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Structural implications for the role of the N terminus in the ‘superactivation’ of collagenases

A crystallographic study

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Abstract

For the collagenases PMNL-CL and FIB-CL, the presence of the N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ correlates with an increase in proteolytic activity. We have determined the X-ray crystal structure of the recombinant Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human neutrophil collagenase (PMNL-CL, MMP-8) using the recently solved model of the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form for phasing and subsequently refined it to a final crystallographic *R*-factor of 18.0% at 2.5 Å resolution. The PMNL-CL catalytic domain is a spherical molecule with a flat active site cleft separating a smaller C-terminal subdomain from a bigger N-terminal domain, that harbours two zinc ions, namely a ‘structural’ and a ‘catalytic’ zinc, and two calcium ions. The N-terminal segment prior to Pro⁸⁶, which is disordered in the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form, packs against a concave hydrophobic surface made by the C-terminal helix. The N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ ammonium group makes a salt link with the side chain carboxylate group of the strictly conserved Asp²³². Stabilization of the catalytic site might be conferred via strong hydrogen bonds made by the adjacent, likewise strictly conserved Asp²³³ with the characteristic ‘Met-turn’, which forms the base of the active site residues.

Key words: Matrix metalloproteinase; Collagenase; Zinc endopeptidase family; X-ray crystal structure; Superactivation

1. Introduction

Matrix metalloproteinases are a family of zinc- and calcium-dependent endopeptidases that exhibit proteolytic activities towards most of the constituents of the extracellular matrix, such as the interstitial and basement membranes, fibronectin or laminin. Due to their central role in extracellular matrix degradation, they have been implicated in tissue remodelling processes associated with mammalian growth and development and in various pathological conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis or tumor invasion [1–3]. At least nine distinct, but highly homologous family members have been identified, including the collagenase subfamily comprising the interstitial collagenase (FIB-CL, MMP-1) and the neutrophil collagenase (PMNL-CL, MMP-8). Each member consists

of an amino-terminal propeptide (maintaining latency), a catalytic domain harbouring the zinc- and calcium-sites, and a C-terminal hemopexin like domain, which is important for the unique ability of FIB-CL and PMNL-CL to cleave collagen [3–7].

In contrast to the FIB pro-CL, which is secreted immediately after synthesis [8], PMNL pro-CL is stored as a highly glycosylated protein within specific granules of neutrophils and can be secreted as an inactive precursor after initiation by inflammatory mediators [9–11]. Conversion of the latent proenzyme to the active enzyme is a crucial step in the neutrophil-mediated initiation of collagenolysis during inflammatory connective tissue turnover. In vitro, activation cleavage initiated by proteinases, mercurials or oxidants leads in a stepwise process to finally active species having either Phe⁷⁹, Met⁸⁰ (Val⁸⁰ in case of FIB-CL) or Leu⁸¹ as the N-terminal residue [10,12–16]. Activation with stromelysin-1 (SL, MMP-3) gives rise to a ‘superactivated’ enzyme, which exhibits a significantly higher activity than either of the two other forms; different activation factors have been reported including an approximately 4- to 12-fold activity for N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ FIB-CL [14,17–18] and approx-

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Abbreviations: MMP, matrix metalloproteinases; PMNL, polymorphonuclear leucocytes; FIB, fibroblast; CL, collagenase; Tris, Tris(hydroxymethyl)aminomethane; MES, 2-morpholinoethane sulfonic acid; PEG, polyethylenglycol.

imately 3.5-fold activity for N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ PMNL-CL [16], respectively. It has been shown, that the predominant species upon stromelysin activation is the Phe⁷⁹ form, demonstrating that 'superactivity' is linked with this form [14,16]. The structural basis of this phenomenon has been unclear until now. Recently, we described the X-ray crystal structure of Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL [19] at 2.0 Å resolution. In this structure the N-terminal hexapeptide Met⁸⁰-Leu-Thr-Pro-Gly-Asn⁸⁵ was disordered; electron density was only observed from Pro⁸⁶ onwards. Here we present the 2.5 Å X-ray crystal structure of Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL, where the N terminus is well ordered, and discuss the phenomenon of 'superactivation' in the light of this structure.

2. Experimental

2.1. Purification of the N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL

A C-terminally truncated short form of PMNL-CL lacking the hemopexin-like domain was expressed in *E. coli* and refolded as previously described [5]. The latent, C-terminally truncated enzyme was activated by addition of active, recombinant Stromelysin-1 to a final concentration of 0.2 μM and incubated at 37° C for 16 h. The activated enzyme, i.e. the catalytic domain of PMNL-CL (Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴²), was afterwards purified to homogeneity by hydroxamate affinity chromatography [5]. The identity of the N-terminal Phe⁷⁹ was confirmed by amino-terminal sequence determination.

2.2. Crystallization

Hanging droplets were made by mixing 1.5 μl protein solution (~12 mg/ml protein in 5 mM CaCl₂, 100 mM NaCl, 3 mM MES/NaOH, 0.02% NaN₃, pH 6.0), 2 μl inhibitor solution (50 mM Pro-Leu-Gly-NHOH [20]) and 6 μl PEG- solution (10% (m/v) PEG 6000, 0.2 M MES/NaOH, 0.02% NaN₃, pH 6.0). PMNL-CL catalytic domain was crystallized by vapour diffusion at 22°C against 1 M potassium phosphate buffer, 0.02% NaN₃, pH 6.0. Small crystals of approximately 0.5 × 0.06 × 0.03 mm were obtained within 3 days. They were harvested into 20% (m/v) PEG 6000, 500 mM NaCl, 100 mM CaCl₂, 0.1 M MES/NaOH, 0.02% NaN₃, pH 6.0 and diffract to at least 2.5 Å resolution. The crystals belong to the orthorhombic space group P2₁2₁2₁,

having the lattice constants $a = 33.21$, $b = 69.53$, $c = 72.54$ Å, $\alpha = \beta = \gamma = 90^\circ$. The asymmetric unit contains a monomer.

2.3. Structure analysis

X-ray measurements were done on a MAR image plate area detector (MAR Research, Hamburg) mounted on a Rigaku rotating anode X-ray generator ($\lambda = 1.5418$ Å, operated at 5.4 kW). X-ray intensities were evaluated with the MOSFLM program package [21] and loaded to the PROTEIN program package [22]. Data collection statistics are given in Table 1. A $2F_o - F_c$ electron density map was calculated using the model of the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form of PMNL-CL [19] for phasing. The N-terminal sequence Phe⁷⁹-Met-Leu-Thr-Pro-Gly-Asn⁸⁵ [23] was unambiguously defined in the electron density map and was incorporated using the interactive graphics program FRODO [24]. The model was subjected to reciprocal space least squares refinement with energy constraints as implemented in X-PLOR [25] using force field parameters derived by Engh and Huber [26]. The final refinement statistics are shown in Table 2.

3. Results

The X-ray crystal structure of the Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL in complex with the inhibitor Pro-Leu-Gly-NHOH has been solved at 2.5 Å resolution using the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form for phasing and subsequently refined to convergence at a final crystallographic *R*-factor of 18.0% using all data ($I > 0 \sigma(I)$) from 8.0 to 2.5 Å resolution. The overall structure of the Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² form as well as inhibitor binding are almost identical to that of the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form, which has been previously described in detail [19]. For the reader's convenience we will briefly summarize the main aspects; the catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL consists of an N-terminal main domain and a C-terminal small domain separated by a relatively flat active-site cleft (as shown in Fig. 1). The main domain comprises a central, highly twisted five-stranded β -sheet, flanked by an S-shaped double loop and two other bridging loops on its convex side and by two long α -helices on its concave side, respectively (for secondary structure elements see Table 3). It



Fig. 1. Structure of the Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-collagenase shown as a ribbon model (using the program RIBBON [31]; modified by A. Karshikoff). An upper (N-terminal) and a lower (C-terminal) domain are separated by a moderately deep-active site cleft. The upper domain harbours two zinc ions (displayed as spheres with the coordinating ligands), the 'structural' zinc (Zn⁹⁹⁸, on the top, coordinated by three histidines and an aspartate) and the 'catalytic' zinc (Zn⁹⁹⁹, in the middle, coordinated by three histidines and the inhibitor's hydroxamic moiety (thick lines)), and two calcium ions (Ka⁹⁹⁶, Ka⁹⁹⁷, displayed as spheres without coordinating ligands).

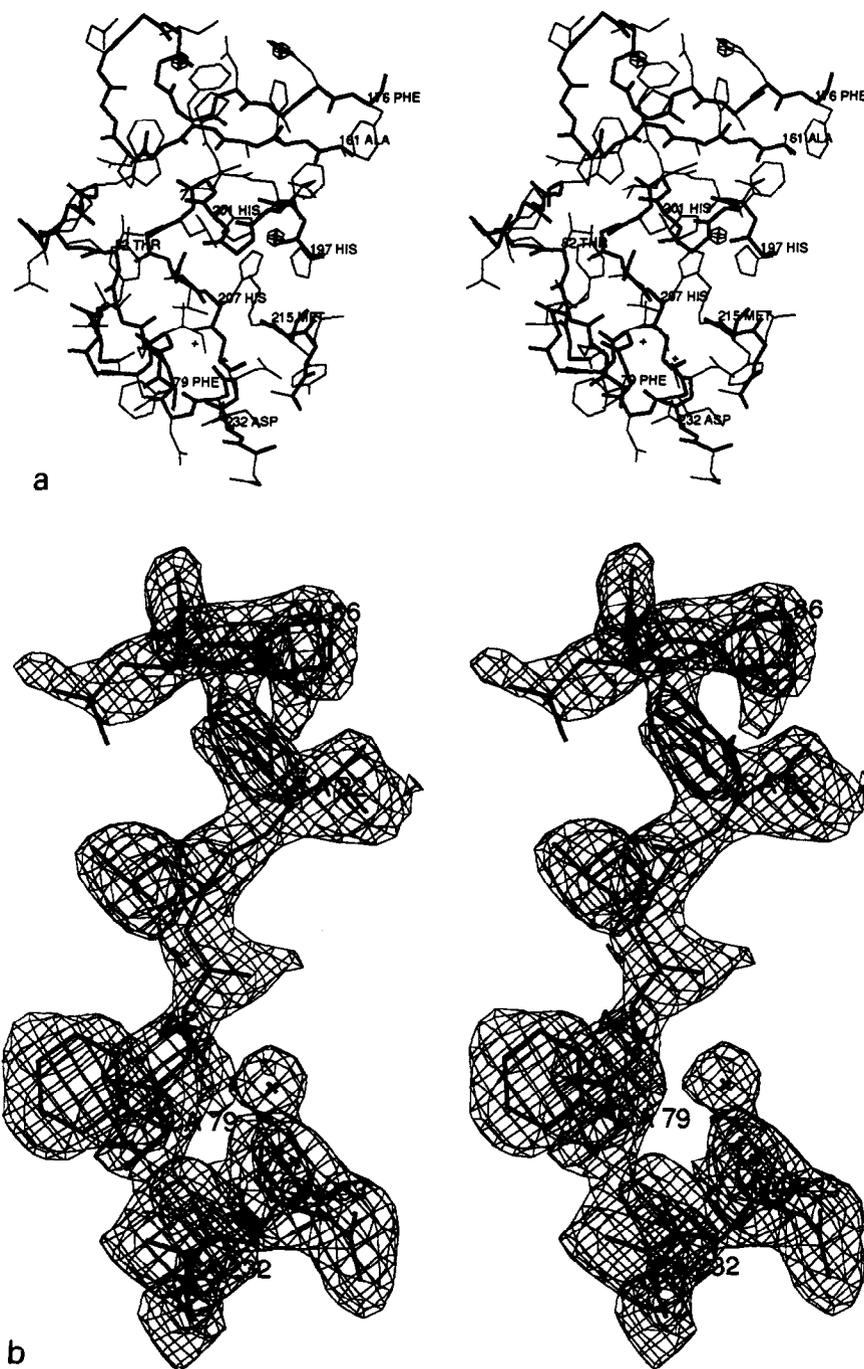


Fig. 2 (a) Detailed model of the N terminus of Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-collagenase including the N terminus (Phe⁷⁹-Trp⁸⁸), β -strand 4 and 5 (Ala¹⁶¹-Phe¹⁷⁶), the active site helix α B and the extended element following α B which contains the third zinc-liganding His²⁰⁷ (His¹⁹⁷-Ser²⁰⁸), the 'Met-turn' (Ala²¹³-Tyr²¹⁶), the 'catalytic' zinc ion (displayed as a sphere), the inhibitor H₂N-Pro-Leu-Gly-NHOH, and the C-terminal helix α C (Gln²³¹-Gly²⁴²). (b) Final $2F_o - F_c$ electron density map of the N terminus with the model of the residues Phe⁷⁹-Pro⁸⁶, Asp²³²-Asp²³³, and two solvent molecules overlaid. The contour level is 1.0σ .

harbours two zinc ions, referred to hereafter as the 'catalytic' zinc (Zn⁹⁹⁹), and the extremely tight bound 'structural' zinc ion (Zn⁹⁹⁸), and two calcium ions (Ka⁹⁹⁶, Ka⁹⁹⁷). The 'catalytic' zinc is situated at the bottom of the active-site cleft and is coordinated by the three His-residues of the His¹⁹⁷-Glu¹⁹⁸-X-X-His²⁰¹-X-X-Gly²⁰⁴-X-X-His²⁰⁷ zinc-binding consensus sequence and by the inhib-

itor's hydroxamic acid moiety. The 'structural' zinc ion and Ka⁹⁹⁷ are sandwiched between the surface S-shaped double loop and the surface of the β -sheet; Zn⁹⁹⁸ is tetrahedrally coordinated by His¹⁴⁷, Asp¹⁴⁹, His¹⁶² and His¹⁷⁵, while Ka⁹⁹⁷ is octahedrally coordinated by Asp¹⁵⁴, Gly¹⁵⁵, Asn¹⁵⁷, Ile¹⁵⁹, Asp¹⁷⁷, and Glu¹⁸⁰. The second calcium ion is located on the convex side of the β -sheet at the end of

Table 1
Statistics of data collection

Number of measurements	20139
Number of observations	19447
Number of unique reflections ($I > 0 \sigma(I)$)	5804
Completeness of data (%)	
∞ –2.50 Å	93.5
2.56–2.50 Å	84.1
R_{Merge}^1	0.125
R_{Sym}^2	0.072

¹ $R_{\text{Merge}} = \sum_i \sum_j (|I(h,i) - \langle I(h) \rangle|) / \sum_i \sum_j I(h,i)$, where $I(h,i)$ is the intensity value of the i -th measurement of h and $\langle I(h) \rangle$ is the corresponding mean value of h for all i measurements of h : the summation is over all measurements

² $R_{\text{Sym}} = \sum (|I_F - \langle I_F \rangle|) / \sum I_F$, where I_F is the averaged value of point group related reflections and $\langle I_F \rangle$ is the averaged value of a Bijvoet pair

a glycine-rich open loop and is also octahedrally coordinated by Asp¹³⁷, Gly¹⁶⁹, Gly¹⁷¹, Asp¹⁷³, and by two solvent molecules. The small C-terminal domain exhibits a largely irregular folding, with a wide right-handed loop followed by an α -helix. The loop is stabilized by a tight 1,4-turn Ala²¹³-Leu-Met-Tyr²¹⁶ known as the 'Met-turn' [27–28], a conserved topological element in the 'metzinkins' [28] providing a hydrophobic base for the 'catalytic' zinc ion and the three His residues.

The inhibitor lies antiparallel to the edge strand ($\beta 4$), with Pro¹¹ residing in a hydrophobic groove formed by the side chains of His¹⁶², Phe¹⁶⁴ and Ser¹⁵¹; Leu¹² forms two inter-main chain hydrogen bonds to Ala¹⁶³, and its side chain is situated in a small opening lined by His²⁰¹, Ala²⁰⁶ and His²⁰⁷, while Gly-NHOH¹³ is oriented towards Glu¹⁹⁸ with the carbonyl oxygen and the hydroxyl oxygen complexing the 'catalytic' zinc (see Figs. 1 and 2a).

A remarkable feature in the structure of Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL is the concave surface at the bottom of the molecule, located between Pro⁸⁶ and Ser²⁰⁹ and formed by the C-terminal helix αC and the strand following helix αB . The structure of the Phe⁷⁹-variant reveals that the N-terminal heptapeptide segment Phe⁷⁹-Met-Leu-Thr-Pro-Gly-Asn⁸⁵ binds to this region (see Fig. 2a for model and Fig. 2b for electron density map). The N terminus extends backwards from the N-terminal residue of $\beta 1$ (Asn⁹²) in a loop towards the active site cleft with the side chain of Trp⁸⁸ slotting into a hydrophobic groove formed by the side chains of Leu⁹³ ($\beta 1$), Ile¹³⁸ ($\beta 3$), Pro¹⁶⁶, Gly¹⁷² (both situated in the

Table 2
Final refinement statistics

Resolution range (Å)	8.0–2.5
Number of unique data in resolution range	5683
Total number of protein atoms (excluding H)	1317
Solvent atoms (excluding H)	108
R -factor ¹	
8.0–2.5 Å	0.180
2.55–2.50 Å	0.233
Root-mean-square deviations from target values	
Bonds (Å)	0.012
Angles (°)	1.7

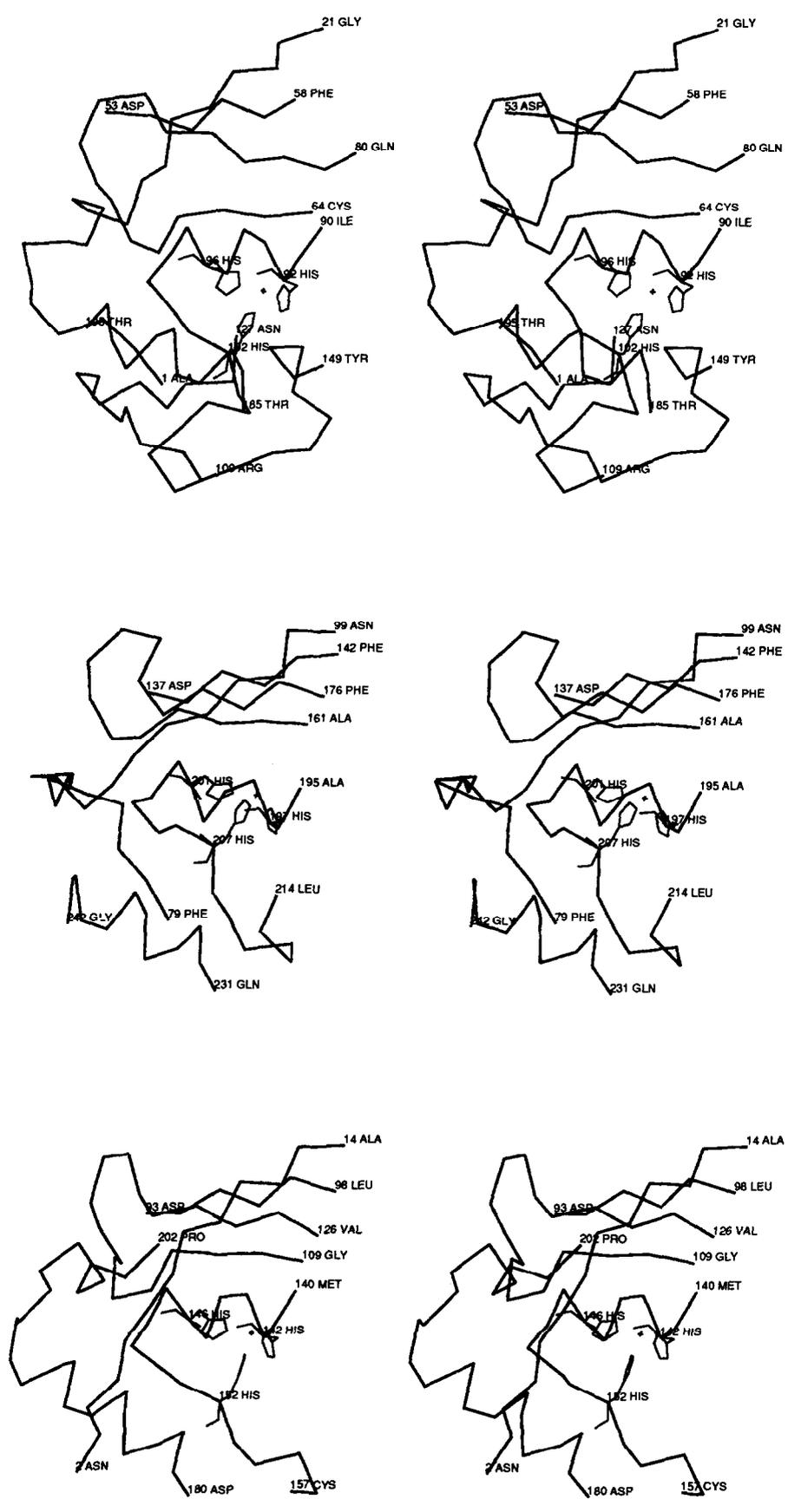
$$1R = (\sum |F_o - F_c|) / \sum F_o$$

loop connecting $\beta 4$ to $\beta 5$) and Leu²⁰³ (situated at the C-terminal end of αB), respectively, thereby stabilizing the loop. It extends to Pro⁸⁶ which is situated near Gly²⁰⁴, i.e. next to the active-site helix αB (left to αB in Figs. 1 and 2a). The chain adopts a 1,4-tight turn Thr⁸²-Pro-Gly-Asn⁸⁵, with the side chain of Thr⁸² fitting into a small hydrophobic groove lined by Pro⁸⁶, Gln¹⁶⁵, Gly²⁰⁴ and Ala²⁰⁶ and pointing towards the inhibitor's Leu (I2) moiety. N-terminal to Thr⁸² the chain turns downward to the C-terminal helix αC , crossing over with the strand following helix αB at residue Leu²⁰⁵ to form the only regular inter main chain hydrogen bond. The N-terminal ammonium group (of Phe⁷⁹) forms a salt bridge with the carboxylate moiety of the strictly conserved residue Asp²³² (Fig. 2a,b). The side chains of Leu⁸¹ and Phe⁷⁹ are oriented towards the C-terminal helix with the former packing against the side chains of Ile²⁴⁰ (αC) and Asn⁸⁵ and the latter packing against Gly²³⁶ (which is strictly conserved) and Ala²³⁹ of the C-terminal helix αC , while the side chain of Met⁸⁰ points towards the bulk solvent and seems to be disordered, as no significant electron density could be observed for this residue. Interestingly, the N terminus locks two water molecules in a cavity, which is created by the C-terminal helix and the strand following the active-site helix and lined by the side chains of Val²⁰⁵, Trp¹²⁰, Met²¹⁵, Asp²³², Asp²³³ and Gly²³⁶, respectively. Both internal solvent molecules are hydrogen bonded to Asp²³³ O_{δ1} and to Met⁸⁰ NH (Fig. 2a,b).

4. Discussion

Activation studies of latent pro-FIB-CL and pro-PMNL-CL show that species activated with stromelysin-

Fig. 3. Truncated C_α-representations of Astacin [29–30] (top), the catalytic domain of human PMNL-collagenase (middle), and Adamalysin II [27] (bottom) showing the structure of the N terminus and the main structure elements creating its environment ($\beta 1$, $\beta 3$, $\beta 4$, $\beta 5$, the elements containing the 'catalytic' zinc signature, the C-terminal helix αC , and the 'catalytic' zinc ions with their liganding histidines). The N-terminal structures (Astacin: completely buried; PMNL-CL: packed but not buried; Adamalysin II: freely exposed) are related to their role in the enzymatic active species (see section 4 for details).



I have a significantly higher proteolytic activity than species activated by other procedures [14,16–18]. However, although significant, the activity differences are rather small. Using collagen as substrate activity enhancement factors of about 12 [17], 5–8 [18] and 4–6.5 [14] have been derived for full-length FIB-CL. For full-length PMNL-CL they are approximately 2 and 3.5 using a synthetic octapeptide and collagen as substrate, respectively [16]. This phenomenon has been termed ‘superactivation’ [3], and it has been demonstrated that it is only observed with species having Phe⁷⁹ as N-terminal residue of the active form [14,16–18].

A superposition of the structural models of the Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² form and of the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² form of human PMNL-CL (not shown, rms-deviation is 0.178 Å for all atoms) reveals that both molecules superimpose well and that, in particular, the geometry of the active-site residues remains unchanged. As expected from the moderate observed enhancement factors, the ‘superactivation’ would not seem to be related to (or caused by) a visible structural reorientation in the active site. The significant disorder–order transition of the N-terminal segment must in some way be linked to activity enhancement. The formation of the salt-link between the N-terminal ammonium group and the side chain of Asp²³² seems to be the main triggering effect on the active site, requiring an N terminus of correct length (including residue 79).

The two structures (i.e. the Phe⁷⁹-Gly²⁴² and the Met⁸⁰-Gly²⁴² catalytic domain) show no obvious differences in position and rigidity of the active-site residues; dynamic aspects beyond the accuracy of the models may nevertheless be important. The differences might reside in very tiny structural (motional) differences leading to stabilization of the active site and hence of the transition states. Alternatively, the reduced activity of N-terminally truncated forms could be caused by interference of the mobile N-terminal segment with a peptide substrate to be bound.

These findings are in good agreement with the results of the activity studies mentioned above, and explain that Asp²³² is strictly conserved in collagenases [3]. Another strictly conserved residue is Gly²³⁶, positioned one turn away from Asp²³² in the C-terminal helix. This residue serves as a contact site for the side chain of residue 79 (which is in almost every case aromatic, i.e. Phe or Tyr [3]). Any other amino acid replacing it would cause stereochemical strain by its side chain protruding towards the aromatic side chain of Phe⁷⁹, most probably preventing the correct orientation of the N terminus.

Fig. 3 shows the main secondary structure elements together with the N-terminal segments for PMNL-CL, astacin [29–30] and adamalysin II [27], the latter serving as examples for two other important subfamilies of the ‘metzinkins’ [28]. It is interesting to compare the N-terminal structures and relate them to the role of the N terminus for activation of the latent proenzyme. In

Table 3
Secondary structure elements of the catalytic domain of human PMNL-CL [32]

Structural element	Residues
β 1	92–97
α A	106–121
β 2	127–130
β 3	138–143
β 4	160–163
β 5	174–177
α B	191–202
α C	231–240

PMNL-CL (Fig. 3, middle) the N terminus packs against the C-terminal helix and the extended chain element Gly²⁰⁴-Ser²⁰⁹, i.e. the N terminus is packed but not buried. In astacin (Fig. 3, top) the N terminus is arranged in a topologically similar manner but is completely buried in a groove shielded from the bulk solvent by a wide loop element extending from Asn¹²⁷ to Tyr¹⁴⁹. The ammonium group of its N-terminal residue (Ala¹) forms a solvent mediated salt bridge to Glu¹⁰³, the residue that immediately follows the third zinc-liganding histidine. Interestingly, while the position of the N terminus is somewhat similar to that in PMNL-CL, the position of the C-terminal helix is considerably shifted. This is quite different from the situation in adamalysin II (Fig. 3, bottom), where the N terminus is much shorter and is freely exposed, while the C-terminal helix is positioned quite similar to that in PMNL-CL, even though the C terminus extends much further and reaches up to the β -sheet.

Thus, the collagenases occupy an intermediate position between the astacins and the adamalysins with respect to the orientation of the N terminus: in the astacins the N terminus is entirely buried, while it is packed but not buried in the collagenases and freely exposed in the adamalysins. This relates to the role of the N terminus in the enzymatic active species. In the astacins an active conformation would seem to require a precisely processed N terminus; N-terminally elongated molecules presumably adopt a different (and possibly inactive) conformation. For the collagenases, it has been demonstrated that the correct processing of the N terminus is not essential but nevertheless important for maximal enzymatic activity. Finally, for the adamalysins it is quite clear that the N terminus most likely has no effect on the enzymatic activity.

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