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The In Situ Supermolecular Structure of Type I Collagen

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family are ubiquitous throughout the animal kingdom. weaker and structurally inferior connective tissues. The most abundant collagen, type I, readily forms fibrils Clearly, then, understanding the supermolecular (packthat convey the principal mechanical support and struc- ing) structure of healthy connective tissue is a prerequitural organization in the extracellular matrix of connec- site to elucidating the pathology of diseases such as tive tissues such as bone, skin, tendon, and vasculature. Osteogensis inperfecta and rheumatoid arthritis, to An understanding of the molecular arrangement of colla- name but two. gen in fibrils is essential since it relates molecular inter- It was over 30 years ago that Crick [1] observed, "The actions to the mechanical strength of fibrous tissues superlattice of collagen is a neglected problem and it and may reveal the underlying molecular pathology of

ducted a study of the native fibril structure at anisotropic proposed over the years [2–21], no consensus structure resolution (5.4 A˚ axial and 10 A˚ lateral). The intensities has emerged. We have circumvented this impasse by of the tendon X-ray diffraction pattern that arise from taking the model independent approach of solving the the lateral packing (three-dimensional arrangement) of phases for the reflections in the native X-ray diffraction collagen molecules were measured by using a method patterns by multiple isomorophous replacement (MIR) analogous to Rietveld methods in powder crystallogra- and by calculating the electron density map directly. phy and to the separation of closely spaced peaks in By using diffraction data from native and isomorphous Laue diffraction patterns. These were then used to de- fibers, we ensure that the unresolved questions of the

tained from a natural fiber using these techniques (more the packing arrangement of the collagen molecules commonly applied to single crystal crystallography). It themselves, rather then from isolated collagen chains. reveals the three-dimensional molecular packing ar- Biological fibers have a much higher degree of order rangement of type I collagen and conclusively proves in the direction parallel to the fiber axis than perpendicuthat the molecules are arranged on a quasihexagonal lar to it. Hence, the resolution in our electron density lattice. The molecular segments that contain the telo- map of collagen, in contrast to that from a crystal, is

health and disease) have been identified, revealing that they form a corrugated arrangement of crosslinked molecules that strengthen and stabilize the native fibril.

Stirling FK9 4LA Collagen is one of the most abundant proteins within United Kingdom the animal kingdom, with diverse locations and specific ² Center for Synchrotron Radiation Research **roles concerned principally with the maintenance of tisand Instrumentation sue and cellular shape, strength, and structural integrity.** Department of Biological, Chemical, **As one of the most crucial components of the extracelluand Physical Sciences lar matrix—the arena of many important cellular func-Illinois Institute of Technology that is perhaps surprising that relatively little is 3101 South Dearborn Street known about the lateral supermolecular organization of Chicago, Illinois 60616 collagen. Relating the structure of connective tissue matrices at the molecular level to their function is not just 3European Synchrotron Radiation Facility BP220 an academic problem; it is a vital step in understanding Grenoble F-38043 the pathology and basis for possible treatment of many France human diseases. In the context of diseased tissues, abnormalities of collagen molecular structure may well adversely affect the packing of collagen molecules in Summary fibrillar-forming types (in bone, skin, tendon, and so on), which in turn reduces the stability of these fibers (char-Background: The proteins belonging to the collagen acterized by reduced fibril diameter) and produces**

numerous connective tissue diseases. seems to be just as true today. While many models attempting to combine X-ray diffraction data, electron Results: Using synchrotron radiation, we have con- microscopic results, and biochemical data have been termine the packing structure of collagen by MIR. Supermolecular organization of the tissue are ad**dressed, since the fiber diffraction patterns obtained Conclusions: Our electron density map is the first ob- from tendons arise due to the superlattice formed by**

peptides (central to the function of collagen fibrils in anisotropic, being of higher resolution in the direction parallel to the fiber axis and less in the lateral direction. ⁴ However, the lateral resolution is sufficient to resolve Correspondence: jorgel@tigger.cc.uic.edu

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is made of collagen triple helices that are axially staggered by D telopeptides) and gold chloride (which labels histidine (67 nm) and regularly organized in the lateral direction (unresolved and selected methionine residues) [23, 24]. Building on structure). The topmost element in the diagram shows normal posi-
these advances, we have solved the structure of colla-
is a schematic representation of a single fibril that shows the dark/
light banding pattern of negati **tural hierarchy of polypeptide to fibril is shown though the bottom nal, the location of the crosslinking helices have been to top figure elements. determined, and a pattern of intermolecular and possibly**

the large-scale supermolecular structural question how the collagen molecules are arranged in the fibrils. Other studies [22] have focused on the structure of short Results and Discussion soluble collagen-like peptides ("short" meaning that these peptides are approximately 30 amino acids in Direct Determination of the Electron Density Map length, in contrast to the over 1000 residues that make The tendon specimens from which we have obtained up the length of the native collagen molecule). Although the X-ray patterns are not, of course, single crystals. such studies have been very useful, they cannot com- They are made up of millions of fibrils which, while ment on the native packing structure of the five molecu- closely parallel to each other, are in fact misaligned from lar segments found within the naturally occurring unit true parallelism by 1–2. The Bragg reflections in the cell and, hence, the need for the approach presented X-ray patterns are therefore drawn out into arcs which

trix are collagen fibrils which, in tendons, are parallel to crystallographic unit cell is triclinic (see Table 1) with its each other and to the long axes of the tendons and long axis inclined at 5 to the axis of the fibril. Hence, are up to 1000 nm in diameter. The type I collagen the X-ray pattern is a 360 rotation pattern with some molecules which make up most of tendons are some crystal (fibril) misalignment and with the long *c* **axis not 300 nm long (L). In electron micrographs, the fibrils show coincident with the axis of azimuthal rotation. In addia periodicity along the axis (the D period), which is tion, the X-ray patterns always show diffuse scattering shown by X-ray diffraction to be 67 nm (234 amino acid as well as the Bragg reflections. This diffuse scatter** residues) in the native, hydrated state. The periodicity originates from the specimen (rather than the X-ray op**is due to the molecules being staggered in the axial tics) and is specifically localized along the principal layer direction by 67 nm with respect to each other (see Figure lines in the collagen molecular transform. There are,** 1). Since $L = 4.46$ D, this means that there are gaps of **0.54 D between the molecular ends distributed, D apart, estimating the intensities of the Bragg reflections. These on a regular array within the fibril in the direction parallel are primarily acquiring patterns of sufficiently high qualto the fibril axis. The X-ray fiber diffraction pattern from ity to allow accurate separation of the diffuse backtendon shows over 140 reflections on a central linear ground from the Bragg reflections, determination of the line (the meridian) through reciprocal space parallel to intensities from these closely spaced reflections, and the fiber axis. These meridional reflections index on the then solving the phases. These problems were largely**

repeat of 67 nm. Our previous MIR study [23] had produced a profile of the electron density to 0.54 nm resolution of collagen fibrils projected onto the fibril axis, sufficient to ascertain the conformation of the telopeptides. Each collagen molecule consists of four segments of length D and a fifth segment of length 0.46 D. Segments 1 and 5 contain the nontriple helical telopeptides that are sites of the intermolecular crosslinks and provide the structural integrity and strength of the fibrils (see Figures 1 and 2).

In the X-ray fiber diffraction pattern, the strong nearequatorial reflection at a spacing close to that expected from near-neighbor molecules (1.3 nm) was shown to be split into three strong components and to suggest a quasihexagonal packing of collagen molecules [8]. An improved set of unit cell parameters was deduced by more detailed measurements on the X-ray pattern ([11, 13]; see Table 1). Further improvements in the quality of the X-ray diffraction patterns obtained by using synchrotron radiation and image treatment techniques have allowed the measurement of the intensities of the Bragg reflections from native tissue and from isomorphous Figure 1. Known Structural Hierarchy of Collagen derivatives. Derivatives used were either iodine (which The principal component of fibrillar tissues is the collagen fibril that labels the tyrosine amino acids that only occur in the interfibrillar crosslinking is inferred on the basis of this new data.

here. often overlap with the arcs from other reflections. The The fundamental units in the animal extracellular ma- fibrils are randomly oriented azimuthally. Finally, the therefore, significant technical challenges to be met in

Figure 2. Quasihexagonal Packing and Identification of the Telopeptide-Containing Segments

(a) The quasihexagonal packing of the collagen molecules seen in a transverse section through the electron density map generated by plotting 2 4 unit cells with an axial thickness of 0.1 units of the unit cell *c* **axis in the region of the C-terminal telopeptide. One unit cell is outlined (bottom left).**

(b) The native axial and lateral electron density profiles. Here, the axially projected electron density is shown as a line profile that exhibits the characteristic density differences in the gap and overlap regions obtained previously [23]. Superimposed on this at the axial levels of the N- and C-terminal telopeptides are the corresponding two-dimensional crosssections through the electron density map showing the lateral electron density profile obtained in this study.

(c) Our knowledge from [23] of the axial positions of the heavy-atom binding sites on each molecular D-periodic segment (numbered 1–5) is shown here. These were predicted from the amino acid sequence and confirmed in previous studies [23, 24]. This information was used in deducing the three-dimensional positions of the heavy atoms from our three-dimensional Patterson difference maps.

(d) The iodide derivative difference map.

(e) The gold chloride derivative difference map.

The iodide and gold chloride derivative difference maps confirm the location of segments 1 and 5, while only the gold chloride derivative shows the possible location of segment 3. The segment numbers are indicated on the diagrams. The arrangement of segments 1 and 5 in particular imply that the nonidealized [13] quasihexagonal packing arrangement of collagen molecules is due in part to the intermolecular crosslinks between these segments. The thickness of the slices shown in (b), (d), and (e) is the same as shown in (a).

mizing the experimental conditions to enhance the qual- and interpretation (see Experimental Procedures; Taity of the X-ray patterns as well as by using software bles 1–3).

overcome by improving sample preparation and by opti- developed from well-established principles for analysis

of thin slices through the unit cell rather than a single disorder is highest in the gap region. This difference in projection down the *c* **axis of the whole unit cell. A the degree of molecular order, with the highest order at schematic diagram of the positions of the amino acids the level of the telopeptides and the lowest in the gap that act as binding sites for heavy atom labeling is shown region with an intermediate degree of order in the overin Figure 2c. The electron density difference maps in lap region, fits with the classification proposed by Jones Figures 2d and 2e show corresponding axial projections and Miller [27] and Hulmes and coworkers [19]. Differgold chloride difference electron density maps at the reported by Phillips and coworkers [28] in studies of level of the telopeptides. Since iodine principally labels highly hydrated crystals of the fibrous protein tropothe telopeptides, this makes it clear that segments 1 myosin.**

derivative fiber diagrams and 5 of the collagen molecules are located next to each other and that they form a continuous corrugation of crosslinked nearest neighbors along a line approxi- 677.9 A˚ mately parallel to the *a* axis of the unit cell. This fits well with biochemical studies on the intermolecular cross-

The molecules are ordered to different degrees within **off-meridional) the D-repeating unit. Figure 3a, which is a view of the Figure of merit 0.4 electron density perpendicular to the fibril axis, shows that they are best ordered at the axial level of the telopeptides (the** *c* **axis of the electron density map has** Interpretation of the Electron Density Map

The electron for the Dechem compressed by times in all axial views). In the

The first direct visualization of the molecular packing in

The first direct visualization of the mol **and lateral sections through the (d) iodinated and (e) ences in the lateral ordering of long molecules were also**

Figure 3. Electron Density Map of Type I Collagen Molecular Packing

(a) A view perpendicular to the fibril axis of two-unit cells (D periods). The molecular packing arrangement is most clearly discernible at the axial level of the telopeptides (shown as the C-terminal and N-terminal regions in the figure) but is also discernible within the rest of the overlap region. There are no complete but only partially discernible molecular paths in the gap region. This implies a large degree of lateral disorder of the molecules in the lower packing density gap region, as predicted in several model studies [6, 15, 19]. Low electron density is commonly encountered in macromolecular crystallography in regions of crystal structures subject to thermal motion (such as chain loops, which disappear into the background). The electron density is viewed here as a 20 A˚ slice, perpendicular to the fibril axis (which has been compressed 5 times).

(b) The molecular tilt of the collagen molecular segments of the overlap region are observed to follow a vector approximately parallel to the line (0,0,0) to (0,2,1) (u,v,w, as in Fraser et al. [15]). This corresponds to a tilt of about 5 relative to the *c* **axis of the unit cell. The molecular segments in the overlap region follow parallel paths. The formation of intermolecular crosslinks and the higher packing density at the interfaces of the overlap/gap regions (at the telopeptides, Figure 2b) ensures that the overlap region is well ordered, particularly in the plane of the telopeptides in contrast to the less-ordered state in the gap. The overlap region is illustrated here with the** *c* **axis compressed by 5 times to show clearly the tilt of the individual molecular segments. The view, slab, and axial compression are as in (a).**

of the overlap region and parallel to one of the principal bunched together, away from the ideal positions in the planes of the quasihexagonal lattice. It shows that the quasihexagonal packing model. This relationship is not molecules are tilted with respect to the unit cell *c* **axis unexpected since the intermolecular connectivity is** by about 5° as proposed by Fraser et al. [15]. The image through telopeptide-derived crosslinks. This informa**we have obtained is therefore consistent with findings tion can be used to reduce the number of possible packwell established by a variety of experimental techniques. ing arrangements, although by itself it is insufficient to However, it also reveals important new features about distinguish between the sheet and compressed microfithe molecular packing, the sites of intermolecular cross- bril topologies proposed previously [8, 12] since this links, and the different degrees of molecular disorder. would require at least three segments to be defined. We**

of molecular packing that are theoretically possible. The packing topology, in turn, has implications for molecular The First "Crystal" Structure for a Natural Fiber assembly and the mechanical function of the collagen The methods employed here to determine the threefibril. In the electron density maps presented here, the dimensional structure of type I collagen have proven

Figure 3b is a view through the electron density map segments that contain the telopeptide regions are can make a tentative positional assignment to segment Implications for Molecular Arrangement
and Connectivity
The distribution of the molecular segments in the unit
cell is of paramount importance since it can allow the
distinction to be made between the different topologies

(which contain the telopeptides) show that there are continuous arising from the corrugated pattern of crosslinked mochains of crosslinked molecules running across the fibril. This is

illustrated by the bold lines between segments 1 and 5. More specu-

latively, we have assigned positions to the other segments based

on our tentative id correct, this shows that microfibrils could exist and that there would **be both inter- and intramicrofibrillar crosslinks, making microfibrils by the telopeptide-containing molecular segments, ex-**

successful. The three-dimensional molecular packing of the normal crosslinking process or even alteration of arrangement of type I collagen has been revealed, and, the (otherwise-normally crosslinked) telopeptide strucof the plethora of models proposed over half a century, ture could result in a significant weakening of the conthe quasihexagonal model has been established. The nective tissues integrity, thereby rendering it more brittle molecular segments that contain the telopeptides have and prone to damage. been identified and their coordinates in the unit cell If our tentative assignment of the position of segment determined, revealing that the molecular segments that 3 is correct, then the basis of fibrillar tissue construction are crosslinked are packed together more closely than is that of fibrils made from corrugated sheets of interthe remaining three segments, particularly in the C-ter- linked microfibrils, rather than the (perhaps) over-simpliminal region. Given the resolution of the X-ray diffraction fied concept of sheets of collagen chains. The existence patterns, we can only discern the arrangement of the of such interfibrillar crosslinking is appealing in that it molecules. No information is available on the atomic shows a high degree of stability and continuity within arrangement within molecules, although broad features the structural hierarchy of the fibril and connective tissue such as intermolecular crosslinks can be recognized. generally, as well as providing an explanation as to why

molecules has been suggested, and this involves the formation of both intermolecular and intermicrofibrillar Experimental Procedures crosslinks. This arrangement of intermicrofibrillar crosslinking would add a degree of integrity and strength to
the fibril, as does the fact that the packing arrangement
of segments 1 and 5 produces a corrugated arrange-
ment of crosslinked molecules. These must contribute a
st forces within and outside of the fibril and therefore **throughout the connective tissue generally. overlapped reflections were separated by using in-house software**

Over 20 collagen types have now been discovered and to determine each Bragg reflection intensity in the off-meridional

They convey the principal mechanical support and structural organization in the extracellular matrix to connective tissues such as bone, skin, tendon, blood vessels, and other tissue types, as well as maintaining cell shape and probably a whole array of yet unidentified roles. Collagen type I is the most abundant and diversely located member of the collagen family, found principally in fibril form.

Collagen fibrils form in a self-assembly process where the correct axial registration between collagen molecules and telopeptide-mediated crosslink formation is crucial to the formation of normal fibrils. Specific axial and lateral organization is somehow derived in this process with the characteristic 67 nm axial staggering of molecular ends visualized by repeating dark and light bands in electron micrographs of negatively stained fibrillar tissues. Until now, the lateral organization has been little understood, with no clear and unambiguous evidence linking the structure of individual collagen triple helices with how they pack and how they are organized laterally to form the much larger supermolecular arrays, i.e., fibrils.

In studying the in situ structure of type I collagen by using synchrotron radiation, it has been possible to Figure 4. Possible Molecular Topologies identify the packing mode of collagen molecules and The assignment of positions in the unit cell to segments 1 and 5 the probable basis for this quasihexagonal packing as difficult to isolate. plains something of the considerable tensile strength displayed by normal fibrillar connective tissue. Inhibition

A tentative pattern of interconnectivity of collagen such microfibrils have proved as yet difficult to isolate.

Prior to data extraction, background scatter was removed according to the procedures described in Wess et al. [18, 21]. Spatially that made use of the Metropolis algorithm [29]. The coordinate position of the intensities in the diffraction pattern were fixed ac-
 Biological Implications cording to the unit cell parameters previously described [18], which marked the center of a two-dimensional Gaussian function used diffraction pattern. The optimum set of separated X-ray diffraction

Figure 5. Background Subtraction and Intensity Determination

(a) Diffuse background subtracted equatorial diffraction pattern (low-angle section) from native rat tail tendon. The reciprocal lattice points are marked by crosses and were calculated from the triclinic unit cell [13, 18]. The indices of reflections indicated a high degree of overlap, particularly in the area corresponding to R = 0.8 nm⁻¹ and Z = 0.018 nm⁻¹, where R and Z are cylindrical polar coordinates of the cylindrically **projected central section of the fiber diffraction pattern. Note that this shows only the most closely spaced reflections. Other Bragg reflections with greater spatial separation appear above this region in the diffraction pattern and were also used in the phase calculations.**

(b) The area in the region of R = 0.8 nm⁻¹. This particular area from the observed and simulated diffraction patterns of the native and two **derivatives are, from left to right, simulated and observed native, simulated and observed iodide derivative, and simulated and observed gold chloride derivative. The region corresponds to the "triplet" of intensity and derives from the interplanar spacing of molecules in the quasihexagonal packing scheme. Ten row-lines of closely spaced Bragg peaks contribute directly to the triplet. Clear differences can be seen between the intensities of the reflections with the same (h,k,l) indices in the observed native and derivative X-ray patterns, as well as good agreement between each of the simulated and observed diffraction patterns.**

(c) The quality of the intensity determination is made more evident in the full low-angle equatorial native diffraction pattern after background subtraction. The right side is the observed pattern; the left side is the simulated pattern used to obtain the Bragg intensities.

intensities obtained in this manner was used to calculate the struc- sional molecular packing arrangement of collagen molecules. The

point to solve the phase problem for the three-dimensional unit cell software suite [30]. **with the Xtalview crystallographic software suite [30] (specifically Calculation of the electron density map was performed by using**

ture factor phases (see Figures 5 and 6 and Table 2). axial positions of the heavy atoms as determined from the previous one-dimensional study were combined with initial difference Pat**and 5th molecular segments was obtained from the iodide and gold terson function data relating to the lateral structure to obtain an chloride difference Patterson functions with reference to the known estimate of lateral heavy atom groupings. The three-dimensional axial distribution of the heavy atom vectors [23, 24] and the amino coordinates of the heavy-atom binding sites were estimated and acid sequence. This information was then employed as a starting refined using Xpatpred and Xheavy of the XtalView crystallographic**

Xfft and Xpatpred) to produce a visualization of the three-dimen- 410 unique reflections that were obtained from each of the native

range (3,2,0) to (3,2,12) and meridional intensities (0,0,13) to (0,0,124) *219***, 157–158. determined previously [23]. Xheavy was applied to the native and 4. Miller, A., and Wray, J.S. (1971). Molecular packing in collagen. derivative data sets to calculate the native phases, the electron Nature** *230***, 437–439.** density map, and the difference Fourier maps. Table 1 summarizes **the experimental details. crofibrils in collagen. J. Mol. Biol.** *75***, 441–447.**

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Figure 6. Off-Meridional Diffraction Pattern of Iodinated Derivative Tendon

Background subtracted false color image showing the indexed Bragg reflection positions as spots and the row-line group definitions listed in Table 3.

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