Photosynthetic electron transport activity in heat-treated barley leaves: The role of internal alternative electron donors to photosystem II

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Received 10 October 2006; received in revised form 5 February 2007; accepted 26 February 2007
Available online 3 March 2007

Abstract

Electron transport processes were investigated in barley leaves in which the oxygen-evolution was fully inhibited by a heat pulse (48 °C, 40 s). Under these circumstances, the K peak (≈F400μm) appears in the chl a fluorescence (OJIP) transient reflecting partial QA reduction, which is due to a stable charge separation resulting from the donation of one electron by tyrozine Z. Following the K peak additional fluorescence increase (indicating QA accumulation) occurs in the 0.2–2 s time range. Using simultaneous chl a fluorescence and 820 nm transmission measurements it is demonstrated that this QA accumulation is due to naturally occurring alternative electron sources that donate electrons to the donor side of photosystem II. Chl a fluorescence data obtained with 5-ms light pulses (double flashes spaced 2.3–500 ms apart, and trains of several hundred flashes spaced by 100 or 200 ms) show that the electron donation occurs from a large pool with t1/2 ≈ 30 ms. This alternative electron donor is most probably ascorbate.

Keywords: Alternative electron donor; Chlorophyll a fluorescence; Heat pulse; OJIP-transient; Photosystem II; 820 nm transmission

1. Introduction

Exposure of plants to high temperatures has two opposite effects on the photosynthetic electron transport chain. Photosystem I (PSI) is stimulated by heat (measured as the reduction rate of P700+), which is related to an enhanced reduction of the plastoquinone (PQ) pool by either ferredoxin (Fd) or NADPH [1,2]. In contrast, photosystem II (PSII), and especially the oxygen evolving complex (OEC) is inactivated at relatively low temperatures (e.g. [3,4]). A further heat-induced effect is a shift of the redox equilibrium between QA and QB, increasing the residence time of an electron on QA relative to QB [5–7] that could lead to back flow of electrons from the PQ-pool to PSII [8,9].

The chl a fluorescence (OJIP) transient is a very sensitive indicator of photosynthetic electron transport processes. Light-dependent changes in the chl a fluorescence yield are thought to be determined by changes in the redox state of QA (reviewed in e.g. [10–14]). At the same time, it has been shown that the OJIP transient reflects the reduction of the photosynthetic electron transport chain (e.g. [15]). The OJ phase is the photochemical part of the transient. Its kinetics depend strongly on the light intensity [16,17]. The JI phase has been shown to parallel the reduction of the PQ-pool [18] and the IP phase depends on PSI activity representing the reduction of the ferredoxin (Fd) pool in...
the presence of inactive ferredoxin-NADP$^+$-reductase (FNR) [15]. The shape of the OJIP transient drastically changes after a heat treatment, especially if oxygen evolution is completely inhibited: the J and I steps disappear and the K peak develops at 300–400 μs if the measurements are carried out at a standard, 3000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ light intensity [19]. After the K peak the fluorescence intensity decreases. The K peak is thought to result from the only stable charge separation possible when the OEC is completely destroyed [20,21] because TyrF can provide only one electron. However, in leaves in the 0.2–2 s time range another peak appears in the fluorescence transient [22,23], which might represent a second phase of QA accumulation.

In this study, we investigated the origin of the fluorescence increase in the 0.2–2 s time range in leaves in which the oxygen evolution was fully inhibited with a heat pulse (by immersing the leaves for 40 s in a water bath of 48 °C). This treatment induces typical heat stress effects, but causes virtually no visible symptoms and secondary effects [23]. (A similar method, a strong but short pulse instead of a longer, weaker treatment has symptoms and secondary effects [23].) We used simultaneous 820 nm transmission and chl a fluorescence induction measurements, and also recorded chl a fluorescence transients induced by short (5 ms), repetitive light pulses. It was found that alternative electron sources provide electrons to the donor side of PSII with I$_{1/2}$ ~ 30 ms. We also show that the electrons originate from a large pool of donors (probably ascorbate molecules).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Plant material and growth conditions

Measurements were carried out on 7-day-old barley seedlings (Hordeum vulgare cv. Triangel). Plants were grown in a greenhouse where the temperature was 20–25 °C during the day and ~14 °C at night.

2.2. Heat pulse

The heat pulse was given by submerging the leaves of barley seedlings. The pots with seedlings were turned upside down into a water bath of 48 °C (if not stated otherwise) for 40 s. In the case of the DCMU+ heat treatment and the MV+ heat treatment leaf segments were used and submerged in 48 °C water for 40 s. In our previous study [23], we used a heat pulse of 50 °C to inactivate all OECs. In this case, 48 °C was enough to achieve the same effect, which is probably due to the lower growth temperature of the plants. We verified that this heat pulse fully inactivated the OECs. The B thermoluminescence band [25] (that is a reflection of recombination reactions between QA and the S$_2$ or S$_3$ states of the OEC) was completely eliminated; this was confirmed by oxygen-evolution measurements carried out on thylakoids isolated from heat-treated leaves using PqBQ (phenyl-p-benzoquinone) as an electron acceptor (data not shown).

2.3. DCMU+ heat treatment

Leaf segments of ~2 cm long were submerged in DCMU (3-(3',4'-dichlorophenyl)-1,1-dimethylurea) solution (200 μM, containing 1% ethanol to dissolve DCMU) or 1% ethanol for 5 h. Half of the leaf segments treated with DCMU and half of the leaf segments kept in 1% ethanol were given a heat pulse (48 °C for 40 s in water bath). There were four types of samples: DCMU-treated, DCMU+heat-treated, heat-treated (treated in 1% ethanol before the heat treatment) and control (1% ethanol treated). It was important to carry out the DCMU treatment before the heat pulse otherwise the F$_{60}$ value of leaves became very high (~78% of F$_{M}$, data not shown).

2.4. Methylviologen (MV)+ heat treatment

For MV treatments, a 200 μM MV (1,1’-dimethyl-4,4’-bipyridinium dichloride, Fluka) solution was applied to both sides of the leaf with a fine brush. The leaves were not detached and the plants were kept overnight in complete darkness before the measurements (see also [15]). Following the MV treatment, leaf segments were prepared and half of them were given a heat pulse (48 °C, 40 s). Control plants were kept overnight in darkness.

2.5. Chl a fluorescence and 820 nm transmission measurements

Samples were kept in darkness after the heat pulse and measured within 30–60 min. In the case of fluorescence measurements carried out by the Handy-PEA (Hansatech Instruments Ltd, UK), the leaf samples were illuminated with continuous red light (650 nm peak wavelength, the spectral line half-width is 22 nm; the light emitted by the LEDs is cut-off at 700 nm by NIR short-pass filters) at the indicated light intensities for 1–5 s. The light was provided by an array of three light-emitting diodes focused on a circle of 5 mm diameter of the sample surface. The first reliably measured point of the fluorescence transient is at 20 μs, which was taken as F$_{0}$. Chl a fluorescence emission is measured at wavelengths longer than 700 nm (Koppicoming RG-9 long-pass filter).

For some of the experiments (Figs. 2 and 3) we made use of a “fast” version of the Handy-PEA instrument that allows reducing the pulse length to 300 μs.

Either two, or trains of several hundred 5-ms light pulses were applied. The dark-time intervals between the light pulses were 2.3, 9.6, 16.9, 31.5, 38.8, 53.4, 75.3, 100, 200 or 500 ms.

A special high-intensity measuring head was used to induce chl a fluorescence at a maximum intensity of 15000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ produced by a single 650 nm LED (Hansatech Instruments Ltd, UK).

820 nm transmission measurements parallel to chl a fluorescence were carried out using a PEA Senior instrument (Hansatech Instruments Ltd, UK). The excitation light intensity used was 1800 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$, produced by four 650 nm LEDs. Far-red light (718 nm peak wavelength, 200 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ light intensity) and modulated far-red measuring light (820 nm peak wavelength) were provided by two additional LEDs. Further technical details and applications are described in several papers by Schansker et al. [15,26,27].

3. Results

3.1. Chl a fluorescence transients of heat-treated barley leaves measured at different light intensities

In Fig. 1 several aspects of chl a fluorescence transients of heat-treated barley leaves are demonstrated. In Fig. 1A, a comparison is made between chl a fluorescence transients measured at light intensities of 5000 and 15000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$; the transients are presented without normalization. In Fig. 1B, the fluorescence transient of heat-treated samples are presented, measured between 200 and 3000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ and the transients were normalized to F$_{0}$. By increasing the light intensity from 200 to 15000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$, the intensity of the K peak increased and its peak position gradually shifted from ~3 ms to 0.16 ms which is in agreement with its photochemical character [21]. In heat-treated samples measured at high light intensities (3000–15000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) the fluorescence intensity decreased after the K peak to a level that was almost equal to F$_{0}$. This is mainly due to forward electron transport to QA but P680$^+$ accumulation may explain
part of the fluorescence decrease [21] because \( \text{P680}^+ \) is a strong fluorescence quencher [28–30].

Following this phase, a second peak emerged indicating further QA reduction. Its maximum was reached at \( \sim 1 \) s which gave the \( P \) value of the fluorescence transient. The position and the intensity of the normalized \( P \) level did not depend on the light intensity (Fig. 1B). The \( P \) value decreased strongly by increasing the temperature of the heat pulse from 48 to 54 °C (data not shown) but it did not disappear completely.

In Fig. 1C, \( F_t - F_0 \) kinetics of heat-treated and control leaves measured at three different light intensities are plotted. The \( F_0 \)-increase caused by the heat pulse was rather small, \( \sim 6\% \) of the \( F_V \) of the control sample and FR pre-illumination did not decrease the \( F_0 \) value (data not shown) but it did not disappear completely.

In Fig. 1C, \( F_t - F_0 \) kinetics of heat-treated and control leaves measured at three different light intensities are plotted. The \( F_0 \) increase caused by the heat pulse was rather small, \( \sim 6\% \) of the \( F_V \) of the control sample and FR pre-illumination did not decrease the \( F_0 \) value (data not shown). This means that there was only a very limited amount of QA at the onset of illumination in the heat-treated plants. This made a comparison of the initial fluorescence kinetics of the heat-treated and control samples possible. The kinetics of the initial rise of the heat-treated and control samples were very similar at all light intensities. This indicates that the first charge separation was not affected by the heat pulse (Fig. 1C).

Hydroxylamine (\( \text{NH}_2\text{OH} \)) reduces and thereby destroys the manganese cluster. Depending on the concentration, it also acts as an electron donor [31,32]. In thylakoids, at low (0.1 mM) \( \text{NH}_2\text{OH} \)-concentration the K peak appears, but there is no further fluorescence increase. However, at 1 mM \( \text{NH}_2\text{OH} \) the fluorescence transient is very similar to the transient of our heat-treated samples presented in Fig. 1 [33]. Therefore, processes on the donor side of PSII seem to explain many of the heat pulse-induced changes in the fluorescence induction.

The \( Q_X \) reduction, as reflected by the fluorescence increase in the 0.2–2 s time range, suggested that not only the one electron of \( \text{TyrZ}^+ \) was available (emergence of the K peak) but that the PSII units had access to further, alternative electron donors replacing water as electron donor to PSII. This hypothesis was tested in a series of experiments.

### 3.2. Detection of alternative electron donors with short repetitive light pulses

Regeneration of the K peak was studied by giving two 5-ms light pulses (3000 \( \mu \)mol photons \( m^{-2} s^{-1} \) light intensity) spaced 2.3–500 ms apart. In this way, the availability of electrons for the re-reduction of \( \text{TyrZ}^+ \) can be studied. Re-reduction of \( \text{TyrZ}^+ \) enables a further reduction of \( Q_A \) that is reflected by the regeneration of the K peak on the second light pulse.

After the shortest, 2.3 ms time interval (Fig. 2A) there was almost no variable fluorescence. This confirms that the OEC was completely inactivated by the heat pulse, because the donation time to \( \text{TyrZ}^+ \) by active OECs is 0.1–1 ms [34]. Indeed, in control leaves, fluorescence largely recovered within 2.3 ms (Fig. 2A).

On the basis of this experimental approach the \( t_{1/2} \) for the regeneration of the K peak was determined to be \( \sim 30 \) ms (Figs. 2B and C). In Fig. 2D the results of a long series of light pulses (a...
train of one hundred 5-ms-light-pulses spaced 100 ms apart) are presented: even in the case of the 100th light pulse, 30–40% of the original K peak was regenerated. Since the 5-ms flashes were nearly saturating for the K step with respect to a single charge separation (Fig. 2A shows that in untreated samples, several charge separations can occur in 5 ms), this experiment shows that the electrons originated from a large pool. In order to estimate the pool size, the heat-treated leaves were illuminated with a series of 5-ms pulses spaced 200 ms apart. Half-depletion of the pool occurred after about 400–500 light pulses; further, a few minutes in darkness allowed full regeneration of the electron donor pool (data not shown).

3.3. Regeneration of the K peak after heat pulses of 50–54 °C

The regeneration of the K peak was also investigated after heat pulses of 50, 52 and 54 °C. The transients of Fig. 3 show that even after a 54 °C heat pulse, the intensity of the K peak and its regeneration after a 31.5 ms time interval were similar to those of a heat pulse at 48 °C (Fig. 2). We note, however, that the fluorescence decrease after the K peak becomes slightly slower by increasing the temperature of the treatment. This may be explained by a gradual change of the redox equilibrium between QA and QB (e.g. [5]).

3.4. Chl a fluorescence transients and 820 nm transmission kinetics of DCMU + heat-treated leaves

Forward electron transport beyond QA can be blocked by DCMU (3-(3′,4′-dichlorophenyl)-1,1-dimethylurea). In DCMU + heat-treated leaf segments the P level was close to the FM value of untreated leaves (Fig. 4A). This indicates that in heat-treated leaves (in the absence of DCMU) at the maximum of the peak in the 0.2–2 s time range (P) not all PSII reaction centers were closed, and thus the FV/FM was low. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the maximum quantum yield of PSII was very much reduced in heat-treated leaves (cf. Fig. 1C).

The F0 and FM values of the fluorescence transient are used to determine the maximum quantum yield of primary photochemistry (φP0=FV/FM=kip/(kip+kN), where kP and kN are rate constants of photochemistry and other losses of excitation energy, respectively; [35]). A requirement for the use of the FV/FM value as the maximum quantum yield of primary photochemistry is that at FM all PSII reaction centers are...
closed. This requirement is not fulfilled in the case of heat-treated samples (Fig. 4A). For this reason, the $F_v/F_M$ value should not be used as an indicator of maximum quantum yield of primary photochemistry in such samples.

We also note that in the case of non-heat-treated samples the $F_M$ values were almost identical in the presence or absence of DCMU. This confirms an earlier study in which it was shown that PQ-pool quenching does not occur if DCMU is allowed to diffuse slowly into intact leaves [36].

The shape of the chl $a$ fluorescence transient of DCMU + heat-treated leaf segments was biphasic: a large fast and a smaller slow phase can be distinguished. This may suggest that the phenomenon is related to $\alpha$ and $\beta$ centers [37]. However, the $t_{1/2}$ of this slow phase is in the order of tens of ms, which is much slower than the closure of the $\beta$ centers at this light intensity [38]. We explain the very slow phase of the heat-treated samples by assuming that charge recombinations between QA$^-$ and TyrZ$^+$ slow down the reduction of QA. These recombination reactions may be gradually blocked when the alternative electron donors re-reduce TyrZ (Fig. 2).

In Fig. 4, simultaneously measured Chl $a$ fluorescence transients (Fig. 4A) and 820 nm transmission kinetics (Fig. 4B) are presented. Transmission changes at 820 nm reflect the redox states of P700, plastocyanin (PC) and Fd, with Fd being a small component [15,26,39]. Transmission changes were used here to monitor electron flow through PSI. In control leaves, a red light pulse induced an initial oxidation of P700 and PC (decrease in the transmission level) followed by a re-reduction when electrons arrive from PSII [26,36]. Re-reduction occurred also in the case of heat-treated samples, but it happened later (after 20 ms for the control and 80 ms for the heat-treated samples) and it was also much slower ($t_{1/2}$ of $\sim$40 ms for the control and $\sim$140 ms for the heat-treated leaves). This indicates that in the case of the heat-treated samples the electrons responsible for P700$^+$ and PC$^+$ reduction arrived much more slowly than in the control samples. This is in agreement with the data showing that

![Fig. 4. Chl $a$ fluorescence (A) and simultaneously measured 820 nm transmission kinetics (B) of heat-treated, DCMU-treated, DCMU + heat-treated and untreated barley leaves. The excitation light was produced by 650 nm LEDs and chl $a$ fluorescence emitted at wavelengths $>700$ nm was measured.](image)
the $t_{1/2}$ of the electron donation to PSII is slow compared to the control (cf. Fig. 2). As shown in Fig. 4B, the re-reduction of P700$^+$ and PC$^+$ is DCMU-sensitive both in the control and in the heat-treated samples. This finding substantiates our conclusion on the existence of an electron donor pool and the functioning of an electron transport through PSII in the absence of active OECs.

In unreported experiments we also confirmed that the oxidation of cytochrome $f$ in heat-treated samples occurred as in control samples but the re-reduction of cytochrome $f$ was somewhat slower in heat-treated leaves. (Flash-induced absorbance transients (see e.g. [40]) were recorded between 505 and 572 nm. Redox transients of the cytochrome $b/f$ complex were identified based on the transient spectra, or for cytochrome $f$, as $\Delta A_{554} - \Delta A_{545}$, after correction for $\Delta A_{515}$).

It is also interesting to note that heat treatment speeds up the fluorescence and transmission decrease at around 1 s (Fig. 4, see also Fig. 1B, P peak). We have shown earlier that the IP phase of the OJIP transient depends on PSI activity and it represents the reduction of the Fd pool in the presence of inactive FNR [15,27]. In the following section the possible role of the acceptor side of PSI on the chl $a$ fluorescence transient was studied in heat-treated leaves.

### 3.5. Methylviologen (MV) treatments

In light-adapted leaves the PSI acceptor side is active (FNR is activated in 1–2 s; reviewed in [67]) and as a consequence, the IP phase is missing [27]. The IP phase is not present in leaves treated with methylviologen (MV), a compound that is known to accept electrons from the FeS-clusters of PSI; therefore it allows electrons to bypass the block that is transiently imposed by the inactive FNR [15].

Methylviologen treatment of intact barley leaves made the IP phase disappear (Fig. 5A) and the re-reduction of PC$^+$ and P700$^+$ did not occur during the red light pulse (Fig. 5B), just like in pea leaves; [15]). In MV+heat-treated leaves the fluorescence peak in the 0.2–2 s time range was not observed (Fig. 5A) and the re-reduction of PC$^+$ and P700$^+$ did not occur (Fig. 5B). These data show that similar to the non-heat-treated leaves, the fluorescence rise to P depends on PSI activity [15].

### 3.6. Double-pulse experiments

In order to obtain further information about the photosynthetic electron transport processes in heat-treated leaves, double pulse experiments were carried out to study the regeneration of several fluorescence parameters. The regeneration kinetics of the O ($F_{20}$ μs) and J ($F_{3 ms}$) steps in the dark depend on the re-oxidation of QA and the PQ-pool, respectively [15,38]. In untreated leaves, the $F_{20}$ μs, $F_{400}$ μs and $F_{3 ms}$ values gradually decreased upon increasing the time intervals between the two light pulses (Fig. 6A). However, in the case of heat-treated leaves, the $F_{20}$ μs, $F_{400}$ μs and $F_{3 ms}$ values initially increased upon increasing the time interval between the two light pulses, and they reached their maxima 0.5 s after the first pulse (Figs. 6B and D). This initial $F_{20}$ μs, $F_{400}$ μs and $F_{3 ms}$ increase may indicate an ongoing reduction of the PQ-pool and QA in darkness that lasts for a short period of time after switching off the light. This may be explained by a stimulated dark-reduction of the PQ-pool [1,2] and a heat-induced shift in the redox equilibrium between Qh and QA towards QA [5,6,8,9]. We note that FR pre-illumination of dark-adapted heat-treated leaves only slightly changed the chl $a$ fluorescence transients indicating that in dark-adapted samples the PQ-pool was mainly in the oxidized state (data not shown).

In untreated leaves, re-oxidation of QA may occur via two pathways [41]: (i) recombination reactions between QA and the S2/S3 states of the OEC ($t_{1/2}$ of less than a second), and (ii) forward electron transport in those centers that are in the S0 or S1 states and that depends on the availability of oxidized PQ-molecules. The $F_{3 ms}$ value can be used as an indicator for the PQ-pool redox state [12,38] and its dark-recovery is considerably slower than the dark-recovery of the $F_{20}$ μs-value that...
reflects the re-oxidation of QA\(^-\) [15]. In heat-treated leaves, the dark-recovery of \(F_{20\mu s}\), \(F_{400\mu s}\) and \(F_{3\text{ms}}\) values occurred in parallel (Fig. 6D) and linear relationships were found between \(F_{20\mu s}\) and \(F_{400\mu s}\) \((R^2 = 0.96)\) and between \(F_{20\mu s}\) and \(F_{3\text{ms}}\) \((R^2 = 0.98)\); inset of Fig. 6D). No such correlation can be found in control leaves (inset of Fig. 6C). This suggests that in heat-treated leaves, re-oxidation of QA\(^-\) occurred only via forward electron transfer and there were no recombination reactions between the donor side and QA\(^-\) (recombination reaction between QA\(^-\) and TyrZ\(^+\) occurs with \(t_{1/2} \sim 120\) ms [42]). This further confirms that the OEC was completely inhibited by the heat pulse and that TyrZ\(^+\) had been re-reduced by an alternative electron donor before recombination could take place.

An interesting fluorescence feature can be observed in the case of heat-treated leaves (Fig. 6B): 0.1 s after the first light pulse, both the K and the J steps were present in the fluorescence transients. In the case of the 0.5 s time interval the J step became more prominent. The discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of the present study, but see [38,43].

### 3.7. Re-reduction of P700\(^+\) and PC\(^+\) in darkness

In heat-treated samples the re-reduction of P700\(^+\) and PC\(^+\) in darkness following a FR illumination is stimulated, which may be caused by a stronger electron donation by stromal reductants like Fd and NADPH to the PQ-pool [1,2]. Immediately after the heat-treatment P700\(^+\) and PC\(^+\) re-reduction is \(\sim 10\) times faster than in untreated samples but this effect does not persist for long [2]. Our measurements were carried out 30–60 min after the heat pulse. The \(t_{1/2}\) of the re-reduction of P700\(^+\) and PC\(^+\) was
The heat pulse exerted little effect on the very beginning of the fluorescence transient: the rising parts of the K peak and the J step overlap completely during the first 70–150 μs depending on the light intensity (Fig. 1C). This implies that dark-reduction of the PQ-pool is stimulated and this may represent a possible explanation for the increase of the $F_{20 \mu s}$, $F_{400 \mu s}$ and $F_{3 \text{ ms}}$ values during the first 0.5 s of darkness after a red light pulse (Figs. 6B and D).

4. Discussion

4.1. The initial fluorescence rise in heat-treated leaves

The heat pulse exerted little effect on the very beginning of the fluorescence transient: the rising parts of the K peak and the J step overlap completely during the first 70–150 μs depending on the light intensity (Fig. 1C). This implies that the heat-treatment had little effect on the effective cross-section of PSII (αPSII; [44]). This means that heat-induced antenna dissociation (e.g. [45]) plays no or a very limited role under our experimental conditions. The initial overlap of the K and J steps also implies that the probability of charge recombination is not higher and there is no stronger accumulation of P680$^+$ in heat-stressed leaves than in control samples at the beginning of illumination. Also, 820 nm transmission measurements (Fig. 4B) show that P680$^+$ accumulation is unlikely during the first 10 ms of illumination, because the build-up of P680$^+$ should have led to a faster decrease of the 820 nm transmission signal (P680$^+$ absorbs at 820 nm just like P700$^+$, e.g. [30]).

Photosystem II contains several other co-factors (Cyt b$_{570}$, TyrZ, ChlZ, β-carotene) that could act as potential electron donors (reviewed in [46]). It has been estimated that the excitation rate of PSII for pea leaves is once every 50 μs at 12 000 μmol photons m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ light intensity [47]. This would suggest that the overlapping parts of the K and J steps represent approximately one charge separation with TyrZ being the electron donor [20]. If any of the above-mentioned additional co-factors were able to stabilize an additional charge separation, it would have prolonged the fluorescence rise beyond the K peak. These co-factors are not likely to donate electrons to P680$^+$ for two other reasons: (i) the pool of available electrons is too small to explain the observed electron transport activity (Fig. 4B), and (ii) there is little sign of heterogeneity in the regeneration kinetics of the K-peak (Fig. 2C).

The results of this in vivo study indicate that if OECs are inactivated, PSII reaction centers have access to a large pool of alternative electron donors making partial reduction of QA and the electron transport chain possible. The $t_{1/2}$ for this electron donation process is ~30 ms (Fig. 2C). This electron donation pathway is rather robust since after a heat pulse of 54 °C the alternative electron donors were still capable of donating electrons to PSII (Fig. 3).

Various compounds are known to be able to donate electrons to the donor side of PSII in vitro in the absence of the manganese cluster: ascorbate (Asc), Mn$^{2+}$, NH$_2$OH, TMPD (e.g. [31,48,49]). Alternative electron donors have been suggested to play an important role also under in vivo conditions (e.g. [50,51]) but their existence has never been experimentally proven. In vivo, in the absence of active OEC, Asc is probably the only alternative electron donor that can supply electrons in sufficiently high amounts to PSII. The concentration of Asc in chloroplasts is rather high; ~25–50 mM in C$_3$ plants [52,53]. In the lumen, where violaxanthin de-epoxidase uses Asc as co-substrate [54], the concentration of Asc was estimated to be 3.8 mM [55]. In isolated thylakoids, Katoh and San Pietro [48] and Mano et al. [51] found that the $K_m$ value for Asc was ~2.5 mM and they estimated that the Asc-dependent electron flux was ~50 μmol NADPH mg Chl$^{-1}$ h$^{-1}$. The donation time that can be derived from these values is of the same order of magnitude as the ~30 ms electron donation halftime that we obtained in heat-treated leaves.

It is worth mentioning that Asc is not a good electron donor to PSII reaction centers with an active OEC [51]. It has also been suggested that Asc can donate electrons to PSI, but this electron donation is significant only at relatively high (>10–20 mM) Asc concentrations [51,56] that are unlikely to occur in the lumen. Indeed, we did not find evidence for electron donation by alternative electron donors to P700$^+$. Fig. 4 shows that if all electron flow from PSII is inhibited by DCMU, P700$^+$ and PC$^+$ were oxidized within 1–2 s of red light illumination in the heat-treated samples, just like in control samples. The lack of electron donors in manganese-depleted samples has been suggested to be responsible for low-light photoinhibition (e.g. [57]). The absence of electron donors would lead to the accumulation of P680$^+$ leading in turn to photo-oxidative damage. The 820 nm transmission measurements presented in
Fig. 4B demonstrate that alternative donors can maintain a limited electron flow through PSII. In low light, this might be enough to protect PSI and PSII reaction centers from further damage even in the total absence of active OECs. This protection can be physiologically relevant given the fact that under natural stress conditions the inactivation of OECs occurs stochastically. Indeed, it has been observed that there is no difference between the photosynthetic activities of plants kept in darkness or in relatively low light (100 μmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹) for 30 min following a heat pulse [23]. However, a few hours of light treatment following a heat pulse makes the K peak disappear indicating a further damage (or degradation) of the PSII reaction centers [23].

Photosystem I itself is heat-tolerant but exposure of isolated chloroplasts to heat in the light causes a selective destruction of PSI pigments. It has been shown that it is a direct consequence of the interruption of the electron flow originating from PSII [58]. Therefore, it is conceivable that the alternative electron donors of PSII may have some protective role also for PSI.

A pathway for the maintenance of the Asc-concentration in the lumen has been proposed by Mano et al. [51,59]. Upon donating electrons Asc is oxidized to monodehydroascorbate (MDA). The MDA radicals in the lumen are then disproportionated to Asc and dehydroascorbate (DHA). DHA is able to diffuse to the stroma where DHA reductase catalyses the reduction of DHA by glutathione. Asc⁻ is then thought to be transferred to the lumen by a postulated transporter [51,59] or by diffusion [55].

4.3. Dark-reduction of the PQ-pool

The heat-induced stimulation of electron transport around PSI has been in the focus of research on heat-stress effects on the thylakoid membrane over the last 10 years. Re-reduction of P700⁺ and PC⁺ after a far-red pulse was shown to be stimulated up to 10-fold after a heat treatment [2]. However, it was also shown that this stimulatory effect disappears quite quickly after the heat-treatment [2]. The only two-fold stimulation that is observed here (Fig. 7) could very well be due to the fact that our measurements were carried out ~30 min after the treatment. A stimulated non-photochemical reduction of the PQ-pool can be due to an increased cyclic electron transport around PSI [60–63] or to increased chlororespiration [64,65]. However, FR-preillumination did not decrease the Fv/Fm value of dark-adapted, heat-treated leaves (data not shown). Therefore it is likely that the PQ-pool and QA were mainly in the oxidized state and the stimulation of chlororespiration was not significant.

Two cyclic PSI electron transport pathways have been described in higher plants: (i) a NADPH-dehydrogenase (NDH) dependent pathway [66], and (ii) a ferredoxin-PQ-reductase (FQR) dependent pathway [60]. Of these, the NDH pathway does not seem to be relevant to our study, because the data indicate (Fig. 4) that in heat-treated barley leaves FNR is inactive in darkness, as expected (e.g. [67]). Havaux et al. [68] have shown that the relative contribution of the two cyclic pathways varies from one plant species to another. In barley protoplasts, it has been shown that the slow component of the far-red light stimulated luminescence (related to PSI cyclic electron transfer) is sensitive to antimycin A [69]. Therefore it is likely that in non-stressed barley plants the FQR pathway is active. In other words, a heat-stimulation of the FQR-pathway could explain the two-fold increase in P700⁺ and PC⁺ reduction (Fig. 7) and the increase of F20 μs, F400 μs and F34 μs that lasts for ~0.5 s after switching off the light (Fig. 6). However, the 820 nm transmission measurements (Fig. 4B) demonstrate that in the light the electron transport activity of heat-treated leaves was very sensitive to DCMU. This means that cyclic PSI electron transport contributed very little and the photosynthetic electron transport was dominated by PSII-mediated electron transport that originates from the alternative electron donors of PSII.

Acknowledgements

We thank also the Hansatech Instruments Ltd for the construction of the high intensity measuring head and the “fast” Handy-PEA instrument. We thank Milán Szabó for the help with the cytochrome f flash-induced absorbance measurements and Dr. László Kovács for the help with thermoluminescence and oxygen-evolution measurements. This work was in part supported by the Hungarian Research Foundation (OTKA K 63252). Dr. S.Z. Tóth received support from the National Office for Research and Technology (NKTH, Hungary, Öveges Fellowship Program).

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