C-PC, the presence of at least two chromophore populations, and a predominant influence of the protein via conformational modifications of the flexible bile pigment chromophore.

Materials and Methods

Frozen cells of *Spirulina platensis* (110g) were thawed, and broken in a beaker-type cell mill with

glass beads (350 g, 0.25 mm ϕ). The pigments were extracted twice with sodium phosphate buffer (0.1 M, pH 7.0) containing NaN₃ (10⁻³ M) and EDTA potassium salt (10⁻³ M). The crude extract was freed from chlorophyll by centrifugation for 1 h at 78 000 × g, and the pigments precipitated by 50% saturation with (NH₄)₂SO₄. Purification on Ultrogel AcA22 (LKB, Sweden) and subsequently DEAE cellulose Servacel CM23 (Serva, W. Germany) yielded C-PC with a E_{620}/E_{280} value of 4.1.

Spectra were recorded on a DMR 22 spectrophotometer (Zeiss, Germany) equipped with a pair of cryostats model 600 (Thor, England) and a temperature controller (Kisch, Germany). Gelchromatographic determinations of molecular weights were carried out on thermostated Sephadex G-200 columns $(1.5 \times 60 \text{ cm} \text{ at } 4^{\circ}\text{C}, \text{ and } 2.5 \times 50 \text{ cm} \text{ at})$ 39 °C) calibrated with Dextran blue, catalase, bovine serum albumin, and cytochromec. Sedimentation velocity (S_{20}) determinations were run in a Beckmann E analytical ultracentrifuge (UV analyzer at 350 nm), and corrected for temperature changes, solvent viscosity, solvent density and the partial molar volume of the protein. For the denaturation experiments a stock solution of C-PC in potassium phosphate buffer (0.05 M, pH 7.5) containing NaN₃, EDTA and sodium ascorbate $(5 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M each})$ was prepared. In the case of heat denaturation, a fresh sample ($\sim 50 \ \mu l$) of this solution was added to the prethermostated cell containing 2.0 ml of buffer to yield a final concentration of 0.25×10^{-6} M, and the spectrum followed in time. In the case of urea denaturation, aliquots were added to buffer containing increasing amounts of urea. The low temperature experiments were carried out in a 1:1 buffer:glycerol mixture, the sedimentation experiments in a buffer without ascorbate, and the Sephadex MW determinations in a Tris buffer (0.01 M, pH 7.8) containing KCl (0.1 M), NaN₃ (10⁻³ M) and EDTA potassium salt (10^{-3} M) . All spectroscopic measurements were performed under N₂.

Results

Complete denaturation

The UV-Vis spectral changes of C-PC upon complete denaturation by either heat (Fig. 1) or urea at pH 7.5 * are similar. The intensity (ε_{max}) of the long-wavelength band is decreased by a factor of 4.5, that of the near UV-band is increased by a factor of 2. The red band is shifted by about 20 nm

^{*} For denaturation at different pH values leading to either cations or anions, or denaturation in the presence of Zn²⁺, c. f. ref. 12.

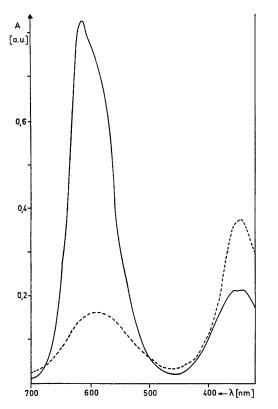


Fig. 1. UV-Vis absorption spectra of C-phycocyanin: — native, at 4 °C and pH 7.5, — heat denatured at 71 °C.

to 600 nm, the near UV-band remains at roughly the same position. The fine structure of both bands is diminished. The long-wavelength band of native C-PC has a pronounced peak at 620 nm, with a broader shoulder to shorter wavelengths (see below), the near UV-band is just resolved into two bands of about equal intensity at 360 and 347 nm. The respective bands in denatured C-PC are considerably broadened. Except for a slight redshift due to the different substituents, the spectrum is similar to that of the free base of the synthetic A-Dihydrobilin $(3)^{1a}$. Like in other bilins, the spectrum probably constitutes but an envelope of various conformers of the flexible bilin chromophore. On this basis, the comparably narrow bands in the native pigments indicate an increased rigidity, and the presence of only few conformers of the tetrapyrrole skeleton. Increased rigidity is evidenced, too, by the strong fluorescence of C-PC **.

However, the spectral changes upon denaturation do not only indicate an increased flexibility of the free bilin chromophore, but also a profound change

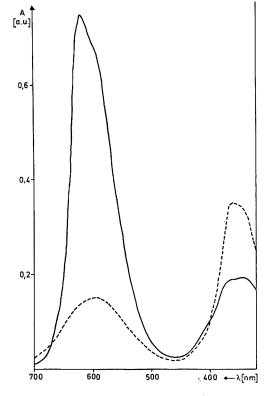


Fig. 2. UV-Vis absorption spectra of C-phycocyanin: — native, solution in sodium phosphate buffer at 4 °C and pH 7.5, —— denatured with 8 M urea.

in the average chromophore conformation. MO calculations of several groups ¹⁴⁻¹⁶ agree that the relative intensity of the two main bands is an indicator for the chromophore conformation. The results predict a weak long-wavelength and a more intense near UV-band for cyclic "porphyrin-type" conformations. This situation is gradually reversed upon stretching the chromophore (c.f. Fig. 3). The trends predicted from these calculations ¹⁵ gain strong support from the recent x-ray analysis of the dimethylester of biliverdin (4)¹⁷. A cyclic "porphyrin-type" structure has been found for 4, and its UV-Vis spectrum is indeed similar to that in Fig. 3 a $(E_{655}/E_{370} \approx 1:4)$. The presence of cyclic conformations in bile pigment solutions, possibly among other conformations, had already been suggested in 1964 by Moscowitz et al.¹⁸ from chiroptical data ***. In the cyclic conformation, the two terminal O-atoms overlap thus rendering the

** This rigidity is a prerequisite, too, for the efficient photoreactivity of Pr. In both cases, the radiationless, energy degrading decay by internal conversion is slowed down sufficiently by conformational fixation.

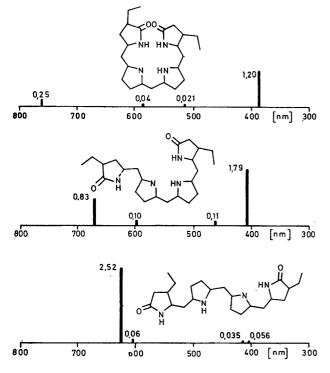


Fig. 3. Calculated oscillator strengths for the biliverdin chromophore in three different conformations: a: cyclic, "porphyrine type", b: semicyclic, c: elongated, "polyene type" (modified from Chae and Song, 1975).

chromophore inherently dissymmetric. The predominance of only one helicality in bilins containing asymmetric α -pyrrole C-atoms then leads to unusually large Cotton effects ****.

Thus, the intensity ratio calculated by Chae and Song ¹⁵ for the cyclic conformation(s) is well supported by experimental evidence. Based on the same calculations, the intensity ratio observed in the spectra of native biliproteins would then suggest the chromophores to be in a linear, polyene-type conformation (Fig. 3 c). The conformation shown in Fig. 3 c is chosen from the set used by Chae and Song ¹⁵ with regard to minimal steric hindrance at

*** "Porphyrin type" structures have been found for tripyrrins, too, both in the crystal ^{19a} and in solution ^{19b}. the β -pyrrolic substituents. Conformations like the ones used in formulas 1 and 2 are sterically much more hindered, but the relief of steric strain by twisting the methine bridges is not expected to change the intensity ratio significantly¹⁴. Although other influences cannot be ruled out, no presently published calculations indicate similar pronounced influences, *e. g.* of electric fields^{16a}. However, these factors may be responsible for the large shifts observed among native biliproteins with the same chromophore 1a.

Partial denaturation

At 4 °C the red absorption band of C-phycocyanin from S. platensis $(0.25 \times 10^{-6} \text{ M})$ is distinctly asymmetric with a narrow peak at 620 nm, which is superimposed to a broader band centered around 615 nm. At 40 °C the red band exhibits no longer this asymmetry, and the maximum absorption is reduced by about 20% (Fig. 4 a). If the decrease of the long wavelength absorption maximum is followed as a function of temperature (Fig. 4b), there is a distinct transition between 20 and 40 °C, and after a plateau a second decrease above 50 °C. The second decrease corresponds to the complete unfolding of the protein chain ^{5b}. The first decrease must then be related to a conformational change from the "low temperature" form, which is stable below 20 °C, to a "high temperature" form stable between 35 and 55 °C. A two-step unfolding is observed, too, by adding C-PC to increasing concentrations of urea, a denaturing agent (Fig. 5). There is again a distinct transition between 1.5 and 4 M, followed by a plateau and a second decrease above 5 M which again corresponds to the onset of complete unfolding of the peptide chain. As long as the temperature does not exceed 50 °C, and the urea concentration is kept below 5 M, respectively, these spectral changes are completely reversible by cooling to 4 °C, and by dialyzing the urea out of the solution.

That these spectral changes are due to conformational changes in the monomeric protein, rather than to aggregation, is suggested from molecular weight measurements. On calibrated Sephadex columns, PC has an apparent molecular weight of 44,000 and 47,000 daltons at 4 °C and 40 °C, respectively. Similarly, ultracentrifugation experiments yield sedimentation coefficients of 2.99 S at 5 °C and 3.15 S at 35 °C, comparable to the 3 S found for monomeric C-PC ⁵⁻⁹.

^{****} A more elongated structure for 4 has been proposed recently from comparison of MO results with low temperature absorption and fluorescence data¹⁵. However, biliverdin and other bilins are protonated at low temperatures in ethanol $(-196 \,^{\circ}\text{C})^{20}$. The increase of the longwavelength band in bilin cations, as compared to the free bases, would then simulate a more elongated structure.

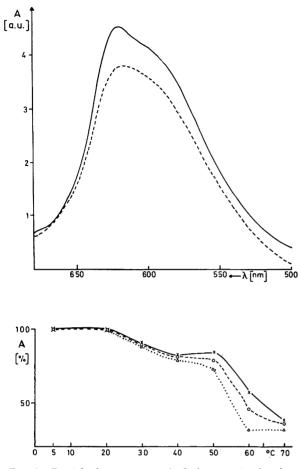
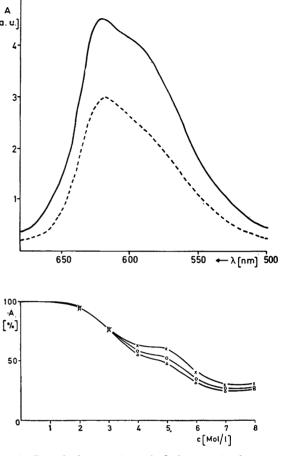


Fig. 4. Partial denaturation of C-phycocyanin by heat
 a) long wavelength band of the "low temperature" conformation at 5 °C (----), and of the "high temperature" conformation at 40 °C (---).

b) Decrease of the long wavelength absorption maximum relative to $E_{620}^{40} = 100\%$. The three points at each temperature correspond to a time of 1, 3 and 15 min, respectively. Prolonged treatment, especially at higher temperatures, leads to irreversible side reactions.

Spectroscopic differences between the two intermediate forms of C-PC, viz. the "high temperature" form obtained by heating to 40 °C, and the form obtained by adding 4 M urea, respectively, indicate that the two forms are somewhat different from each other. With urea, the intermediate still has an asymmetric red band, although the maximum is shifted to 617 nm. In the spectrum of the "high temperature" intermediate, such fine structure is no longer discernible at all, but the peak originally present at 620 nm is decreased in intensity and/or shifted to shorter wavelengths. These differences would indicate the presence of (at least) two sets of chromo-



- Fig. 5. Partial denaturation of C-phycocyanin by urea.
 a) Long wavelength band of the conformation stable in the absence of urea at 4 °C (----), and in the presence of 4 m urea (---);
- b) decrease of the long wavelength absorption band (E_{sz0}^{OM} = 100%). The three points correspond to denaturation times of 3, 15 and 30 min.

phores in C-PC. The two sets are affected to a different degree by heat, but they are less discriminated by partial denaturation with urea. Monomeric C-PC generally contains three phycocyanin chromophores, one in the light (or a), and two in the heavy (or β) subunit^{2,3}. The spectral changes upon partial heat denaturation may then reflect the preferential unfolding of the peptide chain in the environment of one chromophore. Two different chromophore populations for C-PC had been suggested, too, from fluorescence data^{21, 22}. Both sets are efficiently coupled to allow excitation energy transfer from the chromophore(s) absorbing at shorter wavelengths (termed sensitizers, "s"), to the one(s) absorbing at longer wavelengths (termed fluorescers, "f"). Experiments identical to the ones described above, but utilizing fluorescence rather than absorption spectroscopy as a probe ^{5b}, are under way.

The presence of two different chromophore populations is supported, too, by low temperature absorption spectroscopy of C-PC. The UV-Vis spectrum of a solution of C-PC $(0.3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ M})$ in a 1:1 mixture of buffer and glycerol at 4 °C is similar to that in buffer. In particular, the long-wavelength band is again asymmetric (c. f. Fig. 1). If this solution is cooled, both components of the band gradually sharpen, and eventually split into two bands centered

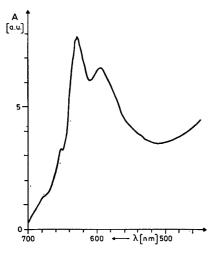


Fig. 6. Low temperature UV-Vis absorption spectrum $(-196\ ^{\circ}C)$ of C-phycocyanin in a l : l mixture of sodium phosphate buffer, pH 7.5, and glycerol.

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at 630 and 595 nm below -100 °C (Fig. 6)²⁸. The end spectrum $(-196 \,^{\circ}\text{C})$ is the same, irrespective of the time required for cooling down (15 - 180 min), and upon warming up to 4 °C the original spectrum is retained. Presently, it cannot be excluded that both bands observed at low temperatures are due to a single chromophore in a defined conformation. This is unlikely, however, in view of the low temperature spectra of free bilins. If care is taken to avoid protonation during cool-down (see above), the spectra still remain broad, and only little fine structure appears down to -196 °C. There is only one type of bile pigment known to have a two-peaked long wavelength absorption maximum. Purpurins are characterized by spectra with two comparably narrow bands centered around 540 and 500 nm. This spectrum has been interpreted, too, as to arise from two distinct forms present in solution ^{1b}.

The results indicate, that the bilin chromophore is held in an elongated conformation in the interior of biliproteins. They also demonstrate, that partial denaturation is a sensitive method to study the interaction between the bile-pigment chromophores and the protein in biliproteins, and to differentiate between distinct chromophore populations.

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