

Structural and Organizational Aspects of Metabolic Regulation

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Contents

Contributors	xi
Preface	
Paul A. Srere, Christopher K. Mathews, and Mary Ellen Jones.	xv
I. CELL GROWTH AND REGULATION	
Constitutive Activation of Cyclic AMP Synthesis Induced by the Expression of a $G\alpha_s/G\alpha_i$ Chimera	
Sidhartha Soparkar, Lynn E. Heasley, and Gary L. Johnson.	1
A Role for Structural Changes in Cell Activation at Fertilization: Differential Inhibition of Enzymatic Activities	
David Epel and Robert R. Swezey.	13
Multiple Parallel Pathways in Plant Aromatic Metabolism?	
Geza Hrazdina and Roy A. Jensen.	27
II. ORGANELLE STRUCTURE AND BIOGENESIS	
A. Nucleus	
Ribonucleoprotein Organization: From Cell Nucleus to RNP	
Harold C. Smith.	43
B. Mitochondria	
Membrane Translocation and Refolding of Mitochondrial Proteins	
Franz-Ulrich Hartl and Walter Neupert.	57
Hierarchical Structure of Respiratory Complexes	
A. Tzagoloff, N. Capitanio, M. Crivellone, D. Gatti, and M. Nobrega.	71
III. MEMBRANE-ASSOCIATED PROCESSES	
Membrane Associated Replisomes of <i>Bacillus Subtilis</i> and Plasmid RK2	
W. Firshein, J.J. Laffan, D.A. Kostyal, L.A. Mele, B.E. Wilkinson, A.M. McCabe, Z. Mei, M.P. Farrell, and I.L. Scolnik.	83
Structural and Biochemical Studies of the Macromolecular Organization of Chloroplast Membranes	
L. Andrew Staehelin and Keith D. Allen.	113
Substrate Channeling of NADH and Binding of Dehydrogenases to Complex I	
Tetsuhito Fukushima and H. Olin Spivey.	129

IV. ORGANIZATION OF NUCLEIC ACID AND PROTEIN SYNTHESIS**Intracellular Organization of the Enzymes of DNA Precursor****Biosynthesis**

- Christopher K. Mathews, Christina Thylén, Yeong Wang, Jiuping Ji,
Meredith L. Howell, Mary B. Slabaugh, and Byungjoo Mun. 139

DNA Topoisomerases and the Bacterial Chromosome

- Li-Shan Hsieh, Richard M. Burger, and Karl Drlica. 153

Proliferating Cell Nuclear Antigen (PCNA)—Dependent and Independent Forms of Calf Thymus DNA Polymerase δ

- Thomas W. Myers and Robert A. Bambara. 165

A General Approach to Defining the Specificity of Interactions Between Cytoplasmic Proteins

- Ronald L. Somerville, Jill H. Zeilstra-Ryalls, and Tiee-Leou Shieh. 181

V. DISSOCIABLE METABOLIC COMPLEXES AND MULTI-FUNCTIONAL ENZYMES**Organization of Mammalian Protein Biosynthetic Machinery Revealed From the Aminoacyl-tRNA Synthetase Complex**

- David C.H. Yang and Alfredo Jacobo-Molina. 199

Compartmentation of Glycolytic Enzymes in the Brain and Association With the Cytoskeletal Proteins Actin and Tublin

- Harvey R. Knull. 215

Structural and Metabolic Consequences of Mitochondrial Protein-Protein Interactions

- Balazs Sumegi and Zoltan Porpaczy. 229

Affinity Electrophoresis As a Tool to Investigate Clustering of Sequential Enzymes

- Sonia Beeckmans, Edilbert Van Driessche, and Louis Kanarek. 245

The Crystal Structure of Tryptophan Synthase—A Multienzyme Complex That Channels Indole

- C. Craig Hyde. 259

VI. DISTRIBUTIVE METABOLIC CONTROL: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO ANALYSIS OF METABOLIC COMPLEXES**Control Analysis of Organised Multienzyme Systems**

- Douglas B. Kell and Hans V. Westerhoff. 273

Holobiochemistry: An Integrated Approach to the Understanding of Biochemical Mechanism That Emerges From the Study of Proteins and Protein Associations in Volume-Occupied Solutions

- Allen P. Minton. 291

Studies of DNA Loops Involved in Repression of the *Lac* Promoter: Implications for the Physical Properties of DNA *In Vivo*

- Gregory R. Bellomy and M. Thomas Record, Jr. 307

Metabolic Control Analysis for Heterogeneous Enzyme Systems

- G. Rickey Welch and Tamás Keleti. 321

Steroidogenic Cytochromes P450 As Models for the Hydrophobic Cores of Metabolic Pathways: Possible Contribution of Local, System-Immanent Modulation of Intermediate Micro-Compartmentation and Reaction-Coupling Efficiency to Oscillating Regulatory Responses
 W. Nikolaus Kühn-Velten. 331

VII. NON-INVASIVE MEASUREMENTS OF CELL METABOLISM

Use of Enzymes and Transport Systems As *In Situ* Probes of Metabolite and Ion Gradients
 Dean P. Jones and Tak Yee Aw. 345

Analysis of Substrate Utilization by ¹³C NMR Spectroscopy
 Craig R. Malloy. 363

VIII. METABOLIC ENGINEERING AS AN APPROACH TO METABOLIC CONTROL

Characterization of Mutant Forms of Yeast Mitochondrial Malate Dehydrogenase
 Joan S. Steffan, Karyl Minard, and Lee McAlister-Henn. 375

Change in the Phenotype of a Yeast Mutant by the Insertion of an Inactive Enzyme
 Gyula Kispal, Claudia T. Evans, and Paul A. Srere. 389

Index 405

MEMBRANE TRANSLOCATION AND REFOLDING OF MITOCHONDRIAL PROTEINS

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ABSTRACT The biogenesis of mitochondria involves the transport of several hundred different proteins synthesized as precursors in the cytosol into the preexistent organelles. Membrane translocation occurs at translocation contact sites between outer and inner membranes through a hydrophilic membrane environment. These translocation sites can be envisioned as proteinaceous pores or channels and are present in limited number per mitochondrion. Precursor proteins arrested during translocation as membrane-spanning intermediates serve as molecular tools to study translocation contact sites. Recent evidence demonstrates that the membrane spanning portions of such intermediates can be in a rather extended conformation. This then implies that proteins have to refold once they reach the trans-side of the membranes to become functionally active. Refolding of imported proteins inside mitochondria and assembly into supramolecular complexes is not a spontaneous process but is mediated by a matrix-localized "assembly-complex" in an ATP-dependent manner. A major constituent of the mitochondrial machinery for the folding of proteins is the evolutionarily conserved heat-shock protein hsp60.

INTRODUCTION

Mitochondria, like chloroplasts, are assumed to have originated from procaryotic endosymbiotic ancestors. During evolution the organelles have lost their autonomy. Most mitochondrial proteins are coded for by nuclear genes and are

post-translationally imported into the preexistent organelles (1,2).

Over recent years transport of proteins into mitochondria has been dissected into a number of distinct steps which can be described as follows: i) Mitochondrial proteins are synthesized as precursors on cytosolic ribosomes. The interaction with 70 kD heat-shock proteins and probably with additional factors is required to keep precursors in a loosely-folded translocation-competent conformation. The requirement for nucleoside triphosphates of the import reaction is probably connected to these steps (3-10). ii) Precursors contain specific targeting signals (in most cases located at the amino-terminus as cleavable presequences) and interact via these signals with receptors at the surface of the outer mitochondrial membrane. Mitochondrial targeting sequences are positively-charged and are rich in hydroxylated amino-acids. Several of them have the potential to form amphiphilic helices upon insertion into membranes or when reaching contact with the phospholipids of membranes (11-13). iii) A component of the outer membrane, the "general insertion protein" (GIP), facilitates membrane insertion of precursor proteins (13). iv) Proteins of the outer membrane then directly reach their final location while proteins of all other submitochondrial compartments are directed into translocation contact sites between outer and inner membranes. This latter reaction is dependent on the electrical potential across the inner mitochondrial membrane (14-17). v) Amino-terminal presequences of precursors are cleaved during or after translocation by the matrix-localized metal-dependent processing peptidase (MPP) in cooperation with the processing enhancing protein (PEP) (18-20). vi) Following membrane translocation, precursors have to refold and in many cases to assemble into supramolecular complexes. Protein folding in the matrix is an ATP-dependent reaction mediated at the surface of the 14mer complex of the heat-shock protein hsp60 (21,22). vii) Proteins of the intermembrane space follow an evolutionarily conserved route to their target compartment. Their precursors are first translocated into the matrix and are then re-translocated across the inner membrane in a process which has similarity to bacterial protein export ("conservative sorting") (23-25). The mitochondrial inner membrane is unique in that it contains two independent machineries translocating proteins in opposite directions. Figure 1 shows a model of the complex import and sorting pathway of cytochrome b₂ to the intermembrane space of yeast mitochondria.

In the present article we review recent advances made in our laboratory towards an understanding of the mechanisms of translocation of proteins across the mitochondrial membranes and their subsequent folding and assembly inside the organelles.

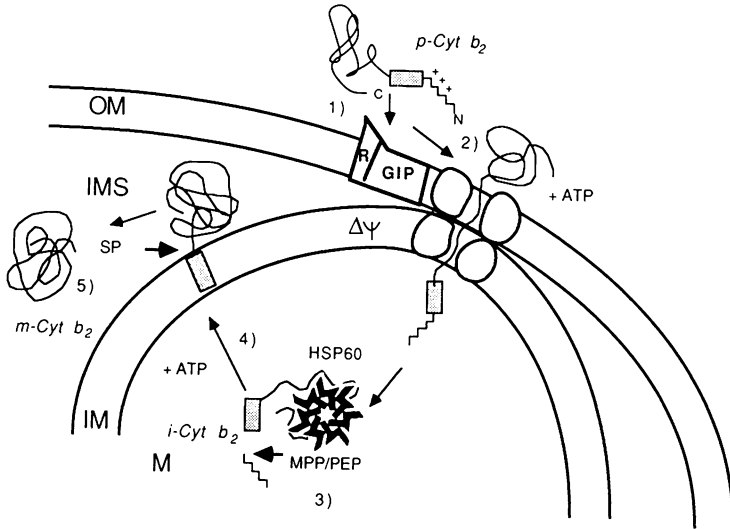


Figure 1: Working hypothesis for the translocation of cytochrome b_2 to the intermembrane space. (1). Cytochrome b_2 is made as a precursor ($p\text{-Cyt } b_2$) in the cytosol carrying an 80 amino acid residue presequence of bipartite structure. $p\text{-Cyt } b_2$ binds to a specific receptor (R) on the outer surface of the outer membrane, and, (2), is subsequently transported into translocation contact sites, via interaction with the "general insertion protein" (GIP) in the outer membrane. Transport into contact sites is dependent on the electrical component $\Delta\Psi$ of the total protonmotive force. Completion of translocation is independent of $\Delta\Psi$ but requires ATP probably for keeping precursor portions still outside the mitochondrion in an "unfolded" conformation. (3). $p\text{-Cyt } b_2$ interacts with the hsp60-complex in the matrix and cleavage of the first part of the presequence (the positively-charged mitochondrial targeting sequence) occurs by the action of MPP in cooperation with PEP resulting in the formation of intermediate-sized cytochrome b_2 ($i\text{-Cyt } b_2$). (4). The prepeptide of $i\text{-Cyt } b_2$ (which resembles a bacterial type

(Continued on page 60.)

MITOCHONDRIAL TRANSLOCATION CONTACT SITES

Most imported mitochondrial proteins have to be translocated at least partially into or across the inner membrane. Transport across outer and inner membranes occurs in a single step at translocation contact sites. Morphological studies have revealed these sites of close contact between the mitochondrial membranes for many years (26). First biochemical evidence that translocation of proteins proceeds via contact sites came from *in vitro* experiments in which precursor proteins spanning both mitochondrial membranes were accumulated as translocation intermediates (14). Precursor proteins which had antibodies bound to carboxy-terminal parts of the protein were arrested during translocation in a position reaching into the matrix with the amino-terminus (which was proteolytically processed) but with other parts of the molecule still being outside the mitochondrion where they were accessible to added protease. Apparently, the two membranes had to be close enough to be spanned by a single polypeptide chain. Performing the import reaction at low temperature or at decreased levels of nucleoside triphosphates (NTPs) also caused arrest of precursors in translocation contact sites (8,9,14). We assume that these procedures render the mature protein part of the precursor incompetent for translocation by conferring a more stably-folded structure. NTPs are probably required to keep precursors in the cytosol in a loosely-folded, translocation competent conformation via the action of 70 kD heat-shock proteins and maybe additional factors (3-10). As demonstrated by immuno-gold labeling of translocation intermediates the biochemically-defined translocation contact sites are identical with the morphologically-described sites of close contact between the two membranes (15).

Contact sites appear to be stable structures.

Submitochondrial fractions enriched in contact sites could be

export signal) directs the re-translocation of the protein back across the inner membrane. ATP is probably necessary for the release of i-Cyt b₂ from hsp60. (5). Cleavage by a second processing enzyme (SP) at the outer surface of the inner membrane generates the mature-sized protein (m-Cyt b₂), a soluble component of the intermembrane space. OM, outer membrane; IMS, intermembrane space; IM, inner membrane; M, matrix.

obtained by sonication of isolated mitochondria and sucrose gradient centrifugation. Low concentrations of digitonin, a sterol specific detergent, were able to remove large parts of the outer membrane except at regions where outer and inner membranes were attached to each other (15). Precursors spanning the mitochondrial membranes as translocation intermediates were extractable with protein denaturants such as urea or alkaline pH indicating that the membrane spanning intermediates were in a hydrophilic, probably proteinaceous environment (27).

Only the transport of precursors from the cytosol into translocation contact sites is dependent on the membrane potential across the inner membrane. The completion of translocation across the inner membrane is independent of the membrane potential but requires NTPs for keeping precursor portions still outside the mitochondrion in an "unfolded" conformation (see above) (8,14). The insertion of the positively-charged presequences into the inner membrane seems to be the membrane-potential dependent step of the import pathway. The electrical component $\Delta \Psi$ of the total protonmotive force and not the chemical component ΔpH is required (17). The role of $\Delta \psi$ is unclear. It might be speculated that the membrane potential (negative inside) exerts an electrophoretic effect on the positively-charged regions of the precursor proteins.

Fusion Proteins to Study Translocation Contact Sites.

In collaboration with B. Guiard (Gif-sur-Yvette) we have recently designed a mitochondrial fusion protein which can be used as a molecular tool to study translocation contact sites. The amino-terminal 167 amino acid residues of the precursor of yeast cytochrome b_2 were fused to the amino-terminus of the complete sequence of mouse dihydrofolate reductase (pb2167-DHFR) (16). In this construct the cytochrome b_2 part and the DHFR moiety fold independently of each other. Binding of the folate antagonist methotrexate stabilizes the folded structure of DHFR (28). Under these conditions pb2-DHFR is only partially translocated and is arrested as translocation intermediate spanning the two membranes. The cytochrome b_2 part of the fusion protein reaches into the matrix where cleavage by the processing peptidase occurs while the folded DHFR stays outside of the outer membrane and can be removed by externally added protease. In the presence of methotrexate DHFR is not digested by protease

and is recovered in the soluble supernatant of the reaction. If the methotrexate is removed from the translocation intermediate by washing of the reisolated mitochondria the DHFR moiety of the construct is unfolded at the surface of the outer membrane probably by the action of a proteinaceous component and the fusion protein is completely translocated into the interior of mitochondria.

The fusion protein pb₂-DHFR was used in the presence of methotrexate to titrate translocation contact sites of mitochondria (16). Around 70 pmoles of translocation intermediates had to be accumulated per mg of mitochondrial protein to reach saturation. It was calculated that a single mitochondrion accommodated about 4000 translocation intermediates. Morphometric analysis of the mitochondria of *Neurospora crassa* revealed that the total area of close contact between the mitochondrial membranes corresponded to about 7% of the total outer membrane surface. At present it is unknown whether contact sites are point-shaped structures or whether they are narrow stripes extending over longer distances at the origin of cristae. Based on the three-dimensional structure of DHFR we estimated that saturating amounts of translocation intermediates occupied about 1% of the outer membrane surface thus potentially leaving enough room in contact sites for proteinaceous components involved in the translocation process. Mitochondria which had accumulated saturating amounts of the translocation intermediate were unable to import the precursor of the β subunit of F₁ATPase and the precursor of the Rieske Fe/S protein of complex III which is localized at the outer surface of the inner membrane. The rates of import of these proteins decreased in correlation to the degree of presaturation of mitochondria with contact site intermediates. Apparently, translocation contact sites occur in limited number. The same translocation sites are used by different precursor proteins destined to different submitochondrial compartments (16,29).

How many amino acid residues are contained in the segment of a precursor which spans the two membranes at translocation contact sites? To address this question a series of fusion proteins derived from the pb₂167-DHFR construct were engineered by stepwise shortening its cytochrome b₂ part (Rassow et al., in preparation). In the absence of methotrexate also the shortest fusion protein, pb₂47-DHFR, was readily translocated across the mitochondrial membranes and

proteolytically processed. In the presence of methotrexate, however, pb276-DHFR was the shortest construct which was still able to span the two membranes and to expose the proteolytic cleavage site at position 30 of the presequence to the matrix-localized processing peptidase. Shorter fusion proteins did no more accomplish stable accumulation in translocation contact sites. This allowed the conclusion that about 46 amino acid residues were sufficient to span the two mitochondrial membranes at contact sites. On electron micrographs of isolated mitochondria the distance from outer surface of outer membrane to inner surface of inner membrane at membrane contacts was determined to be 15-17 nm. This could correspond well to the diameter of two protein rich membranes. Although the two lipid bilayers always appeared to be separated by a narrow gap we cannot completely rule out the possibility that fusions between the bilayers might occur at very distinct areas. Nevertheless, our data would indicate that the region of a stable translocation intermediate spanning contact sites is essentially devoid of tertiary structure. The conformation of the spanning polypeptide might be even more extended than α -helical. The necessity for cytosolic precursor proteins to assume an "unfolded" conformation may therefore directly reflect mechanistic requirements at the molecular level of the translocation process itself.

ROLE OF HSP60 IN REFOLDING AND ASSEMBLY OF MITOCHONDRIAL PROTEINS

Once translocated across the mitochondrial membranes proteins remaining in the mitochondrial matrix have to refold and in many cases to assemble into supramolecular complexes (22). Several intermembrane space proteins are first imported into the matrix and are then re-exported across the inner membrane (23-25). Their precursors carry bipartite amino-terminal targeting sequences whose second parts have characteristics of bacterial export signals (24,30). It has to be assumed that these proteins have to remain in a loosely-folded conformation prior to the second membrane translocation event. Very likely this is also the case for inner membrane proteins including those coded for by the mitochondrial genome, which insert into the membrane from the matrix space.

In contrast to the view generally held so far, folding and assembly of imported mitochondrial proteins does not occur spontaneously, but is mediated by proteinaceous components. The recently described matrix-localized stress-protein hsp60 plays an essential role in these processes (22). Hsp60 is a constitutively expressed heat-shock protein which is functionally and structurally related to the *E. coli* heat-shock protein groEL and to the α -component of the Rubisco subunit-binding protein of chloroplasts (21,22,31). Hsp60, the Rubisco binding protein and groEL have been grouped into a subclass of "molecular chaperones" termed "chaperonins" (31), components assisting in oligomeric protein assembly. Interestingly, the "chaperonins" reside in macromolecular 14mer complexes consisting of two 7-mer rings one put on top of the other.

In an attempt to identify components of the mitochondrial machinery for protein translocation and assembly, Horwich and colleagues selected temperature-sensitive yeast mutants with specific defects in mitochondrial protein import (19,22). One nuclear mutation, *mif4* (*mif* for mitochondrial import function), affecting the gene for hsp60 enabled the identification of hsp60 function (22). At the non-permissive temperature mutant cells showed a deficiency in the assembly of several mitochondrial proteins of matrix, inner membrane and intermembrane space. For example, the precursor of the β -subunit of the F₁-ATPase was completely translocated across the mitochondrial membranes and proteolytically processed but failed to assemble into the FoF₁-ATPase complex. Likewise, the matrix enzyme ornithine transcarbamylase was not able to form the functionally active homotrimer. Proteins of the intermembrane space, such as cytochrome b₂ and the Rieske Fe/S protein, apparently misfolded in the matrix space and did not reach their target compartment. It was found that in the mutant the structural integrity of the hsp60 complex was affected. Hsp60 complex isolated from cells grown at the non-permissive temperature appeared to have denatured and sedimented into a low speed pellet.

Imported Proteins Fold in an ATP-dependent Reaction.

We have now analyzed the sequence of steps during the refolding of proteins imported into the mitochondrial matrix. Using a fusion protein consisting of the mitochondrial presequence of

subunit 9 of Fo-ATPase and the complete mouse DHFR we were able to determine the folding state of the imported protein by measuring the protease resistance of the DHFR moiety (Ostermann et al., in preparation). Unfolding of the DHFR part occurring at the surface of the outer membrane has been shown to be the rate limiting step for the translocation of similar fusion proteins across the mitochondrial membranes. To achieve fast, ATP-independent membrane translocation we therefore used precursor preparations in our import experiments which were artificially unfolded by incubation in 8M urea. Under these conditions, the kinetics of refolding of the imported protein in the matrix were slower than its translocation via contact sites. If mitochondria were depleted of ATP prior to import, the refolding of DHFR was completely blocked ("folding arrest"). The incompletely folded fusion protein could be extracted from the matrix of mitochondria as a high molecular weight "assembly complex" which migrated on sizing columns with an apparent molecular weight of 800 kD. Using non-denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis hsp60 was identified as a major constituent of this "assembly complex". In the absence of ATP the fusion protein associated to hsp60 was completely sensitive towards digestion by protease while the hsp60 complex itself was protease resistant. Apparently, the incompletely folded polypeptide chains of the imported protein were exposed at the surface of hsp60. Readdition of ATP to the assembly complex initiated folding of the associated polypeptide and release from hsp60. GTP and the non-hydrolyzable ATP analog AMP-PNP were ineffective. A very similar sequence of reactions was observed for authentic imported mitochondrial proteins including the β -subunit of F₁-ATPase and the Rieske Fe/S protein.

So far it is unknown how hsp60 functions in folding and assembly of mitochondrial proteins. It seems obvious that hsp60 recognizes some structural motif of the "unfolded" polypeptide chains entering the mitochondrial matrix via contact sites. One important function of the "chaperonin" hsp60 could be to capture these polypeptides thereby preventing their aggregation in the high protein concentration of the matrix space. Both, the hsp60 homologue groEL and the 70 kD heat-shock proteins are weak ATPases. The initial binding of the protein substrate to hsp60 is ATP-independent. As proposed for the interaction of proteins with 70 kD heat-shock proteins (32), ATP-hydrolysis by hsp60 could cause a conformational change of the hsp60 complex

which is transferred to the associated polypeptide chain(s). This could loosen the interaction with the unfolded polypeptide thus allowing for its ordered, domain-wise folding. At the same time, the protein substrates interacting with hsp60 could expose complimentary surfaces facilitating the assembly with other subunits to homo- or heterooligomeric complexes. It is unclear whether additional components are involved in these processes. In *E. coli* the groES protein has been shown to cooperate with groEL in functions such as assembly of prokaryotic ribulose-bisphosphate carboxylase and assembly of phage particles (33,34). An equivalent to groES has not been detected in either mitochondria or chloroplasts.

PERSPECTIVES

Despite the progress made over the recent years, the mechanisms involved in translocation of proteins across biological membranes are still enigmatic. The machinery for protein translocation has not yet been identified in any of the well studied membrane systems. Clearly, one of the major tasks for the future will be the isolation of the mitochondrial translocation contact sites and their molecular characterization. To achieve this goal, the mitochondrial fusion proteins which can be accumulated as stable membrane-spanning intermediates are currently being used as "molecular handle".

It is an emerging theme in present-day cell biology that the folding and assembly of proteins, for a long time been viewed as spontaneous processes, are protein catalyzed reactions in every cellular compartment *in vivo*. For example, the immunoglobulin heavy chain binding protein (BiP) of the endoplasmic reticulum appears to have functions very similar to those described for the mitochondrial hsp60 (32). These findings may also be of considerable biotechnological relevance. One might speculate that in the future components like hsp60 or the groE proteins will be used as "folding catalysts" to solve the problem of active reconstitution of proteins obtained by overexpression in bacteria. However, a more detailed understanding of how these components function at the molecular level will be required to make this a feasible approach.

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Index

- Acetyl-CoA, 368
 - carbon supplied, 363
 - fractional enrichment, 366
 - pool, 371
- Actin, 302
 - binding protein, 302
 - filament, 216
 - pelletable, 22
 - tubulin
 - interaction, glycolytic enzyme, 218
 - and plasma membrane, 357
- Action-at-a-distance, 307, 312, 315
 - DNA loop formation, 317
- Acyl-CoA intermediates, 231
- Adaptation strategy, 113
- Adenylate cyclase system, 339
- Affinity chromatography, 182–183, 247, 392
- Affinity electrophoresis, 245, 247, 249
 - citric acid cycle, 250
 - free pig heart, 248
 - glycolytic pathway, 252
 - use, 254
- Agarose gel, 247
 - α ketoglutarate
 - dehydrogenase complex (KDGC), 129, 398
 - isotopomer, 366
- Alanyl- and seryl-tRNA synthetase, 207
- Aldolase binding actin and microtubules, 219
- Allosteric inhibition, 147
- Amino acid
 - aromatic, 27
 - metabolism, 33
 - residue formation, 264
 - sequence, 3
- Aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase (RS), 199, 206, 209
 - bacterial, 207
 - complex, 200, 208
 - and eukaryotic enzyme difference, 200
 - mammalian, 207
 - tRNA and ribosome, 200
- Amphiphilic helix, 199
 - aspartyl-tRNA, human, 204
 - comparison, 206
 - synthetase complex, 205, 206
- AMP-PNP, ATP analog, non-hydrolyzable, 65
- Anaerobic growth, 156
- Anaplerotic
 - flux, 367
 - pathway, 367
 - reaction, 366
- Androgen
 - biosynthesis, 331
 - organization, testis, 333
 - production increase, 332
- Androstenedione conversion, 331
- Antibody
 - anti 64 kda protein, 93
 - preincubation, dnaB locus gene, 94
- Anti-idiotypic antibody, 182, 185, 186–187
 - cross-reactivity, 193
 - immunization, 192, 193
 - purpose, 194
 - reagent detection, 194
 - research focus, 192
 - visualized, 184
- Anti-Trp, repressor antibody, 185
- Apo-enzyme, binding to complex I, 136
- Apoprotein P700, 121
- AppppA synthesis, 207–208
- Appressed and non-appressed region, 116
 - PSII and PSI, 117
- α , μ (38) chimera expression, 7–8
- Aspartate aminotransferase, 252, 376
- Aspartyl-tRNA synthetase, 199, 206
 - size, 203
- Assay system, 185
- Assembly T4 dNTP, synthetase complex, 147
- Association rate, constant, 298
- ATP, 99, 114
 - concentration, 352, 354–355
 - hepatocyte, 345
 - dependent
 - assembly-complex, 57
 - reaction, 353
 - and O₂ gradients, 353

- production, 352–353
- release of i-Cyt b₂, 60
- sulfurylase, 352
- synthase complex, 117
 - structural domains, 114
- synthesis, 115
- translocation role, 59
- ATP/ADP ratio decrease, 249
- ATPase, 72
- Auto-anti-idiotype antisera, 185
- Azimuthal orientation, 311, 312, 313
- Bacillus subtilis*, 83, 85
 - developmental cycle, 89
 - initiation
 - activity, 88
 - effects, 94
 - membrane associated, 106
 - origin, 87
 - and plasmid RK2 model systems, 85
 - protease deficient strain, 91
- B-cell clone, 186–187
- β-hydroxyacyl CoA dehydrogenase (HAD), 129
- Biosynthesis steroid hormone, 331
- Biosynthetic pathway, dual, 33
- Blotto washes, 184
- β subunit
 - folds, 265
 - pyridoxal phosphate presence, 267
 - two structural domains, 266
- Bulk-phase, pool view, metabolic control, 322
- Calmodulin-dependent protein kinase, 14
- CAMP
 - dependent protein kinase activity, CHO clone, 4
 - level amplification, CHO 13F and CCL39 fibroblast, 5
 - synthesis, fibroblast elevation, 9
- Carbon-carbon coupling, 364, 371
- Carbon isotope, 364
- Carbon skeleton, fractional enrichment, 366
- Cardiac myocyte
 - cytochrome oxidase and myoglobin, 349
 - isolated, 352
- CBP3 and CBP4 gene
 - code, 78
 - synthesis, 75
- cAMP dependent kinase, 208
- cDNA
 - encoding, 375
 - sequence, 199
- Cell nucleus, 43
- Cellular growth on acetate, 384–385
- ¹³C enriched substrate, 365
- Chalcone synthase, 27, 37
- Channeling, 241, 273
 - complex, 326
 - to complex I, 129
 - efficiency, 327, 334
 - pathway increase, 259
 - plant, aromatic pathway, 35
 - systems, 324
- Chlamydomonas thylakoid, 120
 - complexes from, 122
 - membrane, 123
- Chlorophyll-protein complex, 113, 120
 - comparison, 121
 - separation, 122
- Chloroplast, 33
 - membrane, 113
 - model system, 113
 - mutant, 118
- Cholesterol, pregnenolone production, 332
- CHO mutant, 208
- Chorismate mutase (CM), 31
- Chromosomal locus (MDH1), 375
- Chromosome mass remnant, 46
- Chronic hypoxia, 357
- Cinnamic acid derivative production, 27, 29
- Citrate synthase (CS), 391
 - and complex I, 241
 - flux, 367
 - pathway, 366
- Citric acid cycle, 230, 341, 363, 368
 - assumed organization, 251
 - enzyme, 246, 247, 249
 - interactions, 253
 - metabolon, 252
- C kinase and protease activated protein kinase (PAK I and PAK II), 208
- ¹³C NMR
 - ³⁶⁴¹³C nuclei, 364
 - spectroscopy, 364
 - spectrum, 368, 370
- ¹³C nucleus sensitivity, 365
- Complex I, 376
 - and II, 114
 - mitochondrial binding, 231
 - PDC bind, 239
 - reduction, free NADH, 135
 - structure model, 136
- Complex formation techniques, 392

- Concentration
 - gradient equation, 346
 - theorems, 278, 283, 323
- Containment surface effect, 300
- COOH-terminus, contact site of G-protein, 10
- Core protein mutant, 79
- Cor mutant, 74
- Coumarin precursor, 27
- COX10 and COX11 genes, 76
 - cloned, 77
 - protein
 - homologous, 78
 - presence, 79
- CPII polypeptide, 123
- Crosslinking, rat liver mitochondria, 394
- Crotonyl-CoA, 236
 - oxidation, 229, 234
- ¹³C spectrum 363, 367
- CTP synthetase, 148
- Cyclic AMP level, CHO clone, 4
- Cyt b/f complex, 115
- Cytochrome b, 74
- Cytochrome bcf152, 59, 61, 64
 - shortening, 62
- Cytochrome c, amount in mutants, 79
- Cytochrome oxidase, 71, 72, 73, 349
 - analysis, 78
 - assembly, 76
 - complex, 79
 - correspondence, lack, 77
 - oxidation, 355
- Cytochrome P450, 331
 - XVII, 341
 - catalysed reaction cycle, 340
 - XXII and XVII
 - response, 334-335
 - revelation, 339
 - dependent monooxygenase, 332
 - localization, 333
- Cytomatrix, 325
- Cytoplasm, association explanation, 305
- Cytoplasmic
 - chorismate mutase (CM-2), 33
 - protein, 183, 186-187
 - volume fraction, 301
- Cytosolic
 - MDH, 391
 - ribosome precursor, 58
- dCMP hydroxymethylase, 142, 144, 146
- δ DNA polymerase, 165, 166
- Defective mutant, 78
- Dehydrogenase
 - activity in MDH1 mutants, 382
 - cDNA cloned, 377
 - channeling, 129
 - mitochondrial malate, 376, 379
 - extract, 381
 - mutant, 380-381
 - yeast expression, rat, 378
- Dehydroquinase, 33
- 3-deoxy-D-arabino-heptulosonate 7-phosphate, 33
- Deoxy-D-arabino-heptulosonate 7-phosphate
 - synthase (DS), 31
- Deoxyribonuclease treatment, 100
- Deoxyribonucleoside, 150
 - concentration, 96
 - diphosphate, 97
 - triphosphate (dNTP), 139
 - incorporated, 95
- Deoxyribonucleotide
 - biosynthesis, 140
 - synthesizing machinery, 148
- Dihydrofolate reductase (DHFR)
 - folded, 62
 - mouse
 - complete, 65
 - sequence, 61
- DNA
 - bacterial synthesizers, 85
 - binding regulatory protein, 194
 - gyrase inhibitors, 316
 - heavy-heavy density synthesis, 89
 - helix, 155, 309, 317
 - host encoded gene product, 102
 - loop, 45, 54, 307
 - formation, 158, 309
 - formation, *in vivo*, 308
 - formation, lac operator, 309
 - membrane complex, 87, 100
 - B. subtilis*, 86
 - in vitro*, 85
 - in vivo*, 84
 - metabolism, eukaryotic cells, 148
 - polymerase, 95
 - α, 207
 - activity, 144
 - auxilliary protein, δ, 165
 - δI and δII separation, 172
 - δII, 169
 - δII and DNA synthesis, 173
 - δ PCNA and helicase activity, 170
 - precursor

- initiation, subcomplex A, 98–99
- utilization, DNA replication, 96
- protein synthesis, 182
- replication, 140
 - apparatus, 144, 148
 - components, 86
 - coupling, dNTP synthesis, 149
 - initiation, 89
 - 64 kda protein, repressed, 90
 - mammalian, chromosomal, 166
 - membrane code, 85
 - prokaryote, 84
 - prokaryotic, 83
 - protein, 165
 - protein, calf, 171
- strand separation, 154
- supercoiling, 157, 158, 310
 - level, 155
- synthesis, 16
 - destroyed, 100
 - and plasmid DNA membrane, 101
 - rate, 169
- topoisomerase discovery, 154
- topoisomerase and DNA topoisomerase I
 - and DNA gyrase, 153
- dna A*
 - gene product, 84
 - protein, *E. coli*, inner membrane, 106
- dna B*
 - initiation gene, 93
 - locus product, 93, 94
 - protein 93
- dNTP
 - biosynthetic enzyme, 146
 - replication fork pool, 140
 - synthesis, direct coupling, 144
 - synthetase complex, 144, 147, 148
- Elasticity matrix, 324
- Electron micrograph
 - pea thylakoid, 116
 - permeabilized cell, 18
 - and unpermeabilized egg, 19
- Electron microscopic investigation, 37
- Electron microscopy, 117, 119, 216, 390
 - immuno PDC, 237
 - nuclear RNP network, 47
- Electron transfer chain complexes I and II, 254
- Electron transport
 - chain, 376
 - protein correlated, 392
- Electrophoresis, 392
 - gel, 182
- Electrophoretic and fluorographic analysis,
 - SDS gel, 145
- Endogenous sensors
 - multiple, 349
 - protein, 347, 348
- Endoplasmic reticulum, 357
 - and cytoskeleton, 200
 - membrane, 37
- Enzyme
 - cluster, 247
 - complex
 - bifunctional, 35
 - indication, 35
 - reason, 35
 - sensitivity, 35
 - Tr dNTP synthetase, 141
 - couple, readily associate, 249
 - DS and CM investigation, 32
 - G6PDH activity, 21
 - glycolytic, 215, 216
 - NAD
 - into DADP, 15
 - kinase, 15
 - response, progesterone increase, 336
 - same, chiral specificity, 132
- Enzyme–cytomatrix association, 324
- Enzyme–enzyme
 - actin complex, 216
 - association, 252
 - glycolytic, 251
 - channeling, 279
 - complex, mechanism, 131
 - and enzyme–cytomatrix interactions, 322
 - and enzyme–substrate interaction, 331
 - interaction, 229, 279, 395
 - mitochondrial, 239–241
- Enzyme–democracy, 322
- Epitope location, 186–187
- Equilibria and simultaneous reaction path, 131
- Equilibrium protein association, 292
- Erythrocyte, 215
 - and glycolytic enzyme, 216
- Erythro–9–(2–hydroxy–3–nonyl) adenine (EHNA), 150
- Erythrose 4–phosphate, 31
- Escherichia coli*, 84
 - arabinose operon, 312
 - cytoplasmic protein, immunoelectrophoresis, 188
 - genome loop number, 153
 - histone–like protein, HU, 317
 - inner membrane, 107
 - interaction, 193
 - malate dehydrogenase, 376
 - and *Salmonella typhimurium* compared,

- 261
 - and supercoiling, 158
- Euglena* homogenizing, 221
- Eukaryote, lower, 207
- Eukaryotic
 - cell, 140, 194, 199
 - and prokaryotic gene regulatory systems, 317
 - synthetase, 205
 - system, 307
- F-actin, 215, 216
 - exogenous, 222
 - interaction, 292
 - tropomyosin, 216
- F₁-ATPase, translocated, 64
- Fatty acid oxidation, 341
 - enzyme, 240
 - synthetase, 246
- Fertilization cell, change, 14, 24
- Fertilized and unfertilized egg, g6PDH activity, 16
- Fiber
 - model and paired fiber model, 301
 - surface layer, 300
- Fibrous
 - network, 356
 - structure, intact cytoplasm, 302
- Flavonoid, 28
 - biosynthesis, 27
 - compound, naringenin chalcone, 30
 - pathway
 - complete and separate, 31
 - segment, 30
 - precursor, 27
 - segment, 27
- Fluorescence polarization, 392
- Flux control coefficient, 276–280, 282, 284, 324, 325, 328,
 - concentration-control connectivity theorem, 278
 - equation, 323
 - summation theorem, 276, 323, 324
 - supercomplexes, 281
- F_o-ATPase subunit 9, 66
- Freeze-facture, 117
 - biological membrane, split, 117
 - particle, 117, 120
- Frontal analysis chromatography, 392
- Functional membrane unit, 117
- Functional spliceosome, 48
- Fusion protein
 - folding state, 64–65
 - pb/2-DHFR, 62
 - translocation, 63
- Galactokinase (galK), 309
 - activity, 311
- GAPDH. *See* Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase
- Gel filtration, 381
 - chromatography, 382
 - comparison, 18
- Gene
 - 42, amber mutation effect, 143
 - encoding
 - high affinity transport, 156
 - topoisomerase I, 154
 - response, supercoiling, 158
- Generic globular protein scheme, 304
- Genetic codons, amino acid transport system, 206
- Globular protein, 302
 - cytoplasm proximity, 305
- Gluconeogenesis, 249, 251, 364
- Glucose-6-phosphate
 - dehydrogenase (G6PDH), 13, 15
 - activity *in situ*, 21
 - bound, 22
 - inactivation, 23
 - pH-dependence comparison, 22
 - dissociation, 220
- Glutamate, 363, 365, 366
 - isotopomer, 366, 368
- Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH), 217
 - or aldolase binding, 216
 - Euglena*, 221
- Glycerol gradient
 - analysis
 - splicing reaction, 50
 - sedimentation, 50
- Glycine betaine, 156
- Glycolytic enzyme, 246, 357
 - and actin, 216
 - activity, brain 218
 - aldolase, 215
 - cell type, compartmented, 216
 - clathrin vesicle bind, 222
 - and cytoskeleton, 223
 - displacement, 220
 - F-actin interaction, 220
 - hexokinase, 215
 - interaction, F-actin, tubulin, 217
 - micromolar values, 222
 - muscle compartmentation, 221
 - non-uniform distribution, 221
 - phosphofructokinase, 215
- Glycolytic intermediate, 215
- Glycolytic pathway, 215, 247
- Glycolysis, 341, 390

- metabolization, 215
- requirement, 220
- G1 nuclear maturation, 45
- Gonadotrophic stimulation, 331, 334, 338, 341
 - in vivo*, 335
- G6PDH. *See* Glucose-6-phosphate-dehydrogenase
- G-protein, 2, 7
- Grana
 - and stroma membrane, 115
 - thylakoid, freeze-etched, 119
- Guanosine diphosphate, incubated, 97
- Gyrase
 - and DNA replication, 154
 - and superhelical tension, 154
- Hard particle calculated, 296
- hCG. *See* Human chorionadotropin
- Heart
 - extract, ¹³C NMR spectra, 369
 - perfusions, 365
- Heat-shock protein hsp60 57-58
- Helical repeat, 307, 314
- Hepatocyte, 352
 - ATP, 349
 - mapping, 345
- Heterogeneous enzyme system, 324
- Heterologous
 - aggregation, 324
 - enzyme-enzyme associations, 324
- Hexokinase, 357
 - associated with porin, 221
- Higher plant thylakoid, 116
- HisRS mutant, 208
- Histidyl-tRNA synthetase, mammalian, 205

- Holobiochemistry, 291
- Homeostatic
 - model supercoiling, 155
 - regulation, 154
- Homologous state, enzyme organization, 325
- Homonuclear coupling, 367-368
- Hormone interaction, 192
- Hsp60, 58
 - "chaperonin" function, 65
 - complex, isolated, 64
 - or groE, protein folding catalyst, 66
- Human chorionadotropin (hCG), 332
 - action, 338
- Human synthetase, 204
- Hummel-Dryer chromatographic technique, 392
- Hydrophobic interaction chromatography, 199, 202
 - 3-hydroxyacyl-CoA dehydrogenase, 232, 233
 - activity, 236
 - and complex I, 236
 - 3-hydroxybutyryl-CoA, 234
 - mitochondria, 235
- Hydroxyprogesterone
 - and androgen, 334
 - formation, 337
 - intermediary, 338
 - leakage, 341
 - retention, 340
- Hydroxyurea inhibition, 150

- I-band
 - enrichment, 216
 - thin filament region, 215
- Idiotypic antibody, 185
- IGA-65, 50, 52
 - containing complex, 54
 - isolated from nuclear extract and matrix, 53
- IgG
 - anti-Trp and anti-idiotypic, 189
 - pool component, 192
- Immunoblot, PCNA-independent DNA polymerase, 167
- Immunoblotting, 182, 189, 194
 - protein, 185
- Immuno-electroblotting, 183
- Immuno-electrophoretic analysis, *E. coli*, 190-191
- Immunofluorescence microscopy, 200, 208
- Inhibiting gyrase, 156
- Inner membrane
 - binding sensitivity, 394
 - correlated, 393
- Interaction dissection, 186-187
- Interchromatin granule cluster, 54
- Intermediary metabolites, 273
- Intermolecular sandwich structure, 310
- Intracellular ATP incorporation, 21
- Intramolecular DNA loop, 310
- Ionic interaction, 347
- 2ⁿ isotopomer, 366
- Isotopomer, 368
 - analysis, 370
 - glutamate concentrations, 367
- Isozyme in aromatic metabolism, 34

- J/C ratio, 347

- Kacser-Burns-Heinrich-Rapoport (KBHR)
 - model, 321-327
 - analysis paradigm, 328
 - assumptions, 322-323

- 64 kda protein
 - level, change, 90
 - purification, 91, 92
- Kinetic
 - analysis, 183
 - coupling, 141–143
 - rate constants, 326
- Krebs citric acid cycle, 215, 364, 365
- Krebs tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle, 376, 389–391
 - enzyme, 395
 - association, 393
 - binding, 393
 - metabolon coupled, kinetic effect, 396
 - stabilize interaction, 395
 - interactions, specific, 391–393, 399
- Lac expression, 308
- Lac operator, 310
 - loop formation, 313
 - repression, 309
- Lac operon, 308
- Lac promotor, 317
- Lac repression modulation, 310
- Lac repressor, 308, 313, 316
 - operator binding reaction, 308
 - symmetric, 310
- Leucine and histidine operon, 158
- LH/hCG action, 332
- Lignin plant, structural component, 27
- Lipid interaction, 206
- Lipophilic plastoquinone (PQ), 115
- Lipoprotein complex, 71
- Liver
 - cell cytochrome P450, 349
 - microsome, 350
 - and kidney cell gradients, 347
- Loop formation, 312–313
 - analysis, 316
 - efficient, 309
 - extent, 313
 - model, 312
 - process, 307
- L-tryptophan system, 259–260
- Macromolecular
 - association, 294
 - component concentration, 87
 - concentration effect, 299
 - organization, 113
- Malate–aspartate shuttle cycle, 376
- Malate dehydrogenase (MDH), 376, 391
 - function, mitochondria, 384
 - lack, 384
 - lactate, dehydrogenase, 131
 - specific activity, 382
- (MDH1)
 - disruption, 383
 - locus and plasmid structure, 377
 - mutation effect, growth and function, 383
- Malate and oxaloacetate interconversion, 375
- Mammalian synthetase, 204
- Matrix dehydrogenase, bind to complex I, 130–131
- Membrane
 - adsorbed enzyme clusters 322
 - architecture and function, 113
 - compartment differentiation, 334
 - composition, 113
 - lipid binding, 230
 - protein *Bacillus*, 93
 - binding, 230
 - complex assembly, 71
 - gene code, 78
 - genome binding, 85
 - inner, 230
 - translocation, 57
- Metabolic
 - chain transfers, 341
 - channeling, 274
 - compartmentation interface, 36
 - condition and O₂ dependence, 350
 - control, 321
 - analysis, 321
 - theory, 321
 - flux, 275
 - pathway, 390, 391
 - regulation structure, 358
- Metabolism, yeast CS mutant, 397
- Metabolite
 - channeling, 324
 - and ion concentration, 347
 - and ion flux comparison, 348
- Metabolon, 234, 247, 252
 - disruption, 231
 - Krebs TCA cycle, 400
 - permeable, 239
 - rat liver, 233
 - TCA cycle enzymes, 389
- Methionyl–tRNA synthetase, 208
- Microcompartmentation, 338, 345, 347, 354
 - and channeling, 331
 - investigation, 334
- Microenvironment, 322, 331, 354
- Microtrabecular lattice, 356
- Missense mutations, *E. coli*, 264

- Mitochondria, 57
 biogenesis, 57, 79
 or chloroplast *groE* detected, 66
 disruption, 229
 inner membrane, 71
 intermyofibrillar, 352
 and O₂ consumption, 384
 rat liver, 231
 redox carrier, 72
 respiratory chain, 72
- Mitochondrial
 binding, 130–131
 citrate synthase (CS), lack, 389
 cluster, 355
 complex, integral components, 78
 cytochrome, 349
 cytosolic yeast homology, 398
 DNA
 code, 72
 encoding, 72
 enzyme–enzyme interaction, 241
 enzyme subunit, 72
 fusion protein, 62
 genome, 63, 72
 inner membrane, 393
 malate dehydrogenase (MDH), 129, 375,
 381, 382
 mammal, 384
 matrix, 63, 229
 enzyme, 391
 enzyme–enzyme interactions, 230
 protein refolding, 65
 membrane, 59, 61
 inner, 389
 O₂ concentration, 351
 span, 63
 metabolic pathway channeling, 241
 microsomal membrane fraction, 334
 O₂ consumption, 385
 organelle, 73
 oxidation rate, 398
 oxidative interaction, 399–400
 oxygen consumption measured, 398
 protein, 205
 interaction, 241
 nuclear gene, coded, 57
 reaction sequence, 65
 synthesis, 58–73
 respiratory control, 350
 translocation contact site, 66
 yeast function, 398
- Molecular
 democracy, 322
 society, 322
- weight
 Ald, 303
 synthetase, 200
- Molecule IgG, 186–188
- Monomer–oligomer, 324
 equilibrium, 325
 mRNA translation, 74
- Multicopy plasmids *in vivo*, 310
- Multienzyme complex, 95, 140, 246, 322
- Multiplet, 368
 structure differences, 370
- Mutagenesis, 146
- Mutant
 CS growth rate and lag period, 397
 deficiency, cytochrome oxidase, 76
 enzyme, 381
 iron–sulfur protein and cytochrome c₁,
 74
 MDH1, 383
 construction, 380
 protein importance, 399 *Saccharomyces*
 cerevisiae, 270
 shift aerobic condition, 157
 transcription, 159
trpR deletion, 185
 yeast cells, 389
- Mutation obtained as suppressor, 157
- Myoglobin, 352
 oxygenation, 355
- NADH
 channeling, 129
 fluorescence titrations, 132
 oxidation, 229
 rate, 234
 ubiquinone oxidoreductase (Complex I),
 234
- NADPH, 114
 presence, 334
- Na⁺, K⁺, ATPase, in plasma
 membrane, 353, 355
- Negative flux–control, 276
- Negative supercoiling, 154, 160
- Nitrogen fixation gene, 156
- NrdA mutation effect, 142
- NTP precursor role, 61
- Nuclear domain, RNA splicing, 54
- Nuclear gene, ubiquinol:cytochrome c reduc-
 tase assembly, 74
- Nuclear matrix
 and component role, 52
 rat liver, 47
- Nuclear maturation, 44
- Nucleoside

- triphosphate (NTP), 58, 60
sequence, 153
Nucleotide triphosphates, 200
- O₂ concentration, 349
gradient hepatocyte, 345
O₂ consumption and gradient, 356
Oligomerization, 324
Oligomycin-sensitive ATPase, 73
Oligonucleotide-directed mutagenesis, 380
Operon, 158
Organelle
folding and assembly, 59
preexistent, 58
Outer membrane fraction of *E. coli*, 85
Oxaloacetate equilibrium, 375
2-oxoglutarate dehydrogenase complex,
246, 252
Oxygen
activation site, 332
diffusion, 356
tension, 156
- Parallel pathway, 31
Pb₂-DHFR translocation, 61
PCNA. *See* Proliferating cell nuclear antigen
P-coumaric acid formation, 36
P-coumaryl-CoA substrate, cinnamic acid
ester, 30
P450-dependent testicular androgen produc-
tion response, 338
P450-XXII and XVII difference, 333
PDC. *See* Pyruvate dehydrogenase complex
Pellet activity, 219
Periodic oscillation, 312
Peripheral LHCII contribution, 119
Permeabilized cell, 13, 20, 350
centrifuged during assay, 21
enzyme, efflux rate, 23
Permeabilized egg, electrically, 18
PEST sequence, 207
Pet mutant, 73
Pet strain, 73
Phage DNA component, 5-hydroxymethyl-
cytosine, 140
Phenylalanine, 27
ammonia-lyase, 27
channeled, 36
and flavonoid, section induction, 36
preferential utilization, 35
production, 38
cinnamic acid, 29
scheme, 28
Phenylpropanoid
section, 27
channeling, 35
segment, 27
feature, 31
pathway, 29
Phosphofructokinase (PFK) enzyme, 281
Phosphorylated membrane *in vitro*, 123
Phosphorylation
casein kinase I, 208
and cellular reorganization, 15
-dephosphorylation, 246
experiment, 123
pLHCII, 120
proteins, 14
Photosynthesis
efficiency, 119
electron transport chain, 114
membrane, 113
Photosystem I (PSI) and II (PSII), 113
domains 114, 117
pH in proximal tubule cell, 349
P450XVII hypothesis, 334
Pi-elasticity, 324
Pituitary lutropin (LH), 332
Plant aromatic pathway, 28, 37
Plasma testosterone
concentrations, 334
level response, 335
Plasmid, 310
constructs, 309, 312
DNA
membrane complex activity, 99
synthesis profile, 103
encoded protein
distribution, 105
location, 104
molecule bound CAP protein, 316
reporter change and helicity, 156
RK2
membrane associated, 106
small, 83
synthesis, dnaA gene effect, 101
P450XXII levels, 334
Poly(ADP-boseyl)ated AppppA, 207
Polyethylene glycol (PEG), 391
molecular crowding agent, 220
Polypeptide, 120, 121
chains, 261
composition analysis, 123
multifunctional protein, 246
pattern, nuclear extract and matrix, 50
Pool behavior, 273, 282, 323
Pool concept, 274
Pool ratio, dNTP, CHO, whole cell and

- nuclei, 149
- Pool repression, 312
- Pregnenolone production, 332
- Progesterone
 - increase effect, 337
 - incubation, 334
- Prokaryote and gene expression, 194
- Prokaryotic
 - cell, 140
 - enzyme, 384
 - system, 307
- Proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA), 165
 - absence, 175
 - auxilliary protein, 166
 - controversial role, 176
 - dependent DNA polymerase δ , 167, 170
 - products, 174
 - DNA polymerase Δ , 168
 - processivity, 175
 - effect, 173
 - DNA polymerase δ II, 174
 - polymerase conformation *in vivo*, 176
 - purification, 172
- Propionate, 366, 368
- Prosthetic group, 72
- Protein
 - association rate, 297
 - biosynthetic machinery, 200
 - concentration, weight dependence, 295
 - content, inner membrane, 230
 - couple, lack of association, 249
 - DNA complex, 154
 - encoded by COX10 and COX11, 77
 - equilibrium and transport properties, 292
 - folding, 57
 - fractionation, 183
 - I and II, 186-187
 - imported refolding, 57
 - integral membrane, 392
 - machine component, 182
 - membrane, localized *E. coli*, 84
 - mixture examination, 193
 - phosphorylation, 14
 - dependent precursor mobilization, 339
 - protein interaction, 144, 147, 194, 209, 230, 375, 376
 - detection 392
 - enzyme 384
 - investigation 379
 - in situ* 231
 - web 182
 - structure
 - model, 200
 - quaternary, 209
 - translocation, biological membrane, 66
 - whole cell lysate, 18
- Proteolysis, 202
- Proton
 - channel base, 115
 - decoupling, 372
- Protonated glutamate carbon spectra, 371
- PSI
 - complex, 122
 - and PSII transport, 116
- PSII complex, 115, 119
 - and EF particle, 117
 - enriched grana stack, 120
- Pyridoxal phosphate, 267
 - binding site, 268
- Pyruvate, 366, 368, 370, 385
 - dehydrogenase complex (PDC), 230, 390, 395, 398
 - immunological PDC, 238
 - inner membrane interaction, 239
 - labeling, 232
 - mammalian structure, 236
 - molecular mass, 237
 - molecule size, 237
 - size, 241
 - distribution, 354
 - kinase binding, 222
 - presence, 384
- Rate constant scheme, 299
- Reaction center chlorophylls of PSI, 115
- Receptor site(s) competition, 129-130
- Reducing center differences, 118
- Reducing complex excitation energy, 118
- Reductase activity *in vitro*, 147
- Reduction ribonucleotide reductase T4, 146, 147
- Replication protein, 146
- Repression
 - dependence, 311-312
 - operator orientation, 312
 - enhancement, 311, 312
- Repressor
 - binding, 308
 - like activity, 64 kda membrane, 86
 - operator binding, 308
- Resonance, 368
- Respiration
 - dependent oxidation, acyl-CoA, 232
 - linked, oxidation, crotonyl-CoA, 233
- Respiratory
 - chain bacterial and chloroplast, 72

- complex, protein involvement, 78
 - control, 350, 351
 - pathway enzyme, 71
- Reversible
 - enzyme–cytomatrix association, 325
 - monomer–oligomer association, 325
- Ribonucleoprotein particle (RNP) 44, 45
- Ribonucleoside diphosphate reductase,
 - incorporated, 95
- Ribonucleotide reductase, 139, 140, 142, 146
 - interaction, 147
 - T4 encoded, 146
 - virus encoded, 149–150
- Ribosome, mRNA and synthetase association, 200
- RK2
 - DNA replication, 101
 - plasmid *in vivo*, 102
- RNA
 - complex, 48
 - polymerase, 158
 - processing, 46
 - splicing, 48
- Saccharomyces cerevisiae* gene disruption, 376
- Sandwich model, 311
- Sandwich structure, high DNA concentration, 313
- SDS–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis, 194
- Sea urchin
 - egg enzyme, 20
 - metabolism, 24
- Sequence homology, 265
- Shikimate and phenylpropanoid interface, 36
 - dehydrogenase, 34
 - metabolism
 - aromatic, section, 32
 - aromatic, segment, 27
 - catalyzed, 34
 - pathway, 27
 - chloroplast and cytoplasm, 38
 - dual, 31, 33
 - segment, 31
 - Somatostatin inhibition, 9
 - Spectroscopy analysis, 363
 - Spliceosome assembly, 54
 - intermediate, 50
 - Steady–state importance, 365
 - Stromal membrane region, 120
 - mutant, 400
 - strain, transformed, 377–379
 - to study metabolic processes, 396
 - and topoisomerase I, 160
- Substrate
 - binding site, 332
 - channeling, 131, 132
 - vs coupled reactions, 130
 - NADH to complex I, 133–134
 - in vivo*, 134
 - elasticity equation, 323
- Succinate dehydrogenase, 252, 390
- Supercoiling
 - chromosomal, 155
 - growth phase and nutrients, 156
 - increased anaerobic condition, 157
 - negative, 158
 - nucleoid, 156
- SV40 DNA replication *in vitro*, 207
- Synaptosome, 222
- Synthetase, 199
 - complex, 199, 202, 203, 205, 207
 - and endoplasmic reticulum, 208
 - composition, 201
 - dissociation, 202
 - free and complex forms, 200
 - sequence, 205
 - synthetase interaction, 202, 206
 - weight difference, 200
- Tandem chromosomal arrangement, 380
- T4 dCMP hydroxymethylase, 144
- T4 dNTP synthetase complex, 140
- Telophase, late, 44
- Ternary complex formation, 251
- Testicular
 - androgen biosynthesis, 334
 - hCG effect, 335
 - homogenates, 334
 - microsomal suspension *in vitro*, 336, 337
 - P450XVII system, 338
- Thermal stability study, 207
- Three–dimensional
 - DNA view, 307
 - structure, 259
- Threonine residue, 120
- Thylakoid
 - development, 120
 - inner chloroplast membrane, 114
 - lumen, 115
 - membrane, 114, 115, 120
 - functional complex diagram, 118

- lateral heterogeneity, 116
- and peripheral LHCII, 119
- region appressed and non-appressed, 117
- pea plant, 119
- T4 model, 140
- Topoisomerase
 - I
 - activity, 154
 - negative supercoiling, 158
 - and bacterial chromosome, 155
 - and helical tension, 159
- Torsional rigidity, 314
- T4 phage-infected *E. coli*, 140, 146
- Tracer
 - diffusion coefficient, 296, 298
 - sedimentation equilibrium, 295
- Transcript expression, methotrexate-amplified clones, 6
- Transcription
 - complex, 159
 - control, 181
 - initiation influence *in vitro*, 157
 - supercoiling
 - affect, 158
 - change, 159
 - factor, 152
 - tet* gene, 159
- Transduction, proton-mediated, 283
- Translational diffusion
 - coefficients, 296
 - protein, 296
- Translocation
 - contact site, tool, 61
 - cytochrome b_2 , 59
 - site, 57
- Transmembrane primary receptor site, 130
- Triphosphate synthesis, lack, 97
- TROP syndrome, 183, 185
- Trp repressor
 - binding protein, 189, 194
 - and cytoplasmic protein, 185
 - electrophoretically purified, 183
 - level mechanism, 194
 - protein *E. coli*, 181, 183
 - replicas, 182
- Tryptophan, 27
 - synthase, 259, 341
 - α/β barrel fold, 263
 - α , complex, 262
 - channel ability, 267
 - complex channeling, 260
 - complex tunnel, 269
- Tryptophanyl synthetizing complex, 246
- Tubulin, 215
- Tunnel connecting $\alpha\beta$ subunit, 269
- Turnover elasticity coefficient, 282
- Tyrosine, 27
- Ubiquinol:cytochrome c
 - deficiency, 79
 - reductase, 71–73
 - analysis, 78
 - stable, 78
 - synthesis, 75
- Ultracentrifugation, 392
- Vaccinia virus
 - growth, 149
 - plaque-forming ability, 150
- Volume, equilibrium association, 293–294
- Volume occupancy
 - fractional, 299
 - protein concentration, 292
- Volume theory predictions, excluded, 292
- Western blot
 - analysis
 - dehydrogenase, 381
 - polymerase detection by, 175
 - antibody purity check, 232
 - 64 kda protein, 89, 90
- X-ray
 - crystallography, 260, 399
 - structure, tryptophan synthase, 270
- Yeast
 - enzyme, 384